Katharina Rennhak (ed.)

NARRATING IRELAND IN DIFFERENT GENRES AND MEDIA

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Dedicated to our dear friend Werner Huber
(20 July 1952 - 28 April 2016)

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NARRATING IRELAND IN THE NEW MEDIA

INTRODUCTION: NARRATING IRELAND IN DIFFERENT GENRES AND MEDIA

Katharina Rennhak (Wuppertal)

In an article in *The Guardian*, entitled "This much I Know" (2009), Sebastian Barry emphasises the social importance of the storyteller:

> Not everyone is a storyteller, but every group of people needs one. It's an ancient, campfire thing. Storytellers are necessary in the dark, around the fire – someone needs to take responsibility to drive away the terrors of darkness. Or sometimes to help explain the darkness, and even help you embrace it; realise that it's not all black, that there's always a seam of beauty. (Ferguson)

This statement, which daringly reassembles a number of stereotypes about storytelling, no longer casts twenty-first-century authors as poets who "are the unacknowledged legislators of the World" (Shelley 535). Neither does it envision the author, as W. B. Yeats did, as predominantly a dramatist who writes for a "theatre where the capricious spirit that bloweth where it listeth has for a moment found a dwelling-place [and has, as a consequence,] good right to call itself a National Theatre" (414). In the twenty-first century the author whom "every group of people needs" is first and foremost a storyteller. Percy Bysshe Shelley would, of course, have considered his *Prometheus Unbound* and (some) other dramatic texts as poetry, just as well as Yeats is, more generally, interested in "Literature […], the ultimate creator of values" which can manifest itself in "every movement of imagination in song or story or drama" (414). Drawing on the terminology of Wellek and Warren, one could say that Shelley, Yeats and Barry emphasise one "generic mode" – the lyrical, the dramatic and the epic – which dominates their respective (literary) cultures. Significantly, these "generic modes" are neither dependent on nor necessarily correlative to "the generic forms" or "these 'ultimates' – poetry, fiction and drama" (229). *Narrating Ireland in Different Genres and Media* sets out to trace the narrative dominant through twentieth-century and twenty-first-century fiction, poetry, drama, film, TV and the World Wide Web.

One may take issue with a number of aspects of Barry's thesis or seek clarification of some of its implications. Unlike social theorists, who argue that every individual constantly engages in acts of self-narration which contribute to the ongoing process of shaping personal and group identities, for example, Barry reclaims the idea of an extraordinarily gifted storyteller. Does Barry's storyteller, as the fire metaphor might suggest, indeed partake of some Apollonian inspiration? Is it only a particularly talented and creative storyteller who can unite his or her audience by entertaining and distracting them, or by interpreting the enigmatic and frightening presence, or again by providing psychological support and aesthetic delight? Why fashion the contemporary storyteller as a descendant of the traditional campfire-storyteller, at all? – others

might ask. Such questions need not be settled here and now; some of them will reappear in different forms within the confines of this volume and are approached and answered differently by the various contributors. What Sebastian Barry's evocation of the storyteller certainly demonstrates, however, is that the contemporary author's power and responsibility are seen to lie in his ability to narrate, rather than to sing, rhyme or "bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland" (Gregory 402).

To literary and cultural critics this comes as no great surprise, of course. After all, there is hardly a discipline in the Humanities and Social Sciences which has not been affected by the 'narrative turn' that took place over the last two decades of the twentieth century. More than fifteen years ago, in 2000, Conor McCarthy, for example, analysed "the work of contemporary Irish activists in the field of culture – writers, critics and film-makers in this case –" (11) by approaching them with a terminology and methodology that builds on Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives" and on Homi Bhabha's "idea of the nation as a narrative" (qtd. in McCarthy 33, 39). In the process his *Modernisation: Crisis and Culture in Ireland 1962-1992* even begins to sense and contribute to the "gradual movement from emphasising the profoundly problematic nature of narratives (taken to impose order violently on the chaos of reality) to a sensibility characterized by accepting storytelling as an irreducible aspect of human existence", recently located and analysed by Hanna Meretoja in her *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory* (2). As McCarthy noticed more than fifteen years ago,

> the [postmodernist] crisis could be said to be one of narrative. If the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed an explosion of interest and identity groups, based on religion, sex and class, each such group sought to legitimate itself in narrative terms. Narratives help to locate communities historically, spatially, politically, metaphysically, mythically, ethically. Narratives permit communities to plot their futures. They can be understood as assertions of the will, of power. Narratives can be normalising or liberating. (198)

Even though McCarthy acknowledges the community-building function of narratives, for him and other critics in 2000 the "incredulity toward metanarratives" and the ensuing proliferation of micro-(hi)stories is still conceived of as a fundamental crisis. In Sebastian Barry's conceptualisation of the storyteller in 2009, by contrast, the act of storytelling and the storyteller's unifying power are contextualised with a cosy camp-fire setting and regarded to be a reassuring cultural necessity.

