

Belonging in the Age of Global Crisis: The  
Fiction of Colum McCann

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By  
Alsahira Alkhayer MA (Leicester)  
Department of English  
University of Leicester

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## Abstract

Alsahira Alkhayer

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The critical reception of the fiction of Colum McCann does not go far beyond just noting the occurrence, and acknowledging the significance, of the author's use of mythology in his short stories and novels. This research identifies and analyses several allusions to Celtic, Greek and Hindu mythologies in McCann's work. It shows how mythological symbolism supports a cosmopolitan perspective on identity, by helping to cross political, economic, social and racial boundaries. It also shows that mythological allusions help the characters build a utopian world and overcome their immediate and global crises. The thesis groups McCann's work into three settings according to its main geographical locations: Ireland, New York, and Central and Eastern Europe.

My analysis shows McCann's fiction associating the Irish Troubles and national and religious divisions with an apocalyptic motif which leads with no hope for change to a dead-end. Ancient Celtic concepts of the world-axis and the Otherworld represent a second chance for characters to believe in, even if only imaginary. The New York setting, characterized by class and racial hierarchy, is defied by invoking a circular pattern derived from mythological concepts such as the circular flow of time and the Crane dance. Art, ubiquitous in New York, works side by side with mythology to promote the possibility of a successfully pluralist society. The continental European setting also adopts mythology and performance art to challenge the crises of individualism under a totalitarian regime, ethnic discrimination and exile. McCann's characters, this study argues, create a better reality by seeking to belong to a world which embraces human thought across different historical epochs and geographical areas.

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*In memory of my father*

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## **Introduction**

“I suppose so much of my work is about the old dream of going, or picking up the pieces of your life and reassembling them somewhere else. These characters move into a universe of ‘elsewheres.’”<sup>1</sup>

A mere overview of Colum McCann’s work confirms the internationalism of his approach to identity and the scepticism with which he regards boundaries, whether political, racial or cultural. His fiction covers a variety of geographical settings as it delves into the psychological dimensions of humans’ relationships with different places. The epigraph above sets displacement as a choice rather than an obligation for McCann’s characters. At home or abroad, they dream of experimenting with alternative worlds. These worlds, I will argue in this thesis, are mythological; that is, they are rooted in the mythological thought of the ancient Greeks and Celts. The substance of McCann’s “elsewheres,” then, is mythological, and the tools with which they are built are artistic. Whether coming from Dublin, New York, or Moscow, his characters experience certain problems in their surroundings, and tackle them by a physical or imaginative pursuit of self-discovery. The major studies of McCann to date, which include those of Cusatis (2010), Flannery (2011), Cahill and Flannery (2012), consider as two primary aspects in his work a transnational notion of identity and a redemptive impact of art. These critical views locate in McCann’s texts a moral responsibility to embrace the other and speak for the submerged, and, in doing so, they situate the writer’s oeuvre in the circle of the literature committed to a social cause. While acknowledging the committed side of McCann’s literature, I go beyond the social frame to show how his stories explore parallel elements of the human self and meeting points of the human culture across the globe, in relation to the recent influences of globalization on the concepts of time and space.

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<sup>1</sup> Colum McCann, unpublished Q&A with Alkhayer, August 2015.

McCann himself first classified his work within the category of social literature when he asserted that “empathy” was the goal of his writing. The term “radical empathy” defines the general orientation of not only McCann’s fiction but also his journalism and social activism. He expresses uncompromising opinions in a few journal articles that address some of the world’s key political events and present topics that also appear in his fiction. The essence of McCann’s fiction is reflected in his real life as president of “Narrative 4,” a non-profit global organization, active in small communities worldwide, recording individuals’ identification with one another in order to “solve hostile relations in the world.”<sup>2</sup> By allowing youth to listen to, and then tell the stories of, strangers, “Narrative 4” proves the effectiveness of emotional interaction among young people from a myriad of social backgrounds. The project is based on the old maxim of knowing yourself better through knowing the other. As stated in the organization’s official website, its aim is for the world to expand by giving way to channels that link distinct human experiences together.<sup>3</sup> It is, more or less, the real application of an overarching theme in McCann’s fiction, whether short or long: boundary crossing. The barrier of fear of the different other that grows in the human being under the effect of tradition, education and religion is criticized and resisted in McCann’s work. He enjoys the capacity that fiction provides for embodying someone else’s life: “The greatest thing about fiction,” he commented in a 2012 interview with Joseph Lennon, “is that we become alive in bodies not our own. If it isn’t about empathy, then I don’t know what it’s about” (Lennon 2012: 166). Empathy and the consequent expansion of one’s cultural horizons, thus, are the goals for which McCann writes fiction.

The global outreach of McCann’s vision has raised critical debate around nationalizing and internationalizing the author’s literary contribution. Eoin Flannery exhibits the contrasting views of Dermot Bolger and Derek Hand: while Bolger questions the validity of McCann’s Irish belonging, Hand suggests that McCann’s fiction presents “new ways” of living necessitated by the Irish postmodern condition (Flannery 2011: 12). McCann himself does not take the subject of his belonging

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<sup>2</sup> Katie Jensen, “Storytelling and the Movement Towards Radical Empathy” July 11, 2016-last update. Available: <http://grovenewhaven.com/tag/colum-mccann/> [January 3, 2017].

<sup>3</sup> Author’s website: <http://colummccann.com/narrative-4-main-page/> [January 3, 2017].

simplistically. He introduces himself as an Irish writer and refuses to be called American, or Irish American, but he accepts to be attributed to New York City as a New Yorker (Battersby, *The Irish Times* 2011). The city's cosmopolitan character goes hand in hand with McCann's tendency to stress Ireland's connections with the world and make prominent the presence of Irish cultural identity on the global scene. Critics situate McCann's writing in the body of contemporary American literature. His work exemplifies the "affirmative relationship to the ideology of the global" seen in the fiction of fellow postmodern American writers such as Alexander Hemon and Junot Diaz (Irr 2017: 60). Further, the committed aspect of McCann's fiction shows some affinity with the "literature of sincerity" of the late David Foster Wallace (Cowart 2017: 42).

The existence of national and international elements in McCann's writing is not alien to the Irish literary tradition in general, and prose fiction in particular. In his overview of Irish fiction history, Joe Cleary argues that naturalism remains as the main feature of Irish fiction throughout the twentieth century. Cleary divides this naturalist wave into three phases, the first of which was influenced by European, especially nineteenth-century French naturalism. The second phase self-consciously reversed the Revivalist "aristocratic world" into a naturalist "middle-class democratic one," and reflected the impact of key local and global political developments such as the Irish Civil War, the Great Depression and the advance of Fascism in Europe on the Irish social milieu (Cleary 2007: 147). These first two phases of naturalism, then, were engaged with international cultural and political changes. The third stage of naturalism from the 1960s up to 1990s shows, according to Cleary, almost no engagement with the numerous political events at the time, whether international, including the Cold War and decolonization movements, or national such as the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Irish society appears in that period's fiction as an "insular and provincial backwater," Cleary bleakly remarks, overlooking, as Flannery hints, a genuine search for hope and tolerance in the writings of the time (Cleary 2007: 155; Flannery 2011: 6).

This prevalence of the regional and the apolitical in Irish fiction is met with a subsequent openness to surrounding historical conditions, the Northern Irish situation

being the closest and the most influential. Liam Harte and Michael Parker point out that late twentieth-century Irish fiction aimed to “open up new ways of thinking about the hybridized, globalized, multitextured society that Ireland is fast becoming” (Harte and Parker 2000: 4). With political landmarks such as the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement in the North (April 1998), in addition to the Celtic Tiger in the South, engagement with otherness became a requirement in fiction as in other cultural aspects of Irish life. It was during this period of Irish history that McCann started his career alongside peers such as Anne Enright and Joseph O’Connor. These belonged to the “post-national novel” generation which represented plural “voices of dissent, disillusionment and diaspora” that spread in Ireland and abroad (Patten 2006: 259).

This study addresses the inclusive human cultural horizons conveyed in McCann’s writing. It examines the ways in which his fiction transcends constructed boundaries. The analysis suggests that his characters show similar responses in their confrontation of human problems in different settings, whether in Ireland, America or Europe. This essential sameness does not, however, deny diversity or ignore difference. My examination of the global community of McCann’s work finds strong common ground among diverse populations. This unity of human imagination emphasizes the synthesis between the local and the global. In order to expose the connection between different spaces, I look separately at the three main settings that I have just pointed out: firstly, Ireland, secondly New York and thirdly Central and Eastern Europe, with focused analysis on the themes of identity, mobility and cosmopolitanism, mythology, art and literary genre. The following sections include an overview of the existing criticism on each of these themes, highlighting their importance for the general argument and organization of this study.

### Identity

The critical reception of McCann’s work concentrates, among other themes, on a preoccupation with the other. One of his colleagues in “Narrative 4,” Ruth Gilligan, dubs him a “transcultural writer,” meaning by the term a writer who creates characters and addresses topics from a different origin from his own. Gilligan’s point

of departure is a classic division between the self and the other which produces the binary opposition between “us” and “them” that resonates with the division between the “West” and the “East.” She argues that, by applying certain narrative techniques, fiction can overcome the challenges of representation confronted by white writers who try to engage with the other. She calls the outcome a “narratology of Otherness” that views the sometimes taken for granted “ideological questions” through a critical lens (Gilligan 2016: 108). Her notion of “narratological lens” refers to a set of formal techniques that otherize the text, hence make it capable of embracing or identifying with the other. Those techniques which she deduces from studying *Zoli* (2006), McCann’s fourth novel, involve “framing devices, italicization, and embedded narratives” in addition to the “inclusion of stereotype and meta-textual allusions” (Ibid: 123). Gilligan’s article celebrates the success of bringing the other home using certain narrative tools, but it does not analyse how this enriches the self. This study will examine the value McCann’s characters gain by an understanding of the other, which has become a necessity with the impact of increasing cultural diversity around the world.

By examining textual content and themes rather than form in the same novel, José Lanter offers a view that is sceptical about Gilligan’s straightforward division between the self and the other in McCann’s work. For him, the novel does not clearly divide the ethnicities involved – roughly speaking the Roma, Slavs, Germanics and Irish – into insiders and outsiders. He suggests that McCann’s mission is “to give Papsza a voice” while avoiding the pitfall of shaping that voice according to his own vision (Lanter 2011: 33). He draws attention to the point that representation of Roma ethnicity can serve the exact opposite end by “turning the already marginalized ‘Gypsy’ into a trope about modern alienation, and hence a statement about the self rather than the other” (Ibid). Lanter then notes that McCann allows his protagonist to express herself by incorporating “silences in his novel, before Zoli’s voice rings out at the very end” (Ibid 44). Zoli’s early awareness is shaped by her communist patrons, Lanter stresses, while real self-expression is obtained after her later exile and solitude. Eoin Flannery, in the same context, emphasizes that the novel’s task of “embracing” the other is achieved through an “empathetic rather than a sympathetic”

interaction, which presupposes equality between different ethnicities (Flannery 2011: 165). This comparative lens through which the three critics above view Zoli deprives the character of the dimensions she may obtain had she been analysed independently from the author who is of a different origin. As much as McCann tries to be fair to this outcast ethnic group, he produces a literary work about an exiled artist. Therefore, rather than otherizing Zoli by examining McCann's success in delivering her voice, I read her character as an oppressed exile who creates through art an alternative home for herself.

The outward orientation of McCann's vision on the definition of Irishness, and his acknowledgement of the links between the Irish and the non-Irish, and between the Irish inside and outside Ireland, have received significant critical discussion. Miriam O'Kane and Rebecca Oster Bach see that McCann's first collection of stories offers an identity theory that addresses national transformations resulting from the economic boom at the end of the twentieth century, the so-called Celtic Tiger. They argue that McCann presents Irishness in a positive and promising frame by using water imagery whether rivers, lakes or oceans. This imagery is associated with characters' capacity to move on and transform. Cases of illness and disability, their article suggests, reveal a notion of "caretaking" that supports a scene of Irish solidarity. The short fiction continues to transmit a positive spirit to critics who explore McCann's portrayal of Irishness. Eoin Flannery interprets the young age of the main characters in McCann's second collection of two stories and a novella, *Everything in This Country Must* (2000), as a sign of optimism and the beginning of a bright future. The weight given to a healthy notion of Irish identity leads critics to underestimate, if not completely overlook, the challenges of growing up in Ireland, meticulously handled by McCann in both of the collections above, and which include poverty, sudden and drastic economic change, sectarianism and political conflict, to name only a few of them.

## Mobility and Cosmopolitanism

The geographical expansion of McCann's work inevitably involves travel and mobility. Critics tend to understand motion in McCann's work in either ecological or philosophical terms. In this regard, Peter Kalliney's study of the modernist scene offers a matching theoretical frame for McCann's work. Kalliney's *Modernism in a Global Context* (2016) offers a wide-ranging survey of the rhetoric of mobility that dominates modern literary and artistic work. Kalliney observes that a "restless, unsatisfactory temperament" accompanies modern man who consequently wanders the world heedlessly driven either by the desire to explore or the obligation to depart (1). From this new reality emerges the "aesthetics of motion" reflected in "representations of travel, translation, and cultural difference" (3). In order to address the experience of modern man, artists have to incorporate signs of movement in their work. They cannot, for example, avoid the impact of physical migration between places, the transmission of texts to many languages or the interaction between diverse ethnic groups. Further, critical approaches which aim at "expanding the cultural basis of modernism" embrace, Kalliney states, wider geographic and temporal frames, so medieval and non-European texts, for example, would be interpreted as modernist texts (18, 19). Moreover, racial and ethnic hierarchy and discrimination developed by imperialism and anticolonialism have necessarily been complicated and revised; a general "disrespect" of classic boundaries characterizes the mood of scholarly treatment of the point (20, 21).

McCann is responsive to global change and the existing criticism shows that. Critics do not stray far from the points that Kalliney highlights in terms of the typical characteristics of current day literature shaped by the universal reach of contemporary communication technology. Anne Fogarty, for example, tracks McCann's concern with difference to an ecological root by examining two of his novels, *Zoli* and *Let the Great World Spin* (2009). She detects a recurrent setting that combines "environmental apprehension and transnational space and movement" which, in turn, create an impact on the lives of his protagonists (Fogarty 2012: 103, 104). She draws parallels between *Zoli* and the tightrope walker in the later novel,

concluding that redemption emerges from rough and barren environments. Fogarty, further, establishes an important point about McCann's protagonists, also important to some other critics, regarding their combination of the paradoxical qualities of transnationalism, or "lack of fixity," and commitment to a spatial or cultural locality. Characters show their reverence to a sense of belonging to a community that is both open to change, and at the same time, adheres to fixed roots (Ibid: 104). Their spatial and temporal mobility, Fogarty observes, helps them to combine these contrasting traits of fixity and flexibility.

Mobility serves as the principal dynamic used in McCann's fiction in order to break the boundaries of geographical, cultural or literary space. Sylvie Mikowski uses the appellation "lines of flight" to describe the nature of space created in McCann's fiction. Her argument offers an interesting theory about McCann's heroes whom she sees as engaged in counter motion against the acknowledged norms they have naturally acquired in their native environments. Mikowski grounds her argument in the theory of French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari on "deterritorialization:" a creative act of "coming undone" or renouncing spoon-fed ideas in search of the true self (Mikowski 2012: 132). Dissenting from the restraint of tradition is connected with creativity: instead of the imposed space, a private one based on experiencing difference is concocted. In the same context, Marie Mianowski refers to a kind of "space in between" in reference to McCann's novel *Transatlantic* (2013). She argues that the type of space invoked in his most recent novel is not a fixed independent entity. On the contrary, it is produced through people's interaction with each other and through movement across land and between continents on both sides of the ocean. "Places," Mianowski suggests, "take shape at the crossroads of multiple lifelines" that occupy different time periods and geographical locations (Mianowski 2014). Cohabiting with the other and creating mutual bonds is one method in which space evolves into a vibrant peaceful unit. Motion in space, however, is inseparable from motion in time, as far as my analysis of the geographical journeys of McCann's characters is concerned. While following the spatial mobility of McCann's protagonists, I show how they embark on a temporal journey to a moment in the past of their families or communities. This withdrawal from the present and engagement

with the past helps them achieve self-realization and find belonging. I trace this quest for the past back to a mythological belief in which time flows according to a cyclical rather than a linear motion, where life becomes possible after death.

The global dimension of McCann's view on Irish identity generates a seed of cosmopolitanism which has been fairly acknowledged by critics. McCann himself, in an article in the *Irish Independent* (2013), advocates embracing the Irish diaspora as an attempt to stretch the frame of what it means to be Irish. This is one of several times when McCann promotes celebration of difference both in his fiction and in his journalism. His transnational tendencies go in accordance with the increased momentum in the critical studies of cosmopolitanism, especially the work of Bruce Robbins who draws attention to the changes the definition of cosmopolitanism has undergone through time. Considered at first as a pejorative term that implicitly alienates a particular community and accuses them of non-belonging, the concept later became overlapped with universalism, an illusively idealistic view that looks at humanity as one whole without paying tribute to existing fundamental differences. The most recent phase the concept of cosmopolitanism has claimed, Robbins points out, embraced "transnational experiences that are particular rather than universal, and that are unprivileged – indeed often coerced" (Robbins and Cheah 1998: 1). Acknowledging and spreading this latest interpretation of cosmopolitanism has become a necessity in the twenty first century, now that parts of the world are open to each other like never before.

Such a desire to integrate with people of different origins forms a key source of critics' identification of the importance of cosmopolitanism in his work. Sylvie Mikowski, in her 2012 article "Landscapes in Movement: Cosmopolitanism and the Poetics of Space in Colum McCann's Fiction," stresses that displacement and exile are normal situations for the postmodern individual; the Irish experience has nothing exclusive or particular in this regard. She distinguishes between the dichotomy of place and space, considering the former to be an entrapment in rigid ideologies and the latter to have a regenerative power for life and creativity (Mikowski 2012: 122). She argues that McCann's protagonists seek liberation from the repressive aspects of cultural and political features of place into an emancipating customized space.

Contrary to this view which denies any legacy or foundation in a particular community to McCann's sense of belonging, Derek Hand emphasizes that the local and global in McCann's work are interrelated and complementary in that one of them cannot exist without the other. Hand responds to approaches that want to locate McCann in the field of international literature and to strip his writings of any national affiliations. In doing so, he considers that obtaining an awareness of one's surroundings is essential in achieving reconciliation with one's dispossession of the past. Unlike Mikowski, he suggests that a "very firm understanding of place" compensates one's estrangement of their past (Hand 2012: 54).

Amanda Tucker also touches upon the international reach of McCann's work and his cosmopolitan sense of identity. She contextualizes her argument in terms of the increased numbers of immigrants in Ireland in the early years of the twenty-first century. She takes McCann's self-definition as an "international mongrel" as a base for her viewpoint on his characters, mainly in his American and European novels which contain many different nationalities and ethnicities in addition to the Irish (Tucker 2010). Tucker uses the terms "multiculturalism" and "cosmopolitanism" interchangeably, while advocates of cosmopolitanism, such as Kwame Appiah, separate the two concepts, considering that multiculturalism does not deny divisions or hierarchy in a culturally diverse setting (Anthony Appiah 2007: xiii).<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, cosmopolitanism is useful in understanding McCann's view on identity, because, as a concept, it suits his commitment to make silenced people heard. Kalliney draws attention to the possibility of using the cosmopolitan vision in favour of marginalized populations: "the concept of cosmopolitanism has appealed to a wide cross-section of modernist writers, many of whom are concerned about ethical treatment of subjugated groups," whether ethnic, religious, queer minorities or colonized people (Ibid: 60). The concept is complicated; Kalliney's chapter, in the book mentioned above, provides a valuable overview of the distinct ways in which the concept is employed in modernist studies. What needs to be stressed is that the local and the cosmopolitan should not be understood as contradictory: "cosmopolitanism is

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<sup>4</sup> See Ulrich Beck's "Critique of Multiculturalism" in Beck, Ulrich, *The Cosmopolitan Vision*, trans. Ciaran Cronin, Cambridge, Polity 2006, pp. 66, 67.

not about leaving behind local attachments, but about fostering cultural differences and encouraging intellectuals to see the value in such expressions of particularity” (64). The ability to make the regional extend to the universal, and to encourage the universal to embrace and appreciate the regional, is important for McCann who wants to extend the frame of Irish identity. McCann’s work, whether set in Asia or South America, is infused with Irish influence. Kwame Anthony Appiah, while introducing the idea of cosmopolitanism from an ethical perspective, gives explanations that help to understand McCann’s fiction. The concept, in essence, has to do with a “shared language of value” among different people, which might lead to “shared responses” or at least responses derived from the “same vocabulary” (Anthony Appiah 2007: 30). For Appiah, cosmopolitanism is about the courage to have a conversation that engages with the beliefs of other people, whether the parties involved agree or not (85). If we read McCann through Appiah’s lens, we can assume that his call for expanding the boundaries of Irish identity does not mean abandoning all that has been established, but simply accepting and cohabiting with novelty and difference. The paradox is difficult to achieve and the part of the current study that deals with exile and human migration explores the ways in which McCann brings together the concepts of home and exile as well as the local and the global. This study, furthermore, anchors McCann’s idea of cosmopolitanism in mythological thought. It shows how the symbolism of the world-centre secures a link between the regional and the universal. The world-centre is derived from specific cult beliefs, but it symbolizes the whole world. Each of the following chapters in turn will examine the manifestations of the symbol of the world-centre: in Ireland it is seen in a Celtic cross icon, in New York in the vertical architecture of the city and in Europe in the dance of Nureyev.

Ulrich Beck’s sociological study of cosmopolitanism provides a useful context in which to examine McCann’s fiction. Beck describes the dilution of borders in the present-day connected world in which McCann is writing fiction. He defines the notion of “cosmopolitan outlook:”

Global sense, a sense of boundarylessness. An everyday, historically alert, reflexive awareness of ambivalences in a milieu of blurring differentiations and

cultural contradictions. It reveals not just the 'anguish' but also the possibility of shaping one's life and social relations under conditions of cultural mixture. It is simultaneously a sceptical, disillusioned, self-critical outlook. (Beck 2006: 3)

Then Beck moves on to comment on the kind of environment in which the cosmopolitan outlook flourishes:

The world of the cosmopolitan outlook is in a certain sense a glass world. Differences, contrasts and boundaries must be fixed and defined in an awareness of the sameness in principle of others. The boundaries separating us from others are no longer blocked and obscured by ontological difference but have become transparent. This irreversible sameness opens up a space of both empathy and aggression which it is difficult to contain. (Ibid: 8)

To have a "cosmopolitan outlook" is to be conscious of the changing cultural standards and flexible about the evolving social, political and geographical boundaries. Beck states that this new condition of global transfusion between previously separated entities necessitates that people renew their thinking and search for redefinitions of "their interests and interrelations among the ruins of former certainties in whatever way makes continued coexistence possible" (Ibid). The "glass world" metaphor is helpful in reading McCann's human identity. He tries to change opaque barriers – national, religious, ethnic, economic – into transparent ones. The interesting aspect of Beck's study is that, while acknowledging that cosmopolitanism is an abstract idea in a "normative-philosophical sense," he also does not overlook its concrete side in an "empirical-sociological sense" (Ibid: 7). It is becoming a tangible reality; McCann's socially aware fiction suggests that embracing cosmopolitanism has become an urgent need.

### Mythology

The main approach of this study is to engage in a mythological reading of McCann's texts; that is, to analyse mythological allusions in terms of their influence on the form and content of the narratives. Critics mention the mythological motif

underlying McCann's work in a number of places, but they do not develop it into a cohesive argument. Bertrand Cardin (2016) pays considerable attention to this textual aspect. In passing, Cardin compares one of the rivers in McCann's short fiction to Lethe, the underworld river in Greek mythology (Cardin 2016: 28). The most elaborate example is in his reading of a short story in the early collection, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, entitled "Cathal's Lake." He compares it to a similar story in Irish mythology called "The Children of Lir."<sup>5</sup> Cardin associates the story's protagonist, Cathal, with characters from the mythical story. His ordeal is harsh and long like that of the king's children who suffer from the enduring curse their stepmother has cast on them. Despite his pain, however, Cathal's duty is to redeem from suffering the souls of the victims of the Northern Irish Troubles (Cardin 2016: 18). He alludes to the symbolic function of the lake in Celtic mythology as a liminal space between the earthly world and the underworld. Cardin considers that the hybrid quality of water that traverses different worlds is reflected in the text as both a short story and a tale, and as a combination of reality and fantasy (Ibid: 18-20).

The strength of Cardin's account lies in the exploration of connections between McCann's fiction and earlier texts and streams of thought. Cardin's book in a way poses questions more than it provides answers. While it scans scores of texts that have been invoked in McCann's writing, its structural analysis of McCann's language itself might be further developed. Cardin unearths a plethora of connections to a wide range of sources, ancient and modern, Eastern and Western. He examines the interaction between McCann's texts and those of various other writers in order to discern a quality of boundary subversion associated with the technique of intertextuality. "As it bridges the past and present together," Cardin remarks,

the intertext bridges the gap between fiction and reality when it introduces historical personages into the diegesis, between literary genres when it absorbs extracts of poems or plays into novels and short stories, or between

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<sup>5</sup> McCann denies that "Cathal's Lake" is based on Irish myth despite the parallels in an interview with Alison Garden (May 2014), published in *Symbiosis: A Journal of Transatlantic Literary and Cultural Relations* 18(1).

nationalities when it refers to Irish or American writers, but also artists from continental Europe, Africa or South America (Cardin 2016: 187).

Divisions of many kinds, temporal, generic and national are, thus, challenged by McCann's intertextuality. Cardin also sees intertextuality as an expression of McCann's social responsibility of building "a mixed, hybrid universe" in addition to the literary responsibility of conveying full meaning to "world literature" (Ibid). These intertexts give insight to a vast network of influences which interact dynamically to produce material for discourse analysis. However, Cardin's treatment of mythological intertexts is limited, hence the need to more closely examine McCann's intertextuality with regard to mythical tradition. Here it can be noted that McCann's early stories include symbols from Celtic – or Irish – mythology and that later novels invoke myths of other origins such as Greek and Hindu. This is reminiscent of Yeats's revival of the rural Irish folk heritage in his early poetry and his shift to symbols from Classical myths in the later poetry. Rather than focussing on which mythical texts are referred to in McCann's short and long fiction studied in this thesis, I scan the mythological symbols used, examine their native meaning, and then work on deducing their significance in relation to McCann's characters, stories and subjects. The main framework, thus, is always McCann's work. Analysing the mythological allusions does not stop at revealing the link with archetypal motifs; it rather aims to identify and analyse the contribution McCann's use of mythology makes to the perspectives on the world crises given expression in his fiction.

Other studies of McCann acknowledge the importance of the mythological dimension with little development. John Cusatis (2011) refers to a pagan Celtic context alongside the Judeo-Christian one in his examination of the first collection. Cusatis locates McCann's references to Celtic mythological lore that was dominant in Ireland before the arrival of St Patrick in the first century AD in the domain of magic realism (Cusatis 2011: 15, 16, 52). Cusatis suggests that McCann's combination of reality and dream creates a passage that leads to escape and renewal. Both Sylvie Mikowski (2012) and Eoin Flannery (2011) mention McCann's reliance on mythological material. Their stress on the importance of mythology in McCann's work paves the way for further exploration of the type of references used and the origin of mythologies

referred to, as well as to the significance of the selection. Mikowski concludes an article on the cosmopolitan poetics of space in McCann's fiction by identifying the occurrence of a mythological element without defining it or examining its implications: "No wonder then, that McCann should always imprint his stories with mythological undertones" (Mikowski 2012: 126). The mythological and the unbelievable – the deceptive or the unreal – overlap when she claims that McCann is constructing a "new myth aiming at defending ourselves against the ever-increasing threat of utter destruction" (Ibid). Mikowski's remark does not clarify the sense in which she uses the word myth, and which of "myth" and "threat of utter destruction" is the illusion and which the truth.

My view contrasts with that of Mikowski who does not fairly distinguish between the two senses of the word myth that can imply either a sacred belief or a false idea. While examining mythological symbols and noting that they emanate from characters that are sometimes based on real historical personae, I suggest that McCann wants to show us the fruitfulness of thinking of our reality through a mythological perspective. He seems to suggest that what happens in myth can indeed happen in our immediate environments. McCann's use of mythology is greatly overlooked in the existing criticism of his work; therefore, I take the mythological dimension of his writing as the starting point of my argument. By assessing mythological allusions in his short stories and novels, analysing and comparing them, I argue that McCann uses mythology to engage with people's social and ethical awareness and their cultural legacies in order to bridge the gap between the local and the global, placing the two spaces on a connected chain.

"Mythological references," Geoffrey Miles explains in his *Classical Mythology in English Literature: A Critical Anthology* (1999), "can work as a language, a 'code' to communicate instant and vivid meaning" (3). They are, thus, a medium of expression. When the immediate surroundings seem for the writer insufficient or defective, one way of modifying it lies in projecting it to an idealized mythological world which provides a wide range of possibilities. After the scientific treatment of ancient mythologies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by scholars like James Frazer, Freud and Jung, and later Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade and Claude

Levi-Strauss, myths, Miles continues, have become considered “symbolic representations of profound truth” (17). Each one of these scholars above interprets myth according to a specific approach, involving studies such as the psychoanalytic, functional, structural or semiotic (Graf 1996, Chapters 1 & 2). Even though no final definition of myth has been provided by any of them, they are all convinced that the concept implies great significance for humanity’s self-definition. In this regard, Jaan Puhvel emphasizes that myth is the essence of the set of religious beliefs, knowledge and cultural orientations of different people. Puhvel links the importance of myth as a topic of study to its importance in its native environment:

Myth in the technical sense is a serious object of study, because true myth is by definition deadly serious to its originating environment. In myth are expressed the thought patterns by which a group formulates self-cognition and self-realization, attains self-knowledge and self-confidence, explains its own source and being and that of its surroundings, and sometimes tries to chart its destinies (Puhvel 1988: 2).

Puhvel conducts a comparative study of myth that aims to trace “the mythical matter of disparate societies back to a common ancestry, one that includes language, society, and culture alike” (Ibid: 4). This universal notion of myth is useful in analysing McCann’s defence of a cosmopolitan stance that tolerates difference. McCann chooses a suitable method to communicate this idea to his readers, for myth represents a similar set of values that is already shared by different populations, even if in different forms.

Another view on the use of myth in literature, and which has guided my reading of McCann’s texts, is that of Charles Moorman:

Myth in literature ... functions as a great stockpile of common imagery on which the poet may draw at any time in order to condense and reorder his ideas into the shapes required by formal literature. Moreover, in using myth as sacramental rather than as illustrative metaphor, the poet can unify the disordered world he sees around him with the ordered world represented by myth by imposing that order upon the chaotic structure of his own experience.

... In short, the myth brings stature, order and meaning to the modern writer's attempts to order the chaotic world of his own time (Moorman 1960: 19).

It might be risky to claim that McCann uses myth in a "sacramental" manner, but the function of allusions to myth in his writing is definitely not random. He arranges them in order to help convey his transformative and redemptive vision of the world.

In another study of mythology in the modern novel, John J White discerns what he calls the "mythological motif" (J. White 1971: 7). This term describes a way in which fiction addresses the modern world's reality through particular patterns of mythological themes. Mythological motifs "describe the modern world in the light of a readily available set of models," White explains (Ibid). The occurrence of myth in fiction is distinguished according to the meaning it conveys to the content, as well as the features it adds to the structure of the narrative. Sometimes references happen as "solitary similes and metaphors borrowed from classical mythologies" (Ibid: 9). This impulsive and accidental use is contrasted with a "more organized mythological motif" revealed by tracking the supposedly calculated "patterning," "position" and "kind of mythological figure involved" (Ibid: 10). Generally speaking, if McCann's books are examined separately, then his style, I think, is closer to the former manner: scattered references to myth in the narrative, even though *This Side of Brightness* tends to exploit the mythical notion of the under and celestial worlds to the full. Yet, when McCann's work is taken into consideration collectively, mythological allusions start to form a definite structure that serves the aim of reaching an inclusive identity theory and a cosmopolitan world of transparent boundaries. Celtic, Classical and Hindu mythologies are the main three sources for McCann's references, as the analysis in the chapters will show. They occur separately in different novels and are rarely mixed up in one setting. I will show that they are used systematically in order to build a structure for a desired world.

## Art

Since most of McCann's fiction contains either works of art as prominent motifs or artists as central characters, critics have turned special attention to this side

of his work, revealing the redemptive influence behind it. Art forms vary from photography and graffiti to painting, dance and music. Susan Cahill records, for example, in *Songdogs*, three functions of photography. Photography saves the Irishman who emigrates to Mexico from the state of loss that creeps into him as a result of WWII and the Spanish Civil War. The man finds in photographing the body of his beautiful Mexican wife a form of expression and a promising step toward an artistic career. Then Cahill draws attention to the relationship photography establishes between the female body and the landscape. The wife's body transforms into a national symbol, a burden which destroys her in the end when the pictures are published. The photographs finally represent the family legacy that the son later absorbs when he reconstructs his parents' past, relying on his father's photographs of his mother (Cahill 2011, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ch.). In her analysis of *Dancer*, Cahill forges another relationship between the body and time when examining the dancing body of Rudolf Nureyev as depicted by McCann. On the one hand, Cahill suggests that dance "becomes a means of using the body to arrest time" as the narrative suggests that balletic techniques enable the body to freeze in the air. On the other hand, she points out that dance affects the body causing it to decay, thus keeping it under time's mercy (Cahill 2012: 76, 77).

The study of dance and temporality is expanded by Marie Mianowski who finds elements of dance in McCann's story collection *Fishing the Sloe-black River*. By looking at the stories which address internal or external exile, Mianowski explores the relationship between dance and exile locating a special function of dance for the exile. She deems physical movement, in particular dance, as a trope exploited by Irish immigrants in order to adapt to the new setting. Through certain movements, which Mianowski considers are choreographed, these characters reconcile with their past and hope to achieve a prosperous future (Mianowski 2014). In addition to dance, another performance art, music, is interestingly examined by Eoin Flannery in his study of *This Side of Brightness* (1998). Flannery's study represents a sophisticated example of using the formal features of a given art, in this case music, to explain its value in the novel. He investigates the qualities of music as a mode of expression and argues that its relationship to human suffering, desire and memory suggests that it is a

“connective and regenerative” remedy for McCann’s black and poor New Yorkers (Flannery 2011: 99). Through a close look at the engagement of Nathan Walker in singing while digging the urban tunnel network or in listening to Jazz melodies, as well as his grandson’s leisure in playing the harmonica, Flannery sees that music links the vulnerable population with the cityscape and creates an “energizing force in the narrative” (Ibid: 104). This thesis will extend Flannery’s examination of music in McCann’s writing to an examination of the characteristics of surrealist art, walking and dancing in his New York and European novels.

References to art are adjacent to McCann’s mythological allusions, and, at first glance, they seem more prominent than the mythological element because they come in titles, or because they are triggered by principal characters, such as the tightrope walker in New York. However, at a closer look, the artistic motif of McCann’s writing follows the steps of the mythological one. Visual art stands out in my investigation of McCann’s tools to stress the possibility of cultural interaction. I argue in the first chapter that Cathal in “Cathal’s Lake” is a painter who paints impressions from Celtic Mythology. I compare the narrative in both of the New York novels to paintings and collages that show different elements and colours side by side in an integral whole, thus reflecting global cultural diversity. In addition to visual art, performance art, in particular dance and tightrope walking, also contributes to the overall artistic motif, as I will show, producing a dramatic effect that brings together the elements of time, place, people and themes into life by means of interactive dialogue, and invites the reader as well to participate in completing the scene.

### Genre

No doubt themes of openness to the other and boundary crossing require a literary frame that transgresses rigid rules of form. McCann is especially alert to the formal and generic characteristics of his work, having in 1996 produced a story in the first collection “Step We Gaily, on We Go” as a play (Cusatis 2011: 8), and in 2004 another story, “Everything in this Country Must,” as a short film; and his writings direct attention to the organic relationship of their form to their content. The current

study classifies McCann's texts, whether assigned by publishers as short stories or novels, under a literary genre that consists of independent chapters which can stand alone in isolation, but which can also work coherently together when read as one entity. This is obvious in McCann's novels in particular, which are all structured in distinct chapters, more like stories, which differ in point of view and writing style – whether long sentences or short, lyrical or prosaic language – time or space of action. The binding overall plot is subordinate to this fragmentary heterogeneous pattern, which allows minor elements to be pronounced and undermines the hegemony of a narrative centralized on one linear course of action. It can be argued that Colum McCann's story collections follow a relatively similar structure, even though the continuity between the part and the whole is less obvious than it is in the novels. Initially, individual stories seem to evoke meaning only when they are read separately. Yet, they are carefully arranged according to parallel themes, so the total effect of the stories together is also unique and this gives each of McCann's collections a special character and identity.

The ways in which this structure serves each of the texts' subject matter are highlighted in my critical account of its form. With different names such as short story sequence, nomadic text, or composite novel, his chosen genre tends to blur the boundaries between sections and to be more democratic. This phenomenon dominates contemporary fiction and has received a significant amount of critical attention. Robert M. Luscher, for example, explains: "As traditional concepts of the novel and the short story fade, boundaries of genre begin to dissolve" (Lohafer and Clarey 1989: 166). In his examination of the "short story sequence," Luscher stresses the "looseness" that accompanies the form which creates more space for the reader to be involved in shaping the text and approaching it using "unifying strategies" (Ibid 157). The form thus gives room for "subjective interpretation and active participation" on the part of the reader (Ibid 158). Other critics give names for this hybrid type of writing which point to the connection between the form and the themes it introduces. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera calls texts that "resist categorization" and that "freely cross generic borders" by a name that reflects their mobility, "nomadic texts;" these anticipate the concept of identity that they would sustain (Iftekharruddin et al 2003:

51). Herrera observes that such texts evoke universal themes as well as specific cultures, presupposing continuity between the microcosm and macrocosm (56). Herrera's argument goes along with Tanya Agathocleous's article "Cosmopolitanism and Literary Form" (2010) in which she asserts that cosmopolitanism is a "generic formation as well as a cultural one" (458). She scans existing forms of literary production in order to find the possible ways in which texts can reflect cosmopolitanism. She stresses that the global expansion that the novel has achieved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through translation and globalization, as well as its ability to bind the local and the universal, make it arguably the cosmopolitan genre.

One more point needs to be stressed before concluding this introduction. It is concerned with the social, economic, and political contexts of McCann's work. It is reasonable to suggest that his writing is categorized as crisis literature, literature that transmits to the reader a picture of the suffering of people as a result of major political conflicts and wars (Craig & Egan 1979). In what they call "extreme situations," David Craig and Michael Egan refer to the fact that wars have increased in number and in destructiveness in recent human history with the result that it has become the writer's primary concern to probe the ways in which war affects human societies and the human psyche. In addition to the military crises since the Great War up to the Second World War, the Cold War and atomic risk, there have been a number of social and economic collapses, such as the Great Depression, that have shaped people's awareness and the political structure of different global powers. In more recent decades the threat of terror and environmental risk make the thought of destruction more pressing. The main point that comes to the surface of McCann's novels is the rejection of the other; the danger and destructiveness of enclosing oneself in isolated social or ethnic circles and showing adversary toward the slightest sign of difference. For McCann these are dangerous crises the solution of which, he suggests, can be a cosmopolitan identity.

A special feature of McCann's writing is his incorporation of real events and historical figures within his narratives. This means that a thorough analysis of his stories cannot go without giving the contextual background its due. Critics have not

yet fully explored the special interaction between history and fiction in McCann's narrative. When real personalities are mentioned in a literary work, then, arguably, both the historical and the fictional dynamics influence the text and its interpretation. Most of McCann's books include real people; Bobby Sands and his hunger strike companions in Ireland, for example; Philippe Petit in New York; Papsza in Central Europe; and Rudolf Nureyev in Russia and many other countries. I study the role of the historical figure – or in other instances the historical event – in the fiction in as much detail as the role of the purely fictional characters. The analogies between history and fiction provide important insights into the stories. When examining this aspect of McCann's work, the study takes into account the historical background of key events, such as the Irish conflict and New York in the modern era. The thesis involves a certain amount of historical, sociological and ethnographic criticism, and thus stresses an interdisciplinary approach, starting with the mythological analysis of the stories. Human crisis, then, occupies an essential position in McCann's writing. The following chapters will discuss different types of crisis in detail. Oppression, famine, colonization and civil conflict throughout Irish history all define McCann's Irish-set stories. New York's class inequality resulting from the capitalistic system, ethnic discrimination and the threat of terror after 9/11 all appear in the New York novels. The continental European novels mainly revolve around the crisis of the individual living in a totalitarian regime. These crises are different in nature and place but similar in the sense of the loss and exile they inflict on the human self.

### Structure of Thesis

My starting point, then, is McCann's treatment of modern man's pursuit of survival amid diverse crises in a world characterized by global connectedness. I classify the novels according to their geographical setting. I select six of McCann's books, those set in Ireland, New York and continental Europe, tracing themes of division and connection and examining the impact of mythological as well as artistic symbolism in each. In the Irish setting I include two collections of stories, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* and *Everything in this Country Must*, and in the New York setting the two novels *This Side of Brightness* and *Let the Great World Spin*. The European setting covers the

novels *Dancer* and *Zoli*. I group together the books that exhibit the greatest amount of spatial analogy. I exclude Mexico and the American West in McCann's first novel, *Songdogs*, as they do not belong in the particular American context of the New York novels. Also, the challenges they reveal about Irish identity are rather confined in familial and personal circles and do not exhibit clearly enough the prevalent economic and political challenges addressed in the other stories. The son's strife is lost between the private and the national while searching for his runaway mother. The father's withdrawal, symbolic of Irish suffering, is repeated several times in the parent figures in the short fiction. I have therefore not included this first novel. McCann's most recent collection, *Thirteen Ways of Looking* (2016), does not sustain a strong and balanced mythological motif and therefore I have not elected to include this.

