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### **The choreography of exile in Colum McCann's fiction**

Colum McCann's bestselling novel *Dancer*<sup>1</sup> about the life of the famous dancer Nureyev gives the most blatant example of the theme of dancing in McCann's work of fiction. But the scope of dancing and movement in McCann's work goes beyond any use of dancing as a thematic element of storytelling. Dance, gestures and bodily movements in general are actually extremely meaningful in all his writing, not only as a theme but also as a literary trope and further, as part of an aesthetic of exile. In Colum McCann's fiction, dancing is very often a way for exiles to truly inhabit the new space they have landed in and to transform it into a lived-in place. Dancing is a way for the characters to escape past and present traumas and project themselves in the future. In short, it is a means for them to make a home. We will therefore question the relationships between dancing and landscape in Colum McCann's writings and study the way in which choreography and fiction writing are linked when it comes to narrating the experience of exile and expressing the singularity of one's experience of space. More specifically, we will focus on the links between dance, memory and landscape in Colum McCann's collection of short stories *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*<sup>2</sup> (1994), making connections with his novels and his more recent short stories. 'Landscape' is understood here as a concept which 'materializes space by implicitly introducing a viewer and a gaze, while abstracting place by adjoining a critical point of view to it'<sup>3</sup>. Landscapes engender memories of the past and of the exiles' past homeland while dancing bodies inscribe and project a form of hope into space. Therefore, drawing upon the phrase used by Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*<sup>4</sup>, we will first focus on 'the gravity of exile' in the collection: for dancing can be perceived as a way of escaping the spirit of gravity which sees life as a burden to be borne. In

a second part, the fundamental role of memory and repetition in the making of the exiles' landscapes will be examined. In a context of exile, the distance turns the remembered geography of the homeland into a nostalgic landscape in which bodies ache with sorrow. How do dancing rituals heal the minds and bodies of the exiles, and how creatively does imagination feed both on what is remembered from the past and what has been forgotten? Finally, in a third part, we will focus on the way McCann's fiction depicts dancing bodies writing what words are unable to express: the vital, imminent movement of hope. Not only do McCann's characters dance away the 'spirit of gravity', but they gracefully trace the gestures of their imminent future. Dancing movements map the memory of trauma, but they are also the sign of a genuine metamorphosis as they sublimate nostalgia and create a choreography of hope.

#### I. Dancing as a form of exile

Colum McCann was born in Dublin in 1965 and began his career as a journalist in *The Irish Press*. In the early 1980's he took a bicycle tour across North America and then worked as a wilderness guide in a program for juvenile delinquents in Texas. After a year and a half in Japan, he and his wife Allison moved to New York where they currently live with their three children. Colum McCann is also the award-winning author of five novels, *Zoli*, *Dancer*, *This Side of Brightness*, *Songdogs*, as well as *Let the Great World Spin*<sup>5</sup>. Yet his two collections of short stories have also been widely acclaimed and most of them are stories of exile and displacement. His first collection of twelve short stories *Fishing The Sloe-Black River* tells of the suffering and pain of home leaving and displacement in various ways. In the first part of the collection, the narratives depict situations of uprooting and departure from the homeland and deal with the complexity of adapting to a new place. The narratives emphasize the effects of time on the characters' or the narrators' perceptions of the place they have

abandoned. The second part of the collection describes situations of exile within society itself where characters are either excluded from 'normal' society because of some physical disability, or because they have committed some crime. It illustrates a form of exile within society. Death is the third form of exile presented in the last short stories of the collection, and it is the most radical of all as exile then means being utterly retired from the world of the living.

