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Catherine O'Brien

The Emigrant Experience: Sebastian Barry's *On Canaan's Side* (2011).

Over the past few decades, Ireland has undergone and continues to undergo a period of unprecedented change. As Bob Dylan famously sang, it is clear 'the times they are a changin' (Dylan 1963). The 'winds of change' which currently prevail in Ireland do not, however, appear to favour everyone. In fact, only a minority have benefited from the current economic downturn. The Irish are all too well acquainted with this concept. Change does not necessarily or rarely in Ireland's case equate with progress and prosperity. The Irish have coined a proverb 'Is olc an ghaoth nach séideann do dhuine éigin', 'It's a bad wind that doesn't benefit someone', to encapsulate their views on the propensity of change to be unpredictable and selective: winds of change often benefit someone but not necessarily the most needy or deserving of benefitters. However, some things remain the same. It seems Ireland is adhering to the archetypal pattern it tends to follow during and after times of economic crisis – mass emigration. While emigration is evidently a contentious and emotional issue for many, it seems that there still exists a belief in emigration and its ability to offer a chance of renewal and re-invention.

Many of those who emigrate cite seeing no alternative as their main motivation as well as a complete disillusionment with the current state of affairs in Ireland. British poet Carol Rumens neatly summarises and evokes this view in her poem 'Stanzas for a New Start' saying 'Home for a long time fought with me for air/And I pronounced it uninhabitable' (Rumens in Longley ed 2000, 310). The Irish proverb 'Is glas iad na cnoic i bhfad uainn', 'Far away hills are green', appears to offer a solution. Through a combination of traditional thematic readings and the application of literary theory, this essay will examine the emigrant experience in Sebastian Barry's *On Canaan's Side* (2011). In particular, the writings of Jacques Derrida and Homi K. Bhabha will be used to explore the effects of change at personal and public, local and universal, microcosmic and macrocosmic levels.

A tangible but also somewhat mythical land which houses infinite possibilities is

also what allures the modern-day emigrant. America, Canada and Australia are the main recipients of Irish immigrants. The mass movement towards these economic strongholds is read as a direct result of Ireland's inability to sustain its own populace's appetite for stability and financial security. As W.B. Yeats describes in his poem 'The Second Coming', "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned/ The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity" (Yeats in Longley ed 2000, 39). The dissolution of the centre (i.e. the Irish government and economy) has inevitably lead to the 'best' (the general population) losing all hope while the worst (those who through their actions precipitated this economic crisis) continue to evangelise and idealise about what change is possible without concrete evidence of same.

Since 2006, Ireland's rate of emigration has reached a phenomenally high level. Combining figures provided by the Irish Central Statistics' Office with data attained by immigration authorities in Canada and Australia, Locus Insight has documented the exponential growth in emigration from Ireland. In 2006, the CSO estimated that just 36,000 people emigrated from Ireland while almost 108,000 entered the country as immigrants. By April 2011, the situation had changed dramatically. In the previous twelve months, over 76,000 had emigrated while just 42,000 had immigrated to Ireland – a net decline of 34,000 people through migration. In the year to April 2011, the CSO estimates that 53% of those emigrating from Ireland were Irish nationals while EU12 nationals accounted for just under 12% of the emigrant population. It is estimated that, in 2011, an average of 209 people emigrated every day, which means that 9 left every hour, one every 7 minutes. These emigrants were obviously hoping like Lilly (the central protagonist of Barry's novel) that they would have a better quality of life by emigrating.

Although *On Canaan's Side* is set at the end of the First World War, the basic premise for emigration – the pursuit of happiness in a land other than one's own – remains the same. This essay will examine this attitude, tracing Lilly's acclimatisation to her new homeland and challenging the steadfastness of her assertion that anywhere and everywhere can constitute a home place: "Greece, America, Arabia, Ireland. Home Places.

Nowhere on earth not a home place. The calf returns to where it got the milk. Nowhere is a foreign place. Everywhere is a home place for someone, and therefore for us all" (Barry 2011, 58). The hopes and dreams Lilly had prior to emigration ("In America,' he said, everything is possible. Everything is both true and untrue in the same breath", Barry 2011, 240) and the reality of her subsequent life in America do not seem to correlate. Lilly's identity and her perception of her self-hood are seen to be profoundly affected by her experiences in America.

