

INTERNATIONALIZING 9/11:
HOPE AND REDEMPTION IN
NADEEM ASLAM'S *THE WASTED
VIGIL* (2008) AND COLUM
MCCANN'S *LET THE GREAT
WORLD SPIN* (2009)

Eóin Flannery★

Abstract

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 11th 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.' The current discussion strives to depart from domestic, subjective reactions to 9/11 in literary fiction and essay the work of two international novelists: the Pakistani-born Nadeem Aslam and the Irish-born Colum McCann. Respectively, their novels, *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and the National Book Award winning *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), deal with 9/11 in elliptical ways, as neither is set in the direct post-9/11 period in the United States. Respectively, Aslam and McCann provide allochronic narrative responses to the terroristic outrages and, by implication, to the impassioned subsequent reactions and repercussions. In displacing 9/11, both authors allow geographical and historical breathing space in which to reflect upon the motivations, personal tragedies, and the implications of the events. These novels prompt the question: where can we divine non-American and non-contemporary moments of hope and despair?

★ Correspondence to Eoin Flannery, English and Modern Languages, Oxford Brookes University

Introduction

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 and the event has transcended historical time and has entered epochal time. As legion literary critical volumes and scholarly essays amply illustrate, literature, 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 9/11.¹ In a recent literary critical survey, Catherine Morley notes this trend in 9/11 fiction:

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The current discussion strives to depart from domestic, subjective reactions to 9/11 in literary fiction and read the work of two international novelists: the Pakistani-born Nadeem Aslam and the Irish-born Colum McCann. Respectively, their novels, *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and the National Book Award winning *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), deal with 9/11 in elliptical ways, as neither is set in the direct post-9/11 period in the United States. In these texts, Aslam and McCann provide geographically and historically displaced narrative responses to the terroristic outrages and, by implication, to the impassioned subsequent reactions and repercussions.

In a sense, both McCann's and Aslam's novels accord with Richard Gray's assessment of the most effective, and affective, ways to narrate the trauma of 9/11 in novelistic form. Drawing on the work of Cathy Caruth, Gray writes

What is traumatic is defined by what Caruth has called 'the impossibility of . . . direct access' (*Trauma* 4). So perhaps the way to tell a story that cannot be told is to tell it aslant, to approach it by circuitous means, almost by stealth.³

¹ A representative sample of books would include, for example, Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, *Literature after 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2008); Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); and Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2011). Recent special issues of scholarly journals on the topic of 9/11 include: *Journal of American Studies – Special Issue (10 Years after 9/11)*, 45.4 (2011) and *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik – A Quarterly of Language, Literature and Culture – Special Issue: 9/11 as Catalyst: American and British Responses*, LVIII (2010).

² Catherine Morley, 'The End of Innocence – Tales of Terror After 9/11', *Review of International American Studies*, 3.3–4.1 (2008/2009), p. 83.

³ Richard Gray, 'Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis', *American Literary History*, 21.1 (2008), p. 136.

The two texts under consideration here partake of this perspective, as both authors indirectly confront the events and the aftermaths of 9/11. Both novelists ask us to understand and to empathize with ‘otherness’ and ‘others’ – geographical and historical – in our reflections on 9/11. This, then, complicates facile and one-dimensional apprehensions of the event, its fall-out and its mediation. Gray’s argument is principally directed at American writers, insisting that they ‘represent the reality of their culture as multiple, complex, and internally antagonistic’.⁴ Yet, in unpacking the political and cultural realities of both Aslam’s and McCann’s novels, we see authors who are keenly alive to the density of American reality in its most globalized forms. In other words, American reality is neither solely confined to the geographical boundaries of the North American continent, nor to the limits of the present moment. And, though Gray is alert to the historical sensibility required of American writers in the post-9/11 context when he suggests: ‘They can achieve realization of both synchrony and diachrony, a deconstruction of both the structural continuities between past and present and the processes by which those continuities are challenged, dissolved, and reconstituted’, his contention seems to overlook the necessity for an equivalent degree of international geographical complexity.⁵

