ENTERTEXT

Memory, Reliability and Old Age in Sebastian Barryôs

Memory, Reliability and Old Age in Sebastian Barryôs *The Secret Scripture*: A Reading of the Novel as Fictional Life Writing

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> é I am an old, old woman now, I may be as much as a hundred, though I do not know, and no one knows. I am only a thing left over, a remnant woman, and I do not even look like a human being no more, but a scraggy stretch of skin and bone in a bleak skirt and blouse, and a canvas jacket é [1]

This is how Roseanne McNulty starts what is called her ñTestimony of Herselfò in Sebastian Barryôs novel *The Secret Scripture*, which was published in 2008, nominated for the Man Booker Prize and winner of the 2008 Costa Book of the Year Award. Roseanne has been a patient of Roscommon Regional Mental Hospital for over half a century and in the face of her death, she decides to write the story of her life. Simultaneously, her psychiatrist, Dr Grene, needs to assess his patients in order to find out who will have to move to the new mental hospital (the old one is about to be destroyed) and who will be ódischargedôinto community life. Trying to discover the story behind the institutionalisation of Roseanne, who grew up as a Protestant girl in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s and later became the wife of the Catholic Tom McNulty in Sligo, forms the core around which both Dr Greneôs notes in his ñCommonplace Bookò and ñRoseanneôs Testimony of Herselfò revolve. Barryôs novel thus takes the form of two alternating strands of first-person narratives.

In this essay

of what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson refer to as the "memoir boom"[2] of the 1990s and the early 2000s. This boom encompassed many different subgenres of life writing, a term which Smith and Watson use to refer to "writing that takes a life, one's own or another's, as subject" and which "can be biographical, novelistic, historical or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical."[3] At the beginning of the new millennium Merle Tönnies argued that "the issue of life writing is [now] openly appropriated by the domain of fiction",[4] Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) or Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) are well-known examples of this trend. I shall discuss the features *The Secret Scripture* borrows from different popular forms of life writing and show what narrative strategies are employed to deal with the central themes of Barry's novel: truth, reliability, memory and old age. My analysis will be complemented by references to findings by psychologists and cognitive scientists concerning the relations between autobiographical memory and old age. I shall argue that Barry's novel can be read not only as a by-product of the memoir boom, but as a commentary both on practices of life writing and life writing criticism.

The aged female narrator in Barry's novel starts to write her life story out of an urge to tell her version of her life before she dies. Though she does not want her writing to be found while she is still alive, something she shares with the narrator of Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, she has the desire to leave it to posterity. This situation of telling one's life story in the face of imminent death is not only a narrative device introduced in order to reveal the protagonist-narrator's life through a series of analepses and to create tension by the fact that her time is running out, but draws on a real-life phenomenon: in an article on "Aging and Autobiographical Memory" (1999) John Rybash explains how "older adults tend to reminisce in order to prepare themselves for death"[5] and Kate C. McLean and Jennifer Pals Lilgendahl list "*death preparation*"[6] among the most important functions of reminiscence in a study on memory functions, age and well-being. This idea is taken over in Barry's novel: Roseanne McNulty makes this function of reminiscing explicit in her attempt to write her life, saying at the beginning of her account:

> No one even knows I have a story. Next year, next week, tomorrow, I will no doubt be gone, and it will be a smallsize coffin they will need for me, and a

> to speak at all is a betrayal of something, perhaps a something not even identified, hiding inside the chambers of the body like a scared refugee in a site of war.[14]

A testimony is also associated with "bearing witness in a legal é sense",[15] and this association is emphasised in *The Secret Scripture* by the repeated use of legal discourse to refer to Roseanne's situation. Roseanne does not want Dr Grene to "question" her,[16] she emphasises that "it is no crime to love your father",[17] she speaks of her family as her "persecutors",[18] and points out that "it is a very different matter to know your sentence, and then to hear it spoken by your judge."[19] In the latter example, she does not refer to a real judge, but to her former parents-in-law, who refuse to help her and from whose behaviour it becomes clear that Roseanne is excluded from community life.

