



Infinite Spaces: Kevin Barry's Lives of Quiet Desperation

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When Kevin Barry's *Night Boat to Tangier* was published in 2019, both reviewers and readers recognized the situational correspondence between the novel's central characters, a pair of spent Irish drug lords "in their low fifties" (2) inscribed in the act of conversationally unraveling and re-raveling their mostly deplorable lives, and Samuel Beckett's brace of bowler-topped tramps in *Waiting for Godot* (1949). Both the structure and the texture of Barry's novel call to mind Vivian Mercier's famous observation regarding Beckett's play: "nothing happens, *twice*" (1956, 6). Yet while nodding toward *Godot*, *Night Boat* is hardly derivative. Barry's primary characters, Maurice Hearne and Charlie Redmond, have complex lives of their own, and in the foreign setting of a ferry terminal in Algeciras, Spain, they are forced to confront not only the limitations of their elementary Spanish but also their inadequacy in articulating the

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emotional complexity of what has brought them to Algeciras: their search for Maurice's daughter Dilly who has been missing for three years.

While the drama of *Night Boat* is specific unto itself, driven by its own narrative inner workings of character, setting, and situation, it nonetheless speaks to issues involving Irish males (in particular) that resonate beyond its pages. In fact, given that much of Barry's writing is grounded in not only the physical but also the social landscapes of contemporary Ireland, the central thematic focus in his entire body of work to date—three collections of stories, and two novels preceding *Night Boat*—dovetails interestingly with, for example, the work of fellow contemporary Irish fiction writer Roddy Doyle, whose short stories and novels constitute a virtual catalogue of afflictions suffered by Irish males: passionless marriages, entropic drifting away from friends and family, jobs with no intrinsic rewards, the emptiness of retirement years, routines that have become ruts, the mire of memories of childhood bullying and clerical abuse.¹ Indeed, many of Doyle's characters might be read as case studies drawn from the cross-sectional report—*Men's Health in Numbers*—published in 2020 by the Men's Health Forum in Ireland,² a charitable organization founded in 1999 to help identify and thus to help address the wide variety of maladies endemic among Irish males.

In subtle contrast, Barry's characters tend to suffer not from one or another specific malady but from a more general malaise of maleness in its various stages from adolescence to midlife. Common denominators among his characters include loneliness, isolation, and low self-esteem, but perhaps the most telling of all is their inability to articulate, either for themselves or for others, the essence of what ails them. In effect, they are afflicted by a silence—whether absolute or relative—that operates both as a core symptom of that broad-spectrum malaise and as a cause of even deeper suffering. In his wide-ranging study *Silence in Philosophy, Literature, and Art* (2017), Steven L. Bindeman identifies and engages with the myriad ways in which thinkers and artists—ranging from Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein and Heidegger to Giacometti, Borges, Beckett, and Kafka—contemplate and deploy silence in a variety of expressive genres. “Specifically”, Bindeman writes, “the issue under investigation is how and why certain philosophers and artists approach silence, especially

¹ For a detailed survey of Doyle's male characters, see O'Grady (2020).

² See Devine and Early (2020).

from the perspective of phenomenology, as a meaningful experience which unfolds in both predictable and unpredictable ways over time" (2). While Kevin Barry's fiction may illustrate—or even dramatize—how “silence has a force all its own” (Bindeman, 4), his inscribing of silence in his narratives is premised not on philosophical grounds but rather on the same foundational conventions of literary social realism that shape Doyle's narratives: silence operates in Kevin Barry's stories and novels not as a concept but in the same fashion it operates in the real lives of Irish males.

Night Boat to Tangier is a clear case in point. Throughout his writing, Barry has invested many of his characters (and often his narrators) with sparkling loquaciousness. *Night Boat* is likewise premised on talk, but here the irony is palpable: Maurice and Charlie speak in the rich vernacular of their native Cork City and environs, but as hardboiled gangsters, they have always been emotionally tongue-tied when they most needed to speak their hearts. The alien and alienating ferry terminal in Algeciras, the narrative space of the novel, thus becomes for both characters and reader the thematic space as well that Blaise Pascal imprinted famously in his *Pensées*: “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me” (1962, 221). In fact, Pascal's theme pervades Barry's writing from the very start of his career.