The first chapter examines McCann's first two collections of stories, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* and *Everything in This Country Must* in two separate sections. The discussion aims to reveal the national and private devastation brought by the general reality of crisis. For this purpose, I begin with the more recent collection because the stories arguably imply an apocalyptic phantom looming over conflict-torn Ireland. The apocalyptic notion informs the rest of the chapters which look at novels that seek an escape from destruction or annihilation. Each of the stories in *Everything in This Country Must* illuminates one aspect of the Irish Troubles. The two stories and the novella address the role of the British soldiers in the conflict, the social traditions that accompany disagreements between nationalists and unionists, and finally the hunger strikes carried out by Irish detainees in British prisons. The discussion involves a historical reading of the problems named above along with a literary reading of the apocalypse or the world's end. The second section of the chapter examines McCann's earliest collection *Fishing the Sloe-Back River* where the setting is more diverse, comprising Ireland and some parts of the US, mainly New York and Texas. The social background raises problems such as poverty and unemployment in Ireland, alienation and exile in America. The discussion focuses on the occurrence of mythological allusions within the social context and on the motifs they generate. I argue that these allusions, which are derived from Celtic mythology, represent a path for survival and a better life. I examine their symbolism as explained in different archaeological and

literary studies of Celtic and Irish myth. I group them according to two prominent motifs, the world-axis and the otherworld, and dedicate a separate section to the view of the Irish diaspora on myth which does not take its redeeming qualities for granted.

The second chapter, like the first, is divided into two sections, each examining one of McCann's New York novels with focus on the city's modern experience throughout the twentieth, and at the turn of the twenty-first, century. The discussion evolves against the backdrop of class and ethnic discrimination in the city's social structure. I examine the way in which mythological allusions and artistic perspectives subvert the social hierarchy and enable characters to attain new possibilities. *This Side of Brightness* depicts the plight of Irish and black labourers and the inherited suffering of their offspring through three generations. I trace the way in which the convergence between these two ethnicities helps them to overcome the unjust social environment. In the second part of the chapter which deals with *Let the Great World Spin*, I consider that the World Trade Centre Towers bear a double trope by being symbols of two paradoxical notions, capitalism and the city's ordinary population. This assumption of the Towers' dual function arises from the novel's coverage of urban reality over a quarter of a century, before and after the 9/11 attacks. The analysis elaborates the complex symbolism of the tightrope walker who stands for the French artist Phillippe Petit. By looking at the tightrope walk and an analogous act of skyscraper climbing in the earlier New York novel, the discussion highlights performance art's subversion of a socially dominant elitist rhetoric and the revival of the lower class hope of social justice. The chapter involves a study of the city's economic system and ethnographic scene. I show that the issues of class structure, ethnic discrimination and terror provoke solidarity among the population. The city in both novels is looked at as a surreal collage that contains a special combination of heterogeneous social subjects.

The last chapter examines two novels, each centred on a single character in a communist European setting where individualism is almost impossible to experience. While examining the way in which *Dancer* and *Zoli* address the character of the artist, the analysis considers the artist as a heroic figure who is capable of undermining barriers and challenging the notion of exile. Like the previous chapters, this one is also divided into two parts. I begin with McCann's account of the Polish-Romani poet

Bronislaw Wajs, or Papiusza. Named Zoli in the novel, she lives a life of desolation and bitterness. The novel shows Zoli walking her way to freedom after a series of traumas: losing her family as a child of six, then being raised by her grandfather to later engage politically with representatives from the communist government and be expelled by the Roma people, as a consequence of this proximity, on the charge of disclosing their cult secrets. The second part looks at McCann's depiction of Rudolf Nureyev, or Rudi, as he is called in the narrative. Rudi's life is another journey carefully formulated by McCann as a struggle against repression. Extreme poverty during childhood, tension with his cruel father and strict teachers, in addition to social alienation because of his homosexuality in the conservative Soviet society, are obstacles that turn his homeland into a suffocating place. Defecting to the West at the first possible opportunity to escape the Soviet authorities' threats of potential arrest, he pursues an extraordinarily global career. The discussion focusses on Zoli and Rudi's use of their bodies in re-constructing the concept of home as they have been deprived of literal homes. Following an examination of the dilemma of the exile, I argue that McCann's characters can overcome exile by crossing boundaries. Walking, for Zoli, and dancing, for Rudi, are shown to be acts that keep them in motion and thus capable of evading exile or imprisonment. Their lives are arguably heroic quests on the road of cosmopolitanism, an idea that necessitates appreciating difference and embracing the other. Like every chapter, the discussion involves significant social and ethnic study. It also involves critical reading from types of performance art such as dance and walking, as well as reading from mythological sources.

My conclusion will then look at the polarity between crisis and survival as considered together in the three chapters. I will evaluate McCann's approach to time and space by looking at his novel *Transatlantic* (2013). I will retrace the mythological circular motif through an examination of McCann's representation of the life of the granddaughter of an Irish emigrant maid and the flight of Alcock and Brown from Canada to Ireland across the ocean (1919). These two examples stand for the issues of home and exile, boundary crossing, reality and myth.

## Chapter One

### **The Irish Setting: A Reality of Dead Ends in *Everything in This Country Must* and a Mythography of Continuities in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River***

"I understood then that the end was near, at least fairly near."

Samuel Beckett, "The End" in *The Complete Short Prose*

"It was in a mist the Tuatha de Danaan, the people of the gods of Dana, or as some called them, the Men of Dea, came through the air and the high air to Ireland.

...

And the three things they put above all others were the plough and the sun and the hazel-tree, so that it was said in the time to come that Ireland was divided between those three...

And they had a well below the sea where the nine hazels of wisdom were growing; that is, the hazels of inspiration and of knowledge of poetry. And their leaves and their blossoms would break out in the same hour, and would fall on the well in a shower that raised a purple wave. And then the five salmon that were waiting there would eat the nuts, and their colour would come out in the red spots of their skin, and any person that would eat one of those salmon would know all wisdom and all poetry. And there were seven streams of wisdom that sprang from that well and turned back to it again; and the people of many arts have all drunk from that well."

Lady Gregory, "The Coming of the Tuatha Danaan," *Gods and Fighting Men*, Part I, Book I

## Introduction

McCann's first two collections of short stories focus mainly on Irish society in the second half of the twentieth century, while other books, such as *This Side of Brightness* reduce the Irish factor to as little as the presence of a minor character from the Irish diaspora. Scenes of social, economic and political life, thus, are depicted in

order to reveal dilemmas of Irish nationals throughout a history of colonization, oppression and mass migration. Together, these two works, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994) and *Everything in this Country Must* (2000), provide a broad picture of the Irish setting, where other novels explore different geographical locations such as New York and Eastern Europe. Irish people in the stories of these collections seem stifled by a number of problems such as poverty, unemployment, emigration, and of course sectarian conflict. The stories typically contain a character suffering from some physical or mental illness which signifies the impairments of Irish society. Also, there are often one or more teenagers trying to make sense of their lives amidst these challenges. This adds a touch of incompleteness and ongoing development to the Irish element, a possibility of change which emanates from the fact that characters are growing up. On the other hand, the prominence of adolescent characters emphasizes the scale and depth of the suffering as it finds unhappiness and hopelessness even among the youngest in society.

*Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, with a dozen stories, presents a variety of situations which examine Irish identity. The range varies from two sisters growing up with their father in Mayo to later pursue opposite directions of chastity and liberation in America, to a farmer in a rural landscape mourning the casualties of the Northern Irish armed fight. Parents desperately waiting for their expatriate sons, a boy dealing with his new life in a wheelchair after a traffic accident and a girl trying to reclaim her lost home which happens to be a train carriage in the wilderness also feature as reflections from Ireland in the collection. The American setting emerges from the viewpoint of a number of Irish immigrants, too, such as a social worker in New York and a social researcher in Texas. The stories are not related to each other, even if shared themes and motifs bind them together.

Containing only three stories, *Everything in This Country Must* focuses on a single stage in Irish history, the Troubles in Northern Ireland (1968 – 1998). By depicting aspects of three key elements of the Troubles, that is, the armed struggle, the Orange Parades and the hunger strikes, teenagers here seem perplexed and unable to comprehend the reason “why, why, why these horrors were happening?” as McCann puts it in an interview with Joseph Lennon (Lennon 2012: 156). They are

enraged by the situation, yet unable to understand the cause of the deaths and arrests of their family members and helpless to come to terms with the conflict.

Like the thesis as a whole, the current chapter does not adhere to the chronological order of the collections' publication dates. I consider the catastrophe and the pain central to the second collection of stories, but always present in McCann's books, as a principal driver for him to look for ways in which writing can suggest survival. Excluding *Everything in this Country Must* which, I argue, invokes images of closure and death, all of McCann's works discussed in this thesis create a chance for resurrection, living, and finding connections that transcend boundaries and dead ends. Further, the scheme of structuring the argument according to the theme and location rather than date of publication helps to delineate routes of mobility from Ireland overseas and back. While *Everything in this Country Must* is limited to Irish territories, other books reveal a few routes which reflect the dynamics of human migration in the present-day revolution of communication and transport. The transatlantic passage from and to Ireland is one example that is introduced in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, elaborated in the New York novels and perfected in *Transatlantic*, a novel about peace and the return of the Irish diaspora home. The geographical categorization of McCann's works is revealing in terms of the Biblical and mythological symbolism which tend to function in accordance with the cultural currents of the surrounding space. The Troubles in Northern Ireland produce a collection of stories characterized by linear apocalyptic temporality, while transatlantic flow in the other collection generates a cyclical motif of the ever-renewing "eternal return" (Eliade 1975: 61).

The discussion of the aforementioned collections takes its central points from two under-developed areas in the existing criticism of McCann's fiction. The first is concerned with the treatment of the political and economic situation's effects on Irish society. While critics focus on finding a nucleus of hope in McCann's representation of the social background, they neglect to explore the bleak reality depicted in the narrative, which severely affects the characters. The second area is the mythological dimension in McCann's oeuvre of which critics make only brief mention, without leaving enough room – except for the story "Cathal's Lake" – for a detailed

examination of the Celtic or other tropes used. My analysis begins with the collection addressing the Northern Irish question. Following a brief review of the politics of the armed conflict, I will link the civil war to the end of the world as envisaged by the Biblical apocalyptic tradition. I will argue that episodes of violence or social tension between the fighting forces generate an end-of-the-world metaphor which I will define and analyse through a close reading of each of the stories. Having established a connection between the end and different aspects of the Troubles revealed in the stories, that is, the armed conflict, Dublin's peace lines, and the hunger strike, the discussion will extend to McCann's stories, published in other collections addressing the so-called Celtic Tiger, the Irish economic boom in the 1990s. This phenomenon which brought unprecedented wealth to Ireland generates an apocalyptic motif involving a lament for an innocent preceding life. After that, I will move on to *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* and show that it then completes the picture of Ireland by finding room for hope arising from allusions to the mythological past. I show at first how the short story genre emphasizes both the apocalyptic motif and the possibilities of change in each of the discussed collections. Then I will move on to show how allusions to a utopian world are derived from the Celtic folk heritage. Mythological symbolism, I argue, is used to suggest a notion of cosmic belonging which transcends religious and ethnic boundaries. References to water, in particular rivers and lakes as will be revealed, evoke a promise of resurrection and a better life. Finally, I will isolate the stories set in the United States as they offer a sceptical attitude on the utopian mythological world imagined by the Irish at home.

## ***Everything in this Country Must***

### Apocalypse and the Northern Irish Crisis

*Everything in This Country Must* is McCann's second published collection and consists of two short stories set in Northern Ireland and a novella in Northern Ireland and Galway. The title's language bears signs of the coercion and finality dominant for a period in Northern Irish society. "Everything" denotes a totality inclusive of all elements of Irish life, economy, politics, society, and everyday matters; "must" is a strong expression of compulsion and predetermination. The north-east corner of the island does not give much choice for its population. According to political rules and religious conventions formulated through history, things need to follow a definite path. The title provides a preview of a cruel reality that is displayed in more detail in the texts.

The bleak environment reflected in the title is McCann's expression of the tumultuous reality accompanying the Northern Irish Troubles and the armed conflict between nationalist and unionist wings that was the latest among a series of confrontations in Irish modern history. The fight in Northern Ireland is a direct outcome of national hostilities and religious divisions in society (Hachey et al 1996; Kee 1996; Foster 1989). My analysis of McCann's collection will show that divisions are linked to a motif of annihilation. The current collection exploits this correlation, criticizing the inability of the Irish people to adopt a constructive policy which solved disagreements by reaching a firm political consensus. Images of either death or illness arise in the stories to express the outcomes of a divided reality. From this view point, which does not separate divisions from annihilation, I will use theories of eschatology in literature to reveal how the rifts in McCann's Irish scene symbolically lead to a catastrophe and a final end. McCann here takes an apocalyptic approach in which he suggests that divisions cause a termination of life as people perceive it. He extends this idea in other works to say that bridging political and social gaps and extending national boundaries generate a healthier human identity and make new beginnings

after the end possible. Life starts for McCann when frontiers are transgressed. His writing tries to create synthesis between antagonistic groups.

The first and title story examines the role of British soldiers in the Irish struggle. In an encounter with a Catholic family, the soldiers are on one occasion portrayed as murderers, when their military tank collides with a car and kills a mother and her boy inside. On another, the soldiers are saviours of the same family's favourite horse, who is caught in a flooding river and about to drown. The father has to choose whether to accept their help or refuse it. The second story, "Wood," portrays a Presbyterian carpenter who boycotts the Orange Parades – which commemorate the long-time Protestant victory in Ulster in the battle of the Boyne (1690) – and does not sell any poles for the procession flags, and prohibits his children from taking part in the celebrations. His wife, short of money after her husband's stroke which prevents him from working, hesitates between sustaining the family's doctrine and breaking it by accepting parade-related work of making and selling flag poles. The third story, "Hunger Strike," addresses yet another aspect of the Troubles, the arbitrary detention of Irish activists, a move defied by a hunger strike initiated by some prisoners. The story revolves around a boy who lives in the hope that prisoners' demands will be met, before his uncle, a leading striker himself, dies of starvation. The boy and his mother escape the life-threatening warzone of Derry and head south to Galway where they spend the time following the news of their dying relative and waiting, either for his release or his death. Characters in this collection rather stand on a crossroads where they have either to choose between one thing and its opposite, or, as in the final story, passively await a government decision. The course of events takes them in the direction of a dead end, an expected result of a divided reality, as the textual analysis below will illustrate. The collection suggests that blocking the chance of communication across different groups in one society is similar to blocking the chance of life. People become enclosed in separate compartments of fear and apprehension that gradually deprive them of the ability to regenerate or improve their lives.

The complexity of Irish divisions is explored in a study by Sean Swan (2005) in which he critiques the official borderline that keeps Ulster as a separate unit. While

the establishment of the free state in 1922 organized the disagreements between the north and south, it did not resolve the tension between Catholics and Protestants in Ulster. Swan demonstrates how real divisions stem from religious, national, political, historical and colonial factors. These divisions, he contends, are more accurately represented, not by the Ulster border, but by the peace lines of Belfast drawn to contain the armed fight in the Troubles and keep the Catholic/Nationalists and Protestant/Unionists apart (Swan 2005).

Irish divisions are an expression of many centuries of hostilities between the Self and the Other, one side of the society and the other. Religious and political institutions fostered chauvinistic attitudes when they considered the other as a rival, not an ally. Beneath the religious and national divide, furthermore, lie a number of old and new crises such as famine, poverty, recession, war, and oppression. McCann's themes in this collection arise from that history of crisis in his homeland. It is fair to say that his writings incorporate the global tendency in the "history of modern critical thought," which, as Paul Crosthwaite claims, "is best narrated as a history of attempts to register and amplify conditions of crisis in the pursuit of a radical renewal of the intellectual and social order" (Crosthwaite 2010: 2). Crosthwaite relies on the common Greek root of the words, criticism and crisis which is "*krinein*: to separate, judge, decide", along with Paul de Man's claim in his famous essay "Crisis and Criticism" (1967) that "all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis," in order to establish a link between the two concepts. Crosthwaite describes today's crises as diverse, saying they emerge from economic, environmental, geopolitical, public health and terrorism-related factors, and unprecedentedly widespread on a global scale (3). Those two features of crises, diversity and global range, are clear in McCann's works.

Crisis in this collection is rooted in the Irish religious and national conflict which generates images of a calamitous situation, an end, of a life or an idea. This concern about the end here overlaps with humanity's general preoccupation with an end point which can be foreseen in the passing of time, or in the death of living organisms. This discussion focusses on the connotations of the occurrence of the end which has been the topic of the apocalyptic tradition in sacred or secular human narrative. The apocalypse is either "historical," concerned with "the rise and fall of nations and the

end of history and the world,” or “cosmic” or “mystical,” which takes an eschatological approach reflecting on the “fate of the soul after death” (Collins 2000: xiv). The former type explains how the end happens and the latter what it means. Both apocalyptic types are found in McCann’s work as it examines the material conditions that lead to the end, and reflects on the significance of the end and what follows it. Cyclical and linear concepts of time present a simplistic but helpful view of the end. In the former concept, which is commonly seen in mythology, the end is not final and is thought to be a return journey to the beginning. In the latter which is advocated in Biblical tradition, the end is final and followed by a judgement in which souls are either punished or rewarded for their deeds (Wagar 1982: 34). Those are broad categories which leave other types of the end untouched, such as the absolute end, proposed since Greco-Roman times, and believed to be an ultimate annihilation, succeeded by nothing at all (Collins 2000: 89).

The notion of a final point is important in understanding the intermediary position the human being occupies between the beginning and the end of time. As Frank Kermode claims, knowledge about those two obscure points injects the human self with meaning. Kermode argues that the apocalyptic vision does not have to be literally concerned with the world’s end. Antiquity’s different narratives of a final disaster at the end of time, whether in paganism or in Judeo-Christianity, have changed status from truths to becoming merely naïve “fictions” in modern times (Kermode 2000: 27). The end is not “imminent” but “immanent;” we do not wait for it, but witness it with instances of crisis in human history (Ibid: 6). The end can be imagined, Kermode suggests, as often as a “predicament of the individual” emerges (Ibid 27).

Modern apocalypse, then, has been detached from its religious roots. Images of the end in modern literature are secularized in that they observe crisis as a human, rather than sacred, phenomenon. One important branch of apocalyptic narrative is science fiction which “[delves] into the unknown future or into the past or [presents] worlds alternative to our own,” according to Warren Wagar (1982: 9). Wagar contrasts this type with what he calls mainstream fiction, which “[explores] life in the known past or present” (ibid). Indeed, the world’s end is the principal theme in science fiction

and apocalyptic imagery is the genre's definitive characteristic. Studies in the field reveal many ways in which the end is imagined, from alien invasion to ecological disasters, along with the different aftermaths they bring (Wagar 1982, Lisboa 2011). Science fiction is brought up at this point because it raises the issue of reaching the abyss due to a divided society, or one which has a deficiency in cross-communication between its members. This point is evident in Maria Lisboa's reading of some works in the genre. She argues that: "divided we cannot rule. Or at least not for long" (Lisboa 2011: 37). She elaborates her analysis:

The perceived danger to the status quo lies in the superior power of group effort in the face of a habitually fragmented, divided, individualistic status quo. What is seen as the adversary's strength (superior abilities in group communication) in fact defines the nature of the wider social group's weakness: a tendency for competition rather than collaboration, divisiveness rather than cooperation, and, paradoxically, the determination to survive as a rigidly defined group rather than a willingness to permit the dissolution of the barriers that divide the self from the other (Ibid: 41).

Her argument is based on science fiction books turned into films such as *Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) and *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), but applies to the Irish reality too. Fusion between the Self and the Other is essential for survival. She turns attention to internal conflicts, which in Ireland stem from opposite religious and national beliefs. Lisboa relates the condition of the fragmented society with a state of isolation from the rest of the world. She seems to suggest that when individuals of a certain community have problems in connecting to individuals of other communities, the society as a whole will necessarily be unable to open to different societies in other countries. The application of Lisboa's argument to the Irish situation is clear. Failure to achieve full and healthy contact between political representatives of its constituting units, mainly the Unionist/Protestant and the Nationalist/Catholic, puts Irish identity at risk of fragmentation. Further, hostilities between these two wings impede the establishment of a solid network of political and economic communication with the rest of the world, which leaves Ireland fairly passive in the global scene. McCann, the

analysis will show, serves as a whistle-blower when he emphasizes in this collection the effects of divisions on the national identity.

### The Troubles and Divisions

McCann's opening story in this collection bears a strong portrayal of the end and its impact on the Irish population. It begins in *medias res* with a horse on the verge of drowning in the flooding river, being looked after by a father and his daughter who try to free its leg from the riverbed rocks:

A summer flood came and our draft horse got caught in the river. The river smashed against the stones and the sound of it to me was like the turning of locks. It was silage time and the water smelled of grass. The draft horse, Father's favourite, had stepped in the river for a sniff maybe and she was caught, couldn't move, her foreleg trapped between the rocks (3).

The risk of drowning implies a sense of an impending end which is best understood through analysing the mythological symbolism of the horse and the river. In Celtic mythology the horse is a symbol of sun deities, given the shared quality of movement. Similar to the way the sun seems to cross the sky, the horse traverses the land: "The sun is not only the giver of light and warmth, but also the speedy and unwearied traveller who circles the world each day. ... As the horse was the swiftest of terrestrial travellers, the sun was fittingly regarded as the courser of heavens" (O'Rahilly 1957: 290, 291). The image of the divine and constantly moving solar disc is now anchored between the rocks and about to be immersed in water. The horse, as a symbol of the sun, is drastically degraded from an unbound horizon in the sky to a destructive fissure in the bottom of the ground. The water itself suggests another link to the mythological context. In Celtic tradition, water symbolizes a reviving force and an intermediary stage to the Otherworld. Here in the story, water is a fatal threat to the horse, a precious member of the family and a rich mythological symbol. Mythological standards are reversed in this image and what used to be a source of life, is now threatened with annihilation.

The danger surrounding the symbol of the sun, the source of light and fertility, is inseparable from the sectarian and political fight in Northern Ireland. This is evident in the account of the soldiers of the British army whose function in Northern Ireland started as an impartial peacekeeping force deployed to contain chaos and violence. Their lack of training in techniques of maintaining order made them adopt the role of the “defenders of the status quo and as such [get] drawn into the conflict with the nationalist community” (Boyle 1994: 83). Increasing riots and the initiation of the IRA campaign puzzled British troops who consequently violated human rights with regards to the ill-treatment and torture of detainees, in addition to the large number of civilian casualties (Ibid). The story takes into account this double function of British troops in the fight. They are viewed as having both political and human dimensions in the Northern Irish struggle. Their military involvement in Ireland is part of a political process in which they represent power and self-interest. Yet, beneath this layer of strategic interests lies the private side of the soldiers’ human conscience in a land full of tragedy.

A group of British soldiers, thus, are depicted in two opposite ways. Once, they caused the death of the narrator’s mother and brother after their car collided with a British army truck. Some years later, they come across the father and daughter who stand helpless in front of their drowning horse and, to the father’s dismay, help to pull it out of the river. The father is heavily stricken by the fact that British soldiers, who belong to the other side of the conflict, have saved his own horse. The paragraph which describes his feeling expresses great melancholy, and gives an idea about the degree of pain that is inflicted on Irish lives. The girl, Katie, recounts:

Father sat down on the riverbank and said, *Sit down Katie*, and I could hear in Father’s voice more sadness than when he was over Mammy’s and Fiachra’s coffins, more sadness than the day after they were hit by the army truck down near the Glen, more sadness than the day when the judge said, *Nobody’s guilty it’s just a tragedy*, more sadness than even that day and all the other days that follow (9).

The profound sadness suggests a translation of catastrophe from the personal to the national level. It is as though the father is aware of the significance of the horse image

in the Irish heritage. He does not seem to be mourning the beast only, but its symbolic meaning as well. He mourns the demise of the horse as a symbol of life derived from the national Celtic mythology. The passage also bears the only reference in the story to the family's past car accident. The father's denouncement of the soldier's acquittal indicates that he cannot be completely innocent. Indeed, the screen adaptation of the story, a short film of the same title directed by Gary McKendry (2004), depicts a group of soldiers rejoicing in the tank while riding on a country road; the collision happens the moment the driver turns his sight away from the road arguing with one of his comrades behind him.

It is not until the final scene, though, that the apocalyptic approach of the story is fully revealed. This follows Katie's invitation to the soldiers into the house to dry up and drink some hot tea. Some kind of flirtation is observed between her and Stevie, the soldier who stepped into the water to free the horse's leg. Finally the father orders the soldiers out, "*Maybe you should all leave,*" not tolerating one soldier's remark that Katie can use a towel he has just used to dry her hair (13). Stevie recognizes the faces of the woman and child killed previously by the group's tank in a photograph on the wall. He seems to be the sensitive and conscientious soldier and calmly leads his partly furious, partly embarrassed friends outside. The father cannot come to terms with the soldiers' contribution throughout. The fact that they felt at home over tea and showed a tendency to act like one family ultimately pushes him to reject their help by killing the horse they have rescued. Katie describes this episode with an awe that relates to her reflection earlier in the story that life in her country is doomed: "I was wearing Stevie's jacket but I was shivering and wet and cold and scared because Stevie and the draft horse were going to die, since everything in this country must" (10). After the army truck goes away, Katie goes on to transform the noise that she hears into narrative. She infers the miserable state of her father through the sound of his sobbing and then she follows the sound of his following actions:

I heard the living room door shut then the kitchen door then the pantry door where Father keeps his hunting rifle then the front door and I heard the sound of the clicker on the rifle and him still crying going further and further away

until the crying was gone and he must have been in the courtyard standing in the rain (14, 15).

Something seems to be going on in the mind of the father; his movements are oriented toward a certain goal. While he is carrying out his plan, the daughter listens to the clock ticking:

The clock on the mantelpiece sounded very loud so did the rain so did my breathing and I looked out the window (15).

Katie in this picture is haunted by the noise of the clock and her breathing. Their strong echo reveals how slowly time passes while she is waiting. After that, her father's intentions are revealed:

It was all near empty on the outside road and the soldiers were going around the corner when I heard the sounds, it wasn't like bullets, it was more like pops one two three.

The clock still ticked.

It ticked and ticked and ticked.

The curtain was wet around me but I pulled it tight. I was scared, I couldn't move. I waited it seemed like forever (Ibid).

The father has shot three bullets at his horse. Not knowing at first the bullets' target, Katie seems to be a little lost, yet she expects to discover what has happened soon. The clock ticks are a metonymy of the passing of cosmic time and of being aware that an end will eventually come. The adolescent finally realizes the dilemma when she sees that her father has regained his self-composure: "When Father came in from outside I knew what it was. His face was like it was cut from stone and he was not crying anymore and he didn't even look at me, just went to sit in the chair" (15). He has killed the horse, revenged the death of his family by rejecting the help of the British. The price, however, is very expensive. It is his favourite horse, and a national symbol. For the girl, this means the end of the world as she does not hear the clock anymore:

The ticking was gone from my mind and all was quiet everywhere in the world and I held the curtain like I held the sound of the bullets going into the draft horse, his favourite, in the barn, one two three, and I stood at the window in Stevie's jacket and looked and waited and still the rain kept coming down outside one two three and I was thinking oh what a small sky for so much rain (15).

The story's concluding lines offer a prevailing reference to the end. The clock is no longer heard which indicates the end of time. It is a gloomy and final apocalyptic image after which nothing is expected. The Irish sky is small and dark without its sun symbol. In civil war, Ireland cannot embrace life. Conflicting views lead to death. Destruction comes from outside forces as it also comes from within.

The second story of the collection, "Wood," addresses the phenomenon of the Orange Parades which commemorate the victory of the Protestant Monarch, William of Orange, in the Battle of the Boyne (1690) over the Catholic James II of England. William was a prince from the Dutch royalty married to King James's daughter. When English Protestant elites started to worry over the Catholic-biased policy of James who had newly ascended the English throne, they asked for the help of his son-in-law. The latter, following his victory, was crowned as the king of England, Scotland and Ireland – the latter represented in Ulster (Jarman 1997: 31-33). Different sects and political groups took advantage of the celebrations; the parades were used to serve particular political agendas that divided national Irish identity (Ibid: 26). They started first on a small scale and in rural areas then expanded with the awakening of the "unionist political consciousness" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Ibid: 27). The Parades, then, are evidence of the importance of the past in Irish socio-political life. By that I do not mean the cultural sense of the past in which memory of artistic and literary aspects of civilization contributes in enriching people's present imagination. The past here is concerned with conventions and formal habits accompanying a given idea, in this case, a military victory, and legislated only by virtue of repetition. Jarman considers the Parades ritual to belong to what historian E. J. Hobsbawm calls "invented tradition" (Ibid). The Parades, from this perspective, represent a social construct that dominates people's minds.

McCann's story casts a critical eye over the Parades. They are seen as an expression of political and sectarian divisions which deform Irish identity and social structure. The motif of the end is not as explicit as in the previous story. It seems as though "Wood" takes a step back to describe the state leading to the end: again, a divided nation. A Presbyterian carpenter refuses to participate either in the preparations or the processions of the Orange Parades. He represents a voice of reason which aspires to reach a stage of tranquil living between the two communities in Northern Ireland. One of his children explains the father's uncompromising rejection of the ritual: "Daddy says he's as good a Presbyterian as the next, always has been and always will, but it's just meanness that celebrates other people dying. He doesn't allow us to go to the marches..." (23). The processions are not the right form of self-expression from the point of view of the father. Their historical context is related to war, hence they conceal a feeling of hostility and supremacy. The child cannot understand the attitude of his father. He shows his fascination in the visual decorations innocently emptying the ritual from its political implications: "... but I've seen photographs in the newspapers. My favourite was the two men in bowler hats and black suits and big thick ribbons across their chests" (Ibid). Then he continues to describe a photograph of King William of Orange which serves as a contrast to the scene of the drowning horse in the previous story: "They were carrying a banner of the King on a white horse. The horse was stepping across a river with one hoof in the air and one hoof on the bank. The King wore fancy clothes and he had a kind face. I really liked the picture and I didn't see why Daddy got so upset" (24). The visual aspect of the Parades is essential in power discourse (Jarman 1997). Banners, mottos and mobs are inseparable from the ideological background. Here, the depiction highlights the King's status as a knight. He is the sage ruler who brought prosperity to the country. Yet, this viewpoint is qualified by recalling the way in which the horse appears in the first story of the collection.

The story does bear a notion of finality in the end with the father's idealistic attitude towards boycotting the celebrations. A stroke leaves him bedridden and unable to support his family anymore. His wife can manage to live off the savings only for a while; then, she is obliged to accept an order of forty flagpoles for the Parades.

The man who orders them explains to her that “he didn’t want to use the Kavanagh mill on the other side of town” (21). His justification refers to the peace lines of the Northern Irish capital. The father used to challenge those divisions whenever he visited the city centre. One way to amuse his children was when he “swayed in and out of the lines” (29). After his illness, it is no longer possible to challenge the norms, and the divisions prevail. The story’s concluding passage is revealing in this regard:

I looked at the oak trees behind the mill. They were going mad in the wind. The trunks were big and solid and fat, but the branches were slapping each other around like people (37).

The boy compares the society to woods. The tree, a symbol of life and perpetuity, is grand given the strong unity it forms with the ground. It ensures that there is a firm base to hold together the branches. Yet, the natural harmony is reversed by depicting the clash between the branches caused by the wind. Irish society tends to ignore its base that forms a solid texture which unites it together, McCann seems to be saying, and, therefore, the different groups keep fighting.

The final story, “Hunger Strike”, focuses on yet another aspect of the Troubles, the protests that Danny Morrison deems “the historic event of the North since the foundation of the state in 1921” (Morrison 2006: 19). Hunger strikes were organized by a network of republican activists and political personalities inside and outside prison in response to the “internment without trial” introduced by the British government “exclusively against the nationalist community” following the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement (Ibid: 12). Detainees were victims of the conflict insofar as their treatment was affected by the increased political tension. They were automatically criminalized and deprived of the political status of war-prisoners. Following a series of strikes that were called off for various reasons related to alleged progression in negotiations, the most famous hunger strike in 1981 ended in the death of ten prisoners including the strike’s leader, activist and poet Bobby Sands (Ibid: 17). The subject prisoner of the story is in Bobby Sands’ group. His last days are depicted through the viewpoint of his sister-in-law and nephew, who follow each piece of news concerning the political talks and the uncle’s health. The story, in two places, bears particular significance to the argument about divisions and images of the end. The first

one is found in the paradoxical image that shows Ireland to be united by a barbed wire:

The boy wandered in a stupor for an hour, found himself by a barbed wire fence. ... he twanged the barbed wire and wondered if the reverberation would connect with all other pieces of barbed wire, that the sound might carry, from fencepost to fencepost, all the way north to a squat grey building topped with razorwire (54).

The barbed wire, in principle functioning as a separating barrier between areas of different national or geographical identity during war, is here figured as a unifying element of Ireland. Barbed wires, associated with warzones, or secured prison buildings, indicate the execution of power to impose a certain military or political agenda. The stretch of the barbed wire over the Irish south and north suggest that the Irish are kept together by their consent to remain in dispute; they agree to disagree.

The second image of the end is found in the detailed depiction of the uncle's deteriorating health. From the beginning of his strike, his weight is recorded daily, starting from 66.8 kilograms and losing about half a kilo a day until he is moved to the prison hospital on day twenty-four weighing 58.59 kilograms. Counting the days and measuring the weight performs the same function as the ticking clock in the previous story. It raises awareness of the passing of time which gradually feeds on the prisoner's life. On day forty, the notebook in which these numbers are recorded, apparently by someone from the medical staff, compares him to Jesus Christ. The note says "That's the amount of time Jesus went without food" (114). The last count is on day fifty-five and his weight is 52 kilograms where another adjacent note reads, "I don't suppose he has much left" (133). The mother, before her relative reaches this desperate state, expects that the situation will not change and that he will die. She explains to her inquisitive son: "- He'll go to the end, his mother said. / - He'll die? / - He'll go to the end, she said again" (104). Here lies a strong statement about the no-return point to which the uncle is heading. The mother complains elsewhere: "That's the worst thing, isn't it? She said. Just knowing how inevitable it is" (137). The mother's two remarks contrast the prisoner's association with Jesus Christ earlier. It is just about dying at this stage. No resurrection is foreseen.

Interestingly, the image of the horse occurs again in the final story to symbolize the uncle's spirit as seen by his nephew who

lay down instead on the back seat and put his head against the door frame, woke, startled to see a stray white horse staring in at him. The nostrils of the horse flared and then it shook its head, neighed and galloped away. The boy was sure he had seen his uncle's spirit and he ran back along the headland and burst breathlessly into the caravan (132, 133).

The appearance and disappearance of the horse refer to bidding farewell at a moment of departure of some kind. The horse moves away, not leaving any particular trace or making any change. The horse image symbolizes the uncle's spirit. Indeed, the story ends with the uncle's death, not with a political consent to the prisoners' demands. The boy's sorrow in the final scene is another reference to the hopeless way in which the story ends.

When images of the end occur in literature, their significance is often deduced from what comes after:

In what the author sees happening after the end we often discover what the end was all about, and whether it really took place, or was only the occasion for a lesson, a judgement, a critique, or a commentary on the passing show. By this criterion, endtimes come in three varieties: ends without aftermaths, because the end is final and absolute; ends that curve back on themselves, in a pattern of a cyclical return; and ends that liberate (Wagar 1982: 185).

The end-time in this collection falls into the first category: an end without an aftermath, or perhaps an end followed by damnation. McCann shows in this collection that people's reluctance to live in harmony with the Other has a destructive outcome which causes social and spiritual decay. Images of the end, overall, are infused with a motif of finality which annihilates any hope to avoid the abyss or find a new beginning. The murder of the horse in "Everything in This Country Must" terminates Katie's sense of temporal progress in a reference to the end of the world; the father's sickness in "Wood" ends up an ideal path which, if generalized, can heal the fragmented Irish communities. Also, the collapse of the starving prisoner and the portrayal of the cruel

facts about the physical symptoms of starvation overshadow any hint to a promise in his sacrifice. He dies for nothing, prisoners' demands not answered, and the nephew's hope of a miraculous redemption lost.

### Commercialization

The end as a final terminal for human and social life is evoked not only through the civil war in Northern Ireland; the south, too, takes its share in summoning dead-ends. This is when McCann tackles the dire situations accompanying the economic boom of the south in the late twentieth century. This boom was called the "Celtic Tiger" a term which captures "the dynamism of the southern Irish economy" which became the envy of the strongest of nations (Coulter & Coleman 2003: 4). The Celtic Tiger has both orthodox and alternative narratives (Ibid). The orthodox goes along with notions of modernity such as that of Fukuyama who prophesies and celebrates the prevalence of capital just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and that of Giddens, who considers the notion of the ever-renewing individual to be the essence of modernity (Ibid: 6,7). In a world where liberal democracy had the upper hand, the change in the Irish economy was seen as a great human achievement. The economic boom changed an originally traditional and religious Irish society. A cultural twist accompanied the flow of money into the country so that "the people of southern Ireland awoke one morning to discover that their previously cherished beliefs and practices had been replaced with a set more suitable to the rigours of modernity" (Ibid: 15). The change of values referred to above is, in particular, concerned with the consumer culture in the post-national global era so the living conditions of the Irish population became parallel to European standards. Foreign investments also augmented as a result of new regulations and national industry prospered in terms of employment numbers, production and exports (Kirby 2010: 6).

The other side of the picture is not so bright. Suspicion of the orthodox view is first detected in the roots of the Celtic Tiger which do not lie in the competitive plans of Irish economists or politicians but in the "convenient changes in the operation of global capitalism" which required new markets with a minimum rate of corporation

tax (18, 19). The nature of multi-national capital means that the major part of the invested money is not retained by the government, rather flows out again to foreign corporations. This means that the new economic reality is as dependent as the previous one. The Irish state, therefore, constantly lacks a strong national economic base. On the popular level, while citizens tried to create an original self-image since living standards indeed reached unprecedented levels, the prevailing characteristic of the Southern Irish society was “baleful blandness” rather than “diversity and individuality” (24). People expressed themselves in “commodity form” due to a sweeping wave of consumer culture that turned Dublin into a “cultural theme park for the entertainment and distraction of natives and visitors alike” (25). Beside the materialism that dominated the Irish scene during the Celtic Tiger, the “polarisation of wealth” was another feature of that era which demystifies the idealistic illusions woven around it (22). Finally, some nationalist enthusiasts suggested that the Tiger could pave the way for the idealistic rhetoric of unity between the North and South of Ireland. These assumptions “betray a fundamental weakness of the ideological tradition from which they derive” (26). In short then, the Celtic Tiger was not built on solid ground and contained numerous gaps that led to its collapse a little more than a decade after its start.

The debate around the pros and cons of the Celtic Tiger is brought to light because McCann mourns the effect it has on Irish life in two of his short stories. “Around the Bend and Back Again,” in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, anticipates the commercialization of the Irish countryside and criticizes its early symptoms; while “As if There Were Trees,” in an anthology called *New Dubliners* (2006), criticizes the increased racism after the massive stream of international labour to Ireland caused by the economic boom. The story set in the countryside diverges from the ones discussed previously in that it generates a kind of end which implies a return to the beginning. This appears in the story’s title which draws a two-way-trip to the edge of insanity. Its central character is an adolescent girl whose father seems to work in the space industry and her mother in gardening and flower arranging. They live in a “caboose at the bottom of the hills... sitting in the middle of nowhere” (118). The family represents an anti-establishment sentiment living in that unusual habitat along with the

occupations and the life style they follow. The catastrophe in this story happens towards its beginning, while the remaining narrative reveals possible ways to emerge in different life-forms after the end.

The family's first loss happens when the father bets on a horse that loses a race. The caboose "suddenly belonged to some bank up beyond in Dublin" (119). The second loss concerns the daughter, when her parents die in a car crash. She stays in her railway carriage for six months after the accident until the bank announces that the land will be transformed into a mining site. The shock leaves her in a hospital for mental illness where she is called "Ofeelia" because of the flowers she keeps in her hair. The hospital possibly occupies a metaphorical function to show the way in which people who oppose economic progress are treated. Ofeelia rebels in the way she behaves against the hospital's and bank's officials. She sneaks out of the mental asylum one night and heads to the parking spot of the bulldozers which are supposed to crush her home and sets fire to them. It is a purging fire, which melts down the machinery. Ofeelia cannot escape it as it catches her dress, yet it is a transcendental death scene in which the guards who stand for the new economic rationale disappear. The narrator sees Ofeelia's phantom riding the caboose across the sky "The way I see it she has flowers in her hair, dozens of them, wrapped up in the curls, and she's sitting there, bloody pink petals flying, driving that damn caboose through the universe for the last time, smiling like the clappers going hell for leather along by the stars" (146). The end here, as seen through the narrator's dream, seems to bring a trace of the happiness with which the story starts: peacefully at home in the caboose. Yet, this comes after the new commercial order in Ireland has completely destroyed this unconventional family, leaving no space for opposition to the new commercial value system.

The second story, "As If There Were Trees," published in Oona Frawley's Irish short fiction anthology, *New Dubliners* (2006), proposes a reading of a negative phenomenon, racism in Ireland, without suggesting a solution or exit from it. Hence, it accords perfectly with the approach of *Everything in This Country Must*. The story revolves around Jamie, a seventeen-year-old father of a little baby girl who is sacked from his job in construction work when he is caught with a woman during working

hours. He puts the blame on his Romanian colleagues, whom he sees as a group of immigrants who came to steal the nation's job opportunities. Hostility here is not within people from the same society, but between the locals and international migrants. Historically speaking, Ireland has not been an ideal example for receiving migrants on both the popular and official levels. National identification typically intersects with "whiteness and Catholicism" (Coulter & Coleman 2003: 89). People outside this classification are considered as other and different and are generally treated with "illiberal spirit" (Ibid: 90). After becoming jobless, the father, Jamie, attacks with a folded knife a Romanian colleague. The story is narrated in the first person by a middle-aged woman who watches Jamie carrying his child and heading on a horse toward the construction site of the town's new bridge. Yet another horse is used in the narrative as the means of transport Jamie adopts to reach the group of Romanian workers. The narrator's thoughts as she is curiously trying to discover Jamie's intentions reflect a society dominated by discrimination. Her recollection of everyday scenes from the local pub shows a divide, an animosity between the community of Irish poor labourers who cannot obtain the well-paid, high-skill jobs and those who represent foreign cheap labour. Remarks such as "We don't serve the foreigners" at the town's pub, "or at least we don't serve them quickly because there's always trouble" show the locals' attitude that builds a barrier separating them from the international community (McCann in Frawley 2006: 55). The narrator views Jamie's assault as catastrophic since it makes her realize the depth of the problem that is rooted in a culture of exclusion and hate. Immediately after Jamie's weapon glitters reflecting the sunshine, she starts running in shock in his direction to witness his action more closely. She generalizes Jamie's intentions to all the people in the neighbourhood who would be feeling the same way. She stresses that Jamie's violence is a threat to the nation's present and future when she thinks that any of her own children could be in his shoes. The story ends with a horrifying image of the Romanian being beaten before being sent home to "his dark children with his ribs all shattered and his teeth all broken" (Ibid: 60). The narrator seems scared of her own inclination to be involved in such a crime, considering it to be a destructive stigma of her own people.

