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"In Difficulty is Ecstasy": Physical Experience at the Limits in Colum McCann's *Dancer* and *Let the Great World Spin*

Lara Delage-Toriel

"In Difficulty is Ecstasy"
(McCann 2003: 99)

- 1 "Words power the punch," states Colum McCann (2012: Foreword), who believes in a natural affinity between writing and boxing — as if words were fuel that might better propel movement into being and make its impact all the more palpable.¹ In both *Dancer* (2003) and *Let the Great World Spin* (2009),² McCann puts this creed into practice by staging physical performance at its most extreme: the former novel offers indeed a fictional portrait of Rudolf Nureyev, one of the 20th century's most gifted dancers, whilst the latter revolves around Philippe Petit's 1974 tightrope-walking exploit between the World Trade Center towers. Conversely, both these novels make it quite obvious that the writer's own performance is energized and shaped by physical experience, be it at the level of a character's heightened perceptions and bodily awareness, or on the larger scale of a narrative structured like a body, each part being interconnected and innervated by a central event (the tightrope walk) or character (Nureyev).
- 2 This essay is part of an ongoing inquiry into the possibility and usefulness of envisaging a semiotization of the body, along with, or leading to, a somatization of story, in the wake of the theories propounded by Peter Brooks in *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*. Drawing from Brooks' notion that the body is "a site of signification — the place for the inscription of stories — and itself a signifier, a prime agent in narrative plot and meaning" (Brooks 1993: 5-6), I wish to explore the ways in which McCann makes the body signify, particularly when it is pushed to its limits. This will lead me to investigate McCann's politics *vis-à-vis* the reader and its possible

repercussions: how do we participate in this signifying process? How may our psychosomatic and empathetic responses affect our position as critics?

The Dynamic of the Kaleidoscope: Mc Cann's Narrative Kinæsthetics³

- 3 One of the most striking features of both novels is their kaleidoscopic structure, one in which the narrative is not taken in charge by a single prevailing narrative voice but by a rather heterogeneous cluster of focal agents, comparable to the spokes of a wheel rotating around a central axis. In both cases, this nexus is enabled by a non-fictional figure, but McCann shows less interest in the hard facts of Rudolf Nureyev or Philippe Petit's lives, than in the way in which these focal agents perceive and are affected by them.⁴ As a matter of fact, Petit's identity is only given in the paratext of *Let the Great World Spin*; the author seems to have purposefully withheld the name from the novel itself, always referring to him as the tightrope walker or funambulist, and cutting out the actual scene of his trial, in which his name would have been most likely mentioned. McCann does allow for more biographical details in *Dancer*, but there again, he deliberately omits any information about the dancer's birth or his death; Nureyev's first entrance and final exit are both dance steps, a six-year-old's squatting dance and a forty-nine-year-old's pirouette. The latter figure is emblematic of the kaleidoscopic structure of the two novels: a chorus of characters spins around an object that itself is intensely mobile, and these characters all spin together, yet each in his or her own way, the stories that shape the two novels.⁵
- 4 Colum McCann himself has acknowledged the appropriateness of this optical metaphor for his writing of *Dancer*: "each individual story has its own sort of kaleidoscopic moment, its own crystal, if you will. You look at it, you shine the light through it and you see it fractured several different ways. But the accumulation of those things can tell a sort of biography." (Maudet 2014). I would like to suggest a more dynamic modality of the kaleidoscope, in keeping with the shifting viewpoints that characterize both novels, and in the wake of Henri Bergson's intuitions about the relationship between the movement of one's body and the evolving perceptions of one's environment:

Voici un système d'images que j'appelle ma perception de l'univers, et qui se bouleverse de fond en comble pour des variations légères d'une certaine image privilégiée, mon corps. Cette image occupe le centre ; sur elle se règlent toutes les autres; à chacun de ses mouvements tout change, comme si l'on avait tourné un kaléidoscope. (Bergson 1896: 10)
- 5 Contemporary cognitive science has confirmed the correlation between physical movement and sensorial stimulation, particularly when it is visual.⁶ The narrative dynamic of McCann's two kaleidoscopic novels is also worth being considered in the light of a body's motions and one's perceptions of this motion, what I call his narrative kinæsthetics. Indeed, both *Dancer* and *Let the Great World Spin* confer a central position upon the moving body, both as theme and as formal matrix.
- 6 One of the most obvious reasons for this centrality, thematically speaking, is the fact that both Rudolf Nureyev and Philippe Petit were extraordinary physical performers. As fictional heroes they consequently elicit intense responses on their spectators' part: the tightrope walk seems to arrest time, it impels all its chance witnesses in New York

City to suddenly stop whatever they are doing, making them "pull in their breath all at once" (LGWS 7); this simultaneity has, in turn, an immediate spatial effect: "the air felt suddenly shared". They thus experience a moment of collective sublime, in which "awful and beautiful" (LGWS 3) are paradoxically combined.⁷ The power of the performer's impact is also manifest in *Dancer*, insofar as Nureyev, by his mere presence in a room, is able to charge its space with a magnetic field: "there is a sudden sense of magnetism in the room, Rudi seems attached to everyone" (D 245). When his own mother beholds him on the stage, she "leans forward [...], awed and slightly frightened," barely recognizing in this dancing creature "devouring space" (D 107) her own flesh and blood. Interestingly enough, both performers' audiences have their "necks craned" (D 198, LGWS 3, 185), a very physical token of the way in which the audience's inertia is disrupted, their emotion driving them to bodily reach out towards the performer.⁸ The body's response here bespeaks a deeper psychological and spiritual displacement, as is revealed by Yulia when at the end of *Dancer* she muses, "something about him released people from the world, tempted them out" (D 334). Likewise, the funambulist suddenly removes Marcia from her humdrum mortality when she catches sight of him high up in the sky on her way to Manhattan and construes this celestial vision as an apparition of her late son, a pilot who fell in Vietnam. As long as she can entertain that vision in her mind, fix in time and space the figure's sheer dance with death, she is able to pretend her son never fell.⁹

- 7 "What sort of ontological glue" (LGWS 325) holds the tightrope walker so high in the air, often wonders another character, thirty-two years after facts she only witnessed indirectly, by dint of a photograph. The persistence of the question, the fact that this character, Jaslyn, values to such a degree the photographic trace of the walk that coincided with the day of her mother's death, indicates that this "glue", or magnet, also joins the destinies of the characters, shaping them into significant patterns. Thus Marcia's encounter with the funambulist's exploit is rendered itself as a storytelling feat, riveting its audience to such an extent that they no longer notice the peripheral action of their hostess, Claire. The power of Marcia's story is further highlighted by the fact that in this section, Claire is the focal agent, and the reader thus made privy to her frustration at being eclipsed. Her limited point of view also enables the narrative to gather tension as Marcia edges her way towards the question mark of the funambulist's fate. The final stretch of her story waxes lyrical as it takes on the form of a call-and-response gospel, with the listeners echoing her words like a chorus:

— Because I didn't want to know if the poor boy fell.
 — Ah-huh, says Gloria.
 — I just didn't want to hear him dead.
 — I hear you, ah-huh.
 Gloria's voice, as if she's at a church service. The rest of them nodding slowly while the clock on the mantelpiece ticks.
 — I couldn't stand the mere thought of it.
 — No, ma'am.
 — And if he didn't fall...
 — If he didn't, no...?
 — I didn't want to know.
 — Ah-huhn, you got it. (LGWS 99)

- 8 The narrating voice here remains in the background, its brief intrusion ever so slight — notice the lack of conjugated verbs in either of the two sentences, to avoid weighing the scene down with grammatical sedateness. By bringing to the fore the characters'

vocal communion and its spontaneous outpour, it allows for a more immediate connexion between the reader and the text: the women's empathy infuses our own inner reading voice. The strength of that empathy is ultimately reinforced by the reflex response of recalcitrant Claire, whose voice had remained outside the chorus and which now gushes forth, at first with paratactic urgency:

All of it like a slam in the chest. So immediate. At all of their coffee mornings, it had always been distant, belonging to another day [...], but this was now and real, and the worst thing was that they didn't know the walker's fate, [...] or maybe maybe maybe there was another maybe, maybe. (LGWS 99)

- 9 I have omitted a string of hypotheses that display the variety of uncertainties with which Claire is confronted. Yet from all these negations and aporias, from the pain of loss and the dread of death, emerges an affirmation, that of a deeply shared feeling.
- 10 It is significant that Claire's empathy is first conveyed as a bodily experience, thanks to the simile of the slam in her chest; indeed McCann himself considers the empathetic virtues of literature in terms of the body, affirming that "the greatest thing about fiction is that we become alive in bodies not our own" (Lennon 2012: 104).¹⁰ Elsewhere he writes, "if we can step into another body out of this place into somebody else's place, then we're making a human leap that seems to me entirely necessary." (Maudet 2014). By using the first person plural, he suggests that this human leap relies on the fictional impetus the writer and the reader jointly whisk into being.¹¹ In both *Dancer* and *Let the Great World Spin*, this ability to step into someone else's body is encouraged by the fact that their central protagonists make extremely bold steps out of the mundane, out of frames set up by society, thereby creating with their bodies a new creed.

Stepping Out, Making a Statement with One's Body

- 11 Both tightrope walker and dancer demonstrate an absolute commitment to their art — "Live inside the dance" (D 99) is one of the injunctions Nureyev writes to himself. The same holds true for Petit, for whom "the only place he was entirely himself, anyway, was high on the wire" (LGWS 239). Notice the play on "high," as if to hint that this 'trip' affords him an ecstasy as fulfilling as that of a chemical drug, except that his body is not reduced to passive consumption, nor to an oblivion of self, but is on the contrary endowed with a hyper-awareness and self-affirmation that is in keeping with David Le Breton's reflexion on the Ancient rite of the *ordalium*, which he associates with modern forms of risk-taking: "la longue ordalie sur le fil du rasoir prodigue enfin à l'individu une réponse ferme à la question redoutable de sa propre existence." (Le Breton 2002: 82). *Ordalia* were trials that placed the individual in an extreme physical situation, an 'ordeal', the outcome of which was supposedly fixed by God or the gods, who were thus made to pass judgment when a case was deemed too challenging for a mere human tribunal. Risk-taking, in its extreme form, is a modern way for individuals to impose this *ordalium* upon themselves when they are at odds with the established norms of their society; their survival is thus a way of validating their right to exist, but also of lending legitimacy to their marginality.¹²
- 12 Thus, when McCann ends *Let the Great World Spin*'s first chapter with these three words, "Out he went" (LGWS 7), surrounding them with a typographic blank that turns the page into a fragment of the vast expanse of sky he is about to cross, the stakes of each step become indeed very high. This exit resounds with all the other exits that have

made it possible to fully live inside this act and let "the cable become his spinal cord" (LGWS 160). This total immersion is also very palpable in an outstanding piece from *Dancer*:

Eight perfect entrechats-dix, a thing of wonder, the audience silent now, no body anymore no thought no awareness this must be the moment the others call god as if all the doors are open everywhere leading to all other open doors nothing but open doors forever no hinges no frames no jambs no edges no shadows this is my soul in flight born weightless born timeless a clock spring broken he could stay like this forever and he looks out into the haze of necklaces eyeglasses cufflinks shirtfronts and knows he owns them. (D 199)

