

Arrival and Departure: *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994)

‘Fishing the Sloe-Black River’, the title story of McCann’s first published collection, appeared in print a year before the complete volume of stories was published by Phoenix House. The quasi-magic realist narrative was included in an edition in 1993 entitled, *Ireland in Exile: Irish Writers Abroad*, edited by Dermot Bolger. This volume gathered Irish writers, some well known and others relatively obscure at the time, who lived outside of Ireland in London, Tokyo, Cambridge, New York, and elsewhere, and included Emma Donoghue, Harry Clifton, Rosita Boland, Joseph O’Connor, Sara Berkeley, and Greg Delanty, among others. At the time, McCann was teaching English in Japan and, as we shall discuss, ‘Fishing the Sloe-Black River’ is a story that confronts the experience of Irish emigration from the perspective of those that remain resident in Ireland. The story deals, specifically, with the generation of parents whose children have departed the country. The collection, *Ireland in Exile*, strove to capture, in Bolger’s editorial words, ‘the experience of a new breed of Irish writer abroad – writers who have frequently turned their back on a country which has long since turned its back on them, but whose work is increasingly a central part of Irish literature’.¹ While Bolger’s first clause is sound, the remainder of his assertion is characterized by a generalized temper of bitterness, a feeling that one cannot reconcile with the tones and theme of McCann’s writings. There is a melodramatic overstatement to Bolger’s contention, one that seems rather delayed in its portrait of the Irish writer who has been evicted from an unhomely homeland. The novelist Joseph O’Connor provides a greater level of subtlety in his introductory remarks to the same volume, when he suggests: ‘being an emigrant isn’t just an address. You

realise that it's actually a way of thinking about Ireland.² O'Connor's point contrasts with Bolger's in its tone, but more importantly in its embrace of multiplicity. Responses to emigration are not universal; motivations for emigration were certainly not uniform in the 1980s, and literary representations of these variegated stories are far from homogenous. But what is resonant in O'Connor's argument is the notion of conjoining Irish emigration with critical thought about one's country of origin and what kinds of implications this process might manifest.

This historical juncture, which saw the publication of *Ireland in Exile* in 1993 and *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* in 1994, also saw the appearance of other publications that sought to deliberate on Irish emigration and/or the Irish diaspora. As representative examples from different discursive fields, we can start with the first newsletter published by *The Irish Diaspora Project* in 1993, with the stated objectives: 'to facilitate improved communications between, on the one hand, the Irish in Ireland and, on the other, the Irish and friends of Ireland throughout the world; to encourage networking among the Irish abroad; and to assist organisations, promoters and individuals in arranging events overseas of Irish interest as well as exchanges with Ireland'.³ While a year later, in 1994, *The Irish Reporter* issued a special number on the topic of 'Ireland – The Global Nation', which included high-quality critical and historical essays on: the economics of the Irish diaspora; gender and Irish emigration; and criminality and Irish emigration, among several other topics. The aggregation of these four differential but implicated publications situates McCann's volume of short stories within a broader intellectual and popular process of reflection on modern Irish emigration. It suggests the urgency of the matter given the breadth and variety of the media and registers evident in those debates, and it gestures to the historical and theoretical context out of which McCann's early fictions of emigration emanate. Finally, these publications remind us that, following O'Connor's salient point above, there actually was a deal of energy expended upon thinking about Ireland and its emigrant population.

By the early to mid-1980s, Ireland faced the prospect of revisiting the dog days of pre-Lemassian impoverishment. Hamstrung by a national debt that by 1986 stood at IR£22 billion and an unemployment figure that stood at 17 per cent, the entire viability of the Irish

nation-state was not beyond question. Testimony to this spiralling economic failure was the high level of emigration among Ireland's young adult population. The country was in the throes of being abandoned by a generation that felt let down, if not actually betrayed, by a political system that operated its economic policies with one eye on party political rivalries. Perhaps one of the more cutting, and precise, summations of the early part of this period was by Desmond Fennell in his 1983 *The State of the Nation: Ireland since the Sixties*. Fennell's portrait is of a country that is deeply disoriented and whose grip on the nature of reality is defined by misapprehension and confusion:

As we passed through the recession of the '70s and early '80s, with the government borrowing wildly to keep the party going somehow, while unemployment grew weekly and the North rumbled on, people seemed dazed, like sleep-walkers, and were afraid to think. Chatter about unemployment, wages and prices, the bankruptcy of the public finances, political scandals, divorce and abortion, and Northern violence filled the air.⁴

Terence Brown portrays a similarly troubled country during this historical period in his *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922–2002*. It is revealing that Brown entitles the eleventh chapter of his survey 'The Uncertain 1980s'. 'Uncertainty' reflects, on the one hand, the perilous economic condition of the country, as well as the intermittent political turbulence that destabilized government administrations. But equally, in the context of McCann's early emigrant fictions, 'uncertainty' raises questions about the roots of modern Irish identity in the light of renewed mass flight from the country. The 'uncertainty' initially referred to by Brown is, of course, economic, political and social upheaval, and these provide biographical and literary nourishment to McCann's first formal literary output. Not only does Brown refer to 'The *Uncertain* 1980s [my emphasis]', but his assessment is even more apocalyptic. As the 1980s progressed, Ireland's economic conditions degenerated into what he terms 'a full-blown crisis'.⁵ And for many reasons, it is difficult to contradict such a chastening analysis of the decade. On foot of the disastrous government White Paper of 1977, 'National Development, 1977–1980', Ireland entered into an inexorable spiral of indebtedness, which, compounded by two oil crises, had catastrophic effects on the abilities

of successive administrations to fund the public sector in the form of welfare support and employment creation. As Brown states: 'By December 1984...[unemployment]...would reach 208,000 which represented 16.4 per cent of the workforce (well ahead of the overall EEC figure of 10.3 per cent).'⁶ Of pressing relevance to the narratives of McCann's collection is the resurgence of net emigration from Ireland in the 1980s, a phenomenon that had abated in the 1960s and 1970s since the vast haemorrhaging of the 1950s. From 1988 until 1996 there was net emigration from Ireland, and 1989 saw the emigration of 70,000 people.⁷ There was a renewed exportation of young people from across the social classes, as the departures became qualitatively different in motivation from earlier periods of Irish emigration.

FISHING THE SLOE-BLACK RIVER

'In the 1990s and beyond,' according to Heather Ingman, 'the Irish short story showed its readiness to tackle current ideas and topics (gender as performance, retrieving women's history, immigration), as well as a willingness to experiment with language and form and embrace complex, non-linear narratives.'⁸ Ingman's survey of the contemporary short story, then, underscores the genre's vitality in dealing with social and cultural insecurity through experimental forms. As we shall discuss further in Chapter 4, there has always been a link struck between the fleeting suggestiveness of the short fictional form and social dislocation in Ireland. And McCann's first collection might well be read in terms of this latter point and, to some extent, in the light of Ingman's attention to urgent social ideas and formal innovation. Short story collections, explicitly or implicitly, create a sense of community between the characters across stories. Not necessarily availing of the leanness of the formal short story cycle, collections can suggest an intimacy across narratives; *Dubliners* is an example of this implied implication. And *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* touches upon this idea at the level of theme; so many of its characters are connected by their common experience of emigration. McCann does not, however, collapse these unique life stories of displacement into each other in the collection. Furthermore, the multiplicity of voices and narratives included in the collection is suggestive of dispersal, a polyphony facilitated by the

nature of the form. The short story does not bear the cohesive powers of the social novel, and it is this very lack that McCann exploits in his portraits of several Irish lives touched by emigration and globalization. *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* is a literary meditation on travel and displacement, both within Ireland and from Ireland. The collection is a formal admixture of first-person realism and omniscient magic realism, a confection of approaches that captures the anxieties of its thematic foci. Internal and external exile preoccupy the lives of the volume's protagonists, and the combined stories by McCann the emigrant writer bring into view Theodor Adorno's contention that sanctuary from exile can be sought and found in the process of writing. The composition of narratives surrogates as a homeland for the displaced person. This is not, of course, to collapse exile and emigration as identical phenomena, but Adorno's conjunction of writing and physical distance is suggestive in discussing McCann's first volume of fictions. McCann's subsequent works have also anatomized the personal and communal rites and consequences of physical movement, and the upshots of traversing physical and figurative borders.

McCann opens his debut collection in the first-person in 'Sisters', and provides an arresting lyrical passage that congregates many of the preoccupations of the ensuing narratives.⁹ In an idiom that overtly invokes Heaney's *North*, McCann's opening paragraph draws in 'the past', personal and family history, geographical separation and the excavation of memory in brute physical terms, as well as cognitively. Invoking the peaty, tactile repository of the Irish landscape, the passage is an immediate companion to the allusive title of the story. Thus in quick succession the author has shouldered his way into the lyrical as well as the socio-political arenas of Irish literary history: '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.'¹⁰ The focalizing protagonist is precise in the attribution of relative moral guilt and innocence, but as of yet the specificity of place, time and gender are withheld from the reader. We can, of course, deduce from the title that the narrator is female, but there is an initial sense that McCann's narrative, indeed aspects of much of the collection, assumes parabolic or even mythic qualities. Yet still further, this opening paragraph combines the lyrical, the physical

real and resonances of the mythic/symbolic, and it is this admixture of characteristics that is, perhaps, the singular feature of much of McCann's writing. We are witness to characters, objects and places that assume symbolic, cohesive qualities within a given narrative, yet McCann deftly combines such moments of respite, of faith, of unity with oppressive material experiences of isolation, distance and loneliness.

What is of immediate relevance in the light of the discussion above, however, is the manner in which this debut story oscillates from the past to present, and from Ireland to America – none of which the protagonist can escape definitively. As mentioned, the titular detail is a precise literary historical intertextual allusion to the first story of Joyce's *Dubliners*, and yet the material of the story, ostensibly, deviates quite significantly from its Joycean predecessor. Indeed if we concentrate on McCann's title, it offers a helpful wedge with which to expand our previous discussion on McCann's fictional relationship with the country of his birth. 'Sisters' relates the story of two sisters, Brigid and Sheona, siblings of very different temperaments and behavioural patterns. The younger sister, Sheona, is the narrator and, as the extract above implies, her adolescent and young adult behaviour were largely devoid of any sense of moral reference point. In essence she was sexually promiscuous, and garnered a reputation in her home town in the west of Ireland for her wanton sexual mores. By way of contrast, her older sister lived a consummately ascetic life, eventually assuming religious orders as a nun. Both sisters, then, employ their bodies as relative means of self-expression – sexual liberation on the one hand and moral penitence on the other. Eventually having exhausted Ireland's possibilities, Sheona emigrates further west to San Francisco. Now it would be easy to expect that up to this point McCann is patterning a kind of morality tale that is of a piece with the dichotomous imaginary construed for his work by Bolger. However, Sheona's America experience is no arrival in utopia; in the end, after a brutal rape by police officers she is briefly imprisoned and deported back to Ireland. Thus, McCann's story recedes from the facile construction of a liberatory flight from Ireland with its trammelled imagination to the multifaceted possibilities of a global America. Sheona's exit from America and return to Ireland are violent, degrading and bitter.

And while the story's central narrative is founded on the transatlantic axis between Ireland and America, and the traffic of emigration that

has traversed that axis, McCann's narrative makes copious use of deliberate Irish references and Irish place names that are crucial to Irish history. The Irish context in terms of space, time and cultural milieu are repeatedly claimed through the author's narrative attention to detail. While Sheona's libertine ways are described in the following terms:

A man with a walrus moustache gone grey at the tips took me down to the public lavatories. He was a sailor. He smelled of ropes and disuse and seaport harridans. There were bays and coverts, hillsides and heather 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 as a farm boy furrowed his way inside me. (*FSBR*, 1–2)

Immediately succeeding, Brigid is portrayed thus:

My older sister, Brigid, succeeded with a spectacular anorexia. After classes she would sidle off into the bog, to a large rock where nobody could see her, her school sandwiches in her pocket, her Bible in her hand. There she would perch like a raked robin, and bit by bit she would tear up the bread, like a sacrament...the rock had a history – in penal times it had been used as a meeting place for mass. (*FSBR*, 2–3)

McCann erects a clear moral dichotomy from the outset – both sisters adrift in the world, both cleaving to somatic rituals for self definition. They are resolutely absent from each other but, still, it seems, fully cognizant of each other's actions. In other words, while Brigid's votive acts can clearly be viewed as redemptive acts for her promiscuous younger sister, Sheona's physical excess, her sexual indulgence can be read as equivalent acts of redemption for Brigid. The sexual engagements are not just bare moral affronts to Catholic Ireland, but are reversions of Brigid's ascetic physical self-immolation; Sheona's bodily excess is a compensation for the atrophied condition of Brigid's body. These particular intimate moral and physical economies are not exclusively Irish, of course, but do strike of specific relevance and familiarity to twentieth-century Irish theocratic authoritarianism. Perhaps what is equally significant are the cultural coordinates alluded to in McCann's descriptions of the sisters' separate but affiliated rituals.

Sheona recalls her sexual coupling between 'a statue of our Lady

and a Celtic cross commemorating the dead of Ireland' (*FSBR*, 2) – her prostrate, sexually active body, firstly, contradicts the virginity of the iconic Catholic matriarch. But, furthermore, the cult of the Virgin Mary was a peculiarly intense vocation in Ireland during the 1950s, which saw the construction of Marian shrines throughout the country's Catholic parishes. Physically and figuratively embedded between two intensely Irish forms of Christian worship, Sheona affronts the universal mores of the Catholic piety, and, from this Irish perspective, her specific location increases the voltage of the affront. Caught between symbols of chastity and sacrifice, it seems she is capable of neither. In distinction to the formally sanctioned aesthetic kitsch symbology of Catholicism, Brigid's private space resembles Biblical or Irish monastic ascetic retreats. But, we learn, this rock to which she retreats has a very specific history – it too gleans symbolic value from its past associations and uses. The Mass Rock is a potent symbol of Irish national recalcitrance in the face of English penal legislation designed to reform or dissolve Catholic worship in Ireland. Brigid's actions, then, are historically sensitive yet are not mere historical mimicry. While her ritual is based on the actions of the past, it is very much grounded in the present and towards the future. As we have argued, it is at least partly an act of redemption for her younger sibling and in this way it speaks to the ongoing present moment. Importantly, for Brigid, the Irish past and Irish history are not simply voided nostalgia; her actions are not hollow imitation, but are pregnant with agency in the hope of reforming and saving her wayward sister. The histories of Irish punishment symbolized by the Mass Rock are rendered dynamic in the present and transfused with renewed spiritual vigour by this youthful penitent. It is apparent, then, that both sisters possess historical consciousness; they are both aware of the symbolic currency of the respective contexts in which they pursue their somatic rituals. And what we see in the end is not the consignment of one version of the past to oblivion; McCann does not permit one to trump the other. The fact that Sheona and Brigid are sisters intimates that it is, in reality, very difficult to sever the links between the past and the present. Sheona may strive to achieve some form of severance, a form of release from the calcified mores of the past, but as her older sister demonstrates, these ties are surely too ingrained, too anchored in our 'selves' and in our intimate cultural communities to be jettisoned so readily.

Although the story is related in the present tense by the protagonist, it is essentially a narrative about her reconciliation with the past, with her sister, with her own dissolute adolescence, and with her country of origin. McCann punctuates the narrative with a number of significant Irish cultural, social and historical allusions – as we have discussed, the historical symbolism of Irish Catholicism is one noteworthy example. But there are several others that perform a variety of differential functions within the narrative, both confirming and contesting the national limits of the story. We have seen the explicit Joycean and Heaney invocations that frame and initiate the story respectively, but the literary echoes are not limited to these instances. At different stages Patrick Kavanagh and Brendan Behan are also name-checked. Recalling her dismal job on her return to Ireland via deportation, Sheona remarks: ‘The day I received that letter I thought of quitting my secretarial job in a glass tower down by Kavanagh’s canals...Days in Dublin were derelict and ordinary. A flat on Appian Way, near enough to Raglan Road, where my own dark hair weaved a snare’ (*FSBR*, 10). Sheona’s employment of Kavanagh to locate her workplace and her home are far from romantic invocations of Kavanagh’s love song or his poetry of attachment to the Grand Canal. Firstly, the rather obvious manner in which Kavanagh is summoned captures Sheona’s voice as a character, as it were; it suggests that she is familiar with the popular facets of Kavanagh’s canon. Yet for McCann it situates him as an author within the sphere of Irish letters. Invoking Kavanagh is a means of attachment for McCann, but the fleeting reference does not bestow any degree of intimacy or solidity to this link. The use of Kavanagh is an allusive fragment of the history of Irish writing to which McCann, as debut author, stakes a claim and which, *pace* Bolger, he clearly does not disown. The combination of authorial and textual allusions might even be interpreted as the watermarks of McCann’s early uncertainty as an Irish writer. In fact, such a view is only corroborated by the further allusion to Behan later, again by Sheona: ‘It seems appropriate that there is no room for us in the Chelsea hotel, no more Dylan, no more Behan, nor more Cohen remembering us well’ (*FSBR*, 14–15). Joyce, Kavanagh, Behan all represent misfit Irish writers across twentieth-century Irish letters – each spent time living outside Ireland, some were more committed to Irish nationality than others, but they all cohere at the level of being Irish

writers for McCann, and in this sense each is a fraction of a larger story that McCann is highly conscious of and indebted to as a creative artist. While ‘The Chelsea Hotel... Dylan ...Cohen’ are grandstand popular cultural references that shoulder into the Irish consciousness, they are, in fact, global brands of popular cultural chic. And in McCann’s view this is not entirely exclusive from the Irish artistic genealogy discussed above.

Granted, then, we can pinpoint Irish affiliations within the story, but what of their connections to the global, the international and/or the modern. If we return to the Kavanagh allusion mentioned above, we are witness to the gradual modernization of Dublin (and by implication, Ireland). In this extract Sheona references the sprouting of ‘glass towers’ of business and finance as part of Dublin’s cityscape; she also mentions the underside of such urban development, and she ‘began to notice cranes leapfrogging across the skyline. Dublin was cosmopolitan. A drug addict in a doorway in Leeson Street ferreted in his bowels for a small bag of cocaine’ (*FSBR*, 10). The sylvan charm of Kavanagh’s poetry belies its infiltration, if not supersession, by the scaffolding and the depravities of urban modernity. Emphatically, Ireland is not an anachronistic, traditional society but is as equally traduced by the architecture, physical and cultural, of modernity as any other First-World country.

This trend to locate his collection within both Irish and international contexts characterizes the self-consciousness of the collection as a whole, yet, equally, this tactic coheres with the presiding thematic cores of displacement, globality, locality, and cultural exchange. McCann’s broadly intertextual and allusive style can be adjudged to perform several functions at once: as we have noted, it betrays the self-consciousness of a debut collection of stories; it is part of the sophisticated self-reflexivity of the text as both form and as content; it coalesces with the thematic foci of the range of stories; and it re-asserts McCann’s interest in the richness and fecundity of cultural flows across borders and boundaries – flows that do not of necessity, however, extinguish the energies of the local or the national. These intertextual and allusive fragments are stylistic sound bites that imply the larger whole of global interaction and cultural commerce. McCann’s style, then, is broadly dialogic – these fragments are assimilated into his stories yet they gesture outward to their external textual, authorial

and cultural origins. And, as we shall see, it is a strategy that one can track right across *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*.

As a combined work, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* is replete with explicit and implicit intertextual allusions, quotations and resonances, to the extent that it has, at times, a fractured, even a derivative, character. In a sense, at various points the collection resembles nothing less than T.S. Eliot's 'heap of broken images' from 'The Wasteland'. Allusions and quotations are, in their own way, bits of broken text and imagery; they are fragments from other texts, broken off bits of an original whole, and, seemingly, taken out of their present context, they are of necessity incomplete. Yet, even if the allusion or the quotation is a broken off piece of another whole text, it does work to suggest that other text. So what we see is an effort to construct a potential connection, a suggestion of *this* text as one of many other texts. In other words, it establishes affinity or linkage, while at the same time accepting difference and separateness. Furthermore, this stylistic feature establishes McCann's 'awareness' of and articulation among a large history of Irish prose and poetic writing, but also positions the collection as a textual intervention in a wider contemporary cultural continuum. It acknowledges the antecedent, established world of Irish writing and lyricism but also the historical gap between those texts and the modern/post-modern texts of post-industrial America and contemporary Ireland. The textual fragments, then, are deployed as partial content in tandem with the 'partial' form of the short story genre. They intimate the passage of history/time – yet they equally stake a claim within a national context too. In the end, it would be incorrect to construe these fragments as imbued with the same degree of deconstructive play as might befit a poststructuralist reading; rather, they intimate the contemporary experience of combined belonging and displacement. Throughout the collection, then, we see particular Irish and international cultural signs and referents jostling for position within the narratives. Indeed, as we have argued, they become central to, if not even part of, the formal architecture of the stories themselves.

'Step We Gaily, On We Go' is set in New Orleans on 9 July 1992, but takes its title from an altogether less urban Scottish folk ballad. So, and not for the only time in the collection, McCann juxtaposes a titular European anterior folk culture with a narrative that is set in the white heat (quite literally in this story) of emigrant, urban America.

These occasions point, of course, to the deliberation engaged in by the author in his efforts to navigate, to mediate and to understand the complexities of the emigrant experiences within Irish America. His titular selection in this case comes from a Scottish wedding song entitled ‘Mairi’s Wedding’, and the line extracted by McCann is originally in the chorus of Hugh Robertson’s version. Thus it immediately signals one of the presiding themes of the story – marriage; yet there are numerous other unions, communities and close relationships alluded to in the story, and none, including marriage, bring any degree of individual contentment and respite. What is equally apparent, and what can be further extrapolated, from McCann’s lyrical title is the title’s symmetry with the remainder of the story – ‘Step We Gaily, On We Go’ is dense with lyrical extracts and allusions; these quotations, in fact, provide much of the narrative content of the story, and are revealing of the nuances of the elderly and mentally unstable protagonist.

The story borders on the fantastic and it retains a deeply disturbing character when we consider the deviant behaviour of the protagonist, Danny Flaherty. Flaherty is an elderly Irish emigrant living alone in New Orleans, and he has been long abandoned by his wife Juanita. The intervening years have seen him tortured by the memories of her departure, which he cannot entirely come to terms with, and by the lingering memories of his youthful promise as a boxing prize-fighter. We are introduced to the sharp decline in Flaherty’s fortunes by McCann’s opening description of the working-class tenement in which he resides. And one of the striking features of Flaherty’s surroundings is the presence of copious graffiti on the interior spaces of the building. As he descends the staircase he is met with a visual medley of vulgarity, humour and racism in the forms of these guerrilla texts. On the third floor he reads: ‘*When did the black man learn to walk? Beneath it: When the white man invented the wheelbarrow. Beneath that: Eat shit, honky motherfucker*’ (FSBR, 58). Continuing to the second floor he encounters his favourite piece of graffiti: ‘*Women of the world rise up out of the bed of your oppressors...and go make breakfast*’ (FSBR, 59). Still further, he descends to the ground floor: ‘through all the words. *Eat the homeless. Johnny X is hung like a horse. Leroy is sprunger than a mofo*’ (FSBR, 60).

While graffiti can certainly be read as a form of political assertion or utopian cultural articulation, the artefacts that adorn Flaherty’s

building are not of this order. Yet at the same time their presence does allow McCann to make a political point: the very presence of the graffiti suggests that Flaherty is living in a relatively disadvantaged complex; the presence of the form and not necessarily the content, then, raises the issue of class within the story. Flaherty is neither an economic success story of Irish emigration nor indeed a personal triumph either – his departure from Lisdoonvarna via Dublin and onto the United States is littered with perceived and actual betrayals, hardships and abandonment. Thus McCann's engagement with the issue of Diaspora (the Irish Diaspora) is further nuanced in 'Step We Gaily, On We Go'. Flaherty is not living among an expatriate Irish community in America; he is not a part of a stable, and perhaps stabilizing, network of Irish or Irish-Americans. Instead, his lot is that of an isolated and impoverished Irish emigrant living in a racially heated tenement and city. In a sense, then, the buoyant lyrical momentum of the title stands in stark contrast to the abjection of the narrative content. Flaherty's citation of graffiti, firstly, underscores his own personal hardship; it permits McCann to delve into the heterogeneity of the Irish emigrant experience; and, thirdly, locates the narrative within a particular kind of American urban milieu. In addition, the plain textuality of these graphic expressions is surely significant when we consider this story's and the collection's broader textual allusiveness. The details of the graffiti may resort to crude racism or sexism, or bawdy humour, devoid of any obvious, serious aesthetic merit, but within the formal mechanics of McCann's collection, these intrusions by a subcultural or popular cultural textual archive do interface with the more orthodox literary references that punctuate the stories. In this way, then, they increase the sense of fragmentation within the text; they are even less cohesive and coherent than the literary allusions, and, likewise, they remain authorially anonymous. They are usually ephemeral, but it is clear that in this case Flaherty is acquainted with at least one of the pieces and favours it. So while the fragmentary contributes to the combined whole, it also always signals its own partial nature – the sub-cultural and the transient text speaks back to the canonical and the culturally endowed text. In each of these ways, and quite explicitly in this story, McCann establishes an intertextual and cross-cultural exchange, all within the context of the working-class Irish emigrant experience in the United States. Flaherty himself is a

source of the lyrical and of grace in more ways than one within the story. During his erstwhile career as a prize-fighter, which was, he laments, destined for greatness, his trademark was to sing a song in the ring after each successful bout. Flaherty was the consummate performer with his noted grace and deft boxing acumen added to his renowned singing voice. Yet within the contemporary narrative, both of these personal accomplishments have now become elements of Flaherty's threnody of nostalgia. Firstly, his defeat, in controversial circumstances, in a decisive bout is a persistent source of pained regret, and, secondly, the catalogue of his singing days is evident in the disjointed quotations that pock-mark the central narrative, or in uncertain allusions to songs and their composers. Thus the poise of Flaherty's pugilistic pomp and his lyrical stride are both dissolving, and are only present in their increasing absence.

The crux of the story centres on his unrealized ambition of becoming a boxing champion; it is a failed aspiration that haunts Danny Flaherty. Like many of McCann's stories, 'Step We Gaily, On We Go' is concerned with a painful confrontation with the past, but in Flaherty's case he seems to have become interred in the past and cannot reconcile himself to the strained actuality of the present. The decisive moments, and movements, in his life came when he departed Ireland driven with this overriding conviction that he was destined for greatness. And it is this time of his life that is forever filled with promise in Flaherty's nostalgic narcosis; at one point Flaherty engages in an extended reverie on that lost promise, that still-born utopian moment:

Those were the days. Indeed. He left for America on the Washington cruiser, swearing to Ireland that he would come home Heavyweight Champion of the World. Days of cowlicks and curls. It was the Great Depression, he remembers, and unemployed men hung around warming their hands over hot barrels on the dockside in Cobh, eating pigeon sandwiches. Some among them had mouths festered from eating nettles. Hard times and, even back then, America was the place to go. Lachrymose young girls sold daffodils so they could buy tickets. Boys stood up high on the back of dung carts, looking out to sea, dreaming. Bilious crowds watched the white of the waves while the ships foghorned a song of exile. Getting on the boat, standing on the deck, he sang *Ireland, I love you, a Chusla Mo Chroi*. (FSBR, 64–5)

Flaherty's departure is again one of high lyrical performance; his exit from Ireland is one loaded with prospects of sporting achievement and financial success. In this sense it is akin to many emigrant departures, a crossing of borders with the possibility of hope. His departure, though apparently materially discrepant from the millions of Irish who made the same journey before and after him, is linked to the realities of those that emigrated because of extreme economic poverty. The historical and geographical contexts of his departure on the Washington cruiser from Cobh gesture to the dire economic circumstances endured during the 1930s across the globe on foot of the Great Depression. While Flaherty's emigration is motored by idealistic dreams of authentic accomplishment, McCann embraces more mundane and traumatic instances of enforced exile in America. And in a sense, the wretched poverty and demoralization alluded to in this extract actually anticipate, implicitly, the disappointed future that awaits Flaherty in the United States. The inflated dreams of Flaherty the young athletic boxer are leavened in this extract by the portraits of Irish desperation for food and/or for escape – little did he realize they were glimpses of poverty that is not confined to Ireland but that can be the emigrant's lot too.

