

Susan Cahill and Eóin Flannery (eds)

THIS SIDE OF BRIGHTNESS

ESSAYS ON THE FICTION OF COLUM MCCANN



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Colum McCann is one of the most important Irish writers in contemporary literary fiction. His work has been critically acclaimed across the globe for its artistic achievement, its thematic range and its ethical force. *This Side of Brightness: Essays on the Fiction of Colum McCann* is the first collection of scholarly essays to deal with McCann's oeuvre, drawing on the pioneering critical work of some of the leading figures in Irish literary studies. Touching on a host of central themes in McCann's writing – emigration, race, performance, poverty, travel, nationality and globalization – the volume covers each of McCann's publications and includes a substantial interview with the author. The book is an invaluable resource for current and future scholars of the Irish novel.

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This Side of Brightness

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Introduction

This Side of Brightness: Essays on the Fiction of Colum McCann takes its titular impetus from Colum McCann's second novel, and third publication, published in 1998. McCann's *This Side of Brightness* is the first of his fictions to take New York City as the primary crucible of its action – though both previous publications, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994) and *Songdogs* (1995), had alighted upon the transatlantic relations between Ireland and the US as thematics. But the shift in *This Side of Brightness* to a geographical concentration on New York permitted McCann to explore in lyrical detail the tragedies and the hopes of generations of marginalized communities within that burgeoning metropolis. Focalized through the experiences of several generations of one family, the Walkers, the novel marks the most explicit expression of McCann's interest in oppression and redemption up to this point in his writing career. Indeed his 1998 novel is a powerful social novel, which combines elements of class, gender, ethnicity, homelessness (in more than one form), and migration in its exploration of the tenacity of human hopefulness. And this seems, in retrospect, to be the presiding ethical dynamic of McCann's fictions: the power of narrative to redeem and to dignify even the most of abject of lives. Right across his body of work, onwards from the early stories of emigration and displacement and beyond *This Side of Brightness* to *Everything in This Country Must* (2000); *Dancer* (2003), *Zoli* (2006), and *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), McCann tracks lives and narratives that are mobile – a mobility that energises but that also comes burdened with vulnerabilities and compromises. Yet, at the root of all of these stories is a resolute belief in the redemptive and democratic agency of the act of storytelling itself. Thus, McCann's *modus operandi* is one guided by the moral responsibilities of the author to listen and to serve his characters and readers well. While it would be disingenuous to label McCann as an overtly 'political' author, there is a political consciousness

at work in his fictions. Indeed, as is argued here and elsewhere, we can read McCann's body of fictions quite legitimately as one that is transfused with utopian impulses. 'I think in the future', McCann told *The Irish Times* on winning the 2011 IMPAC International Prize, 'that the things that will remain from this period, the stuff that will be remembered, will be the workings of capitalism – that's what the towers represented – and the wire walk, and of course the image of the towers falling'. McCann's triadic vision of what the memories of the future will house touch upon the primary narrative concerns of his multi-prize winning *Let the Great World Spin*. The novel's IMPAC International Prize was preceded by the 2009 National Book Award; and the Twenty-First Century Best Foreign Novel of the Year-Weishanhu Award for 2010 (China). But McCann's reply in interview with Eileen Battersby holds in summary, and in adjacency, the dynamics of hope and anguish, redemption and despair, which animate his literary fiction. There is an ambitious internationalism inherent to his writing, together with asensitivity to the traumas of displacement that can be fomented by unrelenting globalization. McCann does not subscribe to an unconditional celebration of borderless globalism, as he is all too attuned to the costs, in human terms, of capital's machinations. While his literary landscapes and influences transcend borderlines, the causes and tolls of involuntary mobility, in emotional, physical and cultural terms are always attended to by McCann. Yet as the quotation above impresses, he divines hope in the world regardless of the legion burdens of inequality and intolerance that abound across the globe. But as McCann's response also reveals, his writing is not simply a coldly materialist reaction to the inequities and iniquities of capitalism – his answer also reveals his artistic sensibility, as it gestures to the power of symbolism. In this sense, McCann is keenly alive to the competing valences of symbolism as a binding figurative action in society and culture. Symbols can be deployed as prejudicial and/or repressive devices; or, as in McCann's case, the affective currency of symbolism and of the aesthetic can act as a curative to those seeking to comprehend the complexities of a corrupted politico-economic conjuncture. Trauma, discrimination, indignity, and loneliness are thematic touchstones of McCann's fictions, but through a commitment to the empowering agency of storytelling and the analeptic powers of symbols and metaphors, McCann furnishes an enabling 'aesthetic of redemption'.