In this argument, and in his more recent book-length study, *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11*, Gray privileges the notion that a more internal awareness of ‘otherness’ is essential to contemporary American identity and that authors need to reflect this in their writing.⁶ In a partial way, Gray’s contention is sympathetic to the structure of McCann’s novel, which actually pre-emptly Gray’s call for recognition and, crucially, representation of ‘difference’ within the fabric of American identity in both the pre- and post-9/11 periods. However, as Michael Rothberg outlines in his ‘Response’ to Gray, what is just as urgent is ‘a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship’.⁷ For Rothberg, the events of 9/11, those that preceded the attack, those of that day, and of its wake, must be represented and read in an international context. In his view

Turning to ‘foreign’ wars and far-away encounters does not entail a politics of blame or the same black-and-white logic of good and evil that pervades various sides in the struggle against terrorism [. . .] What we need from 9/11 novels are cognitive maps that imagine how citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others.⁸

⁴ Gray, ‘Open Doors, Closed Minds’, p. 147.

⁵ Gray, ‘Open Doors, Closed Minds’, p. 147.

⁶ Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2011).

⁷ Michael Rothberg, ‘A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray’, *American Literary History*, 21.1 (2008), p. 153.

⁸ Rothberg, ‘A Failure of the Imagination’, p. 158.

While Gray, rightly, impresses internal diversity and empathy, Rothberg pushes for global consciousness informed by geographical and historical nuance. In this way, while McCann's text leans towards Gray's vision, Aslam's novel possesses much of the logic of Rothberg's case. Both critics suggest that 9/11 novels can reflect upon notions of American identity and how global 'others' relate and inform such notions. From the perspective of this essay, what is significant is that 9/11 seems to be crucial to contemporary conceptualizations of American identity and to how global populations differentially relate to the US. In their respective narratives, both of these novels 'multiply' the ways in which 9/11 – a contested cornerstone of contemporary American identity – is read and represented.

The Wasted Vigil dramatizes contemporary events post-9/11, but at one remove from many of the previous novels concerned with 9/11. Aslam opens up Afghanistan as a vibrant literary landscape, and he probes the after-effects of invasive warfare and fundamentalist terror, in all of their shades, on a country far distant from downtown Manhattan. Not only is there geographical distance placed between 9/11 and its US roots, Aslam refuses to accept 9/11 as an unassailable singularity in world-historical affairs. Like McCann, Aslam's narrative displaces 9/11 from its immediate context so that political and cultural difference can enter literary representations of that event. 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 a narration of Philippe Petit's 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-creating 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 Petit's walk, and McCann spotlights the possibility of redemption and recovery in the recessed spaces of New York's cityscape. Equally, McCann's attention to Petit's 'sky-walk' together with his focus on other forms of visual narration and spectacle allow us to reconsider the 'spectacular' nature of the 9/11 attacks and of the subsequent visual narration of those events. In displacing 9/11, both authors allow geographical and historical breathing space in which to reflect upon the motivations, personal tragedies, and the implications of the events. These novels prompt the question: where can we divine non-American and non-contemporary moments of hope and despair? But within the orbit of 9/11 in both cases. Aslam and McCann impress the potential for redemption and recovery despite the apparent insuperability of oppression, and their 9/11 fictions display communities of suffering and empathy, which has potentially instructive ethical effects for us as readers at cultural and

political levels. *Let the Great World Spin* and *The Wasted Vigil* are, therefore, international aesthetic mediations of 9/11, which canvass the utopian possibilities of cross-cultural empathy.