While Barry's image of the camp-fire storyteller invokes a moment in which somebody tells a tale (potentially in prose or in verse), his own writing practice demonstrates that storytelling is an activity not bound to a particular literary genre or communicative medium. In the wake of the narrative turn (as McCarthy's *Modernisation* also demonstrates by investigating "writers, critics and film-makers"), storytellers are conceived of as narrators who can tell their stories in verse or via monologues, dialogues and the actions performed on the theatrical stage, on the TV or movie screen, or in fiction.

This collection of articles entitled *Narrating Ireland in Different Genres and Media* is intended as a contribution to a by now well-established tradition of literary and cultural research that regards narratives as all-pervading structures of meaning-making and focuses on the narrative construction of national identities. What, then, is the need for this volume? What new perspectives does it bring to bear on the relationship of 'narratives' and 'narration' on the one hand, and 'Ireland'[1] on the other? In the pages that follow, Irish literature and culture are approached by scholars with an interest in exploring the various narrative strategies, narrative patterns and/or communicative frames that characterise genre- and media-specific ways of storytelling. They do not use the term 'narrative' solely as a rather vague (Lyotardian) synonym for discourse formations, but explore how defining aspects of narratives and narration – such as emplotment, narrative voice and focalisation, or the inextricable correlation of identity and narrative discourse[2] as well as that of narrative space and time – are fashioned and refashioned in different genres and media.

The opening essay by **Elke D'hoker** raises our awareness of an Irish genre tradition that has received surprisingly little attention: the short story cycle. While the short story – characterised by Declan Kiberd as "the natural result of a fusion between the ancient form of the [orally transmitted] folk tale and the preoccupations of [a textually sophisticated] modern literature" (42) – is widely held to be "the prose form best suited to articulating the Irish experience of becoming, along with the provisional nature of modern Irish culture" (Hand 3), the short story cycle "as a narrative form with distinct interests, patterns and characteristics" (D'hoker, below p. 17) has yet to be discovered. D'hoker's essay makes a significant contribution to this discovery. It outlines a brief history of the Irish short story cycle, introduces the main features of this neglected genre and reflects on potential aesthetic and community building functions of a narrative form that invariably juxtaposes the singular and the plural while striving to establish unity through fragments. In addition, the author's careful analyses of the interaction of plot and character as well as narrative space and time in Val Mulkerns's *Antiquities* (1978) and Mary Beckett's *A Literary Woman* (1990) provide two case

1 No need to mention in this series that 'Ireland' is a term at least as multi-facetted and contested as 'narrative'. Suffice to say here that in line with recent conceptualisations of national and post-national identities, the articles assembled in this volume regard Irish identity to be in a permanent state of becoming and, thus, to contribute to the ongoing discussion and simultaneous construction of 'Irishness'. Or to put it with Jennifer M. Jeffers, it would be "naive to think that we can [...] finally nail down 'Irish Studies': Irish culture is in a state of becoming. [...] it is for that very reason that we must continuously create new contexts and new ways of understanding texts, historical situations, and cultural change" (7).

2 Cf. Paul Ricœur's concept of narrative identity: "The person, understood as a character in a story, is not an entity distinct from her 'experiences'. Quite the opposite: the person shares the condition of dynamic identity peculiar to the story recounted. The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character" (147-148).

studies that demonstrate how two short story cycles draw on a Dublin setting to negotiate various aspects of the interaction among individual, family and national identity constructions.

Fiona McCann shares D'hoker's interest in the narrative representation of space and time. Taken together, the two articles that open this collection can be regarded as a significant contribution to the analysis of narrative chronotopes in constructions of Irishness. McCann's article shifts the perspective from Dublin to the Irish North and to the narrative construction of decidedly literary versions of Belfast and Derry. Contemporary novels and short story collections from Northern Ireland, McCann argues, experiment with new narrative forms which she situates in the genre tradition of dystopian allegories and apocalyptic narratives. Fruitfully combining rhetorical and narratological analyses, her article teases out the different ideological inflections of Sean O'Reilly's *Curfew and Other Stories* (2000), Anna Burns's *Little Constructions* (2007) and Francis Hagan's *The Auditor* (2010).