- 13 Gradually divested of any form of punctuation, the sentence mimics the dancer's emancipation from rules, gathering momentum as the stream of his consciousness lapses into a Whitmanesque celebration of the soul unyoked by social and aesthetic strictures, as exemplified by the string of negations and privative prefixes.¹³ The instability of the focalization, oscillating between close-up first-person and a more remote third-person point of view, seems to corroborate the dancer's elusive quality, his body and being in mid-air, flitting in and out of focus. Having grazed what people call god, the ordalic maverick is justified in his decision to 'step out' of social norms, for the audience is also a tribunal, one that he must win over in order to survive and assert his radical autonomy. Another audience has to be seduced, and that is McCann's readership. Each reader is free to be affected in his or her own individual way, but my feeling is that this passage is all the more enticing for offering an insight, seldom given elsewhere in this novel, into the dancer's subjective experience of grace. Moreover, the looseness of the syntactic warp and weft leaves space for the reader's own somatic imagination to roam at leisure and feel some of the elation that comes from untethered movement. In these instances, McCann's grip on the reader's body is such that the more critical mind, which may at times remain aloof from the protagonist and consider him too arrogant, too self-engrossed, now yields to the pure energy of the moment.
- 14 Both Petit and Nureyev are perpetually defying the natural laws of gravity, but in so doing, they are also breaking away from the human laws that condition their societies. This is particularly manifest in the case of Nureyev, who is educated in the coercive context of the Soviet Union, where any expression of individualism is reprehensible. His defection in Paris — a very literal act of transgression if one considers the term's etymology (*transgredi* meaning to step across, go beyond) — turns him into an enemy of his own country, a renegade who is officially disowned by his father. On a less dramatic scale, Petit is also a criminal, since his tightrope walk between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center was illegal — its meticulous preparation is appropriately compared to that of a "bank raid" (LGWS 163) — and it is doubly so. The funambulist is indeed liable for reckless endangerment and criminal trespass, which he is accordingly charged with, although Judge Soderberg sentences him lightly (a penny per floor). If he gets away with his crime, it is because the judge, whose own son fell during the Vietnam War, cannot entirely condemn an act that he admires, not so much for its athletic boldness as for its symbolic significance: "it wasn't just an offhand walk. He was making a statement with his body, and if he fell, well, he fell — but if he survived he would become a monument, not carved in stone or encased in brass, but one of those New York monuments that made you say: *Can you believe it?*" (LGWS 249). For the 21st century reader, this particular walk is all the more eloquent a monument, in the etymological sense of *monumentum* ('something that reminds,' a 'tomb or memorial

structure') since it inevitably points to the unbelievable 9/11 events that turned the Twin Towers into a mass graveyard as well as a memorial space. McCann makes this link quite explicit in his afterword, declaring that "the tightrope walk was an act of creation that seemed to stand in direct defiance to the act of destruction twenty-seven years later." (LGWS 359).

- 15 In a sense, then, the novelist uses his characters' bodies to make a statement that is both artistic and political, carving out a utopian space for human beings to move into, at least imaginatively.¹⁴ Nureyev's request to his sister makes this clear: "tell Mother that her son dances to improve the world." (D 167). It is quite likely that in this instance the dancer is voicing McCann's own desire to counter reality's destructive forces thanks to the fictional pursuit of beauty, something that both dancer and funambulist achieve to perfection by pushing their bodies to the limits, making their "movements defy possibility" (D 193). Of Petit's driving motivation, we are indeed told that "the core reason for it all was beauty" (LGWS 164), whilst Nureyev admits to his lover, Erik Bruhn, "I want to make a statement about beauty" (D 216). While the latter claim is met with a cynical rebuke by Erik, who does not believe in dance's moral impact on society, the way in which McCann comments upon Nureyev's final pirouette leaves little doubt about the faith he holds in the power of art: "that hop is for me one of the most sacred moments of his life. [...] In the face of all that horrible human evidence, there is still possibility that you can create beauty." (Maudet 2014). It is therefore unsurprising to find a very similar observation in the final chapter of *Let the Great World Spin*, when in 2006, Jaslyn muses over the photograph of the tightrope walk, deeming it an "enduring moment [...] still capable of myth in the face of all other evidence" (LGWS 325).
- 16 Since Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, and even before, with the Greeks' attribution of the poet's inspiration to the Muses, a number of critical approaches have steered clear of literary interpretations giving too much onus to the writer's biographical person, hence Wimsatt and Beardsley's caveat against intentional fallacy (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954). My own contention is that a literary text is not autotelic and that a writer like McCann puts much of himself, as a person, in the elaboration of his work, with varying degrees of subjective involvement. Thus direct correlations can be made between the designs of the main protagonists and their creator when the latter, referring to his writing, presents himself as an "explorer" (Maudet 2014) "stepping out into new territory" (Santel 2013). Yet the fact that his characters may partly assume the role of fictional alter egos or mouthpieces does not necessarily guarantee the success of their performance. One might even object that the ploy is too obvious and tax McCann with covert didacticism, but also the present reader with a lack of critical objectivity. In the final leg of this essay, I will focus on the role of feet and hope to show how such pitfalls may be avoided by giving closer consideration to the interdependence of semiotic and somatic experiences when we are in the process of reading.

