
Introduction

Colum McCann and the Aesthetics of Redemption

IRELAND – HOME AND AWAY

At the beginning of the RTÉ Arts Lives documentary, ‘Colum McCann – Becoming a New Yorker’ (2009), Colum McCann asks, self-consciously, why anyone would want to follow him around with a camera and make a film about his life as a resident of Manhattan’s Upper East Side. The newly inaugurated winner of the prestigious National Book Award, 2009, is unsure as to why a permanent and public televisual narrative record, with him as the central topic, would be of interest to a broad audience. Yet, this is only true if we consider McCann’s National Book Award triumph as a kind of departure point and if we treat of McCann as a bolting ingénue to the world of contemporary literary fiction. When, in fact, it is the culmination, thus far, of a virtuoso writing career, which has garnered widespread acclaim, a generous haul of literary prizes, and secured a faculty position on the creative writing programme at CUNY’s Hunter College, alongside Peter Carey and Nathan Englander. The weight of McCann’s 2009 award cannot be underestimated, given the pedigree of previous recipients such as: Cormac McCarthy, Susan Sontag, Don DeLillo, Philip Roth, E. Annie Proulx, John Barth, and E.L. Doctorow. The National Book Award can be added to a host of achievements by McCann, numbered among which are: the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature (1994), for *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*; two *Sunday Tribune* Hennessy Literary Awards (1995), for his story, ‘Tresses’; a Pushcart Prize (1997), for his story ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’; the Princess Grace Memorial Literary Prize (2000); a nomination in 1995 and a short-listing in 2000 for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Prize for *Songdogs* and *This Side of Brightness*

respectively; and in 2003 he was *Esquire*'s 'Writer of the Year'. More recently, McCann has been inducted into the Hennessy Literary Hall of Fame and, in 2009, he became a member of Aosdána and was granted a French *Chevalier des arts et lettres* by the French government. In light of these and other distinctions, McCann's querying of his selection as a subject for an RTÉ Arts Lives feature seems excessively modest.

Winning the National Book Award at the relatively young age of forty-four, then, is a major staging post on a career trajectory that has been international and eclectic and that, perhaps not without coincidence, has its origins in journalism, as well as a family history steeped in writing of all kinds. McCann's father is the well-known Irish journalist and fiction writer, Sean McCann, who was the long-time features editor of the *Evening Press* in Dublin. And despite his father's reservations about pursuing a career in the same field, McCann trained and graduated from the Rathmines School of Journalism between 1982 and 1984. McCann was named 'Young Journalist of the Year' in 1983, during his time at Rathmines, and took this journalistic talent to work as he contributed to a variety of news publications in the years immediately following his education. He worked for various newspapers including: the *Connaught Telegraph* during the summer of 1984, the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Press* as a freelance, the *Evening Press* as 'youth correspondent' from 1984–1985, and the *Universal Press Syndicate* in New York for six months. And this journalistic output continues, in more global outlets, including: *The New York Times*, *Paris Match*, *The Guardian*, *The Irish Times*, *Die Zeit*, and *La Repubblica*. But in 1986, McCann returned to the US with the intention of devoting himself to writing literary fiction; as he admitted to Marjorie Kaufman: 'There was a whole enchantment of travelling to America, a wanderlust, with no real intention to stay, but to become a writer. I landed in Boston and got my first job driving a taxi in Cape Cod, bought a typewriter and had the same empty page in it for six months. I had nothing to write about.'¹ A major part of McCann's literary apprenticeship, then, was taken up with locating materials that would animate his future fiction. Having taken eighteen months to travel across forty American states on a bicycle, worked as a wilderness instructor at a youth correctional facility in Texas, and taught English as a Foreign Language in Japan, McCann had accumulated much of the direct inspiration behind his early works.² Equally, McCann's concern for ideas such as

migration, displacement, the durable currency of private stories, and racial politics resonate in much of the more recent fictions, though based in radically diverse geographies.

While it may seem legitimate to stable McCann's emigrant experience, and that of many of his contemporaries, with previous generations of expatriate Irish artists, such a neat correspondence is limited. In effect, a process of cultural and artistic commuting has largely replaced the qualitative experience of early to mid-twentieth-century artistic exile. That is to say that a writer such as McCann might reside in New York, but he maintains an active participation in Irish social and cultural debate, largely through readings and regular journalistic opinion pieces. In a sense, McCann is a writer in constant flow – his fictions and his other writings are channels through which the mobility of modern Irish identity is trafficked. This is not just a consequence of McCann's biographical history of emigration and migration, but it is also part of 'a new cartography of thought, a new landscape of desires, among the Irish today. Our mental maps are no longer necessarily located in twenty-six and thirty-two counties.'³ As we have noted, mobility is a constant of Irish political and economic life – whether under duress or by conscious choice. But, perhaps, McCann is alluding to the changing textures of mobility over time: the proliferation of international economic opportunities, the contraction of global spatial and temporal coordinates, the fevered pursuit of multicultural exchanges, and the newly forged, and often disorienting, vectors of movement under postcolonial conditions. Naturally, then, such mobility offers dilated imaginative geographies for the modern writer with which to negotiate the vagaries and tensions of individual identity, and those of his or her communities of departure and those of arrival. McCann's initial foray into literary fiction, the collection of short stories *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, drew heavily on the author's personal experiences of traversing the North American continent by bicycle.⁴ The stories are variously located in Ireland and in the United States, broaching such themes as familial estrangement, regret, emigration, and personal exile – themes that are resurrected in much of McCann's subsequent writing. His fictional works are both reflective of and 'modulated by the physical and literary landscapes'⁵ through which McCann has travelled. The impetus towards movement is not just a thematic constant in McCann's literary fictions, but is, he has admitted,

