Irish Tradition or Postdramatic Innovation?
Storytelling in Contemporary Irish Plays

Abstract: Storytelling in Irish drama has traditionally been perceived as evidence for a continuity between Irish theatre and a pre-modern, distinctly Irish oral culture. Hans-Thies Lehmann’s theory of Postdramatic Theatre, however, allows one to describe the exhibition of the act of narration in contemporary Irish plays as a break with both Epic Theatre and the drama of the Irish Literary Revival. In contrast with the alienation effects of Epic Theatre, contemporary Irish theatre texts create intense relationships between narrator and story on the one hand and between narrator and audience on the other. Yet the acts of narration also differ from those in the drama of the Irish Literary Revival in that oral storytelling takes the form of intimate confessions and focuses not on collective but individual memory. At the same time, the Irish example casts a critical light on some of Lehmann’s concepts, particularly the avant-garde character of the so-called ‘post-epic’ narration and its inherent criticism of the mass media.

1. The Irish Dramatic Tradition and Hans-Thies Lehmann’s Theory of Postdramatic Theatre

One of the most interesting formal tendencies in contemporary Irish theatre is the exhibition of the act of narration in numerous plays since the 1970s. Plays like Tom Murphy’s *Bailegangaire* (1985) only show characters telling each other stories and commenting on them. In Brian Friel’s *Faith Healer* (1979) and *Molly Sweeney* (1994), in Mark O’Rowe’s *Howie the Rookie* (1999) and in most of Conor McPherson’s and Donal O’Kelly’s plays, the narrators directly address the audience so that there is no ‘inner’ communication system and no scenic action whatsoever apart from the act of narration. These are formal devices which are quite different in both structure and effect from those of the Epic Theatre. Irish critics, however, tend to emphasise the innovative less than the traditional character of storytelling in drama. Anthony Roche, for instance, links Friel’s texts to ancient forms of Irish oral culture and calls them “a strong cultural reminder that Irish drama arguably had its origins as much in the communal art of *seancháí*, the act of oral storytelling, as in a more formal written script performed on a proscenium stage in an urban centre” (1994, 115; also cf. Corbett, 2002, 114). Yet while the significance of oral storytelling for the Irish dramatic tradi-
tion cannot be questioned, their relationship and the different transformations it has undergone since the Irish Literary Revival still remain to be mapped out.

In order to understand the peculiarities of the act of narration in contemporary Irish plays, Hans-Thies Lehmann’s theory of Postdramatic Theatre can offer some orientation. Although he largely ignores the developments on the British Isles, Lehmann describes a similar exhibition of storytelling in Jan Lauwers’ performances and proposes the slightly self-contradictory term “post-epic narration” for this phenomenon (1999, 195). The notion of a Postdramatic Theatre postulates a radical departure from the traditional form of drama. Since the 1960s and early 1970s, according to Lehmann, new forms and functions of theatre have emerged in response to the increasing importance of information technologies in Western societies. Records, film, radio, television and the internet have reduced theatre to the praxis of a minority, and, at the same time, the pervading presence of these media in everyday life poses questions about the construction of ‘reality’ and the processes of communication with a new urgency. While film and television have taken over its former task of imitating and representing life, the theatre has set out to explore its own forms, materials and historical conditions with a heightened reflexivity. Postdramatic Theatre breaks with the predominance of the written text and the “complicity” with logos and dialectics which has been characteristic of European theatre since the Renaissance. Drama as a fictional representation identifies human subjects (characters) and arranges their actions and the events occurring to them in a meaningful sequence (plot). In spite of its criticisms of Aristotelian poetics, the Epic Theatre does not question this basic “para-logical order” of drama but, on the contrary, preserves it by introducing communication systems which mediate between the audience and the action on stage and help to organise the experience of modern society (Lehmann, 1999, 62). In Postdramatic Theatre, however, characters, dialogue, plot and the construction of a fictional world vanish, or, at least, they no longer form the constituent elements of theatre. The traditional hierarchy of theatre, with the text as the dominant semiotic system and all other systems in only an illustrating, supporting function, is discarded. The mimetic performances of dramatic theatre are replaced by an analytical performativity which, instead of transmitting information, concentrates on exposing the parallel processes of encoding and decoding within the theatre (Poschmann, 1997, 45-47). Postdramatic Theatre aims at an open, fragmentary perception and sensuality which frustrates and deconstructs all longing for closure and wholeness. On the one hand, it integrates the new media into its performances, investigates and criticises them. On the other hand, it creates alternative experiences in which signification and representation are superseded by the presence of the performance and its performers, the unique events in a shared time and space that can neither be reproduced nor totally defined. Correspondingly, the human body is assigned a central place within Postdramatic Theatre: not the ideal, sexualized but the extreme, idiosyncratic, suffering body.
One of the formal elements Lehmann describes as characteristic for Postdramatic Theatre is the so-called ‘post-epic narration.’ In Postdramatic Theatre, the act of narration is no longer used to complement and alienate the scenic action, but replaces it. By solely presenting the act of storytelling, the act itself and the relationship it establishes between narrator and audience become the focus of attention instead of the story and the events occurring in it. The presence of the act of narration overshadows the significance of the story told:

While the Epic Theatre changes the representation of the staged fictive events and intends to distance, remove the audience from itself in order to turn the spectator into an expert, a politically critical observer, the post-epic forms of narration aim at the foregrounding of the personal, not the mediating presence, the self-referential intensity of this contact, the closeness in the distance, not the distancing of the close. (1999, 198; my translation)

Again, Lehmann ascribes a compensatory role to this formal device. Exhibiting the act of narration, the theatre furnishes the age of mass media with an almost lost experience: the listening to storytellers (1999, 197).

Obviously, Postdramatic Theatre has not become the ruling paradigm on the Irish stage. Since the foundation of the Abbey Theatre by three writers, the dominance of neither the dramatist nor the written text has seriously been challenged in Irish theatre. In contrast with the experiments of Heiner Müller or Elfriede Jelinek, Irish writers have never discarded the basic elements of dramatic fiction, characterisation or plot. Still, the concept of post-epic narration allows us to highlight significant differences in the usage of storytelling in the Irish dramatic tradition. Instead of postulating an unproblematic continuity with an oral culture, it becomes possible to distinguish various phases in which different acts of narration appear in distinct ideas of theatre. I would like to propose three phases: firstly, the simulation of an oral culture and its parody within the conventional dramatic form in the Irish Literary Revival and the Counter-Revival respectively; secondly, the usage of narration as a distancing epic element since the late 1950s; and thirdly, the emergence of a post-epic narration since the late 1970s. All of these forms of narration are connected with different modes of memory. I will sketch the role of oral narratives at the beginning of an independent Irish dramatic tradition, before focussing on two contemporary authors, Brian Friel and Conor McPherson. Friel and McPherson represent two generations of Irish playwrights. While the transition from epic to post-epic narration can be traced in Friel’s works, McPherson is the writer to have made this device astonishingly popular.

2. Under the Spell of the Dramatic Form: Oral Narratives in Plays of the Irish Literary Revival

Undoubtedly, the founders of the Abbey theatre, William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, and John Millington Synge, attempted to connect their drama with Irish oral traditions by adapting Irish folk-tales and legends. Yeats believed that
the invention of the printing-press had severely damaged literature. In his essay “Literature and the Living Voice,” published in the Abbey Theatre’s house-journal in 1906, he proposed to turn the theatre into a place in which the revival of an oral presentation of literature could be started. Apart from the performance of plays, this project also included storytelling:

We must have narrative as well as dramatic poetry, and we are making room for it in the theatre in the first instance, but in this also we must go to an earlier time. Modern recitation is not, like modern theatrical art, an over-elaboration of a true art, but an entire misunderstanding. It has no tradition at all. [...] We must go to the villages or we must go back hundreds of years to Wolfram of Eschenbach and the castles of Thuringia. [...] The reciter cannot be a player, for that is a different art; but he must be a messenger, and he should be as interesting, as exciting, as are all that carry great news. He comes from far-off, and he speaks of far-off things with his own peculiar animation, and instead of lessening the ideal and beautiful elements of speech he may, if he has mind to, increase them. [...] His art is nearer to pattern than that of the player. It is always allusion, never illusion; for what he tells of, no matter how impassioned he may become, is always distant, and for this reason he may permit himself every kind of nobleness. In a short poem he may interrupt the narrative with a burden, which the audience will soon learn to sing [...] (1962, 213-15)

Several aspects are interesting in this passage: the distinction between an actor performing a play and a recitor telling a narrative, the distance between the story and the narrator, the association of the oral narrative with verse and music, and the participation of the audience.

Yeats’ project was never realised as it was conceived in the programmatic statement. Nevertheless, oral traditions are continuously evoked in the plays of the Irish Literary Revival. The drama of Lady Gregory in particular focusses on problems of the authority and continuation of traditions. Not the folk-tale or legend but the ballad is the paradigmatic form in which Irish oral culture appears in plays like The Rising of the Moon (1904), The White Cockade (1905), or Devorgilla (1907). The ballad is a specially communal form; it can be sung together, easily learned and passed on with comparatively little loss in form and content. Moreover, the narrative in ballads tends to be very condensed. The form of Lady Gregory’s plays indicates an unwillingness to interrupt the course of action with longer narratives or songs. Usually, only one stanza at a time is inserted into the ongoing dialogue; the existing short narrative passages are dramatised with questions from the listeners. The narration in verse or prose is generally heterodiegetic: Since the stories owe their authority to the belief that they have passed from mouth to mouth and become the product of the community as a whole, a distance between the narrator and the story must be established. Still, a frequent motif in these plays is that accepting the authority of the traditional narrative involves its imitation in the character’s own life. The communal narrative also has to become that of the individual, and the traditional story does not only deal with past but equally with future events. In Yeats and Lady Gregory’s Cathleen ni Houlihan (1902), for instance, the protagonist first listens to the story of Ireland’s great martyrs, then repeats their sacrifice and thereby becomes the hero of new stories. Cathleen, as the personification of Ireland the only truly
confident first-person-singular narrator of oral traditions, always tells the same story and can use both the past and the future tense when she enumerates the men who have died and will die for her:

There was a red man of the O'Donnells from the north, and a man of the O'Sullivans from the south, and there was one Brian that lost his life at Clontarf by the sea, and there were a great many in the west, some that died hundreds of years ago, and there are some that will die tomorrow. (Yeats, 1966, 224-25)

The act of oral narration, the heroic deed and the story form a perfect circle and together constitute the cyclical time of myth. Thus, in Lady Gregory’s and in Yeats’ early plays, there is a strong tension between form and content in the treatment of traditional narratives. On the level of content, oral narratives are the ultimate source of authority, whereas on the level of form, they are reduced to a minimal scope that will not endanger the coherence of the dramatic form. Longer ballads or songs are never included. Nor does the performance as a whole adopt the form of a ritual repetition of traditional narratives. The cyclic oral tradition is integrated into and subordinated to a closely knit linear plot and a mimetic performance. The spectators are not only confronted with a myth but can also observe a tradition in historical time: Catherine ni Houlihan, for instance, is set during the revolt of the United Irishmen, and Catherine’s enumeration of martyrs cited above alludes to historical knowledge that was common at the time of the first performance of the play. The audience is supposed to relate the seemingly timeless mythical pattern of martyrdom to an historical narrative from which the myth obtains much of its force and legitimacy.

