

Let the Great Narrative Spin: A Poetics of Relations

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Abstract: *Contemporary art is at a turning point, questioning crystallized systems of representation and intersubjective relations in order to reconfigure the imaginative framework of people at multiple cultural intersections. Literature is a space which consists of various fractured spaces of knowledge which are simultaneously interconnected. Based upon the renowned physicist David Bohm's proposal (1992) which points out the way in which thought shapes our perceptions, significations and daily actions, I will analyse Colum McCann's narrative in *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) to understand how the writer explores the contemporary "shadows" of the present (Agamben 2006), which manifest themselves in a constant flux of relationships that are triggered by memory and grasped at different levels of perception. I will only focus on the opening of the novel and the closing chapters of the four books, which function as interchapters or intermezzos of the episodes in the lives of the various characters which are narrated in between; the life of Corrigan seen mainly through the eyes of his brother Ciaran is the main line of the narrative which is intersected by other narratives. Colum McCann's art of writing discloses a different treatment of literary elements and concepts in transition, requiring a theoretical approach that apprehends contemporary literature in its complexity. Édouard Glissant's "poetics of relation" (1990) - both aesthetic and political - helps to understand McCann's literary strategies of telling, connecting and constructing parallel consciousness of self and surroundings in order to transform mentalities and reshape societies.*

Literature is the space of memory and imagination that reveals suspended narratives which are linked to the past and the present, to subjectivity and to cosmopolitan forms of human experience. If we see literature with fresh eyes as a *translocation*, consisting of fractured concepts that are related to a network of interconnected spaces of knowledge as if it were a constellation of stars that are linked to one another, McCann successfully explores the literary space representing simultaneous interconnections of spatial perception. For example, the novel opens describing the effect that the image of a man standing at the edge of a tall building provokes in the people below in the

streets. “Those who saw him hushed” (3). An unknown, unnamed man, at an unnamed building though perfectly identified is at the sight intersection of many people standing at any street: “On Church Street. Liberty. Cortlandt. West Street. Fulton. Vesey” (*ibid.*). And the writer continues some lines below: “Up there, at the height of a hundred and ten stories, utterly still, a dark toy against the cloudy sky” (*ibid.*) In this way McCann accessed the collective memory of his readers referring to the memorable event in the life of the World Trade Center in the summer of 1974, while the still-unfinished (and largely unrented) towers were at risk of a financial disaster and facing architectural and social criticism. The young Frenchman Philippe Petit and a few of his comrades committed an unexpected and illegal action that stopped the regular course of people living in New York downtown. Skilfully, McCann portrays from the social, political and economic perspective of large cities the streets and the people rushing to their jobs in the early morning. In the very first paragraph, he defamiliarises New York when astonishment is expressed through “silence that heard itself, awful and beautiful.” Disbelief in what is being seen is explained through an illusory effect: “a trick of the light, something to do with the weather, an accident of shadowfall.” Dismissal of the grandeur of an act is represented as if it were a 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, like waiting for the end of a Lenny Bruce gag” (3).

At exhilarating speed, marked by a narrative made up of short sentences which reach the extreme of having only one word, McCann brings his readers to the turning point of finding themselves in the interstices of old and new memories, of the past of preserved old memories and “retrograde amnesia” (facts related to the high-wire walker of the World Trade Center and a truck bomb detonated below the North Tower in 1993 which were partly forgotten) and the new memories of “anterograde amnesia”, the impaired formation of new memories in the future¹ (the traumatic effects of the 1993 bomb and the 9/11 terrorist attacks distort future memories of historical causes). McCann’s readers share memories in two temporal directions and contradictory perceptions of the real, shaped by collective thought, occur when the young trespasser is recalled.

McCann’s short statements represent the constant movement of the eyes being directed either upwards to the sky or downwards to the streets not only to reflect New Yorkers in their regular jobs in a convex manner, but also to create many simultaneous levels of consciousness through the power of imagination. This effect can be compared with Escher’s self portrait (“Hand with Reflecting Sphere” or “Self-Portrait in Spherical Mirror,” lithograph, 1935) painted as if on a three-dimensional crystal ball reflecting the image of himself sitting at his desk, holding the reflecting sphere in his hand looking at his own distorted reflection. His “real” hand sustaining the sphere is in the centre foreground of the picture in order to make it clear that the whole totality is indeed designed on a two-dimensional space (a sheet of paper) while its aesthetic effect creates the illusion of a three-dimensional object which is also observed from the outside by the artist’s eyes as well as the observer’s. The room and his own body are somewhat magnified in

their distortion; the end of the room and back walls are seen perfectly in the depth of the perspective, while the foreground objects and figure become deformed by the convex reflection, especially the artist's hand, which projects itself into the "real external hand" (also a visual illusion) holding the crystal. In his novel, McCann produces the same aesthetic effect in his portrayal of the lives of New Yorkers and the way a large city moulds and distorts their characters. He creates the illusory three-dimensional convex narrative space where his characters move: the Irish priest living on the outskirts of New York, Corrigan (the distorted figure in the foreground), and his recently arrived brother Ciaran, who is seen clearly through the perspective of the narrative as if he were the real hand holding the whole story and trying to understand its distorted reflections.