an enduring facet of both his personal lifestyle and his *modus operandi* as a writer. McCann underscored this element of both his personal lifestyle and his artistic process early in his writing career in a 1994 interview with *The Irish Times*, admitting that: ‘travel is really central to what I do. Travel pushes within me and pushes within these characters. I don’t know when, but I suppose I’m going to have to stop and take stock some time soon. But I can’t see myself as a writer coming to terms with a single place.’⁶ Underlying McCann’s novels and short stories, then, is his preoccupation with the historical mobility of successive generations of the Irish population, and the attendant traumas and reliefs of dislocated human interaction.

McCann is seen as a writer who expands and challenges the geographical borders of Irish writing with his eclectic cast list of characters and communities across his fictional narratives. This study will consider the ways in which he navigates and negotiates between Ireland and the international, and between the past and the contemporary – not as a writer who unquestioningly adheres to the liberation of the global, but as one who, following the lines of inspiration drawn from such figures as John Berger and Michael Ondaatje, mediates historical and contemporary moments of cultural and political transaction across borders and between different national/ethnic communities. His attentiveness to the global is never trained on transcending the baggage of the Irish past. He is not a celebrant of unfettered globalization, but is mindful of the traumas, dislocations and disparities that accrue, and have historically accrued, from forms of economic and political globalization. His Irish heritage is a valuable resource in his engagement with the disenfranchised of Irish-American, African-American, and Eastern European histories during the twentieth century. These indicative thematic foci have implications for McCann’s ‘location’ within contemporary Irish fiction. He is not alone in engaging with the Irish emigrant experience in the US, but the manner in which McCann interblends and historicizes the Irish experience with that of other marginal communities provides an insight into a unique ethical and political vision in his work. In combination, McCann’s works allow recognizable patterns of Irish historical experience to converse with broader global flows of peripheral peoples, yet what permits them to cohere as ethical rebukes to the indignities of global capital is the creative space of McCann’s fictional art. Thus, it is in these ways that

his writing re-imagines the possibilities of contemporary Irish fiction; he places Irish history, Irish writing, and Irish culture into productive artistic and ethical dialogue with other marginal cultures. All of the foregoing emphasis on narration and storytelling segues into a discussion of the utopian impulses that are prevalent in McCann's work, and will underscore his belief in the redemptive power of narrative and storytelling as a utopian resource – his stated conviction that stories are the ultimate democracy. In other words, much of McCann's work aggregates form and content in its representation of historically peripheral populations and individuals. He recovers and redeems in furnishing utopian narrative spaces and forms in which these people can articulate their own stories. He is keen to stress the utopian liberation of the creative act as resistance and as agency. In tune with the international thematic sweep of his work, McCann exhibits this broad embrace of international influence in the formal and linguistic features of his fiction. Besides the evidence of the Irish oral tradition, we also note his employment of Roma oral storytelling, the language of ballet dance, and an attention to the cadences of jazz music.

There have been a number of survey and single-author publications within this field in recent years, but none has produced entirely convincing and/or comprehensive perspectives on McCann's fiction. Indicative publications in the survey-mould include: John Wilson Foster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (2006); Linden Peach, *The Contemporary Irish Novel* (2004); Rudiger Imhof, *The Modern Irish Novel* (2002); and Liam Harte and Michael Parker (eds), *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories* (2000). In addition, recent thematized survey readings of contemporary Irish fiction have not even cited McCann's writings. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews has published a valuable survey of Irish fictions of the Northern Irish 'Troubles' – a topic that McCann has fictionalized. But Kennedy-Andrews' *(De-)constructing the North* (2003) makes no reference to McCann's work. Elsewhere, in her book *The Irish Novel at the End of the Twentieth Century* (2002), Jennifer M. Jeffers makes no reference at all to McCann's fiction. Finally, a range of single-author publications have also appeared which address writers that constitute a 'canon' of Irish prose fiction in the late twentieth century. We have seen studies of John Banville, John McGahern, Edna O'Brien, and William Trevor; it now seems timely to produce an equivalent study of a younger but no less significant writer as McCann.

