

NARRATING THE BALLYMUN EXPERIENCE IN DERMOT BOLGER'S *BALLYMUN TRILOGY*

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Introduction: Narrating Ireland in Irish Theatre

Narrative and drama are two categories conventionally separated in literary theories. However, particularly in the Irish case, the distinction between the *mimetic* mode in drama vis-à-vis the *diegetic* mode of prose cannot be sustained. Since the Irish Literary Revival, storytelling has been an integral part of the Irish dramatic repertoire to the extent that "Irish theatre is renowned for its literary character; drama which is verbal rather than physical to the fore" (Wallace & Pílný 43). Rooted in Gaelic oral culture, the Irish stage has seen many storytellers, especially in rural settings. Despite the major changes in Irish culture during the last decades, the importance of narrative in Irish theatre has grown rather than subsided. In plays such as Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* (1979) the stories are very personal, tracing the characters' quests to make sense of their experiences and lives in long monological episodes. Since the late 1980s and the 1990s, the monologue has been established as one of the prevalent dramatic devices in works by playwrights like Conor McPherson, Dermot Bolger and Donal O'Kelly. The Celtic Tiger characters are exposed to a rapidly changing society in which traditional values no longer seem valid and identities are inherently unstable. It is in their stories that they attempt to order the confusing and contradictory events with which they are faced; and it is their stories which help them to cope with the difficult task of creating a coherent identity. In this article I am going to analyse how Bolger makes use of narrative elements in the *Ballymun Trilogy* in order to negotiate the emergence of a new type of both individual and local identity. The main focus is on the different ways in which dramatic characters define and express their identity by telling their own stories.

My analysis is strongly influenced by the sociological concept of narrative identity. Narrative identity, as Widdershoven puts it, is "the unity of a person's life, as it is experienced and articulated in the stories that express this experience"¹ (qtd. in Kraus 159, translation A.H.). Identity is understood as a continuous process during which the individual attempts to create coherence and continuity in 'self-narrations' (cf. Kraus 159). This process does not take place in a vacuum; rather, personality is developed as an "object, that is the product of a social process within a certain cultural

1 "Die Grundüberlegung dieses Konzeptes ist, daß die Prozeßziele der Kohärenz und Kontinuität in der Identitätsbildung mit dem Mittel der Selbst-Narration erreicht werden. Narrative Identität kann verstanden werden als 'die Einheit des Lebens einer Person, so wie sie erfahren und artikuliert wird in den Geschichten, die diese Erfahrung ausdrücken' [Widdershoven 7]" (Kraus 159).

setting; identity is not constituted on the biological level”² (Abels 302; translation A.H.). Hence the stories a person tells are always a reflection of their own identity and at the same time mirror the society they live in. Accordingly, the narratives in *The Ballymun Trilogy* are discussed as an expression of the characters’ struggles to develop a coherent identity within Irish society. I will focus on selected narrative episodes in all three plays in an attempt to illustrate how both dramatic and narrative form, such as setting, time and style, contribute to negotiating problems of personal and communal identity. In the process I will make use of some of the analytical tools of narratology in order to show how, exactly, narrative strategies and the construction of identity interact within the three plays. The aim is to explore the ways in which the dramatist Dermot Bolger uses narrative strategies to communicate both individual and communal experiences, and identity constructions, and how his trilogy attempts to give to the people of Ballymun the power to narrate themselves.

Ballymun, the site of a once hopeful project intended to solve Dublin’s growing housing problem in the 1960s, quickly turned into a synonym for unemployment, poverty, drug abuse and squalor. At the beginning of the 1960s the “demand for affordable rented accommodation far outstripped supply” and many families were forced to live in slum-like conditions, as Somerville-Woodward demonstrates (8). In 1963 a number of the overcrowded tenement buildings in the inner city collapsed, causing several deaths (16). Many of the families living in the tenements either left their houses out of fear or were evacuated as a safety measure by the state. By July of 1963 a total 324 families, amounting to at least 1000 individuals, had been rendered homeless and were placed in temporary accommodation or slept on the street (19). Thus the Ballymun Housing Scheme grew out of a dire need for quick and cheap accommodation to house the most urgent cases and the erection of high-rise buildings was chosen as the panacea to the crisis (Bolger xi-xii). While throughout Europe the “high rise schemes were being abandoned for becoming ‘vertical slums’, leaving inhabitants socially isolated [...] the Irish government decided that this prefabricated, high-rise scheme represented ‘an exciting alternative to the squalor of Dublin’s tenements’” (Bolger xi). Due to the urgency to house the families and the government’s miscalculation on both the temporal and the financial scale of the scheme, the first tenants moved into the flats in 1966 – before construction had been finished. There were no shopping or health facilities for almost another decade, it would take years until the estate was connected to the public transport network (Somerville-Woodward 139) and the landscaping that was promised to the new tenants was never put into place (118). The new tenants had to struggle with the flawed construction of the buildings, with lifts that were constantly broken, balconies that were flooded, a lack of ventilation and a heating system that they had no control over – i.e. that left them either too cold or too hot (132-133). Additionally, the