This great world narrative in movement is told through the dynamics of episodes as if each life were isolated. It is divided into four books, each of the first two ending with a chapter on the high-wire walker while the third opens with a chapter referring to the grandeur of his adventure as seen through the eyes of Judge Soderberg, which link the walker's "stroke of genius" (248) to the history of the city that "lived in a sort of everyday present." He takes into account the unknown man's six years of planning and learning everything about the buildings during the construction of the World Trade Centre in order to perform his walk: "It wasn't just an offhand walk. He was making a statement with his body" (249). There is a temporal gap between the first three books and the last one, whose events takes place thirty-two years later, in 2006, when Jaslyn, the youngest of Jazzlyn's daughters who were raised by Gloria and Claire after their mother's accidental death, is on a plane on her way to see Claire on her deathbed. She is holding a photograph which was taken on the same day her mother died; she carried it with her because of "the sheer fact that such beauty had occurred at the same time":

A man high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building. One small scrap of history meeting a larger one. As if the walking man were somehow anticipating what would come later. The intrusion of time and history. The collision point of stories. We wait for the explosion but it never occurs. The plane passes, the tightrope walker gets to the end of the wire. Things don't fall apart. (325)

Just before the last chapter of the second book McCann includes the photograph taken by Fernando Yunque Marcano on 7 August 1974 (237), which focuses on the moment the walker was about to start his crossing, revealing his state of mind, the "sense of losing himself. Every nerve. Every cuticle" (241). However, the photographer's deed is narrated in the first chapter of that book by the same third-person narrator. This movement of the narrative which first triggers the retrograde amnesia of that (forgotten) photograph, which revives the past memory of the tightrope walk, is linked to the anterograde amnesia – the distorted new memories of the 1993 truck bomb – and the very fresh memories of 9/11/2001. However, it is beauty that matters, a beauty at "the collision point of stories" (*ibid.*).

Each chapter within the four books has a different narrator and presents a different perspective of the city of New York. Some of the secondary characters are constructed through their own voices: the prostitutes of the Bronx, Tillie and Jazzlyn, mother and daughter, who were also good mothers who shouldered the responsibility for raising their family (Jazzlyn's two little girls, Janice and Jaslyn); the nurse Adelita from Guatemala, who had two children, fell in love with Corrigan and made him break his vote of chastity; Gloria, the black woman from the Bronx who lost her daughter, represents the politics of the approximation of the high upper-class and low-class, arising from meetings with other mothers who had lost their sons in the Vietnam War; Lara and her partner Blane, two alternative artists, who went to live in the countryside in order to give up drugs, alcohol and other temptations of a large city; the anonymous hackers from California who invade telephone lines to receive detailed live news of the tightrope walker on the World Trade Center. Other characters are only heard in the distance, through the voice of a third-person narrator: Gloria's friend, the Jewish Claire who lost her son in the Vietnam War and her husband, Judge Soderberg, who presided over the court when Tillie and her daughter Jazzlyn were accused of robbery and the tightrope walker was tried after his great deed. However, all the characters are linked to each other in a meaningful constellation of enchained lives, aesthetically bound together by the hand of the writer. He twists the fibres of the various stories and makes the narrative "spin for ever down", like the walker's mind when planning his feat (157).

