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A Reading of the Novel as Fictional Life Writing

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Abstract

In this article, the interaction of the central themes of memory, reliability and old age in Sebastian Barry's novel *The Secret Scripture* (2008) are discussed. Read as an example of fictional life writing written in the wake of the memoir boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the article shows how Barry's novel does not only draw on features of popular genres of life writing such as the testimony, confession or the memoir of ageing, but provides a commentary not only on the difficulties involved in life writing, but also on life writing criticism.

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

Sarah Herbe

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

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

In this essay I shall read Barry’s novel as a piece of fictional life writing, i. e., fiction that borrows elements of form and content from genres of life writing. Fictional life writing gained in popularity around the turn of the century in the wake

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

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

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

narrow hole. There will never be a stone at my head, and no matter. ... My hand is good and I have a beautiful biro given me by my friend the doctor For dearly I would love now to leave an account, some kind of brittle and honest-minded history of myself, and if God gives me the strength, I will tell this story, and imprison it under the floor-board, and then with joy enough I will go to my own rest under the Roscommon soil.⁷

Her account has the title “Roseanne’s Testimony of Herself.” Smith and Watson list the ‘testimony’ among those genres of life writing that “have recently gained prominence.”⁸ Their approach to autobiographical writing is based on Carolyn R. Miller’s concept of “genre not as a fixed form but as a social action,”⁹ a notion of genre which is particularly useful in the context of life writing since it takes into consideration the situations in which certain genres are conventionally employed and the motivations for their use.¹⁰ The term “testimony” is apt for Roseanne’s story in various ways. According to John Beverley, “[t]he situation of narration in *testimonio* has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on,”¹¹ which corresponds to Roseanne’s situation of narration. Her urgency to communicate is caused by her old age and approaching death. It turns out in the course of her report that she was put into the mental hospital by her relatives after having been charged with nymphomania and her time in the mental hospital equals imprisonment as her personal freedom is restricted. Dr Grene admits as much when he explains that he needs to re-assess her due to an “outcry in the newspapers against – such people as were incarcerated ... for social reasons, rather than medical.”¹² Roseanne’s story of childhood and youth is one of poverty and constant struggle, only relieved by a brief spell of happiness experienced with her husband. Further, ‘testimony’ is an apt label for Roseanne’s narrative because “*testimonio*-like texts ... represent ... in particular those subjects – the child, the ‘native,’ the woman, the insane, the criminal, the proletarian – excluded from authorized representation when it was a question of speaking and writing for themselves.”¹³ Roseanne describes her own situation of speaking as follows:

Well, all speaking is difficult, whether peril attends it or not. Sometimes peril to the body, sometimes a more intimate, miniature, peril to the soul. When

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

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

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

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

about her admission to the mental hospital and the events that led up to it, reaching back to her childhood in her narrative. When she tries to remember the circumstances of her admission, she says, "Oh, I must remind myself to be clear, and be sure I know what I am saying to you. There must be accuracy and rightness now."²³ In her attempt to tell the truth, however, Roseanne emerges as an unreliable narrator. She frequently wonders about the correctness of her memories. She says, "I admit there are 'memories' in my head that are curious even to me. I would not like to have to say this to Dr Grene. ... It makes me a little dizzy to contemplate the possibility that everything I remember may not be – may not be *real*, I suppose."²⁴ Earlier in her account, she admits that "[p]erhaps in later years I heard versions of that night that didn't fit my own memory of it."²⁵ Implicitly or explicitly drawing attention to faulty memory is commonly listed among features pointing to the unreliability of narrators in narratological discussions of the topic.²⁶ Also trying to point out the accuracy of her words by repeating her statements (she says e.g., "He was the superintendent there, as I said to you,")²⁷ provides another textual clue pointing to her unreliability.²⁸ In other places, Roseanne asserts that something is 'the truth' explicitly and with vehemence, and though this is once again reminiscent of the situation of someone swearing to tell the truth in a courtroom, it is also another typical feature of unreliable narrators that they wish to convince their audience of the truth in an exaggerated way, which, in Roseanne's case, rather conveys the impression that she needs to convince *herself* that something is actually true. The further the story proceeds, the less sure does Roseanne become about the 'truth' of what she is writing down.