The final point that needs to be addressed before moving on to the second part of this chapter is the significance of McCann's use of the horse. The horse image accompanies McCann's characters in displaying the often dark and painful aspects of Irish life. Elaborate analysis of the picture of the animal drowning in the river, then saved, then shot dead by her owner suggests a link to the Celtic mythology in which the horse symbolizes the sun god. Yet, horses, as mentioned, appear in each of the remaining stories. "Wood" has a horse metaphorically in the form of a sawhorse, rather than a real animal as the father has a stroke while he is in the mill working between two sawhorses. The newspaper picture of King William on a white horse appears in the same story and the child admires the monarch's grandeur. Also, in "Hunger Strike" the uncle's ghost appears to the boy in the image of a galloping white horse. Ofeelia's father in the following story loses the caboose over a horseracing bet, and finally, the sacked labour worker, Jamie, rides a horse on his way to attack his Romanian colleagues. In the above five stories centred on the eschatology of the Irish political and economic condition, the horse appears in a distinct manner each time to serve a similar purpose of stressing the menace behind the disagreements between different communities which have destructive consequences. The significance of the horse is epitomized as an apocalyptic indicator with reference to the Biblical story of the four horsemen of the apocalypse mentioned in the Book of Revelation. In chapter VI of the apocalyptic document, God on the throne has a scroll sealed with seven seals. Each of the first four seals, when broken by a sacrificed Lamb, releases a horse with his knight. Every horse is entitled to spread destruction on earth in a certain way: "They were given authority over a quarter of the earth, to kill by the sword, by famine, by plague, and through wild beasts." The appearance of the horses is associated with the announcement of the apocalypse, "[f]or the Great day of his retribution has come."<sup>1</sup> Each of the horses represents a fatal force, whether murder, or hunger or illness, which are in turn vital forces in Irish history. Indeed, in the stories addressing the Irish conflict, this strong allusion to the Biblical approach of linear time terminated by a judgement day is revealing. There is no promise for change or a new life, whereas

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation, Chapter 6, Catholic online,  
<[http://www.catholic.org/bible/book.php?id=73&bible\\_chapter=6](http://www.catholic.org/bible/book.php?id=73&bible_chapter=6)> [July3, 2016].

in the mythological approach to the Irish reality, evident in the analysis below, a possibility of resurrection and a better future emerges.

### ***Fishing the Sloe-Black River***

#### Literary Form

Excluding the last story which addresses the armed fight in the North, the main themes in this collection are concerned with the socio-economic as well as the political factors of Irish life. McCann tries to shake off the firmly established social and political standards which act as an obstacle in the way of creating a healthy notion Irish identity. The majority of the stories focus on Ireland before the economic boom in the nineties of the twentieth century. Since the establishment of the Irish republic in the early twentieth century, the evolution of the state and society has drawn attention to three points, the first one of which is the rapid application of modernity in the country which is marked by a “profound mutation” rather than a “transition” (Peillon 1982, 1). This has created a defective economic system generating poverty, class inequality and unemployment. It has also destabilized the social values of a population known for its conservative and traditional views. The second issue is the domination of the Catholic Church over the state and education, which spread an ideology of sectarianism that denies the principle of a “pluralist society” (Ibid 93). These factors resulted in a resistance to “modern” values, especially when it comes to the family, where women are deemed merely as “wives and mothers” (Bradley and Maryann 1997: 104). Hence, Irish society has been restrained by its political and religious institutions from achieving parallel power to other countries in neighbouring Europe, assuming, thus, a status which “[defies] classification” (Ibid 1). It is against these social and economic issues haunting Irish identity that McCann reacts, aided, as

the analysis below shows, by the short story form because of its particular capacity to represent vulnerable characters and because of its link to the ancient tradition of storytelling.

McCann uses the short story form to suggest that Irish identity is in a process of formation and ongoing change. In other words, McCann's stories show that the problems mentioned above are temporary. As Frank O'Connor suggests, the short story does not support a hero who is capable of situating his or her place properly in the social surroundings. He associates the short story with a "submerged population group ... always dreaming of escape" from a "defeat inflicted by a society that has no sign posts, a society that offers no goals and no answers" (O'Connor 1963, 18). The young unripe characters in McCann's collections represent the submerged population under social pressures. The choice of children and adolescents as central characters presents an elastic Irish self which can outmanoeuvre the imposed social norms. With the two sisters of strict Catholic upbringing emigrating to America, or the boy coming to terms with his paralysis in Dublin, the features of the Irish self do not seem to be set in stone; the characters do not reach a final definition of themselves; rather, at a turning point of their lives, they complete one stage in the journey of finding a meaning for their existence.

Apart from highlighting the vulnerable character type found in McCann's texts, the short story form serves the themes of both collections in this chapter. In terms of the preoccupation with the idea of the end when handling the Irish national and religious conflict, the literary form intensifies the eschatological motif because of the importance of closure for the structure of the entire story. This point is examined in John Gerlach's study (1985). Gerlach dedicates a book to examining the devices used in building the anticipation of the ending in the short story and sketches the changes in the formal treatments throughout the genre's history. He supports his view by quoting key critics of the form such as the Russian formalist, Eichenbaum, who states, "By its very essence, the story... amasses its whole weight toward the ending" (Gerlach 1985: 1, 2). Another telling remark in this respect comes from Robert Louis Stevenson who is also quoted by Gerlach: "The denouement of the long story is nothing... it is a coda, not an essential member in the rhythm; but the body and end of the short story

is bone of the bone and blood of the blood of the beginning” (Ibid: 7, 8). In the short story, thus, the ending has a special status that influences the whole text. Looking at McCann’s stories with this idea in mind, the ending serves as a cornerstone for the structure of his works on Irish identity, in particular, and on human identity in general. The ending can be looked at as the last part of a story but also as a motif seen in a symbol or an incident, in McCann’s short or long fiction. Those points of closure gain more weight as they produce a will to resist and find new openings. The rest of the chapter will examine the different possibilities of those openings in McCann’s work.

The rootedness of the short story form in the old oral tradition of storytelling is another factor that helps McCann in his portrayal of a flexible Irish identity. Toward the end of the nineteenth century the modern short story started to take shape as a literary form, a step away from the fable or the fairy tale. However, its roots in oral storytelling are arguably still influential in some examples of the modern story. The influence infuses the form with changeability because the oral story is slightly modified each time it is retold as it is influenced by the situation, speaker, and the audience (March-Russell 2009, 3). Vivien Mercier (1964) notices the predominance of the latter in Irish popular culture and the abundance of translations of folk tales into English at the end of the nineteenth century. He emphasizes that links between the modern Irish short story and Gaelic storytelling are evident in a few formal features such as the “life-like and dramatic dialogue” rooted in the ancient tradition and the “awareness of audience” (11, 15). McCann places his stories in the frame of orality by embedding stories within stories, such as the one about oyster fishing in “Breakfast for Enrique” or the one about the people of the goddess Danaan in “Stolen Child.” References to orality are implied in other stories, in the presence of a speaker’s voice heard in “A Basket Full of Wallpaper,” for example, in which the adolescent not only takes part in the action, but also narrates it as if speaking to the reader. One time, such as that when the social worker relates to his patient the “Tuatha de Dannan” story, the reference is explicit. Another time, the reference is implicit, as apparent with the use of the sophisticated pagan and Christian symbolism of the Celtic cross.

The influence of oral storytelling on McCann’s writing links the form and the content of his stories. Oral folk tales in “form, characters and motifs” have strong

parallels with the medieval manuscripts of Celtic mythology (Rees 1961, 15). The tradition is associated with long winter nights when people gathered around a fire and listened to tales of chivalry and magic which were taken for granted: “the prototypes of these tales were clearly parts of the oral 'scriptures' of the pre-Christian Celts” (23). The stories of Colum McCann, as well, contain references to those mythological texts which influence the themes and symbolism of the first published collection, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*.

### The World Image

In my analysis of the references to Celtic mythology, I will draw on the historical and archaeological studies of Miranda Green in *Celtic Goddesses* (1995) and *The Gods of the Celts* (1986) in which she studies the symbolism of Celtic beliefs by combining evidence from archaeological findings and commentaries on the Irish mythological tradition which were collected by Christian monks in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Irish mythology, an elaborate and sophisticated branch of Celtic mythology, is composed of four sections or cycles, the most important of which for this study is the “Mythological Cycle” which comprises the supernatural stories of gods and goddesses (Rees 1961: 26). Approaching McCann's stories from the perspective of mythology suggests that the author digs deep in the ancient cultural heritage of Ireland in order to extract images that support concepts of pluralism and internationalism that challenge the geographical and historical rigidity that controls Irish identity.

“Sisters,” the first story in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, involves two sisters who have been raised by their father after the death of their mother. By making the title of the first story in the collection the same as the first story in *Dubliners* (1914), McCann gives a strong reference to the bleak social milieu in Joyce's Dublin. The family in McCann's work more often than not is fragmented and suffers either from the absence or the illness of one of its members, which tends to reflect the defective structure of the Irish nation. Domestic life in McCann harks back to James Joyce's use of the theme in *Dubliners*, where youngsters are usually orphans raised by the

benevolence of the Church or the relatives. Their futile households and social surroundings collide with their desire for love, adventure and escape. McCann's story is eponymous with Joyce's first story in *Dubliners*; yet, it is more analogous with another story in the collection entitled "Eveline." Eveline suffers from her family's disintegration after her mother dies and fails to follow her dreams because of a promise she had made to her ill mother to keep the family together after the latter's death. She is depicted as immobile the night before her transatlantic trip to marry the man she loves. It seems that, Sheona, the narrator in McCann's story is an Eveline-figure who gets on the boat to satisfy her desire for love and knowledge. At the opening of McCann's story, Sheona, who is also the younger of the two sisters, contemplates her own and her sister's lives: "I have come to think of our lives as the colours of that place – hers a piece of bog cotton, mine as black as the water found when men slash too deep in the soil with a shovel" (1). The Irish landscape becomes an extension of the characters' psyches. The two colours, black and white, indicate the opposite courses of life adopted by the two sisters and also speak for their contrasting reactions to religion and society. By being compared to white bog cotton, the older sister, Brigid, is portrayed as innocent, fragile and insecure; the younger one, Sheona, is confined and restless like water in the shovelled black soil. The opening image comments on the divided social situation in Ireland; each of the sisters represents a social force, one opposing the other, Brigid the conventional and Sheona the liberal.

The life of Brigid, the elder sister, embodies the epitome of how a woman should be according to the Catholic canon: "self-sacrificing and altruistic" (Curtin et al 1987: 13). Brigid has taken on self-denial and suffering as the defining characteristics of a life which she spends in a "strange sort of martyrdom," as Sheona, the younger sister, states (3). Brigid wants to be thought of as the saviour who sacrifices herself for the sake of others. Since childhood she has engaged in spiritual deeds such as giving away her food to birds, thus emulating the Catholic sacrament ritual, or plucking her nail out in order to experience the pain of harpists under Cromwellian rule. As an adult she becomes a nun who heads west across the Atlantic to Central and North America.

Brigid's significance, though, lies also in her name, which is attributed to an Irish pagan goddess and Christian saint. Brigid in Irish mythology is the daughter of the

Dagda, a chief deity in the Tuatha de Danann or the people of the goddess Danann, the most prominent Irish mythological tribe. As a goddess, Brigid is a “patron of poetry, crafts, ... seers and doctors” (Green 1995, 198). The Christian saint is the daughter of a druid and her life has much in common with that of the goddess. Miranda Green suggests that Brigid, the goddess and the saint, represents a “liminal imagery” that extends to both pagan and Christian times (199). She is a figure that is important in the “meeting and merging of paganism and Christianity” which distinguishes the Irish identity (Green 1995, 202). The continuity between pagan and Christian faiths in Ireland has to do with the fact that “the transition from paganism to Christianity in Ireland was accomplished in a relatively peaceful way when compared with the opposition and persecution that characterised the process elsewhere. The result was a balanced absorption of the best elements in Druid religion into Celtic Christianity” (Ledwith 1979, 297). In *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* (1989), James P. Mackey suggests that the reconciliation of the seemingly conflicting aspects of Celtic beliefs and Christian religion contributes to an integral Celtic identity distinct from Greco-Roman or Anglo-Saxon influences on Ireland (5). Brigid, then, highlights this angle of the Irish identity: the compatibility between Christian and pagan Celtic faiths; and she stresses the role of the Celtic past in present-day Irish identity.

Brigid adopts a type of Irishness rooted in a pagan and Christian past and isolated from external cultural influences. Sheona, on the other hand, opens up her perspective on Irishness to the rest of the world. While the mother's death generates in both sisters a state of loss, they react differently, adding tension to the story with their opposing monastic and sensual behaviours. Sheona rebels against social norms and Catholic teachings by embracing sexuality and by having an inquisitive nature which makes her pose critical questions at an early stage of her life: “There were bays and coverts, hillsides and heathers in that place. Between a statue of Our Lady and a Celtic Cross commemorating the dead of Ireland, my hand made out the shape of a question mark” (2). Her contemplation acknowledges a few elements of modern Ireland: the landscape which shapes the life of the large rural population, Christianity and its omnipresence in the collective mentality and the dead who testify to a past of wars and casualties. Sheona investigates the role of those elements in the

composition of Irish identity, and the most revealing tool in this process is that concerned with the Celtic cross.

The Celtic cross manifests the overlap between paganism and Christianity in the Celtic legacy. Accommodating pagan beliefs into Christianity is visited again, not through a figure of dual belonging, Brigid, but through a pagan symbol that passed on to the island's new religion. As Derek Bryce's study (1994) shows, the Celtic cross is intrinsically related in its symbolism to the world's centre, a belief recurrent in all known religions, which considers that the world is shaped as a sphere and based on a pivotal point or vertical pole. Alluding to this belief is a little problematic in the context of McCann's work which challenges the prevalent political order and social norms. The world's centre is associated with a "divine law" and the "most powerful symbol of authority," two examples of power resources that McCann's fiction resists (Michell 1994: 13). Also, every culture is convinced that it, alone, embraces the world's centre which generates a sense of supremacy over other people. Further, the centre reflects a world of strict order in which every element has a definite role that must not be violated. Yet, this mono-dimensional perspective can be employed to function in a diverse context. All the symbols of the cosmic pole, which may be embodied in an array of central mountains, trees, stones, monuments or even a centred and balanced human mind, are associated with an original centre and share in its power, and hence can influence other beings accordingly. This multiplicity of centres defies the existence of a singular cosmic system that leads to a hierarchical social order. As John Michell suggests, "every centre can properly be seen as a world-centre. Mystics and moralists have always said that every unit has its effect on every other, and modern physics has now fallen into line and proclaims the same truth" (Ibid: 18). Bearing in mind the complexity of the symbolism, this commentary will not dwell much on the meaning of the world centre as much as on how it functions in McCann's short fiction. The next chapter will further reveal how McCann turns around the significance of the upper and lower parts of the world pole in his critique of New York's hierarchical structure.

The Celtic cross, Derek Bryce argues, has evolved from ancient sacred pillar stones symbolizing the world-axis. A cross would either surmount or be inscribed on those stones indicating that "some early Christians saw the symbolism of these

ancient sacred stones as not incompatible with Christianity” (Bryce 1994: 13). He argues that the Christian cross, symbolizing the crucifixion of Christ, builds on the vertical symbolism of the sacred pillar stones symbolizing the world-axis. Bryce’s field of study is Celtic Britain and Ireland. He records the existence of pillar monuments in town centres which consist of a square base reflecting the corporeal world, the earth and what is beneath it, an octagonal or circular shaft reflecting the realm of the human, the psychic world linking heaven and earth, and a sphere at the top symbolising the spiritual realm of heaven, the abode of the sun god. Bryce points out that the market crosses common in pre-Christian times underwent a modification with the advent of Christianity by adding a crucifix at their top (Ibid: 22-26).

Bryce draws attention to another type of cross called the wheel cross which, as the name indicates, is shaped as a wheel. In addition to its Christian symbolism derived from the first two letters of the Greek name for Jesus Christ, it is rooted in the belief of the world navel.<sup>2</sup> With two axes meeting at a central right angle and enclosed in a circle, the wheel cross distinguishes between the centre – “the point at the centre represents the Most High God, the motionless mover” – and the periphery moving around it (Ibid 38). These theories that link the Celtic cross to the concept of the world axis call for a closer consideration of Sheona’s reflection over the Christian icon. But before doing that, I need to refer to one more point concerning the national significance of the centre in Irish antiquity as the land used to be divided into different provinces around a central point. Depending on the historical era the division typically involved either five provinces or four – each quarter divided in turn into three sections. These spread around a central point, the most famous location of which is the Hill of Uisnech with its stone of divisions which hosted important annual ceremonies (Michell 1994). Worth mentioning in this regard is the congruity between part and whole: “Typical of the cosmological pattern of old Ireland was that each social unit, from the province to the single hearth, reproduced the whole” (Ibid: 137,

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Campbell highlights a unique quality of the “World Navel” which enables contrasting concepts to arise from it and gather in it without affecting its balance or harmony: “The World Navel, then, is ubiquitous. And since it is the source of all existence, it yields the world’s plenitude of both good and evil. Ugliness and beauty, sin and virtue, pleasure and pain, are equally its production” (Campbell 1961: 44). The possibility to find a meeting point for contrasted concepts will be useful in the following chapters.

138). The centre is represented by multiple units all of which are interchangeable with the cosmic pole: "one's country and all its subdivisions, down to the village and the individual household, were small-scale, imperfect but total reflections of the universe. Each part was an image of the whole, and vice versa" (Ibid: 13). Looking at the Celtic cross as evolved from the symbol of the world-axis turns attention to an uninterrupted cosmic expansion embedded within the scope of McCann's short story. The cross goes beyond the limits of the religious institution to suggest a belief that the cosmos is continuous, with every side open to the other. The mythical context is used here as a link which serves as a bridge between different cultures. Irish identity in this respect is not enclosed in rigid formulas but has a universal reach.

The cross symbolism of a unified cosmic expansion that is centred on a single point informs a type of human condition that celebrates similarities and respects differences between diverse cultures. It arguably relates to a cosmopolitan identity that thrives in disparate geographical or cultural settings. In two different ways, sisters Brigid and Sheona cherish this notion of a local and international spirit by being strongly bound to the rural landscape of their upbringing and open at the same time to a transatlantic journey of new explorations. Brigid's travels in Central America suggest cross-border mobility and her final stay in a convent in Long Island reflects the diverse environment of nuns of different origins, having Spanish and African accents.

Sheona's character, however, introduces a more obvious illustration of the world image. She is portrayed to encounter events and mix with characters that evoke not only the Celtic world centre, but also Greek and Native American myths about cosmology and creation. Her character fosters the idea of the multiplicity of centres, hence, promotes an inclusive world of analogous, albeit diverse, human identities. Like Brigid, Sheona is saturated with local and private early memories of the Irish countryside, growing up with her sister and father, all of them suffering the mother's loss. In her second visit to the US, after getting out of the car boot, Sheona's contemplation of a dark night sky brings about the mythological context she had first evoked with her reflection about the Celtic cross: "A winter Orion thrusts his sword after Taurus in the sky" (8). She seems to be imagining an anecdote from Greek mythology when looking at star constellations. Michael, whom Sheona marries during

her first trip to the US, with his “Navajo blood” represents another example of the mythological world image by alluding to a Native American creation myth in which coyote dogs sang the world into creation: “coyotes were the songdogs that howled in the beginning of the universe” (4). His character evokes an analogy between Native American, Greek and Irish myths which distinctly present the same concept of cosmic unity, Irish through the Celtic cross, Greek through the constellations that symbolize different gods, and Native American through creating the universe by means of a singing coyote.

After Sheona contemplates the night sky, she moves on to reflect upon what can be considered a human attempt to copy the stars’ uninterrupted expansion. She wonders if humans can break boundaries and exist in two places at once, a goal that has arguably been achieved through information technology: “I babble about the notion that if we could travel faster than the speed of light we would get to a place we never really wanted to go before we even left” (Ibid). She seems to be wishing to acquire supernatural powers that enable her to move freely in different lands. She binds places together by swiftly moving from one to another. High speed mobility suggests unity between separate spaces. Her reflection could be interpreted as a reference to technological progress that enables the human being to explore spaces around the world in a single screen. The world image relates to today’s possibility of worldwide cross-connection where distances are eliminated by means of transport and electronic communication. Human beings are open to a wide global range of influences, which develops a notion of a heterogeneous identity capable of adapting to a diverse and connected world.<sup>3</sup>

### The Otherworld or Celtic References to Water

Water is a principal motif in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*. Its importance is evident in its recurrent appearances in the stories and their various connotations.

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<sup>3</sup> The four computer-programming experts in the section titled “Etherwest” in McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* offer another example of the human civilization’s attempt to erase spatial distances via computerization. The four programmers, while physically being in California, witness the World Trade Centre’s cable walk by hacking a telephone line near the walk site. A lady picks up the public phone booth they dialled and transfers to them the artist’s actions.

Three of the stories include major references to water as early as the title. Elaborate images of two rivers and a lake feature in “Fishing the Sloe-Black River,” “Along the Riverwall” and “Cathal's Lake.” Those water sources contribute to the stories' form and subject matter, and, with regard to “Along the Riverwall,” define character development. Analysing the stories mentioned above by drawing on studies of Celtic mythology leads to a deeper understanding of McCann’s references to water.

“Along the Riverwall” is centred on Dublin's river, the Liffey, two points about which need to be highlighted. The first one is that the story uses the Liffey as a mirror image of Dublin, and the second is it endows it with a capacity for resurrection. The story revolves around Fergus, a teenager whose father spends his savings on a bicycle, believing that his son can be a winning racer. Soon after the purchase, the boy, whose name, Fergus, links him with a strong warrior in Irish myth, is hit by a truck while cycling and, as a result, loses his ability to walk. The richness of the river image is grasped early on in the opening paragraph as Fergus “watches the Liffey flow quickly along, bloated from an evening rain, a cargo of night sky and neon, all bellying down towards the Dublin bay” (147). The image emphasizes the river's dual expansion upwards and downwards, each direction related to an opposite aspect of the city. The metaphor of bloating, which implies that the river’s interior is full of forsaken objects and unwanted garbage, meets an outward openness to corporations and institutions, with neon lights brightening Dublin’s sky, for which the Liffey becomes a massive freighter. The rest of the description shows what is hidden on the river’s bed:

He remembers his father once heaving a fridge into the river and wonders what else might lie down there. Flakes of gold paint from the Guinness barges perhaps. Blackened shells from British army gunboats. Condoms and needles. Old black kettles. Pennies and prams. History books, harmonicas, fingernails, and baskets full of dead flowers. A billion cigarette butts and bottle caps. Shovels and stovepipes, coins and whistles, horseshoes and footballs. And many an old bicycle, no doubt (Ibid).

Between the river banks the city is immersed in water. If the urban lights of Dublin, referring to the affluent side of the city, are grandly held on the surface, the river’s valley finds a place for other neglected bits and pieces of the working and middle

classes who, having been faced by many a closed door of government, find their final escape in the river. Fergus's father expresses his protest against the difficult living conditions in a flare up of despair and anger by throwing the fridge in the river instead of returning it to the seller after being unable to complete the due payments. The river ultimately becomes an active subject which embraces the entirety of Dublin with its sky and ground, and which "guides a winter wind along its broadbacked banks" (148). The Liffey can be viewed here as an element of landscape integrated with and having power over its surroundings, and over the story's narrative as well.

The link between the Liffey and Dublin does not necessarily mean that they have the same attributes. While the Liffey appears to be pervasive, Dublin is portrayed as an impotent and dead city whose inhabitants cannot escape ill fate. This aspect of the story reminds of Joyce's depiction of Dublin in *Dubliners* as a "centre of paralysis" symbolized most notably by Father Flynn's emblematic dead body in "The Sisters," by Eveline's immobility in the last scene of "Eveline" or elsewhere by the brown colour of the city's brick buildings (Joyce 2000: xxxvi, xxxvii). Social idleness in McCann's story is seen in the accident that Fergus has, for helplessness and paralysis afflict not just him but also the truck driver who crashes into him after having a heart attack. It becomes necessary for Dublin inhabitants to find a way out of their suffocating city; they believe that the river is a threshold to a different world. The assumption that the river endows people with new possibilities is found in Miranda Green's study of Celtic religion in which she states: "Water held a fascination for the Celts: rivers, lakes, bogs, springs and of course the sea were sources of especial veneration, and naturally so" (Green 1986: 138). Water is related to fertility so it is normal for an agricultural community such as the Celtic to deify it. For that community water "represented purification and a life-force," which are in turn related to healing and regeneration (Green 1995: 90). Their worship of water was enacted in throwing valuable offerings in its sources: "the idea of casting something away irrevocably may in itself have been a holy act, a commitment of certain items beyond earthly control to that of the divine" (Green, 1986, 142). This ritual is seen in the story with Fergus disposing of his crashed bicycle in the river.

After Dublin has left Fergus short of control over his legs, bicycle and dreams, he searches for another place where he can regain them and have a better life; his interaction with the river shows that he sees it as a different Dublin to the one he lives in, a Dublin infused with a healing and regenerative power. He begs the sacred water to bring together what he has lost and starts disposing of his bicycle in the Liffey. Interestingly, he throws the bicycle piece by piece into the water which could be an indication of a fault in the way in which the bicycle had been assembled. Its parts need their old connections to be renewed. During the process of disposing of the pieces in the water Fergus

wonders if all the pieces that he has flung in over the last few days have settled in the same area of river bottom.

Perhaps one day a storm might blow the whole bike back together again, a freak of nature [...] the whole damned thing back in one piece. Maybe then he can take a dive to the bottom of the slime and ride it again (155).

This can be read as a comment on Irish social life. The social network of institutions and individuals has become decayed and rusty and, like the pieces of the bicycle, needs to be repaired. The last part of the bicycle which Fergus throws in the water is the front wheel. The step is described in detail in the final scene of the story:

In an instant, the wheel turns sideways and falls. The walls of the Liffey curl up to gather it down to its belly as it slices the air with the economy of a stone.

Fergus tries to keep the sight and sound of the wheel as it falls in the water of the river, but only through his imagination can he envisage the scene:

Fergus pins his upper body across the chair, leaning against the wall, but loses sight of the wheel about five feet above the water. He listens for the splash, but it is drowned out by the rumbles of a lorry coming along the road from the James' Gate Brewery. Down below, on the surface, concentric circles fling themselves outward, reaching for the riverwalls in huge gestures, as if looking for something, galloping outwards, the river itself shifting its circles for another

moment, moving its whipped water along, all the time gathering the wheel downwards to the riverfloor, slowly, deliberately, to where it will rest. (156)

McCann chooses the wheel because it bears a sophisticated symbolism in addition to that related to the wheel cross discussed above. In Celtic religion it symbolizes the sun god which is closely related to water because of its healing and reviving abilities (Green 1986, 39). Their fusion, however, is not only concerned with healing. More importantly, throwing the wheel in the river represents a synthesis between a sky element and an earth element. McCann stresses again the link between the upper and the lower realms. The link between the sky through its solar disc and the earth through water is a reminder of the pillar stones symbolizing the world-axis which supports heaven and links it with the earth. McCann stresses the totality and continuity of the cosmos as an ultimate home for the human self, rejecting the political approaches that may enclose the individual within artificial boundaries. Fergus's contemplation over the river as a warehouse of the leftovers of several generations that have passed by its banks arguably reveals his awareness of its mythological dimension and its symbolic capacity of revival. He eventually drifts into the river, "He places his hands on the wheels of the chair, grits his teeth, pushes forward along the riverwall, and rams down the quays, his overcoat flapping in the breeze" (156). Although it is a suicide, from the mythological perspective Fergus is not heading to his end. Green points out that "the Celts regarded death merely as a pause in a long life, as a bridge between one life and another and believed that human souls still controlled their bodies in another world after death" (Green 1986: 121). Reading Fergus's act within the frame of water's mythological symbolism suggests that he has adopted the Celtic belief that water is the passage to an after-life: "water represented a liminal space, locations at the interface of the earthly and supernatural worlds" (Green 1995: 90). This liminal milieu helps Fergus escape the despair of his hometown and enter the imaginative world through the water stream.

Irish mythology records the existence of an Otherworld, the concept of which defies one-sided definitions. The relation of the Otherworld to the belief of the transmigration of souls gives it a temporal dimension; it also has a spatial dimension for it denotes a space which can be beneath the earth's surface, inside water

resources or in far islands where gods live in seclusion. The Otherworld can be both a world of virtue and of immorality (Rees 1961: 342-344). Because the Otherworld leans toward the area of the unknown, Green explains that the human imagination has a prominent role in determining the features of that concept. By imagining his bicycle being put together again, Fergus chooses a common notion of the Otherworld as “a happy one, free from care, disease, old age and ugliness” where “Abundance, magic, music and birdsong dominate the scene” (Green 1986: 122). Fergus is one of several characters in McCann’s work who search for an alternative world. That world in the case of Fergus and other characters inside Ireland is imaginative, while, as the following chapters will show, different settings enable characters to obtain a real, rather than fanciful, alternative world.

The final story of the collection, “Cathal’s Lake,” bears another extended reference to the Otherworld. It is a story of a farmer, Cathal, who is, in his own words, “cursed” to dig out of the earth and send to a nearby lake a swan in place of every victim of the conflict in Northern Ireland (178). The story is a variation of an Irish myth about King Lír of the Tuatha de Danann and his children. The story happens in the Otherworld after the gods have been expelled outside Irish territories by the mortals either to a “paradise over-seas” or to the “sidhe,” holes in the ground which lead to a world of “inexhaustible splendour and delight” (Squire 1910: 135, 136). When Lír's wife dies leaving behind four children, the king marries her sister, who becomes jealous of the children as they get all the King's love. Being unable to kill them, she takes them to Lake Darvra, sends them into the water to bathe, and with her magic changes them to swans and commands that they remain away from home in distant waters and islands for nine hundred years. The stepmother remains unable to deprive the children of their human abilities to speak and think and, as a solace, she endows them with the gift of singing beautifully: “You shall be able to sing the softest and sweetest songs that were ever heard in the world” (Ibid: 143, 144). The exile of the gods and of Lír's children is analogous to the contemporary Irish social setting as the society is torn between political and religious clashes which develop internal barriers isolating the groups of one nation from each other and turning them into exiles either at home or overseas.

In this story, McCann sees the political conflict in Northern Ireland through the lens of the mythical story of Līr and his children; the dead people are resurrected from the soil as swans by a farmer, Cathal, and sent to a lake near his countryside home: “It's a sad Sunday when a man has to find another swan in the soil. The radio crackles and brings Cathal the news of death as he lies in bed and pulls deep on a cigarette, then sighs. ... Fourteen years to heaven and the boy probably not even old enough to shave” (173). The story is shaped by what Cathal sees and imagines. The vision of the farmer places the story in a metaphorical frame where the real mingles with the imaginary. Having heard the news on the radio, Cathal pictures the scene of the boy's death, “Then a plastic bullet slamming his chest, all six inches hurtling against his lung at one hundred miles per hour. ... The street suddenly quiet and gray as other boys, too late, roll him around in puddles to put out the fire. A bus burning. A pigeon flapping over the rooftops of Derry with a crust of white bread in its mouth” (173). Opposite to the death scene in the city street lies the rural landscape with the swans gliding on the lake after Cathal extracts them from the earth, each swan embodying a victim of violence. Overcome by their sorrowful destiny, the innocent souls of the dead unify in Cathal's imagination and form an aesthetic world, “the girl from the blown-up bar looking like a twin of the soldier found slumped in the front seat of a Saracen, a hole in his head the size of a fist, the size of a heart” (181). Cathal's picture does not distinguish between the civilian and the militant for both are equally victims of political atrocities. There is no place in the picture for religious and national divisions which burn the city with tension and blood.

It is telling that the afterlife given to casualties takes the form of the swan. Swans are prominent mythological birds to which Tuatha de Danann usually transform in order to achieve a purpose they cannot achieve in their original shape, such as escape, or reunion with the beloved. Green notes that swans, which usually symbolize purity and innocence, are also found in depictions of sun and water deities (Green 1995: 174). In other words, swans represent pure and innocent victims but also work on a wider symbolic level in terms of their proximity with sun and water. Green remarks, “The symbolism may be something to do with the ability of such birds [...] both to swim and fly. There may well be a cyclical image of sky and sun, rainwater and

underworld” (Green 1996: 147). Swans are part of a comprehensive vision of the world cycle where all components are interrelated. In the two stories discussed above, if read alongside each other, a circular movement is seen with Fergus throwing the wheel down to the bottom of the river and with the swans extracted from the soil and sent to the lake to fly later towards the sky.

In Celtic mythological belief, moreover, swans appear to be creatures of “no boundaries” (Rees 1961: 236). Lir's children are exiled but, as swans, they are flexible dwellers of the universe free to move between earth, water and sky. Indeed, their gift of singing and pleasing those who can hear them stands for their far-reaching influence. Cathal believes that his swans will one day sing the song of peace and fill humanity with happiness and hope. Victims of the conflict in Northern Ireland are exiles in real life but they find a warm place in Cathal's metaphorical world which is rooted in Irish mythology.

Cathal’s task is viewed by critics as a reflection of the Irish artist who is “cursed to ignore his practical duties in order to respond with beauty to the world’s ugliness” (qtd in Cusatis 2011: 54). I would build on this point to show that Cathal is a visual artist who immortalizes the souls lost in the Irish conflict and turns them into symbols which inspire Irish identity.<sup>4</sup> This gives a new dimension to the story and adds precision to the link between reality and myth as those two become merged in a painting. Digging the swan out and sending it to the lake can be interpreted as analogous with the process of painting. The link is accounted for in details such as the “swans drift on, like paper” (175), and in the possible comparison of the shovel and mud to the brush and colours (180). Further, it is difficult to tell whether the lake exists for real or only in Cathal’s imagination: “The lake is deep and clear, despite the seepage of manured water from the fields where [Cathal’s] cattle graze. On the surface, the swans, with their heads looped low, negotiate the reeds and waterlilies. The lake can’t be seen from the road, half a mile away, where traffic occasionally rumbles” (175). Sentences composed of short phrases are similar to the quick brush

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<sup>4</sup> It seems more than a coincidence that the story’s main character is eponymous with Cathal O’Malley, an Irish landscape painter who has a few paintings of swan lakes <<http://www.cathalomalley.com>> [February 2013].

strokes of a painter. Also, the lake is invisible from the highway presumably because it is a creation of Cathal's imagination and drawings. The story contains the many layers of reality, myth and art, the last one of which is the most comprehensive. In other words, the Otherworld, in which the children are revived as swans, can be understood as art. Cathal's painting neutralizes the division between the mythical and the real worlds as does McCann's story. The painting and the story create a haven of art for the lonely voices of Frank O'Connor's "submerged population," who here are killed by Northern Irish reality (O'Connor 1963: 18).

References to rivers and lakes discussed above derive meaning from water symbolism in Celtic mythology. The use of the river in the story eponymous with the collection's title, "Fishing the Sloe-Black River," will be analysed with regard to the role of landscape in early Celtic literature. The river is here considered as a landscape element independent from the magical powers of water resources. This view relies on a study of early Celtic literature by Franco Benozzo (2004) and, in particular, on his analysis of a Celtic poem called *The Metrical Dindsenchas*, in which he compares landscape perception to literary intertextuality in that the picture both domains portray is a result of an accumulation or layering of several landscapes or texts. Benozzo suggests that this compound perceived picture merges elements of space and time in a certain landscape. In other words, landscape, which is an element of space, is inseparable from the time through which it has evolved. The past of a particular space is part and parcel of its present status. Time, in this regard, refers to tradition, Benozzo's term to define the anthropological notion of the cultural heritage and set of beliefs of a certain people: "with tradition, in pre-modern times, we have to mean precisely the way of living with and transforming these legends, tales, and rituals, and not a separated 'grammar' of them" (Benozzo 2004: 60, 61). Benozzo does not separate the stories from the real experience or rituals that formulate them. With regard to *The Metrical Dindsenchas*, this "resonance of space and time" as he calls it, or this "timespace in progress," is first observed in its title (Ibid 78). *Dind* means "a landmark, eminent or notable place," and *senchas* means "ancient or traditional lore" (Ibid 58, 59). Benozzo's core argument is that in the *Dindsenchas*, "landscapes places and place names ... are perceived themselves as the tradition, or more precisely are

the tradition in spatial form” (Ibid 60). Benozzo in one respect invigorates space, for he considers it to be formed in essence of the life and history of people who lived in it over generations.

Reading McCann’s story according to Benozzo’s perspective suggests that the river landscape embodies the tradition of the community inhabiting it. The water’s black colour reflects the bitterness of poverty and unemployment. If Irish youth in the previous stories are either disabled or murdered as a result of Ireland’s political and economic conditions, then here they emigrate for better opportunities to Europe or the United States leaving behind their old parents to suffer from their absence and implore the river for their return. The story addresses an Ireland drained of its workforce and left with the majority of the population comprised of women and elderly people.

The story involves parents hoping to meet their children while fishing in the Sloe-black river. They keep waiting for hours by the river hoping that it will bring their children back. They are on a quest to reunite with their children. The fact that they adopt fishing in the passage of the river as the means to realise their purpose is revealing. They seek the “tradition in spatial form” or the riverscape loaded with stories of the past for help, because it preserves the shared memories of incidents experienced while the children were still around (Benozzo 2004: 60). One of the mothers who cast their rods with bread baits into the water starts singing “The Rose of Mooncoin,” an Irish folk ballad that laments the separation of two lovers who used to walk together along the river Suir.<sup>5</sup> The song suggests that the metaphysical aspect of rivers is evident in Irish popular culture and that the lovers’ times together are retained in the river whose flow keeps their memories alive. When the woman sings the ballad’s chorus, “*Flow on lovely river, flow gently along, by your waters so clear sounds the lark’s merry song,*” she wants to re-awaken the memories of her children whose lives are engraved in the riverscape (55). Viewing the parents’ repetitive fishing

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5 “The rose of Mooncoin” is a song written in the nineteenth century by Watt Murphy, a school teacher in Mooncoin who fell in love with the vicar's daughter who is much younger than him, Elizabeth. They used to walk along the river Suir and read poetry. In order to end the relationship, Elizabeth's father sent her away to England. <http://homepage.eircom.net/~mooncoin/history.htm#rose> [June 2013].

attempts through Benozzo's perspective of landscape in the *Dindsenchas* stresses the point that the river carries the children – their stories and memories – in its flow. Conversely, the children carry the river, an element of the Irish landscape, along with its tradition, in their new residences around the world. They are a part of a tradition united with the riverscape and when they travel abroad, they do not break from this tradition; on the contrary, they extend its spatial stretch to new geographies.

The landscape evokes, thus, in addition to the local community's tradition, a mythological tradition derived from the town Westmeath, one of the comprising territories of ancient Ireland. One observation on Benozzo's study finds the extract he quotes from the *Metrical Dindseschas* interesting because it shows how the river Boand (or Boyne) is called by fifteen different names from its source along its flow in Ireland or other locations. The names intertwine the Sloe-black river with several rivers around the world, Tiber, Jordan, Euphrates, and Tigris included (Benozzo 2004: 63). Taking into account McCann's outward-looking vision, this picture of the river Boyne being in unity with different rivers across the world becomes important. The story at hand questions whether the river in Westmeath is like the Hudson or the Rhine. It could be suggested that these rivers are indeed connected and that they foster at each end elements of a common tradition formulated during life in Westmeath's small community. This notion reflects Frederic Colwell's remark on Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1850) that "all rivers and their voices are, under the aspect of eternity, one" (Colwell 1989: 9). It is possible to think of rivers as connected by their perpetuity and eternal renewal.

The image of the Sloe-black river does not contradict that of Dublin's Liffey in "Along the River Wall" in that both rivers are loaded with traces of the lives of those who live near them. The Liffey contains the disposals of the city's lower class of old fridges, beer cans and broken bicycles; the Sloe-black gushes with the shadows of the children and the thoughts of their sad parents. The image of the river in Westmeath resonates with the world image proposed above because the geographical distances do not disrupt the psychological and metaphysical communication between Ireland and the world, between the parents inside and their children abroad. The story definitely bears this possibility of interpretation, even though the husband suspects

the fruitfulness of fishing for the children as he continues that action. This world image does not prevail in the story, for the fathers and mothers fluctuate between trust in the river with their insistence on resuming fishing and their doubt in the river's ability to bring them their sons back. One of the mothers at the end of a long day of waiting beside the river thinks:

One day she would tell [her husband] how useless it all was, this fishing for sons, when the river looked not a bit like the Thames or the Darling or the Hudson or the Loire or even the Rhine itself, where their three sons were working in a car factory. ... although she knew that he too would go fishing that night, silently slipping out, down to the river, to cast in vain (56).

On this image of the husband fishing, the story ends, suggesting that the possibility of meeting the children through the metaphysical dimension of the river persists but that it is not yet achieved.

#### Mythological Past from the Emigrants' Perspective

McCann examines the function of Celtic mythology outside Ireland by setting a number of stories which contain significant mythological references in the United States, a primary recipient of the Irish diaspora. While the politically and economically settled US represents a contrasting setting to the rural and poor Ireland, the parts of America revealed in the stories are fairly similar to the Ireland discussed above. The themes of loss and deprivation are extended to the United States as the Irish who immigrate find themselves involved in social shelters, including the nun in the first story "Sisters" who visits poor communities in Central America and ends up ill in a convent in New York, the researcher in "Through the Field" who conducts a psychological study on prisoners in the juvenile detention centre in Texas, and the social worker in "Stolen Child" who looks after the children in a house for the blind in New York City. Also, family disintegration contributes to the characters' suffering. McCann focuses on similar human experience inside and outside Ireland and explores how Celtic mythology works in America in two stories, "Stolen Child" and "Through the Field".

In "Stolen Child" the use of myth is tested against the ambience of New York City, an intense representation of American capitalistic urbanism. Ideally for the protagonist, engagement with myth in New York is engagement with a rich cultural and metaphysical world which enables people to transcend the barriers imposed around them by the city's capitalistic character. Myth there is initially presented as a method of self-expression as those who get lost in the material rhythm of New York find a sense of orientation in mythology. However, they are later overcome by the city which causes the demise of myth behind closed doors. The story revolves around Dana, a sixteen-year-old blind and black girl with an aggressive character who has been abandoned in a social centre in New York. She is introduced to Irish mythology through the social worker, Padraic, who associates her name with that of the Irish mother goddess, Danann, the supreme deity of the "Tuatha de Danann." Embodying the role of the Irish folk storyteller, Padraic relates to Dana stories of the goddess and her tribe. Dana's response to the mythical account offers insight into two aspects of the role of mythology in the American setting. The first aspect relates to the dissemination of myth, which means that it is not confined to one people or one place; similar elements spread over different myths. The second aspect is connected with mythology as a medium of self-expression taking into account the interaction of Dana with the image of the goddess.

