THE CONTEMPORARY FIRST-PERSON NOVEL IN IRELAND: RENEWAL OF AN OLD TRADITION?

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During the last two or three decades, the Irish novel has undergone a renewal and has met with unprecedented success. While this success is most aptly measured by production numbers and sales figures, it also becomes palpable in critical studies of the Irish novel published before the great boom in Irish fiction-writing. In *The Irish Novel* James Cahalan still feels it is necessary to apologise for the lack of a strong novelistic tradition in Ireland, and in *The Irish Novel in Our Time* Patrick Rafroidi concludes his historical sketch with rather hesitant references to promising new writers such as John McGahern, John Banville, Edna O'Brien, and Aidan Higgins. These writers have now fully realised their promise and have been joined by a large generation of younger writers who have expanded and explored the Irish novel in all directions. Surely, Rüdiger Imhof would no longer be able to write, as he did in 1989, that "the bulk of books published during the last couple of decades is decidedly old-fashioned and conventional, not to say parochial" (Imhof, *Banville* 11).

One particular feature in this relatively recent reinvigoration of the Irish novel is the ever-increasing popularity of first-person fiction. A superficial glance at the shortlists of literary prizes or even a quick perusal of *Books Ireland* reveals that a substantial body of the novels published over the last ten or twenty years have been written at least partly in the first-person mode.[1] Most of the major contemporary Irish novelists have published at least a few first-person novels (cases in point being Edna O'Brien, Roddy Doyle, John McGahern, Dermot Bolger, Glenn Patterson, Anne Enright, Eílis Ni Dhuíbhne, Emma Donoghue, Hugo Hamilton, Joseph O'Connor, and Colm Tóibín), while many others novelists, such as John Banville, Patrick McCabe, Anne Haverty, Robert McLiam Wilson, and Neil Jordan, have made first-person narration almost exclusively the hallmark of their writing.

This observation gives rise to the hypothesis that there may be a connection between the increased popularity of the first-person novel and the qualitative and quantitative boom of the contemporary Irish novel. In other words, the question is whether this foregrounding of the character-narrator in the contemporary Irish novel is simply part of a wider international trend or instead presents a renewal or a strengthening of a specific traditional characteristic of the Irish novel in particular. In support of the former option, one could refer to the first-person novels published abundantly outside Ireland, by well-known writers such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Graham Swift, Jeanette Win-

1 A quick calculation revealed that 40% of all fiction reviews in *Books Ireland* between 2001 and 2003 concerned first-person novels.

terson, or J.M. Coetzee. On the other hand, the latter is supported by remarks often made – although less often firmly demonstrated – about the novel tradition in Ireland.

It has indeed been a long-standing complaint among critics of the Irish novel that, unlike the English or the French, the Irish did not produce any truly great realist novels. Instead of a wide social canvas, a formal coherence, and an omniscient narrator, the Irish novel presented an anecdotal structure, a loose plot, and colloquial diction. Nowadays, these elements are no longer frowned upon as deficiencies, but perceived as distinctive characteristics of the Irish novel tradition. Roy Foster defends these traits arguing that "the assertion that Irish literary culture is deficient in great novels may simply indicate that Irish writers had neither the time nor the inclination for novels that were formal in conception and linear in structure, as in the great age of English or French fiction" (Foster 3). James Cahalan asks rhetorically,

> Why do Irish novels tend to have strong narrators and weak plots? [...] Perhaps partly because of the power of the oral storytelling tradition in Ireland, as well as the virtual absence of a middle class in Ireland as both subject and audience. (15)

In the rest of his very useful study, however, he focuses on thematic rather than formal or narratological concerns and hence fails to provide a sustained discussion of strong narrators or loose plots in Irish fiction.

In order to provide an answer to the questions I formulated earlier, precisely such a discussion is required. A comprehensive discussion would be outside the scope of this article. Therefore, I will restrict myself to a brief overview of the first-person narrator in the canonical history of the Irish novel in order to establish whether strong first-person narration is indeed a familiar feature of Irish literary history and whether it is justifiable to claim that the oral storytelling tradition influences not only the short story, as is generally accepted, but also the Irish novel.[2] Before we delve into Irish literary history, however, it may be necessary to clarify the rather vague term, 'strong narrator,' so that we know what we are looking for.