The opening of the novel represents the spirit of the city at that specific time and place, at around midday, when watchers look up at the manshape in the sky in bright daylight. The narrator expresses their dilemma: "they didn't want to wait around for nothing at all, some idiot standing on the precipice of the towers, but they didn't want to miss the moment either, if he slipped, or got arrested, or dove, arms stretched" (3). The citizens in the streets are described in a contrastive economic division of labour – "Lawyers. Elevator operators. Doctors. Cleaners. Prep chefs. Diamond merchants. Fish sellers. Sad-jeaned whores. All of them reassured by the presence of one another. Stenographers. Traders. Deliveryboys. Sandwichboard men. Cardsharks." (4) There were some that ignored the fuss showing indifference, while others stopped and "introduced themselves with a *Wow* or a *Gee-whiz* or a *Jesus H. Christ*" (*ibid.*). The brevity of these encounters, typical of a large city, reveals the impersonality hidden behind swearwords – "there would always be an expletive in a New York sentence" (249) – whispers, laughs and the sound of the city growing louder, when "perfect strangers touched one another on the elbows" (5) and turned to one another and began to speculate. They establish interrelations that the writer represents by creating aesthetic effects just as Escher did. According to the German sociologist Georg Simmel (in a lecture given in 1903), the inhabitants of large cities have an intellectualist character when compared to the emotional character of the citizens of small towns. The people living in large cities react with their intellects – an intensified level of consciousness. They react as individuals and are reserved people. Indistinctness, apathy and strangeness are their main qualities.

Dissociations and distortions of the cosmopolitan vernacular (Bhabha 2000; Santiago 2004) go beyond the experience of a “liquid modernity” that configures the individual’s identity in a transitory dynamic, as Bauman affirms. McCann reveals the truth of the people’s conscious understanding of the situation:

what they really wanted to witness [was] a great fall, see someone arc downward all that distance, to disappear from the sight line, flail, smash to the ground, and give the Wednesday an electricity, a meaning that all they needed to become a family was one millisecond of slippage, while the others – those who wanted him to stay, to hold the line, to become the brink, but no farther – felt viable now with disgust for the shouters: they wanted the man to save himself, step backwards into the arms of the cops instead of the sky. (6)

“The waiting had been made magical.” The watchers, despite their indifference and reservation, experience a brief moment of communion with the other; they “pulled in their breath all at once”, configuring an illusory unity: “[t]he air felt suddenly shared.” At this point in the narrative, when the man steps out, he and the people, down in the streets, live a certain “oneness and totality, or wholeness, constituting a kind of *harmony* that is felt to be beautiful” (Bohm 3). This kind of perception is explained by the physicist David Bohm, who refers to beauty as the result of dynamic, evolving processes that consist of order, structure and harmonious totalities (Bohm xviii). One’s own mind perceives the razor’s edge of dualisms such as intellect and intuition, absolute and relative. Thus, McCann’s readers engage in creative perceptions for which we currently have no definitions as we are immersed in a routine that does not allow us to discover new orders. The coherent interplay of the elements of McCann’s narrative results in an aesthetic perception of the wholeness of that specific moment when the city stops in order to look up at the sky, an experience that is not strictly subjective. His narrative shows the inner and most hidden reactions of the people, their impulse to stay and see more. Various perspectives are clearly identified, just as in Escher’s portrait, where details of the sitting room in the background are clearly recognisable in their harmonious proportions. The city life represented in *Let the Great World Spin* is a unified totality within a dynamics of the transitory moment when senses become null due to strong antagonistic reactions to the unexpected – “they really wanted to witness a great fall” versus “they wanted the man to save himself, step backwards into the arms of the cops instead of the sky” (6) In each book, death is the ever-present shadow which is rendered visible through words. For example, the group of women who lost their sons in the Vietnam War and meet regularly to purge their sorrow, have a *blasé* attitude to the news of the tightrope walker. For them, death becomes banal with his act. On the day of Claire’s gathering, her friends coming to her home saw him and brought the news. The reaction was a distortion of death:

But death by tightrope?

Death by performance?

That's what it amounted to. So flagrant with his body. Making it cheap. The puppetry of it all. His little Charlie Chaplin walk, coming in like a hack on her morning. How dare he do that with his own body? Throwing his life in everyone's face? Making her own son's so cheap? Yes, he has intruded on her coffee morning like a hack on her code. With his hijinks above the city. Coffee and cookies and a man out there walking in the sky, munching away what should have been. (113)

Indifference and rage become part of the mothers' dualistic perceptions. The states of their mind condemn the local reification of heroism in counterpoise to the value of death in war; spaces and distances are compressed and time is enlarged, bringing past, present and future to the intersecting point of contemporary uncertainties. McCann's novel is a new reading of humanity in movement; he represents the orders of structures that are emerging and makes the readers perceive new orders of relationships which hinge on sensitivity to difference and similarity. According to David Bohm, the "genuinely creative perception" is the power of the concept, since all experience can be structured through the use of concepts in an unlimited array of similarities and differences.

