Representation and Performance: *Dancer* (2003)

THE NOVEL, HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY

Introducing the work of John Banville, Derek Hand invokes the protracted genealogy of the novel in locating the formal and thematic loci of Banville's fictions. Hand alludes to Harold Bloom's recent thoughts on the significance of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as an aesthetic symptom of European cultural modernity.[1] Specifically, Hand is keen to highlight the internal paradox that is at the core of the novelistic tradition: 'On the one hand, it aspires towards certainty, unity, knowledge, and completeness, while on the other, obvious epistemological anxieties and ontological uncertainties are deeply bound up with it.'[2] Latterly, much postmodernist, or self-reflexive, literary fiction has tended towards the latter pole, reflecting philosophical and theoretical scepticism about the natures of modern society and the so-called modern 'subject'. The desire to cohere within the limits of a generic form are perpetually confounded by internal anxiety that meaning is always elsewhere, that there is always something absent. Thus, when one approaches the novel, one encounters a deeply anxious and/or defiantly playful form – one that is increasingly conscious of its provisionality. Hand continues: 'The novel hopes to succeed in its efforts to tell readers everything. However, in the end, it can offer nothing but shards and moments of possible insight.'[3] Yet such comments should not blind us to the utopian and hopeful dynamics of the novel form: the lack of conclusiveness, which is its necessary condition, does not render the novel devoid of political and cultural agency. 'Moments of possible insight' may be provisional but the impulse towards such fleeting epiphanies transfuses the novel with its future-oriented potentialities. From a formal perspective, as Hand maintains, the novel is entirely cognizant of the limits of its unity and the partiality of its

representations. But again, this is precisely what makes the novel, potentially, a quintessential democratic aesthetic space. Such issues, then, as formal self-consciousness, narrative anxiety, the politics of representation, and the relationship between the novelist and history are among those that preoccupy McCann's 2003 novel *Dancer*. If the novel as a form 'can offer nothing but shards', then McCann's novel is eminently characteristic. Its narrative teems with a dissonant chorus of voices, which are enunciated through a variety of narrative registers. These 'shards' are, firstly, part of the internal tremulousness of the genre, its recognition of its own failure as a form of conclusive communication. But at the same time, they represent its viability as an inclusive democratic space; *Dancer* provides a representational embrace to a multiplicity of unregistered personal histories. These unrecorded missives from the margins of recent history, then, are not indulged merely as part of an abstracted novelistic system of playful narration, but are representative of McCann's commitment to our titular 'aesthetic of redemption'. *Dancer* is aware of the urgency and legitimacy of novelistic intervention in the sphere of historical writing and representation. The consequences of historical writing can be too politically and ethically incendiary for these two adjacent fields of storytelling to be left in mutual exclusion. As McCann suggests:

> I'd rather not leave my sense of history, and certainly politics, to the talking-heads on the six o'clock news…There is a point, and a valid point, where writers can step in and create another logic or another angle or another question. Why not? There has to be a point where we, as writers, enter what people call 'history'. Not necessarily to legislate it, but certainly to witness it at its stranger, darker, quieter angles.[4]

As the above exposes, McCann's work exhibits an overt concern with the novel's and the novelist's relationship with 'the living stream' of history. Embedded within this historical sense are political and ethical questions about how such history or, more likely, histories, become monumentalized or jettisoned from historical accounts. *Dancer* is, arguably, McCann's most sustained interrogation of the interior workings of memory, historical record and literary representation. At a number of levels, *Dancer* is a frontal confrontation with mainstream complacency about established historical truths. And the novel edges towards a

deconstructive mode in many of its formal and thematic features. Indeed, a suitable departure point is to consider the paratextual devices operative in the novel, as they disclose the author's awareness of and sensitivity to the power of representation and narrative record. At the beginning of the text, McCann inserts two paratextual devices: an authorial statement and an epigraph; and there are 'Acknowledgements' at the end of the text. *Per se*, there is little unusual about the inclusion of these three technical features, but if we tackle them as a triangulation of authorial self-consciousness, then we are back to McCann's stated concern for the novelist's role in relation to the flow of history. The unpaginated authorial statement reads: 'This is a work of fiction. With the exception of some public figures whose names have been used, the names, characters and incidents portrayed are the work of the author's imagination' (*Dancer*).[5] This statement effectively approaches the idioms of the legalistic in its clipped assertion of the work's fictional origins. It is a resolutely unambiguous testimony that contradicts any 'truth' value that might be pursued in the ensuing narrative. Subsequent to this paratextual insertion, McCann includes a suggestive epigraph from William Maxwell's novel, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. The function of epigraphic material is, in general, transparent, as they locate the text quite explicitly in thematic terms. These quotations also invite or summon the reader to make this thematic connection via intuition or interpretation. Apart from obeying these structural requirements of the epigraph, the content of Maxwell's excerpt is consonant with the legalistic assertion of the authorial statement:

> What we, or at any rate, I, refer to confidently as a memory – meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion – is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we take. (*Dancer*)

Emplotment and falsity are, then, integral components of remembrance – at an individual level and in more collective contexts. What cannot be gainsaid, however, is the tenacity of humanity to seek perpetually to

organize its diverse histories and recollections, hence the importance of storytellers. But with importance comes responsibility, and while the storyteller – in the guise of the novelist or the historian – can manufacture generous narratives of consolation and celebration, the equivalent storytelling skills are prey to politicization in the service of marginalization or demonization. Yet the underlying truth is that each and all of these 'stories' are arbitrary and false in their forms and contents; it is simply an inconvenient truth we are content to disavow. From the legalistic to the novelistic, we move to the final side of McCann's paratextual triangle, the personal in his 'Acknowledgements'. What is remarkable about this paratext is the degree to which McCann anatomizes the intellectual labour that was invested in the production of the novel, as well as his authorial sensitivity to the power of literary and historical representation. He writes:

> In this novel many changes in names and geographies have been made to protect the privacy of people living and also to give a shape to various fictional destinies. I have, on occasion, condensed two or more historical figures into one or distributed the traits of one person over two or more characters. Some of the attributions to public figures are exact; others are fictional…I was privileged to read a great deal, fiction, non-fiction, journalism, poetry and internet material, in the course of researching this book. (*Dancer*, 291)

Because *Dancer* teases the reader with the prospects of biographical details, McCann is pressed to underline the extents to which he has undertaken authorial licence. As we have said, the passage is an open declaration of McCann's authorial process of research and production, and in this sense, alerts the reader to the laborious nature of creative industry. More pertinently to our discussion, it opens the door to fallibility and incompletion, as the novelist as historical investigator and as narrative creator can only ever aspire to parts of the histories and personalities that they are engaged with as textual content. Furthermore, McCann's undressing of authorial practice foregrounds the 'textuality' of the narrative – it emerges from a diversity of other textual sources and resources into the presented textual format. This last point, again, flags the anxiety and self-consciousness of the novel. But *Dancer* willingly exposes such sentiments in the service of a broader discussion of the roles and functions of all forms of narration and storytelling. In

a way the final passage above is an indication of the power of the author, but at the same time an acknowledgement of the limits of that authorial agency – power, in the sense that people invest emotionally in how they, their loved ones and events are textually represented and remembered; powerlessness in the sense that any text is a failure, as well as never being a self-contained autonomous textual assertion. Each of the paratextual devices belongs to a different register and, ostensibly, performs an exclusive task within the overall architecture of the book. Yet these mutually exclusive functions remind us of the 'textuality' of this literary artefact, and therefore the triangulation of passages collectively highlights the anxiety of textuality. Likewise, they are united by their common concern for the politics of remembrance and for the proximity of the vocations and responsibilities of the literary and historical storyteller.

The intersected operations of the literary and the historiographical are most effectively articulated by Linda Hutcheon in her, by now, classic intervention, *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Employing what has become recognizably postmodernist critical rhetoric, Hutcheon reflects that: 'we may no longer have recourse to the grand narratives that once made sense of life for us, but we still have recourse to narrative representation of some kind in most of our verbal discourses, and one of the reasons may be political.'[6] Though much critical and theoretical water may have passed under the bridge between Hutcheon's publication and the appearance of McCann's novel, there are definite traces of common interest. Despite the self-evident unreliability of narrative representation, the claims of narrative representation prove irresistible for a variety of reasons across social and cultural collectives. Hutcheon's point, then, is, perhaps, a truism within contemporary critical theory and literary studies; less so, one might suggest, within mainstream historical studies. And her argument resonates with McCann's stated attentiveness to the democratic opportunities of storytelling. The disestablishment of 'grand narratives' does not necessarily decommission narrative as such, but does democratize, potentially, access to narrative space. Of equal relevance is Hutcheon's later, and more enduring, contention on the phenomenon of 'historiographic metafiction'.[7] While it is difficult to argue, without remainder, that *Dancer* fits entirely within this literary genus, the novel does exist in formal and thematic adjacency to Hutcheon's typology: 'Historiographic metafiction is written today in

the context of a serious contemporary interrogating of the nature of representation in historiography. There has been much interest recently in narrative – its forms, its functions, its powers and its limitations – in many fields, but especially in history.'[8] Thus we can situate McCann's novelistic intervention within a longer, and ongoing, series of debates on the very fabric and, in the views of some historians, the very legitimacy of historical writing. Hutcheon's point contests the demarcations of fiction and non-fiction; of the literary and the historical; and of the imagination and factuality. Loss and creativity are key elements of historical writing, and these elements always shadow attributions of certainty and structure in form when it comes to the construction of historical narratives. There is an essential blindness to all encounters with the past, perhaps one that, *inter alia*, energizes and demoralizes those who write about the past. As Hutcheon concedes: 'the absent past can only be inferred from circumstantial evidence.'[9] Without recourse to putative hard evidence, testimony is partial, oblique and susceptible to the workings of imaginative emplotment. And this is precisely the juncture at which McCann enters the past, with his array of authorial and textual techniques aligned in creative representation of recorded and unrecorded histories. If, as Hutcheon maintains, 'Historiographic metafiction…traces the processing of events into facts, exploiting and then undermining the conventions of both novelistic realism and historiographic reference', then McCann's *Dancer* partakes of this act of narrative exposure through its polyphonic and multi-formal structure.[10] *Dancer* is presented as a cacophonous text, or in historiographical parlance, a congeries of documentary evidence, oral testimonies and first-hand accounts. McCann makes a series of formal selections that have consequences for the novel's problematic relation to historical writing, biographical life writing, and, of course, historiographic metafiction.

McCann's paratexts are indicative of the schizophrenic character of the 'historical': a version can be represented in a textually codified approximation, but the past can never be known, it always remains outside, beyond our epistemological grasp. We can fashion narratives about the past, but it is forever absent from these acts of textual containment. Nevertheless, as we alluded to above, acts of textual seizure do possess agency in their own right. But for the moment, it is worthwhile to focus upon the open-endedness that new approaches to

historiography bring to our understandings of and ways of re-imagining historical narration. While McCann's text throws into relief the gravity of historical representation, it also exploits the liberty afforded by contemporary critical assaults on the sanctity and empirical fortitude of historiographical theory and practice. The radical recalibration of the constitution of the historical is foundational, for instance, to historian Richard Jenkins' lateral political ambition. Again, vitalized by the concepts and the idioms of contemporary 'postal' theories, his view is that it is 'liberating for the creative imagination that there is no such thing as a correct historical method'; this is because 'it is this failure which allows radical otherness to come, new imaginations to emerge. We ought not to waste this chance of otherness, of newness, in deference to the dead weight of professional, academic orthodoxy.'[11] Out of the ultimate failure, the inevitable incapacity of historical representation, Jenkins imagines a new creative politics of representation; in McCann's terms: a democratic narrative terrain. Despite the feverish deployment of theoretical rhetoric, Jenkins' openness to historical inclusivity and his spotlighting of the 'creative' facets of the historian's task serve as enabling counterpoints to the social functionalism of mainstream historical writing. Most explicitly, such an argument chimes with McCann's vision of the respective roles of the literary writer and the historian, and the role of the writer as historian: 'The writer desires to see inside the dark corners in order to make sense of the room that has already been swept clean (or clean-ish) by historians, critics and journalists.'[12] McCann's endeavours in *Dancer* are a project of creative reclamation and of imaginative resuscitation. It is a project that pays tribute to the enabling force of creativity in dealing with the past, and one that recognizes the disabling distance of time and space in approaching those past personalities, places and events. The importance of 'ordering' in historical writing is laid bare by McCann in his repeated acknowledgement of his text's fictionality. In addition, in alighting on the lives and stories of a cast of disposable historical characters, McCann emphasizes the ways in which historical 'ordering' can be both redemptive (in his narrative) and exclusionary.

Through its appropriation of the life of Rudolf Nureyev, one of the twentieth century's stellar artists and politico-cultural icons, *Dancer* tantalizes the reader with the 'truth' value of biographical record. Yet as McCann's paratextual materials impress, the novel simply utilizes

Nureyev's existence as a means of re-imagining the latter half of the century, and in order to interrogate the nature of art and storytelling. Rather than focus on, and ratify again, the publicly accepted mythologies of Nureyev's biography, McCann is more concerned with the impacts of genius, of unrestrained celebrity and of the egotism of the supreme artist upon those that mingle around Nureyev over the course of his life, and the consequences of his vocation for his exiled family. In a sense, *Dancer* confronts the discourse of biographical life writing by trying to imagine everything that could not be included in an official biographical narrative. In McCann's view, he never intended 'it to be a book about Nureyev…it's about stories, other people telling stories and accidentally (almost) revealing a life'.[13] For McCann, biographies are points of imaginative departure and suggestiveness, rather than acts of textual confirmations or closure. Out of the officially recorded events and personalities of Nureyev's life, McCann appropriates, re-invents and transforms people, places and details to his own speculative aesthetic ends. Rather than adhere to the autocratic politics of consummate biographical testimony, *Dancer* effectively disturbs the factual historical anchorage of the field of biographical life writing.

Biographical life writing can be read as a sub-set of the larger field of historical writing discussed above. And *Dancer*, as McCann attests, functions as a lyrical and democratic deconstruction of the principles of narrative veracity, which are more often than not indexical of these two historical fields. In terms of biography, specifically, one of the key intentions of McCann's novel is evident in Hermione Lee's recent diagnosis on biographical life writing. An accomplished biographer in her own right, Lee gestures to one of the fundamental problems of biography when she argues 'that it can tend to sound too knowing and firm about the shape of its subject's life, to make it read too smoothly, to be too selective'.[14] Lee's argument bears affinities to the criticisms voiced earlier about contemporary historiography – both sets of criticisms seem underwritten by an equivalent urge for inclusivity, or, at least, regret the exclusionary limits of the respective forms of historical writing. 'Alternatives,' Lee continues, 'missed chances, roads not taken, accidents and hesitations, the whole "swarm of possibilities" that hums around our every experience, too often disappears in the smoothing biographical process.'[15] These latter possibilities are precisely the details McCann gathers in his narrative and they are,

again, crucial to the democratic and utopian politics that undergird his entire aesthetic enterprise. Lee's self-reflexive comments, then, reflect the problems and the expectations that adhere to the field of biography. And her intimation of the value of the creative and the currency of the marginal within biography are affirmations of the viability of McCann's metafictional usurpation of Nureyev's life stories. Both McCann's novel and Lee's critical commentaries on biography highlight the extent to which biography traverses fields of writing, learning and criticism. In any given biography: 'History, politics, sociology, gossip, fiction, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, documentary, journalism, ethics, and philosophy are all scrambled up inside the genre.'[16] Such a melange of discourses plays to the creative impetus of McCann's project, facilitating his fictional permissiveness with the past. In addition, the disparity of discourses explains the necessary autocracy of biographical representation – it is simply required to tame and to display this variety in a digestible, legible form. In *Dancer*, we witness the revolt of the former against the authority of the latter, and one of the key ways in which this representational disobedience is accomplished is through McCann's privileging of the body.

The mobile, sexual vigour of Rudi's body, in dance most explicitly, is a muscular refutation of the boundaries of biographical textual record. Again, Lee is instructive on this issue: 'What makes biography so endlessly absorbing is that through all the documents and letters and witnesses, the conflicting opinions and partial memories and fictionalized versions, we keep catching sight of a real body, a physical life…The life of the body plays much more of a part in contemporary biographical narratives.'[17] Herein we reveal the proximity of McCann's text to the field of biographical writing in its most explicit form. It is not just the novel's thematic attention to sexuality and ballet that presses the 'body' into centre-stage, but it is equally *Dancer*'s orbit around biographical writing that brings the 'body' into focus. The violence and the energy of Rudi's body confounds the subjugative intentions of the biographer's will; his visceral magnetism resonates beyond the signifying codes of the written word, as well as leaving lingering traces on the anonymous historical persons who came within his circle and his family life. Official biography cannot capture the physical pains, exhilarations or transient grace of his dancing body, nor can it do justice to its affectiveness in those moments of bodily expression. Like any textual representation,

biographies aspire to completion, but 'like lives, are made up of contested objects – relics, testimonies, versions, correspondences, the unverifiable'.[18] Biographies are also replete with gaps, silences and absent details, and all of the foregoing are seized upon and exploited by McCann in *Dancer*. Yet despite the relevance of discussing *Dancer* in relation to biography, it is emphatically not a biography. What it achieves is an implied critique of the genre, as well as employing accepted principles of the field of biography as a means of contesting the self-evidence of historical representation. Biography, then, is another weave in McCann's self-reflexive engagement with the art and act of storytelling. It is another mode through which he explores the politics of historical representation and reveals the elision of subaltern historical narratives.

In his hyper-sensual, free-wheeling narrative, Rudi's friend, Victor Pareci, a fictionalized homosexual *bon-vivant* in 1970s New York, distils one of many perspectives on Rudi's lifestyle. But Victor also exhibits a critical self-awareness about the narrative production of Rudi as a cultural and sexual icon: 'everyone with a Rudi story and each one more outrageous than the next – probably untrue – so that Rudi is a living myth' (*Dancer*, 199). Rudi's notoriety and accessibility as a celebrity fosters an economy of gossip and semi-attachment via rumour and hearsay. His life, in Victor's eyes, becomes an industry of speculation, projection and misrepresentation, and this is precisely McCann's point. In so far as *Dancer* approximates to biography, it too partakes of this narrative industry. The lure to create a fictionalized biographical portrait of Rudi is parasitical on the earlier, persistent economy of myths that crowd around Rudi and his memory. Victor provides a key metacritical pause in the midst of his own relentless, insatiable narrative arc. The remainder of the novel, its structure, voices and textual forms are referenced in Victor's conclusion above. But while he seems to be superficially concerned with the truth quotient of these batteries of stories about Rudi, McCann's real focus is the fact that deliberating over truth and falsity is futile anyway. The formal variety and the chorus of disparate voices afforded narrative space in *Dancer* highlight the author's ambiguous attitude to the claims of historical or biographical verisimilitude: 'for, as Rudi says, remaining unknowable is the only true way to be known' (*Dancer*, 200).[19]

Part of McCann's methodology in preparing *Dancer* takes us back to the field of biographical life writing and the impulse to unearth facts or shards of truth on the personality, the life story under consideration. In

interview McCann describes visiting Nureyev's hometown of Ufa on a research sortie, but this ostensible return to origins yielded scant concrete information on his subject: 'Amazingly, very few people there knew him. He was sort of like a rumour. That, in itself, helped contribute to the novel.'[20] The dearth of information gleaned by McCann in the home place is, firstly, a form of licence to imagine the character and the life that appears in *Dancer*. Rudi's insubstantial existence for the residents of Ufa acts as a catalyst for McCann to wrestle with the conventions of biographical form. Equally, the suggestion that Rudi survives as a kind of spectral figure fleshed out only in rumour actually becomes a key way of understanding the formal structure of the novel. The open-endedness implied by McCann's comments on his fictional subject feeds into his thematic concentration of the art of storytelling in *Dancer*. Similarly, the structure displayed is not univocal biographical storytelling, but multi-formal and multi-perspectival. The novel is a confection of textual forms, historical characters and events, invented characters and events, and semi-fictionalized versions of historical characters. Outlining the relative veracity of the novel, as well as justifying the factual liberties taken in the narrative, McCann remarks:

> On the broad canvas it's fair but it's an abstract fairness, if you will. It's an abstract portrait, concentrating on lines and brush-strokes and traditionally neglected parts of the canvass…Is it factual? No…But facts are mercenary things: they can be used and exploited in so many ways. I wanted to create a texture that was true. I also wanted to question the idea of storytelling. Who owns a story? Who has a right to tell a story? Who and what legislates what becomes a supposed fact?[21]

The catholicity of McCann's narrative forum in *Dancer* means that in responding to his own questions above, the solution seems to be that almost anyone, however peripheral to Rudi's life and legacy, is afforded an occasion to contribute to the tapestry of the larger story. The disparate cast-list includes Rudi's disaffected sister, Tamara; the husband and daughter of his first dance teacher; Margot Fonteyn; Andy Warhol; a young female Chilean dancer at the Kirov Ballet in Leningrad; a bachelor cobbler in London; Rudi's French housemaid, Odile; an anonymous rival at the Kirov; a further anonymous male who frequented homosexual meeting spots in Leningrad; Victor Pareci, Rudi's close

friend and fellow-traveller among homosexual gatherings in New York; and the wife of his dance teacher in Leningrad. The copiousness of the voices does not unfurl the coherence of the narrative; Rudi, though elusive and enigmatic, provides a magnetic core to the brachiating narrative vectors. But it is not simply that McCann shepherds a diffuse cast of voices and characters into *Dancer*, there is also a plenitude of textual forms through which these 'versions' of Rudi are articulated. Again, among the textual registers that punctuate the novel, we note diary entries, letters, magazine headlines, state surveillance reports, private journals, an aviation incident report form, and brief interpersonal notes. In addition to these forms of textual representation, McCann includes telephone conversations and radio broadcasts, as well as the ubiquitous communications of rumour and innuendo. Naturally some of these modes of representation and communication are more prominent than others, and they all vie with an occasional omniscient historical narration for narrative prominence, perhaps even authenticity. Thus the range of people and representational codes that clamour within *Dancer* evoke the vertiginous resonances of Rudi's life in other lives, yet none manage to secure a definitive version of Rudi. Neither individually nor in aggregate do the textual fragments adequately begin to know or to manage Rudi's character. Just as Rudi the exile remains unbounded by geographical borders, the textualized Rudi constantly evades final signification; in equal measure, Rudi's balletic body transcends the parameters of socialized corporeality. In each of these formal respects, McCann assents to Rudi's own belief in his precious unknowability.

DANCING BODIES

If, as we briefly noted, and as Susan Cahill maintains, 'Nureyev's life is used to engage with questions concerning storytelling, the creation of iconic figures, the relationship between individuals and historical discourses, and the place of the corporeal in such discourses', then it is worth accounting for the relations that exist between dance, the dancing body and history.[22] Rudi's balletic agency constitutes a somatic excess, which, following Derrida's theoretical figuration, harbours a specific liberating, deconstructive force.[23] The physical possibilities of dance are a further symptom of McCann's utopian politics, and balletic dance is another aesthetic field in which these hopeful politics are manifest.

Indeed, the utopian energies of dance form part of Ernst Bloch's utopian ur-text, *The Principle of Hope*. In this multi-volume philosophical-political survey, Bloch declares: 'The dance allows us to move in a completely different way to the way we move in the day, at least in the everyday, it imitates something which the latter has lost or never even possessed. It paces out the wish for more beautifully moved being, fixes it in the eye, ear, the whole body, just as if it already existed now.'[24] Bloch's argument envisions the seeds of a better existence in the refined expressive physicality of the dancing body; this operates in sharp contrast to the socialized contours of the labouring or consuming everyday body. The performed 'becomings' of dance transcend the oppressive gravity of the stilted or static body, and such politics are present in McCann's efforts to present the impacts and the possibilities of Rudi's balletic genius. Dance, then, becomes a presiding aesthetic and political agent within the novel, intersecting with the deconstructive re-imaginations of both historical writing and biographical life writing.

