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# John Burnside's Poetry and Autobiographical Writings: A Comparative Analysis

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# 1 CHAPTER ONE

## John Burnside: Context and Oeuvre

[...] Milky smoke poured up from the grate  
like a waterfall in reverse  
and she said my name  
and it was the only thing  
and the last thing that she said. [...]

(Robertson, [www.lrb.co.uk](http://www.lrb.co.uk), 2008)

### 1.1 Contemporary Scottish Poets Overview and Eco-poetics

Among all the contemporary Scottish poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, John Burnside is still active both as a poet and prose writer. His production not only favoured several topics for the ecocritical debate but also introduced a series of compelling elements to the theme of Scottish identity. This dissertation will deal with this particular topic and will dedicate special pages to the issue of identity in literature and writing.

For the Dunfermline-born author, the traumatic experience of leaving his Scottish roots fuelled the inspiration for working on his homeland from the condition of 'exile', representing a cornerstone for his eco-poetic production. Embraced by the support of his colleagues, Burnside exclusively transmitted the reality of his life experiences through his writing, as it is stated in the following quotation:

[...] exile for Burnside seems to be not only a personal and geographic trauma but also something related to the loss of a kind of prelapsarian state, a condition longed for and idealised especially when he feels frustrated by the industrial/capitalist erasure of the possibility of 'being' in the world.

(Fazzini in McGuire & Nicholson, 2009:118)

### 1.1.1 Gairn and Dósa

Louisa Gairn contributed to sealing the relationship between Burnside and a few of his colleagues in a critical chapter of hers where she discusses the role of ecology in the works of Scottish poets, such as Kathleen Jamie and Alan Warner. Gairn decided to discuss the issue by examining the works of these three Scottish writers. Through this analysis, he aims to define the "line of defense" they employed (Gairn, 2008). The first point these compatriots have in common is that Jamie and Burnside have firmly refused to be labelled. Allegedly, the term 'nature poet' seems to restrict the authors that engage in this theme to a narrow sense of their work, including politics, economic and ethical topics rather than simplistic ecologic features. Burnside started to discuss nature and ecology in his poems. Then, as soon as he realised that he needed to suggest a practical change, he decided to put his writing in the mainstream context of newspapers and institutional magazines. The action, for Burnside, begins when a poem is elaborated to ignite the reader upon the element cited in the work. Otherwise, 'poetry makes nothing happen'. From another perspective, Kathleen Jamie questions the reality of things and how the reader is induced to believe in absolute truths that, from a Heideggerian standpoint, consist of surface elements hiding deeper meanings. Burnside shares the same viewpoint on 'facts'. In literature, inanimate objects and events are often portrayed as being observed by the reader. It is the reader's responsibility to interpret their literal meaning and the stories they hold within them. The cultural element that belongs to everything but always hides behind the surface of their worldly dimension. These two writers share an issue related to the descriptive nature of their writing. When writing is involved, it's essential to be not only captivating but also to hold the reader's interest while also being thought-provoking enough to encourage reflection on the physical aspects of the subject matter. Gairn here suggests that to draw the most profound identity of the words, Burnside must exclude itself from any description:

He [Burnside], considers the ways in which language is fundamentally limited in evoking the 'real', a mode of representation or exploration which is always provisional or compromised. For Burnside, there is no possibility of complete description or of

complete detachment, implying a deeply-held suspicion of pretensions to ideals of precision or accuracy which modern science might claim.

(Gairn, 2008:161)

It is indeed an exercise that the Scottish author tends to constantly perform in his works in an attempt to exile himself from his static viewpoint and become an active observer of the 'otherness' of the matter he describes. Gairn, again, is something else to observe on this issue:

Burnside's fiction often meditates on the idea of getting 'clean away', of simply leaving home, with no fidelity to place, family, community or possessions [...] Exile, in Burnside's novels, is accompanied by a blurring of identity and selfhood – the 'self-forgetting' he contends is necessary for the lyrical act to occur.

(Gairn, 2008:164)

Burnside was born in Dunfermline, Fife, in 1955 and spent his childhood in Scotland. At around 10 years old, he moved to the English midlands with his family. After spending approximately 30 years in England, he returned to his motherland. As a result of this return, the writer was confronted with ethical and philosophical debates, acknowledging that he experienced a form of exile from his own values while in England, despite not being physically removed from his native country. Burnside left his current political situation to return to Scotland, hoping to find an environment better suited to his spirit and avoid further unpleasant ethical issues:

I was disgusted by English politics, especially the appalling influence of the Thatcher/post-Thatcher Conservative junta. I felt Scotland was trying to be different, trying to preserve a more humane, enlightened, civic society.

(Burnside in Dòsa, 2001:10)

Sadly, Burnside could not find a place in Scotland where he could pursue his ecological and spiritual interests in a social setting. The Scottish poet is still upset about the disappointment, but it helps him realise his needs. The author uses poetic writing to create a dimension that transcends geopolitical boundaries. The dominant ethos is

influenced by nature and is integrated into the musicality of the author's works. Additionally, Burnside recognises that capitalism shatters his aspirations of achieving a seamless connection between humanity and the natural world. As it can be understood, the writer believes that this generational inclination favours violence and disrespect towards the subject. In general, he accuses the man of valuing superficiality over authenticity. Burnside draws on the philosophy of Heidegger, frequently referenced in his work, to explore the idea of "dwelling" as a means of living in harmony with nature. The term "to dwell" means being able to live harmoniously with the environment around us, acknowledging that we share our living space with other entities:

We may understand dwelling as a way in which people relate to the environment and engage with nature. We dwell where we are at home, where we find our place in the world: the sense of place is central to the philosophy of dwelling. As Burnside frequently stresses, the influence of this Heideggerian concept on his poetry has been considerable.

(Szuba in Laplace, 2015:206)

Burnside draws inspiration from a variety of authors in its production process. Regarding European influences, Burnside mentions several Spanish poets and expresses his intense attraction to Montale's works. Although the English translations do not achieve the same musicality, they offer important insights that are fundamental to the Scottish writer. While in Italy, Burnside was also influenced by Giacomo Leopardi's *Infinito* poem in his quest to represent the "essence". The Scotsman mentions contemporary artists Alfred Hayes and Lucie Brock-Broido. In particular, Burnside highlights Brock-Broido's refined descriptive ability, which effectively combines art and language in her work. During his writing journey, he identified several influential artists. Here are some of them:

I feel particularly influenced by Spanish language poetry, with Octavio Paz, along with Lorca, Machado and Jorge Guillen as my main reading. Marianne Moore is a kind of spiritual mentor in my mind and Williams is never far away in my imagination. Wallace Stevens also, and some contemporary American poets: Allison Funk, Linda Gregerson,



Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Eric Pankey, Robert Wrigley, the sublime Mary Oliver (I only discovered her a couple of years ago), and Chase Twichell, to name but a few.

(Burnside in Dòsa, 2001:9)

After having definitively elaborated the meaning of belonging to a particular earthly dimension within space and time, Gairn's work then indicates that the common intent of Burnside and Jamie is to stimulate the reader's awareness of how to respect everyone's 'home' so that the Earth doesn't become a place where, in the end, nobody can live. Eco-poetics addresses this tension during the development of the engagement, leading to the consideration of Scottish writers as not merely direct imitators of Hugh MacDiarmid. Despite the recurrent references to Scotland in their poems suggest, they use their Scottish home soil to introduce the reader to their denunciation:

My point here is that 'home', for contemporary Scottish writers, has taken on new meanings, beyond questions of 'nationalism' or 'Scottishness'. [...] The need to be taught 'a way to live | on this damp ambiguous earth' is openly considered in the poetry of both Jamie and Burnside.

(Gairn, 2008:167)

Alan Warner's works are subsequently introduced by Gairn in the context of contemporary Scottish writing, concerning travel and the figurative re-definition of 'home' as mentioned by those writers at the end of the 'exile'. The writing of 'The Scotsman' connects the themes presented by Burnside and Jamie, who occasionally focus on the journey of their characters in their poems and stories. There are 'movements' that determine one's outlook on life and are firmly based on culture. Nevertheless, another common thread identified among these Scottish authors is the cause of their travel, which Gairn defines as an 'escape' more than a forced exile. In particular, escaping for Burnside and Jamie means avoiding society's constrictions and the physical sense of imprisonment given by the network of suburbs. Whilst nature always provides a sense of arbitrariness, the structure of the industrial city not only does not allow a complete understanding of reality but also seems to reduce the options to build one's destiny freely. Louisa Gairn highlights the envisioned scenario that Burnside has in mind:

The inauthenticity of this way of living is far from the ecological ideal of 'dwelling', and Burnside explores the possibility that this kind of settlement is in fact a form of escapism, of 'avoidance', running away from the emptiness at the heart of a modern life which separates itself from the authentic, natural world.

(Gairn, 2008:170)

According to the author, authenticity must be found in "non-places" like suburbs, which are often considered to be empty spaces without any valuable assets to help establish one's identity. The author of the critical chapter then switches the focus and discusses a direct effect of the confrontation between substance and insubstantiality, which is mirrored in the notion of 'otherness'. The proposed theory of deconstruction posits that categorising materials and entities would blur the edge between what 'other' means and what 'self' means. Thus, such categorisations should be avoided in order to discover 'the liminal world which exists at the edges of such categories' (Gairn, 2008:174). Gairn explains this terminology to avoid misunderstandings:

The 'liminal' or the 'borderline' has long been an important concept for post-colonial theory, giving a voice to the marginalised racial or geographical 'other', and it is clear that a similar process can be applied to the natural world, which has been similarly marginalised, exploited or 'spoken for' in modern Western societies.

(Gairn, 2008:174)

Therefore, the dissertation infers the presence of a multi-dimensional ecologic issue involving post-colonial debates and societal paradoxes. The contrasts arising from the open topic of nature and natural dogmas could potentially involve any social issue of contemporary 21st-century literature. Burnside and his compatriots are, in fact, aware of the versatility of Eco-poetics as a tool not only for criticism but also for introspection. Indeed, the Scottish writer suggests an intrinsic link between man and nature to the point of suggesting the metamorphosis of the human being into a 'creature' characterised by animalistic traits or which, in any case, loses those traits of humanity necessary to define the character in a simple way. Instead, he describes a complex, wild, indomitable figure driven by a force that manifests itself only in that

liminal context where nature filters and transforms all the spatial and temporal regularities that it encounters. The Scottish-born writer injects his poetry with unprecedented associations that prompt Gairn to contemplate a return to a primal state of being:

Burnside's work is full of strange twinings, relationships between real and imagined brothers, distorted versions of the self which seem to be both psychological and mysteriously 'organic'.

(Gairn, 2008:175)

### **1.1.2 Borthwick and Gairn**

David Borthwick also analysed the similarities and differences between contemporary Scottish poets, including the works of Robin Robertson and Kathleen Jamie. Borthwick quoted Robertson's perspective, which showed that he experienced his separation from his homeland differently than others. Compared to Burnside's works, Robertson's views reflect a stronger connection to the epic myths of Scottish folklore, even reaching the point in which Greek mythology is included. The patriotic theme evident in Robertson's works is quite different from that found in the prose and poetry of the writer of Fife. The latter is much more focused on reporting contemporary aspects rather than historical ones of their origins. At the beginning of the chapter, you will find the lines of "At Roane Head," a poem by Robertson that draws inspiration from Scottish and Irish mythology by citing the mythical creature of the 'selkie.' In Borthwick's essay, this poem is analysed in-depth, and the author's willingness not to underestimate the world of the 'liminal', symbolised by the beheading of the man in Robertson's poem, is reported. Borthwick draws a connection between Robertson and Jamie, revealing a world of historical secrets and mysteries that have inspired contemporary Scottish poets. In his essay, Borthwick discusses the similarities between Robertson and Jamie. Here's an excerpt from his essay:

Like Robertson, then, she wishes to employ tropes or allegorical figures as a means of forcing her readers to look beyond the limitations of 'ordinary' cultural convention. The emphasis is upon drawing attention to the culture that is rooted in place as a multi-

dimensional space in which there are more ways of knowing than the seeming solidity of the quotidian. Jamie describes herself as continually being 'in negotiation with the languages and cultures and tradition which surround and pressurise me.'

(Borthwick, 2011:138)

Discussing Kathleen Jamie again, Gairn then demonstrates how she also deals with deconstructing the categorisations that hinder any philosophical investigation of the "other". Like Burnside, the writer points out the importance of exploring that imaginary but substantial reality hidden from the human's disinterested eye. Jamie's poetics, therefore, focuses on a discussion similar to that of one of his colleagues but adds traits of a social debate that are not so decisive in Burnside's papers. The Currie-raised writer introduces themes such as ecofeminism and sexuality in a not strongly marked but 'cumbersome' way between the words to allow the reader to detect their presence and suggest a personal reflection:

In doing so, they also explore some concepts drawn from 'ecofeminism', a theoretical perspective which posits a continuum between the 'body of nature' and female bodies – similarly 'othered' by Western culture, aligned with the moral ambiguities of nature, wildness, sexuality. In the work of all three writers, the possibility of breaking down the division between the human and natural worlds is often contemplated in the context of transformative or liminal spaces, particularly water.

(Gairn, 2008:177-178)

In addition to Warner's use of the aquatic element as a mysterious and, above all, dangerous extension of the vastness of the reflective consciousness of the characters he describes in his poems, Gairn explains how he also takes care of inserting references to the Scottish Highlands, within his compositions, his own civilisation. Indeed, he suggests how the stigma attributed to that population by literature, a mainly descriptive stereotype of an underdeveloped civilisation governed by the chaos of nature surrounding it, instead constitutes an important step in reaching the concreteness of the 'other'. Furthermore, Warner's disposition to include references to his homeland doesn't exclude the inclusion of contemporary themes such as drug use, sex and violence. Indeed, Warner's exercise consists in applying a 'barbaric' context such as that of the

Highlands to modern issues where, according to Gairn, that 'hybrid' land between urban and rural - and therefore between human and nature - takes shape and is made fertile by the imagination of the reader. The savage nature of the older invaders of Scotland characterised the Highlands with wild traits and fascinating backgrounds. In David Borthwick's essay "'The tilt from one parish / into another': Estrangement, Continuity and Connection in the Poetry of John Burnside, Kathleen Jamie and Robin Robertson", it is reported that:

[...] John Burnside sees the cultural practices of our ancestors, the vestiges of oral traditions and circulated tales, as essential to the more modern agenda of environmental consciousness through rootedness in place. [...] For Burnside, exploring these ancient cultural practices permits a re-engagement with the 'secular wheeling of the seasons', providing insights into the ways in which our ancestors lived more closely with their habitat, using story and communal experience to anchor themselves as situated in place keeping faith with the continuities of tradition that links the past to the present.

(Borthwick, 2011:133-134)

As Gairn explains, Jamie is annoyed by the employment of the Highlands as a conceptual place highlighting only its 'barbaric' aspects. Indeed, in the following passage, the writer explains how Jamie asks to respect the 'dwelling' process that the people of the Highlands have gone through over the centuries, going from being a place exclusively untouched by human artifice to being acknowledged as a place of civilisation and, above all, culture:

For Jamie, a description of the Highlands as a wilderness 'seems an affront to those many generations who took their living on that land. Whether their departure was forced or that way of life just fell into abeyance, they left such subtle marks. And what's natural?' Recognising the 'domestic normality' of the ancient people who lived at such sites allows the modern human to 'feel both their presence, their day-to-day lives, and their utter absence.

(Gairn, 2008:183)

Gairn concludes the chapter by enunciating another determining factor that the poets she analysed seem to employ with the same meaning, albeit using different

representations. The technique of the aforementioned Scottish poets of attributing to darkness the power to create that 'line of defence' mentioned by Louisa Gairn turns out to be the main subversive element proposed by the authors to establish the foundations of ecopoetics. The paper indicates how darkness represents the ideal environment for the 'liminal zone' where the common elements between humans and nature are hidden. Nevertheless, light is not denigrated as an inferior element compared to darkness. It covers a superficial level compared to the role of its opposite, where the philosophical 'metamorphosis' that Jamie and, above all, Burnside strive to shape. To conclude, the text suggests the existence of a possible over-dimension where the essence of things is understood. An Enlightened dimension, which Burnside believes in, can be reached only through the active as well as passive contact of the observer with the observed. Indeed, this seems to be the goal of the ecopoetics of contemporary Scottish writers linked to Burnside, who by metaphorically employing their native land in discovering the essence of the things around them, promote a critical and constructive approach to nature and culture. Burnside's 'enlightened' method consists of feeling the overcoming of boundaries between himself and the world surrounding him. In this dissertation, another concept that will be discussed is the "unheimlich", or the disturbed feeling caused by otherworldly presences. Among the poets considered in Borthwick's essay, John Burnside is the most skilled in using this emotional nuance in his works. He is able to penetrate the imagination of his readers and encourage reflection. This complex thought goes beyond practicality, and there are many examples of this in Burnside's prose and poetry. For instance, "Moth Man" from *The Glister*, most poems in *The Asylum Dance* or *The Hoop*, the stories of *Burning Elvis*, and the creepy scenarios of *The Dumb House*. According to Borthwick, even Jamie uses the persuasive power of fear of the unknown, but to a lesser extent than Burnside. Ghosts, spirits, and 'absent' presences are all characters dear to the Scottish writer of Fife, who uniquely represents this liminality within his production. Here is Borthwick's report on how Burnside deals with the 'uncanny':

In his verse allusions to ghostly recurrences and twilight presences operate to deliberately unsettle the reader, to summon a sense of the unheimlich; to have the reader ruminate on the contingency of existence, on connections between the past and the

present, on dwelling in a narrative of place and time, on seasonal rituals at once communal and personal of remembrance and return.