A Matter of Footing: McCann's Feet, from Metonymy to Hypertrophy

- 17 In both *Dancer* and *Let the Great World Spin*, feet recur as a motif bearing much weight, whether they are designated figuratively or literally. The former novel's opening paragraph limns a devastating tableau of the Second World War, tellingly representing its toll through the loss of the soldiers' toes and closing with the following aphorism:

"they [the soldiers] could tell a man's future by the way he walked" (D 7).¹⁵ In the same work, a significant juxtaposition is made when President Kennedy receives Nureyev in the Oval Office: "he looked at my feet, said I was a symbol of pure political courage." (D 183). It seems hardly likely that the President should feel too abashed to look at his host straight in the eye when paying him this compliment. No, we may rather surmise that the juxtaposition is meant to indicate that Kennedy holds Nureyev's feet responsible for this political role. This interpretation is all the more plausible since, earlier on in the novel, a Soviet officer comes to see Yulia and informs her that right after his defection, "they threw glass at [Nureyev] in Paris" in an attempt to "rip his feet open" (D 150). Evidently, this man's feet are a momentous issue within the context of the Cold War. Yet even within the boundaries of the Soviet bloc, this officer must beware of the ground he treads, since "one foot wrong could have an effect on the rest of his life too, his wife, his children, his apartment" (D 152).

- 18 In his description of the funambulist's first steps between the two Towers, McCann affords us a very concrete understanding of the foot's crucial importance in maintaining both one's balance and one's life:

One foot on the wire — his better foot, the balancing foot. First he slid his toes, then his sole, then his heel. The cable nested between his big and second toes for grip. His slippers were thin, the soles made of buffalo hide [...] He felt for the curve of the cable with the arch and then sole of his feet. A second step and a third. (LGWS 164)

- 19 Each detail is of importance, including the fact that the slippers are thin, their soles a second skin. These "slippers" are, of course, an additional tangential point between the two performers (the judge even designates them as "ballet slippers" [LGWS 265]). In both novels, slippers and feet naturally take on a metonymic function. Thus people's memory of the funambulist's feat is crystallized by three adjectives — "slipperd, dark-footed, agile" (LGWS 242) — and when in *Dancer* Tom, the shoemaker from Covent Garden, makes ballet shoes (rather than "slippers," an American term he dislikes), he not only "think[s] of [him]self as the foot" (D 122) but is also able to imagine the life of the individual who has ordered the shoe: "and just by the sketches alone he intuits the life of this foot, raised in barefoot poverty and — from the unusual wideness of the bone structure — barefoot on concrete rather than grass [...] then a great violence done by excessive training, all hard angles, but a remarkable strength [...]" (D 125). Tom has never met Nureyev, and yet, by the mere observation of his foot's anatomic features, he is able to trace the main lines of the dancer's life, those traits that make him unique, among which the "tremendous violence committed on the body" which first attracted McCann to the topic of dance (McCann 2003). *Dancer* includes six pages on the art of the shoemaker, a painstaking exploration that might remind one of the extensive description that is given of glove-making in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1998). In both cases, what shines through is the absolute dedication of the craftsmen to their art, but in *Dancer*, the presentation of Tom's craft clearly serves McCann's empathetic interest. For instance, when describing the damage that the shoemaker must repair, he is making us vicariously sense the various abuses that are made to the body by professional dancers — "the pounding, the destruction, not to mention the tiny incisions, the surgery [...]" (D 122). The worker's dedication thus grants the reader a close, intimate view of a part of the body to which we may all relate. Indeed, the violence made to the foot is something that any person has felt at least once in his or her life, be it a blister, a sprained ankle, an ingrown toenail or a jammed toe. Like

Whitman's grass in *Leaves of Grass*, feet are a common denominator, a democratic motif that grounds McCann's narrative in a potentially shared somæsthetic¹⁶ experience.

