

Artistic and Medical Humanity: Thoughts on the achievement of Kevin Barry's short story 'A Cruelty.'

By Martin Dyar (Ireland)

Kevin Barry's short story 'A Cruelty' follows Donie, a man of twenty, whose daily life is defined by a deep need for order. We meet him first making the short journey by train from Boyle, his hometown in the West of Ireland, to the larger and busier town of Sligo. The journey is a regular activity for Donie, and something which provides his life with important structure. It appears that, as a consequence of some form of disability (autism seems a likely part of the picture) he is unable to work, and also that he may be incapable of establishing regular relationships. Donie is a shrill and eccentric character, a man vacillating constantly between two intense emotional poles. Quite suddenly, we see him shift from a state of exaggerated satisfaction, a mood prompted whenever his craving for predictability appears to be met by the workings of the world, to a bitter anxiety when he is, or when he imagines himself to be, threatened by any kind of delay. As such, train travel, based as it is on principles of engineering and a respect for public expectations in the form of a kind of contract of punctuality, seems to provide the safest theatre for Donie to yield to the dogmatic and superstitious pressures of his personality. The story's opening line communicates a subtle compression of this relationship between his habit of riding the trains and the metaphysical intensity that underlies his relationship to his physical environment:

He climbs the twenty-three steps of the metal traverse bridge at 9.25am, and not an instant before.

When the inspector greets Donie after he boards the train, we are told 'there is no question of a ticket being needed.' This may well be an indulgence on the part of the train staff, though it is perhaps just as likely that Donie possesses a free travel pass as part of a benefits package through the Department of Social Protection. It is part of the story's quality, it seems to me, that such details are not overemphasised. Whatever Donie's condition, the narrative hones in not so much on the idea of dysfunction but more on the texture of his experience, on the truth of his vulnerability, on his humanity, and on the true drama of the cruelty that is visited upon him by the river in Sligo.

From a personal artistic perspective, as a poet committed to narrative and monologue work, whose first book has been described in the affirmative as being populated by 'wounded' characters (a remark I welcomed) and as a writer who has sometimes worried that his own colloquial characters might be lessened by the Achilles heel of their philosophical fluency, Kevin Barry's characterisation of Donie, a man of unusual mind, strikes me as uniquely well balanced. The way in which Donie is imbued with a capacity for subtle perception, the way in which his subjective life is defined by a kind of temperamental vividness, and the extent to which this is achieved without an obvious effort to engage the reader by having them imagine that their own mind is categorically different from Donie's, unites the beauty of the writing, I think, with a remarkable ethical poise.

For me this is an important and inspiring sleight of hand. Autism, taken as a literary subject, is susceptible to distortion and trivialisation through the use of the imagery of savantism as a vehicle for higher imaginative effects. There is always the risk of a kind of solipsism of excellence in poetic writing, and relatedly, always the need, or perhaps the possibility, of a writer in their process doubling back to more social, more communicative, more clear-cut, and more humane perspectives.

One particular way that Barry's rendering of Donie maintains humanity and dignity and avoids descending into a stereotypical innocence or intensity is by granting him a specific Irishness. In this respect, we are offered two particular coordinates in the opening paragraph of the story. Donie's relies on the digital display of a Casio watch, which has the effect of locating him in a technological timewarp. The digital watch, now an almost obsolete thing was a theatre of dreams for the Irish boy in the nineteen eighties, as perhaps it was for many young people around the world. It was a kind of early personal computer, the ultimate gadget. That a social outsider should possess one, and be engrossed by it, however, provides a distinct note for Donie's naivety. Donie is also proud of the town

of Boyle. Boyle and County Roscommon are his kingdom, which inevitably suggests a kind of comic framing, a kind of grandiose powerlessness.

There is the possibility that the author is personally invested in Donie, that he is a kind of self-portrait, or more expansively, a kind of portrait of the artist. Barry is an especially powerful chronicler of life in rural Ireland in his fiction. Donie's peculiar mode of belonging in and seeing the West of Ireland, oppressive as his impressions are to him at times, discloses a desire to draw close to rural Ireland, to document an artistic effort of looking and documenting. This I impute to Barry himself, though again the dovetailing of intent, and the serving of the character, are quite pure.

There is also an extent to which Donie's subjective experience provides an analogue for the writing process. We see him respond again with especial vividness to language and landscape. In the following excerpt, the truncated syntax represents the protagonist's tense enumeration of the view through the train window. But it also manifests an aesthetic effect, something which is extended in the geographical intimacy and responsiveness:

The train climbs to the high ground outside Boyle. He rides the ascent into the Curlew mountains, and he whistles past the graveyard. The judder and surge of the engine is its usual excitement and he tries to forget the anxiety of Boyle station, but it recedes slowly as tide. Now the broken down stone walls of the old rising fields. Now the mournful cows still wet from the dew and night's drizzle. Now the greenish tone of the galvanised tin roof on the lost shack. The spits of rain against the window, and the high looming of the Brick-lieves on a mid-distant rise, north-westerly, a smooth-cut limestone plateau.

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