PUZZLING NARRATIVE IDENTITIES AND THE ETHICS OF THE LITERARY IMAGINATION IN SEBASTIAN BARRY'S 'DUNNE SERIES'

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In an interview conducted in 1991 Barry explained that when he returned to Dublin in 1985 after a couple of years abroad, "he felt that 'none of the available identities of Irishness seemed to fit', and so he decided, 'Since I was now to be an Irishman, it seemed I would have to make myself up as I went along'" (Llewellyn-Jones). Obviously, Barry's works build on the widespread postmodernist assumption that national identities are constructed. Like many other contemporary writers he contributes to the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century project of "bringing Ireland out of an antiquated nationalism inherited from the Cultural Revival" (Gibbons 104-105) by "using an engagement with Ireland's past to identify resources for reimagining and reinventing a different Ireland of the future" (Kirby, Gibbons, and Cronin 2).[1]

This "Ireland of the future" strives to be more inclusive and more dialogic than earlier dominant versions of Irishness. Emphasising that the construction of 'Irishness' is and always has been contentious, Barry elaborates in an article in *The Guardian*:

> It's difficult to say what an Irish person is. That's what we've spent the century since independence doing – looking for shared tradition, then corrupting it, then fighting about the corrupting of it. Dev's idea was that we were all rural, Catholic, poor: he tried to shoehorn a country together, but it was a country of very different people, and if you were Protestant, wealthy or middle class you somehow weren't "Irish", and that's what a good deal of the fighting's been about. (Ferguson)

As this article aims to demonstrate Barry not only opposes traditional notions of what it means to be Irish with a more inclusive concept of Irishness, he also counters Éamon de Valera's ("Dev's") method of constructing Irish identity. Instead of "shoehorn[ing] a country together" he sets out to "make myself up as I go along", as he puts it in the interview quoted above, which can be assumed to mean 'as I go along writing'. In his play *Dallas Sweetman* (2008) the eponymous hero, an Irish servant to Lucius Lysaght, a Catholic English landowner in late sixteenth-century Elizabethan-era Ireland, calls "Ireland, that puzzle which cannot be puzzled out" (58) and points to the endless and open process of narrating and performing inclusive national identities, which is implicitly contrasted to the traditional myths of an exclusively essentialist Irish identity.

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1 On Barry's "attempt at re-imagining ourselves, not as ourselves alone, sinn féin amháin, but ourselves in our plural difference" see Grene, *Politics* 242-243 and 251. Meche uses the term "restaging Ireland" and comments on the "abiding interest in challenging those narratives from which Irishness itself originates" (464). In this article I set out to probe into the mechanisms of re*narrating* Irish identities.

> […] I have seen great goodness on the earth of Ireland, and that is no little thing. I saw Lucius Lysaght, the finest of Catholics, deal in the world with grace. And his daughter Lucinda, peerless Protestant, show her light to the wondering world.
> And though I am small, and dark, and of no import, I gauge the width of my own self by these things.
> Saying, these matters I saw for myself on the earth, these matters I witnessed, and puzzled for myself.
> In Ireland, that puzzle which cannot be puzzled out – and may God commend it. (58)

The term 'Puzzling Ireland' in the title of this article refers to the metaphor of Ireland as it is established in Dallas Sweetman's words. It encapsulates the idea that many different pieces form one coherent image, yet an image that, according to Dallas Sweetman, can never be finalised and is accordingly defined by the perpetual process of its construction. As a consequence, Ireland is puzzling, enigmatic, never fully to be grasped. Dallas Sweetman, however, also holds that, nevertheless, individuals like himself, a low-born Irishman, who deems himself rather insignificant ("small, and dark, and of no import"), more or less actively participate in the process of puzzling. Dallas, who is one of the rather few self-reflexive agents in Barry's œuvre, reports what he "witnessed" and is certainly confused by what happens to him and his master's family; but he also "puzzle[s matters] for himself" or, in my reading of this metaphor, pieces together his own narrative, trying to make sense of his "own self" by understanding it in the context of the lives of others whose stories he integrates into his own. 'Puzzling Ireland' then points to the conjunctions of personal, communal and national identity, of individual life-stories as well as of the conjunction of these personal stories with narratives about the course of Irish history. In all those stories different identity categories intersect as they negotiate, for example, the relationship between Catholics and Protestants, between farmers and landlords, between the lower, the middle and the upper classes, between men and women, or between the young and the old.

These conjunctions are central to Sebastian Barry's narrative of Ireland, in particular, and to the process of performing a narrative identity (in the sense of Ricœur's postmodernist hermeneutics) by telling a more or less coherent story about oneself and/as another, in general. Paul Ricœur suggests that "the history of a life […] is equated [to] the identity of a character" (147) or as Barry has his character put it in his poetic adaptation of Chaucer's "The Widow of Bath": "I am the ballad of myself" (*Rhetorical* 23). Philosophers and sociologists working with the concept of narrative identity have emphasised that every individual's story is always inevitably interrelated with those of others. Hardly any story is dedicated exclusively to a single self, for even autobiographical tales must incorporate the stories of others (see e.g. Ricœur, *Oneself*; Kraus).[2] In addition, stories are inevitably embedded into a certain narrative context and/or communicative situation that is at least partially defined by others, by culturally

2 Cf. Anna Hanrahan's contribution to this volume.

and historically specific institutions and contexts, and the success of a life-story is dependent on its favourable reception by others.

The integration of biographies and histories, of the personal and the collective, finds a distinctive form in Sebastian Barry's œuvre. Critics have repeatedly noticed that Barry's work is characterised by two closely related features. Firstly, "the individuals [he fictionalises] are members of his own family" (Roche 147-148). Secondly, Roche states, it "is by now something of a critical truism that Sebastian Barry [...] highlight[s] figures whose lives do not fit into the accepted grand narrative of Irish history [...] because they had in some significant way transgressed the taboos of Catholic Nationalist Ireland and so were consigned to oblivion" (147-148). Another distinctive feature of Barry's work is that he narrates individual members of his marginalised Irish family into the history of the nation by writing across the genres. Barry writes poetry, plays and novels, criss-crossing some genre conventions and adapting others in order to make them fit the requirement of his narrative Irish puzzle.