The bodies of the travellers, wanderers or other misfits are central in all the short stories. In the short story entitled 'Step We Gaily On We Go', the central character is a former boxer who has been abandoned by his wife. He lives in the past, as if his life had stopped many decades before, on the day his wife left him. The character never adapted to his Californian environment, and this is visible in the way he is clad, wearing a dark overcoat under a scorching sun. More generally, the first short stories of the collection show how difficult it is for some of the characters to adapt to a new place. Bodies suffer from illnesses or mutilation. When the woman narrator of the short story 'Sisters' leaves Ireland, her father hugs her, but the text describes her as an object, comparing her to a cigarette: 'My father had hugged and cradled me like his last cigarette at Shannon Airport<sup>6</sup>'. When two decades later she clandestinely crosses the border to the United-States, she is still escaping the sordid reality of her family in Ireland with a sister suffering from anorexia and mutilating her skinny body. But as she escapes and crosses the border, huddling like a foetus in the bunk of her boyfriend's car, she still has the status of a mere object in the syntax of the sentences describing her. Guilt is latent and hope is often not an option. Dancing movements and gestures then become a form of exile from the gravity of reality.

In 'Sisters', the narrator does not become an actual, thinking and desiring subject until the final meeting with her dying sister in a South-American hospital. Only then, does she fully

accept the actual time and space in which she lives. At the beginning of the short story, the narrator describes what she used to do with her hands while she ‘gave<sup>7</sup>’ herself to strangers. Her hands seemed to be dancing and the dancing exiled her spirit out of her body and took her away from the sordid reality she was experiencing: ‘Sometimes I would hold my hands out beyond their shoulders and pretend that I could shape or carve something out of my hand, something that had eyes, and a face, someone very little, within my hand, whose job it was to try to understand<sup>8</sup>’. Gestures and movements indeed tell a lot of the mental and physical suffering linked to exile. In ‘Breakfast for Enrique’, the eponymous character, Enrique, who comes from Argentina, is also dying. The narrative hints at his parents back home in Argentina, and the narrator illustrates the distance by pausing in the narrative and describing the imagined pain of the father who does not know where his son is. In doing so, the narrator shows how the father’s body merges with the landscape: ‘There are times I imagine a man at the very tip of Tierra del Fuego reaching his arms out towards the condors that flap their wings against the red air, wondering where his son has gone<sup>9</sup>’. In the same way, the parents in ‘Fishing the Sloe-Black River’ waiting for their sons who have left to Continental Europe, seem to be integrated into the landscape of the homeland. Just as Enrique’s father seems to be about to fly like a condor, standing on the verge of the mountain, in ‘Fishing the Sloe-Black River’, the mothers fish in the river ‘in vain<sup>10</sup>’, symbolically trying to join their exiled children, throwing their lines in unison over the river. The original movement of displacement caused by exile, whether geographical or psychological, is re-enacted through the gestures and skipping or dancing movements of the bodies of those who have experienced exile. The way their bodies move in space is meant to tame the feelings of separation and alienation induced by exile. On the other hand, the reader witnesses a distortion in the way landscape is represented and that distortion seems to betray the ambiguity and unreliability of memory. Memories transform the present reality of the characters as they try to cope with their new

environment. But conversely, landscape plays tricks on the mind, as it makes sudden memories surge again to the surface.

## II. Memory and repetition: dance as a ritual between past and present

Colum McCann's short stories are very finely written and the flow of memories is mingled with implicit facts and forgotten elements of experience. Everything becomes a pretext to make the past come back. The first sentence of 'Sisters' is very relevant in that respect: 'I have come to think of our lives as the colours of that place – hers a piece of bog cotton, mine as black as the water found when men slash too deep in the soil with a shovel. I remember when I was fifteen, cycling across those bogs in the early evenings, on my way to the dancehall in my clean, yellow socks<sup>11</sup>'. While another reference to the same yellow socks closes the short story: 'Where, Sister, did you put those yellow socks of mine anyway?<sup>12</sup>' They have actually travelled across the short story and ended up in a South American convent where Sheona finds her dying sister Brigid and learns that she has grown into the habit of wearing yellow socks too. The socks therefore stand as a symbol of the link between the sisters that transcends space as well as time and despite the very different lives they have led. It links them both to their common past and origins.