The goddess inspires Dana's imagination. The ill-tempered adolescent, suffering from loss after her parents abandon her, finds in the mythical character a ground on which to anchor herself. She asks Padraic questions about the appearance and personality of the goddess and tries to answer herself those which he cannot answer. She starts a process of discovery of the goddess's character when she visualizes her in drawings. Even though she is blind, the African American girl identifies with the Celtic goddess and paints portraits which involve traits of both the mythical and the real Dana, producing a remarkable picture of cross-cultural influences in total harmony: "Once [Padraic] found a drawing in her notebook of a woman with four fluid faces meshed into one another, two of them sightless, two of them mesmerised by a river of yellow hair, all of them black" (100). Dana exhibits a deep understanding of the difference between her origin and that of the goddess and combines them by

using the un-matching colours of the blond hair and black skin in one portrait. With practice Dana develops a better technique in painting: “She drew more pictures of her own mythical Dana. They gained a more singular form, the colours vibrant and wild, the edges sharper, the lines less violent” (104). The drawings gain more precision and character because they are produced by a polished and subtle Dana, capable, with the help of myth, of taming her aggression and transforming it into a creative talent through artistic self-exploration.

In addition to relating her to the mother-goddess, Padraic relates Dana to the human child in Yeats's poem “The Stolen Child” which belongs to the body of Yeats's early poetry that celebrates the Irish peasantry and Celtic past:

Padraic dozes with thoughts of Dana thundering in his head. He sees a cupboard and a little girl huddled under blankets, listening. He hears the poem that he sometimes quoted her when they walked in the park. *For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand*. He sees the small hand lost in a huge gold wedding band. He remembers strolling in the park with the echoing mythology of Ireland. *Come away, stolen child* (102).

Padraic in this extract is reminiscing about his attempts to enrich Dana's knowledge of human culture found in myth and poetry. Yeats's poem is about a choice that the “human child” or the poet as a child makes and regrets afterwards. He seems to be confused whether to follow a real or a magical world. At a crossroads between the two, he is hesitant as to which one will ensure him eternal happiness and save him from sadness and suffering. His choice to follow the fairies to their magical world does not allow him to meet his dreams. Dana in the story chooses to follow her premature love of a middle-aged Vietnam war veteran over pursuing a career in painting, which Padraic wishes she could possess. She marries the veteran to face an expected fate of nursing and care taking. In comparison to Yeats's human child, Dana's happiness is in producing the mythical material in an artistic form whereas her marriage to the veteran is delusively satisfying.

The story “Stolen Child” opens on the morning of Dana's wedding day as Padraic “closes the heavy oak door of the children's home and steps out into the

Brooklyn morning light” (95). This paradox of using the oak door as a signal of closure at the beginning of the story means that the story begins with the end of Padraic’s engagement with mythology. The oak door symbolizes the Celtic tradition of venerating trees in general and the oak in particular, a tree associated with the druids. Padraic closes the oak door locking behind the mythological influences of his Irish heritage and sets off to Brooklyn with a resolution to embrace the urban life in New York. Another character in the collection, Sheona in “Sisters”, shares Padraic’s attitude of abandoning myth. When she has to illegally enter the US in order to visit her ill sister, she refuses to be smuggled by a boat across the river. She seems to be aware of the mythological significance of water and turns away from the world of past beliefs. Instead, she chooses to cross the borders in a car boot, an isolated space where self-centredness and individuality prevail. Both Padraic and Sheona are absorbed into the context of New York City when they abandon myth.

The need to preserve and develop the role of the ancient Irish past in modern identity has been subject to debate. Yeats, who in his early life was a patron of the Celtic Twilight, a movement that emphasizes the role of Irish folklore and Celtic myth in the national identity, later advocated universal human thought present in Classical mythology. Joyce believed that Ireland's Celtic past was unable to address the concerns of the present and in his critical writings he states, “Ancient Ireland is dead just as ancient Egypt is dead. Its death chant has been sung, and on its gravestone has been placed the seal” (quoted in Joyce 2000, xxviii). The characters of Padraic – and Sheona – are different from those characters in the Irish setting who obtain hope from their belief in mythology such as Cathal, Fergus and, of course, the old parents who fish in the Sloe-black river. Padraic believes for a while that Dana, being inspired by the mythological goddess, will pursue a career in painting. But her decision to marry the veteran represents great disappointment for his efforts. The closure of the shelter’s door, which is made of a prominent Celtic symbol, oak, signifies his disillusionment with the mythological past.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Trees were venerated partly on account of their longevity, which symbolized wisdom, stability and sovereignty. ... The oak, yew and ash were especially revered” (Green 1997: 109).

A different approach to myth in the American setting is found in a story called “Through the Field” which conjures the image of rural Ireland through rural Texas and contains two farmers among its characters. A further influence of Irish culture is detected in the element of storytelling when one of the farmers tells his friend the story of Stephen, a boy detained in a centre for juvenile criminals where the farmers have a side job as gardeners. Stephen murdered the man with whom his mother was having an affair. The adolescent is a victim of a fragmented family as his father is “off out west, working in the oilfields” (86). After the murder, the 14-year-old-boy escapes to a nearby pine forest and, hours later, hands himself in to the police. The Irish researcher from the University of Texas, Ferlinghetti, who extracts all the previous information from Stephen, is desperate to know why Stephen walks to the police when he could have remained away. The story builds up to a climax and the revelation about Stephen's surrender. While helping one farmer to dig the garden, Stephen finally unravels the mystery: “I was scared of the dark,'... 'I was out there in the forest and it got dark,' he says. 'I'd never been in the dark like that before.’” (91). It is Stephen's fear of the dark that is behind his surrender; darkness represents a threat to Stephen bigger than a juridical punishment. Darkness functions as an element external to the story's course of action, a condition in the setting which forces a change in Stephen's personality. It shifts the focus in the story to the possibilities of a symbolic interpretation not related to Stephen's engagement with other characters. The murder is no longer as important as his fear of the dark.

“Through the Field” can be contrasted in its treatment of darkness with James Joyce's story “Araby” in *Dubliners* (1914). In addition to the name Stephen which brings to mind Joyce's famous Stephen Dedalus, the adolescent's involvement with darkness echoes the final scene of “Araby” in which a young boy says “Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (Joyce 2000, 28). The boy in “Araby” experiences his first feeling of love for his friend's elder sister and finds his way to buy her a present from the city's bazaar where he hears two men flirting with a woman in a conversation that enlightens him and changes his conception about the spirituality of love. The conversion in the boy's character has been linked to the technique of the Joycean

epiphany, “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind – the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it” (Beja 1971: 18). For Joyce the term is devoid of its religious implication of the manifestation of Jesus Christ and used purely artistically in the way suggested by the story’s incidents. In McCann's story, Stephen's sudden decision to confront the police while standing in the dark initially seems as an epiphany given the assumption that a revelation of some kind causes a conversion in his character. McCann's use of epiphany, however, differs from Joyce's for the conversion in Stephen’s character, as the analysis below will show, happens because of the archetypal symbolism of darkness, not because of the preceding incidents through which Stephen goes.

In Joyce's “Araby” the contrast between light and darkness has a particular importance, for the boy develops false impressions about things that he sees in the light. His friend's sister is exposed to him in the street lamp as he thinks he has found love, but it is in darkness that he realizes he has been “blind to truth” (Garrett 1968: 12). McCann on the other hand relies on the symbolism of light and darkness in Celtic religion to enact changes in Stephen’s character. The sun, the major source of light, is important in fertility and healing. Also, light marks the beginnings of prosperous times for the Tuatha de Danann whose god of light secured their victory in conquering Ireland. Another revealing aspect of light and darkness is their link to the Celtic summer and winter divisions and their celebrations, the Imbolc and the Samhain. The Imbolc on May 1<sup>st</sup> is the celebration of the summer season which is associated with the awakening of nature (Rees 1961: 84). The Samhain on November 1<sup>st</sup> is when “thoughts turned to death and mortality with the decline of the sun. It was a period when this world and the next were felt to be closest to each other. The gods were near, the fairy raths open, and candles were placed in windows to guide the spirits of departed relatives: it was a time of great risk for mortal men” (Ledwith 1979: 57). This symbolic risk of darkness partly explains Stephen's feeling of danger and lack of protection, but his behaviour is not fully understood until the final image of the story when the farmers and their families, in contrast to Stephen alone, run together through the field in the darkness:

Well, it must have looked plumb stupid, us running through the field like that, without our kids, when we had so much work to do. But I [the farmer] was stumbling along, hearing everyone laughing, holding on to my little boy, then I looked up beyond the top of the grass and I noticed how dark the sky was, how big and heavy it was, how much it had come down on top of us. We were laughing, and I knew right there and then what Kevin was doing. He was no fool (94).

“Right there and then” is the epiphanic moment of the story which shows the farmer's awareness of the value of his family around him. His friend Kevin takes them all out at night in the field. Together they are complete and cannot be dismantled of security by the threat of the darkness. The dark sky cannot scare them as a group; rather they take its descent as an emphasis of the unity of the upper and lower world elements; the sky dips down nearer to them on the field taking them to the world-axis, the home of which McCann's characters dream. Stephen, on the other hand, remains afraid because in the dark he is overwhelmed by his loneliness after the dissolution of his family.

## Conclusions

In the discussion of the collections above, I have argued that McCann's stories delineate a specific pattern in the history of the Irish nation concerned with advancing to destruction and subsequently rising. This seems to depict the country's life-cycle that exhibits key motifs of annihilation and resurrection. This dichotomy is significant in understanding McCann's view on the Irish context and it simultaneously illuminates the discussion of his other works that include different settings examined in the following chapters. I have shown how divisions and hostilities generate an apocalyptic motif in *Everything in This Country Must*; they put to an end a life that could only be reignited when links are spread and positive dialogue is initiated between distinct

parties. The political and religious conflict in Northern Ireland is the underlying motive of a number of bleak apocalyptic images in the stories, related in one respect to a biblical linear concept of time. The father in "Everything in This Country Must" intensifies the family's tragedy when he shoots dead his favourite horse in response to British soldiers' participation in lifting it from drowning in the river. The collection's novella depicts in careful detail the dying stages of the hunger striker without hinting at a change in the political situation which can make his death fruitful. The story in between the previous two shows the effect of the forces against maintaining the tolerant spirit that the father represents. His insistence on boycotting the Orange Parades is put to an end with his stroke that disables him from work. His wife finds herself obliged to make flagpoles for the processions participating, thus, in the tradition which commemorates separation.

The second collection achieves a balance between exhibiting crises and suggesting solutions, even if only imaginary ones. Characters who live in Ireland suffer from poverty and economic recession, and those who emigrate to the US cannot come to terms with the pains of exile. Analysis of the symbolism of Celtic references that prove to have a reviving power suggests that the characters find solace in allusions to mythology that evokes a utopian context in heritage and imagination. The reviving powers of water in Celtic mythological symbolism contribute in the formulation of a world in which resurrection and new beginnings are possible. Whether lakes or rivers, water offers a chance for a new life and a way of linking together different geographical areas. In addition to water, the symbolism of the Celtic cross evokes the notion of the world-axis which, in turn, suggests a cosmic belonging that resolves national tensions and expands the individual's horizons. A number of characters, however, remain doubtful about believing in the mythological past as a remedy for present-day dilemmas. Those are the ones who emigrate to the US, including Sheona and Padraic. These two keep a distance between them and their mythological legacy and try to find a more efficient and realistic mode of survival. The next chapter picks up from this point: the Irish immigrants in New York who seek integration with their new setting. New York's urban life represents a great challenge for the emigrant as well as the native population. Ethnic diversity, racism and other social and economic

contradictions are themes that will be examined in the following chapter against mythological and artistic dynamics.

## Chapter Two

### **New York City in *This Side of Brightness* and *Let the Great World Spin*: Class and Ethnic Hierarchies in Mythological and Artistic Frames**

For him antiquity was to spring suddenly like an Athena from the head of an unhurt Zeus, from an intact modernism.

Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet In the Era of High Capitalism*

It was suggested that what was admired about the balloon was finally this: that it was not limited, or defined. ... This ability of the balloon to shift its shape, to change, was very pleasing, especially to people whose lives were rather rigidly patterned, persons to whom change, although desired, was not available. The balloon, for the twenty-two days of its existence, offered the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet.

"The Balloon," Donald Barthelme in *Sixty Stories*

## Introduction

McCann's New York could hardly be more different from the Irish setting of his short stories. Here, ethnic diversity and economic strength create the city and open up opportunities for life and material success. Characters still belong to the lower class as they do in the Irish work, but the difference lies in the availability of relief and the possibility of change. New York is a desired destination for overseas as well as home immigrants because it promises change. McCann depicts the city's development over approximately one hundred years, from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first. In this fairly long history, two phases stand out because of their greater

impact on the narratives: the first is the 1920s' triumphant reinforcement of modernity and the second is the new millennium's phenomenon of terror. These two paradoxical junctures in the city's history, according to McCann's novels, define the times that follow them; and, to a large extent, they shape the events of the narratives and influence character development. The current chapter examines *This Side of Brightness* (1998) and *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), McCann's New York set novels which handle the city from several social, economic and human perspectives. The novels depict the city's development from the industrial to the post-industrial eras with a focus on the impact of the changing economy on the inhabitants.

Taking Chapter 1's discussion of the short stories as the groundwork for the chapter's central argument, I examine how themes of division and connectivity, along with the function of mythological symbolism, are spelled out in McCann's representation of New York City; I aim to reveal the way in which McCann's use of mythological references helps to critique New York's ethnic and class hierarchy. I start with an overview of New York's economic and social context in the early twentieth century when its pursuit of profit resulted in a divided structure in which the lower classes experienced subjugation. Relating McCann's texts to key points in the city's historical register informs the analysis and adds insight to the understanding of the novels within the socio-economic context. McCann's subtle critique of the economic system and the social structure requires, I suggest, an exploration of the historical background that is invoked in his books. The greatest share of critical attention has so far been directed toward the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers, most notably seen in Moynihan's article discussing *Let the Great World Spin* (2012). Flannery anchors the social and political background of *This Side of Brightness* in the 1990's "degeneration" of New York society that resulted in the unprecedented visibility of urban homeless (Flannery 2011: 84). I intend to expand the examination of the historical scope to include some aspects of modernity in early twentieth-century New York that are articulated in the narrative and which I consider to be the major crisis in McCann's portrayal of New York.

I start my analysis by a Marxist reading of the novel to show that craving for economic prosperity destroys any factor standing in the way of profit, even if it is

human life. Then I apply this theoretical analysis on the texts, revealing how the lower classes are cast to the network of underground tunnels, failing to achieve a permanent and secure place on street level where the dominant system is that of money and profit. My examination of McCann's underground community continues to look at his allusions to mythology that present the tunnels' underworld as a stage for resurrection where change is possible. Below the earth, I argue, members of the lower class anticipate their promised revival. This underground metaphor is met with an upper-world metaphor related to the buildings occupied by the economically and politically privileged. I focus on specific characters – a skyscraper construction worker and a tightrope artist – whose engagement with heights undermines the conventional hierarchical power structure. After that, I detect continuity between the city's higher and lower spaces, which evokes a cyclical pattern contrary to the linear pattern that dominates the economic system. Cyclical motion reiterates the possibility of transformation and of life after death evident in the function of mythological references discussed in the previous chapter. Further, I outline the novel's ethnic structure which is dominated by the Irish and African Americans. In this regard, I show that McCann's language establishes a visual dimension in the urban scene, making it possible to read New York society as a collage that embraces a population of heterogeneous origins. Beside mythology, I argue, visual art challenges New York's ruthless urban reality. Even though similar themes and motifs appear in both novels, I examine them one at a time, starting with *This Side of Brightness*.

### ***This Side of Brightness***

#### The Economic Background (New York's modernity)

The first New York novel, *This Side of Brightness*, dives into the darkness of the city's complex and multi-faceted network of tunnels. The title bears a reference to Scott Fitzgerald's 1920 semi-autobiographical book, *This Side of Paradise*. While

Fitzgerald's text depicts the educated artists' journey to self-realization, McCann's postmodern tendency leads him a few steps down the social ladder to portray the lives of the forgotten New York immigrant population. The title possibly refers to darkness, or to a kind of internal brightness that visits the city's poor, without literally being light. At the core of the novel lies a historically true story of a group of labourers blown out by compressed air into the East River while digging the tunnel that links Brooklyn to Manhattan in 1916.<sup>1</sup> The journey down to the city's underground starts with Nathan Walker, a young African American from the south who heads to New York to become a tunnel digger. He is aware with his Irish, Polish and Italian friends that they are transforming the city's history and initiating a global stage of revolutionary modernity, despite the physical damage they experience with their "blackening lungs" and "flue-coloured tissue" (5, 6). The character of Nathan Walker is important in revealing New York's polarities. His life covers a few key scenes in American history, from the Great Depression, when he keeps his job only because his friend is head of the labour union, to the Korean War, where his son loses one of his eyes, to the black civil mobility in the sixties described as "a time of riots and flowers and dark fists painted on walls" in reference to the Black Power and Civil Rights movements, and the flower protests against the Vietnam War (150). The narrative emphasizes these public historical events by showing their destructive effect on the personal life of Nathan Walker. Further, his marriage to his Irish friend's daughter results in different sorts of racism and abuse in a highly segregated society. His life ends in sorrow mourning for his wife and son who have both been violently murdered. The sadness that engulfs him in his final years may suggest a degree of vulnerability and defeat. Nevertheless, positive and even heroic aspects of Nathan Walker's life float to the surface when he remembers his birthplace and, of course, his miraculous survival of the tunnel blowout.

The second strand of the story focuses on Walker's grandson, Clarence Nathan, nicknamed Treefrog, previously a skyscraper builder who inhabits New York tunnels following his grandfather's death in the 1990s in pursuit of a reconciliation with his

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<sup>1</sup> McCann's use of a New York construction accident at the core of his novel reminds of Pietro di Donato's fictionalization of his father's death in *Christ in Concrete* (1939). Di Donato depicts immigrant construction workers in New York killed in the collapse of the building they were constructing.

past days in Harlem which he deserted to embrace the heights of the vertical city. The significance of the tunnels is transformed at this stage from a foundation of modernity in the city to a refuge for modernity's victims who have to pay the price of economic progress. Treefrog's companions are "[w]ounded men and women living in their lazaret of hopelessness" in contrast to their predecessors, the constructors of the city's tunnel network who were conscious of a creative power in their act (93). The narratives of Treefrog and his grandfather are told in separate alternating chapters with no relationship discernible between the characters and the events until halfway through the novel when the two narrative strands draw closer together and unite for the remaining chapters which involve scenes showing the grandfather and grandson together.

McCann's use of mythological allusions in his depiction of New York can be better understood, I suggest, with a close look at the city's embrace of modernity in the early twentieth century. This is because New York's development in this era is the main reason behind its class division and ethnic discrimination. In a few instances, a particular character or element of the city is rooted in episodes of Celtic or Classical mythology. Those allusions offer alternative perspectives on the original urban order that turned a large number of New Yorkers into victims of segregation and poverty. McCann's critical eye recontextualizes the city to recognize the subjugated population through the mythological imagination. New York's aim to make advances in the fields of economy, architecture and culture has destructive consequences for the lower classes but also for the city's very embodiment of modernity. Downtrodden New Yorkers reveal the other side of progress. Marxist thinker, Marshall Berman, sees this paradoxical nature of the city as part and parcel of modernity, which, in its complex development, simultaneously produces aspects of prosperity and decline, control and powerlessness. "To be modern," Berman remarks, "is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are" (Berman 1983: 15). Berman suggests that renewal in modernity is double-sided in that it erodes a long history of knowledge and tradition as it authorizes a new stage.

The experience of modernity in New York takes the paradox of renewal and destruction to an extreme.<sup>2</sup> It generates tension in the city's economic and social structures that divide New Yorkers into an elite and a working class, a centre and periphery. With regard to early twentieth-century industrial, financial and architectural progress, two forces can be seen to have shaped the city: one is related to business and the planning of the projects of the urban order, and the other to the human work force, composed mainly of immigrants from around the world attracted by the city's promise of a better life: "[t]he outcome" to these two contrasting urban dynamic constituents "was a rational and pluralistic metropolis of unprecedented scale" (Ward & Zunz 1997: 3). Rationalization refers to the set of regulations imposed by the authorities of the government and the capital to boost the process of production. Pluralism results from the diverse cultural heritage and personalized human experiences that are acquired through growing up in a domestic environment and being exposed to the influences both of parents and of the immediate society. Confrontation between these two forces creates a tension, definitive of the modern city, between economic homogenization and mixed ethnicities. One aspect of this divide between corporate capitalism and pluralistic social structure is the massive gap between the rich and the poor. Another aspect is reflected in the urban landscape which reflects each of the rational and plural opposing agendas, as each side modifies the urban space according to its own needs. The city in this case is turned into a mix of great modern monuments that reflect economic prosperity – standing for rationalism – and scattered ethnic neighbourhoods comprised of communities striving to preserve their distinct identity – standing for pluralism: "The skyscrapers of the rational city were enmeshed in an extraordinary jumble of neighborhoods and cultural clusters, a microcosm of American diversity" (Ibid: 4). Skyscrapers, parks, bridges and tunnels, in

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<sup>2</sup>Berman further comments on New York's modernity in particular: "The city has become not merely a theater but itself a production. ... A great deal of New York's construction and development over the past century needs to be seen as symbolic action and communication: it has been conceived and executed not merely to serve immediate economic and political needs but, at least equally important, to demonstrate to the whole world what modern men can build and how modern life can be imagined and lived" (Berman 1983: 288, 289). The city's status as the primary symbol of modernity and prosperity attracts migrants from around the world, but the dreamland they imagine holds as many symbols of suffering as of relief. If "New York is a forest of symbols," Berman continues, "it is a forest where axes and bulldozers are always at work, and great works constantly crashing down" (Ibid: 289).

addition to ethnically defined slums, are all constructions that signify the modern experience of man in the city. They reflect the urban dynamics: problems such as social inequality and ethnic discrimination first reveal themselves in the architecture that fills the urban space.

My textual analysis will reveal how McCann's allusions to mythology and his use of art critique the capitalistic urban system by proposing a transformation process that New York's lower classes might follow in order to obtain a better life. The by-product of the city's capitalistic character, the poor and ethnic minorities, links the American and Irish settings in McCann's fiction – with one difference concerning the reactions of the oppressed members of society to the harsh reality. In Ireland, the only alternative revealed in the stories is escape, as the economic stagnation and political conflict seem to linger forever. Characters tend to emigrate, or resort to imagination, that is, supernatural power in mythological symbolism, found in rivers or the otherworld, which provide them with second chances. In New York, by contrast, changing oneself and one's surroundings seems to be possible. Those steps, ultimately translated into real achievements, follow a mythological pattern, and are often formulated in an artistic frame.

### The Underworld

In the urban context, the underworld refers to the environment and awareness of people from a lower class or from a certain ethnic or gender minority. McCann is mainly concerned with this exploited layer of urban society as he empathizes with it through a number of examples in both of his New York novels. Thomas Heise (2010) examines what he calls the American underworld, which in a broad sense constitutes social groups and urban spaces remote from the economic capitalistic centres represented by the white upper class and located mainly in tall buildings. The naming is drawn from the panoptic elevated vision that has become possible from the top of skyscrapers that expose the congested neighbourhoods and chaotic spots on the margins of organized urban planning. While groups in the underworld have been, as Heise states, diagnosed in social and psychological studies with symptoms of "cultural

pathology, sexual perversion, and delinquency,” they have been reinvented in literature and social activist discourse as categories with the “right to be different” (Ibid: 7). The main reason why the underworld exists as a social and cultural phenomenon of urban space, Heise contends, is the “logic of the capitalist uneven development” which is defined as the “geographic polarization of capital and labour and wealth and poverty” that echoes the rational and plural dichotomy explained above (Ibid). People in the underworld, being “the unruly, anarchic outcomes of capitalist development” constitute forces that “clash with the morally regulative expert discourses that try to manage the city’s space and people” (Ibid: 8). When juxtaposed with the rationalized urban system, the underworld is defined by deviance. The rhetoric of individuality and democracy seems deformed when people are considered to be sane only if they conform to a predetermined set of discriminating rules. In a city of high immigrant rates, this has serious ramifications since an essential part of the population is considered beneath the law and deprived of civil rights or proper recognition.

Because of its close link with urban development and planning, the underworld has gone through several geographical changes during one hundred years, most of which are reflected in McCann’s representation of New York. In the early years of the twentieth century, the underworld, as Heise observes, was located in slums neighbouring business and industrial centres and was composed mainly of the city’s ethnic groups. McCann introduces New York’s Lower East Side as an example of this stage and reflects the suffering and resistance of immigrant communities there. When around mid-century, industry and the white middle class moved out to the suburbs, the central ghettos became synonymous with the underworld. McCann depicts Harlem to disclose what life was like in this type of urban space – and both locations, Harlem and the Lower East Side, are examined in *This Side of Brightness*. Finally in the postmodern city, the underworld became difficult to enclose in clearly delineated areas as the poor spread around the city intermingling with the upper classes in what Heise calls “an hourglass-shaped class structure” (Ibid: 23). It thus became difficult to define the nature and the space of the lower class because, like “kaleidoscopic mixings,” they can be seen virtually anywhere in the metropolis (Ibid: 24). This recent

type of underworld is reflected especially in McCann's second New York novel, *Let the Great World Spin*, which is comprised of a wide array of interconnected characters of different social classes. McCann's elaboration on these places his writings on New York in the canon of "American underworld fiction" which started to take shape with Theodore Dreiser and Henry James and continued with Ralph Ellison and Don DeLillo to address concerns about the disparate social structure of the American urban population (Ibid: 10).

Blanche Gelfant offers a compelling perspective on American underworld fiction when she argues that American protagonists have adopted the underworld as their place of action. Gelfant suggests that American protagonists, after being obsessed with movement and frontier-crossing in the landscape of a "vast unexplored country," have taken the constrained neglected abodes that exist below the modern city as their chosen location in which to establish a heroic life. They follow a cyclical movement downward to enclosed spaces under the earth and then upward in pursuit of resurrection:

Another possibility has emerged in contemporary fiction, which describes, in recurrent images, another relationship between an American character and his space. Instead of openness the hero can choose confinement; instead of movement, arrest: he can choose stasis, and find freedom, fulfill his life, in a simulated death and burial underground, in the subterranean spaces that exist beneath the modern city (Gelfant 1975: 407, 408).

Open landscapes generate a sense of void and loss; busy urban settings invade the mind with financial and commercial signs that suit machines more than human beings. In the age of information, life is defined by a set of calculated economic standards and a modelled value system that suffocate the human self. The only escape is to seek isolation in a space uncontrolled by concepts such as profit, class structure or mass media. The city's subway is one of many spaces enumerated by Gelfant as a destination for the journey down:

Contemporary novels regularly give us images of underground confinement – bizarre and unexpected images of figures huddled in tunnels and caves

beneath the city; or stumbling through cellars, coalpits, basements, subways, sewers, and pipes; or squeezing through shafts, secret doors to hidden labyrinths, dugouts, caverns, and holes (Ibid: 408).

Escape involves compartments in which urban influences disappear. Here, the human mind revives an elementary and simple life, similar to that seen in ancient pagan worlds. Gelfant traces the tradition of subterranean descent in fiction back to its mythological roots when time was considered to follow a cyclical pattern that brought life after death. She considers descent as the beginning of an experience that

holds promise of life changed, not ended – of the mode of temporal human existence transformed. For descent into another dimension of space may effect a release from time. In his hole in the ground – perhaps only there – a hero may escape from linear time which carries him from birth to death, and pass into a process of eternal renewal (Ibid 409).

Heroic action in the modern metropolis is measured through the ability to escape urban regulations and summon a mythological notion of change. Be it a mythological god or an epic hero, Gelfant states, “the pattern is timeless – descent: transformation through rebirth: emergence” (Ibid 410). Pursuit of an underworld environment characterizes the account of the “sandhogs” or tunnel diggers beneath the city at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as tunnel dwellers toward the century’s end. Both groups appear in *This Side of Brightness* but also have extensions in the other New York novel. The following is an analysis of the underworld of McCann’s New York.

### Tunnel Diggers

With regards to McCann’s focus on the three types of the “underworld” that, as shown above, emerged in twentieth-century New York, his examination of New York’s subway remains the most significant. His depiction of the transformation of the tunnels from a symbol of modernity to a haven of modernity’s victims reveals a strong link to mythology. In the mythological context, the underworld is a vivid place through which the life cycle passes awaiting rebirth. It is not a final stage but a temporary one that promises revival. In Greek mythology, gods of fertility such as Persephone and

Adonis constantly follow the cyclical pattern going through and above the earth. Adonis would go to the “Lower World” in winter when slain by a wild boar and rise from the ground in early spring to make nature flourish (Guerber 1907: 88). The Underworld has a distinct function in the Irish Mythological Cycle as well. When the “Tuatha De Danann” were defeated in battle against the “Sons of Mil,” they had to desert the land and retreat to the “sidhe” which were “barrows, or hillocks, each being the door to an underground realm of inexhaustible splendour and delight” (Squire 191?: 135, 136). The following will show how McCann’s underworlds become a centre stage for mythological and artistic motifs that serve to liberate the stigmatized population and alter their setting.

I examine first the group of subway diggers who constructed the city’s tunnel network that connects the complex map of land and water, contracting vast distances in a horizontal transportation plan that, alongside the vertical skyscrapers, is a vital “part of the imagery of the modern city” (Ward & Zunz 1997: 7). The diggers’ affinity with the underworld is seen in their employment as labourers and their very poor households in the immigrants’ neighbourhood. Nathan Walker’s improved household in Harlem, which he obtains after long years of work, could well be added to the set of photographs in Jacob Riis’s pictures in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). What is more important about the “sandhogs” association with the underworld is their actual work under the ground. The tunnels are where McCann plays with mythological symbolism in an extended trope that gives a new meaning to the city’s key modern transportation nerve. They are no longer a location of the exploitation of labourers who risk their lives every time they go down in return for scarcely sufficient wages; they are a passage to a new life, to renaissance and resurrection. This transformation starts from the recurrent technique in McCann’s writing by which he fictionalizes real incidents to employ them in the overall narrative frame. The historical incident in *This Side of Brightness* is the ejection of three “sandhogs” through the East River as a result of a leak of compressed air in the tunnel during construction work. With a slight modification in the number and identity of the real victims, the “blowout” in the novel kills the Irishman, Con O’Leary, and permanently injures the Pole, while Vanucci, the Italian, and Walker, the African American, both survive.

McCann's account of the incident triggers the mythological context by explicitly comparing the "sandhogs" to rising gods. This links the New York novels to the short stories' Irish setting that is rooted in the rural and the mythological. Also, in terms of the comparison to Ireland, the use of the East River serves as another significant common metaphor. When Nathan Walker's body is forced upwards through the riverbed by the tunnel's high pressure, the narrative lists a number of objects buried in the soil. The description echoes the Liffey's variety of disposed items which Fergus reflects upon prior to pushing his wheelchair into the river in the story "Along the Riverwall". Walker creates with his shovel a small gap in the soil so he can breathe and:

He twists the shovel more and suddenly the air whooshes and Walker is released like a spat cherry stone. Still conscious, he rises through the riverbed. Past what? Dutch ships sunk centuries before? Animal carcasses? Arrowheads? Scalps with hair still growing? Men with concrete blocks attached to their feet? The dead from slave ships, bleached down to bone? (14)

The fluvial landscape of the East River reflects the unity of human experience in different geographical spaces, given its closeness to Dublin's Liffey discussed in the short stories. The style and content of the description of the river here are very similar to that of the Liffey. Short phrases enumerate many elements stacked throughout the river's history which serves to link water flows in Dublin and New York. The Liffey preserves the remnants of Ireland's colonial past, and the leavings of its deprived working class; the East River, likewise, preserves evidence of American history and transatlantic migration ever since New York was a Dutch colony. Reference to arms and to slavery is an indication of violence, a central aspect of the American past that is not separate from the image of the workers underneath the East River whose rights to a decent life are being violated. Later when in his ascension Walker reaches the water, all that he remembers is "pure blackness, water blackness," the same colour of the Sloe-Black River in Ireland (Ibid). The rivers share the same legacy of melancholy that emerges as a black pigment in the water. The black colour reflects the personal and national experiences of pain and suffering of Irish youth fleeing poverty and violence

only to meet another kind of misfortune in the New World where they face disillusionment with what was thought to be a dreamland.

The blowout establishes another link with the Liffey, if the qualities of healing and resurrection that water acquires in the mythological context are taken into account. The image completes the scene of Fergus dashing into the Liffey seeking life in the Celtic Otherworld; Fergus in his wheelchair falls while Walker and his friends with their shovels rise. The blowout accident becomes a passage to resurrection when Walker is compared to an embryo while still in the soil: “All the time the air cushions Walker against the tremendous weight of soil and silt. He is an embryo in a sac, sheltered as he is slammed upwards” (Ibid). Empowered by the life-giving force of the water, he rises from the dark infernal world under the ground, in a journey of rebirth. When he reaches the surface with his friends, “[t]he three sandhogs somersault in the air above the river. The water suspends them for a moment between Brooklyn and Manhattan, a moment that the men will never lose in their memories – they have been blown upwards like gods” (15). Time stops for a moment, drawing the three workers into a primordial mythological world in which they become divine. They have risen from the underground taking off the mantle of workers and putting on that of gods, thus challenging the urban socio-economic logic in which they are considered to be little more than slaves, and asserting a mythological pastoral logic of cyclical motion of renewal and afterlife. The meaning of the underworld is significantly transformed from a locus of the city’s neglected poor to a launch pad that imbues them with a means of persistence and survival. Their force is believed to be taken from their confidence that, as sandhogs, they constitute a new stage of history, and define the global culture of mobility; they are the builders of the modern metropolis: “The men are beating the river and they are happy” (10). Not only is their digging a landmark in human history; the audacity with which they survived the blowout is virtually miraculous.

## Tunnel Inhabitants

The period of time in which the “sandhogs” turn into deities does not exceed the few seconds in which they are suspended in the air with the water geyser erupting from the river. Immediately after that, they fall back, ordinary workers again, covered in blood and panting with pain. The Pole escapes with a limping leg unable to work anymore while the Irishman, with his frail and no-longer-young body, fails to rise at all and stays buried to fossilize in the riverbed (17, 20). The grandeur the incident of the rising confers on the surviving sandhogs remains engraved in their memories; they perceive themselves as gods. After Walker retires, he gets used to riding the trains to look “at the curves of tunnel walls” (108). His love of the tunnels continues even when he experiences them as a passenger in the tube:

Still, he loves the tunnels, moving from the darkness into the bright yellow light of the stations, the slow roll into blackness once more, the screech of steel on steel, the workers shining flashlights, the elation of being slammed along on a mid-morning express, commuters shuffling their feet on platforms as he whizzes by (108).

From inside the trains, the tunnels display a different aesthetic of mobility, determination and promise. Every element seems to have a purpose, every individual a role. This is how Walker sees the underground network that he and his friends created. The “Resurrection Men,” they call themselves, and insist that they must not be forced to leave no matter how long they stay on the trains: “You can’t kick us off” (110). The city, meanwhile, maintains its capitalistic stance in which they fit only as “sandhogs.”

The subterranean metaphor, however, does not end with the blowout and is given yet more depth with Nathan Walker’s grandson who is called Clarence Nathan and nicknamed Treefrog. Treefrog is two generations younger than the underworld population of tunnel diggers inhabiting Manhattan’s Lower East Side. His descent to the tunnels signifies in part his mourning for Nathan Walker’s death and his quest for the happy days as a family in Harlem, and in part an exposure and criticism of the urban system. Clarence Nathan’s character reveals a different function of New York’s

underworld that emerged during the second half of the twentieth century when a part of the city's tunnels became a refuge for homeless people. The tunnels as means of transportation are not as significant in the novel as their newly acquired role of sheltering New Yorkers who are banished from the city's socio-economic system. The part of the novel that addresses tunnel dwellers uncovers an urban phenomenon known as "mole people," an extra-social class that has no other place in which to live. These people suffer from double banishment, as Jennifer Toth explains in her book about New York subway dwellers: "Often shunned by the street homeless the underground homeless are outcasts in a world of outcasts" (Toth 1995: 38). They decide to live under the ground for several reasons, both societal and individual. Toth states that they choose such an unusual destination in order to escape violence and arrest or to find a sense of belonging:

They go down for many objective reasons. The housing shortage and inadequate welfare budgets are only two. Some go down for safety, to escape thieves, rapists, and common cruelty. They go down to escape the law, to find and use drugs and alcohol unhassled by their families, friends, and society. Some families go into the tunnels to avoid giving up their children to foster homes. Some, ashamed of their poverty and apparent "failure" in society and impoverished appearance, go to escape seeing their own reflections in passing shop windows. Some fall into the tunnels to deteriorate slowly, out of the way of people aboveground and in a place they can call their own home (Ibid).

McCann continues his investigation of social reality when he portrays motives similar to those referred to by Toth.

Treefrog and his fellows, in particular Faraday and Papa Love, for example, evoke the problem of violence and gun culture in the United States. Faraday, named after the physicist because he has brought electricity to the tunnels, is a former policeman who reacts to shooting somebody dead by withdrawing to the tunnels. Papa Love is a school art teacher and a Vietnam War veteran who, having endured exposure to murder and bloodshed, cannot tolerate witnessing his partner being shot dead and deserts the city to live underground. Those two characters refer to the excessive violence in American everyday life brought by policemen or civilians due in

part to the underdevelopment and underinvestment in the racially and socially segregated neighbourhoods as well as to inefficient gun control laws (Bachner 2011: 12). Faraday, whose descent seems a sign of self-discipline, offers a comment on a previous incident in the narrative, related to Nathan Walker's son, Clarence Walker, who kills his neighbour with a blow from the shovel with which his father used to dig the tunnels. The neighbour is a gangster who hits Maura – Nathan Walker's wife – with his car while driving recklessly. Young and overzealous, Clarence Walker rushes to avenge his mother's death by murdering two white men, the driver and a policeman who intervenes to defend him. The police pursue Clarence and kill him later without trial. Faraday shows how the underworld can be visited by government representatives who object to the unjust laws that make it normal to murder somebody before a legal trial has been carried out.

In a 1997 newspaper article entitled "Mole People," McCann described this underground habitat as a "world of brutal magic."<sup>3</sup> Overwhelming obscurity sustains people of widely diverse experiences, all bound together by being "wounded" by contemporary urban reality. The article reveals aspects of life in the New York tunnels observed by McCann in his conversations with several people who later appear as characters in his novel. The tunnels, he concludes, stand for the "subconscious mind of the city;" that is, the bitter reality that the city refuses to acknowledge: "its filth, its ruin, its violence, its dispossessed," as well as the radical thoughts and behaviours that it prohibits (Ibid). This psychological dimension of the tunnels is reflected in the novel through the nicknames adopted by most of the characters. They leave their real names on the surface to dissolve in the city's registries. They dismiss their official past and, using other informal titles, embark on a journey to the uncharted territory of their minds in the darkness.

This community of outlaws down in the earth, as McCann depicts it, uses the tunnel space to forge life-affirming attitudes which challenge ground-level urban reality. Their residence underground is a conscious, "autonomous and pragmatic spatial tactic," as Marisa Williams suggests in her approach to McCann's novel

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<sup>3</sup> Colum McCann, 1997, "The Mole People," in *The Irish Times* <<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/the-mole-people-1.110553>> [December 2014].

(Williams, *MC Journal* 2002). It reflects the way in which they build a life free from the grip of the city's power discourse aboveground, using geography as a tool. They utilize the tunnels for reasons different from the ones for which they were originally built, making them a settlement rather than a railway network. Treefrog transforms an elevated compartment near the tunnel's ceiling just under West Side Highway into a room which he furnishes with a sleeping bag, stove and some storage containers. His place is three blocks from a compound of "cubicles" inhabited by other underground dwellers. Treefrog and his neighbours occupy the periphery of the underworld the nucleus of which is the tunnels underneath Grand Central Station where criminals and addicts live. This distribution of the underworld population suggests that the tunnels are a city underneath a city: even if independent from the socio-economic system of New York, it is managed by its own autonomous system which may well victimize vulnerable people for which examples such as Angela, the prostitute who is gang-raped, stand. The spatial dimension, then, is not enough to change the rhetoric of violence and inequalities.

The artist, once again for McCann, is the key figure in reformulating reality. Papa Love, the art teacher, fills the subway walls with murals of public figures such as Martin Luther King and Miriam Makeba. His work is a triumphant use of the tunnel space in protest against local and global injustice. Graffiti defines the tunnels as a place for anarchism, a notion that is duplicated in McCann's second New York novel, *Let the Great World Spin*, through a number of "taggers" from different origins, mainly "Ricans and Dominicans," who would have remained obscure without the efforts of an amateur Latino photographer, Horatio, to expose their art. Horatio takes pictures that reveal the social challenge of these people, evident either in the radical content or the dangerous position of the graffiti, very close to the course of the subway trains (169, 170).<sup>4</sup>

Treefrog is a distinguished member of the group of tunnel people, for he represents a curious case of descent from the city's peaks on the skyscrapers to its

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<sup>4</sup> "Much of the rationale for New York's graffiti," Jennifer Toth explains, is in "the need for self-assertion, particularly among urban youth whose creativity is stifled by an overbearing city; the need to be remembered; the need to define themselves differently than society has; and the need to feel in control, in some small way, of surroundings they deeply fear" (Toth 1995: 132).

abyss in the tunnels. While he initially seems to undergo a purely spatial experience, the essence of his descent, I suggest, turns out really to be temporal, following the mythological cycle of residing for a period in the underworld and resurrecting afterwards. Both the spatial and temporal dimensions are better understood by looking at Treefrog's early awareness of New York's polarities through its vertical architecture. As a child, he experiences Harlem as an underworld invaded by racism and crime, for his own parents have been victims of that dim reality. Following her husband's murder by the police, Clarence Walker's mother becomes a heroin addict and dies later of an overdose leaving her young child to be raised by the grandfather. The child seems to notice – even if not altogether consciously, given his young age – the connection in the urban order between class, race and geography; he can situate himself in the city's underworld and, in order to transcend that pit of misery, develops a passion for heights and tall buildings:

Balance is the boy's inheritance. While his mother is strung out on a tide of chemicals and his grandfather is strapped to the couch with pain, he likes to come up to the rooftop and look out beyond the architecture of Harlem – past the projects and the redbrick churches and the funeral homes and the intricate plasterwork and the empty lots and the parks – to the skyscrapers leaping across Manhattan. (163)

The boy's point of view enables him to realize differences in the architectural layout between Harlem's neglected brick tenements and the grand shiny glass and steel of Manhattan. He cannot at that point understand the real exploitation, racism and social injustice behind such a discrepancy. He is arguably attracted to the vertical city as part of a young person's eagerness to prove himself independently from the family and community. As an adolescent, he runs away from school to go near skyscraper construction sites and he finds any excuse to climb them. He grows up to be a skyscraper construction worker, husband of a hairdresser, Dancesca, and father of a daughter called Lenora. Treefrog leads a satisfactory life earning a decent living and benefiting from the labour union. He keeps his balance and courage up until the death of his grandfather which severely affects him.

