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Marie Mianowski

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Marie Mianowski – Nantes University, France -

"Down-and-outs, subways and suburbs:
subversion in Robert McLiam Wilson's *Ripley Bogle* (1989)
and Colum McCann's *This Side of Brightness* (1998)"

Robert McLiam Wilson's *Ripley Bogle* (1989) and Colum McCann's *This Side of Brightness* (1998) both point to fundamental common issues as far as the notion of subversion is concerned. McLiam Wilson's eponymous hero is a young Irish tramp wandering in London, who has often been compared to Joyce's Bloom by reviewers. He was born in the suburbs of Belfast and stars as the narrator of a four-day tramp trekking in and around London trying to put the dribbles of his life together. His narrative is punctuated with surges of vomiting and descriptions of wounded flesh as he limps his way along London's squalid pavement.

The main character in Colum McCann's *This Side of Brightness* is Clarence Nathan Walker, grandson of Nathan Walker once a sandhog or digger of New-York's subway and a black man who had come to New-York City from the state of Georgia and married a young Irish woman called Eleanor O'Leary. The narrative presents alternately Clarence Nathan's genealogical history starting in 1916 with the telling of the blow-out in the tunnel under the East River when Clarence Nathan's Irish great-grandfather Con O'Leary was killed while his grandfather Nathan Walker escaped unscathed, and the life of a tramp called Treefrog, surviving in the tunnels of New-York's subway during the winter of 1991. Both narratives alternate until they eventually merge and the reader discovers that Clarence Nathan and Treefrog are one and the same character.

The notion of subversion here should therefore not be understood in its political revolutionary meaning but rather more literally as two sub-versions, in the sense that those two novels present the reader with two versions from the underground, two versions from homeless voices, victims of exclusion. The reader is left wondering about the version of the world voiced out.

In both narratives, the theme of memory mending the feeling of guilt under which both Treefrog and Ripley Bogle suffer, is intertwined with squalid and gory descriptions of subterranean life as 'down-and-outs', to quote a term recurrently mentioned in *Ripley Bogle*, which gives the reader the impression that subversion might at any moment verge on perversion - 'Down and outs are always trying to kill one another for some reason and sometimes they succeed. They're greedy bastards too and I must say that nothing depresses me quite so much as the spectacle of avarice in my fellow-man' - 'In his dark nest, high in the tunnel, Treefrog lit a small fire of twigs and newspaper. It was late evening. A train rumbled in the distance. A few pellets of ratshit had collected on the bedside table and he swept them off before opening the table drawer'. Nonetheless, the sub-versions produced by the two novels appear to be eventually positive ones, since both novels end on an optimistic key. A sort of revolution seems to have taken place, fostered by the sub-versions of the two tramps. Treefrog and Ripley Bogle both acknowledge a mending virtue to their narratives:

‘And at the gate he [Treefrog] smiles, hefting the weight of the word upon his tongue, all its possibility, all its beauty, all its hope, a single word, resurrection’

‘I only plead that most vices are misnamed. The sins and crimes we all tote up are rarely promoted with the full vigour of intention. We don’t commit misdemeanours as such – we make mistakes. Horrible, deadly mistakes, huge in consequence and implication but mostly mistakes all the same. That’s my defence, such as it is. Really no one wants to be a bastard if they can help it. That’s it. The end. I’m glad it’s over.’

