

2013

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### Recommended Citation

Maudet, Cécile (2013) "Change as Threat: Envisioning the E/end in Colum McCann's Two Collections of Short Stories," *Journal of Franco-Irish Studies*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 4.

doi:10.21427/D7JF11

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/jofis/vol3/iss1/4>

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*Cécile Maudet*

**Change as threat: Envisioning the E/end in Colum McCann's two collections of short stories.**

The end of the 1990s – which is the moment when Irish writer Colum McCann produced his two collections of short stories – not only signed the end of a century but also the end of a millennium, so they triggered febrile expectations. The end of a century implies the gradual closing of an era and, in the popular imagination, it is often envisaged as a slow degeneration before a new impetus, a period when time is suspended. In the same way as, at the individual level, the beginning of each year is the occasion for a countdown, retrospection, resolutions and projections, a new century seems to bring about the idea that collective change is at hand. Indeed, it is as if the scope of people's expectations depended on the length of the period of time involved: as a century is obviously longer than a year, its closing seems to address social and macrocosmic questions.

McCann does not make the problematic of the end of times the focal topic of his narrative, contrary to John Updike or Nick Harkaway, with their obvious titles *Toward the End of Time* or *The Gone-Away World* that are resolutely indicative about the content of the novel. Yet, quite strikingly, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994) and *Everything in this Country Must* (2000), which are McCann's only two collections of short stories so far, both revolve around the theme of change and rupture. It is between the lines – through veiled references to the biblical Apocalypse – that McCann discloses the characters' growing awareness that payback time will come at some point, for society's avidity and reckless urge for drastic scientific and technological evolutions most certainly, but also for their betrayals or loss of interest and involvement in genuine relationships.

Spanning over a period of 30 years from the 1970s onwards, his short pieces of fiction present the readers with characters who have concerns about change brought by the deregulations of their environment as they are paradoxically the bitter witnesses and the guilty perpetrators of such dramatic disturbance. Landscapes are often depicted as hostile,

which leads the characters to migrate, if they are not too weakened and can still do so. Indeed, their bodies' deterioration and mental wandering often seem to be the ineluctable consequence of the sometimes chaotic environment present in McCann's texts.

Therefore, this article intends to demonstrate that it is on the end of a life, of a relationship, of a way of life – which are all experienced as tragedies – more than on the End, that McCann lingers in his fiction. Indeed, his texts do not actually deal with apocalyptic times as such, times that would prefigure the annihilation of a whole civilisation. Rather, they are more inclined to highlight lesser disturbances that reveal, if not a doomed world, at least dysfunctional components of the world. Yet McCann's spectacular references to the end of the world undeniably confer a dramatic intensity to his short stories. Although the stories seem to be quite ordinary episodes, part and parcel of life in the readers' eyes, they are very significant turning points for the characters and provoke frustration and anguish in them.

### **Nefarious imprints of time: barren landscapes, decrepit bodies and spoiled relationships**

Toxic fumes emanating from “a chemical factory” (*FSBR*<sup>1</sup>, 167), or contaminated water are examples of varied forms of pollution mentioned in McCann's fiction. The narrator of “A Word in Edgewise” thinks that “[s]oon we'll all be walking around glowing” (*FSBR*, 166-167). Moreover, in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, there are three allusions to the reddish colour of the sun which would not be worth pinpointing if the star was not associated with medication in both cases (as it would then be a mere description of a sunrise or a sunset). In two short stories, the sun is said “[to be] rising like a dirty red *aspirin* over the sea” (*FSBR*, 6, my italics) and “coming up like a small red *tranquilliser*” (*FSBR*, 95, my italics). By insisting on colour, both quotes emphasize the sublime nature of the sun. Paradoxically, the effect is undermined straight away since the sun is reduced to the mere sphere of consumerism when compared to medication. The beauty of the

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<sup>1</sup> All references to *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* will be abbreviated as *FSBR*, followed by the page number.

landscape is played down and it seems no longer possible to appreciate any moment of nature's expression since even the spectacle offered by the most baffling and uncontrollable celestial body is spoiled by the transfer of the characters' feelings of gloom and ill-being.