And perhaps inevitably so, for Barry's reputation as a writer to be reckoned with was launched with his emergence as a practitioner of the short story, a form intrinsically invested in the interior life of, usually, a single protagonist. Specifically, Barry's stories reflect an essential principle identified by Irish short story master Frank O'Connor in his study *The Lonely Voice*: “Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society. (...) As a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel—an intense awareness of human loneliness” (1963, 19). Obviously, Barry's writing is an exception to O'Connor's generalization about novels: the incapacity of his male characters in particular to give voice to their innermost feelings complicates not only the crises that spark his short stories but also the larger conflicts that propel his novels.

SUBMERGED POPULATION GROUP

This incapacity begins with his short stories, many of which are practically textbook illustrations of O'Connor's principle. For instance, while James, the protagonist of “Atlantic City”, the opening story in Barry's

first collection, *There Are Little Kingdoms* (2007), appears to be a suave operator in a provincial Irish town—a pool shark, a pinball wizard, and a young man with a cavalier way with women—the bravado that garners for him the admiration of his fellow late-adolescent males at the local arcade belies an insecurity and a lack of actual, meaningful self-esteem. His social interactions are all set pieces revolving around his superficial swagger. This is dramatized with the arrival of a bevy of suntanned girls who trigger a painful shyness among the other male “habituees” of the arcade; in contrast, James comes across as a paragon of male poise and self-assurance, owning the moment like he owns the pool table:

He laid the cue across the table, rubbed his meaty hands together, straightened his shoulders, closed his eyes, shook his head in wonderment and he said:

‘Ladies? I’ll say one thing now for nothing. I’ve seen ye lookin’ well in yere time but never as well as ye’re lookin’ tonight.’ (Barry 2007, 6)

In a community where concern over the anemic state of the county Gaelic football club seems paramount, James holds even more localized status for his prowess at pinball and at pool. Finessing a shot with all eyes watching him, he gets the approval his impoverished ego craves:

‘Shot, James!’

‘Shot, Jamesie.’

‘Shot boy.’

‘You’re a fuckin’ lunatic, James,’ said Carmody, and tapped the butt of his cue three times on the concrete floor.

‘Sure I know that.’ (9)

But as the story ultimately reveals, the persona that James projects within the closed world of the arcade is a mere façade, and as the other young men in the story begin to get on with their lives as summer turns to autumn, James literally can no longer live with himself:

For one that would move to the city, another would stay in the town, some would take up the older trades, others would try out new paths, and one on a low September evening would swim out too far and drown, and it would be James. (12)

Clearly, he becomes a casualty of his inability to realize socially—and/or to express verbally—an authentic substantive self.

Wanting in social skills and without any notion (or ambition) of upward, or even lateral, mobility, James not only introduces Barry's readers to the enervated and enervating socio-economic world that most of his characters belong to but in doing so also affirms another of Frank O'Connor's principles:

In fact, the short story has never had a hero.

What it has instead is a submerged population group—a bad phrase which

I have had to use for want of a better. That submerged population changes its character from writer to writer, from generation to generation. It may be Gogol's officials, Turgenev's serfs, Maupassant's prostitutes, Chekhov's doctors and teachers, Sherwood Anderson's provincials, always dreaming of escape. (18)

Suffering as much from poverty of spirit as poverty of purse, Barry's characters are indeed “submerged” in the sense that, mostly lacking self-agency in all dimensions of their lives—domestic, romantic, social, economic—they remain marginalized by their inability to translate either feelings into thoughts and words or thoughts and words into elevating actions.

This is literally the case with the unnamed protagonist-narrator in “Across the Rooftops”, a story in Barry's second collection, *Dark Lies the Island* (2012). At its simplest, this narrative recounts the protagonist's failed attempt to seduce a young woman he claims to be deeply enamored of: “My want for her was intense and long-standing—three months, at least; an eternity” (Barry 2013, 1). But his intentions seem doomed from the start, as their daybreak conversation on a Cork City rooftop leads nowhere: “Every line had the dry inflected drag of irony—feeling was unmentionable. We talked about everything except the space between us” (2). Even an eventual shared kiss fails to spark passion:

I leaned in without pause—I did not allow the words to jumble up in my head and forbid me—and I placed my lips on hers.

She responded well enough—the opening of the lips was made, our jawbones worked slowly and devoutly, but . . . we did not ascend to the heavens; the kiss did not take. (5)

Had the story ended there, or thereabouts, it might have been little more than an anecdote of a failed late-adolescent hook-up.

