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KEVIN BARRY'S ATLANTIC DRIFT

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ABSTRACT. ***Kevin Barry's Atlantic Drift***. Kevin Barry is a contemporary Irish novelist, short-story writer, dramatist and publisher whose work is set on the island's coastal fringes. This essay is a reading of some stories from There are Little Kingdoms and of his first novel, The City of Bohane. In tracing the importance of liquid and maritime imagery it suggests the importance of a sea-side perspective in his writing, and situates this perspective in wider conversations about ideas of islands and archipelagos.

Keywords*: Coast, Archipelago, Water, Estuary, Tidal, Island*

REZUMAT. ***Deriva atlantică a lui Kevin Barry***. Kevin Barry este un romancier, nuvelist, dramaturg şi publicist contemporan irlandez, a cărui operă este plasată în spaţiul de coastă al insulei. Eseul de faţă este o lectură a unora dintre povestirile din *There are Little Kingdoms* şi al primului său roman, *The City of Bohane*. Subliniind importanţa imaginilor acvatice şi maritime, se sugerează importanţa unei perspective maritime în scriitura acestuia, plasându-se această perspectivă într-o discuţie mai largă despre insule şi arhipelaguri.

Cuvinte cheie: *coastă, arhipelag, apă, estuar, mareic, insulă*

Kevin Barry is a short-story writer, novelist, dramatist and editor, with his partner Olivia Smith, of *Winter Papers*, an annual anthology of contemporary Irish writing. His work is steeped in music, film and television, and owes a debt to a wide range of literary influences, many of which are slight and fleeting[2]. Underpinning this is an attachment to Dermot Healy and John McGahern, two novelists of the mid- and hinterlands whose importance to a writer like Barry makes all the more sense from a coastal, and an archipelagic, perspective. This

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[2] In an interview with Tom Gatti, Barry joked of the HBO series *Wild Wood* that "I robbed so much from it… that they could almost have sued me" (Gatti 2016, 48).

is a thread made of books like *A Goat Song* and Healey's experiments with *Force Ten*, and of the intense attachment to waterways and beaches in McGahern, who is more frequently read as a novelist of the interior, both human and landscape. Barry adds to this mix an uncanny gift for dialogue and a savage humor, which prevails in his most recent short story collection, *Dark Lies the Island*. The binding theme of these sketches is disappointment, as all stays against disaster are temporary in Barry's work, and perhaps more moving for their fragility; his lyricism is braided into the tragic perspective his characters and his narrators have of the human condition, which is for the most part a tilting balance between anxiety and drink[3].

These edgy narratives are often set in wet weather by the sea and as so often in this book, the coastal margin operates as a porous landscape in which the boundaries between innocence and experience fragment and shift. In this, and perhaps in this only, Barry's writing is related to a novel like John Banville's *The Sea*, and also to Neil Hegarty's *Inch Levels*, the pulse of the tides and rain a metaphor of a rhythmic, and a partial, revelation[4]. Barry's writing is less dramatic than Banville or Hegarty in that it does not often rely on the revelation of some hidden secret for its narrative propulsion. But it does share a similar eye for the weather and the water, both of which brim with uncertainty for his characters, as they do in the closing passage of the story from which the collection takes its title. "Dark Lies the Island" is a troubling narrative of self-harm, which imagines a young woman alone in her parent's home, but for the internet. Her family are abroad in Granada and her father has left the family's various kitchen knives in place as a kind of plea for her to stop. She does, and the story ends with her throwing the knives out into the silent bog, which absorbs them. The bog is another kind of internal wetland that bears comparison to coastlines and estuaries, which are visible in this story through the distant view of Clew Bay with its "hundreds of tiny islands", "inky blobs of mood against grey water" (Barry 2013, 162). This meditation begins Barry's journey to his later novel, *Beatlebone*, which is an uproarious imagination of John Lennon's fictional attempt to visit the Mayo island of Dorinish, which he bought sight unseen. The germ of the idea is here as she skips through the old CD collection, racing through *Synchronicity* and *Astral Weeks* to pause on *Revolver* and her father's claim that he could see Lennon's island from a high point beside the house. The story finishes with her own vision of Dorinish between the night cloud:

[3] Maebh Long argues that Barry's melancholy represents his work's engagement with the contemporary outcomes of historical brutality: "The pace, vernacular and grit of *City of Bohane* calls to the dissolution of Patrick McCabe's 'bog gothic' and Roddy Doyle's 'dirty realism'" (Long 2017, 82).

[4] For more on Neil Hegarty's *Inch Levels*, which traces the aftermath of a child's death on the coastline above Derry, see my brief commentary, "'A momentary balance': memory and forgiveness in Inch Levels", *Irish Times*, 19 September 2017.