Flaherty's life in the present, then, has signally failed to meet the expectations he harboured on leaving Cobh in the 1930s. And the action of the narrative reveals a character that has, it seems, been deeply psychologically scarred by the ensuing years of failure and bitterness. His once satiated marriage has long since collapsed under the pressure of his private disappointments and he now occupies himself with a ritual that is both criminal and votive at the same time. Flaherty habitually thieves clothes from the local launderette, ostensibly as gifts for his wife Juanita – stolen tokens that concretize his delusion that his wife is still a part of his daily life. On this sweltering day in New Orleans, Flaherty is on his way to the launderette, and on arriving, in mid-song, he wonders: 'What will Juanita like? A flowery skirt? A pink blouse with tassels? Another flowery number like Miss Jackson was wearing? No. What's in order, he thinks, is something that will fit her like the sky fits the earth. That much she least deserves. Today is a very special anniversary – July 9th 1992. Juanita is still as beautiful as ever and she deserves something special' (*FSBR*, 64). As we soon learn, the special anniversary is the date on which Juanita abandoned her

marriage to Flaherty, and yet he remains ensnared in a delusional fantasy that his past life persists in the present. His commitment to his former wife is mediated through his symbolic criminal act of devotion, yet there is something undeniably pathetic about his actions. There is also the suggestion that Flaherty's thieving is a perverse form of redemption for him – these clothes act as a kind of salve to his private guilt, his sense that he was responsible for his wife's intense unhappiness and eventual flight. Equally, we learn that he occasionally leaves items of clothing on doorknobs of other apartments in his complex, donating to the poor teenage girls of his neighbourhood. Thus Flaherty becomes a latter-day Robin Hood-type figure, in his own mind, and his donations too act as some form of redemptive absolution for him. His minor acts of robbery and donation actually create a sense of community or solidarity for him, and not only ease his personal guilt but appease the loneliness of his life. The robbery becomes a necessary facet of his life – a curious dependence on criminality to alleviate guilt and isolation.

'Step We Gaily, On We Go' is, as we have seen, a remarkably intertextual narrative, and, like several of the other stories in the collection, it explicitly anticipates McCann's subsequent novel *Songdogs*. In many ways, then, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* is an anticipatory collection of stories, a testing ground for McCann of many of the themes, landscapes, character-types and figurations that populate the later novel. And Flaherty's narrative bears striking resemblances to the situation of Michael Lyons, the father, in *Songdogs*. The 'intertextuality', which is clearly only discernible in hindsight, is perhaps, firstly, a signal of McCann's relative youth as an author in maturation. McCann displays an overriding concern with human loneliness and with the coping mechanisms that people develop in such circumstances – and this is a feature of several of his fictional works. He is also preoccupied with the symbolic import of the mechanisms through which people live on and live through parental or marital abandonment or exile. So that on many occasions in McCann's fictions, apparently mundane, material actions or habits or objects assume symbolic or spiritually sustaining capacities. And this seems to be the case in the lives of Danny Flaherty and Michael Lyons, both of whom have been abandoned by their wives. Indeed, at a basic level the intertextual symmetry begins with the fact that both Irishmen were married to Mexican women named

Juanita; both adopt rituals in later life that possess qualitative differences but that seem aimed at common goals. It is arguable, in fact, that both Flaherty and Lyons are culpable for the breakdowns of their respective marriages, and that they spend the intervening years partially atoning for their guilt. As we have seen, Flaherty's redemption is tied to his ritual robbery from the local launderette – petty thievery that assumes life-sustaining significance. In a similar vein, but different register, Lyons devotes himself to a votive ritual of fishing for an elusive prize salmon in his local river. Symbolically, the contemporary river has become polluted and stagnant with the arrival of a modern factory in the area, but Lyons is insistent in his commitment to pursuing the salmon. Lyons is habituated to a necessary consoling fiction that helps to soothe the hurt of the past and the present with the prospect of a redemptive symbolic harvest in the future. While the devotion to a symbolic act unites the two elderly men, not only are the particulars of their actions discrepant, but it seems that while Flaherty remains materially deluded that his wife is still present in his life, Michael Lyons is fully aware that he will never see his wife again. We are never told definitively what might have become of either Flaherty's or Lyons' 'Juanita', but it is suggested that the latter committed suicide in that very river. Both men, then, are blighted by the aggregated burdens of guilt and ignorance in relation to their marital abandonment.

'Stolen Child' is a second story that takes its title from what can be termed a traditional lyrical source: W.B. Yeats' 'The Stolen Child', published in his 1889 volume of poems, *Crossways*. The titular selection again acts as a self-reflexive authorial gesture on McCann's part and can be read in a number of ways. The choice clearly invokes the idea of a national literary and cultural identity; in fact it invokes a specific kind of national characterization associated with the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Irish Literary Revival. An identity, of course, that Irish culture has variously been trying to eschew, to modify or commercially exploit in subsequent decades. And given the urban setting of this story in New York City, it would seem that McCann is, in some ways, ironizing or critiquing the Yeatsian version of Irish national identity – certainly if we were to follow the logic of Bolger's argument above. Yet it seems equally unlikely that McCann is actually forwarding an explicit critique, but rather he is teasing out the necessary

interaction of different strains within national and communal identities within the narrative; in fact, within the narrative we see the appearance of instances of peculiar cultural hybridity. Essentially, 'Stolen Child' is a story about idealism: McCann explores a range of personal and communal visions of idealized identities or patterns of behaviour. Ranging across literary history to morality and personal ambition, and embracing the mythic as well as the materials of recent political history, 'Stolen Child' interrogates the ideals of a raft of characters and communities. And it is in this vein that we should interpret McCann's titular selection of Yeats' poem. Yeats' 'The Stolen Child' is replete with images and sounds that invoke the esoteric aspects of Irish myth, which proved so attractive and useful to Yeats in his contrary view of the empiricism of British urban modernity. This 'traditional' lyricism and the mysticism on which it was founded were, in Yeats' view, the truly progressive and the modern.

What we see, then, from the outset of this story is a direct engagement with idealism – in Yeats' case a species of national cultural utopianism. The titular reference lends itself not to a sceptical or cynical latter-day critique of Yeatsian mythmaking, but suggests a more universal concern with the need for, but also the limits of, idealistic expectations. And McCann captures the tension between hope and disappointment in the opening paragraph; from the connotations of Yeats' verse in the title, McCann swiftly relocates us to early-morning Brooklyn:

Padraic closes the heavy oak door of the children's home and steps out into the Brooklyn morning light. He looks across the river to where 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. He pulls the hood of his coat and steps across the road. In the background he hears one of the boys kicking at the wooden door, a dull rhythmic thud. A young girl screams from the third floor window. In the distance a police siren flares. *Christ*, he thinks, *no day for a wedding.* (FSBR, 95)

This is a highly sensory passage, with a dissonant interplay of light and sound – all of which is overseen by McCann's startling pharmaceutical simile of the early-morning sun. A new day may be breaking but the light is 'dirty' and obscured, while the soundscape of the city is

undertoned with violence and trauma. Again the 'stolen child' of the title is thrown into sharp relief as we learn that Padraic, our protagonist, is employed at a home for blind children – children who have been abandoned, or whose parents are incapable of administering their care. Thus McCann pitches his idealistic title against the stark institutional backdrop of the children's home as well as the desultory imagescape and soundscape of the awakening city.

The early-morning description of Brooklyn dispels any sense of imminent hope, and, in fact, might be profitably compared to Whitman's enthused and protracted response to the same milieu in 'Brooklyn Ferry'. And even in this brief, perhaps oblique, cross reference, we are again confronted with a text, and an author, who was at the heart of a version of national and cultural idealism. Whitman's 'Manifest Destiny' constitutes another breed of resolute idealism that is, perhaps, marginal to McCann's story in real contemporary terms, but is a latent presence in the emigrant situation of the protagonist Padraic Keegan. In another way the invocations of Yeats and Whitman by McCann alert us to two different species of national identity – both infused with high levels of utopian idealism – and it allows us to consider the contemporary narrative of an Irish emigrant couple in the US with the hopes envisaged by those respective nations' foremost cultural architects. This triangulation of authorship, then, raises a number of questions: How does the contemporary reflect the aspirations of Yeats and Whitman as cultural visionaries? What forms of idealism persist into the contemporary? Do breeds of historical idealism burden the present? Is there evidence that idealism itself can become a national or personal burden? Can it become oppressive when projected onto the needs and expectations of others? And each of these issues can be profitably mapped within McCann's story. But for the time being it is sufficient to inquire as to where idealism surfaces in the specifics of 'Stolen Child'. Padraic Keegan, our protagonist, is a social worker in the children's home in Brooklyn; he is recently arrived from Ireland with his wife, Orla, and they are a young couple who have set up home in the outskirts of New York, in Brighton Beach. The dramatic tension of the story centres around Padraic's professional and personal relationship with one of the blind children: a black teenage girl named Dana. The bond that develops between Padraic and Dana is immediate on his arrival at the children's home:

She ran up to him, scouring her fingers through his wiry hair, fingering the side of his acne-creviced face, lifting his glasses and trying to touch his eyes...She was sixteen, well into the awkward throes of adolescence, and she wore dresses with patterns of furious flowers flinging themselves around her waist. Her hair was the colour of burnt grass. She had dyed it that way so that it would flare against her black skin. (*FSBR*, 98)

For Padraic it is the unique energy and luminescence of Dana's personality, as well as her latent intelligence, that sparks and maintains his concern for her as a patient and as a friend. They develop an intimate, quasi-paternal relationship, as, for instance, Padraic teaches Dana about the origins of her name: 'The Irish goddess who was believed to have come from North Africa in ancient times. Dana was in charge of a tribe of druids, the Tuatha de Danann, who landed on a fair May morning and conquered the country by ousting the Firbolgs, the men with the paunchy stomachs' (99). What we see, then, in this example is a strategic utilization of Irish myth by Padraic for his professional purposes – we witness the mobilization of the mythic/traditional to modern medicinal ends. Of course, his employment of ancient Irish myth recalls Yeats' work, particularly in the early stages of his career, and simultaneously summons up a particular strain of Irish national identity. But what we see is the accommodation of a peculiar suite of national myths with the demands of the modern; McCann shows us the productive interaction of the archaic local with the alien international. In a sense, the professional idealism of the young emigrant social worker, confronted with an acutely tragic case, meets the esoteric cultural national idealism of the Yeatsian variety.

As his professional treatment of Dana continues, Padraic develops a personal investment in the teenage girl, especially when she finds an older boyfriend, Will, on one of her walks outside the confines of the home. This is the point at which Padraic's professional idealism mutates into an unhealthy personal idealism, that in a way becomes autocratic, however grounded his reservations about this burgeoning relationship may appear. Padraic's transition from professional to intense personal investment in Dana is initiated by her blossoming relationship with the older Vietnam veteran. She 'met Will in the park. He sat in his wheelchair, wearing a long roll of grey beard that went down to his stomach as if growing it to cover the place where he had

no legs. He was more than twice her age. Paperback books about Vietnam curled dog-eared in his overcoat pockets' (*FSBR*, 103). Dana's relationship with Will is, initially, clandestine and this ignorance allows Padraic to continue his tutelage and professional commitments to Dana. And through his dedication to her case, Padraic provides Dana with copious intellectual education to the extent that he harbours the ambition that she may achieve a scholarship to Art College. But it is the intrusion of this destitute and disabled war veteran that tests, and it seems, irreparably breaks Padraic's expectations for Dana. The fervent idealism of the young health professional founders on the arrival of Will, himself a victim of another form of misguided political idealism. This episode, which closes the narrative with Will and Dana's wedding, dramatizes another instance in the story in which two differential forms of idealism cross paths. Again, Padraic's professional idealism, so successful and keen in the first half of the narrative, encounters Will's defeated and deformed frame, which represents the detritus of the idealistic contest conducted in the crucible of Vietnam. The hollow idealism that infuses war-time rhetoric returns to haunt the professional and personal idealism of Padraic Keegan. And yet, we could argue that Padraic is simply exhibiting gross self interest in his prescriptive treatment of Dana and her future; he is accruing benefit from the reflected glory of Dana's overachievement. It is here, then, that his didactic idealism, centred on her intellectual attainments, is trumped and frustrated by her perhaps naïve, but apparently genuine, pursuit of emotional sustenance. Perhaps her romantic idealism is unrealistic or ill-judged, as Padraic maintains, but is it any less legitimate than his urge to exert a different form of control over her? What we see in 'Stolen Child' is McCann's non-judgemental and lyrically rendered exploration of an international blend of communal and individual, intellectual and emotional forms of idealism – some of which enable levels of self-confidence and self-liberation and others that eventually accrue oppressive characteristics.

In both 'Sisters' and 'Stolen Child', as well as in a less successful story, 'Through the Field', McCann chooses an institutional setting as the central or partial context for his narrative. In each of these stories we are confronted with a second-hand, yet equally intimate, portrait of a damaged individual confined to a corrective institutional space. In 'Sisters', we are not certain if Brigid will recover, or indeed

if she has the will, desire or capacity to regain her full physical and mental health. In 'Stolen Child', Padraic takes his beloved patient, Dana, as far as he can to rehabilitation – despite his paternalistic frustrations at the limits imposed on his efficacy. But the most extended treatment of the internal dynamics of a secure institution for the mentally infirm is the longest story in the collection, 'Around the Bend and Back Again', a title that captures the maniacal unreason and delusion of much of the narrative. Numbered among the story's concerns are, obviously, its Irish institutional context, but equally given its first-person narration, the story's focalization raises issues such as fantasy, naïveté, sexual exploitation, language and reason, and the psychological pressures of social entrapment in a frustrated and frustrating rural Irish town.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of this story actually returns us to the idea of intertextuality – but in the case of 'Around the Bend and Back Again' we are exposed to a layered intertextual effect. The range of explicit cross-cultural references veers from the high cultural such as Sean O'Casey, Edna O'Brien, the Bible, and Shakespeare to a mass of popular cultural references including Hollywood in the shape of Steve McQueen, the 1988 Michael Keaton film *Beetlejuice*, the Wild West genre, and the Daniel Day Lewis vehicle *Last of the Mohicans*. Adjacent to these international indices of popular culture, the narrative references more parochial Irish icons, including Paul McGrath, Johnny Logan, Chris de Burgh, and The Sawdoctors. The frequency and range of international and Irish cultural allusion gives the narrative a decidedly fractured form, and an almost manic energy; the narrator is constantly referring beyond the text to other cultural referents for comparison or legitimacy. His mind is a maelstrom of popular culture and in a sense it becomes one of the principal ways in which he mediates his sense of reality. These cultural reference points saturate his consciousness and provide solid coordinates on which to found his frustrated personal identity. He becomes a second-hand composite of his cultural accumulations. Yet from a meta-critical perspective, this is precisely the point at which we can divine that second layer of McCann's intertextual effect. The intertextual references combine in their apparent disparity and randomness, and point us to one text to which this one story seems irrevocably linked. The narrative voice, the geographical setting, and the thematic content

align this story with Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*.¹¹ The consonance between these two narratives is solidified precisely by the inventory of cultural references – they are wedded at the levels of content and form through this employment of cultural allusion.

The action of McCann's story unfolds, primarily, within the confines of an asylum in Castlebar in County Mayo, where our narrator and protagonist is a cleaner. From the outset, we gather that he has become infatuated with one of the female in-patients, a young woman whose parents were both recently killed in a car crash. The girl has an enigmatic family background, and the fact that they resided in a disused but renovated rail-car singled them out within the local community. Nevertheless, our narrator is intrigued and gradually becomes emotionally involved with the girl, and her plan to re-visit her erstwhile home, if they can engineer a temporary escape from the asylum. As we have said, the evidence of the narrator's infatuation with her is immediate:

Strange bloody cuckoo, that one. Couple of rhododendrons hanging in her hair. Chewing on her fingernails like she's starving. Spent yesterday afternoon circling one of the puddles out by the greenhouse, just walking round and round like there's no tomorrow...But she's not half bad all the same. Dressing gown giving a bit of a peep there, right down to the brown of the nipple. (*FSBR*, 117)

Her inscrutable, feminine beauty charges the narrator's frustrated sexual urges, and the description emphasizes the intellectual and sexual adolescence of this character. McCann, then, sketches a narrator who is, firstly, palpably immature, even naïve – yet this opening admiring description is not consistently repeated through the course of the story. What we also get, through his opinions and descriptions of 'Ofeelia' is an insight into his uneven temperament – a glimpse of his immature volatility. So while the opening portrait of 'Ofeelia' is relatively positive, subsequent reports vary: 'And she's a wild one too. Had to grab a hold of her feet when they brought her here. Strong as an ox. Wonder Woman how are ya' (*FSBR*, 120); 'Two weeks now she's been here and she's awful nice. I don't think she's as mad as half the bloody people in the country' (*FSBR*, 129); to 'Another fucking delay. It was pissing rain tonight. Ofeelia went barmy with the sugar. Christ that

girl's definitely off her rocker' (*FSBR*, 136); and finally, 'Christ, I'm thinking, she's off her rocker and beyond, Doctor Garlic should have kept her in solitary' (*FSBR*, 142). The danger that 'Ofeelia' represents and the relative immaturity of the narrator's sexual experience combine as he is unable to fashion a clear or distinct judgement on the female object of his adolescent desire. And this incapacity to exercise a definitive judgement is not only a signal of his intellectual limitations and emotional youth, but carries through to other areas of his engagement with his colleagues and friends. As a starting point, the narrative's formal presentation is not uniform; rather it appears as an episodic reportage of the narrator's shifts at the asylum. The discrete entries are fitful and discrepant in their relative lengths and in the focus of the information furnished. Thus the story is rendered as a subjective account of this narrator's fevered emotions and actions – a tactic which intensifies the volatility of the narrative content and of our sense of the protagonist's mindset. Equally, in his dealings with other peripheral characters in the story, or in his interior reflections on these characters, the narrator revels in bawdy humour, vulgarity and, often, violent rage towards these colleagues. There is an uncensored directness to the narrative voice, an unguarded innocence that nevertheless pulses with seething frustration and disoriented passion – all of which adds to the tenor of the piece as a form of personal confession. The unself-conscious immediacy of the storytelling at the same time revisits the linguistic and emotional intensity of McCabe's Francie Brady. Yet, Francie Brady's influence is equally palpable in our narrator's insistence that the abject present in which he is mired is temporary; that a potential future of hope and happiness is eminently possible. These dreams of escape from his menial employment in the asylum are paired with those of his colleague Barney; typical of these aspirations, he resolves that: 'One of these days me and Barney are going to get new jobs. No doubt about it. We'll be up there with the mining boys wearing three-piece suits and colourful ties and the doctors at the bin can lick the piss off the floors themselves' (*FSBR*, 124). Born out of a withering social immobility and dislocation, these banal yet seismic dreams recall Francie's recurring plans for future familial happiness and renewed friendship with Joe in *The Butcher Boy*. Moments such as these are signs of sustaining hope for the narrator, but perhaps what is most tragic is the tone of innocent sincerity that infuses his fantastical everyday dreams.

'A Basket Full of Wallpaper' is a reflective narrative, relayed in the past tense by our first-person narrator and protagonist, Sean Donnelly. In many respects the story is a fragment of a coming-of-age narrative; it recounts one memorable summer that Sean spent apprenticed to a Japanese emigrant, who specialized in wallpaper decoration. Sean narrates his story from his present situation: as an Irish emigrant living in London, a fact that we do not uncover until the conclusion of the story. Sean and Osobe, the Japanese wallpaper merchant, are finally united at the end of the story – joined by their shared, and for a time co-terminous, experiences of distance from their homelands. But the majority of the narrative focuses upon the reception and gradual acceptance of Osobe and his curious ways by Sean, and by the larger body of his local Irish community. In locating a Japanese migrant at the dramatic core of 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper', McCann, in fact, continues the trend of the two preceding stories, in which we get variations on the theme of the development and the course of international relationships. But, perhaps most explicitly, by placing Osobe the exile at the centre of his narrative and locating him geographically in a small town in Ireland, McCann suggests that exile is not exclusively felt by those who actually depart the island. As we shall see in the next, and titular, story, 'Fishing the Sloe-Black River', McCann is also concerned with the effects of emigration on those that remain behind in Ireland. They are not immune from the traumas (or benefits) of emigration and they are equally beholden to the vertiginous networks of global movement of people and capital as those that emigrate. Osobe, then, can be read as a literal figure of exile, a man whose past is unclear but whose present is defined by his distance from home and his cultural distance from those he now dwells among. But we can just as easily read Osobe as a figurative or symbolic character; he represents the universal experience of exile – and he also stands in for the history of Irish emigration. From this figurative perspective, Osobe is the ever-presence of history in Ireland; he is the inescapable history of emigration that constitutes the Irish diaspora in the present. Equally he is the storehouse of narratives and micro-histories that animate the genealogies of Ireland's emigrant pedigree.

One of the most striking features of 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper' is that narrative itself is one of the primary thematic strands in the story. As we see elsewhere in the collection, McCann has authored a suite of

stories that reach high levels of authorial and narrative self-consciousness, and this story is no different. Osobe's ambiguous past is, naturally, the catalyst and the justification for a wild economy of rumour and gossip. His personal diffidence on the topic, of course, is adequate nourishment for the imaginative and the preposterously groundless to thrive: 'Some people said that he'd been a chicken-sexer during the forties, a pale and narrow man who had spent his days interned in a camp for the Japanese near the mountains of Idaho. Endless months spent determining whether chickens were male or female. He had come to Ireland to forget it all' (*FSBR*, 37). Osobe's alleged incarcerated past obviously refers to the Second World War, and this lends him a degree of further exoticism, supplementing his difference with an additional layer of past and potential menace. The scope of rumours about his origins and his prior actions are differentiated across divergent groups in the local community. So that: 'the older men, elbows on the bar counter, invented heinous crimes for him. In Japan, they said, he had attached electrical cords to the testicles of airmen, ritually sliced prisoners with swords, operated slow drip torture on young Marines' (*FSBR*, 37). While in another crucible of rumour, 'even the women created a fantastic history for him. He was fourth son of an emperor, or a poet, or a general, carrying baggage of unrequited love' (*FSBR*, 37). And finally, to the narrator's peer-group: 'To us boys at school he was a kamikaze pilot who had gotten cold feet, barrelling out in a parachute and somehow drifting to our town, carried by some ferocious, magical wave' (*FSBR*, 37). Implicit in each of these speculations on Osobe is a degree of exoticization; one might even suggest orientalizing racial profiling. To these rumour-mongers, Osobe is the accumulation of cultural stereotypes that have, historically, been traded in the West about Japan. The narrator and his neighbours merely default to accepted, but no less damaging and insular, clichés about the Japanese settler. A further commonality to each of these speculative narratives is that each searches for a root cause as to why a Japanese man would wash up on Irish shores; precisely what is the reason for his presence in Ireland and his absence from Japan? These narratives, then, try to give a form to Osobe and to his past; he does not belong to the collective memories that constitute this local community, and, consequently, narratives of his past are invented and fabricated out of necessity. This is done in order to appease the minatory sense of cultural difference

that he imports into the locale. The community cannot tolerate silence about his past, so they step in to speak for him so as to alleviate the disconcerting ambiguity of this silence. The community's urge to 'narrate' the stranger is the obvious point of narrative self-reflection. So while the story's explicit self-consciousness is made manifest, in one respect, in the plethora of narratives invented to explain and to domesticate Osobe, what we actually witness is a community in the throes of re-inventing itself in order to accommodate the presence of this exotic outsider. Despite the overt parochialism of some of the default stereotypes employed, one might suggest that this community does prove itself flexible in its imaginative embrace of the Japanese exile. McCann dramatizes a process of cultural negotiation, wherein national identities are not forsaken or diluted; respective pasts are not abandoned but re-imagined in contemporary moments of encountering the 'other'.

In emphasizing the centrality of McCann's focus on cultural flexibility and exchange, this narrative is not confined to detailing how the local community responds to Osobe's presence. It is here that the adolescent experiences of Sean Donnelly are utilized as further self-conscious reflections on the nature and the functions of narrative at the level of the personal, but with implications for the macro-structural in terms of the communal or the national. The narrator's adolescence coincides with a period of economic hardship in Ireland; and he recalls, in blackly humorous fashion, that: 'my father would moan at the dinner table about the huge toll that emigration was having on his undertaking business. "Everyone's gone somewhere else to die," he'd say' (*FSBR*, 40). In the shadow of these social conditions his mother encourages Sean to seek out work with Osobe, a prompt which initiates a quixotic but enduring emotional attachment between the pair. The proximity that working with Osobe affords the narrator lends him a degree of authority on the Japanese man's character, his origins, and his enigmatic ways. And this is an advantage that is recognized and yearned for by the teenager, as he wills Osobe to have a past worthy of the rumours that have congealed around him over time: '...I wanted Osobe to tell me a fabulous story about his past. I suppose I wanted to own something of him, to make his history belong to me' (*FSBR*, 42). But Sean's appropriative narrative urge is continually frustrated by Osobe's reticence – Osobe never divulges arresting

details about his homeland or the motives that occasioned his departure, nor does he mention Hiroshima (an obvious cause of his flight?). Indeed the appetite for dramatic revelations such as those demanded of Osobe is a signal of the narrow horizon of the Irish townland in which the narrator resides; equally it borrows from the narrative frames of American cinema, to which the narrator is likely to have been exposed. But Sean's queries and imaginative speculations also evidence the seedlings of his imaginative, and eventually physical, desire to experience the foreign, and to live and to think beyond his homeland. In other words, one cannot disaggregate the local and the international – they are always already implicated in each other – they are never mutually exclusive in the same way that the past and the present are never quarantined from each other. Sean exhibits a desire to take Osobe out of the ordinary mill of life in his hometown; to remove Osobe from the grimness of historical banality and to create a figure who is elusive, fantastic and heroic, and who truly symbolizes the idea of escape. In a sense, Osobe must act as a screen onto which Sean projects his own fantasies of tragedy in Osobe's past life and future flight in his own life.