2 “In diesem Zusammenhang muss man sich daran erinnern, dass die Persönlichkeit als Objekt das Produkt eines sozialen Prozesses innerhalb eines kulturellen Rahmens ist; Identität konstituiert sich nicht auf der biologischen Ebene” (Abels 302).

new tenants found themselves isolated from both their former communities and their new neighbours. As Bolger comments, “[p]eople had been taken from close-knit, inner-city communities and dumped in tower blocks. Soon tenants with financial resources were leaving. By 1979, parts of Ballymun were becoming an occasional dumping ground for problem tenants” (xii).

Narrating the Ballymun Experience

Why won't the voices stop whispering,
Straining to be heard amid the babbling?
Lives that were ended and lives that begun,
The living and the dead of Ballymun.
("Ballymun Incantation"; Bolger xix-xx)

The voices of Dublin's notorious Ballymun are quiet; a mere whisper among the loud and more powerful voices of late twentieth-century Ireland. Whispers do not carry far and in the context of Ballymun the desperate attempts of the isolated and stigmatised occupants to make themselves heard were often ignored. The dominant Ballymun-narrative was created by the media which focused on more newsworthy negative stories rather than on positive ones (cf. Somerville-Woodward 182). As a result, the inhabitants of Ballymun were caught between the negative stereotype attributed to them by the media and society on one hand, and the perception of themselves and their own experiences on the other.

Bolger's plays, in particular *From these Green Heights*, seem to retrace the historical research around the towers collected by the Ballymun Regeneration Ltd., a synopsis of which has been published as *Ballymun: a History* by Robert Somerville-Woodward. However, the collection of historical facts is brought to life by showing characters who deal with the daily struggles, as it focuses on the personal side of being faced with difficult living conditions and a growing isolation from society. *From these Green Heights* follows the story of two families who move to the towers in the 1960s. The narrative episodes alternate between different periods of the characters' lives and the distinction between the living and the dead is blurred.

The Townlands of Brazil deals with the intertwined themes of single motherhood and emigration. It creates parallels between the lives of two young women, Eileen and Anna, who live in Ballymun during different decades. The two main characters' stories of loss and isolation are complemented by the narratives of other minor characters who, in turn, speak of similar experiences. The third play, *The Consequences of Lightning*, revolves around a group of family and friends. The characters share a past in the towers and are all trying to leave behind the difficulties it entailed, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, single motherhood and violence.

The Ballymun Trilogy thus stages hitherto muted or distorted stories and gives a voice to the people of Ballymun: "The *Ballymun Trilogy* was produced in the Axis Arts and Community Resource Centre, a local community initiative that has become the

flagship building of the regeneration project. [...] The plays of the *Ballymun Trilogy* validate the often traumatic struggles of the communities of Ballymun [...]” (Malone & O’Sullivan 235). However, the reclamation of the right to tell one’s own story holds more than the validation of experience: The right to speak entails power. Since self-narration, as established earlier, takes place in a social context, Kraus explains that there are various “degrees of freedom” when it comes to recreate and to further develop self-narrations. These

degrees of freedom are not simply given, but have to be fought for. The changes [in self-narrations] are themselves the result of social authority, and if the subjects can assert their self-narrations in spite of this authority, this is the case because they successfully defend their autonomy at least gradually and temporarily, and inscribe it into this potential of [different narrative] forms. (Kraus 182, translation A.H.)³

In staging the stories of the Ballymun community, despite the fact that its members’ lives often deviate from the national ideal of a proper Irish *vita*, Bolger creates a space where unusual, imperfect self-narrations can be told (and heard). Ultimately, the stories themselves become a weapon against isolation and discrimination, as when the characters raise their voices to narrate their individual fates, they begin to discover that they are not as alone as they thought.

Communicating Unheard Experiences

As with every storytelling, the narrators of self-narrations have to pick and choose the events which they find significant, they have to structure and interpret experiences and bring them together in a coherent story. The way we feel about our experiences is strongly influenced by the stories we encounter in our cultural environment: “Much of our emotional life [...] is bound up with the way we narrate experiences. It would be difficult to imagine someone experiencing guilt, joy, or anxiety without having cognizance of the stories to which these are the responses” (Kerby 214). In addition, self-narrations always take place in a social environment and are founded on social interaction. In the case of *The Ballymun Trilogy*, Bolger shows how the move from a well-known social environment to an unfamiliar space with undefined social ties and yet untold new experiences can affect a character’s self-narration and thus the construction of his or her identity.

