

# TERROR AND REDEMPTION IN COLUM McCANN'S *LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN*

Eoin Flannery

## 9/11 – Art and Politics

The encounter between 9/11 and literature brings into focus the triumphs and deformations of language and representation since the acts of criminal terror unfolded over a decade ago. 9/11 has evolved a symbology and a semiotics all of its own. The term itself has entered linguistic circulation as a universal shorthand for murderous terror and noble resistance to unseen terroristic agencies. But, equally, dissent has arisen about the moralistic mobilisations of 9/11 as a legitimisation for surveillance, violent interrogation, and illegal invasion. Heated exchanges have cohered around the ethics of employing 9/11 as a political lode-stone and/or as an emotional default in the invocation of national identity in the United States. When we come to consider artistic responses to, or reflections on, 9/11, we enter battle-worn ground on which politics and culture have colluded and competed. And at the epicentre of these debates is language, and how it has been competitively utilised as a means of cultivating jingoistic assent or, less often, non-partisan critical reflection on 9/11 as an act of terror. This is also the case when matters revolving around the performances of a morally endowed national identity in the US are brought into play. In many respects, instead of provoking lateral constructive argumentation on global relations – political, economic, and cultural –, institutional responses to 9/11 have more often recoiled at the prospect of polyphonic debate in lieu of patriotic consensus. Simply put, there has been a degree of 'anti-intellectualism' afoot in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the intervening duration of the "War on Terror." For Susan Sontag, there is "the suspicion of thought, of words," and "hiding behind the humbug that the attack of last September 11<sup>th</sup> was too horrible, too devastating, too painful, too tragic for words, that words could not possibly do justice to our grief and indignation, our leaders have a perfect excuse to drape themselves in borrowed words devoid of content. To say something might be controversial [...] Not saying anything is best" (Sontag 121). There is a passionate political criticism and consciousness to Sontag's diagnosis. But her argument also dovetails with the actions and reactions of writers after the events of 11 September 2001. 9/11 might have been a "mute act" requiring subsequent narrative coding in Susan Buck-Morss' view (Buck-Morss 23). But the dominant narrative patterning of 9/11 has been univocal, by and large, and has striven to quell critical questioning. The popular call for unity from within the US – that reached across and was accepted by the 'West' – is matched and abetted by cultural agents that do not defy, but affirm simplistic, binary thinking on East/West relations – historical and contemporary. Difference and diversity, long mainstays of American popular

culture, are now watchwords of new idioms of paranoid and xenophobic legislation and monitoring. Political and cultural differences are not the basis for pluralist or multicultural inclusiveness, but are now markers of potential menace. Indeed it is not an exaggeration to speculate that the political and cultural climate of the 'West' has entered the frames of dystopian literary history for many of its narrative figurations in the years since 9/11.

In this intensified state of political and cultural sensitivity, it is worth posing the following questions, as Daniel Lea does in his essay on literary responses to 9/11. Lea inquires:

Why are the views of writers, and in particular novelists, deemed so worthy of collation and dissemination? Why, in the aftermath, were novelists sought out to air their opinions on the traumatic character of events? What, in other words, does the novelist have to offer that cannot be provided by reportage or political commentary? (Lea 4)

Lea's series of questions centres on the role of the novelist in relation to 9/11 and asks what the exceptional abilities harboured by the literary artist are that might enable them to mediate such shocking events for a general readership. The premium placed on the writer, as opposed to the narrative conventions and content of media and political opinion, is not difficult to explain. There is an assumption that the rhetoric of news coverage and political newspeak are blighted by evasion, slant, or outright misinformation. In contrast, the explanatory fictions of the novelist are deemed to express and to possess truths and consolations for the reader. Clearly, Lea's point coheres with the broader issue of the appetite for narrative and explanation after the 9/11 attacks, but it also touches upon other critical issues. In summoning writers to respond to these catastrophic events, it seems as if there is an explicit acknowledgement of the capacity of the literary artist to provide guidance out of the silence and the clamour attendant to 9/11. Likewise, the possibility that literature itself might be a source of succour or solace is implicit in Lea's speculations. This is not to locate the literary artist as a kind of renovated seer in the light of September 11, but there has been a renewed weight placed on the literary as a medium of consolation and resolution in many critical interventions since 9/11.

