

BEATA PIĄTEK
Instytut Filologii Angielskiej
Uniwersytet Jagielloński

Irish History in the Novels of Sebastian Barry

Abstract

Critics of contemporary Irish literature note a surprising omnipresence of historical themes in the novels of a country whose present day is so eventful. Such prominent writers like, Roddy Doyle, Patrick McCabe or Sebastian Barry seem to be immersed in Irish twentieth-century history and the national myth. Barry's theatre plays and novels usually question the official, heroic version of history by focusing on the forgotten and the marginalised: loyalist Catholics, single women, children. The present article analyses two of his novels: *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998) and *The Secret Scripture* (2008), which share some of the characters and are both set in Sligo in the first half of the twentieth century. The present article claims that in the ten years that separates the publication of these novels, Barry's attitude to history visibly changed. Contrary to the opinion of most critics, Barry's approach evolved from the uncompromising revisionism of the earlier novel to considerable scepticism about the possibility of objective history and historical truth in the later work. The article also suggests that tracing this process allows the reader to appreciate the writer's motivation as an attempt to deal with the taboos of the past before embarking on the problems of the present.

Keywords: Irish History, Irish novel, national identity, revisionist history, Sebastian Barry

To announce that the Irish Republic is a modern European state is a truism, but the relationship between the modernity of the state whose vibrant economy was, until recently, the envy of all European Union, and its literature's preoccupation with the past, is at least intriguing. A review of a critical volume on Irish culture published in 2007 contains a characteristic comment: "[the author] wonders why our writers still devote their energies to «slaying the shrivelled dragons of de Valera's Ireland» instead of engaging critically and imaginatively with the realities of the present" (McCrea 2007). Although the reviewer does not mention any writers by name anyone reading contemporary Irish fiction will know that the statement is relevant for the work of such writers as Roddy Doyle, Nuala O'Faolain, Patrick McCabe, Jamie O'Neill or Sebastian Barry. Desmond Taynor writing in *Irish Studies Review* in 2002 identified the main problem of Irish fiction in the twenty-first century to be the historical legacy and the burden of Irishness.

He saw nationality as an obstacle rather than a vital element of personal identity and called for new literature that is free from old stereotypes and sectarian divisions (Taynor 2002: 125–132). Interestingly enough Taynor blames the critics and academics for excessive preoccupation with national identity:

the schoolmen are still busy determining who belongs to the Catholic tradition and who belongs to the Protestant one, who is the Billy and who is the Tim, or who is a Protholic and who a Cathestant, not forgetting what it all says about Irish identity, and what it *means* to be Irish. Indeed, as was well publicised, the editors of *The Field Day Anthology* were so absorbed with the two traditions that they clean forgot there are two genders (Taynor 2002: 129, original emphasis).

The present paper will demonstrate on the example of Sebastian Barry that indeed, Irish writers need to critically interrogate the hidden wounds of the nation's past before they can move on and engage with the present. I will discuss Barry's engagement with history in two of his novels: *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998) and *The Secret Scripture* (2008) to trace the developments in his fiction from a simplified version of historical revisionism to a more ambivalent attitude to Irish history and more complex understanding of the past, in which the questions of gender take central place.

Barry's thematic preoccupations were succinctly characterized by Sean O'Hagan in *The Observer*, when he stated that "Barry writes against the absolute certainties of Irish history" (O'Hagan 2008). He has been exploring the past in a wide variety of literary forms since his poetic debut in 1982. His works include amongst others, a series of six plays "looking for the lost, hidden or seldom mentioned people in one Irish family" (Barry in Woodward 2008), with *The Steward of Christendom* (1995) widely praised and achieving international success. Two of his novels, *Annie Dunne* (2002) and *A Long, Long Way* (2005) have protagonists who featured as minor characters in that most successful play about Thomas Dunne, based on Barry's Catholic great-grandfather, who was also a loyalist and fierce defender of the Empire. The two novels under discussion here also feature characters based on the author's distant relatives whose lives, he discovered, were treated as dark family secrets. Fintan O'Toole, a drama critic and assistant editor of *The Irish Times*, praises Barry for his ability to combine "the experience of family history with a very serious examination of Irish history" which "challenges the classic narrative" and provides "a very useful corrective to monolithic ideals that have existed in Ireland" (O'Toole in Adetunji 2008). Yet, despite Jo Adetunji's claim that Barry is "a greatly admired figure and, unusually in Ireland, [she hasn't] met anyone who doesn't like him" (Adetunji 2008), some critics have pointed out that some of Barry's writing "amounts merely to in-service reading for a fairly standardised brand of revisionism" (Kenny 2005).

