

“PEOPLE MIRED IN HISTORY”: SEBASTIAN BARRY AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Donatella Abbate Badin

As many critics have pointed out, historical legacy and national identity are still the main concerns of Irish fiction in the twenty-first century to the detriment of “individual experience and perception,” which, in the opinion of some critics, are devalued.¹ In these recent years, while Ireland is preparing to celebrate her coming of age in 2016, the obsession of many contemporary writers with history and the national myth is becoming more and more evident. The present is actually still marked by the traumas of the past and, as a foreign critic judiciously remarks, “Irish writers need to critically interrogate the hidden wounds of the nation’s past before they can move on and engage with the present” (Piatek 158).

The novelist and playwright, Sebastian Barry is one of those writers participating in the commemoration of the great historical events of the past century, which have led to the establishment of an independent Ireland. He does it, however, against the grain, through a backward look cast in the direction of the forgotten (or suppressed) aspects of past history that still impinge on the present. Instead of glorifying the 1916 Rising and what followed, Sebastian Barry has been intent on showing through his novels and plays the underside of those great events, the inglorious aspects, the truths of the other faction, the distortions due to the passing of time and defective memory. His is, indeed, a celebration, *sui generis*, but in its way it also fulfils the celebratory purpose, commemorating those “people in the past who are not spoken about because the truth about them cannot be admitted [...] A silence grew up around them. So we have a censored past, censored individuals, and a country whose history is erased” (Sebastian Barry; qtd. in Kenny 10).

It is the purpose of this paper to show how Barry, in order to reconstruct history, used the half-forgotten, distorted, or misunderstood stories of those members of his own family who went through the events of the past aligned on the wrong front or without taking position. The interest and compassion shown for these obscure and pathetic figures of the past has often been mistaken for revisionism, but is, instead, as I argue, a facet of the author’s conception of history and a clue to his scepticism about the possibility of historical truth and objective history. Moreover, this attitude of his puts him in line with the episteme of postmodernity, which questions the grand narra-

1 Desmond Traynor in “Fictionalizing Ireland,” for instance, deprecates the expectations of critics that fiction should deal with “the state of the nation” to the exclusion of more personal matters (125).

tives of history to favour minimalist versions of it, attentive to individual events and to the common man.

Born in Dublin in 1955, Sebastian Barry inherited from his mother, actress Joan O'Hara, a love for the stage and for family stories, which he combined to produce several plays that constructed, together with the novels, the saga of his family. The innovative *Prayers of Sherkin* (1989), based on the story of his own great-grandmother of whom he knew little more than that she had left her island, inhabited by a Protestant sect, to marry his great-grandfather in Cork, inaugurated a series of theatrical and non-theatrical works focusing on different members of his own family from two or three generations back. "It's as if these hidden people sometimes demand that their stories are told," confided Barry to Nicholas Wroe (Wroe). Since the family events elaborated in plays such as the award-winning *The Steward of Christendom* (1995) and most of his novels – *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998), *Annie Dunne* (2002), *A Long Long Way* (2005), *The Secret Scripture* (2008), and *On Canaan's Side* (2011) – coincided with the political upheavals of the beginning of the twentieth century, history ends up playing a major role in Barry's literary universe.

