

## ***Narrative 4 and Fighting Words – The Persistence of the Folk Tradition of Storytelling through Contemporary Irish Writers Colum McCann’s & Roddy Doyle’s Non-Profit Organisations***

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**Résumé.** Roddy Doyle et Colum McCann, deux auteurs contemporains dont l’œuvre est pourtant écrite, contribuent activement à alimenter la tradition orale irlandaise, à travers leurs propres écrits mais aussi par les deux organisations à but non lucratif qu’ils ont créées, à savoir *Fighting Words* et *Narrative 4*. Ces deux organisations ont pour principal public cible les enfants et les jeunes adultes et mettent en avant le lien entre les arts, l’éducation et la narration. Créée en 2009, *Fighting Words* propose principalement des ateliers de narration, tandis que *Narrative 4*, créée en 2012, est fondée sur l’échange d’histoires entre inconnus. Dans un monde hypermoderne et globalisé, mettre l’accent sur les connexions possibles via le prisme de l’art va, dans une certaine mesure, à l’encontre de certains principes de l’idéologie post-moderne. Le rôle des artistes en tant que médiateurs entre une tradition orale profondément enracinée dans leur culture nationale et des personnes ordinaires, en particulier des jeunes, transformées en conteurs et conteuses, peut être lu à la lumière de la tendance métamoderniste, qui répond artistiquement à l’hypermodernité du monde. L’utilisation des médias numériques et des réseaux sociaux par *Fighting Words* et *Narrative 4* peut être vue comme une forme de modernisation de la tradition du storytelling, tout en soulevant la question de la temporalité du contenu qui est raconté, puisque la tradition orale était, par nature, éphémère.

**Mots-clefs.** Littérature irlandaise contemporaine, Roddy Doyle, Colum McCann, storytelling, folklore, *seanchaithe*, métamodernisme, hypermodernité, education, *Narrative 4*, *Fighting Words*

**Abstract.** Two contemporary authors, whose work is actually written, Roddy Doyle and Colum McCann, are actively contributing to fuelling the Irish oral tradition through their own writings, but also through the two non-profit organisations they have created, namely *Fighting Words* and *Narrative 4*. Both organisations have children and young adults as their main target audience, and both put forward the link between arts, education and storytelling. *Fighting Words*, which was created in 2009, mainly offers storytelling workshops, while *Narrative 4* (2012) is based on story exchange between strangers. In a hypermodern, globalised world, insisting on connections through art goes, to some extent, against some of the principles of the postmodern ideology. The artists' role as facilitators between a deeply rooted oral tradition and ordinary people turned into storytellers, especially young people, may be seen as part of the metamodernist trend in today's arts which echoes the hypermodern nature of today's world. The use of digital and social media by the organisations can be interrogated as a form of modernisation of the tradition of storytelling, all the while raising the question of the temporality of the content which is told, since the oral tradition used to be, by nature, ephemeral.

**Keywords.** Irish contemporary literature, Roddy Doyle, Colum McCann, storytelling, folklore, *seanchaithe*, metamodernism, hypermodernism, education, *Narrative 4*, *Fighting Words*

## Introduction

The oral tradition is as much part of the “Celtic”<sup>1</sup> world’s defining features as myths and legends – to which it is often connected, especially in pre-Christian Gaelic societies, and more particularly in Ireland.<sup>2</sup> Even though written literature has now superseded it, it is still thriving, especially in Ireland, where storytellers remain prominent figures on the artistic stage.<sup>3</sup> Two contemporary authors, whose work is actually written, Roddy Doyle and Colum McCann, are actively contributing to fuelling it through their own writings, but also through the two non-profit organisations they have created, namely *Fighting Words* (in 2009) and *Narrative 4* (in 2012). Both organisations mainly target children and young adults, and both put forward the link between arts, education and storytelling. *Fighting Words* primarily offers storytelling workshops, while *Narrative 4* is based on story exchange between strangers. The two organisations have in common that the topics of the stories written or orally exchanged mostly deal with daily – some would say banal – topics and events. This poetry found in the commonplace, as well as the expression and recording of trivial matters, is in keeping with the age-old Irish tradition of the *seanchaithe*, these ancient storytellers (literally: bearers of old lore) who also acted as historians – a tradition that began in pre-Christian Ireland before dwindling out from the 17th century on, albeit without ever becoming fully extinct. Encouraging generational and intergenerational exchanges as well as passing on stories – and the tradition of storytelling itself – constitute an ethical intention and positioning on the authors’ part: the artists’ role as facilitators between a deeply-rooted oral tradition and ordinary people turned into storytellers, especially young people, may be seen as part of the metamodernist<sup>4</sup> trend in today’s arts, one which echoes the hypermodern<sup>5</sup> nature of today’s world.

This article will therefore examine the persistence of the folk tradition of storytelling and its modern inflections as expressed through Doyle’s *Fighting Words* and McCann’s *Narrative 4*.

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1. As the present collection shows with its (re)definition of this term, its use is controversial, hence the use of quotation marks here.

2. See DUMEZIL, Georges, “La Tradition druidique et l’écriture : le vivant et le mort”, in *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions*, 1940: 125-33.

3. See ENGLEHART, Deirdre Sheridan, “A Story to Tell: The Culture of Storytelling and Folklore in Ireland”, in *Childhood Education* 87:6, 2011: 409-14.

4. Metamodernism is the artistic mindset which, some argue, has been overlapping with, if not succeeding to, postmodernism in recent years. The third part of this article will present and analyze this notion and this trend more precisely.

