



Citation: A. Ciliotta-Rubery (2023) A Socratic Revelation: Sebastian Barry's Roadmap to Understanding Identity. *Sijis* 13: pp. 215-228. doi: 10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-14625

Copyright: © 2023 A. Ciliotta-Rubery. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-sijis>) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

A Socratic Revelation: Sebastian Barry's Roadmap to Understanding Identity

Andrea Ciliotta-Rubery
SUNY Brockport (<arubery@brockport.edu>)

Abstract:

Critics have suggested that Sebastian Barry's works provide a platform for omitted narratives within the Irish story. While I agree, I argue that Barry goes further, presenting the readers with a "structural paradigm" for understanding political identity. Grounded in Socratic thought, this paradigm establishes the connection between citizen and state, whereby the internal order of a state is directly linked to the internal order of its citizens. In the absence of such ordered citizens, the state is unlikely to possess a cohesive identity. For Barry, individual self-awareness is requisite for Ireland's establishment of a unified identity. This Socratic "roadmap" towards understanding political identity is best seen in the turbulent nature of the principal characters in *A Long Long Way*, *On Canaan's Side*, and *The Temporary Gentleman*.

Keywords: Irish Literature, Nationalism, Philosophy, Political Identity, Socratic Thought

The link between politics and literature proves foundational in the works of the Irish novelist and playwright, Sebastian Barry. While admitting that his "subject isn't politics at all" (Barra 2014), there can be little dispute that thematically, his most acclaimed novels engage with the political events of the stories' time period. Through the medium of historic memory, Barry allows his characters to encounter with the prescient political turmoil connected with the Anglo-Irish experience and subsequent crisis of identity. In her essay "Branded Ireland or Ireland branded? Versions of Irish Identity", Rebecca Pelan suggests that Ireland has always had to "negotiate" its identity amongst competing views of self-explanation. The first negotiation can be seen amongst the romanticized depiction of an idyllic, rural Celtic identity pitted against the harsh realism of Joyce and others who rejected this version with its "sentimentalization of failure" (2012, 5). The second negotiation of identity occurs amongst two competing narratives; first, Ireland's understanding of itself

relative to its colonial past with England and next, with the view of Ireland as “homeland” by the Irish diasporic community in the United States (6). These phenomena, along with a long history of religious division, poverty and a short-term economic boom in the 1990s have further obfuscated a shared vision of Irish identity.

While the intention of this essay is not to examine the various “negotiated” interpretations of Irish identity, it is meant instead, to look closely at how Sebastian Barry’s works uniquely effect the identity narrative within the Irish experience. First, it will draw brief attention to the initial impact of Barry’s works on their intentional gift of “voice” to those Irish men and women whose stories have been deliberately left out from the historic Irish narrative. Barry reminds his readers that without their inclusion, the concept of Irish identity will never be complete. Second, the paper will argue more notably, that Barry’s works do not develop nor promote any concept of Irish identity. Instead, it will argue that Barry offers a pathway or process by which an Irish identity may be discovered. This second argument reveals itself with a structural paradigm, reminiscent of the one provided by Socrates in *The Apology*, on how one comes to know one’s self. It is with the adoption of this paradigm or pathway, that Barry suggests how Ireland may best come to know herself.

1. *Omitted Voices*

Barry’s works draw attention to parts of the Irish narrative that must be included in any formative understanding of Ireland’s identity. These parts, as Barry seems to suggest, are often parts left out; the disadvantaged few whose voice is absent from the predominant narrative of Irish history. This can be seen in his most celebrated work, *A Long Long Way*, which tells the harrowing tale of a naïve Catholic volunteer, Willie Dunne, whose time with the Dublin Fusiliers is met with the unending carnage of World War I, along with the unforeseen contempt of homegrown Irish Republicanism. In the futility and confusion of this young man’s short life, Barry provides a testimony for the unsung bravery of those forgotten Irish Catholics who fought and died on behalf of the Crown, without recognition and with the disdain of fellow Irishmen back home. Similarly, his *Secret Scripture* gives testament to the many forgotten victims of Ireland’s asylum system, whose routine incarceration of morally “questionable” women has left a permanent stain on the reputations of the Catholic Church and Irish State for their complicity in such injustices. It is through Roseanne McNulty’s “Secret Scripture”, hidden under the floorboards of her asylum room, that her unsung story is hurled before the reader in all of its ugliness, preventing this and other stories from being excluded from the historic narrative of Irish identity.

While critics have largely seen great value in Barry’s efforts to bring forth these forgotten voices, praising the lyric dignity with which he presents these remarkable characters, some have taken issue with the degree to which Barry enlists our support of these overlooked voices. In his essay, “The Politics of Pity: Sebastian Barry’s *A Long Long Way*”, Liam Harte argues that Barry’s creation of such innocents as Willie Dunne and Jesse Kirwan was an intentional device to manipulate audiences to feel pity for these doomed characters, making their unnoticed sacrifice worthy of our memory:

Ideologically, however, Barry’s poetics of innocence seems to me to veer toward a rather heavy-handed polemic, insistently promoting the message that these once-vilified volunteers should not be seen as tragic victims of historical circumstance, thus leaving the novel open to the charge that it refutes one partial version of history with an equally partisan rebuttal. (2014, 212)

