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ON "MAKING ODDKIN" IN SARA BAUME'S *SPILL SIMMER FALTER WITHER*

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ABSTRACT. ***On "Making Oddkin" in Sara Baume's Spill Simmer Falter Wither***. This study argues that in its figuration of the protagonist's complex engagement with the dog that enables him to articulate his autobiographical self, Sara Baume's 2015 novel *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* adopts a critical posthumanist stance on the abyssal rift conventionally understood to separate human and non-human animals. Tapping the potential for dismantling the anthropocentric mindset, the odd kinship Ray forms with One Eye becomes a way of disrupting essentialist conceptions of selfhood and articulating alliances that catalyse the narrator's reconciliation with personal trauma and his ethically responsible repositioning in the world at large.

Keywords*: Sara Baume, Gothic, companion species, Donna Haraway, oddkin, Jacques Derrida, l'animot*

REZUMAT. ***"Înrudiri bizare" în romanul "Spill Simmer Falter Wither" de Sara Baume***. Argumentul studiului de față este acela că prin configurarea unei relații de ordin simbiotic între câine, ca specie de companie, și protagonist, ca animal autobiografic, romanul *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* (2015) de Sara Baume se raliază unei poziții critic-postumaniste asupra faliei abisale care, în mod conventional, trasează linia de demarcație între uman și nonuman. Având potențialul de destabilizare a mentalității antropocentrice, straniile alianțe dintre Ray și One Eye devin o modalitate de bruiere a concepțiilor identitare esențialiste, proximitatea animalului catalizând reconcilierea naratorului cu trauma personală și repoziționarea sa etic-responsabilă în lume.

Cuvinte cheie*: Sara Baume, ficțiunea gotică, creaturile de companie, Donna Haraway, stranii alianțe, Jacques Derrida, l'animot*

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Asked to describe in one sentence *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* (2015), Sara Baume's answer was "Monologue to dog, with birds, trees and sea-junk" (2016). Arguably unequivocal, the author's terse description was somewhat at odds with her novel's richly textured, mellifluous prose and intensely atmospheric descriptions of Ireland's coastal and inland nature. Structured as a four-tiered narrative that follows the progression of the seasons, *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* traces the touching encounter and ensuing companionship between Ray, a 57-year old misanthrope who harbours dark family secrets and lives isolated in an Irish village by the sea, and One Eye, a mutilated dog with an aggressive penchant for other canids. Over the course of the spring, summer, fall and winter they spend together, the recluse and the ratter become symbiotically entwined, forming a "kinship of misfits" (Clark 2017). Ray compassionately assists in the dog's physical recovery from a badger attack and, in exchange, seeks solace in the proximity of the animal that he has taken into his care and confidence, recounting to it, to the reader or, ultimately, to himself a story of parental abuse, trauma and guilt.

Hailed as a "vivid debut" that deserved praise for its "poetic and heartbreaking meditation on life after grief" and for its "visceral descriptions of human and animal life" (Magennis 2015, 45), the novel received a plethora of accolades in both Ireland and the UK, winning that year the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, the Hennessy New Irish Writing Award and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. Admired for the Beckettian untranslatability of a title that "begs to be misremembered" (O'Connor 2015) as its paronomastic suggestiveness captures the dissonant effects of the changing seasons on the natural world, Baume's novel has also been commended for its Shandean technique of digressive narration, which spurs the protagonist to break down of the boundaries of his self-enclosed world and impels him to offer hospitality to the animal "interlocutor" or for its McGahernesque apprehension of nature (Clark 2017). To top this, Estévez-Saá points out that like fellow contemporary Irish writers Deirdre Madden, Eimear McBride and Caitriona Lally, Baume shows a Joycean interest in the decipherment of the "most subtle intricacies of the human condition" and in representing the "most radical crises" an individual may be facing in the process of character construction (2018, 213).