However none of those narratives appears as subversive in its literary form. And yet, quite often in both novels, the status of the narrating voice is highly problematic. *Ripley Bogle* begins like a play with precise stage directions, while the second chapter goes on with a first person narrative thanking the reader for his applause. At the very end of the novel, the reader finds out that the main events upon which the plot hinged, were in fact lies on the part of the narrator. In *This Side of Brightness*, on the other hand, the reader is mystified throughout the novel as to the real identity of the narrator, firstly because the narrative alternatively focuses on two different heroes, Treefrog and Clarence Nathan, who eventually turn out to be one and the same character, but also because towards the end, the narrative turns into a first person narrative and the narrator gradually unveils his true character. One is tempted to link the subversive status of the narrating voice which works as an embodiment of modern urban exclusion to the Irish origins of the two heroes, and the marginalized position of Treefrog and Ripley Bogle to their Irishness. Furthermore, Colum McCann left his middle-class Dublin life more than fifteen years ago, even before he started writing and has always lived abroad since, while Robert McLiam Wilson who himself once experienced homelessness in London, chose to remain in Belfast and made a point of writing as a Northern Irish author. In his book, *Exile, Emigration and Irish Writing*, Patrick Ward tells how in the Irish language ‘Catholic Gaelic linguistic and cultural formations and practices shaped the semantics of exilic discourse’. Thus, ‘in Old Irish ‘deoraid’ was a legal term under ‘brehon’ laws, meaning a person without property. This in the context of communal relationships and attachment to place, carried the implications of dissociation and estrangement – lack of belonging’. We could therefore infer that Treefrog’s and Ripley Bogle’s adventures are forms of exile from their own communities which might coincide with the need to re-map the very notion of Irishness. Treefrog’s crane dances seem proleptic arabesques of Nureyev’s own dancing in McCann’s latest novel *Dancer* but also of his vertiginous leap from Soviet Russia to Paris and post-war New York, as if dancing in all its artistic flourish was a means to cross over borders and boundaries, and escape territories without belonging anywhere. In an interview a few years ago, McCann said that although he had left Dublin and Ireland a long time hence, he did not feel like an exile nor like an emigrant but Irish to the heart and felt he could not return to Ireland because he could not possibly be a writer there. It all seems as if paradoxically, McCann were trying to be an exile from within and an Irishman from without. McLiam Wilson lives and writes in Northern Ireland but his experience outside Ireland was a radical exilic experience of homelessness comparable to that of his hero Ripley Bogle, annihilating the social borderline. Those two authors seem to have experienced two radically opposed and yet highly subversive types of exiles, as if writing was possible only in a

context of unavowed and subterranean exile. Hence, subversion in those two novels could also be interpreted as a way of expressing the difficulty for young Irish authors to write fiction in the wake of great men such as Joyce or Beckett, and as if creating today was for them bound to the necessity of exile, to the idea of being away from home. My working hypothesis in this article is to argue that the problematic of exile and boundaries lies behind those individual and narrative options.

Two sub-versions

Ripley Bogle and *This Side of Brightness* should first literally be read as two versions from the underground or the gutters: two sub-versions. As opposed to Treefrog who dwells in a tunnel in New-York's subway, Ripley Bogle does not actually live underground. The postpositions used to describe his plight convey rather a form of flight and abdication, of sub-mission. At the beginning of the novel, Ripley writes:

'I opted out. I stepped off and bedded down (...) I just capitulated to the world and slipped away'.

On the other hand, *This Side of Brightness* focuses essentially on the tunnel, whether they be the tunnels under construction at the time of Walker's youth in the first narrative or those in which Treefrog lives as a tramp seven decades later. The narrative clearly opposes the 'underground', 'tunnel', 'beneath the river' to the 'topside world' from the very beginning of the novel. This verticality is emphasized by the fact that Clarence Nathan/Treefrog loves heights and used to work at the construction of skyscrapers. As opposed to his grandfather who dugged underground, Clarence Nathan climbed up in the sky - hence the nickname 'Treefrog'. Subway rides punctuate *This Side of Brightness* and illustrate the underground quality of the narrative while also creating a horizontal axis in the representation of space:

'Still, he loves the tunnels, moving from the darkness into the bright yellow light of the stations, the slow roll into blackness once more, the screech of steel on steel, the workers shining flashlights, the elation of being slammed along on a mid-morning express, commuters shuffling their feet on platforms as he whizzes by'

Ripley Bogle only mentions one subway outing as Ripley arrives in London, on which occasion the hero got lost:

' I got lost on the underground (...) and finally extricated myself from this subterranean grip at Turnham Green'.

Ripley Bogle's kingdom is outside and on the pavements as he himself states:

' the vast outdoors is my house and hall (...) I'm an exterior expert'

And whereas Ripley is 'Prince of the Pavements', 'the Parkbench King', Treefrog is king of heights: 'Treefrog will go higher than any walking man in Manhattan'. They each have their share of space and indeed spatial references are essential in both

novels. 'Locational detail (...) is what matters most to me', writes Ripley, but both he and Treefrog seem to take a keen interest to maps. Mapping things out on large sheets of paper or making 'mental maps' is Treefrog's almost obsessive activity. He sketches what the narrator calls 'the cartography of darkness', making sure that every corner, every nook or cranny of his nest is scrupulously noted, just as he draws a map of Angela's face at the end of the novel. Treefrog's 'upground and belowground topographies' belong to the world of verticality whereas Ripley's maps are horizontal. Most chapters begin with indications of a location in London. This structures his story but interestingly enough the structure takes the form of a map:

' This is for what my story is. This is the sly map from which I shall exhume my goal, my task and treasure (...) My search for final goodness in the world'

Similar to *This Side of Brightness*, the mapping out is full of intricate detail:

' The scale is increased but the mapping is concentrated. Tramps know the city in its smallest essence. They know its stones, its pipes and bricks and doors and pavements'

Just as Treefrog knows perfectly all the underground nooks and crannies, Ripley wanders out in the suburbs of London: 'I dribble away from the city', making a new choice at each crossroads: Putney, Barnes, Brompton, Mill Hill.