A brief look at the stage directions of *From these Green Heights* shows that it is in the performance in particular that the narratives unfold their power. First of all, some of the actors are playing multiple roles. Furthermore, the stage is divided into “*three interconnecting ramps positioned at slightly different heights to allow the cast to*

3 “Die Freiheitsgrade in der Neugestaltung und Weiterentwicklung von Selbst-Narrationen sind nicht einfach vorhanden, sondern müssen erkämpft werden. Die Veränderungen sind selbst Ergebnis von gesellschaftlicher Macht, und wenn sich Subjekte dagegen anerkennen können, dann weil es ihnen gelingt, ihre Autonomie zumindest graduell und vorübergehend zu verteidigen und einzuschreiben in dieses Formenpotential” (Kraus 182).

easily move from one to the other" (Bolger 3). In addition, all actors are present on the stage throughout the play. If they are not involved in the main action, they are sitting on rows of chairs on the right and left of the stage and "almost serve as the play's internal audience, listening to and silently supporting each other's stories with their presence" (3). At first glance, the situation seems like a conventional *play-within-a play*, however, like Samuel Beckett, Bolger explores what Richardson calls "the boundaries of representation" (301). As the characters take turns in telling the story of Ballymun, their individual monologues frame mimetic episodes. As the setting of the play is abstract, it is the narratives that create the *diegesis* (Genette 16), the world of the play. Unlike in epic theatre, which often uses heterodiegetic narrators who are not part of the story world and where the act of narration "interrupts and contrasts the scenic action with the narration" and is used to "disrupt the theatrical communication" (Wehrman 248), Bolger has the characters of the story world tell their own stories to draw the audience into the dramatic world and the memories of the characters. According to Wehrmann such "homodiegetic generative narrators may create a more intense relationship to their audience than heterodiegetic generative narrators" (251). In the case of *The Ballymun Trilogy*, Bolger allows the (diegetic and extradiegetic) audience a glimpse into the characters' private recollections. Their long monological episodes reveal their innermost thoughts and feelings and give an immediate insight into the way they narrate themselves.

As the characters address both the extra- and intradiegetic audience in turn, there are repeated metalepses through which the playwright blurs the lines between the real world and the diegetic "fictional" Ballymun. "In its narratological sense, metalepsis, first identified by Genette, is a paradoxical contamination between the world of the telling and the world of the told" (Pier 190). Especially when the plays are staged in the *Axis* theatre in Ballymun, this blurring of the real and the fictional intends to transport the real stories of its inhabitants via the characters on stage and the intradiegetic audience provides an example of communal support for its real-life counterpart.

The prologue of the play, the *Ballymun Incantation*, spoken to the audience by 'a Junkie', establishes an immediate connection between the world of the play and the world of the audience. The title 'incantation' implies the almost magical power of narratives on stage, as they are able to evoke the lives that have passed in Ballymun. The incantation serves as a frame to the stories of the other characters. It poeticises the experience of life in Ballymun and integrates the individual stories into enchanting moments of shared experience.

Familiar Narratives in *The Ballymun Trilogy*

In all three plays the characters draw on familiar cultural narratives which do not only describe the new experiences they are making but also entail the expectations they bring with them. *From these Green Heights* begins with the characters as new tenants moving into the towers full of hope for a better life. Dessie remembers: "We

were moving up in the world – we were moving skyward” (Bolger 4). To them, the towers are not only a symbol for a new start they are the acme of modernity, in line with the 1960s era of space discovery. Dessie’s narrative seamlessly blends into Christy’s tale that shows the same explorer’s spirit:

... and walked and bloody well walked, miles past the Albert College out into uncharted territory [...]. A few bewildered locals hung about that Sunday, lured from their cottages near Dubber Cross [...]. Bogmen on black bicycles, with flecks of dandruff on their black suits just to add a touch of colour. Gaping at the tower blocks appearing in their fields like they were alien spacecraft adorned with Dublin Corporation signs picked up in some intergalactic sale of work. (5)

The young family draws on the culturally familiar models of the explorer’s tale of the discovery of a new world: it is the story of settlers discovering and claiming new land clothed in the narrative of modernity transforming rural Ireland. Christy’s account also carries the undertone of a sense of superiority which the new tenants feel over the locals, who are described as “Bogmen”, and are presented as being overwhelmed by the fascinating foreignness of the tower’s modernity. Carmel, who is glad to leave behind the dilapidated dangerous tenements, also firmly believes in the promises of a better life, comparing her family’s move to Ballymun to the biblical story of the exodus (in its modern, i.e. American, version):

The Minister for Local Government, Neil Blaney, seemed to me like an overweight Moses with a bogman’s accent, leading my family out there to the Promised Land. [...] The Ballymun flats weren’t finished that Sunday we went out there. They still hadn’t laid out the acres of orchards Blaney promised where children could run at twilight and the playgrounds you normally only saw in films about New York. No shops were built yet or clinics or schools. But all these things were promised and moving to Ballymun seemed almost as classy as moving to America. (6)

Her narrative furthermore reflects the representation of the Ballymun project by the government and through the media of the time. Despite the unfinished state of the towers, she believes in the then dominant narrative in the promise that they are going to be “as classy” as the much admired American archetypes and that they are in fact a “Promised Land”. For Carmel, Ballymun replaces New York as the Canaan of the Irish, as it symbolises Ireland’s glamorous modernity, and she gladly leads her family into what she tells herself will be a better future within Ireland.

