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The End of History in Kevin Barry's *City of Bohane* (2011)?

Sylvie Mikowski

- 1 Critics of Kevin Barry's acclaimed novel *City of Bohane* published in 2011 have concurred to stress the generic hybridity of the book, as evidenced by the wealth of adjectives and categories they employed to describe it: for Martyn Colebrook, the novel is "a genre-blending of urban fantasy, post-industrial Gothic and weird retro-fitted future western" (Colebrook 2018: 152). Deirdre Flynn calls it "an eclectic mix of gothic, cyberpunk, steampunk and postmodern" (Flynn 2018, 56). Previously, Meabh Long in one of the first academic papers published on the novel had used the phrase "neonoir", while stating in a paper entitled "Black Bile: Kevin Barry and Melancholia" that "If contemporary Ireland is a melancholic state, in Kevin Barry's *City of Bohane* we see its repetition and failed mourning violently magnified" (Long 2017: 81). Annie Galvin for her part analyses the novel as "An extremely violent speculative fiction", defining it as an "allegory", "meant to speak 'otherwise' of the politics of austerity which were applied to Ireland in the wake of the recession" (Galvin 2018: 579). Pete Hamill in *The New York Times* compared it to "the graphic language of certain master comic book artists from Will Eisner and Harvey Kurtzman all the way to Frank Miller, of 'Sin City.'" (Hamill 2012). Barry himself has jokingly reported how he was invited to speak of his novel at some science-fiction conferences. But he also commented that the city of Bohane could be based on his hometown, Limerick. Nicknamed 'stab city' by some, Limerick is also one of the poorest large cities in Ireland, with some impoverished estates marked by unemployment, lone parenthood, poverty, ostracisation from mainstream society, environmental degradation, drugs, and criminality. In the wake of the 2008 economic bust, Dell company left Limerick, leaving 5,000 people unemployed. For many years until recently the murder rate was the highest in Ireland, arising largely from the family feuds that defined the city for some time. A few criminal gangs got to control some of the most deprived areas and did so through brutal violence, intimidation, and the creation of a culture of fear. Limerick thus got to epitomise all the contradictions underpinning the Celtic Tiger economy, which allowed a small fringe of the population to earn a lot of money, and encouraged greed and consumerism in

everybody, while abandoning the less privileged class of citizens to fight for themselves in the new rat race. Indeed, the Irish government failed to take advantage of the new— huge— flow of wealth brought about by the Tiger to invest in public services, health, road and transportation systems, and above all social housing. The excess of the Celtic Tiger led to the catastrophic 2008 crash, as the real-estate bubble, which had fueled the economy, burst, leaving hundreds of people unable to pay back their mortgage, and making the issue of housing an on-going, nagging preoccupation, up to this day.

- 2 The “boom and bust” of the Irish economy, synonymous with an extremely rapid transition from backwardness to hyper-modernity, followed by a just as quick downturn, has been recorded and illustrated in various ways by writers and novelists: in *City of Bohane*, Barry resorts to parody, in which we can recognize not only the city of Limerick, but also the whole of the island. The novelist experiments in the blending of several genres to offer a mixed vision of the rapid transformations of his hometown and homeland.
- 3 On the one hand, commentators have insisted on the sad, nostalgic mood prevailing in the narrative, as well as on the fierceness of the violence described, while emphasizing as well the entertaining, playful aspect of the book. The one aspect however towards which all these various readings converge is the way staginess, make-believe, simulacrum and performativity are self-consciously foregrounded by the author in many regards. We can find them in the cinematic technique he develops and the numerous allusions to film and photography; in the very precise imaginary cityscape and décor he invents; in his pervading use of intertextual allusions; in the emphasis he places on myth as a substitute for history; in the use of a fictitious language based on neologisms, Irishisms and street lingo; and even in the careful description of the characters’ costumes, meant to alert us to the meaningfulness of their appearance as opposed to real-life substance. All this playfulness and staginess highlight the novel’s satirical intent, the target being contemporary Ireland and its twisted relation to modernity as opposed to history and tradition.
- 4 The rapid economic and social transformations induced by the turn, in the late twentieth century, to globalized neoliberalism, have reduced the historical past to the condition of mere traces, in a nation which used to invoke the past to define its identity and justify its struggle for independence — as is however still partially the case in the North. Under the neoliberal regime embraced by the Irish state, time has thus become distorted, and people have been encouraged to wallow in the eternal present induced by consumption. In the meantime, the devastating effects of the same neoliberalism have jeopardized the future, as was evidenced by the 2008 “bust”. This paper will first examine how Barry creates a world where time is ‘out of joints’, and where entropy has replaced the prospect of any future; this entails a questioning of the novel’s generic affiliation, midway between dystopia and mere satire. The third part will precisely examine the book’s satirical intent and its parodic elements, which can also be found in the works of visual artist Seán Hillen, aiming at a critique of contemporary Ireland, where traces of an archaic past can still be made out behind the façade of a successful outpost of Western neoliberal capitalism.