For Harte, Barry's presentation has undermined his original intent. Similarly, a version of this same critique has been leveled against Barry's *The Secret Scripture*. This time the focus is on Roseanne, an "unwed" mother whose child is taken from her at birth and who, because of her indiscretion, is institutionalized for sixty-five years. While Barry admits that this story was prompted by some childhood memories of his own aunt, it is clearly intended to be emblematic of the many untold stories of young Irish women whose "shameful acts" lead to unwarranted incarceration in Magdalene Laundries' mental hospitals and other facilities alike. The dignity for which Barry affords Roseanne, along with the unlikely "sentimental" ending he provides for her, has led some reviewers, including those who granted this work the Costa Prize, to view the ending as somewhat unbelievable (Harney-Mahajan 2012, 55). For these critics, Barry has again gone too far in his efforts to win audiences over to the side of Roseanne and her tragic story. Whether or not Barry intentionally over plays these unsung narratives seems secondary to the contribution made by them in understanding better, those forgotten factors contributing to a true Irish identity. As Pelan notes, "the modern Irish experience is a complex combination of fragmented, historically and politically influenced, conflicting, and constantly shifting reality" (2012, 8) and thus, piecing together any firm sense of identity proves challenging. Barry's inclusion of these forgotten narratives is a welcomed contribution to this effort, for how can an Irish identity ever be realized without acknowledging the shame suffered by the Catholic soldiers fighting on behalf of the British in WWI and the scores of women subjected to the brutality of the Magdalen Laundries and the judgment of the Church?

The case can be made, however, that Barry does not just "fill the void" of omitted narratives from the multifaceted nature of Irish identity. Instead, he seems to present his readers with something much greater; a structural paradigm that allows for a more revealing, integrated, and holistic approach to discovering a sense of Irish identity in his works. This "structural-paradigm" mirrors Socrates's teaching in *The Apology*:

I went, instead, to each one of you privately to do him, as I say, the greatest benefits, and tried to persuade him not to think of his affairs until he had thought of himself and tried to make himself as good and wise as possible, nor to think of the affairs of Athens until he had thought of Athens herself; and to care for other things in the same manner. (Plato 1984, 43)

First, Socrates asserts the interconnected dependence between man and the state, with a teaching applicable to both individuals and collective communities, alike. It implores us to think of the whole before the parts; the whole being our individual selves and the states that we live in and the parts being the daily choices and policies we pursue, respectively. In keeping with this directive, he tells us that to know who we are as individuals or states, we must dedicate thoughtful attention to the type of life we would like to live and the persons we would like to become. In contrast, going about the "affairs" of the day, without thoughtful consideration of who we are as persons, will lead to confusion, uncertainty, and poor choices. Thus, in their connection, the unreflective man and the unreflective state, mirror each other, with neither knowing who or what they are.

Fortunately, Socrates's teaching provides a starting point to remedy this crisis of identity and Barry seems to have incorporated it into his novels. The solution resides in Socrates's belief that the state is an aggregate of the individual natures of its citizens. This can be seen in an early discussion between Socrates and Glaucon, in *The Republic*, on how to best create a just city in speech, as Socrates asks:

Isn't it quite necessary for us to agree that the very same forms and dispositions as are in the city are in each of us? I said. Surely they didn't get there from any other place. It would be ridiculous if someone

should think that the spiritedness didn't come into the cities from those private men who are just the ones imputed with having this character. (435e, 114)

If we are to agree with Socrates's analogy that the spiritedness of a state comes from and reflects its spirited citizens, then we can assume that the disorder of a state comes from and reflects the disorder of its citizens, as well. To think otherwise, Socrates suggests, would be "ridiculous", thus identifying its citizens as the source of a city's "forms and dispositions". This assertion takes on greater significance when considering Socrates's earlier advice on the importance of caring for our inner life first. When citizens take little time to critically reflect upon themselves and what they hold, it is likely that the state will do much the same. It is with the individual then, that the problem of identity must direct its focus. If Ireland is to have an understanding of its own identity, it must begin with its citizens having a better understanding of themselves. This conclusion seems to be at the foundation of many of Barry's novels.

The frequency with which Barry connects elements of disorder and confusion at the state level with the disordered actions of his main characters is noteworthy. Beginning with *A Long Long Way*, and continuing on with *The Secret Scripture*, *On Canaan's Side*, *The Temporary Gentleman* and *Days Without End*, one cannot help but notice the Socratic connectedness between the external confusion of state policies and the internal confusion of the central figures. For example, the unsettledness of the young Irish state is seen in the unsettled views of Willie Dunne, Jesse Kirwan, Eneas and Tom McNulty. The disquietedness of the newly formed Ghana is realized in the internal anguish of Jack McNulty and Tom Quaye. The continuum of violence across the American frontier against Native and African Americans is reflected in the confused violence of Thomas McNulty and John Cole. Beyond Barry's attention to this connection, is the special attention he pays to the internal turmoil of his leading characters. The case can be made that Barry identifies the source of all private and public disorder originating with the individual. The absence of self-awareness and purpose renders his characters vulnerable and irresolute, as reflected at large; in the ever changing, scattered and, at times, purposeless policies of the state. Such confusion obfuscates any possibility of uncovering a true idea of one's personal and public identity.