Lilly's character is not caught in a dichotomy of polar opposites. It is not vacillating between extremes. Rather, it is centreless and desperately searching for a centre point. Her character represents an interesting portrayal of the migrant experience. Her entire life appears to encapsulate the essence of Bhabha's 'uncanny moment' (Bhabha 1995). The 'reconjugation' and 'permutation' of her identity which continually occurs throughout her life opens up a 'third space' (Bhabha 1995) of enunciation and significance. Her identity is solvency resistant in so far as it does not or can not achieve communality or generality. Bhabha's writings in relation to the colonial experience and in particular their desire to push, elongate and elasticate the borders and boundaries of thought offer perspective here. His acknowledgement of difference and ambivalence provides a theoretical scaffolding which is cognisant of the impossibility of determinacy. Lilly's character constantly eludes determinacy or definition. By applying Bhabha's theories we see how Lilly's character operates in the 'third or supplementary space' (Bhabha 1995). As Bhabha's theories also occupy this territory they shed light on why Lilly acts as she does and in particular how she defends herself against becoming overwhelmed by her own sense of self.

The migrations or permutations that Lilly's character undergoes throughout *On Canaan's Side* will form the focal point of this discussion. In particular, it will become apparent in light of Bhabha's commentary that Lilly's reluctance to translate or indeed acknowledge her own subjectivity is a defence mechanism:

Splitting constitutes an intricate strategy of defense and differentiation....The enunciatory moment of multiple belief is both a defense against the anxiety of difference, and itself productive of differentiations.

Splitting is then a form of enunciatory, intellectual uncertainty and anxiety that stems from the fact that disavowal is not merely a principle of negation or elision; it is a strategy for articulating contradictory and coeval statements of belief. It is from such an enunciatory space, where the work of signification voids the act of meaning....

So you know that something has been signified, but the act of communicative or dialogic meaning has been voided, and in that voiding is an avoiding, a disavowal that is a knowledge base; it is not merely repression or avoidance. You have to look for the meaning in that disavowal – you have to discover its cultural gesture' (Bhabha 1995)

This mechanism is borne of a fear of hurt and abandonment. By voiding her identity and delegating responsibility for it to others, Lilly partakes in an act of disavowal. This process of disavowal is precipitated by the winds of change which enter Lilly's life and force her to emigrate. However, one surmises that the winds which entered Lilly's life may not be exclusively confined to the world of fiction. *On Canaan's Side* resonates with the reader on an emotional level but may it also have an instructive sociological lesson to offer?

Lilly Bere candidly admits feeling inexplicably drawn to America "Even before we got there, I was experiencing a sort of nostalgia for the land, I do not know how other to describe it. As if I had been there before, had left it, and was returning after a long voyage" (Barry 2011, 58). Landscape and mindscape are concepts which are seen to be inextricably linked in Barry's novel. Lilly sees both people and places as expansive and replete with new dimensions and territories to be explored. Indicative of this is Lilly's description of her former employer and now friend Mrs Wolohan. She 'is like a landscape to me, a whole country. Or that pleasing lighthouse on the last spit of land, where the beach has become stony, more like the Atlantic where it gnaws away at Ireland' (Barry 2011, 27). The high esteem with which Lilly views Mrs Wolohan is equated with the consoling quality Lilly associates with vast expanses of space.