The underlying foci of emigration idealism, faith and personal loss that propel many of the narratives in McCann's first collection, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994), seem poignantly relevant to contemporary Ireland. Though published almost twenty years ago, the stories are scored with personalities, landscapes and dramas that are resurgent in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, there are tangible moments and acts of generosity and empathy across the collection, several of which are detailed by Miriam O'Kane Mara and Rebecca Oster Bach in their contribution, 'Seeking the Future in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*'. The need to emigrate and to depart homelands is a key reference point for O'Kane Mara and Oster Bach, but in their working over of this familiar theme in McCann's writing, they telescope the figurative importance of water in the collection, as well as elaborating upon the attention that McCann devotes to the idea of care-giving in his short narratives. In addressing the first of these issues O'Kane Mara and Oster Bach argue:

From frozen waterfalls to unnamed rivers, from creeks to the ocean, water flows through this text and provides an ongoing image that binds the stories together. McCann uses water imagery to represent the problems associated with identity and migration in late twentieth-century Ireland.

The alignment of mobility with the flow of rivers is a symbolic device that McCann reprises in later works such as, *Songdogs*, *This Side of Brightness* and *Zoli*, for instance. But O'Kane Mara and Oster Bach also suggest that:

caretaking, especially non-parental caretaking, recurs often in the collection, and the stories give voices to a variety of characters, who care for others. McCann's texts often place one emotionally whole or healthy person with one broken person in a relationship of sister or gay lover, role model or paid caretaker.

This latter feature of McCann's short stories is, as the authors maintain, part of the hopeful and redemptive energy of his writing. The potential for empathy and emotional solidarity, under duress, provides an affective alternative to the hardships of global capitalism – which occasions patterns of traumatic and involuntary migration.

This interlinking of narrative, temporality, and locale as centrally important to McCann's work is borne out by Amanda Tucker's essay, 'Here

and There: Reframing Diaspora in *Songdogs*.' McCann's first novel, published in 1994, foregrounds transnational and inter-generational migratory relationships through the linked narratives of Michael Lyons, his Mexican wife, Juanita, and their son, Conor who move between Ireland, Mexico and the United States. Tucker's essay perceptively argues that *Songdogs* undermines dominant conceptions of Irish diasporic identities as 'deterritorialized nationalism' and instead works to address the question of 'how to engage meaningfully in transcultural flows'. Tucker's reading of *Songdogs* is sensitive to the particularities of individual migrant experience as mediated through intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and the attendant complicated relationships with place, and memory. As she argues, '[t]he novel neither privileges nor conflates different cultures' diasporic experiences; rather it depicts various models of the global migration as they diverge based on race, gender, and generational difference'. For Tucker, the novel offers intriguing possibilities for negotiating transmigratory subject positions based not on the dichotomy between rejection and assimilation, but rather on multiple, simultaneous, and often disparate and contradictory, sites of connection and attachment.

