

Katharina Rennhak (ed.)

NARRATING IRELAND IN DIFFERENT GENRES AND MEDIA

Irish Studies in Europe

Volume

7

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 **Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier**

Narrating Ireland in Different Genres and Media /

Katharina Rennhak (ed.). -

Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2016

(Irish Studies in Europe; vol. 7)

ISBN 978-3-86821-652-3

Umschlaggestaltung: Brigitta Disseldorf

Further information on the European Federation of Associations
and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS) is available at <http://www.efacis.eu/>.

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ISBN 978-3-86821-652-3

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier

Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier

Tel.: (0651) 41503, Fax: 41504

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

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INTRODUCTION: NARRATING IRELAND IN DIFFERENT GENRES AND MEDIA

Katharina Rennhak (Wuppertal)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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