(Borthwick, 2011:142)

### 1.1.3 Statchura

Further parallels noted between Jamie and Burnside have also been identified in another critical text proposed by Michael Statchura, "A Polar Projection: The Northern Dimension in Modern Scottish Literature". In fact, this dissertation discusses how to find a context in which to experiment and demonstrate the depth of the essential, the natural environment chosen by the two Scottish writers had to be the 'North' that they both know so well. Moreover, the author of the dissertation specifies that the reality on which the Scottish colleagues relied to develop their philosophy of literature coincides with the post-devolutionary period of Scotland, therefore after the 1997 referendum (Statchura, 2015:148). From what can be gathered, the 'northern perspective' considers a territory wider than the size of a Country. The following passage better explains the diversified employment of the area from a literal standpoint:

While a geographic northern perspective is not apparent in Gray's work outside of brief political notes and observations, it is a central component in the work of De Luca and Jamieson, and Jamie and Burnside expand their concerns with the natural world from a specifically Scottish setting into the wider transnational northern space.

(Statchura, 2015:148)

In Statchura's work, all the philosophical correspondences between contemporary Scottish artists take hold, which include not only the dualism between Jamie and Burnside but also the extreme influence of the patriotic and at times Marxist poetics of Hugh MacDiarmid and the 'transnational and transcultural' spatiality of the 'being' of Kenneth White (Statchura, 2015:20). The common point between these artists, according to the author of the essay, seems to consist in the search for the communication of sensory experiences that go beyond the possible description through the linguistic channel. Precisely because what the writers are looking for is indescribable material, they try to provide contextual tools that allow the reader to

empathise with the environment provided by the narrative. Seeking to associate common traits for the aforementioned poets, in the following passage Statchura suggests a categorisation of the three eco-poetic Scottish writers as ‘phenomenological’ poets:

White, Jamie and Burnside are all phenomenological poets. They write about moments of lived experience—walking, listening, observing, connecting—in which any metaphysical conception of self is opened into a greater sense of relatedness with the world and larger cosmos.

(Statchura, 2015:179)

Reasoning on the intentions of White, Jamie and Burnside, it is evident how the 3 detach themselves at a certain point from MacDiarmid, who is guilty, according to them, of not having initiated any process of elision of the culture and, therefore, of the 'self', with the aim of identifying the 'essence of the 'other'. In fact, the contemporary students of the greatest exponent of the Scottish Renaissance, especially White, dissociate themselves from the presence of 'history' within their work of transcendentalising reality to explore the mystery of the landscape. In fact, as Statchura indicates when writing about Burnside, the task of the Scottish writer in question is based on a reconnection of man with the state of nature which welcomed him in the beginning and from which, through social association and therefore, through the artificiality, he detached himself. Burnside, precisely, is a strong supporter of the idea that recovering that bond with the earth lost by the progress of history can in some way allow humanity to reconcile its essence with that of its roots, allowing humans to live in harmony with the planet. In a certain way, Statchura tries to advocate for the metaphysical interpretations of Burnside, who looks forward to lecturing people about the discovery of their true identity through his poems:

His work is full of moments of liminality, sightings and disappearances, presences and absences, and transformations into “a new becoming” with “new eyes to see the world,” all of which are an attempt to dissolve any sense of duality into a more connective relationship between self and other, human and non-human.

(Statchura, 2015:186)



Moreover, Stachura recovers and distributes to contemporary Scottish writers, engaged in their ecological task, the correlation with the 'North'. This locus is recognised independently from the geographical distribution provided by the artists, which varies from Scandinavia to the Highlands, up to the North Pole. The 'North' according to Stachura is what allows the writers that exchange of lights and shadows that simulate the liminality of the worlds placed by them in contrast. There could not be another place that recalls 'appearance and disappearance' more than the remote islands on the Norwegian coast according to Burnside, since the vastness of the environment that confronts the man who crosses it is not quantifiable and who is therefore not only stunned but also 'transformed'. The following excerpt provides a distinction between Burnside and Jamie's 'North' and the one pertaining to other contemporary writers that exploited this theme within their compositions:

The danger of disappearance or self-annihilation within a hyperawareness of actually being in the world is therefore at the heart of Burnside's conception and experience of the North. While both Jamie and Burnside explore this danger in their work, however, their concern is primarily about the importance of bringing the mind and body back into a greater understanding and experience of the natural world.

(Stachura, 2015:192)

In conclusion, Kathleen Jamie, John Burnside, Christine De Luca, Robert Jamieson, Kenneth White and Hugh MacDiarmid by inheritance have helped to introduce a new concept of spatiality and presence using the landscape and, previously, the socio-cultural context of Scotland and the lands of the north. In terms of historical importance perhaps we have not yet come to understand through their words the profound meaning, the "essence" precisely, of the intangible matter constituted by the 'true nature'. Despite this, these artists certainly have the merit of having spread the awareness of the existence of something deeper.

## 1.2 John Burnside's Poetics

John Burnside focuses extensively on environmental issues in his works. His interest in these subjects stems from the stark contrast between the industrial city areas and the natural wilderness of the woodlands. This contrast creates a sensational shock that captivates Burnside, highlighting the differences between these two vastly different settings. As a poet, Burnside is drawn to exploring this contrast in his writing:

I wrote about growing up in industrial towns [...] because you live in that kind of place you realize how important that is, to human well-being [...] you're getting a bicycle and you cycle a couple of miles out and you can come to the woodlands [...] and you feel the difference, you feel that.

(Burnside, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), 2014)

### 1.2.1 From Software Developer To Poet: John Burnside's Passion And Skillset

Before debuting as a professional writer, Burnside worked as a computer analyst and software engineer. Poetry was both a hobby and a way to 'exercise the other hemisphere of the brain'. The Scottish writer admitted he wanted to manage both his potential professional careers simultaneously, but, due to the difficulties of accomplishing this task in the 1980s, he chose to continue to fuel his writing passion. Burnside was disheartened by his computing job being well-paid but not as enjoyable as writing. Indeed, enjoyability and a good income were, in the author's opinion, two simultaneously unattainable features for a job at the time (Burnside, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), 2014). Furthermore, Burnside specifies how the operational part of working on computers was not what attracted him most about that profession, but what aroused his interest was computer systems. This subject was still under development at the time, but Burnside was intrigued by their complexity, which apparently resembled, in a sense, the same intricacy as composing a poem or passage in word choice, meter and meaning that these mediums can convey. While discussing the statement 'poetry makes nothing happen', which was attributed to W.H. Auden, Burnside said the following:

I can take Auden's point... I think if you approach poetry's role in society or poetry's political impact in a naive way or a simplistic way, Auden is perfectly correct in what he is saying, we usually take that line out of the overall context of the poem [...] it is not just the writing of a poem on a page and publishing it but living poetry as a 'discipline in poetry' does make a change in the world and Auden's own life made a change in the world.

(Burnside, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), 2022)

Indeed, he further states that all a poet could ask for is to manage to "move the dial of the culture ever so slightly in the right direction" (Burnside, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), 2022). The Scottish poet thus wants his writing persona to be transposed into reality so that he can achieve that desired effect of change in his operational area. Minding that claim from the professor's standpoint, his poetic *modus operandi* is extensively based on 'listening' and being attentive to his experiences. Concerning this, in the realm of poetic production, Burnside says he can be described as 'eccentric' compared to his colleagues due to his composition methodology:

There are only two things that matter in the page, one is the craft [...] on the other hand there's the content of the poem that it's a bit more tricky [...] if you write a poem about something that matters to you but doesn't matter to anybody else, they may enjoy the musicality of the poem but if they are not engaged by the subject matter of the poem, they'll probably turn away from it.

(Burnside, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), 2022)

Compared to what he believes is the traditional writing method of poems for other colleagues, he begins first with thought, with observation. Burnside's are also long compositions that the Scottish writer mentally elaborates on during long walks outside, usually choosing the neighbouring forests as a setting. Here we can understand precisely how Burnside's production is impregnated with geological and landscape elements that characterise its ecological meaning. The writer's observations then turn into the poetic nucleus of his works, which according to him, take from 2 to 3 weeks to be elaborated through the choice of words and the improvement of compositional musicality. Burnside elaborates on the importance of these choices in adding more

profound meaning to compositions, emphasising the benefits of complexity over oversimplification:

Poetry insists on recognizing the complexity of things and not simplifying it. It's this kind of simplification of things, the making of the right noises and holding up the right signs that block off the path of looking for the truth.

(Burnside, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), 2022)

For Burnside, this large or short phase of text revision and choice of vocabulary is an important task that the author should undertake as one of the most challenging objectives of this profession should be the search for the use of the correct term to save from employment other words wrong (Dósa, 2001:12). For instance, one of his most significant concerns was the use of the term "soul" when speaking of human in an existential context such as nature and ecology:

I believed that the soul couldn't go to heaven and leave the body behind, because souls and bodies need to exist together. The only way a soul can come to exist is with a body, but also a body can't have any function if there is no soul with it. That was the starting point for me, but then I began to think in terms of the spirit.

(Burnside in Dósa, 2001:12)

“Soul” for Burnside takes on a dangerous meaning. Indeed, according to him, this term opens the possibility for a dichotomy between the mind and body of the human being to arise. Burnside spent several years attempting to unite these two terms to eliminate their duality, it is thus possible to comprehend how he came to find in the use of the word "spirit" the most suitable declination to describe how, according to him, our coexistence with Gaia should be interpreted. What Burnside suggests when he says, “think in terms of the spirit”, is followed by his most ecologic and environmentalist statement. In fact, the writer explains how the difference between "soul" and "spirit" is not given only by the potential dualism that one of the two can generate but also by how they are constituted within personal identity. The term "soul" is often associated with Christian religious beliefs. It suggests that every person is born with it and that one must strive to maintain its purity through their actions during their lifetime. This is

according to Burnside's interpretation of the term. On the other hand, Burnside believes that the "spirit" is something that needs to be developed gradually by showing reverence for nature:

The soul is not something given but has to be created by the way in which one lives in the world. Right dwelling in the world is the key to living as a spirit. For example, if I were to go out with a big gun to shoot animals for fun and leave them rotting in the fields, I wouldn't be living as a spirit. It's perfectly all right, however, to go out with a gun and shoot animals because I'm hungry and want to eat, and as long as I behave towards the animal with respect.

(Burnside in Dòsa, 2001:13)

### **1.2.2 Themes And Topics In Burnside's Poetics**

Burnside incorporated Christian iconography into his early poetry, as stated by himself and various critics. However, he later opted for environmental imagery and abandoned the former method. The relationship between the Scottish writer and religion is complex. He expressed irritation towards critics who labelled him as a poet solely focused on religious issues instead of global politics. Burnside has expressed dissenting views on various issues, including the para-feudal Scottish situation, the global environmental crisis, and the shortcomings of American diplomacy. He has formalised his political criticism on these topics. Furthermore, as stated in the first paragraph, the Scottish writer generally dislikes categorisations. The poet himself provides another example of this inclination while arguing about "objectivity". The poet believes that there are no "objects", which has led to some contemplation on the term. Burnside argues that all matter is connected to the spirit and context in which it is found and should be respected in its essence. Therefore, there is no detached matter. The act of objectifying someone leads to violence, according to the writer. Burnside argues that violence is a feature solely about humans and doesn't occur in nature as it is simply a part of the natural process of beginning and ending:

Violence arises from the tendency to objectify others - humans, animals, terrain and so on - and spiritual enlightenment begins, I feel, in a first recognition that there are no

objects in the world. that there is no possibility of being meaningfully 'objective'. Thus, violence is the symptom of a spiritual failure, a failure to recognise the fundamental imperative to respect and honour 'the other'.

(Burnside in Dòsa, 2001:19)

In addition, Burnside sponsors giving attention to themes that are typically considered taboo or objectified in a harmful way, preventing us from fully understanding their content and essence. One example is the concept of "death", commonly viewed as an adverse social event associated with feelings of sadness, loss, and tragedy. According to the Scottish writer, the concept of death exists alongside life without any positive or negative connotations attached to it:

We are creatures of flesh and bodily fluids, and we should celebrate that. I don't understand why our society is so keen to deny death. Death is part of our natural cycle. Poetry helps us to mourn, and you have to acknowledge that you are mourning and grieving.

(Burnside, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), 2022)

In a way, Burnside's poetics aim to detach the word from the social meanings that are associated with it. The poet acknowledges that he is not focused on the technical aspects of poetry, such as the meter and melody. Instead, his aim is to construct a space that conveys the sincerity of the subject matter, free from strict forms. Burnside's text is founded on experience, which serves as its underlying foundation:

I'm not really interested in artfulness. Poetry is to me an attempt to stay close to a spontaneous impulse. It seems to me that spontaneity is something expressing its true nature. A spontaneous work of art, whatever its faults might be, will have the virtue of being organic or authentic, because it comes from the direct utterance, and out of the nature of the writer or the nature of the experience.

(Burnside in Dòsa, 2001:22)

Furthermore, Burnside, in his essay 'Poetry And A Sense of Place', not only prefixes a spatial dimension of the lyric but also defines how time is subject to the exercise of

poetry. In fact, the Scottish poet explains that words can limit what is described in the text to a specific space-time session. Essentially the level at which poetry is placed 'transcends' space and time. A practical example of Burnside's lyric can be seen in "After The Storm":

Somewhere outside, in the gradually stilling world,  
a bus has stalled, the driver turning the engine, over and over again,  
and someone's dog is barking at the noise,  
guarding its phantom realm of bricks and weeds.  
All over Fife, the roads  
are blocked with fallen trees and stranded cars,  
the tide keeps washing wreckage to the shore,  
splints of timber, fishnets, broken toys.

(Burnside, 2006:35)

A catalysing moment for observing nature from the writer's point of view is described here. The passage suggests that Burnside slows down time in the poem gradually and provides spatial information in preparation for the moment of "stall". At this moment, the aim is to add depth and detail to things that may seem straightforward at first glance. The poem's structure is intricate, reminiscent of the aftermath of a storm where everything is disordered and in its proper place. The writing has no discernible pattern, allowing for a sense of disarray that ultimately adds to its beauty. In addition, mentioning Burnside's emotional connection to a specific place is essential. The text also refers to the county of Fife, which has historical significance. Burnside's poetry often centres around his homeland, Scotland, and he has tried clarifying his stance on this topic over the years. Monika Szuba has written a critical paragraph highlighting the defining features of Burnside's metric. She explains that it does not follow a specific pattern but instead consists of irregularities that make it challenging to identify any "wholeness" inside them. In Burnside's poems, the reader is asked to note a specific exercise. The goal is for the final product to represent a 'pleroma' or a perfect whole that includes everything visible and the 'Other'. Through the structure of his poems, Burnside intentionally creates irregularity to imply unguided connections for the reader who encounters his poetry:

I would like to argue that Burnside's forms demonstrate an innovative approach, or reserved attitude towards literary tradition, but it seems to serve other purposes too, namely that he employs poem sequences in order to signal the search for connectedness. I believe that lack of regularity in the stanzaic form enhances the impression of chance encounters, their fleetingness. The lines do not sit still on the page, but flit across it, sometimes suddenly broken by enjambments: iambic pentameters prevail, but they are ensconced by broken down lines.

(Szuba in Laplace, 2015:210)

According to Burnside, one can only access the entire scope of something through knowledge. This clarifies why observation and, in particular, paying close attention are crucial in his poetics. The author describes how poetry can draw the reader's focus to the often-overlooked things, such as daily events and tangible objects. These things are not hidden in a metaphysical or introspective realm but rather occur right before the reader's eyes and are frequently taken for granted. Burnside finds inspiration in the philosophy of 'wabi-sabi', a Japanese current that celebrates the beauty of imperfection and the fleeting nature of things. It takes knowledge and attention to capture the essence of an event or object, even if it's not perfect. The Scottish writer actively seeks this - discovering the intrinsic complexity within simplicity:

People are continually trying to sell us garbage which is kinda exotic and glamorous and superficial [...] and they are constantly trying to distract us from appreciating things like the ordinary stuff around us [...] I like the idea of wabi-sabi that simple, everyday things contain this kind of beauty, but you only get it by paying attention, by investing your attention.

(Burnside, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), 2022)

Moreover, Burnside clarifies that lyrics are also linked to the matter of personal identity, as previously mentioned in the paragraph. The "poetry of space" he created forms a unique dimension, enabling the onlooker to identify themselves within that setting and feel a sense of belonging. In summary, Burnside suggests an interpretation that encourages people to live in harmony with nature and eliminate the barriers that



prevent us from fully experiencing and appreciating the world. The poet suggests that in the chaotic world, the citizens live in, it can be challenging to find our place. The focus on survival often overshadows the ability to coexist peacefully, which could lead to humanity's downfall and a return to primitive ways of living. In the following passage, Burnside provides instructions to the entire group of colleagues on the appropriate place for the poet's subjectivity in a work, as per his perspective:

The lyric invites its reader to identify, not with the poet, or with the poet's experience, but with the space in which that experience unfolds. The best lyric poetry creates a magical, or metaphysical space which the reader can inhabit. For this reason, the poet must resist the temptations of glamour, on the one hand, and nostalgia on the other, because the space of the successful lyric must be, in one sense at least, empty.

(Burnside, 1998:207)

### **1.2.3 Burnside's Relationship With Language**

A further and fundamental aspect of Burnside's poetics is his relationship with language. As the poet admits, the linguistic influences he experienced were significant, as he had to relocate from his home country to a new one during his childhood. The author discusses the significance of linguistic issues, particularly in countries that maintain a distinct cultural and political identity. According to Burnside's report, Scotland has historically considered the English language to represent their national identity, while the Scottish Gaelic language was gradually eliminated between the 13th and 15th centuries:

A specific landscape and way of life gives rise to a specific language or dialect: Scots have found that English is insufficient to describe the land in which they live and, given the fact that Gaelic was deliberately eradicated, as a matter of policy, by the English, the people of Scotland rely on Scots - which some would describe as a language in itself, while others would define it as a dialect - to delineate their world.