Joe Cleary offers a neo-Marxist study of modern Irish culture in his book *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (2006), and he alights upon the topic of Irish literary fiction as part of his analysis. Cleary's focus is principally on what he diagnoses as the 'naturalist' strain in modern Irish fiction, including such writers as: John McGahern, Edna O'Brien, Brian Moore, Seán O'Faoláin, and John Broderick. For Cleary, this tradition is engaged in social and cultural criticism but, crucially, harbours an unrelenting 'scepticism towards all forms of idealism and utopianism'.⁷ While these writers are exemplary in their critical stance towards the conservative, repressive elements of Irish society up to the 1980s, in his view they are more interested in 'the awfulness of the actual'⁸ than in offering glimpses of subversive hope in the face of such mechanisms of social stagnation. Yet this is as far as Cleary's analysis goes in terms of divining for engagements with the utopian in modern Irish literary fiction. He betrays a critical nostalgia for the energies of Irish modernist literature, but there is no real effort to source utopian impulses, international consciousness', or politically progressive voices in contemporary Irish literary fiction. Likewise, the critical and theoretical methodologies employed have largely been confined to issues pertaining to the 'Irish nation', the 'Irish family', Catholic morality, the effects of emigration within Ireland, repression of sexuality, the Northern 'Troubles', and the disparities and tensions of rural life versus urban living. While these thematic foci cannot be gainsaid as relevant prisms through which to read Irish fiction since the 1960s, it seems timely to consider new imaginative thematic horizons of recent Irish prose writing. McCann's work draws on his own biographical experience as an emigrant writer and is concerned with issues such as: contemporary diasporic cultures and communities, the global histories of emigration and diaspora, racial politics in the USA and in Europe, the legacies of the Northern Irish 'Troubles', historical and contemporary global identities, historical injustice and violence, and gender and sexual politics.

As we have stated, McCann is widely considered one of the most accomplished of Ireland's 'international' writers of literary fiction. But the terms on which McCann's work is deemed worthy of celebration are up for debate. Much critical commentary on recent Irish fiction orbits around the dichotomy of the traditional and the modern, on how Irish writers confront and/or overcome the hoary burdens of Irish

cultural and social histories. Principal among the imaginative straitjackets is the Irish nation and its facility to dominate cultural discussions and outputs in Ireland in the twentieth century. But McCann, in Eve Patten's view, offers a potential corrective to this trend; for Patten, McCann's 'writing as a whole marks a turning point at which the horizons of literary Irishness are being radically redrawn and expanded'.⁹ There is nothing controversial about Patten's argument that McCann's works are remarkable, even pioneering, within his peer group of Irish novelists. His biography and intellectual interests have fostered a body of work that is generously international in its array of characters and narrative contexts. But what are crucial to extrapolate from Patten's contention are the terms on which 'literary Irishness' are being defined. It is important that this not be construed as another 'triumph' for modernity over tradition, for the global over the local, or for the international over the national, because these are not the easy dichotomous terms on which McCann's work and thinking are founded. His renovation of 'literary Irishness' has more to do with an openness to foreign 'others', to a celebration of empathy as a political and cultural force, and to a tendency that permits dialogue between Ireland and the world, the local and the global, and not the supersession of one by the other. Irish histories and locations punctuate McCann's works; they are less dominant in later works than the earlier publications, but nationality is not something that can be readily jettisoned or diminished when we read his work.

In her recent essay, 'Contemporary Irish Fiction and the Transnational Imaginary', Anne Fogarty argues for a more equivocal attitude to the cultural boons of globalization in Ireland. Fogarty's case centres on her conviction that globalization cannot, and should not, be accepted as a cultural given, and that its impacts are entirely open-ended and ripe for mediation and negotiation. Contrary to much political and cultural commentary, Fogarty impresses the enduring relevance of the 'national' as a context that can furnish sites of cultural debate between the local and the global. Fogarty is keen to underscore the fact that many Irish people, writers included, do not view the apparent accruals of globalization as unproblematic. Despite an enthusiastic embrace of the opportunities afforded by globalization within Ireland, and by many Irish artists, this engagement with the global is often a matter of anxious negotiation rather than an abandonment of the anchorage of the local

or the national. Ireland's protracted implication in the global flows of people and ideas does not necessarily make us ready-made and unquestioning citizens of the global marketplace. Such embedded historical experiences may also render Irish people all the more alert to and suspicious of the promises and the effects of contemporary globalization. In terms of an Irish literary response to globalization, McCann's novel, *Zoli*, is enumerated among Fogarty's novelistic narratives, together with Roddy Doyle's *The Deportees* and Anne Enright's *The Gathering*. And, in Fogarty's view, these novels 'are cognizant of the impact of globalization on Irish society. They grapple with the effects of such change by probing the ethical responsibilities that this altered milieu brings with it.'¹⁰ Each of these literary interventions, then, is sensitive to the moral questions that accompany accelerated social change in Ireland. In their very different forms and plot-lines, these novels recognize that the relative responsibilities of Irish people and of Irish communities are altered by more concerted implication in contemporary capitalistic globalization. Fogarty continues by suggesting that these novels interrogate 'notions of distance and intimacy, the meaning of locality and...the problematic dimensions of difference', and in so doing, 'they broach many of the ontological problems of global communities as they have been enunciated by recent social theorists...Globalisation in these fictions is less a fait accompli than, as Irigaray says, a shared world which has always still to be elaborated and imagined.'¹¹