Proof that Barry views the individual as central to understanding the overall problem of identity is best exemplified in three of his major works, *A Long Long Way*, *On Canaan's Side* and *The Temporary Gentleman*. In all three stories, the main characters begin their lives in Ireland and travel elsewhere, by means of war or emigration. Ireland's confusion about itself is reflected in each of these characters, as they journey abroad, unknown to others and themselves. While some ultimately evolve towards greater self-awareness, others do not. The results are striking. For those who finally understand the significance of knowing one's own mind, the harshness of the world is somehow mitigated by a spirit of purpose and forgiveness. This proves especially salient when considering the impact of the choices made by individuals within the political realm, for much of Ireland's identity is somehow contingent upon its citizens' ability for forgiveness. For those who never come to know their own minds, the world remains largely without direction and peace. While Barry does not provide his readers with any sort of prescription or definition of Irish identity, he has made use of Socrates's paradigm of the connectedness between the state and its citizens, with special attention towards citizens, to better demonstrate the starting point of where the journey for identity must begin. Knowing who we are as individuals is merely the first step in fostering the states' ability to achieve the same. A careful look at these three works will demonstrate this critical relationship.

2. *A Long Long Way*

A finalist for the Man Booker Prize, Barry's *A Long Long Way*, tells the harrowing story of Willie Dunne, the son of an Irish Catholic police officer at Dublin Castle, whose loyalty to the Crown sets the stage for his son's brief but powerful period of doubt during his service with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers in WWI. Too short to become a policeman like his dad, Willie chose, instead, to volunteer on behalf of Ireland, in the hopes of making his dad proud and protecting the defenseless women of Belgium from the Germans. Willie's naiveté becomes immediately apparent, with his simplistic view of the world and his unyielding faith in his father's assessment of good and evil. While the story shares themes of wasted youth, loss of innocence and uprootedness, present in Vera Brittain's *A Testament to Youth* (1933) and Erich Maria Remarque's *All's Quiet on the Western Front* (1928), offers a unique and simultaneous glimpse into the feeble efforts of both a young man and a young state trying to understand themselves. Chaos abounds and as Barry seems to suggest, the root of Ireland's disorder may find its roots in the internal disorder of the story's leading characters.

Several notable scenes in *A Long Long Way* prove this point but none more than an early discussion between Willie and Mr. Lawlor, the father of Willie's love interest, Gretta. After learning that Mr. Lawlor suffered a head injury during the Sackville Street riots, Willie's dad began sending various care packages to the family (Barry 2005, 6-7). While James Dunne saw such gatherings as incongruous with public safety, he nonetheless, felt remorse that citizens had been injured in the police efforts to restore public order. To address his unspoken guilt, he sent his son with some pheasants and on his first delivery Mr. Lawlor asks, "[s]o what do you think, son, about Peelers rushing in on passers-by and knocking the bejaysus out of them?" (9). Admitting that he does not know what to think about such a question, Willie then becomes the target of Lawlor's rancor:

You should know. You should have an opinion. I don't care what a man thinks as long as he knows his own mind [...] The curse of the world is people thinking thoughts that are only thoughts which have been given them. They're not their own thoughts. They're like cuckoos in their heads. Their own thoughts are tossed out and cuckoo thoughts put in instead. Don't you agree? (*Ibidem*)

With prophetic clarity, Lawlor sums up the essential flaw in Willie's character, namely, he does not know himself. Certainly, he holds views, but these are the views provided by his imposing father who has blindly followed mandates of the Crown. Willie had heard his father's version of the Sackville Street events, but he did not realize until Lawlor's admission that it was his father's police officers who were responsible for the deaths of four men. In Willie's mind, his dad was merely keeping an innocent public safe but after this realization, such thoughts were no longer possible.

This example, along with Willie's naive declaration of intent to save the "defenseless women of Belgium" demonstrates his absence of a mature self-reflection. He could not provide Mr. Lawlor with a thoughtful response about the event because he had never given it any thought of his own. He had merely believed his father's version. Mr. Lawlor's opposing narrative challenged such views, leaving Willie a newfound disquiet that remains for the entirety of the novel. From this point on, he is no longer certain whether the Crown or its Irish agents have Ireland's best interest.

Despite the fact that "[h]e hoped his father's fervent worship of the King would guide him" (22), Willie soon found himself adrift amongst attitudes hostile towards that same King. His Sergeant and longest lasting friend, Christy Moran, provides the first attack:

This fucking British army, I hate it [...] The same fucking army that always done for us. Held me head down in all of history and drowned me and me family, and all before, like fucking dogs, and made a heap of us and burned us for black rebels. English bastards, bastards the lot, and poor people like me and the father and his oul da and his again and all going back, all under the boot, and them just minding their own business, fishing out of Kingstown harbor till they were blue in the teeth. (25-26)

Moran's untoward disdain took on greater relevance for Willie after his D Company suffered 800 casualties from a German gas attack. In an unforgettable exchange with British officers, Willie is confronted with an unknown level of British hostility as the unmoved Major Stokes responds, "Christ Almighty [...] What's wrong with you fucking Irish? Can't you take a bit of gas?" (117). Willie's face must have betrayed his disbelief, for Stokes continued the attack: "what's the matter with you? Little Irish midget with a shitty arse. Don't look at me like you're going to make a fucking complaint. Don't fucking look at me [...] Those fucking Irish" (121).