Ultimately, however, the story operates on a more profound level than such a liaison would ordinarily portend. Though set at the height of midsummer, it concludes with a late-summer mood of existential listlessness and wistfulness:

With her steps' fading, the summer went, even as the sun came higher across the rooftops and warmed the stone ledge and the slates, and I looked out across the still, quiet city, and I sat there for hours and for months and for years. I sat there until all that had been about us faded again to nothing, until the sound of the crowd died and the music had ended, and we all trailed home along the sleeping streets, with youth packed away, and life about to begin. (6)

Is it just coincidence that the rhythms of Barry's sentences echo the rhythms of Frank O'Connor's at the end of his signature short story "Guests of the Nation" (1981)? Reflecting on his role in the execution of two British soldiers during the Irish War of Independence, O'Connor's narrator is likewise at a loss for words to describe the complexity of his emotions: "It is so strange what you feel at such moments, and not to be written afterwards" (O'Connor 1981, 12). He feels isolated even from his comrade-in-arms and the old woman who hosted them and their doomed prisoners in her remote rural cottage:

Noble says he felt he seen everything ten times as big, perceiving nothing around him but the little patch of black bog with the two big Englishmen stiffening into it; but with me it was the other way, as though the patch of bog where the two Englishmen were was a thousand miles away from me, and even Noble mumbling just behind me and the old woman and the birds and the bloody stars were all far away, and I was somehow very small and very lonely. And anything that ever happened me after I never felt the same about again. (O'Connor 1981, 12)

Coincidence or not, it is surely telling that the epigraph to *The Lonely Voice* is that quotation from Pascal and that O'Connor engages with it directly in elaborating on his distinction between novels and short stories: "while we often read a familiar novel again for companionship, we approach the short story in a very different mood. It is more akin to the

mood of Pascal's saying: *Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie*" (1963, 19).

The vast majority of Barry's protagonists in his short stories are male, yet even a rare female protagonist like Hannah Cryan in the title story of his third collection, *That Old Country Music* (2020), is not immune to the inarticulateness that afflicts his male characters. Seventeen years old and pregnant with the child of her thirty-two-year-old fiancé—her mother's former fiancé, no less, a feckless tattoo artist named Setanta Bromell—Hannah waits in a decrepit van in the Curlew Mountains of County Sligo for Setanta to return on his dirtbike from robbing a petrol station in the town of Castlebaldwin below; the takings from that heist will fund their plan to run away to England. As Hannah waits and waits, she is one more Barry character at a loss for words to sound out her own predicament:

Hannah's lips moved softly at the sight and made a wordless murmuring.

Beneath her breath, she made the words of a Taylor Swift song for distraction but the song did not take.

She hummed a string of four or five notes against the meanness, not knowing where they came from nor how. (2020, 156)

Not until she imagines her fiancé in custody for his botched attempt at robbery does her wordlessness lift: "Setanta Browell was—and here the words came unbidden, as if from an old ballad recalled—already in chains" (158).

Eventually, realizing that Setanta has in fact duped her and run off on his own, Hannah becomes the embodiment of that loneliness overarched by silence described by O'Connor: "The strongest impulse she had was not towards love but towards that burning loneliness, and she knew by nature the tune's circle and turn—it's the way the wound wants the knife wants the wound wants the knife" (160). Indeed, while throughout the story Hannah recalls the gist of Setanta's constant scheming blather—"He spoke often of fatedness and of meant-to-be's" (155)—the only words spoken as such in the entire narrative come at the very end and are not even hers but those of her mother who, betrayed by the same man not many months earlier, comes to rescue Hannah from the lonely mountain where Setanta had abandoned her: "Oh you poor fool, she said. Oh you poor sweet fucking fool" (161).

LIVES OF QUIET DESPERATION

True to the intrinsic nature of their fictive subgenre, Barry's short stories tend toward "epiphanic" illumination of essentially static characters at a particular moment of crisis. As Frank O'Connor explains: "since a whole lifetime must be crowded into a few minutes, those minutes must be carefully chosen indeed and lit by an unearthly glow that enables us to distinguish present, past, and future as though they were all contemporaneous" (1963, 22). In contrast, the protagonists of Barry's novels tend to be more complex, and their narratives are fueled by protracted conflicts that lead inevitably to conspicuous development of character. Across his three novels, the principal characters all happen to share a predicament of existence that is also encapsulated in an epigraph—in this case the epigraph to a significant Irish novel, *The Threshold of Quiet* (1917) by Daniel Corkery, who was coincidentally young Frank O'Connor's literary mentor in Cork City. A committed practitioner of literary social realism, Corkery precedes his narrative with a resonant quotation from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854): "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation".³

That condition of living certainly applies to the central male characters of Barry's first novel, *City of Bohane* (2011). Set in the span of October of 2053 to August of 2054, the action of this decidedly dystopian novel takes place in what appears to be an amalgam, physical and social, of the cities of Limerick and Cork:

Whatever's wrong with us is coming in off that river. No argument: the taint of badness on the city's air is a taint off that river. This is the Bohane river we're talking about. A blackwater surge, malevolent, it roars in off the Big Nothin' wastes and the city was spawned by it and was named for it: city of Bohane. (Barry 2012, 3)

Written in a futuristic Hiberno-English dialect, this dark and daring narrative is fraught with sex, drugs, and violence—not a bit of it gratuitous. This is Barry's projection not just of a west-of-Ireland urban environment four decades hence but of Ireland as a whole—a projection no doubt based on what he imagines as the country's trajectory from its early twenty-first-century state of social, economic, and political dysfunction.

³ See Corkery (1917).

The novel centers around an archetypal conflict—a contest between two gang lords, Logan Hartnett and the Gant Broderick, for the affections of Logan's wife of twenty-five years, Immaculata (Macu). This deep-rooted rivalry is played out in graphic detail in an elaborately drawn streetscape and with a shockingly memorable cast of supporting characters, including Logan's ninety-year-old mother Girly—the Hartnett matriarch who from her high bedroom literally oversees all of the mayhem and the bloodshed in the streets of Bohane—and a couple of teenage thugs whose very names, Wolfie and Fucker, denote the degeneration of Irish culture... or perhaps, ultimately, of human culture in the Irish context. The novel ends with an apparent changing of the guard, the rise to power of a *femme fatale* of Chinese stock, a ruthless 17-year-old “killer-gal” named Jenni Ching. Is her supplanting of the superannuated and decrepit Girly modeled on the paradigm of the famous final scene of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* when the old woman is transformed into “a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen” (Yeats 1935, 88)? The final scene of the novel has Jenni riding bareback on a palomino flanked by “a half-dozen wilding girls march[ing] in ceremonial guard (...) [wearing] cross-slung dirk-belts, groin-kicker boots, white vinyl zip-ups, black satin gym shorts”:

The procession moved, and the chained dogs in the merchant yards along the front covered in the cold shadows of morning, their own thin flanks rippling with fright.

Hung upon the livid air a sequence of whinnies and pleadings, the dogs, and the first taste of the new life came to Jenni

as she rode out the measured beat of her ascension and a bump of fear, too, y'check me

as she searched already the eyes of her own ranks for that yellow light, ambition's pale gleam

as she saw in the brightening sky at a slow fade the lost-time's shimmer pass. (277)

Clearly, there is a post-apocalyptic aura to the novel. Or is it ‘apocalypse now’? As Pete Hamill observed in his review of *City of Bohane* published in the *New York Times Book Review* in April of 2012: “None of it is real, yet all of it feels true” (10).

In any case, Logan Hartnett and the Gant Broderick suffer not only from their common obsession with Macu but also, like the protagonists of Barry's short stories, from a broader malaise that handicaps them

in their social interactions with others. In one respect, each of them is simply a version of the stereotypical strong silent male, though Logan, as the reigning overlord of Bohane, also carries the burden of Shakespeare's King Henry IV: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" (1946, III.i.31). In fact, Logan's anxiety regarding his hold on both Bohane and his wife's affections ignites the action of the novel: secretly engineering the return of his romantic archrival the Gant, who left the city in heart-break twenty-five years earlier, as a way to test Macu's marital fidelity, Logan inadvertently adds explosive fuel to the social unrest that constantly simmers between and among the various familial and ethnic factions that operate within Bohane and environs. Even while readerly attention may be drawn to—even riveted by—the intensification of the backroom scheming and the back-alley double dealing (and death dealing) that characterizes life in the precincts of Smoketown, the Northside Rises, the Back Trace, New Town, and Beau Vista, that tense romantic triangle involving Macu, Logan, and the Gant commands attention as well for what it reveals about the particular nature of the desperation experienced by two savagely ruthless and seemingly callously insensitive men.