There are two points to extract from Fogarty's overall argument, which seem to be of acute significance when we broach McCann's oeuvre. First of all, as mentioned, Fogarty underlines 'the ethical responsibilities' adherent to newly globalized topographies of culture, politics, and economics. And in the process she assigns both political and moral responsibilities to the writer. This is not conceived of as a responsibility to pursue a prescribed moral consensus, but, rather, to engage with and to deliberate upon these ethical questions within the literary sphere. Issues such as racial, gendered, class-based inequalities can be enlisted as indicative of the kinds of matters both Fogarty has in mind and that McCann addresses in his writing. Thus, Fogarty's invocation of the ethical in relation to the Irish writer's representations of globalization seems appropriate when we consider the vagaries of McCann's career. He is a writer that navigates between the local and

the global, between the national and the international in his work, and he is willing to learn from these combined experiences. McCann is open to assimilating the global in his work, and permits it to illuminate his relationship with the local. In addition, he often diagnoses subtle and keen correspondences between local lives and communities and those that traverse the globe. Yet all along, as Fogarty attests, he cleaves to an egalitarian and inclusive ethics in his aesthetic creations. The second point that seems to resonate with McCann's literary outlook is Fogarty's contention, via Irigaray, that ours is a 'shared world which has always still to be elaborated and imagined'. Certainly there are postmodernist strains within the theoretical animus of Fogarty's concluding point, but of more relevance is the profoundly resistant hopefulness that is implied in its futurity. Such an attachment to process and becoming has deconstructive roots, but, equally, is magnanimous in its ethical tone. One of the key features of McCann's writing is that its expansive range of characters, histories, and geographies are, at least, partly inspired by the author's own appetite for knowledge. In essence, as we outlined above, McCann writes towards discovery and knowledge. The breadth of his authorial focus chimes with the kernel of Fogarty's and Irigaray's assertions: part of the response to the ethical responsibilities cited above is precisely to embrace 'otherness'. In other terms, the response is to seek out one's ignorance proactively and to remedy that through aesthetic acts of imaginative empathy. Ultimately, this combination of the theoretical and the aesthetic underwrites the inclusive utopian politics of McCann's entire literary project.

McCann's work has been consistently championed as offering an illuminating corrective to the dark night of literary insularity within recent Irish fiction. Rather than focalize his stories through burdened rural Irish protagonists, who battle daily with the baleful constants of religion, nationalism and the family, McCann's literary foci are lauded as emergent rather than residual; his fictional geographies literally fly by these oppressive topographical nets to embrace the global dimensions of Irish and, more importantly, human experience. Representative of just such commendations for McCann's writing is Dermot Bolger's contention that: 'more than ever it is clear that future editors will not just be turning to the banks of the Liffey, the Lee and the Lagan, but to McCann's "the Thames, the Darling or the Hudson or the Loire or even the Rhine itself" to search out the new heart of Irish writing.'¹²

The final phrase in Bolger's summation, rather symmetrically, is redolent of Francis Stuart's 1976 essay 'The Soft Centre of Irish Writing', which appeared in *The Irish Times*.¹³ But to return to Bolger, it seems as if his intent is to establish a more modernized (but not modernist) and international breed of Irish writing. A genus of writing that dilutes the nationality or national specificity, of both the writing and the writer. Distance, anonymity and foreignness become the privileged terms and conditions of this critical orthodoxy – while the local and the national are now outworn artistic currencies. Yet there is something profoundly misguided about Bolger's ambitions to transcend the dailiness of the national in favour of the modernity of the international, and in a recent essay Derek Hand persuasively contradicts Bolger's co-option of McCann for such a literary programme.

Bolger's appropriation of McCann's writing can be legitimately stabled with the Irish revisionist school of literary critical and historical writing – for Bolger, nothing better will do than to rouse Irish culture from its nostalgic narcosis. As Hand suggests in his rebuttal of Bolger's assessment:

The implication [of Bolger's argument] is clear: to be able to write about anywhere but Ireland is good, and why? Because, simply, the place of Ireland is itself restrictive and associated with all that is supposedly negative about the Irish past, about Irish history and Irish tradition. The future, therefore, is elsewhere – or, to put it another way, anywhere else but here.¹⁴

Under such a judgement, Ireland becomes a staunch to genuinely modern creative expression; Bolger, then, articulates a well-stated critical position vis-à-vis national identity: it constricts and distorts the vision of the literary artist with its dependence on the local and on the past. The future lies beyond these restricted horizons, and to embrace the international requires a definitive break with the gravities of the past. And while it is fair to claim that McCann's works document the travails of newly configured and accelerated transnational experiences, to suggest that the Irish dimensions are in some way alien to such debates is plainly incorrect. As many recent postcolonial scholars within Irish cultural studies argue, Ireland's imperial interface with Britain meant that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it experienced a process of modernization without industrialization; in other words,

Ireland was fast-tracked into global modernity without the mediating periods of protracted industrial development and attendant cultural adjustment. Put simply, Ireland has always been implicated in global flows of commodities, people and ideas, and for Bolger to imply that these long and differentiated histories are signs of a deeply insular society are a gross historical injustice.