Major Stokes's disregard for these Irish sacrifices was matched at home by the sentiments of Dublin's young Republicans. Once again, Willie's world view is shaken, as he and several others, most notable Jesse Kirwan, are asked to patrol the streets of Dublin against an imminent danger. Assuming a German threat, Willie complied only to find himself the target of gunfire and the "prisoner" of "a very young shivering man in a Sunday suit" (92). After being shot in the neck by Willie's captain, this young man was asked by Willie if he was German: "'German?' Said the man. 'German? What are you talking about? I'm an Irishman. We're all Irishmen in here, fighting for Ireland'" (*ibidem*). Irishman fighting for Ireland? Wasn't he, Willie Dunne, an Irishman fighting for Ireland on behalf of England, her protector and champion? What could it possibly mean that the Irish were now willing to kill those fellow Irishmen who wore a British uniform, viewing them as traitors and tools of the Crown? Willie had no answer but seemed confused further by the young rebel's request to say an act of contrition; a shared moment of sin and forgiveness. Jesse Kirwan, however, seemed deeply saddened by the day's events, as his mind now confronted a new world reality: Irish involvement in the war was the product of a false promise. While Lord Kitchener called for war against the Germans and John Redmond, a home ruler, encouraged young Irishmen to take up the call, the British promise of self-rule for Ireland was a fabrication. The active recruiting of young men from Ulster to the war effort was designed to combat any nationalistic impulses amongst the soldiers.

Without really knowing his own reasons for joining up, nor what to make of Jesse's refusal to fight, Willie's internal conflict increases exponentially, as does that of his fellow Irish countrymen. While the war is effectively over for Jesse Kirwan, as "an Irishman can't fight this war now. Not after those lads being executed. No, indeed" (155), it is not over for others. Like the corporal watching Kirwan's jail cell, he'd have easily shot the rebels in Dublin, in fact, been "fucking jubilant, me. Bastards" (152). Compound this with the British prejudice of the likes of Major Stokes who "[w]ouldn't think twice about shooting an Irishman anyhow. Says we're all fucking rebels" (*ibidem*), Willie cannot make sense of any of it. Certainly, Willie Redmond's speech before the House of Commons which "expressed the pious hope again that the fact of Nationalist and Unionist Irish soldiers fighting side by side might some day foment a greater understanding of each other and bring Ireland in spite of the recent rebellion to a place of balance, peace and mutual nationhood" (195-196) was for naught.

In an effort to make sense of his world, Willie writes to his dad, the one person of unquestioned certitude. Conveying the "pity" he felt for the young rebel shot before him, Willie admits of his own confusion on the matter, intimating that the killing of the rebellion's leaders just "doesn't feel right" (139). Knowing his dad won't be pleased with this sympathetic view, Willie sought out advice from Fr. Buckley:

So for a while there I didn't know what was what. And when Jesse Kirwan was shot, Father. What can a fella say about that? And the reason he gave me. I still don't know what he meant. I don't know anything at all these days. So I just eat my grub and do what I'm told, but, Father, what for, what for, I don't know. (214)

Despite Fr. Buckley's reassurance that "[y]ou can know your own mind and your father can know his" (215), Willie took little comfort. Being witness to the brutality of war, especially civil war, cast aspersions on Willie's blind acceptance of his dad's world view. Nothing was the same now, especially himself.

Willie's uncertainty bore the markings of a new kind of maturity. He no longer viewed the world in dichotomies of good and evil, right and wrong. He saw now the complexities of life, with all of its brutalities, sufferings and unexpected graciousness. In the end, he came to lose everything; the girl he loved, his father's respect and ultimately his life. Yet, it is in these losses that he emerges as someone who is finally at peace with himself. Willie makes no claims to understand the war. He sees a shared humanity in the German soldiers as well as the Dublin rebels who despised him for wearing a British uniform. He overlooked his father's petulance towards him with his final words, "[b]ut it cannot change the fact that I believe in my heart that you are the finest man I know. When I think of you there is nothing bad that arises at all" (279). His willingness to forgive, to see others as himself and to recognize the loss of his old life, allowed for Willie to embrace his new world order with a gracious acceptance. He did not necessarily know who he was, but he seemed to know better, what he was not. It was because of this then, that he was able to hear the voice of a German soldier singing "Silent Night" and not view it as the voice of the enemy, but the voice of a man "who might have seen horrors" himself (289). Generously, Willie's beautiful voice rose to meet these words and share in song. In this moment of charity and forgiveness, Willie's agency became apparent.

The beauty of Willie's story is not found in the outcome of events. WWI ended with the senseless loss of millions of lives. Ireland's efforts towards independence resulted in a divided country whose understanding of itself has been marred by religious and nationalist divisions and the life of Willie Dunne was extinguished by a sniper bullet at the very moment of his selfless generosity in song. In themselves, these outcomes are all problematic and yet, it is in the changes of Willie Dunne that Socrates's prescription for internal and, ultimately, external order can be seen. Like his homeland of Ireland, Willie begins this story by not knowing who he is or what he wishes out of life; his thoughts were unreflective, mirror images of his father's. However, the incomprehensive loss of life, both at home and abroad, dispelled him of his father's certitude. It was replaced, instead, with a Socratic-like journey of questioning all things, being open to contrary ideas and knowing "what I do not know" (Plato 1984, 26). In the end, had he lived, Willie's openness and ultimate act of generosity would be the exact prescription for beginning to remedy Ireland's ills. Patience, forgiveness and willingness to put one's self in the place of others, all things that found a home in Willie, would serve Ireland well if she was to do the same.