Beverley further points out that "[t]he position of the reader of *testimonio* is akin to that of a jury member in the courtroom."[20] This impression is intensified in Barry's novel by the fact that Roseanne repeatedly addresses an unspecified audience directly in her testimony, so that the readers actually feel addressed and are put into the position of a jury that has to decide, on the basis of the pieces of evidence presented, what really happened in Roseanne's past. The idea of readers as jury members is maintained and amplified in the course of the novel: when they are presented with conflicting versions of Roseanne's past they will automatically try to find clues as to which version is the correct one. Also, on the level of the story, Dr Grene takes on the role of addressee and jury – though he is ignorant of Roseanne's testimony at first, he is a probable recipient of her writing after her death and it is, after all, his job to arrive at a *verdict* about Roseanne's mental condition.

One further central feature of testimonies – not only in the context of life writing – is, according to Bella Brodzki, that they are "speech acts with special claims to truth and authenticity"[21] and as Aleida Assmann, who highlights the role of witness of the narrator of a testimony, points out, "[i]t is é the first obligation of the court witness to provide factual information that will help discover the truth and distinguish between the guilty and the not guilty."[22] Roseanne tries to tell the truth

about her admission to the mental hospital and the events that led up to it, reaching back to her childhood in her narrative. When she tries to remember the circumstances of her admission, she says, ñOh, I must remind myself to be clear, and be sure I know what I am saying to you. There must be accuracy and rightness now.ò[23] In her attempt to tell the truth, however, Roseanne emerges as an unreliable narrator. She frequently wonders about the correctness of her memories. She says, ñI admit there are ómemoriesô in my head that are curious even to me. I would not like to have to say this to Dr Grene. é It makes me a little dizzy to contemplate the possibility that everything I remember may not be ï may not be *real*, I suppose.ò[24]

experiences, such as witnessing her father's death, her mother's insanity, being abandoned by her husband after a charge of nymphomania was brought against her, giving birth to a child alone on the seashore before being sent to the mental hospital without knowing anything about the child's whereabouts, and then being sexually abused by an orderly in the mental hospital. Roseanne says about her admission to the mental hospital, "I remember terrible dark things, and loss, and noise, but it is like one of those terrible dark pictures that hang in churches, God knows why, because you cannot see a thing in them," an account which Dr Grene calls "a beautiful description of traumatic memory."[30] However, Dr Grene does not elaborate his notion of what constitutes a traumatic memory, even though this is a contested area among psychologists and psychiatrists. There is no agreement as to whether traumatic events enhance memory or lead to its repression or distortion.[31] The idea of traumatic memory implied in Dr Grene's remark – and expressed in Barry's novel as such – has its basis in theories claiming that certain traumatic events have the ability to impair memory. According to such theories,

> [m]emories of trauma, or at least certain forms of trauma [such as betrayal], are encoded by processes, such as repression and dissociation, that make them difficult to retrieve as coherent, verbal narratives. The result is that traumatic memories are primarily available as isolated, non-verbal, sensory, motor, and emotional fragments.[32]

The traumatic event of having been betrayed by e.g. her husband and her family would thus explain Roseanne's inability to remember certain events of her past correctly.

Since no one in the mental hospital seems to be familiar with Roseanne's story, it stands to reason that she has not had a chance to deal with her traumatic experiences in the course of her long institutionalisation. According to Leigh Gilmore "there is clinical and theoretical agreement that those who can tell their stories benefit from the therapeutic balm of words" and that "[t]rauma needs a witness who will return the story without violence to the speaker through careful listening,"[33] something Roseanne was obviously denied up to the point of reassessment, when Dr Grene tries to find out about her past suffering by "a

series of cautious questions.ó[34] Roseanneôs testimony, in which she finally tries to put into words the experiences of her distant past, can thus also be seen to borrow elements from trauma memoirs, one of the genres of life writing Gilmore sees as central representatives of the memoir boom.[35] Though Roseanne evokes the events of her past consciously, the fact that she writes her entire story in the narrative form of flashbacks can, in the context of trauma narrative, be seen to mirror one symptom of PTSD on the level of discourse.[36]

