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Études de Stylistique Anglaise

Waterscapes and liminality: a stylistic analysis of Colum McCann's spatialities of rebirth¹

Marion Bourdeau

Introduction

- ¹ One of the major themes in Colum McCann's fiction is displacement. His characters are essentially mobile, which has major consequences on their sense of identity. Some of these intimate transformations unfold in what I call waterscapes, which are specific, deeply in-between spatialities infused with strong symbolic and liminal power while being closely associated with the notion of suspension. They play a crucial diegetic role since they act as both environments for and factors of new beginnings and rebirth, mainly due to the symbolic power of water. This newfound dynamism is echoed in the author's energetic style, which displays characteristics that are specific to the writing of the waterscapes and of these phenomena. The purpose of this paper is twofold: it aims to examine how rebirth, diegetically speaking, stems from the connections between characters, spatiality, suspension and liminality. It also attempts to identify the main stylistic features of the writing of these spatialities of rebirth. In order to do so, it first describes and defines the waterscapes pictured in the texts under study, focusing on their porosity. It then analyses how, as indicated by their specific rhythms, they are related to suspension and liminality, which allow for rebirth. At last, it examines how rebirth is also present within the very fabric of the text, which includes stylistic choices leading to a sense of renewed narrative dynamism.

McCann's spatialities of rebirth: porous waterscapes

Waterscapes defined

- 2 In literary studies, the word *seascape* is often found to refer to maritime landscapes. Epistemologically speaking, it evokes a tradition linked to myth and to the tensions between the universal and the particular:

Seascape provides human beings with a blueprint, which is one of the most compelling stimuli for all their faculties. Responding to it, poets of maritime countries bring into it the scope of their own private mythologies, which simultaneously turn out to archetypically transgress national and natural borders. (Kruczkowska 2012, 79-80)

- 3 Seascapes are usually associated with particular rites and rhythms which are factors of liminality: "Against the sense of permanence and geological time, seascapes also open onto a more versatile, subterranean perception of time. The ebb and flow movement, as well as the light, illustrate movement and change" (Mianowski 2017, 125). McCann's fiction does feature some seascapes, which indeed reflect the potentially transformative dynamic tension that characterises these spatialities according to Mianowski. The latter indeed argues (2017, 124²) that seascapes are linked to the two contradictory states of permanence and metamorphosis and, as such, challenge the notions of frames and boundaries. These attributes are relevant to the study of the spatialities pictured in McCann's texts; however, so as to be more comprehensive and accurate, the term which will be used here is not *seascapes* but *waterscapes*. Although there are a few occurrences of this term in pictorial criticism, it is mainly resorted to in the fields of urban and spatial planning. It is used here as an extension of the term *seascape* – with all the properties it encompasses, as defined above – that makes it possible to refer to all sorts of landscapes featuring water, be they the sea, the ocean, rivers or lakes. Such waterscapes can be found throughout McCann's fictional work, but they are most prominently featured in four texts, which will be studied here: "Hunger Strike" (a novella included in *Everything in This Country Must*, 2000), "the garden of remembrance"³ (a section from the novel *TransAtlantic*, 2013), "Sh'khol" (a short story published in the collection *Thirteen Ways of Looking*, 2015), and, to a lesser extent, *Songdogs* (McCann's first novel, 1995). They all feature Irish waterscapes and are extremely representative of the rest of McCann's waterscapes, diegetically and stylistically.

Sense of place and character/nature porosity

- 4 There is a strong sense of porosity between waterscapes and characters. It is hinted at by the game of mirrors between them as the waterscape can reflect the plot and the characters' feelings. It is the case in "Hunger Strike", the protagonist of which is Kevin, a teenager living alone with his mother after they have fled the Troubles in Northern Ireland to try and forget that the boy's uncle, supposedly from the IRA, is going on a hunger strike in prison along with other comrades. The following passage coincides with the moment when Kevin hears the phone ring; the reader knows that this call is likely to announce that his uncle has died.

[Kevin] [...] stood a long time looking out to sea, the [1] **phosphorescent** waves rolling onto the sand **together like brothers** to each other. There were [2] **no boats** out on the water and [3] **the sea was a deep black**. ("Hunger Strike", 142)⁴