***The Wasted Vigil* (2008)**

‘In most mainstream commentary’, according to Neil Lazarus, ‘the Islamist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 are situated in world-historical terms. We are enjoined to believe that the very sub-structure of the world changed as a result of the attacks.’⁹ 9/11 is cast and cultivated as a decisive watershed moment, and its sublime uniqueness is marshalled as a justification for repressive actions in domestic and foreign politico-military policies. An ‘apocalyptic lexicon’ is circulated to hive off 9/11 from the mainstream of history; the event becomes an epochal hinge through which a new period of history is entered.¹⁰ One of the key points to import into the discussion of Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil* is that 9/11 marks a singularity in world-historical affairs – that it is a discontinuity, unforeseen, and unprecedented. Put simply, the very uniqueness of 9/11 is proposed as an index of the heightened degree of menace and despair that is afoot across the globe. The calculus of risk dictates that freedom and hope towards the future can only be achieved through intensified patterns of surveillance, suspicion, and submission – a contradiction that creative artists seek to expose and to de-commission. *The Wasted Vigil*, as a postcolonial novel, offers an incisive, but not unqualified, critique of contemporary history. The novel is profoundly affective in its anatomization of the manifold grievances and traumas accompanying both historical and contemporary assertions of invasive imperial operations. Crucially, and in consonance with McCann’s narrative, Aslam’s novel cleaves to the notion that hope and redemption are possible, even in the most acutely violent crucibles of warfare: Afghanistan.

Set in the years after the 2003 invasion of Afghanistan, and in the shadows of the infamous Tora Bora mountain range, *The Wasted Vigil* narrates the interconnected stories of a cast of characters that are all drawn, for different reasons, to the isolated house of Dr Marcus Caldwell. Caldwell is an English physician, who lived at the house near the village of Usha with his Afghan wife, Qatrina, and his daughter, Zameen, both now deceased. Breaking his hermetic routine are a stream of visitors including: Lara, a Russian widow seeking the facts of her soldier brother’s disappearance and, likely, death, during the Russian campaign in Afghanistan in the 1980s; and David Town, an American trader in fine jewels, who is also Zameen’s former lover and a lapsed agent of the US

⁹ Neil Lazarus, ‘Postcolonial Studies after the Invasion of Iraq’, *New Formations*, 59 (2006), p. 10.

¹⁰ Lazarus, ‘Postcolonial Studies after the Invasion of Iraq’, p. 10.

intelligence forces. Over the duration of the narrative, they are joined by Casa, a young fearful and confused jihadist, and Dunia, a young local female teacher. Akin to the country itself, Marcus's house by the lake becomes an international crossroads, a global meeting point that is, variously, infused with mistrust, threat, and community. Aslam's novel neither sentimentalizes, nor catalogues laboriously, Afghanistan's protracted histories of imperial and inter-tribal conflagrations – though we do learn of many of these events. *The Wasted Vigil* is consistently allusive to the watermarks of the country's ruinous heritage, as well as inclusive of the broader legacies of global political and cultural violences committed in other times and other places. So, though the narrative canvas of Aslam's novel is, ostensibly, forensically local, his thematics of warfare and dehumanization, on the one hand, and solidarity and redemption, on the other, reverberate beyond the village of Usha and its war-torn hinterlands. In this respect, and to reprise Lazarus's argument mentioned above, *The Wasted Vigil* can be read as a 9/11 novel, given its repeated references to those specific events. Equally, and in tune with McCann, it does not monumentalize that day for the purposes of ideology. Instead, Aslam offers a narrative that embraces and acknowledges the humanity of history's unwilling victims from a myriad of historical and geographical contexts. *The Wasted Vigil* fashions a narrative space in which hope is fostered through empathy and is perceived in the durable virtues of creative art, including literature.

The sedimented layers of travel, commerce, and conquest in Afghanistan are primary reference points for Aslam as he evokes a land in which, if one were to 'pull a thread . . . you'll find it's attached to the rest of the world'.¹¹ Connection and interdependence can be mobilized as means of integration or resolution across nations and time-spans, but proximity or inter-cultural encounter can just as readily foment rivalry and conflict. Aslam attempts to pry open the continuum of history in order to reveal, firstly, the continuities of history that continue to scar remote corners of the world, like Afghanistan. And, secondly, so that one can appreciate the interconnectedness of global histories and contemporary exercises of (neo-) imperialism. 9/11 is not permitted to stand alone, peerless among tragic crimes against humanity in *The Wasted Vigil* – tellingly, there are two prominent references to the earlier assaults on the World Trade Centre in February 1993 (p. 99 and p. 169). The events of 9/11 are not even unique as projects of the contemporary terrorist imagination in New York. But the immediate contemporary presence of US military and Special Forces in the narrative does 'localize' the post-9/11 context. 9/11 is only introduced into the novel after several preceding