Within the discourse of dance studies, sentiments such as those expressed by Bloch, and represented by McCann, abound and cohere around a general 'philosophy that understands the body not as a self-contained and closed entity but as an open and dynamic system of exchange, constantly producing modes of subjection and control, as well as resistance and becoming'.[25] Lepecki's transgressive vision of the dancing body is endorsed in a feminist context by Elizabeth Dempster, who argues that: 'the body, dancing, can challenge and deconstruct cultural inscription…In moments of dancing the edges of things blur and terms such as mind/body, flesh/spirit, carnal/divine, male/female become labile and unmoored, breaking loose from the fixings of their pairings.'[26] In broaching the affective violence and discipline of balletic dance through Nureyev, McCann, then, faces a problematic as author. The arguments of Lepecki and Dempster affirm the empowering contingency of dance as an affront to the embalming grasp of signification. Yet, as an author, McCann must remain conscious of the ultimate failure he faces in his efforts to represent, in text, the affective force of Rudi's balletic performances. The danger of metaphorizing dance as a critical tool is that one (either critic or novelist) reduces the art form to a function of an abstract idea. So, it is true that 'Derrida theorises dance as a conceptual movement that disrupts and reorients spaces through which it moves', but one must retain a perspective on

the non-conceptual aspects of dance.[27] In other words, as dance critic Susan Leigh Foster counters: 'these writings…move quickly past arms, legs, torso and head on their way to a theoretical agenda that requires something unknowable or unknown as an initial premise. The body remains mysterious and ephemeral, a convenient receptacle for their new theoretical positions.'[28] Foster's is a polemical caveat, but it is worth recalling as we discuss the somatic articulations of McCann's Nureyev, and as we consider the service to which McCann puts this bodily incarnation of freedom and beauty. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which McCann's narrative, firstly, remains conscious of and loyal to the bodily functions of the art of dance, as Foster demands. And, secondly, there is a continuous awareness of the transformative agency of dance as an art form voiced by Rudi and others in the narrative. Thus, McCann certainly exploits both the metaphorical possibilities of dance, following Derrida, and the physically affective after-effects of dance on performers and audiences.

From a critical perspective, and drawing on Derrida's essay 'Choreographies', Cahill pursues the deconstructive dimensions of Rudi's balletic performances in relation to the framing of historical and memorial time. Put simply, she concludes that: 'Dance seems to evade and resist any attempt to freeze it in representation', a problematic that McCann is boundaried by, but is eager to display in his inevitable failure.[29] Despite the significations and figurations of choreography, the dancing body overcomes such idealizing and conventional codes to become 'an experiment, all of its impulses going to the creation of an adventure and the end of each adventure being a new impulse towards further creation' (*Dancer*, 209). The performative cannot be contained within signification; it is resistant to documentation or to archivization and thereby hints at a vital utopian impulse. The body in balletic movement is visceral, toned, sexual, desired and violent, and is the site of intense utopian creativity. The body in performance cannot be held or stilled; as Peggy Phelan argues, performance is its own annihilation and performance becomes through its own disappearance.[30] Part of Rudi's elusiveness as a person, which is crucial to McCann's allusions to biography, is conditioned by his life as a performer. Rudi's career, his entire life and lifestyle, are deeply performative; his talent, celebrity and political notoriety demand the cultivations of personae, so that, in the end, we are left querying where or who or what is Rudolf Nureyev.

And, perhaps, this is one of McCann's key speculations. If, as Phelan contends, 'in the plenitude of its [performance] apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else', then where are we ever likely to locate Rudi?[31] McCann's deliberate engagement with historiography and biography, together with dance theory and the politics of performance, cohere around the impossibility of representation. Rudi's body and his life provoke mystery, desire and rumour, all of which have been domesticated by the publication of biographies; his enlistment to political causes; and his absorption into dance history. Yet his stories are those of others in McCann's treatment, and Rudi's meaning is always elsewhere and diffused; it is as unlikely to be captured in *Dancer* as in any other textual representation. Primary among the tensions in *Dancer* is that between the arresting, explosive performances of Rudi as dancer and the choreographic structure of balletic dance. Rudi abides by the firm hands of disciplined practice and exertion, yet his onstage performances travel beyond the received conventions of the art. As C.J.C. Bull notes: 'ballet…represents ideals of exquisitely controlled technical precision and emotional expressions combined with a classical (traditional) framework.'[32] In other words, traditionally there is a scripted form to the balletic performance, as Bull stresses terms such as 'ideals', 'controlled', 'classical' and 'framework'. But throughout the novel, Rudi seems to possess an intuition that disavows any unquestioning allegiance to the ideals of traditional balletic tradition. Helen Thomas re-iterates Bull's argument on the primacy of structure to the successful realization of balletic beauty. She suggests that: 'the mastery of the *codified* positions, shapes, and "steps" constitute the core of the ballet student's training in pursuit of the idealised body based on the aesthetic ideals of classical beauty [my emphasis].'[33] Again, Thomas's language accentuates the importance of abstracted ideals to the dancer's body, and emphasizes the necessary subjugation of that body to the traditional codes of the discipline. In a sense, both Bull and Thomas underline the foundational forms of balletic dance, pressing the key role played by rigour and structure in dance as a bodily vocation. And there is evidence in *Dancer* of the extremities to which the young Rudi extended his body to achieve the stature, proportions and malleability of the accomplished balletic artist. In training and rehearsal, Rudi shows commitment and subservience to the formal structure of his art; however, in public performance the

heightened levels of affectiveness that his dancing engenders are suggestive of an artist that has transcended such formal codification. Rudi is an artist who is expressing a vibrancy that extends beyond the notations of classical balletic beauty. Diagnosing this potency in the young Rudi, his first dance teacher, Anna, believes 'that he was somehow born within dance, that he was unlettered in it, yet he knew it intimately, it was a grammar for him, deep and untutored' (*Dancer*, 44). Rudi's relationship with his vocation, then, is, at one level, a confrontation with history and with artistic form; his excessive performances are affronts to conventional concepts of both. Thus both body and textual forms are thrown into the centre of the narrative by this problematic crux at the core of Rudi's artistic career. Rudi's body is one of the dynamic agents across the narrative – indeed the somatic is a pivotal symbolic locus for McCann's novel as a whole. But of similar relevance is the overt concern for textual form and the mosaic-like fragments that are corralled to form McCann's fractured narrative. The co-location of the body and of narrative as key thematics, thus, operates in terms of form and content.

In a scene that bears more than a passing resemblance to Ursula Andress's sensual exit from the sea in the James Bond film *Dr. No*, Margot Fonteyn describes Rudi's emergence after a swim: 'She watches Rudi's slow rise from the water, head first, then shoulders, then chest, his tiny waist, his penis large even after the chill of the water, his giant thighs, the tough calves, the Michelangelo of him' (*Dancer*, 160–1). This first part of her meditation on Rudi's drenched, muscular anatomy asserts the rippling physical prowess of Rudi. His body is detailed, even objectified, in Fonteyn's systematic representation of its parts. Rudi's hyper-masculine physique is, in Fonteyn's view, historical, even epochal, in its stature; in her description Rudi's body becomes an object of art, a sculptural emergence from the sea. This is a body that she is acquainted with through their years of dance partnership: 'She has, in dance, touched every part of him. His clavicle, his elbow, the lobe of his ear, his groin, the small of his back, his feet. Still, she raises her hand formally to her lips, as if to compensate for her lack of surprise' (*Dancer*, 161). Not only does her account re-affirm the intimate physicality of the discipline and the art of dance, but these outlines of Rudi's body are objective lists of external features and appendages. The aggregation of these bodily parts in balletic motion is, as we shall

discuss below, vigorously affective across a range of characters and audiences. But at this point, it seems that despite the affectiveness of Rudi's bodily exertions, there remains something remote about the body. In this regard, McCann suggests its fragility and its isolated humanity in Fonteyn's portrait. What we get, in essence, is a description of a biological body – beautiful in its proportions but one that is vulnerable to ageing and to objectification. At the same time, this body in balletic movement is capable of transcending such simple objectification and, as such, the body, Rudi's body, becomes a site of contestation. Rudi's body becomes a site onto which competing desires and motives are inscribed. But it also becomes a volatile medium through which, potentially, concretized notions of time, history and identity are chall-enged.

Immediately succeeding Fonteyn's portrait of Rudi's body, there is a change in narrative focalization, as we move to a first-person narrative in Rudi's voice. Invoking one of the many extra-diegetic texts in the novel, this section opens with Rudi reflecting on the contemporary global monumentalization of his body:

> *Cosmopolitan: The world's most beautiful man.* One must confront the fact that the face will change and the body is vulnerable. But so what? Enjoy the moment. The *world's* most beautiful man! When I'm seventy and sitting by the fire, I will take the photos out and weep, ha! Somebody stuck the cover on my mirror and added devil's horns. I wouldn't mind but the bastards ruined my eye-liner pen – it is probably the fat cleaning bitch who left in tears yesterday. (*Dancer*, 161)

Having moved from Fonteyn's intimate appreciation of Rudi's beauty, his physical allure is trumpeted on an international scale through a mass-media publication. Rudi is firmly ratified as a rarefied object of aesthetic value by this high-circulation magazine. The headline underscores Rudi's achievement of popular fame, and of the fact that his body has entered global circulation as an object of high aesthetic currency. The first-person narration betrays the momentary consciousness of inevitable mortality and decline, but quickly re-establishes the current and future worth of this media celebration of his physique. Yet the final sentences of the extract reveal the subcutaneous sides of Rudi's volatile character. The superficial celebrity bestowed by this brand-defining image

is complicated by implications about Rudi's interpersonal behaviour. Nevertheless, *Cosmopolitan*, and this episode, represents a triumphant moment in Rudi's narrative; the bold headline is a brief, but telling, 'version' of Rudi and it exposes the centrality of his body and its beauty, to who and what he is and will become. Rudi's physical prowess is core to the narrative of celebrity, of objectification and of commodification, which provides one of the strands through which the body is explored by McCann. Celebrity and commodification, and the ways in which the body is forced to perform, are parts of the debilitating logic of progressive history. They become means by which Rudi and his body are tamed and rendered marketable, and appear knowable. But these are limits that Rudi's life and his body transcend and escape in other crucial ways. There is a profoundly delimiting and conservative orientation to Rudi's exposition as an ideal of physical beauty. But it is within his means, his bodily means, to defy these limits through the sheer force and ambition of his balletic performances.

In a letter to his sister Tamara dated June 1964, having heard of his father's death, Rudi lays bare many of the travails of his career. In this missive he details his travels, his emotional condition, his fears, his political opinions, and his deep regret and sorrow at his father's passing. The narrative form is one of the few occasions we gain access to Rudi's first-person testimony, and while there is certainly an intimacy and a physical dedication in the act of letter writing, it equally implies distance and physical separation. Whereas the selected diary entries we read of Rudi's progress are private, veering from impressionistic to intense in tone, this letter forms part of a familial rapprochement, or at the very least an effort at détente across the European mainland. The letter is not especially lengthy, but compacted into its frame are insights into Rudi's public and private lives. The passing of his father, with whom he had a remote and fractious relationship, initiates a burst of textual self-reckoning for Rudi. The formal composition of the letter represents a disciplining of the body and mind, a process of focused reflection and expression, but, as above, its very necessity betrays the incessant motion of Rudi's life away from his family and his homeland. Given his political defection from the Soviet Union, both his family and his homeland are not only distant, but are effectively sealed from his return. Indeed, the letter is likely to be the object of censorious scrutiny over the course of its journey from West to East. Nevertheless, we find

a stress on the importance of dance for Rudi and an effort by him to separate fact from fiction about his life condensed into the letter. He is keen to address the distortions that abound about his lifestyle to his sister, maintaining that these are political in their motivations. The letter is significant, then, in that it is an attempt to humanize Rudi, as he tries to strip away the fabulous mythologies and ideological propaganda, which form so much of his perceived persona. Yet, through all of his exiled travel, the patronage and the wanton rumours, dance is a palliative outlet for Rudi; ballet retains a non-judgemental purity for him as an escape from the demands of his political and cultural objectification.

On the night following the belated news of his father's death, Rudi takes to the stage in Milan, but this dedication to performance is not based on a sense of professional duty. Again gesturing to the almost preternatural qualities of dance, Rudi writes to Tamara that: 'dance to me, as you know, is every emotion perfectly crystallised, not just celebration, but death, futility and loneliness too. Even love must pass through loneliness. So I danced him alive. When I went on stage I was released. You may choose not to believe this, but it is the truth' (*Dancer*, 139). With the demise of one body, his father's, Rudi's excessive physical talent assumes a kind of spiritual function. Despite the protracted tension of this father–son relationship, Rudi submits a charged and emotive performance as an act of resurrection for his father. The burden of emotional distance that obtained between Rudi and his father, particularly due to Rudi's choice of career, is assuaged by the balletic performance. The physical bounds of the body, which inevitably include decrepitude, pain and death, are overcome for Rudi by this performative restitution. If death is the telos of human life, the unavoidable terminus of linear time, as Cahill argues in her Derridean reading of *Dancer*, 'Rudi's body operate[s] within the narrative as a codification of alternate modes and paradigms of conceptualising time and memory.'[34] The past, his father, their life together are resurrected through Rudi's balletic dance, through his body's dynamic and transcendent performance, which obliterates the staid uniformity of linear history. The dancing body, and Rudi's life, interrogate the boundaries of both historical time and historical narration. In the same letter, Rudi further attempts to disaggregate his art from its imbrication in the politics of the Cold War. And again, his argument is a moment of self-legitimation to his absent sister: 'Politics is for fat men with cigars. It is not for me, I am a dancer, I live to dance.

That is all…I go from country to country. I am a non-person where I became a person. I am stateless where I exist. So it is. And so it has been, even I suppose since our days in Ufa. It is dance, and dance only, that keeps me alive' (*Dancer*, 140). Of course, it is naïve of Rudi to think that his celebrity and his talent can remain aloof from political exploitation, but is also legitimate for him to imagine beyond the grim polarities of Soviet–American *realpolitik*.

Dance is, as he confirms, essential to his very being; its performance is the kernel of the performance of his identity. As we have seen, dance is redemptive and transgressive at the same time; its somatic articulations and gestures reach beyond the edges of the daily physicality of life and achieve substantial spiritual dimensions for Rudi. As his travelogue essays, his itinerant professional and personal lives may offer opportunities to take 'tea in the White House with President Kennedy…[to dance] at the inauguration of Johnson. At the Vienna State Opera House…' (*Dancer*, 140), but there is a counter-current in Rudi that has 'no desire to be served up as a sensation, a nine-day wonder' (*Dancer*, 140). These examples intersect with his visual objectification via the mass media, but it is here in his letter that he summarily acknowledges how such treatment is managing to hollow out his identity. He touches upon the fact that his life is manufactured as a succession of triumphant spectacles. But, again, he returns to the sanctuary and the vitality offered by and through dance; it is the art that sustains him and that harbours the possibility of retreat from his glamorous rootlessness. Rudi is welcomed and feted everywhere he performs and visits, but it is only in the act of dancing that he really feels a sense of belonging. Only in performance can he elude the superficial roles and identities that have been granted to him, that have begun to stand in for any degree of authenticity. In all of these ways dance, the performative enunciations of his balletic body, possesses vital utopian impulses. His art is a liberating aesthetic of the body, with which he seeks to flee the stasis of Cold War politics and the superficialities of rootless celebrity. And such dynamism is most expressly verbalized by Rudi in the second to last line of his letter when, referring to his mother, he implores Tamara to 'inform her that her son dances to improve the world' (*Dancer*, 142). Rudi's ambition may be overstated but there is no denying the lateral and durable impact of his balletic art across the globe; and his aspiration as a dancer chimes with that attributed to the art by Bloch. But

the broader point centres on the utopian possibilities of art: the viability, even responsibility, of creative art to intervene, and to articulate utopian visions. This does not necessarily equate to polemical or instrumental political art but, in McCann's view, a recognition of the historicity of the artist and their art, all of which bring responsibility and opportunity. The hubris of Rudi's statement suggests, on the one hand, a defensive posture from a son exiled from his mother; but, on the other, is indicative of Rudi's ferocious self-belief, which we witness via the novel's other voices. These concluding remarks reveal a burgeoning consciousness of his position as a world-historical figure, but the letter also exposes his ambiguous feelings about assuming such a status. Attaining this status invites celebrity in tandem with vulnerability to misrepresentation, both of which McCann exploits in his re-imagination of this celebrated life and career. But what is crucial about this letter is the centrality it reveals about dance in Rudi's life, and just how dependent he is on his art. The body in motion as exile and as performer operate at different levels in the novel: Rudi as exiled, international performer is confined to a form of corporate incarceration, while Rudi the *avant garde* dancer experiences exhilarating freedom through balletic expression.

The body in history is not only represented by Rudi's life and art in the novel – McCann opens *Dancer* with a graphic account of the brutalizing experiences of Russian soldiers during the Second World War. Delivered by an omniscient narrative voice, the first five pages of the novel, subtitled 'Soviet Union 1941–*56*', recount the visceral sufferings of these exposed military bodies under the most severe conditions. McCann provides micro- and macro-details of the dehumanizing bodily endurances of this military campaign. The anonymous soldiery undergo punishing exertions and the effects of the war are indelibly scripted onto the surfaces and the dismembered appendages of their bodies. These bodies are described without any of the soldiers being identified, none is allowed to become our primary focalizer, and, consequently, the opening section becomes representative of 'the body in history', and the inscription of politics onto the human body. By opening in this manner, McCann foregrounds the extreme violences that are complacently, and willingly, committed on mass scales under the pressure of political expediency. In image after image, McCann details the exacting carceral toll of history on millions of undocumented historical individuals: 'When they touched bare metal the flesh tore away from their

hands…if they shat, which was not often, they had to shit in their pants…To piss, they hitched oilskin sacks under their trousers so they didn't expose themselves to the weather and they learned to cradle the warmth of the pissbag between their legs' (*Dancer*, 7–8). The privacies of bodily functions become ordeals, as the war conditions subvert the normalcy of bodily evacuation. Yet these simplicities, while unhygienic, pale in comparison to the mortal forces of the military equipment that assaults these abject bodies: 'Pieces of shrapnel caught beneath their eyes. Bullets whipped clean through their calf muscles. Splinters of shells lodged in their necks. Mortars cracked their backbones. Phosphorus bombs set them aflame' (*Dancer*, 9). The technology of conflict mutilates and disables the body, and the history of technological invention runs its course parallel to history's violent assault on the human body. And this notion of the violence of history sedimenting dead bodies in the landscape is expressed by McCann: 'The dead were heaped onto horse cars and laid in mass graves blown out of the ground with dynamite…Yet more dead were heaped upon the dead, and frozen bones were heard to crack, and the bodies lay there in their hideous contortions' (*Dancer*, 9). In this opening section, the body is presented as tactile, as vulnerable, as partial, as organic and as disposable. This initial panorama of deformations, then, alerts us to the implication of history, politics and the body, but does so in a torrent of violence. The nightmare scenario depicted by McCann points to the callous choreography of warfare under which the anonymized, militarized body is stripped of humanity as a purely functional entity. But it is at the very end of this section that we catch a glimpse of the future, of a hopeful germ that will enliven the remainder of the novel: 'each winter afternoon a six-year-old boy, hungry and narrow and keen, sat on a cliff above the river, looking down at the trains, wondering when his own father would be coming home and whether he would be broken just like the ones they were lifting from beneath the steam and the bugles' (*Dancer*, 12–13). In retrospect we know this to be Rudi, captured in tense expectancy, imagining and hoping beyond the carnage of the immediate. The dismal toll of bodies up to this point is soon to have a redemptive counterpoint in the shape of Rudi's dancing body.

This boy re-enters the narrative through the first-person voice of a female volunteer at the military hospital at Ufa. As part of the recuperative programme for the wounded soldiers, a troupe of local children

visit and dance in the hospital wards. Initially the troupe performs as a group under the stern eye of their female instructor, but 'just when we thought they were finished, a small blond boy stepped out of the line. He was about five or six years old. He extended his leg, placed his hands firmly on his hips and hitched his thumbs at his back. He bent his neck slightly forward, stretched his elbows out and began' (*Dancer*, 20). Amid the bodily ruination of the hospital, Rudi makes his first balletic appearance in the narrative. There is a practised assurance to the preparatory routine that Rudi performs, and McCann presents the young dancer beginning to assert mastery over his body as a performer. His talent, his youth and his blossoming skill as a dancer bestow respite to the exhausted soldiers, and his childish dancing body speaks of the future. The dance troupe represent the endurance of art, but equally the contrary actuation of the body in history as a site of redemption and as an instrument of aesthetic beauty. In this anonymous sight of Rudi the boy-performer, we begin to appreciate the affective agency of dance and, in particular, the affective agency that Rudi will wield over so many in the ensuing years of his career. At this juncture, however, the dystopian terrains that assail the bodies of the Russian soldiers, that dismember them as sacrifices to politics, are countered by the utopian energies of Rudi's boyish grace in dance.

DESIRE AND DANCE

But as Rudi develops as a dancer, with Anna's tuition and, subsequently, at the Kirov Ballet in Leningrad, it becomes apparent that his performances, indeed his whole bodily carriage, are transfused with much more than simple grace. Gradually, dance becomes the dominant articulation of his body; it is as if it was the precise reason that his body was created. As Yulia, Anna's daughter, remarks: 'He stood stately in the centre of the room, feet together, and it struck me that his body had now accepted dance as its only strategy' (*Dancer*, 80). The measured routine of the boy in Ufa has evolved into a holistic bodily performance – dance is the only energy that circulates in Rudi's body at this point. And such total immersion manifests in Rudi's dexterous balletic performances, even at this formative stage of his career. At his first showcase performance at the Leningrad Choreographic, attended by Yulia and Anna, Rudi's achievement is breathtaking. Transcending the

logic of scripted choreography, Rudi's rendition of *Notre-Dame de Paris* is perfect, in Anna's view: 'he danced perfectly, light and quick, pliant, his line controlled and composed, but more than that he was using something beyond his body – not just his face, his fingers, his long neck, his hips, but something intangible, beyond thought, some kinetic fury and spirit' (*Dancer*, 81). So while Rudi remains faithful to the postures and gestures of his balletic education – he assimilates the foundational codes of the tradition – Yulia intuits an extra-bodily power at work in Rudi's performance. Her intuition suggests that there is, indeed, an 'excessive' quality to Rudi's dance, which if it is 'beyond thought', may well lead to desire and spirituality. Yulia does not, at this stage, fully apprehend the affectiveness of Rudi's performance, nor does McCann fully develop the effects of his dancing body on his audiences. For the moment, the singular parts of Rudi's body, as listed by Yulia, far exceed their prosaic physicality. The bare biology of Rudi's body, in stark contrast to that of the Russian soldiers at the beginning of the novel, is broiling with potential, and it is intimated that this corporeality houses an anticipatory aesthetic promise. This same sense of a vivifying extra-physical performer is apparent shortly after, when Rudi's mother and sister attend a performance at the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall, again in Leningrad. The opulence of the hall's decorative trappings is far removed from the provincial material poverty of the lives of these two women, but, again, Rudi's dancing entrances and uplifts. McCann's description focuses on the combined physicalities of both dancer and his family members: 'As the dance begins their hands are clenched tight in their laps, but soon the women are gripping each other, amazed to see Rudi, not just the dance, but what he has become, whole and full and fleshed, patrolling the stage, devouring space, graceful and angry' (*Dancer*, 91). But it is his mother's response to witnessing her son perform for the first time that ends this section: 'His mother leans forward in her plush velvet seat, awed and slightly frightened. This is my flesh and blood, she thinks. This is what I have made' (*Dancer*, 91). The nervous energy of Rudi's family is dissipated by the vision of his balletic achievement; the mother and daughter are drawn together in an enthralled embrace at the sight of his performance. In contrast to Yulia's description, there is less focus on the individual parts of Rudi's body, as now we begin to appreciate the emotional and somatic affectiveness of his body, as well as to understand the creative and destructive

vitalities that exist within that body. Rudi's mother's reflection on her biological production of this phenomenon, this nubile, artistic body on stage, reminds us of the base physicality of the ballet dancer. But, more importantly, this stresses the gap that Rudi has opened between that brute physicality and the transcendent balletic motion of his art. Rudi may well be Farida's 'flesh and blood', but in his artistic expressiveness he possesses the capacity to awe and to frighten her.