5. Hypermodernity is defined as today’s form of modernity in which human beings’ relationships to space, time, distance, speed, self or others are pushed to a sort of paroxysm and in which everything is potentially connected, particularly due to recent technological developments. See 3.c.; see also GWIAZDZINSKI, Luc, “Temps et territoires : les pistes de l’hyperchronie”, in *Territoires 2040 : revue d’études et de prospective* 6, 2012: 75-97, and LUSSAULT, Michel, *Hyper-lieux. Les nouvelles géographies de la mondialisation*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2017.

In order to do so, the traditional and modern links between Ireland, orality and storytelling – particularly in Doyle’s and McCann’s works – will be explored; the article will then investigate the ways in which *Fighting Words* and *Narrative 4* take on this tradition and expand it, before arguing that the two authors’ initiatives are in keeping with the new, metamodern trend, which sees a renewal of the tradition of the author as an active citizen, locally and globally.

## 1. Ireland, orality & storytelling: tradition and modernity

### a. The oral tradition in Ireland

In the pre-Christian era, the transmission of knowledge and culture in Ireland rested exclusively on oral tradition.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, during the pre-Christian period, the *filí* (i.e. poets) were the holders of knowledge and passed it on orally from generation to generation. Spoken language was therefore held in high esteem and the *filí* were part of the elite. In pre-Christian and then medieval times, the *filí* were also *seanchaithe*, i.e. storytellers, reciters of ancient lore who told folktales, myths and legends and passed them on to the next generation. In the Middle Ages, with the arrival of Christian monks, the transmission of knowledge began to be carried out through the written medium.<sup>7</sup> The contact between the two media was at the origin of the development of Irish literature and continues to influence contemporary Irish literature. In Ireland, the written tradition has not completely replaced the oral tradition. It has come to overturn it, without ever making it disappear. Indeed, the shift did not happen overnight but spread over centuries, and as a result, traces of it have remained in Irish culture. However, while it is certain that oral tradition has had an impact on Irish music, for example, the influence of this medium of transmission on other aspects of Irish culture is surprisingly under-documented. In his book *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space*, Lloyd<sup>8</sup> describes the mouth as “the most Irish of orifices”, and in the presentation of his book he writes:

Oral space does not persist intact, though it has always been known that elements and fragments of oral culture have shown a remarkable capacity to survive, like shreds of some viral DNA, in ballads, stories, music as in a propensity for conversation and spontaneous rhetorical play.<sup>9</sup>

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6. NAGY, Joseph Falaky, “Orality in Medieval Irish Narrative: An Overview”, in *Oral Tradition*, <<http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/1ii/nagy>>, 1986: 272.

7. *Ibid.*: 274.

8. LLOYD, David, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [2011] 2016.

9. *Ibid.*

As is suggested by Ó Cruailaíoch in *Anáil an Bhéil Bheo: Orality and Modern Irish Culture*,<sup>10</sup> despite the shift to a written tradition, the legacy of the medium of oral tradition transmission is present in all aspects of Irish culture. The oral mode of transmission is all the more essential to Irish culture as it has endured over the centuries, despite attempts at oppression, modernisation and urbanisation:

Orality in Ireland is not a mode of existence that is surpassed and supplanted by literacy and the modes of living it presupposes and sustains. Orality implies, rather, complex interaction of spaces, an intersection of oral and literate modes, and surviving in peculiar ways within the other and even preserving the other's life within itself.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the ancient Irish oral tradition has had a wide variety of cultural consequences in Ireland. These consequences are not only related to the content of narratives inherited from the oral tradition, but extend to the very medium through which they are transmitted. If oral tradition has made the mouth the Irish organ par excellence, the dominant presence of orality in a literary work is also a residual mark of oral tradition.

In Irish literature, two major modern developments derive from this tradition. The first one is the Irish Literary Revival, a literary movement led by Lady Augusta Gregory and W.B. Yeats among others at the turn of the 20th century and by which traditional Irish tales were written down in order to be preserved through the written medium. The second one is the short story, a genre that holds a special place in Irish literature.<sup>12</sup> Both bring an ancient tradition back to life and rest on two characteristics of oral tradition. The short story lays emphasis on the original form of the tale and departs from the mythological content of traditional stories, while the tales of the Irish Literary Revival put forward the mythological content and move away from the form of the tales narrated orally in the pre-Christian era.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, although traditional Irish studies have tended to leave the novel aside when studying the legacy of the oral tradition, this genre is not exempt. Indeed, the impact of the oral tradition of storytelling on Irish literature is manifold, and both Roddy Doyle and Colum McCann have inherited this tradition of storytelling and somewhat honoured it in their works, albeit each in his own way. While it would be interesting to provide a comprehensive review of the way(s) each author incorporates orality and storytelling in their works, due to length constraints this

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10. Ó CRUALAOICH, Gearóid, "Orality and Modern Irish Culture: A Personal Strand of the Weave", in *Anáil an Bheil Bheo, Orality and Modern Irish Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009: 17.

11. LLOYD, David, *op. cit.*: 3-4.

12. See KIBERD, Declan, *The Irish Writer and the World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

13. According to Walter ONG, the need to memorize tales that were not written down tended to favour shorter stories than the ones told orally before the written tradition. See ONG, Walter Jackson, *Orality and Literacy*, London: Routledge, 2002.

article will only give a very broad survey of these features, before focusing on how Doyle and McCann integrate these notions into their respective organisations.

