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BEAUTY AS A REASON FOR LIFE AND AN INGREDIENT OF LIFE: COLUM MCCANN'S *LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN*

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The paper deals with Colum McCann's novel *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) by analysing the idea of beauty, emphasised at several points in the book. Our analysis revolves around the novel's central event: a tightrope performance in the sky above New York City in 1974. The aim is to reveal how this unusual walk is understood by various characters: the crowd on the ground; the tightrope performer himself; finally, Corrigan – a vice-addicted man who has spent most of his life helping people in need – and a group of grieving mothers, whose stories make up parts of a secondary narrative line, parallel to the walker's. We first depict the reactions in the audience below the walker, realising that it is divided into people against and people for his successful ending. Then, we take the walker's perspective and learn that his reasons for tightrope walking are summed up as "beauty". We point out that his stunt is also described as "beautiful" by Corrigan, at the moment of his death. Implicitly, the reaction of the women who mourn their sons confirms Corrigan's idea of beauty associated with the sky performance. After inferring that for both Corrigan and the walker life equals beauty in many ways, and that death is not necessarily void of beauty, we stress that beauty is not included in the reactions of the walker's direct audience. We offer possible reasons for this absence and explain the impressions of the analysed characters as ordinary, special, or something in between.

Key words: beauty, life, Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin*, New York City, tightrope walking.

1. Introduction

Colum McCann's novel *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) can be defined as a circle of personal perspectives *spinning* towards one central event. In this novel, different characters, whose voices one after another are heard in a chosen sequence, lead the narration in such a direction that, sooner or later, it comes back in time to one umbrella situation or their common connector: New York City, August 1974, a man walking on a tightrope between two newly built Twin Towers.

Some of the leading stories are told by: Ciaran Corrigan, who presents the life and death of his younger brother Corrigan – a generous but vice-addicted Irish monk

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doing an ordinary job in the Bronx and supporting city prostitutes; Claire Soderberg, a housewife from Upper East Side who lost her son in the Vietnam War; Lara, a drug-addled artist; judge Solomon Soderberg, Claire's husband; Gloria, Claire's friend and another grieving mother; Jaslyn, a prostitute's adult daughter; and the tightrope walker,³ whose perspective, in spite of being given a small part of the book, is the only one repeated.

Thus, the narration can be said to develop in two parallel lines: one that follows the man's walk in the sky and the other that guides the readers through New York lives of several other key characters. Throughout the novel, the walker's stunt, spotless and enormously distanced from the ground, is naturally associated with perfection. On the other hand, lives of ordinary people, whose past and present abound in loss, void, and many aspects of fall, present a harsh contrast to infallibility.

In this paper, after acknowledging and briefly analysing New Yorkers' immediate reaction to the walk, we will focus on the way in which the tightrope walker himself explains his own extremely original and dangerous act. More specifically, we will analyse an idea derived from his personal point of view as his supreme argument in favour of tightrope walking – the idea of beauty. Then, we will observe how Corrigan – one of the leading characters from the secondary narrative line – talks or thinks about beauty and in what manner his perspectives are linked to the walker's performance and his views. In the same section, we will examine the standpoint of a group of mothers who mourn their dead sons while commenting on the tightrope performance happening at the same time. Pointing out that these women have more or less unique understanding of the man in the sky, we will show that their impressions are also based on the idea of beauty. In the concluding part, we will attempt to find out whether the idea of beauty can also be associated with the initially analysed people's reactions to the walker's act, and why. Finally, we will derive some explanations of the analysed characters' impressions, based on the difference between the ordinary and the special.

³ The tightrope walker's character, although unnamed, is based on Philippe Petit, a French tightrope walker who actually did the walk on 7 August 1974 (Scurr, 2009). However, even though there are striking similarities between the two (for example, the character's walk is as illegal as it was Petit's (Tucker, 2008)), we do not consider this fact relevant to our paper. We will respect the obvious author's intention to fictionalise the true event by, among other things, leaving his character nameless. Therefore, our analysis of the walker's standpoint will entirely be based on the fictional character and not the real man.