Obviously, their ruthlessness is a character trait essential for an individual's surviving in the deeply ingrained culture of violence in and around Bohane. But both Logan and the Gant manifest symptoms of exposure to the "taint" that the novel's narrator (eventually revealed to be an archivist at the Ancient & Historical Bohane Film Society) mentions at the outset. Coincidentally, that taint is pervasive in a way that locates Bohane relative to a number of similarly afflicted cities identified by Alberto Manguel in his review of Turkish author Orhan Pamuk's memoir, *Istanbul*:

All happy cities resemble one another, to paraphrase what Tolstoy famously observed of families, but each melancholy city is melancholy in its own way. The *saudade* of Lisbon, the *tristeza* of Burgos, the *mufa* of Buenos Aires, the *mestizia* of Turin, the *Traurigkeit* of Vienna, the ennui of Alexandria, the ghostliness of Prague, the glumness of Glasgow, the dispiritedness of Boston share only on the surface a common sense of melancholy. (2005, 9)

For Pamuk, Istanbul's melancholy is the spiritual anguish known as *huzun*. Although Barry's narrator associates a "lingering *saudade*" (33) with Macu, who is of Portuguese descent, his description of the screech of the inbound El train heard by the Gant in the darkness just before dawn is specific to what afflicts Bohane:

The screech of it was a soul's screech. If you were lying there in bed, lonesome, and succumbed to poetical thoughts, that screech would go through you. It happens we are often just so in Bohane. No better men for the poetical thoughts. (12)

In fact, that passage both glosses and is glossed by the Irish word *iarmhairacht*, defined thus by linguist Manchán Magan: “the loneliness you feel at cockcrow, when you are the only person awake and experience that existential pang of disconnection, of not belonging” (2020, 50).

But it is not *just* matutinal: clearly, the “taint”, which is equal parts nostalgia for “the lost-time” (a vague notion of a romanticized distant past) and angst with regard to present and future prospects, contributes to the all-consuming desperation that both Logan and the Gant experience in their longings for Macu—a literal “quiet” desperation that each can express only in awkwardly written letters to the object of their desire. Filling three-and-a-half pages of text, the Gant’s letter, replete with run-on sentences and other grammatical shortcomings, concludes with his plea for an in-person meeting with Macu that acknowledges his inadequacy at translating his emotions into written words: “If there are things I should say to you now after all this time then I could say them much better in person” (78). But when he finally does meet her, words fail him even more profoundly:

His belly swollen with fright, he was ill with nerves—it could all end right here and now—but as with death, you look away from the approach of darkness, and he was at their door, and he knocked, and all the words he had prepared were in that instant lost, forgotten, gone, and he was reduced to a single word—almost at once she answered—and he said that word: ‘Macu.’ (131)

Logan fares no better. Over twenty-five years of marriage with Macu, he has never managed to bridge the emotional distance between them shaped by the demands of “the Hartnett Fancy”, the cold-blooded enterprise that he manages under the relentlessly watchful eye of his mother, Girly. Eventually, familiarity breeding discontent, Macu leaves him, his mounting anxiety about the Fancy having exacerbated a growing estrangement, the surface of their domestic life belying the emptiness that lies beneath, apparently unspoken and unaddressed: “Catch them in the morning light—so elegant and childless” (20). Like the Gant, he closes his letter

with a plea: “If you choose to come back to me, Macu, you will meet me at the Café Aliados. At 12 midnight. On the night of August Fair” (229).

Mirroring the Gant’s reunion with Macu, Barry and his narrator also close the scene of Logan’s anticipated meeting with his wife with a single word—a single name—being spoken:

And at midnight precisely, on this the night of August Fair, the cut yellow flowers in a vase on the Aliados countertop trembled as the sideway door opened, and stilled again as it closed, and he turned a quiet swivel on his stool.

‘Well’, she said.

A set of ninety Bohane Fairs were graven in the hard sketch lines of her face, and already he was resigned.

‘Girly’, he said. (276)

Logan will not be heard from again in the novel.

PRIMAL SCREAM

In Barry’s second novel, *Beatlebone* (2015), the desperation may have a different origin, but it is just as silent as in *Bohane...* until suddenly it is not. The novel’s premise involves the author’s imagining the return to Ireland, in 1978, of John Lennon of The Beatles fame on a quest to locate and to visit a small island he bought some years earlier in Clew Bay off the coast of County Mayo. Mired in a period of artistic stagnation, Barry’s fictionalized Lennon hopes that a return to uninhabited Dorinish Island will allow him to exorcise the ghosts of his childhood and adolescence through a self-guided session of the Primal Scream therapy that the real-life Lennon and his second wife, Yoko Ono, practiced earlier in the 1970s under the guidance of California psychologist Dr. Arthur Janov:

Dr. Janov said he should Scream, and often, and he saw at once an island in his mind.

Windfucked, seabeatens.