But whether they concern subway or suburb, such sub-versions have a language of their own, the language of exclusion. The way in which Ripley Bogle describes himself is the epitome of self-rejection:

' No, I must not dissemble when it comes to the tale of my deterioration but I must be wary of the hyperbole of intermittent self-pity. It's not that I'm spreading myself too thinly. It's just that there's nothing left to spread'

Descriptions of bloody wounds, vomit and phlegm abound in both novels to the extent that one is invited to see such descriptions as constituting what one could term the language of subversion, itself subversive to the full:

'Every fluid in his body boiled first, all the blood and water and semen and alcohol drying down to nothing. Six hundred volts of direct current blew a hole in the top of his head'

'Dodging the hovering homos and undercover policemen, I manage to nab an unoccupied and festering cubicle all to myself. Safe in my rancid booth, I bend and prepare. Briefly, I stare at the stained toilet paper and pissdrunk cigarettes clogging the crusted bowl and then I start to vomit. Oh God! There it goes. (Blekthgh! Splish.) Jesus! (Hrrnnggnhhhh! Splash.) Oh no! Stop, please. (Whynjjcklth! Splosh.) With a final splash and slip and drip, I conclude my business and spit brownly. The last of mucus still hangs from my mouth by a stalwart, stubborn thread'

Moreover, the opening chapter of *This Side of Brightness* insists on the 'special language' shared by the sandhogs from different countries in the tunnel under construction: 'languages meld' the text says, while mentioning a couple of pages further on that this mixing of languages implies a certain distortion of reality. Hence, the role of language in those subversions should not be neglected, in particular seeing the impression it produces on the reader. One cannot but question the role of language and how it influences the reader's interpretation of the story. For the particular language which is supposed to build a tramp sub-version of New-York's or London's topside posh reality, focusing on the hardship of surviving in an underground cave or limping about the streets, is in fact the agent of a major revolution in the two main characters of McLiam Wilson's and McCann's novels. In both cases, the narratives seem to have fostered a sort of resurrection. This subversive aspect of the narratives takes the shape of a revolution.

Resurrecting

The word 'resurrection' is explicitly used in *This Side of Brightness* in the title of the last chapter 'Our resurrections aren't what they used to be'. It is also the last word of the novel:

'And at the gate he smiles, hefting the weight of the word upon his tongue, all its possibility, all its beauty, all its hope, a single word, resurrection'

Surprisingly enough, the word is also mentioned in *Ripley Bogle*'s last page:

'I smile without reason. Things aren't so bad. Perhaps the situation may be resurrected. After all I'm young. I've done it before. Dragged myself out of destitution'

Ripley no longer trudges away or hobbles through. The concluding sentence of the novel depicts him walking proudly and this time, not away : 'I walk trimly, with some aplomb'. It is a revolution indeed and the idea of revolution is literally mentioned in McCann's novel through the image of the full circle:

' Clarence Nathan has revisited himself, arrived full circle, each shadow of himself leading to the next, which is just another shadow in the funhouse darkness'

Many elements can be symbolically linked to this revolution. Thus, Treefrog is first described wearing sunglasses on a cold winter morning at the beginning of the novel, and those same sunglasses are described as having 'been smashed and cracked into two pieces' at the end of the novel, while 'he leaves them in the sand'. He can yet face the light and does not need to keep to the darkness of the tunnel anymore. In the same way, by the time the novel reaches its concluding chapter, 'the thirty-nine days of

snow and ice and ferocious cold' are over and the stalactite which was described as early as page 53 ('an icicle hangs') now begins to melt: 'the stalactite has begun to drip'. To the 'first snow' of the first line echoes the 'last snowfall'. Just like the crane of the first chapter, Treefrog is now free 'to move beyond the ice'.