This article analyses Barry's renegotiation of genre conventions in his 'puzzling oeuvre' in order to address afresh the most disturbing – or enormously puzzling – feature of his work: in Barry's fictional Irish cosmos history is more often than not conceptualised as an all-powerful abstract force. History rules the fate of Barry's usually naïve and rather helpless characters who are thus bereft of personal agency and, as it seems to some critics, exonerated of any responsibility for their actions. Especially the central characters of his novels can neither fully understand nor decisively influence the ways of History. Like the eponymous protagonist of *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, they are "only the flotsam of its [politics'] minor storms" (224) and "blown off the road of life by history's hungry breezes" (284).

Judging by the international success of Barry's fiction, it seems that large parts of the general readership is appreciative of his attempt to rewrite into the Irish narrative outsiders who are constructed as powerless in the face of politics and history. Scholarly readers, however, tend to find the naivety and helplessness of many of Barry's protagonists morally and politically dubious. Cullingford complains in her analysis of *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* that "Eneas is constructed as a victim, not as a political agent" (133).[3] In his article on "The Politics of Pity in Sebastian Barry's *A Long Long Way*", Liam Harte, in a similar vein, criticises what he considers Barry's indulgence "in a kind of rhetorical excess, sentimentalising and sanctifying [the] benighted young men" who fought in World War I in their impotence and innocence

3 Cullingford's critique of the "schematic political allegory of the plot" (138) which pits a naïve Catholic Royalist victim against a bedevilled IRA gunman in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* cannot be dismissed easily if one singles out this novel for an analysis of its politics. In what follows, it should become clear, however, that the larger picture of Barry's concept of Irish identity turns out ideologically less schematic, if one regards *The Whereabouts* as just one piece, providing the perspective of just one Irish individual, of the much larger literary puzzle that Barry is still in the process of putting together.

(111).[4] My own reflections on Barry's literary universe also take the unease with a fatalistic concept of an all-powerful history as its starting point. Rather than denigrating Barry's fictional cosmos as an example of a "poetics of [...] liberal humanist ideology" (Harte 111), however, I will attempt to frame his literary puzzle as an interesting and potentially beneficial intervention in the contemporary political discourse on (personal and national) identity politics. I am as puzzled as other critics are by Barry's tendency to conceptualise politics and history as invincible. However, the labelling of Barry as a writer who is on a single-minded and personally motivated anti-nationalist mission (see Cullingford) or as a misguided neo-liberal (see Harte) also fail to convince me. While definitions of neo-liberalism undoubtedly are a matter of contention, one of the abiding and defining characteristics of this ideology is, most certainly, the idea of the individual subject as free agent and not as fully determined by historical or social forces. It is thus not applicable to most Barry characters.

Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's concept of the literary imagination, which she establishes as a vital instrument of the ethics that (ideally) distinguish public discourses in democratic societies, I would like to suggest that by renegotiating and breaking with some fundamental genre conventions of the realist novel while still situating his own fiction squarely within this genre tradition, Barry's literary puzzle can be regarded as an aesthetically more radically innovative and politically more differentiated intervention in the cultural discourse of national identity constructions in today's Ireland than has been recognised. According to Nussbaum, the literary imagination counters "the utilitarian rational-choice models that are in use today" and that are based on the four principles of "commensurability, aggregation, maximizing, and exogenous preferences" (14). The literary imagination succeeds in doing so by virtue of

> its commitment to the separateness of persons and to the irreducibility of quality to quantity; its sense that what happens to individuals in the world has enormous importance; [and] its commitment to describe the events of life [...] from within, as invested with the complex significances with which human beings invest their own lives. (32)

Most importantly, in the tradition of "Adam Smith's conception of the judicious spectator" (72), Nussbaum claims that literature functions as a "source of moral guidance" (75) because the reading process forges a readership which learns to balance "sympathetic identification with [...] spectatorial rationality" or "empathetic participation and external assessment" (73). In this context, Nussbaum also distinguishes the political content of a novel that may be dubious or unconvincing from the still potentially positive moral and political effect of the reading experience. My aim in what follows will be to demonstrate how Barry's innovative narrative strategy of puzzling Ireland serves to enact those features identified by Nussbaum as contributing to the ethics of

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4 Constructing some formal and rhetorical analogies and an ideological unity between the earlier Barry texts analysed by Cullingford and the admittedly "less ideologically programmatic" *A Long Long Way* (111), Harte also sees the latter work marred by "a set of rhetorical strategies that, by placing undue emphasis on the cultivation of sympathy, leads to simplifying acts of representational selectivity" (112).

a democratic discourse. I propose, in addition, to interpret Barry's adaptation of certain genre conventions as a means to envisioning a world that is even less indebted to the aesthetics and ideology of the Victorian realist novel and (with it) the neoliberal tradition than Martha Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice* itself is.

Individual Stories, Intertwined Plots of Self and Other, and the Ethics of Re-constructing Irish Identity

A particularly interesting feature of Barry's work is the fact that he writes his characters' stories across different works, often spanning different genres. Quantitatively most impressive to date is the extension of the Dunne family across Barry's poems, plays, and, most extensively, his novels.[5] The eponymous hero of Barry's first major theatrical success, *The Steward of Christendom* (1995), is based on the life of Barry's great-grandfather, Thomas Dunne, Chief Superintendent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, a Catholic who cannot rise any higher in the colonial hierarchy and is a fierce admirer of Queen Victoria. Responsible for the death of four people during the Dublin lock-out of 1913 and denounced as a traitor after independence, he ends his days as a deluded, marginalised outcast in a county-home in Wicklow. Of Thomas Dunne's four children, three reappear as the main protagonists respectively of three novels: *Annie Dunne* (2002), *A Long Long Way* (2005) and *On Canaan's Side* (2011). In addition, Barry's aunt Annie figures in a number of poems and her world is at the centre of attention of "Kelsha Yard, 1959", the poem which structurally forms the heart of the collection *Fanny Hawke Goes to the Mainland Forever* (1989).[6]