The Distortion of Time in Bohane

- 5 Situated in a distant future – 2053 – the imaginary city of Bohane seems to be on the verge of exhaustion, as if some major catastrophe had taken place there. Progress has been arrested and the course of time has been reverted, flowing back as it were to the very origins of what the narrator throughout the story calls the “creation”. History, if defined as a movement towards progress and modernity, seems to have come to an end in Bohane, where the future does not seem to exist and the past can only be apprehended through myth, fable, or traces, stirring incurable nostalgia among the characters hankering for what they call “the lost time”. Time seems out of joint in Bohane: youth and old age have become reversible. It is the case for instance for the main protagonist Logan Hartnett’s mother, an eighty-nine-year-old woman ironically named Girly, who runs the city from her bed where she spends her days and nights. It is true as well of Gant Broderick, Logan’s eternal antagonist, and of his face: “where the age receded as often as it surfaced. Sometimes the boy was seen in him; sometimes he might have been a very old man” (Barry 2011: 17). As the narrator puts it about the imaginary city, “In the Bohane creation, time comes loose. There is a curious fluidity, the past seeps into the future, and the moment itself as it passes is the hardest to grasp” (Barry 2011: 60).
- 6 The inverted flow of time has substituted entropy to progress, so that the city seems obsessed with its origin, the point where it was created out of the void and where it could return, like the river which gave it its name, as is recapitulated in the incipit of the novel: “Whatever wrong with us is coming off that river. No argument: the taint of badness on the city’s air is a taint off that river. [...] 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 2011: 3) Born out of an evolutionary accident (“spawned”), the city is thus promised to disappearance (“Big Nothin’”, “wastes”), in the same way as the river ends in the ocean (“a couple of miles downstream the river rounds the last of the bluffs and there enters the murmurous ocean”. (Barry 2011:7) But in the meantime the inhabitants must suffer the curse of being born there, “the taint of badness”. The history of Bohane’s badness, the violence that prevails among the different castes of citizens, divided according to their ethnic origins or their social status, and which episodically culminates in the “Feud”, is thus ascribed to a natural phenomenon (“the taint off that river”) and not to human agency.

The confusion between history and memory

- 7 History is consequently substituted by myth and superstition and lingers only through fragments and traces – as suggested by the name given to one of the main thoroughfares of the city, “The Back Trace”. Even though the extradiegetic narrator is himself a historian, who runs the “Ancient and Historical Bohane Film Society” (Barry 2011:178), the way he addresses his audience should warn us about his reliability: “Oh and heed this, my fiends, my tushies, my gullible children” (Barry 2011: 227). Speaking like a traditional *Shanachie*¹ and dealing in film, that is to say in what amounts to a mere projection of reality, the narrator casts doubt as to the authenticity of the story he is telling, which could be only a mix of real facts and make-believe.