As Rudi's fame spreads and his talent matures, the provocative abilities of his performances become more apparent, and his artistic flourishes become more closely entwined with expressions of sexuality and desire. In this register Rudi's performance is mediated by Yulia; we receive a highly charged first-person account of her exposure to Rudi's dancing body. Though experienced in crowded venues, though they are communal events, the dancing body of Rudi provokes the audience in private, individual ways. Yulia's account of Rudi's entrance in *Giselle* at the Kirov captures the incendiary force of his performance: 'The lights were dimmed. When Rudi entered, exploding from the wings to a round of applause, he tore the role open, not so much by how he danced, but by the manner in which he presented himself, a sort of hunger turned human' (*Dancer*, 125). The allusion to 'hunger' naturally suggests a lack of satiety and a striving after fulfilment. Rudi's dance is not complete in itself as a classical masterpiece, rather it unfolds as a 'becoming' – there is a simultaneous feeling of rapture in the presence of the dance, and regret at its immediate disappearance in performance. The balletic performance is an instantiation of creation and obliteration, a consummate expression of desire, and it is the idea of desire that is crucial to Yulia's response to Rudi's performance. As Rudi's performance crescendos, so too does Yulia's emotional and visceral response; she returns to describing the contours of Rudi's body as 'a thing of the most captivating beauty – hard lines at his shoulders, his neck striated with muscle, enormous thighs, his calf muscles twitching' (*Dancer*, 126). But while Yulia may be able to rationalize and to catalogue the individual parts of Rudi's body, she is not in control of the affectiveness that his body exercises on her body. These portraits of Rudi are superficial, but the ensuing effects on Yulia excite deep carnal desires. Watching this dancing body in motion, she 'tried to quell whatever emotion was overcoming me. I was holding the edge of the chair far too tightly, nails gripping the wood' (*Dancer* 126). Rudi's danc-

ing evokes an unconscious and frenzied response from Yulia, which is ultimately expressed in fumbled sexual intercourse with the husband she scarcely loves. The beauty and the artistry of the performance that catalyzes Yulia's desire could not be more removed from the stilted choreography of the sexual act that follows:

> When I entered the room Iosif was sitting at the table, drunk. I put my hands on his shoulders and kissed him. Shocked, Iosif pushed me aside, filled his glass, downed it quickly, then stumbled across the room and kissed me back. I tried to guide him into making love to me against the wall, but he was hardly able to hold me, drunk as he was. Instead he pulled me to the floor. (*Dancer*, 126)

Yulia's sexual assertion is a positive assertion of her repressed sexual self under a grim marital regime. This is enabled by her experience of the sublimity of Rudi's dancing body, which, as she reveals, 'still spun in me – Rudi had stood upon that stage like an exhausted explorer who had arrived in some unimagined country and, despite the joy of the discovery, was immediately looking for another unimagined place, and I felt perhaps that place was me' (*Dancer*, 126). Still further, as she confesses, she harbours a lingering sexual desire for Rudi – the young provincial who arrived and lodged with her several years before his becoming a dazzling object of sexual desire for her. His performance is a spur to the memory of her sexuality, which has been dormant in her marital years. Her figuration of Rudi's posture on stage encapsulates the inherent utopian dynamic of his art, and is connotative of the desire and the hunger that are at the heart of Rudi as dancer. Through his embodiment of desire in dance, Rudi provokes the appetites of his audiences. Some desire him; to others he just awakens the memory of desire. As Cahill argues: 'The novel details the impact dancing makes on the corporeal but throughout the text, the body dancing, that is, the body moving through space and time, is figured as exerting an influence over the audience. Rudi while dancing seems to possess the ability to lend his physical potential to the viewer.'[35]

The virtuosity of Rudi's talent is not only narrated by first-hand experiences such as Yulia's, but McCann also provides lyrical omniscient descriptions of his balletic athleticism. While the first-person narratives reveal the individual effects of the dancing body, the latter sections of the novel allow McCann the author to revel in language.

McCann attempts to represent the actualities of Rudi's performances in highly descriptive passages, trying to seize the somatic articulacy in words. In one such elongated passage, he writes:

> Music reaches into his muscles, the lights spin, he glares at the conductor, the tempo is corrected, and he continues, controlled at first, each more careful and precise, the pieces beginning to fit, his body elastic, three *jetes en tournant*, careful of the landing, he extends his line, beautiful movement ah cello go. The lights merge, the shirtfronts blur. A series of pirouettes. He is at ease, his body sculpted to the music, his shoulder searching the other shoulder, his right toe knowing the left knee, the height, the depth, the form, the control, the twist of the wrist, the bend of his elbow, the tilt of his neck, notes digging into his arteries, and he is in the air now, forcing his legs up beyond muscular memory, one last press of the thighs, an elongation of form, a loosening of human contour, he goes higher and is skyheld. (*Dancer*, 168)

In this key passage, McCann strives to 'write' performance as a physical enactment; the passage chases Rudi's dancing body in its efforts to represent the balletic exertion of this body. There is an effort here to convey the sinewy muscularity and the supreme virtuosity of Rudi's performance, yet there is always a gap, a loss and an absence in the author's endeavour to represent the performative. McCann employs language in order to grasp the dynamic, ethereal qualities of Rudi's dancing body. Rudi is 'a blur of unbroken energy' (*Dancer*, 168); with the audience in stunned, silent rapture, he is 'a thing of wonder…no body anymore no thought no awareness this must be the moment the others call god as if all the doors are open everywhere leading to all other open doors no thing but open doors forever…this is my soul in flight born weightless born timeless' (*Dancer*, 168–9). McCann's Joycean idiom in the latter quotation connotes a sensation of unfettered freedom in balletic expression for Rudi. Yet McCann's syntax, diction and figuration can only deliver a belated approximation of this quasi-religious experience. It is possible to import the technical language of classical ballet into the narrative – '*jetes en tournant*'; '*entrechats-dix*' (*Dancer*, 168) – but the enactment of these abstractions belongs to a different level of somatic and spiritual experience.

McCann's self-evident failure to seize the aggregated rapture of

performer and audience is, of course, symptomatic of all negotiations between performance and representation. And it is this enabling excess or elusiveness that constitutes one of the key concerns of McCann's authorial intent. In focusing on this one particular performance by Rudi, with Margot Fonteyn, McCann gestures, in fictional form, to the impossibilities faced by the novel. This one performance can be rhapsodized in lyrical language, it can be figurated in poetic prose, but there is always a loss at the heart of the representation. Similarly, the multifaceted character of the focal point of the novel, Rudi, is equally elusive and deferred. We gain snapshots, vignettes of his life, its impacts and tragedies, and of world history, but, ultimately, all are as provisional and insubstantial as the attempt to textualize the achievements of Rudi's body in balletic motion. In this sense, we can read both this portrait of Rudi in performance and McCann's narrative more generally in terms of Peggy Phelan's comments on the relationship between performance and representation: 'Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance' (*Dancer*, 146). There is, then, an inevitable failure to McCann's attempts to seize the balletic in prose form; but, equally, all forms of narration, including history and biography, fail to subdue and to contain Rudi's stories. But this inevitable failure is infused with utopian impulses, which defy, or contradict, the certainties of narrow representational boundaries. In accenting polyphony, McCann conducts a self-reflexive critique of authorial autonomy in relation to the fields of historical and biographical life writing. He employs the idea of performance, both in terms of dance and, more generally, as a social concept, to confront these discursive issues. *Dancer* provides a welter of memorial accounts of varying lengths and degrees of familiarity in a cross-section of textual forms as a means of highlighting the provisionality of its own bases. The novel is partly, then, a metafictional narrative that raises questions about the complacent attitudes to historical writing and biographical life writing. In these ways, McCann's narrative possesses deconstructive and utopian energies, as it deploys imaginative and critical-creative strategies in its construction. In utopian vein, *Dancer* asserts the viability of a more democratic attitude to historical representation; McCann produces a narrative that tackles the politics of

performance as well as the performative nature of the historical subject.

The concluding section of *Dancer* narrates, via his sister, Tamara, and Yulia, his long-postponed returns to Leningrad and Ufa. After over twenty years of self-inflicted political and personal exile, Rudi makes a typically fleeting return visit to two sites of origin for him as a person and as an artist. For much of the novel, one of the submerged themes of Rudi's adult life was the impossibility of returning to his home, and this is suggested by his difficulty in never securing a sense of rootedness or homeliness across these years of exile and across these geographies of celebrity. Rudi locates a sanctuary, though, in his art, in the balletic performances detailed above. Indeed as we recall Rudi's final encounter with Ufa and with his mother, his condition bears more resemblance to Edward Said's characterization of exile. Said writes that exile is 'restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier or perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation.'[36] As Rudi is driven through the streets of Ufa before he is reunited with his elderly mother, we get a picture of how disconnected the present is from Rudi's memories of this town. In Pierre Nora's terms, Rudi is deprived of *lieux de memoire* on his return: 'The Opera House was closed; our old house on Zentsov Street had been knocked down long ago; the hall on Karl Marx Street was locked up; and the road to the Tatar graveyard was impassable' (*Dancer*, 277). The mark of history is legible on the geography of Ufa, but the intimacies of personal history and memory are only signalled by their absence for Rudi. Ufa, Rudi's Ufa, lives on in his memory through its very disappearance. This feeling of dislocation retreats from the public spaces of Ufa into the privacies of Rudi's family home when he visits his mother on her sick-bed. By returning to see his mother, it is possible that Rudi is searching after some form of redemption, or pursuing a level of security that has been denied in his current life. If he is looking for either he does not find them in Ufa. Having spent several hours in vigil by her bedside, he emerges to the communal area of her home resigned to the fact that: 'She didn't recognise me' (*Dancer*, 281). Both the physical and familial coordinates of his earlier life have altered irrevocably, and Rudi's ultimate exilic condition is, perhaps, confirmed by this final meeting with his ailing mother. Naturally her declining health impairs her senses, but it is the symbolic qualities of the

mother–son exchange that are most relevant to the overall thematic scheme of the novel. Rudi alludes to the inauthentic versions of his identity that proliferate globally in his later, and final, meeting with Yulia in Leningrad. As they reminisce and inquire after each other's lives, Rudi admits that 'everyone hears about me, they always get it wrong…nobody knows me' (*Dancer*, 284). While earlier in Victor's narrative, this seemed to be part of Rudi's aura, in the aftermath of his failed reunion with his mother, Rudi's unknow-ability takes on a more tragic nature. Over the course of the novel, then, McCann alerts us to the enabling and vivifying opportunities of Rudi's unknowability, but, here, at the end, he reminds us of the less energizing consequences of Rudi's identity.

Rudi departs Yulia's apartment, her life and the novel in characteristically performative guise by transforming the space of the apartment block stairwell into a space of artistic creativity. He …

> … threw his scarf over his shoulder and performed a perfect pirouette on the concrete slab…He stepped slowly to the next landing, through the rubbish and broken bottles, stepped once again in the arc of light and his shoes sounded against the concrete as he spun a second time…and I thought to myself [Yulia]: Let this joy extend itself into the morning. In the lobby Rudi pirouetted one final time and then he was gone. (*Dancer*, 287–8)

McCann's narrative does not follow the conventional time-line of biography in its resolution; Rudi exits in balletic flight and is not pursued to his death. McCann allows the memory of Rudi in performance to resonate beyond the completion of his narrative, and it is Rudi's dancing body, his balletic artistry that are permitted to triumph at the end. In Yulia's description of this theatrical departure, Rudi's dancing body is in full affective form, transforming the dour functional space of Yulia's home into a stage of joyfulness. This final performance by Rudi is a generous, utopian act, which kindles pleasure and hope out of a separation of friends. Despite the ostensible failure of his return to his origins, Rudi is capable of this concluding act of grace and beauty. Amid the poverty and utilitarian geography of his homeland, Rudi delivers a hopeful gesture towards something or sometime better through this aesthetic performance. With his astonishing physical beauty together with the litany of his hyper-athletic balletic and sexual performances,

Rudi embodies and also provokes intensities of desire. As Yulia concludes: 'Something about him released people from the world, tempted them out' (*Dancer*, 286). Rudi is an object of global temptation, but even more he incarnates the transgressive forces of human desire, and not just sexual, in his provocative physicality. And this is another reason why McCann refuses to adhere to the life-cycle structure of biographical life-writing. Unlike the codes of that genre, in this version of biography the subject lives on in the imaginations and the desires of those that encountered him and those that desired him. In fact the novel does not strictly end with Rudi's dramatic exit from Yulia's life. The narrative reaches its conclusion with a catalogue of lots from 'The Rudolf Nureyev Collection' sold in 1995 in New York and London. The material objects auctioned include 'Six pairs of Ballet Boots'; 'Costume for Swan Lake Act III. Prince Siegfried 1963'; 'A French Walnut Refectory Table'; and 'Pre-Revolutionary Russian China Dish in oak box' (*Dancer*, 289–90), among several others of Rudi's accumulated possessions. The auctioned inventory, as a textual document, stands in for an historical account of his physical death. The sundry items represent different times, locations and relationships from Rudi's life, but they are all infused with the magnetic afterglow of his life, performances and personality. The success of the auction is a testimony to the durability of desire that surrounds Rudi. The listed artefacts touch upon his balletic performances, his material wealth and accumulation of exotic possessions, and, specifically, the china dish is a simple token of continuity with Anna and Yulia. The china dish was an heirloom in their family, which Yulia gave to Rudi on the evening of their final meeting. Among the glamorous costumes and expensive consumer purchases, this 'damaged' box evokes the endurance of the past in the present; it is an unadorned symbol of the chorus of minor voices that have spoken throughout the novel. But, in the end, each of the auctioned items coheres around McCann's core thematics: storytelling and desire. Each of the auctioned fragments of Rudi's life tells part of the story, and they are, differentially, symbolic of desires: sexual, consumer and the desire to be remembered.

NOTES

1. Harold Bloom, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004).
2. Derek Hand, *Irish University Review – Special Issue – John Banville*, 36, 1 (Spring/Summer 2006), p.x.
3. Ibid.

4. 'Interview with Colum McCann', *The Stinging Fly*, Summer (2003). http://www.stingingfly.org/issue9/mccann.html.
5. All further references to *Dancer* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003) will appear in parenthesis as (*Dancer*).
6. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p.49.
7. Ibid., p.50.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p.73.
10. Ibid., p.78.
11. Richard Jenkins, *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p.5.
12. Colum McCann and Aleksandar Hemon, 'The Writer Sees in the Dark Corners Swept Clean by Historians', *Guardian* (30 June 2003). http://www.guardian.co.uk/ books/2003/jun/30/fiction.
13. Joseph Lennon, 'An Interview with Fiction Writer Colum McCann', *Poets & Writers* (2003). http://www.pw.org/content/interview_fiction_writer_colum_mccann.
14. Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p.1.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., p.2.
17. Ibid., pp.2–3.
18. Ibid., p.5.
19. On this theme see Edward A. Hagan, *Goodbye Yeats and O'Neill: Farce in Contemporary Irish and Irish-American Narratives* (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010).
20. 'Interview with Colum McCann', *The Stinging Fly* (Summer 2003). http://www.stingingfly.org/issue9/mccann.html.
21. Ibid.
22. Susan Cahill, 'Choreographing Memory: The Dancing Body and Temporality in *Dancer*', in Susan Cahill and Eóin Flannery (eds), *This Side of Brightness: Essays on the Fiction of Colum McCann* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).
23. See Jacques Derrida, 'Choreographies', *Points: Interviews, 1974–1994* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp.89–108.
24. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p.394.
25. André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p.5.
26. Elizabeth Dempster, 'Women Writing the Body: Let's Watch a Little How She Dances', in Susan Sheridan (ed.), *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (London: Verso, 1988), pp.50–2.
27. Cahill, 'Choreographing Memory: The Dancing Body and Temporality in *Dancer*'.
28. Susan Leigh Foster, 'Dancing Bodies', in Jonathan Cary and Sandford Kwinter (eds), *Incorporations* (New York: Urzone, 1992), p.480.
29. Cahill, 'Choreographing Memory: The Dancing Body and Temporality in *Dancer*'.
30. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).
31. Ibid., p.150.
32. C.J.C. Bull, 'Sense, Meaning, and Perception in Three Dance Cultures', in J.C. Desmond (ed.), *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p.272.
33. Helen Thomas, *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p.97.
34. Cahill, 'Choreographing Memory: The Dancing Body and Temporality in *Dancer*'.
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36. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), p.39.

6

Embracing the 'Other': *Zoli* (2006)

ROMA GYPSIES AND THE IMAGINATION OF THE 'OTHER'

Though clearly not a literary polemicist, McCann can, as we have seen, be read as a politically engaged author. And, certainly in interview, he regularly alludes to his consciousness of political and social inequalities during the creative process. As is readily evidenced in a novel such as *This Side of Brightness*, there are elements of the social novel in McCann's corpus of works. The latter novel is, perhaps, most closely allied in his oeuvre to his 2006 work, *Zoli*, the subject of this chapter's discussion. Both novels deal with extreme cases and conditions of social and historical ostracization, but in radically different geographical and political contexts. Both *This Side of Brightness* and *Zoli* seem to embody the spirit of McCann's response when asked in interview by the *Financial Times* in 2009: 'What does it mean to be a writer?' In reply McCann re-affirms his political consciousness and his imaginative utopianism as an artist: 'I would hope that it means embracing empathy. Imagining the life of the "other" is the greatest privilege of all.'[1] Crucially McCann accents empathy rather than sympathy, permitting a level of egalitarian agency to the 'other' in an empathetic rather than a sympathetic relationship. He places a premium on recognizing and valuing the common humanity of the marginalized, and often vilified, social constituencies that populate his fictions. In combining the empathetic impulse of the writer with the privilege the author receives in engaging creatively with the 'other', McCann disestablishes the 'authoritative' position of the artist. Empathetic feeling is designed to re-enforce the democratic potential of storytelling; storytelling is not an autocratic process but a series of negotiations. Likewise, in imagining the 'other', the author is granted a privilege, but a privilege that comes with duties and a responsibility to remain sensitive

to cultural difference. The 'other', in McCann's view, is approached imaginatively not as an anthropological object, but as an autonomous, acculturated historical subject. And in turning our attention to the subject matter at hand in *Zoli*, we encounter one of the most consistently persecuted 'others' of modern European history: the Roma gypsy populations of eastern Europe.

In her seminal *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and their Journey*, Isabel Fonseca documents the accepted excoriation of gypsies within Europe. Through a confection of myth and warped historical recollection, gypsies 'had remained quintessential outsiders of the European imagination: sinister, separate, literally dark and synonymous with sorcery and crime'.[2] Europe's gypsy populations were, and still are, pathologized according to a battery of indices that emphasize their emphatic 'otherness' to the received social and moral mores of enlightened, settled civility. Historically, the lived realities of their material cultures were abstracted into idioms of racial typologization, romantic fetishization, criminal profiling, and mythological distortion. Rather than participating as agents in their own histories, gypsy populations became props in legends not of their own making. In common with Europe's Jewish population, gypsy communities had their cultural identities ratified as 'other' by Europe's majority communities. The term 'gypsy' became a cultural and social descriptor around which a limited range of static 'roles' were assigned to historically changing gypsy individuals and groups. The gypsies became transhistorical and immutable in their behaviours and intentions in the eyes of majority settled populations. As the Roma gypsy expert, Ian Hancock, suggests:

> People who never met a Gypsy in their lives are nevertheless able to provide a fairly detailed picture of how they think Gypsies look and how they live. Their mental image, partly negative and partly romantic but mostly inaccurate, is the result of the response to a Roma identity which has become institutionalized in the Western tradition to the extent that it has become part of its cultural heritage.[3]

Hancock's characterization of the complacent stereotyping of gypsies by settled communities signals an economy of unreflective racism, and his language echoes that of Edward Said in his explication of the cultural politics of Orientalism under Western imperial regimes.[4] The

cultural, political and social mechanisms that Said laid bare in his early work of colonial discourse analysis seem readily apparent in the relations that obtain between gypsies and non-gypsies in Europe. Easy racism is facilitated and legitimized by a cultural architecture of objectification and, in consonance with the processes of 'orientalizing' under Western colonialism, gypsies have no input into the formulation of their representation. It is a point noted by Mary Burke in her recent study of cultural representations of Irish 'Tinkers': 'those who wish to write of the culture concerned decide long in advance of contact what it is that the tradition "symbolises", and will iterate this vision regardless of any contradiction presented by actual association.'[5] Burke's, Hancock's and Said's adjacent arguments intimate how the imagination of the lives of the 'other' can operate as a means of demonization and disempowerment. What is of note in each of these arguments is that the group assumes an irrefutable cultural identity, while individuals are subsumed under this fabricated identity. The individual as historical actor and as political subject is displaced by historical actant and political object. Disempowerment, then, through romantic sanitization or moral pathologization became means of discursively 'locating' and legally containing the roaming communities of Europe. Their racial 'otherness', their linguistic incommensurability, their temperamental inscrutability, and their physical mobility became, and remain, reasons to fear itinerant gypsy groups. As Jean-Pierre Liegois concludes, the gypsies, 'moving about in their nomadic groups, were seen as physically threatening and ideologically disruptive. Their very existence constituted dissidence.'[6] At the very least, the fear generated by the innate 'dissidence' of gypsies is managed under the discursive 'orientalism' mentioned above, but very often discourse becomes the underwriter of extreme legal, political and cultural violence against gypsies.

The orientalizing formation of understandings of gypsy culture in Europe furnishes a textual monumentalization of an internally diverse and historically changing series of gypsy communities. Because of this sanctioned 'typing', gypsies have actually lived, in Paul Carter's resonant phrase, beyond 'the horizon of writing'.[7] Their textual incarnations persist as counterfeits, while historical and contemporary material realities remain outside of history. And it is precisely these confrontations between textuality and orality, between gypsy and settled (or gadže) communities,[8] and between art and politics, which McCann explores in

Zoli. The novel is replete with political idealism, even utopianism, of different hues, each of which impact upon the central protagonist, Zoli Novotna, and her community with disastrous consequences. McCann illustrates how received ideas about gypsy culture have been differentially mobilized for political projects without requisite consideration for the effects on gypsies. The tyranny of excessive political idealism betrays the subtle complexity of gypsy cultural mores repeatedly across *Zoli*. McCann's task in *Zoli*, then, is complicated by all of these factors, and is, itself, implicated in the textualization of a predominantly oral culture and history. One of the dangers faced by McCann was how to avoid becoming complicit in the 'orientalizing' narrative of Europe's gypsy populations. Avoiding the repetition of these disabling portraits of gypsies, *Zoli* is an effort to redeem and to dignify gypsy culture through the semi-historical life story of one member of that community. Writing on the ethics of engaging with 'otherness', Richard Kearney alights on several key philosophical points that are germane to the cultural politics of *Zoli*. *Zoli* narrates the story of a female member of the Roma community across the twentieth century, and while it highlights the intensity and protraction of oppression undergone by that particular community, in more general ways the novel alerts us to the persistence of physical and epistemic violence endured by all 'othered' peoples. Kearney draws attention to the manner in which, latterly, the nation-state has become a discrete imagined edifice that must be inoculated against the intrusion of undesirable 'others'. The institution of borders and legislation – contrary to those who speak easily of a borderless, global geography – perpetuate a discriminating historical discourse of 'self' and 'other', insider and outsider, and them and us. In Kearney's assessment: 'Most nation-states bent on preserving their body politic from "alien viruses" seek to pathologise their adversaries. Faced with a threatening outside the best mode of defence is attack. Again and again the national *We* is defined over and against the foreign *Them*. Borders are policed to keep nationals in and aliens out.'[9] The historically sanctioned cultural strangeness of gypsies, then, provides discursive persuasiveness to the relative 'othering' of this population. The internal normalcy of the settled populations is confirmed by the unyielding transhistorical difference of gypsy communities. In deconstructive and psychoanalytical terms, the self is, however, defined and haunted by repressed 'otherness'. And as such, the historical and contemporary

demonization of European Roma can be diagnosed as basic symptoms of cultural anxiety. Scapegoating of gypsy populations becomes a means of generating calm, as well as solidarity, within settled communities. A racially bigoted political consensus is arrived at that, in turn, continues to serve the marginalization of gypsies. These 'strangers, gods and monsters', as Kearney christens them, 'threaten the known with the unknown – they are often set apart in fear and trembling. Exiled to hell or heaven; or simply ostracized from the human community into a land of aliens.'[10]

Kearney's ethical response to these enduring trends in the self/other dyad is designed to offer what he terms 'a hermeneutic pluralism of otherness, a sort of "polysemy of alterity"'.[11] In other words, Kearney's framework is based on the mutual implication of all selves and others – not on the infinite iteration of difference and deferral of deconstruction, but in terms of a mutual recognition of self-hood between relative 'others'. As we shall see with McCann's text, Kearney's ethical code is strongly empathetic in quality. In proposing to de-alienate the 'other', 'ethics rightly requires me to recognise the other as another self bearing universal rights and responsibilities, that is, as someone capable of recognising me in turn as a self capable of recognition and esteem.'[12] This latter ethical perspective emphatically runs counter to the tone of historical and contemporary cultural and political exchanges between settled and gypsy populations. What Kearney calls for is an acknowledgement and an apprehension of the subjecthood of alienated 'others'; an egalitarian tolerance of cultural difference that is uncoupled from fear, suspicion and persecution. Kearney's ethical project is marked by its utopian credentials, and its inclusive democratic aspirations are explicit when he concludes that there 'is no otherness so exterior or so unconscious…that is cannot be at least minimally interpreted by a self, and interpreted in a variety of different ways'.[13] This vision chimes with McCann's in authoring a novel such as *Zoli*, which provides a forum through which 'otherness' can be explored as an historical and contemporary epiphenomenon in Europe. *Zoli* is not another romantic rendering of Roma exoticism, nor does it trade on easy stereotypes about these communities. In *Zoli*, McCann partakes of Kearney's ethical impulse towards 'recognition and esteem' and attempts to assert the self-hood of one of European history's persecuted 'others'.

