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Tell-tale ellipsis in Colum McCann's *Everything in This Country Must*

Catherine Mari

- 1 The three short stories contained in *Everything in This Country Must*¹ are marked by the quasi absence of or conspicuous distance from what is paradoxically at the core of their meaning, i.e. the Irish Troubles and the trauma they have entailed, which are never tackled directly. The Troubles constitute an implicit story which occasionally surfaces or, in some cases, erupts showing the depth of wounds which are kept hidden and have manifestly not healed. What's left unsaid thus plays a great part in the three stories where it accounts for the characters' otherwise inexplicable behaviours or reactions. The stories are indeed characterised by a discrepancy between their apparently anecdotal contents and the extreme tension of the characters which definitely points to the presence of implicit meanings. My purpose here will be to try and locate the implicit and determine if its presence is simply prompted by the specific requirements of a genre based on ellipsis or if Colum McCann puts it to particular use.
- 2 Let's start with a brief summary of the stories. In the title story, an Irish farmer's horse, trapped in the rising waters of a river, is rescued by British soldiers, who happen to drive an army truck by the scene of the accident. After the soldiers have left, the Father, who has abruptly interrupted the tea his daughter has offered them, shoots the horse. The reader learns through a few scattered hints throughout the short story that the farmer lost his wife and son after they were accidentally hit by an army truck a few years before. In 'Wood', a woman agrees to make poles from which will hang banners for an Orangemen's parade. The task, which will bring the family sorely needed money, is carried out in secret as it is one her now invalid husband has always refused to do, for he insists that his religion (he is a Presbyterian) should not lead him to 'celebrat[e] other people dying' (23). 'Hunger Strike', the novella which closes the collection, also illustrates the impossibility of escaping unscathed from the conflict. A mother and her thirteen-year-old son have moved from Derry to a trailer in Galway. The boy's uncle, whom the boy has never met, starts a hunger strike in a Derry prison. As the hunger strike

progresses, it is reflected in the boy's anger and destructive drives which are somewhat countered by his encounter with a Lithuanian couple. The man teaches him how to paddle a kayak, which appears as an initiation into self-control and a less intransigent vision of things, even though the short story ends with the stoning of the kayak when the boy hears about his uncle's death.

- 3 The three stories conceal and hint at hidden meanings first through their very structure. In 'ETCM', the plot starts with an apparently ordinary story but soon points to the presence of an underlying story and suggests that a crucial event is being omitted. The omission takes the striking form of a momentary paralipsis which is only gradually and parsimoniously filled. Interestingly, Gérard Genette notes that this type of lateral ellipsis is used to omit an emotionally charged event such as a death². In 'ETCM', even before the arrival of the soldiers' truck, the critical situation of the horse about to drown arouses in the central character an emotion which seems disproportionate but which is little by little accounted for through brief but telling hints: 'He was looking at the water as if Mammy was there, as if Fiachra was there'(4); '*One more try*, Father said in a sad voice like his voice above Mammy's and Fiachra's coffins long ago' (5). Thus, the paralipsis has the effect of making the story appear as the repetition of a previous story of death. Moreover, it is reinforced by the Father's withdrawal within himself as soon as he realises the rescuers' identity. At this particular point, verbalisation is replaced by a flow of similes reflecting the upsurge of his emotion: '[Father] looked at me with the strangest of faces, like he was lost, like he was punched, like he was the river cap floating, like he was a big tree all alone and desperate for forest' (6), an emotion which leads him to re-enact, in a masochistic way, a loss he cannot come to terms with.
- 4 A revealing alteration of perspectives also occurs in 'Hunger Strike' which starts with two pages devoted to the description of an old couple serenely preparing for kayaking, the only link with the rest of the story being the unobtrusive mention of a focalizer (the young boy). In other words, the enlarged frame of the short story may at first be mistaken for the bulk of the story; but then the story, shifting focus, concentrates on the young boy. The resulting juxtaposition of the two distinct scenes brings into view what Pierre Tibi calls a '*fault line*'³ which signals a blank space or ellipsis productive of meaning. In this particular case, the sudden shift of scene emphasises the contrast between the couple's harmony and the boy's restlessness and sense of alienation, an opposition which is central to the short story.
- 5 Revealingly, in the three stories, the frame is drawn with particular care, thus acting, according to Clare Hanson's analysis of short fiction, as 'a narrative device, permitting ellipses (gaps and absences) to remain in a story, which retains a necessary air of completeness and order because of the very existence of the frame'⁴. The stories all resort to an epanaleptic structure (a...a) in which the first element symmetrically corresponds to the last. The symmetry is particularly manifest in the first and third stories where the epanalepsis is refined into a chiasmus: thus 'ETCM' starts with a flood and focuses on a horse and ends with the killing of the horse and a mention of the rain, which takes on a deeply metaphoric sense as the teenage narrator exclaims: '...oh what a small sky for so much rain'(15). The opening of 'Hunger Strike' shows a boy watching an old couple carrying a kayak and ends with the stoning of the kayak and a close-up on the old couple watching the boy. The stories are thus shaped into meaningful wholes by their neatly-drawn frames; the fragmentary surface they delimit signals buried meanings to be unearthed by the reader, as is suggested by Paul Muldoon's epigraph:

Horses buried for years
 Under the foundations
 Give their earthen floors
 The ease of trampolines⁵.

- 6 Information is also withheld through the systematic use of first person narration and/or internal focalization: the narrators or focalizers are all teenagers, which justifies the minimal contextual information and their ignorance of and distance from the conflict. Knowing little, the homodiegetic narrators ask questions which are most often left unanswered⁶, as if talking about the Troubles confirmed their existence and conversely passing them over in silence was a means of obliterating them. In 'Hunger Strike', the narrator's mother, anxious to erase the grim physical reality of Northern Ireland, asks her son not to use the adjective 'wee' (in the sense of little) as she says 'there [is] a landscape to language and their accents could be a dangerous curiosity'(46-47).
- 7 Characteristically, the characters' terse lines are not delimited by quotation marks. They are either included in the paragraphs in italics (6) or simply quoted without introductory verbs. This typographical absence reflects the absence of any real dialogue (in the sense of communication). It underlines the characters' isolation and alienation as secrecy is self-imposed as self-protection, or a result of the trauma they have gone through. Moreover, the extreme condensation of the dialogues has a derealising effect. This is manifest for instance in 'Hunger Strike' where they contribute to cancelling linear time and to creating a 'non time', or to quote Jean-Jacques Lecercle's analysis of the short story as a genre, 'un crystal temporel' qui 'rassemble la totalité du temps dans l'intuition de l'instant'⁷. The condensation process is further intensified by the emphasis on the stillness of time. Thus, the ticking of the clock, which is a recurrent element in the short stories, indicates tension and paradoxically points to a time which seems at a standstill and more generally, to a paralysis connoting death. Revealingly, the ending of 'ETCM' is reminiscent of the ending of Joyce's 'The Dead' as it shows an eerily quiet world shrouded not in snow but in a Deluge-like, never-ending rain⁸.
- 8 The text of the short stories also hints at implied meanings through the recurrently paratactic style which, through the deliberate omission of logical connectives, appears as a form of understatement and therefore induces the reader to supply the missing interpretation. This understating technique is used to powerful effect in 'ETCM', when the teenage narrator, describing her Father after he has killed his favourite horse, eloquently suggests his silent pain precisely through her laconic style: 'His face was like it was cut from stone and he was not crying any more and he didn't even look at me, just went to sit in the chair. He picked up his teacup and it rattled in the saucer so he put it down again and he put his face in his hands and stayed like that' (15).
- 9 Character-drawing, unsurprisingly reduced to a minimum, meaningfully disappears altogether when the characters refer to the 'enemy'. Thus the British soldiers in the first and last stories or the unionists in 'Wood' are simply designated as 'they' (25) or 'the man with abig car' (25) or they are reduced to their repressive function (there is for instance a notable emphasis on the soldiers' weapons in the first story, 'There was six of them now, all guns and helmets', 6). The refusal to name and acknowledge the Other's humanity effectively suggests the gap and incomprehension between the two contending groups.
- 10 In a general way, in ETCM, words appear powerless to establish communication. Characters are unwilling or unable to talk: 'She was trying to say a word but there was no word coming...'⁹. Words cannot be spoken or they become mere signifiers cut off from

their signified: 'decriminalisation, remission, segregation, intransigence, political status. The words spun around in the boy's head'¹⁰. Significantly, the narrator in 'Hunger Strike' discovers the old man's and woman's Lithuanian names and starts understanding their language once he has struck up a friendship with them¹¹.