The doubts about the accuracy of Roseanne's story are, for the reader, further nourished by the fact that Dr Grene discovers documents about her admission and her mental condition including information about her childhood and family that conflicts essentially with her own version of events. While Roseanne tells us that her father first used to be a gravedigger and then a rat-catcher, Dr Grene finds conflicting information in which her father is presented as a policeman who was killed by rebels. Dr Grene, too, adopts the discourse of the courtroom when he ponders whether his patient tells the truth or not, as "the fact remains that the evidence is against her about her father's work."²⁹ He believes that Roseanne's deviating versions of her past might be due to various traumatic

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

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

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

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

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

However, Roseanne’s ability to remember correctly is not only affected by traumatic events in her past, but also by her old age. Though she writes in the last third of the novel that “[t]hey say the old at least have their memories,”³⁷ it has at this point become clear that she is not exactly in control of her own memories. While in conversations with old people the impression is often created that they remember the remote past better than the immediate one, studies by cognitive scientists have shown “that episodic memory is more sensitive to the effects of age than semantic memory especially for the remote past”³⁸ and gradually deteriorates with age. While semantic memory refers to “general information and general events,”³⁹ episodic memory means the recall of specific events in one’s past. Considering that Roseanne tries to recall details of specific events of her adolescence and young adulthood, her age thus makes her a prime candidate for unreliable narration: she simply might be unable to tell a story dealing with such remote events correctly.

Readers of Barry’s novel are constantly reminded of Roseanne’s old age. She has problems not only with remembering her own present age but also how old she was when certain events took place, or she is not completely certain about other people’s ages. A typical passage of her wondering about past events and her own age reads as follows:

I don’t know if the Plaza existed just at that time, it must have done, because I had seen Tom McNulty playing, but if it did it would have been 1929 or after even, so I wasn’t exactly a girl, but I am confused about this. It is hard to know a person’s age in a bathing suit, in the riot of the sunlight,

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

The centrality of the theme of old age is further supported by Roseanne's repeated references to her aged body. Especially at the beginning of her account, she remarks on how it is still in comparatively good shape: "Luckily ... I suffer not a jot of rheumatism or any particular infirmity associated with my age, at least in my legs. My hands, my hands alas are not what they were, but the legs hold good."⁴¹ Despite her remarkable fitness, Roseanne is presented as not really feeling at home in her aged body. She says of her hands that they "look like they have been buried a while and then dug up. They would give you a fright"⁴² and she seems to experience her aged body as something that covers her only on the outside when she refers to it as "this wrinkled suit of skin,"⁴³ but is not something she identifies with fully. This attitude towards her aged body is emphasised by comparisons of her body, or parts of it, with material, inanimate matter or with animals, which places her body somehow out of the realm of the human. The tenor for this attitude is set at the very beginning of her account, when Roseanne states that she is "a thing left over" that does not even "look like a human being any more."⁴⁴

Despite being by far the oldest patient of the mental hospital, she refers to other patients as "those ... ancient women,"⁴⁵ so she does not see herself as belonging among the same age group. She perceives the image of the 'old woman' as something other than herself in passages, something that can be put on and taken off at will, which becomes evident when she says: "I smiled at him my oldest old-woman smile, as if I did not quite understand."⁴⁶ Further, Roseanne admits that she has "not looked in a mirror for about fifteen years,"⁴⁷ so she cannot tell the addressee anything about the looks of her face.

However, her old, present self is never absent for long from the stories she tells about her younger self. There are frequent shifts in narrative perspective between privileging the narrating I and the experiencing I, so that the present time of narrating repeatedly interrupts her story, as in the following passage, when she talks about a terrible discovery she made in her teens: "Terror rose in me from the cold flags of the floor, terror so severe I must confess – and forgive such honesty

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

Identity is the construct which provides the person with a sense of continuity of being over time, which creates a sense of coherence so that the divergent experiences form an interconnected whole, and which gives meaning to one’s experiences and to life as a whole. All these aspects of identity: continuity, coherence and meaning, are created by putting one’s experiences in life into a life story, a narrative.⁵¹

Though the narrative of Roseanne’s life contains many gaps and uncertainties, the final pages of her account create an impression of closure: she speculates about the nature of human suffering in general and ends on a not entirely negative note: “All that remains of me now is a rumour of beauty.”⁵² Since she is more relaxed after having completed her account (this becomes clear from Dr Grene’s report), writing about her life has evidently improved her mental well-being.

