Empathy through Foodways in Colum McCann's *Let The Great World Spin*

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Colum McCann's textuality establishes a dialogue between Irish people and diverse marginalised communities around the world, whose substrate is built upon his perspective of Ireland added to his nomadic experience. Born in Dublin in 1965, McCann left Ireland at the age of 21 to live in The United States, whence he set out on an eighteen-month cycling journey around forty North American states to gather stories that would enlarge his storyteller repertoire. Despite having left Ireland at such a young age, he had already graduated from the former College of Commerce in Rathmines and started a journalism career. His job allowed him to enlarge his views about Ireland through research and by living in different places as required by his position. This experience helped McCann financially during the trip to the United States as he kept writing a column for the *Evening Press*, an Irish paper, although he also worked "[…] as a bicycle mechanic, dishwasher, ditchdigger, fence builder, housepainter, ranch hand, and waiter" (Cusatis 2011: 4), collecting stories shared with him along the way. During an interview, he declared that those accounts made him "[…] understand the value of stories and storytelling". Before settling down as a writer, McCann got a degree in English and History from the University of Texas in Austin, worked in Texas as a wilderness educator for wayward teenagers in 1988, and taught English as a foreign language in Japan. He now resides in New York where he is a distinguished professor of Creative Writing at Hunter College and dedicates his life to writing. Such multifaceted experience is mirrored in McCann's oeuvre, which despite consisting mostly of fiction, is firmly grounded on real (or real-ish) characters, locations and, situations. Although he took inspiration from everyday life and everyday people, his relationship with his peers was more than that of observer or gatherer of material for his books; he was, above all, an empath. He bonded, shared, and rightfully gained their trust, which caused even strangers to open up to him. (*idem*: 5).

To build up the characters, McCann has lived in subway tunnels with homeless people, and in Gypsy camps around Eastern Europe; he has travelled to Russia to research about Nureyev: "[…] stayed with black families in South Carolina; Native American families in New Mexico; Christian right-wingers in Texas", people scattered around what, in his words, are the "anonymous corners"[3] of the world, whose voices are not often or easily heard. Nonetheless,

McCann refuses to be a spokesperson: "[…] as writers we don't speak for people, we speak with them. That's where the dignity comes in", he declares.

Such a dignified task allows the creation of empathic bonds, established by getting to know others through the stories they share, which foregrounds McCann's narrative. He conceives the literary text as democratic story-sharing spaces through which "[…] we are allowed to become the other we never dreamed we could be" (McCann 2009). For McCann, "literature is linked to the politics of empathy" (McCann 2016) since a narrative is the only possible vehicle to exercise the human capacity of walking in other people's shoes, in other words, to understand the world from another person's perspective through imagination. Different from sympathy, solidarity or any other semantic relative, empathy is about intersubjective suture generated by imagination. Furthermore, the author believes in 'radical empathy,' which arises from one's willingness to get to know others, despite drastic differences.

Because of its importance in McCann's work, empathy is the core of the present research, whose object of analysis is food-character interaction in Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin.*

The ubiquitous cultural presence of food allows it to be a key element to identifying alterity. To give a literary example, let us take into consideration one of the leading voices in the novel mentioned above. Corrigan, an Irish priest, talks of hunger, thirst and weariness as "immemorial feelings" (McCann 2009: 27), which convey both organic and emotional instances bound together. There is then, on the one hand, the pervasive dimension of food; its materiality, the solid part which fulfils everybody's organic needs, which can be considered an element of intersection among humans since food is a basic element of survival. On the other hand, there is food choice, its usages and any non-material components invested in food, revealing individual traits. Sarah Sceats observes that "What people eat, how and with whom, what they feel about food is why […] are of crucial significance to an understanding of human society" (2000: 1). The point is then, taking the connotations regarding food in the novel, looking at how the habits of the central characters in the story regarding eating (and or drinking) reveal elements strong enough to foster imagination, and consequently facilitate empathy.

Let the Great World Spin, published in 2009, is set in New York in the seventies. More precisely, the narrative time is 7 August 1974, the day of Philippe Petit's legendary feat. A French high-wire artist, Petit rigged a steel cable to cross the Twin Towers during their construction. Not only did he go on the tightrope, but he did it artistically: for forty-five minutes he walked, hopped, and even laid down on the cable stretched between the two towers. A historical anachronism, Petit sent a message of redemption in opposition to the horrors that would occur in the same area twenty-seven years later. There is a pervading atmosphere of possibility in this act, of alternative outcomes, of proposing a different history (or still, new histories). Under the shadow of Petit's daring 'physical poetry,' the lives of Irish and New Yorkers converge and dialogue, unveiling traumas and grief, while they walk their own tightropes in search of redemption.