- 5 The waves rolling together in an apparent show of solidarity and hope – the latter being suggested by the light [1] that emanates from them – can be read as metaphors for the hunger-strikers. The absence of boats [2], which are symbols of movement, echoes the stasis of death. The water itself seems to mourn the uncle [3], its blackness reflecting the boy's grief.
- 6 One of the potential factors of such porosity might be that delimitating waterscapes is a complex task, as evoked by Casey (2011, 91): "How are we to think of the edge of a given landscape or seascape? Assuming it exists – something we cannot take for granted – is it a limit, a perimeter, a periphery? What is it, and how are we to think of it?" In *TransAtlantic*, Hannah, who lost a son to the Troubles and lives alone near a lake in Northern Ireland, says: "**The edges of the lough are never watertight, either to the land or the sea**. The tides flow in and out. Boats and memory, too" (*TransAtlantic*, 253). Mianowski argues: "Amid the mythical seascape, a complex sense of home is experienced, defined by habits and memories" (2017, 125). The strong sense of place that characters develop with a waterscape is indeed linked to the complexity of these stratified spatio-temporalities, which are also open to the future: "An island with edges. It was not so much the memories that tied me [Hannah] to this place, as how it might look years from now" (*TransAtlantic*, 293). The waterscape is linked to the past but also holds the promise of a different future for itself and its inhabitants, hinting at the possibility of change, transformation and, as such, as form of rebirth since some – perhaps even a lot – of its attributes might change, so much so that it may become unrecognisable to its present residents.
- 7 Indeed, the waterscapes are in no way frozen in time. While a form of stasis may be identified in relation with them, such stasis is actually only a transitory stage, one which plays an essential preliminary role for the phenomena of rebirth which eventually take place in and thanks to the waterscapes.

Suspended waterscapes: writing what preceeds rebirth

- 8 In McCann's fiction, waterscapes are inextricably linked to suspension, the diegetic role and stylistic expression of which will be examined here. Suspension is a pause, an interruption, and as such raises the question of the rhythm of the waterscapes, one which mimics the ebb and flow of water, between suspension and action, contraction and expansion.

Rhythm

- 9 The very descriptions of waterscapes create rhythm as they regularly punctuate the narration like leitmotifs. The rhythm of the waterscapes is achieved through the mention and use of specific sounds. For instance in *TransAtlantic*, the descriptions of the cottage located on an island of Strangford Lough highlight the importance of the soundscape, the two main components of which are the wind and the noise of seashells

breaking on the roof as they are dropped by the birds. This creates a musicality which is explicitly evoked by various characters:

Shells fall on the roof **constantly** from the **birds** overhead. There are times I feel like I am **living inside a percussion instrument**. (Hannah, *TransAtlantic*, 252)
Early morning **shells fell** from the sky, **bouncing on the slate roof**. The **gulls** up there, small ziggurats across the expanse. [...] It was **Debussy** who said that the **music** is what is contained between the notes. (Aoibheann, *TransAtlantic*, 273)

- 10 The birds also participate in the creation of the waterscape's own cadence by their migration, which marks the passing of time (see *TransAtlantic*, 250-251). Besides this cyclical aspect, the rhythm of the waterscapes is the one imposed by the water and in particular by its ebb and flow. It is the case in "Sh'khol", in which Rebecca, the protagonist, lives alone with her son in an isolated cottage on the Western coast of Ireland: "During the day Rebecca could hear the rhythmic approach and fall of the waves against the shore. At night the sounds seemed to double" ("Sh'khol", 161). This recurring noise, through the rhythm it imposes, also evokes a form of temporal suspension which seems to pervade the waterscape:

[1] Even in the wet chill of the December evenings, she slept with her window open, **listening** to the roll of the water sounding up from the low cliffs, **rasping** over the run of stone walls, **sweeping toward the house**, where it seemed to [2] **pause, hover a moment, then break**. ("Sh'khol", 161)

- 11 The prominent use of appositions [1] creates a ternary rhythm based on suspension ([2]: flow, pause, ebb) evoking the movement of the tide. Describing her cottage and its immediate surroundings, Hannah remarks:

The lake was **tidal**. [1] It seemed to stretch for ever to the east, **rising and falling like a breathing thing**. A pair of geese went across the sky, their long necks craned as they soared in over the cottage and away. [2] They looked as if they were pulling the colour out of the sky. The movement of clouds shaped out the wind. The waves came in and applauded against the shore. The languid kelp **rose and fell with the swells**. (*TransAtlantic*, 220)

- 12 The distinctive rhythm is produced by the combination of the waves, the birds and the clouds. The coming and going evoked by the tide suggests a lulling, calm movement, embodied by the very pace of the text, which is built on the alternation between two long sentences [1] and four short sentences [2]. The long sentences respectively contain the verbs *stretch* and *craned* as a semantic echo to their contents, and are articulated around commas, as if to indicate to the reader – another "breathing thing" – when to breathe. The last of the short sentences precisely evokes a breathing movement ("rose and fell"), which, combined with the assonance in /e/ (*fell/swells*), the almost equal length of the last four sentences, as well as with the binary, hypnotic rhythm mimicking the advance and retreat of the waves, can result in the reader being lulled too.
- 13 The rhythm of the waterscapes is not only linked to water but also to the wind, is a powerful agent imposing its might on the waterscape: "**The wind came up** from the sea **as if it were looking for someone**" ("Hunger Strike", 125); "**The wind bent the grass-blades**. [...] At the back of the cottage **the trees curtsied**. **The branches speckled the wall** with shadows" ("Sh'khol", 173). It regularly interacts with the other natural elements, especially the trees, and these frequent interactions ("The trees were **stubborn** against the wind, their **branches twisted inland**", *TransAtlantic*, 293)

punctuate the existence – and become essential characteristics – of the waterscape in *TransAtlantic*, as both Aoibheann [1] and Hannah [2] describe:

[1] The cottage sat at the edge of the lough. She could hear the **wind and rain whipping** across the expanse of open water: it **hit the trees and muscled its way into the grass** [...]⁵. She began to wake early in the morning, even before the children. **It was a house worth listening to. Odd sounds** from the roof. (*TransAtlantic*, 1-2)

[2] A quiet night. Three stars and a moon and a lone plane travelling the high dark. **The wind came off the water as if looking for company**, the living and the dead passing into each other. The **breeze rattled the large windows and then curled around the gable end, settled down.** (*TransAtlantic*, 289)

- 14 As such, the wind is part and parcel of the rhythm of the waterscapes. The latter is dictated by natural elements, with which human beings seem – perhaps surprisingly – to coexist in harmony in the suspended space-time of the waterscape.
- 15 Indeed, the rhythm of the waterscapes, whether harsh due to the wind or lulling because of the waves, seems attuned to the character's emotions: through the choice of internal focalisations, the rhythms of waterscape and narrative are often mirrored, exemplifying the specular dimension of water mentioned above. In “Sh’khol” for instance, as her son Tomas has just gone missing, Rebecca seems to tune in to her deaf-mute son and to the landscape, which seems to take over her: “Out past the seastack, she moved along the coast, **the sound of the waves in her ears, another deafness, the blood receding** from her fingers, her toes, her mind” (“Sh’khol”, 175). This momentary deafness, which mimics the tide (“the blood receding”), lasts until Tomas is found: “The house was **quiet again. Only the sound of the waves**” (“Sh’khol”, 194). The moment when the situation goes back to normal for the characters coincides with the moment when the waterscape and the soundscape go back to their usual (“quiet again”) rhythm. This further underlines the connection between waterscape, moment of crisis and suspension. Besides, the descriptions of the waterscapes constitute narrative pauses that create suspension as they delay the moment of resolution for the plot – even more so in “Sh’khol”, which is a detective story. As such, they also create suspense. In “Sh’khol”, this mimics narratively the way suspense is created in the plot by the waterscape itself since everyone thinks that Tomas has drowned in the nearby sea. In this short story, just like in the other texts under study, such suspension thus feeds the tensions which pre-exist between or within the characters; paradoxically, it is also what ultimately allows for reconciliation and rebirth.

Liminality as condition of rebirth

- 16 In all four texts, waterscapes are the locus of complicated mother-son (or father-son in *Songdogs*) relationships, the evolution of which is inherently linked to the waterscapes: the characters eventually reconcile, systematically in the vicinity of water. The latter seems to facilitate transformation processes, and of course, in this perspective, the water from the waterscapes can be symbolically equated with amniotic fluid. Waterscapes are therefore spatialities of deep change and renewal – one might say of metaphorical rebirth – for the characters and their relationships. Mianowski (2017, 6) indeed argues that these types of spatialities are “liminal landscapes by essence.” The characters who converge towards such spatialities all find themselves in phases of deep

transition, underlining the strong connection between waterscapes, suspension and liminality. The following extract from “Hunger Strike” (79) is particularly evocative:

He [Kevin] took off his shoes and toyed with the water, daring it to wet his toes. The cold sand sucked around his feet and made gurgling noises. [3] He **found himself laughing** and [4] he **wasn't quite sure** if he should be enjoying himself or not, [2] in this **strange** town, on this **strange** beach, in this **strange** loneliness.

He stepped in further until the sea was up to his ankles and he kicked up spray and the droplets made shapes and parabolas in the air. Mathematics was the only thing he enjoyed in school, though he told nobody, and he wondered now if he could ever [5] **chart the arc of a droplet of water**. It would be an odd graph he thought, [5] **captured in a millisecond**, from one end of an axis to another. He could create a formula for moving water and it could be decipherable only to him.

The sea no longer felt cold and in a moment he was running along the edge of the sand, [3] **kicking furiously and laughing**, and [1] **the sea itself seemed doomed to the fact of his joy**.