The representation of the cosmopolitan experience in the city of New York through various stories of lives that represent different ethnic groups, brings new "perceptions of place", triggered consciously or unconsciously from the individual sense of place and sense of identity in relation to their pasts, either linked to their land of origin (as in the case of Corrigan, his brother Ciaran and some of the old Irishmen that Corrigan took care of), or to their family histories (as in the case of the prostitutes and the orphan girls), or to their religious, moral and social beliefs (as in the case of the priest's repressed love for Adelita, or the artists who provoked the car accident that killed Corrigan and Jazzlyn).

Tensions create bonds of affiliation and loyalty, and the act of narrating them depends on the relationship between experience, perception and textuality. David Bohm demonstrates that different orders are constructed from creative insights which lead to conceptual structures with a broad application in many fields of thought and experience. The basic orders are the relationships based on similarities or those on differences (or both), on the internal or external relations of historic precipitousness (the confluence of histories that Édouard Glissant has referred to). However, other higher orders of relationship can be established, like the relationships between external and internal elements of cultures and their histories, which provoke new structures of order; and finally, the orders of relationships between these new structures which lead to new totalities. The perception of new orders and the creation of new structures of knowledge is always evolving (Bohm 17). A coherent interplay between all these relationships, like those established by McCann between the various structures of experiencing, perceiving and thinking in the city, results in an aesthetic perception of wholeness which is not

strictly subjective. Beauty is the result of this dynamic process that consists of order, structure and harmonious totality. Another lithograph by Escher, “Bond of Union” (1956), helps to explain these bonds. Inspired in the story of the invisible man, he represents the bond of union of a couple (his wife and himself) whose heads, floating in darkness in the infinite space of the universe, are formed from a single spiralling strip of cloth (with neither beginning nor end, like a Moebius strip that represents the infinite). The infinity of time and space is suggested by the planet-like spheres hanging in front of, behind and inside the heads. McCann’s novel unites all the stories which construct different world views in order to inquire and learn how they fit reality; he suspends them in the infinite bifurcating line of the main story to overturn crystallised ideas and preconceptions of his characters. This action of learning, according to Bohm, is “the essence of real perception” (5).

In the various episodes which make up *Let the Great World Spin*, creativity lies in the self-sustaining confusion in the mind of the characters. Instead of running after the utopian thought of the successful self-made man, the characters run away from it. Their minds are trying to escape the awareness of the conflict that afflicts them in order to avoid perceiving the fact rather than to find a solution. That is why McCann represents through a poetics of relations the uncertainties of his characters, either caused by external or internal forces, to create an order within chaos on a higher level of perception, an order that equals a reflexive state of dullness, in which the natural agility of the mind is replaced by torpor and meaningless mechanical fantasies. The simple perception of this new structure would generate a creative act, a by-product of the mind that focuses on the breakdown of a “correspondence” to something that was apprehended through “the comparative, associative or symbolic method of responding mainly in terms of something similar that was already known earlier in the past” (Bohm 44), the traditional view of reality.

Thus, it is my understanding that the chapters on the unknown walker in the sky become a metaphor of McCann’s world-view narrative. He links and relates the various histories calling upon imagination in order to sense contemporaneity, a network of perceptions. According to Glissant, a poetics of relation is a synthesis-genesis that is never complete. In a metaphorical way, like the lateral ropes at the top of the unfinished buildings that are linked to the central one in order to maintain the correct tension for the high-wire man to walk along it and perform his greatest challenge to death, McCann’s narratives, told either through first-person narrators or a third-person narrator, intersect the central narrative, the man in the sky who equals Corrigan’s state of mind. All the narratives are of great importance. Their function is to keep the principal narrative spinning around the main subject, which gives a higher level of order to chaos: beauty. Though the act of the walker is a challenge to death, the confluence of lives below and above while the world spins *is* beauty, the beauty of experiencing life, perceiving it and learning from it. Like the man up in the sky, McCann’s readers and characters step along the wire and walk till they succeed in their enterprise despite their hidden losses. This

meaning is embedded in the title of the single chapter of Book IV “Roaring Seaward, and I go.” It echoes Tennyson’s last verses of “Locksley Hall”: “Let it fall on Locksley Hall, with rain or hail, or fire or snow,/ For the mighty wind arises, roaring seaward, and I go” (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174629>). From a metafictional perspective, the underlying relatedness has the function of showing paradigm alterations in the grand narrative and creating a coherent true beauty in the cosmopolitan city of New York through other narrative criteria of symmetry, elegance and simplicity:

The core reason for it all was beauty. Walking was a divine delight. Everything was rewritten when he was up in the air. New things were possible with the human form. It went beyond equilibrium.
He felt for a moment uncreated. Another kind of awake. (164)