Roland Barthes declared that a food item is "[…] a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situation and behavior" (2013: 24). As such, food signifies through a large set of themes and situations that it is a cultural object, appropriated by society and transformed into

a "system of tastes and habits" (*ibidem*). The individuals within societies have their preferences of taste and develop personal habits concerning food. It dovetails with Deborah Lupton's ideas about food and eating being at the core of one's subjectivity. Lupton argues that the whole experience of living "[…] in and through our bodies […]" (1996:1) is "[…] inextricably linked with subjectivity […]" (*ibidem*), crystallising the idea that the way individuals choose to nurture their bodies, people's material presences in the exercise of humanity, is a fundamental key in the construction of subjectivity and of cognizance of other's selfhood. As food is an associative element, it allows communication with alterity.

Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik point out that there has been an explosion of studies and texts about food since the eighties. In general, they attribute such proliferation to three key factors. The first is feminism and women's behaviour studies as it legitimises "[…] a domain of human behavior so heavily associated with women over time and across cultures". The second factor has to do with the "interdisciplinary work on food politics." Finally, the third concerns the links between food and "body and soul, self and other, the personal and the political, the material and the symbolic", researched by a great many scholars from different fields (2013:2). Parts of the three propositions are involved in the present research, since they help to understand the characters' constitutions.

The characters chosen are analysed within the heterotopic framework in which they are inserted. Foucault divides what he calls "other places" in society into utopia and heterotopias (1997: 330-336). Utopias are unreal and immaterial spaces, invested with desires and individual or collective expectations contrary to actuality, or sometimes as an improved extension of reality. In contrast, heterotopias are actual places, temporal-spatial fragments within societies. Those are complicated places, crossed by several positionings or counter-positionings, anchored on the subjects' experiences and their physical and mental alterities. There is, then, this idea of particularity connected to heterotopias and, by extension, of difference. The localities focused on in this work convey marginalised geographical spaces but also emotional states that isolate the characters in a margin of grief, thus, 'other places'. Discussing such localities means casting light onto difference, periphery, heterogeneity, implying a rupture with homogeneous discourses of power as heterotopias of crisis offer opportunities for transformation. It is about agency and being the protagonist during one's own 'tightrope crossing.' In *Let the Great World Spin* two characters occupy emotional and physical heterotopic transformative locations: John Corrigan, the Irish monk cited above and Claire, a wealthy woman, grieving her son who died in Vietnam.

John Corrigan's radical empathy.

John Corrigan, an Irish priest, living in the Bronx is one of the eleven voices of *Let the Great World Spin,* whose story is narrated by his brother Ciaran. Corrigan was inspired by the life of the activist and poet Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit who dedicates himself to assisting the poor and is known for his fierce anti-war activism, especially against the Vietnam War (Polner 1997). Like Berrigan, Corrigan incorporates the liberation theology postulates (Boff 1987) about

committing to the poor, pursuing an end to historical and social injustice and promoting action for liberation. As his physical counterpart, Corrigan chooses to be around the people he wants to assist. As young as eleven, Corrigan gives away his blankets and clothes to those in need and starts spending time with homeless drunks along the canal. He drinks and smokes with them and uses his pocket money to buy alcohol and cigarettes. Those people viewed him as "[…] just another snotnose trying on the poorman shoes […]" (McCann 2009: 16). What people failed to understand is that he really was "trying on the poorman shoes" but not out of laughable teenage rebellion; on the contrary, it was to get to know the outcasts of society and being "[…] some bright hallelujah in the shitbox of what the world really was" (*ibidem*), as Ciaran conceives his brother. He tried to bring people close to him, 'pulling' them by sharing their habits instead of trying to convince them of change, or still 'pushing' them as if he was a moral role model. Corrigan had this idea that people were looking for some Eden where they could get relief from their fears. As for fear, Corrigan understands that "You're breathing it in. You touch it. You drink it. You eat it. But it's so fine you don't notice it. […] What I mean is, we're afraid." (*idem*: 30). He includes himself in the discourse by swapping 'You' for 'We,' thus demonstrating he does not consider himself to be different from anybody else. Drinking with people means 'to share his fears and to embody others'. If drinking is the way out people found in order not to despair and, in his own words to "keep going" (*ibidem*), he views it as a legitimate life choice. By ingesting the drinks he is symbolically incorporating the others within himself. Ciaran summarizes his brother's religious perspective thus: "What Corrigan wanted was a fully believable God, one you could find in the grime of the everyday." (*idem*: 20).

Furthermore, Corrigan was playing his part in materialising a "flesh-and-blood-savior" (Cusatis 2011:185). After being sent by his order to live in the projects of the Bronx, he aids neighbouring prostitutes by offering his apartment as their headquarters and getting beaten up to the extremes of martyrdom by their pimps for doing so. Accepting it as a 'job hazard,' Corrigan acquiesces. His mission was his own: who he helps and the way he reaches out to people lie within his power of decision.