¹¹ Nadeem Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 368. Further references given in the text.

allusions to the earlier Soviet occupation. This is not as a means of resolutely differentiating the two campaigns, but so that a line of correspondence might be etched between the relative invasive projects. And it is significant that the house at Usha is gestured to in the first invocation of 9/11:

The mountain range looms above the house. On those quartz and feldspar heights at the end of 2001, American soldiers had ceremonially buried a piece of debris taken from the ruins of the World Trade Center, after the terrorists up there had either been slaughtered, or been made to flee. (p. 30)

In this set-piece, emotive symbolism is wedded to ruthless military engagement. The rite of interment is affective, signalling retribution for this band of soldiers, but it is also explicitly an act of territorial violation – what might be taken as an implantation of symbolic US soil into that of a conquered Afghanistan. Another violent exchange at height, following that of the destruction of the twin skyscrapers, is completed with a quasi-religious occasion of penetration. The occupation and this microcosmic gesture are recompenses for the disturbance of the US delusion that it was ‘at peace’ and ‘believed itself to be safe and immune from all this’ (p. 44).

This last quotation is the voice of weathered experience, David Town, who functioned as US spy during the Cold War in Afghanistan and Pakistan and has returned on business and to visit Marcus Caldwell. David is the primary narrative voice through which we are exposed to the operations of military espionage. And we soon become aware that his youthful idealism in the face of Communist Russia has been tempered by personal loss and betrayal, centred on his life and actions in Afghanistan. On returning to the country post-9/11, David’s conscience is disturbed by the facility with which lives are expended, and by the callousness of political pragmatism towards basic human dignity. Two of David’s reflections on 9/11, in particular, are symptomatic of his ambiguous attitude to the relentless, unapologetic violence of the competing factions in Afghanistan. Weaving together industrial history and delicate beauty, David touches upon the kernel of hope that courses through the novel. As he stands as a first-hand witness to the 1993 attack on the World Trade Centre, he recalls: ‘The workers digging the foundations of these buildings years ago had found ancient cannonballs, a ship’s anchor of a design not made after 1750, and one small gold-rimmed teacup made of china but still intact, with two birds painted on it’ (p. 170). The disinterred artefacts uncovered in the 1970s resurrect an earlier age of international ambition and conflict together with the remainders of historical artisanship. The unearthed archaeological hoard twins destruction with craftsmanship. But there is also the delicate fragility of the teacup, a quaint icon of civility, comfort, and community, perhaps. These remains contest the idea that the sundering of the twin towers on 9/11 was an ‘end of days’ event; it was one among many violent crimes, and it was built

upon the residues of previous lives and communities. There is, in fact, a suggestive juxtaposition between the unearthing at the site of 9/11 attacks and the later rite of burial in the Tora Bora mountains in Afghanistan. Almost immediately subsequent to this memory of David's, we return to the present and he turns to 9/11 itself. He is in Marcus's house at Usha when he remembers that:

No one has ever mentioned – anywhere – the dust-and-ash covered sparrow that a man leaned down and stroked on September 11, the bird sitting stunned on the sidewalk an hour or so after the Towers came down. It is one of his most vivid memories of that day's television, but no one remembers seeing it. (p. 171)

David's recollection highlights the televisual spectacle of 9/11, a feature expanded upon in many critical pieces in the aftermath.¹² The visual image his eye is focused on is enigmatic, as it is not one that entered any of the mainstream narratives of 9/11's visual economy. David's eye reaches out to the edges of the 9/11 panorama, embracing a touching and vaguely surreal moment of tenderness in the penumbra of the collapsed towers. Of course, it might well be that David's 'most vivid' memory is a mis-remembrance, as it appears that he is entirely alone in recording the image. Nevertheless, the combination of this image from 9/11 and the short catalogue of archaeological findings from the World Trade Centre site allows us to access a different register when we think of 9/11. In tandem David's memories drain 9/11 of its exclusive symbology of unprecedented catastrophe, and they challenge the dominant post-9/11 narrative, which is dictated by a tenor of aggression and intolerance. In both images we see the presence of beauty, of fragility, and of generosity, but these are shaded by the material threats of violence and trauma. David's memories are, in this regard, indicative of Aslam's insistence that we look outside the presiding visual and historical narrative codes on offer about and after 9/11.