ZOLI

Zoli opens in 2003 with a Slovakian journalist, David Smolenak, entering a Roma settlement in Slovakia intent on procuring information about the whereabouts of Zoli Novotna. The vivid details of the natural and man-made disarray of the camp are, firstly, reminiscent of Conradian or Naipaulian versions of Africa's inner recesses. The manner in which the landscape looms and broods over the tremulous interloper evokes a return to an earlier historical period or, at least, signposts the individual's removal from the comforting coordinates of organized civilization. Yet, clearly, McCann's motivation is not of a piece with either Conrad or Naipaul. Instead, McCann's rigorous description of the squalid settlement emphasizes the extent to which Roma gypsies have become and remain dehumanized within the broader European political imagination. The unkempt camp may be remote from our lives, but it is not unimaginably alien from our world; this abject poverty is not divorced from our society but thrives within, and because of, our society. In a scene recollective of Treefrog's Hadean home in *This Side of Brightness*, Smolenak's careful navigation of the settlement is detailed by McCann in all of its graphic decrepitude: 'He drives alongside the small streambed and the terrible shitscape looms up by increments – upturned buckets by the bend in the river, a broken baby carriage in the weeds, a petrol drum leaking out a dried tongue of rust, the carcass of a fridge in the bramble.'[14] Steering his way through this symbolic terrain of impoverishment, Smolenak at last reaches his destination: 'there, across a rickety little joke of a bridge, is the grey Gypsy settlement, marooned on an island in the middle of the river' (*Zoli*, 4). The islanded settlement could be disappearing into or emerging from the waters of the river. Its precarious, suspended location here is a forceful imagistic correlative of the political animus of McCann's broader narrative. Yet as suggestive as this figuration of the island camp is, this opening section delivers a grim portrait of the destitution of the gypsy community in almost social realistic description. McCann details the unruliness of the poverty and the sentiments of defamiliarization felt by the visiting gadže journalist as he approaches and enters the settlement. Smolenak is physically and aurally discommoded by these surroundings, and his reactions are consistent with the longer-term 'othering' of the Roma gypsies:

> He feels the weight of what he carries: two bottles, notepad, pencil,

> cigarettes, instamatic camera, and tiny recorder, all away deep in his clothes…He looks up, takes a deep breath, but it's as if a thousand chords have been struck in his blood all at once, his ribcage is thumping, he shouldn't have come here alone, a Slovakian journalist, forty-four years old, comfortably fat, a husband, a father, about to step into the heart of a gypsy camp. He takes a step forward through a puddle, thinking how stupid it was to wear soft leather shoes for this trip, not even good for a quick retreat. (*Zoli*, 5)

Fear conditions Smolenak's response to his immersion in the visual and aural clamour of the gypsy settlement. Burdened with his arsenal of gifts and documentary devices, the journalist is both aggressor and victim in this alien context. His visit is part of an historical continuum of surveillance and attempted documentation of the gypsies – operations that we see at other junctures across *Zoli*. The technologies of record he possesses are viewed with violent suspicion by the Roma, as they are freighted with the history of repression undergone by previous generations of their community. Smolenak enters the camp on his terms, as a journalist seeking nothing more than an erstwhile gypsy poet: Zoli Novotna. But on the terms of the Roma such an investigative intrusion is inseparable from previous violent and, ostensibly, benevolent gadže interventions. There is a level of authorial self-consciousness to Smolenak's incursion into the private sphere of gypsy culture. His investigations re-visit the interfaces between gadže and gypsy, literary and oral cultures, and sedentary and mobile traditions. His efforts to redeem and reclaim the forgotten poet are, of course, consistent with McCann's own authorial task. In a novel that is pervaded by guilt and betrayal, and by lapses in personal responsibility to others, opening with this self-conscious scene of authorial/journalistic intrusion is a gesture by McCann to his own implication in the textual narrativization of this unremembered Roma artist. Yet before she can be found, before there is speech and Zoli's story, silence resounds around her absence and her discarded memory. As Smolenak cautiously negotiates the mores of gypsy hospitality, he hesitantly mentions Zoli's name and reveals the purpose of his visit: 'But when he mentions her name – leaning forward to say, "Have you ever heard of Zoli Novotna?" – the air stalls, the drinking stops, the cigarettes are held at mouth level, and a silence descends' (*Zoli*, 9). The first section of the novel concludes with a glimpse of the banished poet and her name reverberates through history

to foment a tense silence, again, between gypsy and gadže. The mention of her name is enough to shut down the narrative and to seal off communication between the two groups. Smolenak's inquiry anticipates later narrative revelations about how previous gypsy and gadže interaction actually led to Zoli's expulsion from her tribe. The narrative of Zoli's life as a poet, then, is initiated by silence and by a refusal to acknowledge her existence.

If *Zoli* is primarily concerned with the politics of 'otherness', we are again confronted with issues of basic human dignity. In this regard, and as we have seen in Chapter 3, Wole Soyinka twins dignity and freedom as 'the obverse of power and domination, that axis of human relationship that is equally sustained by fear'.[15] Fear, in its turn, emasculates, deracinates and incarcerates individual and populations, depriving them of volition and access to self-representation. And in attending to the relations that exist between various institutional bodies of the state in *Zoli*, Soyinka's attention to the tension between dignity and empowerment versus fear and disempowerment seems axiomatic to our discussion. As we have noted, the transhistorical rafts of measures to contain vagrant communities, in particular Roma gypsies, have consistently denied such dignity and freedom to these 'othered' groups. As Robbie McVeigh reiterates: 'The idea of a travelling underworld has been a source of concern to European states for centuries. And the efforts of the state apparatus to "deal with" this supposed threat have always constituted a brutal and undemocratic project.'[16] In McCann's novel, Zoli's life and journeys, as well as those of her kinsmen, are forever pursued by the macrostructural and microstructural machinations of an anxious, and therefore repressive, state. The projects to assimilate forcibly or to ostracize resolutely are an obsessive concern for the state regimes under which Zoli's life plays out.

Smolenak's visit to the contemporary gypsy settlement may open the novel onto a provocative scene of physical impoverishment and abandonment, but, equally, the episode is suggestive of the fractious terms on which the gypsy and gadže relationship was, and is, founded. The solitary journalist's investigation is but one instance in the novel of the prevailing friction that fuels exchanges between the two communities. As we shall see, Smolenak returns at the end of the novel, and his impact is at a deeply personal level for Zoli. But we also need to consider the larger-scale incursions into traditional gypsy culture by gadže society in the form of

the state and its institutions. The ways in which the state and its ideological apparatuses intervene in gypsy society are by no means uniform in *Zoli*, and range from idealistic celebrations of their culture to more cynical manipulations of that culture. We see Stalinist rationalizations and re-settlements of nomadic gypsies as well as systematic murders of their population. And each of these is refracted through Zoli's life; in fact, at times she becomes a central figure in the workings of the state's politico-cultural programmes. Indeed, her relative intimacy with the ways of gadže politics and society allow her, late in the novel, to reflect on the pervasive ignorance of gadže on the true nature of gypsy culture. Her comment that: 'they are so fearful, sometimes, of their own invented fears' (*Zoli*, 213), not only reminds us of the Saidian 'orientalizing' of gypsies, but suggests that settled society is paralyzed in a blind cycle of terror and hatred, which repeatedly justifies its own excesses. In such an environment where fear dominates and manifests as repression, there is, in Soyinka's terms, no real freedom available to anyone.

ART AND POLITICS

Zoli's narrative opens with her account of the tragic, and murderous, scene of her parents' death at the hands of Hlinka guards. The troupe of gypsies was herded onto a frozen lake, fires lit and they drowned when the ice melted. Only Zoli and her grandfather, fortuitously, survived, having been away from the camp on that day. Thus both Zoli's orphanage and her victimization at the hands of racialized political ideology are signalled as conditioning aspects of her biography and of the narrative at large. But these distorted racial perceptions of gypsies are not simply evident in extreme acts of violence; rather they are witnessed in the incremental pathologization of this community. In the pre-Second World War period, Zoli's narrative meanders across the crucible in which she experiences the stubborn incommensurabilites that persist between gadže and gypsy. From Zoli's medical documentation and examination, to her abortive attendance at formal education and onto the introduction of new repressive legislation on gypsy freedom of movement, Zoli's lifestyle is prey to the state's codification of her innate 'otherness' to its referents of normality. Each of these arenas of state management raises one of the key tensions of the narrative,

discussed below: gypsy suspicion of textuality and of the written word, which is pitted against their dependence upon the somatic commitment of an oral culture. Zoli's time under formal educational structures is not solely an example of statist conformity, but showcases the endemic nature of anti-gypsy sentiment, as she is repeatedly victimized by her fellow school children. Random police searches of gypsy camps, in Kafkan fashion, promote guilt without reference to any crime, and there is a naturalization of guilt and criminality attached to the Roma. McCann's narration of the episodic but persistent scenes of major and minor bigotry against gypsies in the pre-Second World War context progresses into the extremities of the wartime period and in the early sections of the novel we see, and hear second-hand about, the weight of history burdening the Roma across Europe. In a series of passages, the sufferings of the gypsies move from the locality of our protagonists to the stories of international repression. There is a combination of rumour and of conjecture on the extent of persecution and of daily experiences of legally enshrined racial prejudice: 'They were quiet days in the Yellow Farmer's field but bit by bit we began to hear that terrible things were afoot in the country. The Germans didn't take over as they had in the Czech lands, but Grandfather said it hardly mattered, the Hlinkas were just like Gestapo, except they wore different badges. The war was coming our way' (*Zoli*, 34). Zoli might begin to hear stories of repression in the present, but these stories, in the broader context, are warnings from history. The atrocities are not unique to the wartime period of Zoli's life, but are representative of the history of systemized gypsy persecution. In fact, her grandfather's comment suggests as much, as he realizes that it does not actually matter what colour the uniform, what the nationality of the aggressor may be – violence remains violence. And Zoli relays the practicalities of this daily violence under the new regimen of anti-gypsy legislation:

> We were only allowed in the cities and villages for two hours a day, noon until two…After these hours, no Roma man or woman was allowed in public places. Sometimes even the purest woman was charged with spreading infections and was thrown in prison. If a man was on a bus or a train, he was beaten until he couldn't even crawl…We learned the sound of military vehicles the way we'd learned the sound of animals…And yet we still thought ourselves to be among the lucky ones. (*Zoli*, 34)

The legal measures are designed to inoculate settled public space from the contagion of gypsy presence, and their extremity of violence is an index of anxiety in the face of cultural strangeness. But throughout *Zoli* there is a more lateral historical context alluded to by McCann, and there are core ethical issues he wishes to alert the reader about in the contemporary moment. Zoli's group may be prey to the kinds of legal exertions detailed above, but 'many of our Czech brothers streamed south with terrible stories about being marched down the many-cornered road' (*Zoli*, 35). Europe is on the cusp of a frenzied period of warfare and ethnic genocide. Industrial modernity, which contrasts itself so favourably with the benighted ignorance of the Roma, is embarking upon a campaign of unfettered blood-letting, and it is, in Zoli's case, the always already marginalized that will be among those who suffer most acutely. The Roma experience, which includes the Holocaust, is symbolic for McCann of the ease with which received idioms and abstractions of prejudice can be digested and acted upon.

Physical violence is partnered by symbolic violence during the Second World War, as we see a concerted coordination of repressive tactics. In a tragically resonant series of acts, the Roma are coerced into burying their favoured musical instrument, the harp: 'there was a new law out that said we needed licences for any type of musical instrument…the harps were buried in huge wooden containers that the men made out of maple trees' (*Zoli*, 36). The new law is a comprehensive denial of cultural expression to the Roma, as in an orally based culture such as they live in, music and lyricism were of paramount importance. The harp was, then, of practical and symbolic value; the instrument was a means of preserving and transmitting history and traditions. But it was also a practical tool in generating income through public musical performance. Proscribing musical instruments is at once a further conflagration between textual legality and oral musicality and, simultaneously, a firm deprivation of cultural legacy to the Roma community. Not only does it represent a severing of means of communing with the past, it represents the proscription of a means of creativity towards the future. In this sense, the law constitutes a profoundly anti-utopian measure in its intended consequences, and its denial of an interest in the future for the Roma. Yet out of this instance of repression we witness the blossoming of another form of creative expression. Despite the symbolic violence of the enforced interment of their harps, the episode concludes

with the first stirrings of a new utopian energy in the shape of Zoli's emergence as a creator of original poetic lyrics: 'Conka and I ran to the place of the burial and she started a game where she jumped up and down on the ground and we pretended that music was coming out from the earth and that's when I put together a song in my mind, about down in the ground where the strings vibrate' (*Zoli*, 37). However, Zoli's burgeoning talent as an accomplished poet and singer is not permitted to remain as an unproblematic utopian energy within Roma culture by McCann. In general terms, her talent raises matters related to the relationship between the artist and his/her community, and questions the responsibilities that the artist may have to that indigenous group. Likewise in the heavily politicized context of the novel, McCann also allows us to view Zoli as an artist whose work becomes entwined in the workings of idealistic political campaigning, ultimately against her better judgement. In the end, we see the conflicting loyalties and vulnerabilities of the artist in the face of communal tradition and political opportunism.

The image of 'the harps listening to the grass growing above them, and the grass listening back to the sounds two metres below' (*Zoli*, 37) speaks of an organicism inherent to the music and the landscape. In common with many of the descriptions in the novel, there is deep ecopoetical sensibility in evidence in McCann's writing. Out of interment comes a vibrant lyric of rebirth and renewal, even the possibility of a future redemption. It is with these utopian impulses that Zoli's lyrics and vocal music are infused; her lyric does not perceive a death burial but the plantation of future creative yields. Under the duress of 'new laws…it was really only song that held me, kept my feet to the ground' (*Zoli*, 45). Zoli's creative resources are the imaginative birthplace of future prospects for the Roma, as well as a preservative agent for their cultural traditions. Furthermore, song itself is understood as qualitatively redemptive for Zoli; song is a respite from and a countercurrent against the excoriating procedures of Fascist legality. However, in the aftermath of the war, her private votive dedication to the cultural weight of her Roma heritage is transformed into a public and political crusade of Communist egalitarian principles by the new government. In these post-war years a programmatic left-wing utopianism tracks Roma society, periodically celebrating and rationalising their practices. The private, vernacular utopian energy of Zoli's lyrical prowess, which was catalyzed by the burial of the harps, is subsequently co-opted by a

campaign that lauds the Roma as first among equals in post-war Slovakia: 'the gadže tugged our elbows and said, Come sing for us, Gypsies, come sing. Tell us of the forest, they said. I never thought of the forest as a special place, it was just as ordinary as any other…We were given identity cards, tinned meat, white flour, jars of condensed milk. We burned our old armbands' (*Zoli*, 49). As part of the new utopian programme, Roma are embraced as Comrades and their cultural 'otherness' is adjudicated as a resource to be sought after and cherished rather than buried and harassed. This new utopian political horizon is announced as: 'Cargo planes flew over the city. Manned by the parachute regiment, dropping leaflets: *The new tomorrow has arrived* [original italics]' (*Zoli*, 49). For the Slovakian lands, and for the Roma, the 'revolution' has arrived, and as the most marginal of social underclasses, the Roma are feted as exemplars of economic and political discrimination. The Roma are urged to join and are welcomed into the egalitarian mix of the newly configured political mainstream. To this end, their songs and music are broadcast on radio, they are no longer regarded as vermin, and their culture is valued in song and in visual representation. And for the young Zoli, this utopian vision is too much to resist: 'We waved the red flag, looked down the road to the future. I had hope right up until the end. It was the old Roma habit of hoping. Perhaps I have never lost it' (*Zoli*, 50).

Zoli's contribution to the new political dispensation can be read at two levels: firstly, she is incarnated as the public face and voice of Roma culture. And secondly, she is idealized personally, and politically, by two male writers and activists: Martin Stransky and Stephen Swann. If the novel is centrally concerned with both hope and betrayal, then each of these groups, the state, Stransky and Swann, view Zoli as crucial to the anticipatory utopian politics of the Left. However, in the end, she is ruthlessly betrayed by each of them in actions that finally destroy her life. Not only is Zoli embraced by the state as the voice of the Roma as she performs before bureaucrats and Party apparatchiks, but she becomes a potential bridge between gadže and Roma communities. Her literacy gives her uncharted access to the gadže world of administration, and marks her, ultimately, as resident in both communities, and, paradoxically, alien in both communities at the same time. Zoli is paraded at strategic cultural venues such as 'the Ministry of Culture, the National Theatre, the Carlton, the Socialist Academy…the Stalingrad

Hotel, conferences on literature' (*Zoli*, 81), as the gradual emptying out of Roma culture by means of 'romantic' authentification proceeds at a daily level by Stransky and Swann. While the macro-political opportunism of the state seems impersonal, her relationship with these two activists becomes deeply affective. Zoli, Swann and Stransky become a closely allied threesome, each pursuing differential idealized ends. And it is in the durations and denouements of these relationships that the ideas of hope and betrayal are most acutely dramatized.

Swann's first-person narrative reveals the extent, and the consequences, of his and Stransky's championing of Zoli's work. Having arrived in Slovakia brimming with radical political idealism, Swann is soon under the wing of the seasoned poet activist. Slovakia is a homeland for Swann, as it is his father's birthplace, and his return is as much a nostalgic return to familial origins as it is a pursuit of Marxist revolution. The raw pliability of Swann's unquestioning political idealism becomes a dutiful companion to Stransky's literary editorship of Zoli's lyrics. With this unlikely trio, McCann explores the passionate energies of political and cultural hope, the perils of forced marriage between politics and art, and the tragic tensions between intellectual idealism and emotional commitment. In this small politico-literary circle, Stransky is the *eminence-grise*, as Swann recalls:

> Stransky ran a journal, *Credo*, in which he was always trying to push the limits: he was known for publishing daring young Socialist playwrights and obscure intellectuals and anyone else who vaguely amplified his beliefs…He himself wrote in Slovak against the idea that a smaller language was useless. And now, with Zoli, he thought he'd come upon the perfect proletarian poet. (*Zoli*, 62)

Swann's portrait of Stransky exposes the autocratic character of the older writer. His editorial vision is guided by well-honed political convictions and Zoli becomes the object of this uncompromising editorial process. From an aural viewpoint, the insistent plosiveness of 'perfect proletarian poet' only serves to suggest her role as an *object* of inflexible political ambitions. In Stransky's aesthetic, the political is the primary motor of artistic creation and of aesthetic judgement. In similar manner to the broader state operation, Zoli's art is evacuated of its affective and historical resonances. And, finally, we are reminded of the work of Deleuze and Guattari in Stransky's insistence that a minor

language can be a viable vehicle for autonomous cultural and political articulation.[17] But it is Stransky's subservience of art, and of Zoli's to politics, that is most remarkable about Swann's recollective narrative.

In the vibrancy of these new revolutionary times, Swann's political idealism is energized and trained by that of his master. Stransky's utopian cultural politics propose equality for the Roma, but it is only later that the terms and costs of this benevolent egalitarianism can be accurately gauged. For now Swann is intoxicated by 'the high idealism of an older man', and Stransky is 'sure that having a Gypsy poet would be a coup for him, for *Credo*, and that the Gypsies, as a revolutionary class, if properly guided, could claim and use the written word' (*Zoli*, 70). Even at this point there are intimations of the terms on which gypsy culture, the Roma voice, can be registered. It seems as if their oral tradition will have to be textualized, and modernized, if it is to have a genuine purchase within the gadže world. In Stransky's mind, the Roma are a malleable underclass, amenable to the idealistic abstractions of his Marxist doxology. What, on the surface, appears as acceptance is laced with the prospects of assimilation and manipulation. Stransky's 'revolutionary' cultural politics is, in fact, a retreat to another form of cultural fetishism. Part of his anticipatory vision may involve elevating the Roma, creating 'a literate proletariat', and have 'People reading Gypsy literature' (*Zoli*, 70). But this will only arise after considerable 'management' of that artistic output, and, in particular, the 'creation' of Zoli as poet. Stransky might have been 'convinced that Zoli was creating a poetry from the roots up, but he still wanted to put manners on it' (*Zoli*, 74). Swann and Stransky use a tape recorder to document Zoli's lyrics and proceed to transcribe them in preparation for publication. Thus, her voice and the content of Roma orality are doubly processed and estranged through the disembodying form of technology and on towards textual reproduction. And it is this distancing of the oral through textual form that forms one of the bases for Roma suspicion of the gadže, and foments one of the principal crises of the novel. Both of these technologies, sound recording and textual printing, are symbolic of the gadže world, and as Zoli participates with increasing frequency in this milieu in the months prior to the publication of her poetry, her people become hostile towards her liminal position between the two communities. The determination of Swann's and Stransky's political idealism is summed up succinctly in Swann's admission that: 'We were

convinced it went beyond that [Roma gratitude]. We were building a vanguard, there'd never been a poetry like it before, we were preserving and shaping their world while the world changed around them' (*Zoli*, 75). The hubris of Swann's declaration conflicts sharply with the anxieties of the Roma elders, and has grievous results for Zoli. Swann's idiom here returns us to the rhetoric of colonial 'orientalizing', or, in another register, quasi-romanticism. This high political idealism is profoundly compromised as it mutates into a species of exoticization, rendering Zoli and her community into colourful museum pieces. The bond of faith, even trust, which existed between the gadže and the gypsy worlds becomes frayed, and the hope that bound the two communities begins to dissipate as the real power relations materialize.

While Stransky's implacable editorial control of Zoli's poetry might be viewed as a symptom of a broader political betrayal and exploitation, the sexual relationship that develops between Swann and Zoli intensifies the consequences of what becomes a deeply felt personal betrayal later in the novel. Listening to Zoli as he records her voice for Stransky, Swann becomes enraptured by her: 'the thought of her held me fast. Each word she came up with sent a thrill along me…She touched my arm, looked my way. I knew it. We had begun to cross that hollow that had come between us' (*Zoli*, 77). The beginnings of a mutual attraction between Swann and Zoli parallel the putative reconciliation between gadže and gypsy. Their romantic coupling is symbolic of the larger revolutionary affiliation between the communities. But, though the macro-political rapprochement is temporarily accepted, Swann and Zoli's relationship is taboo, and breaks the sexual limits of history and tradition. Theirs is an 'across the barricades' relationship, and, consequently, has the potential to unleash great violence. Thus in her literacy, her literary talent, exposure to gadže, and, now, most subversive of all, her liaison with Swann, Zoli consistently tests the boundaries of her Roma traditions. Indeed the extent to which she transcends received cultural boundaries in her personal life is, again, resonant of her later cross-border journeying across the European mainland. Such is the taboo nature of her relationship with Swann that it is always shadowed by risk, but it is Zoli who has assumed the most acute risks. The origin of their relationship is, of course, Swann's attachment to Stransky's political and cultural reclamation of the Roma. But soon the sincerity of Swann's romantic commitment and that of his political idealism are

forced into conflict. At the same time that Stransky is 'taming [sic] her line length, structuring [sic] the work into verses' (*Zoli*, 93), the Czechoslovakian state introduces Law 74. This new law is intended to settle the Roma and to, benevolently, provide 'schools and houses and clinics' (*Zoli*, 93). Forces of cultural conformity, then, are converging on the Roma in both Zoli's poetic work and in the re-configured public sphere. It is apparent that the atmosphere of unqualified celebration of the Roma has given way to a heavily qualified assertion of autocratic social welfare. And it is during this period in the early 1950s that Swann is implored by Zoli: 'Stephen, she said, You'll fight with us if we have to, right?' to which Swann replies: 'Of course' (*Zoli*, 93). Tragically, it is a promise that Swann cannot keep.