But equally Bolger's insistence on the added value of the global belies the potential perils of homogenous globalized identities. Forsaking the local for the sake of the global is not an inherently positive step; making a fetish of the global over the local is, potentially, replacing one delimiting cultural economy for another. And finally, such a critical trajectory rather presumptuously and prematurely renders redundant the possibility that Ireland as a national place/space might play some, even fragmentary, role in this freshly hewn global aesthetic market. Again, Hand's response to Bolger is instructive in countering such one-sided argumentation. Rather than portraying McCann's fiction as a body of work that actively strives to escape national entrapment, Hand maintains that: 'McCann's fiction moves easily between boundaries, especially Ireland and America. Yet, his writing still documents the psychic uneasiness of this movement between places. Even his American work possesses traces of Irish concerns, highlighting how difficult it is to shed the past and the places of the past.'¹⁵ The basic point remains that McCann's fictions are thematically mobile and they display an authorial, and biographically-informed, sensitivity to cultural polyphony. This is not some form of postmodern pageantry that revels in relativism, but a body of fiction that acknowledges such diversities in all of their positive and negative impacts and legacies. Contrary to Bolger, one cannot wish away national histories and one's investments in those histories in pursuit of apparently less contestable, progressive presents and futures. Again Hand, at length, firmly locates the Irish experience within historical and contemporary versions of the global, countering the willed historical amnesia of Bolger's argument. As we have seen, Ireland has always played a central role, for instance, in the globalizing Atlantic world and continues to be deeply implicated in all contemporary networks of global communications and cultural exchange. Hand's argument, and that of McCann's fictions, acknowledges these facts but neither sees them as unproblematic causes of celebration. Hand suggests:

He [McCann] realises how the contemporary postmodern world demands people live in new ways. No longer do the certainties of rigid and real boundaries – national, personal or spatial – operate as they once did, as people exist imaginatively in many places simultaneously. Yet, the specific Irish experience – as outlined above – would seem to throw that general experience into sharp relief. The Irish have always resided in a problematic world or space: in terms of physical space within Ireland and in relation to the vexed problem of emigration, of being Irish in Berlin or Boston; in terms of culturally belonging because physically in Berlin or Boston. These difficulties registered also for those left behind in a depopulated Ireland; where space carries traces and echoes of those who have gone away.¹⁶

THE STORYTELLER

In an op-ed contribution to *The New York Times* on Bloomsday, 16 June 2009, Colum McCann invokes James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov and his own [McCann's] grandfather as he distils the essence of humanity's narrative impulse. Referencing the Russian modernist, McCann writes:

Vladimir Nabokov once said that the purpose of storytelling is 'to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times, to find in the objects around us the fragrant tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in far-off times when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right: the times when a man who might put on the most ordinary jacket of today will be dressed up for an elegant masquerade'.¹⁷

Nabokov's précis cuts to the wick of storytelling – its precious and, often, prophetic fictionality. There is substantive futurity nested within the narrative act; its creative essence is transfused with a progressive orientation. In a sense, there is a muted utopian energy palpable in Nabokov's anticipatory aesthetic. And it is these aesthetic tenets that McCann candidly endorses later in the same article: 'This is the function of books – we learn how to live even if we weren't there. Fiction gives us access to a very real history. Stories are the best democracy we have.'

We are allowed to become the other we never dreamed we could be.’¹⁸ McCann’s aesthetic and ethical alignment with the tenor of Nabokov’s earlier conclusions betray a deeply empathetic artistic vision, and this will be the guiding critical perspective from which his literary fictions will be broached. As the previous authorial quotation elucidates, ‘books’ are educational spaces in which author and reader convene in differential imaginative solidarities. Storytelling facilitates imaginative access to narratives, lives and geographies beyond the ken of our immediate rote of lives and places. For McCann, storytelling is a singular utopian process, and in the art of storytelling one accrues the capacity to imagine and to empathize. These features of literary narrative, then, lend McCann’s works distinct political inclinations. Indeed, elsewhere McCann takes the author’s fictional interface with the ‘other’ down to the level of rudimentary techniques of creative writing. In an interview with *Poets & Writers* magazine, McCann was prompted to respond to the idiosyncrasy of his thematic focus in *Dancer*. The selection of Rudolf Nureyev as a subject for a novel struck many critics as an unusual decision, as it apparently strayed from one of the principles of creative writing pedagogy: ‘write what you know’. But tersely refuting this principle, McCann responded by offering the counter-principle: ‘I’ve always believed that you [should] write about what you supposedly don’t know about, or you write towards what you supposedly don’t know. This sounds strange, of course. But in making these imaginative leaps you can sometimes find out what you know, but weren’t aware that you knew.’¹⁹ Again there is a discernible futurity inherent to such an authorial process of investigation and production, one that, while directly mechanical in this instance, is fundamentally present in Nabokov’s more abstracted ideas on the ethics of storytelling above. There is an affinity between the authorial impulse towards the ‘other’ as a subject of literature and the egalitarian politics of narration as a democratic space. McCann’s *modus operandi* enables an engagement with the unknown, but also with the limits of writing: his decision to enter the unknown is a self-conscious and reflexive act of interrogation with the act of narration *per se*. In combination, we see a deliberate attentiveness to the questions of literary form and content, and a cognizance of their implication in the ‘living stream’ of cultural and political histories. McCann does not indulge in a breed of literary catholicism merely for its own sake, but is sensitive to the political