Alex Clark, reviewing Barry's *On Canaan Side*, corroborates the idea that the author has chosen to scrutinize the "less travelled byways of history" and "to give a voice to their buffeted, battered but nonetheless enduring victims" (Clark). By bringing them back to life and giving them their narrative due, Barry feels he is redressing history, even though this action makes him a suspect of revisionism. As Bruce Stewart writes, he is "a writer who has been more than once aspersed for failing to participate wholeheartedly in the Irish nationalist project" (Stewart 50). Because of his staying clear of the all-pervasive influence of Irish nationalist history and his refusing to make nationalists his heroes (yet neither does he make heroes of its victims as we can see with his negative hero Eneas McNulty), he has attracted the criticism of the likes of Declan Kiberd, who, reviewing *Annie Dunne*, censures him and "that herd of independent minds which believes that it is a holy and wholesome thing to dismantle the narrative of nationalism" (Kiberd 10). Terry Eagleton, too, although expressing admiration for Barry's work, sees it as an example of an Ireland "desperate to bury its revolutionary history" (Eagleton 15-16). But there are also more mitigated views of his revisionism, such as Fintan O'Toole's, who finds that by "challeng[ing] the classic narrative," his vision of history appears as "a very useful corrective to monolithic ideals that have existed in Ireland" (qtd. in Adetunji), while O'Hagan in *The Observer* notes that Barry "writes against the absolute certainties of Irish history" and puts into question the tendency to consider the republican nationalist version of events as the only viable one (O'Hagan). Christina Hunt Mahony, who edited a book dedicated to Sebastian Barry's work, *Out of History*, concludes her essay denying revisionism and highlighting the humanism that underlies Barry's unpopular approach: "Barry's reclamation of minority figures in the Irish historical landscape [...] could be described perhaps more accurately in [a post-Catholic liberal view of the world] than as a revisionist historical undertaking" (Mahony 98).

In the eyes of a foreign reader, not as touchy as the Irish regarding their national myths, the significance of Barry's novels lies not in what is revealed and what is disregarded about the past, nor about his sympathies, but in the sense of history that emerges from them. The fact that he writes about personal stories "integrated into the wide canvas of Irish history" (Foster 183) gives a hint as to his historiographical interests and orientation that follow the episteme of the last few decades of the twentieth century. The narrative turn history has taken is well exemplified by Barry's historical or, rather, historiographic metafiction (as Linda Hutcheon² calls such works), indicating a kind of self-reflexive fiction that harbours also a self-conscious dimension of history, written in the awareness that history no longer gives the certainties implied in the traditional historical novel. History to him is as much a fictive reality as literature, being essentially 'discourse' and, unlike classical history, it does not seek (nor can it achieve) truth.

Barry's five family novels dealing with the critical years of Irish history (1912-1922) and their aftermath illustrate some of the historiographical tenets of the last few decades such as the fictionality and the unreliability of history and its lack of objectivity due both to ideological bias and to the multiplicity of versions that converge in it. Unlike historical novels that refer to incontrovertible facts, Barry and many other European writers who deal with the past in the same spirit consider history an illusory human construct. Barry's history, moreover, as in postmodern historiography or in historiography inspired by the School of Annales, does not deal with the great events or the great figures of the past but with the common man and with how he or she is caught unawares in the eddies of history.

Barry's practice of illustrating history through 'localized' narratives about small groups of common people (indeed about his forebears) belonging to the margins rather than to the mainstream of society is akin to the concerns of the Italian school of 'micro-history'³ or to Lyotard's theorizing about his "petits récits,"⁴ little narratives about iso-

2 Linda Hutcheon gives the name of "historiographic metafiction" to the kind of postmodernist fiction "that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past" and where "the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the "world" and literature" (3).

3 The school of microhistory, which started in Italy in the 1970s and gravitated around the journal *Quaderni storici*, was founded by Carlo Ginzburg (*Il formaggio e i vermi*, 1976; English title: *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*) and Giovanni Levi (*L'eredità immateriale*, 1985; English title: *Inheriting Power: Story of an Exorcist*, 1988). Ginzburg and Levi directed the collection *Microstorie* for the Turin-based publisher Einaudi. Those studies were derived from oral traditions or local and parochial archives and they recreated the lives of small groups of people emphasizing blood ties, property changes, and the life-styles of small communities normally excluded from historical analysis.