A lot of them flee a country that has become sterile and can no longer give them any opportunity. By having the narrator of "Breakfast for Enrique" call the place he describes "a *wasteland* of concrete" (FSBR, 42, my italics), McCann seems to be re-using T.S. Eliot's idea that society is doomed. Indeed, in McCann's short story, the strict association of the poem's title with the building material should not limit the understanding to a purely physical degradation and impoverishment of the landscape. The scope of the signification is widened in that the territories at stake (Ireland and the USA) clearly lack natural resources, but their sterility also reverberates in social interactions since characters prove unable to voice their feelings, hence their inability to engage in genuine relationships.

Landscapes and characters are intertwined so as to form a lifeless whole in the short stories and a consequence of frustration is emigration. This contributes to emphasize the deliquescence of a whole society in which families are quite systematically fragmented formations. Therefore, one may wonder, like Angelika Bammer, "what we hold onto and what we need to let go" (Bammer, 1994, 92) when the family is no-longer whole. The families depicted by McCann are dysfunctional units in which the parents' behaviors are detrimental to their children's well-being. They end up disintegrating because parents, often single, afflicted and/or overwhelmed have given up their status as heads of their family. Whatever the kinds of families, McCann's characters almost automatically escape them by actually fleeing.

When characters manage to hold on, the reason why they stay together is often that they are enduring a terrible hardship, like it is the case for the characters of "Breakfast for Enrique." This single-sex couple goes through an ordeal of sorts as one of them is slowly dying from what is understood to be AIDS, which resonates quite strikingly when one has in mind T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, especially the following lines from the poem entitled "What the Thunder said":

After the *frosty* silence in the gardens  
 After the *agony* in *stony* places [...]  
*He who was living is now dead*  
*We who were living are now dying*  
 With a little patience." (Eliot, 1969, 72; my italics)

This image of agony, together with that of stone ("After the agony in *stony* places" calls to mind the concrete in McCann's text), are not the only interesting thematic bridges between Eliot and McCann's texts as the imagery of ice present in Eliot's text ("After the *frosty* silence in the gardens") is also echoed in "Breakfast for Enrique." Indeed, the auditory and visual assimilation of the bedroom where Enrique is lying to a frozen place in the sentence "The curtains make the sound of crackling ice" (FSBR, 24) cannot but reinforce the idea that McCann's inspiration for this short story may partly come from *The Waste Land*. Besides, as if to conjure up Eliot's idea that the place is hopeless ("*We who were living are now dying*"), McCann uses an incongruous element whose function seems to consist in bringing comic relief in the text. Indeed, he animates cars, hence the reader's feeling that they are endowed with a wish to die: "The vehicles [...] fling themselves towards the sea." (FSBR, 24)

Like Enrique's, the bodies of the other characters seem to have aged prematurely and "Even the younger ones look old, the hair thinning." (FSBR, 23) Bodies seem to belong to living dead: most of them are literally defunct in the sense that they are deprived of their vital functions. Bodies are always painful, "old bones creaking at the joints" (FSBR, 56), and sometimes, some of them even look altogether dead and decomposed. This is well epitomized by Brigid, the sister of the female narrator in "Sisters," who is said to have "ashtrayed hair [...]" and who is so derelict that the narrator is convinced that "If [she] tried to lift her [she] would find a heap of dust in [her] hand" (FSBR, 20). Some characters' bodies are altered and dehumanised to a point where they are assimilated to ruined buildings. This is the case of a boy who is said to be "still alive in [a] house of burnt skin"

(*FSBR*, 174), Brigid, who is presented as “a house of bones” (*FSBR*, 3), or Enrique, whose body is depicted as “a house of sweat” (*FSBR*, 35).

Both Brigid and Enrique have chosen to leave their mother country but migration has proven to be a clincher for premature ageing and corporal degradation. Putting an end to a life that did not satisfy them by going abroad has endangered them physically as well as mentally: they are trapped in regret, guilt or harmful thought and desperately cling to the past.