Working with Osobe, then, does not further the apparent 'factual' store of information about the Japanese emigrant for the narrator or for his community. But the financial gain grants Sean a degree of independence that coincides with his first steps into adolescent behaviour such as smoking and drinking illicitly with his peers in a remote location 'under the bridge' (*FSBR*, 44). In addition to this slightly rebellious behaviour, the fact that the location is removed from the public spaces of the town is made even more significant by the fact that on these clandestine evenings with his friends, Sean begins to regale them with stories about his Japanese employer. 'Under the bridge', then – a transitional space – becomes a site of initiation and imagination for Sean and his teenage peers. He assumes the privileged role of creator or author of Osobe's past. Recalling the dynamics of the Irish oral storytelling tradition, the already exotic (and exoticized) stranger and foreigner is further tethered to this function within the community by Sean's narrative accounts:

I read books about World War Two and created fabulous lies about how he had been in that southern Japanese city when the bomb had been dropped, how his family had been left as shadows

on the Town Hall, all of them vaporised, disappeared...He had never found his family. They were scattered around the centre, dark patches of people left on broken concrete. He reeled away from the pain of it all, travelling the world, ending up eventually in the West of Ireland. (*FSBR*, 45)

Osobe is figured as a tragic, vagrant hero, a wandering exile whose familial roots have been scorched irreparably. He carries a dark and insuperable burden of grief with him across the globe, as he bears the weight of a tragic political history. Yet just as in Sean's version of his life here, in which his family are rendered as 'shadows', Osobe assumes this kind of quality in the Irish town itself. It is as if part of Osobe has been vaporized in the eyes of the local community – he is elusive, intangible and ghostly. There is symmetry, then, to Sean's imaginative account linking Osobe to the devastation of Hiroshima and Osobe's existence in the west of Ireland. And Sean's commitment to framing Osobe's life-story in terms of historical tragedy comes to dominate his storytelling sessions with his friends: 'Every evening I continued with Osobe stories for them, their faces lit up by a small fire we kept going. We all nodded and slurped at bottles, fascinated by the horror and brilliance of it all' (*FSBR*, 46). The younger, next generation of the town commune in a primitive fashion to hear Sean author, and authorize, the consented to version of Osobe. At these evening meetings there is an admixture of innocence, curiosity, and a desire for the exotic, all of which are nourished and exploited by Sean's narration: 'Fireballs had raged throughout the city as he fled, I told them. People ran with sacks of rice in their melted hands. A Shinto monk said prayers over the dead. Strange weeds grew in places where the plum trees once flowered and Osobe wandered away from the city, half-naked, his throat and eyes burning' (*FSBR*, 46). Osobe's past and that of his country are patently alien to these young listeners, and yet Sean's narration of this exotic actually serves to accommodate Osobe within the local Irish community. He may be portrayed as the 'other', but the establishment of narrative, the articulation of a narrative, offers a degree of anchorage to the Japanese emigrant – he is made knowable and is produced from within the community at the level of narrative.

Despite his willingness to expound upon the tragic intimacies of Osobe's personal history to his friends, Sean is aware, privately, that Osobe is not the personality that he constructs on a nightly basis under

the bridge. Osobe's silence, and Sean's particular proximity to that silence, as they work together from day to day over the summer months foments an intense feeling of anger in Sean. Osobe's reticence at such close quarters and with such regularity only serves to repel Sean: 'For a moment I felt a vicious hatred for him and his quiet ways, his mundane stroll through summer, his ordinariness, the banality of everything he had become for me. He should have been a hero, or a seer. He should have told me some incredible story that I could carry with me forever' (*FSBR*, 47). McCann juxtaposes this private admission by Sean with the previously cited examples of his storytelling fictions on Osobe's past for a specific reason. While Sean fulfils the expectations of his peer group – he allows them the facility of viewing history as exotic, as nostalgic, as heroic and as thrilling – he is not afforded the same by Osobe. Osobe may not reveal the mysteries of his Oriental past to Sean, but he does help the young man to realize that history and histories – personal and communal – are not always heroic or monumental. Osobe's example: the likelihood that his arrival in Ireland was occasioned not by the stories that attach themselves to him but by altogether more banal and human reasons. The histories of diaspora and emigration, in McCann's terms – and this is the acute point that Sean eventually learns – are overpopulated with narratives of banality and ordinariness rather than alluring and enigmatic strangers. They are histories of hardship, isolation and distance; Osobe becomes an historical symbol within the story and the collection of the unadorned commonplaceness of emigration and its historical subjects.

'A Basket Full of Wallpaper' is an Irish emigrant's reminiscence on one summer of adolescence, recalling the impact an ambiguous stranger had on a small Irish town. The end of the story moves us briskly forward in time, and demonstrates the symmetry between Osobe's and Sean's lives as emigrants. At this juncture we learn that Osobe died a number of years subsequent to Sean's emigration, and that the healthy circuit of speculation about his origins did not cease with his passing. Sean receives a letter from his father, relating the latest wave of emigration, but, more importantly, the details of Osobe's death and burial. As is often the case, it is only with their absence that an individual's centrality to or impact upon a community is fully appreciated, and Osobe is no different. Just as he animated a communal network of rumour and gossip during his life, his death is met with

expressions and gestures of genuine sympathy and generosity, as well as widespread agreement that his roots were, after all, to be found in the tragedy of Hiroshima. And in the same way in which his family had been vaporized by the nuclear bomb, Osobe's death reveals nothing that might confirm or contradict the town's versions of his life. It is as if, in the end, he too disappeared without any physical trace remaining: 'There had been no clue in the house, no letters, no medical papers, nothing to indicate that he had come from that most horrific of our century's moments' (*FSBR*, 50). There may have been no documentary or factual explanation of Osobe's history, but this is no obstacle to the demands of communal memory. Ultimately, Osobe represents a triumph of imaginative memory and authorship over factual recollection and narration. His life in the town, its scripting by his neighbours, problematizes the bases of individual and communal memory and highlights the contingency of historical authorship. Yet out of this apparent fragmentation, a culture of communal identity emerges; Osobe is the exotic 'other' of this locale, who is domesticated to a degree by rumour, but always remains aloof from the privacies of his 'creation' among the townspeople.

'Fishing the Sloe-Black River', the title story, is one of two in the collection that assumes magic realist qualities – the other is 'Cathal's Lake', dealt with below in Chapter 4. The narrative is brief yet highly effective as it captures the after-effects of emigration on a 'small Westmeath town' (*FSBR*, 53). Quite simply, it describes the mothers of the town casting their fishing rods into the local river as they fish for their emigrated sons while, simultaneously, the men of the town play a Gaelic football match against a neighbouring parish. Belying the sense of abandonment that underlies the thematic core of the story, McCann's narrative is a lyrical portrait of the remainders of emigration. Though the ritual of fishing for absent children is tragic, McCann's descriptions seem to counter this with their grace. Thus it seems that form and content are, at times, working productively in counterpoint:

Low shouts drifted like lazy swallows over the river, interrupting the silence of the women. They were casting with ferocious hope, twenty-six of them in unison, in a straight line along the muddy side of the low-slung river wall, whipping back the rods over their shoulders. They had pieces of fresh bread mashed onto the hooks so that when they cast their lines the bread volleyed out over the

river and hung for a moment, making curious contours in the air, cartwheels and tumbles and plunges. (*FSBR*, 53)

The ‘ferocious hope’ of these mothers is not verbally articulated, but is expressed in a gestural mode, in violent symbolic acts of devotion to their absent children. And it is striking that the river takes such a central role in McCann’s symbolic economy, as it is a figuration that he returns to in later works such as *Songdogs* and *This Side of Brightness*. The river is a dynamic symbol of change yet also of re-birth, renewal, and regeneration. For these women the river may, on the one hand, be a symbol of the movement attached to emigration, but it is, equally, an element of life’s natural cycle, capable of returning lost or absent loved ones. Their ritual may well be in vain, but it is a sustaining rite, which is at once somatic and emotional without need for verbal mediation. McCann presents a litany of lonely mothers, giving them specific names and, occasionally, some personal details about their children. Thus, while the ritual lends the narrative a mythic or magically real air, the identification of the individual women returns to the realms of realism: ‘Mrs King was there with her graphite rod. Mrs McDaid had come up with the idea of putting currants in the bread...Mrs Kelly was sipping from her little silver flask of the finest Jameson’s, Mrs Hogan was casting with fire-fly flicks of the wrist...’ (*FSBR*, 55).

The ripple effects of a population denuded of its younger generation are not only mediated through the mothers’ dedication to their fishing ritual, but are also made explicit in the form of the physical decline of the male population. A Gaelic football match provides the aural backdrop to the story; the sounds of the ebb and flow of the game resonate across the townscape, providing a stilted soundtrack to the mothers’ actions. McCann references one of the dominant indices of traditional, and modern, Irish identity in alluding to the lapsed physicality of the male population: the GAA. References to the match are inserted at irregular intervals in the story, but when they are, they are not affirmations of a blossoming future in physical terms. As she casts her line, Mrs Conheeny worries ‘that her husband, at right half back, might be feeling the ache in his knee from ligaments torn long ago’ (*FSBR*, 54). And when the game ends in inevitable defeat: ‘Their husbands arrived with their amber jerseys splattered with mud, their faces long in another defeat, cursing under taggles of pipes, their old

bones creaking at the joints' (*FSBR*, 56). The brute physicality of the husbands' Gaelic football match aches in their ageing bodies; the grace of their sporting youths has atrophied and is as insubstantial a memory as the catch their wives quarry for in the local river. Likewise, the inevitability of their defeat on account of an ageing team is matched by the inevitable futility of their wives' fishing ritual. Both will end, and do end, without a productive result: 'Another useless day fishing' (*FSBR*, 56). Whether it is the graceful arcs of the mothers' fishing rods or the diminished athleticism of the football team, the marks of emigration are deeply felt in this small Westmeath town. The realities of physical mortality and the surreal ritual of fishing combine as an odd coupling in McCann's narrative to produce a sense of the unsettling repercussions of emigration. The twin narrative strategy deployed by McCann, then, evokes an ambiguous, almost insubstantial, and ill-defined society. We are, at moments, located resolutely in Ireland, with geographical coordinates: the GAA, Brennan's bread, and a further lyrical intertextual reference, this time to the traditional Irish 'Rose of Mooncoin'. But we finish this story with a deeply unsettling feeling, a sense of disorientation and uncertainty as to what we have just read, where we have read about, and who these people actually are. 'Fishing the Sloe-Black River' oscillates between this typically Irish town, with its recognizable cultural coordinates, and international elsewhere: 'like the Thames or the Darling or the Hudson or the Loire or even the Rhine itself' (*FSBR*, 56). This geographical and cultural oscillation between home and away does not, however, privilege one over the other, but retains an authorial sensitivity to the human stories involved in the histories of Irish emigration.

NOTES

- 1 Dermot Bolger, 'Foreword', in Dermot Bolger (ed.), *Ireland in Exile: Irish Writers Abroad* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1993), p.9.
- 2 Joseph O'Connor, 'Introduction', in Dermot Bolger (ed.), *Ireland in Exile: Irish Writers Abroad* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1993), p.14.
- 3 Carmel Heaney (ed.), *Ireland Worldwide: The Newsletter of The Irish Diaspora* (November 1993) volume 1, pp.1-8.
- 4 Desmond Fennell, *The State of the Nation: Ireland since the Sixties* (Dublin: Ward River Press, 1983), pp.15-16.
- 5 Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-2002* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p.316.

- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Mary P. Corcoran, 'The Process of Migration and the Reinvention of Self: The Experiences of Returning Irish Emigrants', *Éire-Ireland*, 37, 1 and 2 (2002), p.176.
8. Heather Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.255.
9. See Miriam Mara, 'The Geography of Bodies: Borders in Edna O'Brien's *Down by the River* and Colum McCann's "Sisters"', in Helen Thompson (ed.), *The Current Debate about the Irish Literary Canon: Essays Reassessing the Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Lewiston, NY and Lampeter: Mellen Press, 2006), pp.311–30.
10. Colum McCann, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (London: Phoenix House, 1994), p.1. All further references to *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* will appear in parenthesis as (FSBR).
11. Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy* (London: Picador, 1992).

Rites of Passage: *Songdogs* (1995)

The communities of separation that populate *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* give way in McCann's next fictional work, *Songdogs*, to a family history that is equally marked by migration, but that also embraces multiculturalism and references the heterogeneity of the Irish diaspora. In its exploration of the Lyons' family narrative of international mobility and local dissolution, the novel draws our attention to the intergenerational tensions within a diasporic family. Though Michael, the father, has resettled in Ireland, the memories and consequences of his emigration resonate in the present. While his son, Conor, born in Ireland of Irish and Mexican parentage, remains an emigrant on a return visit home, ostensibly, to renew his visa. The narrative is suggestive of the fact that 'diasporas are historical formations in process', as Pnina Werbner argues.¹ In other words, the Lyons family are part of the historical genealogy of the Irish Diaspora, but the traumas that are structural to their family history reveal the internal complexity of any emigrant family or community. The father/son tension is indexical of the very 'process' alluded to by Werbner, and it is one of the factors that fuels the dramatic tension of the novel. *Songdogs* is also a painful confrontation with the past, and McCann probes the unavoidable stress involved in the ceaseless search for origins, for causes and ultimately for answers. McCann charts the individual's progress through a strangely familiar liminal landscape in search of a more complete personal narrative. In the novel, Conor Lyons' narrative indices are his mother's own childhood stories, his father's photography, their beatnik friend Cici's half-invented, half-remembered narratives; and his own imaginative fusion of all three. His transition is a conscious retracing of his parent's travels and is ostensibly a journey to locate his estranged mother. Indeed the most continuous feature of the Lyons family unit is the desire for 'elsewheres' that manifests in all of the members – as Eamonn Wall suggests, [*Songdogs* presents] a critique of settled life: in McCann's vision, people are more

content as nomads because the more settled the Lyonses are, the more they are confined and unhappy.² Conor has inherited a discontinuous family history. Not only has he been separated from his mother and was too young to realize the forces that precipitated her estrangement, but at the beginning of the novel we learn that his father, Michael, was orphaned as an infant. Michael Lyons was actually raised as Gordon Peters by two benevolent Protestant ladies, who were, in turn, drowned when he was a teenager. Subsequent to their death and the receipt of his inheritance from their estate, Michael departed on several years' travel, taking in the Spanish Civil War, Mexico and North America, before returning with his Mexican wife to County Mayo. Thus, Conor Lyons' immediate genealogical lineage is profoundly ambiguous, a condition that is not unravelled in any constructive way by his father, with whom he maintains a limited relationship. And it is the maternal absence that has most acutely fostered a profoundly distanced relationship with his father. His father is an unwilling source of information regarding his mother, and her potential whereabouts. The novel charts both Conor's physical pursuit of his mother and his imaginative rendition of his parents' marriage on the American continent before he was born and resolving ultimately in the cultivation of a final détente between father and son.

Conor has returned to Ireland, and to his home in Mayo, for the first time in five years. But he has returned temporarily in order to address his visa requirements for residency in the United States – he now lives a semi-hermetic life, reminiscent of his father's own youth in Wyoming. Thus the dramatic catalyst of the story is centred on the ideas of movement, of emigration and of the adoption of new physical homelands. On one of his first nights at home, Conor reflects on his restless nature and on the ambiguous emotions his return has engendered:

I sat up in the bedroom tonight and looked out the window to the bible-dark of the Mayo night, the stars rioting away. In a strange way it's nice to be back – it's always nice to be back anywhere, anywhere at all, safe in the knowledge that you're getting away again. The law of the river, like he used to say. Bound to move things on.³

In many ways, then, this return to Mayo does not represent a homecoming at all; Conor's attachment to his roots in the west of Ireland is,

as his sentiments reveal, quite shallow. Indeed, as Wall further argues, this is likely to do with the fact that Ireland is not really his motherland at all – that role belongs to Mexico and to the western seaboard of the United States. The foundations of identity, as McCann's fluid metaphor embodies, are dissolute in an increasingly hybridized global community. With his orphaned father and Mexican mother, Conor is, perhaps of necessity, more than willing to subject himself to the fluctuating patterns of 'the law of the river'. Conor's movement is an ambiguous undertaking – the very act of mobility rejects the stasis of containment and contentment, and in so doing, the action of his investigative travel scrutinizes the narrative authority of his father. If Conor had ignored his urge to move, to escape the constricted emotional and physical bonds of his Mayo home, his father would have retained an autocratic proprietorship of the narratives of remembrance of the Lyons family. But in his inquisitive migrancy, Conor produces a challenge to the rememorative tyranny of Michael.

SONGDOGS AND BILDUNGSROMAN

In his seminal text on the genealogy of the *bildungsroman* in European literary history, *The Way of the World*, Franco Moretti refers to the Bakhtinian view of the genre's synchronization of the temporal plain of 'world history', and that of the 'temporal emergence' of the individual men. Emerging from the closeted sphere of the private, the individual in formation enters the public realm of 'world history'. As Moretti argues, citing Bakhtin's formulation of the *bildungsroman*:

It's the same 'elevation' of the everyday that we encounter in Bakhtin's view of the *Bildungsroman* as a 'mastering of historical time': in these novels, he writes, 'man emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself...the image of the emerging man begins to surmount its private nature (within certain limits, of course) and enters into a completely new spatial sphere of historical existence.'⁴

Bakhtin's schematic version of the genre's narrative trajectories is suggestive of the transitional and processional character of the *bildungsroman*. In many ways it adheres to a linear conceptualization of the historical time; a competitive progression towards maturation away

from the blindness of youth to the full vision of maturity. And such a consistency of narrative momentum across the genre bears distinctively conservative overtones – there is a sense in which the *bildungsroman* does not contest society’s received machinations, but, alternatively, serves as a minor superstructural agent of continuity and consensus. As Moretti later suggests: ‘the *Bildungsroman* seemed to have its own private ideology...they were not trying to shape consistent worldviews, but rather compromises among distinct worldviews.’⁵ The form is, then, reflective of the primary consciousness within these novels; the *bildungsroman* showcases the contradictory, chafing intellectual, political and personal possibilities on offer to their protagonists. And yet, typically in the classical *bildungsroman*, these options are settled, or resolved, into a productive bourgeois individuality. The process of *bildung* is co-extensive with the form of the novel; it has limits, and therefore a form of comfortable conclusion or resolution must be alighted upon, within the space/time of the narrative at least. Naturally this does not preclude the inclusion of stock narrative indices of mobility, transformation, or insecurity – these are all integral to the formative staging of the genre. These apparent structural tensions within the genre are vital, again in Moretti’s terms: ‘dynamism and limits, restlessness and the “sense of an ending”’: built as it is on such sharp contrasts, the structure of the *Bildungsroman* will of necessity be *intrinsically contradictory* [original emphasis].⁶ Despite these contradictory impulses, there is little doubt that the classical varieties of the genre are ideologically predisposed to harmony, while we witness the dramatization of ‘the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of socialization’.⁷ This existential agon cannot continue without any punctuation (as narrative demands), and consequently, a functioning, recognizably bourgeois self must be birthed.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, according to Moretti, the *bildungsroman* had performed three great symbolic functions. It had:

contained the unpredictability of social change, representing it through the fiction of youth; a turbulent segment of life, no doubt, but with a clear beginning and an unmistakable end. At a micro-narrative level, furthermore, the structure of the novelistic episode had established the flexible anti-tragic modality of modern experience. Finally, the novel’s many-sided, unheroic hero had embodied a new kind of subjectivity: everyday, worldly, pliant –

‘normal’: a smaller, more peaceful history; within it, a fuller experience; and a weaker, but more versatile Ego: a perfect compound for the Great Socialization of the European middle classes.⁸

Moretti’s summative comments on the genre reflect his belief in the ideological functions of its narrative features. Specifically, his final assertion of its linkage to both the sociological and the socio-economic signals the political nature of the *bildungsroman* form. It is implicated in the superstructural summoning and pacification of the literate middle classes. The *bildungsroman* is not simply reflective of a worldview, but is productive of that worldview. In affording privilege to youth, the genre establishes itself as the literary outrider of modernity; in other words, it is the genre of the future, of potential and of progress. But, as always, it is a cultural agent that sets limits to the range of life’s possibilities. It may be dynamic and oriented towards the future, but it is not revolutionary nor is it subversive. And under these philosophical and political guises, the *bildungsroman* is the quintessential European literary genre, as it fetishizes its own progress, confirming its own convictions and reflecting upon its own self-crafted images. What is, perhaps, most interesting in relation to our discussion is the question of how and where McCann’s novel coalesces with and/or chafes against the classical tropes and teleologies of the *bildungsroman*. Or do we have to reconsider the genre when we approach McCann’s fiction, or Irish variants of the genre? What can we extract from the history of the genre towards our discussion of the lives that animate *Songdogs*?

Moretti’s treatise on the *bildungsroman* clearly privileges the ‘classics’ of the genre as they arose in England, France and Germany, which begs the question as to the relevance of such a discussion to our reading of McCann’s debut novel, *Songdogs*. And before we can adequately map the longer histories of the *bildungsroman* into McCann’s narrative, it is worth, cursorily, considering the pre-history of the Irish influence on the genre, particularly in the twentieth century. In addition, this preamble will permit us to foreground both the continuities and the discontinuities that pertain between the ‘classical’ and the ‘Irish’ variations on the *bildungsroman*. In any discussion that brings *bildungsroman* into contact with modern Irish fiction, Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is summoned as the *locus classicus* of an ‘Irish’ modernist variant of the form. But not only is Joyce’s novel more closely allied, arguably, to the adjacent novelistic form, the *kunstlerroman*, it is frequently read

either as a 'failed' *bildungsroman* or as one that performs a modernist critique of the form. *A Portrait of the Artist* bears superficial resemblances to the classical tropes of the *bildungsroman*, but this retention of formal indices is not, Gregory Castle argues, evidential of a passive inheritance by Joyce. Castle's contention is that modernist and, indeed, postcolonial strains of the classical *bildungsroman* retain the familiar narratological features of the genre precisely to conduct the destabilizing critique of its literary and political assumptions. In his view, such an operation is a 'double gesture of recuperation of critique', under which the 'generic rudiments are not only retained but embraced with a new vigour'.⁹ Castle's case, then, is founded on the adjacency of modernist and postcolonial appropriations of a conservative, bourgeois European literary form, which, as Moretti maintains, was a recognizable super-structural agent of western capitalist modernity. What is suggestive about Castle's proposition is that the *bildungsroman* cannot be seamlessly imported into Ireland, and its narrative faculties are not viewed without scepticism or as unproblematic by Irish authors. Beginning with Joyce, but stretching across twentieth-century Irish literature, we can point to consistent re-inventions of the formal indices of the classic *bildungsroman*. Contradictorily, this historically conservative novelistic form gains in elasticity as it crosses borders, as it is compelled to narrate and to mediate lives and histories that are outside the central crucibles of European modernity. And in testing the limits of the *bildungsroman*, one can also see an implicit critique of the political and cultural foundations on which it is based and which it fosters and propagates. In addition, this is the case with the multicultural mobility of Conor Lyons' and Michael Lyons' *bildung* in *Songdogs*.

Following on from Castle's alignment of modernist and postcolonial declension of the classical *bildungsroman*, we might well read McCann's *Songdogs* in terms of the postcolonial *bildungsroman*. As we range across McCann's fictions it is clear that he is exercised by many of the most urgent issues animating critical debate within contemporary postcolonial studies. Equally, *Songdogs* loosely appropriates the structure and central drama of the *bildungsroman*, and its Irish context warrants its inclusion within discussions of the postcolonial *bildungsroman*. Contemporary postcolonial *bildungsromane* include: Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, and Chimananda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, and each of these plays their own dissonant

melody on the classical *bildungsroman*. Naturally, there have been efforts to diagnose dominant generic characteristics of the postcolonial *bildungsroman*, attempting to generate a formal typology of the genre. One such effort details at length the conceivable attractions the *bildungsroman* might have for postcolonial novelists:

As possible ground for the extraordinary success of childhood narratives, we could speculate on the large number of children who live in the postcolonial world or refer to the feelings of nostalgia experienced by writers living in exile. We could mention as well the possibilities that the *Bildungsroman* offers to those writers who wish to situate their stories in the first years following independence, in order to draw parallels between the experience of the new nations and their young characters. From a different angle, the interest that *Bildungsromane* take in the construction of subjectivity, and the didactic potentiality of the genre, appeal to the postcolonial agenda, with its emphasis on *questions of identity*, pedagogy and power. Finally...one of the reasons why postcolonial writers turn to the *Bildungsroman* is the desire to incorporate the master codes of imperialism into the text, in order to sabotage them more effectively [my emphasis].¹⁰

It is a given that this inventoried snapshot of the genre by Vázquez is excessively instrumental, but it is equally true that all such rigid typologies are grounded in some degree of critical accuracy. Vázquez's catalogue is prompted by his reading of Okri's *The Famished Road*, but it is worth bearing in mind when we approach *Songdogs*. Specifically, we can draw from this list as preliminary points of departure: McCann's novel reflects the author's biographical experiences of travel and distance from his native country, so there may well be an infusion of authorial nostalgia in *Songdogs*, as it charts the youthful wanderings of an exiled Irishman across the North American continent and his troubled return to his home place in Ireland. Similarly, while the ostensible central *bildung* of Conor Lyons is a generation removed from the period covering Ireland's postcolonial independence, we get a parallel *bildung* narrative of his father, Michael Lyons, which is coterminous with this period. Furthermore, and as we mentioned above, McCann's fictions, including *Songdogs*, are preoccupied with issues of national and ethnic identity, international cultural exchanges, migrancy, and the dynamics of global

political power, which are foci of what Vázquez calls ‘the postcolonial agenda’. Aligning McCann’s novel, tentatively then, with the postcolonial *bildungsroman* also suggests that *Songdogs* performs a formal and thematic critique of the classical modes of the genre. And this is evident in the hybridized internationalism of the narrative, and in the multi-temporal structure of the presentation of the plot.

Of the points of correlation between *Songdogs* and Vázquez’s typology of the postcolonial *bildungsroman*, it is the second dealt with above that is the most intriguing. Rather than solely chart the *bildung* of our focalizing protagonist, *Songdogs*, in fact, delivers what might be termed a dual *bildung*. We are witness to elements of both the father’s and the son’s journeys of international maturation. In this sense, when we read McCann’s epigraph to the novel, we might easily be reading Michael’s reflections as those of his son Conor. Despite the fact that we can say with some certainty that these are Conor’s words, they are haunted by the presence of his father. The feelings and the events described therein would not be entirely alien to Michael’s own life experience: ‘Just before I came home to Ireland I saw my first coyotes. They were strung on a fencepost near Jackson Hole, Wyoming...The hanging was a rancher’s warning to other coyotes to stay away from the field...But coyotes aren’t as foolish as us – they don’t trespass where the dead have been. They move on and sing elsewhere’ (*SD*). What is most significant about this brief epigraphic passage is the traction that Ireland still retains for Conor despite the extensive international travel he has undertaken, and the depth of the discord that fomented his departure from Ireland in the first place. For both father and son, Ireland remains the locus of their emotional and cultural peregrinations across the globe. McCann may appeal to the exotic in his figurative encounter with the consequences of re-visiting the past, but there is a stubborn locality retained and problematized by the novel’s contemporary location in Ireland. And finally, the epigraph obliquely gestures to the consequences of unfettered motion; it notes the violence that is consequent upon trespassing. In this particular figuration, the past assumes a vital and physical form – the coyotes – which is precisely how it materializes in the novel.