During his first conversation with Zameen, David learns that she is originally from Usha and is currently in exile in Pakistan. Zameen glosses the place name 'Usha' and reveals that it means 'teardrop' (p. 133). On the surface, the village's nomination seems to provide an adequate melancholic suggestiveness that accords with the litany of violence committed within and around its boundaries. However, late in the novel, Zameen's father, Marcus, revisits the

¹² See Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002); Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Cultural Theory on the Left* (London: Verso, 2003); and Martin Amis, 'Fear and Loathing', *The Guardian* (18 September 2001) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/18/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety> [accessed 26 May 2011].

image of the 'tear', and his wish at this late stage provides a stark departure point for our consideration of the struggles between hope and despair in Afghanistan. Reflecting on the incessant slaughter defacing and depopulating his adopted country, Marcus, again, turns to a literary exemplar for a sign of guidance: 'Both sides in Homer's war, when they arrive to collect their dead from the battlefield, weep freely in complete sight of each other. Sick at heart. This is what Marcus wants, the tears of one side fully visible to the other' (p. 361). Again Marcus's wish initially calls to mind the trauma of Afghanistan's troubled history, but, in the aggregation of place name and classical literary invocation, Aslam moves beyond suffering. Alternatively, the 'tear' represents a more hopeful energy that, though shrouded by the accretions of generations of warfare, persists as the core impulse of the novel. If we consider the 'tear' as 'biological and dialogical' and as 'somatic and semantic', as Jay Caplan persuasively argues, then a less despondent pathway can be divined in the novel's narrative arc.¹³ For Caplan the 'tear' represents the possibility of solidarity and of shared emotional expression. The 'tear' is a mode of bodily enunciation that reneges the limitations of isolated self-absorption and reaches out past the confines of the individual body. Read in this light, Aslam's place name and literary allusion can be appreciated as signs of his concern for the power of human empathy under the sway of general suffering. The very meaning of Usha, on whose outskirts Marcus resides, establishes the location as a site of actual violence but, co-terminously, as one of potential restorative community. Marcus's recourse to Homer, firstly, reveals his belief that in witnessing mutual suffering, humanity can achieve some degree of redemptive unity. And, secondly, this moment alerts us to the key roles that art and language will play as part of the redemptive processes within the novel. The 'tear', then, is a resonant and affecting motif and, though fleeting in the novel, cuts to the core of Aslam's ethical engagement with 9/11, and its attendant atrocities.

The novel opens with a definitive situation of the action within Marcus's house, though the first description is a figuration to describe Lara's state of mind. Aslam's first line reads: 'Her mind was a haunted house' (p. 5). The figuration can easily be read literally as we learn more about the history of the house. Equally, Lara's is not the only mind that is disturbed by ghosts from the past in the narrative. Still further, on a broader scale, Aslam portrays Afghanistan as a terrain and as a politico-cultural body that is part physical, material geography and part spectral, sensuous landscape. Yet the house at Usha remains pivotal to the drama of the novel despite its spectral qualities,

¹³ Jay Caplan, *Framed Narratives: Diderot's Genealogy of the Beholder* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 11.

perhaps even because of these same features. The house is the fulcrum of the plot, and it is symbolically central within the structure of the narrative. Houses are, in theory, edifices and symbols of stability, in Gaston Bachelard's terms: 'one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams and mankind'.¹⁴ And indeed there is a durability to the structure, the features, and the values of the house at Usha. Over the course of the narrative, Marcus's house is a stubborn enclave of resistance against repression and is a domain of liberated community. As he explains, the house has an illustrious artistic heritage, a heritage that confers aesthetic pleasure but, in times of political and cultural censoriousness, also demands responsibility from its custodians:

The house was built by an old master calligrapher and painter in the years of the nineteenth century. He belonged to what was almost the final generation of Muslim artists to be trained in the style of the incomparable Bizhad. When the six-roomed building was complete, the master – who had painted images on the walls of each room – brought to it the woman he wished to make his companion for life. Beginning on the ground floor, each of the first five rooms was dedicated to one of the sense, and as the courtship slowly progressed over the following weeks, the couple went from one to the next. (p. 11)

The house was a facet of a ritualized courtship by an artist who belongs to a venerated aesthetic tradition. Art is integral to its architectural form, and the space of the aestheticized dwelling is infused with the emotions of romantic and sexual desire. This is the legacy that Marcus inherits and to which he is determinedly attached.