3. On Canaan's Side

The parallel relationship between Willie's early internal disorder and Ireland's external disorder shares a familiar place within Barry's later work, *On Canaan's Side*. This time, however, the external disorder of the state is shared by Ireland and the United States, with the continuum of both country's uncertainty regarding its sense of self and its citizens. In the case of Ireland, it is reflected in the oppositional positions taken by free-state supporters and those who endorse

the new constitution, both claiming the right to define a new Ireland. In America, it is reflected in its continued inability to reconcile the ideals of freedom and equality with existing racial inequality. Once again, the foundation of this disorder can be located in the internal struggles of characters like James Patrick Dunne, the father of Lilly Dunne Bere, the protagonist of the story and sister to the late Willie Dunne of *A Long Long Way*, Tadg Bere and Joe Kinderman, Lilly's first and second husband, respectively. While these figures come to know themselves better in varying degrees, those that do know themselves in the story demonstrate generosity and forgiveness, requisites for the stability and progress of these nations. Without overtly stating this relationship, Barry has woven a beautiful story of loyalty, betrayal and love of homeland that bears witness to Socrates' claim that there exists a parallel, connecting structure between the internal and external disorder of states and their citizens, for which the remedy of this disorder begins with self-awareness and then forgiveness.

While *On Canaan's Side* is largely the story of Lilly Dunne Bere's life in America, it begins, however, in Ireland after the war, when her dad has retired to Wicklow and her fiancé becomes a member of the Black and Tans security force. It is with the brief story of these two men that *On Canaan's Side* first reveals this Socratic link between the internal disorder of the citizen with the external disorder of the state. In both instances, these men are at a loss to understand how there is no place for them within newly formed Ireland. With their service no longer acknowledged, valued or wanted, James and Tadg struggle to make sense of this unfortunate turn of fate. Of her dad, Lilly recalls:

My father was chief superintendent of police under the old dispensation. He was the enemy of the new Ireland, or whatever Ireland is now, even if I do not know what that country might be. He is not to be included in the book of life, but cast into the lake of fire, his name should not be mentioned because it is a useless name with a useless story. (Barry 2011, 42)

Despite his years of service to the Crown and keeping order in Dublin's streets, James Dunne was viewed as a dangerous relic from an old regime. He had no place in this new Ireland. He would be part of that whole legion of Irish men whose treasonous service sentenced them to a future of invisibility or worse, death. In the end, James Dunne's internal confusion mirrored Ireland's own confusion and inconsistent attitude towards those Irish citizens who had served England.

Tadg Bere, Lilly's fiancé, served in WWI as one of the many young Irishmen, fighting on behalf of Ireland and England and, like James Dunne, his service would ultimately be viewed as treasonous. Upon his return to the new free state of Ireland, Tadg was unsure of his place. With the help of Lilly's dad, he secured a job with the newly formed police force called "the Black and Tans"; a name attributed to their half police, half army uniforms (44). Such mixed-matched uniforms were an ominous testimony to the new state's uncertain attitude towards its own police force. Proof of this uneasiness quickly followed, as IRA men set a trap to capture a supply truck of food meant for Aughavannagh Barracks (49). As James conveys to Lilly, the Black and Tans seemed ready for the attack, almost as if someone had preemptively told them of the plan. Several IRA men died and because Tadg was recognized amongst the Black and Tans, he and Lilly, "her father an ould policeman", must likely be the source of the betrayal (50). For that reason, Tadg and Lilly would escape to America to evade the death sentence leveled against them.

Both James Dunne and Tadg Bere found no comfort in the new Ireland, neither seemed welcomed by large swaths of society. Their past service in both the police force and the military seemed to matter little. All that seemed important was their service to the Crown and for that,

they were to pass into history, unwanted and forgotten. As we know from Barry's unsettling story, *The Steward of Christendom*, James Dunne would spend his last days in a county home in Wicklow alone, tormented by a hospital aide and visions of his dead son. Tadg's fate was far worse. While he and Lilly were able to escape to America under false names, his tormentors eventually caught up, assassinating him in a Chicago Museum. While it seems that, in life and death, the emerging new Ireland had little room for such men in its narrative, Barry is not so convinced. Like his confused characters of James and Tadg, the new Ireland struggles with this uncertainty. Indeed, his works suggest that many and possibly most Irish were suspicious of such persons' loyalty and yet, he suggests that maybe not all were ready to discard men like Tadg and James. In James Dunne's case, two men took great risk in telling him about the IRA's intent to kill both Tadg and Lilly, out of some past relationship between their two fathers. Tadg Bere's assassin spared Lilly. While these two examples may seem minor in scope, they do reflect the continued confusion amongst so many Irish, as well as its state, as to how to proceed while living amongst those deemed as enemies.