It is never specified as to when precisely this narrative is being narrated; we can assume that our narrator, Conor, is slightly older than when the events in the novel ensued, but we are not certain if he has remained in Ireland or departed again. Formally, the reflective form of the

novel, its predominantly historical viewpoint, allows us access to the personal histories and developments of both Conor and his father and, in this way, to approach the realms of the *bildungsroman*. To return to the epigraph, because it is written in the past tense, we register that this is the ‘mature’ self narrating an emergence out of youthful innocence or ignorance. In addition, the epigraph’s references to music, travel, violence, the natural world and the past signal some of the primary thematics that resound across the narrative. The violence prefigures the variously tense and intimate relationship that exists between father and son. However, the suggestion that both lives actually bear remarkable resemblances, as revealed by the developmental structure of many parts of the narrative, takes us back to the notion of *bildung*. In an oblique echo of the ‘Law of the Father’, which is a principal narrative agent in the classical *bildungsroman*, the first chapter of *Songdogs* is entitled ‘the law of the river’. This title has the supplementary effect of alluding to one of the recurrent symbolic tropes in the novel, as well as locating the subsequent narrative within the generic territory of the *bildungsroman*. But what is more acute in establishing the father/son relation as the dominant narrative axis is McCann’s opening description of Conor’s stealthy return to his father’s, and his own childhood, home. Unlike the epigraphic coyotes, Conor is now, physically and emotionally, trespassing where the dead have been: ‘I sat on my backpack, behind the hedge, where the old man couldn’t see me, and watched the slowness of the river and him’ (*SD*, 3). McCann herein establishes the physical and emotional remoteness that obtains between father and son. And at the same time flags, in symbolic terms, the affective bond that persists between Michael Lyons and the local river. Notwithstanding the tensile nature of this relationship, McCann initiates the novel with a deliberate co-location of father and son – in proximity but still distant. Conor’s stealthy vigil observing his father continues:

Yet still the old man was fishing away. The line rolled out, catching the light, and the fly landed softly. He flicked around with his wrist for a minute, slumped his head when he finished each cast, reeled in the slack and rubbed at his forearm. After a while he went and sat in a red and white striped lawn chair under the branches of the old poplar tree. He turned his head in the direction of the hedge, didn’t see me. (*SD*, 3)

In purely symbolic terms, Michael's fishing ritual harkens back to the abandoned ageing parents of 'Fishing the Sloe-Black River'; uniting the two is the insistence of redemptive ritual in the face of the departure of children. Yet there are clear distinctions to be made between the two figurative uses of fishing as ritual act by McCann. Tellingly, Michael does not see Conor when he looks in his direction, but of more significance is the profusion of detail in Conor's descriptions of his father and of the homestead during his brief week-long stay. Such precision is important given the context of the narrative drama; Conor has returned after a lengthy period away from home, having left in an ill-tempered break with his father. The next day, having reunited with his father, Conor is, again, surreptitiously watching the old man burn rubbish, and once more his description is painstaking in its accuracy:

I dragged a chair to the window, propped my elbows on the big high armrests, watching him in the farmyard. When he was done with the burning he turned to come back from the pit, and still the whole of his body was leaning over, walking at an angle, paying some sort of homage to the ground. He shuffled back along the muddy trail, stopped and scratched at his head, then moved his fingers curiously along his right cheek as if trying to ruddy it, walked over to the wheelbarrow. (*SD*, 41)

The physical and emotional gaps that have festered for a number of years are, it seems, being filled by a dense accumulation of detail. It is almost as if in light of the previous years of separation and in preparation for those that may well follow, Conor is husbanding memorial details of his father. In another sense, his deep concentration on his father may be conditioned by the tension that exists between them both, and that, in fact, he is looking for moments of weakness, searching out for evidence, however minute, to stoke his longer-term anger towards Michael. Perhaps what is most convincing is that Conor's laboured descriptions, here and elsewhere, are superficial physical portraits, and that the mass of details actually masks the extent to which their emotional links have become emaciated by years of separation. The waves of detail, the telescopic eye for minutiae, betrays an enduring absence of genuine intimacy and mutual familiarity.

The contemporary guiding narrative arc of *Songdogs* mobilizes stark, microscopic detail in its narrative technique but this litany of present-day detail is punctuated by Conor's delivery of impressionistic descriptions

of his father's formative years, of his years spent travelling the Americas and, crucially, of the ramifications of Michael's return to Ireland with his Mexican wife, Juanita. Thus, while McCann dramatizes the struggle between father and son in the present, we are also given a longer, genealogical narrative, which provides a narration of Michael's own earlier *bildung*. The overall effect is that of a subtly double-voiced *bildungsroman*. Conor's is the focalizing consciousness, but the extent to which his life, his *bildung*, materially intersects with that of his father generates this sense of doubling within the narrative. The respective motivations for both young men to depart Ireland and to travel westward are discrepant, but not unrelated. Both leave because they become convinced that all measure of emotional attachment within Ireland has disappeared. In fact, Conor's journeying through Mexico, San Francisco and Wyoming is a mix of first-hand experience and encounters with personalities and places from his parents' former life. Although he is, putatively, seeking to reconcile with his absent mother, Juanita, the more he travels through the coordinates of his father's youth, the more his first-hand experiences seem derivative of his estranged father's life. Thus this first-hand adventure is constantly shadowed by its paternal predecessor.

If the logic of the classical *bildungsroman* was centred on the inauguration of a coherent and rational selfhood, then McCann's novel seems to test the limits of that underlying logic. In *Songdogs*, both father and son are, at various times and in different ways, cast adrift from the familiar anchoring referents of familial and communal identity. The Lyons family history across the twentieth century is founded on absence, illegitimacy and rootlessness. Recalling his father's parentage, Conor reveals: 'A russet-haired woman who only wore one sleeve on her dress gave birth to my father on a cliff-top overlooking the Atlantic, in the summer of 1918. She was known in town as a madwoman' (*SD*, 5). In addition to this compromised maternity, Michael's father was killed before his birth: 'She had just received a letter saying that her lover had been fed to the guns of the Great War' (*SD*, 6). And just as Michael's father never sees his son, the mother, it is implied, abandons him almost immediately after his birth too. Thus, Michael is born of separation and death, and, prophetically, born overlooking the ocean that will become a defining presence in his own and his son's lives. Michael is rescued from his orphaned condition by two Protestant ladies, who endow him with a life of relative comfort. Far removed from the precarious exposure of his birth:

The Protestant ladies raised him in a house of fine china tea cups, radio broadcasts, scones privileged with spoonfuls of clotted cream...His were ordered all the way from Dublin, beautiful white shirts that he destroyed running through the bogs...They baptized him in the Protestant Church with the name Gordon Peters, and years later – beaten up in school for the name – he repaid them by urinating on their toothbrushes. (*SD*, 6)

His urination is not his only reaction to his name, when, at the age of eleven, when he learns about his natural mother, he renames himself Michael Lyons. The Lyons family ‘name’, then, is an adolescent fiction – a wildly postmodern gesture by the youth that establishes a family narrative. In another way, it further complicates the apparent ‘law of the father’ dynamic of McCann’s *bildungsroman*, as paternity is now doubly undermined in death and in name. To add to Michael’s dislocation, his two adoptive parents are drowned when he is sixteen; and this further parental loss foregrounds the family as a thematic hinge of the novel. Both of Michael’s ‘families’ are deeply unconventional in their historical context, and in a sense, they challenge the heteronormativity of the nuclear family in Ireland during this period. The stabilizing agency of the family unit is troubled in *Songdogs*, which has clear repercussions for the development of the individual, in this case both Michael and Conor.

‘THE LAW OF THE FATHER’ – ARTIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER

Prior to the catalytic family breakup of the contemporary narrative, we learn, through Conor, of his father’s peripatetic youth. His rootlessness is at least partly a consequence of his displacement within his home town in Ireland, and his lack of any tangible family connections. But such itinerancy facilitates artistic freedom for Michael, latitude to pursue his newly formed passion for photography. On inheriting the estate of his Protestant benefactors, Michael discovers a camera among their possessions. The camera, photography and the photographic image become recurrent fertile motifs in the novel, assuming a figurative significance equivalent to that of the river.¹¹ This becomes the single most lasting legacy of the inheritance that he is bequeathed by his Protestant mothers; it is an enlivening discovery for the young Michael:

It was the camera that woke him. He found it in a large red box

under one of the beds, forgotten. It had belonged to Loyola, but she had never mentioned it to him. Opening the silver snaps, a Pandora of dust arose around him, and he lifted the parts out onto the bed. It was an old model with a dickybird hood, glass plates in perfect order, wooden legs sturdy, lens unscratched. (*SD*, 8–9)

The camera is an historical artefact, a quaint antique that will, nevertheless, prove a medium of liberation and creativity for Michael. McCann's mise-en-scène of this discovery has echoes of a mythical unearthing of an enigmatic object, which can endow unimagined powers on the bearer. And akin to many of these mythic gifts of endowment, the camera exacts retribution for misuse or perceived misuse of its gifts. Michael is consumed by the object and its creative possibilities, as well as by the mechanical intricacies of its operation. He devotes considerable time and money in operating and maintaining the camera, while aiming its lens at his local natural surroundings and, more provocatively, at many of his neighbours. Yet behind all of this relatively innocent photography, as Conor notes: 'He didn't know it then, but the camera would burst him out onto the world, give him something to cling to, fulminate a belief in him in the power of light, the necessity of image, the possibility of freezing time' (*SD*, 9). Just as we all remember in images rather than in words, *Songdogs* is an aggregation of a verbal narrative, and an historical narrative that is heavily dependent on the testimony of visual imagery. In a sense, McCann presents us with another narrative doubling – interwoven and speculative registers of textual and visual representation. As Conor notes, Michael's and, subsequently, Juanita's lives are measured out in the visual record of their photographic archive. Michael's immersion in the bare mechanics of photography soon matures into a steady flow of income from the vocation and, finally, emerges as a desire to achieve a level of aesthetic mastery and critical acclaim. In these ways, not only does *Songdogs* bear affinities to a curiously doubled *bildungsroman*, but the novel also approaches a photographic *kunsterroman*.¹² The thematic and geographic sweep of Michael's photographic archive is immense – from humble beginnings, his Mayo photography develops into more risqué portraits, as we see the first intrusion of erotic photography, which will violate his future domestic space. Almost as an affront to the ossified moral climate of Ireland in the 1930s, Michael's photographs are testimonies to the presence of desire and sensuality. The voluntary eroticism of his photographic subjects is at once a benign exploration of

sexuality, but also a misrecognition, on their part, of the nature of photographic representation. The photographic exposure might appear a momentary, transient enactment of bodily sensuality, but it harnesses the image and can disempower the object of its gaze, as eventuates later in the novel. Nevertheless, Michael's role as photographer enables him to chronicle briefly the public and private impulses of Irish rural youth culture in the 1930s: 'The owner of the dancehall...wouldn't allow any cameras inside. Still, my father was quite content to hang around, smoking, waiting for Manley [his friend] to emerge, looking for opportunities to use Loyola [his camera]...Outside the dancehall he sometimes took pictures of young women smoking for the first time, new hats cocked sideways, daring lipstick smudged upwards to thicken lips' (*SD*, 10–11). And in tandem with the minor lasciviousness of these public displays of sensuousness, Michael's photography captures more discrete moments: 'My father had rescued an old *chaise* with three legs. When the women reclined on it, their hair swooped towards the floor, Manley, giving politics a rest, let a licentious tongue hang out as he peeped in through the barn slats' (*SD*, 12). The contrast between Michael and his friend Manley in these two extracts is telling; Manley is portrayed as engaged in the social networks of his peers, whereas Michael remains removed and disinterested. This distinction, then, presages Michael's imminent and decades-long travel outside of Ireland, and it exposes his attitude to his photographic vocation. Manley's 'licentious tongue', perversely, is attuned to the ethical content and nature of photography, and explicitly of such erotically charged images. The very licentiousness of his disposition betrays his acknowledgement of the moral code under which he lives. By way of contrast, Michael's guiding principle is not the morality or immorality of his work, or how it might offend. Rather, he is primarily focused on the objective aesthetic merits of the images. In a larger sense, the ethical responsibility that Michael as an artist has to his photographic subjects is ignored or subordinated to the need of the artistic process and the artistic product. Michael does not always jettison the ethics of photographic representation, but does so at crucial times, and such regular neglect, ultimately, sunders his marriage and his family. Having resolved to leave Ireland, Michael invests in two new Leica cameras and follows Manley to civil war Spain. Indoctrinated into Marxism, Manley enlists for combat and Michael pursues as a war photographer. Even here at the vanguard of global ideological warfare, in

the most visceral and public spaces of his photographic career, Michael retreats behind his art: 'he had no politics...he was only a photographer' (*SD*, 20). From Spain and onto Mexico, both in public and in private, Michael chases an aesthetic ideal determined to attain critical recognition for his photographic output. At first it is the public output that Michael retails as his creative portfolio; his work documents the hardships of Mexican copper miners, the summer forest fires of Wyoming, and the multi-ethnic communality of mid-century New York City. But Michael's festering desire for artistic acclaim remains frustrated; the public photography is ignored and is only resurrected and given narrative form years later by Conor. However, contrary to his expectations, Michael's discrete, private images are, in the end, far more explosive. In particular, photography becomes an intimate and sensual theatre within his marriage to Juanita. But it is also the medium through which that marital bond is severed.

Emerging from the Mexican desert, Michael alights upon an isolated hamlet and, while resting briefly, Juanita ganders into his view. He is immediately entranced by the primal erotic physicality that she exudes and, naturally, he reaches for his camera. Less predictably, Juanita responds: 'She pursed her lips provocatively for the camera, her blouse open flirtatiously, her head thrown sideways like a film actress' (*SD*, 36). The minor flirtation is abruptly, and violently, ended in a hail of threats from Juanita's mother. Yet Juanita's derivative erotic performance anticipates the mutual pleasure derived from the medium by the couple in later years. But even within the bond that is struck between Michael and Juanita, a sense of misrecognition persists. As Conor reveals: 'She wasn't performing for the camera – she was performing for him. She never asked to see the prints. There wasn't an ounce of vanity in her poses' (*SD*, 38). The theatre of photographic representation is the crucible in which the erotic drama of their relationship unfolds, but there is a sense in which they are speaking past each other. The camera is the unifying catalyst, but is also, strangely, absent and defunct at the same time. In other words, it seems as if their individual desire bypasses the other – hers for him, and his for the aesthetics of photography. We might suggest that in posing for Michael, and not for the camera, Juanita escapes objectification, that she retains her sensual agency in her deliberate carnal posturing for her husband. She is not reduced to or confined to the de-eroticized machinery of visual reproduction.

The twin foci of Michael's photographic vocation are his ambition to publish a collection of his images and the private realm of erotic photography with his wife. The two vectors are, for the most part, mutually exclusive, as Michael's attentions are given to securing recognition either through a book-length publication or employed in full-time print journalism. Their journeying along the western seaboard of the United States culminates in their sojourn in rural Wyoming and it is here that Michael is presented with his most electrifying spectacles of natural destruction. The unrelenting summer fires offer propitious material for dramatic visual representations, and in McCann's opening description of that 'summer of fires', the pyrotechnic sublimity of the flames imitate the nubile beauty of Juanita's somatic exertions in Michael's private images: 'A summer of fires, that summer of 1956. They licked their way salaciously through the trees. Ran like lizards alongside ridges. Leaped their way over brown streambeds, languished for a while by new ditches and blackened the yellow hardhats that were left hanging on the branches of trees, tongued their way out towards northern corners of the forest' (*SD*, 102). The scenes in Wyoming are characterized by immolation on a grand scale as well as heroism on a very local scale. And reeling and revelling in their midst is Michael Lyons, quarrying visual art from the ashes of the burning landscape. The surging intensity of the summer fires, their fevered pitch of immolation, runs in symphony with the vocational dedication of Michael as he relays around the blazing mountain-sides. The more severely the landscape burns and the greater the scope of its destruction, the more Michael becomes convinced of his imminent professional success. But, inevitably, the imagined publication never materializes, and Michael is faced with another professional and public diminution. And as his prospects of meaningful professional ratification diminish with increasing haste, the worlds of public and private photography become more proximate.

By the time she abandoned her family in Ireland, Juanita may have become physically and emotionally weathered by her exile from Mexico, but as Conor's revelations about the contents of his father's private photographic archive suggest, she was once a woman of extraordinary physical presence and beauty. Despite the potential to be overwhelmed by the medium, it seems to Conor that his mother retains her volition, even as Michael's photographic process attempts to seize her as an aesthetic object. Detailing the content of these images, Conor notes that

his mother's body 'was nude, not flagrantly so, but her stomach was smooth and dark, it held no creases, her legs curved softly, white sheets exposed small tufts of hair' (*SD*, 59). The collection of photographs 'took on a Victorian attitude of lounge and lust, as if being peeped at through a curtain' (*SD*, 59) – a description that evinces the managed aesthetic postures of Michael's images, and equally that foreshadows their calamitous public exposure years later.

As Michael and Juanita travel further, leaving Mexico behind, the improved technical proficiency of Michael's photography is evident in these private erotic stills: 'Some photos were taken when the sun came up, my mother unclothed once more, but more subtle, more precise around the edges than the ones from Mexico' (*SD*, 108). One is left to speculate whether the increasing professional disappointment and the apparent attainment of photographic skill are in proportion to Juanita's 'disappearance' from the artistic process in Michael's eyes. As she strives to retain a vibrant subjectivity, his appetite for egotistical recognition is incrementally evacuating her of such as photographic object. This tension between Michael's objectification of Juanita and her resistant vibrancy is played out in the photographs of their time spent living in New York. At one moment we witness further evidence of the redundancy of her subjectivity – she is sacrificing herself to the needs of her aspirant and discontented husband, to the extent that: 'the only time that her husband seems to be truly at peace is when he's taking those photos...They make him content. It's a small enough price for Mam to pay, and it's an attention of sorts. He is still in love with her. He still makes a temple from her body – even though it's much like a minaret now' (*SD*, 140–1). Yet in another image from the same period, Conor remarks that: 'the shot is loaded with more sexuality than almost any of the others – something to do with its casualness' (*SD*, 143). These two scenes enact the central contest at the core of the Lyons' marital discord, and they are symptomatic of the manner in which the medium siphons away the authenticity of the emotional and sexual energy of the marriage. Michael's artistic ambition, and his *bildung* as a photographic artist, begins to take precedence within the marriage and the family; family and love are sacrificed for aesthetic achievement.

But Michael's ultimate reckoning with his professional inadequacies is quickened by his return to Ireland; he secures a post as a freelance photographer for some agricultural magazines. From the grand public

spectacles of his Spanish, Mexican, Wyoming and New York photographs, Michael's beat now comprises 'fields of barley, gleaming red combine harvesters, cows with splatterings of shit on their tails, formal committee meetings, product launches' (*SD*, 163). His physical and photographic horizons have been foreshortened, and the mesmerizing topographies that energized photographer and his photography are now tapered to the domains of the banal and the beastly. For Michael, photography as a validation and as a redemption seems to have escaped his grasp, but the final death throes of his vocation now occasion that of his family too. Michael's pursuit of an artistic legacy leads him to self-publish a compilation of his life's work, and he ransacks the images of his marital intimacy in a cheap and desperate attempt to secure this legacy. In so doing, he betrays the integrity of his wife's body and her subjectivity, prostituting their sexual past, their combined erotic narrative, for the satiety of his own artistic ego. And it is this final act that propels Juanita's psychological and physical disengagement from her Irish environment and from her family. The privacy and the specificity of her desire is exposed as a public commodity by Michael, as it is reproduced and circulated beyond her control at the behest of her husband. It seems that Michael's artistic pride supersedes the carnal intimacy offered by his wife. In this way, we see the manifold frustrations of Michael's artistic failures traducing the trust and faith of his marriage, and fracturing his entire family irreparably.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND/AS INHERITANCE

Returning to the formative moments of his parents' relationship, Conor retells the story of how his father redeemed himself in the eyes of his Mexican mother-in-law. Several days after her violent warning to him, Michael is permitted entry to the household on foot of an innocent, yet outrageous, fiction concocted by Juanita. In his new guise Michael 'was related to John Riley, an Irishman who had commanded the San Patricio Battalion in the Mexican War' (*SD*, 37). With his revolutionary Irish pedigree established, Michael's courtship of Juanita and her family can begin in earnest. But what is most significant is the necessity for a fiction to enable the consummation of a burgeoning romance. Just like Michael's own insubstantial family and nominal origins, his new life in Mexico is ushered into life on further fictional premises. The requirement for such enabling and sustaining inventions, then, is not only a recurring, but a

dominant, feature of *Songdogs*; in this way the novel highlights the notion of the invention and re-invention of the self and selves over the course of a life. In another vein, and as we shall see, it is the ability to acknowledge and to recognize the need for such consoling fictions that becomes one of the central lessons of the novel and of Conor's *bildung*. The novel throws into relief the urgency and the ubiquity of such enabling personal, familial and communal fictions. Indeed, the persistence of this theme in the novel is, effectively, the link between Michael's and Conor's engagements with photography. Beginning as empirical representations, these images become, differentially, resources of fictional sustenance for both Michael and Conor – Michael, to the extent that the continued productions suggest the vitality of his professional aspirations, and Conor, in the manner in which these images become a restorative imaginative geography that he can share with his absent mother. Resident in Wyoming, Conor developed the habit of perusing his parents' photographs, and in the evening: 'I would rise from my chair, step out the door, look at the Wyoming sky, the thump of creation, and then I'd take another step forward on to the edge of the porch, and I would walk my way slowly into old photographs' (*SD*, 135).

While the public photography of Mexico and Wyoming might be counted as remnants of Michael's professional failure, it is Conor's protracted reveries in the 'Saturday' chapter over a series of photographic images of New York City that reveal most about the son's relationship with the visual record of his parents' American life together. The sequence of four images range from 'the end of the 1950s' (*SD*, 135), to 1964; three of the images are taken by Michael and one by their companion, Cici. Prefiguring the New York streetscapes of *This Side of Brightness* and *Let the Great World Spin*, these pictorial renditions of the blossoming metropolis capture the diversity of emigrant populations, particularly the Irish emigrant community. The Bronx, Queens, and Fifth Avenue form the urban backdrop, and Marilyn Monroe, JFK, and Elvis furnish the cultural scenery experienced by men and women from 'Galway and Dublin and Leitrim and Donegal' (*SD*, 136). The portrait provided by Conor of the interior life of his father's images permits a glimpse of the international cultural networks occasioned by [Irish] emigration. But of more urgency are the ways in which Conor telescopes his mother's appearance in the photographs. The images deliver what are, essentially, over-familiar coordinates of New York City, but their real currency is the

speculative narrative Conor weaves from their representations. Willing his mother to emerge from the stasis of the images, Conor's narrative tense begins to mould new possibilities from the frozen moments. And it is his repeated employment of the conditional tense that draws our attention to his use of the photography as a source of affective consolation. His conditional speculations may be born of ignorance but they are not tainted by frustration, rather they are moments of imagined attachment to the banalities of his absent mother's life before he was born:

Mam is just about smiling as she looks down at her hands. It is not an unhappy smile, just a little lost on her face. Maybe she's wondering what she's doing here. Wondering what has led her to this. Wondering if life is manufactured by a sense of place, if happiness is dependent on soil...Wondering if there is a contagion to sadness. Or an entropy to love. Or maybe Mam isn't thinking this way at all. Maybe she is wondering about the sheer banalities of her day. (*SD*, 138)

Not only is Juanita physically absent and elusive to her son, but her thoughts and motivations remain unreachable to him also. Conor's speculative meandering through the photographic narrative of his parents' lives yields as many questions as it does answers. And his conditional register signals the ambiguous feelings of attachment and distance that are engendered by his photographic reveries. Equally, it is significant that he imagines the likelihood of his mother dwelling on the strains of migration and displacement, perhaps displacing his own feelings of alienation onto his mother's life. The questions he implants in his mother's mind about her sense of belonging are, then, just as germane to his life and reflect his own emotional equilibrium. In these instances the photographic image, the erstwhile index of veracity, becomes an enigmatic referent for Conor – one that confounds through silence, but thrills through the possibility of imaginative suggestion. At the same time, there are moments of fantasy catalyzed by the images. An image from 1960 of his mother dancing on the streets of the Bronx to an Elvis Presley song transports Conor directly into that euphoric scene: 'I walk out there to go dancing. I twirl my hips, too. I move with abandon. She says to me: When are you going to get rid of that stupid earring, Conor? I take it out and give it to her, and she smiles' (*SD*, 142). Sensual, somatic abandon are twinned with good-humoured tutelage of parenthood here, and the image enacts Conor's

desire for intimacy with his mother's past and, also, the presence of a guiding maternal figure in the present. The present-day narrative delivered by Conor represents the continuing difficulty he has in forging some degree of intimacy with his father, Michael. His photographic fantasies demonstrate the extent to which Conor is caught between the living and the dead; his absent (deceased?) mother is a proximate presence in his life, and for much of the novel Conor prefers to dwell in the landscape of the dead and the geography of the past. Its imaginative memorial respite relieves the frigid realities of his relationship with his father: 'Mam has a bead of sweat on her brow. Maybe she will wait for it to negotiate its way down her face to where she can tongue it. Or maybe not. Maybe she will wipe it off with a quick flick of the hand. Or maybe it will stay there eternally' (*SD*, 142). The conditional narrative tense is not a feature of his representation of his father's life, and this suggests that the conditional and the possible are not appropriate to the sedentary life led by Michael, or, it seems, to the father/son relationship.

From a formal perspective, then, it seems that hope, invention and imagination are attached to his relationship with his absent mother, whereas there appears to be a more functional idiom attached to his father. It is only when this functionalism is leavened does Conor begin to empathize with the tragedies of his father's life and with the private contrition of Michael's memories. And the insistence on the conditional tense in the novel returns us to the end of the narrative. As we have argued above, there are utopian impulses embedded across McCann's fictions, which are centred on the idea of redemption. Although there is no final rapprochement dramatized by the close of the novel, we can recognize that a thawed mutual understanding has displaced rigid austerity in the father/son relationship. At the root of this utopian prospect in *Songdogs*, where the central relationship moves towards recovery, are the evident imaginative capacities of both men. Conor's conditional idiom in his imaginative plotting of the photography, coupled with the frustrated artistry exhibited by Michael in producing the images in the first place, are signs of their individual creativity. In addition, we see Michael's deft production of fishing flies and his graceful fishing technique, and all of these aggregated creative skills are indicative of the possibility of an imaginative empathetic resolution to this fractured relationship. Having emerged from his hunkered position behind the hedge at the opening of the novel, Conor has matured, to some extent,

into a position where he can share in the sustaining symbolic and ritual economy of his father's life. Conor is both willing and able to subscribe to the necessary fictions that underpin any loving relationship. This is not to confirm that the novel ends on a definitive note; Conor's magnanimous gesture is a signal, not an end in itself. As we shall see below, McCann's novel deviates, again, from the denouement of the classical *bildungsroman*. By the end, there is the possibility of hope towards the future, of a potential peace between two exiled people.

MOVING BEYOND THE IMAGE

In his late 1974 novel, *Lazare*, André Malraux reflects that: 'images do not make up a life story; nor do events. It is the narrative illusion, the biographical work, that creates the life story.'¹³ Malraux's point consummately expresses the fabricated nature of verbal and visual meanings that are attached to, or are extracted from, literary and imagistic texts. Open-endedness and contingency, then, intrude on the easy patterning of meanings and identities from the raw materials of visual or verbal testimonies. Photographic portraits may superficially impose narrative structure, or perhaps endow identities and personal histories a sense of anchorage, but as Malraux, among many others, indicates, such identitarian assurances are shallow and unsustainable. In an Irish context, photographic images of 'home' have historically been employed to retail nostalgized versions of 'Ireland' and 'Irishness' to diasporic Irish communities, or to advertise the incorruptible, and alluring, fabric of the Irish nation. In other words, such visual texts fall victim to the conviction that photography imposes a narrative truth to the objects represented within its contours – the photographic image is unquestioningly seen as complete and 'truthful'. As we have seen, in *Songdogs*, Michael Lyons has catalogued his own, and his wife's, life of international migration in a range of photographic registers: informal snapshots, individual and group portraits, as well as more intimate and erotic artistic images. But just as these visual texts confound Conor's yearning for clarity and revelation, so too do the physical landscapes through which he travels in imitation of his parents' journeys.