### **The paradox of change as immobility or step backwards: ratiocination and disillusion**

Although change is not necessarily linked with uprooting and can be materialized by death or any other point of rupture, emigration is at the core of McCann’s texts and may lead exiles to get lost in vain considerations. According to Seamus Deane,

Two forms of immobility relative to exile are immediately accessible. One is the immobility that is, so to say, imposed on the native culture by the exilic position. It is a widely canvassed accusation that exiles [...] have not participated in and are frequently ill informed about the changes that have taken place in their absence. Further, they are more susceptible to stereotypic representations of their culture, because the stereotype is the most effective and affixing form of memory and delusion. [...] The second kind of immobility is internally generated. In this instance, the exile remains at home but in a state of deep disaffection from it. [...] Within such immobility there is a longing to escape that is regularly thwarted by the fear of leaving. (Deane, 1997, 166-167)

While the second form of immobility – that is the physical one, due to the fact that characters cannot find the courage or the means to leave although they long for escape – is clearly perceptible in McCann’s *Everything in This Country Must*, the first form of immobility – exile – is a characteristic of *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*. Indeed, most of the characters did emigrate and are therefore often disconnected from the realities of their homeland. They have stereotypical or embellished views of their original country and still imagine it as it used to be or as they wish it to be.

“Stolen Child” narrates the wedding day of a blind young woman, Dana, who was

abandoned by her parents and was brought up in a specialised institution. Padraic, the Irish narrator who works as a social worker, has developed very close bonds with her, beyond those granted to a professional; so much so that she has gradually come to see him not only as a counsellor but as the father she never had. Padraic paradoxically gained Dana's trust by resorting to Irish legends and myths, in other words, by making stories up for her. Dana's sense of uniqueness develops after she becomes aware that she bears the same name as the Irish goddess Dana (or Danu), mother of all gods. This short story is imbued with Irish folklore, and its title calls to mind W.B. Yeats' poem "The Stolen Child," which also deals with Irish mythology, and with the belief that children's death was due to faeries who randomly decided to ravish some of them.

The reference is made even more explicit by Padraic's approximate quote from Yeats' poem: "Come Away, Stolen child [...] For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand" (FSBR, 102). Dana is arguably an embodiment of the stolen child – such a condition *being* a euphemism for death – as she used to be neglected by her parents and regularly locked in a cupboard before being locked away in an institution for violent children, almost dead to society. *Personae non gratae*, Dana and her peers are kept at bay from society and secluded in a building that looks like a prison, but where all social codes seem to be overlooked. Indeed, despite the relentless attempts by hopeful yet dismayed social workers to encourage a fresh start, a rebirth for these blind and broken young adults, their environment is a violent, even a savage one. Moreover, the echo of Yeats' poem is also perceptible in how Padraic regards Dana's wedding as some sort of abduction. His feeling is that this girl, who has come to represent the child he never had, is being taken away from him as she is about to marry a crippled Vietnam veteran, much older than she. By resorting to Irish mythology, Padraic quite naively expresses nostalgia for his past life as both inhabitant of Ireland and substitute father for Dana. Indeed, this wedding seals the end of his exclusive relationship with her and foreshadows his return to a dull life without children or relatives.

The Irish character of "Step We Gaily, On We Go" similarly has no one to count on, being even further rooted in solitude because he steals clothes from a local launderette for

his wife Juanita that the reader understands to be long gone as the story unfolds. His insanity stems from the fact that he has always refused to cope with the end of their marriage; he has daily conversations with a dummy that he keeps in his flat and takes for his wife. In his case, emigration and the prospects that it offered did not go as planned (against all odds, he did not become the successful boxer he was to be) and his strategies of denial have led to an absurd and grotesque situation. The absurd dimension is also at the core of "Fishing the Sloe-Black River," the eponymous short story of the collection, in which mothers are said to be "fishing for sons" (FSBR, 56) each day in a ritualized desperate act devoid of any intelligibility. It is as if the children's mobility – they systematically emigrate to England – was the cause of the parents' paralysis. They lack energy, so much so that a game of Gaelic football cannot be properly played. One of the disarrayed players "slap[s] his hands on the steering wheel and sa[ys] with a sad laugh: 'Well fuck it anyway, *we really need some new blood* in midfield'" (FSBR, 56, my italics). This vampire-like image, reeking of cannibalism, well renders the elders' almost vital need for younger players to revive the whole team, in other words, to sustain each member of the team.

When relationships are not broken, bonds are distended in McCann's short stories, and flawed or even failed relationships are encompassed in the subtle allusion to *The Last of the Mohicans* in "Around the Bend and Back Again" (FSBR, 127-128). This conveys the impression that a whole civilisation is disappearing, not because of massacres like in John Fenimore Cooper's book, but because genuine bonds are severed. A powerful tool to convey atmospheres and feelings in McCann's short stories, imagery (such as that of the Mohicans), as well as the allusion to popular or biblical references sometimes seem to be a way to subtly disclose the fragility of life.