In *The Townlands of Brazil* we again encounter cultural narratives that shape the characters’ perception of experience. This time, Bolger contrasts happiness abroad and at home and directly addresses the ever-present Irish theme of emigration. Eileen recounts her mother’s tales of a new dawn in Irish politics:

Mama was eleven on the night the Treaty was signed with England and she danced in her father’s cottage amid the fields in Balcurris [...] That night Mama felt that her turn to emigrate would never come because freedom had arrived. A bonfire blazed and Mama danced like never before, swept up in the arms of young men and old. (115-116)

Through Eileen we encounter the historical narrative of Irish Independence. It juxtaposes (colonial) dependence, resulting in emigration, with national freedom and the

possibility of remaining at home. Emigration, as it is portrayed by Bolger, is a response to a lack of prospects at home. The characters are placing their hope in the seemingly unlimited opportunities abroad. Anna, the Moldovan immigrant in present day Ballymun, remembers the hopes she had for a life in the west and of her uncle sending her off to a better future: "'You go', he said. 'They need workers in Ireland. It's green with hot geysers. Small blubbery people eat fish-eyes there and dance in the rivers'" (159). Anna's memories reveal that the idea of a life in the West is almost mythical, not based on any knowledge of reality. "Ireland or Iceland [are] all the one" in symbolising a better, if hazy, future (159). Once more, the act of moving to a new place is retold as an exodus to a "Promised Land", as Carmel terms it in *From these Green Heights* (6). Similar to the premature optimism of the families relocating from the tenements of the inner-city to the high-rise towers of Ballymun, for the emigrants arriving from Eastern Europe their future lives can only promise an improvement on what they leave behind. Again, as in Carmel's story, the new Canaan lies in Ireland.

Bolger illustrates how certain types of narratives have a transnational character. The tales of emigration reflect not only how poverty and lack of prospects are not uniquely Irish problems but also that there is a universal wish to improve one's individual circumstances and a desire to believe that life is in fact getting better not worse. The stories that motivate the characters to leave their homes promise financial gain and a new start away from the social and cultural restrictions at home. Emigration is thus not only interpreted as a move toward a better future, it also signifies liberation from the often restrictive narratives at home that define the social status of the characters. Away from home, the self can be reinvented, constructed anew: "It's about who I want my children to be. Back here, they'll always simply be another bunch of Bradys reared in a labourer's cabin in the townland of Brazil", Michael states in *The Townlands of Brazil* (126). Emigration for him is not only a chance to avoid the old stories and prescribed life choices that tie him to his class, but also seems to provide a fresh start for his future children, as their story remains unwritten until they begin telling it themselves.

The characters of each play soon find out how different life in Ballymun is from what the prevalent cultural narratives led them to expect. Instead of finding a life in the Promised Land they are faced with drug abuse, single motherhood and unemployment. In the ensuing poverty and isolation they are left speechless and unable to define who they are.

"Certain stories can't be told"⁴

In *From these Green Heights* the stories of hopefulness soon take a negative turn. Life in the towers is not as glamorous as the young families had pictured it to be. Within

4 This quotation is taken from the opening scene of *The Consequences of Lightning* (199) and alludes to the mother's inability to tell her daughter Annie about a miscarriage and about how the ensuing grief led to a one-night stand in which Annie was conceived.

eight months, an old neighbour dies “from a lack of conversation” (14). Deprived of the communal ties they are accustomed to, the new inhabitants of the towers find it difficult to establish new ones, to voice their emotions and worries, and to find somebody who listens to them. Furthermore, the characters are confronted with events for which they know no cultural narrative that could serve as a template to interpret their experiences. The resulting isolation of the characters, as well as the overwhelmingly dismal quality of their Ballymun experience, results in a form of both individual and communal trauma. According to Michael Bamberg, “traumatic experiences are typically viewed as disruptions of continuity and coherence, posing challenges to the formation of a sense of self and (biographic) identity as well as to our sense of agency” (141). Thus the characters do not only feel disappointed by the promises that have brought them to Ballymun, but also lose the sense of control over their own lives.