### ***Let the Great World Spin and 9/11***

9/11 can be located in a specific set of geographical locations, and the abbreviated nomination indicates the calendar date of the attacks in 2001. Through the labours of policymakers and media agenda-setters, 9/11 has outgrown any sense of itself as a mere temporal marker; the event has transcended historical time and has entered epochal time. As other literary critical volumes amply illustrate, literature, and in particular the novel, has responded variously to 9/11, though much of the literary output and pursuant literary criticism has tended to reflect on American legacies and experiences of 9/11. In a recent literary critical survey, Catherine Morley notes a suite of trends in 9/11 fiction:

While many of the initial reactions to the events of 11<sup>th</sup> September were notable for their uniquely subjective emphasis, with writers discussing what the attacks meant to them, to their art and to their writing, what many writers have also been integrating into their fiction has been the American response to the attacks. (Morley 83)

The present article strives to depart from domestic, subjective reactions to 9/11 in literary fiction and essays by looking at the National-Book-Award-winning *Let the Great World Spin*, which deals with 9/11 in an elliptical way. Colum McCann's novel is set, like much of his previous fiction, in New York, but principally unfolds in 1974 and deals with, in figurative fashion, themes of trauma, loss, and redemption. *Let the Great World Spin* is initiated by the narration of a high-wire walk between the towers of the World Trade Centre on 7 August 1974, and McCann's imaginative performance reverberates forward in time to 11 September 2001, as a utopian act of creation. But rather than re-create a world-historical universe in 1974 McCann prefers to navigate the margins of a profoundly troubled metropolis. *Let the Great World Spin* gestures to the accumulated grief of 9/11 and to the symbolism of the attacks by way of Philippe Petit's walk, and McCann spotlights the possibility of redemption and recovery in the recessed spaces of New York's cityscape. Grief is not confined to this date and this event, and neither is hope; the novel is, then, an allegory about all human suffering and how that suffering can be alleviated or endured.

*Let the Great World Spin* cannot but be considered a political and social novel given its embrace of criminality, destitution, addiction, and class division. Set in 1974 in New York, the narrative primarily spans downtown and uptown Manhattan, as well as the South Bronx, with interludes in Ireland and upstate New York. Gathered within its plotlines are characters of different nationalities, races, and class locations: the anonymous high-wire walker, the Irish monk, John Corrigan, and his brother Ciaran, Tillie and Jazzlyn Henderson, mother and daughter prostitutes, who are friends with John Corrigan, a wealthy couple grieving for their son lost in Vietnam, Claire and Solomon Soderberg, and Gloria, who lost three of her sons in the same war, a teenage photographer on the hunt for new subway graffiti, and a young artist, Lara, who is involved in John Corrigan's death and begins a long-term relationship with his brother after that accident. From the outset, *Let the Great World Spin* clamours with diversity and pulses with the tensions and insecurities of its cast. The narrative reprises the familiar negotiation of the national and the international, the local and the global, characteristic of much of McCann's earlier fiction; he develops further his situation of Ireland, and Irishness, within the macro-networks of global identities. While the narrative action is initiated by the funambulism of the French acrobat – and this action unfolds across the turbulent cityscape of New York – the central moral force within the narrative is that of the Irish monk, John Corrigan. Thus, in one way we see a 9/11 novel that is significantly inflected by the affective force of this Christ-like Irish migrant missionary. Contrary to critical voices that suggest McCann's work represents a necessary transcendence of national identity, *Let the Great World Spin*, together with many of McCann's other works, is neither a globalised rejection of Irish-

ness nor a celebration of borderless global identity.<sup>1</sup> Rather, McCann's works consistently bring Ireland and Irish identities into productive dialogues with international geographies and histories.<sup>2</sup>