On the other hand a few short stories show characters striving to screen themselves from the past and keep it from resurfacing. 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper' best illustrates the will to build a protection from any sort of resurgence. As early as the first page, the narrator argues that Osobe, a Japanese exile, has come 'to Ireland to forget it all<sup>13</sup>'. The narrative depicts a character who, year after year, papers the walls of his house with

'layers and layers of wallpaper (...) It looked as if Osobe had been gathering the walls onto himself, probably some sort of psychological effect of the bomb. Because the

wallpaper had been so dense my father and some members of the town council simply had to knock the house down, burying everything that Osobe owned in the rubble<sup>14</sup>.

In 'Step We Gaily On We Go', the narrative states that on the day Juanita left Flaherty, the 'courtyard was grey as granite [...] granite was impermeable. That he [Flaherty] had learned. Granite doesn't let water through' (77). And yet, albeit all the attempts at protection against the past, dancing movements, gestures, leaps and skips enable the characters to trace links between the past and the present and give meaning to what could not otherwise be expressed.

In McCann's short stories, dancing in city dancehalls is part of the cultural memories of the exiles. But those public dances should not necessarily be understood totally differently from the random dancing movements of bodies suddenly leaping or skipping in an attempt to say what characters or narrators cannot word out or have forgotten. In 'Sisters', Sheona goes to 'dancehalls' and so does Laura in 'From Many, One' (114), as well as Moira and her sister-narrator in 'A Word in Edgewise' (157). Dancehalls are first and foremost places of amusement but dances or movements of bodies trigger memories of the past also when they are ritualised. Indeed, the repetition of movements and gestures partakes of a general acceptance and appropriation of space. And in turn, the repetitive movement of the body or gesture, as in a dance, creates a specific landscape. Faced to the abstraction of foreign and alien space, the characters create their own subjective landscape through the movements of their bodies. In *Difference and Repetition*<sup>15</sup>, Gilles Deleuze described repetition and habit as pertaining fundamentally to dancing. And in McCann's short stories the function of repetitive dancing movements as a means of converting gravity into lightness are obviously key elements. At the beginning of the short story 'Around the Bend and back again', the main character, who is a disturbed young woman who has lost her house and family, is described circling repeatedly around one puddle. The narrator comments upon this circling as if the

character were completely mired into the present and was cut out from any possible evolution, as if the past would not go away and no future was possible for her: 'She spent yesterday afternoon circling one of the puddles out by the greenhouse, just walking round and round like there's no tomorrow' (117). In 'Step We Gaily On We Go', the narrator scatters his tale with literary and historical references, proverbs and sayings which connect the main character Flaherty to his Irish origins. The short story almost has the shape of a reel with Flaherty's plodding to and from the laundromat, his stops at the red sign, his repetitions which function like refrains followed by the acceleration of the pace of the narrative in the end. Here again the exiled character seems unable to move on and his past clings to him no matter what. Just as he seems trapped in a nonsensical routine, the rambling monologue of Moira's sister in 'A Word in Edgewise' resembles a form of stream of consciousness. While she makes up her dead sister's face, it is almost as if she were painting the mask of life on her and forgetting that Moira is actually dead. She speaks to the dead woman as she always has, 'like a runaway train', without really expecting any answer, without paying even any attention to the meaning of what she says, hence negating death itself. The music of her voice and the movements of her hand eventually enable her to acknowledge her place and the present of her sister's death. As the short story nears its end, the 'runaway train' come to its destination and realizes that she faces her dead sister's body on the day of her funeral. In the midst of the narratives, beyond the limited scope of words, the movements of dancing bodies hint at what words fail to express and generate a metamorphosis.

### III. Dancing into the future

The dancing metamorphoses transform the exiles' nostalgia into a form of hope and trust in a future. In tracing into space the time of imminence, dancing movements and gestures also open out onto a form of eternity.

