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REVIEW ARTICLE

Seeking redemption through art: the example of Colum McCann

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Colum McCann and the aesthetics of redemption, by Eóin Flannery, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2011, 244 pp., €45.00 (paperback), ISBN 978 0 7165 3050 3

Colum McCann is rightly acknowledged as being one of Ireland's most talented living novelists. The success of his most recent novel, *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), which won the National Book Award in America in 2009 and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2011, really cemented his reputation as a writer of substance. He is also one of the new generation of Irish novelists who possess few discernibly 'Irish' traits, their preoccupations being of a more global nature. In *A History of the Irish Novel*, Derek Hand notes how McCann 'investigates the boundaries between Ireland and the rest of the world, dealing in a number of works specifically with the problem of emigration and immigration'. He goes on to say something that is regularly reinforced by Flannery in his analysis: 'No longer do the certainties of rigid and real boundaries – national, personal or spatial – operate as they once did, as people exist in many places simultaneously.'¹ Given his undoubted gifts and originality, it comes as something of a surprise to me that up until recently no monograph had been published on McCann's fictional writing. Flannery's study will undoubtedly be an indispensable reference point for future literary critics who seek to engage with McCann's work.

In his introduction, Flannery charts the originality of McCann's aesthetic, explaining how he 'is a writer in constant flow – his fictions and other writings are channels through which the mobility of Irish identity is trafficked' (3). This is not simply a result of the writer's own experience of emigration and migration, but is, rather, a part of what McCann himself describes as 'a new cartography of thought, a new landscape of desires, among the Irish today. Our mental maps are no longer necessarily located in twenty-six and thirty-two counties' (3). Indeed, the gap between the local and the global is becoming increasingly blurred as a result of increased mobility and information flows made possible by the advances in technology. What Flannery senses is unique to McCann can be found in 'his belief in the redemptive power of narrative and storytelling as a utopian resource ...' (5). In much of his fiction, hope emerges out of despair and art possesses a redemptive capacity.

The book goes through the work in chronological order, beginning with the short story collection *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994) and ending with the 9/11 novel *Let the Great World Spin* (2009). In his treatment of each new instalment of the oeuvre, Flannery shows genuine 'empathy' with his subject, a trait he detects on numerous occasions in McCann's own work. The short story 'Sisters' from *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* 'recedes from the

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facile construction of a liberatory flight from Ireland with its trammelled imagination to the multifaceted possibilities of a global America' (26). The main character, Sheona, is brutally raped by American police officers during a brief incarceration prior to being deported back to Ireland. She becomes conscious of the 'glass towers' of business and finance that are beginning to dot the Dublin skyline. The analysis concludes: 'Ireland is not an anachronistic, traditional society but is as equally traduced by the architecture, physical and cultural, of modernity as any First-World country' (30). The changes to the visual topography were clearly visible and soon Ireland would be unrecognisable from what had existed before the 1990s. The river that features in the title story becomes, for the mothers of the two main male protagonists, 'a symbol of the movement attached to emigration, but it is, equally, an element of life's natural cycle, capable of returning lost or absent loved ones' (52).

I am not well acquainted with McCann's short stories, but from the way they are discussed in this book they are worthy of serious attention. The collection *Everything in this Country Must* (2000) deals with the Northern Irish 'Troubles' and presents an array of youthful characters who are 'confronted with an emotional and physical situation that harbours potential threat'. In a similar fashion, 'the incendiary unpredictability of the northern crisis, primarily evidenced in the seeming random nature of violence, is played out *in parvo* within the adolescent dramas of McCann's protagonists' (130).

With *Songdogs* (1995), McCann began his exploration of 'the heterogeneity of the Irish diaspora' (55), as lived out by Conor Lyons, his Irish father and Mexican mother whose marriage comes to an end when the husband's artistic ambition takes precedence over the family. Michael Lyons ends up back in Mayo and resists his son's desire to know more about the estranged wife, Juanita. Flannery views *Songdogs* as a dual *Bildung* in that it allows us to witness both the father's and the son's journeys of international maturation. During a visit to Mexico, Michael encounters Juanita, whose 'primal erotic physicality' attracts his attention and causes him to reach immediately for the camera. Juanita poses not for the camera but for Michael, and in so doing '[S]he is not reduced to or confined to the de-eroticized machinery of visual reproduction' (69). However, by publishing a compilation of his life's work, 'he [Michael] ransacks the images of his marital intimacy' and 'betrays the integrity of his wife's body and her subjectivity, prostituting their sexual past, their combined erotic narrative, for the satiety of his own artistic ego' (72). Conor finally becomes reconciled to his father when they go fishing together in Mayo and the son realises his need for 'fictions of consolation and imaginative acts of generosity, which can repair and redeem his fractured relationship with his father' (81).

This Side of Brightness is this reader's favourite work by McCann. It is a remarkable account of the life of a coloured sandhog – the name given to workers employed in the construction of the New York subway – Nathan Walker, and of his grandson, Clarence Nathan, who years later ends up inhabiting the same subterranean space so painfully reclaimed by a previous generation. Clarence Nathan was a construction worker on the skyscrapers of New York, a work setting as far removed as you could get from that of his grandfather. Both men are marginalised on a number of fronts. Nathan defies an unwritten law by marrying the daughter of a former Irish work colleague, Con O'Leary. This was the America of the early half of the last century, when segregation of ethnic minorities was commonplace. It is only when he is working deep underground that Nathan finds 'a non-prejudicial space in an acutely divided city and nation' (93). Clarence Nathan's mixed lineage equally makes it difficult for him to fit in anywhere. He is traumatised at being the helpless witness of Nathan senior's death during a visit to the subway, where he wanted to experience one last time the atmosphere of his youth. His grandson considers himself responsible for this unfortunate accident and ends up suffering a nervous breakdown

and being suspected of sexually abusing his daughter. His life in the underground tunnels is ‘the story of traumatic self-redemption within the detritus of urban humanity’ (95).