The novel acknowledges both the material and the symbolic as forces within daily life and traces how, as McCann puts it, "the accidental meets the eternal" (McCann, "Q&A"). A fraction of its political engagement is, of course, its concern with 9/11 as a material and a symbolic event. McCann accepts the immense symbolic trauma of 9/11, but he is equally keen to stress the lateral material sufferings that nourish, and are often subordinated to, the public emphasis on symbolic victimhood or symbolic violence. It is a forceful, though tangential, artistic-political response to 9/11, but there is more to the work than this neat summary may suggest: "9/11 was the initial impetus for the book [...] But I am aware of the pitfalls of labelling it a '9/11' novel [...] 9/11 is certainly part of the book's construction, but it is not limited to that [...] I really wanted to lift it out of the 9/11 'grief machine'" (McCann, "Q&A"). While he acknowledges the symbolic threads that link *Let the Great World Spin* to 9/11, it would be reductive to define McCann's novel as one that is exclusively trained on these events. It is a novel that responds to 9/11 without ever becoming obsessed by the immediate repercussions in 2001 in any direct way. McCann does not 'enter' the world of 9/11 or post-9/11 in a sustained fashion, nor does he imagine characters or events implicated directly in this contemporary tragedy. Tellingly, he implies that 9/11 might actually compromise his work; that 9/11 as a "cultivated" event could contract the interpretive scope of his narrative. All of these issues, though, cannot disavow the fact that 9/11 is a thematic and ethical point of departure for *Let the Great World Spin*. But it is equally the case that the novel's visions outstrip the political and cultural agons surrounding the 2001 attacks. As McCann stresses, "it's a novel that tries to uncover joy and hope and a small glimmer of grace...a novel about creation, maybe even a novel about healing in the face of all the evidence" (McCann, "Q&A").

Returning to Lea, is there an inevitability to the prominence of writerly responses to 9/11 and other such extreme public events of violence and spectacle? Ian McEwan's locations of empathy in the imagination and his belief that this is where morality begins centre literature as a primary political agent after 9/11 (McEwan, "Only Love"). There was little that was empathetic or imaginative about many institutional political responses to the attacks of September 11. But it seems from these combined reactions that literature houses utopian possibilities towards political and cultural critique and towards the cultivation of empathetic feeling beyond the local. Post-9/11, novels and other works of art are not solely concerned with eliciting sympathy or empathy for the victims of the hijacked planes, though this is important; this sub-genre of contemporary fiction is also cognizant of the need for narratives that complicate our understandings of the 'other.' These 9/11 fictions can help us to see hope in place of

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1 See, for instance, Bolger, "Introduction" xx.

2 On this, see Fogarty as well as Flannery (1-11).

an insistent rhetoric of vilification and retribution, and they can impress the possibilities of redemption through empathy rather than through violent purging. The brachiated and democratic structures of *Let the Great World Spin*, in tandem with one of its central themes, creative daring, allow McCann to address these questions. McCann's literary intervention is a 9/11 novel, and it attempts to loosen the grip of the 9/11 grief industry, which tries to stage-manage the cultural digestion of 9/11. *Let the Great World Spin* is a political and social novel that looks aslant at the attacks of 9/11; McCann suggests that it is an allegory on human suffering which partially speaks to September 11. Nevertheless, the novel de-monumentalises the suffering of the victims of 9/11, without denigrating their memory. Instead, McCann showcases the longevity and the breadth of human suffering and resilience across races, classes, and nationalities in New York City. It is a novel that is stalked by menace and violence, but one that rises to moments of grace and hopeful anticipation.

Speaking in interview after the publication of *Let the Great World Spin*, McCann admitted to a certain confusion as an author dealing with 9/11, particularly as a resident of New York City. He confessed that he "began to wonder, Who's going to write about this?" and that as responses of various forms and political persuasions began to proliferate, he remarked that "every piece was poignant [...] And everything had meaning: it was like the whole city was infused with meaning" (McCann, "Q&A"). The everyday is transformed into the sacred, as figuration and suggestion engulf the brute realities of a debris-strewn and ash-thickened atmosphere. As the force of the reality of 9/11 manifested itself, understandings of its 'meaning' only became admissible through figuration – symbols and metaphors were drafted in as explanatory buffers: "You couldn't help thinking that everything had importance. Even the child's painting of the two buildings holding hands was a powerful image" (McCann, "Q&A"). McCann's point re-iterates the fact that even this event, perhaps especially this event, cannot escape "the reach of symbol and metaphor" (Versluys 3). Whereas many saw recourse to narrative and figuration as routes out of aphasia and grief, towards a semblance of healing, it is equally true that 9/11 became part of a dominant semiotics in the geopolitical imagination. In other words, 9/11 became a symbolic agent of neo-conservative politics and acted as a guarantor of moral legitimacy for physical and cultural violence across the globe. Its cultivated mythology has seen it conscripted into narrow and heavily politicised commemoration.