- 11 Secrecy, whether induced by fear or synonymous with betrayal as in 'Wood', has in all cases a destructive effect: it perpetuates violence as is evidenced in the closing image of 'Wood', which focuses on oak trunks, 'big and solid and fat, but the branches were slapping each other around like people' (37). Its deteriorating effect is also visible on people who are described as 'hunched' within themselves (20; 67) or so still they seem dead. In 'ETCM', the farmer looks 'like a Derry shop window dummy' (7) or is literally petrified: 'His face was like it was cut from stone' (15), as if silenced by his grief. Interestingly, the same image of petrification is used by Vladimir Jankélévitch when he defines the concept of the unspeakable: 'C'est la nuit noire de la mort qui est l'indicible, parce qu'elle est ténèbre impénétrable et désespérant non-être, et parce qu'un mur infranchissable nous barre de son mystère: est indicible, à cet égard, ce dont il n'y a absolument rien à dire, et qui rend l'homme muet acablant sa raison et médusant son discours'¹².
- 12 Death is indeed an underlying but overwhelming presence in Colum McCann's collection. The conspicuous ellipsis in the title, which is filled by the narrator of 'ETCM', is unsurprisingly that of the word 'die'¹³. Death is at the core of the short stories. Not only is it literally present with the narrator's uncle's hunger strike in the last story but it also takes the form of death instincts in their masochistic and/or sadistic form. The killing of the horse is the illustration of a regressive drive leading to self-destruction, which is made explicit through the striking expression 'with his eyes all horsewild' (5). By identifying the Father with his horse, the expression likens the horse's killing to a form of suicide. In 'Hunger Strike', the damaging effect of the conflict is conveyed by the teenager's destructive and self-destructive drives as his identification with his dying uncle leads him first to put himself for a while on a starvation diet and then to destroy what has become dear to him, i. e. the old couple's kayak. Indeed, the stoning of the kayak is better understood in relation to a destructive drive also referred to as will-to-power when it is aimed at objects of the outside world¹⁴.
- 13 Violence is also hinted at through emblematic details interspersed through the short stories which evoke a trauma, i.e. etymologically the action of piercing. The word 'trauma' precisely refers to a wound involving a breaking-in process. Indeed, references to breaking-in abound, in different forms and in particular in the form of repeated stoning¹⁵. However, the most striking instance is the British soldiers' breaking open of the hedge, which the Father feels as an unbearable violation, although it is meant to speed up the rescue. The pervasiveness of violence is such that even the environment appears contaminated: 'the horizon [is] stained by sunset' (56) while 'the colours in the sky [bleed] away' (86). Everything seems to be corrupted by a conflict which transforms a kiss into 'a stigmata' (141) and unhealthily blurs the boundaries between the human and the inanimate by attributing human feelings such as fear or hostility to the environment while conversely reducing man to a vulnerable inanimate object¹⁶. The recurring image of a deteriorated heart in the novella also points to the disintegration of the self. The heart, which stands for the centre of life, is shown as a pathetically degraded organ, hardly able to sustain its vital function. In 'Hunger Strike', the shapeless 'soggy heart of bread' (51), which has fallen out from the piece of toast the boy has refused to eat, is hardly a symbol

of life. Neither is for that matter the bag containing glue which 'looks like the beat of a curious grey heart', as a few teenagers breathe it in and out (78). We are here poles apart from the symbolism of the Sacred Heart which stands for divine love (and whose cult is a long-standing one in Ireland).

- 14 The violence of the conflict is also implicitly conveyed by the symbolism of water. Thus, in 'Hunger Strike', the boy's anger is suggested by images of what Gaston Bachelard calls 'l'eau violente', 'un des premiers schèmes de la colère universelle'¹⁷. Taking as an example Balzac's *L'enfant maudit*, Bachelard underlines the correspondence between the eponymous hero's anger and the Ocean's fury¹⁸. There is a similar phenomenon in McCann's story where the disarray and revolt of the isolated protagonist are echoed in the short passage where the sea is personified and becomes a sparring partner, an interlocutor, *the* interlocutor the boy is badly in need of: 'The sea threw waves on the beach' (78); 'the boy took off his shoes and toyed with the water, daring it to wet his toes'; 'He stepped in further [...] and kicked up spray'; 'He shouted to the waves: Try me, come on, try me'(79). According to Bachelard, these manifestations testify to a fantasised will-to-power: 'Arrêter du regard la mer tumultueuse, comme le veut la volonté de Faust, jeter une pierre au flot hostile comme le fait l'enfant de Michelet, c'est la même image de l'imagination dynamique. C'est le même rêve de volonté de puissance'¹⁹.
- 15 Water is also an essential component of 'ETCM', where it is explicitly linked with death: 'The trees bent down to the river in a whispering and they hung their long shadows over the water and the horse jerked quick and sudden and I felt there would be a dying...' (4). The shadows themselves suggest death as, according to Bachelard, who quotes from Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Island of the Fay', casting a shadow means giving up a part of one's self and mournfully wasting away as '[the trees] render up shadow after shadow, exhausting their substance into dissolution'²⁰.
- 16 The choice of actants (in Greimas's sense) is also highly meaningful and calls for interpretation. Indeed, each of the short stories centers on an animal or inanimate object endowed with emblematic value: the horse in 'ETCM', the wooden poles in 'Wood' and the kayak in 'Hunger Strike'. A metaphor of the implicit, as Paul Muldoon's epigraph suggests, the horse is linked with death in the first story and reappears in various guises in the novella. It is also an omen of death in 'Hunger Strike' where, on seeing a stray white horse, the teenage boy is sure it is his uncle's spirit (which may be a reminiscence of Celtic lore). The knight (in the game of chess) is another hippomorphic figure with which the boy identifies and which he likens to a centaur. Revealingly, what appeals to him is the creature's hybrid nature with 'the solid body of a horse and yet something human too' (58), implying the coexistence of unruly instinct and control. This reflects the boy's contradictory drives, as he alternately gives way to his anger or is taught how to channel it mostly through his initiation into kayaking. The kayak's smooth gliding on the sea is indeed presented as an image of inner poise and harmony with oneself and the sea. The old man significantly tells the boy: 'Don't fight the water... Let the sea do the work' (102).
- 17 In their concern with hatred and death as opposed to love and forgiveness, the stories irresistibly evoke a biblical intertext which is singularly marked by violence but does not altogether exclude redemption. The first short story constitutes the worst breach of the ideology of Christian charity and pardon as giving (the soldiers' gift of the horse's life) does not lead to forgiving and the ritual sharing of the meal improvised by the girl is shockingly interrupted by the Father and almost ends in a fight. The second story, in