Photography provides an effective symbolic and representative device for McCann, but is not the primary mode through which Conor reconstructs his disjointed identity. Michael Lyons' frozen memories are distilled in Conor's interpretation or re-imagination of their contexts,

their tone and their violent stillness. Conor must populate the 'frozen time' of photographic stasis with his own catalogue of incongruous memories and imaginative remembrance. The photographs represent monumental spaces in which his parents' lives are held in stasis and it is part of Conor's task to re-imagine these images. He is charged with transcending the frozen lens through the physical experience of liminality. The stasis of photography embodied in the smiles and the seductive gazes are interrogated in spatial terms as Conor looks beyond the representation. He attempts to identify the interpersonal dynamics and relations, with their motives, betrayals and choices that contextually frame the still representation. He cannot know his mother or the genealogy of his constitution through simple photographic representation but must seek for it in the liminal spaces of Mexico, San Francisco and Wyoming. Conor negotiates a 'threshold, a no-man's-land betwixt and between the structural past and the structural future as anticipated by society's normative control of development'.¹⁴ The dominant images of his father's photography are portraits of his mother, in which she is represented as an object. And we appreciate the incompleteness of photographic representation with its static, mute limitations as Conor's mother is portrayed as a body turned 'temple' (*SD*, 141). Thus, photography performs as an imaginative and ultimately physical catalyst, and Conor consciously pursues the realities within and behind the photographic images.

Conor must go beyond such representations in order to immerse himself in the heterotrophic physicality of these liminal spaces. A process of cataloguing characterizes his sojourn in Mexico, as he digests the kaleidoscopic physicality of the Mexican town: 'graffiti rolled in red on the courthouse walls. Policemen, chameleons in the shadows, flicked in and out between the scrawls. Old men sat outside in cartinas, gesturing. A labyrinth of laneways...a young man sat on the hotel steps' (*SD*, 67). There is a sense of colour, of light and darkness, in McCann's description, combined with the contradictory feelings of hope, threat or revelation in the town. Initially it assumes a menacing and an ambiguous aspect, seemingly populated by figures of potential threat, and even the forces of order are portrayed in an ambivalent manner. The fructile chaos of a Mexican village manifests itself in both the visceral technicolour of the rural landscape and concurrently in the hapless linguistic incommensurability that obtains between Conor and the indigenous

population. Conor's labours in the native tongue are met 'with loud guffaws' or alternatively by a woman who 'simply shrugged, a little perplexed, a little amused' (*SD*, 69–71). He soon realizes that the mediated memories of his parents' recollections of Mexican life do not correspond to the ambiguous milieu that he now confronts:

The town was bigger than I had imagined. I wandered for days, through bars and cafés, bills coming crisply from my pockets, ordered up shots of tequila, tried to picture myself here forty years before, in a stetson and boots. But the simple truth of it was that I was leaning drunkenly against a bar counter, wearing a gold earring, red Doc Martens and a baseball hat turned backwards, in a town where I could barely understand what the people were saying. It was only with enough tequila in my system that I could make sense of the stories my parents had told me, their endless incantation of memories. (*SD*, 68)

McCann's panoramic description accentuates the defamiliarizing physicality of the transitional experience, as Conor traverses the nocturnal Mexican desert-scape aboard a bus that 'rattles along in darkness, through desert and small towns on the edge of spectacular canyons, and into vast city suburbs' (*SD*, 71). However, the town slowly emerges as simply a place of colour, of contrasts and of unsophisticated contentment, as Conor muses: 'nobody disturbed me...the town was quiet among strangers and sunsets' (*SD*, 71).

In San Francisco, Cici's testimonies to Conor are framed within her own belief in the imaginative fabric of memory. Her recollections are the most intimate anecdotes that he has or is likely to encounter, but her significance within the narrative goes beyond this simple acquaintance. Cici consistently alludes to the promiscuity of identity and of memory; not only is memory three quarters invented and the rest a pack of lies, but even people themselves 'just ain't what they seem, sometimes you dream them up for yourself' (*SD*, 88). Conor's reconciliation is dependent upon his appreciation of the fictive elements of narrative and identity as well as the characteristic uncertainty and discontinuity of personal remembrance. Conor's North American experience is coloured by his mother's stories concerning Cici and his parents' journey to San Francisco. Cici's hyper-accentuated powers of description, indicated by her incarnation as a pseudo-beatnik poet, thrill his imaginative

recollections of his mother. However, her world is perhaps the most elusive, and it is populated by the detritus of a bygone era. Her home is a refuge of bohemian bric-a-brac, a graveyard of defunct beatnik culture. Like her memory, her apartment is cluttered and indistinct: 'the shelves lined with amulets, a strange footlong marijuana bong on the coffee table, the mantle-piece full of candles, a few paintings on the wall, a Warhol imitation' (*SD*, 110). Nonetheless, Cici's stories retain a valency for Conor with her 'startlingly lucid memories and threnody of nostalgia' (*SD*, 112). Latter-day hippies, vagrants, wanderers, and 'people searching for someone' (*SD*, 116) inhabit Cici's San Francisco. The middle-aged men who lounge on the pavement are conducting a silent vigil of remembrance for the passing of their youths. Their desire is indistinguishable from their despair; they are figures of uncertainty lodged in the present but perpetually divining for some trace of the past.

'THE LAW OF THE RIVER' – HOPE AND GRIEF

The most prominent symbol in *Songdogs* is the river, specifically the river that flows adjacent to the Lyons' house in County Mayo. And its flow and gradual stagnation are woven into the emotional fabric of the family over the course of several decades. But by the close of the novel, the river is all but lifeless – a polluted, turgid body of water that has been asphyxiated by discharge from a meat-rendering factory. Slaughter and its offal seep into the natural lifecycle of the river and this incremental suffocation is appropriated by McCann in his tragic narrative. The image of the river, with its incessant flow and latent violence, stalks the narrative. Michael Lyons and the river are intimately connected, as Conor reflects: 'the old man and the water are together in all of this – they have lived out their lives disguised as one another' (*SD*, 5). He has grown old with the votive obsession of landing a prize salmon, and he understands the 'law of water' with its remorseless onward flow that is 'bound to move things on', (*SD*, 5). Conor initially misdiagnoses the contrite ritual as inertia and his lingering misapprehension of his father is evident as he expectorates: '[he led a] life of half-emergence. A consistency of acceptance' (*SD*, 101). Conor's reading of his father's life is confined to a literal perception during his initial period at home; he does not appreciate the totemic aspect to the old man's routine. The catch is a symbolic act. It is an emotional displacement with which he combats the emptiness of solitude. Michael

grasps that his abandonment cannot be redressed by any amount of travelling or retrospective questioning. Thus, the incongruity of his father's routine coupled with a recrudescence of their emotional distance militates against reconciliation upon Conor's immediate return. The absence of discourse between father and son enjoins Conor to pursue his answers elsewhere.

Michael's sedulous fishing signals his prevailing love for his absent wife, but the penitent act is framed within the stark understanding that nothing will bring her back. The narrative or sequence of events that led to his marital abandonment cannot and will not be reversed. Mexico, Cici, and his photography are forsaken as tethers to an immutable past, and just like the coyotes of McCann's epigraphic extract, Michael has moved on and learned to sing in a different place and in a different way. The votive fishing ritual is an act of love. Michael has taken the very real love that existed between his now absent wife and himself in the past as the structural locus of his daily routine. While the malignant elements of the past remain, the vital element of love is his guiding principle, and the narrative's conclusion works towards reconciliation. Michael, in two abrupt responses, summarily dismisses Conor's expansive transcontinental experience, and the motives for such a journey. But the journey furnishes Conor with the necessary knowledge or experience to speak tentatively upon his homecoming with his father. It prompts him to 'accept that the past cannot be changed' and finally to understand 'that there can be no peace if certain cherished illusions are not nurtured'.¹⁵

As the novel nears its conclusion, Michael rises and sets about his daily routine of fishing the river for its equally symbolic bounty: a salmon. On this occasion, Conor accompanies him: 'We went out beyond the yard. Clouds were out, swifts following them. A breeze blew over our heads. It was too early for the factory smell. He negotiated his way over the stile and through the gap in the bushes down towards the water. The river was as dead as ever' (*SD*, 210–11). Within this passage McCann moves from the explosive energy of the swifts in flight and their fragile transcendence on the currents of a light breeze, to the morbid gravity of the corpse-like river. As if stumbling through the overgrown hedging of County Mayo to a scene from Eliot's 'The Wasteland', McCann's image promises the grave and the terminal. Yet even in the final few passages of the novel that succeed this grim spectacle, there is still time for resurrection and for redemption. McCann's narrative sees Conor finally apprehending the necessity for

fictions of consolation and imaginative acts of generosity, which can repair and redeem his fractured relationship with his father. Almost as soon as he commences his ritual of fishing, Michael exclaims: ‘Look at that!...Look!’ (SD, 211). Sitting nearby on the riverbank, Conor says to himself: ‘I looked around and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, not even a ripple’ (SD, 211). But what is remarkable at this late stage, so soon before Conor’s intended departure, is that he does not dismiss his father’s sighting as delusional. The previous cynicism, fuelled by anger, which Conor exhibited towards his father’s life now yields to a more mature temperament of generosity. Not wanting to foment any further discord between them and, finally, learning *how* to love his father, Conor admits:

I know what he saw. Caught in mid-twist in the air, the flash of belly shining, contorted and unchoreographed in its spin, reaching out over the surface so the skips were alight in the air around it, fins tucked in, tail in a whisk throwing off droplets, making a massive zigzag of itself, three feet over the surface, mouth open to gulp air, eyes huge and bulbous, a fringe of water around it – place and motion caught together, as if in one of those old photos. (SD, 211)

Again Conor exercises his imagination to commune with his parent, this time his father, and in that imagining he feels: ‘joy there, I felt it, marvellous, unyielding, and he leaned his shoulder against me and said: “Fucking hell, amazing, wasn’t it?”’ (SD, 211). The symbolic fish breaks the surface of the polluted river as a token of the dissolution of the tension that obtains between Michael and Conor. McCann’s elongated single sentence, which is replete with figuration, natural athleticism, and sensuousness, is the vehicle for a brief but dense moment of revelation. His lyrical prose may stretch to a protracted paragraph, but it bears the poetic gravity of a haiku. Likewise, the final, almost epiphanic, moment aggregates the principal symbolic reference points of the novel. This is a culminating action that convenes the diverse symbolism of the narrative; the river, the salmon, movement, and photography are condensed into Conor and Michael’s complicit ‘sighting’ of the salmon. Crucially, this passage expresses a spirit of hope and redemption, as the salmon’s imagined leap suggests a rebirth of the father/son relationship. At the very close of the novel the heavily figured hope of the previous extract is translated into a concrete gesture of solidarity and into a will to believe for the sake of reconciliation. Conor approaches his father

having retrieved the fishing rod and equipment from the house, and he reflects: ‘Let this joy last itself into the night’ (*SD*, 212). The emotional resolution and the salving of years of distance are distilled out of this shared joy at ‘sighting’ the salmon. And the final piece of dialogue in the novel confirms the hopeful impulse of the narrative’s ending: ‘He tied the fly on. He was whispering, “Did ya see it, son?” I looked over and said to him: “Yeah, I saw it”’ (*SD*, 212). In the final actions of the novel, which is often marked by personal and familial rancour and physical distance, the poetic and the prosaic cohere in a hopeful, redemptive conclusion. With the experience of exile Conor’s return home, specifically to the taut emotional relationship with his father, is eased – travel tempers his bitterness towards ‘the old man’.

NOTES

1. Phina Werbner, ‘Introduction: The Materiality of Diaspora – Between Aesthetic and “Real” Politics’, *Diaspora*, 9, 1 (2000), p.5.
2. 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.83.
3. Colum McCann, *Songdogs* (London: Phoenix House, 1995), p.26. All further reference to *Songdogs* will appear in parenthesis as (*SD*).
4. Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 2000 [1987]), p.vii.
5. *Ibid.*, p.xii.
6. *Ibid.*, p.6.
7. *Ibid.*, p.15.
8. *Ibid.*, p.230.
9. Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida), pp.4–5.
10. José Santiago Fernández Vázquez, ‘Recharting the Geography of Genre: Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* as a Postcolonial Bildungsroman’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 37, 2 (2002), p.86.
11. See Aidan Arrowsmith, ‘Photographic Memories: Nostalgia and Irish Diaspora Writing’, *Textual Practice*, 19, 2 (2005), pp.297–322.
12. On photography in *Songdogs*, see Jack S. Flack, ‘Telling Shots: Photography in/as/and Literature in Colum McCann’s *Songdogs*’, *Nua: Studies in Contemporary Irish Writing*, 4, 1 and 4, 2 (2003), pp.77–88.
13. Cited in Timothy Dow Adams, ‘Introduction: Life Writing and Light Writing: Autobiography and Photography’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 40, 3 (1994), p.459.
14. Victor Turner, ‘Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience’, in Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (eds), *The Anthropology of Experience* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p.41.
15. James S. Brown, ‘Things Not Meant To Heal: Irish “National Allegory” in Doyle, McCabe and McCann’, *Nua: Studies in Contemporary Irish Writing*, 1, 1 (1997), p.33.

The Retrieval of Dignity: *This Side of Brightness* (1998)

NATIONALITY AND ETHNICITY

In the first part of his poetic sequence, ‘The Hudson Letter’, Derek Mahon summons the diversity of aural and artistic voices that congregate on his New York horizon of the mind. From Dylan Thomas and Charlie Chaplin, we progress to the tones of Respighi and of Lorca – a clamorous dawn chorus in Manhattan for the visiting poet. This section of ‘The Hudson Letter’, then, is a call to creativity; it is a paean to the international artistry that navigates through New York City, and that takes the metropolis as its stage and as its surrogated home place. Mahon writes:

The lights go out along the Jersey shore
and, as Manhattan faces east once more,
dawn’s early light on bridge and water-tower,
Respighi’s temperate nightingale on WQXR
pipes up though stronger stations throug the ether –
a radio serendipity to illustrate
the resilience of our lyric appetite,
carnavalesque or studiously apart,
on tap in offices, lofts and desperate ‘hoods
to Lorca’s ‘urinating multitudes’
while I make coffee and listen for the news
at eight; but first the nightingale. Sing, Muse.¹

Mahon gathers the lyrical impulse and he extols its fortitude as part of the human spirit; technology brings this ‘resilience’ to the poet’s attention. In the midst of the sprawling urbanity of contemporary New York City, Mahon divines the precious durability of fragile art, and out of this sourcing his own lyric emerges. ‘The Hudson Letter’ is the product of

Mahon's various teaching assignments in New York in the early 1990s and 'is in the first instance a personal letter, written to his close friend Patricia King during his recovery after his severe alcoholic crisis in New York. It is also, however, a report by a city poet on the crisis of the late twentieth-century metropolis.'²² So, while the poetic emanates from the brisk trade of musicality and aurality on this New York morning, there is a darker, more ominous side to the city temporarily inhabited by Mahon. The poetic sequence is inspired by a deep personal crisis, as Hugh Haughton reveals, which, in turn, takes its poetic form in a meditation on the decline of the urban throng that is New York. During the period in which the poem was written New York was in a crisis of its own, and 'The Hudson Letter' treats of a geography characterized by degeneration. Again, Haughton provides a useful gloss: 'during the early '90s in...subways and squares the social fall-out from post-Reaganite, post-modern America was personified in the homeless, released psychiatric patients, drug addicts, and HIV victims visible in the public spaces across the City. This is the New York of Mahon's poem.'²³ In many ways, this is also the New York of *This Side of Brightness*. While Mahon's poem is a work of profound displacement and crisis, McCann's novel, though written from the vantage point of an Irish writer resident in New York, is less about the author's sense of dislocation than a writer's willingness to immerse themselves in the least visible fastnesses of the city. Written from first-hand experience of the subway tunnels, *This Side of Brightness* certainly deals with urban decay, personal crisis, and the array of social problems listed by Haughton, but it tends towards a commitment to redemption rather than accepting collective and individual atrophy. Both Mahon and McCann foreground the forgotten edges of New York's urban squalor in texts that, through the charge of the aesthetic, bestow a renewed dignity on such locales.

Bringing Mahon's and McCann's literary New Yorks into a tenuous conversation not only raises the squalid environs and moral corruptions of the city over the duration of the last century, but also allows the issue of their nationality to enter the discussion. Both Irish authors deliver differentially displaced perspectives on the city, but what their respective experiences also impress is the variety of New York's historical internationalism, and, implicitly, both texts highlight the levels of impact Irish emigrants have made on the city's culture and society. *This Side of Brightness* may well have been greeted as McCann's least 'Irish' work up

to that point, but such a contention is all but defunct. As we shall see, though the narrative action unfolds exclusively within the city, the genealogies of its protagonists are cosmopolitan. The earlier works, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* and *Songdogs*, both track Irish migrancy in the mid- to late twentieth century, but *This Side of Brightness* gives us the earliest historical account of Irish emigration, and its legacies, in McCann's fiction. Taken as a body, the three early texts confirm the heterogeneity of Irish emigration, and can be read as exemplary of the fact that even within one 'national' diaspora, individual experiences are vastly different. In other words, one of the lessons of McCann's first three books is that we cannot speak lazily of an undifferentiated 'Irish diaspora'. Fintan O'Toole might well argue that 'Ireland is a diaspora...Ireland is often something that happens elsewhere', but such a 'diaspora' and 'elsewhere' are not uniformly identical across histories and geographies of diverse dispersals.⁴ Yet neither is *This Side of Brightness* intent on labouring any narrow-gauge variety of Irish identity in contradistinction to those 'alien' or 'other' ethnicities encountered on foot of transatlantic movement. The novel does not conform to any strict dichotomous presentation of incommensurable nationalities or ethnicities and, in this way, anticipates *Let the Great World Spin*. Rather, McCann's narrative displays the common humanity of displaced communities; there are tensions and violences, but *This Side of Brightness* allows differences to blend and to commune. Irish, African-American, Italian communities intermix, contributing and challenging any overarching idea of a pure American national identity. Naturally these are not unproblematic processes but, as Kelly McGovern argues, the novel succeeds in scrutinizing political and cultural hierarchies through its narration of international communality. Invoking the shared solidarities of colonized peoples, McGovern suggests: 'The Irish are only one of many groups that converged, diverged, and transformed identities with respect to each other during that century. These lateral alliances disrupt binary relations between formerly colonized and colonizing national identities that have attempted to contain complex identities as postcolonial hybrids.'⁵ The central protagonist, Clarence Nathan Walker, or Treefrog, is the embodiment of this ethnic exchange underscored by McGovern, with his combined Irish and African-American family lineage. But what is crucial is that McCann does not retail international travel as an escape from, or a transcendence of, Irish nationality, but as a process of

interrogation of that identity as it comes into contact with a skein of other mobile national identities. Travel does not mean that Irish identity is cashed in in favour of another, less rooted identity, but that its bases are, variously, questioned, adhered to, and/or modified.

THIS SIDE OF BRIGHTNESS

This Side of Brightness is the most expansive treatment of New York City in McCann's fiction up to this point. Both *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* and *Songdogs* have characters who reside in the city, but *This Side of Brightness* takes New York City as its sole setting. McCann portrays a burgeoning, but threatening, urban centre across the twentieth century, as the novel captures the teeming cityscape that is acutely divided along racial and class lines, and that is wracked by violence, drug trade and prostitution. And the novel alights on a variety of characters and locations across the city as it attempts to divine some degree of hopeful resolution to the loneliness and abjection of these lives. The narrative, then, accords with Andreas Huyssen's suggestion that 'no real city can ever be grasped in its present or past totality by any single person. That is why urban imaginaries differ depending on a multitude of perspectives and subject positions.'⁶ The novel represents the plural chaos of New York and the city is diverse and segregated, but its plenitude is not devoid of potential future community and hope. Again Huyssen captures the multiplicity evident in the novel: 'All cities are palimpsests of real and diverse experiences and memories...They consist of a cacophony of voices and, more often than not, feature a multiplicity of languages...Urban spaces is always and inevitably social space involving subjectivities and identities differentiated by class and race, gender and age, education and religion.'⁷ For McCann, it is this differential texture of urban space that can alienate, but that ultimately can offer opportunities for solidarity and mutual empathy. Difference, as we see throughout his fiction, is not the basis for cultural hermeticism, but is potentially redemptive and mutually empowering through the sharing of stories. McCann is concerned with examining the metropolitan sub-histories of New York, which can possibly yield narratives of recovery. And one of the ways to conceptualize the novel is in terms of the 'spatiality' suggested by Huyssen. New York City is defined by spatial boundaries of race and class, yet despair and the stirrings of communal or shared redemption

are seen to traverse these socially engineered lines of separation. The 'spatiality' of *This Side of Brightness*, then, manifests in the political concerns of the novel. Space and its production are functions of power, and McCann is interested in mining the shadowed spaces of powerlessness that proliferate across New York City. From a theoretical viewpoint, the critical impetus of McCann's novel has affinities with Edward Soja's contention that: 'Spatiality is not only a product but also a producer and reproducer of the relations of production and domination, an instrument of allocative and authoritative power.'⁸ Soja's case is laced with Marxist rhetoric, and it would be misguided to pitch McCann's novel in these starkly Marxist terms. But as Soja continues: 'Class struggle, as well as other social struggles, are thus increasingly contained and defined in their spatiality and trapped in its [the State's] grid. Social struggle must then become a consciously and politically spatial struggle to regain control over the social production of space.'⁹

In his collection, *District and Circle*, Seamus Heaney extends his excavation of personal, communal and topographical memories from the peaty repository of bogland to the mortared arteries of the London Underground. In the title poem, 'District and Circle', Heaney narrates the industrial sensuousness of the subterranean transport system. It is a poem in which past, present and future collide in the forms of a fleeting remembrance of the poet's father, a minor moral qualm for the poet in his descent into the humid entrails of the metropolis, and the symbolism of the train's mobility as it hurtles forward with a relentless and shuddering force. The symbolic form of the underground takes on a re-furbished, updated, guise in 'District and Circle', but the content remains as resonant for the poet. Rather than narrating, or re-imagining, archaeological and memorial exhumations, and infusing such 're-births' with moral and historical valences, Heaney now physically descends into the underground himself. The poet enters the liminal zone of evolution, he boards the channels of transportation that ferry people between concrete destinations. Both the initial process of escalatory descent and the herd-like crowding on the underground carriage are spurs to poetic self-consciousness. While the brachiating lines of the metropolitan transport system are facilities of the functioning of capitalist modernity, and, as such, generate anonymity, silence, facelessness, and atomization among the population of users, the poet's encounter with the underground busker and his facial reflection in the door window foster a

sense of individual awareness and reflection, perhaps even crisis. It is telling that in this most public of transitional spaces Heaney is brought to a renewed pitch of personal, intimate self-reckoning.¹⁰ And in his novel *This Side of Brightness*, McCann's characters inhabit just such a landscape – a subterranean space of transition, remote from, yet coeval with, the normative patterns of metropolitan life in New York City. McCann's fictional portrait of this submerged urban landscape is based on the author's own personal research into life in the recesses of New York's subway tunnels. Entering the tunnels as much as four or five times a week, tentatively at first, McCann has testified to the variety of life pulsing through the redundant space of the tunnels. From both McCann's testimony and, of course, his fictional rendition, the subway tunnels are spaces in which despair can find refuge and escape, but also redemption and rebirth. In many ways they are exiled from the rhythms of everyday life, with its attendant pressures, routines, and expectations – locations where alternative modes of behaviour are pursued. Likewise, as McCann remarks below, a certain solidarity is palpable between the fragmented residents of the tunnels; their combined situation in the underground is an affront to, an indictment of modern society's hypocrisies:

I met all sorts of people – junkies, war veterans, people who'd recently been let out of mental asylums, others who had just lost their jobs. I was put in all sorts of different situations. But being Irish helped me – I was never seen as part of the established order, the system. I was outside. And they were outsiders too. So often I felt aligned with the people who were living underground.¹¹

A little beyond the halfway point of the novel, one of the central protagonists', Treefrog's, fellow subway dwellers, 'Faraday', is killed in a gruesome and spectacular accident. Living up to his nickname, Faraday 'had gone fishing for electricity way downtown in the Second Avenue tunnel. He went to help someone hook up a transformer but on the way he found a fishing rod in a Bowery dumpster.'¹² But like many tunnel residents, Faraday was afflicted by a drug problem, heroin in his case, and on this occasion it cost him his life. Disoriented and stumbling while he was casting the fishing line across the rail tracks, Faraday's hand touched the third rail and 'the current sucked him in and his body went lengthwise against the metal and the fishing rod completed the cir-

cuit and he must have been a corpse of wild blue sparks. Every fluid in his body boiled first, all the blood and water and semen and alcohol dying to nothing. Six hundred volts of direct current blew a hole in the top of his head' (*TSB*, 129–30). Not only is his death graphic and pyrotechnic, but in figuring it in terms of the grace notes of fishing, McCann alludes to both of his previous publications. But the distinction in this case is in the brutality of Faraday's demise. Faraday's death is reported to his fellow tunnel residents by the New York Police Department (NYPD) and it is the routine exchange between the forces of the law and the tunnel 'moles' that throws into relief the divided moral economies of the city. McCann draws out the encounter between the police and the 'moles' in a protracted exchange in the tunnels. The dialogue that ensues captures the presiding tension that the 'moles' elicit from 'topside' life.

After their initial disorientation on entering the tunnels, the police interrogate the 'moles' about Faraday: 'You all know James Francis Bedford?' (*TSB*, 127). Gradually it becomes clear who James Francis Bedford was, and, more importantly, who he became – 'Faraday'. In an equivalent manner to Treefrog, Faraday's identity is obscured by his isolation, his nickname, and his abdication from 'topside' life. There may be echoes of communality in the tunnel, but there is rarely any sustained intimacy. This is also another instance where the back story of another of the tunnel 'moles' is filled in before we get a full revelation of Treefrog's background. Faraday was a police officer in his former life above ground and this, perhaps, makes his descent more acute than many of his co-residents in the subway. Faraday/Bedford was part of the machinery of law and order outside of this netherworld, a fact not lost on his erstwhile colleagues: "He was good people," says the cop. "Had himself an accident once. Lost his nerve. Shot someone. Never recovered. His family asked me to come down and get his stuff. Good people, Bedford's family. They was all good people. Even Bedford was good people once. Before he came down here'" (*TSB*, 128). What is most striking is the ease with which the police officer damns his former colleague; once Faraday entered the tunnels he is beyond redemption. The tunnels are emphatically figured as 'other' and as immoral in the minds of those that are removed from their reaches. What this abrupt and unforgiving conclusion on the tunnels exposes is an inability to imagine any circumstance in which they may act as a sanctuary for their dwellers.

The tunnels are blindly viewed as forbidding locales that simply accumulate the detritus and damaged of the 'topside' world. In a sense, Treefrog's narrative is, as we shall see, a rebuke to this conviction. Rather than portraying an unyielding geography of damnation and despair, in McCann's tunnels we can glimpse redemption and hope.

