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Conflicting Contexts: Traditional Storytelling Performances in Irish Short Stories

Georges-Denis Zimmermann

I

A unit may be part of a system, which constitutes its immediate context, and the unit itself may be a system within which smaller units are organized. We can, therefore, speak of contextuality within a text and observe the dynamics of different forces there. The whole text exists in an external context with several levels of inclusion, and there are tensions in these surroundings as well. All this is interconnected, in a game of contexts which can be very intricate.

Contextual studies are often limited to one of those connections, but it might be interesting to try and see how several outer elements in conflict are dealt with in certain texts — not only referred to but enacted in the conjunction of formal devices. I propose to sketch out such a nexus in one category of texts: Irish short stories where narrative procedures corresponding to different cultural systems are juxtaposed. The focus will be the situation in which a written and sometimes fairly sophisticated narrative shows a traditional storyteller performing orally, his technique contrasting more or less with that of the rest of the short story and his relationship with his audience being unlike that between writer and readers. In other words, this paper deals with concise fictional literary representations, in one country, of culture contact and of the reactions of admiration, amazement or laughter that go with it.

In Ireland the British settlement, then the influence of international novelties, have brought drastic changes, resulting in some acculturation

or perhaps deculturation. But it is a well-known fact that there has also been a strong resistance: a deep-rooted attachment to an idealized Irish cultural heritage, one aspect of which would be a folklore that is supposed to preserve the identity of a nation. Traditional storytelling is one of the distinguishing activities that have been celebrated.

Collections of Irish short stories are regularly introduced by some statement concerning a "special gift" of the Irish for the genre; and the explanation has often been something like this: "the Irish custom of oral storytelling seems . . . closely related to the growth of the Irish literary short story"; the short story would have "continued to flourish because it is firmly rooted in a land where a high premium has traditionally been placed on the spoken word, especially in the form of the story or tale."¹ One only has to compare the average short story with the experience of some genuine act of traditional storytelling to realize that there is no such simple continuity. The theory might be substantiated, however, if one emphasizes the basic differences and fruitful tensions between oral traditions and sophisticated written literature.

It is important to understand the true nature of traditional storytelling. From the 1960's there has been a shift in folklore scholarship from the study of tales as texts to the study of the folkloric event as a performance, with interaction between audience and performer as an integral part of the occurrence. From this point of view the telling of the story is more important than the tale itself, which exists only in the telling. It is an aesthetic transaction in a small and often homogeneous group where people are face to face.

In the performance-centred approach,² attention is paid to two kinds of outer contexts. There is the situational context, or context of utterance — the mode of insertion into general conversation, at a certain place and time, with a group of people positioned in certain ways and generating a

¹ Vivian Mercier, introduction to *Great Irish Short Stories* (New York: Dell 1944) 10; Ben Forkner, introduction to *Modern Irish Short Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980) 22.

² See Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman, eds., *Towards New Perspectives in Folklore* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972); Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Rowley: Newbury House, 1975); Dan Ben-Amos and Ken S. Goldstein, eds., *Folklore: Performance and Communication* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975); William R. Bascom, ed., *Frontiers of Folklore* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977); Elizabeth C. Fine, *The Folklore Text* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

certain dynamic, the response to the central performer being both verbal and non-verbal. This situational context is established, and can be modified in the course of performance, by the negotiated actions of the participants. There is also the cultural context in which the event is grounded, the whole network of conventions and institutions bearing on the utterance context; in other words, a shared set of traditions, so that the main performer is working with an audience which has the same competence that he has, if not the same skill. The storyteller must respect the code, and is thus under the immediate control of the audience. The cultural context influences the structure of the particular discourse and the ritual of its performance.

