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Troubling Bodies:
Suffering, Resistance and Hope in Colum
McCann's 'Troubles' Short Fiction

EÓIN FLANNERY

But of course some clever dick from the 'Forensic Lab'
reconstructs
Him, what he used to be – not from his actual teeth, not
his fingerprints,
But from the core – the toothmarks of the first and last bite
he'd taken of
This sour apple.
But then we would have told them anyway.
Publicity.¹

I

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.² 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'.³ In equal measure the conflict has been widely poetically mediated, as well as being dramatised 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.⁴ Most recently, Ronan McDonald has published an accomplished essay, 'Strategies of Silence: Colonial Strains in Short Stories of the Troubles',⁵ 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'.⁶ Notwithstanding the relative merits, and limitations, of these two interventions, the shorter fictional works of

Colum McCann have not been adequately represented in critical accounts of the fictional heritage of Northern Ireland. It is, therefore, my intention to redress such neglect and to focus on McCann's collection, *Everything in This Country Must*.⁷ 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; I will highlight 'the body' as a recurrent thematic presence, 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. Finally, it is my intention to broach McCann's short fiction in terms of the utopian impulses that reside within both the textual and somatic forms of the stories.

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.⁸ Not only, then, as Frank O'Connor maintained, is the short story the province of 'outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society',⁹ 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'Faolain's terms, the dilatory capacities of implication replace the spareness of telling.¹⁰ 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. 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 the short fiction of McCann. 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 addition, he incorporates literary conventions such as oral storytelling, myth, magic realism and symbolism in his works. These threads of formal experimentation further reflect the necessity of writers who attempted to narrate the 'Troubles' to extend their representational limits beyond the ken of the political and formal conservatism of literary realism. In the end, the combined formal and thematic contents of McCann's fictions compel 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. McCann's stories are deeply impacted upon by the competing ideological weights of the Northern Irish 'Troubles'. And 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.¹¹ 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.

II

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, when he debuted with the short-story collection *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*. 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.¹² 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, which 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'¹³ – 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 an uncharacteristically 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 corpse 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 *mis 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.¹⁴

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.'¹⁵ 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 McCabe's *Christ in the Fields*, McCann's own 'Troubles' trilogy explores, and articulates, entrenched intercommunal beliefs from both sides of the sectarian divide. 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.¹⁶ 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*.¹⁷ 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. McCann initiates the story with a panicked scene in which the 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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ In telescoping the fractured contours of these familial situations, McCann demonstrates how 'political and power structures infiltrate familial and sexual relations'.²⁰ 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 interpersonal. 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'.²¹

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, Katie'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, Katie'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.'²² 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 a half 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.²³

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.' 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.'²⁴ 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'.²⁵ This brief emotional transaction between Katie and Stevie provides McCann with a moment of political hope. The privacy of Katie's desires, then, are 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 at the beginning of this essay, 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.

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.²⁷ 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 lies its political voltage for McCann.²⁹

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 paralysed – 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 paralysed 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?’³⁰ 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.³¹

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.’³²

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.

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.³³ 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 recalibrated for terminal acts of resistance. In the Northern Irish context, the mobilisation 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.³⁴

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.³⁵ 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'.

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'.³⁶ 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, but is simultaneously ever edging towards a symbolic perpetuity. 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, in fact 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 manifest 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.³⁷

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' – 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.³⁸

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 – 147.0 lb – 66.80 kg
Day Two – 146.0 lb – 66.36 kg
Day Three – 144.9 lb – 65.86 kg
Day Four – 143.9 lb – 65.40 kg³⁹

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 textualised account of this resistant somatic act:

Twenty-seven	–	127.3	–	57.81 kg	–	110/60
Twenty-eight	–	126.8	–	57.60 kg	–	115/68
Twenty-nine	–	126.3	–	57.40 kg	–	110/59 – Tonight the fuckers put enough food out to feed an army.
Thirty	–	125.9	–	57.22	–	105/65 ⁴⁰