If Ireland and its inhabitants gazed upon a confusing future, so did its counterpart, America. The character of Joe Kinderman, Lily's second husband, reflects this best. Unbeknownst to Lily, the funny, kind, "ashen-faced" policeman with whom she had fallen in love, secretly hid his race from those around him (111). Whitening his already light toned skin each morning, Joe found it easier to engage the world as a white man, garnering the respect of his friends and his community. He would be the champion of her African American friend Cassie, for whom he stood up bravely against the protests of a motor car driver, who tried to refuse her entry. He would take both women, two young domestics, one an immigrant and one African American, to an amusement park and proudly ride and laugh alongside them. While his seeming ability to transcend race and prejudice caused Lily to fall in love with him, it would only be with Lily's announcement of her pregnancy that this masquerade began to fall apart. Fearing the child may be born with darker skin than his own, Joe faked his death during a factory explosion and secretly slipped away from his family. His seeming racial transcendence was rooted in denial and it was not until years later, with an accidental reunion, would Joe explain his cowardly departure. Accompanied by his new African American wife and daughters, Joe related his fears of having his true race revealed, the greater ease of life as a white man and the likely reality of losing his entire family upon the birth of a dark-skinned child. Despite Lily's reassurance that color would have never lessened her love for him, he was unwilling to take such a risk, likening it to "being burned in a fire" (198).

Joe's internal confusion on race mirrored America's same confusion. The uneasiness of his place in society as a black man, his ascent into positions of power and respect as a white man all lead to internal uncertainty. While his love for Lily and the baby were unreserved, he could not face the possibility of their hatred and abandonment. Race, like religion in Ireland, would be the Achilles heel of this new nation and Joe was not strong enough to endure its pain. Both his literal and symbolic "running" from the disquieting problem of race, would be the unfortunate course taken by many in America. Once again, Socrates' teaching that the affairs of the state mirror the internal affairs of the individual soul proves exact and more important, that the possible solution seems to reside with acts of unspoken generosity and forgiveness.

In many ways, *On Canaan's Side* is Lily Bere's testimony to a mixed life of both joy and suffering. The suicide of her beloved grandson pushes her to rethink the many dark events of her life, the losses she has suffered and the withdrawal of love from both family and friends. No betrayals, however, compare to those carried out by her husband, Joe Kinderman and her friend, Mr. Nolan. In both cases, the results were the same. Lily lost her two husbands as a result of hatred and cowardice and yet, in both cases, she shows undeserved generosity. While Joe's

abandonment may be viewed as selfishly weak, his confusion about race was not unlike many others'. However, Mr. Nolan's treachery proved less defensible. His began back in a Chicago art museum where he walked up to an unsuspecting patron named Tadg Bere and in front of his wife, shot him to death. Unable to bring himself to kill Lily, he then set out on a quest to find and befriend the young widow for whom he had caused such horror. In this capacity, he proved to be generous to Lily, her troubled son and grandson. Nonetheless, these many acts of kindness proved bittersweet upon the revelation of his murderous act. For many, such an unseemly betrayal would be unforgivable and yet, Lily managed to do so.

Lily soon comes to realize that the idea of an innocent life and an innocent country may be unfounded. Her beloved Tadg may not have been the saintly man she once believed, as "[t]here may well have been terrible crimes against his own soul. Of course. A killer perhaps, a young killer, in his own country in his own time. Not without guilt, dark guilt" (244). Surely, she'd be justified in damning the whole lot of Irish republicans who gave no thought to cross an ocean and murder a husband, just for having been a Tan. This would not be true, however, to what she knew, as the Tans did terrible things to many, right at "[the] threshold of a new country. My own country that is foreign to me" (245). While Lily claims no understanding about this senseless violence and the men who perpetrated it, she does know that no one, especially the young, are without blame. On several instances, she references the young age of herself, her husband and both countries, as if to suggest that their cruelties were largely the product of their collective naiveté. No one escapes youth and thus, no one escapes the likelihood of judgment gone array. Lily's self-awareness is a product of clearly seeing the past and our shared complicity in its wrongdoings. It is with this recognition that she is able to return to the deathbed of Mr. Nolan and forgive, "there at his bloody side while he, my former friend, the murderer of my husband, died" (246). Predicated upon a new sense of awareness, Lily's forgiveness represents a worthy course for all.

4. *The Temporary Gentleman*

The question of individual identity and lack of self-awareness surfaces immediately in Barry's *The Temporary Gentleman*. As the title suggests, there is something impermanent and incomplete about Jack McNulty's nature, as he is invariably described as "[a] gentleman enough, in your own way" (Barry 2014, 77) and "not an entirely desirable person here" (87). The reader soon comes to realize that all of Jack's talents and energy will be overshadowed by a tendency to drink and gamble. While his unending love for the beautiful Mai Kirwan will become one of the unintended consequences of his irresponsible behavior, Jack is not without merit. Barry has created a complex portrayal of a flawed man within the structure of a self-reflective narrative, whereby Jack thinks back upon the loves and losses of his life, his responsibility in their creation and his desire to make amends. It is largely through this narrative memoir that the reader comes to know the long-standing disorder of Jack's internal life, his inability to control the demons within and his final effort to correct this imbalance.

