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"Such a Sense of Home": The Poetic Drama of Sebastian Barry

by CHRISTOPHER MURRAY

Sebastian Barry, born in Dublin in 1955, is a new voice in the Irish theatre. His first play of any consequence, *Boss Grady's Boys*, was staged at the Peacock Theatre in August 1988 and quickly established his reputation as poet in the theatre, an adversarial voice to the postmodernism of Tom MacIntyre and others. Prior to 1988 Barry had established himself as a poet of Mahon-like elegance. The title of his first volume, *The Water-Colourist* (1983), declares his avocation. His sensibility responds to place, to figures in a landscape, to sensuous experience. But behind the lyric grace there is, to cite Eliot on Marvell, a tough reasonableness, an ability to confront with intelligence the ebb and flow of history. "Poetry is history's companion," he remarks; "we are all defined/and half-created by poetry."¹ That "half-created" betrays Barry's romantic, Wordsworthian roots; one must speculate how the other half is created. Blake is also important for Barry, who is something of a visionary. Indeed, Blake lies behind Barry's second play, *Prayers of Sherkin* (1990), as we shall see. But it is with Eliot we must begin.

In "The Room of Rhetoric," from which the above quotation derives, Barry declares his belief in a particular operation of time. Poetry "by its nature always manages/. . . to be of the present/and of Eliot's trinity of time too" (181). Barry is interested in bringing together past and present, the contemporary and the universal. What is imagined, consequently, and what is remembered can co-exist, just as the "familiar compound ghost" can march alongside Eliot through the war-torn streets of London in *Four Quartets* (140). Indeed, ghosts pervade Barry's drama without the least embarrassment, and serve to represent a characteristic angle of vision whereby "Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future,/And time future contained in time past" (*Four Quartets*, 117). When "time present" is on the stage the whole idea becomes suddenly dynamic.

Barry's development from lyric poet to playwright is reminiscent of Eliot's account of the "third voice." The first voice is that of the lyricist, the poet talking to himself; the second is that of the poet talking to an audience; the third is the voice of a created character no longer to be identified with the poet. Barry has commented on his own entry into the theatre: "When you get older it's a relief

1. Sebastian Barry, "The Room of Rhetoric," *The Inherited Boundaries: Younger Poets of the Republic of Ireland (Mountrath)*: Dolmen Press, 1986), p. 184.

to lose yourself and celebrate the private glories and sufferings of others by giving them a dramatic voice.”² At the same time Barry’s plays are not in verse. His idea of drama must not, therefore, be narrowly identified with that movement in twentieth-century poetry, from Yeats to Eliot and beyond, which attempted to restore poetic drama as such. Barry writes in prose. So, too, did Synge. Eliot’s idea of poetic drama in *The Sacred Wood* (68) is helpful once again: “The essential is not . . . that drama should be written in verse. . . . The essential is to get upon the stage this precise statement of life which is at the same time a point of view, a world—a world which the author’s mind has subjected to a complete process of simplification.” As if in agreement, Barry has said, “The god of the theatre is clarity.”³ What we find in his two plays is a simplicity which encapsulates a world startling, strange, and prophetic.

Eliot may serve as one parameter for a consideration of Barry’s work. But there are others, equally if not more significant. As well as poet, Barry is novelist and anthologist. Each of these avocations supplies information on his artistic purposes. His novel *The Engine of Owl-Light* is an ambitious attempt to move Irish fiction past Joyce and Beckett towards magic realism and the inventions of Salman Rushdie. It is a very sophisticated endeavor indeed, offering a clue to Barry’s use of fantasy, memory, and the supernatural in his drama. He plays variations on a set of acute relationships, mother-son and son-father in particular, and mobilizes form to encounter and define experience as process, as a coming to terms with loss, horror, time: “history is unliveable” (48). The general motive is an anxiety to define: “because I want to get this old piece mapped, and not go back there again” (12).