Within this framework (which we tend to associate with ancient rural life, but it may also regulate the subculture of certain urban groups) there is a considerable variety of possible narrative subjects. The traditional event of storytelling does not have to centre on the telling of an archetypal story of marvels (*Märchen*); such stories may in fact be a small proportion of the repertoire. What is actually told includes accounts of supposedly true experiences (memorats), local legends, tales of lying and jokes. The artefact does not have to be an old story, provided the theme, the organizing devices, the language and the ritual of performance are perceived as traditional. Even the memorats become fiction in the full sense of the word by being enlarged and shaped according to traditional narrative modes and according to what the audience is sensed to expect. Let us add that there is more than one way of performing in a single traditional community: there are performances which involve more memorization, or more improvisation; there can be regular rhythmic patterns or not; there may be gestures and excitement, or forced impassiveness — on the part of the storyteller and/or his audience. And there are good traditional storytellers who are listened to reverently, and bunglers who are politely tolerated failing better artists when a performance is needed (the audience may give them a prompt when they lose the thread of the story). But there is always a performance, in a set of contexts, with a particular ritual and a certain code for oral storytelling, and the fact that the audience is directly involved in the event. Whether those people are unable to read and write is not as fundamental a criterion as used to be thought: human beings can be amphibious in this respect, breathing sometimes in oral traditional culture and sometimes in the world of writing or of the mass media.

Of course there are continuities between oral and written communication; there may be universals of narrative art whatever the medium; in a written text an individualized narrator may be supposed to be delivering the narrative orally; the reader also shares or learns to share a certain code with the author, and he may be said to participate in the narrative communication by actualizing its potentialities. Nevertheless, basic differences remain: traditional storytelling involves a special conviviality among people who respect a certain heritage, and who have acquired their competence through the slow oral imitative process under the control of the whole group. And whereas in literature it is admitted, perhaps hoped, that the horizon of expectation will somehow be disrupted, in traditional arts this is not likely to be tolerated.

II

There are various ways of using folklore in literature. The simplest, perhaps, consists in adaptation or pastiche: just giving a dressed up version of some folktale, or trying to imitate the genre itself in producing a new tale. As far as form is concerned, this means deleting traditional devices that readers would not appreciate and stylizing others that create interesting effects in writing. One finds examples of that in Yeats's *Secret Rose*, when he gives his versions of some authentic folk legends;³ but he adapts the material to his own melancholy at the time, to his taste for refined symbols and to his dream of the *poète maudit* in touch with the beyond. Anyway, the more such narratives look like folktales, the less we should call them short stories if we admit that, within the spectrum of short fiction, short stories are characterized by their being set in recognizable contemporary reality and by their tendency to stress one inner experience of some individual, whereas folktales would rather manipulate a limited number of set roles in some extraordinary yet meaningful fixed sequences of situations and gestures.

Another literary method of using folktales consists in including in the written story, at a certain stage, some elements like typical clusters of motifs or a marked phraseology known to be associated with folktales.

³ See for instance his version of "The Twisting of the Rope"; several transcriptions or written adaptations had been published since the mid-19th century, and the story-type is still in oral tradition.

Such a recognizable folk touch embedded in a modern narrative may be a way of criticizing the pretence to realism, or of revealing some aspect of a character's mind. In Liam O'Flaherty's "The Mermaid"⁴ for instance, the greater part of the text has the "realistic" restraint of a short story, but on the last page (announced by the title) we enter the mind of the protagonist who has become insane after his wife's death. He thinks he is living a variant of the combination of International Motifs B.81.1 (mermaid marries man), C.31 (man loses supernatural wife) and H.1385 (man starts a quest to recover what he has lost) — a familiar legend pattern in the west of Ireland.

But what happens when the traditional narrative performance itself is represented in the written text? The inclusion in a fiction of acts of oral storytelling is almost as old as literature as we know it. We find examples in the *Odyssey*; but the bard who sings at the court of King Alcinous, and Odysseus himself when he becomes the teller of the most incredible episodes, sing and tell in the code of the same culture as the outer narrator and his first audience (though with a distance in time). Things change when writers acknowledge the presence in another cultural or subcultural circle of art forms which, though different from theirs, are nevertheless effectual and not just pleasantly exotic. This could have started with Herodotus. As a professional storyteller perhaps, as well as writer (of texts meant to be read aloud), and as a traveller interested in differences, he was prepared to include the traditional tales of other cultures in his own *Historiē*. But by offering his own contribution as factual he was announcing the treatment of oral storytelling in travellers' sketches rather than in fiction.⁵ No doubt the twenty-two centuries after Herodotus would provide examples of crosscultural meetings of storytellers. Let us just note that by the 18th century, in Western Europe, folktales were held in some reverence precisely because they were different and told in a striking manner by remarkable persons; hence, for example, the vogue of adaptations of the *Arabian Nights*. Then the age of

⁴ First published in *John O'London Weekly* (1929); it can be found in O'Flaherty's *The Pedlar's Revenge* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1976).