The west of Ireland—the place of the old blood. (Barry 2015, 24)

Specifically, Barry’s Lennon suffers from repressed memories of parental abandonment that continues to shape—actually, to stunt—his adult self and also his artistic self. While he engages in small talk and speaks enough to deal with practicalities, much of the thematic substance of *Beatlebone*

emerges through Barry's decision to narrate the novel primarily from the point of view of his single central character—Lennon—that critic James Wood labels “free indirect style”, a third-person narration that “seems to want to bend itself around that character, wants to merge with that character, to take on his or her way of thinking and speaking” (2008, 7–8):

Thanks to free indirect style, we see things through the character's eyes and language but also through the author's eyes and language. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once. A gap opens between author and character, and the bridge—which is free indirect style itself—between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance. (Wood, 11)

In Barry's telling, Lennon is consumed by the darkness of his childhood that he harbors inside: “Love, blood, fate, death, sex, the void, mother, father, cunt and prick—these are the things on his mind” (2015, 6).

Much of the novel thus involves Lennon's attempt to get to Dorinish with the help of his colorful local “handler”, Cornelius O'Grady, while also evading the inevitable horde of paparazzi intent on publicizing his every move. The plot mostly comprises detours to sundry hostleries, including the decaying Amethyst Hotel on Achill Island where the proprietor and an uninhibitedly freebasing, sexually ravenous young couple from England also practice screaming, as well as “ranting”, as a form of therapy. Lennon participates halfheartedly in one ranting session with them in which he seems, finally, to purge himself verbally, ending a long tirade with an emotional flourish:

(. . .) yeah I miss my dead fucking mam and yeah I want to piss on me dead fucking dad's fucking bones coz he didn't fuck her enough and he didn't make her fucking happy and you know what that makes me?

A delighted silence—three breaths are held.

(. . .) It makes me fucking special fucking no-how! (165)

But after retreating to a cave on the seashore, he also retreats back into himself with the wisdom afforded him (at least in a hallucinatory moment) by a talking seal: not that “You want to take the pain away”, but that “You want to take the numbness away” (187–88). And with that newfound

wisdom, he immediately conceives of his next musical project, a nine-song album titled *Beatlebone*: “Now in the cave he has all of its words and all of its noise and all of its squall” (190).

Following an essayistic interlude in which the author recounts his writing of the novel—his curiosity about John Lennon’s purchasing of Dorinish that became a fascination with the real-life Lennon and his real-life anxieties and obsessions and torments that dovetailed with some of Barry’s own—the fictional narrative resumes with an imagining of the recording of that album, whose tracks are entirely instrumental until Lennon informs the studio engineer: “I’m going to turn myself inside out. I’m going to fucking express myself, Charlie. I’ll do the fucking words for this thing. About what happened to me on the island” (273). He then delivers a six-page stream-of-consciousness monologue punctuated only with dashes (shades of Molly Bloom in the “Penelope” episode of *Ulysses*) that, his lifelong angst seemingly finally expunged, concludes: “and we can be quiet now if we want to be” (281).

NOTHING HAPPENS, *TWICE*

Breaking his silence with that torrent of words, Barry’s Lennon apparently arrives at a place of equanimity: “The examined life turns out to be a pain in the stones. The only escape from yourself is to scream and fuck and make and do. He will not go back any more to the old places. He will not go back to Sefton Park [in Liverpool, where his parents first fatefully met]” (2015, 293–94). In contrast, while Maurice Hearne and Charlie Redmond may at times talk virtually non-stop in *Night Boat to Tangier*, their talk is mostly idle—mostly just small talk to help them while away as much as twenty-four hours of waiting in the ferry terminal in Algeciras, Spain, in the hope of catching sight of Maurice’s daughter Dilly who may, or may not, be either arriving or departing on a ferry from or to Tangier in Morocco. Their entire mission there is provisional, and so are their lives, which they live at a hardened remove from “the seven distractions” that they observe in the faces of the other people passing through the terminal: “love, grief, pain, sentimentality, avarice, lust, want-of-death” (Barry 2019, 2).

In fact, as the omniscient narrator notes very early in the novel, “Their talk is a shield against feeling” (11), an observation reinforced by the novel’s ensuing structure, which comprises fourteen chapters alternating—odd-numbered and even-numbered, until the final two chapters

flip that order—between Maurice and Charlie’s “real-time” conversations in the ferry terminal in October of 2018 and flashbacks (mostly Maurice’s) to various locales between 1994 and 2015: Cork City, the Maam Valley in Connemara, Barcelona, London, Berehaven and Beara in west County Cork, Seville, Segovia, and Algeciras. One of those flashbacks, remembering very late in the novel the time they spent together in the Mental Hospital in Cork in 2013, long after Charlie had an affair with Maurice’s wife Cynthia that earned him the ligament of his right knee being severed by a knife blade, resurrects what might pass for intimacy between the two men:

These last days at the Bughouse. They lay in the twin beds beside each other, and, late one morning, a moment opened that allowed the words to be spoken—

You know I think the girl could be mine, Maurice? I mean there is a possibility.