Opening in 1916, a year with obvious historical resonances in an Irish context, *This Side of Brightness* is a lyrical narrative of individual trauma and alienation, and it is characterized by a narrative discontinuity in which liminal experiences occasion forms of personal redemption. McCann has commented that the novel is the story of a family, and that he was interested in the idea of dignity, particularly as seen through a family's experience of life.¹³ The novel is divided into two seemingly disparate but in fact deeply related narratives: as mentioned, an historical narrative commencing in 1916 and a contemporary narrative. Crucially, the historical narrative is more panoramic in its focus, providing a lateral communal and family history, while the contemporary narrative is contracted to the tortured consciousness of one legatee of the family history. These combined narratives embrace diverse social discourses including race, economics, marginalized populations, immigrants, poverty, miscegenation, drug addiction and mental illness. McCann's mise-en-scène is the multi-ethnic communities of New York City's emerging migrant quarters. And in keeping pace with the demands of its own industrial growth, the city's infrastructural architecture is physically completed by these very migrant underclasses of Irish, Italian and African-American labourers. We witness the unfurling social fabric of mid-century and latter-day New York simmering in the background, only occasionally penetrating the central narrative of urban subalternity – a social class that is epitomized by the sandhogs, black communities, economic under-class, and essentially the contemporary subway moles. It is a portrait of the transgressive heterogeneity of the urban sprawl that is New York City. In contemporary New York the discarded, and defunct, transportation arteries of the city house the cast-offs of modernity's shadowy underside. Peopled by criminals, psychotics, prostitutes, alcoholics and sexual deviants, the network of disused tunnels constitutes an urban gothic terrain. Recessed within its 700-mile geography we find society's combined repressions and guilt, whose actions and appetites are affronts to the horizons of social acceptability. These subaltern lives

persist as chafing reminders of society's complicity in their subterranean abjection.

LIMINALITY AND RECOVERY

In *This Side of Brightness*, McCann's characters cling to forms of moral and emotional hope, and, from a thematic perspective, the narratives register the durability and, most significantly, the possibility of hope. Furthermore, in ventilating his testified belief in hope, or personal redemption, McCann's text can be read as evidential of liminal processes of both moral and emotional awakening. Separation, anonymity, silence, ambiguity, and repetition are the watchwords of McCann's liminal spaces, in which his characters alternatively seek moral and emotional redemption. The viscid darkness in the tunnels of *This Side of Brightness* is pregnant with redemptive silences, and the disintegration of interpersonal relationships impels the protagonist of McCann's text towards the liminal, and its attendant confrontation with the ambiguities of memory, identity and place. My concern, then, with the issues of identity and memory extends to Clarence Nathan Walker, or Treefrog, the product of his grandparents' interracial marriage, and his grandfather Nathan.

The anthropologist Victor Turner characterizes the experience of liminality as 'a stage for unique structures of experience in milieus attached from mundane life and characterized by the presence of ambiguous ideas, monstrous images, sacred symbols, ordeals, humiliations, anonymity'.¹⁴ Physical estrangement and emotional dislocation are inherent to the liminal experience, through which the individual is exposed to ambivalent social and physical spheres, and thereby endowed with a *potentially* liberating sense of anonymity. The structural fecundity of the liminal space, or the essential experience of liminality, is in its diversion from the indicative forms of the everyday. As Turner later suggests: 'the liminal phase is the subjunctive mood of culture, the mood of maybe, might be, as if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire'.¹⁵ The ritual, liminal experience, then, offers the possibility of change, but does not promise. As I outline below, in McCann's narrative the subjunctive liminality detailed by Turner is concretized in the somatic experience of estrangement, of alienation and of emotional displacement. In the novel we witness the liminal as somatic immersion

in the unfamiliar, or, in arenas of re-configuration and subversion. However, the ambiguity or fructile chaos of the liminal context is not in any sense random. While the indicative operations of cause and effect are eschewed in lieu of conditional modes, the subjunctive liminal remains '[a] storehouse of possibilities', what Turner terms 'a striving after new forms and structures, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to postliminal existence'.¹⁶ The isolation, or perhaps invisibility, engenders a degree of spontaneity as detachment from the constricted mores of the quotidian occasions a dissipation of social responsibility.¹⁷

McCann's fiction is concerned with remembrance and redemption, and he composes in a narrative style that registers the intimacy of the immediate landscape with the formation of memory. The disintegration of interpersonal relations impels the characters towards the liminal, and its attendant confrontation with the ambiguities of memory, identity and place. The 'limen' then is both the known and the unknown as it problematizes the familiar and domesticates the unfamiliar. My concern with the concepts of identity and liminality extends to the two male protagonists of the novel, Nathan Walker and Treefrog. Firstly, the liminal experience serves as a transitional phase for the younger generations of the Walker family. Equally, the isolation of old age precipitates a yearning for erstwhile sandhog comradeship by Walker. Walker remains detached from the vagaries of an external world through totemistic dedication to desire and fantastic reverie. But in an adjacent manner the tunnels are the 'in-between' spaces cited by Turner, in which the normative protocols of society are summarily suspended in a 'democracy of darkness' (*TSB*, 5). They are both peripheral and central to the everyday routines of New York; they are 'really the subconscious or unconscious mind of New York City. It contains all that the city above ground chooses not to think about. It is a world apart yet it is also the root.'¹⁸ In Nathan Walker's eyes the tunnels resonate with utility and community in the art of digging. The work of the tunnels lies athwart the topside social mores, but, simultaneously, it is ultimately pivotal to the functioning of the evolving metropolis. Further, we uncover the sanctuary afforded by the darkness, specifically in the tunnels beneath the East River, which proves central to McCann's portrait of these urban liminal spaces. The torrid emotional and psychological traumas of two generations of the Walker family are satiated

by the repose of these tunnels that are 'high and wide and dark and familiar' (*TSB*, 2). Nathan Walker spends most of his adult life as a sandhog, preparing the underground for New York's burgeoning modernization. And yet upon retirement, the topside world holds little appeal for him. Above ground his mixed-race marriage and progeny, and his own racial ethnicity, are exposed to the ravages of mid-century bigotry. Equally, at a physical level, the decades of subterranean digging have crippled his body and the only physical movements available to him are his occasional jaunts on the underground trams, supplemented by his daydream reminiscing about his years spent rhythmically excavating the New York underground. The tunnels facilitate an 'equality of darkness' (*TSB*, 37), a non-prejudicial space in an acutely divided city and nation. A culture of mutual respect and toleration among the 'sandhogs' is engendered by the immanence of death and the prospect of overwhelming natural violence beneath the East River. The perverse democracy of Walker's working environment beneath the river persists in Treefrog's dank liminal space a generation later, as he 'feels the darkness, smells it, belongs to it' (*TSB*, 23). Conventional social contours are dissolved and anonymity provides shelter from judgement, as a muted solidarity is fostered in the tunnels by the equalizing proximity of life-threatening violence.

Walker's vocational digging exhibits the intimacy that existed between the sandhog and his labour, just as it reveals the uncomplicated communality of the harsh occupation. We note Walker's emotional recollections of his laborious working life as they intertwine with an imaginative digging of childhood memories of Georgia which, 'by remembering he invented and by inventing he remembered' (*TSB*, 82). The natural isolation of his childhood with its rustic physicality echoes in the brutish physicality of his years as a sandhog. Walker facilitates the liminal experience endured by his grandson, as the tunnels become a cross-generational palliative space. But while Treefrog's experience results in some form of 'resurrection', Walker's yields only his nostalgic yearning for a return to 'the miasmatic dark' (*TSB*, 2). Walker's memories are crystallized in the mid-day reveries of his romantic downward glances.¹⁹ His bond with the tunnels is both physically and emotionally satisfying and the temperate sanctuary of damp and darkness measures out Walker's years in the tunnels until it becomes part of him in every sense; we note: '[the] river's muck is cool against his skin...is good to

touch and soon he is filthy from head to toe' (*TSB*, 9). The rhythm of the tunnels seeps into his very pores and he 'notes the passing of years by the way the tunnel-dust settles down in his lungs' (*TSB*, 46–7) and by the ever-worsening rheumatic pain that afflicts his every movement. The tunnels are the sole constant in Walker's working life, he moves from dig to dig as little else impinges on the ritual of his daily descent into the tunnels' 'yellowy darkness' (*TSB*, 9). Indeed, there is a cryptic symmetry to the manner of Walker's death in the subway tunnel as both Walker and Treefrog have been surreptitiously walking through the very tunnel in which the 1916 blow-out occurred, during which Treefrog's great-grandfather was killed. The circuitous closure of the call of the consuming darkness resolves the tedium of Walker's convalescent years. In a strange inversion he walks towards and beseeches the assurance of the dark tunnels as a respite, as a grave. Just as the claustrophobic sanctuary of the tunnels offers Nathan Walker a totemic release from the realities of New York, the act of digging itself becomes a resonant image within the text. The crossover between contemporary and historical narratives is dependent on the notion of 'digging', in a physical sense as well as a metaphorical sense. Through the laborious tunnelling of his grandfather Treefrog now has the liminal space in which to perform his own torturous emotional digging and to conduct what becomes a solitary vigil of balance and repetition. Nathan Walker spent his life in the rapture of physical digging and subsequent years obsessed with 'the fluidity of his shovel, wishing to be back down underneath digging' (*TSB*, 120), and similarly Treefrog's existence thrives in the midst of an alternative, underground womb. Order, balance and darkness are the emotional and physical coordinates of Treefrog's subterranean liminal milieu. The private tyranny of pathological balance is untenable in the topside world of daily human interaction. But in a liminal space that is replete with ambiguity, menace and estrangement, Treefrog's compulsive neurosis of repetition and equilibrium can flourish. McCann's descriptions of the tunnels and their vagabond populace capture the disjointed textures of Treefrog's urban underworld, with the sight of snow swirling through the grille into the underground dark, the sound of an out-of-tune piano in an abandoned subway station, and the smell of a steam-filled room deep below Grand Central Terminal.²⁰

Treefrog's tunnels are occupied by 'moles': broken individuals who have forsaken or been discarded by topside life. Treefrog and his fellow

moles exist contrary to the day-to-day rituals of topside New York; each possesses a narrative, a story of loss or of trauma that has impelled them to this turgid habitat. The proximity of menace in the shape of physical, sexual or psychological violence demands a keen sense of self-preservation. Similarly, it compromises trust and re-focuses the individual consciousness onto the self and the immediate. The incongruity of the liminal space that resides athwart the topside reality indulges excess but ultimately delivers some form of resolution in the form of death, emotional capitulation or recovery. Yet there is an occasional sense of loose and fragile kinship that is predicated on shared experiences of loneliness, misfortune and deprivation. Self-justification is at the heart of Treefrog's liminal experience as he has transgressed in a most obscene manner in a series of acts that have robbed him of his wife and his daughter. The 'leftovers of human ruin' (*TSB*, 56) inhabit Treefrog's subterranean dwelling, as McCann locates the story of traumatic self-redemption within the detritus of urban humanity. Treefrog's vistas comprise 'broken bottles and rat droppings and a baby carriage and a smashed T.V. and squashed cans and cardboard boxes and shattered jars' (*TSB*, 24); it is a brutal underground life of simmering violence, destitution and substance abuse. We are confronted with a stark subterranean landscape, a shattered wasteland that mirrors the anxieties and self-loathing of Treefrog. The environment of disarray and of displaced materials provides an essential liminal context. His search for redemption is tentatively actualized in his assiduous 'mapping' of the tunnels and it becomes 'his most important ritual' (*TSB*, 24). The 'cartography of darkness' (*TSB*, 25) is not a guiding light for Treefrog, but an aspirational mode of self-redemption. It constitutes an attempt to seek out restitution in a purgatorial landscape. The maps are, perversely, composed in blindness, and consequentially their parameters are exaggerated and ambiguous. Treefrog's subterranean retreat represents a cessation of the historical narrative in the text and his abdication of topside life is a liminal crisis of identity. The certitude of his own identity can no longer be taken for granted as he descends into alcoholism and mental illness. The rich darkness of the tunnels inflicts a blindness in which 'nothing announces its approach except memory' (*TSB*, 24). Treefrog recedes into a state of personal squalor as he permits his body and his attire to decay beyond normal recognition. The darkness and the routine of equilibrium serve as psychological placebos to the torturous

emotional confrontations of topside life. And a lifestyle of furtive scavenging, alcohol dependence and physical isolation is accommodated within the 'clarifying dark' (*TSB*, 25) and is symptomatic of his overwhelming guilt. Within the tunnels, '[the] blackest blackness' (*TSB*, 237) permits the stealthy and shattering approach of memory, or as he terms it, 'the ancestry of song' (*TSB*, 242). The two-fold guilt that assails Treefrog is assuaged by this search for ancestry and he legitimates his own redemption by entwining the motive of one failure with the guilt of the other.

Treefrog betrays the anonymity of the tunnels by confessing his guilt to Angela and she becomes a ghost or an angel of absolution through whom he can mediate his burgeoning resurrection to Nathan's ghost and to his absent wife and daughter. Thus Turner argues that 'liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon'.²¹ It is an idea that McCann has actually alluded to elsewhere, suggesting that 'the dead are the only family that the tunnel residents have';²² indeed, the moles themselves resemble a community of subterranean revenants. Treefrog's self-absolution, facilitated through Angela, is realized in the hemmed-in darkness of his confessional-like nest. Angela's presence, her recognizable consciousness, is all that Treefrog requires in order to convince himself of the possibility of resurrection. Her proximity to, and intimacy with, Treefrog fosters a sense of liminal *communitas*, whereby a tenuous mutual recognition of transition or 'otherness' is forged. As Turner concludes, the *communitas* of liminal entities manifests itself in 'a blend of humility and comradeship'.²³ Equally, the suspension of chronological dependence within 'alternative social arrangements'²⁴ engenders a feeling of motionlessness. Treefrog's 'ancestry of song' tunnels its way from topside past to underground present during days that are replete with dysfunctional time, and are sundered of temporal functionality. Slowness allows memory to percolate through our consciousness, whereas speed or urgency prevents the stealthy approach of memory: 'place is bound up with pace. The more you seek to get away from a place, the faster you go...the slower you go, the more you become aware of place...the more you become aware of the place of memory.'²⁵ Some semblance of re-location is only achieved underground in the thrall of incessant repetition and rhythm. The micro-communities of liminal space, where race, class and sexuality

are rendered redundant, and ultimately inconsequential, are attuned to this sense of rhythm and repetition. Simultaneously, however, the stark underground sanctuary acts upon the fatigued and tortured individual. The music of the tunnels, just like the persistent din of passing trains, echoes through generations from Walker's spirituals down to Treefrog's renditions on the harmonica in the ancestry of song. Through a startling imbrication of music, rhythmic digging and balance, McCann enhances the idea of a profoundly spiritual as well as physically affective liminal space.

MUSIC AND HOPE

As Treefrog prepares to depart his underground cavern at the end of the novel, as he concludes the narrative with a resolution to leave his fellow tunnel dwellers 'to their own brutalities and all the winters yet to come' (*TSB*, 242), he is assailed by a piercing memory of his 'topside' life. His departure from the tunnels takes him past 'the piles of cans and the shopping trolley and the baby carriage and the dead tree and the scent of shit and piss and every other ounce of imaginable worldly filth' (*TSB*, 242). The discarded materials of everyday life stand hoarded along his exit from the subway system. But as Treefrog processes away from this physical carnage, his past re-appears in the bracing, intangible form of the 'ancestry of song' (*TSB*, 242). The musical inheritance that originates, in this narrative, in his grandfather, Nathan Walker, surfaces as a sign of Treefrog's impending, perhaps imperfect, resurrection from his abject condition. Not only does this musical lineage discharge from the recesses of Treefrog's memory, it issues with equal force from the history of the tunnels. As we shall see, the tunnels were and are transformed into chambers of music by Nathan Walker during his sandhog days excavating their grand contours. In a sense, the durable musical motif in the novel is an essential element of the utopian geist of the narrative. From an intertextual point of view, the space that music arrogates for itself within the figurative economy of *This Side of Brightness* marries it to the musical figurations present in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*; *Zoli*; and *Dancer*. But what is also notable is the nature of the musical culture invoked by McCann, because this impacts upon our readings of the cultural politics of the novel. Music and lyricism may, at first glance, be of a piece with the intertextual self consciousness apparent in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* and *Songdogs*, but it is also

deployed to specific political ends by the author. The ‘ancestry of song’ referred to above by Treefrog, then, spools us back to the beginning of the novel.

The generations of the Walker family are, then, connected by an ‘ancestry of song’, a lyrical and corporeal adhesive that binds the memories of the family unit across the century. And it is worth dwelling on the trope of musicality in terms of how it contributes to the rite of redemption undergone by Treefrog. In more expansive terms, we might query, where and how does McCann assert the utopian potentials of the musical in the lives of his socially excluded characters? In the opening sequence of the novel, McCann convenes some of its most resonant figurations: Treefrog finds a dead crane and sets it free on the frozen waters of the Hudson River; he subsequently returns to his tunnel lair to hear ‘a train rumble in the distance’ (*TSB*, 2). The carcass of the once graceful bird is a mockery of its poise in flight and its deathly condition is a natural correlative of Treefrog’s wretched state. The iced stasis of the river is qualitatively different from the fluvial figurations elsewhere in McCann’s work, as here it is further suggestive of Treefrog’s subterranean limbo. Yet there is a counterpoint to the intrusive discordance of the timbres of the passing train and the carcass of the deceased bird. The violent pitch of the locomotive is matched and superseded by the grace notes of a Hohner harmonica. As the short first chapter draws to a close, music revivifies Treefrog and his underground habitation; it acts as a corrective to the silence of death and the noise of mass transportation:

From the depths of the drawer Treefrog took out a small purple jewellery bag, undid the yellow string. For a moment he warmed the harmonica in his gloved fist above the fire. He put it to his mouth, tested its warmth, and pulled in a net of tunnel air. The Hohner slipped along his lips. His tongue flickered in against the reeds and the tendons of his neck shone. He felt like the music was breathing him, asserting itself through him. A vision of his daughter whipped up – she was there, she was listening, she was part of his music, she sat with her knees tucked up to her chest and rocked back and forth in childish ecstasy – and he thought once again of the frozen crane in the river. Sitting there, in his nest, in the miasmic dark, Treefrog played, transforming the air, giving back to the tunnels their original music. (*TSB*, 2)

The music is connective and it is regenerative. Treefrog's musical interlude is, in fact, a precise and necessary personal ritual – among others he adopts in the tunnel. In his description of the ritual, McCann captures beautifully the interplay of the musician's body and the musical instrument. There is also a vividness to the catalyzing effects of music on human emotions and on human memory. In this instance, the cadences of the Hohner harmonica summon memories from Treefrog's past – the presence of his daughter; the harmonica is a family heirloom from his grandfather; and the tunnels that were once animated by the music of Nathan Walker's singing. But these memories are not passive nostalgic effects inspired by the music; rather they are part of Treefrog's painful, sustained reckoning with his past failings. The 'ancestry of song', the musical inheritances are sustenance during, and inspiration to persist with, his purgatorial sentence. Built into the very fabric of all musical expression is the motive force of desire and, as Vincent Geoghegan explains: 'Desire for that which is missing is therefore present at the very birth of music.'²⁶ Treefrog's musical initiation of the novel should not be read as a powerless lament for that which has gone, but, alternatively, as a keen expression of desire for renewal and for reconciliation. In personal terms, there is a singular utopian impulse evident at the outset of *This Side of Brightness*, one that propels many of the characters towards personal change, personal redemption, and simple levels of personal happiness. Treefrog strikes another keynote at this early stage, interblending desire and music in a novel that is populated by a marginal, racialized working-class family. It is the key conjunction of desire and music that Ernst Bloch has in mind in his social critique of music in *The Principle of Hope*. In a curiously apposite argument, Bloch writes: 'music, by virtue of its so immediately human capacity of expression, has more than any other arts, the quality of incorporating the numerous sufferings, the wishes and the spots of light of the oppressed class.'²⁷ While McCann's narrative cannot be conscripted to the Messianic Marxism of Bloch, the consonance between their relative faiths in the power of music as a redemptive agent allies their vision of the utopian in the most remote corners of the everyday. Highlighting the affectiveness of music, then, is a self-conscious celebration of the power of the aesthetic by McCann, but it is also, in tune with Bloch, a part of his political commitment and social conscience as a literary artist.

As the narrative winds backwards to the historical back story to

Treefrog's life we reach 1916 and the period in which the tunnels were designed, dug-out and completed. And in this context too, the juxtaposition of industrial or natural aural dissonance with the soothing redemptive tones of the musical is apparent. The East River, and its underground territories, looms as overwhelming forces that diminish and destroy sound. Descent underground, under the river via modern technology, is a disorienting process: 'The foreman nods at the two sandhogs and they join the group at the mouth of the shaft. They stand close together and move forward. Walker hears the whine of the compression machine from underground. It's a long hard high sound that will soon become nothing in his ears – the river is a grabber of sound, taking it, swallowing it' (*TSB*, 4). But on reaching their appointed labouring point underground, and as the four lead sandhogs chisel away incrementally at the formidable underground obstacles in the way of modern progress, Nathan Walker's fluid digging motion is accompanied by his mellow singing voice. Walker's musical enunciation acts, firstly, as a respite, a welcome lyrical distraction from the repetitive graft of their labour. But it is also an expression of un verbalized desire. The rhythmic union of body and voice beneath the East River is a gesture of futurity as it transcends the stark, endarkened and cloistered limits of the tunnel space. Walker's singing is a defiant assertion of individual identity and performs as 'a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community'.²⁸ The spare physicality and the expendable anonymity of the sandhog populous is refined in Walker's cadences, as Hepburn argues:

Singing effaces neither the body, nor instincts, nor passions, nor reason, nor cognition; it remains the gesture of emotion, unlike speech, which flattens, regularizes, grammatizes, and declaims. Singing obviates identity (any number of singers can perform the same song) and expands it (no two singers sing alike). Singing announces the secret wishes and desires that cannot be spoken in straightforward speech, and these wishes arise from the flesh. Music, especially sung words, embellishes and re-invigorates prosody with emotion. Music is corporeal, not linguistic.²⁹

The reduction of the sandhogs' bodies to functions of the progressive geographical vectors of modernization is countered by the 'secret wishes' nested within the vocal lyricism of Nathan Walker. Hepburn's argument

retrieves the Blochian fixation of desire and hope with the impacts of the musical and also recovers the essential 'embodiment' of all musical performance. Music does not exist without performance; it may be outlined in notation, but this never achieves the affective embodied agency of performed lyricism. In a manner that anticipates the performances of both Rudi in *Dancer* and Zoli Novotna in *Zoli*, McCann's utopian mobilization of music in *This Side of Brightness* reminds us of Daniel Barenboim's conclusion: 'Music has a power that goes beyond words. It has the power to move us and it has the sheer physical power of sound, which literally resounds within our bodies for the duration of its existence.'³⁰ In these brutal subterranean surroundings, music coalesces with the multicultural 'democracy of darkness' as a viable utopian energy. Music, from a utopian viewpoint, is a manifestation of what Bloch termed the 'Not-Yet'. It is expectant and hopeful and is a sensual language that is loaded with the promise of something and someplace better. Soja's explication of the spatial politics of modernity is evident, physically and figuratively, in the occupational entombment of Nathan Walker and his international band of fellow sandhogs. However, with the timbres of singing and lyricism resonating through the claustrophobic spaces of the subway tunnels, an anticipatory consciousness is in evidence. In these ways, music 'is not simply an interlude of consolation but one that drives forward to transformation, rebellion and revolution'.³¹ In *This Side of Brightness* we are not witness to any outright 'rebellion', but the transformative spirit of music is impressed by McCann.

In the months and years after the fatal tunnel blow-out in 1916, Walker returns to his habitual sandhog lifestyle; he descends into the city's entrails and is always mindful of his deceased friend entombed in the river-bed above his head. Con O'Leary's missing body solemnizes the underground landscape, turning the tunnels into a grave at the same time as they perform as arteries of the city's transport system. Death and punishing labour are constant presences in the tunnels, but Walker finds relief in the co-location of memory and desire in the rhythmic somatic articulation of his digging. Walker's lyrical expressiveness in McCann's narrative, then, recalls Alex Aronson's suggestion that: 'the encounter between auditory stimuli and the visual associations or mental processes they evoke is...of growing concern to the novelist who no longer acknowledges any uniform division between what is past, passing or to come. For the musical experience frequently occurs at the still

point where memory and desire meet.³² So as Walker begins another day by saluting his deceased friend, and future father-in-law, his body commences its fluid digging motion in silence: ‘but – after a while – he begins to feel the rhythm seep into him and he lets his tunnel song escape his lips, Lord I ain’t seen a sunset since I came on down, no, I ain’t seen nothing like a sunset since I came on down’ (*TSB*, 34). There may be a plaintive quality to Walker’s ‘tunnel song’, but its relieving rhythm is married to the physical toll of his occupation. The song represents a resistant lyrical affront to the physical marginality of his occupation, his race, and his class. The song itself is an inheritance, assumed by Walker along the ‘ancestry of song’, which will be endowed to future generations of his family.

As the years pass, McCann’s narration of Walker’s life encompasses many of the key social thematics of mid-century American life: institutional racism, popular culture, and the growth of the urban working underclass. And Walker’s, and his family’s, lives are microcosmic of these larger social patterns. At the height of Prohibition, Walker is living and working in Manhattan, and his life has taken on a regular, if sometimes brutal, routine. He is confronted with both casual and institutionalized prejudice: ‘Occasionally he ends up in a tunnel fight that is not of his making, and he only fights if he absolutely has to. Still, he flings a powerful punch, puts all muscle into it...He puts away money in a Negro bank – it gains less interest, but at least it is with his own and he feels that it is safe’ (*TSB*, 46). These combined pressures and grievances will admit of no publicly verbalized outrage or protest by Walker; he must endure these socially sanctioned assaults. But the private vigour provided by his love of music can be read as a residue of personal desire, which runs counter to the violent trammelling of social options available elsewhere. In the same paragraph as the litany of racism cited above, we learn that: ‘On his twenty-fifth birthday he splurges on a Victrola in a Harlem store...Let it roll. Let it sound on out. Two years later, he buys an even finer model with a special stylus. He carts it home and winds the handle carefully. Jazz music erupts around him and he does wild solitary dances around his apartment’ (*TSB*, 46). Walker’s predilection for jazz music can easily be figured in terms of his racial ethnicity and his socio-economic status, but as has been widely documented, jazz assumed political resonances in popular American culture: ‘jazz could lay claim to developing a musical language more capable of

inscribing the sensuous life of the modern city, the feelings of ordinary people, their hopes, affections, fears and griefs; it could lay claim to being an authentic voice of the subject in the modern metropolis, of being a vehicle for the spirit and a reservoir of subjective energies.³³ Witkin's précis of the utopian capacities of jazz music resonates with McCann's employment of musicality. It establishes the social and cultural credentials of his protagonist, Nathan Walker, and it successfully contributes to the creation of the metropolitan New York City milieu of the novel's historical narrative. Jazz becomes a cultural coordinate and partakes of the musical utopianism of the novel. The juxtaposition of fevered racial hatred and private musical respite dramatizes the redemptive dynamics of McCann's narrative. The context of Witkin's argument is also revealing in that it is drawn from a book on Adorno, and Adorno would admit to none of the utopian possibilities of jazz music. According to his refined musical palate, jazz was nothing besides a commodified musical variety. In Witkin's terms, jazz 'was the very antithesis of the modernist project in music to which he was committed...jazz was essentially a formulaic music, a ritualized and impoverished performance.'³⁴ Yet *pace* Adorno, McCann's deployment of 'low' musical culture in the form of jazz might not be high modernist, but it contains the utopian knots espoused by Bloch in his critique of music. Superficially, popular musical elements in the narrative may provide necessary cultural background for McCann's historical narrative, but they also are facets of his utopian political exercise.