In 1986 Barry edited an anthology of younger Irish poets (including himself) under the significant title *The Inherited Boundaries*. He called his Introduction “The History and Topography of Nowhere.” Here he tilted against the prominent profile generally accorded contemporary Northern Irish poets. Barry wishes to mark out a space for a different kind of sensibility with different interests and commitments: “They [Northern poets] are a fine part of the story of an island, but they are no part of the story of the Republic” (14). The anthology was being presented as “the latest report on . . . the poetic of a separate, little-understood place” (14). It was necessary to “map” such a territory, if you were a native, “mapping and talking about the visible and invisible country” (15), because “A country without definition is nowhere at all” (16). From Barry’s perspective, as a poet born in the 1950s, Ireland was still without definition, simply because “it was a new place” (18). The seven poets whose work he gathered together had this for their theme: and here Barry obviously detects a common voice among his contemporaries:

They are talking about a new country that is often hard to make out at all in the thick rain of its history and the sullen, dangerous roll of the land—but they are talking about it with the courage of an inherited, doubted freedom. (29)

2. Cited by Katie Donovan, “Why Many Irish Poets are Taking to the Stage,” *Irish Times*, 22 January 1991, p. 10.

3. In interview with Arminia Wallace, “The Prodigious Sebastian Barry,” *Irish Times*, 17 November 1990, Weekend: Arts, p. 5. This remark follows upon a mention of Barry’s first play, *The Pentagonal Dream*, a highly experimental one-woman play of undisguised obscurity, staged at the Damer Hall in February 1986.

It is at this point one can address *Boss Grady's Boys*. It is a play about two old men, brothers, living in loneliness and poverty on the Cork-Kerry border. One of the brothers, Josey, is simple-minded; the other, Mick, a tailor, has spent his life minding him. We are and are not in the familiar tradition of Irish peasant drama. We may and may not think of the plays of M. J. Molloy and John B. Keane. Certainly, Barry lays down a basis in realism from which the sociological plight of these two forgotten, anachronistic brothers may be viewed. Certainly, there is the pastoral ideal in the background: a farm, a horse, a dog. But where realism looks for reasons and arrives at accusations Barry's work is content to present. We are given images of country life, evocations of *The Great Hunger*, Kavanagh-style, an appraising version of pastoral. Moreover, the farm, the horse, the dog are all dead. Yet they live for Josey as truly as if they were palpably off stage. He cannot distinguish the real from the hallucinatory. Mick, too, has his dreams and recollections, which bring before him and us his dead father and mother. Neither brother has a monopoly on hallucination. We see two versions, however, since Josey's ghostly encounters are charged with wonder and confession while Mick's are suffused with disappointment. It is the father figure who serves to explain what befell these two brothers. Somehow, married to a mute woman, he divided himself into his two sons, pinning his hopes on Mick and denying, repudiating, the inspired idiocy of Josey (who time and again identifies with Charlie Chaplin's boy and the Marx brothers). As a returned spirit, however, the father admits to Josey, "You were the half of me I preferred, you'd no brain to mar you. I wish I had been born like you, without a real thought in my head. You were the best half of me, the half of me I killed in myself always" (29). Boss Grady, then, is the key to modern Ireland.

His legacy is plain to be seen; the nature of his error less so. A girl whom Josey seems in real life to have assaulted returns as another spirit or *genius loci*. "It is not a world" is her cryptic comment on the community (59). Mick puts the same point more clearly. "The people in this valley are as far away from each other as old ships in a fog in an old sea-story. There's a fog of rain that keeps them apart" (42). Here is the "thick rain of [Ireland's] history" which Barry alluded to in his Introduction to *The Inherited Boundaries* (29). That there was a time when the dream of freedom and community might have been realized, the play considers and laments. Mick recalls an encounter as a young man with Michael Collins, whose vision inspired him to destroy what was "beating me down" and to build for the good of others (31). In a long speech Mick articulates the indignities which Collins's inspiration served to identify and promised to alleviate. The peasantry would cease to be mere images, stereotypes:

That we wouldn't be fodder for books again, that we wouldn't be called peasants in a rural district, and be slipped into the role of joker by the foreigners from the cities. That we wouldn't have to stand on the roadside and watch the cars go by with creatures in them from outer space, plastic and cushions and clothes, another Ireland altogether, not people who would mock our talk, and not see us, not talk to us except by way of favour. (30)

"Another Ireland altogether." An Ireland that never was born. "I was to make everything watertight for Collins," Mick recalls (31). Now the landscape is

sodden; the rain pervades and occludes all. Mick's choice was the same as his father's: the rational, hard-working, soul-destroying allegiance to an ideal which proved too narrow, too rigid, and which crumbled under the pressures of isolation, repression, and loneliness.

