

# BOOK REVIEW

## ABOUT FAIRY TALE GENRE ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE IRISH NARRATIVE TRADITION

Vito Carrassi. *The Irish Fairy Tale. A Narrative Tradition from the Middle Ages to Yeats and Stephens*. Translated by Kevin Wren. Plymouth: John Cabot University Press, 2012. 207 pp.

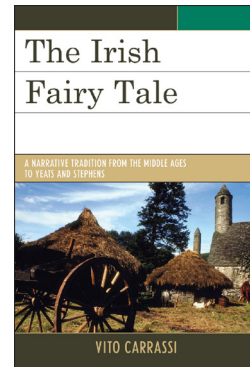
For Vito Carrassi, the author of the book, the main fields of research have involved literary anthropology, narratology and Irish and Italian folklore. The author's treatment of Irish fairy tales was first published in Italian (in 2008) and was translated into English later on.

The heading of the book suggests that it could focus mainly on Irish fairy tales, giving an overview of the changes in the Irish narrative tradition in a temporal perspective. However, the initial impression was misleading: in his treatment Vito Carrassi focuses, above all, on storytelling and narrative tradition in general. Irish folklore is empirical material well known by the author; yet, when reading the book, I had the feeling that it could have been based on the narrative tradition of any European nation. No features intrinsic only to the Irish cultural space or tradition were revealed. Therefore, a more concrete heading would have been more relevant.

The subheading of the book provides a temporal frame for the texts investigated in this research (i.e., from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the 20th century). In connection with the Middle Ages, a brief overview is given about the Christianisation of the Celts, with references to the tradition written down by the monks. Christian culture became well adapted to local culture, which created a favourable basis for the Christianisation of the Celts and merger of Christian features into their oral tradition, thus becoming part of the Irish identity (see, for example, the confrontation between the Anglo-Protestant and the Celtic-Catholic, p. 62). The author's own interest, however, is more focused on the 19th century, when folklore already becomes literary heritage. The author takes a huge leap and steps from the Middle Ages right into the 19th century. Here we could wonder about references to temporal dynamics in the subheading, as the research is not based on this principle.

In the introduction of the book the author provides an overview of the more general principles relating to storytelling, critically dissecting the notions *fairy tale*, *Märchen*, *Sage*, *myth*, *legend*, etc., and discussing collectiveness and individuality, tradition and innovativeness.

According to the author, storytelling is a way of interpreting the world; through narrations of past events a storyteller can mediate to the listeners his or her vision or interpretation of these events. Carrassi sees the narrative tradition as a long chain, which extends from today far into the past. Each narrator forms one ring in the chain. They



use the material from previous narrators and complement the existing stories with new elements, this way providing a new context to the story. So, storytelling involves both collectiveness and individuality, both past and present. Carrassi argues that each independent story is a possible version by itself, and only all of them together form tradition.

The author approaches narrative tradition through written texts. He maintains that instead of reconstructing the original forms of stories, it would be more sensible to explore the tradition of a particular narrative, bearing in mind that it is actually a reconstruction that depends on the material that has persisted in writing, and, therefore, oral tradition can be explored only indirectly (p. 27).

In reference to Walter Ong, several features are elicited, which are inherent in oral storytelling (openness, variability, subjectivity, etc.); if a text is converted into written form, these features disappear and are replaced by the ones inherent in written storytelling (closeness, persistence, objectivity, etc.). Carrassi holds that since the emergence of the written word, we have had to consider the inevitable mutual influence of oral and written culture. Although the author does not refer to Jack Goody, we can detect concurrences in the interpretation of the mutual relations between oral and written cultures. Similarly to Goody, Carrassi sees orality and literacy as two different means of expression, which are employed at a certain moment to describe one and the same culture. While in general, folkloristics has tried to keep the oral and written tradition apart, then Carrassi argues that written text is a version that has been fixated at a certain moment in time, whoever the recorder. The texts written down by a monk, a writer or a folklorist are of the same value. The written text is fixated and does not change any more, whereas the oral version continues to evolve, and therefore it is hard or even impossible to detect the initial version of the story. So, Carrassi understands the oral tradition as an open system prone to changes, whereas written tradition operates as a closed system.

The author has chosen Irish material because in his opinion it reveals at its best the mutual relations between oral storytelling and the written versions reflecting traditional lore. He focuses his analysis on the works of William Butler Yeats, one of the initiators of the Irish Revival Movement. Yeats's (who was generally known as a poet) literary debut consisted in collections of folktales (including fairy tales), which gave an impetus to the abundant use of folk tradition in Irish literature. While Yeats's stories represent oral tradition for the author, then another author, James Stephens's collection clearly represents literature. Yet, Carrassi is convinced that both authors' works represent simultaneously both oral and literary tradition, despite the proportion of oral or literary material in these stories. So, it is not purely oral or purely written tradition but rather their symbiosis. The author argues that both Yeats's and Stephens's fairy tale collections best characterise the interrelations between folklore and literature (see Chapter 3).

By the 19th century, fairy tales had become a privileged genre, which, according to Carrassi, was caused by their ability to simultaneously pass on past tradition and also integrate novel, modern worldview. For me as a reader, the most interesting was Chapter 4, where the author explains the location of the genres *myth* – *legend* – *history* in definite and indefinite fields and the location of the fairy tale in this temporal-spatial dimension. He treats these genres (*myth*, *legend*, *history*) as closed systems. In the transition from myth to legend, from legend to history or from history to myth communal open space emerges, where he places the fairy tale. So, the fairy tale can be viewed as

a transition form, which carries the characteristics of different genres. This kind of viewpoint is undoubtedly interesting.

Although the proportion of the collective and the individual in narrative tradition has been discussed in several chapters, the author focuses on them in more detail in Chapter 6. Proceeding from the structuralist point of view, Carrassi uses the notions of *substructure* and *metastructure*; the former indicates the part in the narrative that is added by the storyteller, whereas the latter represents the part based on tradition.

I would definitely like to point out also Chapter 8, in which the author presents the five phases characterising the evolution of the fairy tale. Here he applies the chronological sequence of the folktale devised by J.W. Foster (see also p. 22). In the preliminary phase, the narrative only establishes itself, and the event/experience predominates here, which is realised as a myth. In the phase following the myth, the narrative is supplemented by personal experience; here informativeness and explanations are essential, and the author links this phase with anecdote genre.

The next phase is constituted by the *legend*. Here the most important is personal relation to the narrated events, as well as the aspect of the truth, which ensures the survival of the narrative in the community. Phase four is dedicated to the folktale. Here folklore yields more space to literature, and orality to literacy. In this phase, historical truth is replaced by human truth. As the last phase, the author mentions the *novella* genre, which is absorbed into literary logic, subjected to its rules and created by the author himself. The storyteller's sequence (*subject or witness – informant or retailer – anecdotalist – storyteller*) also proceeds from this kind of narrative development.

In the author's opinion, movement from orality to literacy is progress (not process as in Goody), which culminates in a fairy tale in literary form. Here we could draw a parallel to Jack Zipes's stance, who maintains that the fairy tale has evolved from the folktale and is largely related to literacy. However, it is quite another issue how well-grounded is the evaluation of oral tradition on the basis of written texts.

In conclusion I would say that the book is really interesting and definitely thought-provoking. However, for me the author is not always convincing, despite his spirited and exuberant style. Also, we can argue if such extensive generalisations could be made about the entire narrative tradition on the basis of written texts, but this is up to the readers to decide.

Kärri Toomeos-Orglaan