4 Jean-François Lyotard elaborated the concept of *petits récits*, that is, mostly fictional small narratives, which he opposes to the grand narratives of modernity (Marxism,

lated individuals – the only tenable way to contrast the great constructs of history, the master narratives of the past. Barry's stories about modest, naïve, unaligned characters, often victims of a purge (Eneas McNulty, Lilly Bere, indirectly also Annie Dunne and Roseanne Clear) or otherwise defeated, are also part of history and, as Roy Foster points out, they, too, "reflect the fractures and losses of Irish experience" (Foster 183). Like Foucault, whose masterworks deal with lunatics, prisoners, deviants and, more generally, marginalized people,⁵ Barry writes historically about the people forgotten by history. The sagas of two fictional families, the Dunes from Dublin and the McNulties from Sligo, loosely inspired by his own family stories, deal with the dramatic events of the past, seen from the side of the losers or, better, in Bruce Stewart's words, "the pariahs and underdogs and untouchables of Irish society" (Stewart 42).

A Long Long Way (2005) is fully set in the past, during WWI, and could be termed a traditional historical novel. It deals with the sufferings of Willie Dunne (the son of Superintendent of the Police Thomas Dunne of *The Steward of Christendom*, *Annie Dunne* and *On Canaan's Side*) on the front of Flanders, torn between loyalty to his regiment and sympathy for the 1916 Rising. At home on furlough, he witnesses the action which he as one of the Dublin Royal Fusiliers is expected to repress. For Willie as for some of his friends this will open up a profound crisis of identity with dire consequences. The intensely lyrical novel tells effectively the 'silenced story' of those quintessential losers, the Irish soldiers of the British army, who were despised, as Barry says, by nationalists as traitors and denounced by the English as mutineers. Given its suppression in official history, it was important, Barry felt, to tell the story of Irish participation in WWI.

Barry's other novels, instead, deal with the long-term consequences of the revolutionary decade embodied in the vicissitudes of marginalized protagonists. Eneas McNulty (of *The Wanderings of Eneas McNulty*), who was briefly in the British Merchant Navy and then in the police, is condemned because of this sin to be a perennially persecuted wanderer. Lilly Bere (née Dunne), the protagonist of *On Canaan's Side*, is an exile hounded by men and fate – "some great agency, some CIA of the heavens" (*Canaan* 4) – because of her husband's belonging to the Blacks and Tans. Even the flight to America will not save her: her husband will be murdered as a punishment for his role, she will be followed and threatened, although she hides under a fictitious name, and her son and grandson, veterans, respectively, of Vietnam and Iraq, will suffer the psychological consequences of violence that keeps recurring in history. Annie Dunne, of the eponymous novel, is consigned to a marginal role in society and

Freudianism, the Enlightenment, the progress of science) that have lost their credibility, as he maintains in *The Postmodern Condition* (xxv).

5 The lesson of Foucault about those excluded from society by the discourses of power is chiefly to be found in his *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and *The History of Sexuality* (3 vols., 1976-1984).

to the torment of the memory of her father's madness. The madness of Thomas Dunne, due to his demise from the role of chief Superintendent of the Police and due to the conflicts of loyalty and fatherhood opened up by this event, is also the subject of the play *The Steward of Christendom* (1995), in which the ghost of Thomas's son Willie repeatedly appears, bringing finally about the resolution of the break between the two over the Rising.

Finally, there is Roseanne Clear (the protagonist of *The Secret Scripture*), incarcerated in a lunatic asylum for connections doubtful even (or, rather, especially) to herself. The Presbyterian Clear family have been hit by the enmity of the powerful Father Gaunt, apparently for giving a Christian burial to a member of the IRA with whose brother, later on, Roseanne will have contacts misunderstood as sexual by the bourgeois society of Sligo. Accused of adultery and even of nymphomania, she is punished by total isolation in a hut. Eventually after a fling with the fugitive Eneas McNulty (her brother-in-law), she has a baby and consequently is sent to the asylum where fifty years later her case will be re-examined by Dr Grene. Thus, her tragedy, too (as well as Dr Grene's, who, as it turns out, is the long-lost son), has its remote origins in the power games of the Civil War, which lead to Roseanne being crushed by the hostility of the Catholic Church, which connived with the winners of the conflict and a conformist new bourgeoisie.