*b. Modern Irish storytellers: Colum McCann & Roddy Doyle*

*b.1. McCann*

In McCann's fictional works, promoting the storytelling process in the diegesis is as significant as promoting the role of the writer as a storyteller in the extra-linguistic world.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, most of his characters are storytellers of a kind: besides the fact that his novels and short-stories feature a lot of first-person narrators, many characters have monologues or simply tell shorter, embedded stories, and such processes are shown as essential. This can be perceived in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994), particularly in the short story "A Word in Edgewise", and is exemplified in *TransAtlantic* (2013), a section of which focuses on the Good Friday Agreement negotiations. This particular section regularly insists on the importance of telling and retelling stories over and over again so as to achieve peace and understanding: "The need to proclaim again and again what has already been said".<sup>15</sup> In this novel and throughout McCann's fiction, from his first collection of short stories (*Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, 1994) to his latest instalment *Apeirogon* (2020), telling stories is shown to facilitate the creation of a crucial memory base as well as of a deeply inclusive oral space. From the perspective of a story exchange, to tell and to retell also becomes a way to relate. It is thus promoted as a potential factor of better empathy and understanding, and therefore of social cohesion. This is particularly vital in a world that is increasingly characterized by hypermobility and diaspora: "Storytelling is the glue of a scattered people. We need our stories to hold us together".<sup>16</sup>

In addition to this thematic insistence on the importance of the storytelling process, several formal choices echo and highlight this keen interest on the author's part. For instance, McCann often returns to the genre of the short story. In the Irish tradition, short and oral stories share several characteristics, such as a focus on what is considered banal, on the minor

14. See BOURDEAU, Marion, *Espaces et interstices dans l'œuvre fictionnelle de Colum McCann : éthique et esthétique de l'équilibre*, Caen, Bibliothèque Universitaire de l'Université de Caen Normandie, unpublished PhD thesis, 2019; see also BOURDEAU, Marion, "Transcultural Dialogue through Connection: Storytelling as a Hopeful Interface in Colum McCann's *Apeirogon* (2020)", in *Ireland: Interfaces and Dialogues*, Ondrej PILNY, Radvan MARKUS, Daniela THEINOVA & James LITTLE (eds.), *Irish Studies in Europe* (to be published in December 2022), and GARDEN, Alison, "Authorship, Orality, and Print Modernity: Representing the Roma in Colum McCann's *Zoli*", in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 57.3, 2016: 348-57.

15. McCANN, Colum, *TransAtlantic*, Bloomsbury, London & New York, 2013: 135.

16. GARDEN, Alison & McCANN, Colum, "'Making it up to tell the truth': An interview with Colum McCann", in *Symbiosis: a Journal of Transatlantic Literary and Cultural Relations*, 18.1, 2014: 5.

mode.<sup>17</sup> This highlights that McCann's storytelling space intends to be open, dynamic and inclusive. These traits can be found in the author's short but also long fiction, as his novels give a voice to a vast array of characters, including marginal ones, as in *This Side of Brightness*, *Dancer* or *Let the Great World Spin*. This insistence that everyone's stories are worth being told is also in keeping with postmodern and postcolonial mindsets.<sup>18</sup>

Besides, following the much-older tradition of *senchas* and *dindsenchas*, McCann writes about his characters' daily life and sense of place. The term *senchas* is

[...] the global label attributed to Irish literature written in the vernacular in the late first millennium, in the sense of 'tradition' (Dictionary of the Irish Language, 537). It encompasses genealogical lore, pseudo-historical tradition, heroic sagas and [...] toponymy [...].<sup>19</sup>

The *Dindsenchas* was a particular collection of *senchas* specifically dedicated to topography as well as to the spatial and cultural tradition:

The *Dindsenchas* itself is a collection of topographical legends about the places of note in Ireland. It constitutes a medieval reinterpretation and reconstruction of the Irish landscape as it was known and perceived by the poets and redactors of the early Middle Ages and fits clearly into the larger frame of *senchas* and the pseudo-historical framework defined throughout the centuries of literary production.<sup>20</sup>

These oral tales, which were written down in the Middle Ages, played a key role as they provided a social and historical link, creating a web of stories, explanations and, ultimately, sense, while entangling the individual and the collective.

It is actually another characteristic of McCann's that he often chooses to focus on what he calls "the collision point of stories",<sup>21</sup> and particularly on the collision point of the personal and the historical, i.e. of story and History. He describes his latest novel, *Apeirogon*, which focuses on the conflict between Israel and Palestine, as follows: "This is a hybrid novel with invention at its core, a work of storytelling which, like all storytelling, weaves together elements of speculation, memory, fact and imagination".<sup>22</sup>

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17. See CARDIN, Bertrand (ed.), *Journal of the Short Story in English – Special Issue The 21st Century Irish Short Story* 63, Angers, Presses de l'Université d'Angers, 2014.

18. See for instance SPIVAK, Gayatri, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in NELSON, Cary & GROSSBERG, Lawrence (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 1988: 272-313. See also BUTLER, Christopher, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

19. HAMON, Denis, "Landscape, *Senchas* and the Medieval Irish Mind", in MIANOWSKI, Marie (ed.), *Irish Contemporary Landscapes in Literature and the Arts*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2012: 29.

20. *Ibid.*: 31.

21. McCANN, Colum, *Let the Great World Spin*, Bloomsbury, London & New York, 2009: 325.

22. <<https://www.harpercollins.ca/9781554689958/aperoigon/>>, last accessed September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

Another form of hybridity can be found in the rhythm of his texts. Since *TransAtlantic* (2012), this rhythm has indeed become increasingly ternary – evoking the significance of the number three in oral tales, including in their pattern – with the recurring use of a combination of three short sentences, as in the following passage of *TransAtlantic*:<sup>23</sup> “We’re forced to change because we’re forced to remember./And we’re forced to remember when we’re forced to confront./Sixty-one children.”