The priest chooses to live on the edge of precariousness, communicated through his dwellings, clothing and meal plan. In his house, there was "Just tea and sugar and milk" (McCann 2009: 16). Tea is Corrigan's only food choice. It is the only drink he has, and there is no other reference to food intake, with one exception that is discussed below. It is possible to infer the other foods (signs) that have been excluded since the tea is the only visible sign. This idea, along with the few items in his possession – barely one set of clothes, a prayer kneeler and few books – indicates, first, the limits of the precariousness in which Corrigan chose to live. Secondly, tea embodies Corrigan's national identity as it is commonly associated with the traditional Irish choice of drink. Tea is the first thing he asks about when his brother arrived from Ireland to stay with him – "[…] five boxes of his favorite" (*idem*: 26). He insists on having it hot, the way it is drunk in Ireland, despite the hot weather of American Summer, instead of putting ice in it, as suggested to him by locals. Finally, as drinking tea is the way Corrigan establishes a direct identity between himself and his country, it symbolises the life he left behind and the emotional grief he carries.

His father had left the family while he was still a baby, the only fatherly "presence" in the house being a monthly check that came in the mail and the clothes his mother neatly kept. He meets his father again only after his mother's death, refusing to socialise.

Ciaran describes men and women in their house yard after the funeral, sauntering along with their father's old suits, hats, scarves and a pair of shoes accompanied by female counterparts all happy with their mother's clothes. Meanwhile, a quite drunk and shirtless Corrigan went among them grinning and waving at their barefoot and stupefied father standing at the front door – Corrigan's way of showing "some sort of triumph that went beyond theological proof" (*idem*: 20), a display of optimism against "the meek" (*ibidem*). Nonetheless, the liberating deeds in this passage did not suffice to end the sorrow and heartbreak held back in his teenager constitution. Ciaran asks why he had not attended their father's funeral, but he kept on preparing tea instead of answering. For some reason, the way Corrigan is moving around reminds Ciaran of one occasion when his brother was along the shore and voices were calling him and then, at this moment, "The kettle whistled, louder now and shrill" (McCann 2009: 27).

Corrigan's grief is crystallised in such memory-invoking scene only to highlight the priest's spiritual transcendence who chose to continue tending to the voices that keep calling him, despite his human suffering. Long after finishing drinking the tea, Corrigan still did not answer Ciaran's question: "Little dribbles of tea sat in his palm. He brought his hand to his mouth and tongued it. […] He kept tilting the teacup on his hand as if trying to get the last drops out." (*idem*: 30). Tea was meant both to rescue the past and to alleviate the burden of grief. On one occasion Jazzlyn, one of the local prostitutes, drinks tea from his mug leaving a lipstick smudge on the rim. Ciaran noted that his brother drank from the same cup without cleaning the rim. It can be inferred that Corrigan did not mind a closer contact with other people, another symbolical amalgam with a marginalised subject. Tillie, who is also a prostitute, as a narrator, describes an occasion when she makes Corrigan a birthday cake: "He cut up the cake and gave a piece out to everyone. He took the last piece for himself" (*idem*: 230). This exemplifies Corrigan's path of giving himself out to people through the sharing of food. Tillie's description alludes to the Last Supper, inclusively because it implies it was Corrigan's last birthday. Corrigan had this idea about Christ being "[…] easy to understand […]" (*idem*: 20*)* as he was just everywhere he was needed. He says Christ "[…] took little or nothing along, a pair of sandals, a bit of a shirt, a few odds and ends to stave off the loneliness. He never rejected the world" (*ibidem*). Corrigan and Jesus Christ are juxtaposed in these two statements. In Ciaran's voice, it is impossible to infer when he is speaking about his brother or about Christ. Corrigan initials cooperate with this allusion: J.C. which sets him in both the human and spiritual spheres, validating his work.

Corrigan overcomes his father's absence by being present for others. If heterotopy means other spaces, we may say that Corrigan inhabits others' spaces to find his place in the world in a continuous transformation of people's lives and his own. Characterised by one drink and one food item, Corrigan perpetuates the idea of the body and the blood of the holy communion. In this way he embodies the everyday Jesus he believes.

Claire – lighting up.

Claire is introduced in the novel at her penthouse on Park Avenue receiving the breakfast tray that Solomon, her husband, brings in. Her "[…] nerves jangle in her […]" (*idem*: 73) and, despite the detailed description of the character's moves since she has woken up, there is no mention of her eating her breakfast, conveying the idea of inappetence. Claire's disempowered position is highlighted by the paternal attitude of Solomon's offering of food plus the fact that "[…] He even lay down on the bed in his suit and touched her hair" (*ibidem*). Claire is about to host a group of mothers who, like herself, have lost their sons in the Vietnam War. She has not still recovered from her loss, and her present apprehension is due to her displaying her wealth, mainly to Gloria, another woman in the group who lives close to Corrigan, in a rundown area of the Bronx. Claire's inappetence accounts for "lack of appetite" for her traumatic life. Claire recollects her doctor's advice about drinking milk for calcium which she scorns: "Calcium indeed. Drink more milk, your children won't go missing" (*idem*: 108). The recurrent question in her mind could be "what is the point of being alive and healthy once my son is dead?"