All four novels, thus (with the exception of *A Long Long Way*), deal with the lingering presence of the past in contemporary Ireland and with the influence that past historical events have had on marginalizing their protagonists in later life. In a postmodernist mood, they focus on the fact that, as Lilly Bere muses as she writes her memoir, "there is nothing called long-ago after all. When things are summoned up, it is all present time, pure and simple" (*Canaan* 217). The same thought is also voiced by Roseanne Clear: "I am old enough to know that time passing is just a trick, a convenience. Everything is always there, still unfolding, still happening. The past, the present, and the future, in the noggin eternally, like brushes, combs and ribbons in a handbag" (*Scripture* 210).

In such a synchronic vision of past and present, the consequences in the present interrogate the past. The leitmotif of Barry's novels, indeed, is the presence of the past⁶ in the present, which defeats those critics who bemoan that Irish novelists, deprived of a sense of place by globalization, are unable to write about contemporary Ireland. The intuition of the synchronicity of past and present, together with the concept of the fictionality of history, are actually central to postmodernism and its conception of fiction. According to Hutcheon, fiction is "at once metafictional and historical" (Hutcheon 3) with past and present confused and synchronical. Barry's views on history and fiction converge indeed with the theory and practice of post-modernity.

6 "The Presence of the Past" was the title of the 1980 Venice Biennale of Architecture that became a landmark of postmodernism.

As contemporary historiography argues, history is a form of narrative. Foucault himself admits in *Knowledge/Power*: "I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth" (Foucault 193). The concept of the fictional nature of history, first upheld by Nietzsche and strongly developed by Hayden White, is behind the notion of history that inspired Barry's novels. "[H]istory, as far as I can see," writes Roseanne, "is not the arrangement of what happens in sequence and in truth, but a fabulous arrangement of surmises and guesses held up as a banner against the assault of withering truth" (*Scripture* 56). This, admittedly, is not a new concept, since Napoleon himself was supposed to have said: "What is history but a fable agreed upon." It has, however, taken a new cogency in our days.

The strategy of having two very old women take up the pen to tentatively construct and (re)construct the past through their dwindling recollections, in Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture* and *On Cannan's Side*, are illustrations of the desire rampant in recent Irish fiction (but also in recent theory) to transform history into narrative and interpretation and to reaffirm the significance of the private over the public. It also foregrounds, however, the unreliability of their accounts – and emblematically of all accounts. The ageing protagonists of these two novels wrestle with their inability to recount the events of past times, being aware of the impossibility to disentangle the private from the public and interrogating themselves as to the truthfulness of what they are telling. As in all postmodern historiography that argues for the existence of a 'multiplicity of standpoints' rather than a 'grand narrative,' Barry's texts are constructions of the past pieced together from fragments, which have no pretence of being all-encompassing and explanatory. For instance, several versions of the same events coexist in *The Secret Scripture* in a mosaic of truths where each narrator brings grist to his or her own mill offering a biased story open to the interpretation of the reader. Roseanne Clear's 'testimony' of her pre-confinement life and of the confused events leading to her imprisonment is flanked by other attempts (Dr Grene's, Father Gaunt's) to piece out the truth about her reclusion and the events that preceded it.

The multiplicity of accounts, Roseanne's failing memory, and Father Gaunt's probable bad faith leave the reader with many questions as to what had really happened to her and to her father in the past, which would have such dire consequences on their lives. Was her father in the Royal Irish Constabulary, was he an informer, was he executed (and by whom) or did he commit suicide? Was Roseanne's encounter on the hilltop of Knocknarea with John Lavelle, the brother of the IRA fighter her father had buried, really innocent or was it adultery as Father Gaunt surmises? Neither Roseanne's testimony nor Dr Grene's commonplace book nor Father Gaunt's report nor the other documents brought forward can tell us her real story and explain why she had been incarcerated in a mental hospital.

History, like the truth about Roseanne, is made of many stories, none of which – nor the sum of them all – can lead to a faithful reconstruction of the past. This also ap-

plies to national history which is composed of many different narratives besides the one most people like to hear about their own nation, some of them little known, others unpalatable. "There is no one writable 'truth' about history and experience, only a series of versions: it always comes to us 'stencillized'," writes Tony Tanner (Tanner 172).

