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Marie Mianowski

The Space In-Between in Colum McCann's Novel *TransAtlantic* (2013)

Marie Mianowski est maître de conférences à l'Université de Nantes où elle enseigne la littérature en langue anglaise et la traduction. Ses travaux de recherche portent sur la littérature irlandaise contemporaine, l'exil, la construction et la représentation du paysage irlandais. Elle est l'auteur d'une thèse sur les représentations de l'espace et du temps dans l'œuvre de Flann O'Brien. En 2012 elle a coordonné un ouvrage sur le paysage irlandais contemporain dans la littérature et les arts (*Irish Contemporary Landscapes in Literature and the Arts*, M. Mianowski (ed.), Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012). Elle a publié plusieurs articles sur des auteurs irlandais contemporains, en particulier Colum McCann, et prépare actuellement une monographie sur cet auteur.

L'espace entre-deux dans *TransAtlantic* (2013) de Colum McCann.

Cet article interroge la manière dont les vastes espaces représentés dans *TransAtlantic* engendrent une réflexion sur le lieu, conçu non pas comme une portion fermée de l'espace mais comme le croisement fécond de lignes de vies, de parcours individuels à travers le temps (Ingold). Cette réflexion ouvre sur le rapport du contemporain à l'espace et au temps dans lequel il vit (Agamben) pour finalement interroger l'idée récurrente chez McCann d'un espace entre-deux comme un lieu qui incarne les tensions paradoxales du monde actuel entre l'universel et le vernaculaire. L'espace entre-deux devient espace intermédiaire favorisant l'ouverture et l'empathie envers les autres et non la nostalgie et le repli communautaire. Le funambule de son précédent roman devient ici métaphore d'une tension et d'un élan, du vertige, et conduit à réévaluer l'engagement de chacun dans la course du vaste monde. Le rythme de la prose de McCann emporte à son tour le lecteur dans cet élan, le conduisant à s'interroger sur son rôle dans la construction d'un monde en paix.

« Mots-clés : McCann, Ingold, Agamben, Lawlor, Irlande, espace, lieu, entre-deux, mouvement, contemporain, exil, paix »

This paper questions the way in which the wide expanses of space depicted in *TransAtlantic* open out on a reflection on place conceived not as an enclosed portion of space but as the crisscrossing of myriads of lifelines (Ingold). In McCann's novel, movement and displacement are paramount as they also question how to be contemporary of one's time. In *TransAtlantic* Colum McCann returns to Ireland while, as the title of the novel indicates, clearly questioning the condition of being 'in between'. I will argue that McCann's dynamics of place focus at once both on the embodiment of the present moment and on the in-between space, hence reassessing what it means to be in the world as a contemporary (Agamben) in relation to global politics on the one hand and Irish origins on the other hand. As in his recent non-fictional texts, McCann unfurls a new rhetoric of peace and engages his reader to embody in reading the irreducible 'blind spot' (Lawlor) and like a funambulist to step himself forward in the unknown, aloft.

« Keywords : McCann, Ingold, Agamben, Lawlor, Ireland, space, place, in-between, movement, contemporary, exile, peace »

Anyone who read Colum McCann's 2009 novel *Let the Great World Spin* will bear in mind the incredible vision of Frenchman Philippe Petit walking on a wire stretched between the two twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. His novel *TransAtlantic*, published in May 2013, is based on the same sort of spatial imagination: the exhilarating tension of journeying across, of looking for one's balance and personal trajectory. Colum McCann was born in 1965 in Dublin but he has travelled extensively across the world and has been living in New York City for the past twenty-five years. His fiction is known for the vast and ambitious representations of space, depicting long-distance displacements across Europe and the world, over vast periods of time. In *TransAtlantic*, the movements across the two sides of the Atlantic are more like a sort of leap than like the slow and tentative crossing of the tightrope walker. But while Colum McCann's representations of life and storylines through space encompass great transatlantic distances over generations, his writing also reveals a reflection on place in our contemporary globalized world but also on place and Irish people. *TransAtlantic* is a novel in which for the first time Colum McCann returns to Ireland while, as the title of the novel indicates, clearly questioning the condition of being 'in between'. I will therefore first consider the apparently contradictory movements of expansion and contraction in *TransAtlantic* as a fundamental tension in McCann's representations of space. This will lead me to examine how, in the wake of Tim Ingold and Doreen Massey's definitions of space and place, Colum McCann's narratives represent life as a journey defined both by movement and a complex meshing of lifelines and storylines. Finally, I will argue that McCann's dynamics of place focus at once both on the embodiment of the present moment and on the in-between space, hence reassessing what it means to be in the world as a contemporary in relation to global politics and his Irish home.