Yet Barry's is not a bleak vision. The play is shot through with fun and inventive business. A card-game, whether real or remembered, introduces local characters who amuse by their determination to be futile. We might be in the countryside of Beckett's *All That Fall*: a lingering dissolution. Josey's idiotic talk is rich in humor also; even his ritualistic nightly prayers are diverting. The play ends on a similar comic note. Mick imagines that they are surrounded by Indians: "I think I'm done for. I don't think I can wait for those cavalry horses." He touches Josey: "You hold out without me. You take my bullets. Don't waste your water on me. Don't let the Indians creep up on you" (61). At the end of this speech he takes Josey's hand and asks, "Is there no sign of them bloody horses?" They remain silent and together until Josey utters the final line of the play, "There is. There is every sign." (61) One must not sentimentalize such a magnificent final semiotic image of community and endurance. Like Didi and Gogo, Boss Grady's boys achieve a victory over entrapment.

Prayers of Sherkin (1990) is set on a small island off the south-west coast of Ireland in 1890. It establishes with extraordinary vividness the life of a Quaker community who make candles for sale on the mainland. One hundred years earlier three families had left Manchester and journeyed west, in search of a place where they might "abide" the new city, the millenium. In time the numbers dwindled until there is but one family left faced with crisis. It is a dilemma, in fact. Unless the children, Fanny and Jesse, can marry and raise families the whole Quaker enterprise will evaporate, but by edict of the founder William Purdy they may not marry outside the sect. Unless fresh migrants arrive the outlook is hopeless. Barry takes this situation and transforms it into a scenario of hope and fulfilment. He does this through a concentration on the future, whereby the present exists in happy parenthesis and the past (i.e., the dark, Satanic mills of Manchester) is revolutionary.

The father, John Hawke, is a careful craftsman whose role as creator of light is symbolic. He has a special admiration for the nuns on the mainland, whose bees supply him with the wax needful for the candles the nuns, in turn, purchase. The nuns suggest a shared ideal. They too are "waiting," at the back of "the lighted town"; they are happy and eligible for "any New Jerusalem."⁴ With this praise Fanny concurs: "They have a stronger world" than that surrounding them. Here the contrast with *Boss Grady's Boys* may be glimpsed: there the revenant Girl remarks about the community, "It is not a world." In *Prayers of Sherkin* there is a world, fruitful if doomed. Through the dwindling Quaker family, ecumenically at one with the religious sisters equally at odds with contemporary values, Barry

4. Sebastian Barry, "Prayers of Sherkin: A Play in Two Acts," p. 37. The text is unpublished as this essay is being written, and all quotations are from the typescript kindly loaned by the Abbey Theatre. *Boss Grady's Boys* and *Prayers of Sherkin* will be published in a single volume by Methuen (London).

is reinventing history, creating a Utopia ignorant of coercion.

Barry completely realizes on stage the lives and faith of the Hawke family. They live simply. They converse cheerfully, using a quaint diction. They turn everything into ritual: meals, work, conversation, trips to the mainland. They respond to everything in a positive way: an encounter is always reported as "a most pleasant talk"; the boatman is "a man of excellence"; even the sunlight "is a prayer in itself." Yet these people face inevitable dissolution.

On one level Barry is imagining Beulah in Blake's sense, the pastoral ideal. John Hawke hums "Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand" while he works. This is from the well-known poem preceding Blake's *Milton* (514):

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land.

This vision is compromised in the play. John Hawke is not radical; this community is passive in the face of history. Very early on Fanny says to her brother, "Oh, Jesse, we are not from here and I have such a sense of home. . . . I think it is the site of our New Jerusalem" (11). The vision that dominates the play is optimistic. We are made to believe that all manner of things will be well, without any sword-play whatsoever.