Historical facts being inaccessible and unreliable, one must abandon the notion of a neutral, scientific objectivity as well as reject a single monolithic history. This tenet of postmodern historiography pervades Barry's narrative world. The truth in most of novels and plays is pieced together with difficulty, especially when the author adopts the stratagem of unreliable narrators that cannot be trusted because of failing memory or bad faith; their many contradictions mimic the musings about the reliability of facts characterizing historical metafiction and historiography.

Roseanne Clear and Dr Grene in *The Secret Scripture* and Lilly in *On Canaan's Side* repeatedly express their belief that history is unreliable both for the way it is transmitted through memory, hear-say, and writing and because it is multiple:

Memory [...] if it is neglected becomes like a box room or a lumber room in an old house, the contents jumbled about, maybe not only from neglect but also from too much haphazard searching in them, and things to boot thrown in that don't belong there. [...] It makes me a little dizzy to contemplate the possibility that everything I remember may not be – may not be real. There was so much turmoil at that time that – that what? I took refuge in other impossible histories, in dreams, in fantasies? I don't know. (*Scripture* 208-209)

Lilly, too, clothes the past in fantasies and remembers in a bitter-sweet and ironical tone her faulty understanding of her father's role in the Dublin lockout:

When I first was told this story as a child [...] I misunderstood and thought my father had done something heroic. I added in my imagination a white horse, upon which he rode with ceremonial sword drawn. I saw him rush forward like in a proper cavalry charge. I gasped at his chivalry and courage. It was only years later I understood that he had advanced on foot, and that three of the working men had been killed. (*Canaan* 6)

Dr Grene, trying to find out Roseanne Clear's real story, complains that he is unable to ask the right questions and report the right things: "Now yet again I discover I do not have the language, the lingo, to talk to her about this, or about anything. We have neglected the tiny sentences of life and now the big ones are beyond our reach" (*Scripture* 73). There are no 'big sentences' for Dr Grene, nor grand narratives for the postmodern historian, but only constructions of the past and these tend to be distorted by imagination and by ideology.

Given the inaccessibility of facts, fictional or would-be historical reconstructions of the past are used as weapons in the imposition of power. Historicization is necessarily a political process selecting and excluding, centralizing the self and peripheralizing the other in accordance with the ideology ruling at the time the official history of a country is crystallized. "One 'fictions' history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true," says Foucault (193), and history is "the propaganda of the victors," in the words of the German playwright Ernest Toller. This is exemplified by Father Gaunt's com-

placent and politically correct version of past events in *The Secret Scripture*, which is so arranged as to justify his institutionalizing Roseanne for her diversity.

With his novels and plays, Barry implies that post-colonial history (or, rather, post-independence history in the case of Ireland) is as biased as colonial history since it, too, excludes many realities and tells a string of half-truths. The grand narrative of Irish history, “a long tale of colonisation and resistance” (O’Toole xi), demonizes or, at least, leaves out people who were neither colonialists nor revolutionaries, but trudged along doing what they thought was their duty – Mahony’s “innocents.”⁷ The naïve and deceptive ideals of those mistaken young Irish volunteers who joined the British Army in WWI are given voice by Jesse Kirvan, a soldier who was more aware than the others of the tragic quandary in which the Irish found themselves in the British Army:

I thought it would be a good thing to follow John Redmond’s words. I thought for my mother’s sake, her gentle soul, for the sake of my own children, I might go out and fight for to save Europe so that we might have the Home Rule in Ireland in the upshot. I came out to fight for a country that doesn’t exist, and now, Willie, mark my words, it never will. (*Long Way* 157).