### **Re-Imagining Space and Performing Hope**

Mobility and exile are defining preoccupations of McCann's previous two novels, *Dancer* (2003) and *Zoli* (2006), and this makes them much more obviously 'spatial' in their concerns. Yet *Let the Great World Spin* asserts the locality of spatial politics; its topographies are, principally, those of New York City, but exile and mobility remain prominent. There are other geographies present: Ireland figures at the outset and at the conclusion, and California enters the narrative via telephonic communication. Al-

lusions are made to Guatemala, Cleveland, Ohio, England, Brussels, Naples, New Orleans, Little Rock, Arkansas, Vietnam, and Genoa. Yet, as suggested above, McCann centres this literary response to 9/11 on Irish characters, with episodic returns to Ireland. We receive first-hand impressions of the Corrigan brothers' upbringing in 1950s and 1960s Dublin from the younger Ciaran, but at the close of the novel McCann returns us to the contemporary, and to the last days of the "Celtic Tiger." While these closing summary descriptions of Dublin hint at the country's embrace of global capital and its attendant indices of identity, they are not presented in any way that might be construed as celebratory. Jaslyn, one of the daughters of Corrigan's friend, the deceased prostitute Jazzlyn, arrives in Ireland to visit Ciaran, and her impressions of the country and the city of Dublin reveal the country's contiguity with the architectural and economic contours of her homeland. Having alluded to the complicity of the Irish State in the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the narrative ensues with a portrait of the thriving city and with Ciaran's active role in this period of economic buoyancy:

Dublin was a boomtown. Neon along the river. The seagulls embroidered it. Ciaran was in his early sixties with a small peninsula of hair on his forehead. Half an American accent – his other office, he said, was in Silicon Valley. He was impeccably dressed in a suit and an expensive open-necked shirt. Grey chest hair peeking out. They sat in his office and he talked her through a life of his late brother, Corrigan, a life that seemed rare and radical to her. Outside the window, cranes swung on the skyline. The Irish light seemed lengthy. (341)

From this compact description, we can intuit the complexities of modern, contemporary Irish identities within the relations of the Corrigan family; Ciaran's financial security is juxtaposed to the altogether alien altruism of his late brother. The local space of Dublin is pockmarked with the edificial monuments of/to global capitalist modernity, which links the city, the country, and its population to the primary site of *Let the Great World Spin*. New York City is the localised global space of McCann's narrative, and the twin towers, looming in their pristine newness, foreshadow the later attack as well as the politico-economic conjuncture that will impact so forcefully on contemporary Irish society.

New York City is the spatial main stage and it is the endpoint of all of these vectors of travel and displacement. Within the city, and the novel, McCann juxtaposes terrestrial and air-borne spaces, which are figurations of hope and despair as well as reminders that life at ground-level can be as precarious as life on an elevated tightrope: both demand balance that is often threatened and uncertain. This is one of the possible interpretations of the wire-walker's funambulism, as an acrobatic correlative of the fragile precariousness of daily living. At the same time, his act is an outrageous seizure of urban space, an act, apparently, with no constructive end other than the outstanding beauty of the act itself. The twin towers and the references to the Vietnam War unfolding at this time are affronted by the vision of the wire-walker's spatial creativity. Both the war and the buildings are parts of the same capitalistic continuum and are complicit in the spatial appropriation of the globe. Empire-building was, and is,

founded on the basic contestation of, and appropriation of, space, and both the towers and the war are internal and external signs of this politics.