- 20 By insisting on feet, shoes and slippers, and thus yoking together physical and stylistic hypertrophy, he seems to invite his readers to literally put themselves into his characters' shoes. Thus, when Gloria walks with her opera shoes, which are a half-size too big, her pain is made extremely palpable by dint of successive strokes, each reference burrowing deeper into her wound, her shoes first "cutting the back of [her] heels," then "cut[ting] a little trench in [her] heels", "each step [digging] a little deeper" (LGWS 306), the wound becoming more acute with "a small blade of pain sho[oting] through [her] each time [she] step[s]," (LGWS 307), until Claire eventually finds her with a little barrier of blood [that has] bubbled up over the edge of [her] heel" (LGWS 308). We are invited deeper into the characters' intimacy as they step into the bathroom and Claire's caring, motherly gestures drive Gloria to somehow feel "that she wanted to dry my feet with her hair", a compassionate crossing of bodily boundaries that may remind one of Sheona's desire to take the cold blue feet of her ailing sister in her mouth while she massages them at the end of "Sisters" (McCann 1993: 22). Claire then goes on to lend Gloria her slippers — perhaps those same slippers in which she ran out into the street on that stormy night, when she discovered Marcia's ad inviting veteran moms to gather. And it is these same slippers that Gloria is wearing when she finally decides to "ste[p] out" (LGWS 322) and save the two orphaned daughters of a prostitute. At this point, the narrative suggests that Gloria is somehow unable to recognize her own body, as though Claire's slippers had endowed her with magic powers: "I stepped out. It didn't seem to me that I was in the same body anymore. I had a quickness. I stepped off the pavement and onto the road. I was still in Claire's slippers" (LGWS 322). This last example further illustrates the importance of interconnection in the novel, since feet, shoes and slippers are very concrete embodiments of the way in which characters coming from very different walks of life are made to converge. ¹⁷It is no coincidence that McCann chooses to foreground the semiotic load of the corporeal during the very event which he himself deems "the core image of the novel," "when two little girls emerge from a Bronx housing complex and get rescued by strangers"(LGWS 363). Indeed, if the reader who has been following Gloria's trajectory engages somatically with the narrative, then the strong symbolism with which these slippers are finally invested will probably not be interpreted as a merely intellectual and abstract contrivance. In other words, our sensory response to the character's experience helps us mentally converge with the writer's semiotic design, inasmuch as mental representation operates in a manner that is similar to direct perceptual stimulation. For cognitive scientists Garbarini and Adenzato, "representation does not consist in a duplication of reality, but in the virtual activation of perceptual and motor procedures — the same procedures that, when actually executed, allow us to recognize objects and interact with them" (Garbarini and Adenzato 2004: 101).

- 21 May one conclude that pain and empathy necessarily go hand in hand in these narratives, as a typical illustration of the mirror neuron theory propounded by neuroscience?¹⁸ One last example might nuance our findings. The final chapter of *Dancer* features a terse clinical account of Nureyev's foot ailments:

Rond de jambe par terre to see range of motion of joints. Severe restriction. Erratic rolling. Hop is acutely pronounced and bones are jammed. Left foot can hardly brush the floor. Acute pain when metatarsals are touched, even when foot is held at

central shaft. Key is to move metatarsals like fan, twist from side to side, effleurage gently between rays. Drain blood blisters and immediately remove welt between second and third digit on left foot. (D 314)

- 22 This crude representation of a god's physical decline might be compared to the Crucifixion in Grünewald's altarpiece, one of European tradition's most remarkably realistic evocations of the Passion of Christ; in both cases, "depiction is pinned to the pain suffered," in the words of art critic John Berger.¹⁹ But whereas Grünewald painstakingly reduced Christ to his ailing fleshiness in order to spur the spectator's empathy, McCann's technical jargon and paratactic perfunctoriness create instead a distance between the reader and the dancer's plight. The latter's unsentimental preoccupations, and the lack of pathos with regards to a situation that can only be extremely trying, lends this hypertrophy of the foot an unreal quality. Despite the intimacy offered by the form of the diary, the narrative does not actually incite the reader to coincide with the character, be it in terms of sensations or emotions. Even in pain, even physically vulnerable and limited, Nureyev somehow remains a legend, a monument that is both monstrous and sacred.