- 17 The character's psyche is mirrored by the waterscape [1]. He feels out of place [2], which leads to a sense of dissociation [3] that may be caused by his transitioning from child to teenager. This creates indecision [4] and the desire to capture the suspended moment [5]. The spatio-temporality of these liminal waterscapes is both suspended and very open since the changes that occur there have much wider consequences⁶: Kevin learns how to kayak from an old man, as a metaphor for him transitioning into adulthood: kayaking is what allows the boy to be born again, as a (young) man⁷. This experience is liminal since it is a phase of suspension and transformation:

Kayaking **kept the thoughts away**. The world is **altered from the position of water**. In the repetition there was quietness. [...] The boy sensed he had achieved a rhythm with the old man, that there was some inevitable axle that joined them. [...] [1] Far out, they turned, found **shelter** in a **cove** where seals barked on the rocks and **stopped paddling, let the boat drift**. [2] The water lapped gently against the side of the boat and the seals barked further down the shore. (“Hunger Strike”, 126-127)

- 18 The sense of suspension is explicitly present as a theme, as expressed by the segments and words in bold type here: from his isolated position in the boat, Kevin feels as if the world was temporarily different, and, for a while, forgets about his problems. At the end of the passage, the characters pause and let the boat drift, simply enjoying the time spent on the kayak, in a sort of *carpe diem* moment. Suspension is also hinted at symbolically through the images of the cove and of the kayak, since their curved shapes evoke a parenthesis and delimit a space-time that is protected from the world. Such framing is echoed from a stylistic perspective by the repetition of the mention of the seals; the change in the tempo mirrors the change of pace once Kevin enters this bubble of calm. The position of the last segment of sentence [1], “let the boat drift”, as well as the choice of a simple apposition and a verbal stem (rather than an -ING form), show the fluidity of the focaliser's thoughts. Like the boat, they seem to drift without paying too much attention to the respect of classical syntax or to the use of logical connectors underlining his reasoning.
- 19 However, this marine interlude is not completely isolated from the rest of the plot. On the contrary, it proves to be truly liminal. The potential for transformation is reflected in the fact that the second mention of the seals is not exactly identical to the first: “seals barked on the rocks” becomes “the seals barked **further down** the shore”, hinting not at stasis but at a form of movement (“further”). This parenthesis effectively

signals the beginning of Kevin's reconciliation with those around him, especially his mother. The moment when he feels he has mastered the kayak is pivotal:

Further out, [5] **the horizon seemed vast** and flattened by a pale blue sky. They paddled for an hour with their backs to the town and [1] **the sea remained calm**.

While they were [3] **floating**, the boy half turned his body in the kayak. [2] **I want to tell you something**, he said. You see this here black armband [sic]?

Yes?

He stuttered and found his throat going dry. [4] **Eventually he told the old man all about his uncle**, and they paddled for an hour without saying another word. ("Hunger Strike", 110)

- 20 Kevin appears in harmony with the surrounding waterscape [1] and eagerly communicates [2]. This suspended moment [3] announces catharsis [4] and holds the promise of change announced by the prolepsis that [5] turns out to constitute. Following this exchange, Kevin shares a crucial moment with his mother: they go swimming, which seals their reconciliation⁸. He then becomes aware of the changes that have taken place: "He **helped her up** the hillside and as they walked he thought to himself that **his childhood had all of a sudden fallen away**, that **he had dropped like a skin in the sea**" ("Hunger Strike", 136). The transformation that began during the suspended time on the water thus finds its fulfilment in this baptismal swim which coincides with a symbolic rebirth for the parent-child relationship. This evokes McCann's novel *Songdogs*: there, the protagonist, Conor, who has been having difficulties reconnecting with his estranged father Michael, experiences a similar process, one which is also fundamentally linked to the liminal and transformative power of a waterscape:

[1] Enough nothingness, I said to myself. [2] Enough of this half-emergence. [3] I **scrambled down** to the beach, **hopped around** on the sand for a moment, **took off** my clothes, **stepped to** the edge of the water, **waded** slowly **up** to my thighs, **dove in**, **came up** laughing and freezing, and I **swam** for fifteen minutes until it felt warm, **suspended** myself in the float, **let** big waves carry me in, **caught** glimpses of a satellite in the tremendous shrinking of the night, *felt strangely light in the holiness of silence as the water lapped over me – the light hitting my eyes might have come from a star long imploded – big salty crests of water pulling me down and shoving me upwards*, throwing me **about**, exhilarated in the darkness. [4] Nothing wrong with being romantic, I said to the sky. [5] To hell with the curse on sentimentality. [6] I felt alive at last and *the long grasses were bowing on the shore and the wind brought an invigorating chill and the moon sprayed out light* and I thought I heard two old women laughing along with me [...], and saw the vision of one of the women, Loyola, appearing along through the waves saying: *Don't be so hard on him, he's about to die*⁹, and I said, No he's not, no he isn't, it's only the grapes of wrath, and **laughed** maniacally to myself at the ridiculousness of it all, **went on** swimming, **saying** hallelujah to the stars, rave on, rage on, **flapping** my arms, **roaring** stupidities at the night, thinking he's a cantankerous old bastard, my father, always has been, always will be, submerged myself once more, seawater stinging my eyes, **came up** chuckling, **swam** around the shoreline, **let** waves carry me in. (*Songdogs*, 125-126)

