Abstract

Kevin Barry has cited Flann O’Brien as a strong influence on his work in a number of interviews. While the aggression underlying much of O’Brien’s work is made determinately manifest in Barry’s, in both writers we find the apocalyptic strangeness that Seamus Deane associates with Irish writing personified in the corpulent body of the law, which roams the countryside in an intimate association with death, desire and violence. In both O’Brien and Barry law and desire are performatively entangled, as Žižek writes in *Plague of Fantasies*,

Desire emerges when drive gets caught in the cobweb of Law/prohibition, in the vicious cycle in which ‘jouissance’ must be refused, so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder of the Law of desire’ (Lacan’s definition of castration) – and fantasy is the narrative of this primordial loss, since it stages the process of this renunciation, the emergence of the Law.

In Barry’s ‘Ox Mountain Death Song’, born of Barry’s cycling trips through the mountains – ‘The rhythm of the bike’s movement was fundamental to the process, somehow. The eerie whirring of the spokes, I believe, got into the prose’ – Sergeant Brown grimly pursues the hypersexualised figure of Canavan and deals a form of justice made localised, subjective, corrupt. In O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman* the mechanised police force obsesses over hypersexualised bicycles and deals an elliptical, evasive and punitive justice to an unnamed, murderous narrator. In Barry’s *The City of Bohane* the law is peripheral, a timid control on a unbridled, hedonistic violence. This paper explores the differing engagements with fantastical desire, the limits of legality and violent ends in the works of Barry and O’Brien.

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