Both narratives actually follow the same progression towards a form of revolution. In both cases the main character is brought to go back over his own history and in a way cure his wounds of guilt through the re-telling of his own past. And both novels start with a birth scene. Ripley Bogle's birth scene is extremely explicit as it is entitled 'It Begins' and stands somewhat apart from the rest of the narrative. It focuses on Mrs Bogle's actual delivery rather than on Ripley's birth, thus underscoring Ripley's unimpressive arrival:

' From her parted, stirruped legs plops a son. Unnamed and ugly, he makes little impression on that world room. An augury of his river-catching life'

In *This Side of Brightness* the birth scene is more subtle and more symbolic. It coincides with the description of the blow-out in the tunnel in 1917 in which Con O'Leary lost his life. As Walker emerges from the East River the narrative seems to be describing a birth scene. The 'weak spot' in the womb-like tunnel is 'the size of a fist, then a heart, then a head' and through this hole Walker slides up head first:

' he slides towards the widening hole and is sucked into it, shovel first, then his outstretched arms, followed by his head, right up to his shoulders'(...) 'And then all three of them erupt through the surface of the East River (...) their chests contracting and expanding madly now, spewing water and muck from their mouths, gulping down oxygen'

While Walker thus emerges over the East River, eight-month pregnant Maura O'Leary 'reels back, clutching at her stomach. Her feet slip on the wet deck and she catches the railing and screams'. But what looked like a birth scene from under the earth takes on a whole other look when viewed from the topside. The description now looks more like a scene of vomiting. While Maura O'Leary clutches at her stomach, 'the water keeps spurting, blowing the detritus of the tunnel twenty-five feet above the East River'. Indeed the version of the same event, whether 'subversion' or 'topversion' differs. The 'spurting' and 'blowing' seen from the top have nothing to do with the words 'ascension' or 'eternity' used to describe Walker's rise to the surface from below the river, what Clarence Nathan will seize as an archetypal event in the shaping of his own identity.

In both novels the question of the narrator's point of view is fundamental but also shifting and complex. In *Ripley Bogle*, as in *This Side of Brightness*, a main narrative in the present tense is interrupted now and then by analepses. This is done in quite a regular pattern in McCann's novel where the narrative taking place in 1991 is regularly intertwined with a narrative focusing on Clarence Nathan's family history from the day of the blow-out onwards. Apart from the first chapter written in the past tense, which pictures Treefrog by the river throwing stones at a crane to free it from

the ice, all chapters, whether 1991 ones or past ones, are narrated in the present tense as if they were all direct reminiscences on the part of Treefrog. One of the effects of subversion is that it blurs the time span and everything past becomes Treefrog's imminent present. The only occasion when past tense is used again takes place towards the end of the novel when Treefrog tells Angela about his feeling of guilt: he has let Walker be run over by a subway train and before that he had abused of his own daughter. All along, the narrator has appeared as an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator way outside the story line. At this stage in the novel, Treefrog becomes an 'I' narrator and the past tense is used in irrational association with the present tense:

'So we went on. It was summer. Garbage in playground. Cherry blossom out along the walkways topside. We're at the swings together. Her hair is done in braids' (...) And then I did it again. At the swings. And then I did it one night in the bedroom and she was wearing a little nightdress and I says to Lenora it's our little game'

As Treefrog admits how he abused his daughter, the past becomes present again and the narrating voice endorses the crime, turning the impersonal form 'it' into 'I'.

In *Ripley Bogle* much the same phenomenon occurs but the alternating pattern between present and past events corresponds to the use of the present tense and the past tense. And yet the shift between the two sometimes occurs in such a way that no typographical clue is given to the reader that such a change is going to take place:

'Nothing there anymore. All was ready now.

By God, I wish I was feeling trim and tremendous now. These obscure London streets have dwindled from grisly order to placeless confusion.'

And yet, the question of the shift between a 'he' narrative and an 'I' narrator is even more crucial. In McWilliam Wilson's novel the shift between the two narrative voices is unclear. Within the same chapter the two modes of narration can succeed one another only separated by a small typographical blank:

'It's my story that matters and we now turnface to that. Back to the business of bathos.

When we last left the youthful Ripley, he was in a pretty bad way'

Narrating the hero's personal or family history is done from a particular point of view. And this point of view from the subway or the suburbs becomes subversive in a way, as it influences both the main character's/narrator's point of view but also the reader's

Subversive novels?

The literary form of neither of those two novels is subversive. They are both original indeed but nothing in the way the narrative is built nor the story told can be

said to be totally new and pushing as to herald some sort of literary revolution. *Ripley Bogle* uses self-conscious fiction writing as a way to drive the reader to feel entitled to judge him as a narrator and therefore judge the value of the narrating voice, what he calls his 'naughty auctorial caprices': 'I don't want you to see this'. Metafiction is also deployed. This can be seen by the way a great number of lines are presented as extracted from a play, all set to be acted out, with stage directions ready at hand. The novel actually begins in that manner:

' (Enter man with money. He waits. Enter woman, misclothed and passionate. They rut. Exeunt.)'