Accordingly, studies that look for the origins of Irish drama in oral storytelling are not totally convincing. Walter J. Ong argues that the drama was the first literary genre whose structure was deeply influenced and only made possible by written communication. The unity of action in conventional drama, its continuously ascending plot with a climax and a denouement could not be constructed before the invention of writing. Oral cultures are not able to tell longer stories in a linear temporal sequence; Homer’s Iliad is the paradigmatic example for a predominantly orally conceived text that starts in medias res and spreads out into analepses and prolepses. Oral narration is non-chronological, episodic and repetitious (Ong, 1982, 142-44). At the time of the Irish Literary Revival, the insertion of long narratives and songs was still incompatible with the intricate and dynamic emplotments demanded of a dramatic script, and the emerging Irish theatre followed the European tradition of playwriting instead of the Irish tradition of storytelling. That Lady Gregory’s plays represented a vivid oral tradition without imposing its forms of communication on the audience was probably one of the reasons for their success. In contrast, Yeats’ later experimentation with the Noh theatre, in which he introduced a ballad singer as the central mediating and organisng subject of the performance, did not have much immediate impact on the Irish dramatic tradition.

The drama of the following decades, especially Sean O’Casey’s and Denis Johnston’s, tended to parody the simulation of oral traditions in the plays of the
Irish Literary Revival but maintained the subordination of narration to the dramatic form. While fragments of stories and songs were very often included in Irish drama from the 1920s to the 1950s, these narratives only gained length with the adoption of epic forms of theatre by Brendan Behan, Brian Friel and others from the late 1950s onwards. Therefore, I would like to turn to the late 1970s directly, when a change becomes perceptible in Brian Friel’s work, a shift which seems to correspond with Lehmann’s thesis of a transition from epic to post-epic forms of narration.

3. From Epic to Post-Epic Narration in the Theatre? Brian Friel’s Living Quarters (1977) and Faith Healer (1979)

In Brian Friel’s Living Quarters, first performed in 1977, one of the characters functions as both narrator and director of the scenic action. This character has no name but is always referred to as “Sir.” Sir introduces himself to the audience as a product of the imagination of the other characters, the members of the Butler family. They conceived him as the impartial custodian and interpreter of the “ledger,” a perfect record in which all the actions and incidents leading to the downfall of the family are registered. Sir enables the other characters to relive and re-examine the tragic events without distortions by their own defective memories. Thus, the scenic action is a repetition of past situations performed by the people who once experienced them. Sir’s authority stems from the accuracy of his ledger and from his absorption in his function. He has no characteristics other than competence and neutrality. Often, his narration is actually a reading and citing of what is written in his perfect chronicle. Not only does he mediate between stage and audience but also between the written text of the ledger and the performance. He chooses situations from the ledger to be repeated, and, like a director, he arranges and controls the acting of the characters who play their own former selves. Although Sir’s version of the Butler tragedy is occasionally challenged by some characters, they all accept it as objective truth in the end.

Without diminishing its originality in certain aspects, it can be stated that Living Quarters is a typical specimen of Epic Theatre. Narration in Epic Theatre is used to disrupt the theatrical communication. Usually, the narration has a metatheatrical function and exposes or openly thematises the fictionality of the performance. Thus, the act of narration is located on a secondary level of fiction. Since Epic Theatre interrupts and contrasts the scenic action with the narration, it tends to minimise the performativity of the act of narration, which can be achieved by different means: While Thornton Wilder chose a conversational,
even casual tone for his stage manager in *Our Town* (1938), other epic dramas depict narration as the intrusion of another medium: the written text. In many productions of Brecht’s plays, scene titles or whole texts were projected on screens, superimposing the individual act of reading on the communal, seemingly effortless theatrical experience. Like Friel, Brecht in *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* and Max Frisch in *Biographie* linked their narrators to written records which they cite from and refer to. All of these narrators resemble officials who serve their function neutrally and impartially. Their impersonality should allow the spectator to enter into an equally anonymous and technical relationship with the narrator and with the text of which he is the mouthpiece. Yeats and Lady Gregory depicted narration as essentially communal, uniting both narrator and listener in one ritualistic activity. In contrast, Epic Theatre emphasises the difference and distance between acting, narrating and listening; it intends to isolate the individual spectator as a critical observer and judge of the scenic action. The plays of the Irish Literary Revival simulated oral traditions; the Epic Theatre has an affinity to written communication. Correspondingly, Brecht asked of the spectator the relaxed attitude of a reader who leafs through a book and compares different passages (1967, 987), and Walter Benjamin called Brecht’s revolution of the dramatic form a “literarisation” of the theatre (1977b, 525).

