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A modern ‘seanachie’ : oral storytelling structures in Frank O’Connor’s early stories

Fabienne Dabrigeon-Garcier

1 The critical fame surrounding Frank O’Connor’s ground-breaking study of the short story *The Lonely Voice* (1962)[1] has somewhat overshadowed his other achievements as novelist (*The Saint and Mary Kate*, 1932, *Dutch Interior*, 1940), translator of Old and Middle Irish poetry, modern Irish poet and some-time playwright, literary historian (*The Backward Look*, 1967) or short-story writer[2]. O’Connor turned his attention to short fiction in the mid-1920s, probably because of his early exposure to oral storytelling in his native Co. Cork. His grandmother was an Irish-speaking peasant storyteller, and, as a young Republican during the Irish Civil war (1922-1923), he lived with a farmer’s family in an Irish-speaking village outside Macroom, Co. Cork, and came to know the celebrated Tailor of Gougane Barra, whose tales were recorded in Eric Cross’s *The Tailor and Ansty* (1970). As to *The Lonely Voice* itself, it might very well be seen as the late outcome of O’Connor’s life-long involvement in short-story writing, both as practitioner and as reader of Gogol, Turgenev, Chekhov, Leskov, Babel, Kipling, Maupassant, Mansfield, Coppard, Lawrence, Anderson, Hemingway, all of whom come under critical scrutiny in *The Lonely Voice*. More interestingly still, the evolution of the genre, as charted by O’Connor himself, from “primitive” storytelling (33, 45) to elaborate art-form, from public performance to the privacy of the modern short story with its “intense awareness of human loneliness” (19), can also be traced in his second short story collection, *Bones of Contention*[3]. In most stories in this collection, not only does O’Connor’s sense of narrative seem to have been deeply affected by his early familiarity with the Irish storyteller tradition, but he casts himself in the role of the *seanachie* (the Irish for ‘a tradition bearer’)[4] — a modern *seanachie,* aware that writing has transformed traditional oral storytelling structures and that, conversely, the written word has to be recharged with an oral narrative impulse. All the stories in *Bones of Contention* work under that double strain and achieve a variety of transitional modes, which will be examined from three different standpoints in the following article.

2 Among the orality structures this latter-day *seanachie* tries to revive, there is, to begin with, the context of oral performance —the place, time and experience shared by both teller and audience. The popular voice of the West of Ireland's village communities –their language, social codes, belief system— is ostensibly posited as prior to writing, as the live material whose transitoriness writing attempts to commit to memory and permanence. Oral communication is prominent, even though its "aura"[5], its ritual function, the "hic et nunc" of original utterance, are definitively lost. What O'Connor seeks to preserve, or rather to retrieve in writing, is the subject-matter of collective experience: local events —sensational crimes preferably— as well as the highly polarised world of orality which finds its way into structures of ambiguity and duplicity, as the second part will show. A peculiar feature of oral storytelling in those early stories is the inclusion of some set pieces of Irish oral narrative, known as "runs". "Runs" were incomprehensible ritual items, in which the verbal material —rhythm, sounds, syntactic parallels— was much more important than meaning, which was secondary and unclear. "Runs", the third part argues, go through a series of transformations as the stories evolve, within the same collection, from tradition to modernity. Three stories will mainly come under consideration: "The Majesty of the Law", "Peasants", "In the Train", and some brief reference will be made to "Orpheus and His Lute" from the same collection[6].

The context of oral performance

3 Like traditional *seanachie*'s tales, all three stories recount events closely connected to local history. In each of them, a crime has been committed by a member of the community and the plot is all about the community's response to it. In "The Majesty of the Law", a police officer ceremoniously calls upon Dan Bride to deliver a warrant to him for opening the head of a neighbour in the course of a heated argument. In "Peasants", Michael Cronin has stolen the funds of the Carricknabreena Hurling, Football and Temperance Association, and in "In theTrain", Helena Maguire has poisoned her old husband. Whichever moment is retained in the plot, either the crime itself in "Peasants" or its after-effects in "The Majesty of the Law" and "In the Train", the main contest is between customary law and official law. Official law is that of the state (the colonial state represented by the judiciary institutions or the police), supported by the Church in "Peasants". It is perceived by the peasant communities as alien, hostile and inadequate. It is therefore superseded in all three stories by customary law, which conspires to shield criminals from official justice in order to avoid the dishonour cast by the guilt of one upon the entire community. For all that, criminals will not go unpunished: they will be ostracized or banished and sent to America, as customary justice will rule, without reference to any outside authority.