What many reviewers, entranced by Baume's intriguing paean to Ireland's rural landscapes, have failed to notice is, however, the subdued Gothic mode in which the protagonist's self-narrative is recounted. In Baume's text, Ray relates a haunting tale of self-estrangement from a family whose very memory becomes the locus of actual horror for him. It is a memory whose telling is, for many years, forestalled by the uncanny realisation that what he perceived as the inhumanity of Robin, his father, who terrorised him as a child,

may have been replicated in the questionable humanity of his own unspeakable act: passively attending the ghastly spectacle of his parent's accidental death. If the humanity of "natural" bonds within Ray's family is cast into doubt in this Gothic plot of dysfunctional relational dynamics, an alternative to blood kinship is provided in the (anti)Odyssean section of the road trip, mapping the manifold entanglement of Ray's life story with One Eye – the aptly named, scarred badger-baiting dog, whose injuries bear testimony to the inhuman treatments it received from its previous owners. Including One Eye in the narration of Ray's flight from the ancestral home decentralises the dominantly human viewpoint, supplementing it with nonhegemonic perspectives on the vulnerability and fragility of life across the animal spectrum. The "unnatural" kinship (in the sense of alliance) that develops between Ray and One Eye pushes towards the "situated emergence of more livable worlds" for both human and dog (Haraway 2003, 51). Their ecology of interconnectivity unsettles the father's presumptuous humanist legacy that man represents the ultimate measure of all else and teaches Ray how to be human by allowing himself to nurture his kinship with the nonhuman other. This post/human symbiosis releases the human and the animal from their respective associations with the inhuman. On the one hand, Ray redeems his unethical gesture of retaliation against the injustices Robin inflicted upon him. On the other hand, One Eye's co-option in the production of Ray's narrative shakes the solidity of the culture/nature or animal/human dichotomy, suggesting that animality can be reconceptualised as the "constitutive inside", rather than as the abjected outside of what "properly" constitutes humanity (Oliver 2009, 11, 20-21).

Human, all too (in)human

Like Seamus Deane, John Banville, Claire Keegan, Patrick McCabe and Neil Jordan, Sara Baume approaches typical Irish Gothic themes: fractured genealogies and savage domestic relations, undisclosed secrets and ghostly revenants, Oedipal crises and transgressive excesses that foreground the family as a space of unnatural attachments and pathological deviations. Margot Backus has summed up the range of generic tropes that trigger uncanny psychological effects in Irish Gothic narratives that are bent on deconstructing the notion of the family as a nurturing space of domestic intimacy and on highlighting it as a hostile, alienating environment: "the guileless protagonist, a forbidden liaison, secret pacts, a labyrinthine interior space in which normative social values are inverted, and the return of the repressed – within a contemporary, realist landscape" (Backus 1999, 1). Sharply recorded in the account of the novel's orphaned albeit aging protagonist, the dissolution of human relations within

the family and their derailment into reiterable patterns of atrocity that set the father and the son against each other is projected against the backdrop of a conventional Gothic setting, the parental house inside which Ray was forcibly cloistered for most of his early youth and which, even in late adulthood, he accepts as a place of self-exile from the outside world, a place where all he can do is "lie down and let life leave its footprints on me." (Baume 2015, 48).

The ghostliness of Ray's isolated existence prior to his cohabitation with the dog is condensed in the haunted atmosphere of the house he inherits from his father through an act of illicit property transmission and patrimony usurpation: "a salmon pink house, which is my father's salmon pink house and my solitary confinement, which is home" (Baume 2015, 12). Inside the house, the spectral traces of the dead father are everywhere: from the roof space that shelters his rat-chewed skeleton, to the tattered slippers Ray still wears or the two towels and two brushes he keeps restocking in the bathroom. Rather than accommodating the self within the folds of familiarity and domestic tranquillity, the house continues to exude the uncanny atmosphere of a site that still bears witness to unfathomable past scenes of child abuse. To be more gruesomely or grotesquely precise, it encloses, within its very walls, the decaying corpse of the father. Locked in the attic, the decomposing remains are a relentless reminder of a scene in which, echoing the inhumanising abuse he experienced in his youth, Ray disavowed his own humanity, doing nothing to prevent his father's passing. In slow motion, mapping every object surrounding that scene of death, Ray's memory activates the coordinates of a place whose immobility literalises his inability to empathise with the dying man:

> My father never got up from the table all the time he was choking. He didn't thrash around; he didn't knock anything over. It seemed like it took a very long time for the old man's choked face to drop and settle against the formica. He placed his nose neatly between the crockery and leaned the weight of his head down after it without upsetting so much as a teaspoon. I remember looking at the dash of discoloured milk at the bottom of the bowl from which he'd eaten his bran flakes, at the smears of grease on the plate from which he'd forked his sausages up. I remember noticing there weren't any pieces left. The one he choked on must have been the last. (Baume 2015, 231)