In one of the first analyses of *The Steward of Christendom*, Grene has argued that "It is the otherness of [a Catholic loyalist's] experience written out of history by Catholic nationalist consciousness which [...] Barry's play[] go[es] out to recuperate" (*Politics* 246). After the publication of several additional narratives which focus on other members of the Dunne family, it has become obvious, however, that taken together Barry's texts avoid the rather stark binary opposition of self and other that is still implicit in Barry's play (and, inevitably, in Grene's and Cullingford's analyses thereof). While *The Steward of Christendom* also begins to point to a diversity of interests and identities within Ireland, its main plot pits an eminent individual outsider, Thomas Dunne, against the Catholic nationalist norm. Barry's narrative of Ireland evolves in complexity, however, as each story about yet another member of the family treats

5 After the publication of Barry's latest novel, *The Temporary Gentleman* (2014), which re-perspectivises the story also told in the play *Our Lady of Sligo* (1997) and forms a trilogy of novels with *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* and *The Secret Scripture*, the McNultys carry almost equal weight.

6 This article's focus on the Dunne-texts concentrates on Barry's novels, but will also take into consideration some aspects of *The Steward of Christendom* and "Kelsha Yard, 1959".

seriously the fate and psychology of yet another individual,[7] each of whom is marginalised by the dominant national ideology for different reasons. Each successive narrative thus contributes to the puzzle of a group identity of outsiders which is internally differentiated and much more multifaceted than *The Steward of Christendom* or *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* taken alone can possibly suggest. At the same time, Barry's Irishmen and Irishwomen, all of whom are "out of history" (Mahony), can be said to move incrementally closer to the centre of the dominant national narrative from one text to the next.

The Steward of Christendom still presents comparatively stark binary oppositions, not just because the play pits a Catholic unionist individual against Catholic nationalist Ireland. Thomas Dunne is, moreover, not just any Catholic loyalist; as the historical Chief Superintendent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police he is responsible for the deaths of four people during the 1913 Dublin lock-out. As such he is, clearly, regarded as a (defeated) enemy by most of his contemporaries in post-Independence Ireland. Barry's choice of his own aunt and Thomas's daughter, Annie Dunne, as the main character of his first "Dunne"-novel is almost equally daring.[8] While Annie, unlike her father, is not personally responsible for political violence, she is another Catholic loyalist openly hostile to the de Valera government. Carrying her father's ideology with her into the rural Wicklow of the late 1950s, she complains that "children in school" are told "about those fierce gunmen, Collins and De Valera, those savage killers in their day that thought nothing of murdering each other and far less of killing the likes of my father" (95). She also disparages the Irish language as "that old language of gobdaws and cottagers" (156; see Phillips 238-239).

By setting *Annie Dunne* squarely in Kelshaw and focusing on the daily routine on aunt Sarah's farm, where Annie finds work and a rather precarious kind of home, Barry, indeed, participates in de Valera's narrative of Catholic rural Ireland, which the Taoiseach depicted in his famous radio broadcast on St Patrick's Day 1943, but with more than one decisive difference. *Annie Dunne* neither portrays de Valera's pastoral countryside as one "bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age" (de Valera 748), nor does Barry tell a story in the tradition of Robert J. Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1937),[9] that focuses on a heroic male figure and his family who struggle to make a living on the hostile Atlantic coast.

7 Cf. Phillips who stresses that "Barry's central characters [are] portrayed [...] as unique individuals with their own flaws but with a very human need for love and affection" (235).

8 About his great-grandfather, Thomas Dunne, Barry stated: "I was in fear of it being discovered that I had such a relative […]. He was […] a demon, a dark force, a figure to bring you literary ruin" (*Steward* vii).

9 On de Valera's enthusiastic reception of Flaherty's ethnographic documentary see O'Brien 48-49.

Annie's story is rather set in the rural east, which is less sublime than the Irish West (in the literary imagination, at least), and concentrates on the uneventful and toilsome every-day life of an old spinster. Again, there is a fairly stark contrast between the dominant national narrative and Anne's life-story, between self and other, as Barry sets the elderly aunt, handicapped by a spinal defect and never having attracted a potential husband, in opposition to the post-Independence ideal of "comely maidens" (de Valera 748) and the rural patriarchal family. Barry's Annie, try as she might, is shown to fail to gain her own personal financial and emotional independence in a mid-century Ireland which is built on the same prevailing patriarchal structures that characterised her father's Catholic Royalist world whose protection she has lost (Phillips 240). Indeed, the traditional patriarchal family unit of father, mother and children is nowhere to be found in Annie's neighbourhood; and Annie and Sarah are fiercely envied for having the opportunity to care for their grand-niece and grand-nephew for a couple of weeks during the summer of 1959.

As Grene comments, in "*Annie Dunne* Barry leaves behind the macro-narrative of Irish history, to which the drama of *The Steward* was connected, for the micro-narratives of lives that fall outside the scope of history altogether. [...S]omeone like Annie Dunne was never in public history to be written out" ("Out of History" 170, 177). Moreover, unlike her father, this heroine is not an exceptional, eminent outsider-figure, but rather represents what is depicted in the novel as the larger social group of elderly, lonely women, who desperately struggle for a living in rural Ireland. Indeed, most farms in Barry's Wicklow house old women. Besides Annie and her cousin Sarah, there is another set of cousins living in Feddin farmhouse nearby: Winnie Dunne and "the rook-like shapes of Lizzie and May", her sisters, "wildish women, with their startling hair and rough clothes, the backs of Lizzie's hands torn into scabs and wounds by maybe barbed wire, by God knows what manly labour" (*Annie* 137). While Annie is grateful to Sarah and feels close to Winnie, with whom she proudly shares a respectable past and family history (e.g. 136), she despises the "cottier" Mary Callan, another lonely neighbour, whose family was "nipped and tucked" by a famine in 1872 and who is "said to be one hundred and two years old" (29; also see 73). Thus, on the one hand, Annie is established as an individual "who must bear [her pain] alone, […,] who ha[s] just one life in which to strive for happiness" (Nussbaum 29) and with whom the reader feels sympathy despite her snobbishness. On the other hand, she is one member of an internally differentiated larger group of unmarried Irishwomen who are all left behind in de Valera's rural Ireland and as such has the potential to activate the reader's rational judgement about the construction of national myths.