While in *Living Quarters*, Sir’s narration frames and structures the scenes depicted on stage, in *Faith Healer*, first performed two years later in 1979, the whole action consists of four monologues. The first and the last of them are spoken by Frank Hardy, who worked as a faith healer and tried to cure illnesses by supposedly magic means. On his tour through the rural areas of Scotland and Wales, Frank was accompanied by his manager Teddy and his wife or mistress Grace, the other two narrators in the play. These three characters give quite contradictory accounts of their miserable past life together which ended in catastrophe: Frank was murdered by the enraged friends of an invalid he was unable to heal. Like *Living Quarters*, *Faith Healer* is set in a fantastic limbo of memory which allows Frank to tell the story of his own death.

The detached view of the heterodiegetic narrator Sir, who is not involved in the family tragedy of the Butlers, is replaced in the later play by homodiegetic narrators who try to understand events in which they are inextricably entangled. The naked presentation of narratives is too radical a rupture of dramatic tradition not to result in some kind of alienation. Yet since narration is no longer contrasted with traditional scenic action within the play, the performativity of the act of storytelling itself is brought to the foreground. The act of narration does not expose and multiply the fictionality of the performance, but establishes a sustained connection between narrator and audience. Moreover, the close existential relationship of the narrators to their story lends these narratives a great intensity and immediacy. The characters’ difficulties in recollecting the past and coping with it find expression in non-chronological, associative, fragmentary and obviously unreliable stories. Witnessing the act of narration as a problematic and very personal endeavour while trying to find out what might really have hap-
pened, the audience is involved in a more intimate relationship than in both Epic Theatre and the ritualistic storytelling envisaged by Yeats and Lady Gregory: They become the listeners to private confessions. Although the act of narration itself thus creates suspense, this is not merely achieved by its intense presence but also by the search for meaning it triggers.

In the strict definition of Gerda Poschmann, who limits the term to texts without narration, figuration and fictionality, *Faith Healer* cannot be called a postdramatic theatre text, of course. Narration is simply transferred from a scenic to a merely verbal mode, the narrators develop into particularly round characters through their long monologues, and, although they often directly address the audience, their fictional frame remains intact. In contrast, Lehmann does not think that a Postdramatic Theatre necessarily has to move beyond representation. He perceives the difference between Postdramatic and dramatic theatre rather as one of emphasis; conventional formal elements of the drama can be used as the material for a Postdramatic Theatre when they are newly combined and connected with new functions. Lehmann’s concept of a ‘post-epic’ narration can be applied to *Faith Healer* in that the acts of narration in the play lead to an involvement rather than a distancing of the spectators. The heightened presence of the act of narration in Brian Friel’s *Faith Healer*, however, does not dominate or supersede the significance of the narrated. On the contrary, the presence and meaning of the narration mutually increase each other’s effects.

The transition from epic to post-epic narration in Friel’s work did not come as sudden as the temporal proximity of the first performances of *Living Quarters* and *Faith Healer* might suggest. In fact, it can at least be partly explained by Friel’s preoccupation with memory and the drift of his thoughts on this subject. During the 1970s, Friel explored the forms, functions and pathologies of both collective and individual memory, and he demonstrated the deficiencies of one type of memory by contrasting it with the other. In *The Freedom of the City* (1973), various official narratives of an event presented by different epic figures in the drama are confronted with the scenic representation of this event and the oral narratives of individuals about their life. Thus, *The Freedom of the City* is an epic drama that is critical of written discourse. Rather than using epic devices to expose the fictionality of the scenic action, the drama questions the epic voices and the official discourse they represent in the play by contrasting them with the scenic action. Conversely, *Living Quarters* introduces a perfect historian as an epic narrator who is able to ascertain the distortions of the past by individual memories, which attempt to determine the scenic action. Friel was highly sceptical of both individual and collective memory, but the conventional dramatic form as well as the form of Epic Theatre did not allow a consistent critique of