Nathan Walker's death represents a turning point in his grandson's character development. It is the trigger for him to descend to the tunnels. Nathan Walker has always been Treefrog's link with the past – the father he did not see, the mother he did not enjoy a healthy relationship with, the waning glory of the tunnel construction stories and, above all, the rural stories of the Georgian countryside, Nathan Walker's birthplace, where all the subsequent anecdotes started. Treefrog witnesses his grandfather's violent death, being run over by an underground train, while he was searching for the wedding ring of his Irish mother in law, Maura O'Leary, which she had flung in the area where her husband's remains lay. Walker is on the rails looking for the ring, "standing, staring" and expressing joy as the subway train swiftly passes, runs over the old man and tears his body into pieces the moment Treefrog is trying to lift him to the concourse (Ibid). The fatal accident deeply affects the grandchild who enters a stage of loss and uprootedness following a rupture of the chain that used to tie him to his past and give him a sense of security. From that moment, his quest becomes to satisfy the urgent need of reconnecting his present with the chain of the past. The mission is highly challenging, especially because Treefrog suffers from a kind of a mental illness the symptoms of which mean losing his capacity to balance on the skyscraper tops during construction work. Pathological symptoms also include touching his daughter's body – thinking that he can extract Walker from her. The wife later deserts him with her daughter for fear of child sexual abuse. Treefrog is left with nothing. He roams the city streets and sleeps in the parks until he is led by a pigeon to an ironwork gate of a tunnel where he feels at home and which somehow obliges him to stay: "[h]e gazes along the tunnel and then he feels it, it rises right through him, it is primitive and necessary, and he knows now that he belongs here, that this is his place" (228). Treefrog descends to the place where his grandfather worked, lived and died, the underground tunnels, in order to see what is below the surface of the ordinary neighbourhoods and reach a mature understanding of his identity.

Beneath the city, the narrative at first shows Treefrog taking advantage of the element of space in order to compensate for the sense of belonging that he lost with his grandfather's death: "Treefrog feels the darkness, smells it, belongs to it" (23). He embarks on a long term project of drawing detailed maps of the tunnels. Having

designated the tunnels as his home, he aims to expose and record the tunnel space that is hidden in the darkness. The process suggests a display of power and control over the surrounding space. Treefrog is recreating his own world on paper, and endowing it with new meanings. He uses a tactile connection with the tunnel walls to sketch the surface in the drawings; he feels the tunnels with his hands, so he can define their structural topography, then copies them on paper. The process becomes a “ritual” for him:

[h]e exaggerates the features to ten times their map size, so that, on the paper, the nest looks like a rumple of huge valleys and mountains and plains. ... Later he will transfer them to a larger map he has been working on for the past four years, a map of where he lives, hand-drawn, intricate, secretive, with hills, rivers, ox-bow lakes, curved creeks, shadows, the cartography of darkness (24).

The extract suggests that subterranean space is crucial in Treefrog’s pursuit of belonging after being deprived of his grandfather’s protection. Darkness permits him to modify the tunnel features according to his own desires. He escapes the urban setting by using his imagination to turn the tunnel’s holes and bumps into valleys and hills. He invents an elementary existence in unity with nature. Darkness is introduced as the element that opens up alternative interpretations of the surroundings. It wipes out dominating urban norms and makes room for change. By changing the meaning of his surroundings, Treefrog thinks he can undo the insecurity and deprivation caused by his grandfather’s death. He thinks that he has come to terms with his origins. While his interaction with the tunnel space is an important factor in the treatment of his uprootedness, the ultimate redemption is not obtained until later, as the analysis will show below.

The spatial exercises of Treefrog as well as of other tunnel dwellers are only a stage in the mythological pattern of cyclical time where life is possible after death, and rise after fall. Treefrog’s descent is a stage he has to get through in order to reconcile with his past life. In his strong relationship with Walker, he is introduced to century-old stories about the misery and happiness of immigrant sandhogs in the tunnels, the wild rural Georgian landscape, and hardworking Irish women; Treefrog knows the stories by heart yet does not relate to them. The environment below the city surface

helps him to link his past and present: he who has made it to the heights gets closer to his ancestry who belong to an underworld full of pain and suffering. The tunnels isolate Treefrog from aspects of urban modernity, from the hustle of industry, trade and finance, and equip him, instead, with a primordial setting that is pointed out by Jennifer Toth who describes the city's tunnel inhabitants as "prehistoric men against the elements" (Toth 1995: 38). Treefrog starts to search for possibilities to identify with currents that resist New York's socioeconomic hegemony. When he needs to start a fire for cooking, he projects himself onto the times of the nomadic culture of American indigenous tribes by arranging the kindling in the shape of the tepee, the type of tent in which they used to live (59). Beside Native American culture, Treefrog alludes to Greek mythology when he thinks of himself as Prometheus, the deity who is punished for disobeying the gods by introducing fire to the human race. When the flames are "lit and leaping," Treefrog claims that he is "Prometheus Treefrog the firestealer! Come down, lovely eagle and consume my liver for eternity!" (60). The comparison with Prometheus's eternal torture adds another dimension to Treefrog's tunnel experience in which he undergoes a self-imposed punishment, a purgatory for the negligence he showed in the past to his wife and daughter.

By going down, thus, Treefrog detaches himself from the city, not only spatially but also temporally. A different temporal order is obvious in a number of ways. Firstly, what persuades Treefrog to stay in the tunnels, as seen above, is their primitiveness and their link with a previous stage of human history. Also, "TROGLODYTES," one of Papa Love's graffiti slogans supports the self-awareness of the underworld population as primordial humans (62). One further piece of Papa love's tunnel art gallery is the mural of Salvador Dali's "Melting Clock," a symbol that challenges the concept of organized progressive time (25, 229). The underground environment generates a different conception of time to that prevalent in the city where human life is measured by the number of work and commuting hours. In the course of Treefrog's character development, the tunnels are the stage he passes through in order to refill the gap that his grandfather's death caused between him and his past. Walker and his grandson are both drawn to an essential mythological circularity so contrasted with New York's linearity, as McCann represents it, which victimizes the lower classes in

favour of rapid progress. Clarence Nathan climbs up the city peaks to escape the misery surrounding his family and neighbourhood then goes down to the tunnels to experience his grandfather's life, that of a submerged community on the margins of urban development. Clarence Nathan intends to leave the tunnel when he fully assimilates the past: "All inheritance moves through him" (234). He burns all the maps he has been working on, gives up his nickname, Treefrog, and "at the gate he smiles, hefting the weight of the word upon his tongue, all its possibility, all its hope, a single word, resurrection" (239). About one hundred years earlier, his grandfather occupied New York's underworlds and emerged anew from the tunnels he helped create. The city's geography enables them to find a passage outside history, beyond standard time, where they can achieve self-realization.

### Ethnography and Visual Art

McCann's depiction of New York attempts to transcend the city's racism by asserting possibilities of connection between different ethnic groups. The relationship between Nathan Walker and the family of his Irish friend, the tunnel digger Con O'Leary, reflects a picture of New York's complex ethnic structure in which immigrants confront discrimination by establishing close affiliations. Walker and O'Leary are underworld friends during the wave of the so-called "New Immigration" at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first quarter of the twentieth century (Grillo 1998: 141). Because New York was the main entrance port for temporary and permanent immigrants, the city acquired resonant names which are reflected in book titles of significant studies of its ethnic structure such as *All the Nations Under Heaven* (Binder & Reimers 1995) and *Gateway to the Promised Land* (Maffi 1995). Immigrants who wished to remain in the US were pushed toward the "melting pot" of a single form of American identity; America at the time vacillated between imposing values of the Anglo-Saxon heritage of the "Founding Fathers" and generating a more pluralistic identity that acknowledged the diverse origins of the American population (Grillo 1998: 152). In broad terms, developing a national identity meant that Northern Europeans underwent a different experience from that of Asians, Hispanics or even Southern and Eastern Europeans (Grillo 1998: 159). In his treatment of the ethnic

texture of New York, McCann challenges the early twentieth-century ongoing attempts of homogenization by highlighting the beauty of convergence among different ethnicities as well as the difficulty of defining people's pure origins.

In addition to defying the city's racist inclinations, the emphasis on New York's diversity is revealing in terms of McCann's depiction of Irishness. In the short stories Irish people are isolated and divided whereas in the New York novels, they show significant tendencies of openness to the other. The stories, as previously shown in the discussion of *Everything in this Country Must*, present an Ireland torn apart by a reality of divisions in which notions of Irish identity demonize difference and do not allow tolerance between communities in a single society. They focus on the effects of a long history of colonization, repression and civil war that turned Ireland into a complex network of conflicting political parties. The New York novels, on the other hand, highlight an aspect of Irishness that is open to integration with other groups in society, whether religious or ethnic. This underlying aspect of Irishness is brought to surface by the nature of the metropolis that is comprised of a vast canvas of communities from various nations.

American urban life is depicted in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* through a number of impressionistic images that reflect the observer's feelings. The urban scene is shaped by the perspective of immigrants who cannot be separated from their rural heritage which was characterized by socio-economic difficulties. The strong attachment to a past life of suffering stands in the way of the Irish people's integration with the new setting. Padraic, for example, who works in a New York social centre, sees the city's polluted air as an opaque curtain between himself and his surroundings: "the sun is coming up like a small red tranquiliser, leaving smudges of dirty light on the New York City skyline, galloping in and out of the skyscrapers" (95). His foggy vision asserts a detachment from the city and intensifies the feeling of estrangement. Padraic cannot embrace Brooklyn's morning and wishes that the dust could carry him to a "very different" place (96). Further, New York appears as an alien impenetrable mass through the eyes of Sheona who has spent her life moving between San Francisco and Dublin and later visits New York to see her ill sister. New York to her is vague and indefinite, consisting of "[f]loods of neon rushing by" (14).

The mobility of city lights reveals an ephemeral nature which prevents Sheona from finding a fixed element to hold on to. New York does not seem more approachable at night to Sheona than in the morning to Padraic. The same collection of stories, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, bears yet another mention of New York with the Irish boxer in “Step We Gaily On We Go” who immigrates to follow his dream of becoming a world champion. The story centres on the boxer’s disillusionment with the land of dreams. He becomes “less imaginative everyday,” and fails to meet his ambition (59). The treatment of American urban reality mainly focuses on an Irish self broken by the cruelty of the new environment and by a nostalgia for the homeland, so the boxer descends “easily to a no-hoper from the bowels of Brooklyn” (66). The short stories, thus, display New York’s urban scene in brief interrupted impressions which emerge from homesick travellers; their view on the city fails to reveal the ways in which they can identify with different aspects of urban life.

Irish characters in the short stories remain tied to their past in Ireland after they immigrate to the US. Departure grinds their memories and generates a feeling of guilt or regret about leaving their home country behind. In a *New York Times* article entitled “No Place Like Home” (2006), McCann states that “[e]very immigrant carries in him or her a certain quiet desire to be wounded. It’s the nature of leaving in the first place. We leave in order, one day, to remember. This nostalgia slips between our rib cages and turns our hearts a few notches backward” (McCann 2006).<sup>5</sup> This quotation echoes the immigrant’s shriek of pain resulting from being distant from home. Whether one leaves to escape poverty or danger, or to seek a more indulgent life, separation from the home environment leaves a permanent scar of nostalgia that reawakens, McCann hints, near big occasions such as New Year’s Eve. In “The Sense of the Past” (1993), Seamus Heaney provides an insightful comment on the concept of the past in which he distinguishes between an intimate and personal past and one of imposed general tradition. The personal past is acquired naturally while growing up in a household and being surrounded by family and relatives as well as immediate domestic objects. The general past generates definite images of national principles

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<sup>5</sup> Colum McCann (2006), “No Place Like Home” in *The New York Times*,  
<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A03E0DF1F31F932A05751C1A9609C8B63>>  
[January 2015].

fostered by language and history. Heaney attributes a “moral force” to elements from the past in that they “insist upon human solidarity and suggest obligations and covenants with generations who have been silenced.”<sup>6</sup> Heaney suggests that this authority of the past should be used as an educating tool to teach “breadth and refinement” and to “challenge a too narrow conception of loyalty and solidarity.” Heaney shows the necessity of understanding the past in such a way that develops an inclusive approach on human culture where differences between cultures do not overshadow the shared experiences evident in various narratives of history or folklore. All of McCann’s immigrant characters experience the pain of remembering the past after leaving. In the New York novels, however, they show a tendency to escape memory’s entanglement and enjoy the present by intermingling with fellow immigrants from other origins. McCann’s New York responds to Heaney’s call to nurture common elements in the memories of distinct human groups. In what follows I will examine how *This Side of Brightness* portrays New Yorkers’ engagement with difference and their attitude towards the diverse cultural heritage of the population. Then the discussion will extend by examining similar cultural interactions in *Let the Great World Spin*.

The immigrant’s outsider perspective on the city is turned in the novels into that of an insider. Irish immigrants are now only one of multiple ethnic groups, the examination of which helps to show the impact of the multi-ethnic social fabric on the urban space. New York in McCann’s novels is turned into a field for ethnographic studies which pushes the discussion from the realm of national experience into a cross-cultural experience in a cosmopolitan city. If one simplified definition of ethnography is “the art and science of describing a group or culture,” then both New York novels *This Side of Brightness* and, as the second section of this chapter will show, *Let the Great World Spin*, offer interesting cases for an ethnographic approach to New York’s society that reveals particular qualities of a given ethnic group in their interaction with the other (Fetterman 1989: 1). The first example I will examine is the marriage between the African American Nathan Walker and the Irish Eleanor before I

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<sup>6</sup> This quotation and what follows are from “The Sense of the Past” by Seamus Heaney, 1993 *History Ireland* 1(4) <<http://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/the-sense-of-the-past-by-seamus-heaney/>> [January 2015].

move on to the second novel to look at other featured inter-racial relationships and encounters.

*This Side of Brightness* early on establishes New York as a city with an ethnically diverse social structure with the scene that describes the “sandhogs” heading to the tunnel construction site at dawn and getting ready to start digging. The majority of the diggers are immigrants; the heterogeneous picture of them is not romanticized, for those labourers reveal two rough aspects of what city life means to working class immigrants: poverty and segregation. Nathan Walker and his Irish, Italian and Polish friends provide specimens of early twentieth-century immigrants who seek labour that grants them just enough of a weekly wage to survive. Together, after they finish work, they can only go to bars which admit people of colour and then they return to their remote residences in the narrow dark streets of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, famous for the congested tenements that sheltered immigrant communities. The Irish Con O’Leary “meanders through the darkening streets” of the Lower East Side whereas Nathan Walker’s more isolating trip leads him to a “Colored hotel” somewhere unknown (13).

In a highly segregated urban environment such as New York’s, it is worthwhile to dwell upon the representation and implications of the marriage between Nathan Walker and the daughter of his Irish friend, Eleanor. The couple represent a historical phenomenon, marriages between African American men and Irish women in New York, common in the second half of the nineteenth century. Public opinion, influenced by the press, deemed such relationships “unnatural and morally reprehensible,” and considered them a “major social problem” (Ferris 2012, 159). Values of white supremacy and racial purity that shaped the response to interracial marriages in reality at the time affect the married couple in the novel as well: Eleanor and Walker are treated with disdain as outsiders by both white and black people. Harlem children throw stones at the windows of their rented room and Catholic priests ban them from attending mass. “Y’ever get that feeling?” Eleanor complains to her husband following her ban from the church she used to attend, “when ya walk down the street and their eyes are ripping ya up? ... you feel like they’ve just sliced you? Like they’ve got these razor blades in their eyes” (81). Eleanor occupies a very low rank in society, being a

daughter of Irish immigrants, and her marriage to a black man only makes things worse for her. Irish women married to black men were considered to be morally “of the worst class” (Ferris 2012: 158). An immigrant Irish woman was one of the least fortunate in the social scale; marriage, even if to an African American, gave her some privilege of being sheltered within a family. However, it made her suffer severe discrimination.

Walker and Eleanor’s marriage refers to an important landmark in the history of the antagonistic relationships between the African American and the Irish. The nineteenth century Irish immigrants “had no experience of American-style racism before coming to New York,” yet they “had plenty of experience of a society riven by prejudice and conflict” (Kenny 2000: 71). They were extreme in their claims to “whiteness” because they themselves were seen as “inferior people” on arriving in the New World (Ibid: 68). Irish prejudice against African Americans turned into violence with the so called Draft Riots (1863) following amendments on the military service draft law that affected the white population, especially the Irish, but spared the black. This overview of Irish racism against African Americans suggests that continuing marriages between the two races challenge the accepted racial boundaries and make “the ‘natural’ separation of races irrelevant” (Ferris 2012: 167). They reveal a different aspect of Irish identity, a flexible and adaptable one. “Records of interracial families... reveal communities of Irish and African Americans that were based on integration and intimacy, rather than exclusion and ethnically defensive violence” (Ferris 2012: 153). Eleanor and Walker’s marriage represents a significant challenge to the social setting in which African American and Irish communities throughout their history together in the US have faced either reciprocal discrimination or hostility. Their marriage symbolizes an inherent unity and integration between ethnic groups. Further, the willingness of O’Leary’s family to mix with Nathan Walker contrasts the extremist aspect of Irish identity highlighted especially in *Everything in This Country Must* where different social backgrounds are considered a reason for enmity.

Interracial marriages are important in the history of the ethnicities at hand and in the history of New York City as well. New York seems to be a city of a dual nature which simultaneously causes segregation and offers ways to eliminate it. The seed of

Walker and Eleanor's love is embedded deep down in the city's tunnels where it all begins with the friendship between Walker and O'Leary, Eleanor's father. The "sandhogs" realize that, under the ground, racial boundaries are transcended: "[i]t strikes Walker that it's only in the tunnels that he feels any equality of darkness. ... it is only underground that colour is negated, that men become men" (35, 36). It is in this utopian context that Walker develops awareness of himself, away from the racist practices that face him in the light. After O'Leary dies in the blowout, Walker helps his wife in raising Eleanor. Later on Walker and Eleanor get married, consummating a long history of intimacy between them in the love scene described on their wedding night:

They move like two chiaroscurists above the covers, black and white, white and black, then sleep under foreheads wet with sweat. They lie on their sides, arms around one another, one hip a hill of bony pink, the other muscular brown (74).

The word *chiaroscuro* raises a special perspective on physicality in the extract in which colours of the lovers' bodies are elevated into aesthetic elements in a work of art. Their skin colours no longer present criteria for the society to evaluate them as individuals belonging to a certain race. Chiaroscuro is a style of visual art which uses light and shadow to create an effect of a special dialogue between contrasting bright and dark parts, eventually endowing the painting with meaning (Fankbonner 2004: 94). The couple express their love by becoming chiaroscurists of their own naked bodies. In a chiaroscurist painting, the light part would be defined by the dark and vice versa. Eleanor and Walker are two artists who re-invent their lives and identities through experiencing each other's physicality.

In the painting's abstract context, the contrasting colours develop a harmonious relationship that proves very interesting with regard to the colour-based social discrimination seen in New York's environment. People in the street do not tolerate seeing the two of them holding hands: "she takes his hand but he quickly lets it go and steps behind her at two paces .... He walks in her shadow" (48). During Walker's courting of Eleanor, whenever they walk together in the street, "[t]he eyes of strangers cause him to hang his chin on his chest .... Sometimes he even gets violent glares from his own people" (50). The social reality that renders Eleanor and Walker's

ethnicities antagonistic dissolves between them as the seemingly different cultural traditions of the two lovers become united through their tangent bodies in a chiaroscuro context. With reference to Susan Cahill's studies of McCann's *This Side of Brightness* (2007, 2012) in which she argues that the "body's morphology" establishes a link with one's surrounding space as well as with one's ancestors, it is fair to suggest that the visual illustration of their bodies is continuous with snapshots of memories from their past lives (Cahill 2012: 56). Their intertwining bodies tell therapeutic stories of a past that is marred by segregation and prejudice against interracial relationships. The colours, black and white, that have defined a great part of their social behaviour are shown through art as coexistent. Similar physical intimacy between Eleanor and Walker recurs in the narrative, later on in their marriage after their children sleep, for example, in the coloured cinema nearby, and on the night of Eleanor's death that remains in Walker's memory until his own death later. This suggests that what they have gained by being described as artists by the narrator becomes a motif that helps them to survive the atrocities from the population in Harlem.

Around the date at which Walker is represented as cementing his relationship with the Irish family and marrying Eleanor, the American social scene was developing a new consciousness and appreciation of ethnic diversity, called by Brad Evans the "ethnographic imagination," and defined as an "experimentation ... with new ways of perceiving, representing, and producing structures of affiliation and difference" (Evans 2005: 8). Evans's starting point in his explanation of the phenomenon is that of seeing race only as a biological issue, and not representative of nation or culture. He draws attention to the dynamic of a circulating culture in which folktales are disseminated from one language and literature to others. This results in a situation in which "people of different races, nations, and languages, spread across vast geographic areas, shared a variety of fairy tales, stories, songs and sayings" (Evans 2005: 56). Anthropologists at the time engaged in studies that ascribed this "problem of sameness" to either "social evolution" or "historical diffusion from a common source" (Ibid: 56, 67). This ethnographic viewpoint is significant in terms of Eleanor and Walker's relationship for it suggests a difficulty in defining difference between their ethnicities as they have essential similarities. Their marriage lets a buried truth float to the surface, for it

merely clarifies an already proven point of shared cultural elements. They create in a city constructed on a base of racial discrimination a cell which signifies an ongoing cultural dialogue.

In his article on the spread of ethnography and surrealism in Paris in the early twentieth century, James Clifford asks, “is not every ethnographer something of a surrealist, a reinventor and reshuffler of realities?” (Clifford 2002: 147). Walker and Eleanor’s encounter is arguably an exemplification of James Clifford’s notion of “ethnographic surrealism” which questions the accepted norms by which the self is defined and seeks another reality that erupts through contact with the ethnic other. Reality, for surrealism and for ethnography, “is no longer a given, a natural, familiar environment,” Clifford states; “[t]he self, cut loose from its attachments, must discover meaning where it may,” taking the “other” as a key tool in its discovery (Clifford 2002: 119, 120). If the dark part of a chiaroscurist painting is isolated from the light part, meaning is lost. Similarly, self-realization in isolation from the other is incomplete. Both fields, surrealism in art and ethnography in human science, are concerned with the unknown obscure other, the “continuous play of the familiar and strange” (Ibid: 121). This ethnographic approach offers an insightful interpretation of Walker and Eleanor who question the city’s dominant politics that theoretically separates them and strive to create an original counter-reality of their own. An interesting further aspect of Walker and Eleanor as ethnographers is that they do not abide by Clifford’s view of the ethnographer as a social scientist focusing on an object of study. Twentieth-century New York offers a chance for every inhabitant to become a surrealist ethnographer searching everyday life for the best combination of reality and dream. The love scene between Eleanor and Walker establishes a relation between the corporeal and the cultural thanks to the visual chiaroscurist image where skin colour acquires aesthetic meanings detached from social judgements. The two characters destabilize ethnic borders in their marriage so it becomes difficult to know where the Irish element ends and the African American begins.

Beyond the representation of their bodies as elements of a painting to stress the aesthetics of ethnic and cultural convergence, the fruit of their marriage, their son Clarence Walker, suggests a case of hybridity that points to the endless possibilities of

racial and cultural mixings in a diverse US society. “Ancestry steps through [Clarence Walker] in colourful swaths – he has light cinnamon-coloured skin and tufts of rude red hair on his head” (82). His mixed genes inform the multiple patterns of cross-ethnic relations happening in the US, which assumes a difficulty in defining a specific formula for American identity. This point is clear in Treefrog’s – who is Clarence Walker’s son from a Native American nurse he met while serving in the Korean War – reflection on who he might be: “black man white man red man brown man American” (90). An ethnographic reading anchors Treefrog’s hybridity in New York’s urban setting which has made such hybridity possible in the first place. New York’s cityscape becomes the meeting point of numerous ethnicities and makes possible an array of cross-ethnic relationships, such as that of Eleanor and Walker, which defy the predominant segregation and destabilize myths of racial purity. The city’s tunnels not only contribute to the ethnic mix of the Walker family, but also to the cultural memory of each “sandhog”. The city, the body, and culture seem to be connected in a triangular formula that recurs in McCann’s writing.

### ***Let the Great World Spin***

#### Heterogeneous Connections

With a structure as complex as the earlier New York novel, *Let the Great World Spin* covers urban settings spanning a greater range of social contexts. The novel depicts a post-industrial New York in the 1970s with an economy based on services and information technology. It encompasses a slightly modified ethnic chain as the two main ethnicities of the previous work, the Irish and the African American, appear beside representatives of more recent immigrants to the city such as the Latin Americans. Further, the novel does not exclusively focus on the poor; samples of the middle class appear sporadically while the upper class is depicted in control of the

city's politics. The last and most important common point in the two novels is that both of them are based on historical facts. *Let the Great World Spin* is designed around the wire stretched between the two towers of the World Trade Centre by the French tightrope walker, Philippe Petit, who shook New York with his walk high up in the air between the Twin Towers in 1974. As a fictional character, he remains unnamed. His determination, preparation, performance, triumph and following arrest by the police are related as acts of heroism in three chapters distributed evenly through the first two of the four books of the novel. His walk represents a special meaning for each of the New Yorkers who see him in action. The novel thus consists of the tightrope artist's story as it organizes the stories of city inhabitants who are influenced by his walk.

*Let the Great World Spin* is a post-9/11 novel too; it is a tribute to a city hit by terror in which the characters undergo the pains of destruction. McCann's treatment of the notion of a city threatened by terrorism is far from direct yet very revealing. The attack on the Twin Towers and its aftermath is not mentioned in the novel but implied in its form and content. The disintegrated chapter structure stands for the intermittent overlapping shrieks of the victims; the devastation and sorrow experienced by most characters reflect the families' mourning for their loved ones buried under the ashes. Images of loss are most obvious with the group of five bereaved women who meet to tell the stories of their sons' deaths in Vietnam. The prostitutes in the Bronx also illustrate a state of despair and hopelessness emphasized by the Irish priest who lives among them and fails to lead them to salvation.

The artist's walk generates a linking motif that infuses the damaged parts of the devastated city with a dose of positivity. Social connections are to a great extent licensed by the funambulist who becomes the primary shared preoccupation for New Yorkers; the mystery he represents distracts them from their sorrows and gives them a spark of hope to light their lives. Connections, however, do not stop at New York's borders, but cross them to create a transatlantic route between Ireland and the US. The Irish priest's brother, for example, travels to New York, escaping violence in Ireland, but then returns after the economic boom toward the end of the twentieth century. The aim of these connections is to blur the boundaries between inside and

outside, between home and overseas, as well as to foster an image of Ireland as a place open to the rest of the world.

Starting from Warner Sollor's argument that cultural pluralism disguises purism and from his call to a "transethnic" classification of the American literary canon, in which membership of a certain ethnic group is "understood to be a very partial, temporal, and insufficient characterization at best," this section will examine New York's complex network of ethnic connections as depicted in the 1970s in the novel (Sollors 1986: 256). Diversity is the crux of McCann's fiction. In addition to moving across continents, McCann delves into the cultural symbols of multiple origins to create a mosaic of varied settings and themes. Diversity may generate both hostility and tolerance, hence incidents of segregation as well as fusion are depicted in New York's urban setting. I argue that ethnic belonging, rather than being ultimate, fixed or one-dimensional, is mutable, because subject to the influences of time and space. A few examples of cross-ethnic relations illustrate the social structure of the city and emphasize two points: how different origins mix in New York, and, more importantly, how pure race is impossible to delineate.

*Let the Great World Spin* differs from its New York predecessor in that it tracks the route of the Irish Transatlantic migration from its source in Ireland to the New World. Beginning in Dublin with two boys, Corrigan and Ciaran living with their mother, the novel echoes McCann's short fiction, especially the story "Sisters." The brothers are raised by their single mother whose husband has deserted her. The longing of Corrigan, the youngest brother, for his father drags him into alcoholism and drugs from an early age. Like Brigid in "Sisters", he joins the Catholic Church, embracing mysticism and spirituality. He and Brigid introduce faith as a force detached from political contexts that result in rifts among the population. Ciaran sees his brother the priest as a "bright halleluiah in the shitbox of what the world really was" and he sees his alcoholism and drug abuse as a pursuit of "Eden" (15, 18). The representation of Corrigan's involvement in religion evades the discourse of hatred used to serve political purposes. He joins the Jesuits' School after his mother dies of kidney cancer, and later, his few tours with the Church lead him to New York.

McCann's continued interest in the effect of proximity between various ethnic groups is evident in a number of urban scenes. The two predominant groups, the Irish and African American, are drawn from the previous novel to create another interesting pattern of mutual interplay between multiple ethnicities. Corrigan arrives in the Bronx "among the cast-offs of New York – the whores, the hustlers, the hopeless" (15). The alliteration of the h- sound in those three words supports the sense of an infernal status of a neighbourhood full of noises of lament and torture. The Bronx is an emblem of a desolate urban space which reveals an important aspect of McCann's New York as a city which stands for "modern ruin and devastation" (Berman 1983: 290). This notion of the city starts with the tunnel dwellers in *This Side of Brightness* and is elaborated here in the calculation of the extent of the destruction carried out in the Bronx. The thriving neighbourhood is destroyed by a highway which tears it apart; in addition, there are a number of real-estate and social dilemmas that haunted the area in the 1970s. Berman comments on the change that the Bronx, the neighbourhood of his childhood, has witnessed: "The Bronx, where I grew up, has even become an international code word for our epoch's accumulated urban nightmares: drugs, gangs, arson, murder, terror, thousands of buildings abandoned, neighborhoods transformed into garbage and brick-strewn wilderness" (Berman 1982: 290). These changes feature in the novel through references to the razor-wire-topped-chain fence that surrounds the tenements, the expressway that penetrates them, the long line of women waiting for clients, and finally through referring to the phenomenon of arson in which owners of buildings deliberately burnt them down in order to claim the insurance compensation.

Corrigan works in a health centre for elderly people where he meets the nurse Adelita, a mother of two from Guatemala who immigrates to New York to follow her dream of becoming a doctor. Corrigan and Adelita fall in love with each other and thus become one of the novel's examples of inter-ethnic relationships. In this section, however, I will discuss a subtler and more extended example of inter-ethnic relations, those between Corrigan and a number of African American sex workers in the Bronx. He allows them to use his flat as a station for relaxing and dressing up before strolling down the street to collect customers. The Latino and African American presence

mirrors the desolation in which Corrigan grew up in Dublin. It is a shared experience of misery in both settings. Corrigan is similar to a saint who endeavours to heal the pains of those in need, in particular the African American heroin-addicted hookers.

McCann goes one step beyond mapping the obvious cross-ethnic relations to problematize the accepted notion of pure ethnic belonging. This is achieved through the perspective of the artist, Lara. In contrast to an aspect of New York that more or less coincides with the Irish condition of despair and helplessness, the lens of the artist comes to reformulate reality. Lara, a white New York painter and daughter of a multi-billionaire owner of a car empire, describes a traffic accident in which Corrigan and Jazzlyn die while driving back to the Bronx after the latter has been released from detention. The accident is partially started by Lara's husband, who, under the effect of drugs, hits Corrigan's van causing it to skid. The death scene, which becomes a turning point in Lara's life, is transformed into a piece of visual art in her eyes:

There is something that happens to the mind in the moments of terror.

Perhaps we figure it's the last we'll ever have and we record it for the rest of our long journey. We take perfect snapshots, an album to despair over. We trim the edges and place them in plastic. We tuck the scrapbook away to take out in our ruined times (116).

The picture of the accident is one of a few examples in which the attack on the Twin Towers is implied through the feeling of intense horror and dismay that follows a given catastrophe. In its direct context, however, the accident has two functions: on the one hand it represents a threshold which the two Bronx captives, Corrigan and Jazzlyn, cross to enter the wider New York setting. They publicly announce that they exist and suffer the city's inequality and indifference to justice. What they fall short of saying while alive, they communicate at their death via the artist's insight into their situation. On the other hand, the death scene leads Lara to undergo self-criticism when it abruptly interrupts the trend that she and her husband adopt by retreating to the twenties, and living in the style of an idealized period in US history. She exits the shell of the past and embraces the present to "take responsibility" for the tragedy that she has witnessed, trying after Jazzlyn's death to help her mother and daughters (117).

The development in Lara's character is triggered mainly by the bodies of the two victims, Corrigan and, in particular, Jazzlyn. From the moment Jazzlyn "[untucks] herself at the ankles" until she "[expresses] herself in a patch of blooming blood," she introduces Lara to a dimension of New York previously unknown to her, one of submission to and subjugation by a hegemonic reality. Lara perceives her as "calm. As if ready to accept" her fate (116). Yet, on a closer look, Jazzlyn's eyes seem more defiant and outspoken: "Her eyes travelled across mine as if asking, What are you doing, you tan blond bitch in your billowy blouse and your fancy Cotton Club car?" (117). The strong language with the repeated "b" sound reinforces a humiliating response from Jazzlyn producing noise of several beats that fall hard on Lara's conscience. Further, Lara makes a connection between her behaviour and US history by referring to a 1920s cabaret, the Cotton Club, which objectifies the black population and culture. The connection prompts a new self-awareness on the part of Lara, who considers herself a racist and determines to act against that by getting involved in the outcomes of the accident, seeking to discover the identity of the victims and showing solidarity with their relatives. Jazzlyn's body is, finally, important with regard to challenging the accepted racial classifications. Looking at Jazzlyn from a special angle, Lara sees both black and white shades on her skin. The description is, to an extent, eccentric or surreal as it indicates a rather pornographic posture of Jazzlyn lying down with her feet on the van's dashboard, but it is revealing,

... all I could see was a pair of bare feet propped up on the dashboard.

Untangling in slow motion. The bottoms of her feet were so white at the edges and so dark in their hollows that they could only have belonged to a black woman. (116)

A metonymic effect is seen in the lines above. Jazzlyn is recognized as a black woman from a part of her body that combines two contrasting colours in an image that can be used, alongside that of Treefrog and his grandfathers, to argue for the variability of ethnic identities. Analysis of McCann's cross-ethnic encounters in New York City cannot end without considering the relationship between Gloria and Claire. Gloria, a university-educated African American daughter of a sign painter marries a Civil Rights activist who leaves her to end up mother of three boys living on the top floor of a

decaying Bronx tenement. Claire, a white Upper East Side Harvard graduate mother of one boy, leads a lonely life married to a busy judge. The two women lose their sons in Vietnam. Their sorrow unites them in frequent meetings for mothers who have lost children in the war. An intimate friendship develops between the two women when they cooperate in raising Jazzlyn's orphaned daughters.

### The Tightrope Walker: A Higher Elevation

The part of Clarence Nathan's (Treefrog) life preceding his fall to the tunnels completes the picture of a character unbound by his surroundings that explores the possibilities of time and space and refuses to acknowledge the superimposed limits of New York on its inhabitants. His affection for elevations arises from a young man's hunger for dissent, not only from Harlem, but also from the corporate bodies that regulate the urban system. He defies both poles of the city, the upper with its luxury offices and the lower with its dirty slums. He wants, as "a man in motion towards the sky," to transcend the city as a whole and "go higher than any walking man in Manhattan" where "businessmen seem small and useless" (TSB: 187, 189). His affinity with heights takes him beyond real time, again, to a world of reflection similar to that he found in the tunnels. In both extremes he is detached from the accepted temporal measurement. While in the tunnels Treefrog unites with his past, on the skyscrapers he shakes off every obligation, and becomes master of himself: "for one single second he is absolutely free of everything, it is the purest moment, just him and the air" (190). The ascension implies divinity and can be absorbed in the mythological cyclical pattern, for Treefrog becomes similar to a god over the city which, seen from above, appears like random marks without particular resolution: "Manhattan becomes a blur of moving yellow taxis and dark silhouettes" (188).

The image of Treefrog on the skyscraper's highest point significantly re-defines New York's urban reality that is constituted of upper and lower worlds. Power and control are now being generated by somebody who has a family history in the city's underworld. Treefrog speaks for people of colour, deprived of social status and subjugated by those who normally occupy high spaces in the vertical city, to impose

their own terms that would strengthen their control over the city and its population. To use the terms of Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City," Treefrog on the top of the tall building is a "solar Eye, looking down like a god," keeping his distance from the urban system and transforming from a passive participant to a reader, a formulator, of the city that spreads down like a "text" to analyse and hence, manipulate (De Certeau 1988: 92). The city's upper world with Treefrog represented as a god is defined in mythological terms, a step away from the language of politics and economics which defines the gap between the rich and poor. Treefrog's Icarian elevation makes him a god who re-interprets the city and destabilizes the discrepancy between its upper and underworlds since both levels are now below his own, subject to his perspective. Treefrog on top of the tall building continues what his grandfather Nathan Walker initiated in the Hudson blowout: establishing a mythological order of authority and resurrection instead of the urban order of economic and political power. The mythological context helps forlorn characters acquire the self-definition they are denied in an urban system in which they are regarded as minor immigrant labourers. Simulation of the mythological context enables them to obtain freedom from the restraints imposed by the city and acquire self-definition as members of a culturally rich ethnic group that has to survive in a new land. Mythological references emancipate the human self from the urban captivating capitalistic order into a world of dreams and beauty.

The impact of ascension to a higher level than the rest of the city can be explained more fully in the account of the performance artist walking on a tightrope stretched between the two World Trade Centre towers, for McCann examines in some detail people's reaction on street level as they watch the artist's figure gliding in the air. The walk is based on the true story of Philippe Petit, a French tightrope walker who sneaked into the South Tower of the WTC in 1974 and discreetly attached a cable to the North Tower by a bow and arrow and, after spending more than thirty minutes walking on the stretched cable, was arrested by New York police on trespassing charges. The artist, like Treefrog, embodies the city's condition when the heights are occupied not by businessmen and urban planners, but by ordinary people, thus triggering the mythological cyclical pattern. While Treefrog on the tall building's top

remains in the shadows unnoticed by people on the ground, the tightrope walker is exposed to the entire public space. De Certeau's notion of the city as a text defined by the vision of the god mounting the one hundred and ten story building is realized in McCann's description of the street crowds looking up at the black figure on the edge of the roof about to embark on a mysterious action. The artist's appearance imposes awe among the watchers: "Those who saw him hushed" (3). He transforms them into passive stunned statues: "They found themselves in small groups together" in different spots on pavement corners and in building windows trying to secure the best view (4).

The sense of awe that dominates the viewers binds together dissonant social categories that show a common effort to try to comprehend the external force appearing in the sky. The crowd includes members of all social classes merged together without barriers:

Lawyers. Elevator operators. Doctors. Cleaners. Prep chefs. Diamond merchants. Fish sellers. Sad-jeaned whores. All of them reassured by the presence of one another. Stenographers. Traders. Delivery boys. Sandwichboard men. Cardshark. Con Ed. Ma Bell. Wall Street (4).

The city's investors and delivery boys are put in the same square of anticipation and apprehension, a case which blurs New York's boundaries between the upper-world's rich and underworld's poor populations. What temporarily shakes the stratified urban system is, arguably, the obscurity of the identity of the man above and the nature of his actions. He represents the unknown and feared outsider who intervenes in the city from an authoritative high position that enables him to modify street space: "The man above remained rigid, and yet his mystery was mobile" (Ibid). His mystery travels among the private stories of not only his viewers but also each recipient of the news of his walk, and is moulded distinctly into the life of each New Yorker.

The tightrope walker represents a supernatural phenomenon to New Yorkers. People who normally contribute to keeping the economic and political nerve of the urban system running are struck by an action that brings them to a state of numbed disbelief. While trying to understand the mystery of the man, they accommodate him

to aspects of their own lives; thus, they endow the rather supernatural phenomenon with the flavour of the ordinary and the everyday. This fusion between the extraordinary and the ordinary is comparable to the fusion between reality and imagination in McCann's writings when mythological symbolism emerges from everyday landscape or cityscape elements. In addition to the way that Petit echoes De Certeau's presumption of the god-like position, the mythological dimension is sparked from the overlap of the tightrope with the image of a river, which appears in McCann's earlier work as a motif generating resurrection and connection. For the stunned onlookers "the waiting had been made magical, and they watched as he lifted one dark-slippered foot, like a man about to enter warm gray water" (7). He steps on the cable as if he is delving into a river that not only connects the two towers together, but also all New Yorkers, and the separate chapters of the novel. The river metaphor echoes the horizontal span that symbolically connects the old parents in Ireland with their children abroad in "Fishing the Sloe-Black River," and the vertical dimension that gives resurrection to Fergus in the Celtic Otherworld, and to Nathan Walker in the Hudson.

The tightrope walker, thus, with the help of the narrative structure, more explicitly than other symbols, shows the function of myth for both desolate and fortunate New Yorkers. Each chapter conveys the influence of the funambulist's act on a particular character or group of characters and reveals how the artist's myth impacts upon people's different desires. Corrigan, the Irish priest, believes that he has seen God when he catches sight of the artist between the towers while driving Jazzlyn back from the court hearing. This overwhelming thought leads him to lose control of his van at the moment of the collision with the painter's car. The incident stresses the presence of the artist in the city as a force that controls people's life and death. In contrast to that, the artist offers consolation to the five women who meet to mourn their sons' deaths in the war. They seem, for a while, merrily unified around Marcia as she explains to them the miracle she has seen between the towers while on her way to Claire's house; Claire is the only woman who hates the artist as he delays the conversation about her late son's skills and courage. Further, the artist foreshadows the future for the group of young hackers who work on developing the Arpanet. This

group of young men represents the aspiration of technological science to create an innovative electronic space, a nascent type of the internet that is meant to transform human life and revolutionize concepts of time and space. From Los Angeles, they follow the walk through a live phone streaming in a call to one of the spectators who answered a nearby public phone the number of which they have dialled. The telephone live streaming of the walk between the American east and west is a proof of the success of the Arpanet developers and the promise of their work.