- 21 This extract, especially as it is marked by the lexical field of religion (*holiness, light, vision, hallelujah*), highlights the parallel between bathing and baptism, which is a metaphorical rebirth. This new beginning coincides with a moment of joyful revelation and sensory epiphany (*saw, heard, felt*) – another moment of brief suspension holding the promise of a new direction. The euphoria produced is translated by a form of lyricism tinged with self-mockery and lucidity: "Nothing wrong with being romantic, I said to the sky. To hell with the curse on sentimentality"; "laughed maniacally to

myself at the ridiculousness of it all”; “roaring stupidities”. The revelation, which opens new perspectives in the diegesis – the text is initially centred on Conor and his body in the water but ends up evoking the sky and the universe – is mirrored by a parallel movement of expansion of the narrative. As illustrated by the almost oxymoronic formulation of the segment “the **tremendous shrinking** of the night”, the text is marked by this double movement¹⁰. First, the two pairs of short sentences ([1] [2] and [4] [5]) that correspond to the narrator’s evaluation of the scene evoke contraction. Then a sense of expansion is produced by the length of sentences [3] and [6]. They act as a counterpoint to the others and open up the narrative, especially since [6] is even longer than [3]. Within these two sentences, the sense of expansion is reinforced by the dynamism created by the use of a consistent series of action verbs (see bold characters) and prepositions indicating movement (see underlined items). The inclusion of several voices¹¹ also contributes to this opening of perspectives: in addition to Conor’s, the voices of the two women who raised his father can be heard. Another voice may be perceived, expanding further the spectrum of voices: that of Dylan Thomas, through the possible intertextual allusion to his poem “Do not go gentle into that good night” as the reference to the night sky in *Songdogs* is followed by the following segment: “saying hallelujah to the stars, rave on, rage on”¹². The expansion/contraction movement at play here contributes to the sense of dynamism and transformation that accompanies the symbolical rebirth process. This movement is also created by the contrast between moments of action and quieter moments of contemplation. In the latter, the waterscape seems to take over and to be endowed with more agentivity than the character (see italicized items). Sentence [6], instead of using verbs in the active form like sentence [3], includes verbs with an -ING form. This choice hints at a form of stasis and indeed, before it returns to a faster pace at the end of the extract, the text does seem suspended, as Conor lets himself be carried by the water (“let waves carry me in”) in a moment out of time (“suspended myself in the float”). The revelation is thereby given time to occur and to be integrated by the protagonist who, as a result, seems to accept his father’s shortcomings and reconciles with him. The father-son relationship is thereby metaphorically reborn.

- 22 All these symbolical rebirth processes – in the relationships between the characters, in the characters’ personalities or destinies – are thus enhanced by the waterscapes. The way these developments and spatialities are written also produce a sense of rebirth, this time at the level of the very fabric of the text.

Writing rebirth... and the rebirth of writing?

- 23 Indeed, McCann’s writing of waterscapes is a creative one; it brings new dynamism to the language, especially through phenomena of salience and as such, rebirth – the outcome of the plot unfolding in the waterscapes – is also, metaphorically, a stylistic feature of their writing. The dynamism and the creativity which regularly allow the texts featuring waterscapes to be symbolically reborn – in the sense that they keep offering multiple inventive and original images and phrasings – are mostly produced through foregrounding the agentivity of natural elements, as well as through playing on phenomena of visual and stylistic salience. Not only does the combination of the two enable the text to frequently renew itself, but it also, as a consequence, ensure that the readers’ attention is frequently revived as well.