How this is contrived is a matter of plot. On the mainland one day, during a family trip to Baltimore, Fanny meets Patrick, a lithographer who has fled Cork city and set up his craft in less violent surroundings. In short, they fall for each other. The dilemma defines itself: how can this Romeo and Juliet come together without tragic consequences? One might say the answer lies in historical determinism; more properly, it lies in faith. The plot derives from fact, or history itself. Fanny Hawke was Barry's ancestor, whose tribal betrayal fructified in his existence.⁵ Her act was Eve-like, a primal, radical, act, destroying the Quaker home and yet enabling the new generation to appear: a *felix culpa*, indeed. But Barry avoids conflict between Fanny and her family. They accept her going as something she must do. She herself couldn't go, however, unless she had sanction. This is granted when the founder of the community, Matthew Purdy, appears to her and makes it seem his doing, in Blakean, quasi-Biblical terms:

For I would give thee a lithographer out of Baltimore, a gentle man of little account who has borne his trouble. Moreover, I have given him a dream of thee, that he may come to fetch thee. For that he is a gentle heart. . . . (65)

He tells her she is being called by the voices of her children: "They wait for you up the years, and you must go. All about them lies a century of disasters and wars that I did not foresee. I steer you back into the mess of life because I was blinder than I knew." Fanny tells nobody about this vision. When Patrick comes to the island to propose she simply accepts: "Yes. I will go from my family like a

5. See the title poem in *Fanny Hawke Goes to the Mainland Forever* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1989), pp. 54-55. See also "The Prodigious Sebastian Barry," above n. 3.

dreamer, and wake in the new world" (71). Her leaving is ritualized like every other action. She crosses at night, and as her father's light fades and goes out on the pier, Patrick's light on the mainland increases. Fanny crosses to meet her destiny.

As outlined the play probably seems naive to an absurd degree. It was not so in performance. The direction, by Caroline FitzGerald (who had previously directed *Boss Grady's Boys*), presented the play with utter conviction. The ensemble work was such that an atmosphere of simple content was created on stage. A world estranged and yet warm and attractive was fashioned in all sorts of detail. It was a world of innocence, prelapsarian and loving. It was a self-contained and whole world, generating its own spiritual energy.

Undoubtedly, *Prayers of Sherkin* lacks conventional dramatic conflict. It is unified, indeed, by this very evasion. No characters are admitted who do not in some way share the transcendental outlook of the Quakers. This is idealization; no island is without its Caliban. Barry is excluding evil: to that extent his drama is simplistic. But it is also beautiful.

Barry's insistence on "inherited boundaries" implies an impatience with republicanism. He wants to imagine an Ireland where sectarianism has no place. John Hawke is beleaguered, "since all around are the darknesses of the Catholics and the strangenesses of the higher Protestants" (4). But the man Fanny finds is a compound, the son of a Jewish woman from Lisbon who married a Cork Catholic. Patrick is an unconventional Catholic, who will not put pressure on Fanny to obey the bishops: "What are bishops only government? And I don't care for that either" (46). His independence is just that: he has liberated himself from sectarianism and (in the idiom of the play) from darkness. He and Fanny will, in a way, extend the Quaker ideal in new directions. Perhaps Friel's analysis in *Translations* is more realistic: it is a dangerous thing to marry outside the tribe. But Barry seems to be insisting that this danger is man-made and can be overcome. He is not advocating pluralism so much as New Ageism, a breaking away from old categories and a search for community, a spiritual world elsewhere. In that respect the old boatman Moore may have the last word as he muses over the lives of sailors, passing the south-west of Ireland *en route* for the Americas:

Dear sailors, simple, leaving aft the prayers of Cape Clear. Ah, human men. I know the words myself. (*Mouths a silent prayer, with a gesture of good-bye.*) I suppose in their time a few prayers have missed Cape Clear and washed against Sherkin. The prayers of Sherkin would be firewood of that sort. . . . (35)

All is connected, past and present, the human voyage and the flotsam of history. All is fuelled by a common concern which has its goal in spiritual destiny. Out of such unlikely material Sebastian Barry creates a drama, his dream of a new Ireland.

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