which a mother hides from her husband in order to make poles that will foster hatred and in the process initiates her son into duplicity, may be read as a story of betrayal. The mud spots on her skirt, which the narrator notes at the end of the short story, are no '*effet de réel*' but connote the taint resulting from her compromising. The poles they make are an interestingly ambivalent symbol: they stand for hatred but also serve to bring about redemption in the last short story where a pole is used to maintain what appears as a sacrificial victim being stoned to death. This metaphorical crucifixion seems indeed to lead to redemption as the last sentence intimates '... the couple standing together, hands clasped, watching, the old man's eyes squinting, the old woman's large and tender' (143). The biblical intertext summoned by the short stories thus enriches their meaning and orients their interpretation.

- 18 Whether through stylistic ellipses, extreme narrative condensation, tell-tale details or symbols and oblique intertextual references, Colum McCann's collection generates and fosters implicit meanings. In the writer's very words, 'Short stories are a lovely little explosion of a moment. They can encapsulate an entire life purely by suggestion'²¹. The aesthetics of suggestion is taken very far in the stories and it actually seems to go beyond the requirements of an elliptic genre, 'un genre pressé', best represented by the synecdoche²². Indeed, not only does the figure apply to their form but it also reflects the deliberately reduced scope of their contents as they shift from the political to the personal, and by inverting perspectives, lay emphasis on the harm done to the individual. Although the destructive effects of the conflict are powerfully suggested by the pervasive presence of literal and metaphorical death, this does not preclude the stories (the last one in particular) from discreetly hinting at redemption²³, a redemption dependent on the purging of anger and grief, the transforming of death instincts into life instincts, or the coming to light of Muldoon's buried horses.

NOTES

1. . McCann, Colum, *Everything in This Country Must*, London: Phoenix House, 2000. The title of the collection will subsequently appear in the abbreviated form, ETCM or 'ETCM' for the title story.
2. . Gérard Genette defines the paralipsis as 'l'omission d'un des éléments constitutifs de la situation' and he gives the example of Swann's death and its effect on Marcel in *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Figures III, 92-93).
3. . Tibi, Pierre, 'La Nouvelle : Essai de compréhension d'un genre', in *Aspects de la nouvelle*, 18, premier trimestre 1995, Presses Universitaires de Perpignan (p. 70).
4. . Hanson, Clare, "'Things out of Words': Towards a Poetics of Short Fiction", in *Rereading the Short Story*, Macmillan, 1989, 25.
5. . Paul Muldoon, *Dancers at the Moy*.
6. . 'If we asked a question she said: Ask your Daddy. And if we asked why, she said: Because your daddy said so...' (ETCM, 24).
7. . Lecercle, Jean-Jacques, 'Esquisse d'une théorie de la nouvelle', in *Trame et filigrane*, Annales de l'Université de Savoie, 16, 1993.