However, Roseanneôs ability to remember correctly is not only affected by traumatic events in her past, but also by her old age. Though she writes in the last third of the novel that ñ[t]hey say the old at least have their memories,ó[37] it has at this point become clear that she is not exactly in control of her own memories. While in conversations with old people the impression is often created that they remember the remote past better than the immediate one, studies by cognitive scientists have shown ñthat episodic memory is more sensitive to the effects of age than semantic memory especially for the remote pastò[38] and gradually

> and I can't see what age I was, I am peering back with my mind's eye, and all I see is fabulous glitter.[40]

The centrality of the theme of

in an old woman remembering horrors ï that I helplessly pissed my pants.ò[48] These shifts in perspective rather serve to consolidate Roseanneôs present, old self in opposition to her younger self than to represent herself as a continuum. She refers to the latter as ña stranger that hides in me stillò[49] and thus perceives herself a composite of her different selves; her present self, though she does not fully seem to identify with its physical shape, serving as a container for her former, younger selves. By telling her life in the face of her imminent death Roseanne finally makes an attempt to attain ñpersonal continuity and coherenceò,[50] the promotion of which is another function of reminiscing listed by McLean and Lilgendahl. As Christian Roesler argues,

> Identity is the construct which provides the person with a sense of continuity of being over time, which creates a sense of coherence so that the diverp-353(cre0 1 172 Tf1 0 0 1 38 0 1 120.5 490.73(iv)x)-38 Tm[(p)-segergueoso43(s)-3

interested in whether Roseanne's account or that of Fr Gaunt, a priest who tells quite a different story about her life, is true, but thinks that "from both of them can be implied useful truths above and beyond the actual verity of 'facts'. I am beginning to think there is no factual truth."[65] His loss of interest in factual truth becomes evident when at one point, after having read Fr Gaunt's report on Roseanne, he admits that he is "too tired" to fetch it from the other room and "will see how much of it [he] can write down from memory"[66] – a rather peculiar strategy for someone who up to that point in his narrative pretended to be intent on finding out some factual truth and assessing someone scientifically, and especially for someone who is acutely aware of the fallibility of memory. As the readers get to see only the version written from Dr Grene's memory, not only Roseanne's, but also the doctor's reliability is at stake all of a sudden. The theme of unreliability is carried to a further level when Dr Grene starts to question the authority of Fr Gaunt's report (on the basis of which Roseanne was institutionalised): after having been impressed by it first due to its elaborate style, Dr Grene is later "puzzled by [Fr Gaunt's] omniscience" and points out that "[h]ow Fr Gaunt knew all these details is not clear."[67] With this insight, it becomes impossible to doubt Roseanne's story on the basis of Fr Gaunt's report; the question of whose narrative is ultimately reliable or unreliable remains largely unresolved. In any case, the potential unreliability of narrators becomes a central theme in Barry's novel and can be read as another feature of life writing adopted in *The Secret Scripture*, because, according to Francis R. Hart, unreliability in autobiography is "an inescapable condition, not a rhetorical option."[68]

While Roseanne's account might be affected by her traumatic experience and her old age, it also becomes obvious that she prefers writing her life without having to answer any questions about it to speaking about it with her psychiatrist:

> I suppose it is off that I am trying to write out my useless life here, and resisting most of his questions. I suppose he would love to read this, if only to lighten his own task. Well, when I am dead, and if someone thinks to look under the loose board, he will find it. I don't mind him reading it as long as I don't have to be questioned closely, as no doubt he would if it fell into his hands now.[69]

or invented ï her child, and, in Dr Greneôs eyes, frees her from the charge of insanity. Though Dr Grene does not tell Roseanne about his discovery, it serves him as proof that her institutionalisation was effected by her relatives who wanted to have her out of the way conveniently, and when she asks him about his verdict at the end of the novel, he answers: ñBlameless. Wrongly committed.ò[76]

Roseanneôs and Dr Greneôs reflections on transforming their own lives into stories, together with the moment of unreliability, embody some of the preoccupations of postmodern theories of life writing, especially the idea that writing oneôs life is not simply a recording of oneôs life, but a creation of it and that there is no ultimately knowable truth about it. Smith, for example, points out that an ñautobiographer constantly tells áaôstory rather than áthêôstoryò[77] and Tönnies sums up the question of truth in biographical writing: ñThe advent of

with postmodern theories of life writing. The author seems to