Although she finds parting from her father difficult, Lilly believes she is doing the right thing in going to America: "what safety and haven was America to me" (Barry 2011, 29). However, even as Lilly journeys through America, it is clear that she has not left the remnants of her old life behind. She still views her world as something which is created

for rather than by her: "I had the oddest sense as we sat on the train to New York that America was being built in great haste all in front of us, being invented for us as we went" (Barry 2011, 60). The move to America does not free Lilly, rather it further entrenches her in her role as a figure of what Homi Bhabha termed 'mimicry'. Jacques Lacan's comment regarding mimicry seems fitting in relation to Lilly's character: "The effect of mimicry is camouflage....It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare" (Lacan in Bhabha 1994, 85). The mottling of Lilly's character has been caused by her lack of agency over her sense of self and delegation of that agency to others. Bhabha's writings illustrate that colonial mimicry is repetitive rather than representative. In many ways, Lilly's life could also be described as mimicry - it is mimetic of the lives of those around her instead of being representative of her uniqueness as a human being. Lilly thinks she can escape her sorrows and problems by running away from her old identity (both literally and metaphorically). However, she never succeeds in forging a new identity. "I was already a prisoner in the open asylum of the world" (Barry 2011, 98) : this statement made by Lilly as she muses about how utterly alone she is in this new land prepares the reader for Lilly's subsequent docility and acquiescence. Her imprisonment is self-enforced.

She opts to be a passenger on her life journey rather than the driving force. However, instead of protecting her, this decision (whether it is conscious or unconscious she does not explicitly reveal) makes Lilly vulnerable and further entrenches her in misery and longing for a chance at change.

Lilly's entire life has been parasitic. She was influenced heavily by her father while he was alive. Her childhood belief that he is the most important person in the world does not alter when she reaches adulthood: "Who made the world? I knew in my heart that the teacher Mrs O' Toole erred in providing the answer God the world, as I thought she ought to have known, was made by my father" (Barry 2011, 5/6). Lilly's life displays a recurrent pattern of displacing her self-hood onto others and relying on them. When the bond with her father is severed, she clings to Tadg for reassurance. Despite the fact that

she doesn't know him that long before they are forced to flee together, she still entrusts him with her welfare: "I gripped Tadg's hand like a veritable child, trusting in his greater strength" (Barry 2011, 62). When Tadg is murdered, she is portrayed as not only a grief-stricken, but also as an abandoned and isolated figure: "Some hidden drain of the world opened under me as I knelt beside him" (Barry 2011, 80).

On Canaan's Side is predicated entirely on the subjective and retrospective narration of Lilly Bere. Her narration spans seventeen days in total. These seventeen days directly follow the suicide of her grandson Bill. As Lilly describes, her narration is chaotic and disorientating for the reader: "my head is like an unbroken pony plunging about" (Barry 2011, 96). Her narration is offered both in the present and past tense, with the past surfacing in the present through memory. As a result, the novel is a quick-paced and engrossing read. However, more importantly in terms of this essay's concern with identity and self-hood, Lilly's refusal to discriminate between past and present also marks a reluctance to confront reality. Herein, I would argue, lies the true skill and value of Barry's fiction. In foregrounding all of Lilly's life experiences, Barry illustrates that literature, as Jacques Derrida observes in *Dissemination*,

seems to aim toward the filling of a lack (a hole) in a whole that should not itself in its essence be missing to itself. But literature is also the exception to everything: at once the exception in the whole, the want-of-wholeness in the whole, and the exception to everything, that exists by itself, alone with nothing else, in exception to all. *A part that, within and without the whole, marks the wholly other, the other incommensurate with the whole* (emphasis added) (Derrida 1981, 56).

The last line could be used to describe Lilly's life. Her testimony attests to the fact that her identity since she was obliged to flee Ireland has always been and necessitated being "incommensurate with the whole" (Derrida 1981, 56).

Her experience, as will be observed, is also seen to refute the commonly held assumptions which Benmayor and Skotnes address as they note that:

the dominant tendency, both in popular thinking and in much of the literature, is to define migration as a

single movement in space and a single moment in time. The focus falls on the act of crossing, or the more or less finite period in which relocation takes place. Underlying this approach is the assumption that at a certain point, migration ends and a process of assimilation/integration and upward mobility begins (Benmayor & Skotnes eds. 1994, 8).

Such a period of assimilation/integration never begins for Lilly as is evidenced in the continual migration of her identity throughout her life. These migrations are both physical and psychological as Lilly adapts to suit her circumstances.