2. An incredible walk and a divided audience

A New York spectacle on an August morning in 1974, showing a man's walk at a great height between the tops of two newly built skyscrapers of the World Trade Centre, makes city people react. As they spot the man while on their way to work, one by one, New Yorkers stop and freeze, fixing their gaze on the black figure above their heads. At first, they refuse to believe that it is actually a human being in the sky. Soon, however, as the walk goes on, the audience's disbelief turns into a stunned reaction:

Those who saw him hushed. [...] It was a silence that heard itself, awful and beautiful. Some thought at first it must have been a trick of the light, something to do with the weather, an accident of shadowfall. Others figured it must 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 [...]. But the longer they watched, the surer they were. [...] Up there, at the height of a hundred and ten stories, utterly still, a dark toy against the cloudy sky. (McCann, 2010: 3)

The sky walk lasts for a significant period of time, forcing the curious crowd of people to watch the man continuously and expect something to happen, wait for an ending. Consequently, as a notable performance unseen before, this walk divides its audience into those who want the man to fall and those who want him to stay on the wire. Within the span of one morning, a tightrope walk is able to show not only how delicate and easily breakable human life is, but also how important or unimportant someone's life could become to other people. As if influenced by a great physical distance between themselves and the walker, some watchers nonchalantly consider the walker a "toy" or an insignificant showman who wastes their busy morning, at the same time making them unable to move and go on with their day. They openly express a wish for his fall, that is his death. Others, emotionally unaffected by the same distance, feel for the man and want him to stay on the wire. One way or another, none of the watchers remains indifferent to the walk. Moreover, the fact that the two types of reactions are so sharply opposite and indicative of their owners' ability or inability to empathise, implicitly testifies to the walk's extraordinariness:

There was a dip before the laughter, a second before it sank in among the watchers, a reverence for the man's irreverence, because secretly that's what so many of them felt – Do it, for chrissake! Do it! [...] while the others [...] felt viable now with disgust for the shouters: they wanted the man to save himself [...]
 [...]

Don't do it! (McCann, 2010: 6, 7)

3. "Beauty" as a reason for walking

The walker's audience, in addition to shouting words of rejection or support, is wondering *who* he is and, as a result, *why* he is doing this:

– there was a chatter among them, [...] did he work there, was he solitary, was he a decoy, was he wearing a uniform [...]? [...] Swearwords went between them, and whispers that there'd been a botched robbery, that he was some sort of cat burglar, that he'd taken hostages, he was an Arab, a Jew, a Cypriot, an IRA man, that he was really just a publicity stunt, a corporate scam, *Drink more Coca-Cola, Eat more Fritos* [...] (McCann, 2010: 5)

However, they are left without an answer. As readers, we do not encounter in the novel many data on the walker either, including his name, as mentioned above. Still, it becomes clear that he is not playing any of the suggested roles, but a role of his own. We realise that a passionate tightrope performer is carrying out a self-imposed task. As for the reasons behind his act, if we observe the whole context from his perspective, we only find "beauty" as "[t]he core reason for it all" (McCann, 2010: 164, emphasis added) and the explanation that:

[w]alking was a divine delight. Everything was rewritten when he was up in the air. New things were possible with the human form. (McCann, 2010: 164)