⁵ Synge's *The Aran Islands* (1907) is the best Irish example, with ten accounts of traditional-storytelling acts, and the twofold surprise at finding a different art form and universal tale-types: "It gave me a strange feeling of wonder to hear this illiterate native of a wet rock in the Atlantic telling a story so full of European associations." J.M. Synge, *Collected Works*, vol.2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1966) 65.

nationalism conferred a new respectability on traditions, because to build up a sense of national identity which would justify national unity and independence it seemed necessary to insist on a distinct cultural heritage.

Here again, Ireland is a case in point. Publishing the texts of Irish folktales started in the 1820's (as Daniel O'Connell's campaign for Catholic Emancipation was going on), and writers soon started evoking acts of traditional storytelling in narrative fiction.⁶ The age of the short story (from the last years of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th) was crucial in the process of social and political change, of acculturation and efforts to avoid it, with a high value placed on what was in danger of being lost. At the same time, on the part of the better writers there was a hope of doing something that would be new yet still distinctively Irish. Around 1900, traditional storytelling could still seem fairly strong in many parts of Ireland. From the 1920's the collecting of folklore officially became a sacred national duty, and old storytellers (in Irish, not in English) were paragons of Irishness.⁷ But before 1950 it was obvious that this tradition was doomed, and the only audience left was finally the collector's recording machine. Written literature reflected this evolution, especially the short story, which during the period in question was a major narrative mode in Ireland. The short story provides a good illustration also because the economy of the form puts a limit on the general tendency to use the inserted tale as a not very significant technical convention, and brevity may emphasize the contrast between different sorts of performances.

In the narrative representation of acts of traditional storytelling, when the performance is at least as important as what is told, there is a choice of different arrangements, which may be classified according to the roles played by the main (literary) narrator and the (traditional) subnarrator:

⁶ Early examples may be found in John and Michael Banim, *The Tales of the O'Hara Family* (1825), Gerald Griffin, *Tales of the Munster Festivals* (1827) and William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1830). Carleton differed from the others in that he was an insider writing for outsiders: the son of a traditional storyteller and of a traditional singer, he was addressing Anglo-Irish and English readers.

⁷ Particularly the Blasket Island storytellers, whose art was revealed in book form and in translation from 1929 onwards: Tomás O'Crohan, *The Islandman* (tr.1929), Maurice O'Sullivan, *Twenty Years A-Growing* (tr.1933), Peig Sayers, *An Old Woman's Reflections* (tr.1962) and *Peig* (tr.1974).

A.1. *The main narrator does not play a role in the story.* A character, whose actions are the object of a neutral narration, engages in a traditional narrative act, and the story he tells (with his way of telling it) is embedded in the outer action. Which of the two stories takes more space and what are the links or points of rupture — this may vary. The intercalated tale may contain a suggestion of how the frame text should be read (or vice-versa) by emphasizing a theme; the subnarrator's contribution may function as a mirror-image or *mise en abyme* of the overall story.

A.2. *The main narrator is present in the story as a listener.* He is the witness of a performance rather than an actor. Most often the only developed story is the one told by the subnarrator. (Similarly in grammar a subordinate element or embedded sentence may be longer and richer in information than the main clause.)

A.3. *The main narrator is a participant in the story.* One event, possibly the main event, is the traditional narrative performance, to which the main narrator reacts and which has some decisive effect on the development of the action he is reporting.

There may be intermediary degrees and combinations of these types. In the three types there is some cultural contrast between, on the one hand, the main narrator and the audience he is addressing, and on the other hand, the subnarrator: they belong to different cultural or subcultural circles.