Though he is never named in the novel, *Let the Great World Spin* opens on the morning of Philippe Petit's tightrope walk between the twin towers of the World Trade Centre on 7 August 1974. Immediately, McCann gestures to the agency of the visual as both a universal cultural medium and as a core motif of the novel. Vision, spectacle, and sightings provide a link between the opening act of funambulism in *Let the Great World Spin* and the brute spectacular of 9/11. Indeed, the "walker's" preparation to step out onto his high wire is met with similar silent awe and trepidation by the congregation of confused viewers on the streets of Manhattan below: "Those who saw him hushed [...] Others figured it might be the perfect city joke – stand around and point upward, until people gathered, tilted their heads, nodded, affirmed, until all were staring upward at nothing at all" (3). The grouped crowds may be witnesses to the "walker's" actions, but there is nothing besides suspicion and uncertainty in the accumulated speculations. There seems to be a disjuncture between vision and comprehension in the presence of this acrobatic feat, yet curiosity persists among the viewers:

He could only be seen at certain angles so that the watchers had to pause at street corners, find a gap between buildings, or meander from the shadows to get a view unobstructed by cornice work, gargoyles, balustrades, roof edges [...] It was the dilemma of the watchers: they didn't want to wait around for nothing at all [...] but they didn't want to miss the moment either [...] Around the watchers, the city still made its everyday noises. (3)

In this opening set-piece, McCann corrals fantasy, illusion, and reality, the expectant silence of the watchers and the commotion of the city morning, and the minute vulnerability of the human body amid the domineering concreted scale of the city. The repetitions, the habits of the everyday, are intruded upon by "a dark toy against the cloudy sky" (3) – the "walker."

The build-up to the moment when the "walker" steps off the edge of the tower captures the heteronomy of sounds and sights as the working day in Manhattan commences. McCann's description evokes the mobility, even the transience, of the city: "Ferry whistles. The thrum of the subway. The M22 bus pulled in against the sidewalk, sighed down into a pot-hole. A flying chocolate wrapper touched against a fire hydrant. Taxi doors slammed [...] Revolving doors pushed quarters of conversation out into the street" (4). Snatches of urban sensuousness form the backdrop to the "walker's" defiant artistic performance high above the street-level bustle. Yet the fragmented sensory chaos of Manhattan is somehow nullified by the "walker's" gesture; his presence on the sky-line unifies the disparate lives into an integrated audience. His brazen act is received with reverent silence as the watchers mingle and convene in pockets on the pavements: "Doctors. Cleaners. Prep chefs. Diamond merchants. Fish sellers. Sad-jeaned whores. All of them reassured by the presence of one another" (4). The improbability of the sight and the rumours that it generates – "he was

some sort of cat burglar, that he'd been taken hostage, he was an Arab, a Cypriot, an IRA man, that he was really just a publicity stunt, a corporate scam" (5) – creates a tangible level of community between the gathered watchers. The slow, methodical preparations of the "walker" allow time for the pedestrian audience to intrigue about his motivations, but more importantly, this period of silent viewing must be and is filled with expectancy and mystery. For those at street level, "the waiting had been made magical [...] shared. The man above was a word they seemed to know, though they had not heard it before. Out he went" (7). Given the historical context in which the novel is set, a period during which New York City was rife with violent crime and drug addiction, as well as facing the prospect of financial bankruptcy, the image of the "walker" perched on the highest building in the world is a signal utopian moment. The significance of using Petit's daring in this fashion, and in a 9/11 novel, is touched upon in these exact terms by McCann. The moment of physical transcendence became a powerful symbolic act for McCann in the wake of 9/11, what he calls "a spectacular act of creation" (Johnston). The private sufferings and griefs of ordinary people, which exist side by side with faith in possible recovery, are primary thematics of the novel, and Petit's walk catalyzes this possibility of redemption. Equally, this emboldened creative act assembles disparate individuals in Manhattan, however briefly, and allows them to share a unique spectacle. In this sense, the "walker's" gesture facilitates an instance of belonging and restores faith in the possibility of solidarity; it is suggestive of the numinous touching upon the banalities of the everyday. The "walker" is apparitional on the Manhattan sky-line, a spectre on the horizons of the visible and of the possible. But he is, most importantly, an agent of hope in the allegorical structure of the novel. His decision to step out onto the high wire is the ultimate act of faith: faith in oneself. It is an inspirational, generous act offered to those who stop, wait, and watch his sky-borne performance.