I would like to demonstrate in this paper how the writer's approach to history changed in ten years between the publication of *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* in 1998 and *The Secret Scripture* in 2008. It may be useful to begin this analysis by explaining the meaning of historical revisionism in Ireland, which is closely connected with a rejection of nationalist myth-making. As Bradshaw points out "Since the 1960s [...] the stance on nationalism has become more hos-

tile, with the refusal to empathise now turning into a delight in an iconoclastic debunking” (1989). On the one hand revisionist historians claim that they are writing value-free, objective history, that in the past myth has been used to legitimate tyranny and privilege and also that national myth-making sustains sectarian divisions in Ireland (Hutchinson 1996), but on the other hand critics of revisionism argue that “at times, it has displayed some of the less welcome characteristics of the chauvinism it seeks to undermine” (Kennedy 1973 quoted in Boyce). As I shall try to demonstrate, Sebastian Barry’s portrayal of history goes through a process of evolution, and he begins from the position which is rather sarcastically described by Desmond Fennell:

What is the popular image of historical revisionism today? A retelling of Irish history which seeks to show that British rule of Ireland was not, as we have believed a *bad* thing, but a mixture of necessity, good intentions and bungling; and that Irish resistance to it was not as we have believed, a *good* thing, but a mixture of wrong-headed idealism and unnecessary, often cruel violence. The underlying message is that in our relations with Britain on the Irish question the Irish have been very much at fault (Fennell 1994 qtd. in Boyce and O’Day 1996: 1, original emphasis).

In *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, Barry tries to construct a protagonist who will disarm the readers with his innocence and naivety only to present him later as a victim of historical circumstances in which he has played no part. Although Eneas takes no interest in politics, Irish politics will ruin his life and lead to his banishment from his native town of Sligo. The life-as-a-journey plot may be interpreted as allegorical or schematic depending on the attitude of the reader. The correspondence with the fate of Homer’s Aeneas is quite loose for the Irish Eneas is hunted out of his home town and country by local nationalists and his life story consists not so much of a journey in search of a place to set up new home, as of tentative attempts at returning home. Eneas’s suffering is made more poignant by his constant hope that maybe enough time has passed for his old enemies to have forgiven, or at least, forgotten him. His fate is allegorical in another sense, for Barry brings him into the world in the final years of the nineteenth century and makes him live through most of the tragic historical events of the twentieth century. As the opening lines of the novel announce:

In the middle of the lonesome town, at the back of John Street, in the third house from the end, there is a little room. For this small bracket in the long paragraph of the street’s history, it belongs to Eneas McNulty. All about him the century has just begun, a century some of which he will endure, but none of which will belong to him (Barry 1998: 3).

These few lines foreshadow the key elements of the novel which follows: history is told rather than written, the style is more akin to that of a fairy tale than of a historical novel (“in the middle of a lonesome town [...] there is a little room”) and the protagonist is not an actor in the events, but a passive witness at best, and a victim most of the time (“some of which he will endure”). It is quite clear that Barry wants to challenge the nationalist and heroic version of Irish history by focusing on an individual character constructed as an Everyman who finds himself on the wrong side of the barricade only because he wants to be decent. Eneas is presented as too simple to make sense of politics, he has “sheep’s brains” (Barry