The theme of how one perceives one’s own ageing and age and how others perceive it is structurally emphasised by the double narrative perspective of the novel, the two alternating strands of records. Though Roseanne cannot tell the audience anything about the appearance of her aged face, she wonders what she must look like to Dr Grene: “A face so creased and old, so lost in age.”⁵³ And indeed, by way of the psychiatrist’s commonplace book, the readers get an outside view of Roseanne. Dr Grene describes her aged body in positive terms throughout. He repeatedly calls her “ancient”, but adds that she has “one of the faces that is so thin she bears the look of youth yet, what she was”.⁵⁴ In his

descriptions he stresses how beautiful she must have been in her youth so he, too, does not fully acknowledge her present self as it is, but always sees it in relation to her former looks. Roseanne reports at the beginning of her testimony that Dr Grene asked her, “Don’t you think it very remarkable to be so well at a hundred?” and adds that “He himself was growing old, but not as old as myself.”⁵⁵ This remark foreshadows what will surface as an important issue in the course of the novel: Dr Grene’s own ageing.

Dr Grene is in his mid-sixties, and during the time he is assessing Roseanne, his wife suddenly dies. From this point onwards, there is a shift in Dr Grene’s records from wanting to find out ‘the truth’ about his patient to his own musings about age, ageing and coming to terms with his own past. Dr Grene’s records, which started out as rather objective observations and reports of his investigations, turn into very personal, subjective diary entries, whose focus shifts from his patient to himself. While he points out that he could never understand his wife’s worries about her wrinkles, he is surprised when he looks at himself in the mirror⁵⁶ for the first time after a long time and notices that his hair has turned grey:

Anyway for my sanity I am writing here. I am sixty-five years old. Past the Beatles song. By some accounts this is young. But when a man wakes on his fortieth birthday he may safely say he has not youth ahead of him. ... When Bet died I looked in the mirror for the first time in many years ... I was amazed at what I saw. I did not know myself. My hair was thinning all about the crown, and was grey as a badger, whereas I had imagined myself to have retained my old colour. The lines in my face were like the folds in a bit of leather that has been outside in the rain for a long time. I was utterly dismayed, utterly shocked. I had not realised it while Bet lived, the simple fact. I was old. I didn’t know what to do.⁵⁷

The description of his aged body with the help of images of inanimate matter and similes containing comparisons with animals recalls Roseanne’s descriptions of her own body. The two narrators cast themselves, on the one hand, as passive and, on the other, as not fully responsible for their actions in face of their age; thus, a not entirely positive image of the consequences of ageing is created by

their self-representations and self-perceptions. Dr Grene's experience in front of the mirror is followed by his insight that one only perceives others as old but never really oneself, which echoes Roseanne calling the other patients of the hospital 'ancient'. Seen in the framework of genres of life writing, Dr Grene's records and Roseanne's testimony borrow features from what Smith and Watson call "memoirs of aging,"⁵⁸ in which subjects look back on their lives or contemplate the deterioration of their bodies.

In a further step, Dr Grene's records assume features of the confession, one of the earliest genres of life writing (dating back to Saint Augustine's *Confessions* in the fourth century), which gained new popularity over the last two decades. Usually, a "confession is addressed to an interlocutor who listens, judges and has the power to absolve."⁵⁹ When contemplating whether one of his colleagues has always treated the inmates of another mental hospital correctly "or to what degree he sits back and lets things take their course" Dr Grene admits that "I am afraid I have often been guilty of [this] myself", points out that "I would [not] confess this anywhere but here, but I am sure St Peter is taking notes against me,"⁶⁰ and thus introduces a divine interlocutor for his confession. He confesses how he cheated on his wife, significantly at a conference dealing with "geriatric psychosis, dementia" where he was "presenting a paper on versions of memory"⁶¹ (one of the central themes of Barry's novel is thus referred to explicitly in the title of Dr Grene's paper, though the contents of the paper are not outlined). Dr Grene further confesses that he feels guilty for his little brother's death – his brother crossed the road in order to meet him and was run over by a school bus. After having put this memory into writing, he reflects on how he has just turned his life into a story: "I am astounded to read back over what I just wrote. I have made an anecdote out of the tragic death of my brother, for which, as is clear to me from the cooled syntax, I obviously blame myself."⁶²