Lilly's initial migration involves her involuntary movement from childhood to adulthood as she is forced to flee with her fiancé Tadhg to America. Tadhg's identity as a Black and Tan is seen to impact on Lilly's identity as orders exist that they both be killed. Lilly is depicted as a disillusioned and frightened child when her father warns her that she must leave: "Such a sensation of utter terror descended upon me. If my father had told me that wild wolves were to drag me off and eat me in the dark night I could not have been more terrified" (Barry 2011, 50).

Lilly's next migration is a physical one and consists of her passage to America. Her narrative which reflects on this period reveals her as being within a liminal space both geographically and in terms of her mindscape. She is perturbed by her role as Tadhg's fiancée, as the notion of intimacy scares her. However, this is a fear which she overcomes and it is just as she and Tadhg begin to realise their true importance to one another that Lilly is cruelly compelled to undergo yet another transition to "another America", a "Tadhg-less country" (Barry 2011, 79). Tadhg is killed in an art museum by a Mr Nolan who was commanded to do so in accordance with the order issued in Ireland. Lilly is forced to migrate yet again to find safety and to find a place where she can construct a life for herself without Tadhg.

The migrations which Lilly's identity has been forced to cope with thus far show Barry's attempts to access a much forgotten and neglected dimension of history: emigration. As Homi Bhabha observes in *The Location of Culture*, the "liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one; there is no resolution to it because the two conditions are ambivalently enjoined in the 'survival' of

migrant life" (Bhabha 1994, 224). The translation of Lilly's identity and the difficulties she encounters with respect to same is, one could argue, precipitated by her experience of migration and also aggravated by her failure to be an individual translator and interpreter of her own existence, as her identity is immersed in, and in many respects, defined by the lives of others.

Lilly's marriage to Joe Kinderman serves as an example. The marriage, even if Joe had not abandoned her, would surely have been doomed to failure. Joe's reason for leaving her, although seemingly neurotic, offers a window into a troubled soul which very much resembles that of Lilly. It is a soul oscillating wildly between contrasting identities and haunted by a fear of loss. As he explains:

My great-grandfather, the one who swam the tunnel to get to his wedding, you remember? He was white all right, but his bride was black, and all his children. And Jürgen Neetebom, he was the only white man ever in my family. And when I was born, his great-grandchild, by God if I wasn't so black at all, which I know now can happen, it's, you know, skipping generations, and I was very confused in those days, Lilly, and I was afraid when I got out into the world, and was able to live as a white person, that people would find out about me, or that my skin would turn back, so I used to use all those lotions, you remember, and the bread soda and God knows, and when you got pregnant, I feared, I feared so bad the child would be black, and I knew you would leave me, I knew I would lose everything (Barry 2011, 198).

Joe's fear mirrors that of Lilly, who is seen throughout her life to be afraid of losing those most precious to her. She fears losing her son Ed when he goes to fight in the war, and her grandson Bill, who she tellingly describes as "the boy who meant more to me than my own sere life" (Barry 2011, 250). Lilly's reliance on others to define her identity reaches a dramatic climax at the novel's denouement. She decides to commit suicide, an act which will put an end to her migrations and to her grief: "I knew, I exulted in the fact that when I was done, there would be something so slight lying there in the dress I wore. That the infinite gap between two points, in this instance being alive and being dead, that the mathematicians tell us cannot be closed, would be closed. I would not have any distance at all to go to nothing" (Barry 2011, 254).

In light of his commentary in *The Gift of Death*, Derrida would surely contest Lilly's

view that her suicide will enable her to become “a stranger at last” (Barry 2011, 254). In fact, Derrida contends that it is only when confronted with death that an individual can be fully cognisant of his or her own self-hood: “Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, ‘given’ one can say, by death” (Derrida 1995, 41). True self-awareness and responsibility can only be attained by the individual when confronted with his/her own mortality. It is at this juncture that the individual becomes cognisant of his/her irreplaceability: “We have thus deduced”, Derrida concludes, “the possibility of a mortal’s accession to responsibility through the experience of his irreplaceability that which an approaching death or the approach of death gives him” (Derrida 1995, 51). Ironically, the advent of Lilly’s self-imposed death, thus, will not free her from herself, as she so yearns, but, rather, reveal her to herself.