1998: 20). He first offends the nationalists represented in the story by his childhood friend, Jonno Lynch, when during the Great War, Eneas joins the Merchant Navy in the hope that in this way he will help France. For the nationalists, working for “the king’s shilling” (Barry 1998: 34) is a betrayal of Ireland for which they decide to ostracize Eneas, which will have a snowball effect: unable to find employment, he feels forced to join the local police force loyal to the crown, the Royal Irish Constabulary. Barry tries to make this decision quite innocent despite the bad reputation of the RIC, “He can’t live a life to please Jonno Lynch, [...] [a]nd a fella must work, must toil in the dry vale of the world” (Barry 1998: 56). He joins the police force just before the Anglo-Irish war breaks out in January 1919, and again willy-nilly, he finds himself on the side of the loyalists. He gets onto the nationalist death list only because he witnessed the murder of his superior officer and is suspected to have given the names of the IRA murderers to the notorious Reprisal Man, who later found and killed them. Jonno Lynch, who by this time has become a Lucifer figure in the story, informs him of the death sentence and offers a chance to atone for his deeds. The IRA will erase his name from the death list if he kills the Reprisal Man. Eneas refuses because as he says, “killing a man is a very particular thing” (Barry 1998: 83). Waiting for the execution, Eneas becomes a complete outcast, he leaves home only at night and is paralysed by fear, he “is a very strange man [...], he will be the curse and the bogeyman of the district” (Barry 1998: 86). He finally leaves Ireland soon after the Anglo-Irish treaty is signed, freedom for Ireland will be a disaster for Eneas. He spends the rest of his life in exile working as a fisherman in England, fighting in Dunkirk, building canals in Nigeria and finally running a hotel for sailors in London. He makes a few attempts at returning home, but even his own family have come to terms with his banishment, and in the end Jonno Lynch traces him in London. Both men die in 1970, when Jonno brings a novice Provisional IRA gunman to execute Eneas in the name of, “Liberty. Love of country. Things you don’t understand Eneas. Things that make great men. Great notions. Powerful classes of feelings. Patriots! Belfast, Derry, Portadown” (Barry 1998: 297).

In *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* Sebastian Barry creates a world seeped in history but clearly at odds with the official, patriotic and nationalistic version of Irish history. He uses the colloquial, poetic style of a folk tale to paint the picture of good guys – simple hard-working men who do not care for politics and out of simple decency happen to be loyal to the British crown and Empire, and bad guys – blood-thirsty nationalists whose despotic rule is far more brutal and ruthless than that of the English. In this world freedom and patriotism are dangerous words; they bring about mayhem and murder. Such handling of history cannot have escaped the attention of Irish critics. As Elizabeth Cullingford points out in an extremely detailed analysis of *The Steward of Christendom* and *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, Barry’s message in those texts “is that the history of Ireland in the twentieth century has been bedeviled by the patriotic idea of «freedom»: decolonization spells disaster” (Cullingford 2004: 35). She goes on to admit that “this position can certainly be argued [...], but both texts would have been more powerful had they been less black-and-white, less driven

by their anti-republican thesis, less concerned to refute a one-sided version of history by offering an equally one-sided and sometimes factually misleading rebuttal” (Cullingford 2004: 36). In her article, Cullingford raises two serious objections to Barry’s version of history: first, that he manipulates and distorts historical facts, second, that his portrayal of Catholic unionists is “preposterously sanitized” (Cullingford 2004: 25). Some of the factual distortions may result from insufficient research, for example, the celebrations of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, which equal banishment from home for Eneas, were most unlikely to have taken place on the beach in Strandhill given that the treaty was signed on December 6th. Other factual mistakes are clearly driven by the writer’s political agenda: while working as a fisherman in 1939, Eneas sees a large ship whose passengers seem to him “like prisoners” (Barry 1998: 131), he finds out in the local paper it was a ship with German Jews who had been refused asylum in Britain, USA and Ireland. “And he thinks of that fella De Valera, now king of all Ireland piously refusing the ship entry...” (Barry 1998: 132). Cullingford has researched the history of the ship Barry is alluding to and as she stresses, “there is no factual evidence that the captain of the St. Louis sought asylum for his human cargo in Dublin” and that “Barry distorts the historical record in order to damn De Valera” (Cullingford 2004: 31). He also extends the period of the activity of Blueshirts i.e., supporters of fascist ideas, in Sligo, which was over by 1936, to the 1940s. Jonno Lynch, who embodies the nationalist evil in the novel is equipped with rather inconsistent political allegiances, as Cullingford points out, a former Blueshirt and supporter of Fine Gael was most unlikely to become an IRA gunman in his old age.

These nuances of Irish history and politics may seem negligible to a non-specialist reader, but the way in which Barry distorts the psychological verisimilitude and historical probability in order to construct Eneas as an innocent Everyman, is striking. Although Eneas lives through two world wars, a civil war in Ireland and the war of independence in Nigeria, Barry insists on presenting him as a character who never commits a violent act. It seems that he is designed as a victim and that to be a victim he must be completely blameless and that through victimhood he gains moral superiority over the nationalists. There is a degree of naivety on the part of the author in his insistence that Eneas never hurts anyone even though he is a policeman during the Anglo-Irish war. Not only Eneas emerges from the descriptions of the horrors of this war as innocent, for Barry gives him the job of transporting corpses to the coroner’s premises, but the notoriously cruel Auxiliary Forces and Black and Tans seem quite blameless too:

They have come back most of them from the other war and what haunts them now is the blood and torn matter of those lost, bewildering days. Many of the Auxiliaries are decorated boys, boys that ran out into no-man’s-land and took positions that only bodiless gods could have, and rescued men from the teeth of slaughter and saw sights worse than the drearest nightmares. And they have come back altered for ever and in a way more marked by atrocity than honoured by medals. They are half nightmare themselves [...] some of them handsome and elegant men, with shining accents, some terrible dark boys from the worst back-alleys of England, but all with the blank light of death and drear unimportance of being alive in their eyes (Barry 1998: 57–58).