In the wake of the Hungarian uprising, and its quelling, in 1956, Stransky, Swann and Zoli begin to experience the pressure of new reactionary legislation. The new national tone is mordant, and for Swann the revolutionary ideals that had charged through the country, that had fashioned the embrace of the Roma, were withering: 'the country had changed, turned sour, lost its edge' (*Zoli*, 95). Not only is Stransky soon ostracized, but Zoli and her community return to the status of scapegoat under the burden of this new legislation. The erstwhile idealistic trio are sundered: Stransky is politically outcast and eventually executed, while Swann and Zoli are placed under surveillance. Indeed, the latter are bordered by threats from the state and from Roma tradition. Zoli's refusal to settle or to compromise, as part of the statutes of Law 74, in her affair with Swann in defiance of Roma tenets, or her efforts to escape the 'Gypsy jam-jar' (*Zoli*, 99) mean that there are inevitable punishments awaiting her and the Roma. For the Roma, Zoli is implicated in the state's so-called 'Great Halt' and its legal assault on their way of life. The broadcast and dissemination of her poetry and image become signs of her incremental betrayal of her community. Once the locus of cross-community détente, Zoli is now vulnerable as political object and as ethnic traitor. The final act that will see her banished from her people is the publication of her poetic work. The symbolic and actual textualization of her Roma lyrics will prove to be the gravest transgression in the eyes of her elders. To this end, again, she pleads with Swann not to proceed with the publication; in a sense she is asking him to fulfil his earlier promise of support to her. In the pivotal scene in the novel, Zoli tests Swann's loyalty to her: 'If

you print this book they'll blame me…They'll have a trial. They'll make judgement…The blame will come down on me…burn them. Please' (*Zoli*, 106). At this point Swann's commitment to either Zoli or his political convictions is under scrutiny, as the abstraction of his dissipating political ideals are pitted against a forbidden yet real emotional attachment to Zoli. But Swann cannot extricate himself from the bogus arguments in favour of proceeding with the publication. He presents a barrage of arguments that do little but dissimulate and cloud the truth:

> ...the book could not be shelved, the Union of Slovak Writers wouldn't allow it. Kysely and I were under strict instructions. The government could arrest us, there were darker things afoot. They needed the poems to continue resettlement. Zoli was their poster girl. She was their justification. They needed her. Nothing else could be done. They'd soon change their minds. All she had to do was wait. (*Zoli*, 106)

These false professions of compulsion and duty, Swann's insincere promise of a positive future resolution, eventually yield to his understanding of what his stubborn publication would actually mean. As the technology of print reproduction heaves into motion, he reflects: 'The metal began to roll. Its dark and constant rhyme. I couldn't give it a meaning now even if I wanted to, the cogs caught and the rollers spun, and I betrayed her' (*Zoli*, 107). In the shadow of technology, Swann confesses to his betrayal of Zoli. Though cognizant of the widespread actions of the state's betrayal of Roma trust, and the demise of the country's once vigorous revolutionary zeal, Swann lacks the courage to abandon his political idealism. With his redundant promises and justifications to Zoli and to himself ringing in his head and aching his conscience, Swann touches upon another of the primary thematics of McCann's literary ethical project. In a moment of clarity, he concludes: 'It is astounding how terrifying words can be. No act is too shallow so long as we give it a decent name' (*Zoli*, 107). This concise reflection carries beyond Swann and *Zoli*, across McCann's fiction. It raises questions relative to the proximity of language and violence, and politics and morality. Swann's betrayal of Zoli destroys their relationship and leads to her permanent exile from her community. As Anne Fogarty astutely observes: 'Swann in effect turns Zoli into a symbol to suit his needs. The view of Zoli as the quintessence of solitude is a Romantic

projection that bypasses her and ignores her actual dilemmas. She is seen in this manner by all of the men in the novel and turned into an embodiment of absolute difference.'[18] Though Zoli is betrayed by Swann, the publication of her poetry is, in fact, adjudged as continued complicity with the gadže by her fellow Roma and, consequently, she undergoes a purity trial. Despite her long and spirited defence during the ritualized staging of her judgement, Zoli is deemed to be guilty and faces the most severe punishment: 'the congress said that she was weak, that she did not have the strength of body or mind, and they sentenced her to Pollution for Life in the Category of Infamy for the Betrayal of Roma Affairs to the Outsiders' (*Zoli*, 114–15). The sharp lines of division between gypsy and gadže are highlighted in the verdict and Zoli is convicted of the most heinous betrayal. At this stage she has lost her trust in Swann and the state, and she has lost the trust of her entire community: 'she can see nothing before her that she wishes to enjoy, and little behind that she cares to remember' (*Zoli*, 115). From a position within a marginalized community to a choreographed status within the state armoury, Zoli is now utterly abandoned and placeless. She can make no claim on her communal past, as she is banished from participating in that culture. Equally she has no role in the future of her community. Her Roma origins dictated that she was part of a mobile, nomadic community, but there was structure and solidarity to that nomadism. On foot of her expulsion, Zoli remains mobile and transient in her physical movements, but these are now conducted as a universal outcast. There are no communal structures of kinship to protect her and she becomes a ghostly and abject itinerant presence on the European landscape.

At one point in her epistolary narrative, Zoli reminds her daughter that: 'You can die of madness, daughter, but you can also die of silence' (*Zoli*, 195). The latter association of death with silence is a keynote of the novel, as well as being a defining preoccupation of McCann's fiction. Just as Kearney asserts that 'stories make possible the ethical sharing of a common world with others', access to representation is a means of sustaining cultural life into the future.[19] Zoli's equation of silence with death recalls the subaltern status of the Roma gypsies in the narrative and in narratives of European history. As Roma scholars like Hancock correctly argue, Roma gypsy identity has more often been the product of non-gypsy politicians, historians and sociologists.[20] Thus,

McCann's novel focuses on the struggles for representative space undergone by Roma gypsies. The state-sanctioned physical and cultural violences evident in *Zoli* are effects of the bigoted and ventriloquized histories produced about Roma gypsies. Zoli's community are typically taxonomized as 'traditional' or 'archaic', and as preceding modernity, and, consequently, out of joint with the demand of modernization. But what McCann's novel urges is that Roma life and values should not be viewed as anti-modern or regressive, but are, in Johannes Fabian's terms, coeval with modernity.[21] The state-led efforts to domesticate Roma itinerancy and orality misrecognize coevality for anteriority; they assume anachronism instead of alternative simultaneity. In fact, McCann's narrative, and the political point inherent to the novel, accords with Dipesh Chakrabarty's contention that 'the writing of history must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself'.[22] Chakrabarty's subalternist historiographical argument is fuelled by the same ethical animus as Kearney's reading of 'otherness', and both are at the kernel of McCann's ethical and political agenda in *Zoli*.

ORALITY AND TEXTUALITY

As McCann acknowledges, *Zoli* is loosely inspired by the life of Papusza, a Polish poet who lived between 1910 and 1987, and, in that sense, we can draw a tentative line of comparison between this novel and his previous work, *Dancer*. Both *Zoli* and *Dancer* are works that appropriate the formal masks of biography – in divergent and limited ways – and both centre on the lives of artist-performers. Theoretically, then, these two recent novels are metacritical reflections on the lives of artists and on notions of narration and historical representation. *Zoli* and *Dancer* explore the utopian possibilities of art, but are aware of how programmatic utopian politics can burden and disfigure the life of the artist and the work of art. In addition, McCann telescopes the ideas of art and embodiment in performance, as in both novels aesthetic pleasure issues from the somatic articulacy of the central characters, but again in discrepant forms. In *Zoli*, one of the foremost tensions is between the embodied artistry of oral lyricism, and oral culture generally, and attempts to 'preserve' its artefacts through technological reproduction. At various junctures in *Zoli*, it seems that

orality is only prized when it can be rendered into a textual version of itself. It is important, then, to recall that the novel draws on the life of a celebrated Roma poet, who was steeped in an oral lyrical tradition, as we begin to consider the tensile relations between orality and textuality. In discussing the orality of Roma in *Zoli* we might view it as yet another agent in the arsenal that is employed to define the Roma as cultural 'other' in the novel, and in the contemporary historical context.

Emphasizing the historical gap that exists between the text-centric gadže world and the orally transmitted Roma culture, Fonseca states: 'there are no words in Romani proper for "to write" or "to read". Gypsies borrow from other languages to describe these activities.'[23] If language is what we use to create our world, then textuality is effectively non-existent in the culture described by Fonseca. Such a fundamental incommensurability at the level of communicative forms becomes central to cross-communal discord that surfaces in *Zoli*. In foregrounding the tensions between orality and textuality, McCann does not idealize orality over the textual; it is not a question of undoing a naturalized hierarchy of value by fetishizing the authentic purity of an orally communicated system of knowledge transfer. What is of concern, however, is exposing the illegitimate superiority of text over orality; in *Zoli* orality is not an exotic refuge of archaism but a dynamic and living cultural system on which an entire communal and ethnic legacy is founded and reproduced. Orality is not portrayed as a kind of original cultural salve, which can remedy the functional excesses of ideological textual record and documentation – though these imposing textual exertions are in evidence in the novel. In other respects, Zoli's oral heritage is analogous to the mobility of her and of her community's physical lives. At different stages in the novel both their linguistic and physical mobility are preyed upon by the textual and physical stasis of the state. Just as she becomes a mediator between gadže and gypsy communities as a literary cult figure in the 1940s and 1950s, Zoli is equally the embodiment of difficult and, in the end, destructive negotiations between oral and textual cultures.

In his work on memory and oral tradition, Jan Vansina underscores the collectiveness of oral cultures. In his view, 'oral traditions are sources of exceptional value since they convey not only the interpretation of the witnesses to an event but those of the minds who transmitted it.'[24] Oral

traditions permit a more generous historical accessibility to the historian, but, more importantly, Vansina's point indicates a greater degree of democratic participation and record is possible through oral transmission. Bypassing the singularity of textual authorship, oral cultures represent collective assertions of democratic articulation. Through the registration of a polyphony of voices and minds, orality seems to be both more inclusive and, therefore, more elusive than the textually enshrined document. In terms of *Zoli*, Fonseca argues for an equivalent collective value in her précis of Papusza's oral folk songs: 'Many of Papusza's song-poems fit into this tradition: through hundreds of refinements and retellings, they are mostly faceless, highly stylized distillations of collective experience…It is impossible to tell the origin or era of most songs by their words, because they speak of the universal and unchanging *cacinos* – truth – of a people living as best they can outside history.'[25] In *Zoli*, her songs belong to this tradition. Though she sings both inherited and her own original compositions, Zoli's lyrics are all firmly rooted in the kinds of heritage outlined by Fonseca. Additive to the collective pedigree of oral culture, Fonseca signals another notable feature of orality in her allusion to the practices of 'refinement', 'retelling', and 'stylized distillation'. Because these lyrics are inherited, there is a drama of negotiation, compromise and re-invention involved between successive singers. As we noted with respect to Rudi's role as performer in *Dancer*, each new [oral] performance of these songs is a renewal of the song, whether it is performed by the same artist or by different artists and different times. Oral art forms remain important sites of reference, and performance and are not exclusively reserved for the purposes of aesthetic pleasure or leisure. As Angela Bourke explains, there is an aggregation of use to which oral art forms are put: 'Oral cultures have therefore developed elaborate verbal art forms through which to arrange knowledge and ideas in patterns, partly in order to conserve and transmit them with maximum efficiency; partly for the intellectual and aesthetic pleasure of such patterning. Much of what an oral culture has to teach is packaged and conveyed in stories.'[26] From pedagogy to aesthetic pleasure, and acting as a mnemonic structure of recollection, orality is densely layered and is critical to the cultural scaffolding of any given oral community. Thus, when we witness the opportunistic enlistment of Zoli's oral songs for politically strategic publication by Stransky and Swann, it is not merely a matter of committing

a series of lyrics to textual form. The underlying tension arises from the fact that the entire project is a fundamental re-shaping of how these oral songs were created and how they can, and will, undergo repeated re-invention into the future. The drama between orality and textuality in *Zoli* stems from the fact that orality is not just a *facet* of culture, but is elemental to that culture's *weltanschauung*.

In formal terms, Zoli's narrative is relayed in the first person and is framed as a direct address to her absent daughter. Again, the novel mimics, or re-asserts, the intimacy of oral storytelling form. The first-person focalization also re-visits the territory of biography, in this case gendered and ethnically marginalized. And all of these points gesture towards the inventiveness of oral narrative, and the possibility for inventive self-fashioning present in biographical representation. The mother–daughter narrative frame is not accidental, as Zoli's own deceased mother is the apparent source for her own singing and poetic talent. Her childhood and adolescence are conditioned by a culture of oral performance, and her beautiful voice and proficiency for remembering old songs singles Zoli out among her peers. In another vein, this talent also prepares the way for her future isolation, as her genius is exploited and betrayed in future years. The songs and stories of her early years are relayed in late-evening and late-night rituals and the Roma stories are populated by 'twelve-legged horses and dragons and demons and virgins and cruel aristocrats, about how the gadže blacksmiths tricked us with their molten buttons' (*Zoli*, 34). While the songs that Zoli performs range from 'They broke, they broke my little brown arm, now my father cries like the rain', to 'I have two husbands, one of them sober, one of them drunk, but each one I love the same', and 'I want no shadow to fall upon your shadow, your shadow is dark enough for me' (*Zoli*, 26), the latter lyrics are deceptively simple and are preoccupied with personal pain, love and sorrow, themes that, as Fonseca argues, are predominant in Roma folk songs. It is this raw, emotive simplicity that appeals to Stransky in his appropriation of Zoli as iconic gypsy poet.

MOBILITY AND EXILE

In a recent essay on postcolonial European cinema, Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas and Guido Rings argue: 'The idea of Europe is increasingly

recognized as a highly mobile and provisional concept and configuration for a variety of reasons including the ambiguity of political and geographical definitions, the constantly evolving membership of Europe as a federation of states, and its operation within an increasingly global context.'[27] Europe's provisional identity might well strike these critics as an emergent phenomenon, but what is missing from their analysis is the sense that the ambiguity mentioned engenders anxiety among sections of Europe's population. For many, especially Roma gypsies, there is little that is ambiguous about 'geographical definitions', as border controls and immigration legislation are enforced with ever-increasing impunity and violence. As Europe's internal 'other', the Roma cannot savour the newly hewn liberties of a borderless and globalized continent. In many ways, this newly configured European polity only heightens the voltage of panic and suspicion among settled populations and their governments about Roma movements. Zoli's banished wandering across the European mainland is, of course, prior to the re-imagination of Europe as we understand it in the contemporary. But her experiences throw into relief the physical rigidity of imagined national and political frontiers; and her clandestine journey is symbolic, for McCann, of continued contemporary displacements, which are conditioned by stealth, fear, and disorientation. Contrary to the argument cited above, there is never a universal experience of political or geographical borders. As *Zoli* makes clear and Roma experience illustrates, these are contingent on ethnic origin and prevailing patterns of cultural 'othering'.

The stasis of her political objectification under Stransky's editorial optic is an explicit counterpoint to Zoli's protracted march across Europe. Stasis meant co-option and a degree of tolerance for her, but at an extreme price, while her mainly pedestrian movement is a symptom of irrevocable expulsion and 'otherness'. Yet the impulse to move has been integral to Zoli and her lifestyle throughout the novel, and this is not just evident in her community's nomadic tradition, but is figurated by McCann through his repeated use of fluvial movement in the narrative. As we have seen in his earlier novels, the river is a recurring symbolic device for McCann, and, in *Zoli* the central protagonist is once more closely linked to the perpetual movement of the river. Even at an early stage, prior to her exile, Zoli's bodily affinities with moving water were flagged in Swann's narrative: 'I woke in the

morning to find her dozing happily under the floribundas. She washed in the running stream distant from the house. She couldn't fathom someone taking a bath in standing water' (*Zoli*, 91). There is an inscrutable Romantic quality to Swann's portrait of Zoli, she is placed seamlessly in an idyllic, pastoral setting and her habit is an additional function of her appealing cultural difference. But in later exiled years such Romantic framing is redundant, as the geographies of Europe become obstacles and conceal threats to Zoli and her body. Though her extensive travel is precarious and physically painful, the river does not shed its recuperative value to Zoli. In Swann's portrait, the river is part of Zoli's, and gypsy, superstition, but in subsequent years the river becomes a curative for Zoli: 'By early afternoon beads of sweat shone on her forehead and a dizziness propels her. I must find a stream to plunge my head into, some moving water to take this fever away. But she can find no sound of running streams along the road' (*Zoli*, 120). In exile and in physical distress, Zoli manages to retain a somatic link to her Roma heritage; her instinct is to locate moving water as a medicinal relief to her suffering. The river might be an overt symbol of transience and momentum, but it also has lingering affective currency for Zoli as a connective to the past and to the life that she has been exiled from as punishment. As her trek proceeds she does find water, and it is a stream that has iced over, perhaps a compromise between still and moving water. But also a reminder of the iced water that cracked and melted under her family as they were murdered. Nevertheless, Zoli breaks the ice to reveal the moving water below the ice cap:

> With a deep breath she plunges her face into the water, so cold it stuns the bones in her cheeks…The blisters have hardened and none of the cuts have gone septic, but the makeshift bandages have become part of her skin. Zoli inches her feet into the burning cold of the water and tries to peel away the last of the bandages. Skin comes with them. Later, over a small fire, she warms her toes, pushes the flaps of torn skin against raw flesh, attends to her wounds. (*Zoli*, 153)

There are deliberate spiritual overtones, Biblical echoes, in McCann's descriptions of Zoli's dependence on the river water as a physical and psychological analeptic. The exiled impoverishment of her condition is eased by the regenerative properties of the river. So that not only does

the river symbolize movement, its healing qualities enable Zoli to tend her wounds in readiness for further, perhaps indefinite, travel.

The curative waters of the river may harbour an ideal figuration of mobility and possess positive redemptive power for Zoli, but the broader realities of her physical movement are dictated by international and ideological boundaries. And borders, analogous to rivers, are both practical and figurative presences in the novel. Zoli repeatedly tests and traverses various boundaries, cultural and political, but now she is confronted with the invested violence of political frontier-zones. Quoting Kundera, Fiona Doloughan touches upon the barriers in prospect for Zoli: 'As long ago as 1971, Kundera bemoaned the fact that "[i]n our society it is counted a greater virtue to guard frontiers than to cross them".'[28] Borders figure, then, as further manifestations of the state's material intrusion on individual and communal movement. At the same time borders are strategies of containment deployed against political and cultural outsiders. As she imagines making her way to Paris, a random yet utopian choice of destination by Zoli, she wonders: 'How many borders is that? How many watchtowers? How many troopers lined along barbed wire? How many roadblocks?' (*Zoli*, 155). The full armoury of the state is engaged as Cold War politics supplement national borders with the barrier of the 'Iron Curtain'. The blind anticipatory gesture of nominating Paris as a speculative endpoint to her travels is tempered by the industrial militarism of gadže surveillance. Roma itinerancy is easily visioned as an absolute 'other' to such intense policing of national contact zones. Borders can be viewed as sites of utopian energies, where cultures can potentially mingle in enriching ways and where new prospects are envisioned. But the co-location of her imagined destination and the insuperable system of barriers to be overcome is suggestive of the fragility of utopian consciousness and of its absolute necessity. McCann suggests how the hopeful geographies of borderlands can be denuded of their vitality by the paranoid politics of the nation-state. In Zoli's case, it is the border between East and West, between competing sides in the Cold War that proves the most daunting. Her situation provides the starkest instance of the vulnerability of the individual in the shadow of programmatic utopian politics and ideology. As a gendered and ethnic migrant, she is helpless in the drama of Cold War politics. Her art has already been hijacked by these politics, and now she must overcome the physical boundaries dictated by these

antagonistic versions of political truth. And she is sensitive to the grounds on which political borders are based, and to the importance of fear and hatred to their preservation: 'The other border, East and West, she knows, will begin in a matter of days and it strikes her, as she walks, that borders, like hatred, are exaggerated precisely because otherwise they would cease to exit altogether' (*Zoli*, 165).

Much of the second half of the novel is taken up with Zoli's journey from Bratislava to Compeggio in northern Italy. Her travels are partly fuelled by her wish to forget the minor and major betrayals of her life in Slovakia, to escape the memories of Swann and of the lateral political manipulation of the Roma. Yet there is nothing to which she is consciously headed, and Paris is, simply, at this stage, a fantasy or an imagined point on the horizon of her travel. In symbolic fashion, she begins her journey by declaring: 'I struck out west' (*Zoli*, 186), and thereby invokes a much longer history of hopeful *westward* travel; the 'west' has always been seen as the trajectory of new prospects and hopes, while the 'east' is more often associated with mystery and the unknown. Indeed, in other works such as *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* and *Songdogs*, McCann presents characters that travel on westward journeys as a means of escape or in pursuit of knowledge. For Zoli, westward travel suggests hope and liberation and it offers the chance of anonymity from the effects of her banishment from the Roma community. To return to both *Songdogs* and *This Side of Brightness*, Zoli's travel is a form of liminal movement. Flensed of her original cultural coordinates and devoid of any structural support from the Roma community, Zoli is cast into a topography of risk but, also, potentially, a terrain of opportunities. She endures savage deprivation during the prolonged period of isolated journeying, to the point of abject dehumanization. Indicative of her struggles, we read: 'Villagers stared at me as I passed. I was sure I looked wretched, all skin and bone and rags…At a deserted farm, I filled my pockets with bonemeal from a feeding trough and later boiled it and ate it without thinking. The paste clove to the top of my mouth and I thought to myself that I was eating the food of animals' (*Zoli*, 186). Her diet, her appearance, the locations where she sleeps, cumulatively suggest the gradual divestment of Zoli's humanity. Her physical decrepitude indexes her increasing remoteness from social propriety of any kind. McCann's description of Zoli's physical decline is another instance where he demurs from presenting an objective and

exoticized version of the Roma. Zoli's apparent community with the natural world, part of the gadže's historical stereotype, is absent from the protracted narration of her gruesome liminal trek across Europe. Contrarily, her body is wracked by pain and starvation in these exposed physical conditions. Her journey allegorizes the vulnerabilities – historical and contemporary – of Europe's nomadic communities and undermines belief in the universal virtues of unfettered globalization.

Despite the betrayals she is fleeing and the perils she encounters and imagines during her flight, there are moments of human generosity evident in the narrative. The journey might figurate the plight of 'otherness', but McCann implants hopeful acts of solidarity. Though the novel is apparently dominated by repeated acts and programmes of persecution, McCann resists such pessimistic historical evidence by emphasizing the persistence of interpersonal solidarity between gadže and gypsy. In the throes of abjection Zoli receives several gestures of unconditional generosity from strangers during her travels. In one of the first of these, Zoli receives food and drink from a farmer and his mother, having hidden in an out-building of their farm for several days. The act of giving is, of course, physically sustaining for Zoli, and, as above, its significance is amplified by the fact that it is unconditional. Yet there is more to the effects of Zoli's receipt of this sustenance; as she prepares to depart the farm, 'Zoli feels a pulse of strength…As she moves out, across the stone wall, onto the tarmac, she has the sudden feeling that if a truck screams down the roadway now she will undoubtedly be able to stand out of its way' (*Zoli*, 130). Zoli is revivified both physically and spiritually; she is charged with renewed purpose, and this is the real worth of the act of generosity. But not only is this an act of generosity, it is a recognition of Zoli's common humanity and an affirmation of her entitlement to basic human dignity. In its brevity and simplicity, this act restores much of Zoli's dignity, in stark contrast to the prolonged efforts of the state in previous years to thieve this dignity.

This utopian gesture is not isolated in Zoli's narrative, and in the face of naturalized prejudice against Roma gypsies, Zoli benefits from several different kinds of aid. She travels with another farmer and her initial suspicions of this man yield when he offers cigarettes, provides her with apples, empathizes with her in his 'passion for the travelling life' (*Zoli*, 211), but, crucially, counsels her against the threat of the

state police. Likewise, she encounters long-distance truck drivers hauling consumer goods across the continent, and she is welcomed into their vehicles. In another instance she is invited to travel with a family in their car and 'to gladden them I began to hum the tune of the old horse song. The man turned in his seat and gave a smile, though the mother kept looking straight ahead. I sat back and hummed some more and he said he liked the humming and I surprised myself with song' (*Zoli*, 216). The confined space of the car becomes a space of dialogue and sharing between gadže and gypsy in this short-lived, and not unqualified, episode. Though not devoid of suspicion, there is a palpable mutuality of respect evident in the sharing of Zoli's music. In another way, her art returns, and through her own volition she brings and offers it to an exterior gadže audience. These differential episodes in Zoli's narrative, then, are aspects of McCann's faith in human redemption, and evidence of the utopian impulses that energize his fictions. This is not to argue that such discrete pockets of solidarity or sharing can preside and can undo the ingrained politics of repression endured by Roma gypsies. Rather, they stress the precariousness of human dignity but also the possibility of its sustenance and redemption in the contemporary world. The last instance is, arguably, the most powerful in this sense, in that it showcases the redemptive agency of art as a bridge between gadže and gypsy histories.