According to Elke D'Hoker, "so-called fictional confessions are a substantial subgenre of the contemporary novel."⁶³ She says of such literary confessions that "questions such as When is truth found or created? How is it recognized?"⁶⁴ are central. In Dr Grene's writing, these questions gradually give way to an insight that there might not be such a thing as truth at all. He is no longer predominantly

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

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

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

The fact that she writes her story ultimately with an audience in mind highlights the process of deciding what to include and what to leave out, which is always involved in an act of writing one's life. The passage above also emphasises that in the course of writing her testimony, Roseanne intimates that – after her initial claims to absolute truth – she writes a version of her life she wants to be remembered by. She further comes to see that “[f]riend or enemy, no one has the monopoly on truth. Not even myself, and that is also a vexing and worrying thought.”⁷⁰ She extends this wisdom to historiography in a rather enlightened move for a woman who has spent half her life isolated from society: she believes that “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.”⁷¹ Like Dr Grene, Roseanne reflects on the process of putting oneself into writing. At one point, when she recalls the Irish civil war, she says: “I write this to stop my tears. I stab the words into the page with my biro, as if pinning myself there.”⁷²

Roseanne's testimony ends with “a memory so clear, so wonderful, so beyond the bounds of possibility”⁷³ and soon afterwards, she falls seriously ill. Dr Grene's records, however, continue and finally, in what constitutes a rather melodramatic turn, *The Secret Scripture* proves to be an unwitting “story of filiation”, which is “a story of detection in which the son or the daughter conducts a journey to discover the story of the lost or abandoning parent.”⁷⁴ In the course of his research, Dr Grene finds out that he is actually Roseanne's lost child. In hindsight, thus, Barry's novel complies with the features of a story of filiation as such narratives normally explore “the conditions of the parent's childhood and adulthood and the context of abandonment”⁷⁵ – exactly the period of Roseanne's life Dr Grene was interested in from the beginning. This discovery does not only provide him with a mother all of a sudden, but also solves the mystery of Roseanne's child, the existence of whom was hitherto subject to doubt: she only remembered that she gave birth to a baby on the seashore, in the midst of a thunderstorm and that the baby was then somehow taken from her side, whether dead or alive remained unclear. So there is, after all, a piece of factual truth revealed in the story, and it absolves Roseanne from the charge of having killed –

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

Roseanne's and Dr Grene's reflections on transforming their own lives into stories, together with the moment of unreliability, embody some of the preoccupations of postmodern theories of life writing, especially the idea that writing one's life is not simply a recording of one's life, but a creation of it and that there is no ultimately knowable truth about it. Smith, for example, points out that an "autobiographer constantly tells 'a' story rather than 'the' story"⁷⁷ and Tönnies sums up the question of truth in biographical writing: "The advent of postmodernism has obviously made the writing of biography inherently difficult. Concepts of totality, truth, and objectivity have become suspect, so that biographers find it increasingly hard to produce and justify reliable, coherent accounts of their subjects."⁷⁸ What she says here can be extended to writing about oneself, and Tönnies shows how, in fictional instances of autobiography, the "autobiographers' own past turns out to be just as distant from their present selves as another person's life and its reconstruction as liable to fictionalization as a biographer's account."⁷⁹

However, the final revelation that Dr Grene is Roseanne's child, i.e. the revelation of a piece of factual truth, subverts the postmodern suspicions about factual truth expressed in many passages of *The Secret Scripture*. It implies that other factual truths about the protagonists could be revealed if only sufficient documentation and evidence were provided. This notion is also supported by the fact that Dr Grene finds a letter written by Roseanne's brother-in-law which Roseanne never opened. In the letter, which Jack McNulty wrote in the face of his imminent death of cancer to ease his conscience (the motif of reminiscing and writing about one's life as death preparation is thus repeated), he apologises for his family's unfair behaviour towards Roseanne and asks for her forgiveness, thus supporting Roseanne's version of at least some of the events referred to. This turn towards the knowability of factual truth comes as a surprise for the critic familiar

with postmodern theories of life writing. The author seems to have shied away from leaving the narrative entirely open. However, despite – and because of – its ultimately giving in to the structure of a teleological narrative, Barry's novel offers a meta-commentary not only on mechanisms of life writing, but also on life writing criticism and audience expectations.