Essentially, McCann’s writing can be described as cumulative and kaleidoscopic: he tells individual stories, but sharing them and having them reflect on one another creates a web of interlacing stories that can later resonate with an audience/readership. The place given to the recipient of the stories is fundamental in McCann’s approach, and this translates in the way *Narrative 4* functions, as will be shown later.

## *b.2. Doyle*

Roddy Doyle is an Irish writer born in Dublin in 1958. He is a writer of orality *par excellence*. He is mostly a novelist, although he has written some short stories and plays, and, perhaps his most incredibly oral pieces, books of dialogue.<sup>24</sup> The legacy of the oral tradition is most visible in Doyle’s mastery of dialogue.<sup>25</sup> Some of his novels, such as *The Commitments* (1989), are built almost exclusively on conversations in Direct Speech in which spelling is often modified in order to account for the speakers’ pronunciation. These conversations are carried out in a markedly oral or dialectal grammar and with a lexicon that is also oral and/or vulgar – the word “fuck” being used recurrently. This style is somehow paradoxical, since it appropriates the oral medium of communication in order to introduce it into the most written of genres. Doyle’s novels are marked by a strong focus on banality and triviality. They tell the daily lives of working-class Dublin families with their troubles, difficulties and happy moments. Their narrators are common people who tell their own tragedies (be they illnesses, unemployment, teenage pregnancies, divorce or even rape), as modern-day *seanchaithe*, in an often very light and humorous tone.

In one of his most recent novels, *Charlie Savage* (2019), Doyle introduced a narrative device that definitely anchors him in a 21st-century reappropriation of the oral tradition, when he decided to make Charlie, the narrator and main character, a real *seanchaí*, by making

23. McCANN, Colum, *TransAtlantic*, Bloomsbury, London & New York, 2013: 145.

24. BOICHARD, Léa, “Oralité ou irlandité : la stratégie du leurre dans *Two Pints* de Roddy Doyle”, in *Phonologies de l’anglais : Théories et application*, Lambert Lucas, 2018, 117-34.

25. See BOICHARD, Léa, *La Poétique du parler populaire dans l’œuvre barrytownienne de Barrytown – étude stylistique de l’oralité et de l’irlandité*, unpublished PhD thesis, 2018: <<https://www.theses.fr/2018LYSE3068>>.



him address the reader directly through the 2nd-person pronoun: “Now, normally, I wouldn’t be telling you this and you, I’m sure would be happier if I wasn’t.”<sup>26</sup> Through this technique, Doyle seems to be attempting to create a more direct connection between reader, narrator and writer, making readers feel as though they were sitting by the fire listening to a storyteller narrating a 21st-century tale.<sup>27</sup>

However, one must not see in Doyle’s oral style a return to the pre-Christian tradition. There is no nostalgia in this reappropriation of the Irish oral tradition. For instance, traditional *seanchaithe* are mocked and contemporary world-famous pop stars preferred: “—Think about it, says the daughter. —Who would you prefer to be married to? Peig Sayers or Lady Gaga?”<sup>28</sup> Peig Sayers was a 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish *seanchaí* born in County Kerry. She transmitted her stories orally, but they were written down by others and included in the Irish school syllabus.<sup>29</sup> References to rural pastoral Ireland are virtually non-existent in Doyle’s novels, and when they are made, as is the case in the example above, it is generally for humorous reasons. In fact, the world that Doyle depicts is not ancient rural Ireland, but hypermodern globalized and European Dublin. It is a world which is closer to Lady Gaga’s than to Peig Sayers’, and in which tradition is usually a cause for derision: “I come from a long tradition of men who shout at the wireless.”<sup>30</sup>

The tales told by Doyle’s modern-day storytellers feature no mythological creatures, no magic, and no traces of Irish mythology, nor do they contain any stories about rural Ireland. *Charlie Savage* and most of Doyle’s stories focus on the everyday concerns of narrators living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and deal with their own personal interrogations about living in the hyper-modern world and adjusting one’s perspective to the evolution of society.

This concern for the contemporary world and for finding one’s place in society is common to both Doyle and McCann. It plays a defining role in McCann’s organisation, *Narrative 4*, and is also at the core of Doyle’s volunteering project *Fighting Words*. These two projects thus participate in keeping the Irish tradition alive.

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26. DOYLE, Roddy, *Charlie Savage*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2019: 141.

27. BOICHARD, Léa, “‘Now, normally, I wouldn’t be telling you this and you, I’m sure, would be happier if I wasn’t.’ The modern-day storyteller in Roddy Doyle’s *Charlie Savage* (2019)”, in ICHE, Virginie and SORLIN, Sandrine (eds.), *The Rhetoric of Literary Communication*, London: Routledge, 2022.

28. DOYLE, Roddy, *op. cit.*: 36.

29. See SAYERS, Peig, *Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island*, translated by Bryan MacMahon, Dublin, The Talbot Press, 1973 and Ó CRUALAOICH, Gearóid, “Orality and Modern Irish Culture: A Personal Strand of the Weave”, in *Anáil an Bheil Bheo, Orality and Modern Irish Culture, op. cit.*, 15-24.

30. *Ibid.*: 99.