Lilly’s life is revealed both to her and her readership as having been less self-orientated and more value and family-orientated. A clear lack of bias has coloured her life, something which has afforded her much happiness, and indeed visited much sadness upon her. However, her narration offers readers the comfort of demonstrating that identity is not and should not be predicated “on the notion of the subject as existing in a voluntaristic space” (Bhabha in Benmayor & Skotnes ed 1994, 197). However, whilst on a cursory first glance the novel may be said to lament the non-existence of a voluntaristic space where identity could conceivably operate, it would surely also be wholly sceptical of such a space where identity could be strategically both deployed and manipulated. Rather it depicts “identity as being an illusion of totality” (Bhabha in Benmayor & Skotnes eds. 1994, 197). Lilly’s testimony attests to the irrefutable fact that simplistic and conveniently homogenised versions of personal histories can never be accurate or appropriate.

In fact, Lilly’s entire existence is deeply ambivalent. Her hyphenated name Lilly Dunne-Kinderman-Bere along with that of her grandson is evidence of this. A clash of cultures and a sense of never fully belonging preside over the novel. Lilly’s identity is affected and by default, so too are those of her son Ed and her grandchild Bill. She notes that “Ed, flesh of my flesh, was of America. America made him and America unstitched

the gansey of him” (Barry 2011, 191). The use of the word ‘gansey’ (a word in English usage but derived from the Irish word *geansaí* meaning jumper) reminds the reader of Ed’s Irish roots which are not enough to sustain his or his mother’s identity, while their adopted homeland of America also proves insufficient.

Lilly occupies an ambivalent space of the interstitial variety of which Bhabha speaks in *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha’s writings seem apt in terms of this discussion as parallels can be drawn between his real-life experience of migration and Lilly’s fictional migration. Bhabha was born in Bombay, India: “I belonged to a small community of Parsees, a largely urban community of Persian migrants who’d come to India in the seventh century” (Bhabha in Benmayor & Skotnes eds. 1994, 183). Parsee culture, as Bhabha outlines, is not supported by a readily identifiable sociological framework or traditions: “The Parsees don’t have a great Parsee literature. They don’t have a great Parsee art And there is something about belonging to a community with a style or a flavour rather than a tradition of tablets, which has a rather contemporary feel about it. Because the essentialist model of identity seems, in some way, now passé: identities are much more performative and you construct a sense of identity” (Bhabha in Benmayor & Skotnes eds. 1994, 183). Lilly’s identity epitomises performativity as it moulds itself to suit the situations in which it finds itself. However, while Bhabha is secure within and proud of his Parsee heritage, quipping that “Parsees are rather like ‘Bombay Mix’ from the health food shops, you know! Rather like that!” (Bhabha in Benmayor & Skotnes eds. 1994, 185), Lilly is appalled and distressed by her inability to form a concrete sense of self. She is particularly haunted by the fact that this is a legacy which she has passed onto her son and grandson. As the following excerpt from the novel illustrates, she feels inadequate as a mother because of her failures in this regard: “Those finishing touches, that it is the work of a good mother to supply, were missing. I was thinking that and felt the terrible treachery in the thought. I didn’t even know where the thought came from, and hardly what it meant. I had failed in something, I had failed. I had not managed to *complete* him” (Barry 2011, 192).

It is by chance that Lilly decides to write down her story before she dies. She

confesses to the reader: "I have feared writing, being scarcely able to write my name until I was eight" (Barry 2011, 9). Ultimately, it is the reader who, it may be argued, retrieves and re-appropriates Lilly's lost identity from the mire of history. In an interview regarding *On Canaan's Side*, Barry has described his hopes for his readership: "my ideal reader perhaps can put aside the cargo of experience somewhat, and access also their original innocence, so that that sense is also brought to the book in their lap" (Barry 2011 Interview). It is the reader who views the uncauterised wounds that have formed part of Lilly's life and assists in their healing, in so far as the reader engages in the mopping up of the slippage of meaning between her conscious and unconscious mind, what she reveals and what she conceals. It falls to us, as interpreters of the text, to re-appropriate her identity.