The Secret Scripture highlights the fact that life writing frequently makes use of familiar, pre-existing narrative structures and models to tell and grasp individual lives. Non-fictional life writing often relies on literary genres such as the bildungsroman.⁸⁰ By borrowing, conversely, from genres of life writing for his piece of fictional writing, Barry emphasises the mutual exchange between literary and life-writing genres and illustrates the difficulty of distinguishing between them. The inclusion of the melodramatic plot twist can thus be read as an emphasis on the constructedness of life stories as such in an exaggerated way. What is further drawn attention to is that existing genres or narrative structures and discourses may also determine how one's life is perceived and told. This is made obvious e.g. when Dr Grene becomes aware of having turned an event from his past into an anecdote and of course by the fact that Roseanne chooses the genre of testimony for telling her life story. The notion of the testimony as an apt tool for providing evidence in a courtroom is questioned by the emphasis on Roseanne's reliability.

While this reading reconciles the disappointingly conventional ending of *The Secret Scripture* with an analysis of the novel informed by postmodern criticism of life writing, I would like to close this essay with an alternative reading. Barry is obviously not only familiar with the central notions of current life writing criticism, but with the popularity of specific genres of life writing, such as the testimony, the family story or the trauma narrative. His novel is an amalgamation of buildings blocks that have guaranteed the success of popular examples of life writing and thus appears to be the carefully calculated result of research into the book market at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Though clearly marketed as a novel, *The Secret Scripture* tries to appeal not only to readers familiar with successful earlier examples of fictional life writing and novels, but to readers of non-fictional life writing. In the second edition of *Reading Autobiography*, published in 2010, Smith and Watson wonder about the scandals created by autobiographical hoaxes

– scandals that seem paradoxical when autobiographical writing is viewed as “an intersubjective mode ... resid[ing] outside a logical model of truth and falsehood”.⁸¹ The indignant responses to life writing texts revealed as fakes show that, utterly untouched by postmodern critical theory, readers generally believe that truth can be known and told in life writing and feel cheated when they are denied the truth, e.g. when writers break the autobiographical pact. By making at least parts of factual truth ultimately accessible, Barry's novel takes a stand and undermines the postmodern suspicions as far as truth is concerned. The implied readers and addressees of Roseanne's testimony thus represent readers of actual life writing texts who expect to learn factual truths – like those readers of Margaret B. Jones's *Love and Consequence: A Memoir of Hope and Survival* (2008), who were given back their money by the publisher when the book was discovered to be a fake memoir.⁸² In Barry's novel, the readers' desire to learn some truth is satisfied.

The opposition between theoretical concepts about truth and actual experience is embodied by a contradiction found at the end of Barry's novel: the doubts about the nature of personal memories and the possibility of knowing any truth at all harboured by Dr Grene clash with the fact that a piece of factual truth has just made an impact on his actual life. *The Secret Scripture* thus provides a reminder for critics in the field of life writing studies that postmodern theories to some extent ignore how many people actually perceive their lives and what they expect from texts designated as life writing.

Endnotes

¹ Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 4.

² Sidonie Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 127.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ Merle Tönnies, “Radicalising Postmodern Biofictions: British Fictional Autobiography of the Twenty-First Century,” in Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Wolfgang Görtschacher (eds.), *Fiction and Autobiography: Modes and Models of Interaction* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006), 305-14, 305.

⁵ John Rybash, “Aging and Autobiographical Memory: The Long and Bumpy Road,” *Journal of Adult Development* 6.1 (1999), 1-10, 3.

⁶ Kate C. McLean and Jennifer Pals Lilgendahl, “Why Recall Our Highs and Lows: Relations Between Memory Functions, Age, and Well-Being,” *Memory* 16.7 (2008), 751-62. 752. Italics in the original.

⁷ Barry, 4-5.

⁸ Smith and Watson, 128.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰ See Carolyn R. Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” in Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway (ed.), *Genre and the New Rhetoric* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 23-42.