4 Not only are the local events around which the stories centre typical of community life, they are also dramatised, turned into public oral performances, thus illustrating the proximity that O'Connor detects, in *The Lonely Voice*, between drama and storytelling. The extratextual context shared in oral tradition by teller and audience, "the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs"[7], is re-established thanks to the emphasis laid on place and time, custom and body language. Place and time in all three stories jointly define the context of the oral performance. This is done in "The Majesty of the Law" in the conventional description that opens the story, and much less conventionally in "In the Train", where a group of villagers journey by train from Dublin

to Farrenchreesht, their homeplace. As the hours go by, the villagers move from compartment to compartment, so that the setting and the groups of characters change in each of the three sections as they would in the successive scenes of a play; and yet, unity of place (the train), time (the journey) and action (Helena's crime) is altogether preserved, as in classical drama. In each section, talk is foregrounded – talk about the village, the country customs, the neighbours, human relations, and hints at the future that awaits the murderess: though she has been officially cleared of the charges against her thanks to the false evidence given by the villagers at the Dublin Criminal Courts, she will be outlawed once back in Farrenchreesht. The narrative insists on the body language, the facial expressions and vocal inflections of each character, registering dramatically the non-verbal signs of verbal communication:

> " 'They might have stopped to say good evening,' she added sharply, and her face sank into its old expression of boredom and dissatisfaction." (586)
> " 'Oh, Farranchreesht! Farranchreest!' cried the young woman with the haggard face, the ravaged lineaments of which were suddenly transfigured. 'Farranchreesht and the sky over you, I wouldn't change places with the Queen of England this night!'" (596).

5 However, the central element of this public oral performance is indeed the speaking voice [8], the characters' and the narrator's. In the three stories, dialogue predominates by far over narration, even though, structurally, the narrator's voice is the enunciative frame encompassing all other utterances. The prominence granted to dialogue allows the peculiarities of oral speech to develop: the Hiberno-English vernacular, with its specific turns of phrase, idioms and proverbs, the impossible place-names, the value-code and inherited assumptions of the villagers, and, above all, the dramatization of the agonistic potential of oral utterance:

> When Michael John Cronin stole the funds of the Carricknabreena Hurling, Football and Temperance Association, commonly called the Club, everyone said: 'Devil's cure to him!', 'Tis the price of him!' 'Kind father to him!' 'What did I tell you?' and the rest of things people say when an acquaintance has got what is coming to him. ("Peasants", 155.)

6 The simulation of oral peculiarities in writing is all the more successful as the narrator makes his own language echo popular speech, and mediates without any marked discontinuity between dialogue and comment, between the empathetic world of the public performance and the estrangement of the written narrative, irremediably detached from the original context of utterance. The narrator's mediating position is most strikingly balanced between oral transmission and written transcription in the ending of "Peasants", where he (the I-narrator) becomes the receiver of the tale and passes on the moral to be drawn from it to the anonymous (implied) audience of his own narrative:

> He [the priest] has left unpleasant memories behind him. Only for him, people say, Michael John would be in America now. Only for him he would never have married a girl with money, or had it to lend to poor people in the hard times, or ever sucked the blood of Christians. For, as an old man said to me of him: 'A robber he is and was, and a grabber like his grandfather before him, and an enemy of the people like his uncle, the policeman; and though some say he'll dip his hand where he dipped it before, for myself I have no hope unless the mercy of God would send us another Moses or Brian Boru to cast him down and hammer him in the dust.' (163)