(Burnside, 1998:207)

Additionally, the writer suggests that its political circumstances do not solely determine a country's language. Indeed, the landscape and the soil have the same, if not more significant, influence on a nation's linguistic and cultural formation. The Scottish dialect is a prime example of a language that has withstood political pressure and identity changes. It has adapted to different forms while remaining deeply rooted in the history and culture of the people who consider it an essential part of their identity. Without it, their sense of self would be lost. Burnside, who is considered a fugitive regarding categorisations, argues that it is not suitable to label him as both a Scottish poet and a nature poet. He prefers not to be described with any attribute in his work. In fact, he enjoys being recognised for improving the elements that lead to comparisons. In Burnside's "Husbandry", he prompts readers to consider other perspectives that are often overlooked, using the metaphorical concept of "leaving" them to ponder the other side of the coin:

Why children make pulp of slugs  
with a sprinkling of salt

or hang a nest of fledglings on a gate  
with stolen pins

is why I sometimes turn towards the dark  
and leave you guessing,

only to know the butter and nickel taste  
of cruelty;  
to watch, and show no sign

of having seen.

Not  
wickedness, that sometimes celebrates

a tightness in the mind;  
but what I comprehend

of fear and love:  
cradled remoteness, nurtured by stalled desire;  
  
willed deprivation;  
the silence I'm learning by heart.

(Burnside, 2000:53)

### 1.3 John Burnside's Novels

Burnside's most renowned prosaic work might be considered *A Lie About My Father*. By examining this work, we can identify the distinctive features of the extensive writing style of the Scottish author. Burnside's descriptive refinement, not only of the environment but also of personal memories, enables us to explore and internalise his introspective dimension. The author himself acknowledges that, unlike his lyrical works, he spends much more time refining the concepts he produces mentally for his stories. It may seem paradoxical to devote more time to prose than poetry, but Burnside explains that it is not just a matter of instinct when writing his novels. Instead, it studies how expressions are modulated within the story to extemporise the memory flow. Burnside's memoir *A Lie About My Father* uses storytelling to express his emotions about the past and create a space for readers to do the same. The following excerpt is an example of how he accomplishes this:

Meanwhile, I had started attending a primary school for the children of the poor, one of those institutions where to turn up at all and stay awake till the end of the day was an achievement. In that community, Catholics had to be very careful: their children should not stray, their schoolteachers should be seen to be diligent and strong on discipline. To encourage near-perfect attendance, the work was carefully designed so that it was not too difficult, while being mildly rewarding. At least, that was how it seemed to me. I was bored in school, most of the time; the only exception was in Scripture class, when we studied the life of Jesus and looked at beautiful, ancient-looking maps of Palestine and Judaea. I liked the teachers well enough. They lent me books and gave me special problems to solve.

(Burnside, 2006:47)

### 1.3.1 The First Lightning In The Dark: *The Dumb House*

To trace Burnside's stylistic development, the inquiry must begin with one of his earliest and most prolific prose works, *The Dumb House*. At the dawn of publication, the author had just married after returning to Scotland after an extended stay in England. Luke is known for being a private individual and not inclined to form social connections. His mother's untimely passing likely solidified this aspect of his personality to the point where he can be challenging to track down or interact with. Despite his adulthood, the protagonist still lives a life of complete indiscipline and solitude. Luke can narrate his experiences with great clarity but lacks an understanding of ethics and genuine humanity. As a result, he commits a crime against nature that eventually leads him to discover his nature. This can be considered, in a sense, the common trait of Burnside's early prose works: self-discovery through self-annihilation. After impregnating a homeless woman with mental problems and causing her death following the birth of twins, of which he is the biological father, he begins an actual path of human experimentation that leads him to madness. The work's concept is said to be inspired by the myth of a Mughal dynasty emperor named Akbar, who conducted an experiment raising his children with mute caretakers to study language generation in a non-speech community environment. The protagonist, Luke, is fascinated by the concept of language innateness but also dangerously obsessed with exploring forbidden territory, which is why the protagonist sets up a room where the two twins have to be confined within their own communicative space. This results in the siblings' creation of their network, where they only speak through singing, which infuriates Luke and causes him to sever their vocal cords until they sing no more. The following is a passage from one of Astrid Bracke's essays that tries to address the result of the protagonist's foolish experiment:

[...] Luke comes to realize that in secluding himself in the house with the twins, he did not so much imprison them, as himself. While they did not know any better, he obviously suffered from hardly ever leaving the house, and while the twins communicated with each other through their own language, Luke was locked out of their universe by not understanding them. In short, they were not the ones in the dumb house—he was.

(Bracke, 2014:433)

Despite the graphic violence portrayed in the novel, the author's vivid descriptions of the setting help guide the reader through these disturbing scenes to reveal the dire consequences of communication and affection deprivation in human relationships. James Saynor wrote a captivating review of the book, and in the excerpt below, he evaluates the quality of the masterclass of Burnside's descriptions following the critics' opinions:

We are trapped here in a mental landscape somewhere between that of Leonardo da Vinci and Norman Bates. The writing has an icy fabulousness, as in the malign dissertations of some of Nabokov's characters or the testament of the Grand Inquisitor in "The Brothers Karamazov." Incidents of unspeakable cruelty are captured in tones of mincing equanimity. You almost wish such scenes were more gruesomely told, if only to allow Burnside's readers a simpler moral vantage point. But he shows behavior that doesn't grow in easily cultivated ethical topsoil; it dwells below, in impulses that seem to go beyond good and evil.

(Saynor, [archive.nytimes.com](https://archive.nytimes.com), 1998)

### **1.3.2 The Tragic Background Stories Of 4 'Friends' Coming Together: *The Mercy Boys***

Burnside's second notable book, *The Mercy Boys*, presented a unique challenge for the Scottish writer. The novel explored the perspectives of multiple fictional characters, precisely four men from Dundee who frequented a local bar to indulge in liquor. As their stories unfold, the confessions become increasingly gruesome, shedding light on the unusual lives of these small-town inhabitants. One individual, known as Sconnie, wanders around Scotland without a specific destination, boarding trains that transport him to locations that differ significantly from where he was the day before. Junior complains of intense depressive symptoms and for some time professes the death of his wife, who instead lies bedridden by an illness that prevents her from walking. Alan, yet another drinker of the group, seems to find himself in an almost paranormal context: he is persecuted by a woman who believes herself to be a voodoo priestess who wants to exorcise him and, at the same time, is undermined by a crazy sadist who tries to

convert him to unconditional hatred towards the female gender. Rob, the last of the company, commits a heinous act of violence that opens the dances of a dance of blood and perversion consumed with a spiral of tragedies leading to the "hell on earth" of the four protagonists.

There is no telling what kind of gift one of John Burnside's wonderful sentences will contain. They unroll in front of the reader (though this is too fancy a conceit for a writer so stringently Scottish) like (what the hell) some beautiful carpet, all pattern and colour, until, tipped out with a last flick of the fringing, is ... the necessary thing.

(Enright, [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com), 2007)

### **1.3.3 Burnside's Challenges Himself With His First Collection Of Short Fictional Stories: *Burning Elvis***

Burnside explores the creation of a collection of 12 short novellas called *Burning Elvis* (2000). These stories revolve around characters who are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives. Through the elements portrayed in the story, it becomes clear that man's pursuit of identity is futile and that finding true meaning in life, symbolised by "Graceland", is impossible. The characters' violent, lustful, and naive actions ultimately lead to the downfall of their aspirations. In this instance, Burnside conveys his wish to transfer to the reader the perceived significance that an individual holds in their own limited perspective before encountering the immense scope of the world. The seemingly insignificant aspects of the characters' lives are captured, highlighting the importance of striving for a true sense of completeness that can only be achieved by the four protagonists.

In prose I want to write about people who are relatively limited, like the central character or narrator of this story might be. He is nowhere near pleroma. Fullness is a long way away from this person, so far away that he can't even see the possibility.

(Burnside in Dòsa, 2001:9)

Burnside's early prose works focus on the topical moments of his characters' awareness, with "violent revelations" at the core of these themes. Actually, the

characters think they are living in a world of freedom, but in reality, they are confined by societal conventions that limit them to the present moment. Society expects them to conform and prevents them from experiencing the true essence of life, which includes birth, growth, and death. The main characters don't realize that their minds have been deceiving them until a certain event triggers a significant reaction. Moreover, the central narrative of the anthology, which also serves as its title, offers insight into a critical element that will prove crucial in the author's subsequent works of prose (in terms of the temporal progression of the writer's oeuvre). The story's main victim is in fact, Lindy, brutally killed out of jealousy by another girl. Precisely, the female figures in Burnside's fiction are often involved as injured parties within the stories, both physically and psychologically. As the Scottish writer's episodes unfold, a pattern emerges that critics attribute to a likely misogynistic influence stemming from Burnside's own experiences. This hypothesis will be proven to be accurate, as evidenced by the author's later publications. In the following excerpt of an essay precisely concerning Burnside's *Burning Elvis*, masterly exposed by Alexandra Campbell, this misogynous sensation is addressed:

Across his fictional worlds, Burnside's women often appear as 'insignificant, two-dimensional characters, existing only in relation to men' (Bracke 2014: 424); their constant objectification becomes clumsy tool through which to highlight the dangers evident in communities shaped by a 'socially legitimised psychosis, a psychosis intimately connected, unfortunately, with our ideas of manhood, and social worth' (Burnside 2009:120). While the stories contained within *Burning Elvis* seek to address the underlying 'social psychosis' of toxic masculinity that legitimizes and normalizes conditions of exploitation, violence and abuse, these narratives also fall victim to such impulses.

(Campbell in Davies, 2020:55)

#### **1.3.4 The Roots Of Misogyny: *The Locust Room***

Reconciling with the aforementioned release of his book *Burning Elvis*, the Scottish author unintentionally hints in his subsequent work about how his personal life will impact his future literary creations. Indeed, Burnside has revealed that writing *The*

*Locust Room* in 2001 was a way to confront his conscience for his past treatment of women. Paul, the main character of the novel, recognises that his actions are shaped by his father's behaviour. The author, Burnside, uses Paul as a literary persona to explore his own experiences with relationships with women. Additionally, the book features two other significant male characters, including Paul's father, who is revealed in the author's memoirs to be based on Burnside's own father. The author analyses the personality of a rapist in the narrative and almost justifies his actions. However, the author eventually shows how the rapist had to distance himself from a society that prevented him from rebuilding his shattered identity. The reviews of this novel have been critical, but readers seem to have understood it well. Burnside's approach to depicting the book's primary situation has made Paul's perspective relatable and justified to readers.

So, not all men are rapists. Yet... three chapters are conducted within the rapist's mind, and he too relishes invisibility - a trick that, unlike Paul, he has already mastered. He too loves to hang around the edges of the social; like Paul, he is fascinated by the gaps. In fact, he is very like Paul indeed.

(Falconer, [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com), 2001)

### **1.3.5 'Dwelling' Becomes Challenging (Without The Right Tools): *Living Nowhere***

In 2003, Burnside achieved another significant milestone in his writing career. The author released a book titled *Living Nowhere*, which delves into the emotions of grief and displacement caused by various life circumstances. Curiously enough, Burnside referred to his early novels, ranging from *The Dumb House* to *Living Nowhere*, as "disastrous" in retrospect. It is clear that his harsh self-evaluation only considered his personal opinion. *Living Nowhere* and his other early works of prose received significant acclaim. The events happening in Cowdenbeath, which involve the Camerons and the Ruckerts, are noteworthy. The Camerons are new residents, while the Ruckerts are Latvian migrants who have also made their home in the Scottish town. The story takes place in the 1970s and follows the lives of two teenage friends, Jan Ruckert and Francis Cameron. They live in Corby, which is described by Burnside as



an unliveable place, but they still enjoy a carefree existence, until a terrible event changes the course of their lives forever. In his review of the novel, Andrew Cowan is amazed by the depiction of Corby in this book, as he once lived there himself. The journalist is left speechless by the strangeness of the layout. However, the reader recognises that the author's portrayal is a courageous effort to propose that individuals must step out of their comfort zone and expand their perspective of reality to achieve harmony with the world:

Francis's quest is not to find himself, but to lose himself, to become one with the stars and the tides and the deer in the woods, to slip the ties of "home", identity and history, to live precisely "nowhere". Having achieved this "erasure", he is then able to return to a post-industrial, cleaned-up Corby, if only to make clear he doesn't mean to stick around.

(Cowan, [independent.co.uk](http://independent.co.uk), 2003)

The story also reflects Burnside's commitment to ecological action. Indeed, the award-winning Scottish writer of *Living Nowhere* has created one of the most captivating 'industrial fiction' of the early 21st century. The story takes place in the town of Corby, where a group of young boys find themselves trapped in their reality. This novel highlights the theme of Burnside's desire to escape and find self-imposed exile. Gustav Klaus notes in one of his essays that the young protagonists in the story either actively seek out or stumble upon the opportunity to leave their current reality behind. Unfortunately, this often leads to unintended consequences. The youngsters in this story live in a world heavily affected by industrial pollution and the isolating atmosphere of the factories dominating their town of Corby. They use drugs to flee their nausea and embark on a trip to find their true selves. This setting is a crucial element that Burnside uses not only to shape the growth of one of the main characters, Francis, but also to set the tone for an ecocritical reading of the oeuvre. By doing so, the story becomes more than just a traditional coming-of-age tale, as Klaus points out. Unfortunately, one of the characters, the Latvian Jan, will find freedom through violence, becoming the victim of a ferocious attack from a group of street criminals. In the following passage, Gustav Klaus addresses the industrial source and identity of this fiction by Burnside:

One instance of this materialist tendency can be found in the marxist premise that a mode of production determines our ways of living and dwelling. This leads up directly to our theme, for what industrial fictions have done over the past two hundred years is precisely to explore the impact of industrial capitalism on human lives. In their imaginative responses to industrialism, writers saw people coping with and resisting the demands made upon them. They detected at once human waste and slumbering potential beneath so much degradation. They made sure that the dream of a healthier, more just and more dignified life was never lost. They valorised work even where they noted its absence. They represented ordinary men and women in their communities and environment. But they also showed the other side, the captains of industry and the repressive state apparatus in time of strife.

(Klaus, 2013:112)

### **1.3.6 Burnside's Memories Are Finally Unleashed: *A Lie About My Father***

In 2006, Burnside embarked on his autobiographical journey with the release of *A Lie About My Father*. This work marked a significant milestone in the literary career of the Scottish writer, solidifying his reputation as a skilled prose writer. Burnside's memoirs not only serve as a guide to understanding all of his works but also are the reason behind his prose writing until they were published. By sharing the narrator's journey, it becomes evident that Burnside's mental state has been dramatically affected by the loss of a steady sense of self, struggles in familial relationships, and the necessity to reconnect with reality. At the beginning of his autobiography, Burnside shares his fascination with Halloween. He expresses his interest in the unknown and mysterious folklore that suggests the return of the living from the realm of the dead, which leads him to contemplate the existence of another dimension. This concept plays a significant role in developing his philosophy as a Scottish writer. Continuing the story in the book, Halloween night triggers a series of flashbacks for the narrator, taking him back to the 90s. During this time, the narrator meets an American man named Mike by chance while on his way to Lake Kekuā. Over there, the narrator is set to meet with a friend there. During a break on their journey, Mike brings up a topic that triggers a memory for John. The stranger then asks John to talk about his father after speaking about

memories of his own father's figure. The narrator feels obliged to give way to his memories, and there starts his journey back to where he would not want to return anymore, back to where everything started, back to the lies:

Finally, however, and with some misgivings, I abandoned that idea and, as Mike wanted me to do, not just because his head was full of beautiful, simple scripts, but also because he was a certain kind of son, and because Martin was a certain kind of man, I told him a lie about my father.

(Burnside, 2006:13)

The narrator's troubles commence at King Street, which happens to be the location of the Burnside's initial residence. Immediately, Burnside expresses the loneliness and despair of being an only child. Through his parents' vivid accounts of their first home, little John feels like he was an active spectator of his older sister's death shortly after her birth. The death of Elizabeth, this is the name of the narrator's sister who died prematurely, turns out to be another reason that probably caused the alcoholism of Burnside's father. According to Burnside, his father no longer lived 'within the family' and had become quite distant. The narrator implies that this has affected the relationship between Burnside's parents. The narrator suggests the state of their relationship in the following passage:

I remember this girl because my father talked about her when he was upset, or when he came home drunk and sat in the kitchen muttering to himself. It was characteristic of how they were, I see now, that my mother never once mentioned Elizabeth's name, while my father talked about her all the time. Even in grief, they were separated.

(Burnside, 2006:33)

The story carries on with the portrayal of a despondent young Burnside, who is affected not only by his father's behaviour but also by the financial hardships faced by his family. The young man had to leave his hometown, where he lived in a prefab and relocated to Cowdenbeath in another house with his family. This town was also the setting of his previous novel, *Living Nowhere*. Following what would be his future survival guideline, he is once again beginning his search for a new "home" that isn't

the cold walls of his recently acquired residence in southeast Scotland. Ricarda Menn's analysis of Burnside's work focuses on his nostalgic memories of the "water-houses" he frequently visited, even when it went against his parents' wishes. In Burnside's memoirs, there is a lovely moment where Menn catches a glimpse of the yearning to find one's place in the world and live in harmony with nature. In her analysis, Menn seeks to establish a connection between Burnside's memories and how they are intertwined with his poetic production. This research is crucial because chapter two will explore the connections between the Scottish poet's life experiences and poetry. The excerpt below highlights this integral link:

In contrast to the industrial fabrics of his childhood, nature is conveyed as a potential form for retreat and solitude and presented as a 'world' in its own right, constituting a different mindset. This spatial perception, moreover, goes along with a peculiar sense of ownership and imagination: although aware that the place has to be entitled or owned by someone, Burnside alone feels entitled to its belonging. Underlying this is a form of ecological connection, which runs deeper than material conditions. Since he alone discerns himself as cherishing its merits and being able to imagine and convey an image of the place, the affective connection is more profound.