The destructive force of the inability to interpret and communicate experience can be seen in Sharon, the young drug addict who never fully seems to enter into life. Christy remembers: “She took my hand and walked home to her mother’s flat and I felt ... I don’t know ... like she was the ghost of my kid sister who’d never properly been born [...]” (74). A little bit further on in the play he states: “Sharon was rarely there and when she was she seemed like a ghost already” (79). Jane recounts:

It scared me how quickly she moved from coming home reeking of cider, to coming home with pockmarked veins, to not coming home at all. It was like she reached the cliff-edge of childhood and saw nothing beyond it but a vast emptiness. Disaffected was the social worker’s term. (69)

Sharon’s world-weariness and her lack of attachment to life leave her constantly on the borderline between life and death and only when she dies, can her ghost finally find peace and move on (85).

Even though Sharon appears in several short dramatic episodes, she does not tell her own story. Bolger thus contrasts the act of narration, which structures experience, with the overwhelming rawness of unfiltered experience. The characters that narrate their memories have gained a certain amount of control over who they are and what has happened to them. Sharon’s inability to make sense of her existence results in drifting through life without ever truly participating in it. She is unable to create coherence and desperately tries to escape her overwhelming, fragmented world.

Sharon’s self-destruction is a symptom of severe depression, a condition from which many of the play’s characters suffer and that both Christy and Carmel term “the high-rise-blues” (32). It is manifested in the hopelessness and isolation the characters feel and the inability to share their emotions with the people surrounding them:

Carmel Christy wasn’t the only one who couldn’t say what they felt. The high-rise blues. [...] Maybe it was being so high up ... the maze of distant lights ... but I felt isolated and tired. After seven years I was tired of waiting for Ballymun to be finished. You saw it in the other mothers too, a different tiredness than our mas had known. (32-33)

The isolation reaches so far that even within the family the members can no longer speak of their pain to each other. In Christy's case, his despair leaves him standing on the balcony on the brink of suicide after his wife has told him she needs a change:

Carmel [...] you've been a dead weight around my neck. I drag shopping up those stairs, I drag myself but I don't see why I should have to drag you. [...] Take a good look at the view and if all you're good for is looking, then go back to the porn films or give us all a break and fucking jump. (46)

Carmel in her loneliness and inability to communicate her pain, loses any empathy she might otherwise have felt for her husband. Even though Christy cannot speak of his emotions, Carmel is aware of his troubles. In their unspoken state they seem overwhelming and she has no means to deal with them except by rejection. Secretly observed by his son, Christy is struggling to choose life and he has to make this decision alone:

Christy [...] Carmel didn't want me to make this choice for her or Dessie. She wanted me to make it for myself alone, my decision to live or die. I wasn't sure how far I was over the balcony and if I opened my eyes the fright alone might make me fall. So I stepped back with the slowest, most deliberate step I ever made [...]. (47)

Christy's step back into life is not only a step away from suicide. He chooses to move from the state of victimhood to becoming a husband and father once again. He chooses to actively break through the isolation that the towers have imposed on him. By letting all three family members recount this pivotal moment in Christy's life, Bolger demonstrates how the isolation the characters describe is not caused by the singularity of what they endure, but rather by their inability to share it with the people around them. In his monograph *Das erzählte Selbst (The Narrated Self)* Kraus stresses that in the process of developing a concept of our self we are strongly influenced by the assumed evaluation of our person by others (139). As each character struggles with a sense of failure, they are inclined to hide what they conceive as shameful instead of sharing it and discovering that they are in fact not alone in their struggle. However, it is only in retrospective that they can discover the shared aspects of their Ballymun experience.

The narration of the characters can also be understood as an overcoming of trauma. Although Bolger underlines the often traumatic aspects of life in the towers, he shows how deciding to tell your own story is inextricably linked to a sense of empowerment. Making sense of their past and sharing their stories enables the characters to move on and brave the future.

The deficiency and thus the breakdown of cultural narratives cannot only be seen on the local level, where the flawed Promised Land belies the narrative of hope for a better, more modern future, but also on the level of national ideals. Like in many of his other plays, Bolger's characters express disillusionment with the didactic and homogenising idea of Gaelic Irishness. In *From these Green Heights* Carmel reminisces about why she never learnt how to read "Everything was taught through Irish, which I didn't understand, and the real lesson you learnt was never to draw