> She looked down on the dark of Clew Bay and the tiny islands that pay in the murk. The cloudbank shifted, a fraction… and light fell from the quarter-moon and picked up a single island – a low, oblong shape – and it was lit for a moment's slow reveal… Darkly below the moving sheets of water were reliable, never-changing, mesmeric. The hill shapes picked out against the night; the islands, and the Atlantic beyond (Barry 2013, 170-1).

Barry's language is cinematic and ironically lyrical, the always shifting ocean appearing for one moment to be permanent in its motions. The view from the edge is taken to its literal extreme in *Dark Lies the Island*'s exceptional story, "Fjord of Killary", which was first published in the *New Yorker*. In its bare parts it is a lock in drawn in the grey shades of local color, the new owner of this west coast hotel living some dream of escape from the responsibilities of middle-aged life. Except that one set of cares is replaced by another, the staff and the customers as unpredictable as the weather, and the Atlantic its own strange self, an ocean that "turned out to gibber rather than murmur… Gibber, gibber – whoosh" (Barry 2013, 30). Barry is brilliant at writing these sonic signatures, which give so many of his stories a weird and unsettling soundtrack, which his characters try to drown in a chorus of swearing. They exist in a state of constant sensory overload, for which metaphors of floods and downpour are the perfect companion. This story's narrator is a poet and the near disaster of the flood that abates just in time provokes him to "random phrases and images" that would soon take "their predestined rhythms" (Barry 2013, 45). The mountains, the sea and the narrow strip of human habitation are the basis for Barry's larger aesthetic, the energy of his writing in direct relation to the dolour of his surroundings, the "bleakness, the lapidary rhythms of the water, the vast schizophrenic skies" (Barry 2013, 37).

The psychedelic effect of the western weather creates a visionary aesthetic that runs throughout Barry's work, however demotic. His stories give the reader the impression of being only lightly tethered together, much as his characters are thrown together in rag-tag groups whose fractious interactions drive the dialogue and the narrative. They move in shifting packs through an archipelago that extends in a maritime circuit from the north west coast of Ireland south to Cork and from there north-east towards Wales and Liverpool, a city that features frequently in his writing, and they do so in the wake of larger political and economic realignments, of devolution, recession and the death of the Celtic Tiger. Barry's fiction wanders this Atlantic fringe in fog, rain and the occasional glimmer of sun, and the melancholy that attends this climate is of a piece with his interest in those moments where a character's imagination meets provincial reality. This is the source of his association with McGahern, which is a shared foundation for his two otherwise very different novels, *The City of Bohane* and *Beatlebone*. Water at all times represents for Barry a medium by

which to describe, but not contain, the fluid conditions of a mental life; "we all have our creeks", he writes in "Last Days of the Buffalos", and lagoons, riverbanks and estuaries are a key part of his literary landscape. Each also shares certain narrative structures, which are common to the coastal work in the period of late empire and after, and each is a miniature epic of space and time, intimately tied to the material and cultural history of the places in which they take place. Despite the novel's futuristic setting, Kevin Barry establishes Bohane early on as a classic city in this mode.

> Our city is built along a run of these bluffs that bank and canyon the Bohane river. The streets tumble down to the river, it is a black and swift-moving rush at the base of almost every street, as black as the bog waters that feed it, and a couple of miles downstream the river rounds the last of the bluffs and there enters the murmurous ocean. The ocean is not directly seen from the city, but at all times there is the ozone rumour of its proximity, a rasp on the air, like a hoarseness. (Barry 2011, 7)

If Barry nods towards Joyce in his prose, he extends the logic of a global exchange of goods to the immigration of new populations to the island of Ireland since *The City of Bohane* is home to unexpected ethnicities of Asians and Caribbeans, which has the further effect of shifting the social taboos of settled society by the central role travellers play in the narrative[5]. The social architecture of post-independence Ireland still exists, but its power is now symbolic, as if nationalism lost the long war against the continual migration of people within and across state borders. So Barry describes the life of De Valera Street as an ethnic promenade:

> Here came the sullen Polacks and the Back Trace crones. Here came the natty Africans and the big lunks of bog-spawn polis. Here came the pikey blow-ins and the washed-up Madagascars. Here came the women of the Rises down the 98 steps to buy tabs and tights and mackerel… De Valera Street was where all converged, was where all trails tangled and knotted… (Barry 2011, 31)

This Ireland is not made of ideals but signs, and objects signal the global networks of which Bohane is a fictional part[6]. Irish nationalism's obsession with

[5] For more on this subject read Mary Burke (2009).