In his book *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life*, Leonard Lawlor

locates in the ‘upright human body’ the “‘between” of survey and fusion, the *mi-lieu*, the *mi-chemin* between essence and fact’ (Lawlor 92). If the image of the upright human body strikes a resemblance with the recurrent figure of the funambulist in McCann’s work¹, I would first like to consider the tension between movements of expansion and contraction in *TransAtlantic*, or what Lawlor also calls ‘survey’ and ‘fusion’. Paradoxically, this mode of spatial representation is a way of encompassing space as a whole, vertically and horizontally, over vast time spans as well as in the present moment and imminence. But it also emphasizes the impossibility of truly locating what Lawlor designates as ‘a minuscule hiatus’, paraphrasing Foucault’s ‘*écart infime*’ (Lawlor 92) or the place of a battle between life and death, the visible and the invisible, passivity and activity, words and things.

In *TransAtlantic*, McCann describes three real journeys from America to Ireland: former slave Frederick Douglas in 1845 who voyaged across the Atlantic from Boston to Dublin; aviators John Alcock and Arthur Brown on the first transatlantic flight in 1919; and Senator George Mitchell in 1998 who was the main architect of the Good Friday Agreement and played a key role as a mediator between all the protagonists flying over the Atlantic sometimes three times a week. Those three episodes are key moments in the history of Ireland and in the history of humanity, because all three journeys express a desire for peace: promoting emancipation in 1845, joining two worlds after World War I, and constructing the Northern Ireland Peace Process in 1998. All are characterised by a movement of expansion from America to Ireland. The three narratives describing those journeys are intermingled with the saga of a fictional family over five generations, starting in 1845 when Lily Duggan, inspired by Frederick Douglass’ speeches of freedom in Cork and Dublin decided to emigrate and boarded a coffin ship in Cork. Her descendants then also travel from one side of the

¹ In *Let the Great World Spin* the funambulist is part of the storyline. It is also the case in an earlier short story entitled ‘As If There Were Trees’ (McCann 1999) where a Romanian immigrant is being assaulted while practising tightrope-walking in a poor Dublin suburb. The image of the funambulist is also present in *TransAtlantic* (McCann 2013a, 75), used figuratively by Frederick Douglass to describe the experience of writing. The narrator links autobiographical writing and walking on a tightrope in the air, struggling to keep one’s balance.

Atlantic to the other as generations succeed one another. The storylines of real-life and fictional characters are intertwined in such a manner that the reader is only gradually aware of the links between the different characters. Opposed to this movement of expansion from America to Ireland and back again, there is a distinct movement of contraction. In book 1, when aviator Arthur Brown rises above the clouds, we can read: ‘he could lean out over the edge and see the shadowshift on the whiteness below, expanding and contracting on the surface of the clouds’ (McCann 2013a, 3). And as Senator Mitchell flies to Ireland to negotiate the Peace Process, he experiences quite a similar phenomenon of contraction at the final press conference. Mitchell’s joy is expressed as the complete suppression of distance:

But really what he would like now, more than anything, is to walk out from the press conference into the sunlight, a morning and evening jammed together, so that there is a rise and fall at the same time, east and west. (McCann 2013a, 136)