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- 23 In one of the few diary sections in *Dancer*, Rudi notes that his masseur is able to tell the plot of whatever the dancer is reading "just by running his hands along [his] spine" (D 220). This is an eloquent statement about the ways in which the meanings of words may write themselves onto the flesh, into the reading body's frame. Likewise, the challenge of articulating the non-verbal art of dance opens fresh possibilities for the fiction-writer: words are shaped into dancing bodies as he choreographs them on the page.²⁰ Within the boundaries of this essay, by studying notably the function and impact of transgressive performance along with heightened somæsthetic experience, I have attempted to show how Colum McCann's writing engages the human body in the literary process, both as sensitive and sense-making entity. Although readers' responses may widely vary according to a whole set of contextual criteria — at once social, biological and æsthetic — my contention has been that the anchorage of his fiction in intense physical experience is a powerful motor not only for creativity but also for intersubjectivity, given the ontological continuity that exists between mind and body.²¹ This approach thus invites a shift in the way in which scholars sometimes perform literary criticism, a practice that, owing to its inherent logocentrism, tends to view with indifference, suspicion, or a certain condescension non-discursive somatic experience. Words do power the punch, but they are also powered by the punch.

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NOTES

1. As fate ironically has it, McCann was himself the victim of a violent physical assault just two years later. In his victim-impact statement, he describes its traumatic impact as "a series of punches behind the punch." The first piece of fiction he published since this assault, *Thirteen Ways of Looking*, has been hailed as an "assertive counterpunch, in nonviolent form" (Collins-Hughes 2015).
2. Page references to these novels will be made using respectively the following abbreviations: D and LGWS.
3. "Kinæsthetics is the study of body motion, and of the perception (both conscious and unconscious) of one's own body motions" (Hatch and Maietta 2003: 5).
4. As Eóin Flannery has discussed, such appropriation of historical representation may be related to Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction" (2011: 134-40).
5. In her study of *Dancer*, Susan Cahill links this choral structure to the type of "choreographic text" advocated by Jacques Derrida, one that is able to subvert monological discourse (Cahill 2011: 146; Cahill 2012: 99).
6. See in particular Francisco Varela: "Even a change in posture, while preserving the same identical sensorial stimulation, alters the neuronal responses in the primary visual cortex, demonstrating that even the seemingly remote motorium is in resonance with the sensorium" (1991: 93).
7. Paradoxically, because philosophers of the sublime — Kant, Burke, Schopenhauer — consider that the beautiful conveys an aesthetic experience that is less intense than, or at least different from the sublime, which provokes at once awe, terror and attraction.
8. In *This Side of Brightness*, McCann also associates dance with cranes, which, both as birds and machines, form a recurrent symbol of fragile equipoise, arrested time and lofty grace. For more on this, see John F. Healy (2000).
9. As Marcia explains, "because if he was alive it couldn't possibly be Mike Junior." (LGWS 99)
10. An almost identical expression is given to the virtue of love in *Let the Great World Spin* when Adelita, Corrigan's beloved, reflects that "the thing about love is that we come alive in bodies not our own." (LGWS 275). This could lead one to infer that love, literature and empathy are intimately bound in McCann's mind.
11. Sheila Jones also encourages such a parallel when borrowing one of the expressions used by Lara to evoke her physical experience of the car crash in *Let the Great World Spin*: "author and reader, connecting with each other and with their cocreated fictional world, together inhabit a 'body we didn't know' [...]. The bridging of distance plays an important role in the narrative spacing of McCann's novel and also, I would suggest, in the event of the novel itself, in which as readers we too can rescue and be rescued by strangers" (Jones 2014: 99). Jones's reference to the

body remains metaphorical as it does not aim to exploit the potential somatic implications of the parallel, yet it has some bearing on the issue of empathy that is developed in this article.