In their articles **Hedwig Schwall** and Anton Kirchhofer both discuss the relationship between traumatic experiences and narratives. In "Trauma and Narrative Techniques in Contemporary Irish Fiction", Schwall's analyses of Seamus Deane's autobiographical *Reading in the Dark* (1996) and Anne Enright's novel *The Gathering* (2007) demonstrate that the traumatic experience of the Northern Irish Conflict as well as that of socially unacknowledged instances of child abuse find a particularly adequate form in experimental, non-linear and fragmented narratives; drawing on Suzette Henke's psychoanalytical concept of 'scriptotherapy', Schwall also shows how the traumatised narrator-protagonists of these narratives provide examples of how to cope with and how to work through traumatic experiences by experimenting with different forms of storytelling. As instances of scriptotherapeutic exercises, Schwall claims, such trauma narratives "can also show a way forward by offering models of empathy" (below p. 47-48). They thus help to create a social climate that no longer represses and silences traumatic memories, but is beneficial to healing processes of national importance.

Anton Kirchhofer's article "Beyond the Comfort Zone" unfolds an insightful short history of Irish narratives of child abuse, identifying different phases of the discourse on child abuse in Ireland, which has changed considerably in the early 1990s. Carefully commenting on the significance of dysfunctional communicative structures, unreliable narrative voices and non-linear emplotments in James Joyce's "The Sisters" and "An Encounter", Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* and Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, Kirchhofer also demonstrates that all these literary narratives are characterised by an approach to child abuse which differs substantially from the non-literary public discourse on this phenomenon. While, as Ian Hacking has shown, the latter is predominantly "conducted in medical terms" (Kirchhofer, below p. 64), Joyce's, McCabe's and Enright's fictional stories disentangle the larger social implications of handling abuse in Irish culture.

In my own article I set out to demonstrate how Sebastian Barry's rather idiosyncratic way of constructing a literary puzzle by continuing to write the history of individual members of his family across (and against) different genre traditions contributes to re-narrating Irish identities. Situating Barry's poems, plays and, most prominently, his novels about members of the Dunne family in the tradition of the national tale and drawing on Martha Nussbaum's concept of 'poetic justice', I interpret Barry's adaptations of familiar plotlines and his – often slightly odd – handling of narrative mediation so as to shed new light on the function of the sentimental tendencies in his works, which many readers seem to appreciate but which have also been the target of severe criticism from literary scholars.

Anna Hanrahan's article turns from fiction to drama. She explores how Irish identity is narratively constructed in Dermot Bolger's Ballymun trilogy and discovers a project that is in certain respects similar to Barry's narrative Irish puzzle. Based on the assumption that the ability and opportunity to talk about one's experiences is a prerequisite for any self-empowering act, Hanrahan analyses the struggles of Bolger's characters to find a voice and narrate their own stories by drawing on those influential cultural narratives that are most readily available to them. In addition, she demonstrates how Bolger's plays orchestrate an impressive array of individual life-stories on the stage so as to turn his plays into multi-layered narratives that help the marginalised inhabitants of Dublin's Ballymun to establish a communal identity.

While Hanrahan focuses on the narrative representation of the social milieu of the Dublin high-rise scheme Ballymun in a trilogy of plays, **Christian Huck** turns to the unlikely combination of poetry and the suburb. In his article "Ireland, Lost Between Country and City. Eavan Boland in the Suburb", he analyses how Boland's lyrical evocations of ordinary lives in suburban estates construct an Ireland that diverges substantially from the dominant myth of Ireland as the Emerald Isle, on the one hand, and the alternative narratives of urban Ireland as imagined in Roddy Doyle's novels or Ciaran Carson's poems, on the other. Challenging the conventional attitude to the suburb in literature, literary criticism, and theory, where suburbia is usually regarded to be a bleak and eminently 'unpoetic' space, "a place of utter mundanity, a dystopia of domesticity" (Huck, below p. 117), Huck reflects on the lack of narrative qualities associated with the suburb. Boland's poetry and prose which revolve around suburban scenes and details, he claims, establish the suburb as an object that can be narrated in the first place and, secondly, endows it with the lyrical grace and existential significance which it deserves as the place where Irish lives are "lived here and now, for better or for worse" (below p. 116).

