

2008-9

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Recommended Citation

Maher, E., (2008) Spirituality in the Underground, *Reality*, vol.73, No. 8, September, pp.26-28.

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SPIRITUALITY IN THE UNDERGROUND

There is a deep spirituality at the heart of Colum McCann's *This Side of Darkness*, writes **Eamon Maher**. Throughout the pages of this remarkable book, one has the impression of observing people who are moving towards the light, while living in darkness

Colum McCann is one of the new generation of Irish novelists who are not discernibly 'Irish' at all in terms of the subjects they treat and their global appeal. For example, *Dancer*, a fictional account of the life of the famous Soviet ballet dancer, Rudolf Nureyev, and *Zoli*, a story inspired by a photograph of a Polish Romani poet and singer known as Papsza, illustrate the diversity of McCann's approach. A similar originality can be seen in what is his best novel in my view, and the one on which we will focus our deliberations in this article, *This Side of Brightness*.

This book is a remarkable account of the life of a coloured sandhog, a worker employed in the construction of the New York subway, Nathan Walker, and of his grandson, Clarence Nathan, who ends up years later inhabiting the same subterranean space so painfully reclaimed by a previous generation. Clarence Nathan, possibly in an attempt to distance himself from his grandfather's occupation, worked as a construction worker on the skyscrapers of New York, where his uncanny balance gained him some respect and a reasonable salary.

Both men are marginalized on a number of fronts. Nathan the elder dares to fall in love with Eleanor, the daughter of a former Irish work colleague, Con O'Leary, and their life together is haunted by the spectre of prejudice and racial discrimination. This was America at the beginning of the last century, after all, a time when segregation of ethnic minorities was commonplace. Only when working

underground was Nathan considered an equal: 'The sandhogs were the first integrated union in the country and he (Walker) knows that it is only underground that colour is negated, that men become men.' (p.37)

Clarence Nathan is brought up in a slightly more liberal society, but his mixed lineage nevertheless causes him difficulties fitting in anywhere. During an exploratory visit to the subway, Walker senior, who wanted to experience one more time the atmosphere of his early working life, is struck by a train as he attempts to climb up to safety from the rails. His grandson can only look on helplessly as Walker is carried along the line to his death. After that episode, the young man is haunted by guilt and considers himself responsible for what happened to the elderly man. He has a nervous breakdown, loses his job, and finally is unjustly suspected of the sexual abuse of his daughter, which leads to the end of his marriage. After this, he makes his home in the tunnels of New York.

THE WOUNDED

While completing field research for his novel, McCann discovered that there were about 2,000 to 5,000 people living underground in Manhattan, of whom a good 75 percent were Afro-American males. McCann saw them as 'the wounded.' Writing in *The Irish Times*, he described some of the people he had met in the following terms: 'There is Doreen, mother of two, wounded by crack. There is John, a proud and lived-in man, wounded by his years in Vietnam. There is Danielle, a Long Island girl, wounded by years of peddling her body. [...] One or two, like Bernard Issacs, actually choose to live away from the chaos, and, as Bernard says, 'the intellectual terrorism of topside.'"

There is a sense in which Issacs is correct. What many of us persist in seeing as a 'normal' existence is often as confused and demeaning as life in the tunnels of New York. You can often find out far more about yourself and the authenticity of the life you lead when you remove yourself from the centre of society and settle on the margins.

CLEAR CONTRAST

You would not find much spirituality in such a setting, you might think. And yet throughout the pages of *This Side of Darkness* one has the impression of observing people who are moving towards the light, while living in darkness. The clear contrast between the urban Hades and the hint of the eternal glimpsed from the skyscrapers of Manhattan is an obvious attempt to show how Heaven and Hell are often merely two sides of the same coin. Everything depends on your perspective. Clarence Nathan (referred to as Treefrog) chooses a tomb-like subway space as his home. It is only here that he can feel close to his grandfather and the other men who worked with him. It is only here that he can have the time to reflect on the things that went wrong with his life: 'Treefrog feels the darkness, smells it, belongs to it.' (p.23) He draws maps of his underground cell, of people's faces, of the tunnels, employed in compiling 'the cartography of darkness.' (p.25)

One day he spots a woman, Angela, who reminds him of his wife. He yearns to get close to her, but realises that neither has much to offer the other human because of what they have experienced in their lives 'topside': 'He has seen them, the truly damned. They live crouched under platforms strewn with clothes; or high on steel girdings; or in hidden cubbyholes; or buried under broken pipes. Wounded men and women living in their lazaret of hopelessness.' (p.97)

After the death of his wife, killed by a drunk driver, and son, who takes the law into his own hands and kills the man responsible for his mother's death, Walker senior rebels against any possibility of a loving God. He watches people going to church on Sunday and thinks how they will 'lift their voices to some useless heaven. A unified song of self-deception. God only exists in happiness, he thinks, or at least the promise of happiness.' (p.151) However, after months in a state of despair, he is brought back to life in a sense by the sight of his drug-addict daughter-in-law performing a dance in their apartment. He then observes his grandson and picks him up in his arms, discovers a reason to go on living.

BIBLICAL IN TONE

It all strikes me as being very biblical in tone. For example, there is one marvellous moment in the novel when a small hole in the pressurised tunnel on which they are working in 1916 allows the air to rush in and suck Walker and some other workers through the bed of the Hudson and then suspends them on a plume of water above the river. It is a resurrection of sorts: 'And then all three of them erupt through the surface of the East River [...], shooting out into the air with only their overalls and boots on, their chests contracting and expanding now, spewing water and muck from

their mouths, gulping down oxygen, feeling their brains thump, some tools from the tunnel accompanying them, planks spinning, a hydraulic jack cartwheeling, a bag of hay, an overcoat, a hat, a shirt, the most unlikely of flying things, it is morning, it is light, and they are up on a huge brown geyser.' (p.15)

The theme of the resurrection is prominent in the novel. In the final pages, Treefrog has a moment of epiphany when he visualises the important people in his life and comes to a sort of accommodation with what has happened to him. Then come the following lines: 'Leaning over the side of his nest, Clarence Nathan looks down into the shadows and, with half a grin, he says to the darkness: "Our resurrections aren't what they used to be."' (p.244) He realises that 'he has stayed alive for the calm of this moment.' (p.246) So while the 'resurrection' might not be what he had envisaged it would be, it is nevertheless a rebirth, with all the possibilities, the beauty and the hope that such a moment brings.

MESSAGE OF REDEMPTION

This Side of Brightness has a definite spiritual quality that is uplifting and therapeutic. It is not a novel with an artificial message of redemption, and makes no attempt to proselytise or convert its readers. No, what happens is that the experience of the characters leads them to a heightened awareness of God in all the detritus, the brokenness, the despair of the subterranean setting in which much of the plot is set. The characters may be 'wounded', but they are not completely broken; they retain some semblance of dignity in spite of living close to rats, human urine and faeces, with danger lurking at every corner. Treefrog, when asked by Angela why he persists in making maps, replies: "In case God comes calling." Angela thinks he's a 'Jesus Jumper', but he explains: "No, it's just so He can find me." (p.210)

There is a huge amount of food for thought in comments such as these, and *This Side of Brightness* provided me with a more genuine sense of what constitutes real spirituality than a lot of more 'obviously' religious books I have read. It's well worth buying for that reason alone. ■