motivations for and implications of narrative representation. What is equally important to emphasize is that his fictions are not didactic spaces either, and they are not ministering polemics. Whether we approach McCann's narratives that deal with the Northern Irish 'Troubles', the mole people of the New York City subway system, Roma gypsies in Slovakia, or Irish emigrants of the 1980s, the kernel of McCann's authorial intent is that these stories are told and that they deserve to be listened to by others. His works are narrative spaces of grace and redemption, and not didacticism or relativism. Put simply:

The thing is, we all have a deep need to tell a story – that's the thing. Everybody needs to tell a story, whether it be to your shrink, whether it be to your publisher...that's the vast democracy – the only democracy, in fact, that we have that goes across every geography, every age group...But at heart, everybody wants somebody to talk to and to be listened to. That's the function of literature. This is why we do get charged up about talking about books, because it's somehow how we have our finger on a pulse that's alive.²⁰

HOPE AND REDEMPTION

The link between art and ethics is succinctly expressed in his recent collection of literary critical essays, *The Curtain*, by the Franco-Czech novelist, Milan Kundera. In a neo-Aristotelian register, Kundera argues: 'The history of art, because it is the history of values, thus of things we need, is always present, always with us.'²¹ Kundera's own fiction is a body of work that preserves an acute sense of itself as art that contradicts the centripetal inclinations of authoritarian power, although without ever becoming artless propaganda. More specifically, Kundera views the longer history of the novelistic tradition as part of a genealogy of aesthetic resistance, what has been termed 'a genre of questioning'.²² And it is in this spirit of novelistic interrogation, or scepticism, that we should broach the fictions of Colum McCann. Though McCann's emigration provides an easy correspondence with Kundera, the nature of their relative travels, and the content of their fiction, decommissions any prospect of further correspondence along these lines. But both seem to speak to each other on the terms outlined in

Kundera's initial quotation; there is a profound concern with the ethical agency of literary art. Ranged across McCann's fictions, then, are highly affective narratives of displacement, impoverishment, vulnerability, exile, grief and disorientation. Yet in each case McCann encourages us to empathize with his abjected protagonists, and, furthermore, he cleaves to the utopian notion that even in these lives and stories there is the prospect of redemption. The simple act of telling one's story to a willing listener might constitute the redemptive act, but for McCann, there is currency in such acts of simple sharing. And in this way we see a modulation of the ethics of the literary from Kundera's argument to McCann's writing. McCann's sense of the literary is encapsulated in his tribute to one of his foremost literary influences, Benedict Kiely. For McCann, 'The true value of literature is that there's always another story to tell. The work of any writer is concerned with the doings of his fellow men and women with whom he shares some territory, some rage, a little loss and maybe even some faith. He doesn't speak for them, but with them.'²³ This qualitative statement on literature partakes of the ideals of a range of contemporary critics and philosophers in its privileging of the democratic space of narrative and with its empathetic relation to 'fellow men and women'. Empathy and redemption are two of the key words that structure McCann's entire literary project. Literary art is disabused of any transcendent formalist exclusivity in this school of thought, and both literary form and content are freighted with extra-literary responsibility. In this view, the metaphorical structure of literary art enables imaginative empathy and, therefore, facilitates a productive ethical engagement with the literary narrative. Indeed, there is an obvious connection between these sentiments and those articulated by Kundera, again, on the intimacy of art and values across human history. In simple terms, as Richard Kearney states, 'stories make possible the ethical sharing of a common world with others in that they are invariably a mode of *discourse* [original italics].'²⁴ Stories are shared experiences of real or imagined events, worlds and personalities, but all involve the invocation of the figurative as structural features of emplotment, as well as the interface of two or more people in narrative exchange. For critics from Alasdair MacIntyre to Richard Rorty, and Martha Nussbaum to Wayne C. Booth, stories and narratives are elemental to the formulation and the dissemination of human selfhood and to ethics. For both MacIntyre and Rorty, storytelling is a means of inaugurating communal coherence