The place occupied by the main narrator is only one element. A narrative is always directed to some narratee, who may be personified in the story or not. The stories I am examining are often characterized by the multiplication of distinct narratees. The most obvious patterns for the arrangement of recipients are:

B.1. *The main narrator watches the traditional storyteller addressing his natural audience.* The storyteller in the middle of his community (Group Narratee 1) is heard by an outsider (Narratee 2); the second narratee is also a narrator who is addressing the reader (Mass Narratee 3), the distance between N.1 and N.2 being greater than between N.2 and N.3. If we consider separately the related series of fictional events (X) and the act of narrative utterance (Y) — though they are two aspects of one

process — we note that the strongest links or contrasts may develop between frame story (X.1) and enframed story (X.2) or between the narrative modes (Y.1 and Y.2) with possible mixed forms (X.1 and Y.2 . . .). Within the overall text, there are thus inner contextual relationships corresponding to a double outer cultural context with cultures in contact, and the literary game of contexts develops between outer and inner elements.

B.2. *The traditional storyteller addresses the main narrator, in the absence of his traditional audience.* This, however, can hardly be considered the account of a traditional performance.

III

We need a few examples to test those rudiments of a model. The first group of texts I shall apply them to dates from the period 1899-1907.

James Joyce's "The Dead" appears to be a very special treatment of Type A.1 (with a touch of A.3), and it subtly plays with patterns of speaker-addressee relations and opposed or overlapping cultural contexts. The main narrator has tried to refine himself out of existence (while coping with some personal problems), and there is a shift in occasional roles of inner subnarrators and narratees. After the middle of the story, Gabriel, the acculturated protagonist and would-be cosmopolitan writer, becomes for a short while an urban traditional storyteller when he stoops to Dublin subculture with the anecdote of Johnny the horse walking round King Billy's statue (an act of storytelling Gabriel is shown to perform skilfully). This embedded tale functions as a *mise en abyme* of the whole text, and it is one of the ways of expressing the predicament of acculturation since the horse is stupidly circling around a dead imported symbol (while the occasional storyteller himself is "[pacing] in a circle round the hall in his goloshes amid the laughter of the others"). Rural and supposedly ancient tradition appears only indirectly, with the ballad (a short narrative form too) of "The Lass of Aughrim," the singing of which later turns out to have been a decisive fact in the story. Gabriel is now one of the narratees, and like the reader not the one who immediately grasps the message (of which Gabriel, like us, gets only a fragment). We have only a faint echo of the tradition here, since Bartell d'Arcy, the singer as subnarrator, does not perform in

traditional fashion and would not be in the right setting for that: it has been clearly established earlier that people in the Morkan house are trained in other singing modes, and we hear a piano while Irish traditional singing is always unaccompanied. The man who used to sing the ballad traditionally and who (like Gabriel in his telling of the anecdote) acted physically in the story he was telling (Michael Furey) is missing – but not forgotten.

Joyce knew that this ballad was still alive in oral tradition in the west of Ireland when he was writing the story – indeed, it still is today. Yet it seems essential to realize that this is not the dying Gaelic tradition Miss Ivors will worship on the Aran Isles: the ballad – and this kind of balladry in general – arrived in the west of Ireland in the 17th century, from the north-east like King Billy's army which defeated the Irish at Aughrim. This shows that there are different ways of being a "West Briton," and that acculturation can also lead to a new firmly rooted tradition. Well, surely Joyce's short story cannot be reduced to just that; but the grid I have sketched out offers this reading of it.