- 8 In Bohane, history and its relationship to the reality of the past have come loose and given way to a pervasive nostalgia for “the lost-time”, an expression which insists on the irretrievability of the past except through memory. But memory is fickle, subjective, elusive, selective. In *History, Memory, Forgetting*, Paul Ricœur warns us about the possible abuse and manipulations of memory, which comes to us as images of the past and is therefore difficult to dissociate from imagination, even though Ricœur does not deny the role of memory in the making of history. He also establishes a link between memory and Freud’s writings about mourning and melancholia, a pathology resulting from the subject’s inability to overcome grief and loss – and therefore to forget. Memory can thus be associated with paralysing obsessions, such as seems the case for the inhabitants of Bohane, for whom remembering the past is an atavistic trait which the narrator calls “our native reminiscence” (Barry 2011: 60). This abuse of memory is opposed to the work of the historian, who provides interpretations of the past which in turn makes a better understanding of the present possible and helps imagine a future. In Bohane, nostalgia and melancholy are presented as a temper, a mood, an atmosphere which pervades the streets of Bohane but offers no perspective of change or improvement, enclosing the characters in a neurotic, endless cycle of repetition: periods of “the Calm” are inexorably followed by episodes of “the Feud”, whose original cause has been lost to everyone, but that nobody can forget. The inhabitants of Bohane can only predict and witness the return of the same, with slight alterations, as when Gant Broderick returns to Bohane looking a few years older, only to confront once more his impossible future with Macu, his former lover now married to Logan, and his endless rivalry with the said Logan Hartnett. Bohane society is as a result at the same time young and innocent, insofar as it never learns from the past, and old and worn-out, because this ignorance leads to the endless repetition of the same mistakes. Thus the “men of the Authorities” “wished that the lost-time in Bohane might with the years that passed fade into less painful memory” (Barry 2011: 157), that is to say be the cause of less violence, destruction and entropy. What is more, the obsessive rumination of the same memories has made truth and reality recede behind fables, myths and legends, similar to the one telling the story of the creation of the city from the waters of the river: as a result, Bohane is governed by fancy and imagination, as is reflected by the name “Fancy-boys” given to those whose ambition is to rule Bohane’s gangland and to serve the interests of either Hartnett or Broderick, the two protagonists who compete both for the control of the city gangland and the love of beautiful Macu.

A critical dystopia?

- 9 The idea of reality and truth receding as an effect of pathological nostalgia finds a formal expression in the aesthetics of the novel which aims at foregrounding fakeness, invention and make-believe, while maintaining signs of authenticity. As such, it raises interrogations as to the novel’s generic affiliations: the situation of the action in a distant future would normally tie it to the genre of science-fiction, or speculative fiction, but the obvious absence of any reference to innovative technologies has been noted by several commentators.
- 10 Another category that may better apply to the novel is that of dystopia. Dystopia pushes bad tendencies of contemporary societies to their extremes in order to show

their consequences for the individual. They present a shocking but yet distant society which nevertheless addresses significant similarities to real societies of its age: existing societies and their nightmarish counter representations are the central theme of dystopias. But can we actually say there is anything nightmarish about life in Bohane? Of course, violence prevails in the city, and the eternal return of the Feud, as cyclical as the seasons which mark the division of the novel into four parts called “October”, “December”, “April”, “On the Night of August Fair”, means that the plot inevitably escalates to a “general bloodbath” (Barry 2011: 271). But the spectacle of it makes the city’s elderly sigh “in despair and happiness both”, suggesting that the riot is nothing more than a ritual comparable to the “August Fair” during which it takes place: “There came a time always on the night of August Fair when the badness took over” (Barry 2011: 271). “The Feud” is therefore regarded as a custom with a social function, a kind of carnival which allows the lower classes to release their anger and frustrations under the guise of merriment and therefore helps avoid an actual insurrection, followed by an actual reshuffling of the social order.

- 11 Dystopias on the other hand often revolve around a counter-narrative of resistance against an oppressive, even tyrannical political system, as is the case in such a canonical dystopia as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which stages the struggle of one individual against a totalitarian regime. But even though life in Bohane is chaotic and generally described as “bad” and even “homicidal” (Barry 2011: 7) by the narrator, who compares it to Babylon (Barry 2011: 84), Barry has included in his novel no description of any tyrannical regime. Of course, the city is half ruled by gangs, whose current leader is Logan Hartnett, who succeeded Gant Broderick when he went into self-inflicted exile.
- 12 What is more, the social order that prevails in Bohane is based upon a strict social and geographical division between the different strands of populations, according to their ethnic or social identity. The well-to-do are invisible, seemingly busy working in “Endeavour Avenue down the Bohane New Town” (Barry 2011: 26). The rich, “the Bohane Dacency” (Barry 2011: 20), who made their money in all kinds of legal or illegal business like Hartnett, live in beautiful houses in the “Beauvista bluff”. The Northside Rises are populated by the Norries, “a skittish, temperamental people with a tendency towards odd turns of logic” (Barry 2011: 25). The Big Nothin’ is the countryside where the “spud-aters” live, as opposed to the urban districts of the Back Trace, De Valera Street and Smoketown, where the Fancy boys strut their way. The city has its ethnic minorities, such as the sand-pikeys, who live in the margins of society: “Our sand-pikeys brethren settled the dunes way back. They had a forge out there in which they made weaponry for their protection and for trade. [...] They drank elderflower gin and married at fourteen years of age and enjoyed the maudlin scrape of a fiddle” (Barry 2011: 134), or the “blow-ins” including the Chinks, like Jenni Ching, Logan’s lieutenant. But Bohane has a liberal political regime: the government is represented by “The Bohane Authority”, whose authority resides strictly in its name:

The Authority men were desperate and ill-paid souls who lived as peaceably as they could in the modest terraces that ascended towards (but did not reach) the Beauvista heights. They kept always to the New Town side of De Valera Street. They went nervously about their business in an animal town. Their business was to keep the place in some manner civilized. It was a job of work. (Barry 2011: 156)
- 13 Despite the obvious social inequalities and the risk that violence and corruption may eventually have the upper hand and sink the place into chaos, nobody offers any

resistance to the system among the inhabitants of Bohane. The reason for this is that they seem to have become numbed, intoxicated and conditioned by all the deceptive charlatanism offered by the consumers' society which rules the city and is on display in the main street, De Valera Street:

There are soothsayers. There are purveyors of goat's blood cures for marital difficulties. There are dark caverns of record stores specializing in ancient calypso 78s-oh we have an old wiggle to the hip in Bohane, if you get us going at all. There are palmists. There are knackers selling combination socket wrenches etc. Discount threads are flogged from suitcases mounted on bakers' pallets, there are cages of live poultry, and trinket stores devoted gaudily to the worship of the sweet Baba Jay. (Barry 2011: 32)

- 14 The deceitful promises of mass culture, religion and consumption, together with drugs (the "dream-pipe") all concur to keep the inhabitants of Bohane apathetic, passive, dreamful, and thus unable to break the cycle of repetition of violence they are locked up in, or to overcome nostalgia in order to invent a better future. Thus, the novel can hardly be said to present "a critical dystopia" according to the definition of the genre given by Lyman Tower Sargent of "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one utopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a utopia" (Tower Sargent, 2016). It doesn't fit either Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan's remark that "the new dystopias not only critique the present triumphal system but also explore ways to transform it" (Baccolini and Moylan 2003: 8). On the other hand, Raffaella Baccolini also argues that "dystopia is [...] immediately rooted in history. Its function is to warn readers about the possible outcomes of our present world and entails an extrapolation of key features of contemporary societies" (Baccolini and Moylan 2003: 115). In a similar vein, British author Sarah Hall for her part claims that "for its speculations to be taken seriously, dystopian fiction must be part of a discussion of contemporary society, or the wringing of present jeopardy for future disaster" (Hall 2007).

A Satire of Contemporary Ireland?

- 15 If the word "disaster" hardly fits the description of the future presented by Barry in *City of Bohane*, what is certainly true is that the novel does offer "an extrapolation of key features" of contemporary Ireland, and as such represents "a discussion of contemporary society". It is not hard indeed for the reader to recognize contemporary Ireland behind the imaginary Bohane, in the same way as contemporary readers of Jonathan Swift were able to recognize various aspects of British political life in *Gulliver's Travels*. Likewise, the readers of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* were able to clearly distinguish Stalin's U.S.S.R. behind the fable. Satire, like parody, "marks difference rather than similarity", according to Linda Hutcheon (Hutcheon 1985: 6), but is also "repetition with critical distance", and seems therefore more appropriate than dystopia to describe the enclosed, seemingly immutable world of Bohane, where the characters' inherent nostalgia, which governs all their decisions and behaviors, inexorably entails the return of the same.
- 16 Similarity and difference, together with ironic inversion, can indeed be spotted out at all levels in the novel. The target of Barry's satire in *City of Bohane* is of course real

contemporary Ireland, which we recognize behind the cardboard façade of Bohane, behind the “peninsula”, or the “creation”. Critics have also wondered whether Bohane was not a thin disguise for Limerick, Barry’s own hometown, all the more so as the novelist enjoys using the local accent in his public readings of the novel. As Marie Mianowski argues, “To a reader of *City of Bohane* in 2016, the landscape described is both familiar and literally outlandish, as if the elements that make it a typical Irish landscape (bogland, low skies, shimmering waters...) were present, and yet oddly reconfigured” (Mianowski 2017: 99).