attention to yourself. That way you'd less chance of being belted." (58) Her memory of mid-twentieth-century Ireland expresses two aspects of traditional Irish culture: The exclusion of people who do not identify with the Gaelic revivalism and the oppression of individualism. The same tendencies can be seen in *The Townlands of Brazil* where Eileen's breach of her society's rules leaves her with two choices: Accept society's punishment and vanish in a Magdalen home or leave the country. In 1960s Ireland, a young girl pregnant out of wedlock is suddenly excluded from her community and forced to choose either imprisonment or exile. In the national narrative there is no room for the story of a "fallen woman". Heather Ingman points out "[t]he sexually loose woman was not only shocking, she was seen as anti-Irish or foreign" (qtd. in Ryan 103). According to Ryan, it is the dominant group's fear of what is foreign, and thus the foreigner, as "difference serves as a constant threat to the community's identity" (Ryan 104). As Eileen is now unable to conform to her prescribed destiny of being either married or celibate, she is simply written out of her family's history: "She has [...] joined the Ballymun girls who've disappeared from history [...]. Girls who only exist in whispers about sluts" (112). Bolger uses both the image of a whisper and the over-painted graffiti of the word 'slut' to illustrate the fate of those who have been written out of the national narrative (112). The word 'slut' painted on her parent's house summarises society's judgement and despite her father's attempt to paint out the daub "a white mark [is] left on the tar like a public stain on his soul" (112). With her narrative, Eileen reclaims her right to be part of Irish history and to tell her story, replacing the "whispers about sluts" with her account of ill-fated but true love. Her story, however, is finished by her son Matthew, who reveals that despite Eileen's move into exile in England, there was no escape from both the ostracism and the ensuing poverty of single motherhood. The loss of a husband, of communal support and any other social ties, left her unable to provide for herself and her child. He recounts being taken from her at the age of four by social workers because she was unable to feed him and like the immigrants in Ballymun she was helpless and alone: "she was a foreigner lost in a foreign land" (190).

Connecting and Embedding Narratives

Bolger expands the local, individual experience by showing universal aspects of life changing moments. As Paula Murphy points out, "his use of dramatic time is always non-linear [...] Bolger often finds ways of vacillating between past and present in his plays" (183). The effect of these anachronisms is that the events cluster around themes rather than being structured chronologically. The beginning of a new chapter in Dessie, Christy and Carmel's lives, precedes the scene that depicts the fresh start Dessie and his daughter are going to have in a new home upon leaving the towers. Both times there is hope for a better life and just like with the young family moving to the flats, there is also uncertainty:

Tara What will our new home be like?

Dessie (*smiles wryly*) Perfect, like my ma used to say. Just wait until it's finished. (10)

The playwright thus creates parallels between past and present events through both the speech of the characters and quasi-mimetic episodes framed by the character's narratives. The newness and incertitude the three family members feel when moving to the towers resonate in the emotions that Dessie and Tara feel when leaving them behind. This clustering of similar scenes from different phases in Dessie's life not only emphasises recurring themes of human existence, it also reveals the power of narrative within the theatre. In her work *Postmodern Theatri(c)ks* Deborah Geis writes:

[...] monologue allows the playwright to dislocate, fragment, and otherwise transform this perpetual present into other temporal modes. The speaker of the monologue has the ability to compress time by narrating a series of events, to suspend time entirely by offering words that do not affect the time elapsed in the play, to move either forward or backward in time (and sometimes to move the ensuing narrative with him or her as well), and to alter time by changing our perception of the rate at which time moves during the monologue itself and/or during the onstage events that follow it. (10-11)

Through monologue Bolger can create an intersection of the "fallen" Irish girl in the 1960s and the Polish single-mother, the lives of the emigrant and the immigrant. In *The Townlands of Brazil* Bolger parallels the lives of the women Eileen, Anna and Monika. One woman lives in Ballymun prior to the towers being built, while the others live there at the time of their demolition. All three women are faced with emigration. In Monika and Anna's case they belong to the people who

follow the work – Irish, Poles, Latvians. Landscapes change, our faces and nationalities change, our clothes, even our jobs. But nothing else changes. We leave home to seek work or sanctuary. And the farther we go, the more home becomes frozen in our minds. (108)

Anna, the Moldovan girl working in Ballymun, narrates the feeling of constant foreignness and exclusion and the struggle to be treated like a human being, not a commodity. She has come to Ireland because "the only way to make this much money in Moldova involves an awful lot of retouching your lipstick and having to brush your teeth afterwards" (158). She knows about the potential dangers of emigration, which often exposes immigrants to different forms of exploitation, because her own cousin Maria has become a victim of human trafficking and she is haunted by the thought of "her [cousin's] eyes staring out if I clicked the right link, another piece of driftwood lost amid the ocean of pornography" (158). Anna's story is one of trying to belong and being accepted. Yet she, like the other immigrants, is stuck with, as Oscar puts it, "a foot in both worlds and his arse in no man's land" (173). By leaving their homes, their life stories are suddenly uprooted. Anna describes her floundering existence: "Sometimes, I feel that a gust of wind will sweep me away with nobody noticing" (169). Furthermore, she is met with the xenophobia of the Irish surrounding her: "Three little girls followed me from the supermarket, jeering, 'Go home, you foreign bitch'. I should be used to abuse, but they're too young to have such hatred. The West was where I thought I'd feel equal" (169). As Kraus explicates: "self-narration is not the story of a single subject. It is not only embedded in social narratives, but also a social construct. By drawing on a language system to convey and

relate events, the individual is involved in a social act. Narrative accounts are embedded in continuous processes of exchange" (180, translation A.H.).⁵ In isolation the flow of narrative exchange is disrupted and thus the construction of a stable identity is inhibited: "Self-narration can only be successfully sustained and continued, when it is supported by others who are willing to second its representation of past, present and future" (180; translation A.H.).⁶