Structuralist narratology classifies narrators according to their degree of perceptibility, which ranges from a maximum of covertness in so-called weak narrators to a maximum of overtness in so-called strong narrators (Chatman 196-8; Rimmon-Kenan 96-99). Signs of overtness, in mounting order of perceptibility, are description of setting, identification of character, temporal summary, definition of character, insight into the character's (un)consciousness, and commentary on the story or narration. Following this scheme, I-narrators are among the most overt of narrators since they – almost invariably – judge events, interpret thoughts and feelings, and self-consciously com-

2 Many commentators have noted the influence of the storytelling tradition on the Irish short story. Sean O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor noticed the link in their early studies of the short story and several more recent articles have traced the influence of folklore and storytelling in the works of writers as diverse as William Carleton, James Stephens, Frank O'Connor, and Liam O'Flaherty.

ment on the process of narration. The fact that they can easily be identified as a character within the story further heightens their perceptibility. Yet, even within the class of overt first-person narrators, an additional distinction can be made between unobtrusive I-narrators, who tend to hide behind the story they are narrating and stronger or more obtrusive narrators, who are very much present in the story they tell. Examples of unobtrusive I-narrators can be found in Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, John McGahern's *The Leavetaking*, and Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*. Strong or obtrusive narrators appear, for example, in Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, Neil Jordan's *The Dream of a Beast*, or John Banville's *The Book of Evidence*. Precisely because the personal experiences, diction, and opinions of these strong narrators can be seen to shape and influence the story they tell, they are especially vulnerable to charges of unreliability. This leads to an ironic distance opening up between the story as it is told by the narrator and the story as it is construed by the reader from the contradictions, idiosyncrasies, or gaps in the narration.[3] This second, hidden story may then either supplement or contradict the first. Famous examples of such double-levelled narratives in Irish literature are Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* and Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*. Although reliability is itself largely a matter of degree, it is clear that the unreliable narrator stands at the far end of the scale of weak vs. strong I-narrators. Suspicions of unreliability are therefore easy markers in the search for obtrusive I-narrators in the Irish novel.

It is notoriously difficult to clearly demarcate the Irish – or Anglo-Irish[4] – novel from the English one in the early decades of the novel tradition. During the eighteenth and even in the nineteenth century, many Irish novelists lived in both England and Ireland, writing primarily for the English market and looking for publishers in London. Yet, while it is necessary to consider the Irish novel – just like the Scottish or early American novel – within the wider context of the English novel (or rather, the novel in English), it is also possible to look for specific interests in form and subject-matter that might set apart novelists with special ties to Ireland from those with no links whatsoever. This pragmatic approach should enable us to look for specifically Irish themes and formal characteristics in the works of, say, Goldsmith, Swift, or Stoker, without having to engage in the controversy about their national identity or socio-cultural allegiances. Laurence Sterne will be considered here in this manner: not as

3 Wayne Booth first introduced this term in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: "I call a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not" (158). This rather vague definition has recently been the cause of considerable debate (see e.g. Nünning and Phelan), but in practice, readers seem to know quite well when a narrator's representations or interpretations are suspect.

4 Although I am aware of the concerns which prompted the use of the term 'Anglo-Irish' for Irish literature written in the English language in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I will – for convenience's sake – employ the term 'the Irish novel' for novels written by Irish authors from the eighteenth century to the present.

the founding father of the Irish novel, but rather as one of the first great innovators of the first-person novel who – perhaps not entirely by coincidence – happened to have links with Ireland.[5]