- 17 However, the carefully outlined topographical division of the place rather evokes the whole island of Ireland, especially through the emphasis on its divisions: in the first place, the partition between the Republic and the Province of Northern Ireland through the allusions to the “Northside Rises”.
- 18 Another typically Irish kind of division is that between traditional rural Ireland, disguised as “the Big Nothin”, “a place of thorn and stone and sudden devouring swamp holes” which has “an infinity of small wet fields” (Barry 2011: 43), and the Dublin area, symbolized by the Back Trace, where the old (such as “Smoketown”, where the “streets of old tenements are tight, steep-sided, ill-lit” (Barry 2011: 7)) and the new (“New Town”, “Endeavour Avenue”) live side by side. This is indeed much the case in today’s Irish capital, where crumbling houses are gradually being torn down to be replaced by steel and glass high rise buildings; the Liffey riverbank has been dubbed the “Dublin Silicone Valley” due to the number of multinational high-tech companies who have erected their European seat there.
- 19 The sand-pikeys and their “forge” could very well be an allusion to the “travelers”, those Irish people who over the centuries, were driven out of sedentary homes by either dispossession, eviction (“clearances”) or poverty, and were forced to become itinerants, living on odd jobs such as metalworking, hence the derogatory name “tinkers” that was long attributed to them, as in J.M. Synge’s 1909 play *The Tinker’s Wedding*. Their presence alongside the globalized elites working in high-tech multinational companies is a sign of the distortion of time brought about by hypermodernity in Ireland in the twenty-first century, where traces of an archaic past have survived in the middle of what Ursula Heise has called in *Chronoschisms* “a speed-up of temporal experience” (Heise 1997: 12).
- 20 As to the “blow-ins”, they are obvious allusions to the deep transformations induced in the Irish population by the arrival of numerous migrants in the wake of the economic boom through the last decade of the twentieth-century, turning what was traditionally a country of emigration into one of immigration, raising new issues of racism and of human rights, particularly through the enforcement of the rule called “Direct Provision”, whereby asylum-seekers have to live in allotted accommodation where they are unable even to cook their own food.
- 21 Ireland’s newly pronounced social divisions, resulting from the late-twentieth century boom followed by the 2008 bust, can also be recognized through Bohane’s various sets of characters, as Annie Galvin suggests when she speaks of the novel as an allegory “meant to speak ‘otherwise’ of the politics of austerity which were applied to Ireland in the wake of the recession”, as mentioned in the introduction to this paper. On the one hand the lower classes are described under the guise of those Bohane citizens who spend their time either smoking the “dream-pipe”, buying the trinkets sold along De Valera Avenue, or praying the “Sweet Baba Jay”. This obvious parody of Ireland's

tradition of religious devotion places it on the same level as drug or mass consumption and is denounced as an instrument of social control meant to keep the lower classes oblivious to their subordinate condition. In the meantime, the upper classes are busy making business on “Endeavour Avenue” and the politicians “kept always to the New Town side of De Valera Street” in order to evade the real problems and to confront their fellow-citizens. Again, this reads as a bitter indictment of the Irish political class, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, caused by the reckless conduct of bankers and real-estate investors, all supported and encouraged by politicians whose blindness and even corruption led to the collapse of the economy, whose first victims were the ordinary citizens. Some Irish lost their homes, whose value dropped dramatically, unemployment rose to over 14%, and thousands of educated young Irish people had to leave the country in search of a better future elsewhere.

Parody

- 22 In order to pass a satirical judgment upon the *hubris* and resulting downfall of contemporary Ireland, Barry parodies Irish history as well as its geography or its socio-political order. Some of the imaginary city's place-names—De Valera Street, the 98 Steps, Croppy Boy Heights— are evident allusions to some of the most sacred cows of Irish history, and mostly to its Republican heroes. Foremost among them is Eamon de Valera, who as a participant to the Easter 1916 rebellion proclaimed the Irish republic, later became Taoiseach of the Free Irish State and the author of the 1937 Constitution of Ireland. Another republican hero is Theobald Wolfe Tone, the leader of the 1798 Republican United Irishmen rebellion, followed by the “People's Insurrection”. But the names of those famous heroes and historical events are reduced to mere devalued signifiers, whose original meanings have been lost. Logan Hartnett is nicknamed “The Long Fella” (Barry 2011: 43), in the manner of Eamon de Valera. His legendary rivalry with Gant Broderick could be reminiscent of the conflict which opposed de Valera and Michael Collins in the aftermath of the signing of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, which created the Irish Free State but also the partition of the island. But Logan and Gant, for all their seductive power in Bohane, are only gang leaders fighting for their drug dealing territories. In *Bohane*, memories of the Great Famine, one of the most traumatic events in Irish history, and of the way the British government failed to prevent the deaths of thousands of Irish people, subside only under the shape of the “rough and ill-formed drystone walls [...] A lazy job, the walls. It wasn't Presbyterians put up those walls” (Barry 2011: 43), an ironic reference to the religious discriminations which all through Irish history condemned Catholics to dire poverty. The “Feud” which returns episodically with each summer, can be read as an allusion to the long, recurring history of struggle against British colonial power, which ended in 1921 with the independence of the twenty-six counties, but was followed by a deadly civil war. The Anglo-Irish conflict re-ignited with a vengeance in Northern Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century; but again the impact and seriousness of that historical past have dwindled in Bohane to the mere level of a desultory gang war opposing petty criminals eager to retain the control of their territories.
- 23 A similar process of disconnecting the present from the historical past, thus emptying it of valuable meaning, which more or less amounts to a betrayal of the ideals of the past, is also applied to Irish literary figures, such as the name given to “the Louis