The narrator's empathy for the British Auxiliary Forces is evident in the justification for their deeds (whose violence is consistently not mentioned) and even more strikingly in the emotional choice of words. It is highly unusual for any contemporary writer, let alone an Irish writer, to refer to the Black and Tans as "boys". The above extract stands in stark contrast to the paragraph depicting the actions of those that the Black and Tans are imported to fight:

And indeed ferocious events are afoot in the sacred web of fields and rainy towns. It isn't just murders and such or killings, you couldn't call them that. Whenever an RIC man uses a gun and wounds or kills in a skirmish, some man in his uniform is taken and God help him in the dark hedges and isolated farms. Such a man might be gutted with a big knife and his entrails fed to the homely pig in front of him, and the last leaks of life drained out of him then slowly and silently with terrible swipes (Barry 1998: 57).

The above examples demonstrate that Barry's version of Irish history is hardly 'value-free'. And while the readers may accept that this biased vision of the world is, in fact, Eneas's and subjective and that on the basis of his personal experience he assumes that all nationalists and patriots are brutal murderers, the author's attempts at keeping Eneas innocent i.e. untarnished by violence, reach grotesque dimensions when he makes his protagonist spend five months in occupied France as a slave of an elderly vineyard owner. Although he is a sergeant major in the British army, a survivor of Dunkirk, there is not a single instant in the text where he would be described as holding, or firing a gun. Traumatized by the carnage he witnessed on the beach, Eneas walks away from the sea until he is rescued, sheltered and shackled by Jean. It is no mean feat to walk from Dunkirk to the wine-making regions of France, especially that Jean makes red wine, but Eneas accomplishes it twice; after the harvest he walks back to the sea "where he stands weeping on the harbour wall. And the fishermen come out of the dark café and hide this wretched man and take him out that night over the dangerous sea and deposit him softly on the murmuring shore of England" (Barry 1998: 154). Even the protagonist is surprised at the fact that he never encounters any German soldiers and later when he recovers from shell-shock in a mental hospital in Sheffield he reflects on his curious fate in the war: "he begins to feel a certain pride for all he has done as a soldier. What better thing than to spruce a French farm, better than maiming and killing, he hopes" (Barry 1998: 157).

Sebastian Barry is most convincing in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* when he makes a poetic take on historical revisionism i.e., when he presents silence and secrets as a form of oppression and a source of unhappiness. Words unspoken, events and people not mentioned are experienced by Eneas as causes of his misfortunes. His decision to go off to sea at the age of fourteen is prompted by the news of his mother's illegitimacy: "By God he'll go off to war now if there's terrible secrets to be endured [...] Why couldn't his father have told him?" (Barry 1998: 26). When teenage Jonno Lynch becomes a messenger boy to the local bigwig O'Dowd and rumour has it that he has become the "Mercury to all the dark men in the town", Eneas would like to ask Jonno about it but "Jonno has become [...] silent [...]" (Barry 1998: 30). After Eneas is discharged from the RIC "his Mam understands [...] but they don't speak about it. They've taken silence to

themselves like an adopted dog” (Barry 1998: 67). When he returns briefly home in 1943 after a spell in a mental hospital in England, the short visit is punctuated by “silencing looks” of the parents, things his brothers “won’t say” or “can’t tell him” until even the rather slow-witted Eneas “wants suddenly for his family to keep their mysteries to themselves” (Barry 1998: 176). In the last conversation with his mother, when Eneas asks about her “hard beginnings” her first reaction sounds rather like a list of rules they all seem to live by: “Least said, soonest mended. Telling won’t help it. Silence is the job” (Barry 1998: 197). By this time the reader knows that the life experience of the main characters proves that these rules have done them no good. It is possible to read the silence and thwarted relationships in the McNulty family as a metaphor of Irish history with numerous unmentionable topics. This metaphor is much more thought provoking than the rather blatant opposition between good loyalists and bad nationalists.