I know there is, Charlie. I know that. (189)

Otherwise, while the back-and-forth dialogue between the longtime drug-dealing cronies is rich in native wit and vernacular expressiveness, their colorful talk rarely rises above mundane matters:

With a shudder Maurice Hearne reaches sharply for his upper back and shows a glance of fear—

Did you ever get a whistling-type pain out the left lung, Mr Redmond?

Is it one of those sinister-type pains that you’ve never had before, Mr Hearne?

’Tis, yeah.

Give it time, it’ll be like an old pal to you.

Maurice leans in to his friend, and he speaks with fear and very quietly now.

I’m fifty-one years to fucken Jesus, Charlie.

You rang the bell, Maurice. Whatever happens. You got more out of it than I did.

That’s true.

I’m a tragic case.

Ah here. (91–92)

Might, then, Maurice and Charlie and their particular brand of talking be located relative to Seamus Deane's incisive distinction between the thematic implications of talk in the plays of Sean O'Casey and of John Millington Synge? Deane explains:

The best talkers in O'Casey's early plays are the most useless people because talk has taken over entirely from action in a situation where no remedial action seems possible. The contrast with Synge is striking. Synge's people talk themselves out of inertia into action. O'Casey's people talk themselves into inertia for fear of action. In each case, talking is the central activity. The subject of the talk is the death of a community. The mode of talking is full of vitality. The vitality intensifies as the community degenerates. As a result, we finally witness the emergence of a wonderful individual performance, a virtuoso display in the midst of dilapidation. That is one of the appropriate images for Irish writing between Wilde and Beckett. (1986, 94)

In effect, for all their capacity for talk, both Maurice and Charlie suffer from their silence—their mute reticence—*beyond* that capacity, that led first to Cynthia's lonely death (already dying of cancer, she walks into the ocean and drowns herself) and then to Dilly's estrangement from the two most important men in her life. They suffer from that "shield against feeling" that inures them not only to their own sensitivities but also to the sensitive needs of others, especially those whom they purport to love. Very early in *Night Boat to Tangier*, a young man whom Maurice and Charlie interrogate in the ferry terminal about Dilly's whereabouts boldly asks them a rhetorical question in return: "Why'd she take off? Benny says. You ask yourself that ever?" (29). The answer emerges in the penultimate chapter of the novel, a flashback centered on mother and daughter: "Dilly, what you have to know? Is that you can't be around them. You need to go away and not come back" (201). Tellingly, the inconclusive conversation that concludes the novel takes a page out of *Waiting for Godot*, whose final scene mirrors, by reversing, the speeches of the two main characters at the end of Act I:

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

They do not move.

Curtain. (Beckett 1954, 60)

Likewise, the final exchange between Charlie and Maurice in *Night Boat to Tangier* begins with a question—“Is there any end in sight, Maurice?” (214)—that echoes the novel’s opening: “Would you say there’s any end in sight, Charlie?” (1). Of course, the implications of their question differs from those in the question posed in *Godot*: their situation is neither lower-case nor upper-case “existential” but simply circumstantial. Simply put, now mere epigones of their former vital—and sometimes vicious—selves, Maurice and Charlie continue to lead loquacious lives that cannot belie the dilapidated state of their meaningful personal relationships.

THE OLD LOST VOICES

From the evidence of a new short story published in *The New Yorker* in April of 2022, the “eternal silence” of “infinite spaces” holds ongoing thematic interest for Barry. Equal parts ghost story and COVID-19 narrative, “The Pub with No Beer” is set in northwestern County Mayo within sight of the Stags, an archipelago of five small islands in Broadhaven Bay. Visiting his closed public house regularly during the COVID lockdown, the unnamed protagonist, a third-generation proprietor of the modest drinking establishment, attempts with diminishing effectiveness to create an illusion of normalcy: “These afternoon visits to the pub were to simulate routine but now they were failing. They were filling increasingly with the old lost voices” (Barry 2022, 53). Those voices belong to the “ghosts” of the regular customers of the pub—many of them, like his father, dead and gone. In effect, the silence that pervades the pub actually “speaks” to the protagonist in a way that resonates far beyond just the current moment of social isolation and emotional blankness resulting from the pandemic protocols: “The meagerness of his world closed in. In such a quietness all was amplified” (52).