12. For more on this topic, see Le Breton (1991). An interview of the real Philippe Petit in *The Daily Beast* confirms the parallel with the *ordalium*. Petit indeed refers to himself as an alien, a man totally at odds with modern society (Haden-Guest 2014).

13. "Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" exclaims Walt Whitman in Section 33 of *Song of Myself* (Whitman 1990).

14. As E. Flannery writes, the fact that the tightrope walker "demands an alternative use of the body in space, an alternative orientation of the body in the public space" is "central to the utopian imagining of this novel" (2011: 215).

15. This truth is implicitly echoed towards the end of the novel, when Nureyev's declining fortunes are conveyed by his hobbling progress down the beach in Brighton (D 310).

16. Also known as "somatosensory": sensory perception of bodily feelings like touch, pain, position of the limbs, etc.

17. For another useful study of this anatomic motif, considering other examples, and as part of the overriding theme of coincidence in *Let the Great World Spin*, see Sophie Vallas (2014).

18. Neuroscience explains the link between empathy, mirror neurons and represented pain by the fact that the activation of mirror neurons does not necessarily require direct perception: semantic understanding and imaginative reconstruction will trigger an equivalent neuromotor simulation.

19. John Berger (2003: 326).

20. I am borrowing her an analogy made by McCann in the above-cited interview with A. Hemon: "for *Dancer* I started placing words together, choreographing them on the page until it seemed to me that they sounded right."

21. This notion of ontological continuity, or unity, was developed by philosopher John Dewey, who accordingly coined the neologism "body-mind".

ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on two novels by Colum McCann, *Dancer* (2003) and *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) that place the body in extreme conditions, be it the dancing body of Rudolf Nureyev, the tightrope-walking body of Philippe Petit or the bodies of other characters when pushed out of their comfort zones. By reflecting upon the function and impact of transgressive physical feats along with the heightened somæsthetic experience that is undergone by the novels' characters and readers, this study aims to show how Colum McCann's writing engages the human body in the literary process, both as sensitive and sense-making entity. To this end, it brings into play different scientific approaches: Peter Brooks on the correlation between semiotization of body and somatization of story, Henri Bergson on the relationship between the body's position and its varying perceptions, David Le Breton on the social meaning of risk-taking, as well as various cognitive scientists on the mechanisms at work in kinaesthetic experience.

Cet article se concentre sur deux romans de Colum McCann, *Dancer* (2003) et *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) qui placent le corps dans des conditions extrêmes, qu'il s'agisse du corps dansant de Rudolf Nouriev, du corps funambulesque de Philippe Petit ou du corps d'autres personnages poussés hors de leur zone de confort. Cette réflexion sur la fonction et l'impact d'exploits

physiques d'ordre transgressif et des expériences somesthésiques intenses vécues par le personnage de fiction et le lecteur, se donne pour objet de mettre en évidence la manière dont l'écriture de Colum McCann engage le corps humain dans le processus littéraire comme entité à la fois sensible et créatrice de sens. A ces fins, cette étude met en jeu diverses approches scientifiques, notamment la corrélation entre sémiotisation du corps et somatisation du récit chez Peter Brooks, le rapport entre positionnement corporel et perception chez Henri Bergson, l'enjeu social de la prise de risque chez David Le Breton, sans oublier l'apport de la recherche en sciences cognitives dans l'analyse de l'expérience kinesthésique.

INDEX

Mots-clés: McCann Colum, empathie, intersubjectivité, kinesthésie narrative, ordalie, implication somatique, perception, sémiotisation, corps, métonymie, expérience somesthésique
Keywords: McCann Colum, empathy, intersubjectivity, narrative kinæsthetics, ordalium, somatic engagement, perception, semiotization, body, metonymy, somaesthetic experience

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