As we have said, McCann's 1998 novel, *This Side of Brightness* is the author's first protracted reckoning with the migrant histories and contemporary inequalities of his adopted city of New York. And in his essay, 'Living in a Global World: Making Sense of Place in *This Side of Brightness*', Derek Hand broaches the politics of nationality and place in McCann's writing in general, and in this novel particularly. Primary among Hand's critical targets are those commentators, such as Dermot Bolger and Eileen Battersby, who unquestioningly stress the undiluted internationalism of McCann's writing. For Hand such readings of his life and work fail to account for the level of attention given over to, and awareness of, Irish history and culture evident in McCann's publications. While Hand concedes that 'McCann's fiction moves easily between boundaries, especially Ireland and America', at the same time, 'his writing still documents the psychic uneasiness of this movement between places. Even his American work possesses traces of Irish concerns, highlighting how difficult it is to shed the past and the places of the past'. In other words, there is no complacent disregard of the local and the national in McCann's writing; rather it confronts the difficulties

in negotiating between the local and the global, and this is precisely the cultural transaction that gives many of his fictions their dramatic appeal and momentum.

Everything in This Country Must (2000) is McCann's second foray into shorter fiction, and is his most sustained and direct engagement with the Northern Irish 'Troubles'. Working within a broadly utopian frame, in his essay, "'Troubles' Trilogy: *Everything in This Country Must*", Eóin Flannery focuses on the significance of McCann's generic selection of the short story and the novella as formal modes in which to mediate the tribal tensions of the Northern conflict. Equally, he explores the implications of focalizing each of the three narratives – 'Everything in This Country Must', 'Wood', and 'Hunger Strike' – through adolescent protagonists. Each of the stories is shadowed by death, by the national past and by the familial past, and out of each of these potentially tragic narratives, McCann fashions a more hopeful future. He uses the age-profiles of his central characters to locate them as 'transitional', which means that they are not necessarily freighted with the ideological inflexibility of the older generations. Rather than assume the legacies of hatred, which surround and threaten to overwhelm them, these emergent individuals are positioned as creators of a more pacific and catholic future in Northern Ireland.

McCann's 2003 novel *Dancer*, based on the life of ballet dancer, Rudolf Nureyev, plays out this emphasis on multiplicity, particularity, and contradiction in both its form and content. Structurally the novel operates as a chorus of voices and perspectives circulating around the iconic figure. As Susan Cahill's 'Choreographing Memory: The Dancing Body and Temporality in *Dancer*' argues, this structure, which emphasizes Nureyev as a body and subject continuously viewed and constructed by his onlookers. In her view, '[t]he idea of Rudi as a dancer, as a body in movement (and as a body that has taken on iconic status, which freezes it somewhat) is intrinsic to the novel, to the stories it tells, and to the relations of time and memory that are configured by it'. The essay focuses on the dancer's body, demonstrating through this body the relationships between theoretical and cultural understandings of dance as a transformative and deconstructive process, visceral experiences of memory, and non-linear experiences of past and present. Cahill's argument circulates around the interlinked

constructions of identity, narrative, corporeality, and history arguing that McCann ‘uses the lives of his historical subject to foreground the place of the corporeal within historical discourse and to use reconfigurations of the body as a means to re-imagine relationships between temporalities’. As McCann himself states in one of the interviews with Joseph Lennon that close this collection, ‘*Dancer* is a book about fame, a book about the telling of stories and who legislates those stories, a book about how our lives matter, a book about sex and desire’.

Recent Irish literary and cultural criticism has witnessed an ecological ‘turn’, and a burgeoning consciousness of the enabling reading strategies of ‘green’ criticism. And Anne Fogarty’s essay, “‘An Instance of Concurrency’: Transnational Environments in *Zoli* and *Let the Great World Spin*’ both partakes of this trend in Irish literary studies, and is, in itself, a pioneering exemplar of this breed of criticism. Focusing on McCann’s two most recent novels, Fogarty’s essay explores ‘how McCann imaginatively construes identity in terms of environmental apprehension and of transnational space and movement’. In Fogarty’s view the protagonists of both of McCann’s novels are deeply implicated in the respective ecologies that they inhabit – though the qualities of these environments are significantly different across the two narratives. Equally, Fogarty’s ecologically informed reading of McCann’s works allows us to reconsider familiar issues from McCann’s oeuvre, such as Otherness, migrancy and social marginalization, from new critical and political viewpoints. It is Fogarty’s contention that in McCann’s ‘novels place is seen at once as local and specific and as multi-dimensional and global. The environments McCann describes are indelibly coloured by the politics of migration and transnationalism. They are recurrently seen as part of a network of places and temporal sites and a confluence of stories’.