Visual art and sensuous experience are elemental to the house's genealogy, and the emphasis placed on sensuousness is one that punctuates the novel's vivid descriptions of Afghanistan's natural abundance. But desire, liberty, sensual indulgence, and aesthetic pleasure are not tolerated in a country that is, in the contemporary moment, fought over by competing ideologies. Marcus has lived through the theocratic excesses of the Taliban, partially vanquished in the latest post-9/11 war, and the domestic art of his home still bears the scars of the earlier period of repressive rule: 'The imagery was there on the walls still but, out of fear of the Taliban, all depictions of living things had been smeared with mud by Marcus' (p. 11). Afghanistan may have been superficially 'liberated' by a western invasion force, but fundamentalist Islam remains a potent didactic agent in the environs of Usha. The painted walls are, symbolically, *veiled* in mud; in another view, they are buried under thin layers of earth yet, as the quotation maintains, the imagery is still discernible. Marcus was inspired to camouflage the art on the walls of his home having visited

¹⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 6.

caves across Afghanistan in which ‘centuries-old Buddhist paintings . . . were covered in mud to prevent them from being damaged by Muslim invaders’ (p. 254). The polyphonic histories of faith and art in Afghanistan are necessarily repressed under contemporary conditions. Primitive methods of disguise unite Marcus with the longer history of self-preservation by artists, and Aslam consciously aligns Marcus’s efforts with those of others who have tried to retain a faith in art under inclement political conditions. Again this is not exclusively a vernacular parable confined to Afghanistan, but is germane to the post-9/11 context. As with McCann, Aslam invests in the agency of the aesthetic, though under duress or censorship it is animated by an enduring resistant dynamism. Marcus’s house is a sanctuary for the aesthetic, but is also a haven for those that are displaced and who, in turn, can expose themselves to the redemptive powers of the aesthetic inheritance on which the house is constructed.

Over the duration of the narrative Marcus’s house gains a transient but deeply integrated population of residents, each of whom is rewarded with temporary respite from the external conflict. As we learn, each of the protagonists has had private family lives ransacked by the dramas of broader political history, as the private has been repeatedly and savagely violated by the public. Lara has lost her father, her husband, and her brother to the demands of Russian state politics, and David’s losses include his erstwhile lover Zameen and his older brother, Jonathan, in the Vietnam War. While Marcus, as mentioned, lives with the memories of Zameen, his wife, Qatrina, and Bizhad, the grandson he has never met. Marcus’s home offers a measure of domestic anchorage to the displaced lives that cross its threshold. The house assumes another significance, then, in addition to its aesthetic inheritances: it is a space in which individual stories of loss can be shared. Once more, this chimes with *Let the Great World Spin*, as Aslam’s novel can be read as a democratic representation of diverse voices. There is a range of nationalities, ages, genders, and political affiliations congregated at the house at Usha, but *The Wasted Vigil* showcases a dramatic scenario in which connection is forged despite such differences. Touring the house, moving from storey to storey, Marcus and Lara engage in an exemplary instance of mutual sustenance. As Marcus, characteristically, details the prolonged cultural transactions between Islam and ancient Greek philosophy, Lara ‘thinks he is slightly drunk’, but she ‘lets him talk, following him wherever he goes. Perhaps its ebullience brought on by all this light. Or it could just be the company. They are stirring in each other memories of other things’ (p. 220). In a country beset by fear, in which, as Aslam makes clear, dignity is sundered as a matter of daily routine, redemption is sourced in exchanges such as that between Marcus and Lara. Redemption for perceived insults or crimes is not realized through vengeance, torture or summary execution – each of which abounds in the novel – but in

empathetic dialogue. Under the radar of ideological monitoring, silenced voices of critique and resistance are palpable in *The Wasted Vigil*. They may not assume overt public forms or forums, but it is in their determination to 'live on' with dignity that their subversive hope is to be found. The voices of exiles, orphans, refugees, and lonely lovers convene at Marcus's house, on the margins of history in the sacred private space.