McNeice tenements”, a parody of Ireland’s reverence for poetry, standing in utter contrast with the country’s socio-economic realities. The same can be said of a character named the “Gypo”, who “knew the backways of the red-light streets, and the nuance of the double-jointed lingo, and the whereabouts of the secret passageways” (Barry 2011: 203), a clear allusion to Liam O’Flaherty’s character of the same name in his novel *The Informer* (1925), adapted to the screen by John Ford in 1935, a story of betrayal, whereby a republican gunman informs on his comrades and is as a consequence pursued by the IRA.

24 Parody is also perceptible in Barry’s novel through the invention of a fictional language, a kind of Newspeak, which combines “traditional” vernacular Hiberno-English locutions, such as “quare”, “hoors”, “aul”, “wee”, “spud-aters”, with a few authentic Gaelic expressions thrown in here and there, such as *bog*, *boreen*, *shebeen*, *lackeen*, etc., and coinages such as “hoss polis”, “shkelper”, “tarry joe”, the “lost-time”, the “Fancy boys”, etc. This combination of old, traditional elements pertaining to Irish culture, with new ones, often drawn from popular culture, are to be found through other aspects of the novel.

25 The style of the narrative is for instance an imitation of the epic so familiar to Irish folklore, in the way the story-teller addresses his audience and constantly refers to a curse or a taint, providing a legendary or mythical explanation for the currently bad situation: “oh these were good-looking young people, in a hard town by the sea” (Barry 2011: 53), “the Bohane taint was stronger than blood” (Barry 2011: 23), “oh, the Bohane taint darkened each and all of us” (Barry 2011: 117). The west of Ireland, and its associations with the romanticizing of the past first initiated by the Celtic Revival, and which remained for long a staple of nationalist imagery, is also the butt of satirical parody: “Smaller tracks lead from it into the hills and onto the bog and down briary laneways peopled by haggard souls in cottages that sag with damp, and loss, and sadness” (Barry 2011: 42), a parody of Eamon de Valera’s famous 1943 St Patrick’s day speech in which he portrayed the ideal Irish nation:

The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age.

26 The satire of the exaltation of rural Ireland is itself an Irish tradition, such as illustrated by Flann O’Brien in *The Poor Mouth: a Bad Story about the Hard Life* (1941) with its refrain: “our likes will never be there again”, and where the nationalists in power in post-independence Ireland are mocked in the same way as Barry’s characters’ incurable nostalgia for “the lost-time”. O’Brien was already mocking the romanticization of the West of Ireland by the nationalists of the Celtic Revival, who regarded it as the seat of an authentic Irish identity, while being totally oblivious to the poverty and the social needs of the inhabitants.

27 However, in *City of Bohane* fragments of global popular culture are intermingled with those bits and scraps of traditional Irish culture: Gant Broderick and Logan Hartnett are presented, because of their alleged invincibility, as revised versions of epic Irish heroes, a mix of Finn MacCumhaill and Cúchallainn surrounded by their faithful warriors. But they are also described as Clint Eastwood-like western heroes, as is apparent in the

detailed description of their physical appearance and the outfits they wear, which read like scripts for the shooting of a film:

All sorts of quarehawks lingered Trace-deep in the small hours. They looked down as he passed, they examined their toes and their sacks of twany wine — you wouldn't make eye contact with the Long Fella if you could help it. Strange, but we had a fear of him and a pride in him, both. He had a fine hold of himself, as we say in Bohane. He was graceful and erect and he looked neither left nor right but straight out ahead always, with the shoulders thrown back, like a general. (Barry 2011: 4)

- 28 As for Jenni Ching, she is presented like a mix between a Quentin Tarantino heroine and a manga character: “Jenni Ching carried a spike ball on a chain and swung it above her head. She wore an all-in-one black nylon jumpsuit, so tightly fit it might have been applied with a spray-can, and she smoked a black cheroot to match it, and her mouth was a harsh slash of crimson lippy” (Barry 2011: 148).