The presence of jazz as a palliative refuge for Nathan Walker mirrors the sanctuary of the uterine spaces of the tunnels. And this sense of respite and hope nourishes the younger Walker and fills out his later years, when his mobility has been severely limited and his family circumstances have been tragically altered. As the 1950s begin in Chapter 8, the middle-aged Walker has become a prisoner in his own body; the decades of extreme physical effort in the tunnels have broken him. He sits inside his apartment, confined to a daily routine of domestic inertia, intruded upon by the discordant soundscape of the city on his doorstep. As he rests on his sofa, he is perched above the street that has become 'maddened in recent years by motor cars' (*TSB*, 108). Nathan is physically paralyzed and is animated only by the return of memories provoked by music. In a frank but suggestive description, McCann establishes Nathan's dependence on jazz music and, equally,

conveys the severity of his withered physicality:

The stylus of the record player tumbles across an old jazz record. Louis Armstrong. The pulse of the man. The gorgeous rhythm. The syncopated slide. Walker moves his head to the beat and the silver cross sways gently against his neck. When the record finishes he stands up from the sofa to break the cramp in his knees and stretches wide, bending the pain from his fingers. Carefully he places the needle in a groove just beyond a scratch in the vinyl. Last week the needle began to skip, but the jabs were so terrible in his knees that he just let it sound over and over and over again at the point of a shrill trumpet note – it got to the stage where he didn't hear it anymore, he was back underneath a river, he was digging, his friends were around him, it was the compressor sounding out. (*TSB*, 108–9)

For Nathan, music and the tunnels are inextricably linked; music belongs in the tunnels, it aided the excavation of the tunnels, and it is a contemporary prompt to those earlier days in his life. Louis Armstrong's 'pulse', 'the gorgeous rhythm', might equally be referring to the steady lyricism of Nathan's youthful digging routine, and recalls the rhythmic physicality of Heaney's 'Digging'. Music becomes a way of communing with the past for Walker; it enables him to resist the degenerating confines of the present in his bodily decline. As McCann puts it at another point: 'Walker lets the music roam in him' (*TSB*, 109). Music is an energizing force in the narrative; it propels, it relieves and it liberates in many different ways and contexts across the Walker family lineage.

This Side of Brightness narrates the lives that populate an urban netherworld in New York City, and this invisible landscape is wracked by the fears and indignities of its junked population. Homeless and impoverished, this loose community is individually and collectively flensed of human dignity and they occupy the ultimate site of social marginalization. In his *Reith Lectures*, the Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka foregrounds the precariousness of just such human dignity in the face of overwhelming political and economic power in the contemporary world. At a general level, there seems to be a moral consensus between Soyinka's philosophical argument and McCann's literary ethics. Central to Soyinka's contentions are the mutuality of dignity, freedom, respect,

and community, and he foregrounds these as the basic units of functional human collectivities. In his view, the late twentieth century is a period during which these have been denied or threatened with ever-greater acceleration and alacrity. He diagnoses a ‘global climate of fear’, which ‘owes much to the devaluation or denial of dignity in the intersection of Communities, most notably between the stronger and the weaker ones’.³⁵ Marginalization, victimization and disenfranchisement are processes that are instrumental within this ‘climate of fear’ and they are central themes of McCann’s fictions. Specifically, the urban netherworld of *This Side of Brightness* is haunted by permanent menace and fearfulness, and the conditions of the urban subalterns charted by McCann seem at odds with the fundamental requirements of respecting human dignity essayed by Soyinka. In his view: ‘it is within human relationships that the essence of a human attribute, such as dignity, is most meaningfully sought, not within the self as some mystic endowment, but as a product of social interaction.’³⁶ McCann attempts to restore a level of dignity and of humanity to the marginalized populations of twentieth-century New York City by embracing and by representing their stories in his narrative. Their impoverished anonymity is remedied to some extent by McCann’s narration of the micro-history of three generations of the Walker family. He points towards the vitality and the tragedy of New York City’s ‘unconscious’ populations, and, once more, brings a democratic spirit to his storytelling. McCann preserves a narrative space for those that inhabit the nowhere and liminal territories of a cosmopolitan, global city. As an authorial action and as a specific plot, *This Side of Brightness* is a gesture of redemption and chimes with Soyinka’s ethical imperatives towards human dignity.

NOTES

1. Derek Mahon, ‘The Hudson Letter’, *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew, Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1999), pp.186–7.
2. Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.226.
3. *Ibid.*, p.228.
4. Fintan O’Toole, *The Lie of the Land: Irish Identities* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1998), p.12.
5. Kelly McGovern, ‘Burying Con O’Leary: New York Cartographies of Identity in Colum McCann’s *This Side of Brightness*’, in Gerhard Stilz (ed.), *Territorial Terrors: Contested Spaces in Colonial and Postcolonial Writing* (Wurzburg: Verlag Konigshausen & Neumann, 2007), p.176.
6. Andreas Huyssen, ‘Introduction: World Cultures, World Cities’, in Andreas Huyssen (ed.), *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p.3.
7. *Ibid.*

8. Edward Soja, 'The Spatiality of Social Life: Towards a Transformative Rethorisation', in Derek Gregory and John Urry (eds), *Social Relations and Spatial Structures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), p.110.
9. Ibid.
10. It is not insignificant that Heaney is positioned in the underground in London, which is part of a longer history of Britain's transportation network that was built with the employment of the labour of emigrant Irish populations.
11. Colum McCann, 'This Side of Brightness Interview', *Colum McCann Official Author Website*, www.colummccann.com.
12. Colum McCann, *This Side of Brightness* (London: Phoenix House, 1998), p.129. All further references to *This Side of Brightness* will appear in parenthesis as (TSB).
13. Eileen Battersby, 'Coming Up for Air: An Interview with Colum McCann', *Irish Times*, (15 January 1998).
14. Victor W. Turner, 'Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience', in Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (eds), *The Anthropology of Experience* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p.41.
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16. Ibid.
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18. McCann, 'This Side of Brightness Interview'.
19. John F. Healy, 'Dancing Cranes and Frozen Birds: The Fleeting Resurrections of Colum McCann', *New Hibernia Review*, 4, 3 (2000), p.113.
20. David Willis-McCullough, 'Tunnel Vision', *New York Times on the Web* (5 April 1998). www.nytimes.com/pages/readersopinions/index.html. Accessed 22 May 2005.
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22. Colum McCann, 'The Tunnels Under New York City', *Fotoshoot Magazine*, A.1 (5 February 1995). www.fotoshow.com/magazine/tunnels_a.html. Accessed 11 February 2006.
23. Edith L.B. Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1985), p.173.
24. Victor W. Turner, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp.13–14.
25. Michael Cronin, 'Inside Out: Time and Place in Global Ireland', in Éamon Maher (ed.), *Cultural Perspectives on Globalisation and Ireland* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), p.12.
26. Vincent Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.53.
27. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1986), p.1063.
28. Allan Hepburn, 'Noise, Music, Voice, *Dubliners*', in Sebastian Knowles (ed.), *Bronze by Gold: The Music of Joyce* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), p.196.
29. Ibid., pp.205–6.
30. Daniel Barenboim, *Everything is Connected: The Power of Music* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), p.115.
31. Ruth Levitas and Tom Moylan, 'Introduction: The Once and Future Orpheus', *Utopian Studies – Special Issue: Music and Utopia*, 21, 2 (2010), p.213.
32. Alex Aronson, *Music and the Novel: A Study in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), p.x.
33. Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Music* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.161.
34. Ibid., p.171.
35. Wole Soyinka, *Climate of Fear* (London: Profile Books, 2004), p.95.
36. Ibid., p.92.

Hope and Youth: *Everything in This Country Must* (2000)

LITERATURE, HOPE AND THE 'TROUBLES'

The Northern Irish 'Troubles' have been well narrated within the novel form. Michael Storey estimates that as many as five hundred novels deal with the cultural geography and the political history of the conflict,¹ while Aaron Kelly suggests that in the region of 'four hundred thrillers have been produced over the last 35 years in response to the current phase of political upheaval in Northern Ireland'.² In equal measure, the conflict has been widely poetically mediated, as well as being dramatized theatrically – and each of these differential genres have received considerable literary critical attention, both comparatively and in their own right. However, with a few exceptions, the representation of the 'Troubles' in the short story form has received considerably less critical attention.³ Most recently, Ronan McDonald has published an accomplished essay, 'Strategies of Silence: Colonial Strains in Short Stories of the Troubles',⁴ while Storey's *Representing the Troubles in Irish Short Fiction* is the sole book-length survey of this literary genre and the striven history of the Northern 'Troubles'.⁵ Notwithstanding the relative merits, and limitations, of these two interventions, McCann's collection *Everything in This Country Must* has not been represented in critical accounts of the fictional heritage of Northern Ireland. My primary foci in this discussion will be the logic of operating within the abbreviated parameters of short fiction in narrating the historical origins and enduring divisions of Northern Irish society. In addition, because of the intensity of carceral violence attendant to the 'Troubles', the discussion will highlight 'the body' as a recurrent thematic presence in the collection, and discuss how it is differentially exhibited as a site of political and cultural contestation, and as a resource for possible political solidarity in the Northern Irish context.

While much of the literary heritage of the ‘Troubles’ catalogues and explicates the varieties and excesses of savage hatred and violence, writers like Eugene McCabe, Eoin McNamee, Benedict Kiely, and Ciaran Carson, among legion others, have tracked the performance of sectarian conflict across the Northern province over the duration of the ‘Troubles’. However, in the current context, and returning to the ‘aesthetics of redemption’, we will turn briefly to the poetry of the ‘Troubles’ – specifically a cursory glance at a poem by Seamus Heaney. By looking at Heaney’s poem ‘Keeping Going’, and by providing some critical positioning of the poem, one can glean some sense of context for the subsequent arguments. In other words, Heaney’s poem offers a poetic keynote to the broader treatment of the ‘Troubles’ in McCann’s short fictions. One of the abiding features of ‘Keeping Going’ is the endurance of hope as embodied by the poet’s brother and, by implication, the poet’s own artistic/poetic tribute to that unsullied ordinariness. Literary art is essentially hopeful, even utopian, in its desire and its capacity to imagine alternative social worlds and ethical systems, as well as its facility for radical political and cultural critique. So while Hugh Heaney is offered as an embodiment of redemptive hope, literary art is affirmed as a commensurate utopian form.⁶

In his 1989 Oxford Lecture, *The Redress of Poetry*, Seamus Heaney addresses the ethical capacities of the poetic imagination. Drawing on the work of Simone Weil, Heaney writes:

‘Obedience to the force of gravity. The greatest sin.’ So Simone Weil also writes in *Gravity and Grace*. Indeed her whole book is informed by the idea of counterweighting, of balancing out the forces, of redress – tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium. And in the activity of poetry too, there is a tendency to place a counter-reality in the scales – a reality which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation.⁷

It is perhaps inevitable that Heaney advances such a measured précis of the potentials of poetic art given the extreme disequilibrium that obtained in the North of Ireland during the greater part of his life and artistic career. And indeed, his 1996 collection *The Spirit Level* is the most obvious instance in which the very notions of balance and equilibrium

are creatively explored at length. Again there is a thematic symmetry here with McCann, in whose works, particularly *This Side of Brightness* and *Let the Great World Spin*, balance and equilibrium are primary motifs. Art, for Heaney, retains material political import in its ability to engender languages of hope in those that expose themselves to its simple truths. Hope, in other words, is a profoundly enabling political cohesive, 'a protest against necessity'; and art, in its turn, embodies a Blochian 'principle of hope'.⁸ In *The Spirit Level*, Heaney provides us with one of his most personal, and affective, symbols of such durable hope in 'Keeping Going'.⁹ The poem is dedicated to the poet's brother, Hugh, who unlike Heaney, decided to remain resident in Northern Ireland during the course of the worst excesses of the 'Troubles'. 'Keeping Going' is a six-part piece that catalogues Hugh's personal virtues of stoic endurance, good humour and commitment to hard work, while at the same time detailing the encroachment of various forms of moral evil, in the form of Pre-Christian superstition, Macbeth and the witches, and a cold sectarian murder in the local village. The binding agent in all of these is, of course, Hugh's quiet resilience in the face of such moral outrages. 'Keeping Going', Helen Vendler suggests, 'is in part an investigation of the qualities that go to make up that sort of emotional stamina [Hugh's stamina], in part an overview of the atrocious conditions which make the stoic response an heroic one'.¹⁰ She further notes that: 'a great deal of weight in favour of Hugh's choice of life is exerted by this habitual present of decency, exuberance and hard work: one feels Heaney's deep admiration for his brother's restoration of equanimity to everyday existence.'¹¹

The formal structure of the poem itself dramatizes the act of equilibrium cited by Heaney above; the aggregated menace of intangible and tangible agents of threat is balanced by the uneroded everydayness of Hugh's routines. Heaney presents naturalistic descriptions of wanton sectarian murder and unalloyed agricultural habits, as they unfold within the same urban space, 'the Diamond'. Countervailing the oppressive burden, and persistent threat, of internecine murder is Hugh's stoic banality, unremarkable yet inspirational for that very reason. Hugh's environs are not unscarred by the legacies of the 'Troubles' and Heaney provides a protracted, almost slow motion cinematic rendition of a particular assassination:

Grey matter like gruel flecked with blood
 In spatters on the whitewash. A clean spot
 Where his head had been, other stains subsumed
 In the parched wall he leant his back against
 That morning like any other morning,
 Part-time reservist, toting his lunch-box.
 A car came slow down Castle Street, made the halt,
 Crossed the Diamond, slowed again and stopped
 Level with him, although it was not his lift.
 And then he saw an ordinary face
 For what it was and a gun in his own face.
 His right leg was hooked back, his sole and heel
 Against the wall, his right knee propped up steady,
 So he never moved, just pushed with all his might
 Against himself, then fell past the tarred strip,
 Feeding the gutter with his copious blood.¹²

Amid the early morning rituals of this rural streetscape, Heaney charts a more sinister ceremony of evil. The density of Heaney's description engenders a sense of simultaneity in the poem – although the poem proceeds over time, the narrative is building in texture rather than unfolding chronologically. That is not to say that the temporal or the historical are elided, they are signalled in the reference to this morning's similarity to any other morning. But the killing is figured in terms of a spatial act; the brutal violation of the carceral within the intimate social space of the town square. Significantly, the act of murder is narrated in terms of the dismemberment of the victim's body; his brain, face, knee, sole, heel and blood are the constituent elements that are invoked in this local theatre of sectarian death. Indeed this is a theme that we will return to below with respect to McCann – the unrelenting assault on the somatic and the figuration of the body as a political site of oppression and resistance are recurring tropes within literary, historical and anthropological engagements with the Northern 'Troubles'.

However, the symbol of hope in the poem is the poet's sibling, to whom he offers the following address:

My dear brother, you have good stamina.
 You stay on where it happens. Your big tractor

Pulls up at the Diamond, you wave at people,
You shout and laugh above the revs, you keep
Old roads open by driving on the new ones.¹³

Hugh's routines reclaim the violated space of murder, the defiled 'Diamond', from the unnatural and the unspeakable. Delivered by Heaney in the reassuring, and affirmative, register of the present tense, the scene conveyed above is a testament to the possibility of hope and resolution. Heaney's brother, then, is physically implanted in this locale and within this community; and again the image of Hugh, akin to the scene of the earlier murder in the town square, is articulated in performative terms. But the protestant gestures are not aggressive, they are not staged-managed; Hugh's resilience is effected through affective means, through the recalcitrance of moral courage. He is a figure of equilibrium within a society of unreason; his is a silent resistance, which is no less viable than the languages of violence and political discourse. As we shall discuss, there are similar symbols of change, of futurity nested within McCann's short fictions – individuals whose bodies become sites of contestation and of resistant hope.

‘EVERYTHING IN THIS COUNTRY MUST’

The American academic and writer Joyce Carol Oates has suggested that the short story is an endangered species of literary expression; the fact that it is essentially more 'literary', or genuinely 'artful', than the novel militates against the generation of broad constituencies of readers.¹⁴ Not only, then, as Frank O'Connor maintained, is the short story the province of 'outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society',¹⁵ but the form itself has acquired the status of a marginal literary mode. Equally, narrative exposition within the short story is typically elusive and suggestive, rather than deliberate and detailed, a device that provokes the reader into the fertile possibilities of imagination. In this way the part, or the fragment, is allowed to speak for some absent, but implied, whole; in Sean O'Faoláin's terms, the dilatory capacities of implication replace the spareness of telling.¹⁶ The attenuated formal structure of the short story permits snapshot exposures to the lives, motives and emotions of the characters involved. Denied the narrative scale of the novel form, the short-story writer portrays fragments of human experience in densely compressed

moments of representation. The aggregation of these characteristics, it might be argued, explains the radical political possibilities of the short story as a literary genre; its marginal status and ambivalence of articulation confer a level of unpredictability that has been well domesticated within the realist aesthetic. In this sense, 'the essential deviousness of the short story form, in which so much needs to be suggested by so little, houses a radical potential: through its reticence, its instinctive chariness of normative representation, the short story can slip through the totalizing narratives of the dominant culture.'¹⁷ The apparent peripherality of the short story form coupled with its stylistic and formal embrace of unconventional representational codes facilitates the narration of trauma, excess, violence and dislocation – all of which are abiding presences in McCann's short fiction. In tackling the embedded contradictory convictions of the Northern 'Troubles', McCann avails of the suggestive and localized form of the short story, allowing its compressed borders of revelation to illuminate basic human truths in fragmentary moments of crisis. In the end, the combined formal and the thematic contents of McCann's collection compels the reader to imagine beyond the parameters of the immediate, beyond the horizons of burdensome ideologies and to interrogate how the present, and *possibly* the future, have been disfigured by repressive, oppositional politico-cultural histories in the past. In McCann's case it is possible, and this was the author's explicit intention, to discern the stirrings of resolution or accommodation across antagonistic communities. In these stories McCann's utopian ambitions are literally 'embodied'; an unspecified, yet implicit, utopian investment is made by McCann in the fertile, emergent bodies and imaginations of these youths, and McCann points towards an as yet to be imagined future social conjuncture.

With the publication of *Everything in This Country Must* in 2000, McCann returned to the literary province of short fiction, a form that had initially launched him as a writer of considerable promise in 1994. The later collection, however, is not confined to the short-story mode; *Everything in This Country Must* contains two short stories, 'Everything in This Country Must' and 'Wood', and a novella, 'Hunger Strike'. Indeed both collections embody what McCann has called the 'implosive moment' of the short story; points of ferocious energy.¹⁸ Yet, it is not just at the level of form that McCann strikes a note of

continuity between the two editions. The earlier collection ends with a story entitled 'Cathal's Lake', a story that concerns itself with the violence of the Northern 'Troubles'. 'Cathal's Lake', like many interventions on the cultural politics of violence, probes the mechanics of individual and communal rituals. Drawn from an old Jewish myth, it tells of the existence of thirty-six hidden saints who bury the world's sorrows so that it can continue to function, as well as bringing to mind the Irish myth of the Children of Lir. The story is narrated from the point of view of a middle-aged man, the eponymous Cathal, whose ritualized rural existence is tethered to the cyclical violence of urban civil unrest in the North. McCann's importation of such mythic structures, however, is not confined to this story – his use of magic realism is a recurrent feature in his first collection of stories. But his employment of the magically real transfuses realist representation with the narrative contingency of myth, magic and folklore. Significantly, McCann's co-option of magic realism into the minor art form of the short story, specifically in 'Cathal's Lake', is, then, both politically and aesthetically enabling. It is a coupling, at the levels of form and content, which eschews the aridity of telling in favour of the fertility of imaginative suggestion.

The narrative begins with the ambiguous reflection by Cathal that: 'It's a sad Sunday when a man has to find another swan in the soil' (*FSBR*, 173) – a statement that only assumes its full meaning at the end of the story. Its magically real connotations are replaced for the majority of the narrative by a realist approach from McCann, whose style is most often noted for its linguistic sensuality and its rich symbolism. However, in this story, McCann stylistically melds the magical, the real and the mythic within the limits of the short-story form. As we have seen, and as is well attested to, the accommodation of marginal individuals and constituencies within the narrative codes of the short story is abetted here in the coupling of narrative realism with the non-realist register of the magically real. This stylistic turn to magic realism imports another literary register that is traditionally associated with narratives of oppression, exile, displacement or cultural resistance. And that points to 'other' ways of living; Cathal's physical remoteness to the violence is narrated as a parallel redemptive space, an imagined space where the defiled, dismembered carceral of the victim of violence is transfigured into a body of grace and beauty. The visceral

brutality of the body under violence mutates into a figure of delicacy as the victim moves out of the brute realities of sectarian ideology into the purgatorial or mythological space of Cathal's lake. In a sense, we might suggest that one suite of myths is usurped by another – but it is in the contrast between the two that McCann's utopian hopes exist.

In a fashion recollective of the works of Michael McLaverty, McCann's story navigates both the urban and the rural in the northern province. The urban is portrayed as an incendiary venue of intercommunal aggression, while the rural, almost Arcadian, milieu in which the enigmatic figure of Cathal lives is a sanctuary of calm and renewal. In contrast to these regenerative surroundings, on hearing of the death of a teenage boy in sectarian disturbances in Derry, Cathal imagines the *mise-en-scène* of the youth's demise:

Maybe a head of hair on him like a wheat field. Or eyes as blue as thrush eggs. Young, awkward and gangly, with perhaps a Liverpool scarf tied around his mouth and his tongue flickering into the wool with a vast obscenity carved from the bottom of his stomach. A bottle of petrol in his hands and a rag from his mother's kitchen lit in the top. His arms in the beginnings of a windmill hurl. (*FSBR*, 173)

The boy's strained, physical posture, poised in the act of violence, is, however, abruptly altered in the next line: 'Then a plastic bullet slamming in his chest, all six inches of it hurtling against his lung at 100 miles per hour. The bottle somersaulting from the boy's fingers. Smashing on the street beneath his back. Thrush eggs broken and rows of wheat going up in flames' (*FSBR*, 173). The verbal intensity of McCann's language here, together with the report of the statistical specifics of the plastic bullet, enforces the brute physicality of this uneven suburban military exchange. The image drawn by McCann is clearly that projected time and again on news footage from any one of hundreds of civil riots across the North of Ireland since the late 1960s. But also, the description recapitulates Heaney's earlier cited image of the random murder victim in 'Keeping Going', wherein the body-as-image is dismembered and fractioned.

And the later stories resume this thematic preoccupation; all three narratives are meditations on the physical, emotional and geographical stresses of the internecine conflict in the North of Ireland. In a manner

similar to the structure of Eugene McCabe's *Christ in the Fields*, McCann's own 'Troubles' trilogy explores, and articulates, entrenched intercommunal beliefs from both sides of the sectarian divide.¹⁹ Specifically, 'Everything in This Country Must' is told from the point of view of a Catholic teenage girl; 'Wood' is narrated by an adolescent Protestant boy, while in 'Hunger Strike', another adolescent boy relates the most ambitious, and also problematic, of the stories, this time a Catholic youth. In these stories McCann's youthful protagonists straddle the border between a mature comprehension of the deep-seated forces that nourish the respective sectarian convictions of their families and localities, and a childlike lack of apprehension of the severity of these naturalized passions.²⁰ And again, in this sense McCann's narratives recollect the childhood and adolescent emotions and territories of McLaverty's short story, 'Pigeons', and the novel into which the earlier story developed, *Call My Brother Back*.²¹ Yet more crucial to McCann is the possibility that these formative consciousnesses might imagine alternatives to their apparently naturalized historical inheritances. These are people in process, who, respectively, eschew, misunderstand, or naively experiment with the well-furrowed rituals and expectations of their political communities, but who retain the possibility of escaping such future roles.

The titular story, 'Everything in This Country Must', opens the collection and establishes a frantic tone in its opening paragraph.²² McCann initiates the story with a panicked scene in which the young girl and her father are faltering in their combined efforts to save their old draft horse from drowning in the flood-expanded waters of a nearby river:

A summer flood came and our draft horse got caught in the river. The river smashed against 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 rocks. Father found her and called *Katie!* above the wailing of the rain.²³

Besides the obvious idiom of entrapment deployed in this extract by McCann, he also reprises the verbal intensity of 'Cathal's Lake' cited above; there is a sense of urgency and of violent movement to the

beginning of the narrative. The horse itself is of limited practical use on the family farm, but the frenetic rescue is actually fomented by the animal's symbolic value to the girl's father.

As we learn subsequently, and as is a thematic constant in 'Troubles' fiction, the low intensity warfare of the conflict has invaded the domestic space. In this context the girl's mother and brother were killed in a collision with a British Army vehicle some years previously, an incident that was adjudicated to have been accidental. And this is a motif that McCann employs in each of the stories in the collection: in 'Wood', the family remains integrated, but the boy's father has suffered a stroke and is effectively paralysed from the neck down, and in the novella, the boy's biological father is also deceased and has been surrogated by the boy's uncle, an imprisoned hunger striker whom the boy has never met.²⁴ In telescoping the fractured contours of these familial situations, McCann demonstrates how 'political and power structures infiltrate familial and sexual relations'.²⁵ In a colonial context, a context in which the fundamental historical dispute is rooted in the division and occupation of territory, the politics of reproduction and the constitution of communities of ethnic, racial or confessional solidarity are foundational matters. Equally, from a formal perspective, the 'deep' representational horizons of the short story mode find suitable material within the domestic privacies of the family unit, rather than in the more social landscapes of the novel form. And as McDonald mentions, the insinuation of the political onto the topographies of the domestic can be either explicit ideological presences or more non-political and practical in nature.

The fulcrum of the dramatic tension in McCann's narrative is the unexpected arrival of a British Army patrol onto the aforementioned rescue site. As the headlights of their vehicle approach it is assumed by both father and daughter to be those of a neighbour's vehicle. But when they catch sight of the uniformed figures exiting the jeep in order to aid their efforts, the father recoils from his attempt to save the animal. Essentially, the draft horse's affective worth to him is negated by its rescue by the British soldiers, accomplices, however obliquely, to his more acute familial loss several years before. In this sense, then, the father is representative of congealed forms of cultural memory – embedded in divisive simplicities, which foreclose any semblance of political rapprochement, even at the level of the practical and interper-

sonal. While his perceptions of the soldiers are coloured exclusively by the pained hatred of his own private loss, his fifteen-year-old daughter, the first-person narrator of the story, is of a more inclusive disposition. As she observes the various military bodies disperse in their rescue strategy, she christens each of them according to their physical features: one becomes 'Hayknife' because he 'had a scar on his cheek like the bottom end of Father's barn hayknife'; another 'had a moustache that looked like long grasses' and, therefore is dubbed 'LongGrasses', and yet another, whose 'hair was the colour of winter ice', is 'Icehair' (*ETCM*, 6–7).

Rather than retreat to the distance of anonymity, a silent idiom that engenders only suspicion, the girl personalizes each of the soldiers in a catholic language of her own. And again, this explains McCann's formal logic – he relates this incident within the abbreviated form of the short story, but tellingly does so through the narrative device of the first-person testimony of an adolescent. The language of the young girl, then, suggests the possibility of hope through its very playfulness, yet it is not entirely the language of childhood. Nested within her colloquial attribution of names are the murmurings of an autonomous adolescent female sexuality, an energy that has, traditionally, been diagnosed as politically, culturally and morally subversive. In her father's jaundiced view, Kate's sexuality is to be protected and fenced off from the contaminating advances of these British soldiers. In the apparently conciliatory gesture of offering her the warmth of a British army jacket, Kate's father divines an ulterior, transgressive intent: 'LongGrasses was standing beside me and he put Stevie's jacket on my shoulders to warm me, but then Father came over and he pushed LongGrasses away. Father pushed hard' (*ETCM*, 8). Rather than permit his daughter to be shrouded in the protective garments of this illegitimate occupying force, the father is driven to exact violence. Clearly the episode has multiple ideological resonances; the girl's emergent female body is transformed into a political document onto which the competing ideological freights of the 'Troubles' are projected. Furthermore, the scene is an enactment of a prevailing patriarchal authority, under which the girl's body is subservient to the contestatory designs of two male figures.