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3 The more limited usage of “drama” in a theory of Postdramatic Theatre demands the introduction of a new generic term for texts performed in the theatre. “Theatre text” has been proposed as such a term, under which both drama and the postdramatic forms are subsumed (cf. Poschmann, 1997, 42-42).

these modes of memory. Both conventional drama and Epic Theatre had to presuppose the adequacy of one narrative form to reality in order to expose the inadequacy of other narratives to the past. By reducing the scenic action to acts of narration, *Faith Healer* escaped this paradox. In the storytelling, the past is present through the guilt of the narrators, the traces of bodily and psychological harm, and the indubitable reality of death. But simultaneously, the past eludes all attempts to make sense of it and remains irretrievable.

At the time of its first production and well into the 1980s, *Faith Healer* could appear as an isolated curiosity within Irish literature. In his next plays, Brian Friel himself returned to the traditional realistic dramatic form, which has always dominated the Irish theatre. Although epic devices were used in some plays in the 1980s and the 1990s, it is remarkable that generative narrators—i.e. narrators who frame and organise a scenic action—tended to be homodiegetic more often than heterodiegetic. In Stewart Parker’s *Northern Star* (1984), Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), Tom Murphy’s *The Patriot Game* (1991) and Marina Carr’s *The Mai* (1994), the narrators play an important part in the stories they relate. Homodiegetic generative narrators may create a more intense relationship to their audience than heterodiegetic generative narrators, but insofar as they are still used to disrupt the scenic action and to expose its fictional character, they remain closer to epic than post-epic narration. It was not until the early 1990s that several younger writers adopted the form of the narrative monologue: Dermot Bolger might have been the first with *In High Germany* and *The Holy Ground* (both 1990), but Donald O’Kelly and particularly Conor McPherson established themselves as the most important representatives of this formal tendency in the course of the 1990s.


Conor McPherson was twenty-one when he directed his first play at University College Dublin in 1992. Like most of McPherson’s plays, *Rum and Vodka* is simply a narrative with no stage directions at all; even the attribution of the text to a character is missing. Apart from the paratextual declaration of its genre and the references to its first performances, the text differs from a short story or novella only in the oddly short paragraphs, which often contain no more than one sentence. While *Faith Healer*, though highly esteemed by the critics, does not belong to Brian Friel’s commercially successful plays, Conor McPherson’s meteoric rise to fame is entirely owed to the popularity of his narrative monologues.

*The Good Thief*, first performed in 1994, is the story of a small-time gangster from Dublin whose routine job of scaring a businessman develops into a full-scale shoot-out with IRA terrorists. The only survivors, the gangster, the busi—

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5 A term adopted from Brian Richardson, 2001, 685, although I do not restrict it to heterodiegetic narrators but use it for all narrators who seem to generate the scenic action.

6 Not every monodrama is a narrative monologue; cf. Frank McGuinness’ *Baglady* (1985).
nessman’s wife and her little daughter, have to flee to the west of Ireland since the gangster’s organisation wants to eliminate them as potential witnesses. After an idyllic interlude, in which the gangster catches a glimpse of a fulfilled life, his colleagues find them.

Two quite interesting stories are attached to *The Good Thief*. Not only a storyteller in playwriting, McPherson seems to love relating anecdotes about the production and performances of his plays. The first story is about McPherson’s most memorable and perhaps favourite performance:

Garrett [the actor giving the narrative monologue] always had a whiskey bottle on stage while he performed and drank from it regularly. It contained apple juice. It looked like whiskey and it was easy to drink. But when we arrived in Derry our stage manager, Philip, couldn’t find any apple juice in the shops. Garrett said he had to drink something. The show was starting in like ten minutes: We thought about what might work. Cold tea? No, disgusting. Red lemonade? No, too much fizz. What then? Garrett sighed and reached into his pocket. He handed me a ten. ‘Get me a bottle of whiskey,’ he said. And I did.