The young girls' abuse, just like the word 'slut' on Eileen's house, shows how the dominant cultural narrative that these girls draw on leaves no room for a non-essentialist Irish identity. This leads them to reject the foreignness of the immigrant, inhibiting her from entering into the traditional narratives of Irish identity and tell a story of belonging. As Anna, who is searching to be accepted by the society they represent, is unable to get their approval for the identity she is trying to develop, her integration seems to fail. However, by creating parallels between different characters, Bolger underlines that despite the fact that the characters feel isolated, they are not alone. His way of merging the past and the present emphasises shared aspects within his characters' lives. It is through telling their own stories and listening to the stories of the people around them that the characters can discover what they have in common, emerge from their isolation and begin take an active part in shaping a new community.

Renegotiating Life Stories

As part of the Ballymun regeneration project, the *Ballymun Trilogy* thus intends to show more than just the disintegration of the cultural narratives that fail to help the characters define their identity. As Bolger states himself in the author's note speaking about *The Consequences of Lightning*, "it is about the process of letting the past go, about not diminishing any pain or hurt that has previously occurred but acknowledging it and moving into a different Ballymun, a different Dublin and a different Ireland" (xvi).

Next to its identity forming function, Bolger assigns a cathartic function to the stories the characters tell. Both in *The Townlands of Brazil* and *The Consequences of Lightning* the characters encounter instances of untruthful stories about themselves or their family members. Eileen has to discover that her mother's story about "a boy named Butler" who tried a spell "hoping to spy his future wife" is a lie (123). Accord-

5 "Die Selbst-Narration ist keine Geschichte eines singulären Subjektes. Sie ist nicht nur eingebettet in soziale Narrationen, sondern darüber hinaus eine soziale Konstruktion. Indem sich das Individuum auf ein Sprachsystem stützt zur Vermittlung und Verbindung von Ereignissen, ist es in einen sozialen Akt involviert. Narrative Darstellungen sind eingebettet in kontinuierliche Austauschprozesse" (Kraus 180).

6 "Selbst-Narration kann nur dann erfolgreich aufrechterhalten und fortgeschrieben werden, wenn die handlungsstützenden Rollenträger bereit sind, die Darstellungen der Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft mitzutragen" (Kraus 180).

ing to her mother he ended up seeing "four men holding aloft a black coffin! People found him dead next morning with his hair turned white" (123). Only when Eileen meets Michael the true events are revealed: "Butler was found beaten to death in a field back during the Troubles. [...] By IRA die-hards who heard he was about to cycle into Dublin to join the new Free State police" (129). Suddenly her mother's accounts of the past are exposed as untrue and Eileen starts to doubt. Through this, and the attempt to write Eileen out of her family's history by sending her to a convent and hiding her shame, it becomes obvious that there is a tension between what is told and what is intentionally concealed, distorted or not mentioned at all. The familial story can only remain unquestioned and pure if questionable episodes like the murder of a boy or the pregnancy of an unmarried girl remain untold. (115). The personal life-stories have wider implications, of course: If the rumour of joining 'the other side' in a civil war leads to violence and death, how can one maintain the claim that "freedom ha[s] arrived" with Irish independence (116)? Furthermore, Eileen realises that the ideal of marriage as a sacred space for love, which her parents contrast with the sinful life she is said to be leading, has been eroded by the placing of appearances over substance – while she deeply loves Michael, her parents are trapped in a loveless, hollow relationship (137).

In all three plays the characters have to challenge narratives that were passed on to them in order to shape their lives. As Damien Shortt puts it: "Bolger often explores how traditional nationalist representations of Ireland no longer resonate with most young people. His Ireland is one of suburban streets, unemployment, confusion and a pervading sense of betrayal" (104). In the *Ballymun Trilogy* he sheds light on the hidden aspects of Celtic Tiger prosperity, which often goes hand in hand with the exploitation and isolation of the many immigrants pouring into the "new" Ireland. Starting from this point of disillusionment, Anna has to come to terms with the fact that Ireland is not the hoped for "Promised Land" and Matthew has to discover that his mother's stories of Ireland as a home hold no truth for him, as he is, like her in England, "a foreigner lost in a foreign land" (191). Eileen has to narrate herself against the tale of the "slut, opening [her] legs for the first man" (137) in order to preserve the memory of her love for Michael and to tell her son that his origin lies in a loving relationship.

