



SIEBENQUELL

The day Scheherazade spoke Gaelic



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In his first great work of narrative theology »Stories of God«, John Shea wrote the following: »For humankind is addicted to stories. No matter our mood, in reverie or expectation, panic or peace, we can be found stringing together incidents, and unfolding episodes. We turn our pain into narrative so we can bear it; we turn our ecstasy into narrative so we can prolong it. We all seem to be under the sentence of Scheherazade. We tell our stories to live.« (pp. 7-8)

Here John Shea refers to the most famous heroine of Arabic storytelling, Scheherazade. The grand work »One thousand and one Nights« would not exist without her, for she is the brilliant storyteller who can fill one thousand and one nights with stories. What is perhaps less well known or remembered is the fact that she tells her stories to live.

The Persian sultan Scheherban is a wounded man. He was betrayed by his wife and was convinced that all women are faithless and betrayers. »Thereafter, the Chief Wazir received the command to daily bring him daily a beauty maiden from one of the great families of country to the palace, so that she would become his wife. Yet, already on the very next morning after their wedding, the poor unfortunate was executed as was the first wife. By this cruel method Scheherban wanted to insure that no woman would ever betray him again. This senseless murdering went on for months. Fear and terror filled the

land, for already hundreds of beautiful maidens had lost their young lives. Yet, no one had the confidence to temper the wild sultan or attempted to tame him.«

Scheherazade is the daughter of the Chief Wazir of the Sultan and wants to set an end to his cruelties. She persuades her father to give her to the sultan as his wife. On the first evening of their marriage she begins to tell the sultan a story. But on the following morning she breaks off the story. By doing this she became the first and most successful practitioner of »to be continued«! The sultan desperately wants to know how the story goes on and lets her live another day. That repeats itself over 1001 nights. She tells her stories to live.

In »One thousand and one Nights« Scheherazade speaks Arabic. However, four weeks ago as I was in Cnoc Suain in Ireland, I experienced the day when she spoke Gaelic. Dearbhaill Standún stood before us in a small cottage and told us of her childhood, of the great changes that Ireland had experienced over the last decades and of the slow dying out of venerable customs and traditions that had once marked the land and its people.

I was kept very busy in this hour, because I had to translate the stories of this sensitive storyteller into German without losing myself in her tales. That was no easy task, because I was enchanted by this Scheherazade from Connemara. Here was a woman who told her stories in order to live. In today's Ireland, it is a matter of indifference to many that the lifestyle of this culture of oral tradition is threatened with extinction. Others actually welcome it, because they are ashamed of a time marked by poverty and often associated with a sense of backwardness. Yet others bemoan that matters have taken this turn. Songs, dances and old stories had once been passed on in a direct encounter.

Yet, here stood a woman who did not surrender, complain or simply resign herself to the inevitable. She told of the life that had taken place behind these walls. She told of poetry and song, of immigration and the return home to seek roots, of fueling the fire and baking the bread, of preserving her beloved Gaelic mother tongue and of melodies passed on from musician to musician. She told of a lifestyle, a culture and a language that had been passed on by oral tradition.

However, this culture of the oral tradition has a price. The price is belonging. Belonging is non-negotiable for the deep conversations of life. I can read a book without the author before me, but I can hear no tale without a storyteller. I can play music without the composer before me, but when there are no notes on the sheet, I cannot take up or receive the music without the musician. I can even read the Gospel without a relationship to God, his creation, my neighbour and myself. Notes, texts (even biblical texts) can become a substitute for the direct encounter with life and, therefore, for belonging.

The world will not end when the last story is lost, but rather when the last storyteller dies. It was a blessing to be in the room with Dearbhaill Standún as she told stories so that a way and wisdom of life might continue to life. And I was grateful, for the hour of the last storyteller is a long way off as long as Scheherazade can speak Gaelic.

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