[6] Annie Galvin takes this argument in a different global direction with her reading of 'Barry's novel as an exemplar of post-crash fiction that develops a trenchant critique of the age of austerity via its literary aesthetics. An extremely violent speculative fiction set in the year 2053, *City of Bohane* differs from other post-crash Irish novels that deploy gritty realism to confront the wreckage of financial collapse and subsequent austerity' (Galvin 2018, 2). In this, Galvin compares Barry's novel to Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2013) and Colin Barrett's *Young Skins* (2013).

cultural purity can be read as a postcolonial reaction to imperial sovereignty; another perspective might suggest that the relationship between characters and things is the most constant guide to the continual migrations that are the push and pull of coastal life. Ireland exhibits this condition strongly as one island attached by history to another, the archipelago of which extended across the oceans. If that global empire has long receded into political history, its material structures still remain, sedimented now with the history of the nation states that followed it. The crisis that these modern states face are still global and Barry's novel emerges as uncertainty grows that nationalism can answer the financial and environmental challenges it faces. This uncertainty registers in Bohane's condition as a place of seepage, the peninsula on which it is built "a many-hooked lure" (Barry 2011, 31) for the senses. The sound of *fado* carries over a variegated landscape of bogs, poppy fields and turloughs, in which memory is a rendition of the city's global past, as registered in the presence of clothes, scents and furnishing. The Gant approaches an old lover, Macu, and finds her in a "pair of suede capri pants dyed to a shade approaching the dull radiance of turmeric, a ribbed black top of sheer silk that hugged her lithe frame, a wrap of golden fur cut from an Iberian lynx…" (140) This is a description at once historic and fantastic, the old association of the west of Ireland with Spain dressed now in the fur of a wild animal. The description is in tune with the novel's sensuous tone; Bohane is a city of distraction and desire, a place of fairs, pubs and opiates. This, again, is a coastal condition. In a passage reminiscent of scenes from Jack Yeats's sketches, Barry describes the arrival of carnival to the dockside of Bohane:

> And of course many a carnie was sprung from the peninsula originally. We would be the sort, outside in Bohane, who'd run away with the Merries as quick as you'd look at us. (Barry 2011, 266)

The king of this fair day scene is Logan Hartnett, and he too is dressed in a worldly fashion, "a pair of Spanish Harlem arsekickers" and a "dress-shkelp in his belt, ivory-handled" (245). Ivory is an established symbol of Ireland's imperial connections at least since Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*[7] and is an essential part of the material fabric of Bohane's social system, a system built with the flexibility of the coastal place in mind. This is the last point to make of *The City of Bohane*, which is that the city and the sea are partners in the construction of human habitation. The infrastructure of this mutual possession begins at the coastal fringe and seeps into the city through estuaries, docksides, quays and

[7] In one vivid passage Stephen Dedalus imagines empire and India through the recitation of schoolboy Latin, a gesture itself to the twin powers of Rome and London in his formation: "The word now shone in his brain, clearer and brighter than any ivory sawn from the mottled tusks of elephants. Ivory, ivoire, avorio, ebur. One of the first examples that he had learnt in Latin had run: *India mittit ebur*…" (Joyce 2007, 156.

wharfs. The motion of water throughout represents a liquid transition between the expanse of the ocean and the interlocked streetscapes of the city. Barry describes this as a "North Atlantic drift" (Barry 2011, 249), a transitional space between land and sea that is defined by its colour and conditions:

> Bohane was green and grey and brown:
> The bluish green of wrack and lichen.
> The grey of flint and rockpool.
> The moist brown of dulse and intertidal sand (249).

As the borders of the coastal city peter out in the intertidal zone between land and sea the coastal work's origins in the novel form may be traced back to the fictions of Erskine Childers and James Joyce, both of whom observed the coastal margins of island life as symbolic terrains of global modernity[8]. Patterson and Carson renovated this tradition in their books about Belfast a century later, but all are connected by their attention to the long decline of the British Empire and its legacies in Ireland. Barry returns to the early twentieth century's fascination with the western seaboard in his treatment of a fictional city, but he too integrates Ireland with a world tide of objects and ideas, his imaginative territory a seeping ground that is both land and sea.

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[8] Erskine Childers published his classic work of maritime espionage, *The Riddle of the Sands*, in 1903. Its combination of literary flair, knowledge of sailing and warnings of a war with Germany gave the book a reputation for insight that it still enjoys. Childers had a turbulent and fascinating life as a British establishment figure, Irish gunrunner and eventual victim of the Irish civil war. See, for example, Andrew Boyle (1977).