Sarah Heinz is also interested in the narrative construction of contemporary Irish spaces. She turns to critical representations of Celtic Tiger Dublin in a play and a film respectively – Sebastian Barry's *The Pride of Parnell Street* and Lenny Abrahamson's *Adam and Paul.* Her article "Celtic Tiger Ireland and the Politics of Disgust" squarely situates Barry's play and Abrahamson's film in the context of the dominant

narrative of Dublin in movies of the 1990s and early 2000s which establish the Irish capital as a recent addition to the hippest urban localities on the map of a global consumer culture. Using Ange-Marie Hancock's concept of 'the politics of disgust' to identify "the blind spots of this construction of normality in the recent Irish national narrative" (Heinz, below p. 136), she carefully analyses the plot lines and narrative logics of time and space in the stories told by Barry and Abrahamson in order to demonstrate how the play and the film re-perspectivise Celtic Tiger Dublin in stories of "stigmatypes" (below p. 141). Such narratives, she argues, vitally assist in de-essentialising the more glamorous representations of Irish Celtic Tiger identity.

In his reading of the very popular sitcom *Father Ted*, **Rainer Emig** sets out to "inquire into both the specifics of *Father Ted* and the question in how far the sitcom as a form of narrative may contribute to images of national identity as well as their subversion" (Emig, below p. 152). Reflecting on the cultural function of stereotypes in different contexts and media and identifying the narrative features of sitcoms, he explores how stereotypes of the Stage Irishman are reproduced and subverted in *Father Ted* and proceeds to weigh the ideological consequences of his findings. Emig's article concludes with a comment on "the limitations of current narrative theory with regard to sitcoms" (below p. 159-161).

In her article which further pursues the question of how Irish stereotypes are narrated, **Claire Lynch** turns to 'Cyber Ireland' and investigates how postcards, Barack Obama and Google Doodles, i.e. "fun, surprising and sometimes spontaneous changes that are made to the Google logo" (Google), have been instrumental in recent constructions of Irish identity as they have evolved in online forms. Her look at the narrative power that icons and images unfold is accompanied by a critical investigation into practices of narrating Ireland in social networks like Facebook™. Paying particular attention to the intersection of the national with other identity categories, Lynch demonstrates that communicative structures provided and encouraged by social networks in the World Wide Web serve to "lead people into 'local' frameworks" (Lynch, below p. 175) rather than to integrate Irish and global online narratives.

Narrating Ireland in Different Genres and Media is the result of a fruitful synthesis of two major research interests at the Wuppertal School of Humanities: Irish Literature and Culture on the one hand, and Narrative Research on the other. The project, which has now found its final form in this collection of articles, started out as a lecture series titled "Narrating Ireland" which was held at the University of Wuppertal in 2010 and organised by the English Department in cooperation with the Wuppertal Centre of Narrative Research. During the last decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century Prof. Heinz Kosok and Prof. Rüdiger Imhof had firmly established Wuppertal as one of the strongest Irish Studies centres in Germany. In 2010 it was uncertain whether this tradition would continue to thrive. The enthusiastic scholarly support of all those colleagues who came to Wuppertal and participated in the lecture series during the rather hot summer of 2010 – Claire Connolly (then Cardiff; now

Cork), Rainer Emig (then Hannover, now Mainz), Luke Gibbons (Maynooth), Christian Huck (Kiel), Rüdiger Imhof (Wuppertal), Claire Lynch (London), Nell McCafferty (Dublin), Chris Morash (then Maynooth; now Dublin), Shaun Richards (Staffordshire; Twickenham), Mark Schreiber (then Siegen; now Klagenfurt), and Hedwig Schwall (Leuven) – was indeed decisive in ensuring that the tradition of Irish Literature and Culture is still alive and kicking in Wuppertal. I am most grateful to all of them for generously sharing their insights and stimulating inspiring discussions.

For their invaluable support with the organisation of the lecture series I would like to thank Anna Hanrahan and Anna Lang. Further thanks are due to Nicholas Hurford for his advice on matters concerning English academic style. I am also very grateful to Daniel Becker, Eva Kerski and Pia Martin who have helped with proof-reading and formatting many of the articles assembled here.

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