Despite this lack of information, however, we get thoroughly familiar with the walker's state of mind. Faced with his point of view more than once, we are able to discover what this "beauty" amounts to. We feel his determination, a lack of fear, and a total absence of regret. He does not see his deed as a mockery of the city, people, or authorities. For him, the walk is not a game, or a reckless attempt to prove his skill to the others, or to himself. In a way, it *is* the crown of his tightrope career, and he *is* aware of a certain amount of "arrogance" in it, "but on the wire the arrogance bec[omes] survival" (McCann, 2010: 240). There is no sense of competition or assumed superiority in his intention. What it really means for him is a way of living – living one day out of many days. If life is making effort, struggling, fighting, risking, taking care of oneself and others, endangering oneself and others, and possibly dying, but always walking ahead and (re)creating – this *is* living, in his own manner and in his own chosen place. If life can in any way be beautiful, this is what he wants at least

one morning of his life to be. It is the only possible scenario of this day and he lives it, lives through it, and "along" it. Moreover, unlike many of the people down there, the walker is *enjoying* his day and his walk – the journey from one tower to the other, just as if it were any other city walk and any other part of life, no matter how difficult or painful. While absorbing New York into his body he nearly stops feeling his own presence. This scene, in which the walker seems to become one with the city, or become the city itself, is certainly one of the most beautiful literary examples of *interface*⁴ between the body and the city:

[H]e was pureness moving, and he could do anything he liked. He was inside and outside his body at the same time, indulging in what it meant to belong to the air, no future, no past, and this gave him the offhand vaunt to his walk. He was carrying his life from one side to the other. On the lookout for the moment when he wasn't even aware of his breath. (McCann, 2010: 164)

[...]

It was the only time he could lose himself completely. [...] Get rid of this foot. This toe. This calf. Find the place of immobility. [...] To become anonymous to himself, have his own body absorb him. [...] He took the air of the city into his lungs. (McCann, 2010: 240-241)

However, he is losing himself with a paradoxical intention – so as not to lose balance, that is his own life. The walker is deaf to the city so that he could remain himself – still, perfectly content, and concentrated on his walk:

The shouting, the sirens, the dull sounds of the city. He let them become a white hum. He went for his last silence and he found it: just stood there, in the precise middle of the wire, one hundred feet from each tower, eyes closed, body still, wire gone. (McCann, 2010: 241)

For the man on the wire, living means walking, while walking is pre-imagined as urban. Earlier in the book, we find out that, while he is practising tightrope in non-urban places, thus constantly preparing for the walk between the two towers, the nature and the city merge in the walker's mind, almost becoming the urban one entirely: "a tower at the far end of his vision, a cityline below him" (McCann, 2010: 161). Then, "[h]e [is able to] freeze that image and [...] concentrate his body to the wire" (McCann, 2010: 161). This image seems to anticipate not only the man's walk between Twin Towers, but also the fact that, as we have seen, the walker does make

⁴ *Interface*, as a term denoting a two-way connection between the body and the city, is created by Elizabeth Grosz (See Grosz, 1992).

the city below him *freeze* from his own point of view as well as from the point of view of any common place. Later, after he gets arrested and is safely grounded, the walker "stay[s] still, looking upward, wondering how the onlookers [saw] it: what line of the sky [was] interrupted for them" (McCann, 2010: 243). This "interrupted line of the sky", although it primarily has a spatial reference, also alludes to temporal interruption of the line of life – the walker's own, the onlookers', and New York's life. As if more aware of the fact that he indeed had an audience and that his act was not only dedicated to his personal need but also performed "for" city people, the walker seems to confirm the finished lapse by making another short interruption. This interruption is marked with two literal clicks: he masterfully unlocks his handcuffs for several moments to greet his audience and then shuts them back again. Beauty, therefore, is also the ability to communicate with a city in a rarest possible, almost unbelievable way, make a temporary halt in the everyday life of a metropolis, turn uneventful performing experience into awe-inspiring art, transform a patch of morning sky into an elevated stage, and make dull city streets become a lively auditorium. Interestingly, the acrobat walks several times across the wire and back again, that is, he turns on each edge and makes a few tightrope "circuits". This fact implies that, in his own way, the walker is repeatedly *spinning* towards his final goal – the achievement of beauty.