## 2. Fighting Words & Narrative 4: *keeping tradition alive*

### a. Fighting Words

*Fighting Words* is an organisation created by Roddy Doyle and Seán Love in Dublin in 2009. Here's how its aim is described on the organisation's website:

Our aim is to help children and young people, and adults who did not have this opportunity as children, to discover and harness the power of their own imaginations and creative writing skills. At its core, *Fighting Words* is also about something much broader and more inclusive. It is about using the creative practice of writing and storytelling to strengthen our children and teenagers – from a wide range of backgrounds – to be resilient, creative and successful shapers of their own lives.<sup>31</sup>

*Fighting Words* proposes free creative writing workshops in order to teach children and adults how to use their imagination and structure it into stories. The workshops are led by volunteers, some of whom are writers themselves, while others are simply adults interested in sharing their skills and interest for storytelling and transmission. The idea to create this organisation stemmed from the fact that creative writing is not included in Irish schools' curricula, but also from the very democratic idea that everyone is able to write stories, "not just the few".<sup>32</sup> Roddy Doyle used to be a secondary school teacher and his commitment to this organization may have been fostered by his passion for transmission. According to its website, *Fighting Words* aims to build children's, young adults' and adults' confidence in the value of their imagination and of their skills. One of the ways in which it does so is by publishing the productions written during the workshops. Since the creation of *Fighting Words* in 2009, twelve collections of short stories have been published, including *Beyond Boundaries* (2018), *Dissent into Madness* (2019), *The Mind's Penumbra* (2020), and *To The Future And Back Again* (2020), all of which were written by teenagers who attended the workshops for periods of two to seven months. Anthologies of younger students' stories are also published regularly, and each child or teenager leaves the workshop with a copy of the group's stories, blank pages to finish the story, their picture on the back cover and a blank place to write their own biography. Since September 2019, *Fighting Words* has also developed a partnership with Dublin City University, with a *Fighting Words* fellow who organises workshops with students on campus.

The project builds on and fosters Ireland's tradition of storytelling by encouraging young people's confidence and by investing in the future. Indeed, as are most of Doyle's novels, *Fighting Words* is anchored in the local, in Dublin, and it aims to focus on the young generation

31. <<https://www.fightingwords.ie>>, accessed on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

32. LOVE, Séan, "Fighting words: Sean Love at TEDxDublin", <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ReiZIRF05s>>, last accessed on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

growing up in Dublin, to give them confidence and to prove to them that their voice matters and that no matter where they come from and what kind of background they have, they can find their place in the world. This is very much in-keeping with the subjects of Doyle's writing. As Doyle and Love wrote in *The Irish Times*:

Evidence shows that participants in *Fighting Words* demonstrate increased levels of engagement not just with creative writing, but with the whole school experience leading to increased motivation, self-confidence, self-esteem, recognition of and pride in creative ability, a greater ability to work collaboratively and **improved literacy**. *Fighting Words* is a unique and impactful free resource for mentoring young writers in Ireland. Using a participative, stimulating workshop model, it encourages and nourishes young writers and quality writing – but it achieves much more than that. **Because, at its core, Fighting Words is also about something much broader and more inclusive: it is about using the creative practice of writing and storytelling to strengthen our children and teenagers to be resilient, creative and successful at shaping their own lives.**<sup>33</sup>

At a time of uncertainty and growing anxiety, hope for the future is at the core of this project, which invests in the young generation in a very optimistic and democratic urge. Indeed, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the organisation kept working with the aim to maintain the link with the young generation. They launched “the *Fighting Words* Un-School club” on their website, for children and teenagers to publish their lockdown stories. They also conducted online workshops. On April 16, 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, a lucid and yet hopeful Doyle wrote in *The Irish Times*:

We don't know what is going to happen. We don't know how long this is going to last, or what our social and educational normality will look like in a month, in six months, in a year, in two. [...] We opened at a time of deep recession, in 2009, and survived. The new time is hideous, terrifying and heart-breaking, but what a story! This event that we're trying to endure, this is the time that our country's future writers – our novelists, poets, playwrights and filmmakers – are living in. This is their material. This is their opportunity. *Fighting Words* is helping them to find their rhythm, their stories, their words. [...]<sup>34</sup>

Optimism, investment in the young generation and hope for the future are values which, although they might seem utopian and even naïve, are at the core of Colum McCann's *Narrative 4*, the purposes and modus operandi of which will be detailed next.

## b. Narrative 4

*Narrative 4* was created in 2012 by Colum McCann and Lisa Consiglio. On its webpage, it is described as follows:

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33. <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/fighting-words-helps-youngsters-to-find-their-way-1.3052957>>, last accessed September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022. The emphasis is ours.

34. <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/roddy-doyle-i-read-the-work-in-fighting-words-and-i-stop-worrying-our-future-is-in-great-hands-1.4231572>>, last accessed September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

Narrative 4 is a global organization driven by artists, shaped by educators and led by students. Our core methodology, the story exchange, is designed to help students understand that their voices, stories, actions and lives matter, and that they have the power to change, rebuild and revolutionize systems.<sup>35</sup>

The organisation partners with neuroscientists to feed the research focusing on empathy – which is at the core of the way it operates – and its impact on education and society. On its website, mental health is also highlighted as a top priority for the organisation’s actions and goals. *Narrative 4* can involve adults, but it mostly focuses on young adults as it hopes to shape a more empathetic world for tomorrow.

*Narrative 4*’s workshops operate by gathering children and young adults with very different backgrounds, and have them exchange stories during a carefully calibrated session. Each participant is paired with another person, to whom they tell a personal story; their partner then has to retell the story in the first person. The process is then repeated with the roles exchanged. The participants are encouraged to choose a personal story that tackles “the broad, yet intersecting, themes of faith, identity, immigration, violence, and the environment”.<sup>36</sup>

Story exchanges are methodically led by professionally-trained facilitators. The exchanges are organised following four basic steps: Preparing / Sharing / Exchanging Stories / Reflecting. The *Narrative 4* website insists that

A successful story exchange is the result of careful preparation in partnership with the host and skilled facilitation that creates mutual respect among every person in the exchange. The post-exchange reflection allows participants to consider what they’ve experienced and plan for how they can build on it.<sup>37</sup>

The organisation relies on in-person interaction but also increasingly on virtual exchanges and events, because of the Covid crisis but also, more generally, in order to fulfil its goal of helping people connect globally. The event called “Stories of Faith: From Jerusalem to NYC”<sup>38</sup> thereby took place online on Sept. 23<sup>th</sup>, 2020, like many other projects and events.