One of the characteristics of art is always to try and push limits beyond what it could reasonably reach. McCann's writing carries words to the limits of words, towards what cannot be told nor spoken: gesture or movement. When words fail to tell what emerges from the past because it has fallen into oblivion or it is too cruel to be told, bodies come along and dance out a few skips and leaps. As Giorgio Agamben argues in his essay 'Les Corps à venir'<sup>16</sup>, 'dancing is then simply a form of bodily writing'<sup>17</sup>. This becomes a real feat when it concerns a fiction character.

Well before publishing his novel *Dancer* which McCann entirely devoted to dancing and Nureyev, dance was therefore intimately part of his writing. In *This Side of Brightness* (1998), his hero Clarence Nathan worked on the construction sites of New York City's skyscrapers and leapt from floor to floor in a movement that the narrator himself described as a dance: 'he is swinging in the air, in nothingness'<sup>18</sup> (197). Colum McCann's latest short story 'Aisling'<sup>19</sup> with its repetitious ternary rhythm also grounds its aesthetics in music and dance<sup>20</sup>. In a paper devoted to Deleuze's analyses of dance and movement, Estelle Jacoby<sup>21</sup> argues that dancing is about transmuting weight into lightness through movement<sup>22</sup>. And quoting an extract by Deleuze in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*<sup>23</sup>, she mentions the Greek God Dionysos as the ideal dancing figure who enacts metamorphoses through dancing: the tension between weight and lightness destabilizes bodies before they themselves undergo a metamorphosis. Dancing movements are thus interpreted as incessant metamorphoses. The image of a metamorphosis is present in the last short story of McCann's *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* collection. In 'Cathal's Lake', Anna Pavlova is a swan who 'in the early days of the year before the lake became so choc-a-bloc would dance across the water, sending flumes of spray

in the air' (180). In real life, the dancer Anna Pavlova was Nijinsky's partner in the Parisian 1912 performance of the 'Death of the Swan' at the Chatelet Theatre. In the short story, the narrator Cathal, who adds a swan to the lake each time a soldier dies in Northern Ireland, has decided to dig the soil until he discovers a white new-born swan deep in the mud. At the end of the short story, the lake is practically covered with swans ready to take their flight. So Cathal resumes his digging and in the narrative his actions are compared to a struggle to meet his exiled relatives: 'All these years of digging. A man could reach his brother in Australia, or his sister in America, or even his parents in heaven or hell if he put all that digging together into one single hole<sup>24</sup>'.

In 'Fishing the Sloe-Black River', the eponymous short story of the collection a simple choreography conjures up the longing of 26 mothers for their exiled sons. Although the writing is extremely concise and the allusion to the sons' exile is very brief, the true meaning of the mothers' ritual weekly meetings and vain fishing in the sloe-black river is revealed by the tragic choreography of their motherly bodies throwing their lines in unison. The movements of their bodies lined along the river banks and the empty lines they eventually reel, illustrate how pointless their waiting is, but also how much all those little daily individual and collective rituals link them to that other place where their exiled children now live: 'they waited the women, and they cast, all of them together' (56). The syntax and the inverted verb and subject, as well as the symmetrical repetition of the pronoun 'they', give a particular rhythm to that sentence which literally almost dances. Symbolically, through their movements the dark and slimy emptiness of the river has been transformed into the lightness of hope, as a thin line lightly floating in the air. In 'Step We Gaily On We Go', the title of which ironically comes from a wedding song, Flaherty is an ex-boxing champion and the word 'dance' is used to describe the movements of the boxer on the ring: 'Wait for the hole. Spare the right. Dance a little. Jab. Atta boy. Move away. Dance. Throw that shoulder' (60). The

dancing movements are meant to fill in the moments between the actual boxing actions in which anything is still possible. They can also be read as pointing to fundamental moments in between the gestures and postures of bodies. In this moment of dance, the movement of bodies also translates the imminence of a metamorphosis, a transformation is about to take place in the economy of the short story. In ‘Through the Field’ and ‘Stolen Child’, the two short stories that depict a social type of exile and in which social institutions play a central role, dancing also appears as exhibiting a sort of metamorphosis:

Kevin gets me to stand at the end of the line and then just starts walking through the field. Everyone just steps on along behind him, but pretty soon he gets to jogging and everyone jogs along behind him, brushing away the grass with their hands, until it gets faster and faster and we’re hightailing through that field, the grass parting along in our way. (...) My own body gets kind of loose and I find myself damn near dancing through the field. I haven’t danced like this since the club in Giddings burnt down.  
(93)

The dancing inscribes in the air above the freshly ploughed field something that cannot be written or described in words and which has to do with the sense of being there and simply alive. The same sort of existential revelation can be read at the end of the short story ‘Sisters’ in relation with dance. One of the many discoveries Sheona makes as she is reunited with her sister Brigid, is that her sister has learnt how to dance (18). The episode is crucial, as it shows that, over time, dance is a language that has become common to both sisters. Sheona is standing at the foot of Brigid’s, her dying sister’s bed and she is handling Brigid’s feet as if they were puppets and as if her feet were going to talk to her:

Her feet are blue and very cold to the touch. I rub them slowly at first. I remember when we were children, very young, before all that, and we had held buttercups to each other’s chins on the edges of brown fields. I want her feet to tell me about butter.

As I massage, I think I see her lean her head sideways and smile, though I'm not sure. I don't know why, but I want to take her feet in my mouth. It seems obscene, but I want to and I don't'. (21)

This extract can be compared to an episode of Diasnas' show *Le Sourire de l'Aube* which Giorgio Agamben commented in his essay on dancing. Diasnas is a contemporary dancer and the show Agamben mentions in his essay was produced at the Bastille Theatre in February 1995. He described how Diasnas put his bare feet negligently on a suitcase and how his feet suddenly seemed to move away from his body, as if transformed into metaphysical puppets which over the course of a few minutes experienced a life of their own in reunions and separations. And at the very moment when the hand of the dancer popped out and got hold of the handle of the suitcase, the feet returned to their simple nature of feet and absurdly had to fit back inside a pair of shoes and walk about. Through this example, Agamben wished to emphasize that in the brief interval during which the mime's feet quitted their role as puppets and had not yet resumed their walking role, 'a pitless being' had emerged. That 'pitless' being was beyond any shaped or shapeless thing, beyond anything utterable or unutterable, a being existing outside any system of representation of reality. In 'Sisters', while the narrator massages her sister's feet, all of a sudden she is seized by the urge to take her sister's feet in her mouth. As in Diasnas' show, those feet cease to exist as mere feet but suddenly also reveal the image of a 'pitless being'. What is essential in this example, is what has been created by the massaging of the hands and feet, between the moment when the desire was expressed and the moment when the word 'obscene' can read. During this hiatus, it is as if a veil had been lifted over reality and a future become altogether possible. Not surprisingly, Sheona then looks out of the window and thinks of her future. The metamorphosis of her gaze, as well as the possibility of a future, have been expressed through a gesture, in a movement of feet like dancing puppets.

## Conclusion

In Colum McCann's short stories, dancing seems to reconcile bodies with the actual space and time in which they live, thus suspending inner turmoil and chaos. In *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Alain Badiou defines dancing as forgetting, because bodies forget their weight. He also defines it as a beginning because any dancing gesture should be as if it were re-inventing its own beginning. He then goes on defining dancing as a game because it frees bodies from all social constraint and he eventually also defines it as a wheel turning on itself.