### A City without a Past

The artist's performance is closely examined by Judge Soderberg in relation to the New York urban setting. The judge, through his knowledgeable vision, regards the walk as a part of the city's capitalistic experience. What amazes Judge Soderberg about the funambulist is his incarnation of the city's spirit of temporariness, existence only in the present time at the expense of the past. The artist constructs a unique New York monument that lasts only for the period of the performance, which makes him fit perfectly in the city's spirit that expunges any witness to its past. This position of living in the present moment arises from the capitalist belief in time as an asset whose value is guaranteed as far as it gains profit. Time has been employed directly to serve the needs of markets ever since the standardization of time into what is called railway time in the nineteenth century; the development culminates in the use of electronic technology to inspect the "future movement of the markets rather than the markets themselves" (Tallack 1991: 13, Rochlin 1997: 77). In vertical cities, time, space, labour, production and commerce, are all exploited to achieve growth; hence, commemorating historical events is undesirable as it halts the influx of the capital into the future. New York's prevailing economic character makes its existence dependent on the markets, on the value of a particular commodity in the future. From this viewpoint, Judge Soderberg observes, the tightrope walker expresses himself in perfect transitory New York style: "He had made himself into a statue, but a perfect New York one, a temporary one, up in the air, high above the city. A statue that had no regard for the past" (248). New York is committed to creating and possessing the future; it is constantly facing forward with no regard to the path it has taken or the

history it has gone through, because “... no body felt a need to lay claim to history. Why bother? You couldn’t eat a statue. You couldn’t screw a monument. You couldn’t wring a million dollars out of a piece of brass” (248). This is, in Soderberg’s opinion, why “out-of-the-ordinary” images, crimes, terrors, or scenes of beauty “happened, and re-happened” in New York (247). Its forward-oriented motion prevents it from bypassing any disaster and makes it a city of the extraordinary.

Soderberg clings, albeit with difficulty, to his belief in the promise of the urban system. He seems to be undergoing an internal conflict between faith in the experience of modernity and awareness of its decay, which is clear everywhere around the city, either in the poverty of the lower class, or in the loss of youth in Vietnam, a major crisis in *Let the Great World Spin* that underlies the twenty-first century terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre. McCann juxtaposes those two major crises in a subtle insight on the real continuity between the past and present, a point that New York works hard to evade. Soderberg’s own son is one of the men lost in Vietnam. The young man, Josh, develops a program called the “Death Hack” to store the names of dead soldiers and later becomes a code in his own design (88). Losing his son makes Soderberg question the virtue of war, but then he reverts back to his self-assuring belief in the national dimension of war: “And yet sometimes he wanted to agree with Claire that war was just an endless factory of death; it made other men rich... Still it was not something he could afford to think of” (263). Contrary to his wife, who has a Brechtian anti-war attitude when she wishes that her son had never participated, Soderberg chooses to believe in war’s validity, justice and patriotism.

In addition to poverty and war, destruction in the experience of modernity is reflected architecturally in the cityscape where existing areas are wiped out to be replaced by new bigger constructions. The World Trade Centre as the epitome of global trade in Lower Manhattan is evidence of the island’s history of “violence and displacement” which has been going on since its foundation in the seventeenth century (Flowers 2009: 148). Manhattan’s urban development has been neither “peaceful nor orderly” with slave deaths and slave riots, several fires and the bombing of Wall Street, an early twentieth-century terrorist attack that preceded 9/11 (Ibid

152-3). The World Trade Centre exemplifies this dynamic of construction on top of ruins, for it “rose on a site cleared by a mighty wave of demolition justified by the imperative to develop land to its most profitable use” (Ibid: 153). The construction site of the World Trade Centre was “a death knell for a whole community and way of life” because increasing profit and power involved destroying minor businesses in order to centralize and augment the profit (Ibid 154). Judge Soderberg reflects on this pattern of demolition and construction, celebrating the promise of change: “In place of the shysters, the Port Authority had built two towering beacons high in the clouds. The glass reflected the sky, the night, the colors: progress, beauty, capitalism” (248). Economic control makes it essential to keep in constant pursuit of the future, progress and profit, not threatened by nostalgia for the past. In the judge’s view, the victory of the artist resides in his ability to be like a New York monument that is resonant because it does not choose to stay for long.

### Mythological Temporality

The artist transcends the urban order as portrayed in the inter-chapters that describe the walk as a liberation from capitalistic linear time. He represents a subversive force in the urban system, and hence, foreshadows the destruction caused by the 9/11 attacks. He symbolically subverts the financial aspect of the city whereas the exploding planes thirty years later actually demolished the towers. The funambulist’s symbolism here is revealing in terms of the response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Sinead Moynihan argues that McCann’s novel challenges the accepted notion that trauma represents a “rupture” between the past and the future; that what follows the attacks is separate from the city’s history (Moynihan 2012: 270). She draws on Ruth Mackay’s analysis of *Man on Wire* (2008), a documentary about Philippe Petit’s cable walk in 1974. Mackay’s interpretation of the film relates the artist’s walk to the later terrorist destruction of the towers (Ibid: 282). Even though Mackay classifies *Let the Great World Spin* as a text which “distinguishes between creation and destruction,” Moynihan has a contrasting opinion, that the novel highlights the point that undoing the authority of the urban system is a common aim for art and fundamentalism even if each follows a different means to achieve that end

(282). Indeed the artist's account in McCann's novel ends the existence of the towers once. Their second actual demolition becomes, in a way, less important as it has already been metaphorically achieved. The artist sees the towers as his nemesis in the part of the narrative relating his training. Hints of the cunningness of the artist are found in his practice of magic tricks, identifying the age of totally confounded businessmen for example (239, 240). Moreover, many a time the artist seems to be engulfed in a confrontation with the towers, such as the one revealed in the reference to the harm caused by vertical lighted buildings to the migrating birds. The artist hangs in his cottage a feather of a migrating bird killed after colliding with the tower glass when its natural navigation gift is damaged by the bright electric lights of the modern metropolis. The feather is "another reminder" for the artist of the choice he has made; he shall not be defeated, become another bird. The artist indeed relates to the city's past as well as its future. In the same way he anticipates and even warns about the attacks, he echoes the past revealed in the other novel, *This Side of Brightness*. Thinking of the tightrope walker beyond the 9/11 context draws him closer to Walker senior in the tunnels and his fellow immigrants. The artist speaks for New York's underworld population and, like Treefrog the builder, subverts the social structure. His engagement with the element of time shows that the city's relentless aspiration for the future without heeding any attention to the past is a self-destructive strategy that results in annihilation.

While the judge associates the tightrope walker with the city's characteristic of living in the present, the viewpoint in the inter-chapters describing his training and performance suggests that the artist, rather than adopting New York's temporal experience, first, is strongly rooted in the past and, second, goes beyond time to escape its grip. The artist emerges from a past experience that makes him feel like an immigrant who has left something behind and is ready to embrace a different reality. On his arrival in New York he feels like an "ancient immigrant" who has "stepped onto new shores" (161). Philippe Petit himself, in his autobiographical book on the adventure, *To Reach the Clouds* (2002), makes clear that the choice to leave his motherland is due to his desire for new discoveries: "I'm tired of the French," he states; "The zeal of the Parisian police and the constant wet and cold have curtailed

my street performances so drastically that I decide to try New York City” (Petit 2008: 10). The theme of emigration surfaces once again, this time involving a different kind of emigrant, one in pursuit, not of a few crusts of bread, but of something no less than the victory of making human history, exceeding the “limit of what a man could do” (LGWS 161).

The tightrope walker reverses the image of New York as a city which takes advantage of its citizens; he exploits the city, uses its monuments to satisfy his own selfish desire: “There was an arrogance in it, he knew, but on the wire the arrogance became survival” (240). Up in the air, he is fighting for his own life against the urban environment which diminishes around him. He is completely free from everything around him, space, time and people. He is surrounded only by a void which is shaped according to his action. The artist is “indulging in what it meant to belong to the air, no future, no past, and this gave him the offhand vaunt of his walk” (164). Philippe Petit in recounting his own walk describes the time spent on the cable as a “cyclic path,” “a mythological journey” (Petit 2008: 179). When in the novel’s opening the people on the street first catch sight of the artist in front of the roof’s railing, he appears to them as a god, evoking by that the mythological context of circular time. Passers-by see the artist like a god entering a river. A further narrative view takes the artist to a world in which there is no time: “The logic became unfixed. It was the point where there was no time. The wind was blowing and his body could have experienced it years in advance” (241). The presumption echoes Jorge Luis Borges’s essay “A Refutation of Time” (1944) in which he denies temporal succession and thinks of time as separate moments. The possibility of evoking a past moment one has gone through, replicating it and reliving it, denies the passage of time. The artist’s manipulation of time while performing high above the city numbs the rapid motion of the urban surroundings. He exists, like Yeats’s Byzantine artifice, outside nature to relate stories of prosperous and vanishing civilizations. He seems to comment on New York’s entrapment in a linear passage of time in which everything awaits a looming end. Exiting this linear order leads to a better self-recognition.

The tightrope act which takes the artist outside time acquires a revolutionary notion if set against the rather apocalyptic feature of time in McCann’s works seen in

the Irish Troubles and in New York's capitalistic ethos. The constructive aspect of time is usually found through withdrawal to a mythological cyclical pattern that diverts the advance to a dead end. In the Irish and American settings, mythological references are used to evoke new beginnings. Sheona and her sister Brigid devour their childhood memories of pastoral Ireland when they find themselves in the barren land of exile, while Fergus in the Liffey and Clarence Walker in the Hudson use the reviving power of water to acquire a new life. Outside those mythological excursions, there seems to be only annihilation, a prevalent motif in *Everything in This Country Must* where the Irish social divisions cause either death or disability to its population. In New York's temporal context, characterized by speed and the desire to control the future, it is a rebellious heroic achievement to escape time. The artist does that by bearing the quality of a mythical god overlooking the city, but also by breaking free of the flow of time, whether mythological/cyclical or urban/linear.

#### Cyclical Motifs in Performance

The tightrope walker during the performance high up on the cable does some dance movements – “He lifted his leg. ... Leg held high for drama” – copying the same stance as Nathan Walker performing the crane dance to Eleanor on their wedding morning: “Walker winks at Eleanor as he stands on one foot and stretches out his arms” (*LGWS* 242, *TSB* 77). The metaphor of the dancing crane is one more channel that links the urban space to mythology. New York is a vertical city in which antagonism between upper and lower levels is stressed. Mythological/cyclical motifs create a continuity and interdependence between heavenly and earthly elements. The concept of the world-axis does not divide the sky and earth but links them. Mythological allusions that invoke this pattern are recurrent in McCann's texts as the discussion reveals in a few places. The crane bird metaphor, in contrast to cranes as modern machinery used in knocking down and constructing parts of the modern metropolis, brings nature to the foreground of McCann's urban space. Elements of nature advance from the Irish and Southern American settings to saturate with spirituality the global capital of finance.

Nostalgia for the primordial stage of human civilization can be seen again in the reference to cranes which are significant mythological birds that appear in different mythologies including the Greek and the Chinese (Johnsgard 1983). Walker's engagement with the crane dance arises from his childhood in Georgia where those birds lived around swamp Okefenokee where he used to spend his time. Besides Walker, Louisa, his daughter in law, performs the crane dance after the murder of her husband, Clarence Walker. The father, Walker senior, regrets that his son died before seeing a single crane; Louisa starts to recall her childhood memories of the migrating cranes that depart and return annually in a seasonal cycle that resembles the turns they make while dancing. Imitating the birds' movements, she "dances, hands outstretched, arms in a whirl, feet back and forth, the most primitive of movements, dissolving beyond the boundaries of her body" (149). The mythological motif is formed as a kind of performance art. The circular movements of the crane dance are associated with the "sun's seasonal movements," with its implications of life and death (Johnsgard 1983: 73). The association between the crane dance ritual and the sun god echoes the celestial dimension in McCann's short stories where the "world-axis" represents an open passage between earth and sky. The axis evokes the thought of cosmic expansion as a home for the self, eradicating all political, religious, economic and geographical fabricated measures. It calls for a belonging which transcends man-made borders and lives up to a utopian world which embraces all being.

The transition in depicting the crane from a sinking bird, as Treefrog sees it diving into the depth of the water, to a migrating dancing bird as Louisa remembers it, is telling in terms of McCann's method of allowing space for mythological allusions amid urban scenes. The opening of *This Side of Brightness* involves a transformation of a goose or a heron, frozen in the Hudson River, into an image of a crane in Treefrog's mind, establishing the mythological context right from the start: "He knew it must have been a goose or a heron, but he decided that it was a crane. ... He peered down at the water's surface and imagined the ancient ornamental beak" (1). Treefrog keeps throwing bricks around the bird to liberate it from the ice and give it a chance to flow with the river despite his awareness that the bird will drown on the riverbed again. The picture early on sets the overarching tension of the mythological context against

the urban setting. That the bird occupies the earthly and the celestial, like the swans in “Cathal’s Lake,” suggests a link between high and low spheres.

This continuity between upper and lower cosmic elements is reiterated in a song that features in both of McCann’s New York novels. Tillie, one of the sex workers in *Let the Great World Spin*, recalls a blues song while she is in prison after her daughter, Jazzlyn, dies in the car crash with Corrigan: “Big Bill Broonzy’s got a song I like, but I don’t like to listen to it: *I’m down so low, baby, I declare I’m looking up at down*” (218). The line suggests that Tillie is at the extreme of misery, at the lowest point possible; the suffering takes her even below the standard “down” so when she hopes to be lifted one or two levels up, the cap for her elevation remains in the lower part. “Looking up at down,” however, implies a difficulty in distinguishing any genuine difference between high and low levels: one can see what is up by looking down and vice versa. The two sides are merged into one. Nathan Walker, in the earlier novel, is found to be singing the same song in Harlem with his grandchild’s family; Treefrog recalls, “We was so happy sitting there on the stoop that we went changed the words and we were singing: Lord I’m so high-up I believe I’m looking down at up” (210). Treefrog contemplates the aesthetics of the picture stripped of any personal or social binds: “Which is one of the things I always do find myself thinking about. Looking up at down and looking down at up. I never heard nicer than that, no matter which way you believe it” (Ibid). Treefrog admires the beauty of the image as it places him in the centre of an axis the upper and lower parts of which are identical.

With an implied cyclical motion, the image completes a set of narrative images that try to subvert the polarity between New York’s distinct upper and lower classes by shifting the focus from the divided social context to an integral cosmic context. The vertical dimension in the song is related to the mythological belief of the world-axis, the centre of all being, which is considered by different nations to be located in a central spot of their land. The concept, in one respect, generates national and racial discrimination in terms of defining centre and periphery; it is the only meaningful centre and anybody who does not belong to it is worthless or an enemy. Still, the world axis bears the connotation that “each part [of one’s country is] an image of the whole and vice versa” (Michell 1994: 13). The meaning of the “whole” here may be

the nation but also may be the whole universe which encompasses all life, thus evading the trap of prejudice and discrimination. Moreover, believing in the world axis illuminates a spiritual path to realize and be in complete harmony with oneself:

When we discover that centre, as a people or within ourselves, we can draw upon divine guidance from above and imaginative inspiration from below the earth's surface. In that situation, personally, geographically and symbolically centred, one is at the hub of the universe and perfectly balanced to receive its full range of influences. Anyone who is thus centred is ... in the esoteric sense only, King of the World, that mystical figure whose kingdom can be founded in the heart of any individual. ... He is the complete, perfected image of oneself. (Ibid 14)

The trope of verticality in New York does not stop at examining the condition of the poor and homeless through their struggle for existence against investors and decision makers. It goes beyond delineating and modifying social reality to suggest a psychological dimension in which the human self is in harmony with the universe.

This vertical axis echoes the concept of the world navel that, as seen in the Chapter 1, emanates from Celtic Cross symbolism. The central axis becomes a metaphorical space sought in order to secure accordance between the self and the nation, or the race and the world. Finding this world-navel motif through examining the lives of desolate people reveals a possibility to transcend narrow surroundings and embrace the horizons of oneself. New York space, architecture and urban planning mirror the tension of oppression and rebellion that involves each of the tunnel diggers, tunnel dwellers, skyscraper construction workers along with high society urban regulators. Mythological allusions are an alternative world that characters invoke in order to break free from urban rigidity and fixed standards. The novels open the door for a mythological verticality characterized, in essence, by a continuum between heaven and the underworld. The mythological context highlights the significance of seeking the world-centre imagined as an axis containing traits of the sky and earth.

## Conclusions

New York City in the two texts discussed in this chapter undergoes a crisis that affects the lives of the population. The twentieth century's accelerating modernization, which generates both prosperity and destruction, represents one aspect of the city's crisis. The second aspect is reflected in the indirect subject of *Let the Great World Spin*, the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre. New Yorkers suffer from racist segregation and class hierarchy as well as from melancholy and loss. In this lies the importance of McCann's representation of the city which in essence celebrates the promise of change for the inhabitants. The epigraph from Barthelme's story "The Balloon" suggests that people are fascinated by an object spreading in the city because of its flexibility and resilience which provides a chance for change so valuable to people who are confined to rigid patterns regularized by economic and political authorities. McCann's texts grasp the same feature of transformation apparent in the epigraph but differ from it in how they explain the transformation's origin. The difference for McCann is in the driving force of transformation considered by Barthelme to be found in arbitrariness. For McCann, it emerges from the mythological motif.

The vertical dimension rooted in mythological thought provides the antithesis of New York's phallic architecture that reflects the control of capital by hosting the upper class in elevated spaces and keeping the lower classes neglected in scattered neighbourhoods. The incidents of the rising sandhogs from the Hudson, Treefrog up on the skyscrapers and then down in the tunnels, and the funambulist on the wire in the air all rewrite the relationship between high and low parts of the city. The idea of resurrection from the underworld, life after death, is strongly present to Nathan Walker and his fellow diggers, ascending like gods from the city's bowels, and also with Walker's grandson, Treefrog, living in the tunnels for four years before reconciling with his past in order to be able to embrace life again after a long interval. The other function of the higher elevation is seen with Treefrog working in skyscraper construction and with the performance art act between the two towers. Treefrog and

the artist acquire a capacity to modify the urban space below them aided by their own panoptic vision. Beneath Treefrog, businessmen shrink and dilute in the city's motion and beneath the artist they merge with delivery boys in the same reaction of awe. Upper and lower worlds are linked by a cyclical flow derived from mythological possibility to move between life and death, heavenly and abysmal worlds. Through the mythological approach to New York's reality, hierarchies rooted in ethnicity and class are undermined, and change in the city is achieved, at least on a spiritual dimension.

The mythological vertical axis invokes the belief in the world centre. This is telling in terms of New York being a cosmopolitan city, one of the world's financial centres and for a long time one of the busiest immigration centres. This makes it a world city from an economic perspective where global movement of capital controls the urban space and shapes people's positions and mentality. Bringing forth the mythological world centre presents a strong antithesis to economic globalization; the centre maintains a world expansion independent from the monetary context, introducing by that a significant comment on human's conceptions of the sense of place. The novel's characters revolve around a utopian cosmic centre, the source of the tree of life, which annihilates aspects of urban injustice. New Yorkers want to belong to that place, the "symbol of the continuous creation," of continuous change and renewal (Campbell 19661:41). Affiliation with the world centre also presents a counter discourse to divisions in the city, for belonging is no longer measured ethnically, economically or religiously, or even nationally; it is measured cosmically. People who associate themselves with the cosmic centre see New York as a massive canvas on which they paint their lives with the colours of their own bodies. They also see it as an open stage on which to perform their creative acts to the public. Art is idealized alongside cosmopolitan identity. The next chapter picks up from this point to examine the function of art and the artist in the Eastern European setting where the recognized crisis is totalitarianism.

## Chapter Three

### Eastern and Central Europe: Exile, Heroism and the Aesthetics of Motion in *Zoli and Dancer*

Savages dance ceaselessly the Revels of the Night.

Arthur Rimbaud "Cities (1)", *Selected Verse and Prose Poems*

Whoever we are, passing through our bodies at all times, is a map of the entire universe.

Phil Smith, *On Walking*

## Introduction

McCann's diverse settings enable the reader to view the shared theme of breaking historical obligations imposed by social traditions or economic systems from different geographical locations. In trying to map McCann's settings, one does not end up with physically independent spaces, rather with one spatial mass lined by multiple two-way-routes that reflect a flow of human migration, with no clear-cut discernible internal boundaries. Ireland and countries of the Irish diaspora are spatially and culturally interconnected. Ireland is the outbound terminus of a travel route that sometimes takes the classical westward direction to the US. The return trip to Ireland is often sought and sometimes achieved, as in the novel *Transatlantic* (2013), firstly, by the famous landing of the first transatlantic flight in the Irish bogs, and secondly, by the return of a second-generation Irish-American journalist to her motherland after a long time spent in North America and Europe. Another less well-known connection

between Ireland and Eastern Europe is embodied in McCann's semi-biographical accounts of two artists: the Russian ballet dancer, Rudolph Nureyev, and the Romani poet Pappas, whose nonconformity in their own societies turned them into exiles. The novels, *Dancer* (2003) and *Zoli* (2006), which depict these two artists, are the focus of this chapter.

These two characters, Zoli and Rudi, exemplify McCann's vision of the artist's defiance of the reality of exile. My discussion looks at the character of the artist who is rejected by his/her own people as the primary expression of McCann's tendency to challenge different sorts of geographical, economic or political boundaries. Critics have so far tended to study Zoli and Rudi as two exotic elements in McCann's fiction, in contrast to the ordinary people in the Irish and American contexts. While studies frame McCann's novels as examinations of the other, my approach aims to introduce each of the protagonists as "a" human being, rather than an "other" human being. This allows, I contend, for more attention on the protagonist as an entity independent from subjective judgements. I start my analysis by highlighting the contrasts between the two protagonists, Zoli and Rudi, and their social, historical and political surroundings. In the first section, I argue that Zoli is confronted by two kinds of social obstacles, the first coming from her Roma ethnicity and the second from the communist government. I consider her poetic practice when she is a political activist aiming to improve the living conditions of the Roma as an early and incomplete expression of the self. Only when she is expelled by her own people, I contend, is her self-awareness complete, which makes it possible for her true talent to emerge. Then I show that the art form through which Zoli realizes herself is walking, an act that, I will argue, engages both the physical and the intellectual, or spiritual, dimensions of the human being. In the section that examines *Dancer*, I follow a similar organization, focusing, first, on Rudi's private conflict as the youngest child in a poor family with a rigid father, then on his social conflict in the context of communist Russia. I will show that Rudi's dancing on the world's stages constitutes an abstract state of belonging to an idea, or more specifically, to an artistic act, that blends the private with the public, the local with the international and the physical with the spiritual. By analysing the symbol of the first dancer, the Hindu god Shiva, I trace Rudi's dancing to mythological

roots. I then relate the mythological aspect of his dance to the all-encompassing cosmopolitan belonging symbolized by the world-axis examined in the previous chapters. The final part of the chapter will be dedicated to re-evaluating Zoli and Rudi's achievements as heroic. By examining their characters against the evolution of the hero from epic to modern times, I will conclude that they represent a heroism that bridges the gap between art and the everyday.

## ***Zoli***

### Constraints of a Romani origin

Home and belonging, concepts that underlie displacement in McCann's Irish and American works can hardly be more radically approached than they are in his Eastern European novel *Zoli* which takes the Roma, a community of nomads, as its subject. The text's unconventionality arises from the choice of the nomadic tribes as the material of fiction as they have no home or state, hence present a special case when it comes to origins and abode. The Romani people were originally armies from India formed of several non-Aryan lower class populations, some of whom have no Indian roots, recruited by the Aryan Hindu rulers to fight against Muslim expansion in the north of India in the early decades of the eleventh century. Failing to stop the Muslim leaders who became the new rulers of that area, these armies fled India and headed north-west, acquiring on the way a distinct ethnic identity, incorporating new members, and losing others who left to assimilate with other communities. Finally they reached Europe where they have become in recent centuries "a continuum of distinct ethnic groups constituting a larger whole" (Hancock 2004: 14-18). The novel's structure resembles the nature of their existence, even though the book is less bifurcated than some of McCann's other works, for it involves a more or less consistent plotline. This is because the book consists of separate parts that vary in the

time and place in which they are set. They also vary in voice and focus; nevertheless, the different sections remain connected as they all trace aspects of Zoli's character. The protagonist's tale is based on the real life of Pampusza, a self-educated Roma poet whose literacy broke one of her community's rules. Through her poetry, singing and dancing she epitomizes McCann's inclination to see art as a power opposing the accepted socio-political conventions. The life of Marienka Novotna, known as Zoli, is a record of challenges against fascism, her people's traditions and communism. She tells her story to her daughter, who grows up to be a human rights activist in Paris, the story of a woman's struggle for independence. She finds freedom only over limited stages in her life, remaining at other stages torn apart, seeking help whether offered to her by an Irish journalist or a Czechoslovakian poet, or an Italian husband.

As a Slovakian-Romani woman, Zoli grows up amid atrocities against her ethnicity and against her gender. This double oppression, as shown below, impacts upon her character and shapes her future confrontation of the crises she passes through during her adulthood. Zoli's story starts when she is six years of age emerging with her grandfather from a mass murder that killed the rest of her family. The hideous massacre early on in the novel connects the public and private aspects of Zoli's life which is permanently affected by this catastrophe. A group of Hlinka guards – militants from the Czechoslovakian army who were in power during the Fascist control in Europe in the 1930s and early 1940s – drive the Roma camp to the centre of a frozen lake by which they are settled and light a ring of fire around the horrified unarmed families, leaving them to sink through the melting ice and drown. The old man and his granddaughter survive only because they have been away travelling for three days before they "came back to silence" (15). Zoli marks the tragedy as the beginning of her life-story as she narrates it to her daughter:

I did not see any of it happen, daughter, but I could hear it in my mind and, although there was great music to come along later, sweet-sounding moments when our people were raised up and strong and valued, that will always be a time of looking backwards, listening and waiting for my dead family to catch up (Ibid).

These lines present two main dimensions of Roma history: one depicts their plight through ethnic cleansing and racism and the other records their rise to a plateau of relief, achieving under the Communist government some degree of social recognition. McCann, distressed by the fact that there is merely “one single ‘Gypsy’ story” for an internally diverse population of twelve million, states that *Zoli* is a social novel which addresses recent examples of the oppression that the Roma have undergone throughout their history.<sup>1</sup> This general stereotypical prejudice against them as ‘Other’ has led to various aspects of subjugation, whether in the enslavement in feudal principalities around present day Romania from the middle ages until the mid-nineteenth century, or in the different kinds of persecution under the Nazis (Fonseca 1995: 177). According to the racial classification of pseudo-scientists, the Roma would either be deprived of their citizenship, sterilized – if they were women – or deported to concentration camps (Ibid: 258, 259). Throughout their history, they have been judged as “congenital criminals” (Ibid: 247). They have been subject to prejudice that emerges from hatred which is full of fear, like that felt “for the Bedouin, the heretic, the philosopher, the solitary, the poet” or any voice which deviates from the accepted social norms or political currents, as Gustav Flaubert reflected on a visit to a Gypsy camp (qtd in Hancock 2004, 12).

Alongside this public concern with the Roma as an ethnic group, the novel also focuses on Zoli as a poet. Zoli’s character is based on the real life of Papusza, a Polish-Romani poet, who took a sceptical attitude towards the unquestioned “truths” that her people preserved over centuries. She transgressed social limits, first by being self-educated at a time when Roma women were meant to remain illiterate, and second by collaborating with a *gadjo*, or a non-Roma, the Polish poet Jerzy Ficowski. The latter came to meet Papusza while conducting research on the Polish Roma. In his wanderings, he lived for a while with Papusza’s Roma cluster, recognized her talent and contributed in cultivating her lyrical poems and transcribing them. Ficowski, who was a communist activist, published Papusza’s poetry in a magazine called *Problemy* in 1950, then in a book that takes the Polish Roma as its subject matter to direct

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<sup>1</sup> Colum McCann and Laura McCaffrey, *Zoli* interview: Q&A with Laura McCaffrey <<http://colummccann.com/interviews/zoli-interview-qa-with-laura-mccaffrey>> [June 2016].

attention to their plight and improve their conditions. After the appearance of her poems in a book by an outsider, the Roma accused Papusza of disclosing their secrets and betraying their loyalty to oral culture. They deemed her irreversibly “unclean” and expelled her from the group to live “alone and in isolation” until her death in 1987 (Fonseca 1995: 3-9).

McCann uses Papusza’s double confrontation with her people and with communist activists, as the discussion below will show, to draw traits of a heroic character in his novel. “From a Romani point of view,” McCann remarks in an interview with Michael Hayes, “what she does is extraordinary, and, I hope, true. She forges her own identity. She fights through, not back. And then it becomes a personal song of triumph.”<sup>2</sup> Her achievement crowns a two-fold strife defending the artist against her community and her community against the centres of political power, in this case, the Nazis and communists. McCann considers that Zoli’s “song of triumph” is represented in the written poem inserted independently between the chapter describing her married life in Northern Italy and the chapter narrating her visit to Paris to participate in an international conference for displaced people. The poem admires the Roma way of life which is intrinsically related to nature, and condemns and laments the ethnic cleansing against that group carried out by the Nazis in WWII. Her triumph as the novel’s protagonist stretches from childhood, when her grandfather, Stanislaus, names her Zoli, “a boy’s name, after his first son,” instead of the little girl’s original name, Marienka, until old age when she starts singing her songs in Paris (20). Along with the scene where she cuts her long braids and hides them in a pillow, having a masculine name completes her crossing of gender boundaries, which represents an early sign of the radical life to follow. Stanislaus further shapes Zoli’s life by sending her to school to get an education, something that her female peers are never given. Stanislaus plants in his granddaughter the seed of independence, by convincing her that “No matter what... it is [her] choice” (39). In the poet’s true story, she is self-taught. She asks an old woman who owns a shop to teach her the alphabet, and then continues by herself to improve her reading and writing skills. McCann’s version varies

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<sup>2</sup> Colum McCann and Michael Hayes, Zoli Interview: Q&A with Michael Hayes  
<<http://colummccann.com/interviews/zoli-interview-qa-with-michael-hayes/>> [March 2015].

from the poet's true story, for Zoli is taught here by her grandfather. This variation is an important call against stereotyping the Gypsies, for here is an educated man, passionate communist and a reader of Marx, who breaks a community taboo and urges his granddaughter to learn. He also notices her talent for creating songs and encourages her: when Zoli complains that a friend's voice is more beautiful than hers, she absorbs her grandfather's wisdom: "the important thing was the right word, to pull it out, or squeeze it short, and then dress it up with air from my lungs" (34). With words, indeed, Zoli records her complex life. Through songs, she first documents different chapters of her adulthood with the kumpanija – the music group that constitutes Zoli's immediate community – from roaming the forests and visiting different cities in their nomadic travels, and revealing their suffering as a marginal and rejected ethnic group in Europe, to celebrating their love and unity with nature.

Songs, thus, represent an important expression of Zoli's attitudes toward her people as well as the government. Her radical nature indeed is not organized in a purposeful agenda; that is, a clear plan of her actions is difficult to define. She is satisfied neither by the Roma's traditions nor by the communist's compulsive call for assimilation. She resists both forces, yet fails to escape or undermine either of them. At this stage of her life, before exile, her thoughts are expressed in poetry, but are not translated into specific actions that liberate her from the overwhelming authority of the Roma or the government. Being limited to a verbal expression and lacking action is likely the reason why Richard Eder suggests that "[Zoli's] story does not convey a character so much as a passion" (Eder 2007).<sup>3</sup> Eder's remark is meant to describe Zoli's life-story that she later told to her grown-up daughter. Eder focuses on the story's plotline rather than its symbolic significance. I intend to analyse Zoli's behaviour in a number of situations from her communist fight for a better life for "minorities," to her reaction to expulsion from her group, to her later visit to her daughter in Paris. My reading shows that Zoli undertakes self-formulating and liberating acts, the most important of which is walking. For now, the focus remains on the songs which are a crucial part of Zoli's intellect. The two communist activists, journalist Swann and poet

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Eder, (2007) "Ultimate Exile: A Gypsy Poet Expelled by Her People," in *New York Times* <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/08/books/08eder.html>> [January 2015].

Stransky, urge her to develop her gift and write poetry instead of orally composing lyrics to be sung. The English-born half-Slovakian, half-Irish journalist, Swann, describes Zoli's relationship with songs she used to perform with the *kumpanija* and their evolution to written poetry:

[T]he songs were what mattered, the old ballads that had been around for decades, and she was only shaping the music so they'd be passed along to others. She was surprised to find new words at her fingertips and when the whole new songs began to emerge, she thought they must have existed before, that they had come to her from somewhere ancient (93).

Zoli makes an effort to carve her crude talent into a refined work of art. Her poetic creativity at first emanates from mobility in nature for the basic purpose of survival. The training she gets from Stransky helps her shape the verse in a more cultivated manner. Further, the knowledge she obtains from extensive reading and from participating in urban cultural life including theatre and art galleries endows her with a more sophisticated vision. Still, the words of her songs seem pure and old, as if untouched by contemporary conditions.

This continuity reflects the complex view of art on the relationship between the past and the present. McCann is arguably idealizing an old state of living as well as recognizing the importance of the past in shaping the present. Zoli's song reflects the literate culture that performs the paradoxical duty of preserving and renewing the Roma heritage. She acknowledges writing and wants her community to do the same: "It is our revolutionary right to reclaim the written word" (65). At the same time, she gives speeches at public political meetings to persuade officials to abandon the campaign of assimilation that will potentially deprive the Roma of their identity. The natural setting surrounding the Roma sustains their primitive life as travellers who are "meant for skies not ceilings" (23).<sup>4</sup> Zoli's Gypsy upbringing in the 1930s and 1940s in

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<sup>4</sup>Modern life is often represented as an enemy that threatens the free and peaceful sense of belonging to moving caravans, outside the reach of the binding concept of the nation state which imposes a limited identity on citizens. The direct contact with nature that inspires Zoli's songs echoes the Irish folk tales mentioned in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* through characters such as Fergus, Brigid, or Cathal. A similar paradigm of primitive culture takes the urban setting in the New York novels a step backwards to a mythical world of gods and nature in which no steel or stock market count.

Czechoslovakia plays an important role, as I have shown, in shaping her political identity and artistic creation; yet, it is only after she is expelled that she reflects on her inherited traditions and political views. Her exile, as the following discussion will show, is the crucial factor in shaping her experience, achievement and identity.

### Communist Ventures

Zoli, in comparison to characters in the American setting, seems to be taking a reverse step: leaving nature to face the challenges of the “civilized” world. This tendency is observed in the period stretching between the end of the Second World War and Zoli’s banishment from her community. During that time, Zoli follows the communist revolutionary spirit ingrained in her by Stanislaus. Indeed, following the Nazi’s criminal record, communism promises the salvation that all vulnerable classes yearn for, and this is the reason why Zoli’s kumpanija support that radical direction: “The only thing that seemed right was change,” Stanislaus states, “and the only thing that would bring change was good and right and red, we had suffered so long at the feet of the fascists” (60). He makes clear that the symbolism of the communist red is related to a long-awaited change that would bring social justice. The Roma’s enthusiasm for the communist government at the time makes them fail to realize the fact that they themselves are treated more as numbers than human beings with genuine social needs. Zoli and her friend Conka compose committed and “more and more red” songs, for they live in the “old Romani habit of hoping;” it is an innocent hope, a child’s hope that a rosy prosperous life, represented in this case in the communist promise to the oppressed population, lies ahead (64).

Zoli starts her actual collaboration with the two communist activists in the novel, Swann and Stransky, following a lake scene that is intriguing in its resemblance to other characters’ engagements with water discussed in previous chapters – such as that of Cathal in “Cathal’s Lake” and Nathan Walker in *This Side of Brightness*. The scene involves Zoli bathing in a lake in the forest after the death of her grandfather. Having lost her last remaining connection with the past, she turns to the symbolic meaning of rebirth and healing associated with water in mythological thought. After

the cremation of her grandfather, Zoli takes a cyclical retreat to the past, to the lake's dark underworld:

I took a trip to the lake one day, alone, and plunged myself in. The water made my skin tight and my body became a part of the drifting. I stayed for hours, trying to go deeper, right out into the centre, to see if I could touch what had fallen through. My hands reached out ... When I opened my eyes, they burned. The longer I stayed underwater the more I struggled but then my lungs could take no more and I felt the speed of my own rising weight. I broke the surface. ... I went under water again, longer this time. I was quite sure that I was going to drown. They were all still there, I felt them – my mother, my father, my brother, my sisters – but who can set a lake on fire? (61, 62).

She offers her body to the water so she can acquire a form of existence that enables her to communicate with traces of her family members. Zoli dives in the water seeking a revival of her past life with a family she barely knows; she wishes she can set fire to the lake, perhaps so their remains can be cremated. The mythological approach applied in this study is important here with regard to the cyclical flow that makes it possible to rise after a fall and resurrect after death. When seen through the lens of the mythological cyclical motion, McCann's characters appear capable of bringing about change in their lives and resolving personal dilemmas caused by factors that range from poverty to displacement. Zoli's lake scene can be compared to a number of scenes involving descent and water in McCann's Irish and American works. One is Fergus's appeal to the river to regain a bygone happy moment when he throws in the pieces of his broken bicycle then dashes on his wheelchair to the riverbed to unite with them; another is Treefrog's purgatorial stay below the surface of New York City searching its tunnels for the spirit of his grandfather. The description of Zoli's upward ascent is arguably most similar to Nathan Walker's blowout from the East River given the focus on the ascent with both characters: "I felt the speed of my own rising weight. I broke the surface" (61, 62). Her rising crushes the rigid surface formed by different factors through her life. The hard surface may refer to the frozen ice layer that once supported her family before they sank through it, or to the traditions of her community which is one reason why they are isolated. By rising, Zoli unleashes her

spirit beyond the walls of the shell in which she is enclosed at that stage of her life by the Nazis as well as the Roma. She is a new born character by now: "That was the birth of me, it always will be" (62). At this point of self-marked birth, she starts the new stage willing to collaborate with the communists personified by Swann and Stransky.

Zoli experiences an identity crisis which remains unresolved; her desire to reconcile the Roma and the modern urban society surrounding them results in her losing both. Her collaboration with the communist government aims to achieve the difficult mission of improving Roma's conditions and preserving their cultural heritage at the same time; as an educated Roma, she wants to be a part of urban society without weakening the group's independence and distinct identity. Zoli tries to modify, not eliminate, the Roma traditions by encouraging them to acknowledge literacy. She also wants the communists to accept the Roma as they are, without forcing them to change. Assimilation is one of the most important issues in the Roma's modern history which is highlighted in the novel by Swann: "The crux of the matter was assimilation, belonging, ethnic identity" (127). McCann refers here to a post-war Soviet campaign, called "the Great Halt," which aimed to end the Gypsies' nomadic life and assimilate them in the social structure of the Soviet nations (Fonseca 1995: 7-9). While it was a major re-definition of the centuries-long prejudice against the Roma, assimilation showed several shortcomings when carried out on the ground. The Roma themselves were not consulted with regard to defining the steps of the change they would undergo. Therefore, the campaign brought "disastrous" results in terms of the loss of their traditional craftsmanship and scarcity of employment which pushed them to take on illegal activities to earn a living (Ibid: 9). For the Roma, assimilation enforced "a new culture of dependency" and resulted in the legacy of their cultural identity being "outlawed" (Ibid: 8, 167). Swann briefly explains the tension in this campaign: "We wanted them, but they wanted us to leave them alone" (McCann 2006: 127). The tension is obvious in the novel and is reflected in Zoli's character; her complex attitude drives her to adopt on the one hand, to the distress of her community, the cultural life of the communist revolution: "There were other rumblings among some of the Gypsy leaders of course – Zoli was becoming too gadžo for them, her Party card, her literary life, her trips to the cinema, the Lenin Museum,

the botanical gardens ..." (106). On the other hand, she is determined to see her community as independent: "In town meetings she spoke about tradition, and nationhood, about the old life, against assimilation. She had written down the poems, she said, in order to sing the old life, nothing more" (127). For a people who had always shunned the written word, transcribing the oral culture would, Zoli believed, be an important progressive step. Zoli wants to contribute to the development of her culture by renewing, not erasing, its oral nomadic past.

### An Outcast

Zoli's efforts to rejuvenate her traditions do not pay off; on the contrary, they cause her to be expelled by her own people. She suffers from total deprivation after being an important personality for both her community and the government. While the Roma have tolerated that she recites her poems in communist assemblies, they do not forgive her when those poems appear in a book published, without her knowledge, by Swann that examines their traditions in the past and present. The charge against her, "Betrayal of Roma Affairs to the Outsiders," is deemed a "Pollution for Life in the Category of Infamy" (147). Her exile is a climactic point in the novel that is seen by some critics to mark the beginning of her surrender to the unfair decision and retreat to a state of passive solitude. Views on Zoli's character often point out a certain weakness. Discussing his own creation, McCann acknowledges that Zoli does not show enough determination when denounced by the communists and her own people. Her submissive attitude around the publication of her poems and her banishment pushes her to "[take] what comes to her" and "[walk] away".<sup>5</sup> She does not challenge the verdict, but accepts it silently and leaves to marry an Italian smuggler, Enrico, whom she meets in Austria at the final stage of her long journey away from home. Her husband's communist views lead him to defect from an aristocratic family and live a nomad's life. Sylvie Mikowski suggests that Zoli's married life is a setback in her attempt to forge a unique artistic career. She considers that, by

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<sup>5</sup> Colum McCann and Laura McCaffrey, *Zoli* interview: Q&A with Laura McCaffrey <<http://colummccann.com/interviews/zoli-interview-qa-with-laura-mccaffrey>> [June 2016].

getting married, Zoli loses a chance to emancipate to a self-defined space not ruled by social and political “codes” (Mikowski 2012: 132, 147). Zoli willingly commits to a husband and a house, being satisfied by the role of the wife and mother rather than that of an artist.