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35. <<https://narrative4.com/>>, last accessed September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

36. <<https://narrative4.ie/>>, last accessed September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

37. *Ibid.*

38. The event is described as follows in its YouTube description: “Narrative 4 and Millions of Conversations hosts N4 board chair and co-founder of the Telos Group Greg Khalil, Millions Founding President and CEO Samar Ali, and two N4 Student Ambassadors as they illuminate how to use personal storytelling to build empathy and transcend differences. Using the Narrative 4 story exchange, these four individuals share defining personal stories that have shaped their own sense of belonging and faith.” <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wwgq-HxP1COg>>. For more information about the Telos Group, see <<https://www.telosgroup.org/who-we-are/>>.

*Narrative 4* is indeed an international network (“*Narrative 4* is working in four continents, sixteen countries, and eighteen US states”)<sup>39</sup> with global headquarters in New York City. It creates and coordinates various events promoting interactions between students, educators and artists through different programs, such as the “Empathy Into Action” campaign which supports local initiatives in the US but also in South Africa or Palestine. These events and programmes are often organised in collaboration with and/or sponsored by *Narrative 4*s emerging “Artists Network”, which is self-defined as “a vast, constantly evolving network of writers, musicians and visual artists who support *Narrative 4*, its teachers and its students all around the world.”

The organisation also has a national branch in Ireland, *Narrative 4 Ireland*, which is based in Limerick and is the only official national centre. Its website describes it as such:

*Narrative 4 Ireland* team leads the charge of *Narrative 4*s mission across Ireland and Europe. In addition to story exchange programmes in schools and communities, the *Narrative 4* Limerick centre hosts student engagement events and cultural activities such as a monthly storytelling night, literary readings, and master classes.<sup>40</sup>

*Narrative 4 Ireland* is looking for local and national impact. It has launched several projects such as “Girl’s Stories” (“a weekly after-school creative arts project for migrant adolescent girls who are new to the city. The project provides a safe space to make art, build relationships, share stories, and improve their spoken English”),<sup>41</sup> “Boys’ stories” (“What does it mean to be a man in the twenty-first century?”: partnering primary school boys with men in their community “to explore questions and stereotypes about masculinity”),<sup>42</sup> “Tell Your Story” (“an intergenerational community integration project that connects teenagers with older people in their community”)<sup>43</sup> and various specific programmes aiming to address particular issues, all through story exchange. Literary events, storytelling open mic nights, community art projects or art exhibitions are also set up. *Narrative 4 Ireland* is also partnering with local and national organisations; it recently launched a programme called “Story Exchange Facilitation Training for Youth Workers” that offers to train twelve youth workers who work with Traveller and Roma communities to become certified Story Exchange Facilitators.

It is therefore possible to argue that despite their own specificities, both organisations display a fierce interest in promoting the age-old tradition of storytelling, especially with

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39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

younger generations. This interest for the future reveals the organisations' and the writers' societal concerns, while potentially bridging the gap between the traditional and the hyper/metamodern, in the literary field and in real life.

### 3. *Hyper/Metamodern settings and approaches*

#### a. *The re-birth of the author as a citizen*

Interestingly, despite their different approaches, both authors have used their writing skills and their relative fame as public figures<sup>44</sup> with similar goals in mind. In *Narrative Four* as well as in *Fighting Words* we find:

- A focus on the younger generation (associated with the promotion of intergenerational exchanges)
- Long-term society-changing – one might say utopian purposes
- Short-term social impact with help programs for people in need
- Mental health awareness
- The promotion of creativity and the arts
- A strong focus on sharing, (re)writing and telling
- Partnerships with local organisations
- Trained tutors/facilitators

As a result, through their commitment to these organisations, Doyle and McCann, along with many others, seemingly turn their backs on the artist writing solely for art's sake, unconcerned by what happens in the “real” world. Rather, they appear to return to the tradition of the “citizen author” figure. Their stance is an optimistic – perhaps idealistic or even naïve – one, and it translates into their non-profit organisations, which both equate storytelling – oral or written, textual or pictorial – with a source of positive impulse for the future. Indeed, as Doyle said to the *Irish Times* in a May 2020 interview, still in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic:<sup>45</sup>

I worry. I wake up feeling anxious, immediately, before my feet are on the floor. I worry about the future, my family's, my own, the country's. But I read the work in this new edition of *Fighting Words* and I stop worrying, or I worry a lot less. Because our future is in great hands.<sup>46</sup>

44. Doyle was awarded the Booker Prize in 2003 and McCann the National Book Award, which hints at the recognition they have gotten from their peers.

45. <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/roddy-doyle-i-read-the-work-in-fighting-words-and-i-stop-worrying-our-future-is-in-great-hands-1.4231572>>, last accessed September 13th, 2022.