Bohane and *Irelantis*

- 29 This pasting up of clichés of old, traditional Ireland and of a new, globalized one, can be set in parallel with the artist Seán Hillen's 1994 to 1997 series of collages *Irelantis*,² in which the artist used John Hinde's technicolor postcards of an idealized, sanitized Ireland and added futuristic elements, or on the contrary inserted references to a very distant time. The allusion to photomontage is besides made evident in chapter 23 of Barry's novel, “The Darkroom”, where several paragraphs are preceded by the term “close-up”, and also in chapter 25 called “Babylon montage”. In both *City of Bohane* and *Irelantis*, the incongruous, preposterous superimposition of a mythologized past with an equally artificial, implausible future is meant to set the onlooker aback. This reaction is meant to reflect the sudden and unforeseeable transformation of an archaic, conservative, backward society into a globalized, multicultural vanguard of Western neo-liberalism. The technique of photomontage also enhances the fakeness and superficiality of versions of Ireland sold both in the past by the conservatives in power in the post-independence period and today by the promoters of globalized neoliberalism. With hindsight, the romanticized picture of a rural, Catholic, archaic Ireland proved to be just much of a political construct as did the Googled, Starbucked contemporary version of it, which collapsed in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, as Barry suggests here, but has already been resurrected since.

Conclusion: the End of History in Bohane/Irelantis/Ireland?

- 30 This is what the cartoonish, comic-strip aesthetics of Barry's novel seeks to put to the fore, by evoking an enclosed, artificial world, where past and present co-exist in an equally meaningless stasis, without any hope, or perhaps any wish on the part of the citizens, for any change. This is perhaps what Francis Fukuyama announced in his controversial 1989 essay “The end of history?”, in which he argued that society had entered a new and lasting phase and that this change was so dramatic that it might be best represented as the end of history. He explained that twentieth-century battles of ideology (between Western liberalism, communism, fascism; and between capitalism

and socialists) came to an end with the fall of communism in 1989, which, according to Fukuyama, marked the universal triumph of free-market liberalism. As Raffaella Baccolini, analysing Fukuyama summarizes it, “Once humanity’s desires are replaced by consumer demands and, thus, fulfilled by the ideology of free market liberalism, there is no more space for utopian longing: [...]We cannot picture to ourselves a world that is essentially different from the present one and at the same time better” (Moyland and Baccolini 2003: 116).

- 31 Now Fukuyama has been categorized as right-wing thinker; but Marxist essayist Fredric Jameson has argued in his book *Postmodernism, or the Culture of Late Capitalism*, about contemporary art and literature, that “Every position on postmodernism in culture – whether apologia or stigmatization – is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today” (Jameson 1991: 55). This applies wonderfully to Barry’s *City of Bohane*, as the novel borrows many of the devices of postmodernism, especially parody, collage and pastiche, to implicitly comment on the effects of neoliberalism in Ireland. To take up Fukuyama’s idea, the novel seems to register the end of history in Ireland, namely the end of the utopia that underpinned the nationalist, republican struggle for independence. That utopia has been relegated to the “lost-time”, and as Gant Broderick acknowledges, it cannot be reprieved: “he tried to bring himself to the lost-time, but it could never be regained” (Barry 2011: 59).
- 32 Utopia in the fake but recognizable version of contemporary Ireland embodied by the city of Bohane has been replaced by the urge to wallow in sentiment (nostalgia) and in immediate gratification, as the one provided by “the dream-pipe”, or by the old movies that Girly Hartnett enjoys watching in her bed while “on a diet of hard booze and fat pills” (Barry 2011: 64). All those possibilities of evasion, cheap sentiment and immediate pleasure are also offered by kitsch, an aesthetics which both Barry’s and Hillen’s works hark back to, and which, according to Thomas Kulka, “comes to support our basic sentiments and beliefs, not to disturb or question them” (Kulka 1996: 65).
- 33 However, if we compare again Barry’s novel to Hillen’s photomontages, we can notice that behind the seemingly innocuous atmosphere of nostalgia and kitsch they recreate, a real danger is looming in both cases: as said at the beginning of this chapter, Bohane is defined by entropy, and some major catastrophe seems to have already taken place there, which not only arrested its development but made it regress to a more primitive state, back towards nothingness. That retrospective danger is what we can see too in most of Hillen’s photomontages, as Fintan O’Toole has noted in a 2011 article:
- Even if you look again at those well-known Irelantis images, they are not at all the same as they were a decade ago. Back then, their humour was the most obvious thing about them. They seemed to make some kind of sense of a postmodern, hyper-globalised Ireland in which space and time were jumbled up together. Their wit and invention made this condition seem like something we could live with.
- What you see now in the Irelantis images, however, is above all the approach of the apocalypse. The montages are full of explosions, inundations, precipices, whirlpools, lightning storms and earthquakes. There is a haunting image of the Stephen’s Green shopping centre in Dublin as a Hiroshima-style ruin. Fabulous inventions they may be, but Hillen’s creations now seem weirdly prescient and ruefully realistic. (O’Toole 2011)
- 34 The catastrophe which has already taken place in Bohane/Ireland is clearly the 2008 economic bust and the austerity which followed in its aftermath, as Annie Galvin was