(Menn, 2018:39)

### **1.3.7 Back To Fiction (Or Not?): *The Devil's Footprints***

Having more space for reflections on Burnside's autobiographical works in the second chapter, the research continues by presenting yet another novel by Burnside published the year following the release of *A Lie About My Father*. Burnside's sixth fiction novel, *The Devil's Footprint*, brings him back to the raw and mysterious narrative style that was present in his earlier works. It is worth mentioning that in "Solitaries, Outcasts and Doubles: The Fictional Oeuvre of John Burnside", Astrid Bracke addresses a curious analogy involving the main characters of *The Locust Room* and *The Devil's Footprints*, Paul and Michael. The theme of violence and cruelty once again takes centre stage in *The Devil's Footprints*. The protagonist and narrator of the story, Michael Gardiner, is a lonely man, just like Paul in *Locust Room*, who tries to live his own life according to the rules of society. He feels the need to be separated from society. Probably this is due

to another trait that the two Burnside's fictional characters have in common, their awkward and unusual relationship with their father. Here is what Bracke points out in her essay:

His father, Michael believes, had no choice but to withdraw: "he made the only choice he could: to withdraw from the lesser, more local patterns, in order to work through something wider"<sup>1</sup>. In other words, he withdraws from the everyday—the local—to experience that which lies beneath or beyond the social world, beyond that which we see on the surface. His awareness of, and possible connection to, these pattern necessitated his father to seek seclusion: as Michael recognizes, he "had to close himself off in one direction, in order to be open in another"<sup>2</sup>.

(Bracke, 2014:431)

Michael tells the stories of Moira Bernie and her two children, who perished in a fiery tragedy, as well as the death of her brother and the strange tales of the residents of Coldhaven. Anne Enright notes in her review that Gardiner resembles a character in the memoirs of the Scottish author. In fact, in *A Lie About My Father*, the character of Arthur Fulton suggests the exact hidden nature of the protagonist of *The Devil's Footprints*, unsuspecting in some ways of committing acts against nature, he is guilty of having committed a terrible crime against an underage girl he left dying on the side of the road. In the following excerpt, Enright emphasises that Burnside's metaphysical episodes attempt to lure readers into exploring the already familiar unknown:

Michael has that dulled sense of someone on the brink of the unknown and of the erotic that Burnside evokes when he writes about the last years of his boyhood. Here is a similar fascination with empty interior spaces and botched deaths, and with the uncanny sense that you may have a double somewhere.

(Enright, [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com), 2007)

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<sup>1</sup> Burnside J., 2007:209

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 210

### **1.3.8 Pollution And Knowledge Are Discussed In A Dystopian Scenario: *The Glisten***

*The Glisten*, published in 2008, one year after *The Devil's Footprints*, is another masterpiece that epitomises the author's need, appeal, and drive to raise awareness among his audience. The Scottish author presents a utopian vision of a city divided into two main social classes: Innertown and Outertown. Innertown is home to working-class citizens who struggle to make ends meet amidst difficult economic and environmental circumstances. Meanwhile, Outertown is a reflection of the affluent and privileged lifestyle of the wealthy. The population is centred around a chemical plant that is devastating their community and causing irreparable damage to the already heavily polluted atmosphere. The protagonist of this fiction is Leonard, a boy afflicted by various family problems who seeks shelter in an imaginary world made of books and illusions. Books play a crucial role in this novel as they hold the key to saving a destroyed town. The knowledge they offer is essential to acquiring this salvation. Unfortunately, the distribution of wealth in the village hinders the spread of knowledge. This is because the wealthy, who have the means to purchase any book, often view reading as a pointless pastime. Instead, they prefer to engage in more superficial interests that highlight their social status. On the other hand, working-class individuals who desire to expand their knowledge and gain new perspectives through theoretical literature cannot afford it, leaving them ignorant and submissive to the existing system. The following excerpt is taken directly from the book, which explains how the industrial plant in the city was gradually harming the population:

The most convincing evidence that some evil was being perpetrated on the headland, however, was the fact that, for as long as the plant had existed, the people themselves had not been right. Suddenly, there were unexplained clusters of rare cancers. Children contracted terrible diseases, or they developed mysterious behavioral problems. There was more than the usual share of exotic or untreatable illnesses, a sudden and huge increase in depression, a blossoming of what, in the old days, would have been called madness.

(Burnside, 2010:9)

This fictional and ethical tale takes place in an apocalyptic setting. It follows the protagonist, Leonard, who experiences post-mortem visions from encountering the "Moth Man" character. This mysterious tormentor attracted and subsequently killed his victims, young boys lured by the same man. The youthful main character recounts a paranormal encounter where he perceives himself in a dimension without time. They claim to have witnessed a reflection of themselves, resembling a suspended copy, before their demise. The phrase "mon semblable—mon frère" was used to describe this experience. This detailed digression is intended to highlight how this passage is an integral part of Burnside's work: the presence of a 'double'. Bracke attempts to explain the significance and function of identifying "doubles" within a narrative through a theoretical approach:

Doubles play a significant role in Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny, a sense of anxiety best captured by the German word *Unheimlich*. Drawing on the psychoanalyst Otto Rank's research, Freud notes that doubles are linked with "mirror-images, shadows, guardian spirits, the doctrine of the soul and the fear of death". Particularly in terms of death—and the death of the mortal body—doubles serve as a kind of "insurance", as Freud puts it, for the extinction of the self. In other words, even though the mortal body dies, the soul is immortal and as such ensures the continued existence of the self. Consequently, Leonard's experience of encountering himself—or his double—is not unpleasant, but merely surprising, even reassuring to him.

(Bracke, 2014:435)

To conclude this section about *The Glisters*, it's important to mention a call to action in the book. The book explores John Burnside's philosophy and his desire for a place beyond the constraints of society that limit our true nature as human beings. According to Ulaş Özgün's article about *The Glisters* and its eco-political and eco-critical implications, the fiction urges people to act. It addresses the same people who are played as characters witnessing the catastrophic deterioration of their city and do not consider themselves a valuable intervention to change its fate. Furthermore, these people have not even considered the issue of putting an end to the tortures of Moth Man, who continued to reap victims over the years without anyone bothering to stop his bloodlust. In his article, Özgün cements this thought, taking the audience back to

the activism of the early 2000s, where computer technology began to contrast tangible reality by transporting humans to a place disconnected from their material existence but irreparably linked to the virtual dimension. The following is an excerpt from Özgün's aforementioned article "Toxins Pervading Post-Industrial Ecology in John Burnside's *Glister*", stating that it is paramount to consider the government's negligence towards the issues of the polluted town.

The apparent negligence of governmental bodies for not realising the fragile human body's enmeshment with the more-than-human world causes insurmountable suffering to the point of insanity for the living and lead to numerous deaths in the book. [...] The fact that government and political authorities do not take any comprehensive action to prevent the local people from being exposed to these toxins makes these bodies the primary culprits in what befall to the people of the town.

(Özgün, 2019:166)

### **1.3.9 Feelings And Drugs In The Second Volume Of Memoirs By Burnside: *Waking Up In Toytown***

In his second autobiography, John Burnside reveals more about himself than just his story. *Waking Up In Toytown* is a journey into the introspective mind of a young man. He battles his inner demons and those of a society that holds him back. Burnside has chosen to share a particular set of memories, likely in an effort to alleviate the burden on his heart and mind that has been weighed down with negative thoughts for a while. The work of the Scottish writer takes the reader on a journey through the perplexing task of discovering one's place within the enigmatic realm of "Toytown" - a place that holds both significant meaning and no meaning at all. His memoirs begin with an epilogue. He is in an asylum where he has no idea how he got there, which he describes as the "strangest lunatic asylum that I had ever seen". The book's first chapter is titled as an epilogue to showcase a unique structure and because Burnside refers to it as the "final" chapter, indicating his recovery from a near-death experience. His health conditions for much of the narrative are that of a drug addict and a drunkard at the limits of his demise. Right from the start of the book, it's evident that the narrator will transport readers to the fringes of humanity in a liminal realm. In the autobiography,



Burnside fails to find a solution to his addiction. *Waking Up In Toytown* is also a collection of memories focusing on love, lost and found. The captivating search for a companion that would ease the author's painful existence through the conventions of society and the several working environments in which he found himself throughout his career intertwine into a mixture of uneasiness and unnecessary efforts. Later in the paper, these conflicting relationships will be introduced from another perspective, perhaps relating to an essential extent to the poetic production of the Scottish writer. Even in this work, Burnside considers and criticises the poor education he received from his father. He tries to justify it by linking his dramas as an adult with the possible misadventures and psychological difficulties that his father may have suffered at that age in the past. In the following passage, Burnside explains how even his intrusive reflections have influenced his relationships with love. In particular, the Scottish writer recounts here his first approach with Adele, a married woman, another piece of the puzzle of his daring memoirs.

I could look back at that first idyll with Adele and say that it was just the customary days-of-wine-and-roses gig - something I had mastered over the years - with a little sexual ambiguity thrown in for good measure. But that wouldn't be the whole truth. The truth would be more like this: I was blundering through life with a head full of voices, doing my best to act normal, but unable to stop myself from making occasional visits to the psychotic end of the spectrum, the ultraviolet zone where love and death weren't as clearly separated as they were elsewhere, the Edgar Allan Poe, *Yeux sans Visages*, you-always-hurt-the-one-you-love end [...]

(Burnside, 2010:139)

In this regard, Ricarda Menn's intervention in her essay "Elsewhere, yet Nowhere: John Burnside's Autofictions and Strategies of (Dis) Placement" explains an exciting aspect of understanding the research in the Scottish author's production:

As a structuring principle, the placement in a lunatic asylum creates a problematic unreliability, caused by limited accountability and sanity implied by the stay in such an institution. Openly admitted, it engages the reader in an underlying search for order and ordering memory in the text, and not a deliberate lie. A general problem of autobiographical texts being the limits of memory, this generic convention is here

deliberately staged within the autofictive reconstruction of the past. Denoting a play with the reader, who is potentially on the lookout for slips and errors, questioning authenticity, the generic problem of limited memory is made productive to a certain extent by making the reader aware of this. The space of the lunatic asylum thus serves a dual purpose within the text: it marks a point of departure, for the narration, but also the quest for normalcy of the protagonist. In posing a connection to implied madness as recurring reference in Burnside's fictional writing, this quite openly problematises autobiographical reliability.

(Menn, 2018:35)

Menn theorises and recognises that the structure of the work proposed by Burnside is a device the writer studied to induce a particular type of reasoning in the readers. The setting and temporality of the facts narrated by Burnside suggest that in the writer's head, those related facts were highly fragmented and positioned in a confusing way within his memoirs. The writer's purpose is to arouse the sense of perdition that dazed him in his memories, which were full of shame and apparent disbelief at how his life path led him in the direction he then decided to pursue. In this analysis and summary of Burnside's second pivotal autobiography, a common thread emerges in how he approaches prose writing. It could be induced that preparing a text structure linked to the poet's feelings is connected to what has been said previously about the author, or rather to the need for 'annihilation' to proceed with 'regeneration'. In this case, destruction develops on two fronts: the physical and personal one of the author, recounted in his memoirs, and that of the reader, who is invited to transcend the dimension of the outside observer by being thrown inside the storytelling. The reader is tamed by the need to empathise with and be overwhelmed by Burnside's narrative passages.

### **1.3.10 Burnside Changes Scenarios And Protagonists In His Eighth Fiction: *A Summer Of Drowning***

*A Summer of Drowning*, published in 2011, marks a further passage within the fictional world of Burnside. At the time of the narration, the protagonist Liv is 28 years old and lives separated from her mother. A flashback of an episode 10 years earlier opens the

work. The reader is introduced to the island of Kvaløya in remote Norway. With Angelika, her mother, Liv, lives a life of confinement, probably dictated by her mother's artistic and work needs. However, Liv does not disdain this type of life. Indeed, she rejoices in passively observing what surrounds her. She defines herself as "one of God's spies". The memory of 4 characters who allegedly drowned ten years ago constitutes the introduction of the fiction. As usual in Burnside's high-quality works, there is an episode where a well-known character named Liv, also known as Maia, is compared to the Nordic mythology figure of the 'huldra'. This creature is known to resemble a troll disguised as a woman who can seduce any man and either kill or reward him based on her will. As always, Burnside incorporates a dual nature and adds a spiritual and metaphysical element, which had become a vital component in his work by that time. The following is a section from a review of Robin Leggett's work, where he discusses the liminal nature of the characters in the story, particularly Liv. The reviewer accurately highlights the challenge of immersing oneself in Burnside's fictional world:

If Liv draws you into her story and her character, then I suspect you would enjoy this book rather more than I did. But the dreamlike effect where you feel that reality and events are just a touch away but unobtainable ran though to Liv herself for me. I wanted to like her and find her interesting, but I didn't. I found her to be strangely naive and immature even allowing for her remote upbringing. The influence of Kyrre Opdahl on her is suggested and yet she doesn't spend much time with him. And in a world where there is television, computers, schools and a nearby airport, the death of two young boys and disappearance of several others seems to spark no interest in either the community or the police. But then, perhaps I'm trying to force reality onto Burnside's dream world. Yet I cannot deny that it is compellingly told and evocative. My sense was a story that wanted to speed up at times but Liv's narration wouldn't let it.

(Leggett, [thebookbag.co.uk](http://thebookbag.co.uk), 2011)

Astrid Bracke's essay "Solitaries, Outcasts and Doubles: The Fictional Oeuvre of John Burnside" suggests that a fairly significant turning point for Burnside's prosaic output occurs in *A Summer of Drowning*:

Yet although the appearance of a female protagonist in *A Summer of Drowning* is a significant change, it does not account for the shift that has taken place in Burnside's most recent novels. That development runs deeper, encompassing not merely the protagonist, but also the setting, and most importantly, the atmosphere of *A Summer of Drowning*.

(Bracke, 2014:426)

In fact, for the first time, the novel's protagonist is female. The narrative develops around Liv, a young girl discussing memories and her isolated life with her mother. As Bracke points out, Angelika is one of the most significant characters in Burnside's production: an independent woman, a single mother and a role model for her daughter. Overturning the habit of reading those who had previously only been described and used as simple silhouettes or sacrificial lambs, a three-dimensional description of the feminine characters is thus provided. In an attempt to clarify Bracke's note regarding *A Summer of Drowning*, the research aims to elaborate on the considerable shift in Burnside's fictional structure. This new development is most likely connected to another breach in the author's plans, which was mentioned in the previous paragraph and occurred after the release of his second autobiography.

### **1.3.11 A New Collection Of Short Stories Comes Together With A Tiny Bit Of Positivity: *Something Like Happy***

Burnside takes a different path from his earlier prosaic works in his latest anthology of short stories. As can be verified in the writer's later oeuvre, a shift is observed in the focus of his writing following the release of his second memoir, *Waking Up in Toytown*. Despite being marked by the writer's sombre descriptions, the short stories contain moments of hope and joy, as indicated by the title. The 13 short novellas range from everyday topics, such as the problem of medical expenses and, therefore, the challenging economic conditions of "Slut's Hair", and metaphysical stories inspired by the great works of the past, such as the Shakespearean "A Winter's Tale". In this collection, Burnside departs from the melancholic themes of his earlier stories. Instead, he presents a more optimistic outlook on his memories while acknowledging the presence of spirits and disappearances that have long intrigued him. It appears that

Astrid Bracke has not embraced the changes made by the writer. She advises the reader to be cautious of Burnside's innovations, implying that they may be a deliberate ploy to establish his new identity as a "novelist-poet":

Although of the thirteen stories in *Something Like Happy* five are focalized through women—one even has a female narrator—the majority of these women are every bit as cardboard as they were in Burnside's earlier work: they are passive, and at times abused, whereas the men are the ones who are active and dominant. Consequently, the centrality of women in Burnside's most recent novel is short-lived. It is more likely, then, that it is not the gender issue that has caused the oft-noted shift in Burnside's work, but the way in which the borders between the everyday and the mystical have been re-established and solidified. This shift is so consequential that it can be related to Burnside's changing status as a novelist.

(Bracke, 2014:437)

### **1.3.12 Women, Songs And Other Memories In Burnside's Third Autobiography: *I Put A Spell On You***

Approaching the most recent works (compared to the writing of this essay) by John Burnside, we meet the Scottish writer's third and last autobiography in order of publication. In this piece of work, Burnside takes the readers on a journey to explore his initial experiences with love and how they shaped his relationships throughout his life. In particular, the book focuses on his relationship with the women in his life, from his cousin Madeleine, perhaps his first and true love, to the more adult and troubled relationships of his past. *I Put A Spell On You* should not be ignored or seen as unimportant in his memoirs. The next chapter will show how this work is connected to various events that are also reflected in his other works. Other characters may have depicted these events but share similar plot developments. Furthermore, *I Put A Spell On You* also reveals the strong connection between Burnside and the art of music. In the text, disparate connections and associations match the sensoriality transmitted by the songs that marked the writer's adolescence and growth, significant for having inspired several of his compositions.

### 1.3.13 A Paean To The Art Of Listening: *Ashland And Vine*

When it comes to Burnside's latest work of fiction, *Ashland And Vine*, it is clear that the author has reached a level of artistic maturity. Published in 2017, this novel follows the familiar pattern of featuring a troubled main character - in this case, Kate Lambert, who is plagued by personal struggles and a history of family tragedies. She meets what will later prove to be something of a saviour from his self-destructive spiral of alcohol addiction, Mrs Jean Culvert. Jean is an elderly person who inadvertently offers Kate a chance at redemption at a modest but significant price, ending the girl's relationship with alcohol. This work has some gloomy details that are typical of Burnside. However, there is a noticeable parallel between the identity that young John had in the past and Kate's story. The Scottish writer suggests that he has undergone a mental adjustment and has matured due to the serenity of the family life he has built over the years. He encourages the reader also to take a moment to pause and listen, just as he has done. In this case, to listen to what John Burnside has to say, to discover what has long been his fantasy world, and to take his eyes to see it as he has seen it all this time.