7 The narrator retells both what the rumour said publicly and what was said to him privately; he parodies the style of genealogical litany, jocularly mixing biblical and Irish

history, Moses and Brian Boru[9]. O’Connor thus recasts the art of the *seanachie* in a modern mode by transforming oral storytelling structures, by enacting on the page the context of oral speech, by converting the non-verbal signs into verbal ones, which may account for the excess in writing, partly due to the amount of non-verbal matter recaptured in it[10]. But he also brings innuendoes and subtleties into the narrator’s voice to suggest a meaning beyond the storyline, thus developing implicitness and polysemy, so peculiar to modern short story writing.

Agonism, double-speak, duplicity

8 Ong argues that “residually oral cultures strike literates as extraordinarily agonistic in their verbal performance and indeed in their lifestyle. Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle.”[11] In oral cultures a request for information is commonly interpreted interactively as agonistic, and, instead of being really answered, is frequently parried:

> “ ‘Well, now,’ said Kendillon darkly, ‘wasn’t it great impudence in her [Helena] to come back?’ ‘Wasn’t it now?’ answered a woman. ‘She won’t be there long,’ he added. ‘You’ll give her the hunt, I suppose?’ asked Moll Mor politely, too politely. ‘If no one else do I’ll give her the hunt myself.’”(“In the Train”, 596.)

9 The first woman parries the question with an echo-question, though the introducing verb is, inappropriately enough, “answered”; then Moll Mor, with her over-polite, sarcastic query, derides both Kendillon and the custom of “giving the hunt” which he is determined to use against the murderess. In another instance, Moll Mor recounts a short agonistic dialogue she had with the sergeant, in which she returned or eluded all the latter’s questions: “ ‘Have you e’er a drop, Moll?’ says he. ‘Maybe I have, then,’ says I. ‘What is it?’ says he. ‘What do you think?’ says I. ‘For God’s sake,’ says he, ‘baptize it quick and call it whisky.’” (“In the Train”, 600).

10 Double-speak, generally characterized in oral cultures by deliberate ambiguity, obfuscation and elusiveness, is transformed into outright duplicity in the three stories. All the villagers *know* privately what the truth is –that their neighbours are guilty of crimes punishable by law– but, in public, they will *declare* untruths in order to help one of them eschew the law. “Peasants” is built on three successive confrontations of the Club Committee, who try to exonerate Michael Cronin from guilt by any means, with the priest, who wants to turn him over to the police. Each time, a new stratagem is used to divert the course of justice: first a plea to “give Michael Cronin a character” (i.e. restore his respectability to shield the parish from shame), then bribery, then blackmail. Each time, the duplicity of the Committee is laid bare by the priest.

11 In “In the Train”, the peasants gloat over their perjury in court, and Moll Mor is praised for having shown herself “the biggest and brazenest and cleverest liar of the lot” (598). What these instances show is the dramatization of double-speak, its transformation from a mode of interactive exchange into a plot of verbal duplicity and collective perjury. Double-speak is, according to Nancy Scheper-Hughes, a historically anti-colonial pastime in Ireland:

> “Irish double-speak creates intolerable levels of ambiguity, which can provoke schizophrenia in vulnerable individuals. It is suggested that this Irish

> expressiveness was shaped by the nearly eight hundred years of English domination and colonialism. Verbal ambiguity is a common response of a defeated people toward their conquerors – that is, never giving the master a straight answer.”[12]