Agentivity of natural elements

- 24 Throughout McCann's fiction, water is systematically presented as an exceptional force. Waterscapes draw their transformative potential from water itself. Its power is such that it imposes its form and rhythm on the characters who live in the waterscapes. The unusual formulation in *TransAtlantic* (92) exemplifies this: "The town of Cove **genuflected** to the water". Water is a potent agent and is often personified, as if to insist on the contrast with the character's helplessness. The sea seems sentient and appears to control its components: "**The sea threw** waves on the beach" ("Hunger Strike", 78). Besides, the waves are often the grammatical subject of the sentences they feature in: "**The waves hurried** to shore, long scribbles of white" ("Sh'khol", 166); "**The waves came up** to her and **broke** at the waist and it seemed to him like the opening of hands" ("Hunger Strike", 135).
- 25 The same agentivity can be found in the description of the skyscapes which complement the waterscapes, and similar mechanisms can be found in the descriptions of maritime skies. The latter are often associated with water within the same sentence¹³: "The **sky** beyond the trees is an **oceanic** thing" (*TransAtlantic*, 18). Even the dark has these transformative powers, and the use of the same narrative devices translates this similarity: "**The colours in the sky bled away. It became** shadowy. Darkness doesn't fall, he thought as he swayed to the radio, **it rises up** from the bottom of the sea and **begins to breathe** around us" ("Hunger Strike", 86); "**The darkness dropped** from the bent limbs of the trees" (*TransAtlantic*, 289). Light and light effects share the same features: "They stood talking a moment and **the sunlight shone through their clothes, giving darkness to the shape of their bodies**" ("Hunger Strike", 41). Light and dark thus seem to give new birth to waterscapes and humans alike.
- 26 The creative potential of the skyscape is also translated by original metaphors in *TransAtlantic* ("The sky **lifts the helm** of Belfast", 229) and in "Hunger Strike" ("Dawn broke over the mountains and **light gnawed the town into shape**", 93). The catalogue of possible images and collocations associated with the skyscape is thus renewed. Just like water, the sun is personified: "The sun **gave a bow** to the sea" (*Songdogs*, 181); "They watched the sun disappear on the horizon. It was a magnificent red and it seemed to **spill itself out generously** into the sky" ("Hunger Strike", 140). In "Hunger Strike" and *TransAtlantic*, the light effects created by the sun are associated to the image of the wheel, which is reflected on the water surface: "The sun shone down a hard yellow and **wheels of light** worked on the water's edge" ("Hunger Strike", 128); "The evening sun fashioned **wheels of light** on the surface" (*TransAtlantic*, 130). This motif can evoke the repetitive rhythm of natural elements and suggest circularity and stasis. Yet it also alludes to the object which provides a useful tool for transport and transformation. The dynamism thereby hinted at is paralleled by the inclusion of such striking images, which relate to salience phenomena.

Salience as a source of renewed stylistic dynamism

- 27 Indeed, another key characteristic of McCann's writing of waterscapes and of the rebirth processes they host is the foregrounding of surprising linguistic choices,

allowing for the metaphorical rebirth of the use of language as well as of reader attention. Foregrounding is “a deviation, or departure, from what is expected in the linguistic code or the social code expressed through language; functionally, it is a special effect or significance conveyed by the departure” (Leech 2008, 3). Jobert (2014, 65), adds: “There is foregrounding when readers become aware of the linguistic code because of its unusual use.” The salience thus produced represents a departure from the norm, marking a form of linguistic creativity, with “‘ordinary’ language providing the background against which any form of deviance (*figure*) can occur” (Sorlin 2014, 183-4). The following extract from “Hunger Strike” exemplifies the stylistic devices creating the specificities of McCann’s writing of waterscapes:

[1] **The waves rocked the boat** up and down: [2] it could have been the **single beat of a cardiac machine**. Further out, there were **whitecaps that broke** early, but the kayak never moved off its course, [3] the **blades cutting** the air, the **nose sideways** to the breakers. [3] It was **startingly yellow** on the water, [1] as if **the sea had decided to give it more colour than it deserved**, and only the old couple, in their **drab clothes**, diluted that colour, the man in a blue work shirt, the woman in a grey dress. (“Hunger Strike”, 75-76)

- 28 The use of personification to emphasise the striking agentivity of water [1] is worth noticing, as well as the insistence on the peculiar rhythm of this natural element, which is compared to that of a living being [2]. Rhythm is all the more central as the pace of the last sentence, which relies on the use of commas, evokes the alternating movement of the paddles. This creates a visual effect creating salience, just like the recurrent use of the verb *break* to highlight the contrast and to introduce a certain form of violence into the narrative. This is reinforced by a play on the *figure/ground* opposition¹⁴ from a visual point of view [3].
- 29 Salience and the opposition between figure and ground are found in all waterscapes: “The *caps* of swimmers **bobbed on the sea** and, further out, an *oil tanker* seemed nailed to the horizon” (“Hunger Strike”, 97). This quotation illustrates how salience and the figure/ground opposition is often expressed both visually (the elements of figure in italics contrast with the ground in bold characters) and linguistically (see the underlined item). In the rare cases in which there is no visual foregrounding, linguistic salience tends to take over to still produce outstanding visions, like in this extract from “Sh’khol” (174): “The distant islands **lay humped and cetacean**. Gray water, gray sky.” While the gloomy colours may evoke a sense of flatness, the connection with the cetaceans and the personification (“lay humped”) of the islands, which are the subject of the verb, create a striking image. There are many other examples of creative use of language producing visual and linguistic salience in the descriptions of the skyscapes associated with the waterscapes, like in the following sentence: “the horizon was already **stained with sunset**” (“Hunger Strike”, 56). Besides the visual contrast, the salience here is based on the unexpected and contradictory cohabitation of *stain*, a word which generally has negative connotations, and sunset, which is commonly equated with beauty – although this has to be qualified since it is also often associated with decline and demise. A similar mechanism can be found in the following extract from *Songdogs* (5): “When evening fell the eastern sky was **the colour of nicotine**, merging into red in the west. A few thin clouds **slashed along** through it.” Here again, the element of surprise stems from the association between sunset and nicotine, but also from the use of the verb *slash*, which denotes a certain violence even though twilight is usually associated with a moment of serenity. Unusual representations and