As the title suggests, *The Wasted Vigil* is peopled by characters that maintain devoted, sometimes futile, *vigils* for long missing family members and loved ones. There are other derivations of the word 'vigil' in the narrative, and they bear more menacing meanings. Casa, the young jihadist, lodging temporarily at Marcus's house, knows that in such an 'infidel' environment 'he must be vigilant' (p. 184). Dunia, the teacher, wears a head scarf that 'was difficult to keep in place on her sleek hair, requiring constant vigilance' (p. 272). And, speaking to an American mercenary friend in Afghanistan, David argues 'I understand the need to be vigilant' (p. 322). Typically a 'vigil' is associated with emotional or spiritual devotion and, similarly, the word is often attached to peaceful demonstrations or rituals or mourning. Indeed Marcus's house might be read as a site where vigils are cherished and convened. But the latter three examples cited above convey the intimacy of the peaceful 'vigil' and altogether more threatening prospects that must be guarded against. Each of the three, though mindful of different threats, demonstrates the encroachment on the personal by the political. If we read Aslam's utilization of the idiom of the 'vigil' and 'vigilance' in another direction, we might argue that there is an urge to the reader to retain a level of political vigilance in the contemporary context. The novel stresses the need to be vigilant to the lessons and the creative legacies of history, and it proposes interrogative vigilance in our critical encounters with the rhetoric of fundamentalist politics in the present. In *The Wasted Vigil* the past is in contestation: on the one hand, the history of Afghanistan is one of interminable devastation, but on the other hand, as allusions to myth, storytelling, and natural beauty attest, the history of this country is something out of which a more hopeful future can be imagined and manufactured. Even with the excesses of competing ideologies burdening Afghanistan, and much of the globe, Aslam points to the possibility of hope and redemption in these minute, local, sometimes buried, fractions of creativity and vision.

***Let the Great World Spin* (2009)**

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’.¹⁵ 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’.¹⁶ *Let the Great World Spin* is a political and social novel that looks aslant at the attacks of 9/11. Indeed, McCann suggests that it is an allegory on human suffering, which partially speaks to 11 September 2001. 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, where he is a long-time resident. It is a novel that is stalked by menace and violence, but one that rises to moments of grace and hopeful anticipation. Primarily set in 1974 in New York, and charting the criminality, destitution, addiction, and class division of that time and place, the narrative 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 shudders 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’. 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

¹⁵ ‘Interview with Colum McCann’, *Colum McCann Official Author Website*, www.colummccann.com [accessed 20 July 2011].

¹⁶ ‘Interview with Colum McCann’, www.colummccann.com.

violence. 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'.¹⁷

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 and that 9/11 as a 'cultivated' event could contract the interpretive scope of his narrative.¹⁸ 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'.¹⁹

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 1974.²⁰ 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 spectacle 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

¹⁷ 'Interview with Colum McCann', www.colummccann.com.

¹⁸ 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', *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, ed. by Giovanna Borradori (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 85.

¹⁹ 'Interview with Colum McCann', www.colummccann.com.

²⁰ On Philippe Petit and 9/11, see Ruth Mackay, "'Going Backwards in Time to Talk about the Present": *Man on Wire* and Verticality after 9/11', *Comparative American Studies*, 9.1 (2011), 3–20.

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'.²¹ 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. (p. 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 mingle with 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' (p. 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' (p. 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 sky-line 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' (p. 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' (p. 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 be intrigued about his

²¹ Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 3. All further references will appear in the text.

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' (p. 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'.²² 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 catalyses 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 sky-line, a spectre on the horizons of 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 recasting 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' (p. 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

²² Bret Anthony Johnston, 'Interview with Colum McCann', *National Book Award Website*, www.nationalbook.org/nba2009_f_mccann_interv.html [accessed 11 June 2011]. See also, Christopher 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 [accessed 17 June 2011].