out of which moral consensus can flourish. In another vein, and of more pressing relevance to our discussion, Nussbaum and Booth promulgate the moral virtue of the novel form and the effectiveness of the reading experience as an ethical encounter. The importance of novels to Nussbaum's ethical criticism is revealed in her contention that 'it is not as economic historians but as readers of novels that we should approach the social choices before us, trying, before our death, to consider our fellow citizens, our fellow human beings, with the wonder and generosity that this imagination promotes.'²⁵ Revoking the licence of the social sciences, and in the same manoeuvre highlighting the intellectual limits of empirical philosophy, Nussbaum extols the social traction of novelistic readership. In her view, other disciplinary fields lack the imaginative resources to inform ethical understanding. It is only in the form of the novel that we can expose ourselves to the true 'enlightenment ideals of the equality and dignity of all human life'.²⁶ The critical and imaginative excitations of the novel form on its readership far exceed those of other epistemes, which depend upon the imparting of facts or empirical description. Fiction is figuratively provocative and suggestive, and, thereby, equips readers to think 'otherwise' – a process that enables ethical imagination. The full import of literature's effects on the reader is emphatically condensed by Nussbaum in, somewhat ironically, geometrical terms, and her argument here is a close approximation of McCann's authorial philosophy:

The point is that in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly...So literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but, also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper and more precise than much of what takes place in life.²⁷

The ethical focus of McCann's fictions, taken together with their international content, are suggestive of, firstly, the author's critical disposition towards the contemporary world, and, secondly, his concern for the possibility of mutually enriching solidarities across ethnicities and nationalities. Thus in foregrounding the ethics of the literary, the ethical within literature, and in placing Irish fiction in conversation with

global thematics, McCann's writing displays a critical utopian inclination. Clearly his fictions cannot be filed with those of the utopian literary tradition that project and imagine alternative and holistic literary worlds, following Thomas More's foundational literary utopia. Nevertheless, there is a level of political and social concern evident across McCann's body of work that betrays a definite critical utopian stance. Furthermore, his commitment to the ethical and 'community-creating' potentials of storytelling and/or shared narrative acts reveal equivalent utopian impulses. In these ways McCann's work belongs to a strand of contemporary utopian consciousness elucidated by Fatima Vieira, which is conceived of as 'the desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in'.²⁸ There is no doubting that such a desire is present in McCann's work as it narrates micro-dramas of trial, hope and redemption. His work does not offer any macrostructural solution or alternative on a grand utopian scale, rather it tracks the displacement and the possibilities of recovery in scattered local lives and cultural networks. McCann's utopianism might be profitably described as 'a matter of attitude, as a kind of reaction to an undesirable present and an aspiration to overcome all difficulties'.²⁹ Vieira's explication of this utopian orientation diverges from other historically constituted versions of utopianism, which are theoretically monumentalized in systematic, ideological programmes. Indeed, Vieira's approximation of utopian desire reclaims the agency of utopian critique in the contemporary. What is important in Vieira's argument is that it delegitimizes the assertions of critics who deny the valence of utopian thought in critiquing the contemporary economic and political conjuncture. Utopian thought does not naturally equate to systematic teleology or singular definitions of perfect social conditions. Following Vieira's first point, it is justifiable and productive to view utopia as an intellectual and political strategy, not as an insoluble goal or indivisible aspiration. In other words: 'Utopianism is not a blueprint for a "perfect society" but may be better conceptualized as a moment of hope. It undermines dominant understandings of what is possible and opens up new conceptual spaces for imagining and practising possible futures...it is about opening up visions of alternatives rather than closing down on "a" vision.'³⁰

Key to understanding utopia is the motive force of desire – desire to imagine and desire to change the present array of social conditions.

Utopia occupies a particular space between life as it is lived and our appetites for something different. In Ruth Levitas' view, 'we learn a lot about the experience of living under any set of conditions by reflecting upon the desires which these conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled.'³¹ It is precisely the space between the generation of and absence of fulfilment of our desires that is tenanted by utopia. But, crucially, utopia is not simply a fantasy to be revelled in, but is 'a vision to be pursued'.³² Again, it is thinking and imagining 'otherwise' that represents the life force of utopianism. McCann's narratives are, evidently, not programmatic assertions of alternative political worlds, but human desire for change; the imagination of redemption, the anticipation of a better life, and the prospects of solidarity being forged with previously 'othered' communities are all tangible utopian foci of his fictions. In another resonant utopian phrase, there are traces of 'social dreaming' in McCann's works, in his fictions that endorse intercommunal connections and interpersonal commonality in a world that circulates atomization as a daily condition. Out of the 'negativity' of alienation and suffering detailed in McCann's narratives, there are consistent and durable moments of hope and recovery. In Blochian fashion, hope emerges out of despair; the positive is present in the negative. As aesthetic artefacts, McCann's novels embody the utopian agency of art, but, equally, in their content, which frequently labours the role of the artist and the power of the aesthetic, these novels accent the redemptive possibilities of literary creation. These are fictions of journeys, of despondencies, of learning, of hidden memories and histories, of national and global politics, and of inter-ethnic and inter-racial meetings. Each and all of these thematics are implicated in broader questions of ethical deliberation and utopian imagining. The coordination of ethical and utopian trajectories in McCann's fictional works, then, roots his art securely within our titular 'aesthetics of redemption'.