In her synoptic and theoretically sophisticated contribution, ‘Nomadic Artists, Smooth Spaces and Lines of Flight: Reading Colum McCann through Joyce, and Deleuze and Guattari’, Sylvie Mikowski locates McCann within the lineage of James Joyce; as a writer that revels in multivocality, locational mobility, and cultural plurality. Mikowski proposes that we read McCann in terms of ‘the substance of Joycean ethics and aesthetics’ or, in other words, as an author whose writing is centred on:

the figure of the wanderer whose fate overcomes the limits of individuality; the transformation through the creativity of language of the most down-to-earth reality into poetic material; the recourse to myth, whether Irish or otherwise, to transcend and escape the entrapments of history; and most of all, the substitution of time – the traditional provider of causality and meaning in narrative – by space, an opening onto an infinite multiplicity of stories.

A Joycean predilection for process and becoming are the informants of McCann's fictional oeuvre, for Mikowski, but her argument proceeds to find contemporary theoretical and philosophical sympathies between the Irish authors, Joyce and McCann, and the work and thought of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Availing of concepts such as 'Deterritorialization', the 'rhizome', 'lines of flight', and 'geophilosophy', Mikowski's essay suggests that the topographical foci of McCann's narratives, together with the frequency with which he narrates the lives of nomadic figures, partake of such theoretical argumentation. These concepts are cast as politically and culturally subversive and creative by Deleuze and Guattari, and it is Mikowski's contention that this finds literary fictional form across McCann's writing.

The volume ends with two interviews by Joseph Lennon with McCann. These revealing interviews were conducted in 2003 and 2008 and thus concentrate on the novels *Dancer* (2003) and *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), though McCann also elaborates on *Zoli* (2006) and the short story collection, *Everything in this Country Must* (2000). The interviews highlight McCann's artistic and ethical curiosity and his empathic impulse to inhabit other lives through fiction. Writing, for him, inhabits the spaces that 'you supposedly don't know' and this drive towards the unknown, the other, structures his work. For him, '[t]he greatest thing about fiction is that we become alive in bodies not our own'. His generous attention to the intimacies of human lives is deeply connected with an ethical drive away from hopelessness: 'I feel we must fight against the absolute of despair'. As we mentioned above, McCann's novels and short stories all stage the contiguities and borderlines between hope, anguish, redemption, and despair. For McCann, this is the moral compulsion of fiction: 'the job of fiction is to get at the texture and the truth and the deep honesty of what it's like to live inside your own – and other people's – skin'.

The corporeal metaphors used by McCann here are no accident – they implicate the reader, draw us into intimate connection with other lives, and make us aware of our own borders and vulnerabilities. This is nowhere more obvious than in McCann's discussion of artistic practice. McCann observes that he 'create[s] from scratch. I try to create from a scratch that has become a deep wound'. Thus, McCann's locates creativity – 'original, daring, and innovative acts' – as a painful, rupturing act, one that acknowledges and brings to light psychic and cultural wounds, making them manifest in order to prevent festering. This type of creativity does not simply inhere in the work of art, or the artist, but is simultaneously created and experienced by the reader, a process in which the reader, in McCann's words, becomes 'a moralist' and in which the self-contained self is irretrievably punctured as an ethical necessity. The novel forces you to 'recogniz[e] the hurt' and 'check [...] your skin for the fresh wound'. McCann's work, both individually and as a whole, stimulates compassionate engagement with other lives, makes us alive to the potential of storytelling, and insists on the connective power of memory. His work searches out the dark corners but always returns us to 'this side of brightness'.