Broadly, that “meagerness” is made manifest in the ghostly snippets of speech that echo in the protagonist’s head in the silence of the shuttered public house. These are the banalities, the clichés, the Polonius-like platitudes of the small-minded people his father actively attracted to his pub: “No singsongs; no recitals; no displays of romantic affection. This had been a house that favored schoolmasters, respectable farmers, country solicitors” (52). Tinged with local color that gives the story both its dark humor and its ring of authenticity, these disembodied voices reveal the mean texture of life in a backwater community. One regular customer made belittling high drama of his son’s learning to drive a car:

'Softly, softly, turn the wheel softly', Michael Batt said. 'Until I'm blue in the face I'm telling that boy to turn the wheel soft but will he listen to me? In my sweet hole he will. Boy took down cejitry from the mother's side. He sits in behind that wheel and it's like he's wrestling a fucken gorilla'. (51)

Another harped nightly on an aggressive dog she encountered every evening on her way to the pub:

'That particular dog comes at me one more time and it's getting the quare end of the stick', Alice Nealon said. 'Every night, half gone seven, on the one walk I can feekin' muster, the bastard come at me, him with the long face out of the Sullivan yard. Eejit dog! Eejit dog come lollopin'! Next time I'll open the ignorant face on him'. (51)

And so on.

But the story ultimately hinges on the arrival at the door of a former resident of the hamlet who shows up looking for a drink in the midst of the pandemic. Whimsically wondering if this unexpected visitor could be Death but then guessing correctly that the man is a grown son of a family of O'Caseys that had drifted away three decades earlier, the protagonist is subsequently taken aback when the visitor insinuates that as a publican's son, he would have felt socially superior to a hard knocks family living in a decrepit hovel on the shore road. Confronted with this long-held begrudgery, the protagonist is left to reflect on how he came to spend his life in a community where such narrowness and pettiness can prevail, and he recalls a trenchant observation regarding his father by one of his long-ago patrons, "a Church of Ireland farmer from the Ox Mountains transplanted by a peculiar marriage to the North Mayo plain—from beyond the place himself, he could see it more clearly": "True enough that his father had been a careful man. Growing up in the house of such a man you could hear yourself thinking. Without a single word being said you could sense that you were being measured for what tasks might be presented. The running of the pub was at slow length presented" (52).

In an online interview synchronized with the publication of "The Pub with No Beer" in *The New Yorker*, Kevin Barry reflects specifically on how one by-product of the pandemic, at least in Ireland, was a silence that, in his description, sounds uncannily reminiscent of that inscribed by Pascal in his *Pensées*:

That sense of vast quietude that opened out during the lockdown period created a space for dreaming in. We could really tune in to ourselves. When you're taken away from your usual routines, your usual flapping about, your usual hustle, you begin to see your life in very stark relief. You consider the choices you've made, the paths you've taken. This is what's happened with the publican. He is realizing that the role he's taken on in life is just that—it's playacting; many other roles were possible, but he adapted himself to the most convenient casting. (Leyshon 2022)

For his protagonist in the story, the silence that at first allows the old voices to enter his head, more or less benignly, becomes more disconcerting after the O'Casey revenant rattles him: "He was alone with the voices. He wanted to be away from them. He wanted to travel past himself and across the fields of the bay and beyond the horizon and into the equinox, into the light" (Barry 2022, 53). As the voices fade out, he almost resolves to act on the illumination of his life—in effect, the epiphany—they contributed to: "He might sell the fucking place yet" (53).

But the story's ending suggests otherwise. Like so many of the characters in the "submerged population group" of Barry's short stories, the protagonist in "The Pub with No Beer" can only (as Frank O'Connor observes) dream of escape: reflexively wiping down the same bar that his bachelor great-uncle and then his soberly "steady" father had wiped down for decades before him, he is clearly trapped in a life of generational "meagerness". While not of the epic scale of Logan Hartnett's and the Gant Broderick's unarticulated and inarticulate melancholy in *City of Bohane*, in inheriting the pub "without a single word being said" between father and son, he also inherited via the silence of that transaction the life of "quiet desperation" of his forebears. Ultimately, he is resigned to his lot. While not quite to the degree of John Lennon in *Beatlebone*, he apparently achieves after that disquieting encounter with O'Casey a level of equanimity that predicts his future: "There was across the slate-gray water a sensation of great silence and now somehow of peace" (Barry 2022, 53). The silence, broken and then restored, has given him both sharp clarity and cold comfort.

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