In the key historical scenes of his plays and novels, Barry recreates an early-twentieth-century environment where “despite the increasingly urgent political conflict [...] most people were not bothered by politics one way or the other,” as Keith Jeffery remarks in his review of *A Long Long Way* (Jeffery). Although Barry refuses a manicheistic vision of history, noting [in our society] “a game is played with our history and our society, of cops and robbers, goodies and baddies. But there is no such thing” (qtd. in Kenny 10), he too ends up sinning and writing stories (or history) that are biased in favour of those who mistakenly or unthinkingly made the wrong choices or were dragged into situations that history would later decree as wrong. Roseanne thus is justified in wondering: “How does good history become bad history by and by?” (*Scripture* 119).

This sort of revisionism has appeared more or less in the same years in other cultures as well and is the fruit of a postmodernist questioning of history and of the refusal of the rhetoric and claim to coherence of historical narratives, along the lines I have briefly indicated. In Italian culture much debate was aroused by the case of Antonio Pennacchi’s *Canale Mussolini* (a tell-tale title) which, like Barry’s *The Secret Scripture*, was awarded a prestigious prize (Costa 2008 for Barry, Strega 2010 for Pennacchi). *Canale Mussolini*, like Barry’s ambitious narrative project articulated in several novels and plays, also deals with a family saga, modelled on the author’s own people, through which many salient events of the past emerge. The story of one

7 Mahony aims at demonstrating how most of Barry’s protagonists are endowed “with a degree of sustained innocence and a purity of soul and spirit which seems to defy any negative experience life might have dealt them” (83). These characters do not always understand what is going on but whether they are soldiers or policemen or occupy other institutional roles, they feel they are there “to serve and to protect” (91) and rarely recriminate.

large family of migrant peasants, arching over almost one century, covers the tragic evolution of history from WWI to the rise of Socialist workers' movements, the growth and affirmation of Fascism and the disaster of WWII. All these events are experienced without much understanding by Pennacchi's disadvantaged protagonists, who were relocated from their miserable existence in the East of the country to participate in Mussolini's reclamation of the marshes south-west of Rome (hence the title of the book) in the years 1926-1937. Being thus benefitted, the family become staunch and uncomprehending supporters of Fascism and, finally, suffer the consequences of their loyalty still in an uncomprehending fashion.

Both the Irish and the Italian author concentrate on the underdogs (in society as well as in historical memory) emphasizing the collective nature of mentalities. Through their work, Barry and Pennacchi try to overcome a phenomenon, shared by both countries, of cultural ostracisms and of the suppression from collective memory of those who are not in the mainstream. We realize that this new sensibility is the reflection of a particular moment and need in our society, that of looking at histories rather than at history. Neither Ireland nor Italy are "desperate," as Eagleton said, to bury their more glorious past (the 1916 Rising for the Irish, the Resistance movement for Italy), but there is a desire in the air to look at some other aspects of history, at those aspects that have been buried or hidden as shameful. Interviewed by Nicholas Wroe, Barry said "the way we think about ourselves in Ireland means there is no longer a necessity for those secrets. We can now marvel at them. It's as if the signal has been given that we can drop the purely nationalistic, De Valera history" (Wroe). Pennacchi, too, defends his right to give the victims of exclusion their due:

In the novel I make no concessions to Fascism, there is absolutely no kind of revisionism. Yet I believe that it is still uncomfortable to say some things, it is as if people did not want to listen to them. I never questioned the negative aspect of the regime but it is undeniable that in those years an incredible feat of reclamation was achieved. And we made it happen it with our own hands.⁸

In French, German and Spanish literatures, too, we have examples of fiction and drama regarding the repercussions of the painful historical events of the last century on the lives of normal people who are not part of history but passively accept the world. History is not only made by its actors. There have been many attempts to deal with an embarrassing past in a non-censorial way in all of these countries, and the shadows of Francoism or of collaborationism haunt their recent literatures. Understandably, German literature is more severe on its recent past. The figure of the uninformed Nazi, the *Mitläufer*, who does not share the ideology but opportunistically follows along, never plays a central role and is described with disapproval. But increas-