Type A.2-B.2 can be illustrated with a simpler, more conventional example: George Moore's "The Curse of Julia Cahill."⁸ There is a (sub)cultural and class distance between the two narrators. The personified main one, addressed by the other as "Sir" or "Your Honour," is a gentleman travelling through Ireland and convinced that "religion is hunting life to death" there: he is not clearly distinguishable from George Moore himself. The subnarrator, a local jarvey (or jaunting-car driver), tells the story of a beautiful free girl who "had been with the fairies" and who laid an effective curse on the village when the priest banished her. Styles are set distinctly apart: the subnarrator speaks a literary stylization of Irish peasant dialect, while the main narrator writes Standard English; the subnarrator believes in the girl's magic and the main narrator is skeptical (he sees only a confirmation of his anticlericalism). Thus we have the meeting of men who belong to separate worlds and interpret differently the same sequence of events; but if Moore makes use of contrasting varieties of English and irreconcilable points of view he does not make his narrators organize their story in noticeably divergent ways, and the conversation is not the equivalent of a traditional performance.

⁸ First published as "The Golden Apples" in *The English Illustrated Magazine* (1902), then, with several revisions, in *The Untilled Field*. It can be found in Mercier's anthology (see note 1).

Type A.3-B.1 is represented by Somerville and Ross's amazingly intricate "Lisheen Races, Second Hand."⁹ The two ladies who wrote it have often been held in bad repute by Irish nationalists: belonging to the Protestant ascendancy they are seen to be accomplices in the colonial situation and to have shamelessly staged stereotyped Irish peasants for the amusement of the English. But behind their slapstick comedy there could be incisive renderings of contacts with an already partly acculturated yet still resilient traditional society. In this particular story the main narrator (Major Yeates), who plays a minor role in the action, was born in Ireland but spent the greater part of his life abroad; he can still be surprised by some aspects of Irishness. Another character is an Anglo-Irish landlord who knows the Catholic peasants quite well: he is culturally amphibious. The real authors stood between these two types of Anglo-Irishness. The central character and victim, Leigh Kelway, is an outsider, the Briton who comes to Ireland for the first time and cannot understand what is happening there. There are Irish peasants too, and this group includes a fellow nicknamed Slipper (the real authors were hidden behind a pseudonym too), who tells a story in the Irish way. In brief, we have an encounter between the most English and the most Irish, and the defeat of the former, watched by three types of cultural half-breed.

The interesting point is that storytelling is the ground on which they confront each other. Kelway, the Briton, has come with the intention of collecting material for a novel he intends to write on the Irish question. The Anglo-Irish know that he cannot understand the subject he proposes to treat, but they try to make him experience something of the Irish difference by taking him to some local races. Through a series of farcical mishaps they are prevented from watching the event but they hear about it, "second-hand," in a *shebeen* where subnarrator Slipper is addressing several audiences at the same time: the local participating traditional audience (N.1), the Anglo-Irish who know more or less how stories are told in Ireland and how the truth can be treated in such circumstances (N.2), and the flabbergasted Briton (N.3), while the readers constitute a mixed, absent audience (N.4) addressed by a member of N.2.

⁹ In *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1899). It can be found in Benedict Kiely, ed., *The Penguin Book of Irish Short Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

The situational context, the treatment of the inner story and the progress of the performance together with the reactions of the various persons or groups present, all stress the clash of cultures. There is an effort on the part of the authors to deal with both the form and the function of traditional storytelling. As concerns form, they foreground the special technique to convey dialogue in an oral narrative; when the storyteller does not try (and he seldom does) to vary his intonation and to imitate the different voices, he uses a kind of oral quotation marks, the constantly repeated tag phrases "he said" or "says I," which are accepted as perfectly natural by the Irish traditional audience but become odd in writing, or when heard by an audience unused to the code.

Slipper, while carefully watching the varied responses of his audiences, transmutes what happened at the races into a kind of epic, ending with the death of his protagonist — after which the supposedly dead man arrives alive and kicking (a constant motif in Irish folk narratives). Slipper's story is exciting, and (luckier than Synge's playboy some nine years later) when he is exposed as a liar the traditional audience and the Anglo-Irish half-initiates do not turn against him. It is rather his triumph, because if lies are crimes in everyday transactions they are welcome in a discourse marked out with stylistic signals. A true story, in traditional Ireland, is a story truly good to hear, and it should belie drab everyday life (whereas modern short stories often stress the fact that the world is a very dull place). The novel Kelway would have written about Ireland (if he had not been disgusted with the country and its inhabitants) would of course have been inaccurate too, but boring.