- ¹¹ John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio (Testimonial Narrative) 1," *Modern Fiction Studies* 35.1 (1989), 11-28, 14. Beverley uses the Spanish form "testimonio" because he focuses on the development of testimonial narratives in Latin America.
- ¹² Barry, 28.
- ¹³ Beverley, 13.
- ¹⁴ Barry, 80.
- ¹⁵ Beverley 14.
- ¹⁶ Barry, 24.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 22.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 4.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 234-5.
- ²⁰ Beverley, 14.
- ²¹ Bella Brodzki, "Testimony," in Margaretta Jolly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms L-Z*, Vol. 2 (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001), 870-72. 871,
- ²² Aleida Assmann, "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony", *Poetics Today* 27.2 (2006), 261-73. 266.
- ²³ Barry, 32.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 208. Italics in the original.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 56.
- ²⁶ Cf. e.g. Ansgar Nünning, "'But Why Will You Say that I Am Mad?' On the Theory, History and Signals of Unreliable Narration in British Fiction," *AAA Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 22.1 (1997), 83-105, 98.
- ²⁷ Barry, 9.
- ²⁸ Cf. Nünning, 98.
- ²⁹ Barry, 288.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 106.
- ³¹ See e.g. Katharina Krause Shobe and John F. Kihlstrom, "Is Traumatic Memory Special?" *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 6.3 (1997), 70-4 or Lynn Nadel and W. Jake Jacobs, "Traumatic Memory is Special," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 7.5 (1998), 154-7.
- ³² Shobe and Kihlstrom, 74.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Barry, 123.
- ³⁵ Leigh Gilmore, "Trauma and Life Writing," in Margaretta Jolly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms L-Z*, Vol. 2 (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001), 885-7, 886.
- ³⁶ For the relationship between the narrative and filmic device of the flashback (analepsis) and the flashback as symptom of PTSD, see e.g. Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 15 or Edgar Jones et al., "Flashbacks and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Genesis of a 20th-Century Diagnosis," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 182 (2003), 158-63.
- ³⁷ Barry, 209.
- ³⁸ Pascale Piolino et al., "Episodic and Semantic Remote Autobiographical Memory in Ageing," *Memory* 10.4 (2002), 239-57, 254.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 240.
- ⁴⁰ Barry, 148.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 24.
- ⁴² Ibid., 145-6.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 131.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 4.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 16.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 28.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 146.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 109-10.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 131.
- ⁵⁰ McLean and Lilgendahl, 752.
- ⁵¹ Christian Roesler, "A Narratological Methodology for Identifying Archetypal Story Patterns in Autobiographical Narratives," *Journal of Analytic Psychology* 51 (2006), 574-86, 575.
- ⁵² Barry, 278.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁵⁶ Kathleen Woodward points out that “[g]azing in the mirror is a ubiquitous trope in the image repertoire of age.” See Kathleen Woodward, “Performing Age, Performing Gender,” *NWSA Journal* 18.1 (2006), 162-89, 168.

⁵⁷ Barry, 122-23.

⁵⁸ Smith and Watson, 150.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 265.

⁶⁰ Barry, 279.

⁶¹ Ibid., 185.

⁶² Ibid., 190.

⁶³ Elke D'Hoker, “Confession and Atonement in Contemporary Fiction: J. M. Coetzee, John Banville, and Ian McEwan,” *Critique* 48.1 (2006), 31-43, 31.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁵ Barry, 291.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 186.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 159.

⁶⁸ Francis R. Hart, “Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography,” *New Literary History* 1 (1970), 486-511, 488.

⁶⁹ Barry, 132.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 134.

⁷¹ Ibid., 56.

⁷² Ibid., 34.

⁷³ Barry, 277.

⁷⁴ Smith and Watson, 155.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Barry 302-3.

⁷⁷ Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 46.

⁷⁸ Tönnies, 305.

⁷⁹ Ibid. For a discussion of “auto/biographic metafiction”, which, according to Max Saunders, “represents a post-modernising of auto/biography,” see Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 324.

⁸⁰ See Smith and Watson, 91.

⁸¹ Smith and Watson, 17.

⁸² See Motokiko Rich, “Gang Memoir, Turning Page, is Pure Fiction,” *New York Times*, 4 March 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/04/books/04fake.html?hp>> (27 April 2012) and <http://us.penguingroup.com/static/html/features/LC_statement.html> (27 April 2012).