In *A Long, Long Way* and, especially *At Canaan's Side* Barry's choice of his main protagonists falls once more on characters neglected by the dominant national narrative who, even more obviously than Annie, represent larger groups of Irishmen and -women. Willie is a representative of the Irish soldiers who fought and died on the Western Front as members of the Royal British Army in World War I. As a member of the Irish diaspora in the U.S., Lilly Dunne, the youngest daughter of Thomas Dunne

and the narrator-protagonist of *On Canaan's Side*, represents an even larger group, namely all those Irish-Americans who emigrated from the homeland but still contribute vitally to the ongoing process of defining a (post-)national Irish identity. As Barry's œuvre grows, his outsider characters crowd in on the centre, as it were. In the process, what used to be the centre of the national Irish discourse, the Catholic Irish Republic as defined by Éamon de Valera, becomes increasingly fragile. As more and more Irishmen and -women are shown to have been at odds with the dominant twentieth-century version of Irish national identity, this monolithic Catholic and Republican Irishness, which the array of Barry characters resists and challenges, begins to appear increasingly stereotypical and hence less and less natural.

Refashioning the National Tale Across the Genres

Quite obviously, Barry's narratives build on the traditional allegory of the family as nation or, vice versa, the nation as family, which has been a distinctive attribute of the Irish national tale ever since Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806). Barry, however, cleverly refashions the traditional genre by providing a different plot structure for his own extended national tale, one that must be pieced together from various stories that revolve around different individuals. Unlike his nineteenth-century predecessors, he does not write "allegories of love and marriage" (Connolly 88), which in the tradition of Owenson or Edgeworth inevitably construct plots that are driven by a desire for the union of two partners (lovers/nations) who begin their encounters as strangers or even enemies.[10] Rather, Barry takes as a given the basic family unit into which his characters are born – however tenuous this unit may be – and narrows in on the differences within this always already existing family. In other words, Barry's contemporary national tales do not write allegories of love and marriage, but stress the existential isolation of each individual whether within or apart from the family. His narratives reveal that each individual member of the (national) family encounters different hardships that depend on the geographical places into which life blows them and on the historical and social circumstances that shape their experience. If one looks across the full range of his works, Barry can be considered demonstrably to avoid the utilitarian strategies of commensurability and aggregation and practising instead that "deep respect for qualitative difference" which Martha Nussbaum deems characteristic of the literary imagination (45). Nussbaum's *desideratum* that "[p]ain and happiness are shown as things that belong to separate individuals [in the plural], who must bear them alone" (29), may not become obvious if one reads (or sees performed) only one of Barry's works, but grows more and more

10 Connolly emphasises in her analysis of early nineteenth-century national tales that "[r]arely do these narratives endorse any 'single, self-identical' political future; rather, the 'double reading' that Sommer [in her *Foundational Fictions*] sees as characteristic of allegory serves to hold open the relationship between sexual and national stories" (*Cultural* 89). On Owenson's and Edgeworth's national allegories also see Rennhak 242-294.

powerful with addition of each new literary piece to the puzzle. Despite the diversity and divergence of personalities, careers and experiences, all men and women in the Barry cosmos are ultimately driven by the very same desire to each be recognised as a valid individual within his or her (real and allegorical) family, no single life is regarded as more precious or momentous and no pain more excruciating than that of another.

By focusing on the family into which one is born and which always already exists, Barry deemphasises the most influential literary tradition of the all-powerful romance plot to suggest that there is no escaping from the communal (family and national) past.[11] In order to build a home and a future for the individual outsiders which people Barry's Ireland it is not enough to fall in love with a stranger, already existing relationships have to be renegotiated if/when new ones are formed, conflicts must be resolved and a multitude of stories have to be connected and embedded in the potentially endless process of writing this twenty-first-century national allegory.

After the groundbreaking start of the Dunne series with *The Steward of Christendom*, a *King Lear* adaptation that revolves around a patriarch whose actions in the political and the domestic realm intersect with tragic consequences and that partly draws on and partly refashions the conventions of the Shakespearean and the Aristotelian tragedy, Barry continues to tell the story of the Dunne family in novels. This turn from drama to fiction signifies a quite decisive departure from the extraordinary individual with an overreaching hubris and insatiable desire for a transcendental signified befitting a tragic hero, to the common man who traditionally finds his literary home in the novel. According to Martha Nussbaum "[t]he novel has [...] a greater commitment to the moral relevance of following a life through all of its adventures in all of its concrete context [...]; an especially distinctive feature of the genre [being ...] its interest in the ordinary" (Nussbaum 32). *Annie Dunne* certainly takes this focus on the ordinary to extremes. As one disappointed reviewer scorned, "*Waiting for Godot* has been described as a play in which nothing happens, twice. *Annie Dunne* is a novel in which nothing happens many times" (Sweeney). Instead of constructing an exciting plot which hinges on momentous events, Barry graces the everyday routine on a Wicklow farm with the aesthetic lyricism so typical for his œuvre. Sarah, for example, wins a "delicious victory" when she who "has no knack for the butter" successfully churns the cream.

> And this is a great moment, a moment of strange stiffness after long labour, and a releasing moment, and it is how I am sure the butterfly feels when at last it breaks from the discarded caterpillar, drying its wings and easily flying to become that graceful thing. And there is a grace in butter, how can I explain it – it is the colour we all worship, a simple, yellow gold. (125)

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11 I will later argue that some literary strategies employed by Barry also work towards including his audiences and readers into his imagined family by establishing them in the position of the "judicious spectator" as conceptualised by Adam Smith and re-deployed by Martha Nussbaum.