8 "Nel romanzo non faccio nessuno sconto al fascismo [...] non c'è assolutamente alcun tipo di revisionismo. Credo invece che certe cose siano ancora scomode da dire, sembra che qualcuno non le voglia ascoltare. Il lato negativo del regime nessuno lo ha mai messo in discussione, ma è innegabile che in quegli anni fu realizzata un'opera di bonifica straordinaria. E la facemmo noi con le nostre mani." (Pennacchi; qtd. in Bursi; the translation above is my own)

ingly stories of naïve young people going through a Nazi education without resistance or criticism have appeared in literature. The most important book on the subject is Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* (1972), in which a young girl of the bourgeoisie (possibly a self-portrait) absorbs uncritically the indoctrination of the Thirties. Franz Fühmann, too, a former Nazi and a soldier in Greece, in the collection of short stories entitled *Das Judenauto*, traces a personal trajectory that begins with childhood anti-Semitism, continues with a youthful acceptance of Nazism, and finally moves to the rejection of the deadly ideology and the adoption of Socialism. In Uwe Timm's *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003) the narrator wonders about what made his elder brother volunteer for the SS and tries to understand his motivation and role through the dead man's diaries and letters home.⁹

As in Barry's case, in these examples of German semi-fictional literature, great history is filtered through individual history, indeed history experienced by children and teenagers. However, unlike Barry's youthful protagonists, Willie Dunne or Eneas McNulty, the German protagonists emerge enlightened from the experience and earn their audience's forgiveness. On the Irish side, Willie and Eneas, but also Thomas Dunne and, maybe, Roseanne Clear's father, who were serving in British institutions in a spirit of duty and loyalty, never understand why they are being marginalised and berated by their contemporaries (and by many of the readers to whom their stories are told). Repeatedly, through his characters' words, Barry insists on the idea that the only fault that weighs on his protagonists' shoulders is that of being an uncritical part of the old establishment trying to do the right thing in a spirit of humanism rather than in the pursuit of an ideology or religious belief. In the words of one Barry's spokesmen, Dr Grene:

The world is not full of betrayers, it is full of people with decent motives and a full desire to do right by those who know them and love them. This is a little-known truth, but I think it is a truth nonetheless. Empirically, from all the years of my work, I would attest to that. I know it is a miraculous conclusion, but there it is. We like to make strangers of everyone. We are not wolves, but lambs astonished in the margins of the fields by sunlight and summer. (*Scripture* 186)

Barry's world is full of such lambs that also need to be remembered. The rhetoric of memory has a healing power especially in dealing with national traumas and their influences on personal lives. Barry's heroes are well aware of the bitter-sweet power of memory, so different from a celebratory commemoration: "To remember sometimes is a great sorrow, but when the remembering has been done, there comes afterwards a very curious peacefulness. Because you have planted your flag on the summit of the sorrow. You have climbed it" (*Canaan* 217). In the rest of Europe, too, we find this urge to remember and heal. Barry and his foreign colleagues re-articulate and (re)cover the past, questioning, often in a non-celebratory mood, World War I, the Easter Rising, the Civil War and forced emigration in the case of Ireland; World Wars I and II, totalitarianisms, civil wars, resistance or collaboration in the other countries.

9 I owe the information about German literature to conversations with my Germanist colleague, Prof. Anna Chiarloni of the University of Turin.

Often this attempt to heal means that the authors adopt the unpopular viewpoint of lending a voice to the forgotten and the marginalized who ranged themselves on what history proved later on to be the wrong side of the barricade.

Looking with disenchantment at the ambivalent transformations of Irish society throughout the past century, Barry has steered clear from a mythologizing and hagiographic approach to the past which he wants to re-appropriate in its entirety, in order to achieve and communicate Lilly's "curious peacefulness." To do that he has had to look at history from a different angle inspired by the Eurocentric vision of a post-nationalist, post-colonial and less insular Ireland. He remains, however, convinced of the inescapable role of historical memory, evident in the statement he made when he was interviewed by Nicholas Wroe: "By the accident of being born in Ireland, everywhere I looked I found people mired in history" (Wroe).