46. *Ibid.*

On the *Narrative 4* website, McCann goes further and equates this optimism with the very conception he has of true democracy: “The one true democracy we have is storytelling. It goes across borders, boundaries, genders, wealth, race – everyone has a story to tell.”<sup>47</sup> Doyle might very well have written the same thing. Storytelling is, in McCann’s opinion and words, fundamentally related to empathy and inclusion:

Storytelling facilitates imaginative access to narratives, lives and geographies beyond the ken of our immediate rote of lives and places. For McCann, storytelling is a singular utopian process, and in the art of storytelling one accrues the capacity to imagine and to empathize.<sup>48</sup>

As such, it becomes an ethical intent and process, based on a horizontal form of cooperation between author and reader, much in the same way as connection and cooperation are encouraged between the people involved in *Fighting Words* and *Narrative 4*.

This horizontal cooperation can be found equally in Doyle’s and McCann’s writings. Walter Benjamin<sup>49</sup> actually insists on the collaborative aspect of the storytelling process, which is seen as an accretive phenomenon that is made possible through an exchange<sup>50</sup> during which the storyteller collects their interlocutors’ life experiences before transforming them into stories and passing them on to others, who will be able to appropriate them in turn:

Stories are there to be told, and each story changes with the telling. Time changes them. Logic changes them. Grammar changes them. History changes them. Each story is shifted sideways by each day that unfolds. Nothing ends.<sup>51</sup>

As a matter of fact, according to Benjamin,

the storyteller provides stories of experience with the aim of opening up a communal dialogue [while] the novelist is focused on the pursuit of a solitary, interior investigation [...] Benjamin implies that a vital difference between the work of a storyteller and the work of a novelist is the textual construction of communal space.<sup>52</sup>

Such a communal space is a hybrid, inclusive one, which allows people with or without artistic purposes to express themselves through stories that can use the written or the oral medium.

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47. <<https://narrative4.ie/>>, last accessed September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

48. FLANNERY, Eóin, *Colum McCann and the Aesthetics of Redemption*, Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 2011: 13.

49. BENJAMIN, Walter, *Illuminations*, Fontana, London, 1968: 87.

50. *Ibid.*: 107.

51. McCANN, Colum, “Author, author: Stories Are Here to Be Told”, in *The Guardian*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009, unpaginated.

52. GARDEN, Alison, “Authorship, Orality, and Print Modernity: Representing the Roma in Colum McCann’s *Zoli*”, in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 57.3, 2016: 355.

Focusing on inclusiveness and community, as McCann and Doyle do, is all the more topical as these notions are fundamentally challenged – or rather, crucially redefined – in today’s hypermodern world.

### *b. Hypermodernity and Metamodernism: a new hope?*

Hypermodernity is a form of modernity pushed to its paroxysm in all fields (be it one’s relationship to space, time, distance, speed, self or others), particularly due to recent technological developments. It is synonymous with hyperchrony,<sup>53</sup> hypermobility and hyperspatiality – the latter being defined by “[a] systematic possibility of connection”.<sup>54</sup> In this perspective, networks replace lived-in places as the dominant form of spatiality: “Instead of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations”.<sup>55</sup> The sense of place thus becomes synonymous with (or at least dependent on) a “sense of people” that is fuelled by the sharing process (of stories for instance). The co-presence of others and the relationships which grow out of this imply that it is necessary for hypermodern citizens to develop a form of ‘ethical imagination’; is it also the case for writers and literature?

Green<sup>56</sup> asserted that: “New writing in this beginning of [the 21<sup>st</sup>] century has clear[ed] a space for narratives that re-assert the democratic agenda”. McCann and Doyle, through their literary and activist work, seem to embody this revival of the writer as an active citizen. As such, they can be said to belong to the metamodern movement, which has been defined<sup>57</sup> as an attempt to fill the gaps left by the postmodern ideology following recent historical, social and cultural developments. Indeed, taking the latter into account while trying to write about these hypermodern times turns the postmodern approach obsolete:

The postmodern vernacular has proven increasingly inapt and inept in coming to terms with our changed social situation. This goes for discussions of History as much as it goes for debates about the arts. We can think, here, of the waning of a host of different postmodern impulses [...]: pop art and

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53. GWIAZDZINSKI, Luc (in “Temps et territoires : les pistes de l’hyperchronie”, in *Territoires 2040 : Revue d’études et de prospective*, 6, 2012: 90) explains: “Hyperchrony’ is the name I will give to this temporal organisation of society, of territories and of polychronic individuals [...]. Hyperchrony is a temporal regime that encourages us to work with the tension between the ephemerality of a commitment and the simultaneity of a plurality of commitments, between acceleration and deceleration, intensification and relaxation, improvisation and anticipation.”

54. LUSSAULT, Michel, *Hyper-lieux. Les nouvelles géographies de la mondialisation*, Le Seuil, Paris, 2017: 29, our translation.

55. MASSEY, Doreen, “A Global Sense of Place”, in *Marxism Today* (June issue), 1991: 29.

56. GREEN, Jeremy, *Late Postmodernism – American Fiction at the Millenium*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2004: 196.