The recurrent image of contracted space runs through all the sections of the novel and finds its most efficient metaphor in the ice house which Lily Duggan manages with her husband John Ehrlich in the 1880s in North Missouri, conserving ice and then sending it to Saint Louis on the river. The image of the frozen lake, which in many respects reminds McCann’s readers of the trapped crane in the frozen Hudson in *This Side of Brightness* (McCann 1998), serves as a running metaphor of what the narrator also calls ‘strange collisions’ (McCann 2013a, 275) when Queen Elizabeth and Obama both come to Northern Ireland in the same week. But just as the ice eventually thaws, the sea ebbs and flows, and the momentum created by contractions and collisions brings about new movements and new lives. It is in fact the ‘joining of worlds’ (McCann 2013a, 29) McCann is interested in, just as Emily Ehrlich, trying to write about the first flight over the Atlantic ocean for her newspaper, is interested in the joining of words: ‘transatlantic, trans atlas, transatlantic. The distance finally broken’ (McCann 2013a, 21). Over all, the alternating patterns of expansion and contraction emphasize the pre-

eminence of movement and displacement in McCann's narratives. This displacement is both spatial and temporal and questions the characters and the narrator's relationship to the time they live in and to their mode of being in the world.

In an essay entitled 'What is the Contemporary?' Giorgio Agamben analyses the contemporary as 'that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism' (Agamben 41). As Connal Parsley explains in *The Agamben Dictionary*, 'the contemporary's attention thus constitutes a "return to a present where we have never been"' (Agamben 52) [...] repurposing the disjuncture constitutive of its identity, it introduces the possibility of a special relationship between different times" (Murray 50). In *TransAtlantic*, the experience as contemporaries of each of the characters is described in terms corresponding to Agamben's definition. The relationship of Douglass or Mitchell to their times for example, is both anachronous and disjunctive and this is reflected for example, in their perception of the Irish landscape as they arrive in Ireland. The yellow bloom, the green hills and the boggy meadows all create some sort of continuity and an apparently stable reference point. But this continuity is in fact an illusion. Just as Alcock and Brown had not expected to land on bogland and almost crash their landing plane, the landscapes the characters contemplate on their journeys are different from what they expected. Frederic Douglass, who came as a former slave to Ireland to meet abolitionist patriots, arrives in Cork in the middle of the Irish famine. Douglass is surprised to find that other people suffer under a plight unknown to him and does not mention the Irish famine in his writings. The narrator points out that Douglass needed to learn, thus also shaking up the reader's preconceptions, forcing him to leap from one point of view to another and admit that Douglass too, for all his suffering, had his own human limitations. In much the same way, Alcock and Brown who in 1919 flew all the way from Newfoundland to Ireland with the ideal in mind to join worlds after World War I, are astonished to land in a country at war. They had

not realized that a civil war was going on in Ireland at the time (McCann 2013a, 34). The disjunctive nature of experience is also reflected in the spatial distribution of the novel. The opening 2012 section stands explicitly outside Book I with no page number and is impossible to understand without reading the rest of the novel. Moreover the narrators in each of the final 2011 and the opening 2012 sections are different. Therefore, although the opening and the closing chapters of the novel are both contemporary, they are not symmetrical but reflect each other at odd angles. The female character of the prologue is not the female narrator of the closing section. As he completes the reading, the reader is made to go back to the first page to finally make sense of the prologue and realize the prominent role played by a specific place, ‘the cottage by the lough’ in the general economy of the novel. In *TransAtlantic*, the cottage by the lough corresponds to the definition of a place as a lived-space (Lefebvre 33), a location to which the members of a family are attached, which has been transmitted as a wedding present and then lived-in generation after generation. As a geographical location it is very specific, being separated from the mainland and built on an island in the middle of the lough. Situated south of Belfast, the lough in itself is a closed-in portion of the sea and is therefore neither the vast open sea nor an enclosed lake. The cottage by the lough not only frames the novel but is somehow present throughout the entire narrative, linking all the characters in the novel whether real or fictional from the 19th to the 21st century.