Colum McCann's first short story collection expresses through dancing movements and rhythms the vital energy that goes along with any exile. Movements trace in the air a form of choreography of the times to come. The work of the imagination and the art of fiction enable Colum McCann to sublime the harsh reality and turn the memory of land into a landscape. But to the characters in the short stories, exile contains within itself some of the inalienable nature of death. The experience of otherness is like a deep chasm that art only can hope to bridge and sublimate. In his writing, Colum McCann is as much a poet as a choreographer, for he attempts to sublime time, space and the shortcomings of memory by conjuring up visual references, linguistic tropes and the arabesques of dancing bodies. According to Alain Badiou, dancing is the perfect metaphor of thought, because just like dance, thought is an intensification of actual experience. But dancing also suspends time into space and because it is an absolutely ephemeral art form, dancing has to do with eternity. Nureyev's urge was to tell a story and dance at the same time. As early as his short stories, Colum McCann seemed to be ready for an encounter with the hero of his novel *Dancer*.

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Paul Valéry *Dance and the Soul*

Nietzsche *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Abstract:

This paper is based on the observation that dancing in Colum McCann's work goes beyond any mention of dancing as a mere element of story-telling. Dancing, gestures and more generally bodily movements are extremely meaningful in his writing and could be interpreted as part of an aesthetic of exile. In Colum McCann's fiction, dancing is very often a way for exiles to truly inhabit the new space they have landed. Gestures and dancing movements help the characters turn the strange and alien space in which they find themselves into a landscape of their own. This paper will therefore question the relationships between dancing and landscape in Colum McCann's writings and study the way in which choreography and fiction writing are linked when it comes to narrating the experience of exile. More specifically, we will focus on the links between dance, memory and landscape in Colum McCann's collection of short stories *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994), making connections with his novels and his more recent short stories. Landscapes trigger special memories of the past and of the exiles' past homeland but dancing is also a way of inscribing into space a form of hope and a projection into the future.

Keywords: dance, exile, gesture, landscape, memory

References and endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Colum McCann, *Dancer* (London : Phoenix, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Colum McCann, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (London : Phoenix, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Marie Mianowski, *Irish Contemporary Landscapes in Literature and the Arts* (Basingstoke : Palgrave, 2012) 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London : Penguin, 1961) 178.

<sup>5</sup> Colum McCann, *Songdogs* (London : Phoenix, 1995).

-----, *This Side of Brightness* (London: Phoenix, 1998).

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-----, *Let the Great World Spin* (London : Phoenix, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> McCann, 'Sisters', *Fishing* 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>10</sup> McCann, 'Fishing the Sloe-Black River', *Fishing* 56.

<sup>11</sup> McCann, 'Sisters', *Fishing* 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>13</sup> McCann, 'A Basket full of Wallpaper' 37.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 50.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum International Publishing 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'Le Corps à Venir', *Les Saisons de la Danse* 292 (1997) : 6-8.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Valéry, 'Philosophie de la danse', *Œuvres I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956) 1390-1403.

<sup>18</sup> Colum McCann, *This Side of Brightness* (London: Phoenix, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Colum McCann, 'Aisling', *New Irish Short Stories*, ed. Joseph O'Connor (London: faber & faber, 2011) 182-186.

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<sup>20</sup> Marie Mianowski, 'Skipping and Gasping, Sighing and Hoping in Colum McCann's 'Aisling' (2011): the Making of a Poet', *Journal of the Short Story in English / Les Cahiers de la nouvelle* 62 (2014), ed. Bertrand Cardin (Angers : Presses de l'Université d'Angers, 2014 to be published).

<sup>21</sup> Estelle Jacoby, 'Penser la Danse avec Deleuze', *Littérature* 128 (2002) : 93-103.

<sup>22</sup> Jacoby 94 : 'En effet, travail de transmutation, la danse s'appuie sur le lourd, le corps, pour en faire du léger dans l'affirmation du mouvement' (my translation).

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la Philosophie* (Paris : PUF, 1962) 222.

<sup>24</sup> McCann, 'Cathal's Lake', *Fishing* 178.