McCann’s narrative represents the awakening to a cosmopolitan kind of wholeness. According to Pollock *et al.* (2002), cosmopolitanism is a way of living in terrains of historic and cultural transition. Transitional territories have to be negotiated while “a minoritarian modernity (as a source for contemporary cosmopolitical thinking) is visible in the new forms of transdisciplinary knowledges” (Pollock *et al.*, 6). Literary narratives create a potential space of tangential encounters of memories in which knowledges and perceptions “touch” slightly provoking turning points in the processes of representation. The writer’s translational process of in-between cultures acknowledges a confluence of perceptions rather than “a transcendent knowledge of what lies *beyond* difference, in some common pursuit of the universality of the human experience” (Pollock *et al.*, 6-7). Contemporary narratives are related to what constitutes social and cultural identities and different modes and histories have been the source of aesthetic concerns for many writers, artists and social scientists.

In the introductory essay “Cosmopolitanisms”, Pollock *et al.* affirm:

it is understood that the cosmopolitanism of our times does not spring from the capitalized virtues of Rationality, Universality and Progress; nor is it embodied in the myth of the nation writ large in the figure of the citizen of the world. Cosmopolitans today are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism’s upward mobility and bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging. Refugees, peoples of the diasporas and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitical community. (Pollock *et al.*, 6)

Our sense of contemporary place discloses a mental spacetime-like interval of convergence through language. Édouard Glissant’s ‘poetics of relation’ (1990) – both aesthetic and political – helps us to understand McCann’s literary strategies of telling, connecting and constructing parallel consciousness of self and surroundings in order to transform mentalities and reshape societies. *Let the Great World Spin* is a renewed way of considering the literary space as *a space of confluence and connections*, in which the

representation of different kinds of knowledges, orders of perception and people is more a matter of recognizing that there is a different kind of totality “in movement” where frontiers are invisible and crossings, even imaginary, are possible when the twisting story-threads that make up the great narrative let it “spin forever down”.

Notes

Special thanks to Peter James Harris for revising this text.

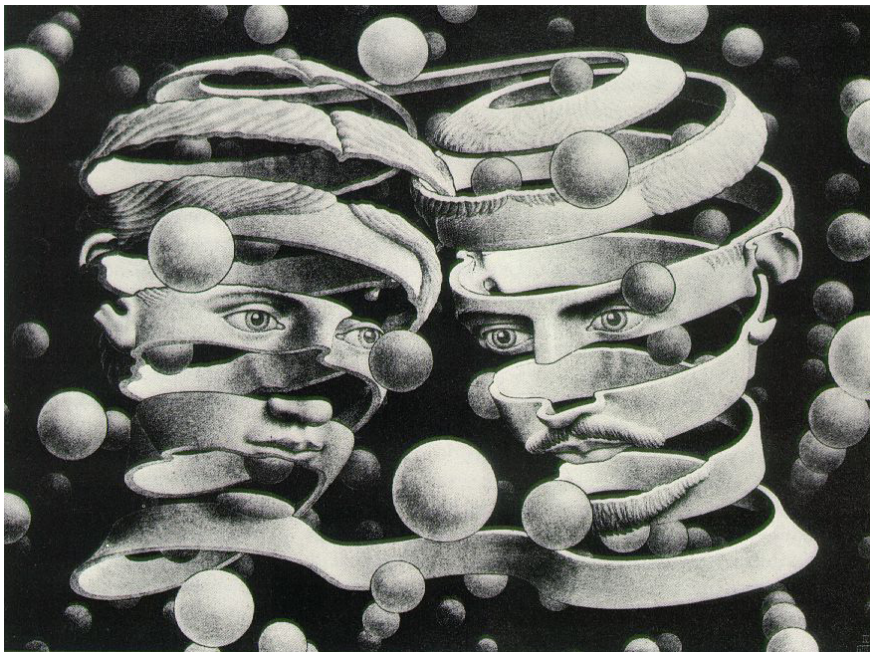
- 1 Hans Markowitsch refers to the retrograde and anterograde kinds of “amnesia” suffered by people who have had a traumatic experience or have been under great stress: parts of their memory could be affected in two temporal directions, towards the past (old memories) or the future (deficient formation of new memories). (Galle *et al.* 2009).

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Maurits Cornelis Escher. “Hand with Reflecting Sphere” or “Self-Portrait in Spherical Mirror” (lithograph 1935).



Maurits Cornelis Escher. “Bond of Union” (lithograph 1956).