Echoing the defining *topos* of Irish Gothic fiction, the decrepit and derelict Big House, with its attendant anxieties of carceral interment or illegitimate emplacement in the absence of the father's rightful authority, the "salmon pink house" is conveyed as a psycho-spatial hub of Oedipal transgressions, of muted rebelliousness and repressed anguish. "I haven't fought in any wars or fallen in

love. I've never even punched a man or held a woman's hand. I haven't lived high or full", Ray confesses about his "squat, vacant life" (Baume 2015, 48). Uncomplicated ways of managing the limits between inside outside, like making a phone call or answering the doorbell, are beyond his grasp. Ray's (self)concealment like a shameful, abject secret in the house, whose boundaries he could not cross even to negotiate the slightest exchange with the village community, coupled with other unresolved traumas of his youth – for instance, his abandonment in the wilderness by his father and his return home with the help of a stranger or his not being allowed to play with the other children and go to school despite his avid reading habits – provided sufficient reason for his amnesiac blockages or for his inability to speak out his grievances:

> Whatever the name of the woman who drove me home, I knew my father told her I'd run away, and wouldn't come back, and couldn't be found. Because I wasn't a right-minded little boy. I wasn't all there. I was special. See how that explains why nobody came to ring the bell again? It explains why I never started school, never lined up with all the other little boys and girls, all those all there and right-minded and unspecial. It explains why I never got a chance to play on the straightforward swings and slides and see-saws. Now do you see? Now I see. I see how uncourageous I was. I see how I only asked about the neighbour woman because I was yet too afraid to ask about my mother woman instead. The old man was dead and still I hadn't the nerve to confront him. (Baume 2015, 233-34)

The Gothic house, Ian Duncan, shows, "insistently thematise[s] the structure of a dislocated origin" encapsulating, "in settings of decayed ancestral power […] the malign equation between an origin we have lost and an alien force that invades our borders, haunts our mansions, possesses our souls" (2010, 23). In Baume's novel, the inhumanity of past child-rearing practices cannot be erased in the present, despite the disappearance of the irresponsible father who may have turned his own progeny into a scapegoat of his own fallibilities and vulnerabilities. As the author suggests, Ray walks a thin "line between situational unhappiness and mental illness" (Clark 2017). Indeed, granted the reliability of Ray's narrative standpoint, his father deployed his entire energies towards disavowing their kinship and erasing the mark of paternity from his child, seeking to deny the latter's sanity and normality or to restrict his access to networks of sociability.

In turn, Ray's recollections of growing up in the shadow of a tyrannical father are so anguishing that he occasionally fantasises about obliterating all biological ties to him or to an ever-absent mother, pretending that "I was born all alone without any fuss, without any gore. And right here, in my father's house. I like to believe the house itself gave birth to me, that I slithered down

the chimney, fell ignobly into the fire grate and inhaled my first breath of cold, swirling ash" (Baume 2015, 13). We learn that his phantasy about the primal scene of birth from which all human presence is written off becomes a symptom of his later aversion to mankind, hearkening back to a debilitating memory implanted in young Ray's mind by his father, who held his offspring responsible for the early demise of his wife Ruby during childbirth. However, towards the end of the last section, "Wither", when the narrator discovers his mother's tombstone during one of his strolls with the dog, he eventually realises that her death, which actually occurred when he was a two-year old, was unrelated to his coming into the world:

> To find my mother, my mother's grave. But there's no need. Now I find her easily. All the years I never looked, and now here is my mother. Here she was all along. OUR DEARLY BELOVED RUBY. On a plain grey slab in the perpetual downpour. DIED 1956 AGE 23 the headstone says. I answer by saying it out loud.
> 'Nineteen fifty-six,' I say, 'when I was two.'
> You know I believed she died when I was born, because I was born, and that my father always blamed me. I believed I'd never known her, and now I see I knew her two whole years and can't remember a single moment. And so I wonder why he blamed me anyway, and if he didn't blame me at all, why was he always so unkind? (2015, 243)

Whereas the humanity of the father's conduct continues to be shrouded in uncertainty, particularly since the legacy of pain he bestowed upon his son defies all rational explanation, unravelling the secret surrounding the loss of the mother raises the possibility that his father may also have been susceptible to suffering. Insufficiently processed, the grief caused by Ruby's death led her husband to cease communicating with Ray, who paradoxically grew up as a sort of feral child within the household, with all but a precarious grasp of language as a social skill and with no tools for carrying out his own work of mourning for his father. Left unaddressed, past trauma seeps across generational boundaries, violently erupting into a present whose spinning out-of-kilter is, nonetheless, provisionally put on hold by the new alliances and kinships the protagonist forms outside the realm of the human and beyond the Gothic trap(ping)s of the familial house.