Burnside's latest explored work ends this paragraph, as it was meant to analyse and present his fiction and autobiographies. The study aimed to present Burnside's complete collection of writings to encourage readers to explore the Scottish writer's work and how his personal life has influenced his experiences. The upcoming chapter will delve into the connections and parallel elements between Burnside's production., i.e. the research will turn to the main body in which all the works of interest of the writer, in prose and poetry, will be involved.

## 2 CHAPTER TWO

### **How John Burnside's Life Influenced His Literary Production**

*Sometimes I think you love those children more than you love me."*

It was the first time she had used the word love. She had used words like sexy, and sensual, and Lovely, and fond of - but she had never said love, and as soon as she did, she realised that it was inappropriate. We both did. We also knew that what she had said was true.

(Burnside, 2010:106)

In Burnside's initial memoir, *A Lie About My Father*, the author draws heavily from personal experiences. The book's authenticity and empathy towards readers were highly praised, proving pivotal in the Scottish writer's career. To an extent, the writer unleashed a Pandora's box of his experiences and multiple 'dimensions'. As mentioned before, *A Lie About My Father* by John Burnside did not include all parts of his story. Published later than the first one, *Waking Up In Toytown* is the second collection of memoirs, where the author delves deeper into the events that shaped his life and influenced his work. In the next paragraph, the research will analyse *Waking Up In Toytown*. However, it is essential to note that our analysis will not include *I Put A Spell On You*, Burnside's most recent collection of memoirs. This work will not be involved in the research as, despite containing several autobiographical references, it seems to focus mainly on the relationship between Burnside and the female gender, thus not providing as many facts as the other two autobiographies.

#### **2.1 Connections with *A Lie About My Father***

As regards this chapter's content, the first section will examine the connections between elements in *A Lie About My Father* and the author's poetry and prose. John

Burnside has included several quotes from episodes of his personal life in his poems. One of the examples is evident in "Sense Data", where he writes about the sensory experiences that inspire his theoretical work. The poem is a tribute to the sensory data that Burnside has experienced in his life. In his communion with nature narrated in these lines, an episode also reported in *A Lie About My Father* appears within the poem. The following is the poetic segment to which the episode mentioned earlier refers; it will then be compared with the correspondent in *A Lie About My Father*:

Waking at night, I would sneak downstairs in the dark  
and know my way by some unconscious craft,

some seventh sense that recognised  
a deeper pulse, the tug of things at rest,

the tension in a table, or a vase of goldenrod  
- and when I stood outside,

head tilted to a night-sky packed with light.  
I waited for a music I could feel

like motion in the marrow of my bones, [...]

(Burnside, 2000:12)

Six years after the publication of this poem as part of *The Asylum Dance* collection of poems, Burnside recalls the episode while bringing back highlights of his childhood in *A Lie About My Father*. Indeed, in the earlier years of his infancy, the poet often wandered out of his house in search of the first traces of nature and peace, which did not seemingly pertain to the author's life at that time. The following is the excerpt from which an association with the precedent quotation could hypothetically be sensed:

When I was around seven, I took to getting up on summer nights, after my parents had gone to bed, and sitting out on the window sill, listening to the owls, spooked by their weird cries, even more spooked by the fact that, no matter how close they sounded, I never saw them.



Although the poem's reference to the episode wasn't explicit, the writer will inadvertently insert it in his first autobiographical work. This instance is reported to introduce the scope of the research of this chapter, which will focus on identifying potential links between his poetic production and his autobiographical narrative, as just demonstrated. Furthermore, another instance of connections between Burnside's memoirs and his poetic production could be represented by a memory inserted in "Fields", another composition part of *The Asylum Dance*. This is a significant example of how the author's private life is depicted in his lines with a powerful description. The details highlighted by the Scottish writer convey both affection and melancholy to the reader, which are imbued with a different meaning when compared to the autobiographical elements of *A Lie About My Father*. Below is a fragment of the poem that contains references to the memories of the Scottish writer:

When I was five  
or six  
                  - I can't recall -  
the land for miles was sick with foot and mouth  
and grateful for the work  
                  my father  
travelled the length of the county  
                  digging pits  
for slaughtered herds.  
On farm after farm for miles  
                  in the paling light  
he worked all day  
                  and far into the dusk  
then caught the last bus home  
                  his shirtsleeves stitched  
with quicklime and dust.  
That was the year our neighbour  
                  Agnes  
                          died:



my father was almost never actually violent. At some instinctual level he understood that a threat is much more potent than an actual blow. [...] hed got used to the smell of burning flesh when he worked on the disposal squads during the foot-and-mouth epidemic of the early sixties. He'd got used to a few blows himself, no doubt, over the years, and he could take as good as he gave. He'd come home a few times, when I was a child, with blood on his face and shirt, cuts on his arms, bruises on his knuckles. Yet his injuries never troubled him. 'It's a scratch,' he would say, when my mother tried to get him to go to the hospital; then he'd wash the blood away with warm water and throw his shirt in the dustbin. [...] My father was one of those men who sit in a room, and you can feel it: the simmer, the sense of some unpredictable force that might, at any moment, break loose and do something terrible. [...] The worst thing that could happen was when he fell into one of his dark silences and sat brooding all day waiting for the small provocation that would set things going.

(Burnside, 2006:32)

The father is a significant element in understanding the literary techniques used by Scottish writer John Burnside. Burnside depicts his father as "unravelling like twine" in his poems and falling "into one of his dark silences" in his essay *A Lie About My Father*. The father's role represents a heavily "present" "absence" that torments Burnside during his episodes of daily insanity. The author recounts a vivid childhood memory of when his father, exhausted from work, created tension in the family environment. Burnside's parents' relationship is reflected in his prose and poetry. We can see how the Scottish writer's mother constantly feared her husband's outbursts. The phrase "fix the tea" employed by the author could metaphorically mean that the woman constantly tried to keep her partner's "unpredictable force" at bay. Here lies the meaning of this comparative analysis. The impact of the traces of Burnside's life has indelibly permeated both his descriptive repertoire and the content of his poems.

### **2.1.1 Snow, Remembering Elizabeth and Andrew**

The references to Burnside's poems linked to his autobiographies are diverse and cover various themes. Another example of a hypothetical association between the author's memories and his lines concerns a rather significant memory of his life, the premature death of his older sister. In fact, the eldest daughter of the writer's parents died shortly

after being born, leaving a substantial emotional void within the couple. According to the writer, the birth of young John was only an expedient to try to fill the resulting disappointment from that unfortunate event. Burnside dedicates a few pages to divulge this sad memory in *A Lie About My Father*, a fragment of which is reported below:

I always felt kin to her, though, even when my father took me aside, one drunken Saturday afternoon - the first time, this may have happened when we still lived in King Street, but it happened more often than I can recall, and it went on for years - and told me that he and my mother had had another child before me, that her name was Elizabeth, that she had died and that he wished she had lived, and I had died instead.

(Burnside, 2006:33)

Since childhood, Burnside has felt opposition to his role as a son, particularly from his father, as can be inferred from his statements. Several consequences are related to John's position towards his father figure. Burnside, although willing to try to create an emotional relationship between himself and his father, was openly rejected by these ferocious and probably significant words. However, in his poetic production, the memory of Elizabeth's death resurfaces, albeit veiled, in "Adam and Eve":

I always think of them  
as innocents:  
too much intended for sin  
they walk their garden

stunned with a local wonder  
angels and beasts

inured to everything but them  
or lost in unwitting joy  
like the dreamed unborn.

(Burnside, 2000:20)

Burnside's interpretation of this poem suggests that the central theme of the lines is words. The words 'laced' on things, creating references, being inextricably linked to the

definition of something, exploited for the communicative use of human beings, incapable of not labelling what surrounds them. The above fragment of the poem suggests a metaphor with the phrase "like the dreamed unborn" as its term of comparison. It is documented that Burnside's older sister was born before her death. However, the phrase "unwitting joy" may imply that Burnside was aware of his parents' emotions leading up to the birth of Elizabeth. Therefore, the author is aware of the desperation caused by the loss of something desired so much, leaving no time to savour its happiness for those who cared about it. Furthermore, other lines within "Adam and Eve" can be traced back to a theme in *A Lie About My Father* and in theoretical writings and essays discussing Burnside's literary production. Indeed, his connection with nature implies that many details regarding his descriptions are often connected to images present in his mind, whether they are memories or imaginary places. As already seen in the first section of the first chapter, a very favourable setting for the investigations of Burnside and other British eco-poetics and eco-critics is the Nordic environment, Scandinavian in the case of the Scottish writer. In fact, after visiting Norway, Burnside returns to his search, almost hypnotised by what he has just seen among the fjords. From here, he may have taken the inspiration for the setting of *A Summer Of Drowning*, for example, but certainly, his connection with these cold and snowy places dated back long before the publication of that fiction. As can also be seen from the following lines, at the time of *The Asylum Dance*, there were these winter scenarios in the author's thoughts to immerse his situational complexes.

our bodies  
half-inhabited  
  
and finding it harder to live  
with others:  
  
with each new winter  
each new space  
  
the gardens we remember in our sleep  
filling with snow all day  
  
as we come to require  
  
this white out

this  
sufficiency of names.

(Burnside, 2000:22)

According to the research hypothesis explained in these pages, these lines are fundamental, especially to understand what was discussed in the first chapter regarding the theoretical phases concerning Burnside's production. In fact, in the lines cited, "half-inhabited" bodies are mentioned, such as those which, according to Burnside, would have belonged to us if we had not dared to exile ourselves or definitively delete our dimension of earthly existence or to turn our gaze towards the 'other', to understand what our totality consists of. The "sufficiency of names", also the object of Burnside's critical investigation of categorisation through the use of words, is mentioned at the end of this poem, which means a lot for Burnside's story. It has to be mentioned that everything could be traced back to the writer's past since, as seen from the following excerpt, imagination and grief have been consequential in Burnside's dimension:

The best I could come up with was to tell my own stories, stories that countered his half-truths with the pure actuality of fiction. It was self-defence, nothing more; but what better defence than a story, set somewhere in the far north, about a boy and a dog and the secrets they keep, in a country of perpetual snow.

(Burnside, 2006:35)

To put the segment just mentioned into context: according to his son, Burnside's father, when he found himself intoxicated from alcohol abuse, used to remind him that John's conception occurred only to fill the void left by Elizabeth's loss. During his infancy, young Burnside was frequently addressed with these words of resentment, which undermined his sentimental temperament even under his mother's protective wing. Therefore, the young man had devised a rather crude but quite effective method to overcome this pain: denial through his imagination. In his memoirs, a young Burnside tells of how he resorted to inventing stories like the one mentioned to distract himself from his father's words. Furthermore, there was another significant loss in the life of Burnside and his family, also chronicled in his first autobiography. Once again, it is an

untimely death. Following further pre-birth complications, the Scottish writer's mother lost the family's third child, who would have been Burnside's brother, the late Andrew. This time, being more prepared than the previous trauma of the death of their eldest daughter, Elizabeth, it is said that the Scottish writer's parents had a very different, yet painful, reaction to the family bereavement. The mother isolated herself from everyone for a few days, without communicating with anyone, to process the second unexpected loss while remaining within her private sphere. Meanwhile, the father chooses to mourn by continuing as if nothing had happened and drowning his pain in alcohol and gambling. The most interesting note, however, concerns the author himself. Unlike Elizabeth's loss, which he can only experience through the memories of his parents, the very young Burnside also suffers the premature death of his younger brother, as told in the following passage taken from *A Lie About My Father*:

I would lie awake, then, listening to the night and thinking about my brother. He was gone before he had even existed, and I never even got to see him, but I had a new ghost to entertain.

(Burnside, 2006:62)

The memory of this 'ghost' is preserved by Burnside and reported in the lines of "Brother" in *The Hoop*. This line is the most explicit reference to an episode in the Scottish writer's life among the other lines containing autobiographical references. The poem is filled with heartbroken but conscious words, and the segment that describes the scene in Burnside's mother's room is a significant depiction of mourning. The vase of narcissi and hazel twigs on the dresser is part of an unforgivable imagination, which is dismayed by a pain that cannot be replicated. Throughout the poem, the Scottish writer reminisces about his brother, as if they had grown up side by side, even after his passing. This loss potentially allowed Burnside to no longer be the catalyst for his father's pitiful complaints. One of the lines in the poem, "We hated you," could also symbolise the transfer of Elizabeth's loss to that of Andrew's disappearance:

You were dead in the womb. They had to cut you loose: like some diver trapped in a wreck you lay helpless, tethered to death by the cord. We hated you for that. The flowers in a jar by Mother's bed: narcissi and hazel twigs. A kind of sign. I remember the dreams

I had about that time: the milk in my glass transformed to blood and still I drank it,  
thirsting in your place.

(Burnside, 1988:55)

### 2.1.2 Fleeing

The poem that gives the title to the collection *The Asylum Dance* is a masterpiece with cryptic content that perfectly embodies Burnside's path towards his professional greatness and personal development. In this case, the writer immerses the memories of a past time in a moment of chaos, in an imaginary "dance" of madness. Summerswood becomes the stage of the performance, described by Burnside as the intertwining of bodies that exchange the heat of their movements and feelings. At that point, the poem focuses on observing a couple, a boy and a girl, who dance and exude love. According to Burnside, it all ends in the blink of an eye. In a certain sense, part of the poem also ends in those lines, since from that point, the author's reflection is born, left alone to observe and elevate himself, to see the world from another, higher and more detached perspective compared to the position at the centre of the "dance". This poem contains plausible connections to Burnside's personal life, as seen in the following segment:

[...] It was something we did, every year,  
in that backwater town,  
abandoning our lawns and flower beds,  
to meet the patients, out at Summerswood.  
It seemed a privilege to be allowed  
within those gates, and know we might return,  
to see the meadows, striped with light and shade,  
the silent lake, the fallen cedar trees. [...]

(Burnside, 2000:31)

According to Burnside's autobiographical memoirs, these lines may be linked to his childhood. The author reminisces about spending his leisure time with his friends in a location resembling the one in the poem. The following excerpt provides the basis for this assumption:



Beyond that, there was nothing but open fields, and the odd derelict farm building, till you got to the place we kids called the Water Houses, a dark, mysterious set of sheds and storehouses that, to my mind, was both deeply sinister and infinitely exciting. I spent a good deal of time at the Water Houses, mostly because I had been forbidden ever to go near them.

(Burnside, 2006:39)

These ‘Water Houses’ not only lexically recall the ‘backwater town’ mentioned in the poem but also suggest, from the description, that they have similar characteristics of mysteriousness and awkwardness towards Burnside. In the Scottish writer’s memories, the place seems more like a dark spot where he could explore the unknown part of existence. On the contrary, in “The Asylum Dance”, the backwater town is considered more like a sacred space where the same occurrence happens yearly. In addition to this, the autobiography reports how Burnside used to escape from his home to isolate himself, reflect and imagine. In “Lost”, part of *Common Knowledge*, the poet describes the pleasure of suddenly getting lost in the suburban forests. Burnside finds that the feeling of disappearing and being desired by someone is stimulating. He has combined these activities into a single gesture, a habit. According to him, this habit has allowed him to feed his poetic vein over the years. Escaping enables him to isolate himself and focus on his thoughts and the presence or absence of those around him. Moreover, running away allows him to observe nature and comprehend its unadulterated aspects, describing its details with great sensitivity. Below is a part of the poem that will be analysed in the following lines.

I wanted the pink-toothed  
killer, the casual  
expert, the tribal memory of one  
who slips into the chicken runs of mind  
and works his way with something of my own  
bright rage towards the folly of the damned.

(Burnside, 2006:9)

During “those Sunday afternoons”, in which the Scottish poet used to escape from everybody and flee his home to find ‘another one’, he tried to contrast his enemies with whom he had to live, the spirits that did not want to let him alone. In the previously quoted lines, Burnside suggests that his task is to gain control over “the chicken runs of mind” that bothered him to the point that he felt enraged towards himself and the feelings he displayed. Usually, in order to tackle the strength of the emotions that clouded his vision, he abused forbidden substances, which led him both to suffer from health issues and, at the same time, overturn reality into a brave fiction, far from the struggles of the industrial suburbs. The following is an excerpt reporting the first escapes of young Burnside after the accident that led his broken arm to be the cause of his acceptance that his parents were overly neglecting him.

I liked being lost. It reassured me that it was so easy to detach myself and slip away. I had fantasies of being found, hours later, by a policeman or a good-hearted stranger who would take me off to some good, clean, friendly place while they tried to find my parents; then, when that plan failed, I would be taken in, shown to my room, sent to a new school, looked after by kindly women, given new clothes and brand new books, with that straight-from-the-bookshop smell. Every street that led somewhere else, every tree I'd never seen before, every house with strange curtains was a new life, just waiting to be entered.

(Burnside, 2006:113)

### **2.1.3 Falling**

In *A Lie About My Father*, Burnside's troubled life is made available for examination by the reader. Although only very generic parts of his late adolescence and early adulthood are described, the writer's discomfort experiences illuminate the interpretation of specific patterns found within his poetic production. In "Wrong," a poem from the collection *Swimming In The Flood*, Burnside uses a phrase to recall his period of personal decline due to alcohol and substance abuse narcotics. It should be noted that *Swimming in the Flood*, in particular, seems to be the best destination for lines collecting Burnside's tormented experiences, as the poems within it are entirely dedicated to rehabilitation paths after moments of depression or misfortune. The

following is a segment of the aforementioned lines in which Burnside uses the verb ‘to fall’ to describe a state of depression. It could remind the reader of the usual expression “to fall from grace”, but that is not quite the sense the author of the poem wants to convey, in my opinion:

For years I've wondered how it all went wrong,  
how I went down,  
how gulped air thickened to milk,  
and how I was drained by that other  
who found me there,  
fluttering over my face  
like a giant bat,  
holding the knife that would cut through my flesh  
like butter, then letting me fall  
and turning away to the crowd  
where he disappeared.