For McCann redemption is not an unrefined event but a journey and a testing process undergone by the individual, and this is apparent across his fictional protagonists. Redemption as a literary theme centres on the possibility of a character reaching a level of triumph subsequent to a measure of earlier failure, and in this respect chimes with the general utopian dynamics of McCann's work. There are obvious theological overtones to any discussion of human redemption, but literature can employ the structural features of redemption to its own effects. Differentiating

the theological from the literary, Daniel Boscaljon contends: ‘Literature...looks at the process as being more important than the event’, a point alluded to already.³³ But he adds: ‘By seeing suffering as more than a means to the end of salvation and by being able to explore agents of redemption other than a divine being, literature – which keeps the form of the theological construct while altering the content – is able to explore a variety of ways in which human suffering can be redeemed.’³⁴ As will become apparent, McCann travels in a variety of directions in his portraits of how people can process from suffering to redemption. At this point, Boscaljon places a premium on the content of the literary as a redemptive form, but he later alludes to a general formal feature of literature – the novel in particular – which, appropriately, weds his argument to that expounded upon by Nussbaum and Kearney. According to Boscaljon: ‘One possibility for redemption...is in the telling of stories...Storytelling thus opens up the possibility of redeeming others.’³⁵ This final point brings us back to McCann’s repeatedly stated preoccupation with the ethical currency of the narrative act.

NOTES

1. Marjorie Kaufman, ‘An Author Fishing for Souls of Irish Emigres’, *Sunday New York Times* (10 November 1996).
2. For a more detailed biographical sketch of McCann see Joseph Lennon, ‘Colum McCann’, in Michael R. Molino (ed.), *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Twenty-First-Century British and Irish Novelists* (Farmington Hills MI: Thomson Gale Publishers, 2003), vol. 267, pp.181–91.
3. Colum McCann, ‘The International Bastards’, p.38. Cited in Éamonn Wall, ‘Winds Blowing from a Million Directions’, in Charles Fanning (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), p.281.
4. During this time McCann worked a number of temporary jobs including as a journalist, fence-builder, ranch hand, bicycle mechanic, house painter, ditch digger, and dishwasher.
5. Wall, ‘Winds Blowing from a Million Directions’, p.282.
6. Luke Clancy, ‘Writer and Wanderer: Interview with Colum McCann’, *Irish Times* (21 June 1994).
7. Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day Books, 2006), p.134.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Eve Patten, ‘Contemporary Irish Fiction’, in John Wilson Foster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.273.
10. Anne Fogarty, ‘Contemporary Irish Fiction and the Transnational Imaginary’, in Eamon Maher (ed.), *Cultural Perspectives on Globalisation and Ireland* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), p.147.
11. Fogarty, ‘Contemporary Irish Fiction and the Transnational Imaginary’, p.147.
12. Dermot Bolger, ‘Introduction’, in Dermot Bolger (ed.), *The New Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* (London: Picador, 2000), p.xx.
13. Francis Stuart, ‘The Soft Centre of Irish Writing’, cited in *Paddy No More* (Nantucket, MA: Longship Press, 1977).
14. Derek Hand, ‘Living in a Global World: Making Sense of Place in Colum McCann’s This Side of Brightness’, in Susan Cahill and Eóin Flannery (eds), *This Side of Brightness: Essays on the Fiction of Colum McCann* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).

15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Colum McCann, 'But Always Meeting Ourselves', *New York Times* (16 June 2009). <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/opinion/16mccann.html>.
18. Ibid.
19. Joseph Lennon, 'An Interview with Fiction Writer Colum McCann', *Poets & Writers* (2003).
20. Robert Birnbaum, 'Interview with Colum McCann', *Morning News* (2007). http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/birnbaum_v/colum_mccann.php.
21. Milan Kundera, *The Curtain* (London: Faber, 2007), p.16.
22. Hana Pichova, *The Art of Memory in Exile: Vladimir Nabokov and Milan Kundera* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), p.13.
23. Colum McCann, 'The Heavens be his Bed', *Irish University Review – Special Issue – Benedict Kiely*, 38, 1 (2008), p.66.
24. Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.150.
25. Martha Nussbaum, 'The Literary Imagination in Public Life', in Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker (eds), *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy and Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.246.
26. Ibid., p.243.
27. Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.47–8.
28. Fatima Vieira, 'The Concept of Utopia', in Gregory Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.6.
29. Ibid., p.7.
30. Valerie Fournier, 'Utopianism and the Cultivation of Possibilities: Grassroots Movements of Hope', in Martin Parker (ed.), *Utopia and Organization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p.192.
31. Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), p.9.
32. Ibid., p.1.
33. Daniel Boscaljon, 'Possibilities of Redemption through the Novel', in Andrew Hass, David Jasper and Elisabeth Jay (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.761.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., p.766.