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 immigrant 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'.⁴¹ 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 argued:

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.⁴²

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 I have outlined, to divine moments of hope or of imagination in the stories beyond the foreshortened mindscapes of

sectarianism. McCann's fictions are symptomatic of an author who has glimpsed post-'Troubles' Northern Ireland, 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-profile 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, indeed valediction of, 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 and References

- 1 Ciaran Carson, 'The Mouth', *The Ballad of HMS Belfast: A Compendium of Belfast Poems* (London: Picador, 1999), p. 78.
 - 2 Michael Storey, *Representing the Troubles in Irish Short Fiction* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), p. 10.
 - 3 Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 1.
 - 4 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'; *Etudes Anglaises*, 54:2 (2001), p. 152.
 - 5 Ronan McDonald, 'Strategies of Silence: Colonial Strains in Short Stories of the Troubles', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 35:1 (Jan. 2005), pp. 249–63.
 - 6 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.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 238–58.
 - 7 Colum McCann, *Everything in This Country Must* (London: Phoenix House, 2000).
 - 8 Joyce Carol Oates, 'An Endangered Species', *New York Review of Books*, 29 June 2000, pp. 38–41.
 - 9 Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963), p. 5.
 - 10 Sean O'Faolain, *The Short Story* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1948), p. 177.
 - 11 In an email to the author, McCann stated that the collection *Everything in This Country Must* was always intended to be 'about sexuality and the emerging consciousness of adolescents, and where all that lies in a political context'. (15 Jan. 2008)
 - 12 Colum McCann, *Everything in This Country Must* – Interview, <http://www.colummccann.com/interviews/everything.htm> (accessed on 7 Sept. 2006).
 - 13 Colum McCann, 'Cathal's Lake', *Fishing the Sloe Black River* (London: Phoenix House, 1994), p. 173.
 - 14 *ibid.*
 - 15 *ibid.*
 - 16 Again, Ben Forkner suggests that 'McCann dwells on those inevitable moments when
- 50 FLANNERY, 'Troubling Bodies', *Irish Review* 40–41 (2009)

- 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'; 'The Irish Short Story (1980–2000): Ireland Anthologized', p.159.
- 17 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.
 - 18 Colum McCann, 'Everything in This Country Must', *Everything in This Country Must*, p. 3.
 - 19 The dysfunctional family unit is a feature that, again, is apparent in Joyce's *Dubliners*.
 - 20 McDonald, 'Strategies of Silence', p. 254.
 - 21 McCann, 'Everything in This Country Must', pp. 6–7.
 - 22 *ibid.*, p. 8.
 - 23 *ibid.*, p. 10.
 - 24 *ibid.*
 - 25 *ibid.*, p. 11.
 - 26 Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. xix.
 - 27 McCann, 'Everything in This Country Must', p. 12.
 - 28 Phillips, *On Flirtation*, p. xxv.
 - 29 Naturally, from a feminist viewpoint, it can be argued that this heterosexual flirtation is merely another device in the service of a further system of inter-sexual repression, which will incarcerate Katie's sexuality in new homosocial constraints. This line of questioning is not my concern in the current essay.
 - 30 Colum McCann, 'Wood', *Everything in This Country Must*, p.21.
 - 31 *ibid.*, p. 24.
 - 32 *ibid.*, p. 33.
 - 33 Sharman Apt Russell, *Hunger: An Unnatural History* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
 - 34 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.
 - 35 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.
 - 36 Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, p. 8.
 - 37 Joe Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 97–141.
 - 38 Colum McCann, 'Hunger Strike', *Everything in This Country Must*, pp. 55–6.
 - 39 *ibid.*, p. 72.
 - 40 *ibid.*, p. 97.
 - 41 *ibid.*, p. 143.
 - 42 Raymond Carver, 'On Writing', *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), p. 17.