In the following section I will argue that Zoli’s reaction to exile, contrary to what is claimed above, positions her as an emblem of heroism, which she achieves by breaking the ethnic and political boundaries that are the main reason for her suffering. McCann, in his interview with Laura McCaffrey, has called Zoli his “most complicated statement about exile.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, his selection of an ethnicity described as living for centuries “outside history,” then of a poet who is ousted by her original people, and betrayed by activists who have adopted her and fostered her talent, makes of Zoli an embodiment of the exile who is forced out and unable to return home (Fonseca 1995: 5). Zoli is not a “voluntary exile,” a notion that John Cusatis uses to refer to the expatriates among McCann’s protagonists who choose to leave their homeland (Cusatis 2011: 15). Zoli does not have a choice in her departure. She can usefully be understood through Edward Said’s perspective on exile, which I will examine before I look at Zoli’s life in exile. Said suggests that exile is a “secular” and “historical” procedure in that it is “produced by human beings for other human beings” (Said 2001:174). A person is not born an exile nor naturally evolves into one. S/he is made an exile, Said contends, because of measures related to concepts such as nationalism. Simply put, nationalism identifies a certain people as one unit based on elements such as language, geography, and legacy; hence a border emerges between true insiders, and between outsiders who are seen to occupy an ethically inferior rank. An exile experiences a rupture from history and geography when s/he no longer fits into either of the two categories, “us” or “them” (Ibid: 175-7). This state of not belonging to the once familiar environment generates for the exile a feeling of threat and insecurity which can only be overcome by creating an alternative, “a new world to rule” (Ibid: 181). In the formation of their alternative worlds, exiles refuse the conventional

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<sup>6</sup> Colum McCann and Laura McCaffrey, *Zoli* interview: Q&A with Laura McCaffrey <<http://colummccann.com/interviews/zoli-interview-qa-with-laura-mccaffrey>> [June 2016].

concepts of the homeland, as those often one-dimensional standards of “us” and “them” are key reasons in the construction of the outcast.

In examining the mentality of the exile, Said touches on a critical question of how the exile manages his/her dilemma. The answer to this problem forms a common ground in McCann’s body of fiction and concerns itself with opening channels between separate entities of thought and subverting existing boundaries. The exile’s response to imposed isolation is to rebel against the factors which created that isolation in the first place: borders, whether cultural, political or geographical. Said remarks on the process of blurring the divisions that are naturally generated in exile:

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience (Ibid: 185).

Said’s view helps us understand McCann’s presentation of Zoli. She is an exile because of the ethnic boundaries drawn around her by both her own people and the communist government. Because she defies her community’s distrust of the written word through poems that serve as a bridge between her culture and what is seen as an outsider culture, she finds herself no longer able to live in her native environment. The expulsion is the catalyst that sets her off on a journey, the key stages of which will be analysed below; they figuratively merge disconnected geographical and cultural territories into an interconnected whole. Weaving a cohesive world out of discontinuous and incomplete fragments seems to be the exile’s method for recreating the home that has been lost.<sup>7</sup>

### The Walk

Zoli experiences the exile’s psychological effects, from loneliness to longing and estrangement. Her deprivation of the roles she used to occupy triggers a reaction that

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<sup>7</sup> See Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands” in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981 – 1991* (London: Granta Books: 1991).

is seemingly passive but actually involves a strong artistic statement of identity. Upon her banishment, Zoli does not linger for an appeal; instead, she embarks on a walk along a path that marks the features of her personal experience. Walking is Zoli's creative act in which she discovers her desires and determines her goals. In fact, it is her first genuinely independent attempt to give meaning to her life since her childhood, without the surveillance of her grandfather, her singing group, "kumpanija", or the communist "comrades." At first, the walk seems like a random reaction to her shock and bewilderment: "No place seemed more or less sheltered than any other. It was then that she had begun to walk" (150). But her act acquires significance on the way. Her journey is contiguous with, yet distinct from, infinite trails lined by her people's footprints. She demonstrates a relation to the past similar to that presented by Treefrog over his grandfather's death. He descends to the same tunnels opened by Nathan Walker, taking a step back in time away from the city's regulations to reconcile with his past and gain a better understanding of his independent self in relation to the present moment. Zoli, though, differs from him both personally and culturally in her approach to space. While Treefrog hides in an underground den, she exploits the horizontal distances and directs her ethnic heritage of movement to imprint her personal mark on the long line of communal travel. Zoli, from the start, is aware of the change in her status after banishment and gradually ploughs her own path, moving through solitude and alienation into heroic self-assertion.

Walking involves physical movement between geographical areas. This particular aspect recalls Colum McCann's journey across the United States in 1988 which he undertook to enrich the real-life resources of his writing and to expand his knowledge beyond the borders of Ireland. That trip, even though it was on a bicycle, not on foot like Zoli's, was pivotal in the formulation of McCann's literary personality. McCann highlights the importance of the road in opening up a wide variety of influences that have characterized his writing as pluralistic. He states that the road was his "university" that could introduce him to "an unacknowledged part of [himself]" (qtd in Cusatis 2011: 5). Perhaps the disparities between Zoli's walk and McCann's bicycle journey are too numerous to allow a real comparison. Yet among the different sorts of

movement that feature in McCann's fiction, and which involve either escape, significant achievement or self-awareness, the walk does highlight the importance of the actual distance which is passed, rather than merely the start and end points, and the stations en route. Travel on the road builds experience. Looking at Zoli's walking journey within the frame of McCann's cycling journey establishes, as I will argue below, a link between her walk and the realization of herself as a human being as well as an artist. My analysis will show that it is part of her artistic achievement, and unlike McCann's bicycle trip, it is not a preparatory stage, it is the finished work of art.

Tim Ingold remarks that "the way-farer draws a tale from impressions in the ground," combining the physical with the mental, verbal and visual (Ingold 2010: S135). Zoli's journey conveys the continuity between those various modes of expression embedded in walking. It is related in a chapter which is divided into three parts, beginning, middle and end, which means that the walk section stands as a story within a story. The first and third person narration in this section tells Zoli's story of movement toward self-realization. Whether a story can be told by walking, without using words, relies on an informed definition of the act as a physical movement and an art form. Walking tends to be one of the human actions that integrate with a number of artistic, critical and literary texts, presenting an example of the unity between language and mobility in a landscape, whether urban or rural. Central to Wordsworth's poetry, for example, are his wanderings in the Lake District, and rarely are the modernist intricacies of Paris critically studied without the images conveyed by its Baudelairean "flaneur". Later, sociologist Michel de Certeau finds another link between walking and language by suggesting that the city can be read as a text through its pedestrians' walks and its inhabitants' physical activities (De Certeau 1987: Chapter VII). Walking for artists such as Richard Long becomes a medium to produce abstract works of art such as photographs, texts, maps or sculptures.

Walking suggests an analogy between physical and mental actions, as it not only modifies the surrounding environment, but also generates thoughts in the pedestrian's mind, hence formulates their character: "Walking along," Ingold explains, "is not the behavioural output of a mind encased within a pedestrian body. It is rather, in itself a way of thinking and knowing" (Ingold 2010: 135). This combination between

the physical and the mental endows walking, according to Rebecca Solnit, with “cultural meanings, from the erotic to the spiritual, from the revolutionary to the artistic” (Solnit 2002: 3). Walking is part and parcel of human civilization with different sorts of experiences, personal and communal. It illustrates the process of those experiences physically and visually. The history of walking has a branch in every field of human knowledge thanks to a trespassing quality that makes the act a perfect tool for Zoli to challenge her exile (Ibid: 4).

Zoli’s walk can be categorized as what is called in art criticism an “open-ended walk,” open in that she does not have a preliminary fixed plan to shape her wanderings but allows them to generate meaning and subsequent directions (O’Rourke 2013: 98). What she acquires from walking crystallizes along the way, reflecting the second instance of Long’s observation: “In some of the road walks, I’m simply following an idea. In other kinds of works, the walking can reveal the idea” (Long, qtd in Ibid). In the beginning, her walk is a question of survival that she links to mere instinctive habit, with no supreme goals assigned to it just yet: “how strange this desire to stay alive, she thinks, how easy, with no integrity nor purity, simply a function of habit” (146). She soon realizes that her steps leave in the ground trails that can be exploited according to her wishes. She discovers this potential in her footprints while walking in circles around a deserted hut that she has used for shelter: “I have walked all day and have come full circle ... If there had been a pencil beneath me it would have made great, useless circles” (159). On realizing the potential of her footprints in marking an oriented track that could reflect her thoughts, she determines to direct both, her mind and body, towards summoning a meaningful artistic creation.

Zoli’s walk is integral to her life. It is not simply meant to transport her from one point on the map to another. In addition to moving away from the places where her presence is no longer permitted, the walk contributes to Zoli’s character development. A number of achievements and desires spring from the experience of walking in nature and in the city and stand as determinants of the change Zoli undergoes and the knowledge she acquires. During her walk, she develops important views about herself and the world around her. Instead of hovering around the same spot, she heads to Bratislava, the Czechoslovakian capital, where she used to be active as a poet, and

dispenses with all the production that tied her to the past. She burns all her poems. McCann here diverges from Zoli's real story by not pointing to her mental instability at that time. He gives his version of her in full control as she liberates herself from the past by setting fire to all the manuscripts. She is determined to cut connections with any person or incident that might have affected the way she thinks and behaves. This tendency leads her to abandon her traditions and breach a Roma taboo by eating wild bird meat: "It is against all custom to eat wild bird but what is custom now but an old and flightless thing?" (200). Her boldness along the way is uncompromising, making the search for food supply an opportunity to release and listen to her inner voice. When she catches a fish in the river she thinks aloud that she should have caught a bigger fish. At that moment:

The sound of her voice surprises her, the clarity of it, crisp in the air. ...

"You," she says, looking around once more. "A big fish would have been more generous. You hear me?" (201).

Hearing her own voice is a sign of a gradual ascent to a stage of independence and self-awareness, uncontaminated by collective and political impositions. She builds her individuality from instinctive behaviours such as walking or finding food.

Through walking, she acquires a unique voice that enhances the individuality and self-consciousness that she endeavours: "I can walk and keep walking: longer roads, fence lines, pylons" (Ibid). However, she is prepared to escape her own voice if it transforms into a tool that restricts her movement: "Nothing will catch me, not even the sound of my own voice" (Ibid). She is presented as aware of the risk that her voice can copy the traditions and teachings of her community, in which case she is ready to abandon this voice and continue moving on. Walking becomes not only an act to physically survive but also to complete a self-image incorporated in her voice; as she walks she redefines her relationship with both her native culture and communist ideology. Moreover, it constructs the alternative home where the exile can find belonging. Zoli's rebellious and creative nature keeps her isolated from her own people even before they exile her. She feels at home with the help of the locomotive aspect of walking through which she can modify the surrounding time and space according to her desire. She changes the drive of the Roma's nomadic travels. While it

originally emerges from the biological needs of survival, she elevates it into an intellectual urge to discover oneself.

Traversing frontiers is Zoli's strategy to find safety and to stay alive as well as to record a statement against political borders that do nothing in her view but separate originally connected people, and generate conflicts. In a continuation of McCann's demonization of borders in *Everything in this Country Must*, where political and religious divisions lead to the detrimental outcomes of annihilation and disease, borders here are seen as pretexts for destructive wars that turn the land into a mass grave: "how many dead bodies lie along these imaginary lines?" (215). McCann wants his literature to "break through the policing of our borders," so he employs the flow of Zoli's walk for the mission by making her move between countries unaware of the border line:<sup>8</sup>

It startles her, the ease with which she has crossed from one place into another, the landscape wholly alien and yet so much the same. The other border, East and West, she knows, will begin in a matter of days and it strikes her, as she walks, that borders, like hatred, are exaggerated precisely because otherwise they would cease to exist altogether (214, 215).

These lines reveal an artificial characteristic in borders; Zoli's mobility generates a dialogue between her body and the landscape through which she realizes that borders are political constructs and that the human being would be better off ignoring them. Borders, then, are deprived of their divisive power. Solnit provides a useful image derived from modern day life with regard to the potential of walking in linking divided space. She observes that with the modern retreat of public space, people have become enclosed inside different interiors. She explains that "[o]n foot everything stays connected," for those who walk occupy the mediatory space between separate entities, turning them into one whole. This enables one to live "in the whole world rather than in interiors built up against it" (Solnit 2001: 9). In the same way walking connects distinct interiors, it can connect politically divided countries on a continuous land.

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<sup>8</sup> McCann's remark on borders is in Zoli Interview, Q&A with Laura McCafferey.

Walking for Zoli is a way to create an interconnected map in which borders, whether political or racial, become gateways that permit transition from one side to another. Through walking, Zoli reflects on her relationship with rural and urban space, discovering the meaning of her existence as an independent woman as well as a part of the Roma lineage. One remarkable feature with regard to the thoughts generated by Zoli's wanderings is her contemplation of Paris. From the belief in the inability of borders to impose a complete separation of spaces and cultures, and from the pain caused by her state of exile, emerges her dream about the boundless city. Paris comes to her mind as she reaches a dead-end, "near the roadblock" (201). The thought of the city represents a planned route that leads Zoli, who is now locked behind a barrier, to a new beginning. Her steps which are congruous with her thoughts shape the passage to Paris, making the city's name the road's verbal counterpart which Zoli "stretches... out, a wide elegant avenue of sound" and starts to attribute different meanings to it (201). Paris is "[a]n absurdity," a notion that rather indicates the unattainability of the city for Zoli (202). Travelling there entails many obstacles: "How many borders," she wonders, "How many watchtowers" and "troopers lined along the barbed wire" and "roadblocks" (Ibid). As Zoli walks, her footsteps and mental image of Paris combine to drive her towards the city. The image of Paris as a city of art informs Zoli's sense that her journey there is itself an artistic endeavour. "Zoli learns exactly when the first of the word will hit with her heel against the ground, and the last of the word will hit with her toe, so that she is going, in perfect conjunction, sound and step, onwards" (202). Her utterance of the word "Paris" blends "rhythmically" with each step she takes (Ibid). Language, signified by the word "Paris" which one time refers to the road and another refers to the steps, serves as a link between the landscape and physical movement. Zoli's walk, thus, involves different meanings that relate the action with the road ahead and with the thought of Paris as the ultimate dream. Zoli shows a desire to reach the city but fails to realize her wish at that stage, the actual distance proving to be invincible.

Being preoccupied with Paris at the stage that follows her exile becomes more significant when we know that, as an old woman, Zoli will travel there to recite her poems to a global audience. The desire to reach Paris is triggered by a movement

begun with Zoli's banishment and achieved decades later when she visits her daughter, Francesca, who grows up to be a social worker in an organization for immigrants in Paris. There, Zoli sings her Gypsy song to the whole world when she participates in an international meeting for the displaced Roma. Her arrival in Paris does not reveal the city in the same way Zoli has imagined it before; rather, it describes a typical twenty-first century urban setting overcrowded with traffic. The daughter and her fiancé's relationship is presented unromantically; they have everyday mundane disputes despite the mother's presence. Zoli's song, nevertheless, is not contaminated by this ordinariness of contemporary urban life. The novel concludes with a lyrical language which portrays Zoli entering the main hall in her daughter's house and orchestrating the musicians who have gathered there. As she starts singing, she moves with the song to a world of imagination: "... the room feels as if it is opening, one window, then another, and then the wall themselves. ... [Zoli] smiles, lifts her head, and begins" (353). Zoli's poetic performance, like her earlier walk, opens up closed spaces and links together isolated cultures, creating by this connection a new beginning.

The character of Lily Duggan, a maid in an upper-class Dublin Protestant household in McCann's later novel, *Transatlantic* (2013), provides a post-script to Zoli's walk. Lily takes on the same pattern of Zoli's walk to freedom. Lily is the great-grandmother of the three generations of women depicted in the novel. Like the majority of McCann's work, the novel combines factual and fictional elements. Lily lives through the early years of the Great Famine of the nineteenth century, the biggest tragedy in Irish history. She is inspired to emigrate to the US by the abolitionist escaped slave, Frederick Douglass. In a visit to Ireland to campaign against slavery, Douglass stays at the house of Lily's Methodist master. Douglass's Irish mission and his achievement in personally escaping slavery inspire Lily and convince her that there must be a better life out there. She does not wait to be overtaken by hunger and decides to emigrate to America: she escapes her master's service and embarks on a walking journey from Dublin to Cork where ships sail to the other side of the Atlantic. The lady who helped Lily in her endeavour meets her in Cork and introduces her to Douglass:

- She will leave from Cove in a few days, said Isabel.
- That's wonderful, said Douglass.
- She walked here.
- Good Lord.
- Lily was inspired by you. Isn't that right, Lily?
- By me? (84, 85)

Amazed by her act, Douglass does not apparently understand the reason behind her walk: "Why, he wondered, had she come all the way to Cork by foot? And in such weather, too?" (86). Yet, walking for Lily, as it is for Zoli, is her life story dug on earth and recorded in history. Walking guarantees these two women their existence by giving them an opportunity to survive. The act bears a personal and political significance as it liberates those two women and helps them to deliver a message of confrontation and perseverance against all communal and political oddities.

Lily is the predecessor of a line of women who participate in writing transatlantic and Irish history. She lands in New York marrying a middle-aged man of Norwegian descent, owner of an ice-manufacturing business, and gives birth to six children. Her youngest is a daughter who pursues a journalistic career in Newfoundland, Canada, and covers one of the novel's historical facts, the first uninterrupted transatlantic flight of Alcock and Brown, which landed in Ireland in 1919. The journalist's daughter later settles in Ireland, loses her son in the armed conflict in the North, and witnesses the crowning of the Irish negotiations in a peace treaty in 1998. Lily's walk south to Cork initiates a human wave of leaving and coming back after gaining a culturally enhanced experience. She survives death but also intermingles with the other in the diverse US society. Her offspring returns later to ingrain in Ireland the heroic features of the grandmother's epic journey.

### Motion and Words

Zoli, like Rudi in *Dancer*, develops a special relationship with Paris based on an accordance between motion and words. Walking and dancing are kinetic actions which generate a verbal counterpart rooted in the city of Paris. Zoli repeats the word Paris during her walk, and Rudi learns dance movements named in French and hopes to dance in the Paris Opera, the dream of every ballet dancer. Like New York in the

previous chapter, Paris is a platform for artistic expression. The two artists, Zoli and Rudi, want to take the leap to freedom in Paris. The physical and intellectual aspects of motion work together to change the dominant ideological structure surrounding the two artists. The way in which Paris occurs to Zoli through an intertwining of step and language echoes an experience of Rudi's which has similar elements. According to the novel's order of events, Rudi is first introduced to the world of ballet through dance journals brought to him from the school's library by his sister. He encounters various French words defining balletic poses and techniques. Later, in Ufa's ballet school, the second stage of his ballet education, "he is given a whole new language," a two-fold language of word and motion: the words, all French, are names for ballet moves and postures (60). Instead of paying attention to his classes, he registers the foreign words in his notebook, hence "he feels sometimes like a boy of another country" (40). Early on in his life Rudi tastes the flavour of going beyond the local, and, like Zoli and Lily, grows up determined to discover the outside world. While Zoli generates ideas about Paris on her walk, Rudi seems more systematic in learning dance theory while practising it.

The French capital shapes the awareness of both artists for it is the city in which they anchor their passions and dreams of a free artistic career. This feature of the city is fervently reflected in Rudi's encounter with its streets when he travels there to perform with the Kirov. In his evening strolls with the Parisians, while other dancers have retired to the hotel, he finds that "Each corner, each sculpture, each painting, takes the breath away. It is like walking through a history book that goes on forever, refuses to meet its own back cover. It is a marvel, an eighth wonder" (172). The description is of Paris in the early 1960s at the peak of its postwar glory. It contests Soderberg's reflection on the transient nature of New York City in which monuments are drowned by a flood of technology and finance. Paris is an old, well-preserved gallery, always renewing and adapting to the present. This is the way Zoli must have imagined it before experiencing the postmodern twenty-first century chaotic urban space affected by economic and political crises.

Rudi's dance, then, is analogous with Zoli's walk. Both acts have an extension in language and are connected through an invisible line to words, whether in Zoli's

verbalization of the thought of Paris while walking, or in Rudi's French ballet terms while learning dance movements. Both dance and walking are acts which have movement as their essence. They fall under the category of performance art which has a particular relation to time and space in its temporariness and transformation. "Performance's only life" Peggy Phelan remarks "is in the present" (Phelan 2004: 146). Rudi and Zoli's acts emphasize the importance of live experience where meaning is valid only at the time and space of performance; if these acts are reproduced, they are no longer a performance. Phelan continues to explain that unlike image or text, performance cannot be represented in the codes of dominant ideology and political power; it communicates meaning in a fresh and independent perspective through which one can "revalue a belief in subjectivity and identity" unaffected by ideology (Ibid: 2). Performance, further, helps these two characters realize their desires. "The body's agency lies in its performance of desire" (Martin 1990: 9). According to Randy Martin, the body has supremacy over the mind in that it liberates it from the "consumer consciousness" imposed by the economic and political order. If Zoli's walk is a re-writing for her Roma heritage and a foregrounding for her own experience, then Rudi's dance is, as the analysis below will show, another aesthetic device through which the alternative world of the exile can be written. The novel depicts Rudi's dance from his early days in Ufa, but the real critique of the act, its formal and thematic contribution to the narrative, occurs as Rudi dances in Western theatres.

### ***Dancer***

#### The Ethnic and Political Condition

*Dancer* is McCann's fictionalized portrait of Rudolf Nureyev. Nureyev was a Russian ballet dancer of Tatar origin who made history by defecting to the West in 1962 to become the world's top dancer. He was the most globally renowned dancer of

the twentieth century, and his life, which combines great career success with the bitter tragedy of exile and illness, provides rich material for McCann. Dancing, being a physical activity and a form of expression, is similar to walking. My analysis of Rudolf's dance and its manifestations in the narrative, however, suggests that dancing embodies, more prominently than walking, two themes related to the general argument of the thesis: mythology and cosmopolitanism.

*Dancer* was published in 2003, chronologically preceding *Zoli*. McCann is fairly faithful to Nureyev's real life in the parts he chooses to represent. Rudik's or Rudi's – as he is called in the novel – story starts in the town of Ufa in the Russian south-east when he is six years old performing folkdance to hospitalized Second World War veterans. With an elder sister, Tamara, he is the younger child of extremely poor parents from the Tatar race. He struggles while growing up from a rigid father and a tyrannical political system. He finds escape in the dance lessons he starts at an early age with Anna, a previous Marinsky – the ballet company of St Petersburg before the Communist Revolution, later known as the Kirov – ballerina who has been ousted with her husband from St Petersburg to Ufa by the 1917 government because of belonging to the aristocratic class. After that, the novel portrays Rudi's dance education in the Kirov, then his break through the theatres of the world which starts in Paris. *Dancer* is by far McCann's most diverse novel in narrative style, deliberately avoiding coherence as McCann "wanted to see what might happen to a story if it became a chorus, even a dissonant one, where everyone gets up and sings in different voices."<sup>9</sup> Those voices include dancers like Rudi's best friend from Chile, RosaMaria, who happens to be studying in Leningrad, and Margot Fonteyn, Rudi's most famous partner in the Royal Ballet in London. They also include neighbours, soldiers, shoe makers, servants, family and friends. From all those secondary characters, the current discussion will focus on the family of Rudi's first dance teacher because, unlike the rest, they contribute in building his personality as he spends much time with them during his early training. Further, the fact that they are themselves exiles is significant in examining Rudi's experience of exile.

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<sup>9</sup> Colum McCann and Declan Meade (2003), "Dancer Interview,"  
<<http://colummccann.com/interviews/dancer-interview/>> [April 2016].

The established link between walking and dancing through the common ground of language helps to consider the two acts as part of one experience, that of the exiled artist who seeks to belong in a refined relationship between the body and the world. At this point, in order to understand the meaning of Rudi's dance, an examination of his character is needed. Any attempt to delineate Rudi's character has to pass through the novel's maze of numerous fragmented sections that vary in point of view and style: "first-, second- and third-person narratives, straight narration, journal entries, letters, flight reports."<sup>10</sup> The outcome of the heterogeneous narration is a collection of different psychological traits in which Rudi appears as the defiant, the melancholic, the amorous, the committed, the reckless, the rude, and of course, the artistic. This highly complex character overshadows the wide range of other characters that appear with Rudi in all the places he visits in his extensive travels. They cannot match the infinitude of Rudi and his world. McCann's assertion that "Rudi was more than able to look after himself" is true even in his own text in which he decentralizes the dancer. Rudi prevails even though McCann at times concentrates on "smaller people" around him.<sup>11</sup> The discussion will focus on Rudi because of his prominence among other characters and also because he is central to the themes of this thesis as outlined in earlier chapters, such as escaping historical obligations by way of mythology and art in order to become reconciled with oneself. In a broad sense, Rudi's experience resembles that of Zoli, yet with close examination some distinctions emerge. Both their lives depict journeys begun in childhood, journeys of survival and nonconformity. Taking into account the social and political background of the artists, two common aspects seem to affect their lives but in different ways: their ethnic background and the communist regime. The following comparison and contrast of the artists' challenges will show how they both become exiles when faced by the socio-political agenda of the Soviet Union at the time.

The fact that both characters are from ethnic groups in the diverse fabric of Central and Eastern Europe is worthy of attention. Rudi's Tatar blood adds to his

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> This quotation and the previous one are in Laura McCaffrey, "Zoli Interview: Q&A with Colum McCann," <<http://colummccann.com/interviews/zoli-interview-qa-with-laura-mccaffrey>> [June 2016].

exotic image as the artist who comes from a minor group in the East and storms the whole world with his overwhelming presence. His first ballet teacher's husband reflects upon what the boy's appearance says about his origin: "In truth I saw nothing extraordinary in him – he seemed ragged at the edges, overly excited and there was a dangerous charm and energy to him, very Tatar" (49). Rudi looks crude with an innate power, like an unprocessed gemstone.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Zoli's outcast and constantly subjugated race, Rudi's people had dominated Asian and Russian territories in medieval times. His Tatar origin does not appear in the novel to be an obstacle in his ascent to the top of the dance world. Tatars are assimilated citizens of the Soviet Union who had contributed to the formation of national identity during the Communist Revolution and later during the Second World War. The novel's opening scene of victorious soldiers returning to the city of Ufa, Rudi's hometown, is used to celebrate the harmonious multi-ethnic texture of the Soviet Union where different ethnicities are united by their communist spirit. Further evidence of the absence of discrimination is the profession of Rudi's father as one of the soldiers in the Red Army of Mother Russia that encompasses all citizens regardless of their origin. The Tatars, nevertheless, have been subject to the prejudice of stereotyping. The "Tatar Yoke" is the appellation of the period in which they ruled southern parts of present-day Russia in medieval times, a name – now waning – which promotes the negative sides of oppression and exploitation during that era and completely ignores the accompanying stability and civil development the reign achieved.<sup>13</sup>

Rudi's dilemma, then, does not concern his race but the totalitarianism of the Soviet regime which prevents, even outlaws, the preeminence of the individual. It is the control of the Communist Party of sectors of life such as education and, especially, the arts, that suffocates Rudi and forces his wild and radical nature to reject his surroundings. This reality that oppresses personal desires in favour of the collective interest could, by no means, be tolerable to Rudi who is himself only when he is

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<sup>12</sup> Seeing the Tatar as both mysterious and powerful is reflected in dancer Marika Besobrasova's remark on the behaviour of Rudolf's niece while attending her dying uncle in the hospital: "That mixture of great power, and great presence, and then some things that are absolutely out of our habits" (Solway 1998: 541).

<sup>13</sup> "Was Tatar Yoke Really All That Bad?" *The Moscow Times* (April 19: 2000) <<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/sitemap/free/2000/4/article/was-tatar-yoke-really-all-that-bad/264037.html>> [April 2016].

different from others. Reality around him is monotonous and controlled by institutions, as is evident in the revealing scene of the preparations for the opening of Ufa city's opera house. The description shows how the stage curtains are tailored by the most talented seamstresses in Ufa "under the auspices of the Bashkirian Ministry of Culture" (36). After seventeen attempts at stitching, when the "proper nuances of the curtains are in synchronicity," the workshop supervisor approves the result (37). The incident reveals the rigidity of the social and political order. No discrepancy is allowed and the tailoring must be in full alignment to the pattern. The inspectors, further, examine the "consistency of colour" and check the embroidery of the state insignia with a magnifying glass and finally, in their "gruff voices of collective harmony," acknowledge the achievement of the lined-up seamstresses (Ibid). The description reveals how artistic expression in a communist state is an "ideological superstructure" which has to deliver a social message that resonates in a "classless and perfect society" (Hampsch 1965: 173, 174). McCann carefully chooses his language, using the insistence on inspecting every stitch to reflect the intolerant socio-political authority during Stalinist times that polices people's behaviour, freedom of expression, and even thinking.

McCann continues to engage with the political context surrounding Rudi as he concentrates in the narrative on the conflict between Rudi and his teachers arising during his adolescence. The significance of this conflict lies in showing the beginning and development of the radical aspect of the dancer's character. The oppressive reality invoked in the curtain scene haunts Rudi from his childhood up to his study and work at the Kirov. He suffers, on the familial level, from the cruelty of his father, who regards it as shameful for his son to grow up to be dancer. The father-son relationship is in constant tension: the more Rudi clings on to his dream, the more the father brutalizes him, until he eventually stands powerless in the face of his son's determination. Further, during Rudi's higher study at the Kirov ballet school, a similar agitation defines his relationship with his teachers and colleagues. Not only does he skip the sessions of the "Komsomol" – an educational organization concerned with spreading Party teachings among the youth – but he also bullies his friends and defies the teachers who are impatient with his nature. Such a nature makes Rudi a favourite

for the “informers” who are responsible for observing and reporting to the authorities any suspicious behaviour; they do not miss a chance to record any action which is measured as abnormal. On a different level, Rudi’s homosexuality shuts the final outlet for his freedom in the highly conservative Soviet society. Gay men, or “goluboy”, meaning “blue”, as they are called in Russian, go out in the dark and hide in one of Leningrad’s squares, waiting to watch Rudi from a distance when he passes by, far from the sight of the people who see them as “perverts” (117). They live in constant fear of being caught and moved to the labour camps.

### Exile and Connections

“External exile” in Russia is considered to be a cultural “betrayal” and “transgression,” as Svetlana Boym observes in an essay that examines two types of Soviet exile by looking at two poets, one who stayed in the homeland and another who was forced to emigrate (Boym 1996: 244). Those two forms of exile do not differ from the usual external and internal exiles which are not exclusive to the Soviet Union. Artistic creation becomes expressive of a deep sense of estrangement that the exiles undergo. Rudi experiences throughout his life both types, internal and external. He is estranged not only when he is still in Russia but also during his life in the West. In a letter to his sister Tamara which he writes upon receiving the news of his father’s death, Rudi states, *“You must understand that I desire choice. And yet that choice is denied to me”* (165). It is indeed so, for both the fictional character and the real person, especially in terms of the episode of his defection. According to Solway’s biography, Nureyev only stayed in the West because the other option would have been arrest by the Soviet intelligence and a termination of his career.<sup>14</sup> His defection simply reinforces the exile in which he already lived. In his message to Tamara he writes, *“I go from country to country. I am a non-person where I became a person. I am stateless where I exist. So it is. And so it has always been, even I suppose since our days*

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<sup>14</sup> It is safe to say the true story behind Nureyev’s defection is a mystery. Otis Stuart’s biographical account considers that Rudy’s learning English while still in Russia and his mingling with the celebrities in Paris are preparatory steps for his defection (Stuart 1995). The BBC’s documentary, *Nureyev: From Russia With Love* (2007), reveals that a German friend encouraged him to defect.

*in Ufa*" (164). His deep isolation deprives him of any sense of affinity to a certain place.

As noted above, McCann is more concerned with the people around Rudolf than with Rudolf himself. The network of characters is interrelated in the novel so that an examination of certain aspects of the lives of people around Rudi highlights more points about him. The theme of exile is raised by a number of characters in the novel as shown in the account of his first ballet teacher's family. Anna, the erstwhile Marinsky ballerina, is exiled after the Revolution to Ufa with her husband because they belong to an aristocratic family. Their overwhelming estrangement in Ufa is interrupted briefly during Rudi's ballet classes in their flat. The couple's visit to their daughter in Leningrad reveals the change that the city has undergone after the Communist Revolution years later in the fifties. The notion of eradicating the past and erasing the city's memory, seen earlier in New York's ever-changing urban planning, takes in Leningrad the form of re-naming streets and monuments with what suits the fresh Soviet spirit. Anna's husband, Sergei, finds the city "largely lost" (89). He is unable to identify with the new atmosphere, "[h]e marked all the changes, the post-Revolutionary places that had lost their history" (92). The present reality fails to provide Sergei with a home and when he searches for the usual streets, squares and buildings he does not find them or, at best, finds them distorted. The overwhelming feeling of estrangement and unbelonging continues with Yulia, the couple's daughter who is a part of the Soviet intelligentsia. "I suppose," Yulia thinks to herself while looking at Rudi, "that one finally learns, after much searching, that we really belong to ourselves" (76). Her statement introduces a theory of belonging that transcends social and cultural heritage and seeks to discover the essence of the self, the true ultimate residence for the human being. Yulia grows up away from her parents and deeply estranged because of her country's government. Searching for a source for belonging becomes a necessity in a repressive political system; she concludes that one's self provides a permanent and adaptable home to obtain reassurance and satisfaction. This view can unify human kind as it is not built on a racial or political basis, rather on a common human need for internal peace.

Rudi's exile is profound especially when viewed through Yulia's perspective on belonging, for he fails to reconcile with himself. At a dinner party in the United States, intoxicated with alcohol, Rudi imagines that every person has a double somewhere. His longings drive him to imagine that every person close to him in Russia has a duplicate in the party guests. The dinner suddenly changes into an assembly of friendly faces around the hall and Rudi begins to visualize the strangers surrounding him as his family and friends, his parents and sister, the ballet teacher and her husband. When he needs to feel the presence of his family, he sees them embodied in the guests; yet, he is distressed when he directs the compass to himself: "On searching for myself I realized there was nobody" (207). Rudi's vision is agonizing as he cannot insert himself in the scene he made up of the doubles for the ones he loves. He lives, indeed, in ultimate isolation. The quotation above explicitly suggests that Rudi is lost and uprooted, unable to find his true self or to pick a match for it in the guests. His mind does not allow him to find an impersonation of himself in the guests because he is not certain about his existence in the first place.

The discussion of Nureyev's exile cannot pass without alluding to his birth on a train on the Siberian plains. As implicitly referred to in McCann's novel, Nureyev's mother gave birth to him while travelling by train from Ufa across Siberia to meet her husband in a city on the far Eastern Russian coast. Being born on the move foreshadows the kind of life Nureyev had moving between theatres and cities in all continents. In her biography of Nureyev, Diane Solway quotes him reflecting on his birth on a train:

It seems to me very symbolic and revealing that I should have been born en route, in between two places. It makes me feel that it was my destiny to be cosmopolitan. Ever since I was born, I have had no real sense of 'belonging'; no real country or house to call my own. My existence had none of the usual limitations which make for a feeling of permanence and this has always left me with a strong sensation of having been born stateless (qtd in Solway 1998: 10).

It is not by coincidence that Nureyev used the word "stateless;" he wants to cut the thread that politically ties him to either the Eastern or Western camps. As a celebrity, he was reserved indeed when speaking about his stay in Paris, and he never openly

engaged in a political debate with regards to the Soviet Union. In addition to the apolitical dimension he ascribes to his life, he also detaches himself from conventional notions of belonging to one nation or a certain place with definite borders, and rather wanders, with his body and imagination, the whole globe. Solway comments that Nureyev's early years, which he had to spend moving from one side of Russia to the other, caused him a "permanent sense of rootlessness" (Ibid). The effect of that stage is everlasting so that "[h]e would always be a gypsy, never a native," Solway adds and brings to mind Papusza's nomadic history (Ibid). Indeed, the in-transit state in which Nureyev lives is parallel to Zoli's journey of crossing boundaries, the imagery of which is abundant in *Dancer*, as the following analysis of Rudi's years at school will show.

The independent chapters that compose the novel reveal Rudi's congenital propensity to global outreach. He seeks belonging outside limited ethnic, historical and geographical contexts, a will which leads him to reside in dance and therefore in motion. Several examples illustrate his fluid and mobile imagination that expands beyond the conventional and fixed meaning of the motherland and the individuals belonging to it. When he is six years old, like Zoli at the beginning of her story, he sits on a hilltop in his hometown, Ufa, watching trains as they cross the landscape of Bashkiria through the woods and along the river. The railway stands for the culture of perpetual mobility. Modern machinery facilitates departing the local into a larger world. Rudi the child is obsessed with trains so that "[i]n school he draws maps with pictures of trains moving across the landscape" (40). Beside trains, his childhood bears a hint of another feature of modern technology that has defined human life in the twentieth century. At night, when his mother and sister are asleep, he turns on the radio to listen to stations broadcast from inside and outside the Soviet Union: he "leans into the wireless radio and steadily adjusts the dial along the yellow paneling: Warsaw, Luxembourg, Moscow, Prague, Kiev, Vilnius, Dresden, Minsk, Kishinev, Novosibirsk, Brussels, Leningrad, Rome, Stockholm" and the list goes on to include "Tallinn, Tbilisi, Belgrade, Tashkent, Sofia, Riga, Helsinki" and "Budapest," formulating, thus, one among many lists in the novel of places that Rudi visits, souvenirs he buys, celebrities he meets and activities in which he participates (26). The long list reflects Rudi's multifaceted character that is composed of diverse cultural elements. While

observing trains and listening to the radio suggest a readiness to develop thoughts of movement and connectivity, Rudi as a child transforms those ideas into material creation which can be interpreted as his first step in learning how to dance. This is discerned when he has to write punishment lines at school: “there is something about the crawl of the pen over the page that Rudik has grown to like. He connects the letters as if each word were a piece of string, never arranging the lines in columns, preferring their disorder, their bump up against each other. This is contrary to how the teacher wants it” (38). The defining lines of his career – movement, deviation, diversity, continuity, connectivity and rebellion – are present at quite an early age. He is mentally ready for the dance before he is physically so.

Beside the revealing scene of him on the hilltop watching the passing trains and dreaming about going away on one of them, Rudi’s aspiration for the fleeting and the outlandish is obvious in the incident that shows his reaction to being bullied by his classmates for his “Froggy” face and “sleepyhead” (32). This episode resonates with that of Clarence Nathan on the rooftops of Harlem hoping to reach the skyscrapers of Manhattan. After being beaten, Rudi goes to the top of the stairs that look over the skyline of the city of Ufa with its “chimneys, bridges, low smokestacks,” where the “sky is broken by the horizon’s clean sharp shapes” (32). Among his friends he feels a stranger so he wants to reach the sky to see if he finds better company there. The depiction of Rudi staring at the distances strongly places him in an open unbound setting after breaking through the barriers of small social units starting with the family, moving on to the group of school friends, and arriving at his dance teachers and colleagues. The picture, from a different point of view, alludes to Rudi’s future as a dancer with the reference to the “clean sharp shapes” of the horizon that destabilize the order and stasis of the sky. Those geometric patterns are the buildings at which Rudi is looking. However, if seen as abstract patterns, they intersect with dance movements. Like a routine choreographed for dancers, those lines interfere with the serenity of the Soviet sky which symbolizes the imposed, social order. There, the imposed limits and divisions are circumferential, isolating the inside from the rest of the world. External cultural or political influences are resisted, and collaboration only with other communist countries is allowed.

## Dance and Mythology

When one reads what Yulia thinks on seeing Rudi in a standing posture, “his body had now accepted dance as its only strategy,” as well as Rudi’s confession, “*It is dance, and dance only, that keeps me alive,*” the hypothesis that the exiled artist creates through art a habitable world where survival becomes possible is confirmed (94, 164). Rudi’s existence is found in the unity of the three elements of motion, physicality and thought. Dance, the performed act, is infused with significant implications that contribute to my general argument about McCann’s use of myth and art in his writings. Both Susan Cahill (2011) and Marie Mianowski (2014) present interesting views on the art of dance in McCann’s work. Cahill links McCann’s treatment of dance to Derrida’s assumption that to dance is to move against conventions; thus, Rudi liberates his body and revolutionizes the boundaries of space when he dances (Cahill 2011: 134, 135). She focuses on the image of staying still in the air while dancing in order to suggest that dance is a tool to stop the flow of time (Ibid: 145). Mianowski, on the other hand, extends her examination of dance motifs to the rest of McCann’s fiction, especially to his first collection, *Everything in this Country Must*. She argues that dance is a strategy for the exile to overcome the traumas of the past and present and embrace the future. She usefully refers to Alain Badiou’s dialogue with Nietzsche’s view of dance, even though she does not interpret McCann’s texts according to Badiou’s approach. Badiou sees that dance generates meanings embedded in the images of the thought, the bird, and the infant (Badiou 2013: 57). The earlier discussion of walking is echoed through the elements of thought and flight in that they combine the intellectual and the creative with the physical and the mobile. The element of the child provides insight into Rudi’s character as beyond the law. The child’s image implicit in dancing is linked, Badiou says, to “play, of course, because dance frees the body from all social mimicry, from all gravity and conformity” (Ibid: 58). Starting with Badiou’s classifications of dance, I will extend Cahill and Mianowski’s views on the dance’s relation with time and space to examine Rudi’s performance art in terms of its capacity for transforming the world and its link to the cosmic metaphor grounded in mythology.

I will first allude to the famous dancer Merce Cunningham's definition of dance which presents a useful theoretical ground to support the analysis. "Dance," Cunningham remarks, "is movement, and its opposite, in time and space. It is this continuously changing fact that gives its structure – its permanence in fluidity – and provides a fascination that impels a good many people to be concerned with it: choreographers, performers, teachers, and spectators" (Sheets-Johnstone 2015). For the purpose of the current argument, I will focus only on the concrete level of Cunningham's language and avoid the words' metaphysical connotations or philosophical dimensions. Dance is a paradoxical act which combines the static and the mutable. Its influence on time and space is sensorially perceived. It is a fact, a truth that does not stay the same: perpetually mercurial. The people involved in it are drawn away from reality into a world of fascination and magic. It is an effective motif in McCann's work that suggests ways to undermine given social and political realities. Rudi, in his turn, refers to this transformative aspect in dance when he stresses the capacity of art to change the world in a few places in the novel; one of them is the letter he writes to his sister Tamara, "*Inform [our mother] that her son dances to improve the world*" (167). Rudi's dance acquires a social dimension when he considers himself an artist who wants to make the world a better place. The dancer is equipped with the necessary combination of physicality and creativity to lay the foundation for a desired and personalized present.