In the early years of the English novel tradition, first-person narration was the dominant mode of narrative representation. Inspired by existing genres such as the travel narrative and the picaresque novel, Daniel Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe* – and most of his other novels – as first-person narratives. Similarly influenced by the popularity of authentic ego-documents in the eighteenth century, Samuel Richardson let Pamela tell her own story in letters and diary entries. It was only by means of the editorial narrator's 'I' – traditionally read as the voice of the author – that Fielding instituted the omniscient third-person mode, which became the model for realist representation in the decades to come. With *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, however, Sterne breaks new ground, not only in the novel tradition in general, but also specifically in the exploration of first-person narration. In the novels of Defoe, Richardson, and many of their followers, the story is of primary importance and I-narration is simply considered the most convenient and convincing mode of conveying that story to the reader. In *Tristram Shandy*, however, the emphasis shifts from story to narrator, from the events and facts of the plot to the narrator's idiosyncratic way of telling these events. Tristram is clearly a strong narrator who foregrounds his opinions and ideas, draws attention to himself as narrator rather than as protagonist, and self-consciously reflects on the problems of narrative representation. Similarly, while Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding did their very best to establish their narrator's reliability (cf. Nünning 91), the whimsicalities of Fielding's highly eccentric narrator show precisely the opposite, namely that a narrative cannot possibly be a fully reliable representation of facts. Sterne makes very clear that the narrator's perspective is of necessity limited and that his opinions and characteristics colour and distort his narrative. In addition, *Tristram Shandy* and an older, but lesser known Irish first-person novel, Thomas Amory's *The Life of John Buncle, Esq.*, share the conversa-

5 That the controversy about someone like Sterne is still going on is evident in Imhof's recent *A Short History of Irish Literature*. In an argument of over one page, he sets out to demonstrate that Sterne and his novel are "thoroughly English" and that "there is no Irish literary tradition in the light of which *Tristram Shandy* could be appreciated" (26). Although Sterne's links with Ireland are admittedly rather small, I think that the Irish oral storytelling tradition might provide an interesting backdrop against which to consider some of the very peculiarities and innovations that have made *Tristram Shandy* famous as the first anti- or meta-novel. I agree therefore with Cahalan, who claims that "it is possible to discover the features of a particular kind of Irish novel even among Irish writers who, although born in Ireland, did not choose to write novels about Ireland" (7).

tional style, the loose, anecdotal plot, and the eccentric narrator which were later construed as indicative of an Irish oral tradition.[6]

Another Irish novel which brings all of these traits to even greater acclaim is Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*. Although this novel is, strictly speaking, neither the first novel set in Ireland, nor the first novel written by an Anglo-Irish writer, the publication of *Castle Rackrent* in 1800 is often perceived as the beginning of the Irish novel tradition. Incidentally, the near-mythical status of this novel is similar to Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, which is often celebrated as the first modern American novel.[7] Both of these novels interestingly share a first-person narrator who 'speaks' with a markedly colloquial voice and whose (real or professed) naïveté gives his narrative an ironic double edge. In a brief historical overview of unreliable narration, Ansgar Nünning pronounces Thady Quirk therefore the first unreliable narrator in British fiction. Nünning reads Thady as an "incredibly naïve servant [whose] sense of family honour and loyalty not only borders on the absurd, but also distorts his chronicle of what he believes to be an illustrious family" (91). Although Nünning's reading of Thady's story may itself be rather too naïve, *Castle Rackrent* certainly is the first truly double-levelled narrative in the English novel. In the preface, the Edgeworths themselves point out that Thady's blind "partiality to the family" distorts his narrative, but they consider this distortion to be so blatant that it "ceases to be dangerous" (62). Indeed, underneath Thady's rather ambivalent description of the Rackrent family, the reader easily detects Maria Edgeworth's cautionary tale about bad management and absenteeism in the Irish Big Houses. Yet, it remains a point of discussion among critics and readers in how far Thady himself is aware of this hidden story or, even more disingenuously, had a hand in the Rackrents' downfall himself. Perhaps Edgeworth herself gave the most accurate description of her narrator, when she wrote in the postscript:

> All the features in the foregoing sketch were taken from life, and they are characteristic of that mixture of quickness, simplicity, cunning, carelessness, dissipation, disinterestedness, shrewdness, and blunder, which, in different forms, and with various success, has been brought upon the stage, or delineated in novels. (121)

Apart from the question whether Thady is a crafty schemer or a naïve and faithful servant, it is clear that Thady is a highly obtrusive narrator, whose voice and personality shape and determine his narrative. As Marilyn Butler indicates, Thady's voice – with its colloquial diction, its many non-sequiturs and inconsistencies – must have

6 Cahalan argues: "Buncle establishes a speaking narrative voice engaged in the telling of a seemingly formless, long tale – a pattern that would become very familiar in the Irish novel" (12) and Imhof agrees: "In structure the book is episodic, displaying an affinity with the Irish oral tradition in its delight in fantasy and regression" (*Short History* 37). In an article on this novel, Ian Campbell Ross sets out to prove "Amory's debt to Irish oral narrative" (76).