The narratives of old have become meaningless to Bolger's characters. However, as they relate their individual experiences to each other, they discover that the power of prevailing in a seemingly hostile environment lies in developing new communal ties and in telling new stories. As Marita Ryan puts it:

Bolger's poignant blending of the characters and their situations functions to create a bond and a passage between the self and other, between what is familiar and what is strange, and between the past and the present without ever negating the specificity of each individual's experience. [...] In reconciling ourselves to the other within, therein arises the hope that we can meet the external other in a place of understanding and harmony, not one of assimilation and dominance. (110)

Storytelling has not lost its significance in the Irish theatre but has in fact gained importance. It is the only means the characters have to communicate their experiences and emotions. However, unlike the static and prescriptive stories of nationalist Republican Ireland, the new self-narrations can never be finalised. The characters of a post-national, postmodern Ireland exist and narrate themselves in a continuously changing environment.

In *The Consequences of Lightning* Annie is desperate for her mother to reveal the story of how she came into being: "I want my ma to tell me a story, but I don't know how to ask when I see pain still in her eyes" (200). In her attempt to define her identity Annie is looking to her mother for help as she finds it difficult to "acquire [her] sense of communal historical being and situatedness" (Kerby 218) on her own. As the daughter of a single-mother in a traditionally unforgiving Ireland she is constantly struggling to claim her right of existence by "buil[ding] up a mystery about who [she is]" (277). When her mother reveals that she was the result of a one-night stand, she has to come to terms with the fact that she was just "an accident between strangers" (277). The story of her conception, of her mother in a drunken stupor grieving for a baby she just lost, stands in stark contrast to Annie's hope of being the result of a loving relationship (270-271). "You settled for me, like I was something you'd pick up in a spare parts shop" (272). Her story is shaped by her mother's guilt and lets Annie fear that she was a mistake. "Have I screwed up your life?" (295), she desperately asks her mother, reflecting the prominent discourse of the young single mother who has to sacrifice all her dreams and future prospects in order to take care of an unwanted child. Katie reassures her daughter and reinterprets said narrative: "You're a star. You're so high up that you shine down on all my mistakes, you're the one truly monumental thing I've done in my life. You were an accident but you have been no mistake, because you're the piece of the jigsaw that makes sense of every other bit of my life" (295). Katie clearly defines Annie's life as a gift and thus enables Annie to let go of the past and start anew: "when I finished crying and we walked back here, this new house really felt like home. Like that explosion had blasted the past off my shoulders and we could make a fresh start" (297). Together the two women find a new way of narrating their identity; the love between mother and daughter suffices and replaces the wish to resemble the traditional family of father, mother and child.

Liam Harte claims that Bolger revises 'Irishness' and replaces the homogenising essentialist nationalist view of identity with a "'post-national' or 'trans-national' identity which is defined in terms of multiplicity and diversity" (17). In his view, Bolger opens up the narrow definition of (Irish) identity that is defined by nationality. This is certainly correct, as Bolger attempts to create a theatrical space where new identities can be negotiated and narrated. The idea of the rural, Gaelic, Roman Catholic Ireland is obsolete for most of his characters and the Ireland we find in the *Ballymun Trilogy* is multicultural and diverse. Yet, despite the fact that the static identity categories of cultural nationalism cannot help the characters define who they are anymore, they seem to long for a sense of stability and continuance: The theme of home and be-

longing runs through the three plays. The characters are often desperate to find 'home', a place where they belong. The loss of the roots within the familiarity of home constitutes one of the main struggles in the trilogy. Home is not only a place but represents a shared history, shared values and strong community ties. The confusion of the postmodern individual permeates the life of the characters and in their desperation to give structure to the chaos surrounding them, they have to learn anew how to tell their life story. The process of telling is left unfinished; the characters are shown in fleeting moments of their existence but even death is not final. This home is shown to be created through the telling of, and listening to, self-narrations. Bolger presents characters that have difficulties creating coherence and defining who they are. He stages a world in which the traditional national and cultural narratives are empty shells rather than structures that help to construct a coherent identity and a home. However, the breaking of the old shells, though difficult, can be liberating. Identity construction, as it is found in Bolger's plays, is a process of constant renegotiation. Through their self-narrations, Bolger's characters can structure their experience and overcome traumatic experiences, such as the isolation the tenants of the towers are faced with, the loss of a baby, unemployment or the drug abuse of a relative. Through their stories they can also reach out to each other and establish new community ties. Through their stories they can renegotiate what it means to be Irish, a single mother, an immigrant etc. Through their stories they begin to draft an image of their future selves.

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