While the twenty short poems assembled under the title “Kelsha Yard, 1959”, at the heart of Barry’s poetry collection *Fanny Hawke Goes to the Mainland*, concentrate on individual objects and snap-shot moments typical of life on the farm, the novel, eventless as it may seem, narratively emplots such details by giving them significance as the experiences of Annie (and Sarah), whose identity is constructed by them. To put it with Ricœur: “The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told” (147-148).

In a characteristic scene of the novel a stubborn pony turns into a “perilous animal” and fierce enemy that may have “plotted [against Annie] for years, eyeing [her] with those evil eyes” (36), before it bolts and threatens to throw her and her niece and nephew into a ditch. Here, Barry gives an epic dimension to a rather unheroic minor adventure to stress its significance for the narrative of the elderly farmer. In addition, this scene about the trap accident, which ends happily thanks to Billy Kerr’s “epic efforts” (53) in stopping the animal and bringing Annie and the children safely home, also radically adapts one of the conventions of the courtship novel so as to better fit it into Barry’s contemporary national tale that de-emphasises heterosexual love and marriage plots. After all, Billy Kerr, the elderly farmhand of the Dunnes of Feddin, is not the dashing hero who rescues the heroine, first from a carriage accident and later on from spinsterhood. On the contrary, his plans to marry Sarah threaten to expel Annie from her new home.[12]

The second novel in the ‘Dunne series’, *A Long Long Way*, could be said to continue the piecing together of Barry’s allegorical national puzzle by integrating features of *The Steward of Christendom* and *Annie Dunne*. With its protagonist who fights and dies in the Royal British Army during World War I, it returns to the macro-narrative of Irish history and, like *The Steward*, contributes to an ongoing historical controversy.[13] Like *Annie Dunne*, however, it writes this history ‘from below’. Willie’s involvement in the political world differs from his father’s in so far as he is not a high-ranking officer but an ordinary recruit in the service of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. In literary terms, he is the individualised type of an innocent naïf (Mahony) rather than a multifaceted tragic figure. For an analysis of the national allegory as envisioned by Barry, it is as important, however, to notice the similarities in the literary construction of father and son as to comment on their differences. Like his father, who doubts that his son will be able to contribute his share to the Empire because “he would never reach six feet,

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12 While the heroine is convinced that Billy just wants to egotistically better his own social position by a marriage with Sarah, the novel allows Nussbaum’s reader as judicious spectator (see below) to see in this old, impecunious men’s wooing of Sarah yet another legitimate desire to find a home.

13 In *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* Foster speaks of “a policy of intentional amnesia about the extent of Irish commitment to the war effort before 1916” (472; also qtd. in Grene, *Politics* 243). More recently, Keith Jeffrey has contested the ruling “myth of ‘national amnesia’ regarding Ireland’s engagement with the Great War” (256), which he sees as a construction of Irish revisionist historiographers; also see Phillips (241).

the regulation height for a recruit" in the Dublin Metropolitan Police, Willie is driven by the idea to serve. When World War I breaks out he is "proud to [...] be signed up, his height never in question. For if he could not be a policeman, he could be a soldier" (15).

In terms of the construction of narrative space, it is noteworthy that the scope of the realm which the loyal servant Willie must defend has immensely widened from one generation of Dunne men to the next. While his grandfather managed the affairs of Humewood Castle, an old Wicklow estate, and his father's responsibility as head of the Dublin Metropolitan Police was to secure law and order in the Irish capital, Willie and his comrades are called to defend the whole world against evil influences. This, of course, turns out to be an impossible task. The setting of World War I thus, eventually, serves to debunk the ideology of the British monarchy "as the perfecter", and his loyal servants as "steward[s] of Christendom" (*Steward* 16), in particular, and "exposes the cruel myths of heroic warfare and patriotic sacrifice" (Harte 110), in general, as it demonstrates how "all those boys of Europe born in those times, and thereabouts those times, Russian, French, Belgian, Serbian, Irish, English, Scottish, Welsh, Italian, Prussian, German, Austrian, Turkish – and Canadian, Australian, American, Zulu, Gurkha, Cossack, and all the rest [...were] flung on the mighty scrapheap of souls" (*Long Long Way* 4). "[So] many [souls] were expended freely, and as if weightless. For a king, an empire, and a promised country" (290), we read Willie think (or the narrative voice comment?)[14] shortly before his death – in a phrase that features John Redmond's belief that an Irish involvement in the British army would guarantee the implementation of the Home Rule Bill.[15] As Harte shows, Barry uses the setting of World War I to prove his theory of a multifaceted and internally differentiated Irish national identity. Willie "encounters volunteers from many different parts of Ireland who harbour varying degrees of fealty to crown and shamrock" and "give voice to [...] varied ideological positions" (109). They include the Catholic loyalist Willie, the Redmondite nationalist Jesse Kirwan or Captain George Pasley, descendent of landed Wicklow Protestants and probably a "Church of Ireland m[a]n" (51).

With regard to the representation of the Irish soldiers, there are without doubt some passages and tropes – for instance the "associations" of this novel's main protagonist with "a childlike neediness and vulnerability that 'little Willie' exhibits throughout" (Harte 112) – that are open to the charge of sentimentalising the Irish soldiers' pain and suffering (Harte 106).[16] Likewise, a stylistic device that contributes to the senti-

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14 More on Barry's experiments with narrative perspective below.