7 As Ernest Hemingway famously said: "All modern American fiction comes from one book by Mark Twain" (as quoted in Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* 18).

substantially subverted the common expectations of contemporary readers (9).[8] Edgeworth herself insisted on the oral origins of the novel and she succeeded quite well in retaining this oral quality within the written narrative: "The only character drawn from life in *Castle Rackrent* is Thady himself, the teller of the story [...] I heard him when first I came to Ireland, and his dialect struck me, and his character, and I became so acquainted with it that I could speak it without effort" (as quoted in Butler 4). *Castle Rackrent* may therefore also be the first example of what the Russian formalists have called *skaz*, a written narrative that imitates a spontaneous oral account in its use of dialect, slang, and idiom of a particular person.[9] It is perhaps also a sign of its uniqueness that the innovative style and narration of *Castle Rackrent* did not find any immediate followers. Edgeworth did not publish another book like it and although many Irish writers would become fond of using Irish colloquial diction, it remained for a long time safely embedded within the narrative of the omniscient narrator.

In fact, in the course of the nineteenth century, writers increasingly preferred the omniscient narrator, possibly, Nünning argues, because "novelists proceeded from the assumption that an objective view of the world, of others, and of oneself can be attained" (92). Still, even in the mid-nineteenth century, the high point for the Victorian realist novel, some first-person narratives continued to be written. First among those are fictional autobiographies or memoirs, such as Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, or W.M. Thackeray's *The History of Henry Esmond*. This genre, which still owed a great deal to authentic memoirs and autobiographies, was subsequently used for comic purposes in W.M. Thackeray's *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq*. If in the traditional retrospective first-person novel, the narrator is a fairly unobtrusive figure who focalises most of the story through his or her younger, experiencing self, in the comic autobiography the focus is very much on the eccentricities of the narrator. In the case of *Barry Lyndon*, we even have a highly untrustworthy narrator who unwittingly condemns himself as conceited, arrogant, and selfish through his own story. While *Barry Lyndon* is usually considered the first in the genre of comic autobiography, which was rather popular during the 1840s and 50s, it is worth noting that Thackeray found inspiration for his novel in Ireland. In a letter, Thackeray intimates that his main charac-

8 See Hollingworth for an enlightening and subtle study on Edgeworth's use of colloquial speech in her work.

9 In most critical accounts, *Huckleberry Finn* is referred to as the first example of *skaz* in the English language, but a case could be made for this to be *Castle Rackrent*.

ter is based on one of his many Irish acquaintances[10] and that the innovative narrative mode of the novel is partly modelled on Charles Lever's *Harry Lorrequer*:

> I have in my trip to the country, found materials (rather a character) for a story, that I'm sure will be amusing. I want to write it & illustrate it, and as you see how Harry Lorrequer succeeds both in the Dublin Magazine & out of it, why should not my story of BARRY-LYNN [...] answer in as well as out of Regina. (as quoted in Anisman 38)[11]

Charles Lever's *The Confessions of Harry Lorrequer* features a narrator who, although highly similar to Barry Lyndon, is rather less disagreeable. Looking back on his life, Lorrequer tells us – with pride and abundant hyperbole – of his adventures, which mainly consist of lying, bragging, and trying to cheat other people. Lorrequer is clearly an unreliable narrator, both epistemologically – one has to take his story with more than just a grain of salt – and ethically, since selfishness and conceit colour his narrative as well as his actions. However, since most of the characters he meets have similar defects, his actions are never really vicious, and, while Lyndon ends his life in prison, Lorrequer ends up marrying the rich heiress he loves. The formal differences between both novels are again revealing for the Irish novel tradition: while *Barry Lyndon* has a coherent plot and a clear moral message, *Harry Lorrequer* consists of a series of anecdotes and its tone is merely comic. The novel is also closer to *Tristram Shandy* or *John Buncle*, as the narrator "hold[s] forth, taking listener and reader wherever wit and imagination lead" (Cahalan 68).