Flannery detects a retrieval of dignity in the pages of *This Side of Brightness*, a title that hints at a flickering light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. Indeed, birth and resurrection are common motifs in the novel. There is one powerful moment when a small hole in the pressurised tunnel where the sandhogs are working allows the air to rush in and suck Nathan and some other workers through the bed of the Hudson and then suspend them on a plume of water above the river. It is a highly symbolic moment and one that perhaps ought to have been explored in more detail in a book dealing with the aesthetics of redemption. The spiritual side of the novel is not examined to any great extent by Flannery and this is a pity, as McCann proves very adroit at suggesting inner awakenings among his protagonists in the most uncongenial circumstances.

Dancer (2003) and *Zoli* (2006) are viewed from the perspectives of performativity and otherness. While ostensibly a biographical novel about the Russian ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev, *Dancer* uses this intriguing life story ‘as a means of re-imagining the latter half of the century, and in order to interrogate the nature of art and storytelling’ (140). This point was reinforced in an interview McCann did for *The Stinging Fly*, in which he asked the following questions: ‘Who owns a story? Who has a right to tell a story? Who and what legislates what becomes a supposed fact?’ (143). The issue of capturing in words Nureyev’s extraordinary balletic performances is raised a number of times. There was something electric about seeing this great exponent live on stage: his physical grace and movement seemed to defy description. Shortly after the death of his father, for example, a man with whom he had a problematic relationship, the dancer brought about a resurrection of the dead man’s body in a magisterial, almost mystical physical display: ‘The physical bounds of the body, which inevitably include decrepitude, pain and death, are overcome for Rudi by this performative restitution.’ This is why it is apparent that ‘Rudi’s excessive physical talent assumes a kind of spiritual function’ (151).

Zoli exemplifies how subaltern literatures and cultures are often ‘mobilized for political projects’, which is very evident in the way in which the central protagonist, Zoli Novotna, a gypsy poet and musician, is used by the ruling elite to popularise and normalise an art that relies on fluidity and movement to survive. In unwittingly becoming the starlet of a government propaganda machine and ultimately the lover of an official of that organ, Swann, this woman ‘consistently tests the boundaries of her Roma traditions. Indeed, the extent to which she transcends received cultural boundaries in her personal life is, again, resonant of her later cross-border journeying across the European mainland’ (180). McCann is critical of societies that demonstrate intolerance towards that which is different and Flannery detects in *Zoli* a desire for ‘A politics that does not fetishize difference and “otherness” or subordinate it in different ways, but one that recognizes and restores dignity and hope’ (197).

The final chapter of this study brings the various threads to a magisterial conclusion. It begins with a discussion of why creative artists, and novelists in particular, have been saddled with the job of coming up with a language capable of translating the reality of what happened in New York on 9/11. Susan Sontag debunks the notion whereby the horrors of what transpired on that fateful day were too painful, too tragic for words, that words could not possibly do justice to the grief and indignation ignited by the terrorist attacks on the North American mainland. Flannery asks whether ‘literature was a cultural medium through which redemption could, potentially, be found’ (201). He goes on to discuss how McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* demonstrates how ‘the question of empathy is crucial to understanding McCann’s work’ in the same way as ‘the relationship

between empathy and narrative is essential to any engagement with his fiction' (203). While the narrative is set in 1974 and revolves around the audacious high-wire walk between the twin towers of the World Trade Center undertaken by the Frenchman Philippe Petit, it 'reverberates forward in time to 11 September 2001' and produces 'an allegory about all human suffering and how that suffering can be alleviated or endured' (207). When Petit began his walk, the gaze of Manhattan inhabitants was forced heavenwards to witness this unusual spectacle, and the act of viewing generates a type of communal empathy among the spectators. Petit's gesture was 'an unforeseen subversion of the logic of capitalist space' (212), a foreshadowing of a much more violent destruction of these symbols of capitalism by the 9/11 terrorists.

While Petit is engaged in his high-wire antics, parallel stories are happening around New York, most notably that of an Irish priest called Corrigan who dedicates his life to the prostitutes in the South Bronx. The contrast between the ethereal heights of Petit's performance with that of the grime and deprivation of what Corrigan experiences recalls the one already noted between Nathan Clarence and his grandfather in *This Side of Brightness*. Corrigan, a sexual innocent, ends up in a loving physical relationship with Adelita, a single-parent emigrant whom he seeks to protect while harbouring massive guilt about the betrayal of his priestly vows. Speaking of his dilemma to his brother proves a great relief to this well-meaning and in some ways saintly priest.

For Flannery, McCann's aesthetic quest can be summed up in the following manner: 'Art is seen to embody a redemptive moral value system in contradiction to the destabilizing values of modern terrorism. Art facilitates a reflective, even temperate, coming to terms with 9/11 ...' (228). This is the point the book has been making throughout and it impresses on the reader how appropriate such a reading is for a writer like McCann.

There is much to admire in this mature study which is destined to be the standard work on a writer who is guaranteed to enjoy continued success in the years ahead.

Note

1. Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel*, 276.

Bibliography

Hand, Derek. *A History of the Irish Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

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