Those three examples do not invalidate the principles established in the preceding section of this paper, but we may note that the interesting stories are those which combine different types. They also confirm that at the beginning of this century the quasi-mythological figure of the Irish traditional storyteller was a well-established literary subject. Now let us see how it fared in the next fifty years or so. Briefly, we can say that, whereas the idealized portrait endured in celebrations of Irish specificity, short-story writers pointed to the degradation of the real character and the waning of his function.

The most interesting short story written during the Irish revolutionary period, by a Sinn Féiner, is Seumas O'Kelly's "The Weaver's Grave."¹⁰ It

¹⁰ First published in *The Golden Barque and The Weaver's Grave* (1919). It can be found in Forkner's anthology, see note 1.

symbolically confronts the younger generation (the Ireland of the future) and the old one which they have come to bury (the Irish past, with its slowly woven traditions). The dead man, who had tried in vain "to keep up the illusion of a permanent youth," was a kind of *seanchaí* in the strict sense: a person who made a specialty of local lore. At the end, a young couple jump happily over his grave — but the story of their liberation should become a tale worth telling. The oldest bearer of tradition still alive, bedridden and systematically referred to as the "mummy," the "skeleton," the "ghost," is still capable of miracles of energy ("hoisting himself up from the dead") when he sees an opportunity to take up his vatic role again, but his discourse has become very difficult to understand.

In the post-revolutionary period, from the twenties to the forties, the traditional storyteller in Irish short stories, like those in actual life,¹¹ was gradually marginalized, supplanted by the radio and deprived of an audience, as Irish society was moving farther away from traditional culture in spite of official retrogressive ideologies. The very development and success of the new narrative form, the so-called modern Irish short story which could be read on the radio, seemed to confirm the inevitable evolution, though writers could have mixed feelings about the ousting of such forebears.

In the 1940's Sean O'Faolain treated the subject of contact or severed ties with vanishing oral arts in two short stories. In the significantly entitled "The End of the Record," a folk collector with his machines comes to a poorhouse in quest of "any story at all only it has to be an old story and a good story." But most of the inmates have forgotten what they used to know. There is, however, the widow of a famous storyteller; and the microphone approaches her bed. She starts narrating, but faints or dies, and the end of the record is just the cry of some lonely bird outside. In another story, "The Silence of the Valley," modern Irish people are holidaying in some remote Gaelic area, where the last storyteller has just died. They watch his wake as a curiosity, and the following day the last

¹¹ As Peig Sayers, the most respected of the Blasket verbal artists, said: "That was the chief pastime, then, story-telling and talking about old times. But that's not the way now. They no longer care for stories, and the stories would have died out altogether, for young people weren't ready to pick them up. But now, thank God, there's a gadget for taking them down, if there were any storytellers left, but there aren't" (quoted in W.R. Rodger's introduction to *An Old Woman's Reflections* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p.IX). Peig Sayers died in 1958.

sound is the noise of the coffin going down into the grave; after which the valley seems to be definitely voiceless – though a writer can still try to convey its beauty through his different techniques.¹² One can therefore add a couple of items to the taxonomy offered above:

B.2.1. *The main narrator watches a traditional storyteller deprived of his natural audience.* We have, at best, vestiges of the traditional art, and a failed performance.

B.3. *The main narrator watches an audience deprived of its traditional storyteller.* A kind of eloquent silence is felt.

The next step is the vanishing of the very sense of void, and of the narrative pattern I have studied. More recent Irish short stories may still treat the theme of the old versus the new, or native originality versus global mediocrity, or local mediocrity versus life at large; they are less and less likely to express it through the confrontation of distinct narrative performances. But the model sketched out in this essay, with its variables, seems to correspond with narrative sequences still being produced in various parts of the world where traditional societies are undergoing acculturation.

¹² "The End of the Record" first appeared in *New Statesman and Nation* (1949) and "The Silence of the Valley" in *The Bell* (1946); both can be found in vols 2 and 3 of *The Collected Stories of Sean O'Faolain* (London: Constable, 1981-82).