### **Instrumentalizing the Apocalypse: the sacred and the profane**

In his essay entitled "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy," Jacques Derrida explains that resorting to the Apocalypse in texts is likely to be subversive



as it “can use the detour in order to mislead another vigilance, that of censorship” (Derrida, 1984, 29). A text which uses references to the Apocalypse may intend to veil its message “to avoid detection” (Walliss, 2009, 188), which renders quite obvious why, “apocalyptic writings increased the moment State censorship was very strong in the Roman Empire.” (Derrida, 1984, 29) Indeed, all criticisms against the Empire became criticisms against the Emperor and were seen as criminal offences, also called crimes of lese-majesty. In the same way as the discourses uttered by the Shakespearian fools were an oblique way for the author to sharply criticize monarchy in England without risking to be condemned for treason or disobedience, utilizing the Apocalypse throughout the ages has been a way to condemn and warn people about the excesses of the most powerful.

Interestingly, it seems that Colum McCann re-uses this hackneyed device in his short stories by veiling, if not political comments, at least concerns about change. In “Sisters”, a lion is described in such a way as one becomes aware that its originally golden mane is now stained by blood. This mythical animal has been “the victim of a road kill” (*FSBR*, 4-5) and has died because of human misconduct. One cannot but compare and establish a link between this feline and the canine whose presence is alluded to through coyotes, since they are almost the only animals mentioned in the short story. In McCann’s text, coyotes are presented as “the songdogs that howled in the beginning of the universe” (*FSBR*, 4). While coyotes symbolize the beginning of terrestrial life in Amerindian legends (Coyote being the name of the original god), the crushed-dead lion sharply contrasts and brings death to mind since in the Book of Revelation, the lion has a role near the celestial throne<sup>2</sup> and contributes to the Last Judgement. The sacred animal is trivialized, now devoid of any spirituality, and it becomes powerless, mere rotting flesh alongside the road that the guilty driver and the following ones have not deemed necessary to bury or remove from the road.

This lack of scruples triggered by irreverence for what is sacred – and deriving from self-centred modern ways of life – seems to be the first step toward disbelief. “From Many, One” corroborates the idea that characters tend to live profane lives, and that faith – and

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<sup>2</sup> *The Jerusalem Bible, New Testament, Revelation, 4.7: “The first animal was like a lion [...]”*

life to a lesser extent – are not left unquestioned. It relates the story of a man who comes to realize he does not know his wife so well as he thought. The character's disillusion about his superficial relationship with the person he has shared his life with for a long time is echoed by his wife's existential questioning of the meaning of faith, which she expresses through art. She illustrates her growing spiritual void by making the "O" in the word "God" stand out on her drawings as if to better materialize nothingness. Indeed, "she [doesn't] colour in the G or the D" so that the character reads "IN O WE TRUST" (FSBR, 112), the graphic "O" recalling a bottomless hole.

Brought up in a culture imbued with religious traditions, Colum McCann himself has voiced his puzzlement and misunderstanding concerning his fellow citizens and their link to religion. In an article for the *New York Times* entitled "Sounds of Silence in Northern Ireland," he declared:

As I grew up and travelled, eventually to New York, I found that trying to explain the politics of Northern Ireland to others was nearly impossible. Whose God were these people fighting for? Why did justice sound like another word for revenge? Who would ever be able to make a virtue of old hatreds? (McCann, 2007, NYT)

In his experience, religion rhymes with conflict and death, an equation that is ubiquitous in his fiction, particularly in *Everything in this Country Must*.<sup>3</sup>

### **Changing roles: from victim to executioner, from perpetrators to scapegoats**

The title of the collection is elliptical but the gap is filled by the narrator of the eponymous short story "Everything in this Country Must," and the reader goes through a revelation of sorts as they become aware that the missing verb in the title is "die" as the narrator states: "Stevie and the draft horse were going to *die*, since everything in this country must." (ETCM, 10, my italics) "Everything in this Country Must" revolves around

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<sup>3</sup> All references to *Everything in This Country Must* will be abbreviated as ETCM, followed by the page number.

the story of an Irish father and his daughter who are striving to rescue their female draft horse that has been trapped in the swelling river. In the course of the narrative, the reader comes to realize that the mother and the son have both been killed by British soldiers during the Troubles, which are still raging. This accounts for the father's reluctance to accept the help of three British soldiers passing by and for his decision to shoot his female draft horse dead once it has been rescued, as he perceives the success of the intervention not as his, but as the enemy's.