15 For a concise summary of the historical contexts of *A Long Long Way* see Harte 107-108.

16 Harte bases his criticism of sentimental strategies in *A Long Long Way* on Jefferson's definition of the sentimental. "Jefferson argues that what chiefly distinguishes sentimental works is 'their emphasis upon such things as the sweetness, dearness, littleness, blamelessness, and vulnerability of the emotions' object. The qualities that sentimentality imposes on its objects are the qualities of innocence. But this almost inevit-

mentalising effect is the extended lamb /shepherd /wolf metaphor. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that in Barry's Irish narrative of World War I all of "King George's lambs" (54; also see 274) – even the most naïve and innocent ones – are not only being slaughtered and "expended freely" (290), but also in danger of being morally corrupted by a war which dehumanises everyone involved. Within the European slaughter house of the early twentieth century the binary of the lamb-wolf metaphor, Barry's novel emphasises, does not hold (see e.g. 289, 291). This corruption of the innocent soldier is most drastically conveyed when Willie's comrade Pete O'Hara participates in a gang rape that kills a Belgian woman. "Could the soul hold good, could the heart?", Willie (or the narrative voice?) asks himself, in a world where "women like that woman, and old men and their women, and the children of Belgium [were] all swallowed up in the mouth of war. [...] Was there no friendly army left upon the unkind earth?" (169)

It is not always possible to draw a clear line between a simplifying and politically suspect sentimentalism (also criticised by Martha Nussbaum [33]) and the narrative strategies that trigger the kind of sensibility which characterises the judicious spectator as conceptualised by Adam Smith and Martha Nussbaum. The fact that in Barry's national allegory the internal differentiation of the Irish nation is mirrored within the Dunne family contributes appreciably to toning down some of the sentimentalities that *A Long Long Way* may feature, and to complicating the ideological binaries that are constructed elsewhere in the 'Dunne series'. After all, the central conflict in *A Long Long Way* is yet another piece in the Barry puzzle that eschews the conventions of the political allegory as established in Sydney Owenson's national tales and of the historical novel à la Walter Scott. Barry's war novel avoids the melodramatic oppositions between the loyalist and the rebel, the conservative and the progressive, the unionist and the republican, that find resolution at the end of the traditional courtship plot.[17] Instead it focuses on the ideological fissures that run right through the core family of Irish misfits. By pursuing the generational conflict between father and son who both in their individual ways struggle to defend (in the father's case) or find and define (in the son's case) their precarious political and private loyalties, the novel points to the differences within. These intersecting narratives, of a father who admires the British Queen as "the flower and perfecter of Christendom" (*Steward* 250) and of his son who begins to doubt his own loyalty to the British Empire, do not melodramatically pit a likeable protagonist against an abominable or

ably involves a gross simplification of the nature of the object. And it is a simplification of an overtly moral significance. The simplistic appraisal necessary to sentimentality is also a direct impairment to the moral vision taken of its objects. [...]' (526-27)" (Harte 112).

17 Phillips also notes that Barry's "novel as a whole [confronts] the simpl[e] binary of the nationalist who refused to fight for the Empire on the one hand and the opponent of nationalism who fought loyally for the Empire on the other. Willie is no nationalist but by the end of the novel he has no loyalty to the Empire or to any cause" (242).

misled antagonist, but rather seek "to purchase the reader's sympathy and pity" (Harte 106) for both characters, to each of whom Barry dedicates a narrative that constructs an individual Irish identity.

The conflict within the Dunne family is accompanied by a refashioning of the dominant Irish master-narrative on the plot level. The Easter Rising, which in the historiography of the Irish Republic has long been regarded as the historical moment in which the nation was born,[18] is of central importance in Barry's *A Long Long Way*. Home on leave, the puzzled protagonist witnesses the Dublin rebellion which renders him an enemy of his own people. This experience significantly contributes to Willie's ambivalence about his involvement in World War I and severely exacerbates the father/son conflict.[19] It is thus the confluence of the Great War and the Rising, together with Willie's inner conflict rooted in his love and friendship for his comrades in the British Army and his father on the one hand and his sympathy and pity for the young Dubliners who give their lives in the fight for Irish independence on the other, which defines the plot of *A Long Long Way.*

However, Barry not only reorganises traditional binaries by contextualising the Easter Rising with the war experience of Irish soldiers fighting in the 16th (Irish) Division; going further, while still assigning due significance to the Easter Rising, he divests the historical event of its momentous, near-mythological importance and centrality by granting it neither the initial, nor the middle, nor the final position in his plotline. In *A Long Long Way* the Easter Rising is neither constructed as origin, as climax nor as final resolution. Willie's experience of the Rising occurs somewhere in the first half of the novel. This insignificant position within the plot structure deemphasises the historical event as such. Instead the novel puts the life of the representative son and soldier squarely in the centre of the narrative attention.

Last but not least, even though Willie and many of the other characters in Barry's puzzle are represented as helpless children, innocent naïfs or powerless, dependent creatures and even though *A Long Long Way* at times verges on sentimentalism, the events demonstrate effectively that their actions do invariably have consequences for the communities to which they belong. Barry does not completely relinquish the idea of human agency, but like other late-twentieth-century and twenty-first-century authors (from Virginia Woolf to Samuel Beckett and Salman Rushdie), philosophers and

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18 See, e.g., Michael McNally. *Easter Rising 1916: Birth of the Irish Republic*. Oxford: Osprey, 2007.

19 As Phillips summarises, "The novel's particularly Irish dimension is provided by Willie's encounter with the Easter Rising. [... he meets] a young rebel whose death he witnesses on the streets of Dublin. [...] having witnessed the death of so many of his fellow Irishmen in the war [...,] the experience leads him to write a fatal letter to his father in which he says in relation to the execution of the rebels, 'I wish they had not seen fit to shoot them. It doesn't feel right somehow' [139]. [...] His father makes his displeasure clear and Willie meets his death before he receives his father's letter of reconciliation" (243).

political theorists (from Friedrich Nietzsche to Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben), he reconceptualises it. The audience/readership, as judicious spectators, of Barry's Irish puzzle are invited to leave behind the idea of the enlightened self-made man firmly associated with the novel and the Robinson Crusoe-figure which single-handedly builds a colonial empire from scratch. Firmly situating himself in the realist tradition, Barry nevertheless experiments with narrative techniques that allow him to construct a new kind of (narrative) subjectivity.