Works Cited

- Adetunji, Jo. "The Guardian Profile: Sebastian Barry." *The Guardian* 12 Sep 2008. <www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2008/sep/12/bookerprize.awardsandprizes> (21 Apr 2015).
- Barry, Sebastian. *Plays*. London: Methuen, 1997.
- . *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*. London: Faber, 1998.
- . *Annie Dunne*. London: Faber, 2002.
- . *A Long Long Way*. London: Faber, 2006.
- . *The Secret Scripture*. London: Faber, 2008.
- . *On Canaan's Side*. London: Faber, 2011.
- Bursi, Matteo. "Io, revisionista? Leggetemi" [Antonio Pennacchi]. *Gazzetta di Mantova* 12 Sep 2011. <gazzettadimantova.gelocal.it/mantova/cronaca/2010/09/12/news/io-revisionista-leggetemi-1.92502> (20 Apr 2015).
- Clark, Alex. Rev. of *On Canaan's Side*, by Sebastian Barry." *The Guardian* 20 Jul 2011. <www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/20/on-canaans-side-sebastian-barry-review> (21 Apr 2015).
- Eagleton, Terry. "'Overdoing the Synge-song': Rev. of *On Canaan's Side*, by Sebastian Barry." *London Review of Books* 33.18 (22 September 2011): 15-16. <www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n18/terry-eagleton/overdoing-the-synge-song> (21 Apr 2015).
- Foster, Roy. "'Something of us will remain': Sebastian Barry and Irish History." *Out of History: Essays on the Writings of Sebastian Barry*. Ed. Christina Hunt Mahony. Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 2006. 99-120.

- Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Vintage, 1980.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of Fiction." *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Ed. P. O'Donnell and R. Con Davis-Undiano. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989. 3-32.
- Jeffery, Keith. "Young Ireland Comes of Age: Rev. of *A Long Long Way*, by Sebastian Barry." *Times Literary Supplement* 22 Apr 2005: 20.
- Kenny, John. "Rev. of *A Long Long Way*, by Sebastian Barry." *The Irish Times* 26 March 2005: 10 ('Weekend').
- Kiberd, Declan. "Rev. of *Annie Dunne*, by Sebastian Barry." *The Irish Times* 18 May 2002: 10.
- Liotard, Jean-François. *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979. (*The Postmodern Condition*. Trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984).
- Mahony, Christina Hunt, ed. *Out of History: Essays on the Writings of Sebastian Barry*. Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 2006.
- . "Children of the Light amid the 'risky dancers': Barry's Naifs and the Poetry of Humanism." *Out of History: Essays on the Writings of Sebastian Barry*. Ed. Christina Hunt Mahony. Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 2006. 83-97.
- O'Hagan, Sean. "Ireland's past is another country: Rev. of *The Secret Scripture*, by Sebastian Barry." *The Observer* 27 April 2008. <www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/27/fiction.culture> (21 Apr 2015).
- O'Toole, Fintan. "Introduction." *Sebastian Barry, Plays*. London: Methuen, 1997. vii-xiv.
- Pennacchi, Antonio. *Canale Mussolini*. Milan: Mondadori, 2010.
- Piatek, Beata. "Irish History in the Novels of Sebastian Barry." *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis* 6 (2011): 158-167.
- Stewart, Bruce. "'To have a father is always big news': Theme and Structure in *The Engine of Owl-Light*." *Out of History: Essays on the Writings of Sebastian Barry*. Ed. Christina Hunt Mahony. Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 2006. 37-58.
- Tanner, Tony. *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970*. New York: Harper, 1971.
- Traynor, Desmond. "Fictionalizing Ireland." *Irish Studies Review* 10 (2002): 123-132.
- Wroe, Nicholas. "As our ancestors hide in our DNA, so do their stories: Sebastian Barry Interviewed by Nicholas Wroe." *The Guardian* 11 October 2008. <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/11/sebastian-barry-booker-prize>> (21 Apr 2015).