Over the past decades, the notions of space and place have been endowed with various definitions, depending on the disciplines from which those definitions emerged: cultural geography, cultural anthropology, philosophy or literature, to name a few. Referring to Edward Soja’s famous three-level definitions of space, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews opens his book *Writing Home: Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland (1968-2008)* in defining space as “abstract, featureless, indefinite” (Kennedy-Andrews, 1). He then defines place as “lived space [which] carries connotations of familiarity, stability, attachment, nostalgia and homeliness” (Kennedy-Andrews, 1) and quotes

another definition by a famous geographer who conceptualizes place as a pause: “if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (Kennedy-Andrews, 1). Those definitions are part of the traditional theoretical framework within which most scholars usually conceive and write about space and place, with place seen as an enclosed portion of space. Those definitions are relevant for the study of *TransAtlantic*, and the cottage by the lough seems to fit perfectly within this theoretical framework. However, in many of their writings, cultural geographers such as Nigel Thrift reach the conclusion that ‘encounters with place cannot be adequately registered through language and discourse’ (Thrift, 95) and that place is concerned with ‘embodiment’ (Thrift, 95). It is particularly true of McCann’s fiction, in which place can often be read as embodiment of the present moment. Colum McCann’s representations of space illustrate perfectly well what Tim Ingold and geographer Doreen Massey conceptualise as space and place, moving away from the traditional theoretical framework described above:

[Space is] a world of incessant movement and becoming, one that is never complete but continually under construction, woven from the countless lifelines of its manifold human and non-human constituents as they thread their ways through the tangle of relationships in which they are comprehensively enmeshed. (Ingold 2011, 142)

In other words, ‘space is not a flat, abstract, two-dimensional surface deprived of temporality, but it is a cut-through of myriad of stories, and time and space are therefore intimately connected’ (Warburton 3). The cottage by the lough therefore corresponds to Tim Ingold’s definition of place not as an enclosed portion of space within the wider space, but as an intersection of lifelines. The cottage becomes alive as a place, thanks to a meshing of lines over centuries and over generations. The temporally spiralling structure of the narrative emphasizes its continuity as a place, as it is eventually transmitted to an Irish-Kenyan couple. It is inscribed within a story of transmission and closely linked

to the story of a letter. This letter circulates throughout the novel and travels over the generations and the Atlantic Ocean. It was handed to aviator Arthur Brown in St John's, Newfoundland, by the young Lottie Ehrlich, on the eve of his first transatlantic flight in 1919. Brown then forgot about the letter and it never reached its destination, the letterbox of a certain Mary Webb, who decades earlier had facilitated the journey of Lottie's ancestor -Lily Duggan- to America, and who had that same winter accommodated Frederick Douglass. The letter therefore stands at the crossroads of fiction and non-fiction. It is eventually handed to Hannah, Lottie's descendant, still unopened, and presented to the reader as a riddle by Hannah herself as narrator, in the opening of Book III:

I've had in my possession, for many years now, an unopened letter. It travelled by Vickers Vimy over the Atlantic almost a hundred years ago, the thinnest of letters, no more than two pages, possibly only one [...]. (McCann 2013a, 247)

The destiny of the letter and the cottage by the lough are tied together. They are fascinating as they draw geographical as well as genealogical lines between the generations and the characters, hence illustrating the pattern of lines and movements at work in the novel as a whole. As a material object, which has circulated over time, the value of the letter is not so much what it contains as what it represents: a link between characters of one family over time and across space. It embodies transmission and attachment and as such symbolizes place, adding movement to what is otherwise represented as static, and compensating the unopened, secret status of the envelope and the enclosed letter, with movement, transmission and circulation.

In *TransAtlantic*, as in Colum McCann's fiction as a whole, the journey 'in between', the spacing, is at least as essential as the destination. The recurrent use of the swerving tennis ball in *TransAtlantic* can be interpreted as a metaphor both of this 'in-betweenness' and of how to embody the present moment.