When I handed it to him he went to open it. ‘No,’ I said. ‘Open it on stage in front of the audience. Let them hear the seal break. Let them know it’s real.’ And that’s what happened. He opened it on stage and the mad bastard drank about half the bottle. Was he pissed? Well, let’s just say there were a right few pauses towards the end of the show. But he did it and it was fine. (McPherson, 1999, 183)

In this anecdote, heavy drinking appears as the Irish equivalent of body art. Like the self-mutilations of some performance artists, the physiological act of getting drunk on stage foregrounds the bodily presence of the performer and blurs the boundaries between the ‘real’ and the theatrical. McPherson’s story exemplifies an interest in an even more immediate act of narration than was achieved in Brian Friel’s *Faith Healer*. Whereas in both *Living Quarters* and *Faith Healer* a fictional space is still created that is different from the ‘real’ space shared with the audience, Conor McPherson’s narrative monologues generally attempt to erase this distinction. If there are any stage directions at all, the act of narration is set on a bare stage as in *St. Nicholas* (1997). In some productions which created a space other than the theatre – an urban pub – the spectators were included in this space as if they were just listening to somebody telling his story in an everyday life situation. Thus, McPherson’s plays are consciously staged as communal events, but the informal and urban context as well as the personal, confessional character minimise the ritualistic quality of storytelling.

The other anecdote connected with *The Good Thief* is that upon watching a performance of the play, the Irish film director Paddy Breathnach invited McPherson to write a screenplay for him. McPherson accepted. His affinity to the cinema contradicts Lehmann’s thesis that there is necessarily a critique of the mass media inherent in forms of post-epic narration. *I went down*, Breathnach’s film based on McPherson’s screenplay, came out in 1997 and deals with people on the road like *The Good Thief*. Since then, McPherson has repeatedly worked as both scriptwriter and director for the cinema (Renner, 1998, 21). For instance, he adapted his play *This Lime Tree Bower* (1995), which, like Friel’s *Faith Healer*, consists of the narrative monologues of three characters, for the screen. Actu-
ally, there are various elements in his narrative monologues that highly facilitate their translation into films. The plot is usually very eventful and, in the case of *The Good Thief*, obviously influenced by gangster films. Moreover, the narrative is generally chronological; the speed of narration is almost constant; there are no extensive reflections or comments by the narrator, no complex descriptions of psychological states and hardly any summaries of iterated actions or long-time developments. In contrast with those in *Faith Healer*, the narrator appears to be reliable; even in *This Lime Tree Bower*, the different voices do not contradict but complement each other. Although the narrative is homodiegetic, it sometimes approaches the impression of a neutral camera eye. It is not only due to the intensity and presence of the act of narration that McPherson’s narrative monologues are popular but also because his stories are so accessible and gripping.

One of McPherson’s plays explicitly refers to traditional oral storytelling. *The Weir*, first performed in 1997, is set in a country pub in the west of Ireland where a group of old bachelors gathers to relieve their loneliness with a little chat and a few pints. The arrival of a young woman from Dublin results in a contest among the old boys of telling supernatural stories. Then, the evening takes a sudden turn when the woman herself relates a very personal experience. Her small daughter died in an accident. Unable to go on with her usual life, the woman stayed at home for weeks. One day the phone rang, and the woman heard the very distant voice of her child begging to be picked up.