However, the extent to which the reader can retrieve Lilly's identity is questionable, in particular when one considers Derrida's idea that "The first effect or first destination of language ... involves depriving me of, or delivering me from, my singularity" (Derrida 1995, 60). Lilly's attempt to gain ownership of her identity through writing her life story is, in light of Derrida's writings doomed to failure. By employing language to define herself, Lilly is engaging in a common rhetoric which further strips away her individuality. The use of language involves surrendering to commonality, an activity which sacrifices the integrity of the self that attempts to articulate itself through language.

Lilly cannot forget that "We may be immune to typhoid, tetanus, chicken pox, diphtheria, but never memory. There is no inoculation against that" (Barry 2011, 83). Just as memory and memories cannot be forgotten or avoided, language's erasure of identity by virtue of the inherent slippage of meaning between signifier and signified cannot be evaded. It equally does not bode exclusively well for modern-day emigrants. Their lives will be irrevocably altered by their decision to emigrate. That alteration may not necessarily be negative, but their lives will inevitably follow a different course.

By cataloguing intimate and intricate episodes in Lilly's life, Barry ensures that her story does not become assimilated into the "hegemonic canons" of which Derrida writes in *Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments*. The notion which Derrida posits of history as biodegradable, something which can be rewritten to accommodate demand is an

interesting concept. History cannot be a collective palimpsest unless it privileges individual histories and desists distilling all experience into a collective legacy. Derrida makes reference to the notion of amending realities to suit the mould of “hegemonic canons”, a process which necessitates the notion of common sensibilities and memories: “all that which certain forces have attempted to melt down into the anonymous mass of an unrecognisable culture, to ‘(bio)degrade’ in the common compost of a memory said to be living and organic” (Derrida 1989, 821). In many respects, Barry’s novel may be said to offer a view of history which is non-biodegradable in that it remains steadfast in its loyalty to individual rather than communal dictates. As Derrida asserts, “as ‘nonbiodegradable’, the singularity of a work resists, does not let itself be assimilated, but stays on the surface and survives like an indestructible artefact or in any case one which is less destructible than another” (Derrida 1989, 824).

However, despite Barry’s valiant attempts to reject tradition and escape its trappings, as Derrida eruditely observes a text can never fully operate successfully in this manner: “a text must be ‘(bio)degrad-able’ in order to nourish the ‘living’ culture, memory, tradition. To the extent to which it has some sense, makes sense, then its ‘content’ irrigates the milieu of this tradition and its ‘formal’ identity is dissolved And yet, to enrich the ‘organic’ soil of the said culture, it must also resist it, contest it, question and criticize it enough (dare I say deconstruct it?) and thus it must not be assimilable Or at least, it must be assimilated as inassimilable, kept in reserve, unforgettable because irreceivable, capable of inducing meaning without being exhausted by meaning, incomprehensibly elliptical, secret” (Derrida 1989, 845). Perhaps the most valuable and salient phrase encountered here is “inducing meaning without being exhausted by meaning” as it encapsulates what Barry achieves in his novel.

Barry’s novel foregrounds Lilly’s life experiences. However, he does not allow them to smother or eclipse the novel’s central messages. The novel is a tale of resilience and hope amid adversity which testifies as to the tenacity of the universal human spirit. Lilly’s inability to feel content with and attuned to the various facets of her identity is heartrending for the reader. The effect of mimicry on her life has been profound. The

application of literary theory to the novel reveals the perils of generalising the emigrant experience. It illustrates that the traditional view of history as stemming from a 'factual' palimpsest which reflects the communal sensibilities of all is deeply flawed. *On Canaan's Side* seeks to address this flaw by ensuring that Lilly, an otherwise peripheral character of history, is not forgotten, but rather she is elevated to a pivotal position. Her subjective story prompts the reader to question the efficacy (if any) of a narrative of history which purports to speak from and of a communal sensibility of human experience. In a somewhat ironic manoeuvre, Barry's novel attests as to the value of and necessity for invention in the process of retrieval. His novel demonstrates the importance of continually interrogating the version of history we receive. *On Canaan's Side* appears to advocate a healthy scepticism of and a revisionist approach to history so that the winds of change may be adequately acknowledged.

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