The three British soldiers bear striking physical and behavioural resemblances with three of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Symbolically, the soldiers embody the oppressive force that deprived Ireland of its freedom, and led to the catastrophe of war and violence. The island that used to be united and harmonious is embodied by the female draft horse, which used to be vigorous and at one with Irish nature: "[it] cut the soils in the fields long ago" (*ETCM*, 4). Therefore, the mare's faithfulness has made it the "[f]ather's favorite [horse]" (*ETCM*, 3). Yet, like the nation itself, it is now facing a deadlock as it is stuck in the river's bed, trapped by rocks and unable to move. Although they struggle to save the draft horse, the British soldiers are responsible for the slow extinction of a whole culture, like the Four Horsemen, summoned by God to precipitate the end of the world.

The first British soldier may be likened to the First Horseman riding a white horse, as his association to the white colour suggests: "his hair was the colour of winter ice" (*ETCM*, 7). In the Apocalypse, the First Horseman<sup>4</sup> is said to advocate righteousness so the first British soldier is all the more reminiscent of the First Horseman as he does not hesitate to dive into the river to try and free the draft horse's leg, a proof of his abnegation. He is the most benevolent of all four soldiers since he protects the girl from the cold and prevents his colleague from fighting with her father.

The description of the second British soldier mentions that he has "a scar on his cheek" (*ETCM*, 7) – which justifies the nickname of "Hayknife" chosen by the narrator –

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<sup>4</sup> *The Jerusalem Bible, New Testament*, Revelation 6.1: "Then I saw the Lamb break one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four animals shout in a voice like thunder, 'Come'. Immediately a white horse appeared, and a rider on it was holding a bow; he was given the victor's crown and he went away, to go from victory to victory."

and that “his face [i]s red and scrunched (*ETCM*, 13). He is about to fight with the father, so one may argue that he stands for the Second Horseman mounting a red horse, with a sword in his hand,<sup>5</sup> who is said to represent war or the blood that is spilled on the battlefield.

The third British soldier sports “a moustache that look[s] like long grasses” (*ETCM*, 7), the grass of course pertaining to the green colour, which echoes the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse, who is depicted as mounting a very pale horse whose skin is greenish in some versions of the Bible. His corpse-like pallor makes him the most frightening figure and he is said to incarnate Death.<sup>6</sup> What is striking is that the soldier associated with the green colour tends to annihilate whatever he touches, devastating the environment by driving “the big army truck (often khaki or green) [...] through the hedgerows [so that] the hedge [i]s broken open with a big hole” (*ETCM*, 9). Besides, his violent traction also makes the draft horse whine in an awful way, “the draft horse was screaming like I never heard a horse before or after” (*ETCM*, 9).

If McCann’s story bears characteristics from the original biblical text, it can be easily noticed that there are only three British soldiers in the story, whereas there are four Horsemen in the Apocalypse, and that the Third Horseman mounting a black horse is not represented among the soldiers. If one keeps in mind that the father has lost part of his family and has never been able to overcome this hardship, it seems relevant to liken him to the Third Horseman<sup>7</sup> who stands for famine, and in a more general way, for lack. While it seems that the father-figure should be striving to preserve his own culture (embodied by his horse), he contributes to its downfall by killing it. In the context of a civil war that divided a whole nation, the father killing his own mare is significant because this symbolic

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<sup>5</sup> *The Jerusalem Bible, New Testament*, Revelation 6.3: “When he broke the second seal, I heard the second animal shout, ‘Come’. And out came another horse, bright red, and its rider was given this duty: to take away peace from the earth and set people killing each other. He was given a huge sword.”

<sup>6</sup> *The Jerusalem Bible, New Testament*, Revelation 6.7: “When he broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth animal shout, ‘Come’. Immediately, another horse appeared, deathly pale, and its rider was called Plague, and Hades followed at his heels. They were given authority over a quarter of the earth, to kill by the sword, by famine, by plague and wild beasts.”