As the novel draws to a close, Zoli comes into further contact with institutional bodies of the gadže world, but in both of these cases they are proposing to aid her and her community's plight against displacement and racism. Having navigated the border between East and West, Zoli wakes to find herself in a Displaced Person's (DP) Camp in Austria. And her initial reaction is entirely conditioned by her prior experiences of institutional benevolence in Slovakia; she violently rejects all promises of help and hygiene. Despite the stated charitable intentions of the DP camp and its staff, the long history of gadže and gypsy relations manifests again in terms of instinctive suspicion. Zoli is so acquainted with the processes and the language of bureaucracy that she is unable to accept the sincerity of their motives towards her. In fact, her stay at the DP camp is another ambiguous location, as it provides sanctuary to Zoli, but it also appears as an extension of state efforts to document and to account for the movements and the origins of displaced peoples. For Zoli, the idiom of the camp and its staff is all too reminiscent of the past

she has been striving to escape. In contrast to the random gestures of generosity she receives and welcomes in other contexts above, Zoli is resistant to the pleas of her medical assessor, Doctor Marcus: 'You don't have to suffer, she said, there's no point, why don't you tell me your situation and then I can help, I promise' (*Zoli*, 193). To this medical intervention, Zoli exhibits a well-earned cynicism: 'It was like an old song, a children's rhyme. I had heard it so often, it was as if she had taken the words of a bureaucrat and put them in a child's mouth' (*Zoli*, 193). Her time at the DP camp allows Zoli to commune again, and to assist a family of Roma gypsies in their plans to re-settle to Canada. It is always her intention to leave the camp, as she cannot accept the institutional and bureaucratic mechanics of re-settlement, even in this putatively charitable guise. Unable to abide by the spirit of the camp's administrative systems, she departs the camp and arrives, and settles, in Compeggio in Italy. This location delivers a life that is rooted for Zoli, and here she marries and has a family, a daughter, to whom the narrative is addressed and with whom she will complete the novel.

Zoli finally arrives in Paris in 2003 on a visit to her daughter, Francesca. In this final section of the novel, Zoli's story is no longer relayed through her first-person narration but is related via an omniscient voice. Her arrival in Paris brings a kind of resolution to the imaginative wandering she undertook decades before, and, fittingly, during her time in Paris she is forced into a reckoning with her past and with Swann. But what is of significance also is the convention of an academic conference on the topic of 'From Wheel to Parliament: Romani Memory and Imagination' (*Zoli*, 250). The event is organized and hosted by Francesca, and its inclusion in the novel is another moment of self-reflexiveness by McCann. The conference references contemporary initiatives in the United States and European academia to represent Roma history and culture. In an adjacent manner to the DP camp, the academic conference is a liberal and institutional act of support for the Roma, but as Zoli intuits, it too is not unproblematic. The list of attendees include 'Academics…Social scientists…Romani writers…Some poets', and indicative topics to be covered are 'the Holocaust, the Devouring, Lexical Impoverishment…Police Perception of Belgian Roma' (*Zoli*, 256). Francesca's defiant assertion at the conference opening that 'We will not be made to stay at the margins any longer' (*Zoli*, 256) is a resolute political statement. But the suspicion

is that these events are purely academic in nature, and cannot be translated into material ameliorative action. Zoli's instinctive discomfort and her refusal to participate actively must be read as symptoms of, firstly, continuing Roma resistance to gadže initiatives that proposed to improve and to understand Roma life. Secondly, it suggests, again, her well-founded scepticism about institutional endeavours to intervene in her life and her culture. And, finally, it is relevant to the broader critical and ethical issues on how and where academics and writers can and should represent cultural and political 'others'. How can the legacies and endurances of such 'othering' be equably redressed or even addressed at the present time? This does not disqualify the efforts currently being made, but raises justifiable questions. Francesca's conference is, then, centred on furnishing a voice for her Roma heritage within a mainstream discursive context, but it is apparent that, from her life experience, Zoli is attuned to the question of whose terms dictate this participation in the mainstream.

Paris is a city of reunions and reckonings in this final part of *Zoli*. She is reunited with her daughter, she visits a Roma enclave in Parisian tower blocks, and the broad topics at the conference highlight some of the history of her people. But this final section also brings the three focalizing protagonists of the novel together at the conference hotel, as it strives for a resolution to their disparate searches and travels. The Slovakian journalist Smolenak confronts Zoli, informing her of his prolonged investigation into her whereabouts and her work. Smolenak, in effect, breaches the fabric of history, allowing a torrent of memories to engulf Zoli. His investigation into her location had opened the novel, and now it foments an intense crisis for Zoli as the past she had repressed returns in the form of Smolenak's project. What is literary historical research for the journalist is profoundly personal and emotional for Zoli. The betrayals of decades before are invisible to Smolenak, who simply sees Zoli as 'a new voice from old times' (*Zoli*, 263). The scene of the conference is doubly problematic for Zoli because she is confronted with the discursive discussions of liberal academics and the popular historical research of Smolenak. She sees her life and its manifold tragedies, as well as those of her people, mutating into the abstract interests of gadže intellectuals. Having fled her status as cult figure and outcast, Zoli senses history's urge to repeat itself, as Smolenak's work positions Zoli as a resurrected literary

figure and is, in some ways, comparable to earlier 'productions' of her work and image. It is Smolenak's unsolicited interventions that promise the reunion between Zoli and Swann in Paris. But a forced reunion would never heal the betrayal by Swann years previously, and though they cursorily converse at the conference hotel, there is no conclusive reconciliation. In fact, McCann does not present an explicit reunion between the former lovers in the novel; instead it is promised at the end of the narrative – it will happen in the future. The reconciliation will, therefore, be on Zoli's terms and not hijacked by Smolenak:

> And then Zoli knows for sure, yes, she will take a taxi to the train station, stop off first at the hotel…call Swann's room, stand in the reception, wait, watch him shamble across toward her, hold his face in her hands for a moment, and kiss him, yes, on the forehead, kiss him, allow him his sorrow and then she will leave, take the train, alone, home to the valley. (*Zoli*, 273)

The promise of reconciliation between Zoli and Swann is, symbolically, fixed for the future, and she will assume the responsibility. Zoli will indulge in another act of spiritual generosity towards her erstwhile lover. McCann does not end the novel with a conclusive resolution of this fractured relationship but does hint at the prospect of redemption. Having decided to visit Swann the following day, Zoli enters the living room of Francesca's apartment, in which musicians have gathered, and it is this space, with this music, that *Zoli* concludes. The conference centred on hearing the Roma voice, but, as we noted, the danger remained that this voice could become objectified or abstracted. By way of comparison, McCann ends the novel with Zoli and the enunciation of her voice as a Roma poet and singer. In the final scene, Zoli's identity is seen as performative rather than constative; she is an artistic subject rather than a discursive object. The novel concludes with Zoli in the midst of the gadže world, but, tellingly, she is about to sing on her own terms. Zoli's is the final voice that is registered and, herein, McCann once more brings art and politics; art and redemption; and music and hope into focus:

> 'Go on,' she says, 'Play.' The curly-haired one strikes a note on the mandolin, a bad note, too high, though she rinses it out with the rest, and the guitarist joins in, slowly at first, and a wave moves across the gathering, like wind over grass, and the room feels as if

> it is opening, one window, then another, and then the walls themselves. The tall musician strikes a chord and nods at Zoli – she smiles, lifts her head, and begins. She begins. (*Zoli*, 274–5)

The general political impulse of *Zoli* is candidly summarized by Fogarty when she argues that: 'McCann constructs an indictment of societies that are intolerant of difference and create Others in order to shore up their corrupt regimes.'[29] This is a contention that we have pinpointed throughout the chapter and one that, clearly, informs much of McCann's fictional output. But the political effectiveness of McCann's novel is not only recognized within literary critical responses such as Fogarty's. Ian Hancock is equally effusive about the sensitivity of McCann's portrait of his community: 'I review a great many Roma-themed manuscripts for publishers, but none has ever moved me as profoundly.'[30] *Zoli* portrays a complex cultural constituency without reducing it and its history to Romantic typologies. There is a sense in which McCann acknowledges the subaltern nature of Roma culture – a culture that is not anterior, archaic, or 'traditonal', but that exists as a vibrant, coterminous culture to mainstream 'modernity'. Indeed David Lloyd's summation of subalternity seems apposite to the Roma experiences narrated by McCann in *Zoli*. Lloyd writes: 'the apparent discontinuity of popular or non-elite history furnishes indications of alternative social formations…the insubordination of such formations is in precise differentiation to the narrative forms of official histories.'[31] Lloyd's suggestive use of the word 'insubordination' is the key to understanding the litany of representation and misrepresentation undergone by the Roma, but it is also crucial to the imagination of a utopian politics. A politics that does not fetishize difference and 'otherness' or subordinate in different ways, but one that recognizes and restores dignity and hope.

NOTES

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2. Isabel Fonseca, *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and their Journey* (London: Vintage, 1995) p.273.
3. Ian Hancock, 'The Struggle for the Control of Identity', in Michael Hayes (ed.), *Road Memories: Aspects of Migration History* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), p.4.
4. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Vintage, 1978).
5. Mary Burke, *Tinkers: Synge and the Cultural History of the Irish Traveller* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.271.

6. Jean-Pierre Liegois, *Gypsies: An Illustrated History* (London, 1985), p.104.
7. Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (London: Faber, 1987), p.326.
8. The term *gadže* is the Roma term for non-Roma people.
9. Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.65.
10. Ibid., p.3.
11. Ibid., p.81.
12. Ibid., p.80.
13. Ibid., p.81.
14. Colum McCann, *Zoli* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), p.3. All further references to *Zoli* will be in parenthesis as (*Zoli*).
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23. Fonseca, *Bury Me Standing*, p.11.
24. Jan Vansina, 'Memory and Oral Tradition', in Joseph C. Miller (ed.), *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1980), p.276.
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29. Fogarty, 'Contemporary Irish Fiction and the Transnational Imaginary', p.140.
30. Cited in Carolyn T. Hughes, 'Adventurist: Interview with Colum McCann', *Poets & Writers* (Jan/Feb 2007), p.54.
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7

‘Burning from the Inside Out’: *Let the Great World Spin* (2009)

9/11 – ART AND POLITICS

The encounter between 9/11 and literature brings into focus the triumphs and deformations of language and representation since the acts of criminal terror unfolded almost a decade ago. A symbology and a semiotics all of its own has evolved from 9/11. The term itself has entered linguistic circulation as a universal shorthand for murderous terror and noble resistance to unseen terroristic agencies. But, equally, dissent has arisen about the moralistic mobilizations of 9/11 as a legitimation for surveillance, violent interrogation, and illegal invasion. Heated exchanges have cohered around the ethics of employing 9/11 as a political lodestone and/or as an emotional default in the invocation of national identity in the United States. When we come to consider artistic responses to, or reflections on, 9/11 we enter battle-worn ground on which politics and culture have colluded and competed. And at the epicentre of these debates is language and how it has been competitively utilized as a means of cultivating jingoistic assent, or, less often, non-partisan critical reflection on 9/11 as an act of terror. This is also the case when matters revolving around the performances of a morally endowed national identity in the US are brought into play. In many respects, instead of provoking lateral constructive argumentation on global relations – political, economic and cultural – institutional responses to 9/11 have, more often, recoiled at the prospect of polyphonic debate in lieu of patriotic consensus. Simply put, there has been a degree of ‘anti-intellectualism’ afoot in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks and the intervening duration of the ‘War on Terror’. For Susan Sontag there is ‘the suspicion of thought, of words’, and ‘hiding behind the humbug that the attack of last September 11 was too horrible, too devastating, too

painful, too tragic for words, that words could not possibly do justice to our grief and indignation, our leaders have a perfect excuse to drape themselves in borrowed words devoid of content. To say something might be controversial…Not saying anything is best.'[1] There is a passionate political criticism and consciousness to Sontag's diagnosis. But her argument also dovetails with the actions and reactions of writers after the events of 11 September. In Susan Buck-Morss' view, 9/11 might have been a 'mute act' requiring subsequent narrative coding.[2] But the dominant narrative patterning of 9/11 has been univocal, by and large, and has striven to quell critical questioning. The popular call for unity from within the US, and that reached across, and was accepted by, the 'West', is matched and abetted by cultural agents that do not defy, but affirm, simplistic, binary thinking on East/West relations – historical and contemporary. Difference and diversity, long mainstays of American popular culture, are now watchwords of new idioms of paranoid and xenophobic legislation and monitoring. Political and cultural differences are not the basis for pluralist or multicultural inclusiveness, but are now markers of potential menace. Indeed it is not an exaggeration to speculate that the political and cultural climate of the 'West' has entered the frames of dystopian literary history for many of its narrative figurations in the years since 9/11.

In this intensified state of political and cultural sensitivity, it is worth posing the following questions, as Daniel Lea does in his piece on literary responses to 9/11. Lea inquires: 'why are the views of writers, and in particular novelists, deemed so worthy of collation and dissemination? Why, in the aftermath, were novelists sought out to air their opinions on the traumatic character of events? What, in other words, does the novelist have to offer that cannot be provided by reportage or political commentary?'[3] Lea's series of questions centres on the role of the novelist in relation to 9/11 and asks what are the exceptional abilities harboured by the literary artist that might enable them to mediate such shocking events for a general readership. The premium placed on the writer, as opposed to the narrative conventions and content of media and political opinion, is not difficult to explain. There is an assumption that the rhetoric of news coverage and political newspeak are blighted by evasion, slant or outright misinformation, whereas the explanatory fictions of the novelist are

deemed to express and to possess truths and consolations for the reader. Clearly, Lea's point coheres with the broader issue of the appetite for narrative and explanation after the 9/11 attacks, but it also touches upon other critical issues. In summoning writers to respond to these catastrophic events, it seems as if there is an explicit acknowledgement of the capacity of the literary artist to provide guidance out of the silence and the clamour attendant to 9/11. Likewise, the possibility that literature itself might be a source of succour or solace is implicit in Lea's speculations. This is not to locate the literary artist as a kind of renovated seer in the light of 11 September, but there has been a renewed weight placed on the literary as a medium of consolation and resolution in many critical interventions since 9/11.

And another series of queries, this time by David Simpson, opens up the discussion of what might be termed a recalibrated utopian function of literature since 9/11. In his *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, Simpson asks: 'Does the experience of literature inevitably or even plausibly lead us to a compassionate response to the sufferings of others? Is literature the best means by which we can educate ourselves into an appropriately full engagement with the deaths of others?'[4] Simpson is sceptical about the moral and affective agencies of the literary – in his view repeated textual familiarity with or exposure to the suffering of others can inure one against feelings of empathy. Contrary to the views of critics such as Martha Nussbaum, Simpson expresses doubts regarding the conjunction of literature and empathy.[5] Nevertheless, Simpson's case has been met with distinguished and widespread opinion, which articulates the contrary viewpoint and partakes of Nussbaum's argument. The impacts of 9/11 as physical and symbolic assaults, then, were pinpointed as moments that required not only explanation but redemption, and literature was a cultural medium through which such redemption could, potentially, be found. Out of the elevated reality of the trauma of 9/11, a journey or process of redemption must emerge.

Countering Simpson's suspicion of the necessary redemptive agency of literature are critics including Richard Kearney and Michael Rothberg – whose arguments chime with the logic of Nussbaum's longer-term work. Both Kearney's and Rothberg's contentions underscore the political and critical responsibilities of literature. And there is a call to vigilance evident in each of these cases, and a demand for

attention against complacent consumption of divisive and bellicose narratives within the public sphere. In his view, a combination of philosophy and literary criticism, Kearney draws a crucial distinction between popular media outlets and the realms of literary narratives:

> Philosophical and artistic works are…capable of furnishing some extra, because indirect, insights into the enigma of horror. For both proffer an *unnatural* perspective on things – by virtue of style, genre and language. And this unnatural perspective is almost invariably absent from the all-too-naturalistic stance of most entertainment and mass media…The advantage of art and philosophy is that they are critical discourses which underscore the character of such illusion.[6]

Focusing on narrative form, Kearney displays an awareness of the limits of narrative realism when confronted with an event of such sublime proportions as 9/11. The inherent formal flexibility of artistic narratives enables them to respond to such events and such spectacles in more reflective ways than mere information outlets or partisan broadcast channels. There is a utopian impulse embedded within Kearney's appraisal; he displays a consciousness that literature and art are fully sensitive to the artificialities of narrative production and, therefore, bring us closer to truths by exposing the falsities of populist and propagandized narratives. The view espoused by Rothberg is, arguably, more explicit in its alignment of literature with politics and terrorism in the post-9/11 context. Under his critical optic, the literary can act as a riposte to terrorism itself, and can be a voice in analyzing and speaking back to the political contexts out of which terrorism arises. Literary art in this schema is resolutely public and capable of revealing 'the interconnectedness of the public and the private'.[7] The broad concerns of national and international politics that appear to unfold on the stages of the public sphere, of course, impact upon the private lives of individuals, particularly under 'states of emergency' maintained at various levels since 9/11. According to Rothberg: 'the aesthetic has a particular role to play in responding both to acts of extreme violence and to the political process in which they unfold and to which they give rise'; furthermore, 'the aesthetic is neither an apolitical zone closed off from violence nor a realm that can simply be subsumed under the seemingly more urgent activity of

politics, even in a moment of perpetual emergency.'[8] Rothberg's conclusion is that 'the aesthetic constitutes a bridging realm that connects subjective experience to larger collectivities'.[9] Literary artists were expeditious in their responses to 9/11 in personal and journalistic pieces, but Rothberg's point is trained on how they did, and can still, react in purely literary terms. Literature, the aesthetic, is a political agent; it is a competent mediator between the geopolitics of the public sphere and the anxieties, the terrors, or discontentments of the private. And in this conceptualization of literary art, Rothberg's case joins Kearney's as one that is energized by a utopian dynamism. Both are significant because they reflect the felt need for a critical reckoning with the narration of 9/11, and literature is a viable vehicle for conducting such a project. The aesthetic, then, in its attentiveness to language and its differential usages; to the mechanics of narration; its facility to critique the contemporary political order; and to re-imagine and to redeem alternative worlds and histories becomes a muscular political and cultural resource after 9/11. And, perhaps, there are some of the reasons, to answer Lea's series of questions above, that artists, novelists in particular, were enlisted as respondents to the terror of 11 September. And it is why their artistic works that reflect on 9/11 and its resonances are important contemporary cultural and political touchstones.

If the question of empathy is crucial to understanding McCann's work, then the relationship between empathy and narrative is essential to any engagement with his fiction. As we discussed above, the possibilities of evoking empathetic feeling through literary reading is a highly contentious field of critical debate. But it is a suite of arguments that was thrown into focus again in the light of literary responses to 11 September. In his short piece published in *The Guardian* on 15 September 2001, Ian McEwan draws empathy and the power of the imagination together in his polemic against the cruelties of the 9/11 hijackers. McEwan cleaves to the conviction that: 'If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed.'[10] In his view, empathetic feeling is rooted in the imagination – in one's ability to place one's self in the situation of another, the 'other'. In pairing empathy and imagination, McEwan asserts that this facility to imagine in such compassionate ways is 'at the core of our

humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.'[11] A failure of imagination leads to charges of mass murder; a failure of empathy is an index of the abandonment of human fellow feeling. Indeed, McEwan's essay 'Only Love and the Oblivion' is endorsed by Kearney in his own writing on 9/11. And Kearney's agreement with McEwan again underscores the privileged position of writers as respondents to scenes of immense trauma – scenes which seem to confound our narrative perceptions of reality and our apprehensions of what constitutes our external realities. For Kearney, 'it is not insignificant that some of the most insightful responses to 9/11 came from thinkers and artists...The contribution by McEwan to *The Guardian* a few days after the event is to my mind one of the most cogent testimonies to the power of *narrative understanding*.'[12]

LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN AND 9/11

Again the 'narrative' labour and expertise of writers, together with their 'imaginative' range are signalled as a means of fashioning and relating understanding to dazed readers. Returning to Lea, in the wake of Rothberg's and Kearney's arguments, is there an inevitability to the prominence of writerly responses to 9/11, and other such extreme public events of violence and spectacle? McEwan's location of empathy in the imagination, and his belief that this is where morality begins, centres literature as a primary political agent after 9/11. There was little that was empathetic or imaginative about many institutional political responses to the attacks of 11 September. But it seems from these combined reactions that literature houses utopian possibilities towards political and cultural critique, and towards the cultivation of empathetic feeling beyond the local. Post-9/11, novels and other works of art are not solely concerned with eliciting sympathy or empathy for the victims of the hijacked planes – though this is important – this sub-genre of contemporary fiction is also cognizant of the need for narratives that complicate our understandings of the 'other'. These 9/11 fictions can help us to see hope in place of an insistent rhetoric of vilification and retribution; and they can impress the possibilities of redemption through empathy rather than through violent purging. The brachiated and democratic structure of *Let the Great World Spin*, in tandem with one of its central themes, creative

daring, allow McCann to address these questions. McCann's literary intervention is a 9/11 novel, and it attempts to loosen the grip of the 9/11 grief industry, which tries to stage-manage the cultural digestion of 9/11. *Let the Great World Spin* is a political and social novel that looks aslant at the attacks of 9/11; McCann suggests that it is an allegory on human suffering, which partially speaks to 11 September. Nevertheless, the novel de-monumentalizes the suffering of the victims of 9/11, without denigrating their memory. Instead, McCann showcases the longevity and the breadth of human suffering and resilience across races, classes and nationalities in New York City. It is a novel that is stalked by menace and violence, but one that rises to moments of grace and hopeful anticipation. And in this latter point, it coheres with Rothberg's and Kearney's faith in art after 9/11.