right to point out. But what Barry described as the permanent present in which the citizens of Bohane seem to live, being as it were unable to learn from the lessons of the past and to imagine a different future, has been evidenced by more recent developments, as Ireland has of today re-emerged from the recession, and only a little more than a decade after the near-collapse of its economy, has become again a vast “Endeavour Avenue”, where multinational companies can enjoy low corporate taxes and a highly qualified manpower, where social inequalities are always on the rise. Meanwhile, the “Feud”, if we take it to mean the long-lasting violence opposing the different social groups in Northern Ireland, has been re-ignited by Brexit, a sign that the historical past, despite all the efforts of neoliberalism to erase it from memory with the help of different kinds of “soothsayers”, “sweet Baba Jay”, “trinkets”, or “dream-pipes”, can return with a vengeance.

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NOTES

1. *Shanachie*: from the Irish, a teller of old tales or legends.
2. For examples of Hillen's photomontages see <http://www.irelantis.com/gallery/index.html>

ABSTRACTS

This paper examines the issue of time and history in Kevin Barry's 2011 novel *City of Bohane*, a mix of dystopia and satire in which post-Celtic Tiger, post-2008 "bust" Ireland is thinly disguised. That imaginary, dystopian world seems arrested in an eternal present, having reduced the historical past to the status of mere traces, the origin of which has been lost, while the future is jeopardized by entropy. However, the novel is not a critical dystopia in that the inhabitants of Bohane do not show any sign of protest or rebellion, numbed as they are by the pleasures of consumption of drugs or other material goods. The second part of the chapter analyses the different elements of the parody of contemporary Ireland and of the way neoliberalism has reduced the sacred cows of history—republicanism, nationalism, Catholicism—to devaluated signifiers. *City of Bohane* is comparable to visual artist Seán Hillen's series of photomontage *Irelantis*, in which the incongruous, preposterous superimposition of a mythologized past with an equally artificial, implausible future is meant to set the onlooker aback, in the image of the sudden and unforeseeable transformation of an archaic, conservative, backward society into a globalized, multicultural vanguard of Western neo-liberalism.

Cet article analyse le traitement du temps et de l'histoire dans le roman de Kevin Barry *City of Bohane* paru en 2011, mélange de dystopie et de satire dans laquelle l'Irlande d'après la crise de 2008 est à peine déguisée. Dans cet univers dystopique, le temps semble s'être figé dans un présent éternel, le passé historique ayant été réduit à l'état de traces dont le sens originel a été oublié, tandis que l'avenir est menacé par l'entropie qui caractérise ce monde imaginaire. Le roman n'est cependant pas une dystopie critique, car les habitants de Bohane, anesthésiés par la consommation de drogues ou de biens matériels, ne montrent aucun signe de rébellion. La

deuxième partie de l'article décompose les différents éléments reconnaissables sous la parodie de l'Irlande contemporaine et du néolibéralisme, et de la manière dont il a réduit les figures emblématiques de l'histoire irlandaise – républicanisme, nationalisme, catholicisme – au niveau de signifiants dévalués. *City of Bohane* peut être comparé aux photomontages de l'artiste Seán Hillen, réunis sous le titre *Irelantis*, qui superpose de façon incongrue des visions traditionnelles et hypermodernes de l'Irlande, qui surprennent et interrogent le spectateur, de même que peut paraître surprenant et incongru le passage brutal de l'Irlande d'une société traditionnelle et conservatrice à un avant-poste du libéralisme globalisé et multiculturel.

INDEX

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