phrases (see items in bold below) can also be found in Rebecca's description of the coastline in "Sh'khol" (165):

They stepped out into a shaft of light **so clear and bright it seemed made of bone**. Just by the low stone wall, a **cloud curtained across** and **the light dropped gray** again. [...] This was what she loved about the west of Ireland [...]. A squall could blow in at any time and moments later **the gray would be hunted open with blue**.

- 30 These salient, surprising elements participate in the rebirth of the attention the reader pays to the text. Incidentally, the recurrence of such devices actually gives birth to the stylistic identity of McCann's liminal waterscapes.

Conclusion

- 31 McCann's displaced, mobile characters experience a form of rebirth when they find themselves in waterscapes; despite the symbolical association between water and the amniotic liquid, such rebirth is of course only metaphorical. The characters shed their old skins and manage to get rid of what had been holding them back to become new versions of themselves and to embrace new relationships. This is not necessarily a once-in-a-lifetime experience: rebirth, in this sense of a new beginning, is always a possibility in McCann's fiction¹⁵. Waterscapes in particular are spatialities of rebirth since they are defined by constant dynamism: diegetically, as they are liminal spatialities where suspension and transformation occur, but also stylistically, due particularly to the work on rhythm, the special agentivity conferred to natural elements, and the use of foregrounding and salience. The dynamism they convey is key to the reception of the texts as the readers keep being unsettled by the creative phrasing.
- 32 The same mechanisms can be found throughout McCann's works, thereby creating thematic and stylistic cohesion and coherence¹⁶. Yet, for the very same reasons, the association between waterscapes, their stylistic features and rebirth may also be questioned in the long run: since the same patterns have become systematic, is it still possible to talk about a sense of constant rebirth of stylistic creativity? A reader who is well-acquainted with the author's style may come to think that it is losing its sense of surprise, instead becoming stiffened and, in a way, institutionalised. If so, the paradoxical, double orientation of McCann's fiction in-between expansion and contraction which Mianowski identified (2014) and which I aimed to develop further (2019a & 2019b) could also be said to apply to this aspect of his work.

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NOTES

1. Disclaimer: the following analyses are further developed in my unpublished PhD thesis.
2. Mianowski's original wording goes as follows: "The seascapes can also lead us to re-examine the myths of permanence, continuity and metamorphosis. [...] To what extent do the seascapes [...] offer possibilities of metamorphosis and regeneration to imagine the future? [...] Seascapes are linked to notions of permanence and stability and seem somehow immune to change. They offer a very stable framework in terms of geographical landmarks while at the same time questioning the very notion of frames and boundaries."
3. None of the initial letters are capitalised in McCann's novel.
4. In the entire paper, unless otherwise specified, all bold characters, italics and numbers in the quotations are mine.
5. The first description of Rebecca and Tomas' cottage in "Sh'khol" (161) echoes this description: "The cottage was hidden **alongside** the Atlantic, blue-windowed, **slate-roofed**, tucked near a grove of **sycamore trees**. **The branches were bent inland by the wind**. White **spindrift blew up from the sea**, landing softly on the tall hedges in the back garden."
6. See Mianowski 2017, 8-9. According to her (2017, 121-182 and more particularly 123, 130, 148), the whole passage, liminal as it is, is linked to the concepts of *emergence* as delineated by Malpas (2012, 235: "a standing or coming forth – that might itself be thought as a form of movement towards, into, or out of"; Malpas argues that the contemporary sense of place is well-defined by *emergence*) and of *Kairos*. The latter is defined by Agamben (1993, 2009) as a moment bringing a revolutionary opportunity, a moment of truth marking a radical new beginning when man "grasps favourable opportunity and chooses his own freedom in the moment." (Agamben 1993, 105).
7. His training also symbolises his quest for personal balance, symbolically echoing the situation of his country, Northern Ireland, which is also in transition at the time of the plot.
8. In *Songdogs*, Conor helps his father Michael bathe, and this represents the climactic moment of their reconciliation. A similar, if reversed scene can be observed in "Sh'khol", when Rebecca bathes her son once he has been found, in a moment of newly found harmony.
9. Original italics.
10. I am using here Marie Mianowski's terms and phrasing. She argues that the "apparently contradictory movements of expansion and contraction" (Mianowski 2014, §2) are a key feature of *TransAtlantic* and I have contended that this double movement characterises not only the perception of space in this novel but also McCann's writing style throughout the corpus of his work (see Bourdeau 2019a and Bourdeau 2019b).
11. This polyphony is highlighted visually since italics are used to represent Loyola's words ("Don't be so hard on him, he's about to die"), which is not the case for Conor's (free direct speech: "and I said, No he's not, no he isn't, it's only the grapes of wrath, and laughed maniacally to myself").
12. This poem was first published in 1951 in *Botteghe Oscure* then in 1952 in the collection *In Country Sleep and other poems*. Thomas wrote this poem as a tribute to his dying father; this finds an echo in *Songdogs* as Connor's father Michael's health is also irremediably declining. The lexical fields of the stars, the sky and the sea are also common to both texts. The passage from *Songdogs* ("saying hallelujah to the stars, rave on, rage on"), and in particular the use of the verb *rage* in this context, may echo the following lines from Thomas' poem: "Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rave at close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light. [...] And you, my father, there on the sad height, / Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray. / Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage against the dying of the light."
13. The similarities between water and air are illustrated at the beginning of *TransAtlantic* (30) when two pilots who are flying out of a cloud struggle to differentiate one from the other: "A