Unlike the readers, the audience, among whom a journalist asking the walker "Why?" after the performance, does not get the "beauty" reply. For an artist of his calibre, beauty is an obvious, self-sufficient, and silent reason for performing:

[T]he word ["why"] didn't come into it for him. He didn't like the idea of why. The towers were there. That was enough. He wanted to ask the reporter why he was asking him why. (McCann, 2010: 243).

4. Life consists of "small beauties"

What the watchers may not be aware of during the man's walk is the fact that every single life is as uncertain and everyone's walk at least as unsteady as the steps of the tightrope man. Each skilful yet risky movement he makes far up in the sky, followed by disappointment or applauses after his successful staying on the wire, is in fact everyone's reality. It is a projection of life filled with ubiquitous danger, a walk over a thin rope dividing life and death. Therefore, contrary to what the audience may conclude, the tightrope walker is not in any way more endangered than the people on

the firm ground. Moreover, by seeing his temporary yet almost unreal, godlike, superior skill, and perhaps a correctly supposed joy (the walker hops, dances, and his enjoyment must be obvious to the watchers as well as to the readers), the onlookers appear, and unfortunately turn out, small, fragile, transient, mortal in comparison. Corrigan, for example, going through the city with the aim of helping his arrested prostitute friends go out of lockup, most probably sees the walker's skilful survival in the sky, and, as it happens, he later dies of injuries suffered in a traffic accident. Corrigan's final words include a vague testimony that "he saw something *beautiful*" (McCann, 2010: 72, emphasis added). As an ever likeable man whose only mission in life has been to help city cast-offs, even to his own detriment, Corrigan shows that the life of an ordinary man is sensitive and insecure, yet always capable of an amount of happiness. On that day, having spent many hours trying to help Jazzlyn and her mother Tillie to avoid prison, Corrigan fails in driving a vehicle – an everyday skill on the ground. However, he also fails in saving Jazzlyn, a young, careless prostitute (but also a mother of two children), arraigned and tried at the same time as the tightrope walker. Clearly, she has been saved from prison, but the later collision leads the van in which Corrigan drives her back to her children to *spin* "[o]n and on and on" (McCann, 2010: 116) towards her and Corrigan's final undoing. As Ruth Scurr (2009) says, this accident shows that "[t]he body's vulnerability, exposed and temporarily conquered by Petit,⁵ is brought gruesomely back down to earth". However, according to his brother Ciaran, who serves as a presenter of Corrigan's perspective, "[t]he comfort [Corrigan] g[ets] from the hard, cold truth – the filth, the war, the poverty – [is] that life could be capable of *small beauties*" (McCann, 2010: 20, emphasis added). Ciaran is utterly disgusted by New York's moral backwardness and considers the city irretrievably fallen. Still, by interpreting more deeply Corrigan's life (upon watching children play and old wheelchaired people enjoy tiny details of everyday life), even Ciaran realises that there is in this city "something to be recognized and rescued, some joy" (McCann, 2010: 46). A "small beaut[y]" or "some joy" is exactly what marks a segment of Corrigan's last day of life and gets forcefully embedded in the "snapshots of the decaying city" (Mahler, 2009). On his last morning, Corrigan is presented with the tightrope walking scene as one of life's "beauties" in the middle of New York's moral filth, tragic war consequences, and spiritual poverty. The deadly *spinning* of his car also seems to mark a spiritual movement towards a critical stage at which he will

⁵ Scurr interprets the novel acknowledging that the walker is Philippe Petit, which, however, does not make her words less applicable to our analysis.

be able to consider and remember this "beauty" in the clearest possible way. Another life's beauty for Corrigan definitely arises from his way of life: he creates beauty by protecting women stamped as immoral and making it possible for them to feel as human beings. Thus, they enjoy his friendship free of judgement and his modest home free of charge.