Instead of eating, Claire smokes cigarette after cigarette, a habit that disgusts her husband, which is why she does it in secret. She has read somewhere that smoking could help to overcome grief as the body will be busy dealing with poison instead of the suffering, which makes her think that this is why the soldiers are given cigarettes. Lucky Strikes, she sarcastically declares. Claire is attempting to reach a state of numbness through a surrogate replacement for food which is also a point of intersection with her soldier son. While lining tea bags up to resemble a formation of troops, the mother thinks that she "Can't indulge this heartsickness," (*idem*: 84) and advises herself to "Imagine endurance" (*ibidem*). Claire fasts and smokes to undergo a soldier's routine but also to keep herself alive.

Joshua was asked to go to Vietnam to work as a computer programmer. His squad's job was to write codes which would make it possible to keep track of American casualties. Joshua describes his routine in Vietnam in detail in the many letters he writes to his mom. Whenever he had a difficult task, Claire would place Joshua's correspondence by the freezer and "allow it to cool him down" (*idem*: 100). After his death, she would look for any electronic devices in the house as an allusive reference to Joshua and his computer. For example, leaning against the fridge allowed a journey along with electricity. There is a juxtaposition between Joshua's computer and the fridge as both have wires, cathodes, and transistors as displayed in the text. This meant that as she opened the fridge it would feel as if "[...] she was in the very same room, right beside him [...] (*ibidem*). So, while her husband is asleep, Claire sits by the fridge and reads Joshua's letters. She imagines smoothing his hair and giving motherly advice about sleeping time and eating properly to make sure that he "wasn't fading away" (*idem*: 89). This connection with the fridge conflates nurture, presence, and grief. A refrigerator is a place to keep foodstuffs and from where Claire would get ingredients to prepare meals for her family, fulfilling her motherly duties. Joshua's memory, like food, is preserved in the same environment. The fridge provided the luminosity she needed to read – the material instance of light – but she also needed the metaphorical brightness of the spiritual connection with her son.

However, while on one hand the fridge epitomises preservation and light, thus life, on the other hand it is a sad portrayal of death. It evokes a mortuary refrigerator as besides all the specific elements already discussed; Claire turns to it to 'see' her son again "[…] through the ether" (*idem*: 86). Nonetheless, even though Claire herself understands the group of mourning mothers' meetings as "A revival of funerals […]" (*idem*: 114) she also views it from a transformative perspective, as she says those moments are occasions "[…] during which we hurt, and have one another for the healing" (*ibidem*). Since she allows herself to make connections, as the tightrope walking implies, she takes on her "mission" of finding her way out of darkness, as implied by the meaning of her name.

Corrigan's relationship with food displaces him to an inhuman sphere, applying to him a numinous aura whereas Claire's scant foodways materialise the void left by her son's death. Both lives are permeated by traumas linked to absence, which set them in marginalised lonely places in the search for self-redemption. There is an unimaginable alliance between them alluding to the invisible link between the two towers envisioned by the funambulist. It engrosses the empathic chorus about the importance of interrelations present thorughout the narrative, which is the case with Claire and the other mothers and Corrigan and the outcasts of society. McCann's text therefore compels readers to continually reflect upon otherness, since difference and connection are intertwined tacitly or explicitly.

Food images may reach the reader in an almost subtle way, stimulating thoughts and feelings that connect them to the characters, accepting or rejecting them, but invariably being added to by them. The intersubjective suture is vividly generated by the creative imagination reaching emotional instances, thus opening space for empathic response.

Focusing on the text rationally or allowing themselves to be affected by its production of senses will provide each reader with a different experience. Both aspects may happen more intensely in some passages or have a broader appeal in others. Nonetheless, an "active attempt by one individual to get 'inside' the other" is needed (Davis 2018: 5).

Literary narratives offer readers the opportunity to foster their creative mind by interpreting the symbolic subtexts. The centrality of food displayed in the present analysis stimulates the reader to think about their own food choices and addictions, thereby establishing a dynamic dialogue with the characters.

Cognitive and affective instances are recognised as part of the empathic process and pertain to the reading act. Therefore, it is only the reader's imagination through foodways, instilled with the richness of literary language, that allows both intellectual and emotional correlations which, transformed into feelings or emotions, will plausibly create an empathic bond between text and reader.

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