In Colum McCann's work, place emerges at the intersection of multiple lifelines and it is alive with the criss-crossing of lives. The cottage by the lough sums up various conceptualizations of place, both as an enclosed location -an island in a lough- and as the meeting point of myriads of stories. Colum McCann constantly questions what it means to be alive at one point in time, and the meaning of place in a global world. More precisely, he also probes what it means to be Irish in our globalized, uprooted world. Furthermore, in his latest non-fictional texts, McCann's urgent calls have been calls for world peace. In *TransAtlantic*, apart from Lily Duggan's voyage to America to escape the Famine, all the other journeys are journeys in the name of peace.

The 'upright human body' in the '*mi-lieu*' (Lawlor 92) and McCann's funambulists illustrate place as embodiment and a search for balance. But in *TransAtlantic* the search for balance and the funambulist have become more abstract. The funambulist has vanished from the scene as a human body and there only remains the tension and the swerve from one end to the other. The absence of the funambulist could be assimilated to the 'blind spot' that Lawlor identifies as the 'minuscule hiatus' (Lawlor 97) that separates the present and signals the irreducible presence of death at the heart of life, the invincible zone of tension between opposites, the visible and the invisible, words and things. The metaphor of the tennis ball present throughout the novel is just another version of this tension and the tennis ball a metaphor of the funambulist aimed to cross from one end to the other, always likely to fall and somehow heading towards his predetermined goal. The word 'swerve' which recurs in the novel an unnatural number of times is eloquent. The fictional character Lottie Tuttle, Lily Duggan's granddaughter, is also a great tennis player. She meets senator Mitchell on a tennis court during the 1998 Peace Talks. She is then in her nineties and sitting in a wheelchair, so only watching the game from a distance and making her comments. But that is how Lottie and Mitchell first meet, as she observes the swerves of the tennis balls and makes her comments upon the lopes and bounces on the court. And yet, in the novel, the swerves on the tennis court metaphorically contaminate the narrative.

The peace talks themselves as well as world politics are described as words and actions swerving from one side to the other and undergoing a metamorphosis that could bring about peace: ‘There is a swerve to Blair. The neat suit, the tie. A dishevelment to Ahern. A busy grief’ (McCann 2013a, 142). Life is like the movement of the tennis ball in the air. The sense of ‘release’ that Brown remembers of his flight back in 1919 (‘he fell into the recollection: the sheer release of being in the air’ (McCann 2013a, 209)), is echoed in Emily’s pleasure in writing: ‘Emily could sense the skip in her life, almost like the jumping of a pen. The flick of ink across a page. The great surprise of the next stroke. The boundlessness of it all. There was something akin to a journey across the sky’ (McCann 2013a, 218). What surfaces of all those swerves and feelings of release is a search for balance. The funambulist is present again in McCann’s text but as an image, in a comparison to the art of writing, when Frederick Douglass compares writing to walking artistically on a rope: ‘his book was going into a second printing. It was an exercise in balance. He would need to find the correct tension. A funambulist’ (McCann 2013a, 75).

The metaphorical funambulist is not only the embodiment of the impetus, or swerve. He actually embodies the space in-between that William Desmond identifies as the ‘Irish condition’, for historical and geographical reasons, in his book *Being Between: Conditions of the Irish Thought*:

By being thus outside in the between one becomes intimate to the irreducible intermediacy within oneself, within us all, and between us all, in the most intimate communications that bind us together and respect our singular solitudes. (Desmond 13)

The in-between experience has often described as the fate of any exile, not only Irish, and of many people in a globalized world. As in Desmond’s quote, the intermediacy inherent to the in-between experience is something that, as McCann claims (McCann 2103b), should engender more empathy between people and bring about more peaceful relationships at every level. In his latest fiction, the space in-between does no longer only concern things and the theme of his stories. It has contaminated

the language, the rhythm of his prose and its words. If we were to focus only on essential keywords in *TransAtlantic*, apart from the verb ‘to swerve’, it would be the adverb ‘aloft’. While ‘aloft’ is the last word of the novel, it is also one of its first words, concluding the first paragraph of Book 1 and one of Alcock’s inner thoughts right before take off: ‘hand on the throttle, feet on the rudder bar, he could already feel himself aloft’ (McCann 2013a, 3). ‘Aloft’ is also part of the miraculous words in Frederic Douglass’ personal dictionary:

It was essential to hold his nerve. To summon things into being by the mysterious alchemy of language. Atlantic. Atlas. Aloft. He was holding the image of his own people up: sometimes it was weight enough to stagger under. (McCann 2013a, 55)

‘Aloft’ echoes ‘Atlantic’ by means of alliterations and things come into being ‘by the mysterious alchemy of language’. As the peace negotiations progress in the section of the book devoted to senator Mitchell, the rhythm of the sentences accelerates, the sentences themselves get shorter:

For the next two days, he will hardly sleep, hardly eat. No hotels even. He refuses to leave the office. He will sleep at his desk. He will wash at the hand basin in the small bathroom. Run the water. Tap the soap dispenser. Wash his hands thoroughly, methodically. Splash water on the back of his neck. Walk back along the corridor. Meet with Hume and Trimble. (McCann 2013a, 141)

In some passages of *TransAtlantic* the rhythm of McCann’s prose mimics the swerves, creates a tension and eventually embodies movement. The reader is in the position of the funambulist caught in midair, yearning for the other side. This effect is even more extreme in Colum McCann’s short story ‘Aisling’ published in 2010, in which rhythm is so potent that the reader is embarked on a breathtaking journey, reading four sentences in four pages, while the narrator, an embodiment of mother Ireland, mourns her past life as in the famous 18th century *aisling*:

I woke up, opened the curtains, found my nightgown, made the bed, tightened the sheets,

fluffed the pillows, donned my slippers, boiled the water, brewed the tea, stirred the milk, climbed the stairs, woke the boys, combed their hair, straightened their curls, brushed their teeth, buttoned their buttons, zipped their zippers (...) [...]. (McCann 2011, 182)

The rhythm imposed on the reader almost induces a gasp. Through the reading process, the reader becomes the embodiment of a funambulist determined to reach the opposite end, inhabiting the space in-between, experiencing the present moment in all its strenuous paradoxes.

In *TransAtlantic* Colum McCann's representations of space map out an ever-changing globalized world in which place is not any more defined by nostalgia or the weight of tradition. Just as new places can be adopted by newcomers, old places can in turn welcome foreigners. And yet this new definition of place does not sign the advent of placelessness or the absence of place attachment or any sense of belonging. As Tim Ingold and Doreen Massey show, space and place exist through relationships and myriads of stories. Space is not an abstract, infinite mode of reference, nor is place strictly localized and an enclosed portion of space. Rather, places take shape at the crossroads of multiple lifelines. In drawing the attention of the reader towards embodied movement as the main architect of both space and place, Colum McCann, like the characters he depicts, appears as a contemporary of the times he lives in. His is a disjunctive gaze on his times, a vision capable to perceive the blind spot and shift the perspective. In writing, he captures the tension between opposites and paradoxes and through language he manages to embody the minuscule hiatus which ignites creation and life. The space in-between, which he relentlessly describes throughout his work, is not a space to inhabit selfishly but to co-build in relation with others. His time is the time of imminence, a present moment already leaping forward into the future. At a round-table event² in Rennes in June

² Round Table event organized by the Centre d'Etudes Irlandaises of the University of Rennes II at the Institut Franco-Américain in Rennes, on June 6th 2014.

2014, to present his novel *TransAtlantic*, McCann insisted that stories of peace should be told over and over again because peace is not a sweet, easy thing to do. Peacemaking is hard, tough work, ‘the peacemaker, as senator George Mitchell learned in 1998 must show the tenacity of the fanatic’ (McCann 2014). In McCann’s fiction, spaces in-between are not empty voids. They are spaces in which perspectives are being constantly re-shuffled to become creative meeting places from self to self and teach us to swerve ahead towards the others and contribute to world peace: ‘it is the job of literature to confront the terrible truths of what war has done and continues to do to us. It is also the job of literature to make sense of whatever small beauty we can rescue from the maelstrom’ (McCann 2013b, vii).

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