The novel about the Irish involvement in the Great War, *A Long, Long Way* (2005) marks Barry’s departure from the ideologically biased version of history. There are no evil nationalists in this tragic story of Willie Dunne, the son of Thomas Dunne from *The Stewart of Christendom*. When the son of the chief superintendent of Dublin Metropolitan Police expresses doubts about the executions of the leaders of the Easter Rising, his father disowns him. The Rising is not glorified, but it is not condemned either. Barry successfully portrays the tragedy of young men who volunteered to fight in France in the hope that after the war the British will deliver the promise of Home Rule and who, when visiting home for Easter in 1916, are forced to suppress the Rising. The novel has won acclaim from the critics for the way the author conveys “sheer physical pain and the speechless horror of the trenches” as well as the protagonist’s “complex feeling of homelessness” (Kenny 2005), it has been put in line with Pat Barker’s *Regeneration Trilogy*, Roddy Doyle’s *A Star Called Henry* and Sebastian Faulks’s *Birdsong*. As Alan Taylor writes, “In the annals of Ireland’s march to independence, the role played by men such as Willie Dunne was simply too painful to bear scrutiny, and so they were forgotten” (2005), in this sense Barry continues in *A Long, Long Way* to explore the theme of the forgotten minorities in Irish history.

The Secret Scripture (2008) is similar to *The Whereabouts* in that it also deals with the theme of history destroying individual lives, but it no longer presents the history of Ireland in the first half of the 20th century as black-and-white. Another similarity lies in the fate of the protagonist, who here too suffers from banishment and isolation, but the victim is a woman and the oppressor is a bigoted Catholic priest and her mother-in-law, who also happens to be the mother of Eneas. With the help of Father Gaunt, the family of her husband, Tom McNulty, commit Roseanne to a mental hospital in Sligo. The novel is a dialogue of two first-person narratives: an account of Roseanne’s life that she writes in secret at the age of probably one hundred in the Roscommon Regional Mental Hospital, and a diary of her psychiatrist, Dr Grene, who investigates her past in order to determine whether she would be fit to return to normal life when the hospital is closed down. As Roseanne has spent most of her mature life in the institution her dread of freedom does not bear the political undertones that were so strong in *The Where-*

abouts. Roseanne is a self-conscious narrator and her text is full of reflections on the act of writing, nature of memory and reliability of the written accounts. She frequently questions her own reliability, admits that she may be “not remembering right” (Barry 2008: 228) or that she “took refuge in other impossible histories, in dreams, in fantasies” (Barry 2008: 209). In the course of the novel, Dr Grene quotes from a number of documents he obtains: Father Gaunt’s deposition, archives of Sligo mental hospital and the archives of the RIC in Sligo. Consequently the readers participate in the process of history making as described by Paul Ricoeur in an interview about the value of testimony:

There is this triangular relation in testimony: I testify in front of someone about something, an event that I have witnessed. There is therefore a presumption of credibility for the voice that bears witness. But this credibility itself can always be submitted to criticism. One can say that the witness is a false witness, a liar or an impostor. In this sense, history truly begins only with the confrontation with and between testimonies... (Ricoeur and Antohi 2005: 12).

By confronting Roseanne’s life-writing with other testimonies, Barry allows us to see through her lies and identify the events that have been repressed and replaced by related traumatic memories or fantasies.

In fact, given the unreliability of the authors of various testimonies, what remains intact for the reader is trauma, what Cathy Caruth calls “unclaimed experience” the event so painful that the mind refuses to record it and which in consequence cannot be retrieved (1996). We know from Father Gaunt’s deposition that as a young girl Roseanne witnessed the beating and murder of her father by the IRA, but in her story the event is replaced by the memory of a scientific experiment of a dubious nature. Sexual abuse that she suffered in Sligo mental hospital does not appear in her story, but she remembers attempted rape by the man mentioned in the archives as taking place some twenty years before. We come to realise this only towards the end of the text, and as we never receive a full picture, we have to use our imagination to fill in the blanks.