In this manner, the walker's act supports Corrigan's belief in "small beauties". On the other hand, Corrigan's impression, enacted at the moment of dying, confirms the tightrope walker's reasoning that "beauty" is the main motive for walking, risking, and living. Moreover, Corrigan suggests that, on a given urban day, out of many beautiful walks, at least one, as by definition, must end in *death* – a state free of choice, but not necessarily void of beauty.

Life's capability of "small beauties" is also confirmed by Jazzlyn's daughter Jaslyn, more than thirty years after the day of her mother's death. Jaslyn narrates that, several years before, she found a tightrope walker's photo showing his 1974 stunt and has since been fascinated by this walk in the sky, often asking herself "what it is that holds the man so high in the air" (McCann, 2010: 325). However, it is not merely admiration that makes this photo "one of her favorite possessions" (McCann, 2010: 326), which she gets framed, always takes with herself, and analyses every now and then. If this were the only true reason, her reaction to the photo would be timeless and free of context. However, unlike her sister Janice, who "want[s] nothing to do with the past" (McCann, 2010: 341), Jaslyn regards the past – her mother's past in particular – as a more or less mysterious intersection of lives and events, which "[s]he want[s] to know more" (McCann, 2010: 341) about. What actually attracts Jaslyn to this picture is the fact that it "was taken on the same day her mother died" (McCann, 2010: 325). Each look at the photo, therefore, serves as a reminder that "such *beauty* [...] occurred at the same time" (McCann, 2010: 325, emphasis added). Death and beauty, it is once again implied, are able to coexist.

Unavoidable at this point is also the perspective of a group of grieving mothers whose sons were killed in the Vietnam War. These several women can be said to represent the tightrope walker's indirect spectators. At the time of his stunt on the wire, the women are having breakfast at Claire Soderberg's home. Admittedly, Marcia, one of the mothers, has witnessed directly a segment of the tightrope performance, while on her way to Claire's, but the rest of them form only mental images of the show, based on Marcia's interpretation. Nevertheless, their reactions seem to be more or less uniform: they fear the ending of the man's walk and are reminded of their own

dead sons. Overwhelmed by her motherly grief and unrealistic hopes, Marcia identifies the walker (in whose vicinity there is a helicopter) with her son, who was killed in a helicopter accident. The other mothers utter exclamations like "Please don't tell me he falls" (McCann 2010: 95), in an attempt to prevent hearing the news of another death. In contrast, Marcia says she "kept darting around corners thinking [she]'d get a better view" (McCann 2010: 98) of the "very brave" (McCann 2010: 97) act that made her think of her boy. Still, she soon stopped as she had no courage to stay and see the ending. However, it was not because she could not stand another death. On the contrary, it was "because if he [stayed] alive it couldn't possibly be [her son]" (McCann 2010: 99). Claire's son, on the other hand, died in Vietnam when four grenades hit a café in which he was sitting. Deeply influenced by the report of a wire walker in the sky, she feels that this man, who has presumably decided to die in such a spectacular, almost artistic way, "[m]ak[es] her own son's [life] so cheap" (McCann 2009: 113). Although the mothers never mention "beauty" when talking about the tightrope performance, it is clear that this is exactly what such a stunt in the middle of their ordinary mo(u)orning amounts to. Despite the fact that it eventually deepens their sorrow as it reopens their wounds, the sky walk is a "small beauty" able to revive their children as well as themselves, and to briefly divert their attention from the endless lament.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed Colum McCann's novel *Let the Great World Spin* from the point of view of beauty as an idea raised in a few characters' interpretations of a New York tightrope performance in 1974 – the novel's central event.

We have briefly depicted the immediate audience's reactions to the sky walk between Twin Towers and acknowledged that the crowd on the ground is divided into people who alienate from the tightrope walker and would have nothing against his film-like death, and people who identify with him and want him to stay on the wire.