Apart from the (comic) fictional autobiography, the mystery novel is another nineteenth-century genre in which the first-person narrator proved its lasting popularity. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and – within the Irish tradition – many of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's Gothic novels are cases in point. When studying the narrative voice in *The House by the Churchyard* and *Uncle Silas* – an I-witness and an I-protagonist, respectively – one is struck by the emphasis on oral storytelling. Although in fact, both narrators write down their stories, they frequently refer to the process of 'telling' their story. While the narrators of *Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights* write letters and journals, Charles de Cresseron in *The House by the Churchyard* opens his tale with: "We are going to talk, if you please, in the ensuing chapters of what was going on in Chapelizod about a hundred years ago" (1). Maud Ruthyn in *Uncle Silas* ends her tale somewhat more ambiguously with: "I have penned it. I sit for a moment breathless" (423). Although the narrator of *The House by the Churchyard* is not an entirely plau-

10 Rather good-humouredly Thackeray once called Ireland "a nation of liars," referring to the fact that cunning and storytelling, whether true or false, were in high popular esteem (Sanders vii). *Castle Rackrent* is also mentioned as one of the sources for *Barry Lyndon*, precisely because of its narrative technique (Anisman 34).

11 Although Anisman exhaustively lists the real and literary models for *Barry Lyndon*, he curiously fails to take up this hint, perhaps because *Harry Lorrequer* does not really belong to the established canon of the Victorian novel. Similarly, Andrew Sanders neglects to mention *Harry Lorrequer* as a source for *Barry Lyndon*, even though he mentions Thackeray's acquaintance with Lever and with his work (xvii-xix).

sible I-narrator – he assumes the properties of an omniscient narrator after the first chapter – he styles himself as a storyteller throughout, and his wise and humane voice effectively holds together the various plots, anecdotes, and characters that make up this Irish mystery novel.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the first-person novel went into further decline. Following Henry James's famous injunction "dramatize, dramatize," showing (or *mimesis*) was promoted as the highest ideal to which the novelist could aspire. In practice, this meant that novelists sought to efface the narrator as much as possible.[12] The modernist novel found other means of entering and exposing individual consciousness – e.g. through the use of free indirect style and interior monologue – and the invariably overt I-narrator was doomed to lead a more marginal existence in short stories and 'lesser' genres such as the detective novel.[13] During the first half of the twentieth century, very few first-person novels were written, either in the Irish or the English literary traditions. A major – and again Irish – breakthrough came after the Second World War with Beckett's rigorous exploration of I-narration in his *Trilogy*. In the history of the first-person novel, Beckett's *Trilogy* constitutes a limiting case. It presents an extremely denuded form of I-narration which explores both the limits and the possibilities of the genre. Molloy, Moran, Malone, and the narrator of *The Unnamable* are narrators and almost nothing but narrators. All props of occupation, history, relationships, etc. are increasingly left behind. We only read, or even hear, a voice telling stories about itself and about others who turn out to be very much like this self. Even though the narrator in *The Unnamable* expresses the wish to reach the end of storytelling, to reach final silence, he must or will go on narrating. For the words he speaks not only create stories, but also the author of the stories. In this way, Beckett illustrates some basic truths about all first-person narrators, even about all forms of storytelling. Although the influence of Beckett on the contemporary novel is much less researched than the influence of Joyce, there might be a connection between his *Trilogy* and the boom of first-person narratives in the decades that followed. While Beckett's influence could be demonstrated in novels by John Banville, Neil Jordan, Edna O'Brien, or Robert McLiam Wilson, further research will have to determine whether his unprecedented exploration of the first-person novel did indeed prompt other novelists to try their hand at first-person narration.[14]

12 On the decline of 'diegesis' and the corresponding popularity of 'mimesis' in fiction of the first half of the twentieth century, cf. Rimmon-Kenan 106-8.

13 Although writers like Conrad and James published (most or all of) their major novels in the third-person mode, they famously experimented with I-narrators in their shorter fiction, e.g. *Heart of Darkness* and *The Turn of the Screw*.

14 I am thinking for instance of the analysis of storytelling in John Banville's *Ghosts*, of the almost surreal monologue in Neil Jordan's *The Dream of a Beast* and Edna O'Brien's *Night,* and the insistence on bodily functions by the narrator in Robert McLiam Wilson's *Ripley Bogle*.