Nonhuman, all too (post)human

Suppressed for decades, Ray's childhood memories of his father's absenteeism, maltreatment and the psychological harm he inflicted upon him surge into a life narrative that can be voiced neither in the proximity of other humans, nor in the intimate space of selfhood, but in "conversation" with the

animal that "becomes a projection of the narrator's desires, losses and thwarted longings" (O'Connor 2015). Opening up a space of enunciation that does not belong exclusively to the narrating "I" but also includes the "you" of his companion and would-be interlocutor, the dog Ray has saved from the pound, Baume's text appears, therefore, to be dialogical, in its positing of the dog as the direct addressee of the narrator's autobiographical confession. In an attempt to fathom the innermost recesses of human memory, a memory haunted by debilitating grief and foreclosed mourning (for the dead mother) and by the secret of unutterable guilt (for the death of the father), Ray's second-person narrative expands its compass beyond the bounds of his insulated self and disseminates across a network of "distributed reflexivity" (Wolfe 2008, 116), in which the monologising self cedes primacy of vision and ethical agency to the animal other.

In its questioning of the deeply embedded dualisms underpinning anthropocentric thought and practices and in its representation of the new relationalities made possible by Ray's empathetic response to the animals' plight, Baume's text participates in the posthumanist Derridean critique of the "abyssal rupture" deemed to separate human and nonhuman animals, grounded in the idea of man being superior to the other species, which are consigned to a domain of abject, disposable otherness (2008, 28-29). Thus, like Derrida's dizzying recognition, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am,* that the cat's gaze reciprocates his own, impelling his interrogation of the limits and polar divisions between the singular species ("we men" or "I, a human") and the countless other species collapsed under the same appellative ("what we call animals"),

> It can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will have ever given me more food for thinking through this absolute alterity of the neighbour or of the next (-door) than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat. (2008, 11)

Ray senses that his ontological security is destabilised when the dog returns his gaze, albeit from the photographic frame of an objectified representation. From the outset, while collecting the dog from the animal shelter, Ray recognises the deep-seated connection he shares with One Eye, going as far as to claim it is the animal that has found him and not the other way around:

> You're sellotaped to the inside pane of the jumble shop window. A photograph of your mangled face and underneath an appeal for a COMPASSIONATE & TOLERANT OWNER. A PERSON WITHOUT OTHER PETS & WITHOUT CHILDREN UNDER FOUR. […]
> Your photograph is the least distinct and your face is the most grisly. I have to bend down to inspect you and as I move, the shadows shift with

> my bending body and blank out the glass of the jumble shop window, and I see myself instead. I see my head sticking out of your back like a bizarre excrescence. I see my own mangled face peering dolefully from the black. (Baume 2015, 3)

Meeting across the interstitial surface of the window pane are their overlapping facial outlines. The piercing detail that jams and clears, at the same time, Ray's field of vision is the composite structure of the "bizarre" shape he forms together with the dog, activating his awareness of the "heterogeneous multiplicity of the living" that the animal other encapsulates (Derrida 2008, 31). As an "inappropriate/d other" himself (Haraway 2004, 69), Ray refuses the tyranny of the limit. His keenly discerning eye detects myriad problematic areas of interspecies relations. He notices, for instance, how the nature reserve in his village, squeezed amidst an oil refinery and a power station, barely suffices as breeding ground for the mallards, grebes and herons: "sandwiched by the tunelessness of industry, the birds shriek and sing, defiantly" (Baume 2015, 14). Moreover, the jumble shop becomes the "tiny refuge of imperfection" where the pictures of countless incarcerated animals presage an intimation of his shared vulnerability with them:

> I always stop to gawp at the window display and it always makes me feel a little less horrible, less strange. But I've never noticed the notices before. There are several, each with a few lines of text beneath a hazy photograph. Altogether they form a hotchpotch of pleading eyes, foreheads worried into furry folds, tails frozen to a hopeful wag. The sentences underneath use words like NEUTERED, VACCINATED, MICROCHIPPED, CRATETRAINED. Every wet nose in the window is alleged to be searching for its FOREVER HOME. (Baume 2015, 4)

As Derrida points out, the reciprocating animal gaze "offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man" (Derrida 2008, 12). The animal responds not by immersing itself in language, but by prompting a response from the human in the form of a self-interrogation. The animal – rendered through a portmanteau term coined by Derrida, *l'animot*, with its twofold connotations of plurality and verbality – compels a reconsideration of the logic of the limit, not by effacing all differences between humans and nonhumans, but by "multiplying its figures, […] complicating, thickening, delinearising, folding, and dividing the line" (Derrida 2008, 12). Like Derrida's *animot*, One Eye elicits Ray's self-introspection and a redefinition of the limits of his humanity in the form of the autobiographical story he tells. It is a story in which he discards all claims to species superiority, refusing to cordon off the

animal's living space from his own or to issue commands that might discipline or constrain the dog's movements:

> 'BOLD!' I holler, 'BOLD BOLD BOLD!' But I know it's wrong of me to scold what's natural to you. I'm sorry, I shouldn't holler […]
> I don't want to turn you into one of those battery-powered toys that yap and flip when you slide their switch. I was wrong to tell you you're bold. I was wrong to try and impose something of my humanness upon you, when being human never did me any good. (Baume 2015, 38)

True, dogs do not speak "furry humanese", as Donna Haraway states, barring temptations of sentimentalising anthropomorphism (2003, 49). Nor do they *not* have a capacity to respond, for as our "companion species", they are "relentlessly becoming-with" and co-evolving with humans (Haraway 2016, 13). Living-with the animal drives Ray to attempt envisaging the world from a canine's perspective and he even claims to reconstruct One Eye's back story by dreaming as his dog might: "I dream I'm inside a pen with a water dish but no food bowl. […] Tonight, I dream of the place where you came from, the place where you were starved" (Baume 2015, 35). The manifold entwinements between Ray and One Eye – their "strangeness", their disfigurement and reclusiveness – probe and push the limits of the human-animal binary, as their "ontological choreography" (Haraway 2003, 51) blurs, confuses and admixes the boundaries that ought to separate human and dog, creatures that "inhabit not just different genera and divergent families, but altogether different orders" (2003, 1).

For Ray, as seen above, blood kin is the mark of corrupted genealogies that ensure the transmission of violence, guilt and trauma within the family across generations and that block the process of individuation and selfhood formation. Even as he approaches old age, he feels that to face the pressures of human sociality, he must wear an invisible "spacesuit which buffers me from other people" (Baume 2015, 9). The alternative of a family that is hollowed out of compassion, affection and support is the trans-species kinship he forges with the dog, with which he builds those new relationalities and reciprocal "response-abilities" that should intimately bind humans and non-humans in post-anthropocentric times: in other words, "making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible" (Haraway 2016, 2).

The "relationship is the smallest possible unit of analysis", as Haraway insists in her seminal text about the cyborg, that other trope of "heterogeneous associations", "queer confederacies" and compulsory symbioses (besides the coyote, the vampire or companion species) that has enabled her to reconfigure the notion of kinship in contemporary technoculture (2004, 315, 128). "Where

were you last winter?", Ray asks One Eye as the end of their journey together approaches. "I find it hard to picture a time when we were simultaneously alive, yet separate. Now you are like a bonus limb. Now you are my third leg, an unlimping leg, and I am the eye you lost" (Baume 2015, 40). While embracing the messy complexity of his co-constituted subjectivity in the presence of the animal, Baume's narrator simultaneously acknowledges the irreducible difference of the animal other and engages responsibly and empathetically in telling, at once, a story of self-realisation and a narrative of man's "thinking-with" and "becoming-with" what Haraway describes as "naturalcultural multispecies" – the reciprocally shaping encounters between species or the areas of interspecies relationality that render the nature/culture distinction inoperable or indiscernible (2016, 40). Tapping the potential for dismantling the anthropocentric mindset, the odd kinship Ray forms with One Eye becomes a way of disrupting essentialist conceptions of selfhood and articulating alliances that catalyse the narrator's reconciliation with personal trauma and his ethically responsible repositioning in the world at large.

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