MIRIAM O'KANE MARA AND REBECCA OSTER BACH

Seeking the Future in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*

Rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full. Then the water returns again to the rivers and flows out again to the sea.

— ECCLESIASTES 1:7

Originally published in England in 1994, and brought to the US in 1996, Colum McCann's first collection of short stories *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* thematizes personal history and relationship to place. The collection includes twelve stories including the title story and the lead story 'Sisters' which had also been published in Britain's *Best Short Stories 1993*. McCann expands beyond the setting of Ireland for many of his stories, some of which show how the political, mythological, and personal histories of the Irish people have always had a global impact. The stories in the collection, while set internationally, maintain connection to Ireland, but to an Irish identity that has changed. The tensions between coming/going; exile/migration; and responsibility/choice reflect the coupling of traditional challenges of building identity with the new possibilities burgeoning on the eve of the Celtic Tiger. This group of stories displays an unusual hopefulness in its original treatment of traditional themes, such as emigration and caretaking, and this hopeful treatment, reflects, perhaps, the openness and hope of Ireland's then-new place in the space of a globalized world. McCann's stories represent a new Irish identity, an identity that toggles between the need to care for people or be cared for, and the need to move on, sometimes through migration.

From frozen waterfalls to unnamed rivers, from creeks to the ocean, water flows through this text and provides an ongoing image that binds the stories together. McCann uses water imagery to represent the problems

associated with identity and migration in late twentieth century Ireland. The most common source of water, rivers, represent mobility in their ceaseless motion. For John Cusatis McCann's 'rivers represent the inevitable movement of time, which often separates children from parent'.¹ While he rightly recognizes the connection of rivers and time, it also seems important that most rivers flow into the ocean, which usually forms a political border, but always a geographical one. This movement means that most rivers eventually cross into the borderland, while some do flow into lakes. When Sean in 'A Basket of Wallpaper' learns of Osobe's death, he connects to his past experiences with his friend through a river. He explains how 'down by the Thames in the early morning, I dropped a single twenty-pound note into the water and watched it as it spun away, very slowly, very simply, with the current'.² This return of the twenty pounds he had stolen years ago into a very different river displays how the characters recognize water's ability to move away, but also to return. In 'Step We Gaily, On We Go' the aged Irish boxer, Flaherty, with a propensity for stealing women's clothing, displays an inability to move physically from the home in New Orleans where his wife left him or to reconnect to his previous home, Ireland. Flaherty notes that Ireland's limestone lets 'the water seep through',³ whereas the granite in Louisiana resists the movement of water. He describes the day his wife left 'gray as granite',⁴ and unable to move on, he remains immobile like water within granite. The movement of these various forms of water represents how Irish identity is built through efforts to embrace a country changed by globalization and emigration, and through care for its citizens, both at home and abroad. Water's ease of movement both around and through some borders suggests that the water in the stories reflects the migrants themselves. Additionally, the characters' ability to stay mobile displays how new global Irish identities are built. For Flaherty, on the other hand, sadness after losing his wife creates immobility like water trapped in granite,

- 1 John Cusatis, *Understanding Colum McCann* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), p. 31.
- 2 Colum McCann, 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper', *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1994), p. 53.
- 3 Colum McCann, 'Step We Gaily, On We Go', *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, p. 110.
- 4 McCann, 'Step We Gaily, On We Go', p. 110.