57. See VERMEULEN, Timotheus, GIBBONS, Allison & VAN DEN AKKER, Robin, et al., *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*, Rowman & Littlefield International, Lanham, 2017.



deconstructive conceptual art [...]; punk, new wave and grunge's cynicism in popular music; disaffected minimalism in cinema; spectacular formalism in architecture; metafictional irony in literature, as well as the whole emphasis on a dehumanizing cyberspace in science fictions of all kinds.<sup>58</sup>

This entails adopting a perspective that is different, both ethically and aesthetically; several academics have thus coined and developed the notion of “metamodernism” to accommodate this new reality and the art it has been producing:

Whereas the postmoderns ‘recycled’ popular culture, canonised works and dead Masters by means of parody or pastiche, metamodern artists – from writers to artists in a broader sense – increasingly pick out from the scrapheap of history those elements that allow them to resignify the present and reimagine the future.<sup>59</sup>

Therefore, metamodernism “emerges from, and reacts to, the postmodern as much as it is a cultural logic that corresponds to today’s stage of global capitalism.”<sup>60</sup> This logic is an inclusive, complex, perhaps paradoxical one, and it is often said to be characterized by oscillation:

Metamodernism oscillates between what we may call [...] postmodern and pre-postmodern (and often modern) predilections: between irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity, between eclecticism and purity, between deconstruction and construction and so forth. Yet ultimately, it points to a sensibility that should be situated beyond the postmodern.<sup>61</sup>

The metamodernist approach could be compared, both in terms of processes and purposes, with recycling, or even upcycling, using what can and/or should be changed and reused in the old to better fit the present and prepare fertile ground for the future:

Metamodern artists often employ similar strategies to their postmodern predecessors in the way that they eclectically quote past styles, freely use older techniques and playfully adopt traditional conventions. [...] Yet, in doing so, metamodern artists attempt to move beyond the worn-out sensibilities and emptied practices of the postmodernists – not by radically parting with their attitudes and techniques but by incorporating and redirecting them towards new positions and horizons.<sup>62</sup>

This is precisely what Doyle and McCann do as writers: they reuse forms, motives and techniques borrowed from postmodernism and use them with a constructive purpose and with a more optimistic – some might say idealist – energy.

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58. *Ibid.*: 2-3.

59. *Ibid.*: 10.

60. *Ibid.*: 5-6.

61. *Ibid.*: 11.

62. *Ibid.*: 10.

Not unrelatedly, metamodernism marks a return to affect, following postmodernism's insistence on the fragmentation of the self.<sup>63</sup> Reconstructing through affect while using postmodern techniques can be noticed in McCann's *Dancer, Apeirogon* or "Treaty", or in Doyle's *Smile* (2017), which features the cathartic act of putting into words the horrors of the past in order to move forward. *Smile* dwells on an act of narrative manipulation that can be described as formally postmodern and that makes room for the optimistic thrust of the final revelation, however horrible it may be. Metamodern literature's representation of the process of "remembering finally and with certainty"<sup>64</sup> can be seen as a promising catharsis. Doyle and McCann are also part of this metamodern reconstructive wave as citizens, through their organisations: their "recycling" of the traditions of orality and storytelling can therefore be considered as embodiments of the "pragmatic idealism"<sup>65</sup> that characterizes metamodernism.

### Conclusion

The works of authors Roddy Doyle and Colum McCann, as well as their involvement in organisations such as *Fighting Words* and *Narrative 4* come to challenge the longstanding idea according to which writing it down was in fact killing the oral tradition rather than allowing it to go on:

In a much-recounted anecdote, the writer James Hogg recalled a meeting between Sir Walter Scott and Hogg's mother. Responding to Scott's interest in whether a particular song she had sung had ever been printed, Mrs Hogg scolded Scott's interest in printing what were orally transmitted ballads: [There] war never ane o' my sangs prentit till ye prentit them yoursel', an' ye have spoilt them awthegither. They were made for singin' an' no for readin'; but ye hae broken the charm noo, an' they'll never sung mair.

The anecdote serves perfectly to show the uneasy relationship between the enthusiastic antiquarian, eager to 'preserve' remnants of an oral culture, and an actual practitioner of that culture, suspicious of someone who transposes, and thereby destroys, songs from an oral culture into a textual one.<sup>66</sup>

But in a society that has undeniably adopted the written mode of transmission, the shift was unavoidable, as Kelly<sup>67</sup> shows:<sup>68</sup>

63. GIBBONS, Allison, "Contemporary autofiction and metamodern affect", in VERMEULEN, Timotheus, GIBBONS, Allison & VAN DEN AKKER, Robin, et al., *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*, op. cit.: 85.

64. TOTH, Josh, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the Rise of Historioplasmic Metafiction", in *ibid.*: 47.

65. VERMEULEN, Timotheus & VAN DEN AKKER, Robin, "Notes on metamodernism", in *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2:1, 2010, 56-77.

66. KELLY, Jim, "The Oral Tradition and Literature in Ireland and Scotland: Popular Culture in Robert Burns and Charles Maturin.", in *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 1.1, 2007: 61.

67. *Ibid.*: 63.

68. See also KACANDES, Irene, *Talk Fiction: Literature and the Talk Explosion*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2001: 46.

It [the oral tradition] is, on the one hand, consecrated through memory, becoming authoritative through its survival outside of the modern world of a public print-media. On the other hand, the only way in which it can be appreciated by the modern audience is to be recuperated from being merely 'a venerable Deposit' through the means of the public authority of the written word.

What contemporary writers with a firm grip on the evolutions of society such as Doyle and McCann show is that they are ready to live up to any challenge that might come their way in order to perpetuate what is unequivocally not a cultural atavism, but a tradition strongly anchored in Irish cultural and literary history. Both authors seem to be located at the confluence of the traditional and the new, of the modern and the postmodern. As such, they are fundamentally metamodern, be it in their literary work or their commitment as artists-citizens. As a matter of fact, reconstruction and adaptation are two driving principles behind *Fighting Words* and *Narrative 4*, including in terms of the media they resort to. Their use of digital and social media can be perceived as a form of modernisation of the tradition of storytelling, while also raising the question of the temporality of the content which is told. Oral tradition is, by essence, ephemeral, whereas the written production by *Fighting Words* members as well as at least some of the exchanges organised by *Narrative 4* are posted on social media or the internet: they are therefore given a lifespan which is much greater than more traditional forms of storytelling.

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