While many components of Martha Nussbaum's concept of poetic justice can be applied to Barry's work, Nussbaum herself is firmly indebted to the tradition of the novel which features sovereign subjects who have the "ability [...] to choose the shape of [their] life as separate centers of agency" (29) and, thus, she perpetuates the idea of (characters and readers alike as) "social agents responsible for making a world" (31). Barry's Irish puzzle, in contrast, is puzzling because he remains sceptical towards the enlightened and neo-liberal idea of the autonomous and sovereign subject, while at the same time his texts (just like the realist Victorian novels Martha Nussbaum takes as her standard) enlist the reader's sympathy for all those resurrected, marginalised individuals to each of whom he dedicates their very own narrative. With affinities to Lauren Berlant's concept of the subject, for example, Barry's novels compel us to "recast some taxonomies of causality, subjectivity, and life-making embedded in normative notions of agency [...] to counter the moral science of [neoliberal] [...] politics, which links the political administration of life to a melodrama of the care of the monadic self" (99). Like Berlant he invites his readers "to think about agency and personhood not only in inflated terms but also as an activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness that does not always or even usually follow the literalizing logic of visible effectuality, bourgeois dramatics, and lifelong accumulation of self-fashioning" (99). In Barry's Irish puzzle, the individual may have little power to change the course of history, but it can and invariably does contribute to shaping the life of his community. Characters who are less interested in self-reflexively defining and actively performing their identities are moreover shown to be surprisingly successful at times in positively shaping their personal and group identities.

Taking the next novel of the Dunne series, for example, we learn that Willie's actions made a difference, and that he was more than a slaughtered lamb or a lost soul, and that he persists in the memory of those who knew him. Tadg Bere, "a friend and fellow private in the platoon", comes straight to the Dunnes after his return to Ireland and helps Willie's sister Lilly to "underst[and] that Willie had been valued in the army, loved indeed" (34). What is stressed in this scene is the value of ordinary, not very exceptional, let alone heroic deeds of friendship and family love, that can unfold against all the (unsentimental) odds of generational conflicts and adversarial political factions.

> 'The thing about Willie was,' Tadg Bere was saying, 'it wasn't just you could be depending on him, you knew he was keeping a weather eye out for you, like you might a brother. So I was always thinking that was a sorta [sic] compliment to his family, that they had reared him up in that frame of mind.' (*On Canaan's Side* 35)

This scene, especially if taken out of its context, clearly verges on the sentimental. Again, however, Barry rearranges the conventional genre ingredients of the sentimental tableau. Firstly, the scene is inserted into the novel dedicated to the youngest Dunne daughter, Lilly, and thereby detached from the narrative that revolves around and defines Willie Dunne's Irish identity. It is further distanced by being presented not as a vivid scene but as a distant memory of the narrator-protagonist of *On Canaan's Side*, who is far more interested in introducing Tadg, the love of her life, than Tadg, her dead brother's comrade. Furthermore, while Tadg's visit and his "compliment to [Willie's] family" brings some consolation to father Thomas, it cannot resolve the major breach that occurred between father and son, neither of whom will ever learn that the other had regretted his contribution to their disagreement and had been willing to ask for forgiveness. It thus lacks the most important ingredient of the trite version of the sentimental *tableau vivant*, a happy ending and final resolution for all the characters involved or, at least, for all those still alive. The scene thus foregrounds what the sentimental attempts suppress, namely, that the performance of acts of friendship, love and forgiveness does not (always) lead to easy, clear and fast solutions.

The negotiation of what could be termed Barry's concept of unexceptional 'ordinary agency', which contributes just as much to the individual agent's happiness as to that of his or her community, is also central to *Annie Dunne* and *On Canaan's Side*. *On Canaan's Side* features a particularly ambiguous and unsentimental version of ordinary acts of friendship in the character of an IRA terrorist who, having shot dead Lilly Dunne's fiancé, Tadg Bere, shortly after the couple had begun their new life in the U.S., takes on a new identity and tries to atone for his crime as Lilly's good friend Mr Nolan for the rest of his life. Lilly, anything but a stern and merciless character, is unable to forgive him on learning the full story shortly before their deaths decades later. "You had no right to my friendship all these years. You took away my life when you took him anyhow. I should kill you now. If I had strength in my hands I would do it. [...] 'No', I said, '[...] I curse you'" (243).

In *Annie Dunne* the principle of 'ordinary agency' is discussed on and established via both the plot level and the discourse level. On the plot level of this novel, the embittered protagonist must learn to accept that she is part of a village community that helps and supports even her when it assembles a search party following the disappearance of Annie's little nephew. As Phillips has shown,

> The key point is the revelation which comes to Annie immediately after the sight of the search party, "So there is a district. It is myself that has no district, no sense of it, but it is there, despite me" […]. While [Annie] has felt excluded from a collective and popular memory which has transformed the imagined community of the nation into one which in her view is peopled by gunmen […], there remains the community of the district, a community she has failed to recognize. (240)

Phillips's analysis, which draws on memory theories, thus comes to the same conclusion as mine, which looks at the identity politics and narrative ethics in Barry's Irish puzzle. "Barry's novels often argue against the inhumanity of too much loyalty to a

political cause, a loyalty which causes suffering" (240). Instead they form a "community [which is] created out of living in a shared space" independent of the agency of a neo-liberal subject.

If the reader empathises with the rather unappealing Annie throughout the book, this is due to the fact that the principle of 'ordinary agency' also shapes the novel on the level of (authorial) narration: *Annie Dunne* is, after all, the most autobiographically informed work of Sebastian Barry to date. It is her own nephew himself who learned to love Annie as a little boy during the summer of 1959, who writes her story, and who gratefully and lovingly integrates her into his Irish puzzle. As befits the concept of unexceptional ordinary agency and the whole drift of Barry's twenty-first-century version of an Irish national tale, the Barry persona on the plot level is a little and anonymous child with an as yet quite undeveloped identity. This autobiographical character's significance for the novel is that he is a recipient of Annie's love and attention rather than an active main protagonist. The readjustment of yet another literary genre – the autobiographical novel – thus contributes to the construction of post-neoliberal personal and group identities in Barry's narrative Irish cosmos.