<sup>7</sup> *The Jerusalem Bible, New Testament*, Revelation 6.5: “When he broke the third seal, I heard the third animal shout, ‘Come’. Immediately a black horse appeared, and its rider was holding a pair of scales; and I seemed to hear a voice shout from among the four animals and say, ‘A ration of corn for a day’s wages, and three rations of barley for a day’s wages [...]’”

auto-mutilation is reminiscent of the division of the Irish people and of the subsequent mutual harm that led the country to implode.

Through this desperate act, the father could be seen as reenacting a religious act consisting in transferring sins onto a scapegoat. Indeed, the goat was the victim of a Jewish ritual, that of going to the desert to hunt a goat whose head would be touched by a priest and would serve as a receptacle for the deeds of the community as the sins would be transferred onto it.<sup>8</sup> With time, this ritual has lost its purely religious dimension and “scapegoat” has become a term commonly used to qualify the substitute target for someone’s rage and misdirected violence, be it an animal or a person.<sup>9</sup> The father’s act, an act of dissension, most certainly – as he kills an animal symbolically soiled by the British intervention – can also be seen as a pristine act that enables to bond and unite a long-divided community.

Contrary to the example of the dead lion given above, clearly redolent of the Apocalypse, in the case of the British soldiers, the allusions are more subtle. Instead of using the Apocalypse to safely criticize the British army, McCann uses the factual, the historical, to eclipse the religious. It is only by digging into the narrative that one may perceive elements of the religious text, whose insidiousness strikes all the more as religion has been ostensibly at the core of the Troubles.

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“When he emerged, into the half-light, all was utterly *changed* [...A]t the aftermath of 9/11 [...] the city ha[d] *changed*” (McCann, 2006, II). This sentence is Colum McCann’s and

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<sup>8</sup> *The Jerusalem Bible, New Testament*, Leviticus 16.21: “He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task.”

<sup>9</sup> René Girard, *Je vois Satan tomber comme l’éclair*, p. 203-204. “Dans un univers où la violence n’est plus ritualisée et où elle fait l’objet d’un interdit puissant, la colère et le ressentiment ne peuvent pas ou n’osent pas, en règle générale, s’assouvir sur l’objet qui les excite directement. Le coup de pied quelque part que l’employé n’a pas l’audace de donner à son patron, il le donnera à son chien en rentrant le soir à la maison, ou peut-être maltraitera-t-il sa femme et ses enfants, sans se rendre tout à fait compte qu’il fait d’eux ses « boucs émissaires ». Les victimes substituées à la cible réellement visée sont l’équivalent moderne des victimes sacrificielles d’antan.”

appears in the article that he wrote after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001, and which is entitled “Burning From the Inside Out.” “He” refers to his father-in-law who almost died in the Twin Towers. The word “change” mentioned twice most certainly refers to a part of the city that has become mere ruin, but above all to a whole world forever altered by such a violent event. Although McCann’s hint at 9/11 in his latest novel entitled *Let the Great World Spin* could be unequivocally seen as signing a radical change in his way of looking at our times – a vision that he discloses in both that novel and his articles for varied newspapers – his concern with ongoing change was born well before this dramatic date.

Indeed, the author’s preoccupation with the ephemeral and the fragile nature of life is perceptible in his first works as he has parsimoniously followed the artistic trend of the second half of the twentieth century, a sensible part of which has consisted in dealing with the end of times by resorting to a secular contemporary version of the apocalypse as some kind of *memento mori*. According to John Walliss, the contemporary apocalypse is conveyed “to refer to any form of immense cataclysm or destruction, typically involving the whole planet [...]” (Walliss, 2009, 72-73). The idea of finitude, although less dramatic, is well rendered in McCann’s fiction, and might well be seen as inherent in all migrants who are well aware of what they have left behind them, and who have to face the crumbling down of their own world before building up another anew.

In an article for the *New York Times* tellingly entitled “No Place Like Home”, McCann once wrote:

There is a lovely Portuguese word, “saudade,” which indicates that person or [that] place or [that] object [which] draws out of us our most extreme or improbable yearning. *It is a feeling for something that is gone, but might, one day, return.* (McCann, 2006, my italics)

Thus, irreversibility and determinism are not part of McCann’s creed, but – and this is quite typical of any exiled author – it seems that ardent longing combined to a feeling of never being fulfilled animate him in a similar way to his characters.

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