When Rudi dances, his body and mind are in organic unity with all the dynamics referred to in Cunningham's definition: time, space, motion, self. He becomes a motif which implies in each dance different meanings for different audiences. Yulia is absorbed by Rudi's bodily energy when she watches his performance in a dance school in Leningrad. He emphasizes her sense of femininity and takes her to a world of magic. His motion in space endows Yulia and the audience with a sense of satisfaction. Yulia thinks, "he was using something beyond his body – not just his face, his fingers, his long neck, his hips, but something intangible, beyond thought, some kinetic fury and spirit" (95). He enchants his viewers into his own world of freedom and mystery, where the ordinary acquires extra-ordinary meanings. Dance enables Rudi, and the spectators with him, to traverse the familiar realm of the

everyday into a new, mysterious and ideal place. In another instance, the narration also starts with a literal description of Rudi's body movements: "he is in the air now, forcing the legs up beyond muscular memory, one last press of the thighs;" then it portrays the imaginative world which evolves with the performance: "an elongation of form, a loosening of human contour, he goes higher and is skyheld" (198). Badiou adds one further point about dance that is concerned with verticality, ascending upwards into the air: "Verticality and attraction enter the dancing body and allow it to manifest a paradoxical possibility: that the earth and the air may exchange their positions, the one passing into the other" (Badiou 2013: 58). Reading Rudi's performance that leads up to the magnificent supernatural posture of being "skyheld" through Badiou's point, it becomes fair to suggest that the dancer represents the vertical axis that lies at the world's centre and links together heaven and earth.

The picture of Rudi suspended in the sky, moreover, reverberates with that of Clarence Nathan (Treefrog) on the skyscrapers and that of the tightrope walker between the towers. In yet another example that depicts the transition between the bodily and the spiritual, the description goes:

a thing of wonder, the audience silent now, no body anymore, no thought no awareness this must be the moment others call god as if all the doors are open everywhere leading to all other open doors nothing but open doors forever no hinges no frames no jambs no edges no shadows this is my soul in flight born weightless born timeless a clock spring broken he could stay like this forever and he looks out in the haze of necklaces eyeglasses cufflinks shirtfronts and knows that he owns them (199).

Reading these lines in the light of Randy Martin's view on dance as a social movement helps us understand the significance underlying Rudi's performance. Martin considers dance as a total cultural experience that binds between conceivers and consumers; that is, between the artists (choreographers and dancers) and the audience (Martin 1990: 86). Rudi's performance is described in a passage void of punctuation marks. No breaks in the syntax control the meaning. Meaning is liberated and transmitted to the audience. In his dance, Rudi creates an infinite space that embraces him as well as the audience. Martha Graham refers to "absolute dancers" as the "center of gravity"

which “induces the co-ordination that is body-spirit” (qtd in Ibid: 89). The dancer draws the audience towards him as if he is their god, the centre of their world, as in the Celtic myth of the world navel around which all being revolves. It is interesting that the signs of this mythical world created by dance include the absence of fences that cause partitions. Further, Rudi’s dance in the passage above aligns him with other characters who take motion as their method of expression. Zoli, beside walking, indeed performs a few folk-dance routines throughout the narrative, the last of which is in Paris. She recalls, in another reference to doors, that “she has never lived in a place with locks on the door” (315). She is in constant, nomadic motion that broadens the edges of her identity, making it purer, simpler and more flexible. McCann’s characters in different texts seem to work in communion to subvert the boundaries found not only in the real worlds they address but also in the literary texts in which they exist.

An important dimension of dance stems from its mythological origins, a point addressed in the short story “Sisters” in reference to the Celtic goddess, Brigid, and the related Imbolc festival which includes a dance ritual. More importantly, though, dance as a mythological motif appears in *This Side of Brightness* in the discussion of the crane dance. In the stratified New York ethnic and social structure, the symbolism of the crane dance evokes a cyclical pattern of time which implies change and resurrection as well as a mutual impact between upper and lower levels of the universe, emphasizing its unity. The mythological dimension of dance is emphasized by dance critic Sondra Horton Fraleigh who comments on the link between the human being, body and soul, and the universe suggesting that through dance “we can visualize ourselves as our bodies and as part of the world’s body” (Horton Fraleigh 1996: 77). She argues that the human being and the cosmos obtain a meaningful and coherent existence by going through the same process which is “the oscillation of opposites within a coherence” (Ibid: 78). The dancing body pursues a cyclical sphere which links the subject to its opposite, binding by this motion contrasts such as life and death, beginning and end.

Fraleigh takes the example of the Hindu god Shiva known for creating and destroying the world through his dance. “Shiva’s dance,” Horton Fraleigh explains:

engaging an oppositional interplay of creation and destruction, is understood as the source of all cosmic motion, action, and tension. He dances to release the innumerable souls of mankind from the snare of illusion. The theater of his dance and the center of the universe is within the human heart (78, 79).

The Hindu sacred dance, thus, helps the self to discover its true meaning in the world. It is a cosmic revelation. Rudi learns about this myth during his education in the Kirov. He and RosaMaria conduct long debates trying to reveal what Shiva's myth adds to the understanding of dance as a form of art:

He made himself immediately at home, talking animatedly about a myth he had read in his world literature class that day. It had to do with the Indian god, Shiva, who had danced within a circle of fire. He and RosaMaria were arguing about whether the act of dance was one of construction or destruction, whether by dancing you made a work of art or you broke it down (81).

RosaMaria and Rudi differ in their opinions about dance. Rudi sees it as a process that constructs individual movements into an integral whole, whereas RosaMaria sees it as a process that breaks down the whole into its constituting movements. Both views assert the creative power in dance, and highlight the equality and complementarity between the whole and the parts, which in turn alludes to the harmony between the local and the global. The general appearance of the dance does not annihilate the value of the movements perceived individually as "separate, splendid segments" (Ibid). This disparity in their evaluation of dance vanishes in the story of the god Shiva who joins these two traits in his cosmic dance.

Shiva's cosmic dance is performed by an incarnation of him, called "Nataraja,"<sup>15</sup> which means "the Lord of the Dance" (Zaehner 1977, 85). The icon of Nataraja shows him posing vertically with a raised leg and stretched arm inside a ring of fire. The icon is similar to the depictions of the tightrope walker lifting his leg while doing his acrobatics on the cable, and of Nathan Walker, while dancing the crane

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<sup>15</sup> Shiva's dance is described as follows: "His dance is two-fold: either he dances in the sheer joy of overflowing power – he dances creation into existence; or else, in the Tandava dance, he careers down the mountain-side frenzied, like a madman or a drunkard, surrounded by a rout of half-human, half animal creatures who urge him on in his mad career. This dance represents the destruction of the world" (Zaehner 1977: 85).

dance to Eleanor. The image also relates to Zoli; she is a singer who engages in dance performance. The posture establishes a parallel between ordinary human characters and a god of creation and suggests that the human body is a microcosm through which the world can be reinvented and modified. Rudi's body reflects Nataraja's power over his world. One time Rudi ridicules those who compare him to a god when he dances:

The French critics say you are a god when you dance.  
I doubt that.  
You doubt the critics?  
I doubt the French.  
(laughter all round)  
I also doubt the gods (178).

Rudi doubts gods, but never doubts his bodily motion's power to convey meaning: "the energy of the body always fills the face with meaning" (173). The novel's final book that describes Rudi's only visit to Russia in 1987 after his defection involves an image of him that resembles Nataraja's pose. On his way out of Yulia's house:

... as if on cue Rudi paused in the light on the third floor stairwell, threw his scarf over his shoulder and performed a perfect pirouette on the concrete slab ... He stepped slowly to the next landing ... stopped once again in the arc of light and his shoes sounded against the concrete as he spun a second time (337).

The circle of light harks back to Nataraja's circle of fire and the bent leg in the pirouette also copies the god's posture. While Rudi spins around, Yulia confidently thinks, "No remorse." The mythological dimension of Rudi's physical motion fills Yulia with happiness: "I thought to myself: Let this joy extend itself into the morning" (Ibid).

Shiva's symbolism shows McCann, once again, nostalgic about a primordial cosmic existence which evokes the continuity, rather than separation, between opposite elements such as sky and earth, upper world and under world. "Shiva is the reconciliation of all opposites," the Hindu mythology suggests; he is "both creator and destroyer, terrible and mild, evil and good, male and female, eternal rest and ceaseless activity" (Zaehner 1977: 85). Shiva enriches the theme of undermining

boundaries and merging contrasts. He strongly questions the veracity of the basis of opposites which become for him variant aspects of one element. The sharp polarity between the East and West during the Cold War can arguably be taken as an example of a division shaken by the Hindu god's dance, echoed in Rudi's dance, which is directed to the whole world regardless of the boundaries, such as the Iron Curtain, or other blocks that cause human existence to disintegrate.

### Zoli and Rudi as Artist-Heroes

The reaction of Zoli and Rudi against their surroundings gains clearer understanding if compared to the experience of other characters in the Irish and American settings. In *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, the majority of characters are either dreaming of salvation or enclosed in a compartment of despair. The Walkers in New York derive power from the qualities of change and renewal offered by the city. Further, the tightrope walker's godlike presence prevents us from seeing him as an ordinary human being. He has no need to overcome obstacles; the narrative does not depict him as a child growing up amid the difficulties of life. Rather, he creates his own challenge of tightrope walking 110 stories above ground level. Rudi and Zoli, thus, embark on a heroic quest, exclusive to the Eastern European novels, starting from childhood and fulfilled in old age, a quest for trespassing frontiers, full of challenges. The following analysis will define the way in which Rudi and Zoli accord with and diverge from the mythological hero type. The brief reference in the previous chapter to Gelfant's view on the modern American hero of confined space, pushes the discussion towards a more comprehensive examination of the heroic type in McCann's work. The mythological approach of the thesis indeed necessitates a discussion of McCann's concept of heroism and its origins in mythology. I will argue that McCann's hero, despite being different from the mythological hero in social status, shows similarities with the archaic type in terms of the heroic journey and of interaction with society.

The comparison between McCann's hero and the mythological one begins with the heroic journey or quest. The complex spatial aspect of the quest finds parallels in

each of Zoli's and Rudi's journeys. This similarity is significant, taking into account the quest's political statement in challenging the dominant authority. The quest, as shown in Dean A. Miller's study of the epic hero (2003), entails a detachment from the centre of power. The hero is not merely distant from the authorities; he defects from them and defies them. The king represents a three-fold enmity with the hero as the latter feels estranged within the social order established by the king who in turn violates all the rules imposed on others; the king, further, is the hero's nemesis because of the personal threat he poses to the hero (Miller 2003: 181). The antagonism between the king and the epic hero reverberates in Zoli and Rudi's estrangement within the totalitarian communist regime. Similar to the hero's reaction which entails a detachment from the centre of power, Zoli and Rudi start their quest by departing from home to explore the wilderness or international art venues. The hero's quest involves motion in open space, mainly a horizontal plain and sometimes water or forest, where he roams the distances to meet either hardship or prosperity on the way (Ibid: 134, 135, 138). Zoli faces both, danger and support, in the path that she takes in her walk across the borders of Central Europe. Miller remarks that "enclosed space is opposed and antithetical to the hero's position, for it displays a three-dimensional solidity replacing or obtruding into his zone of simple spatial freedom and extension" (140). While the transient and information-loaded urban space of New York forces the citizens to a confinement underneath the ground, changing, thus, the standard destination of the hero's quest, the open space of Central Europe and the world theatre stages becomes the setting for Zoli and Rudi's heroic action. Their encounter with distances symbolizes a rebellion against the social and political status quo. The freedom to wander they obtain the moment they are exiled elevates them to a heroic position.

In addition to space, the quest has a specific relation to time which makes it possible for the hero to delve into a different temporal dimension. In his adventure, the hero may find the night spreads across the day, for example, or a certain period of time lasts much longer than usual (167). This characteristic adds to the extraordinary qualities of the hero that help him to subvert the status quo. The temporal dimension in the quest reminds us of Rudi reaching the stage of no time in his dance which

enables him to escape the ordinary world. Likewise, New York's tunnels annihilate the capitalistic sense of time. The pace of time under the ground is greatly slower so the Walkers, grandfather and grandson, are liberated from the grip of the urban system.

The adventure's manipulation of time, as well as of space, is a sign of an entrance to the Otherworld, hence the hero's quality of liminality: existence in two different worlds at once. Here, it is useful to recall Joseph Campbell's delineation of the quest which evokes a mystical context related to divine powers, unlike the objective approach of Miller. Campbell considers that the "adventure of the hero normally follows the pattern of the nuclear unit ...: a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life enhancing return" (Campbell 1961: 35). Campbell's study of the mythological hero contends that the essential heroic quality is having both human and godly traits. This is supposed to be reflected in the ability to experience the ordinary and supernatural worlds and achieve a unity between the two. Liminality and crossing the imposed boundaries are special features of the hero who Campbell calls "master of the two worlds" and explains:

Freedom to pass back and forth across the world division, from the perspective of the apparitions of time to that of the causal deep and back – not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other – is the talent of the master. The Cosmic Dancer, declares Nietzsche, does not rest heavily in a single spot, but gaily, lightly, turns and leaps from one position to another. It is possible to speak from only one point at a time, but that does not invalidate the insights of the rest (229).

The transition between the everyday world perceived by the senses and the metaphysical world corresponds to McCann's recurrent theme of crossing boundaries. McCann re-reads national, gender and ethnic boundaries. His references to mythology expand the scope of reality to give way to the magical and the impossible. Also his reliance on real people and true stories in writing complicates the distinction between reality and fiction.

McCann's views on Ireland expand the national border in order to embrace, first, the Irish diaspora, and second, the external cultural influences that, he contends, reveal more similarities than differences with Ireland itself. The US social setting exhibits a diverse fabric underlying mainstream American identity that is congruous mainly with the qualities of the white middle class. In addition, some of McCann's women characters such as Sheona – in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* – and Zoli cross gender boundaries. Sheona's character is revolutionary given that she was brought up with conservative views that regarded women as mothers and caregivers. Zoli, further, takes on a man's name and enters the heroic domain, openly identifying with masculine epic heroes. The ethnic boundaries are no less resisted by McCann whose New York is an exhibition of different opportunities to merge with the other in an influential social interaction. Zoli offers another example of refuting ethnic division in the conversation with her husband in which he equates the Roma with other ethnicities. When she wonders why he has not been inquisitive about her experience of "being a Gypsy", he answers her, "why [she] had never asked him anything about not being one" (289). Themes of traversing borderlines are, moreover, reflected in McCann's use of literary form as his writing combines elements of both short and long fiction. The division of his novels into independent and self-contained chapters linked through a motif, inter-chapters or a certain narrative twist, is revealing in that it relates the content with the form in order to generate an integral influence. The last discerned manifestation of connecting separate entities is with McCann's mythological references which expand the scope of reality to give way to the magical and the impossible. Campbell's notion of the hero occupying liminal spaces thus informs McCann's thematic and generic approach. McCann accommodates yet another mythological idea to modern day life, in order to challenge man's inclination toward a divided reality.

Indeed, McCann takes from the context of the mythological hero a basis for his characters and themes. Yet, the link cannot be taken for granted, because the concept of the classical hero itself has undergone great transformation in the modern era. The two main changes have to do with the hero's social role. From one point of view, the hero has experienced degradation in status, for he no longer descends from gods who

used to form a natural shield for him, but he is now someone neglected and belonging to the outcasts of society. Walter Benjamin sees the modern hero as the poet who occupies the role of the “ragpicker” sweeping the city streets “in solitude at times while the citizens indulge in sleeping” and searching for “rhyme-booty” (80). This leads to the second social change of the mythological type which renders him isolated and introvert by contrast with a public figure. This point is again carefully explained by Joseph Campbell who suggests that the hero has become estranged from the rest of the population with the advent of modern democratic thought and scientific progress. He is left without the protection and guidance that society provides. The society used to be the hero’s lighthouse, for he is on a mission which is issued by and is meant to go back to the people. “Then,” observes Campbell, “all meaning was in the group; ... today no meaning in the group – none in the world: all is in the individual” (388). The modern hero wants to play the role of the saviour, but he cannot because of being socially estranged.

The second part of the discussion is concerned with the image of the artist-hero as it is depicted by McCann. The artist-hero type relates to Campbell’s view on the modern hero who is isolated from the rest of society. A study by Maurice Beebe (1964) shows that “the artist-as-hero is the artist-as-exile” (6). This is because the artist is engaged in a search for the self which is the adversary to society. In order to find their true self, artists need to wander alone and seek a shelter from the crowds. The artist is “always sensitive, usually introverted and self-centred, often passive, and sometimes so capable of abstracting himself mentally from the world around him that he appears absentminded or ‘possessed’” (5). The artist’s alienation prevails as the essential condition for artistic production. The artist, Beebe proposes, is the anarchist in disagreeing with the group’s standards, and the solitary who avoids the crowds.

While the image of the modern hero and the artist-hero reflects a passive social role, McCann’s protagonists, Rudi and Zoli, move in an opposite direction. Before analysing this point, it is worth returning to two artist-types developed in McCann’s short fiction. *Fishing* introduces an example of the alienated artist as the modern hero. Three stories in the collection are centred on the idea of the artist who sees art as an escape from the infernal human world destroyed by wars whether

international or civil. "A Basket Full of Wallpaper" relates the story of a Hiroshima survivor who flees Japan and ends up in Dublin working as a wallpaper installer. He decorates people's houses with as little interaction with them as possible. Dubliners do not speak with him and his detachment allows them to turn him into a myth which they formulate according to their imagination: men reckon that his past job was a chicken-sexer and sometimes fabricate a criminal record for him. Women think he is of royal descent while boys take him as a military pilot who strayed in the air all the way to their city. Osobe, as he is called, searches for the fragments of his spirit tormented by the use of the nuclear weapon in his country. Rolls of pale-coloured wallpaper are scattered in his house to make a "strange collage, flowers and vines and odd shapes all meshed together" (40). Osobe in addition to his job amuses himself with the art of Origami, making different figures out of paper. He creates forms of his lost family and other members of Japanese society, so their memory can surround him in his loneliness: "On the ground sat rows and rows of small paper dolls, the faces painted almost comically. An old philosopher, a young girl, a wizened woman, a soldier" (Ibid). His house is symbolic of the artist's isolated shrine. The wallpaper is his tool to shelter himself from the world's horrors. Osobe can locate himself neither among the population of his original country nor in his new destination, Ireland. He is the artist hit by disaster who believes that art offers him a sense of belonging to a certain place and community, so he applies one layer of paper after another on the wall until they become about two feet thick.

Another artist is the painter in "Cathal's Lake" who embodies the persona of a farmer, and resorts to a secluded piece of land far from the main highway which symbolizes urban life. Cathal expresses his pain over the death of the Irish people during the Troubles by drawing paintings that can capture their spirits and keep them alive through the incarnation of the swan. Each of these two characters, Osobe and Cathal, illustrates the modern heroic type who distances art from life. The artist is not heard nor understood. He creates codes for himself to comprehend not for others. In addition to the wallpaper installer and the farmer, the same collection includes one more reference to the artist figure in a story entitled "For Many One." Here the artist seems to be trying to escape the pressure of a tedious marriage, the emptiness of

which is left to the reader's imagination. She works as a night dancer in one of the neighbourhood's clubs without her husband's knowledge. One aspect of her behaviour remains more important than dancing; it is seen in the act of painting and colouring quarter-dollar coins. In an act of a subversive nature, she transforms currency stating her dissatisfaction with the status quo: "Jefferson with a peace sign on his forehead, another with the LIBERTY shortened to BERT, the eagle wearing a bra, all sorts of colours everywhere" (114). Laura, as the wife is called, always hidden in her little studio at home and in the dark local brothel, transmits yet another kind of art codes for people to try to appreciate. She prefers to stay anonymous as a modern hero would.

If the mythological hero and the modern one are depicted at two ends of a scale, then McCann's hero may sit in the middle. Zoli and Rudi have revived traits of the mythological hero while representing a perfect modern example. Unlike the mythological hero, McCann's types are self-driven to find meaning in their existence, and unlike the modern hero, they do not withdraw completely from society. Their opposition to the socio-political order proves their engagement with it. This point can best be demonstrated by looking at the final part of each of Zoli and Rudi's quests, that is, the return part. They diverge from the modern type who keeps isolated from the society, and return, obtaining a public reward of some kind. Zoli's concluding scene is when she sings the Roma song in the international conference for immigrants. The final stage of Rudi's journey includes his return home to the Soviet Union to perform a ballet and visit his family and friends.

The exile of Zoli and Rudi reveals a certain degree of social engagement, especially in the case of Zoli in her fight for the Roma and the communist causes. She is not simply reflective about this; she is totally active: she gives speeches, writes poetry and negotiates as a mediator between the government, the communist activists, and the leaders of her Roma group. In one instance she is even marked as "heroic, the vanguard of a new wave of Romani thinkers" (113). This follows two months during which Zoli disappears with her Kumpanija after a dispute with the authorities over the way they raise a child with poor health. Zoli on that occasion turns into a "cult figure" (ibid). This is Zoli becoming a hero in the perspective of the

communist officials. Her true heroism, however, goes beyond communist standards. If the modern hero deserts his society to ultimately take refuge in an isolated space, then Zoli, rather like the mythological hero, deserts the public to return back to them later on. This is reflected in her performance in the international conference for immigrants and displaced people. Having for a long time abandoned the public spotlight and resigned from art, she returns on a global level, carrying a strong message of perseverance in art and commitment to her ethnic identity.

Rudi's journey includes a return phase as well that is referred to briefly in the part of the discussion that compares him to Nataraja. His artistic career, unlike Zoli's, is ingrained in his personal experience. He performs to the whole world dance movements that express his inner feelings which are detached from social or political debate. His connection with ordinary people springs from his ability to attract them to a liberating metaphorical world associated, as seen before, with mythology: "Something about him released people from the world, tempted them out" (334). Unlike the modern hero then, Rudi is not passive. Further, he takes on an Odyssean return to his family and country, concluding the narrative visiting Ufa and Leningrad in his homeland, the cities where he was born and educated. He meets Yulia's seventeen-year-old adopted son who is working to become a visual artist. The young man is symbolically Rudi's heir. Rudi in the end does a ballet movement as if to crown his victorious heroic quest: "In the lobby Rudi pirouetted one final time and then he was gone" (337). By reading the novel's ending within the frame of the discussion of the hero, we can observe that it only includes parts of Rudi's life that align with the heroic quest. The novel does not cover what followed Nureyev's brief visit to the Soviet Union, neither his trip back to the West again nor his death there from an AIDS-related disease.

Zoli and Rudi's heroic personae follow the mythological type in a number of ways from the political significance of the quest to the capacity to cross boundaries between different realms of the ordinary and extraordinary, to completion of the journey with a return to childhood roots. The two novels infuse the modern heroic type with mythological qualities, and thus take it a step forward in time to the postmodern hero reflected in Mike Featherstone's article on heroic life and everyday

life (1995). Featherstone offers a useful observation in this regard, arguing that postmodernism draws the modern exiled hero back to society by denying the distinction between the heroic and the everyday. Zoli and Rudi's returns, in one respect, mean that they have descended from the heroic platform to unite with their ordinary origins. Viewed from Featherstone's perspective, this could indicate an "anti-heroic ethos fostered by cultural modernism's antinomian movement away from notions of artistic and intellectual genius and the retreat from life into art, to favour a blurring of the boundaries between art and everyday life which has been enhanced by surrealism, Dada and postmodernism" (67). The concept of the hero is normalized by making it emerge from an everyday experience with nothing outstanding about the character's ancestry or social position. On asking McCann whether literature in our crisis-charged times can accommodate heroes, his answer confirmed the need of contemporary man for heroes despite the difficulty of finding the true heroic character of classical times: "It is more difficult to make our heroes or heroines real but yes we need heroes, especially ruined ones, flawed ones, broken ones."<sup>16</sup> The hero is an ordinary person emerging from the destruction of twentieth and twenty-first century crises. The heroic category to which Featherstone and McCann refer is detached from its classical prototype where the hero is an offspring of a deity and sometimes grows up to be royalty leading his people to salvation. Heroes nowadays are not born to be heroes. No prophecies at their birth predetermine their future destiny to redeem society. On the contrary, they collect the fragments of their soul and follow roads that they hope would lead to individual survival. The discussion of Zoli and Rudi's artistic quest suggests that McCann's concept of heroism lies in a complex knot between the archetype and its modern and postmodern representations.

### Cosmopolitanism

While revealing Zoli's and Rudi's parallels with the typical heroic quest informs the potential of their social role, it does not say much about the essence and

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<sup>16</sup> Colum McCann, unpublished Q&A with Alkhayer, August 2015.

originality of their actions in the wider frame of McCann's works. The question remains: to whom do they carry their heroic message, and what value do they try to convey in it? The answers to these questions start at McCann's tendency to renounce the divisive ideas the effect of which turns his characters to conflicting religious, national and social parties. The counter discourse to that divided environment is promoting a cosmopolitan belonging that transcends differences of colour and class, a point which begins with Zoli and is perfected with Rudi and defines their heroisms. Opposite the indication to the ethnic isolation of the Roma, a thread in the community's description shows a quality of unboundedness in them. They seem to be reconciled with infinite nature, unaccustomed to physical barriers. Zoli's concluding speech metaphorically erodes the walls of her daughter's house and opens the windows to the rest of the world. Cosmopolitanism, nevertheless, remains implicit in this novel while it is explicitly mentioned in *Dancer*.

Regarding the development of the idea of universalism, Amanda Anderson in her critique differentiates between two types of cosmopolitanism, exclusionary and inclusionary. The exclusionary accords with the thought of the Stoics, who acknowledge as cosmopolitan only those belonging to their community. This concept led to an elitist cosmopolitanism that is defined by the regulations and boundaries of Alexander the Great's Empire or later to the Latin Empire and Western world. Contrary to this notion, Anderson draws attention to an inclusionary cosmopolitanism in which "universalism finds expression through sympathetic imagination and intercultural exchange" (Anderson 1998: 268). Anderson draws on Bruce Robbins's contention that an "embrace of worldliness" is implicit in a cosmopolitan ethos where elitism changes into egalitarianism. Inclusionary cosmopolitanism, thus, supports an egalitarian approach to difference and otherness as it "aims to articulate not simply intellectual programs but ethical ideals" (Ibid 269). This "new cosmopolitanism" flourishes, Anderson points out, in contemporary anthropological studies whose "intellectual project" by definition involves "ethical questions" (Ibid).

Rudi's character exemplifies this notion of "new cosmopolitanism." In a section in the second half of the novel that sketches the establishment of Rudi's career in the West and reveals the public reception of it, what appears to be a magazine heading

reads: "*Cosmopolitan: The world's most beautiful man*" (190). The typeset arguably stresses the significance of the statement and its implications by exaggerating the capital "C" to many times bigger than the standard font. Including what is possibly on the front page of a women's magazine that awards him the title of the most beautiful man stresses Rudi's global sex appeal. But the line bears a wider scope of interpretation as it resounds beyond journalistic language to a philosophical one that links cosmopolitanism to beauty. Even though this link may seem elitist and detached, it actually enforces egalitarianism because the popular icon that Rudi has become draws the value of beauty closer to the public. The rhetoric of aesthetics is invoked to advocate universal belonging beyond sectarianism, racism and nationalism. Rudi's art evokes a sense of beauty that resides in human minds as a common denominator that binds people together in spite of their differences.

This abstract notion of cosmopolitanism is supplemented with a concrete illustration of the idea a bit later in the same section of the narrative. Anderson's notion of cultural interaction is evident here in the folk stories and simple anecdotes exchanged between Rudi and his artefact dealers. In a grey box spreading over two and a half pages, a group of Rudi's belongings is listed: precious items he has collected from around the world. Antiques, handicrafts and works of art from six continents – the North and South Poles excluded – meet in Rudi's personal collection. Obtaining the artefacts is the result of close communication between Rudi, craftsmen and art dealers. They expose a busy network of human contact that stretches across time and space to select the most unique souvenirs from different historical periods and geographical areas. The deeper-than-trade human relationships between vendors and consumers showcase significant cultural interplay in which objects speak for the civilizations that have produced them. World cultures combine not only in Rudi's mind and body but also in his possessions in order to assert the beauty of diversity.

The circulation of the objects is depicted through the metaphor of storytelling that reflects a universally connected human experience. Rudi's conversation with his Moroccan carpet maker evolves into telling the story of his life. The encounter offers an insight into the themes and formal aspects of McCann's texts; therefore I will quote it before concluding:

In Raizon he kneels on carpets made for him by a blind Moroccan man to whom he tells the story of the Leningrad choreographer who listened so intently to floorboards. The Moroccan loves the story so much that he repeats it to other customers, so that the story itself shifts and changes as it makes its way through living rooms around the world, told and retold, the choreographer becoming a dancer from Moscow, or a Siberian musician, even a deaf mute Hungarian ballerina, so that years later he hears the story, distorted, and he bangs on the dinner table and shocks everyone silent with the words: *Horseshit! That's horseshit! He was from Leningrad and his name was Dimitri Yachmennikov!* (222)

What Rudi considers a distortion can also be understood as a subsequent enrichment and multiplication of his story. People adapt the original story according to their own desire. The extract, further, tracks a circular pattern for the distribution of the story which starts with Rudi and years later returns to him. This is comparable to his own thoughts that roam the world but stay rooted in his hometown Ufa. The final item enumerated in the list of his belongings is “a train set built for him by Llewelyn Harris, a craftsman in Cardiff, the models so real that when he lays them out on the floor he can sometimes remember himself at six years of age sitting on the hill above Ufa station, waiting” (224).

## Conclusions

Zoli and Rudi's characters join in these two works to represent two further and deeply comparable cases of dealing with crisis. Even if provoked by different causes from those discussed in previous works, crisis still maintains divisions as its essence. Divisions appear as the stasis challenged by the motion of the characters. Zoli revolts against the strict traditions of the Roma people, which isolate them from the literate world, paradoxically by taking advantage of their unique nomadic lifestyle. The cultural as well as the political isolation of the Roma is challenged by Zoli's activism

with government representatives. Her role as a mediator between adversaries takes another turn at her exile when she starts a walk that leads her to the platform of an international gathering in which she recites her poems. Similarly, Rudi's sense of isolation is the generator of his artistic creation. Exile, here, is seen as an imprisonment the boundaries of which are blurred by the physical performance of the artist.

The novels allow significant space for the artist and artistic expression. Art is presented as a dynamic activity that aims to make "the world a better place" (Dancer 215, 216). The motion generated by walking and dancing helps to transgress boundaries and create an alternative concept of home that intersects with mythological imagery which is recurrent in McCann's works. Alluding to the god Shiva's cosmic dance illustrates this point, for Shiva's home is the whole world which he creates and annihilates through the power of dance. The texts which are set in Central and Eastern Europe call for embracing a cosmopolitan human identity. These semi-biographical novels introduce the artist as a hero who struggles in order to establish a diverse interconnected human culture on the world's geographical map.

## Conclusion

The lineage of women spanning four generations in *Transatlantic* gives insight into McCann's vision of the elements of time and space in his writing as it is shown in the preceding chapters. The Transatlantic journey begins with Lilly Duggan's emigration to the US, and ends with her bankrupt great granddaughter, Hannah Carson, sitting in the sunroom of a large family house that has been put up to auction and thinking: "We have to admire the world for not ending on us" (295). For the world not to end on McCann's characters, it has to keep moving across the frontiers of accepted beliefs. Channels of cultural communication have to be open and constantly extended. Isolation behind religious, political or racial boundaries is attached to a sense of finality and crisis. The inability to cross boundaries and the lack of mobility evoke apocalyptic images, as seen with the horse that is caught in the river in "Everything in This Country Must". In addition to the horse, the eponymous collection involves two bedridden patients, a family provider and an activist, who support the link between fixity and illness. The mobility undertaken by the four generations of women in time and space, in *Transatlantic*, equals a chance to live. These women between them follow a round trip across the Atlantic Ocean from Ireland to North America and back again. The circularity of their collective journey is linked to their achievement, as is the circular pattern of the journeys carried out by the characters distributed in the three settings of the thesis.

Lilly Duggan, like Zoli and Rudi, survives through spatial migration. Space is brought to life by her physical motion of walking from Dublin to Cork. The human body is elevated to spiritual levels and is meant to represent a path to freedom. The different environments involved are also worthy of noting. These characters not only traverse land but also sea. This reminds us of the significance of the water and the river flow in reviving barren surroundings, especially in McCann's first collection of stories, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*. Lilly gives birth to Emily Ehrlich, a pioneer journalist who moves to Newfoundland in Canada and later travels with her daughter,

Lottie Tuttle, to Europe to visit such famous cities as Barcelona, Rome and London. The daughter, Lottie, then marries an Irishman she falls in love with and continues to live in Ireland. Lottie's daughter, Hannah, concludes the novel by narrating in the first person the final chapter in which she has to deal with debts and sell her house. The ending of this novel is not romanticized, yet it is optimistic. Hannah is tired and poor, sometimes evoking with her badly-fed Labrador the image of a tramp. She stands for the Irish working class, drawing sympathy one time from an employee in her bank and another time from a wife of an acquaintance. However, Hannah and her mother complete the circular journey and celebrate homecoming after a cross-continental trip that, spread across the four characters, takes approximately two hundred years. Zoli's similar cross-border walk, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 3, exhibits a spatial freedom that enables her to overcome exile. Spatial excursions in New York take other forms apparent in Treefrog's descent to the tunnels to avoid a life without his grandfather on the surface. The bereaved women in *Let the Great World Spin* even bring about a therapeutic aspect to domestic space in their regular visits to tell stories of their sons. They infuse the rather enclosed space with a therapeutic trait by maintaining an inward movement and exchange of stories. Like a number of short stories, the same New York novel involves a transatlantic mobility when Corrigan travels with the Church to New York to work with elderly people or when his brother Ciaran follows him after the spread of violence to Dublin during the escalation of the Irish conflict. Corrigan assimilates with the city's desolate population while his brother marries the painter, Lara, and returns to Ireland to chair a company which later flourishes economically during the era of the Celtic Tiger. Ciaran's return is parallel to that of Lottie and Hannah and even bears a more positive element. Whereas Hannah is depicted as selling her house, Ciaran buys the house that he and his brother had to put up for sale in the past.

Hannah Carson's chapter, "The Garden of Remembrance," is centred on a letter that links her to her past. The circle drawn by the women in this novel is not only about a spatial trip, but also about a temporal one. The letter was written by Emily Ehrlich in Newfoundland and it was Lottie who secured its postage by giving it to one of the pilots who would cross the ocean before they took off. The pilot who took

it, Brown, kept it in his pocket instead of putting it in the mail bag. Thus, the letter never reached its destination to the Jennings Family in Cork who helped Lilly throughout her escape from Ireland. It was not until years later that Emily Ehrlich regained the letter from Brown himself after she did a press interview with him. The letter occupies the major part of the final chapter, and the first two pages are dedicated to Hannah's reflection about this object from the past that has been "passed from daughter to daughter" (248). The letter that is still sealed is described in detail in terms of both its appearance and significance to Hannah. She thinks, "So many of our lives are thrown into long migratory orbits" (249). So much of McCann's fiction, through estranged, oppressed or ambitious characters, also follows this orbital path. His are not texts of one space or one time. As they wander history and geography, his characters generate these cyclical routes. In a line that reflects McCann's authorial perspective, Hannah confirms: "There isn't a story in the world that isn't in part, at least, addressed to the past" (295). Only after knowing the content of the letter, which is a note of gratitude addressed to the Jennings, can Hannah agree to put the house up for auction; having unravelled this mystery from the past, she understands better her relationship with her ancestors. She feels secure because losing the house no longer threatens her existence which now predates that of the house, if the four female generations are taken into account.

The parents waiting beside the Sloe-Black river, Treefrog, Zoli and Rudi all support the presumption that memory is an essential factor for reconciling themselves with their reality and realizing their true selves. For these characters the past possesses a healing power. It helps the parents to find traces of their faraway sons, whereas it guides Treefrog to imaginatively meet his late grandfather. In addition to crossing physical boundaries, revisiting the environments of their childhood is an essential procedure for Rudi and Zoli to overcome their exiles. Hannah Carson's world, then, does not end with herself because of this circular pattern that brings together different spatial and temporal settings. Her world, like that of many other characters in McCann's oeuvre, does not end because it keeps revolving and expanding in space and time. As she explains: "We return to the lives of those who have gone before us, a perplexing Möbius strip until we come home, eventually to ourselves" (248). She

associates the sense of home and belonging with the self and by this, she echoes Yulia in *Dancer* who thinks: “I suppose that one finally learns, after much searching, that we really belong to ourselves” (74). It seems as though McCann examines his characters against their social and political backgrounds by tracking their movement in time and space. Then he allows these characters to emerge as independent from, yet enriched with, the history and geography that they have experienced. Coming home or belonging to oneself relates the idea of being to the individual, which implies an element of existentialism in McCann’s fiction that would perhaps be worthy of investigation in future research.

McCann’s world, which he describes in an essay called “An Imagined Elsewhere: The City of Cities,” is a world in which “[p]lace and time are bundled together” (Pericoli 2008). This essay was published together with a visual book containing a world-map as designed by Italian artist Matteo Pericoli. If we consider McCann’s “elsewhere” in relation to the graphic illustration of Pericoli, we can suggest that the spatial dimension is represented by a horizontal line and the temporal one by a vertical line. Pericoli draws some architectural monuments of seventy cities and stacks them side by side on a horizontal line to form his vision of the “Skyline of the World,” which is a huge mural in JFK airport in New York. The horizontal expansion is contrasted with the verticality of the buildings, forming an axis, or rather various axes, that recall the symbol of the Celtic Cross. Each one of these poles can symbolize the centre of the world, which is located in a specific urban spot yet encompasses the whole world. The urban context of Pericoli’s and McCann’s book, *World Unfurled* (2008), is echoed in the image of Treefrog and the tightrope walker on top of New York’s skyscrapers. But the axis is not restricted to these architectural manifestations of modern civilization. It extends to the rural environment that is evoked in the symbol of the crane, for example, which links through its circular dance the sky and the earth.

Speculating about the content of the letter, Hannah thinks, “there are times I admit that I have sat at the kitchen table, looking out over the lough, and have rubbed the edges of the envelope and held it in the palm of my hand to try to divine what the contents might be, just as we are knotted by wars, so mystery holds us together”

(248). The enigma of the letter provides Hannah with life. She considers that mystery binds the lineage of women from which she descends together. The unknown activates imagination, an extremely valuable element for McCann's characters. The section related to Emily Ehrlich in the novel explains the impact of imagination on her: "Her imagination pushed back against the pressures of what lay around her" (188). It has, thus, a redemptive impact to which Hannah wants to continue holding, as evident in her interrogation: "What mystery we lose when we figure things out, but perhaps there's a mystery in the obvious, too" (294). Even after knowing the content of the letter, she searches for further mystery. Even what seems to be obvious, she suggests, actually contains mysteries and ambiguities. This hypothesis is maintained by characters that use mythology as a tool to interpret their lives or to create alternative realities. McCann's first collection of stories provides plenty of examples on the function of mythology. The motif of the Otherworld, for example, bears an element of the mystery to which Hannah alludes. Fergus, in "Along the Riverwall" believes in an Otherworld even though he does not see it. He is confident that he can resurrect in the water which is strongly linked to the concept of the Otherworld. The "whole life" of Emily Ehrlich is "defined by water, Newfoundland and beyond," her daughter thinks (264). The symbolic dimension of rivers, lakes and oceans in McCann's fiction offers rich material for the human imagination. Sometimes water is associated with mythological revival, as seen with Fergus and Nathan Walker. Other times it is related to annihilation, such being the case with Walker's friend, O'Leary, and the domestic horse in "Everything in this Country Must." Water, of course, is associated with connections and continuity as it links old parents beside the Sloe-Black river with their children abroad and it also supports transatlantic migration. Mythology offers a unique way to view the two key factors of geography and history that define McCann's novels. The circularity of mythological time and the similarity in mythological traditions urge the characters to find belonging in the infinity of the universe.

The letter reads, "*We seldom know what echo our actions will find, but our stories most certainly outlast us*" (291). Emily Ehrlich here implicitly talks about the transcendence and legacy of art. The actions of characters acquire significance beyond

their lives that are recorded in narrative plots. The actions of people live longer than the people themselves. Emily in this instance refers to the two veteran pilots who converted the war bomber to a civilian plane that carried the first parcel of airmail across the Atlantic. This ground-breaking human achievement is not a singular one in McCann's fiction. As the flight links the two continents, the funambulist links the Twin Towers. The story he writes with his performance is in sense everlasting as it transforms the metropolis in particular and human civilization in general. The story of Zoli's walk has a similar role. Because she traverses borders she can later reach Paris to sing the Roma song to the world. Rudi's dance is most notably an artistic expression which impacts on the whole world. Art embraces diversity, the visual perspective on New York City proves. While racism dominates the social context of McCann's metropolis, the contrast between black and white becomes an aesthetic element when considered as a feature of visual art. McCann links artistic achievement to heroism. The artist hero confronts social and political limitations; s/he aspires to embrace a transcendental world and achieves this through art.

McCann's fiction extends the concept of the other so it becomes valid in a variety of contexts including the nation, ethnicity, gender, class and religion. He zooms in to reflect the sufferings of these several others against the harsh historical conditions, and he also depicts their steps on the road of redemption. He seems to be arguing against the exclusion of the other and strives to bring together the self and the other by accentuating the various similarities between the two concepts. A broader view of McCann's main themes such as social reality and mythological imagination suggests that he aims to alienate contemporary times and idealize mythological thought. His characters, who feel estranged in the present, associate themselves with an archetypal past. This presumption draws on Robert S. Ellwood's study of the politics of myth in the writings of three major twentieth-century mythologists, Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell. About these three thinkers Elwood remarks:

all cast passionate (though not always uncritical) eyes upon the primitive, believing that, largely through the power of myth and ritual, primal humanity was better integrated spiritually and cosmically than moderns, and they also

held that enough recent examples obtain to suggest that primal integration can be recovered at least in part, though perhaps only on an individual basis. In their own terms, they were not so much reactionary, then, as integrationalist: holding that the mythological past needed to be integrated fully into the subjective lives of modern persons (Ellwood 2009: xiv).

This study has revealed an effort on the part of McCann to do exactly this: integrate the mythological past into modern and contemporary subjectivities. The effort is evident in the assimilation of real people and events into his fiction. He dresses factual incidents with supernatural traits and by this he leaves room for a unification between the real and the imaginary. The gods who rise from the East River are only a group of New York sandhogs and the god who guards New York on top of its highest building is only a French artist. The god of dance and creation is a Russian dancer and choreographer. The plane that “sticks out of the earth like some new-world dolmen” is a weapon converted by two engineers (McCann 2013: 34). Through comparing these old symbols and modern manifestations in McCann’s fiction, it is fair to suggest that he is inviting us to perceive life differently by imbuing it with traces derived from sacred texts of primordial human thought.

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