Speaking in interview after the publication of *Let the Great World Spin*, McCann admitted to a certain confusion as an author dealing with 9/11, particularly as a resident of New York City. He confessed that he 'began to wonder, Who's going to write about this?' and that as responses of various forms and political persuasions began to proliferate, he remarked that 'every piece was poignant...And everything had meaning: it was like the whole city was infused with meaning.'[13] The everyday is transformed into the sacred, as figuration and suggestion engulf the brute realities of a debris-strewn and ash-thickened atmosphere. As the force of the reality of 9/11 manifested itself, understandings of its 'meaning' only became admissible through figuration – symbols and metaphors were drafted in as explanatory buffers: 'You couldn't help thinking that everything had importance. Even the child's painting of the two buildings holding hands was a powerful image.'[14] McCann's point re-iterates the fact that even this event, perhaps especially this event, cannot escape 'the reach of symbol and metaphor'.[15] Whereas many saw recourse to narrative and figuration as routes out of aphasia and grief, towards a semblance of healing, it is equally true that 9/11 became a part of a dominant semiotics in the geopolitical imagination. In other words, 9/11 became a symbolic agent of neo-conservative politics and acted as a guarantor of moral legitimacy for physical and cultural violence across the globe. Its cultivated mythology has seen it conscripted into narrow and heavily politicized commemoration. As Simpson avers: 'The event has been and will be made to mark a new epoch, and as such it is already generating a mythology and a set of practices of its own.'[16]

The attacks of 11 September were entirely without public warning or, apparently, precedent. Yet as Slavoj Žizek argues, the forms the attacks assumed are familiar features of our visual fantasy worlds.[17] But the sheer spectacular qualities of the World Trade Centre attacks take us back to Lea's series of questions: were writers summoned in order to verbalize some meaningful explanation of the silent spectacle of the terror attacks? The mute eloquence of the events can be adjudged to confer a level of uniqueness on 9/11, as Buck-Morss concedes: 'The staging of violence as a global spectacle separates September 11 from previous acts of terror.'[18] Nevertheless, the lethal visibility of 9/11 reminds us of the relative invisibility of other acts of terror, often committed in its wake and on our behalf. But the spectacular nature of the event brings into tension the viewers' sense of what is real and what is fictive; and occasions a blurring between the real and the cinematic. There is, in other words, a clash of communicative or narrative codes, and at the moments of the attacks there is no mediation to untangle this confusion. The perpetrators of the crime well understood both the symbolism of the twin towers and the centrality of the visual to the West's cultural economy, as well as the intimacy of remembrance and images. In differential modes – remembrance, cinema, information – the visual is crucial to understanding 9/11, and is a key motif in McCann's 9/11 novel. To return to one of the early novelist respondents, Martin Amis, we see this exact point concisely articulated: 'But no visionary cinematic genius could hope to create the majestic abjection of that double surrender, with the scale of the buildings conferring its own slow motion. It was well understood that an edifice so demonstrably comprised of concrete and steel would also become an unforgettable metaphor. This moment was the apotheosis of the postmodern era – the era of the image and perceptions.'[19]

9/11 can be located in a specific set of geographical locations, and the abbreviated nomination indicates the calendar date of the attacks in 2001. Through the labours of policymakers and media agenda-setters, 9/11 has outgrown any sense of itself as a mere temporal marker; the event has transcended historical time and has entered epochal time. As other literary critical volumes amply illustrate, literature and, in particular, the novel, has responded variously to 9/11, though much of the literary output and pursuant literary criticism has

tended to reflect on American legacies and experiences of 9/11.[20] In a recent literary critical survey, Catherine Morley notes a suite of trends in 9/11 fiction: 'While many of the initial reactions to the events of 11 September were notable for their uniquely subjective emphasis, with writers discussing what the attacks meant to them, to their art and to their writing, what many writers have also been integrating into their fiction has been the American response to the attacks.'[21] The current discussion strives to depart from domestic, subjective reactions to 9/11 in literary fiction and essays by looking at the National Book Award-winning *Let the Great World Spin*, which deals with 9/11 in an elliptical way. McCann's novel is set, like much of his previous fiction, in New York, but principally unfolds in 1974, and deals with, in figurative fashion, themes of trauma, loss, and redemption. *Let the Great World Spin* is initiated by the narration of a high-wire walk between the towers of the World Trade Centre on 7 August 1974, and his imaginative performance reverberates forward in time to 11 September 2001, as a utopian act of creation. But rather than re-create a world-historical universe in 1974, McCann prefers to navigate the margins of a profoundly troubled metropolis. *Let the Great World Spin* gestures to the accumulated grief of 9/11 and to the symbolism of the attacks by way of Philippe Petit's walk, and McCann spotlights the possibility of redemption and recovery in the recessed spaces of New York's cityscape. Grief is not confined to this date and this event, and neither is hope; the novel is, then, an allegory about all human suffering and how that suffering can be alleviated or endured.

Let the Great World Spin cannot but be considered a political and social novel given its embrace of criminality, destitution, addiction, and class division. Set in 1974 in New York, the narrative primarily spans downtown and uptown Manhattan, as well as the South Bronx, with interludes in Ireland and upstate New York. Gathered within its plotlines are characters of different nationalities, races and class locations: the anonymous high-wire walker; the Irish monk, John Corrigan and his brother Ciaran; Tillie and Jazzlyn Henderson, mother and daughter prostitutes, who are friends with John Corrigan; a wealthy couple grieving for the son lost in Vietnam, Claire and Solomon Soderberg; and Gloria, who lost three of her sons in the same war; a teenage photographer on the hunt for new subway graffiti; and a young artist, Lara, who is involved in John Corrigan's death and

begins a long-term relationship with his brother after that accident. From the outset, *Let the Great World Spin* clamours with diversity, and pulses with the tensions and insecurities of its cast. The novel acknowledges both the material and the symbolic as forces within daily life, and traces how, as McCann puts it 'the accidental meets the sacred'.[22] And a fraction of its political engagement is, of course, its concern with 9/11 as a material and a symbolic event. McCann accepts the immense symbolic trauma of 9/11, but he is equally keen to stress the lateral material sufferings that nourish, and are often subordinated to, the public emphasis on symbolic victimhood or symbolic violence. *Let the Great World Spin* is, in this way, a politically engaged narrative, which speaks from an equivalent critical position to that outlined by Rothberg and Kearney above. It is a forceful, though tangential, artistic-political response to 9/11, but there is more to the work than this neat summary may suggest: '9/11 was the initial impetus for the book…But I am aware of the pitfalls of labelling it a "9/11" novel…9/11 is certainly part of the book's construction, but it is not limited to that…I really wanted to lift it out of the 9/11 "grief machine".'[23] While he acknowledges the symbolic threads that link *Let the Great World Spin* to 9/11, it would be reductive to define McCann's novel as one that is exclusively trained on these events. It is a novel that responds to 9/11 without ever becoming obsessed by the immediate repercussions in 2001 in any direct way. McCann does not 'enter' the world of 9/11 or post-9/11 in a sustained fashion, nor does he imagine characters or events implicated directly in this contemporary tragedy. Tellingly, he implies that 9/11 might actually compromise his work, that 9/11 as a 'cultivated' event could contract the interpretive scope of his narrative. In this there are echoes of Jacques Derrida's argument that works of literature might themselves become objects within the commemorative industry of 9/11.[24] All of these issues, though, cannot disavow the fact that 9/11 is a thematic and ethical point of departure for *Let the Great World Spin*. But it is equally the case that the novel's visions outstrip the political and cultural agons surrounding the 2001 attacks. As McCann stresses: 'it's a novel that tries to uncover joy and hope and a small glimmer of grace…a novel about creation, maybe even a novel about healing in the face of all the evidence.'[25]

RE-IMAGINING SPACE AND PERFORMING HOPE

Mobility and exile are defining preoccupations of McCann's previous two novels, and this makes them much more obviously 'spatial' in their concerns. Yet *Let the Great World Spin* asserts the locality of spatial politics; its topographies are, principally, those of New York City, but exile and mobility remain prominent. There are other geographies present: Ireland figures at the outset and at the conclusion, and California enters the narrative via telephonic communication. Allusions are made to Guatemala; Cleveland, Ohio; England; Brussels; Naples; New Orleans; Little Rock, Arkansas; Vietnam; and Genoa, but New York City is the spatial main stage. New York City is the localized global space and it is the endpoint of all of these vectors of travel and displacement. Within the city, and the novel, McCann juxtaposes terrestrial and airborne spaces, which are figurations of hope and despair as well as reminders that life at ground level can be as precarious as life on an elevated tightrope: both demand balance that is often threatened and uncertain. And this is one of the possible interpretations of the wire walker's funambulism, as an acrobatic correlative of the fragile precariousness of daily living. At the same time, his act is an outrageous seizure of urban space, an act, apparently, with no constructive end other than the outstanding beauty of the act itself. The twin towers and the references to the Vietnam War unfolding at this time are affronted by the vision of the wire walker's spatial creativity. Both the war and the buildings are parts of the same capitalistic continuum and are complicit in the spatial appropriation of the globe. Empire building was, and is, founded on the basic contestation of, and appropriation of, space, and both the towers and the war are internal and external signs of this politics. As Edward Soja summarizes: 'The production of ideas (and ideologies) is thus an important component of the production of spatiality but this relationship is rooted in social origins.'[26]

Though he is never named in the novel, *Let the Great World Spin* opens on the morning of Philippe Petit's tightrope walk between the twin towers of the World Trade Centre on 7 August 1974. Immediately McCann gestures to the agency of the visual as both a universal cultural medium and as a core motif of the novel. Vision, spectacle and sightings provide a link between the opening act of funambulism in *Let the Great World Spin* and the brute spectacular of 9/11. Indeed

the 'walker's', as he is referred to, preparation to step out onto his high wire is met with similar silent awe and trepidation by the congregation of confused viewers on the streets of Manhattan below: 'Those who saw him hushed…Others figured it might be the perfect city joke – stand around and point upward, until people gathered, tilted their heads, nodded, affirmed, until all were staring upward at nothing at all.'[27] The grouped crowds may be witnesses to the 'walker's' actions, but there is nothing besides suspicion and uncertainty in the accumulated speculations. There seems to be a disjuncture between vision and comprehension in the presence of this acrobatic feat, yet curiosity persists among the viewers:

> He could only be seen at certain angles so that the watchers had to pause at street corners, find a gap between buildings, or meander from the shadows to get a view unobstructed by cornice work, gargoyles, balustrades, roof edges…It was the dilemma of the watchers: they didn't want to wait around for nothing at all…but they didn't want to miss the moment either…Around the watchers, the city still made its everyday noises. (*LGWS*, 3)

In this opening set-piece, McCann corrals fantasy, illusion and reality; the expectant silence of the watchers and the commotion of the city morning; and the minute vulnerability of the human body amid the domineering concreted scale of the city. The repetitions, the habits of the everyday, are intruded upon by 'a dark toy against the cloudy sky' (*LGWS*, 3) – the 'walker'.

The build-up to the moment when the 'walker' steps off the edge of the tower captures the heteronomy of sounds and sights as the working day in Manhattan commences. McCann's description evokes the mobility, even the transience, of the city: 'Ferry whistles. The thrum of the subway. The M22 bus pulled in against the sidewalk, sighed down into a pot-hole. A flying chocolate wrapper touched against a fire hydrant. Taxi doors slammed…Revolving doors pushed quarters of conversation out into the street' (*LGWS*, 4). Snatches of urban sensuousness form the backdrop to the 'walker's' defiant artistic performance high above the street level bustle. Yet the fragmented sensory chaos of Manhattan is somehow nullified by the 'walker's' gesture; his presence on the skyline unifies the disparate lives into an

integrated audience. His brazen act is received with reverent silence as the watchers mingle and convene in pockets on the pavements: 'Doctors. Cleaners. Prep chefs. Diamond merchants. Fish Sellers. Sad-jeaned whores. All of them reassured by the presence of one another' (*LGWS*, 4). The improbability of the sight and the rumours that it generates – 'he was some sort of cat burglar, that he'd been taken hostage, he was an Arab, a Cypriot, an IRA man, that he was really just a publicity stunt, a corporate scam' (*LGWS*, 5) – creates a tangible level of community between the gathered watchers. The slow, methodical preparations of the 'walker' allow time for the pedestrian audience to intrigue about his motivations, but more importantly, this period of silent viewing must be and is filled with expectancy and mystery. For those at street level, 'the waiting had been made magical…shared. The man above was a word they seemed to know, though they had not heard it before. Out he went' (*LGWS*, 7). Given the historical context in which the novel is set, a period during which New York City was rife with violent crime and drug addiction, as well as facing the prospect of financial bankruptcy, the image of the 'walker' perched on the highest building in the world is a signal utopian moment. And the significance of using Petit's daring in this fashion, and in a 9/11 novel, is touched upon in these exact terms by McCann. The moment of physical transcendence became a powerful symbolic act for McCann in the wake of 9/11, what he calls 'a spectacular act of creation'.[28] The private sufferings and griefs of ordinary people, which exist side by side with faith in possible recovery, are primary thematics of the novel, and Petit's walk catalyzes this possibility of redemption. Equally this emboldened creative act assembles disparate individuals in Manhattan, however briefly, and allows them to share a unique spectacle. In this sense, the 'walker's' gesture facilitates an instance of belonging and restores faith in the possibility of solidarity; it is suggestive of the numinous touching upon the banalities of the everyday. The 'walker' is apparitional on the Manhattan skyline, a spectre on the horizons of the visible and of the possible. But he is, most importantly, an agent of hope in the allegorical structure of the novel. His decision to step out onto the high wire is the ultimate act of faith: faith in oneself. And it is an inspirational, generous act offered to those who stop, wait and watch his sky-borne performance.

The wire walker's feat is an imaginative re-calibration of spatiality;

it is an unforeseen subversion of the logic of capitalist space. The hubris and the rational architecture of the World Trade Centre are challenged by the wire walker's re-casting of the twin towers as objects of acrobatic beauty. And the implications of the wire walker's actions are consummately expressed in the novel by the grieving Claire Soderberg: 'And an attempt at beauty. The intersection of a man with the city, the abruptly reformed, the newly appropriated public space, the city art. Walk up there and make it new. Making it a different space' (*LGWS*, 103). Claire's description has implicit references to Ezra Pound's Modernist injunction 'to make new', and to Karl Heinz Stockhausen's provocative statement that the World Trade Centre attacks were pieces of high art. Her reaction on hearing of the wire walker combines space as art, the redefinition of urban utility, and the aesthetics of violence, in particular in relation to 9/11. In this emotional processing of the wire walk, McCann touches upon: 9/11; the pursuit of arresting innovation in art; and the rousing utopian dynamism of the spatial re-conceptualization of iconic capitalist edifices. The twin towers were the concreted and glazed embodiment of a set of economic, political and cultural abstractions, and there is no gainsaying the symbolic violence of their destruction. But rather than dwell on the destructive levelling of the towers in 2001 as an act of incommensurable violence, McCann urges us to appreciate the imaginative spatial assault on the towers in 1974. The wire walk is, of course, a temporary performance, but no less affective for its brevity; it is a jolting act of faith and creativity. And the achievement, with its possibilities, are apprehended by Claire's husband, Solomon, who is the judge assigned to try and to sentence the wire walker after his arrest. For Solomon Soderberg:

> The tightrope walker was such a stroke of genius. A monument in himself. He had made himself into a statue, but a perfect New York one, a temporary one, up in the air, high above the city…He had gone to the World Trade Center and had strung his rope across the biggest towers in the world. The Two Towers. Of all places. So brash. So glassy. So forward-looking…The glass reflected the sky, the night, the colors: progress, beauty, capitalism. (*LGWS*, 248)

The wire walker not only stills and silences the gathered urban crowds, but he carves a monument out of thin air. The spectacle of the

walker undermining rationality as he draws his audience skyward, re-imagines the potential use of the twin towers. These other monuments, to financial functionalism, are alternatively deployed by the wire walker's performance. His act and his art are highly impractical, and they are, in fact, treated as criminal. But the brazen creativity displayed infects the lives of those that witness the walk first hand, and those that hear of it subsequently. The walk may not change the ways in which spatiality is conceived of and produced in New York City, and it does not alter the spatial employment of the twin towers. But the wire walker's gesture opposes 9/11 in pre-emptive fashion with an act of daring creation. The tightrope walk defies belief, but is equally motored by the belief and the faith of the walker, and, again, flags the roles of faith and belief in the overall narrative. The wire walker, then, performs a utopian spatial act that strikes one of the thematic keynotes of *Let the Great World Spin*.

The wire walker's sky-borne theatre anticipates, but creatively contradicts, the spectacular spatial violence of 9/11. And the realms of the visual and the creative are not confined to this astounding air-borne act – the novel sees creativity constantly jousting with destructive impulses. If we bracket *Let the Great World Spin* as a 9/11 novel, then part of its distinctiveness within this subgenre of fictions is not only its authorship by a non-American-born novelist, but also its anachronicity to the events and its emphasis on differential acts and forms of creativity, from the wire walker to graffiti art and failed mainstream painters. Corrigan may be the most explicit embodiment of lived redemption and faith in the novel, and the wire walker does suggest hope in his physical and imaginative performance, but there are less prominent but telling exercises of creative imagination and redemptive grace across the narrative. And it is the tenacity of creativity that McCann offers as a respite to even the most acute of grief and tragedy. *Let the Great World Spin* clings to the belief that in the wake of extreme loss, in the gloom of catastrophe, life must and can proceed. Basic human faith, generosity of spirit, and fertile creativity are constants in human history, in the same way that violent tragedy persists across history. The wire walker is not the only 'visual' artist in the novel: Lara is a painter, but more interestingly, McCann takes us into the underground and to the world of urban graffiti in 'Book Two'.

At the beginning of 'Book Two' we move to the New York subway system – a retreat, again, to the landscape of *This Side of Brightness*. The 'Tag' chapter is a fleeting but revealing third-person narration of a teenager's obsession with the 'Zoo York' culture of urban graffiti. The boy, Fernando, rides precariously in the crook of the subway carriages hoping to discover new graffiti tags and to capture them in photographs. McCann's account of the clandestine cataloguing of a guerrilla art form has overtones of a subterranean wire walker: 'He surfs the thin metal platform as the train jags south out of Grand Central. At times he gets dizzy, just anticipating the next corner. That speed. That wild noise in his ears. The truth is, it frightens him. The steel thrumming through him. It's like he has the whole train in his sneakers. Control and oblivion' (*LGWS*, 167). The visceral intensity and potential violence of this pursuit of art has a parallel in the exertions of the wire walker, who is preparing for his first sky-borne step at the very moment that this boy is scavenging the underground for illicit art. In much the same way that Corrigan and the wire walker are embodiments of spatial and hopeful extremes, this boy is one end of the spectrum of beauty and, again, the wire walker the other. Yet both are linked by their faith and by the riskiness of their search for beauty in what are marginal aesthetic forms. But not only does the boy find beauty in the darkest corners of the New York subway, he locates the hope that sustains his everyday life. Seeking out new, distinctive graffiti tags is 'the only thing that oils the hinges of his day'. For this disaffected teenager, 'everything else crawls, but the tags climb up into eyeballs' (*LGWS*, 167). What we see is quite literally an underground art, which retains an enlivening and enabling energy because the search for the artistic artefact is as important as the piece of art. Of equal significance is the doubly visual emphasis at this point. The illicit visual register of the urban graffiti is recorded and unearthed by the boy's photographic seizures, so that the power of the visual is accented again by McCann. Affective visions that inspire, provoke, and shock are commonplace across *Let the Great World Spin*, and this is another of the thematic strands that foreshadows the spectacular atrocity of 9/11. McCann's novel encompasses the most public spectacle as well as the least accessible visual media, pointing towards the saturation of modern culture by visual agents. Its omnipresence is not necessarily retrograde; certainly its gross commercialism is suffocating,

but in this novel, the visual is frequently a register of insight, respite, desire, and silent rapture.

In other ways, by foregrounding the visual, McCann reminds us of its basic sensuality; visual culture often lets us forget its rootedness in the human body as a sensory experience. Both the wire walker and the graffiti hunter are figured in terms of the visual, but also as performing potentially fatal physical actions. Each of their pursuits of beauty is dependent upon carceral danger and stress and, thus, the achievement of aesthetic beauty, its visual record, are essentially bodily experiences. The wire walker compels his watchers to stop and look up, and in this action he demands an alternative use of the body in space, an alternative orientation of the body in public space. Public space is re-fashioned on this morning, the conveyor belt pavements of Manhattan are transformed into muted viewing galleries. And this is central to the utopian imagining of the novel. *Let the Great World Spin*, therefore, refuses to accept the inability of the ordinary to inspire and to accept only despair without the possibility of recovery from grief. The underground, as in *This Side of Brightness*, might be assumed to be the horizon of dejection and vagrancy, but even here, art is produced despite physical risk and the proximity of death. The 'Zoo York' graffiti is arduously created and recorded, and this difficulty is part of the fascination for the young boy:

> It's a mystery to him if the writers ever get to see their own tags, except maybe one step back in the tunnel after it's finished and not even dry. Back over the third rail for a quick glance. Careful, or it's a couple of thousand volts. And even then there's the possibility that a train will come. Or the cops make it down with a spray of flashlights and billy clubs. Or some long-haired puto will step out of the shadows, white eyes shining, knife blade ready, to empty out their pockets, crush and gut. Slam that shit on quick, and out you go before you get busted. (*LGWS*, 170)

All three, then, the wire walker, the graffiti artists, and the young photographic chronicler are interconnected by the physical risk of their aesthetic expressions. Just as the wire walker's tense balancing act is a physical and figurative evocation of the idea of the volatility of equilibrium in our daily lives, these latter underground artists perform their own funambulist feats. This is a continuation of McCann's interest

in the notion of balance, which, again, sends us back to *This Side of Brightness*. Balance as a psychological state, as a physical action, and as a figural device unites these two New York novels. But in spotlighting equilibrium in *Let the Great World Spin*, McCann moves from an opening performance of acrobatic balance to the vulnerabilities of ordinary, earth-bound and buffeted lives on the streets. All of his characters are funambulists, they all are forced to take risks and are all delicately perched between life and death, and hope and despair. Fernando's brief appearance in the novel is resonant in a number of directions, not least for its reminder that the tedium of the mundane is often the source of the beautiful and the inspirational. As he mulls on the nature of art while sweeping the floor of his stepfather's barbershop: 'There was a guy he saw once on television who made his money knocking bricks out of buildings. It was funny but he understood it in a way. The way the light came through. Making people see differently. Making them think twice. You have to look on the world with a shine like no one else has' (*LGWS*, 173). This is precisely the role that Corrigan and the wire walker play in the novel, and it is the aspiration of the young boy. The wire walker halts his watchers, Corrigan forces others to reflect on the value of the most worthless of discarded lives, and Fernando wants to disinter, and to acclaim, the aesthetic charge of the subterranean graffiti. It is in these unlikely corners that the utopian aesthetic of McCann's work is apparent. The redemptive possibilities of art and the locations of this art are in scenes of everyday functionality *and* everyday dysfunctionality.

FAITH, DESPAIR AND REDEMPTION

Despite the resolutely American locale of the novel, it is book-ended by the landscape of Ireland – not the fantastical topographies of the west of Ireland, but the dour urban vistas of Dublin in the 1950s and, later, 2006. Ireland's presence registers the umbilical link that existed between the two countries via emigration during the twentieth century. But the insertion of an Irish character, John Corrigan, as one of the protagonists, arguably the central personality, permits the introduction of religious faith into the narrative. Corrigan's religious vocation, rooted in Catholicism, but gradually receding from its institutional forms, is key to the enactment of redemption in the story. He is a

'character who's in conflict…[and] I wanted to embrace the expansiveness, the beauty of spirit, the generosity, the decency that actually is embedded in the faith and in the Church'.[29] Corrigan's devotion to the sufferings of others compels him to leave Ireland and to abandon Europe entirely – he is constantly in search of ever greater abjection to which he can devote his spiritual and physical labour. In thinking about the worldview of this character, McCann concludes: 'So you force yourself into a position of difficulty, because it seems to me that we have forgotten…the excellence of difficulty…But there's something really beautiful in the notion of difficulty.'[30] Both the beauty and the excellence of difficulty are evident in Corrigan and the 'walker' – both challenge themselves and test their respective faiths, and both, in the end, offer some hope of redemption to those lives that are affected by their actions. Difficulty, trauma, despair – these seem to have been the primary responses to 9/11 that soon mutated into anger and an appetite for recompense. But for McCann these emotions, these apparent obstacles, are not necessarily devoid of or removed from hope and renewal.