glimpse of new light. A different **wall of colour**. It takes a split second for it to register. A slap of **blue**. A hundred feet. Strange blue, spinning blue, are we out? **Blue here. Black there.** [...] Another line of black looms. The sea stands soldier-straight and dark. **Light where the water should be. Sea where the light should crest.**"

14. "The figure and ground opposition is derived from Gestalt psychology. It was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and was later introduced into cognitive linguistics and cognitive stylistics. Originally, the opposition between figure and ground was exclusively a visual one: an element is said to be the figure when it becomes more salient than others that, as a consequence, come to constitute the ground" (Jobert 2014, 64).

15. This is illustrated by most of McCann's characters; Zoli (in the eponymous novel), Rudi, Yulia and Victor (in *Dancer*) or Beverly (in "Treaty") are but a few examples.

16. Cohesion can be equated with formal, or linguistic balance; Halliday and Hasan (1976) suggest that it results mainly from the following linguistic tools: repetition, reference, substitution, ellipsis, coordination and lexical cohesion. It does not necessarily lead to an impression of coherence, which is rather a matter of internal logic and would therefore instead be equated with psychological or cognitive balance. On this subject, see Rotgé 1998, 184.

ABSTRACTS

This paper focuses on the processes of rebirth the characters experience in extracts from four works (two novels, a novella and a short story) by Irish author Colum McCann. These characters are defined by a strong sense of displacement and betweenness but they go through deep transformations, through physical closeness with *waterscapes* – spatialities that are closely associated with water –, as well as through the game of mirrors between them that ensues. This article analyses how the latter stem from the connections between *waterscapes* and phenomena of suspension and liminality. It also aims to study how the writing of these mechanisms echoes them, by identifying the main stylistic characteristics that are specific to the author's description of these phenomena and forms of spatiality. To this end, it uses analytic tools borrowed from narratology and cognitive stylistics such as the *figure/ground* opposition and phenomena of visual and linguistic salience.

Cet article étudie les processus de renaissance dont font l'expérience les personnages de quatre œuvres (deux romans, une novella et une nouvelle) de l'auteur irlandais Colum McCann. Ces personnages sont définis par un fort sentiment de non-appartenance et d'entre-deux mais, par leur proximité physique avec les *waterscapes*, spatialités étroitement associées à l'eau, ainsi que par le jeu de miroirs qui s'ensuit entre eux, ils subissent de profondes transformations. Cet article analyse comment ces dernières découlent des liens entre *waterscapes* et phénomènes de suspension et de liminalité. Il vise également à analyser la manière dont l'écriture de ces mécanismes leur fait écho, ainsi qu'à identifier les principales caractéristiques stylistiques des descriptions que l'auteur fait de ces phénomènes et formes de spatialité. Pour ce faire, il utilise des outils analytiques empruntés à la narratologie et à la stylistique cognitive, tels que l'opposition *figure/ground* et les phénomènes de saillance, visuelle et linguistique.

INDEX

Mots-clés: spatialité, waterscapes, suspension, liminalité, transformation, renaissance, stylistique, saillance, figure/ground, rythme, agentivité

Keywords: spatiality, waterscapes, suspension, liminality, transformation, rebirth, stylistics, salience, figure/ground, rhythm, agentivity

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