(Burnside, 1995:6)

These lines seem to recall an episode of violence suffered by Burnside in his life. However, no event similar to the one described involving the author is reported in his autobiography. The choice to associate this part of the poem with a part of the story of the Scottish writer's life derives from the redundancy of those words which describe an abandonment to oneself, self-inflicted confinement which represents the first years of Burnside's adulthood, dismayed by substance abuse and precarious life, at the limit, in search of a dimension that could not be reached simply through the exploration of nature. The following is a passage from *A Lie About My Father* in which Burnside talks about ‘falling’, from which the analysis will try to gather and point out an analogy with the quoted lines.

Falling takes so long. [...] How manifold. How mysterious, how seductive at times, like the seduction of casinos where the promise of the big win is overshadowed only by the beauty of losing, the beauty of having everything stripped away, till nothing remains but the soul, bereft and miraculous. [...] that notion of touching the bottom and coming up again, is a lie. Yes, you touch bottom, at some point or another, in that long fall, but that

doesn't mean you rise, or not necessarily. A man can bounce along for quite a while, lifting and falling, lifting and falling. In the end, the only way he can return to the surface is to stay in the murk, to take it into himself.

(Burnside, 2006:265-266)

The reported event in Burnside's poem could be interpreted as a recollection of a dark moment corresponding to when the writer realised, he was losing touch with reality. The "other" in the poem who wounds him to death and disappears is merely a reflection of himself, attacking his "flesh" form. Falling may take a long time, and knowing how the process began is crucial. The lines propose that one often recovers his consciousness after having dropped. Still, continuously stepping up to find an ending to the downward spiral eventually results in the inertia of slipping into a worse state. Burnside's autobiography believes that the only way to escape the inevitable motion of falling in one's life is to let oneself be carried away by inertia until one realises the process's starting point and ending target. The author recalls in particular the significant relationship with Rick, a friend he met in Brighton and who, according to him, was falling at "exactly the same speed" as him. Rick will play a crucial role in the author's autobiography as a "ghost brother" who inspired him to understand, through terrible consequences, that it was time for him to try to take steps to emerge from the self-destructive spiral he had been trapped in.

#### **2.1.4 In The Psychiatric Hospital**

The Scottish writer had a significant experience during his time at a psychiatric institution, which he elaborately describes in his works. Burnside felt trapped at Fulbourn and believed he had been wrongly placed in that labyrinth. During his stay, Burnside was confronted with the reality of the facts twice. The reason why he was hospitalised at Fulbourn for the first time is unsettlingly remembered by himself in the autobiography: now wholly involved in the search for the narcotic that can allow him to elevate his point of view to a higher dimension or to find the "other" that hides behind his person, the Scottish writer decides to self-administer some belladonna extract which was not supposed to be lethal but had to be strong enough to cause an extreme hallucinating psychosis. This experiment resulted in Burnside being confined to the

rehabilitation facility near Cambridge because he was considered a danger to himself at that point. The following are segments excerpted from *A Lie About My Father*, in which Burnside describes the environment of the mental institution. From these, we can understand how the writer himself was not only scared but also positively impressed by the tortuous paths that the treatments of that structure offered to patients:

[...] an everyday word for life beyond the pale, a word for pleasant gardens with high fences and rooms filled with medicated phantoms muttering to themselves or to other, even less palpable ghosts in day rooms and isolation wards named for local beauty spots or historic figures. [...] I - knew that the only way out of Fulbourn was to accept the logic, not of some unexpected, yet wholly necessary transformation, but of the rules that had put me there in the first place. In other words, you got out by appearing normal. [...] If I was a voluntary patient, all I had to do was push open those doors and walk out. It was all so easy - and that was how I knew it was a trick. I wasn't mad, I could walk out any time; but if I did, it would be taken as another confirmation of my madness. Another sign that I still hadn't discovered the secret trick of seeming normal.

(Burnside, 2006:245-246-247)

As mentioned earlier, Burnside's stay in Fulbourn had a profound impact on his literary output. The collection titled *Swimming in the Flood* features poems that were inspired by his experience in Fulbourn. "In The Psychiatric Hospital" is one such poem that offers a vivid portrayal of the reality of a psychiatric institution. The poem depicts a grim and eerie atmosphere, reminiscent of a morgue or a lazaret, with Gothic undertones.

This was a private house  
in other times:  
thumbprints smudging the walls  
in the day room;  
cat-hairs and traces of perfume  
sealed in the paintwork like pledges:  
a ghost forensic.  
Now there are stockyards and marshes  
in every bed,

women laid out in flannel and medication,  
meeting their fathers again, after thirty years,  
fumbling with buttons, bleeding away through their dreams,  
and men who have drowned on land  
a thousand times,  
drowning again, in a vapour of chalk and water,  
a little in love with the pain  
they have come here to mend. [...]  
Sometimes it cries and I rise in the blue of the ward,  
crossing the moon-squared chessboard of the floor  
to press my hands to where I heard it last,  
finding the hollow, finding the gap in my thoughts,  
feeling the pulse rise, quick,  
through the blood in my fingers.

(Burnside, 1995:29)

The lines cited here reflect Burnside's approach towards the psychiatric institutions he was admitted to. In these lines, the Scottish writer mentions a place that once belonged to specific people but now seems to have left room for ghosts of what used to exist in the past. This ghostliness suggests supernatural presences that represent nothing more than memories in the form of hallucinations experienced by the patients. The metaphor of "drowning" of men represents that depressive state of abandonment that led them to mental insanity and made them dependent on that state of suffering. Patients find it difficult to forget the worst moments they have experienced in the past, which they are unconsciously attracted to, to the point of being emotionally attached to the pain they have felt. In addition, the poem uses language that refers to specific wounds and the loss of blood, as if to suggest the harm or responsibility for mistakes that affected the souls of the people who were welcomed into that structure. Towards the end of the poem, the narrator also identifies himself as a participant, searching in a hallucinatory state, or metaphorically, for the "gap" that may have caused him to lose direction in his life path.

### **2.1.5 Mother**

Burnside's memoirs are filled with vivid recollections of the various places he lived throughout his life. From his earliest memories of King Street to the time he spent in a prefab on Blackburn Drive, to his brief stint in Birmingham due to his father's work, before returning to Corby and later moving on to Cambridge and Brighton alone. The Scottish author embarked on a journey to connect his memories to milieux. These recollections have remained constant over time to keep the fragments of the author's memory intact. In his poem "Fidelity," from *The Asylum Dance* collection, Burnside recounts a vivid memory that he cannot shake, no matter the circumstances he finds himself in.

It's some  
          inevitable end  
that one house  
          echoes another:  
settlements and shifts  
          behind a door  
accumulations  
          traces  
vacancies.

(Burnside, 2000:55)

Every time he crosses the threshold of a house, the writer says he mentally imagines a recurring scene of a person, in this case, a "common ghost". This spectrum, says Burnside, seems identified through feminine attributes.

[...] no one you'd expect  
no sisterling  
or mother-in-the-green  
only the other woman  
who arrives  
and goes  
before I know  
she's ever there  
and isn't you

can no more take your place  
than rainfall  
or some perfume  
on the air.

(Burnside, 2000:55-56)

According to the hereby provided interpretation, although the Scottish author does not explicitly state a familial connection, the "ghost" symbolises Burnside's mother. Among various elements, the concept of an exhausted person sitting in a chair supports this hypothesis. However, his element could be linked to that character based on Burnside's familiarity with his father's traits. According to the Scottish writer's autobiography, the father frequently returned home drunk, alone or with a friend, in the evenings after having squandered his earnings on alcohol and gambling. He would then sit in the living room so as not to disturb his wife, who was already in bed. However, the research proposes that the character dozing in the living room is the writer's mother since, in the text of the poem, the mysterious individual is described as a "woman" and also because it could very well have been her who had dozed off in the chair while waiting for her son or her husband to come home. Logically, this poem is very reminiscent of a sort of eulogy and remembrance of Burnside's late mother, who in *A Lie About My Father* stands out clearly as the parental figure of which the poet was most fond. Additionally, to reinforce the earlier assumption, the following brief excerpt from *A Lie About My Father* alludes to the "other women." This term refers to the maternal figure who tirelessly tries to maintain harmony within the family, even at the cost of her well-being.

‘Mum?’ I waited patiently till she looked at me. She raised her spoon and smiled vaguely, but she didn't say anything. In her face, I saw age - and I realised, with a shock, that she was as old as the other women who lived out there, on the edge of Cowdenbeath, making ends meet.

(Burnside, 2006:131)

In the works of Burnside, otherness can be found in unexpected places. Whether it's in his autobiographies or poems, the essence of every living or non-living thing can be



connected through a vast network of vibrations and similarities that can extend beyond the immediate surroundings. This allows sharing a part of one's soul with the next or the most distant object in proximity. In this context, the memory of his mother holds great significance for the Scottish writer, as it helps to establish further connections between his autobiographies and poetic works. As will be analysed further in the analysis, Burnside's compositions are heavily influenced by the concepts of memory, spirit, and ghosts. "In Memoriam" is a poignant tribute to a person who acquainted the poet with the profound sense of loss and mourning, a feeling as intense as the memory of a painful passing. The poet addresses his interlocutor directly in these lines. It is possible that the interlocutor could be the ghost of the poet's mother, who passed away prematurely after a terrible illness. Burnside describes the ghost's transformation. He sees it as "fog", "phosphorescent" material. First, he remembers the final phase of the disease in the hospital environment, then he returns to domestic memory, and finally, the ghost ends up in the sky, like air, and then "stone" in the cemetery. In the following lines that introduce the poem, we can see how the author resizes and, in a certain sense, blocks the passage of the mother's ghost to another dimension. Burnside's words give density to his visions:

Someone might call it ether, but for you  
the light at the end of the tunnel is never quite air,  
  
and breath is a shape that sails out over the rooftops,  
into the lights off the quay and the tethered yawls.

(Burnside, 2009:3)

### **2.1.6 Playing Games and Setting Fires**

When Burnside was a child, his interests were simple. He adjusted to the living conditions that only allowed him to engage in superficial activities. In the late 60s and early 70s, young John began forming his first groups of teenage friends and experiencing the first effects of youth. As explained in the next paragraph, various autobiographical asides suggest the Scottish writer's fondness for the era's music and outdoor adventures with peers. During Burnside's early adolescence, his relationship

with his father profoundly impacted him, even though his father was frequently absent from his memories. When John reached his mid-teenage years, he underwent significant changes. Initially, he excelled in disciplinary training, but something happened to his mentality, causing him to become chaotic. At 13, everything became "a game" for Burnside. In this extract from *A Lie About My Father*, the author reports on the turning point in his mentality when he abandons the values of discipline and commitment in favour of leisure and adventure.

I know it's a cliché, but it's also true that a boy seeks his father's respect, his father's recognition, first. Looking back now, I see that my problem wasn't just that I couldn't win my father's approval but that, even if I had, I wouldn't have wanted it *from him*. I wanted the regard, not of this wounded, inadequate individual, but of the father I had invented from scraps of literature and hearsay. [...] A father who never shows up is both a curse and a blessing: a curse, because it's a lonely feeling, to win something and have nobody to show it to; a blessing because, after a while, I didn't care to do anything other than for its own sake. [...] It was a game, now.

(Burnside, 2006:146)

In *The Hoop*, there is a poem that talks about a "quest". According to the poem's lines, that thing that people are looking for can be interpreted as a sense of freedom. That same freedom that Burnside had discovered once he thought he had freed himself from the judgment of his increasingly absent father. Freedom in the text takes the form of a promised land, which in a certain sense refers to a medieval era, to the time of kings and knights, in search of a Holy Grail that only the hero can reach. The categorisation of things around us limits our freedom. As the poet suggests, humans tend to believe they know something without truly understanding it. Labelling something we come into contact with can be misleading, and it prevents us from finding its true identity. Instead, we should observe nature entirely, as it is too complex to understand through words completely. The legendary crusaders seeking the Grail in this context could be interpreted as Burnside and his peers, all dedicated to adventure and taking a stand on their lives, which until then had been about fulfilling their parents' demands without taking their destiny into their hands. This sense of government and self-judgement is connected to the adolescence of the author of *A Lie About My Father* as a critical

moment in his personal growth: free from the constraints that the father, appeased only by the civil law which attenuates his initiatives, the 'Corby boys' were ready to dominate the world and create chaos. The following is an excerpt from the aforementioned poem "The Quest", in which Burnside talks about the promised land from his youth:

You begin with the fauna you invent. Like Adam, waking in a certain world, looking, talking. Nothing is not your own, nothing is itself till it is found. Then you are deceived by otherness: the treason of a flame, or holly leaves, the grip of ice. [...] We grew remembering another country, happy sentiments whistled between the scratches on 78s. And who would deny the small epiphanies of Sunday afternoons, the jerseys streaming for a try, or hymns, meaningless and strong, around our fire? We did no harm. And if we missed the Grail some other, safer prize could still be won. This could be the Grail myth where the hero cannot be lost; his pledge is to survive.

(Burnside, 1988:63)

### **2.1.7 The Way The Dead**

In Burnside's imagination, he envisions vast spaces occupied by thoughts of non-living entities and how their otherworldly presence can be felt in tangible reality. The 'otherworldly' is a captivating stage for the Scottish writer's lines. Since his literary debut, he has experimented with paranormal fiction, and his poems often contain references to 'ghosts', 'spirits' and other supernatural entities with which Burnside seems to have at least a fraternal, 'familiar' relationship. This otherworldly presence is also evident in 'The Hoop' and celebrated in 'The Way The Dead'. The following is an excerpt from the above-mentioned poem which suggests how these otherworldly entities are addressed:

The way the dead are familiar,  
looking for empty spaces to  
hold them, as the people in your dreams  
are always climbing or falling [...]

(Burnside, 1988:15)

In *A Lie About My Father*, the author uses the pretext of referring to the Halloween event to share his thoughts on the dead. He considers it a sacred celebration where the return of people missing in the material dimension from which they were removed must be contemplated. The references to this dimension become apparent through the author's writing. He states that he does not observe the occasion modernly by venturing into the streets and participating in public programs that endorse it. Instead, he chooses to confine the sanctity of the event to a private ritual, where he creates a domestic setting that aims to welcome the spirits into his personal spaces. In Burnside's first autobiography, he invites the reader to join him in his reflections on the supernatural realm. In particular, his grief for his mother's premature death and his estranged relationship with his father have left a profound mark on his connection to the world of the dead. Through his ceremonial transcendence on Halloween, Burnside seems to have found a way to purge himself of his mourning and grief, as hinted in the text.

To make it work, Halloween has to be a collaboration. The dead have their part to play, but so have the living. The reason I stay close to home on Halloween – whatever home happens to be – isn't just because I am conscious of, even dutiful about, my part in the ritual, but also because I know how vulnerable I am at such times. Halloween is an occasion, not just for visitations, but also for subtle, yet significant shifts and slips in the psyche, near-imperceptible transformations that, by the time they become visible, have altered the path of a life for ever. At Halloween, when the ghosts are about, I feel more open; more open, and more alert, but also more threatened. It's best, at such times, to sit at home until the first light breaks, and send my personal spirits away satisfied.

(Burnside, 2006:4)

It seems from these words that Burnside rejoices in the contemplation of 'his ghosts'. This happens because the Scottish writer really experiences his emotions by filtering them from two points of view: a more or less discernible past and present. His past is a collection of people and events that cyclically reappear in different forms throughout his life. At the same time, his present oscillates between the desire to return to nature's essence and the fictitious nature of society's colours. Burnside's work also highlights another binary division that helps to clarify the presence of otherworldly elements in his narrative. In the closing lines of *A Lie About My Father*, he describes how his father,

despite their tumultuous relationship, instilled in him the ability to distinguish between 'spirits' and 'ghosts,' which he views as a valuable gift.

Maybe one of the things a father does, for his sons at least, is to let them see the difference between spirits and ghosts, to reveal for them the fabric of the invisible world. Ghosts can be dismissed, or they can be sent on their way, come Halloween night, with a kind word and a warm fire, but spirits are with us always, and it seems that the stories we tell are the only means we have to decide who or what they are, and how they might be accommodated. In the end, ghosts are powerless, but spirits feed our imaginations, and they are capable of anything.

(Burnside, 2006:324)

In the following excerpt from his autobiography, the author admits to openly harbouring hatred towards his father, yet he cannot let his memory fade away. Burnside's inability to forget someone with whom he had not shared good moments is likely due to unresolved issues and feelings towards a significant figure like a father who did not reciprocate. Burnside's work discusses the concept of 'ghosts' versus 'spirits'; the father's presence is an example of a 'spirit'. However, instead of bringing comfort by reminding the writer of loved ones who have passed away, the father's spirit becomes a source of torment. It is like a shadow that follows the writer and prevents him from remembering the ghosts of those who truly loved him.

These days, when Halloween comes around, I observe the rites and I think about the chosen dead - my mother, my grandparents, the four or five people I have lost over the years - but none of them ever comes. Nobody comes but him, the one I don't choose and would prefer to forget.

(Burnside, 2006:231)

Another example is the poem "Halloween" from the *Common Knowledge* collection, which is dedicated to the atmosphere of the event commemorating the missing people. Burnside discusses the importance of nature and time in these lines in a specific context. The Scottish writer explores the idea of "place" and the alternate version of oneself. The autumn setting blends seamlessly with the author's emotions.

The village is over there, in a pool of bells,  
and beyond that nothing,  
or only the other versions of myself,  
familiar and strange, and swaddled in their time  
as I am, standing out beneath the moon  
or stooping to a clutch of twigs and straw  
to breathe a little life into the fire.

(Burnside, 2006:11)

More figuratively, "Day of The Dead", part of *Black Cat Bone*, is also a significant line composition for understanding Burnside's metaphysical vision. The poem portrays two lovers who could either be dead or disguised as dead. They gaze at each other while the author focuses on the groom. It is assumed that they might be disguised because the context could be "Dia de Los Muertos", a traditional Mexican holiday honouring the dead. The photograph could represent the groom deep in thought in front of his deceased bride, although the context is unclear. Burnside stands beside the groom and thinks about the people who are not present anymore. He suggests interpreting these 'absences' as a way of understanding the situation rather than simply viewing them as losses. The following is a passage from "Day of The Dead", which suggests that the dead groom's body is no longer burdened with the emotions of the living. He is now a passive listener to the events of the world, regretfully contemplating what his life could have been if he were still alive. The passage indicates that the groom's corpse has moved beyond the hope and fear that dominate the living.