Apart from the possible influence of Beckett, however, a number of other reasons could be adduced to explain the popularity of the first-person novel since the 1950s. In his collection of essays, *Consciousness and the Novel*, David Lodge surmises that "in a world where nothing is certain [...] the single human voice, telling its own story, can seem the only authentic way of rendering consciousness" (87). Himself a steady practitioner of the omniscient narrator, Lodge hastens to add that "of course in fiction this is just as artful, or artificial, a method as writing about a character in the third person." Still, what matters is that first-person narration is perceived as a more plausible way of telling a story, perhaps because of its affinities with 'real' ego-documents, such as autobiography, diary, or memoir. The idea seems to be that if in real life we cannot know what other people think, the novelist should not pretend to be able to in fiction either. In the Irish context, this mimetic explanation might perhaps account for the first-person novels of John McGahern, Jennifer Johnston, and Deirdre Madden, which remain firmly rooted within the realist tradition.

Another reason for the popularity of I-narration is that it provides an excellent way of exploring the way the mind works: how it remembers or fails to remember things, how it cheats itself about motivations or aims, and – as Beckett's novels already showed – how it constitutes itself in and through storytelling. This interest certainly pervades novels like Ronan Bennet's *The Catastrophist*, Anne Haverty's *One Day as a Tiger*, John Banville's *The Newton Letter*, or Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors.* As in this last novel, a first-person narrator is also often used to give voice to other or 'marginal' forms of consciousness, such as that of a child, a traumatised woman, or a voiceless historical figure, like William Hazlitt's Sarah Walker, who tells her side of the story in Anne Haverty's *The Far Side of a Kiss*. In a more extreme form, this interest in marginal, eccentric, or even aberrant forms of consciousness is realised in the numerous first-person narratives of murderers, madmen, or psychopaths, such as John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* or Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*.

A final preoccupation of the Irish first-person novel in particular (although something similar is at work in the Scottish novel) is the exploration of the more or less colloquial Irish voice.[15] Starting with *Castle Rackrent*, Irish fiction has tended to stage Irish dialect partly for comic purposes. This comic or even grotesque dimension still pervades the novels of Patrick McCabe, whose unreliable and highly ambivalent narrators are reminiscent of Thady Quirk. On the other hand, the comic and bragging Irish voice of *Harry Lorrequer* finds its postmodern counterpart in novels like Robert McLiam Wilson's *Ripley Bogle* or Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry*. Yet, in some of his other novels, Doyle stages the narrator's distinctly Irish voice in a less comic and

15 This renewed attention to the oral quality of the narrative voice could also be interpreted in the light of what Walter Ong has called "secondary orality": the new proliferation of oral speech via television, radio, telephone, etc. in our contemporary technological age. In contemporary Scottish literature, such use of colloquial 'Scots' can be found for instance in the novels of Irvine Welsh, Alan Warner, and Candida McWilliam.

more authentic manner. The same holds true, although somewhat less noticeably, for Clare Boylan's *Room for a Single Lady*, Anne Haverty's *One Day as a Tiger*, or James Ryan's *Home from England*.

In general, however, the preceding explanations are not exclusively Irish. They also hold true for many other English novel traditions, in some cases especially for other more 'marginal' traditions such as the Australian or the Scottish novel. It cannot therefore be denied that the rise of the first-person novel in Irish literature is part of a wider international trend. Still, it is clear that the Irish novel, more than its British or American counterparts, has a surprising history of strong and unreliable narrators, which is partly rooted within an oral tradition. With a change in the literary climate, the Irish novel seems to have been freed from trying to observe standards of morality and realism dictated by London and can self-confidently indulge in what it has always been good at: telling highly amusing and highly ambivalent stories in an attempt to outwit reader and listener alike. Put differently, if – as Imhof (*Banville* 11) asserts – the Irish novel has lagged behind in postmodern experiment, it is clear that with the first-person novel, it has successfully hooked on to an international trend. Although the success of the Irish novel in the past few decades is certainly due to a number of different factors, the contemporary revival of an Irish tradition of strong and eccentric first-person narrators may at least have been one of them.

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