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 reconceptualization 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 unprecedented 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, is 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. (p. 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 skyborne 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 airborne 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 allochronicity 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, the Soderbergs adorn their home with a Joan Miro, but more interestingly, McCann takes the story 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 series of sites that revisits his 1998 novel, *This Side of Brightness*.²³ 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. (p. 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 skyborne step at the very moment that this boy is scavenging the underground for illicit art. In much the same way that John 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' (p. 167). What we see is quite literally an underground art,

²³ Colum McCann, *This Side of Brightness* (London: Phoenix House, 1998).

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 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, is essentially a bodily experience. The wire walker compels his watchers to stop and to 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 refashioned 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 of 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 of 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. (p. 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. (p. 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.

Conclusion

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 critiques that are suspicious of the necessary redemptive agency of literature, Michael Rothberg reaffirms the political and critical responsibilities of literature. There is a call to vigilance evident in Rothberg's argument, as he issues a demand for vigilance against complacent consumption of divisive and inflammatory narratives within the public sphere. Under his critical optic, the literary can act as a riposte to terrorism itself and can be a voice in analysing 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'.²⁴ 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', and 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'. Rothberg's conclusion is that 'the aesthetic constitutes a bridging realm that connects subjective experience to larger collectivities'.²⁵

The Irish Nobel Laureate poet, Seamus Heaney, responded to 9/11 in adjacent and more personal ways, firstly, in his poem, 'Anything Can Happen', included in his 2006 collection, *District and Circle*.²⁶ 'Anything Can Happen' is a translated version of Horace's Ode 34 from his First Book of *Odes*, which was initially published in 2004 together with an essay as part of an *Amnesty International* publication.²⁷ Writing later, elsewhere, on the genesis of the poem, Heaney recalls how two American friends of his were holidaying in Florence, Italy, when the 9/11 attacks occurred. Reeling from the shock of the events, which was compounded by their physical distance from their homeland, the friends sought out and studied 'picture and sculptures that kept standing their ground . . . in spite of the shaken state of the world around them'. In Heaney's view, this course of action was about putting 'art to the test rather than to retreat into it'.²⁸ These friends asked 'art to hold up at the moment when they were being most borne down upon'.²⁹ Heaney's anecdote co-locates art and ethics, as 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 *The Wasted Vigil* and *Let the Great World Spin*. As works of art these novels advertise and embody the durability of human creativity as a utopian resource. This pairing of literary

²⁴ Michael Rothberg, 'Seeing Terror, Feeling Art: Public and Private in Post-9/11 Literature', in *Literature after 9/11*, ed. by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 124.

²⁵ Rothberg, 'Seeing Terror, Feeling Art', p. 124.

²⁶ Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).

²⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Anything Can Happen: a poem and essay* (Dublin: TownHouse, 2004).

²⁸ Seamus Heaney, 'Reality and Justice: On Translating Horace, Odes, I, 34', *Irish Pages – The Justice Issue*, 1.2 (2002/2003), p. 50.

²⁹ Heaney, 'Reality and Justice', p. 51.

fictions is exemplary of what Gilles Deleuze calls 'the realm of the possible'.³⁰ A realm neatly defined by Elleke Boehmer and Susheila Nasta 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.³¹

Both works are multivocal, democratic texts that braid diverse narratives and lives together in varying patterns of unity and empathetic understanding. To the dominant US-centric narratives of post-9/11, both McCann and Aslam tender disjunctive counter-narratives that expand the horizons of what can be stabled as 9/11 literary fictions. Neither novel seeks political or cultural consensus nor do they indulge in reactionary political dogmatism. McCann and Aslam, in their differential fictional worlds, have created diverse, but inclusive, narratives of post-9/11 hopefulness.

³⁰ Elleke Boehmer and Susheila Nasta, 'Cultures of Terror', *Wasafiri – Special Issue on 'Cultures of Terror'*, 22.2 (2007), p. 1.

³¹ Boehmer and Nasta, 'Cultures of Terror', p. 1.