Unfortunately, Jack is ill prepared for the task of self-correction. Unlike Willie Dunne and Lily Dunne Bere, Jack does not seem to garner any greater self-awareness from the recognition of his failures as they occur. Instead, he adopts the pattern of running from all difficult situations, preventing any witness to the consequences of his actions. This results in a collection of broken promises, heartbreak and death; damage too vast to ignore. Thus, his attempt to make right the errors of his life comes only at the end and only after many have long suffered or passed. Three incidents reveal this point. The first incident occurred when Jack met the for-

midable Mr. Kirwan, Mai's dad. Aware of both the elevated social status of the Kirwan family and Mai's adoration of her father, Jack made the unfortunate decision to calm himself with whiskies before their first encounter. The drink had the opposite effect: instead of relaxing him, it seemed to ennoble him with the ill-conceived courage to challenge Mr. Kirwan's assessment of Sligo and its people. The reaction was immediate, Mr. Kirwan stopped talking and as Jack recalls, "he looked at me with an open, smileless look, that didn't need words, that had all the appearance of a final judgment, on this bloody Jack McNulty, the *buveur* of Sligo, that he be cast forever into the deepest and dampest dungeon, and the keys thrown away" (52). Ultimately, Jack's drinking would cause Mr. Kirwan to ban him from their home, begging his daughter to abandon her affections for him. As it turned out, Mai did not listen and Jack merely waited things out until Mr. Kirwan died to ask for her hand in marriage.

A second incident occurred when Jack's irresponsible gambling habits resulted in the loss of Mai's beloved family home, Grattan House. Unbeknownst to Mai, Jack had mortgaged the house for bank credit and depleted the stash of hidden silver. It was only when she went to find the silver gone that the impossibility of their situation became evident. All Mai could do was to whisper, "Jack" and all he could do was to realize that his "talent" for "blank[ing] out the possibility of this terrible event" had failed him (138). Upon his own recollection, Jack acknowledges his recklessness and lack of self-awareness:

The guilt attached to 'losing' Grattan House is still profound, eternal, and terrifying. But at the time I am not sure I fully understood what I had done. Looking back now, sitting in this simple clay and wooden room in Accra, it is clear that it was a time to lay my heart bare to her, to talk to her about how we lived, and to beg her to forgive me for what had happened. But I did none of those things. (143)

A third incident of note occurs when Jack departs after the stillborn death of his son Colin. Leaving Mai to suffer alone, Jack, at 37, volunteers as an engineer in the war. When his brother Tom brings Jack's two daughters for a short visit, Jack is confronted with the havoc left behind:

'It's nice of you to drive them over,' I said.
 'It's a long time not to see their father', he said, and in my private mind I said *un-oh*, here it comes.
 'I don't need to tell you there's been difficulties since you left', he said, and seemed to get stuck immediately.
 'What difficulties, Tom?' I said.
 'Well I suppose I don't need to say anything about the heart of the matter. Is there any chance you might get back to see her, you know? Mai, I mean'.
 'Well, I'm not due leave for a bit anyhow'.
 'That's a pity then', he said.
 'Mai's in the doss mostly and Mam says she's just crying most of the day'.
 I sat there in silence for a moment, withdrawing my legs a little.
 'How's Roseanne getting on?' I said. (183-184)

In typical fashion, Jack attempts to change the subject. Through either silent avoidance or departure, he repudiates all that is his own doing, avoiding any real responsibility for his behavior. It is only at the end of the work that Jack becomes reflective on this point but to no avail. So long as there is the occasional relapse into drinking, Jack seems destined to be beholden to this chaotic master:

When I contemplate the stations of her cross it is impossible to disagree with Queenie. Her unhappiness over having the babies I didn't understand, even though Mam tried to tell me. The loss of Grattan House was my doing. I responded to the death of Colin by moving further away, and then enlisting as

soon as possible when war broke out. And when she plainly needed me the most, I returned to the war. And throughout everything, from the beginning, I was drinking, showing her what drinking was. (277)

While Jack is right to blame the drink for many of his problems, it is not the sole cause. There is something fundamentally amiss about Jack's internal awareness. Why else would Barry include the side note that Jack lived his entire life not realizing the existence of man by the same name and age living in his own town, if not to prove his imperceptiveness? By his own admission, "the great fog that has persisted through my life" has rendered him largely incapable of recognizing the desperation of those around him (176). It is only at the end of the work that this fog begins to lift as Jack records the events of his life. Unfortunately, this "enlightenment does not bring happiness" as it proves an insufficient challenger to the chaos of Jack's soul (177). When his internal disorder yields itself to a final night of drinking, the temptations of a beautiful woman and an act of violence, Jack's end is assured.

Once again, Barry has created a character whose internal disorder is mirrored in the aggregate disorder of Ireland, as both seem disconnected from the gravity of surrounding events. While almost every corner of the world has been touched by the brutality of the Second World War, the people of Sligo have barely noticed its presence:

They talked passionately enough, full of jokes, joshing as always, but the thing I noticed was that they never referred to the war the whole night. I listened to the familiar talk, of land, and marts, and deals, and local scandals – but never the war. Of course they wouldn't have heard too much about it, the radio said nothing, the newspapers were blank. They had an idea about it no better than a child's. It was curious to be among them, Tom laughing with them, with the new salt on his talk of personal triumph. The doings of Sligo were paramount, and if ten thousand men had been fastened to the Russian earth by frost and blood, it meant nothing. The war was a word. I had come back from a word and was soon going back to it. (224)

For so many, this was an English war that didn't involve Ireland. Certainly, the men of Sligo find the war reprehensible when one of their own dons an English uniform, but only because it is seen as a betrayal, doing the work for the exploiter. Hitler's vast designs upon Europe and his slaughter of the innocent goes unnoticed. Ireland seems to exist within a "child-like" cloud of rivaled, local interests, filtered through an anti-English lens. Despite the fact that Jack almost dies in a submarine attack and a bomb explosion, his lucky escape goes unnoticed. Instead, he is judged to have abandoned his family, as Mai notes:

'You're not here, Jack. They need their father here'.