Narrative Perspective and the Judicious Reader

A brief concluding look at the experiments with narrative perspective in the novels of the Dunne series will consolidate the idea that Barry creates a narrative aesthetics compatible with the ethics developed in his Irish puzzle. In the process, it will also become clearer how the position of the judicious reader can be said to be initiated by Barry's novels. With regard to the construction of plot, space and characters, Barry mainly uses narrative techniques that allow the reader to become absorbed into the story world and to empathise with the characters. Still, the narrative mediation of this story world is always slightly odd, stimulating questions and encouraging rational reflexions which accompany the reader's emotional involvement in the story world.[20]

While Barry writes historical novels, he does not contribute to the genre of historiographic metafiction that has dominated the postmodern novel (see Hutcheon; Nünning), and is characterised by what Wayne Booth has called "struggle narratives": narratives whose "plot [...] is the plot of the struggle to tell it" (126). Barry's chief interest is in telling the stories of his marginalised family members who never told their stories themselves (like Willie) or who have no great difficulties to articulate what they want to say, if they are constructed as first-person narrators (like Annie and Lilly Dunne). Barry's focus is not on the question of how to represent the past linguistically. Nevertheless, adapting Booth's term of the "struggle narrative", I want to suggest that it is helpful to think of Barry's historical narratives as '*covert* struggle stories'. The communicative situation and/or narrative perspective constructed by

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20 Nussbaum stresses "that both empathetic participation and external assessment are crucial" for Adam Smith's concept of the "judicious spectator" (73).

Barry is always somewhat unsettling and, as a consequence, has a subtle but palpable distancing effect, after all. Even though the difficulties of the historiographical voice are not foregrounded, Barry's reader is bound to stumble over the question of how the story of the marginalised can be made audible and/or the question of who would want to hear or read their stories if they were told.

In *A Long Long Way*, passages narrated by a third-person voice which provides value judgments and generalising commentaries typical of an omniscient narrator clash with free indirect discourse (FID), a technique usually found in novels with much less overt narrators. The question of who speaks, thinks and comments is often triggered by FID, which always "enhances the bivocality [...] of the text by bringing into play a plurality of [...] attitudes" (Rimmon-Kenan 113) and becomes even more virulent when the attitudes and voices of an authoritative and assertive narrator and a powerless, naïve and rather quiet character like Willie Dunne are forced together in Barry's fascinating handling of FID. *On Canaan's Side*, which at first sight looks like a rather conventional fictional autobiography, turns out to be a rather paradoxical testimony: the memories of an eighty-nine-year-old narrator-protagonist which the protagonist herself regards as the confessions (to no confessor) for a sin not yet committed (her planned suicide); memories, moreover, which she commits to the written word even though she "hate[s] writing, [...] hate[s] pens and paper and all that fussiness" (9).

Annie Dunne belongs to the (until very recently) rare species of a first-person narrative told in the present tense. As such it can be regarded as a particularly radical attempt to reconstitute the lost presence of a forgotten figure. A present-tense first-person narrative constructs an impossible scenario, of course. Nobody tells his or her life to such an extent as Annie does at the same time as they experience it. Even though I do not wholly agree with Grene's analysis and interpretation of the narrative perspective in *Annie Dunne*,[21] his comment certainly points to the fact that readers of the novel cannot but be puzzled: "The inner world of an Annie Dunne is rendered with a rich specificity she could never manage to voice herself. […] The point of view hovers between the child [i.e. her nephew Sebastian Barry] and the protective old woman, both endowed with the vocabulary of the mature writer" ("Out of History" 175). It is as if in *Annie Dunne* Barry were consciously choosing the other extreme of the metahistoriographical struggle story in order to do full justice to the forgotten Other, while the authorial narrative voice, which – as we cannot fail to notice – must have made this story available, almost vanishes completely.

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21 Grene does not quite acknowledge the radicality of Barry's choice of the present-tense first-person narration, when he compares it to Virginia Woolf's very different kind of an "interiorized mode" (175, 176). Also, there is no need to assume that Annie Dunne would have been unable to think and speak as the text suggests she does. On the contrary, Barry's choice of a first-person narrator serves exactly to suggest just that: that Annie does "manage to voice" the text we read (Grene 175).

Instead of a Conclusion: Barry's Postnational Irishness

As Barry's treatment of the national family allegory stresses the complexities within the Irish nation and diaspora, his work only implicitly comments on what the Irish have in common. His device of using his own family history as an inspiration simply takes for granted that there are certain centripetal energies that bind the nation together like a family. This is one reason for the fact that his œuvre raises the question of how to define the/a nation once the dominant ideology is being replaced by an inclusive and highly complex new version. Is Barry's work then, ultimately, "'post-nationalis[t]', in the sense of nationalism becoming obsolete or losing its popular appeal" (Fitzpatrick 173)? The following passage, which turns the Irish family into just one member of the global family certainly suggests such a conclusion:

> 'What is the greatest discovery in our lifetime? [...] In my [Mr Dillinger's] view, Mrs Bere, it is DNA. [...] The DNA of every modern person goes back to one, or maybe three women in Africa. The good news is, we are all the same family. The bad news is, we are all the same family.' This was his little joke. 'The point is, all these wars, all these teems of history, all this hatred of difference, and fear of the other, has been a long, elaborate, useless, heartbreaking nonsense. America is not a melting pot of different races, it is where the great family shows its many faces. The Arab is the Jew, the Englishman is the Irishman, the German is the Frenchman, it is a wonderful catastrophe, no? (57-58)

If the Irish can still be differentiated from members of other nations, it is the fact that they all share a specifically Irish history (of which, at times, they seem mere playthings) rather than essential national features. It is the shared experience of certain events (even if from very different perspectives) and the memories thereof which bind Barry's characters together as members of a nation. Their desires – for home, for loyalty, for community and for love – are shown to be universal.

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