12 The narrator’s voice itself entertains ambiguity too, in the sense that it privileges no single point of view or discourse. In “Peasants”, neither customary law nor the priest is vindicated. Neither party is spared irony and satire. The priest turns the thief over to the police, but he himself is driven away by the hostility of his parishioners; Michael Cronin serves a short term in prison, but punishment does not produce reform: he becomes a rogue and a parasite like all of the Cronins before him, and a curse to the village. In “In the Train”, the narrator holds back information about Helena’s crime till late into the story, and even then, there are only few and scattered allusions to it, which makes it difficult for the reader to reconstruct the underlying plot. It could be said that the narrator colludes with the villagers in covering up the crime and opts instead for thrusting into the limelight the folk speech and the folk culture, making writing mimick the wiles of orality and abstain from any fixed meaning. Dissonance and tension within the text are not resolved, and no absolute or single interpretation is delivered by the off-stage narrator. “In the Train”, more than any other story, achieves a dialogic concordance of unmerged discourses: feminist revolt vs patriarchal rule, country life vs city life, conservatism vs evolution. More “modern” (in O’Connor’s sense) than any other story too, it ends with the outlawed figure of Helena Maguire and her “lonely voice” inwardly rehearsing and wondering at her gesture of rebellion:

> The flame of life had narrowed in her to a pin-point, and she could only wonder at the force that had caught her, mastered her, and thrown her aside.
> “No more to me,” she repeated dully to her own image in the window, “no more to me than the salt sea!” (“In the Train”) 603.

Runs, formulaic storytelling, and mnemonic patterns

13 An interesting case of an orality-structure adapted to short-story writing by O’Connor is the traditional “run”. Runs in the Irish oral tradition were resting-places for the storyteller. They were semi-obscure, elaborate embellishments meant to impress the listener[13]. They were characterised by a bombastic series of alliterating adjectives, by formulaic or parallel constructions[14], and were recited at greater speed than the narrative proper. They were probably part of the mnemonic patterns and formulas shaped for ready oral occurrence which an oral culture uses to retrieve articulated thought[15].

14 “Orpheus and His Lute” recounts a battle between two rival popular bands in patterned rhythms and with epic bombast quite reminiscent of the runs:

> ‘Now, some to this day maintain that Melancholy Lane were to blame, and some say Irishtown; some say the bandmaster of the Melancholy Lane gave the order “Eyes Right” and some say ‘twas pure curiosity made his buckos turn their instruments on the Irishtown contingent. But, whatever it was, there was a roar, and the next minute the two bands were at one another’s throats, and the new uniforms that Melancholy Lane took such pride in were wiping the mud from the streets so clean you could nearly eat your dinner off it after. ‘Well, as God done it, Butty Bowman happened to have a bit of a heavy stick with him and with one lucky swipe he opened the head of a flute player and grabbed his flute. Then he made a run after the procession, and, falling into step as if nothing had happened, he struck up “Brian Boru’s March” on his own. And whether ‘twas the warlike sound of that or the way they were after being starved for music for a month past till they were more like hungry lions and tigers than men, the Irishtown fellows whipped off their

> belts and laid out all round them, and one by one they were racing after Bowman with cornets, clarinets, piccolos and trombones; and, if they were, their supporters were springing up from every quarter and falling in two deep at each side. And still the band kept running up with bleeding noses and broken heads and faces that were after being painted and decorated with mud.”(“Orpheus and His Lute” 40-41.)

15 This is the closest to the run in the Gaelic tradition that can be found in the collection. It goes on in this style not merely for two paragraphs as here, but for three pages, with very few marks of punctuation, florid imagery, innumerable sound effects, and formulaic turns of phrase[16].

16 Still close, but rather in the vein of a family-saga, is a genealogical piece in “Peasants”, about the Cronins and their poor reputation in the parish. The genealogy ironically boils down to a methodical list of all the black sheep in the family from time immemorial, in the tone of village gossipings, with the exaggerations and the long-winded syntax characteristic of the runs:

> And not only Michael John but the whole Cronin family, seed, breed, and generation, came in for it; there wasn’t one of them for twenty miles round or a hundred years back but his deeds and sayings were remembered and examined by the light of this fresh scandal. Michael John’s father (the heavens be his bed!) was a drunkard who beat his wife, and his father before him a land-grabber. Then there was an uncle or grand-uncle who had been a policeman and taken a hand in the bloody work at Mitchelstown long ago, and an unmarried sister of the same whose good name it would by all accounts have needed a regiment of husbands to restore. It was a grand shaking-up the Cronins got altogether, and anyone who had a grudge in for them, even if it was no more than a thirty-third cousin, had rare sport, dropping a friendly word about it and saying how sorry he was for the poor mother till he had the blood lighting in the Cronin eyes.(“Peasants”, 155.)