The wire-walker's feat is an imaginative re-calibration of spatiality; it is an unforeseen subversion of the logic of capitalist space. The hubris and the rational architecture of the World Trade Centre are challenged by the wire-walker's re-casting of the twin towers as objects of acrobatic beauty. The implications of the wire-walker's actions are consummately expressed in the novel by the grieving Claire Soderberg: "And an attempt at beauty. The intersection of a man with the city, the abruptly reformed, the newly appropriated public space, the city art. Walk up there and make it new. Making it a different space" (103). Claire's description has implicit references to Ezra Pound's Modernist injunction to "make it new!" and to Karl Heinz Stockhausen's provocative statement that the World Trade Centre attacks were pieces of high art. Her reaction on hearing of the wire-walker combines space as art, the redefinition of urban utility, and the aesthetics of violence, in particular in relation to 9/11. In this emotional processing of the wire walk, McCann touches upon 9/11, the pursuit of arresting innovation in art, and the rousing utopian dynamism of the spatial re-conceptualisation of iconic capitalist edifices. The twin towers were the concreted and glazed embodiment of a set of economic, political, and cultural abstractions, and there is no gainsaying

the symbolic violence of their destruction. But rather than dwell on the destructive levelling of the towers in 2001 as an act of incommensurable violence, McCann urges us to appreciate the imaginative spatial assault on the towers in 1974. The wire-walk is, of course, a temporary performance, but no less affective for its brevity; it is a jolting act of faith and creativity. The achievement, with its possibilities, is apprehended by Claire's husband, Solomon, who is the judge assigned to try and to sentence the wire-walker after his arrest. For Solomon Soderberg:

The tightrope walker was such a stroke of genius. A monument in himself. He had made himself into a statue, but a perfect New York one, a temporary one, up in the air, high above the city ... He had gone to the World Trade Center and had strung his rope across the biggest towers in the world. The Two Towers. Of all places. So brash. So glassy. So forward-looking [...] The glass reflected the sky, the night, the colors: progress, beauty, capitalism. (248)

The wire-walker not only stills and silences the gathered urban crowds, but he carves a monument out of thin air. The spectacle of the walker undermining rationality as he draws his audience skyward re-imagines the potential use of the twin towers. These other monuments to financial functionalism are alternatively deployed by the wire-walker's performance. His act and his art are highly impractical, and they are, in fact, treated as criminal. But the brazen creativity displayed infects the lives of those that witness the walk first hand and those that hear of it subsequently. The walk may not change the ways in which spatiality is conceived of and produced in New York City, and it does not alter the spatial employment of the twin towers. But the wire-walker's gesture opposes 9/11 in pre-emptive fashion with an act of daring creation. The tight-rope walk defies belief, but is equally motored by the belief and the faith of the walker, and, again, flags the roles of faith and belief in the overall narrative. The wire-walker, then, performs a utopian spatial act that strikes one of the thematic keynotes of *Let the Great World Spin*.

In this context, then, art is seen to embody a redemptive moral value system in contradistinction to the destabilizing values of murderous terrorism. Art facilitates a reflective, even temperate coming to terms with 9/11 – in contrast to impulses of rage or blind hostility. This is the context in which we should finally read *Let the Great World Spin*. As a work of art the novel advertises and embodies the durability of human creativity as a utopian resource. This literary fiction is exemplary of what Gilles Deleuze calls “the realm of the possible,” a realm neatly defined by Elleke Boehmer and Susheila Nasta as “the visionary territory of the imagination, a world situated between the political and cultural borderlines of national/international struggles, a realm where it is the artist's imperative to keep speaking, to keep writing, to keep interrogating, to keep making art even in the face of terror itself, counter-insurgent or otherwise” (1). It is a multivocal, democratic text that braids diverse narratives and lives together in varying patterns of unity and empathetic understanding. To the dominant U.S.-centric narratives, McCann tenders a disjunctive counter-narrative that expands the horizons of what can be stabled as 9/11 literary fiction.

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