As in the plays of the Irish Literary Revival, there are only narrators internal to the scenic action in *The Weir* who tell their stories not to the audience but to each other. The emphasis is thus as much on the depiction of the atmosphere and context of storytelling as on the exhibition of the act of narration. Formally, *The Weir* could be called a conventional drama apart from the fact that there is no action other than the chat leading up to the narratives. Though especially the first story told resembles traditional narratives, the play presents oral traditions in a stage of dying or becoming mere folklore. An outsider is needed to initiate the storytelling, and the narration is part of an acting of the bachelors as picturesque countrypeople who are still rooted in their traditions. The alienation of the bachelors from traditional supernatural beliefs is demonstrated by the rapidity with which they distance themselves from their stories when confronted with the woman’s account of her supernatural experience. Also the development from heterodiegetic to homodiegetic narration in *The Weir* is different from that in the plays of the Irish Literary Revival. While in the drama of Lady Gregory, the communal narrative is adopted by the individual, in *The Weir*, the communal story is replaced by individual confessions. After the woman’s narrative, one of the bachelors tells the central episode of his life story. Interestingly, a similar shift from heterodiegetic, ritualistic to homodiegetic, confessional narration also forms the central event in the other contemporary Irish play that stages oral storytelling within the conventional dramatic form: Tom Murphy’s *Bailegangaire* (1985).
Instead of a collective Irish identity, individual identities are negotiated in *Bailegangaire* and *The Weir*, and this observation can be generalised with reference to all of the Irish contemporary plays discussed in this paper. Although contemporary Irish theatre continues to explore and criticise national historiography and collective identities, it does not depict oral storytelling but rituals, memory spaces, and written texts as the primary media of collective memory. Whereas the Irish Literary Revival attempted to absorb historical memory into a ritualistic oral storytelling, thus turning history into myth, contemporary Irish theatre tends to distance oral storytelling from both ritual and history and to regard it as an alternative, liberating mode, particularly suitable for the expression of the individual. Orality still possesses a utopian function which, however, is very different from that in the Irish Literary Revival. The development may be described with Walter Benjamin’s distinction between “memory” and “recollection” in his famous essay on the narrator: “[The memory] is dedicated to the one hero, the one quest and the one fight; [the recollection] to the many scattered facts.”

While memory looks for the typical and connects every event with the network of all existing stories and the mythical patterns governing them, “recollection” attempts to capture the particular and individual in homogenous and abstract time and space. Benjamin ascribes “memory” to oral cultures and “recollection” to cultures dominated by written communication. Ironically, it could thus be argued that storytelling in contemporary Irish theatre with its emphasis on the individual confession reflects the continuity of Irish oral traditions less than the completed transition to a culture dominated by literacy and mass media.

5. Conclusion

Storytelling of some length could only enter the Irish stage with the introduction of epic forms of theatre. If there is in existence a particularly strong Irish disposition for oral narratives, it was dependent on Japanese, European and American models to find full expression in the theatre. Yet it is questionable as to whether the development from an epic to a post-epic narration in Irish theatre was intended or perceived as a radical breakthrough beyond traditional theatre. Although contemporary Irish theatre texts share some interests and forms with those of the loose international artistic movement that Lehmann calls Postdramatic Theatre, post-epic narration is not used to establish an avant-garde, and the popularity of Conor McPherson’s narrative monologues demonstrates that such a form of narration has quite easily achieved a compatibility with a large audience’s habits of reception. This is partly due to a general process of familiarisation with narration in the theatre. The alienating effects of Epic Theatre have certainly weakened somewhat with the years. But post-epic narration is also more easily accessible than Epic Theatre because it does not disrupt or multiply...
the primary fiction of scenic action with a secondary fiction in which the act of narration is located. While narration in Epic Theatre alienates the scenic representation, post-epic forms familiarise us with the act of narration on stage by creating intense relationships between narrator and story on the one hand and between narrator and listeners on the other. Narrative monologues cling to conventions which are known to the spectator from other contexts like fiction, film and everyday situations. Furthermore, the Irish authors of these texts have not stopped writing conventional drama but on the contrary, as in the case of McPherson, have re-integrated the act of narration into the traditional form. Perhaps, the so-called post-epic forms of narration in contemporary Irish theatre text should not be described as an avant-garde movement but as the creation of a new genre.

Works Cited


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