What Roseanne emphasizes in the beginning is her own suspicion of history, which she calls “a fabulous arrangement of surmises and guesses” (Barry 2008: 56), she also has no illusions about her own significance as she has “no heroic history to offer” (Barry 2008: 56). The more we know about her life though, the more we realise that the facts are to the contrary, although she has been persecuted by Father Gaunt (and not so much for her insistent adherence to her Presbyterian faith, but for her beauty and defiance of the moral norms), her marriage was annulled on the grounds of insanity, she was made an outcast by her husband’s family, her child was taken away from her and she was locked up in a mental hospital, where she was subsequently abused, she strikes the reader at the age of one hundred as a powerful woman. Her distance to herself, her resilience and love of life make her a larger than life character, a mythical figure, an indestructible woman, who is able to offer consolation to her psychiatrist when his wife dies. Dr Grene says about Roseanne that her “life spans everything, she is as much as we can know of our world... She should be a place of pilgrimage and a national icon” (Barry 2008: 193). And if we look at her as such, then even the highly improbable

ending, that many reviewers have sneered at, because it seems to fit a fairy tale better than a historical novel, is not completely out of place.

In this novel the history of Ireland no longer is black and white, it is much less melodramatic than in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*; Roseanne is persecuted by Father Gaunt, a priest corrupted by power and hatred of women and their sexuality, not by the Catholics. Her father is murdered by the nationalists but they are not cold-blooded murderers, they are confused and frightened young men. Later on one of the soldiers falls in love with the girl and will make his son watch over her till the end of his life. The only villains in the story are “the religious” who “are so certain about things” (Barry 2008: 193). The two narrators with whom the readers are invited to identify share a deep suspicion of history and are quite skeptical about the powers of their memory. Roseanne’s reflections on the nature of history are mirrored by those of Dr Grene:

For history as far as I can see is not the arrangement of what happens, in sequence and in truth, but a fabulous arrangement of surmises and guesses held up as a banner against the assault of withering truth (Barry 2008: 56).

(...) I am beginning to wonder strongly what is the nature of history. Is it only memory in decent sentences, and if so, how reliable is it? I would suggest, not very. And that therefore most truth and fact offered by these syntactical means is treacherous and unreliable. And yet I recognize that we live our lives, and even keep our sanity, by the lights of this treachery and this unreliability, just as we build our love of country on these paper worlds of misapprehension and untruth (Barry 2008: 304–305).

This skepticism about the reliability of historical accounts is a new element in the work of Sebastian Barry with an interesting consequence for the moral dilemmas he constructs in the plot. Unlike in *The Whereabouts...* the question that the readers are faced with is not ‘did Roseanne’s father deserve to be punished for being a member of the Royal Irish Constabulary?’, but ‘what was the effect of the violence and cruelty of war and the abuse of power by the Church under DeValera on the children and women?’

Another important point of difference lies in the conciliatory message of *The Secret Scripture*, the novel presents the history of women in Ireland as traumatic, but the main heroine is not a victim, she survives and her love of life remains intact. She is prepared to forgive and when she remembers the violent past, she does not cut herself off from the responsibility: “In the civil war we shot enough of each other to murder the new country in its cradle” (Barry 2008: 218) the “we” is significant. In a similar vein, Dr Grene is prepared to assume responsibility and apologise for what she had suffered as a patient of the psychiatric hospitals in Ireland long before his time. To use the words of Illan Pappé, an Israeli historian working with collective memory of Israelis and Palestinians, while *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* is a text that illustrates “the struggle over control of the memory of victimization,” *The Secret Scripture* moves in the direction of what Pappé would call a “bridging narrative,” one that forces both sides to distance themselves critically from nationalist ideologies (Pappé quoted in Moses 2005: 315).

In his by now classical essay, “The Burden of History,” Hayden White discusses the negative portrayal of history in modern fiction, where in his opinion it

usually appears as “worship of the dead” which “must be transcended if the needs of life are to be served” (White 1966: 118). This certainly is not true about *The Secret Scripture*, whose two narrators derive a degree of comfort from their private engagement with history: Roseanne has an urge to write down her story for some unknown future readers and Dr Greene seems to escape from the grief over his failed marriage and later his wife’s death into the investigation of Roseanne’s past. In this last novel, Barry also seems to engage more with “the needs of life” than in the earlier two texts mentioned here. In *The Secret Scripture* he conveys a very strong sense of moral responsibility that the Ireland of the present bears towards the victims of DeValera’s rule, when Catholic church and its priests condoned such practices as leaving illegitimate babies to die in orphanages and locking inconvenient women up in mental hospitals. It is therefore possible to understand that in order to “engage critically with the present,” writers like Sebastian Barry or Roddy Doyle need to deal with the Joycean “nightmare” of history first.

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