The most significant aspect of the passage cited above is, however, the girl's referral to one of the soldiers as 'Stevie'; during the rescue

operation she has learned his real Christian name and is suitably impressed with his strident efforts to save the draft horse. As a consequence, she invites the group of soldiers to return to her house for tea and in order to dry off, an invitation that understandably infuriates her already indignant father. The other soldiers either remain anonymous or retain their nicknames, but Stevie emerges from the ideological confines of his uniform, his rank and his accent and a brief, but effective, drama of coy flirtation ensues between Katie and him. The theatre for this furtive action is within the domestic geography of a rural Catholic family, a kitchen in which half a dozen British soldiers are sharing tea with an embittered widower and his daughter. What is striking is that the usual scenario in which such a group would be together in such circumstances is under a violently intrusive operation of counter-insurgency, a security search. Predictably, perhaps, the father's belligerent attitude and equivalent remarks provoke one of the soldiers and the scene does, in fact, conclude with a reversion to type. The episodic flirtation between Katie and Stevie is bracketed between two acts of ideological expression. As we have seen, it ends with a sectarian argument, but our first description of the interior of the house, as the men wait for their tea, is of Katie meticulously preparing her father's brew:

Father likes his tea without bags like Mammy used to make and so there is a special way for me to make it – put cold cold water in the kettle and only cold then boil it then put a small boiling water in the teapot and swish it around until the bottom of the teapot is warm. Then put in tea leaves not bags and then the boiling water and stir it all very slowly and put on the teacosy and let it stew for five minutes making sure the flame is not too high so the teacosy doesn't catch flame and burn. Then pour milk into the cups and then the tea followed at last by sugar all spooned around into a careful mix. (*ETCM*, 10)

The simple act of making tea is elongated into an absurd ritual of domestic control; in effect the girl's past and future unite in this banal household chore. She has assumed the roles of mother, wife and daughter within the domestic economy, but none of these roles, in their current guises, offers her any opportunity of escape, or of change. In this respect, the story, in its delineation of an oppressed female

sexuality has a clear historical precursor in Joyce's 'Eveline'. The protracted surgery of brewing tea could easily be re-imagined as a task set for Eveline, in her parallel world of clipped domestic horizons. But whereas Eveline's desires to flee the cramped social and moral conditions of Dublin are still-born, McCann's narrative allows the unsettling capacities of human desire to infiltrate the hardened arteries of political entrenchment. Immediately subsequent to the lengthy rendition of the tea making, Katie describes the energizing thrill of her flirtatious interaction with Stevie – one act of dull repetition is juxtaposed with an act of possibilities: 'My tea fuss made the soldiers smile, even Stevie who had a head full of blood pouring down from where the draft horse kicked him above his eye' (*ETCM*, 10). But his smile is, of course, an affront to her father: 'Father's face went white when Stevie smiled but Stevie was very polite. He took a towel from me because he said he didn't want to get blood on the chair. He smiled at me two times when I put my head around the kitchen door' (*ETCM*, 10). This illicit, and previously uncharted, exchange of sexual tension permits Katie a level of physical and emotional autonomy that has previously been foreclosed under her father's domestic regime. She felt her 'belly sink way down until it was there like love in the barn, and he smiled at me number three' (*ETCM*, 11). This brief emotional transaction between Katie and Stevie provides McCann with a moment of political hope. The privacy of Katie's desires, then, is demonstrative of a secret language of solidarity, and this is a consistent feature of the entire collection; each of the young protagonists retains secrets and privacies from the probing eyes of their parents. McCann is actually employing flirtation as a political device in the narrative, a contrastive mode of behaviour to the rooted, and ruthless, passions of mutual antipathy.

The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips alludes to just such trajectories in his study of flirtation and contingency. Flirtation inaugurates a process of re-scripting, in which previously naturalized commitments to relationships, to ideologies or to vocabularies can be opened to alteration:

In flirtation you never know whether the beginning of the story – the story of the relationship – will be the end; flirtation, that is to say, exploits the idea of surprise...from a pragmatic point of view one could say that a space is being created in which aims and ends can be worked out; the assumed wish for the more or

less obvious sexual combinations, or commitments, may be a way of pre-empting the elaboration of, making time for, less familiar possibilities. Flirtation, if it can be sustained, is a way of cultivating wishes, of playing for time. Deferral can make room.²⁶

If, as Heaney maintains above, creative art kindles hope as a political energy towards the future, in this context the flirtatious act sustains liberatory impulses in the form of desire – both primary ingredients of any utopian imaginary. Rather than cementing the staid certainties of their respective cultural codes, these two young people transfuse such stasis with an ambiguous language of risk. By inserting this erotically charged passage, McCann multiplies the narrative possibilities that can ensue from these lives; nothing may come of the episode, an episode that has other self-evident predecessors in ‘across the barricades’ fictional love affairs, but it does invite the chance that something may transpire.²⁷ Equally, in eschewing the cautious conservatism of stereotype, Katie and Stevie import an element of contingency into the narrative; likewise, in sharing this series of moments they display generosity towards each other in offering a spur to the other’s desire. Under the strained atmosphere of the family’s kitchen, which is suffused by traditional sectarian borders, the vigorous unpredictability of flirtation provides emotional sustenance for Katie: ‘Father is good, he was just wanting to dry my hair because I was shivering even in Stevie’s jacket. From under the curtain I could see the soldiers and I could see most of all Stevie. He sipped from his tea and smiled at me and Father coughed real loud’ (*ETCM*, 12). Phillips is keen to highlight, contrary to Freud, that flirtation is a legitimate idiom of possibility; it is not merely a frivolous gesture of indecision. ‘Flirtation,’ he suggests, ‘is more than a trivial nostalgia for a world before the war. Like all transitional performances it is an attempt to re-open, to rework, the plot; to find somewhere else, in the philosopher William James’s words, “to go from”.’²⁸ In essence, the act of flirtation leavens the tyranny of certainty, it is consistent with a subjunctive mood – a mood of maybe, and therein rests its political voltage for McCann.

'WOOD'

Moving to the domestic terrain of a rural Presbyterian family, McCann's second short story, 'Wood', explores the pervasive secrecy of life in Northern Ireland. As before, the first-person narrator is a youth, an adolescent boy, who narrates the clandestine, nocturnal activities he engages in with his mother at the family wood-mill. The farm on which the drama unfolds also functioned as a wood-mill, until the father suffered a stroke that left him severely disabled, effectively paralyzed – a condition that reverberates with symbolism throughout the story, and again gestures towards the endemic inertia of Joyce's earlier collection. Furthermore, McCann again focuses on the notion of intergenerational tension – in 'Everything in this Country Must' it was a simple binary friction between father and daughter, in 'Wood' the intergenerational dynamics are more complex and fundamentally traumatic for the young boy. 'Wood' imports the rituals and symbolism of loyalism into the familial sphere, rather than explicate the divisive contours of the spatial command of loyalist marches and spectacular seizures of contested public space. McCann's story deals with the private, practical mechanics of preparation involved in organizing these events. He examines how political and moral principles are compromised when stark economic choices are confronted, and even within the remote family unit, new secretcies and deceptions are fostered under the weight of straitened political and economic circumstances. Simply, the boy is compelled to deceive his paralyzed father by his mother, who sees the deception as necessary for the economic well-being of the family.

The dramatic strain is centred on the fact that the local Orange lodge have requested forty wooden banner poles to be manufactured at the mill, a request the mother has agreed to meet. However, as the following exchange reveals, there are political implications within the household: 'Your husband'll be alright with that, then?' he asked. He will, aye. He was never mad keen before, was he?' (*ETCM*, 21). While the father may remain permanently physically immobile, his political sensibilities, indeed his political imagination, extend beyond the sectarian paralysis that he sees around him. The family's participation in the triumphalism of loyalism may only extend to the provision of banner poles, but the father is alert to the divisive symbolism of the most mundane of actions. From his perspective, the performance of

loyalist identity and the spatial commemoration of past sectarian victories merely service further intercommunal antagonisms. The boy recalls that his father was a proud Presbyterian, but eschewed the ‘meanness’ of such public commemorations and forbade his children to attend the Orange parades. And here, again, we see a disjunction between the generations; the father’s disavowal of triumphalism and the attraction of such theatricality to the boy:

He doesn’t allow us to go to the marches 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. 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. (*ETCM*, 28)

The boy’s waking dreams are electrified by the imagined prospects of the communal carnivalesque of the Orange parades; in the youth’s yearning reveries the drama of the spectacle is evacuated of its divisive political connotations and he assumes a role within the parade as the creator of the displayed banner poles: ‘Lots of people cheering and blowing whistles and drums playing. Ice cream vans giving out free choc ices. All the crowd would stand up on the tips of their toes and say my oh my, look at that, aren’t they wonderful poles, aren’t they lovely’ (*ETCM*, 33).

In producing the banner poles for the upcoming Orange Order parade the boy and his mother forge a covert bond that sees their activities shielded from his father and also from his siblings. Born of material necessity, even economic desperation, the situation casts the boy into an alien moral dilemma in which he is bound to deceive one parent in his professed loyalty to the other. Thus the complex contradictions of economic urgency, political fealty and sectarian bigotry in the North of Ireland are mediated through the maturing adolescent experience of this youth. And the intimate subterfuge within the family reaches a dramatic climax in the final pages of the story. On the morning of collection by the Orange Order the boy is permitted to shave his prone father. Yet this ritual that seems to resurrect a feeling of guiltless intimacy between the two merely continues the deception. The boy has been instructed to turn on the radio and increase the usual

volume so that his father will not hear the stealthy approach of the collection van or the transfer of the poles from the mill. The central tension, then, of McCann's narrative revolves around the stark physical paralysis of the boy's father – confined to bed and a routine of utter dependence on his wife and children, and the political paralysis of his community's repertoire of annual rituals. In effect, the passive, paralytic body of the father houses the imaginative possibility of political progress and hope, while the resolutely mobile bodies of Orange Order commemorative marches, and, of course, those of his wife and eldest son are, to varying degrees, complicit in the sustenance of political stasis. The mobile bodies of the commemorative march are further inscribed by intercommunal history and are politico-cultural texts of popular remembrance. We note the performance of community identity through the reclamation of space – the politically inscribed corporeal enacting the accumulated historical identity of the imagined loyalist community. The banner poles, while obvious symbols of a more lateral cultural group at one level, demand, at another level, the physical participation of the individual in the confessional community. This surfaces in the manufacture and the laborious production of the object, subsequently in its symbolic transformation through detailed decoration, and finally in the somatic articulation of the banner pole bearer during the Orange Order parade.

'HUNGER STRIKE'

In *Hunger: An Unnatural History*, Sharman Apt Russell argues that the physiological experience of hunger is, in fact, a form of articulation – hunger is a mode of somatic speech.²⁹ Hunger demands to be satiated. Likewise, the choice of hunger in the pursuit of hunger striking takes this communicative essence to an altogether different register. Under circumstances of perceived political and/or cultural disenfranchisement hunger striking is a route through which the always already political, and politicized, body is re-calibrated for terminal acts of resistance. In the Northern Irish context, the mobilization of the body in such extreme forms of political protest belongs to a longer continuum of somatic negotiation. The genealogies of fictions, myths and histories of the northern conflict are all indelibly marked by spatial

relations; dispute over territories at the local, provincial and national levels. With the spatialization of power, in repressive and counter-repressive guises, the body became a focal site of contestation. And as Allen Feldman suggests:

In Northern Ireland the body is not only the primary political instrument through which social transformation is effected but is also the primary site for visualizing the collective passage into historical alterity. The body's material deformation has become commensurate with the deformation, instrumentation and 'acceleration' of historical time.³⁰

Both Tom Herron and Scott Brewster have recently explored the body as trope in contemporary Irish poetry – the body as a victim of state and of paramilitary violences.³¹ In this section I will turn to McCann's novella, 'Hunger Strike', in order to discuss the degenerative recalcitrance of the incarcerated and hunger-stricken body during the northern 'Troubles'.³²

In his study of political violence and Northern Ireland, cited above, Feldman charts the ideological consumption and production 'of the body as a political institution'.³³ Part of Feldman's project is to explore the H-Block hunger strikes of 1981 as rituals of re-appropriation by the republican prisoners. What is important about his analysis is that Feldman positions the hunger strikes within the broader framework 'of the cultural construction of violence' in the North, and does not simply draw easy analogies with other, ostensibly non-violent or pacifist protestation. The hunger strikes, then, were elements of a longer process of somatic resistance within the state-governed institutional space of the prison. Prior to the strikes, republican detainees had engaged in lengthy 'blanket' and 'dirty' protests, both of which symbolically and literally saw the prisoners commandeer bodily autonomy – retrieving such authority from the state. The hunger strikes represented the next, and terminal, step in this logic of somatic seizure; incarceration subjected the prisoner to the routines, violences and surveillance of the state's authority, but these three voluntary rituals of bodily self-sacrifice were resistant in their excess. Rather than protest in the hope of a cessation of violence, the prisoners assumed control of the violence inflicted on their own bodies; indeed the violence of the protests exceeded that which the state itself had

imposed. Under the conditions of the hunger strike, in particular, the body of the starving prisoner is both biologically terminal in its organic decline and simultaneously ever edging towards a symbolic perpetuity. Again in Feldman's terms: 'The historicized and historicizing body is a pluralized site of torsion and contestation. But it is not a passive site.'³⁴ In McCann's narrative, the progress of one man's hunger strike is filtered through the consciousness of his teenage nephew, and McCann records the gradual biological decay of the hunger striker together with the resonant symbolic import of his actions for his dislocated adolescent nephew.

The story is remarkable for its consistent channelling of the boy's emotional and cognitive development through the rigours of the somatic. Various we see the boy engaged in rhythmic boatmanship with his elderly Lithuanian acquaintance, tentative sexual experimentation, and a *faux* enactment of a 'Troubles' riot by the boy. McCann interweaves the troubling bodily landmarks of pubescent development, with their attendant emotional strains, and the combined performances of protest of the youth and his imprisoned uncle. The boy's masturbation on the beach is matched by his illicit theft of his mother's cigarettes, and her money. His attentive curiosity concerning his uncle's bodily degeneration, likewise, is echoed in the detailed descriptions given of the age-ravaged bodies of the elderly Lithuanian couple. McCann realizes that in portraying the growth of the emotional and cognitive intelligence of these young protagonists, one cannot but include the lateral corporeal evolution in equal measure. The boy in this story is not only confounded by the distant, yet intimate, political narratives of the 'Troubles', which are relayed sparingly and second-hand; he is also perturbed by the profound emotional and physical alterations that are intrinsic to his bodily maturation. Yet it is this prospect of maturation in which McCann banks his authorial hope for the future; these are the repositories of McCann's utopian energies. As one body commits to death, and is charted and symbolized through this process, another is a seed-bed of future peace. The narrative action of 'Hunger Strike' unfolds in and around the town of Clifden in County Galway, but the emotional focus of the novella is centred on the North of Ireland, specifically the penal space of the H-Blocks. Having recently left his home in the North with his mother, the anonymous protagonist struggles to adjust to life in the west of Ireland. His

accent, his age and his diffident temperament are varying indices of estrangement for the boy. And this period of geographical and emotional teenage transition is amplified by the news that his paternal uncle has committed himself to the hunger strike protests. Although the boy has never met his uncle – he has only ever seen a picture of him – the symbolic voltage of the uncle's sacrifice, as Feldman outlines, transcends the limits of biological time and historical time, and enters epochal time. The mythic aura of this resistant act becomes an obsessive concern of the boy and at one point he initiates his own, unsuccessful, attempt at a hunger strike. In a certain light, the boy's commitment to his uncle is mirrored in the uncle's devotion to his own stable of abstract political ideals. Again, it is significant that McCann chooses to mediate the hunger strikes through the narrative device of a thirteen-year-old consciousness, and through the compressed exposition of the novella. The relative concision of the narrative does not elaborate on the loss of innocence that is at the core of the story [as a novel would], nor does it extensively abbreviate the circumstances of this loss [as a short story would], but offers a constellation of events in which the boy gradually demonstrates the frustrations and confusions that are attendant with all forms of emotional awakening.

The journey to the west of Ireland, which furnishes nostalgic consolations for the boy's mother, is less rewarding for the youth. His detachment from his social and physical surroundings manifests in various, and frequent, acts of delinquency: theft, vandalism and deception. These trivial acts of adolescent immaturity and pubescent defiance are marginal in comparison to the symbolically charged actions that transcend these shallow teenage gestures. Specifically, his imitative enactment of a hunger strike, the short-lived routine of rowing with his elderly Lithuanian neighbour [which is actively fostered by his mother], and at the story's conclusion, his attempt to destroy the old man's kayak. The story signals the very real, but often suppressed, fact that the conflagration in the North of Ireland was not simply confined to the geopolitical limits of the six counties. As Joe Cleary has argued, both British and Irish governments preferred to represent the conflict as a localized dispute, thereby absolving themselves and their own political jurisdictions of any direct responsibility; in effect, quarantining the sectarian warfare within the dysfunctional Northern polity.³⁵

As a prelude to his own brief hunger strike, the boy exhibits a fascination with his uncle's body; however, the only material reference point that he possesses is a recollection of previously seen photographs. He calls to mind an image of his uncle's distinctive facial profile, which was 'hard and angular with shocking blue eyes; the hair curled; the eyebrows tufted; a scar running a line of outrage across the bottom of his nose' (*ETCM*, 55) – it is a face that has been indented with unexplained violence. But as the boy realizes, this image almost certainly bears little or no resemblance to his uncle's current bodily state. The dissolving body is now scripted with the resistance of the man's political convictions, his communal obligations. And although the boy can draw on no specific image that will singularize his uncle's individual suffering, he imagines through the lens of a newspaper article, which graphically details the conditions of those who have progressed from blanket protest to dirty protest and are now on hunger strike. In this sequence we see a confluence of the boy's imaginative creation of his uncle's present bodily condition and McCann's insertion of brutal realistic description of a stark historical reality:

There had been a photo smuggled out of the H-blocks during the dirty protest – a prisoner in a cell, by a window, wrapped in a dark blanket, with shit in swirled patterns on the wall behind his head. The boy wondered how anyone could have lived like that, shit on the walls and a floor full of piss. The men had their cells sprayed down by prison guards once a week and sometimes their bedding was so soaked that they got pneumonia. When the protest failed they cleaned their cells and opted for hunger instead. (*ETCM*, 55–6)

McCann further documents the insistent decline of the hunger striker's body when he notes, in empirical fashion, the gradual loss of weight by the starving prisoner:

Ranged in a notebook in opposite columns:
Day One – 147 lb – 66.8 kg
Day Two – 146 lb – 66.36 kg
Day Three – 144.9 lb – 65.86 kg
Day Four – 143.9 lb – 65.4 kg (*ETCM*, 72)

While at one level the prisoner's body, as Feldman maintains, outstrips

the material and enters the mythical, McCann's stark, metrical record of the declining mass of the imprisoned body reminds the reader of its actual disintegration. The medical report of the dissolving physiology of the prisoner is continued throughout the narrative, bringing a disarming extra-diegetic feature to McCann's text. As the stricken prisoner's hunger strike continues beyond twenty days and closes in on its thirtieth, extra commentary is added to the textualized account of this resistant somatic act:

Twenty-seven – 127.3 – 57.81 kg – 110/60

Twenty-eight – 126.8 – 57.6 kg – 115/68

Twenty-nine – 126.3 – 57.4 kg – 110/59 – Tonight the fuckers put enough food out to feed an army.

Thirty – 125.9 – 57.22 – 105/65 (*ETCM*, 97)

The blood pressure of the hunger striker has now been added to the report – a narrative that gradually begins to read like an ongoing biography, or morbid medical diary. The protesting prisoner is somewhat replaced by the statistics of his declining physical state; the unrelenting slide towards death is the shadow that is cast across this newly authored biological narrative. Time, weight and blood pressure become imbricated in the mechanics of political struggle – a struggle that is revealed as callous and vulgar by the insertion of a short discursive comment about the prison authorities. Indeed this insertion merely serves to underscore the absence of discourse in this protest; verbal discourse has been abandoned in favour of the fatal narrative of the hungering body's inevitable collapse.

These reports can be figured as the struggle between myth and history that is played out during this hunger strike. And the boy is entangled in this ideological dialectic; the myths that corral around such sacrifices have already been seen to activate the boy's imagination, as when he enacts an imaginary riot of protest, and in his brief but physically real hunger strike. The issue, then, is how to wean the youth from such political trajectories, given the evident inevitability of suffering, if not death. Exile, of course, is one route through which the boy might be sheltered from such a future, and it too belongs to considerations of the somatic; the body is literally removed from the context of threat. But surely that is a partial solution and McCann sees it as so; it is contributive but nothing more. At the end of the story, the

long developmental cycle of the boy, which is repeatedly figured in overtly corporeal terms, remains south of the border, but is abetted by the tutelary presence of the elderly Lithuanian couple. At this point he is in the process of vandalizing their kayak, as they watch benignly; but it is their presence, their understanding of the historicity of extreme ideological violence that will offer the boy guidance as he develops physically, intellectually, and emotionally. The final lines of the novella indicate the generosity of spirit and the depth of emotional intelligence that this emigrant couple bear. Their experience, which is always subterranean within the novella, hints at a familiarity with the dynamics of the northern 'Troubles', and the manners in which the boy is assimilating these 'personal' events. It is the conjunction of this catholicity of humane experience and the possibilities rooted in the developing adolescent that represents McCann's 'hope principle'. As he rampages on the beach, destroying their kayak, 'the boy lifted his head from the boat, looked back over his shoulder, saw the light from the house of the Lithuanians, the front door open, the couple standing together, hands clasped, watching, the old man's eyes squinting, the old woman's large and tender' (*ETCM*, 143). It is an indelible and highly charged symbolic set-piece that draws McCann's collection to a close, and, as an imagistic fragment, concisely expresses the underlying utopian impulse of the whole.

In his critical reflections on the nature of the short story, the American author, Raymond Carver, a contemporary master of the genre in his own right, consistently accented the necessity of menace to the dramatic success of short fiction. Most memorably in his revealing essay, 'On Writing', Carver argues:

I like it when there is some feeling of threat or sense of menace in short stories. I think a little menace is fine to have in a story. For one thing, it's good for the circulation. There has to be tension, a sense that something is imminent, that certain things are in relentless motion, or else, most often, there simply won't be a story. What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things.³⁶

In this sense, it seems entirely apposite for McCann to operate within the abbreviated literary parameters of the genre. We are offered cursory glimpses of ordinary lives lived within or adjacent to the grounds of the northern conflict. Each of the youthful characters in *Everything in This Country Must* operates in an environment that is uncharted and enigmatic. Each is confronted with an emotional and physical situation that harbours potential threat. Similarly, the incendiary unpredictability of the northern crisis, primarily evidenced in the seeming random nature of violence, is played out *in parvo* within the adolescent dramas of McCann's protagonists. Through the recurring motif of the body, initially the fractioned body of the victim, and subsequently the emergent sexual, the prone paralytic, and the resistant starving bodies, McCann's narratives foreground the methods through which the political extremities of the 'Troubles' were scripted onto the carceral. Nevertheless, it is possible, as we have outlined, to divine moments of hope or imagination in the stories beyond the foreshortened mindscapes of sectarianism. McCann seems to insist on the urgency of change and responds to political extremity through the brevity of the short-story form. McCann's fictions are symptomatic of an author who has glimpsed post-'Troubles' Northern Ireland, as they intimate at a will to imagine peace. While we can only definitively 'locate' the novella 'Hunger Strike' in a specific time period, 1981, we can assume that the other stories are set in adjacent years of the 'Troubles'. The age profiles of each of the protagonists in McCann's stories suggests that any form of effective intimated reconciliation is in the medium to long-term future – at least a decade and a half. In this respect, we can view McCann's collection as a literary response to the various tentative steps towards cross-factional accord that took public, material form in the mid- to late 1990s. The emergent bodies and minds defy, or are encouraged to defy, the artificial political and cultural tenets of sectarianism.

NOTES

1. Michael Storey, *Representing the Troubles in Irish Short Fiction* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), p.10.
2. Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p.1.

3. In his essay, 'The Irish Short Story (1980–2000): Ireland Anthologized', Ben Forkner writes: 'As far as energy and conviction are concerned, the Irish short story has little to fear or envy when compared with the celebrated examples of the past', *Études Anglaises*, 54, 2 (2001), p.152.
4. Ronan McDonald, 'Strategies of Silence: Colonial Strains in Short Stories of the Troubles', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 35, 1 (January 2005), pp.249–63.
5. For a recent summary survey of the Northern Irish novel, see Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, 'The Novel and the Northern Troubles', in John Wilson Foster (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.238–58.
6. On the utopian form *The Cambridge Companion to The Irish Novels* of literature see Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). More recently see Bill Ashcroft on postcolonial literature and utopia: 'Critical Utopias', *Textual Practice*, 21, 3 (2007), pp.411–31.
7. Seamus Heaney, 'from *The Redress of Poetry*', *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), p.259.
8. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1986).
9. Seamus Heaney, 'Keeping Going', *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), pp.10–12.
10. Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), p.164.
11. *Ibid.*, p.166.
12. Heaney, 'Keeping Going', pp.11–12.
13. *Ibid.*, p.12.
14. Joyce Carol Oates, 'An Endangered Species', *New York Review of Books* (29 June 2000), pp.38–41.
15. Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing, 1963), p.5.
16. Seán O'Faoláin, *The Short Story* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1948), p.177.
17. McDonald, 'Strategies of Silence', p.250.
18. Colum McCann, 'Everything in This Country Must – Interview'. <http://www.colummccann.com/interviews/everything.htm>.
19. Eugene McCabe, *Christ in the Fields* (London: Minerva, 1993).
20. Again Ben Forkner suggests that 'McCann dwells on those inevitable moments when innocence is shattered and the inner self splintered into divided allegiances. These are universal experiences, of course, but far less easy to assume when they arrive too early, and with the brutality of historical fate', p.159.
21. On these two works by McLaverty see Sophia Hillan, 'Wintered into Wisdom: Michael McLaverty and Seamus Heaney, and the Northern Word-Hoard', *New Hibernia Review*, 9, 3 (2005), pp.86–106.
22. This story was adapted into an Oscar-nominated short film in 2005 by McCann and directed by Gary McKendry. It can be viewed in full at: <http://www.colummccann.com/media/film.htm>.
23. Colum McCann, 'Everything in This Country Must', *Everything in This Country Must*, (London: Phoenix House, 2000), p.3. All further references will appear in parenthesis as (ETCM).
24. The dysfunctional family unit is a feature that, again, is apparent in Joyce's *Dubliners*.
25. McDonald, 'Strategies of Silence', p.254.
26. Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p.xix.
27. See Joan Lingard, *Across the Barricades* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972).
28. Phillips, *On Flirtation*, p.xxv.
29. Sharman Apt Russell, *Hunger: An Unnatural History* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
30. Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.9.

31. Tom Herron, 'The Body's in the Post: Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Dispersed Body', in Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland (eds), *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp.193–209 and Scott Brewster, 'Rites of Defilement: Abjection and the Body Politic in Northern Irish Poetry', *Irish University Review*, 35, 2 (2005), pp.304–19.
32. For a detailed historical account of the 1981 Hunger Strikes, see David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead: The Story of the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike* (London: Grafton Books, 1987).
33. Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, p.8.
34. *Ibid.*, p.177.
35. Joe Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.97–141.
36. Raymond Carver, 'On Writing', *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), p.17.