[...] and, happy to be free  
of hope and fear,  
he listens for the wind  
that snakes across  
the asphalt, hymns  
and ghost towns in its wake  
and silence trailing after, like the sleep  
he thought would end  
in sugarcraft and satin.

(Burnside, 2011:36)

### 2.1.8 Pidgeon

In *A Lie About My Father*, Burnside's childhood was centred around his quest for a different way of life apart from his family's conditions and economic situation. For the author, avoiding reality is a pastime and an obligation. As mentioned earlier in the essay, the author of the autobiography frequently sought solace in the open countryside to escape the confines of his home and the industrial landscape that limited his perspective to the reality of Scottish metallurgical factories. Burnside did not often get a chance to leave the house, so he likely occupied himself with cultural pursuits like listening to music, reading, or conducting experiments. One interesting cultural development he witnessed was the introduction of the first television devices in history. In *A Lie About My Father*, the Scottish writer describes his experience of watching television for the first time. Here is an excerpt from the book:

When television arrived, everything changed. [...] On good weeks, my father would give us money to go out to Katie's van and buy ice creams, while Norman Vaughan guided members from the audience through the latest in a line of bizarre games, or Perry Como slumbered through another performance of 'Magic Moments'. [...] I remember how strange it felt, the first Christmas we had the box, standing at the foot of our Christmas tree, handing the ornaments and strings of tinsel up to my mother, then turning around and seeing a character in the film that was showing at that moment - June Allyson, say, or Judy Garland - doing exactly the same thing.

(Burnside, 2006:88)

Burnside's first exposure to a different reality comes from television, where he finds inspiration in characters and begins to understand impersonation, empathy, and representation of the ideal. Among the TV characters, Walter Pidgeon stands out, an actor of Canadian origin active between the first and second half of the 20th century. For Burnside, he is a "hero" in every sense. His performances are captivating and surprising, to the point that the Scottish writer, who was still very young then, believed that Walter Pidgeon represented the ideal father figure. In the movie *A Lie About My Father*, the characters played by the Canadian actor fill every gap presented by

Burnside's father figuratively. Neglected affections, indecision, lack of commitment, dignity, and disproportionate pride are all traits that do not belong to Walter Pidgeon, a character who always remains consistent with his choices. Even in his imperfection, he maintains his composure and always makes his presence felt as fundamental in times of need. The following passage is taken from Burnside's autobiography and describes a particular character.

Pidgeon represented something unparaphraseable for me. Later, it might be Montgomery Clift, or Zbigniew Cybulski, or Yves Montand who played out my fantasy of manhood on the screen, but they were troubled older brothers doing things that I might have done, given the opportunity. Walter Pidgeon was the father I couldn't find anywhere closer to home, one of those real fathers who can do the impossible. Most importantly, Walter Pidgeon made decisions and stood by them, no matter what. Maybe this was what made him appear so competent. Whenever I saw a Walter Pidgeon film, I wanted to be a better person in a simple, unexceptional way: more thoughtful, more alert, less self-regarding, humbler, yet more self-assured than before. What I saw was a possibility of goodness, something more than ordinary decency. I clung to this possibility, knowing it for the fantasy it was, but needing something to aspire to.

(Burnside, 2006:89)

In the book *Swimming Against The Flood*, you can find the lyrics of a poem titled "The Light Institute". This poem specifically talks about the famous personalities of the television screen who inspired Burnside - Clark Gable, Mirna Loy, and Walter Pidgeon. Burnside aspired to be like Walter Pidgeon, whom he considered a "hero". In the poem, he meets Pidgeon "on the far border of knowledge and skill", which refers to a combination of qualities that Burnside did not attribute to his own father. The following excerpt includes key lines for reading the illuminating composition by the Scottish author:

[...] the master of the house,  
plugged into the undertow of scripts  
where I could happen, suddenly alive,  
chosen for something, leaving my bed in the dark  
and crossing the yard to meet him on the far



border of knowledge and skill,  
the hero now, the one I should have been:  
Walter Pidgeon. Gable. Franchot Tone.

(Burnside, 1995:13)

### 2.1.9 Suburbs

The working-class community dwells in the suburbs. For many, the suburbs represent a social identity. Those who come into contact with it, like those born from it, describe the influence they have experienced over time. Burnside talks about these places as if they were a place to train the soul and imagination to see more expansive spaces. Raised among the Scottish prefabs and then also based for a short period in Birmingham, a historic city for the developments of its suburbs, the Scottish writer breathes the claustrophobic yet multi-faceted atmosphere of the suburbs. It has to do with almost all the difficulties encountered in such difficult places: alcoholism, poverty, drug abuse, family problems, and internal conflicts between neighbourhoods. For a curious soul like his, what Burnside finds on his journey fuels his imagination. In a segment of *A Lie About My Father*, the Scottish writer describes how Cowdenbeath resembles an immobilising spider web in some ways. The author tells how, in his opinion, that coal town shaped his father's character in some way. Getting used to being labelled for everything, Burnside's father must have built his personality based on bestowing his exploits and skills to create a filter of omnipotence against the chatter of suburbanites. Burnside's parents had contrary opinions regarding their stay in Cowdenbeath: the mother had created her circle of acquaintances in that town to whom she could rely. At the same time, the father was tired of pretending to be someone else and wanted to start from a new place. Below is the autobiographical excerpt in which Burnside describes the reality of the place in which he and his family had to confront themselves:

I knew the words for this, even when I didn't fully understand the system: coal towns were close-knit communities; everybody pulled together. The same machinery that allowed my father to get away with what he did also kept his family going, through fat and lean - though it was mostly lean, and that was also common knowledge. [...] For

him, mornings after were reserved for remorse and sweet tea, just as they were all over Scotland.

(Burnside, 2006:80)

Burnside also celebrates the suburbs in a poetic context. The collection *Common Knowledge* (1991) by the Scottish poet depicts the suburbs as living entities that transform with changes in environment, seasons, and time. The poet's vivid and poetic descriptions of different aspects of the suburbs bring to life the often-overlooked features of these places. The suburbs and their inhabitants have a natural symbiotic relationship where they adapt and evolve. The poet finds solace in these places by imagining himself in that apparent 'home' dimension, a deep reflection of his childhood memories. This is a place where people come together and share common interests that connect them with their inner selves. Burnside's story is centred around this environment, where all the spirits and ghosts accompanying him are present. He welcomes them, knowing they are part of a place shared by many other souls trapped in these illusions. The poem "Suburbs" grounds on the essence of those presences, or rather 'absences' that culminate in the 'liminality' of the creatures that inhabit the woods, the prefabs, or the dustbins along the borders of civilisation. The following is an excerpt of the homonymous poem, in which Burnside confirms the suburbs as the place "where everything is implied":

I think I am already present somewhere else, having made a journey of some kind, as if any journey could end somewhere other than here, in the suburbs, where everything is implied: city, warehouse district, night stop, woods emerging from mists, as if newly-created, like those Japanese paper flowers which unfold in water, empty back roads at night where, momentarily, a sougning of wings passes close in the dark, followed by the tug of silence, the feel of grain fields shifting under the wind, a lamp in a window beyond, where someone has sat up all night, drinking tea, remembering something like this.

(Burnside, 2006:5)

In this context, Burnside refers, in particular, to the industrial suburbs, with the author sharing his experience of working in companies during the transition period between high school and college. The Scottish writer's work highlights the significant

contribution of life in the factory, with "Night Shift at The Plug Mill" being a notable example discussed in *The Hunt in The Forest* (2009). This work describes a memory that feels like a nightmare, where the worker's attention is brought to the maximum, as the description suggests. The poet uses powerful language to paint a picture of despair and exhaustion as one struggles to survive. The trains in the distance remind him of war films and mass transportation. At the same time, the machinery's deafening noise startles him awake from his daydreams, bringing him back to the harsh and unforgiving reality around him. The snow falling outside the factory reminds him of the cold, bleak world in which he lives. The following are the first lines from "Night Shift at The Plug Mill", emphasising the tension caused by the noise made by the mill's gears.

Four hours into the dark I'd fall asleep  
for seconds, then wake to the scream  
of gears, as the belt started up  
and the formed tubes dropped to the rack,  
still bright from the fire:  
sometimes I had to step in over the teeth  
with a crowbar and straighten them out,  
the heat flowing back through my arms and into my  
heart,  
the rack shifting under my feet, while I bobbed and  
swayed  
and watched for the misalignment that might kill me;

(Burnside, 2009:10)

## 2.2 Connections with *Waking Up in Toytown*

In order to examine the potential connections between John Burnside's poetry and his autobiographical works, some of his poems were compared with his first autobiography, *A Lie About My Father*. The second chapter's next section will focus on a similar analysis, but this time, it will consider Burnside's second autobiography, *Waking Up in Toytown*. The work may have similarities with the first section of the chapter, but they have been explored in greater depth in the second collection of

Burnside memoirs. *Waking Up in Toytown* takes the reader on a sentimental journey through the author's most sensitive memories. The narrative is focused on the events that took place during the adolescence and adulthood of the Scottish writer, presented in chronological order. The first event described is the medical examination at age 15, during which the writer was tested for tuberculosis. During this time, the writer observed the local nurse and first experienced the natural feeling of falling in love. It is noteworthy that this event is recounted in the first pages of the book, in correspondence with the epilogue, since the uneven interweaving of Burnside's memories starts from an end and then travels through a development that does not follow well-defined timelines, probably by the will of the same writer. In his introspection, he is tormented by the "ghosts" of his past that still have an impact on his present. He reminisces about the untimely passing of his colleague Helen and his sentimental experience with the young Esmé. Alongside these memories, he shares other significant events that have contributed to his personal growth and maturity. The themes explored in the author's reflections are similar to those discussed in the first autobiography. However, in this case, more reasoned thoughts can be discerned, which occupy a more significant portion of the book than the mere narration of facts in *A Lie About My Father*.

### **2.2.1 Something Like A Bride**

The tumultuous relationships that Burnside recounts in *Waking Up in Toytown* are part of a larger journey. In some ways, this work can be seen as a tale of a personal odyssey, a twisted romance that leads the Scottish writer through perdition in temptation and the rebirth of good intentions. Part of this journey are the 'sentimental stages' of the writer. The reports are all very different from each other, unfortunately all culminating in the same negative outcome, in which Burnside suffers following the end of the report rejecting his torments in the abuse of drugs. The most significant relationships, where the Scottish writer has not only established a stable relationship with his partner but also envisaged a future as a couple, with all the relative consequences of that type of situation, are probably those lived alongside Adele and Gina. The tumultuous relationships that Burnside recounts in *Waking Up in Toytown* are part of a more

extensive trip. This work is a personal odyssey, a Dante-esque parable that takes the Scottish writer through the depths of temptation and the journey of redemption. Along the way, the writer experiences their journey's 'sentimental stages'. The relationships are all very different from each other, unfortunately, all culminating in the same negative outcome, in which Burnside suffers following the end of the affairs, pouring his torments into the abuse of drugs. The Scottish writer has developed two significant relationships with Adele and Gina. He enjoys a stable partnership and envisions a future with all the consequential effects. Relations with both lovers unfortunately end pretty brutally. With Gina, the Scottish writer realizes that he has completely lost interest in his partner. He had invested all his genuine interest in his bond with her daughter, little Petra. The bond established with Petra was so strong for Burnside that detaching from the children of his partner, for whom he felt like a father, caused him enormous difficulty and pain. This situation created a deep discomfort for the author, who ultimately had to resign himself to the fact that he was no longer essential in Gina's life. Gina, on the other hand, looked forward to finding a partner who was more interested in her.

*Sometimes I think you love those children more than you love me.*

It was the first time she had used the word *love*. She had used words like *sexy*, and *sensual*, and *lovely*, and fond of - but she had never said love, and as soon as she did, she realised that it was inappropriate. We both did. We also knew that what she had said was true. After the Valium episode, something had cooled in us both. There's nothing wrong with a relationship based entirely on sex, but it usually starts to fall apart once you realise that that's all it is. There has to be an illusion of something else, even if both partners know, when they're alone, that it really is just an illusion. We both tried to carry on, and sometimes we got the illusion back. Some weekends, I managed to prevail upon her not to go out by turning up with a couple of bottles of fancy wine and some sweets for the kids, and we would just stay at hers, playing house. It wasn't going to last, though, and we both knew it.

(Burnside, 2010:106)

Burnside shares a story of his teenage romance with Adele, where they were deeply in love and happy. Unfortunately, their relationship ended due to distance and time. Later in life, they were reunited after fate brought them back together. After a chance

encounter, Burnside was happy to find Adele again. However, she was already married and had a stable job. Despite the challenges, Burnside was grateful to have found her. They met once again while travelling on the same train to London, which led Burnside to begin a new phase in his life, with the intention of settling down in his own personal "Surbiton". The author describes this term as being symbolic of the bourgeois, urban life that is characteristic of the consumer society, in short, gregarious. The turning point in Burnside's life began with the purchase of his home, and the first attempt to build a stable relationship with Adele, with the ultimate goal of building a family together. Unfortunately, the relationship does not have a happy ending, just like the one with Gina. The reason their affair comes to an end is the news of Adele's unexpected pregnancy, which forces the two lovers to abandon the idea of building a relationship together to safeguard her reputation and marriage. The following is an excerpt that reports a Burnside once again defeated by the illusion of having found a solution in search of a 'normal' life:

The thing to do is to carry on. Go to work. Try to stay sober. Pass this time. Wait for a miracle. *How could her husband love her the way I did? He didn't even know her.* Put those thoughts out of your head. Practise wabi-sabi. Go to work. Pass the time. Keep busy and, most of all, stay sober for as much of the time as possible because, when you're drunk, all you can think about is that old movie *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. But then, when you're not drinking, you feel as if your body is being torn apart from the inside, and there are voices in the plumbing, This is when the prudent suburbanite turns to self-medication.

(Burnside, 2010:166-167)

These situations being reported and described with extreme vulnerability by the author are naturally the cause for reflection in his lines in poetry. "The Bride" is a poem from the *Black Cat Bone* collection. It reflects Burnside's anguish in finding a life partner. The lines in Burnside's poetry can be interpreted as his personal views on the institution of marriage. In his works, he often criticises the notion of marriage being based on contractual obligations rather than genuine love. For example, in *Waking Up In Toytown*, he contextualises these situations by reporting on his personal experiences. Similarly, in "Husbandry" from *The Asylum Dance*, we can understand the sadness that

arises when partners lose sentimental contact and passion. The Scottish author suggests that the natural outcome of these events is that they must seek that passion in something or someone else once the extent of the emotional damage has been established. These significant lines of "The Bride" manifest the author's torments, possibly linked to past experiences:

Whatever you should have been, you were never the one  
who walked home from the small hours in a veil  
of citrus and mariposa, dressed for another  
ballo in maschera, [...]  
I come home late and vanish on the stairs;  
you rifle through the Deaths and Marriages  
for something more akin  
to passion spent,  
and when you leave me so,  
unsatisfied  
I lumber on, by mutual consent,  
whole flocks of shadow papering my skin

(Burnside, 2011:21-24)

### 2.2.2 Look In The Mirror

Burnside's first autobiography, titled *A Lie About My Father*, revolves around his relationship with his father and forms the central theme of the entire work. Although the work mainly focuses on Burnside's personal reflections and experiences, it also explores the concept of similarities and inequalities between the author and his father. In his book *Waking Up in Toytown*, Burnside further delves into his personal life and emotional connections with society while still exploring his relationship with his father. *Waking Up in Toytown* can be seen as a journey towards a significant realisation for the Scottish writer. In the events that took place between his adolescence and adulthood, there came a point, as detailed in his memoirs, where Burnside had a personal confrontation which made him understand that the mission he had been pursuing, either consciously or subconsciously, was a complete failure. In the end, he

could not help but feel like he was following in his father's footsteps. The following lines are an excerpt from *Waking Up in Toytown* in which the author commiserates after the incident with Crystal, a friend of his with whom he shared a disinterested relationship and also abused drugs. After the protagonist unconsciously assaults a man who is helping her friend recover from a moment of physical difficulty, he takes refuge on the run from the authorities in a bar, where he loses consciousness. Upon waking up, he decides to head to his apartment to seek shelter, and there the first psychological confrontation with his perspective takes place:

When I was a child, my eyes were extraordinarily blue. [...] And now they were a faraway, washed grey. I peered at myself in the mirror and studied these grey, washed-out eyes - and at that moment I had a sudden, stinging memory of my father. My father as a younger man, before he began to slide. My father when there was still some gravity to him. [...] Now, as I stood in front of the mirror, razor in hand, I saw that I was performing a long-familiar ritual. I saw his face in the glass, his predicament in mine, his ability to deceive himself in my ridiculous attempt to put on a normal face. I saw myself and I saw him. The one thing I had always wanted, growing up, was to be different from him and here I was, faking normal in an empty bathroom, his mirror image. Faking normal, telling myself the kind of absurd, convoluted story that he told all the time.

(Burnside, 2009:244-245)

The poem "Burning a Woman" from the collection *Swimming in The Flood* sheds light on Burnside's inner conflicts regarding his relationship with his father. Remarkably, the "Like Father" section reveals a surprising similarity with what was previously reported in *Waking Up in Toytown*. The poem expresses Burnside's unspoken accusation against his father for the spiritual heritage he left him and his desire for his father to show his true personality. Burnside's desperation is palpable in the poem, as he feels tired of fighting against the fate his father said he could not escape. The statement "*Let me imagine you capable of love*" (italics mine) represents the peak of what the author of *Waking Up In Toytown* could never obtain from someone he could never entirely remove from his life, despite managing to do so in other contexts. Additionally, the phrase "*you made me listen to stories I couldn't believe for years*" (italics mine) encapsulates Burnside's intended message in his first autobiography. It



confirms that he made intense efforts to free himself from his toxic family but ultimately failed to do so. In an interview, John Burnside admitted to retracing his father's mistakes. He hopes to manage them better and ensure they do not affect his responsibilities as a father. The analysis proposes to report the entire poem "Like Father" due to the fact that it contains several lines that showcase potential associations with *Waking Up in Toytown* and *A Lie About My Father*.