and he stays not to care for someone who needs it like other characters, but out of fear. Migration and sometimes exile saturate the stories, perhaps reflecting McCann's own wanderings, but the more deeply global nature of the fiction moves beyond biographical reflection. In *Understanding Colum McCann*, Cusatis suggests that 'In his twenty-year career as a fiction writer, McCann has continued to be drawn to the idea of leaving home and finding one's way back, on both a literal and a metaphorical level'.⁵ Yet the stories in *Fishing* prefigure McCann's later fiction set in Russia, the United States, and the Roma areas of Eastern Europe, as they portray a globalist understanding of the possibilities of making home anywhere without erasing origins. While he mostly follows Irish immigrants abroad in the stories, the migrancy of his characters includes people who travel to Ireland, like Osobe, a Japanese man who came to Ireland 'to forget it all'⁶ in 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper'.⁷ McCann wrote these stories in the 1990s when, despite his own trajectory to the United States, migration into Ireland first matched and then, for a while, surpassed, emigration, the traditional drain of people from Ireland. The narrator of 'Basket,' Sean gains fellowship with Osobe, who had travelled to Ireland from Japan, when he takes a summer job hanging wallpaper. While Sean⁸ wants to know why Osobe has come to Ireland, answers are not forthcoming. He speculates:

I had an uncle in Ghana, an older brother in Nebraska, a distant cousin who worked as a well digger near Melbourne, none of which struck me as peculiar. Osobe was probably just one of their breed, a wanderer, a misfit, although I didn't want him to be. I wanted him to be more than that.⁹

5 Cusatis, *Understanding Colum McCann*, p. 1.

6 McCann, 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper', p. 39.

7 The protagonist's mother in *Songdogs* is also an immigrant to Ireland, in this case from Mexico. Much of the novel traces her complex relationship to her new homeland and the reflection of that relationship to borders of the country in her treatment of her body borders.

8 Sean anticipates the young man in 'Hunger Strike,' Kevin. Both young men befriend older people, who have immigrated to Ireland in connection to the global shifting during and following the Second World War. See Colum McCann, *Everything in This Country Must* (New York: Picador, 2001).

9 McCann, 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper', p. 48.

This tension between migrancy as lifestyle and non-voluntary exile underlines the complexity of migration in twentieth century Ireland, which was named the most global country in the world in the early 2000s.¹⁰ Yet, like the protagonist of 'Hunger Strike', Sean strikes out at the kindnesses with anger at Osobe's mundanity, reflecting how the tension between those versions of migrancy affects Ireland's people.

McCann's further complicates the migration theme in 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper' by refusing to tell either the immigrant Osobe's story, or the future emigrant, Sean's either. The story begins with what 'some people said' about Osobe; he is 'fourth son of an emperor, or a poet, or a general ... a kamikaze pilot.'¹¹ Since the community does not know his history, they make up a history about him. Osobe also helps to cover his own history through his wallpaper business, perhaps wallpapering his home to conceal his own past. When he dies, they find layer upon layer in his house 'gathering the walls into himself' until it closes him in.¹² The boy, who seems open to the idea of migration and combined nationalities, wants Osobe to fit in: 'I suppose I wanted to own a piece of him, to make his history belong to me.'¹³ Sean, however, also mirrors the community's resentment of Osobe's silence about his own history, eventually becoming angry at Osobe's resistance or inability to connect to Sean. Like McCann's discussion of migration in 'Fishing', migration is inevitable, a part of life, but also an issue that separates relationships. The boy's father laments the effects of immigration on his business, stating, 'Everyone's gone somewhere else to die.'¹⁴ The boy also later leaves his country for London, and, similarly, he has family in Ghana, America, and Australia. Sean understands the inevitability of migrancy, but is disappointed when Osobe is unable to connect him to the outside world. Osobe's mobility brought him to Ireland and enabled him to perform a caretaking mentor role for Sean. Sean, in turn, must become mobile to find his own identity.

10 A. T. Kearney, 'Measuring Globalization: Who's Up, Who's Down?', *Foreign Policy*, 134 (1 January 2003), p. 60.

11 McCann, 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper', p. 39.

12 McCann, 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper', p. 43.

13 McCann, 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper', p. 44.

14 McCann, 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper', p. 42.