Taking the walker's perspective, we have stated that, in spite of the fact that we do not know his name or anything substantial about his life, we are still capable of penetrating his mind. The reasons behind his walking on the wire are defined as "beauty". Walking on the wire is for this man a way of living, while walking between the tops of these two skyscrapers, newly built at the time, is a major challenge. Therefore, in order to make his life beautiful (or one walk of his life), he chooses to spend a morning doing what he loves most. He does not in the least seem afraid of

dying, as he is aware that death is a possible ending of any life's walk. Dying in this way, then, would not be lacking in beauty.

The idea of beauty appears again at the moment of Corrigan's death. Dying of injuries suffered in a car crash, Corrigan remembers seeing "something beautiful", and he most probably refers to the walk in the sky. In this way, as his brother also concludes much earlier, Corrigan is able to recognise "small beauties" in the blackness of everyday life and feel happy about them. The memory of an artistic walk above New York City – a black spot of moral backwardness which has largely swallowed Corrigan as well as people around him – has the power to illuminate his death and even the unsteady walk of his prematurely finished life. Corrigan's mental image of the "beautiful" walk is briefly recalled and a new possibility of linking beauty and death is reopened through Jaslyn's interpretation of a photo at the end of the novel. In addition, an implicit repetition of the idea of beauty is found in the perspective of a group of New York mothers who mourn their sons. The uncertain fate of the man on the wire reminds them of their own tragically killed children. Still, by offering a grain of hope, fascination, admiration, and suspense to the mothers' purposeless lives, the walker's brilliance here as well justifies the name "a small beauty".

Finally, after realising that beauty is repeatedly associated in the novel with the tightrope walker's stunt, we are now tempted to go back to Section 2 and ask the following: is beauty also included in the reactions expressed by the man's direct, on-the-spot audience? Unfortunately, reminded of the audience's tense dilemma over who the walker may be, and of their impatience followed by a wish for him to fall or fears for the man's safety, we have to admit that they do not recognise the aestheticism of the tightrope stunt. In truth, the applause after the successfully ended performance is definitely a result of admiration for great skill. Still, considering the audience's comments during the walk, the honoured skill seems to refer only to the skill at daring to do the walk and surviving, and not at performing *per se*. Obviously, it takes an effort to see beauty in outwardly dangerous, frightening, or fatal situations. One has to be special in some way to be capable of this (unless one is looking at such beauty in a photo). Indeed, the tightrope walker and Corrigan can be said to be special. Possessing extreme characteristics each in his own way and living a life frequently unfathomable to others, the walker and Corrigan are different from the ordinary crowd. They both seem not to be "quite of this world", which is a phrase used by Tim Adams (2009) to describe Corrigan. Once the person falls into this category, they understand that beauty is an omnipresent ingredient of life, provided that they are prepared to

search for it everywhere. Once they are able to detect it intact in every experience, beauty becomes their sole reason for living. Ordinary New Yorkers are unable to think about the walker in terms other than the black-and-white distinction between life and death, in which case life is good and possibly beautiful, while death is bad and unpleasant. In contrast, for the walker as well as for Corrigan, there are causes higher than their own remaining alive. In the walker's case, these are beauty, art, and challenge; in Corrigan's case, these are humanity, protection of people, and unconditional friendship. In this philosophy, death is also part of life. As such, it is plausibly beautiful, even if only fed on a memory of beauty. Within this aesthetics, art and life need no "why".

Inside the difference between the ordinary and the special, the mothers' reaction to the walk seems to stand somewhere in between. Having outlived their own children, they belong neither to this world nor to the other one; their tragic experience is neither usual nor quite rare; they can neither ignore nor enjoy the tightrope show in the sky. It is obvious that the women recognise human perfection achieved at a significant distance from common lives. However, just like the narration itself, whose secondary-line stories are constantly *spinning* towards the first-line event but always remain overshadowed by its dominance, the mothers are forever *spinning* (or "darting around corners") towards an ideal of beauty only to find themselves looking at its minimised image high above their reality and beyond their existence.

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