Let me imagine you capable of love  
and transformation,  
the dream of a man made subtle, or straight as a die,  
a judge of character, a connoisseur,  
whatever you thought you had lost, when you made me  
listen for years to stories I couldn't believe.  
I know how you shift and start when I'm passing the time,  
walking from church to church in a foreign city,  
making coffee, talking on the phone,  
clumsy, helpless, sorry for myself,  
and just the man you wanted me to be,  
good for nothing, skilled in self-deceit,  
punished so often for errors I never made  
I'm blind to my worst mistakes, and beyond redemption.

(Burnside, 1995:39)

### 2.2.3 Helen

One of the significant sections of *Waking Up in Toytown* focuses on the memory of Helen Watson's untimely death. Burnside, the author, had grown fond of Helen after meeting her at the fruit and nut processing factory where his mother worked. Burnside was young and struggled to integrate into the work environment, but his encounter with Helen in the factory cafeteria changed that. They both enjoyed watching the employees lose their money at the first slot machines that had just started circulating, and that is how they reportedly met. According to his memoirs, the relationship between Helen and John was never physical or romantic. The Scottish writer was infatuated with the girl, who did not reciprocate his feelings. However, he enjoyed John's company and

considered it a simple friendship or camaraderie necessary to pass the time. What struck the author of the autobiography was the sudden and unexplained disappearance of the girl. According to Burnside's report, the Scottish writer was initially fooled upon receiving news of her death, having prematurely ended the courtship phase he was experiencing with the girl. After reflecting on what had happened, he had an epiphany that made him realise the value of life and the pleasure of the 'very present absences'. The author's second autobiography recounts his relationship with Helen, and here is a significant excerpt in which Burnside contemplates the aftermath of her death:

We were never lovers, or even very close friends; we never actually touched - yet I remember her alongside my most cherished ghosts and I cannot envisage a time when I will forget her. She comes unbidden, like my mother and my infant brother and my near-mythical grandfather, still immense and graceful in his black coat, his massive, skilled hands still seen through a child's eyes. Now, compared to these, Helen is nothing to me [...] She is a story, nothing more - but then maybe this is why we tell ourselves stories, in order to work out why we remember some things more than others, why some events live on in the mind, [...] It's not about her life or her death; it's about what I lost and how, whatever that lost thing might be, it resembles her in some way.

(Burnside, 2009:127)

The disappearance of Helen distraught Burnside and influenced his writing when referencing missing characters. According to Burnside, the poem "The Missing" is a tribute to those sudden disappearances that turn into a part of the spiritual realm of spirits and ghost refugees in the author's mind. These entities are acknowledged in the poet's lines, and the same poet feels responsible for saving their souls. Despite not knowing how such events are possible, he tries to give them meaning by imagining various otherworldly beings that seek contact with him. Here are some lines from "The Missing" that refer to Burnside's relationship with kindred spirits and his responsibility towards them:

Like one of those friendships I always intended to have  
and never quite managed, distracted by other things  
- family, schoolwork, that roundness the self acquires  
on quiet days, surrounded by its few

possessions;  
like the kin I never had,  
there was always an echo, waiting to be recovered,  
something to do with sports days, or Midnight Mass,  
the handling of money, the milk-scent and swim of the future. [...]  
somebody died  
and the others were left behind  
so that I could save them;  
but nobody answered by name  
when I called the rolls,  
busy, as everyone is, with something else:  
a light they might enter, the green of a world to come.

(Burnside, 2009:35)

#### 2.2.4 Self-maintenance

Burnside faced many challenges in his life, which led him to develop self-defence mechanisms. He primarily developed these mechanisms to address his health issues related to his condition called apophenia. This condition amplifies his negative life experiences, causing him to suffer more. The author of the autobiography had to devise various strategies to cope with his struggles. Hallucinations, insomnia, and anxiety were only countered by Burnside's drug abuse. Once he decided to turn his life around, however, and stopped using drugs, he was forced to find alternative methods of treatment to his suffering. Thus, Burnside discovered and started to practice “wabi-sabi”<sup>3</sup>, also mentioned earlier in the dissertation. In a segment of *Waking Up in Toytown* these practices prove to be fundamental for the author. Specifically, when the Scottish writer’s relationship with Adele is interrupted by the woman’s pregnancy, Burnside resorts to the weapon of indifference by seeking interests that do not make

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<sup>3</sup> Wabi refers to simplicity, imperfection, and forlornness celebrated in the art of tea ceremony. Sabi, literally meaning both loneliness and rusticity, is the aesthetic ideal of haiku. Yugen is the sublime loftiness of Noh performance, while iki, sometimes translated as "chic" or "stylishness," was identified as a unique Japanese aesthetic sensibility by Kuki Shuzo in his seminal work, *Iki no Kozo* [The Structure of Iki] (1929) (Saito, 2007:94)

him think of this sad epilogue. Here is the section of *Waking Up in Toytown* that talks about the author's coping mechanisms:

The thing to do is to carry on. Go to work. Try to stay sober. Pass this time. Wait for a miracle. *How could her husband love her the way I did? He didn't even know her.* Put those thoughts out of your head. Practise *wabi-sabi*. Go to work. Pass the time. Keep busy and, most of all, stay sober for as much of the time as possible because, when you're drunk, all you can think about is that old movie *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. But then, when you're not drinking, you feel as if your body is being torn apart from the inside, and there are voices in the plumbing. This is when the prudent suburbanite turns to self-medication.

(Burnside, 2009:166-167)

"Maintenance" is a poem from *The Hunt in The Forest* by John Burnside. The poem's lines highlight the importance of observing and appreciating the seemingly insignificant things surrounding us. Burnside believed this practice helped him in his poetic production and the difficult moments of his personal life. In "Maintenance", Burnside refers to "love" as a place where we bury everything that we cannot bear to carry with us. Love counteracts hatred or pain caused by traumatic events, and Burnside uses this tool to elaborate the reflections that follow in his tormented mind. In *A Lie About My Father*, the Scottish author attempts to cure his insecurities through creativity and imagination. He portrays his father's preference for his deceased sister, which made him feel neglected from an early age. These episodes trigger a series of psychological mechanisms that lead Burnside to find solace in the details of nature, which offer serenity and tranquillity compared to the chaos of his surroundings. The lines below from "Maintenance" highlight the healing power of the poet's focus on his surroundings.

If happiness is how you think of time [...]  
then love must be the white in which you bury  
everything you cannot bear away,  
the puzzlement of cattle, staring back  
across a sodden gatepost, or the stranger's  
lipstick on a cup, mid-afternoon,

when you're halfway through washing up  
and alone for a lifetime.

(Burnside, 2009:47)

### 2.2.5 California

In *Waking Up In Toytown*, there is a significant turning point in Burnside's life when he is allowed to work for a British agency that requires him to go to the USA for some time. This opportunity arises after his relationship with Adele ends, and it represents a massive chance for him to move beyond his recent memories and, as he states in the book, "recalibrate". The British company specialising in knowledge-based systems suggested he go to California for several weeks. Burnside travels to the United States, where he encounters a mesmerising setting that helps him think about things other than his painful memories. The relatively short chapter titled "How To Fly" marks an event that profoundly impacts the author's personal growth. The successive chapters of the book document his return from his temporary exodus. Burnside acknowledges the possibility of "mending himself" when he returns to Britain. The passage below is *Waking Up In Toytown*. In this excerpt, the author expresses his admiration for the Californian landscape and how it has influenced him personally and professionally. Later in the dissertation, this topic will be discussed in more detail in the subsection of the subchapter.

Later that night, I drove out and sat for hours on a dirt road near the ocean, watching a huge Monterey cypress as it filled with the wind and then emptied under an immense darkness barely lit by the stars and the wet slit of a moon. It was beautiful, that motion, like something breathing. There was nothing else for miles, other than the darkness and a stony road to nowhere special, but that was what I had driven out there for in the first place - for the American night, for the smell of it and the wideness and the feeling that whatever happens is part of this story with no beginning, no middle, no end, just an infinity of tiny, improbable details of light and shadow, of colour and shape, of gravity and time. Though it didn't really exist, I wanted to drive away and stay in that American night forever, [...] That was the place I had dreamed about all my life, a place to be lost in, a place where I might disappear, once and for all. I don't know to this day what

changed during that California trip, but when I got back to Surrey, I felt better than I had in a long time.

(Burnside, 2009:203)

According to the lines of the poem, it can be inferred that Burnside pours out the passage mentioned earlier, which refers to a similar view described in the poem "Fen Colours" from the collection *The Hoop*. In these lines, the Scottish poet depicts a combination of observable elements that provide him with a sense of bewilderment. This feeling stems from the belief that he is immersed in an environment which allows him to disappear and feel irrelevant. The author says he has adopted a lighter perspective by taking away the responsibility for his existence. This perspective removes the drive towards achieving a 'standard' life, which is considered 'normal' in the eyes of others. The phrase "pregnant pause" refers to the necessary break from ongoing processes to reflect and recalibrate, leading to the birth of new ideas and inspiration. The landscape described in the poem is reminiscent of the roads along the oceanic slopes of California. However, this description can also be applied to the Scottish Highlands, linking John Burnside's origins to a distant space he later explored in his life. The lines below are taken from "Fen Colours". They describe the Californian landscape that can be experienced while driving by the ocean.

The way the eye is casually seduced  
by flatness, or the lonely petrol lights  
on moonlit roads,  
or how you always end by driving  
out, through purple suburbs, to a blue  
of pasture land or sea, [...]  
The way you reduce what you can to a clean  
ideogram: the wind, the colour green,  
and how you return  
with nothing, or next to nothing and a feel  
for less: the pregnant pause, the unpursued.

(Burnside, 1988:77)

### 2.2.6 The Fridge

In the first narrative sequence of *Waking Up in Toytown*, we are introduced to Burnside and his colleague Greg. Both of them worked at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) at the time of the narration. They meet at a bar on Epsom Road while John is trying to find someone who can interest him enough to become his trusted friend. The Scottish writer had never been able to establish a bond of friendship with colleagues who shared the same cultural tastes and sense of humour as him. However, he became friends with Greg, although this friendship turned out to be somewhat risky due to Greg's ambiguous behaviour. It appears that Greg's colleagues are investigating his marriage as they are unsure about his relationship with his wife. Unfortunately, during a visit to Greg's home, his colleague Burnside finds evidence that supports this unfortunate hypothesis. Burnside discovers Greg's wife asleep in the living room. The colleague immediately confirms assumptions made by Burnside, stating later that the wife is not just sleeping, her husband had sedated her hours ago. The relationship between the two spouses is unbearable for Greg, who even goes so far as to engineer the death of his wife, seeking the desperate complicity of John, who categorically refuses to attend the event. The author suffers a double psychological damage following this event: he suffers the disillusionment of having established a human bond with someone who could lead him to achieve the set goal of bourgeois 'normality' and also attends the first marital drama after the one he previously experienced in his family, which, despite being formally cohesive, concealed moments of crisis and separation also arising from the bond of marriage undertaken by the author's mother and father. The following text is an excerpt from Burnside's second autobiography. Greg uses a metaphor to explain to John why it would be impossible for him to separate from his wife. He needs someone to take her down because he cannot take risks and cannot let it go away with all his property:

Greg smiled wistfully. 'We didn't have a fridge when I was a kid,' he said. 'Nor to begin with.' He opened the door, and a bluish light came on. 'Then, one day, it was summer, really hot, and the delivery van arrived. My dad had just changed jobs, they had more money, so they bought this massive fridge, a beautiful appliance.' [...] 'I do the same thing now. I've had this fridge for twelve years and it still runs perfectly. It's the same

model, more or less, as the one we had back then.' He put his glass down on the draining board. 'I love this fridge more than anything. [...] It was like a companion.' [...] 'And no matter what happens', he said, 'I can't let her take this fridge away from me.' 'Well,' I said, 'I don't imagine she would fight you for custody of the fridge.' 'No,' he said. 'She wouldn't. But she'd take half of everything. I'd have to sell this house. I would be losing everything.' We were back on familiar territory. For some time now, he had been talking about the consequences of a divorce.

(Burnside, 2009:64-65)

It can be deduced from this passage that Greg's love for his wife, if it ever existed, has been non-existent for quite some time. He now wants to end the unhappy marriage without losing many of his possessions. Burnside remarks that this autobiographical section was shocking for the author himself. Greg's ability to reason calmly on a matter that would free him from the oppression of marriage, which he describes as an experience of imprisonment with no chance of escape, amazes Burnside. The lines from the poem "Notes Towards an Ending" in the Black Cat Bone collection suggest that the poem's object could be the demise of an unhappy wedding. An explicit reference to this subject would be the phrase "*No more wedlock*" (italics mine) marked in the second line reported below. The suggested interpretation is to read the poem's lines from Greg's perspective as a final song directed at his wife before ending the relationship that binds him to her.

No more conversations.

No more wedlock.

No more vein of perfume in a scarf

I haven't worn for months, her voice come back to haunt me, [...]

It's never what we wanted, everafter;

we asked for something else, a lifelong Reich

of unexpected gifts and dolce vita, [...]

every night, we tried and failed to mend

that feathered thing we brought in from the yard,

after it came to grief on our picture window.

(Burnside, 2011:25)



## CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation analyses and compares two of John Burnside's autobiographical works and some of his poems. Burnside is a highly regarded figure among contemporary Scottish writers, particularly for his dedication to promoting environmental awareness through his writing. His works serve as a tool for spreading a shared perspective on the significance of the planet we live on. This perspective is conveyed through ecopoetics. Essays such as those written by Kate Rigby and Laura Severin play a crucial role in introducing readers to sustainability topics from an academic perspective. Kate Rigby's essay on sustainability issues is more technical than Severin's essay. In fact, it discusses the distinctions between the terms used for environmental protection and their use in literary contexts such as poetry and prose. Rigby cites themes such as the use of 'pastoral' in postcolonial ecocriticism to express his point of view on various legitimisations of these 'eco-disciplines' and particularly how they affect literature.

To frame bio-proportionality in terms of hospitality is to wager on altruism. Personally, I think highly enough of human potential (despite ample contrary evidence) to consider this wager worthwhile. But I am also enough of a realist (and, for that matter, an epicurean) to share the view [...] that, at least among the more pampered citizens of the 'developed' world, the pleasure principle is likely to provide a more powerful motivation for the kind of socio-ecological transformation entailed in the bio-inclusive practice of sustainability

(Rigby, 2017:61)

In Severin's case, she explores the eco-feminist movement, particularly the Scottish version, which also challenges Kathleen Jamie, as mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation. For instance, the following excerpt from Severin's essay refers to the figure of the female poets, considering Kathleen Jamie as the primary reference from an environmental perspective:

The female poet enables nature's life and it, in turn, enables her own. This entangling of the natural and the poetic represents a newer paradigm in which nature is connected to

and interactive with humanity. Humanity's survival and nature's survival are seen as interdependent, and the poet draws her strength and sense of purpose from this reality.

(Severin, 2011:100)

After covering the known literature about Burnside and other important literary figures of his time in the introduction, the dissertation delved into the analytical section, which forms the core of the entire document, exploring Burnside's life and poetic creations. The comparative study examined the possible links between the Scottish author's personal life and art. It also demonstrated the correlations between the ecopoetic and psychological scenarios narrated in Burnside's works. The dissertation established links between the episodes of Burnside's life and the theoretical predispositions that have characterised his literary production. It also considered the Scottish writer's concept of the 'afterlife' and all aspects related to the visions generated by the original author's artificial or natural imagination. The distinction between artificial imagery and natural imagery is significant since, in both collections of memoirs under analysis, Burnside admits to having abused psychotropic substances during his lifetime that have potentially influenced a slice of his poetic production, as exposed in the previous chapters. The second chapter of the dissertation indeed presented a comparative analysis that can offer various suggestions by highlighting the links discovered between different elements. Firstly, the research has successfully confirmed the thesis's presupposition that the author's poetic compositions contain autobiographical references. The study has also established that the Scottish writer's life experiences, habits, and surroundings have significantly influenced his work. Several links to Burnside's childhood have been reported compared to *A Lie About My Father*. These references cover a diverse range of topics, including the author's earliest memories of the leisure moments of the 'waterhouses', as well as his father's behaviour following the trauma of losing their firstborn, Elizabeth. There have been references to the adolescence of the Scottish writer, who was troubled by negative influences that led him to participate in violent events. Additionally, the moments he spent in rehabilitation facilities, as mentioned in his autobiography, have been discussed on various occasions. These experiences had a significant impact on the author's poetic work. Some of his poems include elements from Burnside's teenage popular culture, which have been compared to characters or situations in his prose works. Nevertheless,

*Waking Up In Toytown* contains several autobiographical references, which refer to a more mature period in the life of the Scottish writer. This second autobiography focuses on Burnside's work and personal experiences, which were often tumultuous and eventful. The characters Gina, Adele, Helen, Crystal and Esmé, who are significant to Burnside, played a pivotal role as inspiration for his writing. Another observation that can be made after analysing Burnside's poems is that autobiographical events likely influenced his earliest compositions more than they did with the latter ones. For instance, Burnside's first editorial publication, *The Hoop*, shows identifiable autobiographical correspondences with the experiences of the Fife County-born author. To summarise and conclude, this article offers an in-depth look at the literary contributions of John Burnside, placing him within the context of modern Scottish literature and eco-poetic criticism, featuring a detailed comparison of two of Burnside's autobiographies and carefully chosen poems from his most notable works. The knowledge gleaned from this analysis is sure to be a valuable resource for those examining Burnside's poetry and prose in the future.

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