8. . In the last paragraph, the narrator remarks that 'The ticking was gone from my mind and all was quiet everywhere in the world...' and concludes with the words, '...oh what a small sky for so much rain' ('ETCM', 15).
9. . 'Wood', p.22.
10. . 'Hunger Strike', p. 66.
11. . 'Hunger Strike', p. 108-109.
12. . Jankélévitch, Vladimir, *La Musique et l'ineffable*, Seuil, 1983 (1^{ère} édition Armand Colin, 1961).
13. . 'I was wearing Stevie's jacket but I was shivering and wet and cold and scared because Stevie and the draft horse were going to die, since everything in this country must' ('ETCM', 10).
14. . For a detailed definition of death instincts, see Laplanche, J., Pontalis, J-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, Paris : PUF, 1967, 371-377.
15. . In 'Hunger Strike', the narrator successively throws stones at the sheep (54), at the beach poles (88), at the three traffic lights (93).
16. . For instance: 'The logs made a sound like they were nervous too' ('Wood', 19); or in 'ETCM' the comparison of the Father with 'a big tree all alone and desperate for forest' (6).
17. . Bachelard, Gaston, *L'Eau et les rêves : Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris : ed. José Corti, 1942, p.200.
18. . *L'Eau et les rêves*, pp 195-197.
19. . *L'Eau et les rêves*, pp. 201-202.
20. . *L'Eau et les rêves*, p. 67-68 ; Poe, Edgar Allan., *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, London: J.M. Dent, 1908, p.64.
21. . Interview with Katie Bolick, *Atlantic Unbound*, July 16, 1998.
22. . Pierre Tibi remarks that, 'Liée, au départ, au caractère fragmentaire de la nouvelle, la synecdoque de la partie pour le tout en est donc la figure première, la figure-mère' ('La nouvelle : Essai de compréhension d'un genre', p. 69).
23. . Colum McCann has stated his belief in redemption in an interview: 'I don't believe the world's a particularly beautiful place, but I do believe in redemption. There are those moments when the world comes together and we go home' (interview with Katie Bolick, *Atlantic Unbound*, July 16, 1998). The very last sentence of *This Side of Brightness* also confirms this belief: 'And at the gate he smiles, hefting the weight of the word upon his tongue, all its possibility, all its beauty, all its hope, a single word, resurrection' (London: Phoenix House, 1998).

ABSTRACTS

Comme le suggère le titre elliptique, les nouvelles de Colum McCann sont marquées par l'absence apparente de ce qui est paradoxalement au centre de leur signification, à savoir le conflit irlandais et le traumatisme qu'il a engendré, qui ne sont jamais évoqués directement. L'implicite joue en effet un grand rôle dans les trois nouvelles où il justifie le comportement ou les réactions sinon inexplicables des personnages.

Il prend en premier lieu la forme d'une inversion délibérée de la relation de cause à effet (effectuée par le biais d'une paralipse saisissante dans 'ETCM') : les trois nouvelles débutent comme d'innocentes anecdotes mais ne manquent pas de donner des signes de l'histoire implicite dont elles sont chargées, à savoir leur lien avec un passé de violence et de mort.

La narration à la première personne et/ou la focalisation interne (à travers les yeux d'un

narrateur adolescent) laissent de fait un espace au non-dit, reflété en particulier par le style ostensiblement paratactique et l'extrême condensation narrative (en ce qui concerne la structure temporelle et la construction des personnages). Le silence, motif récurrent dans le recueil, est synonyme de peur et de trahison, ou encore, il reflète l'incapacité des personnages à dépasser l'état de deuil. Sous-entendue dans le titre, la mort est aussi signifiée par des détails emblématiques évoquant des images de violence et de détérioration. En outre, la violence du conflit est suggérée par le symbolisme de l'eau (tel qu'il a été analysé par Gaston Bachelard).

L'intertexte biblique qui sous-tend les nouvelles reproduit également l'histoire de violence et de mort (partage rituel d'un repas brutalement interrompu, trahison, et lapidation métaphorique d'une victime sacrificielle) mais n'exclut pas totalement la rédemption.

Dans ETCM, l'esthétique de la suggestion semble aller au delà des exigences d'un genre elliptique, dans la mesure où, en se déplaçant du politique vers le personnel, les nouvelles font mesurer avec acuité l'étendue du mal fait à l'individu.

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Catherine Mari, maître de conférences at the University of Pau, teaches literature and narratology. She has written a thesis on David Lodge's fictional and critical work. Her research interests include in particular genre literature and short fiction. She has published articles on such writers as Charles Palliser, Michael Dibdin, Robert McLiam Wilson, Margaret Atwood, and A.S. Byatt, and is currently working on the link between contemporary fiction and Renaissance literature and culture.