Other passages are extracted from a radio program or directly written in italics as if meant to be read as a large aside to the reader/spectator. Yet the main characteristic of *Ripley Bogle's* narrative techniques is that the plot is based on a three-fold lie which the narrator admits and justifies in the last pages of his narrative. He explains that those lies attempted to hide a fundamental feeling of guilt. In other words, in *Ripley Bogle* as in *This Side of Brightness* subversion is a foil to mask a greater perversion. 'You can see why I lied about it' admits Ripley at the end of the novel, after he has lifted the veil over his first 'spooof'. But the 'spooof' is even greater than he admits, for as early as page 9 he had avowed: 'I have at least given up lying' echoed a few pages further on with: 'I'd never lie to you'. Subversion is a second nature to the narrating voice here. It is present from the start in the guise of metafictional transparency and eventually unmasks itself once the story has been subvertively told and the narrator has been re-created in the process. Subversion is in those two novels a means to avoid the full-blown evidence of perversion : child-abuse or abortion and non-rescue or near-murder of Walker or Maurice in *This Side of Brightness* and *Ripley Bogle* respectively .

Both novels end on the conclusion that the irresistible call to subversion might be linked to their Irishness. Ripley's Irishness is intrinsically part of his identity. He calls himself as early as the first pages of the novel: 'Ripley Irish Bogle'. But as he himself states, he was aware very soon that a 'compromise' was needed:

'in the spirit of compromise I dubbed myself 'Ripley Irish British Bogle'.

So there I was, poor little sod, almost wiped out by the startling array of difficulty and consequence that I had suddenly been lumbered with'

Ripley's 'Irish Britishness' is experienced as a subversion of his own self. All along the novel it will be regarded as the main ailment in his life down to his Cambridge years. But the last page of the novel concludes on the plight of being Irish:

'If there's a sin to be committed, the Irish will take its weight, international altruists that they be. The world did me wrong by making me an Irishman'

In the same way, all along *This Side of Brightness* the question of Irish-Black marriage and interbreeding is presented as problematic and a source of exclusion. Moreover, Treefrog/Clarence Nathan says to Angela that Walker's death had been

caused by his hat, that he had turned to catch just as the train was entering the station and as he was about to get hold of Clarence Nathan's hands. But the hat in question happens to be a tea-cozy brought from Ireland by Maura O'Leary and passed down to her daughter Eleanor. Earlier in the novel the narrative had specified that this particular tea-cozy was the sole object that had remained from Clarence Nathan's Irish ancestors over the years. Ironically it is also the cause of Walker's death and Clarence Nathan's torment and feeling of guilt.

The narrative voices in both novels have a subversive appeal and this perhaps is due to their Irishness. The process of narrating their individual stories and histories has been a struggle 'with the imbalance of [my] guilt and reparation', and reparation has won over the temptation of perversion.

The cranes of Walker's childhood which he never had a chance to show his own son Clarence, the 'dancing cranes' which he remembers from his native Georgia, are subject to a first displacement as the text mentions the 'Favco cranes' which helped build the skyscrapers in New-York's construction sites. This metaphor is a subversion of the initial bird's name. But at the end of the novel Treefrog's resurrection dance is called 'a crane-dancing' by the narrator: the inversion of the two nouns in the compound, from 'dancing crane' to 'crane-dancing' shows that he has himself become a crane bird and does not need the substitution of the crane machine metaphor to make one with his origins and the dancing cranes his grand-father wanted to show him. The circle between his past, his origins and his present is complete and the Favco metaphor is now useless. *This Side of Brightness* is punctuated with the recurrent use of the verb 'emerge' and interestingly enough, Ripley Bogle also concludes his narrative using this verb in close association with the word 'version':

'in my first version of that episode, I emerged smelling of roses whereas in reality I smelt of death, treachery and botched bog births. The discrepancy between all the versions of me that emerged was at its widest just there. It was the bit that needed the biggest rewrite'

The versions that emerged, in other words, the subversions brought to the topside, need to be rewritten so as to fit reality and truth. On the whole, it is the very process of emerging that is at the source of both Ripley and Treefrog's re-creation, as if their Irish identities first needed to take shape through a subversive voice before being given a chance to emerge newly and bloom in the open.

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