17 In the last instance, taken from “In the Train”, O’Connor moves away from the oral tradition, though the form of the run is preserved in the sound echoes and modulations (“gnarled, wild”, “black sombreros”), as well as in the syntactic patterns: in each of the following four sentences, sentence-order is subverted to theatrically foreground movement (“Into the lamplight stepped a group”) or picturesqueness (“Gnarled, wild, ... they swept in”):

> Into the lamplight stepped a group of peasants. Not such as one sees in the environs of a capital, but in the mountains and along the coasts. Gnarled, wild, with turbulent faces, their ill-cut clothes full of character, the women in pale brown shawls, the men wearing black sombreros and carrying big sticks, they swept in, ill-at-ease, laughing and shouting defiantly. And, so much part of their natural environment were they, that for a moment they seemed to create about themselves rocks and bushes, tarns, turf ricks and sea. (“In the Train”, 587.)

18 With its abundance of visual images and its mock-heroic tone[17], the scene suddenly brings to life an odd set of characters with their peculiarities of dress and manner; and along with them, their Western environment rushes into the picture, so strong is the organic continuity between the peasants and their natural habitat. The result is a poetic vignette [18], on the borderline between drama (action) and poetry (diction), between the traditional run and the modernist image, “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”[19].

19 All of the stories in *Bones of Contention* are to some degree steeped in orality. From its title onwards, the collection spells out the agonistic impulse in oral culture as well as the antagonisms in contemporary Ireland at large between popular tradition and official institutions, between authority structures and the individual. At one end of a wide

spectrum of transitional modes, some stories, such as "Orpheus and His Lute", are closest to the public, ancient, art of oral storytelling, to its taste for verbal excess and dramatic invention, to its context and style of delivery (the "runs"); at the other end others, like "In the Train", herald in the more private and elliptical art of the modern short story, "the silence of those infinite spaces" within the individual consciousness[20]. By cleverly poising his narrators as mediators between oral speech and written narrative, and by paring down orality structures in order to fit them into the economy of the short story, O'Connor manages to redeem in writing the waning away of a cultural icon, the old Irish tradition of oral storytelling. Ultimately, orality becomes in his early stories a strategic device to recuperate the indigenous voices of those "submerged population groups" which, as he will argue some decades later in *The Lonely Voice*, have become the hallmark of the modern short story[21].

NOTES

1. All subsequent references will be to this edition: Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (London, Melbourne, Toronto: Macmillan, 1965).

2. There are 17 collections and anthologies of short stories by O'Connor (1903-1966), published between 1931 and 1969. See Maurice Sheehy, ed. *Michael/Frank: Studies on Frank O'Connor with a Bibliography of his Writing* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1969).

3. Frank O'Connor, *Bones of Contention* (London: Macmillan, 1936).

4. "*Seanchai* is applied as a rule to a person, man or woman, who makes a specialty of local tales, family-sagas, or genealogies, socio-historical tradition, and the like, and can recount many tales of a short realistic type about fairies, ghosts and other supernatural beings." James H. Delargy, *The Gaelic Story-Teller*, reprinted from the Proceedings of the British Academy, XXXI (London, 1945) 6.

5. Walter Benjamin, "L'œuvre d'art à l'ère de sa reproductibilité technique", *Essais 2: 1935-1940* (Paris : Denoël/ Gonthier, 1983) 143-147. See also " Le Narrateur " (translated into English as " The Storyteller ") in the same collection.

6. "The Majesty of the Law", *My Oedipus Complex and Other Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), first published in *The Fortnightly Review* (1935); "Peasants", *The Stories of Frank O'Connor* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970), first published in *An Long* (1922); "In the Train", *The Stories of Frank O'Connor* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970), first published in *Lovat Dickson's Magazine* (1935); "Orpheus and His Lute", *Bones of Contention* (London: Macmillan, 1936), first published in *Esquire* (1936) and not reprinted in later collections. All page references will be to the 1970 Hamish Hamilton edition, except for "In the Train", whose page references will be to the first version published in *Lovat Dickson's Magazine*, June 1935, p. 586-603.

7. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London; New York: Methuen, 1982) 47.

8. To Frank O'Connor, in *The Lonely Voice* and elsewhere in his criticism, the short story should ring with "the tone of a man's voice speaking" (*Lonely Voice*, 29).

9. Brian Boru was a High King of Ireland in the eleventh century, who put an end to Viking domination.

10. Speaking about Leskov in *The Lonely Voice*, O’Connor mentions “the popular taste for excess” and for the accumulation of “marvels” (29).

11. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 43-44.

12. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics. Mental Illness in Rural Ireland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) 82.

13. Delargy mentions the “ coru catha ” (“ preparing for battle ”) and the “ culaidh ghaisge ” (“ battle-dress ”) in heroic tales, which described the hero’s preparations and accoutrement prior to battle in considerable detail. *The Gaelic Story-Teller* 34.

14. J. M. Synge was fascinated by the formulaic run with which an old storyteller from the Aran Islands ended a tale: “They found the path and I found the puddle. They were drowned and I was found. If it’s all one to me to-night, it wasn’t all one to them the next night. Yet, if it wasn’t itself, not a thing did they lose but an old black tooth.” To Synge, it was nonsense, “gibberish”. John Millington Synge, *Prose*, Alan Price, ed., *Collected Works,* vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) 120.

15. “In an oral culture, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns. (...) Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero’s helper), in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall.” Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 33-34.

16. “*and if they were*, their supporters...”, in the last but one sentence, echoes Synge’s example in note 14 above.

17. See *The Lonely Voice* about “the old rhetorical device of the mock-heroic” in Chekhov’s “Death of a Civil Servant”, p. 15.

18. For a standard definition of “vignette”, see Martin Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Harlow: Longman Group, 1992): “the word applies to descriptive passages in prose works which resemble little pictures.” (p. 301).

19. Ezra Pound, “ A Retrospect ”, in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound,* T.S. Eliot, ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1954) 7.

20. O’Connor repeatedly refers in *The Lonely Voice* to Pascal’s “the eternal silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me” to express the art of ellipsis, of suggestion and intensity that is constitutional of the short story.

21. Frank O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice* 18, 20, 39, 41, 42, 43.

ABSTRACTS

Plus connu comme auteur de The Lonely Voice, son étude de la nouvelle qui fit date dans les années 60, Frank O’Connor débuta comme nouvelliste fortement influencé par la tradition du conte oral, encore très vivace dans les années 20-30 dans l’ouest de l’Irlande dont il est originaire. Son deuxième recueil de nouvelles, Bones of Contention (1936), s’intéresse aux motifs de conflit et de discorde dans l’Irlande d’après l’indépendance, et les observe du point de vue des gens du peuple – les communautés irlandophones des comtés de l’ouest. Pour faire entendre sur la scène publique cette voix populaire (ses principes éthiques, ses codes sociaux, son langage, sa culture), il attribue à son narrateur la fonction du conteur traditionnel, le seanachie. Il fait revivre dans l’écriture les relations d’empathie entre conteur et auditeurs, il postule la priorité de l’oralité sur l’écriture, et il transforme certains traits spécifiques de l’expression orale comme le “double-speak”, ou des structures discursives telles que les “runs”, fragments digressifs, allitératifs et partiellement incompréhensibles, propres à la récitation. Cet article se propose d’examiner les transformations discursives qui s’opèrent de l’oral à l’écrit, du “double-speak” en polyglossie ou dialogisme, des “runs” en blocs narratifs incongrus, en hypotyposes ou en vignettes poétiques. Il interroge également la position de médiateur entre deux cultures, orale et écrite, irlandaise et anglaise, qu’adopte O’Connor.

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