From the outset Corrigan is marked as a unique personality and throughout the novel he is mediated second-hand – apart from one brief confessional interlude. We learn most about Corrigan through his brother's first-person narrative, a narrative that wrestles with one brother's efforts to comprehend the other's excessive immersion in poverty and human misery. As relayed by his brother, Corrigan's entire life from childhood was animated by a compulsion to seek out and to aid those in destitution. Corrigan's life is dictated by an ongoing series of personal sacrifices to physical suffering in the hope of furnishing spiritual succour. As a child Corrigan 'had no idea that his presence sustained people, made them happy, drew out their improbable yearnings' (*LGWS*, 14), and one of the issues raised by Corrigan's early death in the novel is: how can his family, lover and friends sustain themselves in his absence? In these formative years, 'Corrigan liked those places where light was drained. The docklands. The flophouses…He often sat with drunks in Frenchman's lane and Spencer Row…It was a ritual he couldn't give up. The down-and-outs needed him, or at least wanted him – he was, to them, a mad, impossible angel' (*LGWS*, 15–17). Recalling the 'walker', Corrigan is intermittently portrayed as, and might easily be read as, a character with

supernatural capabilities. Certainly Corrigan's brother casts him in the role of spiritual healer or saintly seer, and his untimely death in a motor accident has the aura of a martyred demise. Again, in his youth, the drunks of Dublin's inner city might well have viewed Corrigan as an angel, but in later life, as his brother habituates himself to the privations of Corrigan's routine in the Bronx, he is figured in sacrificial and saintly terms. For his brother, Corrigan is one of 'thirty-six hidden saints in the world, all of them doing the work of humble men, carpenters, cobblers, shepherds' (*LGWS*, 44). Corrigan's selfless and anonymous vocation among the drug-addled prostitutes and abandoned elderly of the Bronx is part of the difficulty detailed by McCann. He is one of the hidden saints that 'bore the sorrows of the earth and…had a line of communication with God, all except one…who was forgotten…Corrigan had lost his line with God: he bore the sorrows on his own, the story of stories' (*LGWS*, 44). The naked sacrifice of Corrigan's life is just as suggestive of a Christ-like existence – a martyred redeemer of the wretched of the earth. And here there is a further symmetry to the figure of the wire walker as a transcendent or resurrected cruciform figure on the skyline. However, it is Corrigan's plight that is, in the end, more important to McCann. While he may be figured as a symbolic and religious icon, Corrigan's work is materially and grossly earthbound. From the docile drunks of Dublin, Corrigan's faith-bound mission takes him to larger-scale geographies of decrepitude. It is an American landscape alien to his visiting brother from popular culture, one that is oppressive and ransacked:

> Corrigan drove me through the South Bronx under the flared-up sky…Arson…Gangs of kids hung out on the street corners. Traffic lights were stuck on permanent red…A building on Willis had half collapsed into the street. A couple of wild dogs picked their way through the ruin…Every now and then a figure emerged from the shadows, homeless men pushing shopping trolleys piled high with copper wire. (*LGWS*, 48)

The lived context of Corrigan's vocation is prostitution and drug addiction; he effectively dwells among a group of black prostitutes providing basic physical and emotional supports as they trade under the Major Deegan expressway bridge in the South Bronx. His dedication

to these harassed women is absolute and is tested by repeated physical assaults by pimps, as well as the proximity of the prostitutes' semi-clad, sexualized bodies. Corrigan, the sexual innocent, is engaged in a mission to stretch the limits of his faith in the service of those most exposed to physical and sexual exploitation. In lives wracked by fear, Corrigan's minor gestures of humility and tolerance are occasional stays against overwhelming despair. The vocation pursued by Corrigan identifies him as an edifice of altruistic humanity and hope in the novel – a conduit of generosity to which many of the other characters in *Let the Great World Spin* are drawn and become dependent. But there is remoteness to Corrigan at the same time, which again is suggestive of his presence as an angelic or Christ-like figure. The excess of his faith and his unyielding commitment to alleviating pain are, at times, incomprehensible to his family. Again his brother, Ciaran, at first cannot fathom a vocation that embraces the ruins of New York City and of humanity. But it is precisely within the ruins that Corrigan divines everyday beauty, and it is out of such ruination that his faith gains its strength and legitimacy. Only with the benefit of hindsight can Ciaran apprehend the bases of his brother's faith, a faith that is Christian but ecumenical, that is spiritual but rooted in material privations of the banal, and that inhabits despair but is unquenchably hopeful. Corrigan's God is 'one you could find in the grime of the everyday' and his conviction 'was that life could be capable of small beauties' (*LGWS*, 20). Corrigan is a pillar of faith and hope in *Let the Great World Spin*, and his death is a figuration of the felling of one of the twin towers in 2001. His life, though enigmatic, is a moral compass to those in his life. Though the wire walker opens the novel and his feat awes and stills early-morning Manhattan, his performance becomes less important as the novel progresses. The twin poles of extreme height at the World Trade Centre and the lows of ghetto life in the South Bronx are symbolic of the proximity of hope and hopelessness, of looking up in wonder and living life at ground level. But for McCann it is the beauty of the terrestrial and the unremarkable that becomes more significant in the end. Indeed, this is a thematic constant throughout his fiction; there are moments of elevated aesthetic beauty, but, more often, McCann endorses the agency of the marginal voice.

On his arrival in the South Bronx, Ciaran Corrigan is dazed by the

mouldering vistas of his brother's neighbourhood. As he scans his surroundings, the Major Deegan expressway catches his attention with its 'light-streak of cars zipping above' *(LGWS*, 24). But in another juxtaposition of elevation and interment, it is what is below the bridge of the expressway that proves most distracting:

> Below, by the underpass, a long line of women. Cars and trucks were pulling into the shadows. The women struck poses. They wore hotpants and bikini tops and swimsuits, a bizarre city beach. An angled arm, in the shadowlight, reached the top of the expressway. A stiletto climbed up the top of a barbed-wire fence. A leg stretched half the length of a city block. (*LGWS*, 24)

In this gloomy snapshot, several key motifs and themes of the novel are in evidence: the body, spectacle, performance, incongruous sightings, urban netherworlds, and the imminence of predation. The cabal of prostitutes is introduced as a faceless litany of erotic objects, out of which two emerge over the duration of the novel: the mother and daughter, Tillie and Jazzlyn Henderson. But in this glimpse, they are all Hadean figures, and objects of coarse sexual desires; the scene takes us back to Treefrog's milieu in *This Side of Brightness* and the existence of sites of New York City's 'unconscious'. The latter half of the description expresses the uncanny nature of this sight for Ciaran: an urban beach image, which is distorted by the play of light and shadow. Ciaran's obscured observation of this scene of sexual exploitation is consistent with his initial failure to grasp the gravity of his brother's vocation. Similarly, this passage is a shadowed dismemberment of female bodies and the prostitutes' bodies are projected objects of male sexual desire. Yet the silhouetted shapes retain a certain beauty, in that there is nothing intrinsically debased about the images that are detailed here. Their bodies, in particular their attire, enforce the idea of hyper-sexualization, but the performances alluded to in their poses do not prohibit their potential beauty. The prostitutes are essentially performing, but their tragedy is that they are compelled into these degrading performances through financial pressure, drug addiction, and preclusion from even the slightest social mobility.

Ciaran is initiated into his brother's 'underground' culture, which is physically remote from the centre of the city's consciousness, is legally proscribed and policed in cynical ways, and is indicative of the

broader moral corruption in the city. It is in these circumstances that Ciaran's lessons and his ultimate redemption through understanding his brother's devotional labour are located. Continuing with the motifs of balance and performance, the prostitutes that Ciaran is confronted with, especially Tillie and Jazzlyn, are further instances of the precariousness of walking life's everyday tightropes. The potential for violence that each of these women faces on a daily basis in their profession constitutes another of the novel's 'balancing acts'. As we discover, there is an integrated resilience to the prostitutes, which Corrigan attempts to husband in his charitable actions. And one of McCann's concerns is to show the thin border that separates such ordinary resilience and despair. The excessive posturing and semi-naked presentation of their bodies is underwritten by fear, and these are daily demonstrations of their diminished dignity. Yet still they persist. This, for McCann, is the real triumph of the novel, and, again, it is one of the lessons that Ciaran has to learn. He must learn to see past the scene of his first impression and arrive at an understanding of the vulnerable humanity of these women, a humanity that deserves to be heeded, that needs to be heeded in order to preserve its basic dignity.

The visual and the performative are also evident in the lingering erotics of the body on display throughout the novel. We get repeated omniscient and subjective descriptions of and references to characters' physicality. Just as there is an overt physicality to the wire walker's performance and in the combined artistic outputs from the subway tunnels, the narrative dwells on the intimate details of the prostitutes' somatic features – in privileging the body in motion, under stress and in the midst of urban ruination and moral degeneration. As touched upon above, Ciaran's view of the provocative bodily performances of the prostitutes is, at first, suspicious – the women are anonymous objects:

> I woke later to the parasol hooker slamming through the doorway. She stood mopping her brow, then threw her handbag on the sofa beside me…She walked across the room, hitching off her fur coat as she went, naked but for her boots…Her calf muscles were smooth and curved. She hitched the flesh of her bottom, sighed, then stretched and rubbed her nipples full. (*LGWS*, 25)

Using Corrigan's apartment as a bathroom facility, the prostitutes are part of the domestic traffic of his life, but exist at a distance from his visiting brother. McCann's descriptions, which are numerous, attend to the sensuous physicality of these women. They are specimens of physical prowess that reside in a landscape and culture of menace, exploitation, and violence. This is a physical eroticism that is, however, exposed, cheapened and vulnerable, an erotic that reduces the human dignity of the women. And it is the diminution of this dignity that Corrigan's vocational interventions strive to correct. In two successive impressions delivered by Ciaran of one of the youngest prostitutes, Jazzlyn, we grasp the ambiguity of this base erotic of the streets. His view of Jazzlyn reveals the hollowness of the performative poses that are struck daily underneath the Major Deegan expressway. As she enters Corrigan's apartment, Ciaran describes her presence: 'The tallest, in a white tissue minidress, sat down beside me. She looked half Mexican, half black. She was taut and lithe: She could have been walking down a runway…She was very young…with one green eye, one brown. Her cheekbones were pulled even higher by a line of make-up' (*LGWS*, 28). What is remarkable about this portrait is the confluence of the titillating sartorial exposure of her minidress, and the uncertainty of Jazzlyn's ethnic origins. In addition, the fact that her eyes are of two different colours not only recalls Irish oral folklore, but can be wedded to the mystery of her ethnicity and, as we learn, the uncertainty of her paternity. She is, at this point, the mother of two young children, and it is their fate to become the primary focus of Corrigan's project in the South Bronx. Jazzlyn's life and death, and her children's lives, reach outwards across the novel via Corrigan to touch upon Solomon and Claire Soderberg, Gloria, Ciaran, and Lara. With the wire walker, Corrigan and Jazzlyn, *Let the Great World Spin* is a novel of connections. Its structure may appear to partake of a postmodernist fragmentation through its dissonant chorus of lives. But there is an underlying unity of purpose to McCann's plural narrative. Despite Jazzlyn's striking physical beauty, there is an equal measure of vulnerability; her pose might intimate agency, but with each performance a fraction of dignity is squandered. And this tone is captured in Ciaran's simile: 'She looked like some failed sunflower' (*LGWS*, 29).

In her narrative of mourning, Adelita, Corrigan's lover, recalls his

thoughts on the idea of faith: 'He told me once that there was no better faith than a wounded faith and sometimes I wonder if that was what he was doing all along – trying to wound his faith in order to test it – and I was just another stone in the way of his God' (*LGWS*, 284). Adelita's sentiments are congruent with Corrigan's wish to aid those in most need and to travel to the most deprived locales in order to seek out destitution. Equally, it is consonant with McCann's reference to the attractiveness of difficulty. Does Corrigan couple faith with one's ability to challenge that faith? Is one's faith only as strong as the capacity to withstand tests of that faith? Adelita's reflections here are, conceivably, informed by her grief at Corrigan's death, but they magnify the kernel of Corrigan's vocation. Corrigan's material life in the South Bronx is spare and impoverished and is, perhaps, the easier test of his faith. What Adelita refers to is, firstly, the romantic relationship that developed between Corrigan and her, and, secondly, the suggestion that Corrigan's work and life among the prostitutes is another way of confronting the celibacy of his vocation. In very different ways, Corrigan is faced with his own sexuality, with sexuality per se, and as a religious, this clearly impinges on one of the fundamentals of his doctrinal duties. The dynamics of both crucibles of sexuality are discrepant, but both, in a sense, manage to humanize Corrigan. He is not left as an inscrutable martyred monk, but develops as a physical masculine character. In other words, he emerges from the realms of the purely spiritual to negotiate the carnal materialities of his humanity.

As the passages from Ciaran's earlier narrative disclose, Corrigan inhabits a terrain of sexual exploitation, commoditized eroticism, and carnal trade. And it is not to suggest that Corrigan is ever likely to indulge in any of this sexual performance; it is the proximity of this naked sub-culture that represents the examination of his faith. The daily depravity, the cruel cynicism, and disposable human sexuality surely weigh on the rigour of Corrigan's religious belief: where can one divine redemption in this squalid urban morass? Yet he insists that it can and that it must be uncovered and cherished. In other ways, the charged sexuality of Jazzlyn is occasionally focused on Corrigan. Again there is no overt clue that this is anything other than playful but, regardless, McCann's scrupulous attention to the visual 'embodiment' of Jazzlyn's performance is a reminder of Corrigan's masculine sexuality.

He may not act his sexuality out in this context but Jazzlyn's sexualized play indirectly alludes to the presence of Corrigan's sexual potentials: 'Jazzlyn wore a one-piece neon swimsuit. She tugged the back, snapped the elastic, edged closer to him a hint of a belly dance against his hip. She was tall, exotic, so very young she seemed to flutter' (*LGWS*, 35). While on another occasion, as Corrigan walks through the throng of prostitutes:

> Jazzlyn stood chatting with him, her thumb under the strap of her swimsuit…She leaned close to him again, her bare skin almost touching his lapel. He did not recoil. She was getting a charge from it all, I could tell. The lean of her young body. The hard snap of the strap. Her nipple against the fabric. Her head tilting closer and closer to him. (*LGWS*, 38)

Not only is there a sexual charge to Jazzlyn's provocative posturing, but it seems that in witnessing and in narrating these episodes, there is a voyeuristic visual pleasure derived by Ciaran.

As Adelita hints, there seems to have been an undercurrent to her relationship with Corrigan that was tied to his spirituality. Adelita is a Lutheran nurse employed at a home for the elderly, where Corrigan provided weekly help. And it is the evolution and potential consummation of this relationship that foments Corrigan's sustained emotional and spiritual crisis. In an extended confession to his brother, Ciaran, Corrigan divulges details of the tension between his profound love for Adelita and the strictures of his vocation. His religious vows of celibacy are not worn lightly and the carnal desires aroused by his devotion to Adelita are sources of intense guilt. The virginal Corrigan even expresses the effects of his first physical contact with Adelita in guilt-ridden language. He comprehends the stimulation of carnal desire in the early phases of this relationship with Adelita as a test and as feelings that must be combated. Their first quasi-sexual encounter, which is nominally physiotherapeutic, becomes a trial for Corrigan. As Adelita massages the inside of his arm, he is assailed by an instinctive guilt: 'And there was a voice inside me saying, "Strengthen yourself against this, this is a test, be ready, be ready." But it's the same voice I don't like. I'm looking behind the veil of it and all I see is this woman, it's a catastrophe, I'm descending, sinking like a hopeless swimmer. And I'm saying, God don't allow this to happen. Don't let

it' (*LGWS*, 51). The steady control of Corrigan's religious faith is again under scrutiny at this point – there is yet another loss of equilibrium as his commitment to religious vows is tested. But Adelita and her life with her two young children soon allows Corrigan to calibrate his spiritual fervour and his romantic affections. The difficulty of Adelita's life as an emigrant, a single parent and as a member of the economic under-classes re-focuses Corrigan's view of his relationship with her. Though he never outgrows the bonds of his religious celibacy: 'On Sundays I still feel the old urges, the residual feelings. That's when the guilt hits most. I walk along, the Our Father in my mind. Over and over again. To cut the edge off the guilt' (*LGWS*, 56). Corrigan arrives at a liveable but uneasy reconciliation between his religiosity and his sexuality. And vocalizing his anguished state of mind to his brother is liberating and redemptive for Corrigan. The fear of failing his vocation, of betraying his faith, is matched by his unwillingness to abandon Adelita, as McCann does not offer a facile or unproblematic resolution to Corrigan's balancing act. The tensile equilibrium of Corrigan's life is captured by the series of questions that signal the refusal of his crisis to end: 'What might happen if she tumbled short of his dreams? How much might he hate his God if he left her behind? How might he detest himself if he stuck to his Lord?' (*LG WS*, 58).

CREATING THE FUTURE

Though the wire walker's aerial performance is a singular act, as metaphor it is an act of union with the tightrope stitching the twin towers to each other. As we have seen, it is a radical spatial re-imagining as it utilizes the air-space between the buildings as a bridge rather than as a boundary. The wire walker, then, imagines a link out of nothingness and enacts a precocious feat of courage and balance. Such a resounding figuration necessarily carries throughout the novel, and another of the strands in which the motifs of boundaries and balance materialize is in the braided stories of Claire Soderberg, Gloria, and Jazzlyn's orphaned daughters. Claire and Gloria are members of a group of women who meet regularly as a support network for those who have suffered loss in the Vietnam War. The intrusion of geographical and military aggression in this local context, again, hints at the parallels being drawn by McCann between this historical

period and the contemporary moment. The women are from different backgrounds, but none seem further apart than Claire, the Jewish wife of a Manhattan judge, and Gloria, a Southern-born, working-class single-mother of three deceased sons. Their respective geographical locations on Park Avenue and in the South Bronx confirm the social distance between the women, and re-enforces the social fragmentation of New York's urban tapestry along class and ethnic markers. Yet their relationship, though pock-marked by difference, is a testimony to the agency of redemptive solidarity that underpins the politics of the novel.

Claire's material wealth does little to compensate for the loss of her only son, Joshua, and her husband, Solomon, is routinely diffident about Joshua's death. And in the context of her support group, this wealth and apparent privilege are further barriers to genuine and unequivocal acceptance by the remainder of the women. On the day that the wire walker performs in downtown Manhattan, Claire hosts a meeting of the support group at her uptown apartment. At the close of this meeting a potentially irredeemable exchange occurs between Claire and Gloria. Claire pleads with Gloria to stay a while longer, but conflates her desire for company with an earlier thought that she might pay Gloria as a housekeeper, and offers Gloria money to stay. The exchange sets Gloria off on a prolonged walk from Park Avenue to Harlem and back to Claire's apartment. She returns after being mugged, and her decision to return to the scene of social embarrassment is instinctive rather than rational, but it enables a valuable reconciliation. The larger unit of the support group had been a means of talking over the past and of resurrecting the memories of dead children. But on Gloria's return to Park Avenue she intuitively resists dwelling exclusively on her deceased sons. When Claire inquires about her boys, Gloria thinks: 'I didn't want to think about my boys anymore. In a strange way, all I wanted was to be surrounded by another, to be a part of somebody else's room…I guess I wanted another sort of question altogether' (*LGWS*, 312). Without neglecting the memory of her sons, Gloria understands the burden of a melancholic fixation with the past. Levelling social, racial and geographical borders, the companionship that is shared by these two women – across many subsequent years, as we learn – is a connection forged despite difference. Their respective lives may have been assailed by

the machinations of global politics, but there is the mutual recognition of humanity in their supportive relationship. The novel's insistent metaphor of the tightrope walk asserts the notion of connection. And despite the fractured structure of the narrative, connection is always possible, though not without difficulty, through imagination and acts of faith.

At the end of this day, 7 August 1974, as Claire drops Gloria at her building in the South Bronx, social workers are escorting Jaslyn and Janice, Jazzlyn's daughters, out of the same building. Throughout her time residing in this environment, Gloria has resolutely ignored the lives of squalor that thrived around her. But Jazzlyn's orphaned girls suddenly enter her life, a life that has been renewed with her new friendship with Claire. Symbolically, she is given a chance to save two lives after seeing three lives taken from her through warfare. Gloria alights from the car and 'saw them come out, two darling little girls coming through the globes of lamplight' (*LGWS*, 321). The luminescence prompts her memories of these girls and their deceased mother: 'I knew them. I had seen them before. They were the daughters of a hooker who lived two floors above me. I had kept myself away from all that. Years and years. I hadn't let them near my life. I'd see their mother in the doorway, a child herself, pretty and vicious, and I'd stare straight ahead at the buttons' (*LGWS*, 321). Wrapped in the difficulties of her own life, Gloria had previously abjured intervening in the lives of those in the projects. But at this moment, she chooses to extend herself in an act of unsolicited and selfless grace. The only motivation that she can reason for adopting the girls is that: 'It was a deep-down feeling that must've come from long ago' *(LGWS*, 285). Her charity is ineffable, and is, in the end, the culminating act of redemption and hope in *Let the Great World Spin*. The narrative spools forward to 2006, to Jaslyn's brief contemporary narrative. The adult girls now live in post-9/11, post-Hurricane Katrina America, with international wars also ongoing. In temporal terms, McCann reaches past 9/11, framing a temporal link, instead, between 1974 and 2006. In this he urges us, again, to see connections between the possibility for redemption out of tragedies and conflict in the earlier period and similar opportunities in the current time. Symbolically, Jaslyn and Janice pursue 'political' occupations: Jaslyn works for a small foundation helping working-class victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita with tax

forms, while Janice is in the US army. In fact Jaslyn's occupation is an oblique recollection of Corrigan's immersion in the plights of the discarded. And part of her vocation, her attentiveness to the practical bureaucratic needs of these people, allows her to appreciate the vulnerable yet passionate humanity of such forgotten communities. As Jaslyn reflects on her daily tasks she provides telling summative words on the structure of *Let the Great World Spin*, on the thematic of the potential healing power of relating one's story, and on the intimacy of dignity and self-representation:

> Sometimes it takes them an age just to sign, since they have something else to say – they are off and chatting about the cars they bought, the loves they loved. They have a deep need just to talk, just to tell a story, however small or reckless. Listening to these people is like listening to tress – sooner or later the tree is sliced open and the watermarks reveal their age. (*LGWS*, 337)

The stories that Jaslyn hears may be wildly divergent in form and content, much like the novel itself, but the driving impulses are the needs to share and to connect, and the desire to be heard. From the dizzying summit of the World Trade Centre towers to the recessed graffiti of the New York subway system and all spaces in between, there are stories and potential tellers of stories waiting to be heeded. Art is seen to embody a redemptive moral value system in contradistinction to the destabilizing values of murderous terrorism. Art facilitates a reflective, even temperate, coming to terms with 9/11; again, in contrast to impulses of rage or blind hostility evidenced elsewhere. And this is the context in which we should, finally, read *Let the Great World Spin*. As a work of art the novel advertises and embodies the durability of human creativity as a utopian resource. This literary fiction is exemplary of what Gilles Deleuze calls 'the realm of the possible'.[31] A realm neatly defined by Susheila Nasta and Elleke Boehmer as 'the visionary territory of the imagination, a world situated between the political and cultural borderlines of national/international struggles, a realm where it is the artist's imperative to keep speaking, to keep writing, to keep interrogating, to keep making art even in the face of terror itself, counter-insurgent or otherwise'.[32] It is a multivocal, democratic text that braids diverse narratives and lives together in varying patterns of unity and empathetic

understanding. To the dominant US-centric narratives of post-9/11, McCann tenders a disjunctive counter-narrative that expands the horizons of what can be stabled as 9/11 literary fiction.

NOTES

1. Susan Sontag, *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007), p.121.
2. Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Cultural Theory on the Left* (London: Verso, 2003), p.23.
3. Daniel Lea, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Anglo-American Writers' Responses to September 11', *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, 11, 2 (2007), p.4.
4. David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p.126.
5. For example see Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
6. Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.134.
7. Michael Rothberg, 'Seeing Terror, Feeling Art: Public and Private in Post-9/11 Literature', in Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (eds), *Literature after 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2008), p.124.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ian McEwan, 'Only Love and then Oblivion', *Guardian* (15 September 2001).
11. Ibid.
12. Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, p.136.
13. Colum McCann, '*Let the Great World Spin* Interview', Colum McCann offical author website: www.colummccann. com/interviews.
14. Ibid.
15. Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p.3.
16. Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, p.16.
17. See Slavoj ŽiŽek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002).
18. Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror*, p.23.
19. Martin Amis, 'Fear and Loathing', *Guardian* (18 September 2001). http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/18/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety.
20. See Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn's *Literature after 9/11*; Kristiaan Versluys' *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*; Dunja M. Mohr and Sylvia Mayer (eds), *Zeitschrift fur Anglistik und Americanistik – A Quarterly of Language, Literature and Culture – Special Issue: 9/11 as Catalyst: American and British Responses*; Daniel Lea, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Anglo-American Writers' Responses to September 11'.
21. Catherine Morley, 'The End of Innocence: Tales of Terror after 9/11', *Review of International American Studies*, 3, 3 and 4, 1 (2008/2009), p.83.
22. McCann, '*Let the Great World Spin* Interview'.
23. Ibid.
24. Jacques Derrida argues: 'When you say "September 11" you are already citing…You are inviting me to speak here by recalling, as if in quotation marks, a date or a dating that has taken over our public space and our private lives for five weeks now. Something *fait date*, I would say in a French idiom, something marks a date, a date in history,' 'Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides – A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida', in Giovanna Borradori (ed.), *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.85.
25. McCann, '*Let the Great World Spin* Interview'.

26. Edward Soja, 'The Spatiality of Social Life: Towards a Transformative Retheorisation', in Derek Gregory and John Urry (eds), *Social Relations and Spatial Structures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), p.94.
27. Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p.3. All further references to *Let the Great World Spin* will appear in parenthesis as (*LGWS*).
28. Bret Anthony Johnston, 'Interview with Colum McCann', *National Book Award Website* www.nationalbook.org/nba2009_f_mccann_interv.html.
29. Chistopher Lydon, 'American Literature and New York's Redemption: An Interview with Colum McCann', *Huffington Post* (7 April 2010). http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ christopher-lydon/colum-mccann-american-lit_b_528881.html.
30. Ibid.
31. Elleke Boehmer and Susheila Nasta, 'Cultures of Terror', *Wasafiri – Special Issue on 'Cultures of Terror'*, 22, 2 (2007), p.1.
32. Ibid.