'I am away at the war. Away at the war. The whole world is away at the war'.

'What the hell are you doing going out there?' she said. 'Nobody in Ireland gives a tuppenny damn about it'.

'When you see Hitler coming up Wine Street in a tank you might take a different view', I said.

'Bloody Hitler – what did he ever do to you, Jack?' (203-204)

For Mai, Tom McNulty and Jonno Lynch, Eneas's archenemy, the implications and outcome of the war have no relevance. To them, Jack is a traitor for abandoning his family and Eneas for abandoning his homeland. Ireland appears oblivious to its place on the world stage, as its focus remains entrenched in the local and personal. How can it ever come to know itself better if it denies the occurrence of things around her?

Of course, the same can be said for Ghana. Despite efforts to modernize, Ghana shares Ireland's propensity to operate within a patriarchal world of personal alliances and affronts. Amidst so much change, it yet remains much the same, thwarting its ability to progress nationally.

For a brief moment, Jack seems to have recognized this when he noted that “Everything new contains the rotten cancer of the old here, as indeed we found ourselves in Ireland” (290-291). Unfortunately, this momentary insight had little impact on Jack’s actions, as he disregarded Inspector Tomelty’s warning of caution regarding Mensah’s vengeance: “Mensah’s a taxi driver. He can move about. He’s angry. I tell you, half the time I’m out here, it’s like I never left Ireland. Take away the heat and the fucking palm trees and the black skins and it’s all just Ballymena in the rain, I tell you” (249).

Without any real or lasting self-reflection, neither Jack, nor Ireland nor Ghana can escape the entrapment of both past and present. Their fates seem already decided by this absence.

In the final analysis, one of the greatest strengths of Sebastian Barry’s novels is their absence of a prescriptive teaching on Ireland. He doesn’t pretend to know what is best for her, how she should view herself nor what her place must be within the world. Instead, he provides his readers with rich and complicated narratives, headlined with characters, whose lives intertwine with the political and religious complexities of the times. While he may draw attention to those “omitted” voices from Irish history, he, in no way, dictates which of those hold greatest weight in determining Irish identity. Rather, he provides his reader with a “path” by which an Irish identity might become knowable. This path begins with the enlistment of Socrates’s structural understanding of the connection between the individual and the state, with the state being an aggregate reflection of its individual members. Following this, Barry seems to share Socrates’s conclusion that if the internal life of individuals is disordered, the external life of the state will be the same. In order to stabilize this symbiotic relationship, reflection and change must begin at the individual level. It is only when individual members of society begin to critically examine their own lives that true growth and understanding of one’s self and others is possible. This cannot be more evident than with the characters he has created in these three works. Through painful reflection, both Dunne children come to see their worlds with greater clarity; a clarity that spares no pain but offers a kind of resolution for those willing to understand. Their journey towards greater internal order allows them to witness the shared, yet flawed humanity of others and in this recognition, forgive. As Socrates notes, such individual awareness cannot help but positively impact our collective existence, leading us to a better understanding of our collective selves. Barry’s characters allow us to see what this journey might look like and how it might facilitate a greater understanding of ourselves and our countries. Why else would he begin *The Temporary Gentleman* with Virgil’s words, “Hic Amor, haec patria est” (There lies my love, there lies my homeland)?

Works Cited

- Barra Allen (2014), “Sebastian Barry, Ireland’s Greatest Living Writer, Speaks for the Voiceless”, *The Daily Beast*, 23 May, <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/sebastian-barry-irelands-greatest-living-writer-speaks-for-the-voiceless>> (05/2023).
- Barry Sebastian (2002), *Annie Dunne*, New York, Penguin.
- (2005), *A Long Long Way*, New York, Penguin.
- (2008), *The Secret Scripture*, New York, Viking Penguin.
- (2011), *On Canaan’s Side*, New York, Viking Penguin.
- (2014), *The Temporary Gentleman*, New York, Viking Penguin.
- (2016), *Days Without End*, New York, Viking Penguin.
- Harney-Mahajan Tara (2012), “Provoking Forgiveness in Sebastian Barry’s *The Secret Scripture*”, *New Hibernia Review* 16, 2, 54-71.
- Harte Liam (2014), *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel 1987-2007*, Chichester, Wiley Blackwell.

- Hunt Mahony Christina, ed. (2006), *Out of History: Essays on the Writings of Sebastian Barry*, Washington, Catholic University of America Press.
- Murray Christopher (1991), “ ‘Such A Sense of Home’: The Poetic Drama of Sebastian Barry”, *Colby Quarterly* 27, 4, 242-248, <<https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2851&context=cq>> (05/2023).
- Pelan Rebecca (2012), “Branded Ireland or Ireland Branded? Versions of Irish Identity”, *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 25, 1, 3-9.
- Pine Emilie (2008), “Remembering and Forgetting: Memory and Legacy in Irish Theatre and Film”, *Éire-Ireland* 43, 1-2, 222-236.
- Plato (1968), *The Republic of Plato*, New York, Basic Books Inc.
- (1984), *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito*, Indianapolis, The Bobbs-Merrill Company.