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# Skipping and Gasping, Sighing and Hoping in Colum McCann's "Aisling": The Making of a Poet

Marie Mianowski

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- 1 Colum McCann has been writing short stories since the middle of the 1990s, most of which were collected in the volume *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* in 1998 which addresses the theme of exile and its variations, such as social exclusion, disability and the most extreme version of exile, death. Three other short stories<sup>1</sup> had been published in magazines or anthologies between 1997 and 1999, addressing the themes of geographic exile, social exclusion and handicap, much as *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*. A collection of novellas came out in 2000 about the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland. Since 2005, only two short stories by Colum McCann have been published: "What is it Called your Country behind the Mountain?" in David Marcus' anthology *The Faber Book of Best New Irish Short Stories 2004-5*, also on the theme of exile and belonging, and "Aisling," Colum McCann's latest short story, first published in 2010 in the *Paris Review*, and then in 2011 in Joseph O'Connor's anthology *New Irish Short Stories*.
- 2 "Aisling" deserves specific attention not only because it is Colum McCann's most recent short story, published in the wake of the longer novels which have earned him international fame. It is also remarkable because "Aisling" is a very short four-page piece of fiction, giving voice to a modern-day female "I" enunciator. As a writer who has voluntarily exiled himself abroad and has been living most of his adult life in New York City, Colum McCann has often been examining in his fiction the tension and confusion, energy and despair, as well as the sense of guilt and redemption that goes along with any exile, but which is also part of any life. In "Aisling," McCann makes the journey all the way back home, so to speak, taking his inspiration from an ancient poetic form, the "aisling," which flourished in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and carrying it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This short story reveals a double metamorphosis. The first metamorphosis resides in the writing itself. Dance and dancing movements and gestures which have been at the core of McCann's writing since his first collection of short stories *Fishing the*

*Sloe-Black River*, are not explicitly present in "Aisling." Instead they seem to be deployed through the syntax, rhythm and tropes. The narrative actually recedes behind the power of images and rhythm, so that the reader is captivated by the visions and seized by the breathing, sighing and sometimes almost gasping of the text. The second metamorphosis concerns Colum McCann himself: as a New York-based, Dublin-born writer, he has not only chosen to focus on the fate of his native country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but he has chosen to give voice to a female first-person narrator, borrowing from ancient lore and Irish literary tradition. This paper will therefore question first how much of the heritage from the ancient aisling tradition can be found in McCann's short story "Aisling," and the meaning it bears, as it links contemporary Irish issues with myth and folklore. How are present-day Ireland and ancient lore represented and brought together artistically in a double tension between home and exile, peace and violence? A final section will show how in "Aisling" McCann brings the aesthetics of hope and the energy of dance to their poetic essence.

- 3 The title of the short story "Aisling" itself links it to the Celtic aisling tradition. As Danielle Stirling wrote in her "Examination of the Aisling Genre in the Work of Three Irish Poets," "in the aisling genre of poetry, Ireland is represented as an otherworldly woman weeping for her misfortunes, awaiting her savior" (2). In the Irish Bardic and post-Bardic tradition, the desire for the good old days, "the backward look" (Stirling 2), is often expressed in a hope for the future and a return to the old ways. The genre had its roots in prophetic and love poetry. But it was only in the seventeenth century that the two were joined to form the political aisling, comparing and contrasting the past and present, in which the dream-woman embodied the past. Brendan O Buachalla described the four motifs of standard aisling genre as: the description of the vision-woman, the conversation (in which the poet interrogates the woman, the naming (in which she reveals herself to be Ireland) and the prophecy (qtd. in Sterling 2). In a paper entitled "For Want of Education: The Origins of the Hedge Schoolmaster Songs," Julie Henigan also described the different types of aisling poetry, stressing the variations in the attitude of the dreaming poet and the prophetic vision:

Not all eighteenth-century aislingí follow this pattern precisely. For example, some neglect the dream premise or the interrogation; others employ the basic framework but possess no allegorical or political connotations; still others retain the allegory, even the Jacobite allusions, but omit the final prophecy. But whether more or less to type (the pattern most closely associated with Eoghan Ó Súilleabháin), the eighteenth century aisling was indisputably a well-established and much-exploited genre. (5)

- 4 Colum McCann's "Aisling" short story is definitely a descendant of the ancient form of the aisling tradition, although of course there are fundamental differences. Apart from the fact that it is not presented as a poem, the narrator does not wake up to meet a woman of supernatural beauty and there is therefore no interrogation of the woman by the narrator. Here the "I" narrator woman clearly has a prophesying vision and herself embodies Ireland's past, future and present. The short story is made of three non-identical parts and six paragraphs. The general pattern is not balanced, although the sixth and final paragraph definitely echoes the first two and therefore gives the reader the impression that a cycle has been completed. But the "vision" theme is definitely present. The short story begins with the three words "I woke up" (183), which are again mentioned as the opening of the last paragraph with the addition of the adjective "alive": "I woke up alive" (186). Between the first paragraph and the sixth and final

one, the narrator has embarked the reader on a journey through time and space, the contours of which are difficult to trace and to make sense of. Suffice to say, for a start, that the final paragraph and the short story as a whole end on an optimistic note of hope. The short story is composed of six paragraphs which all present the different facets of Ireland evoked by the allegorical voice of Ireland itself. Apart from the title, the reader is given few hints that would enable him to guess that he is offered a vision of Ireland's fate in modern times. But at the end of the sixth paragraph, the quote from an old song definitely roots the entire narrative in a long tradition of lament over Ireland's fate. It also inscribes the implicit voice of ancient Ireland within the narrative, as if some sort of dialogue were taking place in the last lines of the short story, echoing the traditional dialogue between the poet and his vision of allegorical Ireland: "*Be not sad, Roisín, for all that happened thee.*" This sentence seems to be echoing from the most faraway recesses of the narrator's mind and connects the entire narrative to the ancient form of the *aisling*.

- 5 The song "Roisin Dubh" was written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and is attributed to Antoine O Raifteiri. It was translated into English by James Clarence Mangan, as well as Padraig Pearse. It is one of Ireland's most famous political songs and is based on an old love-lyric which referred to the poet's beloved rather than, as has often been the case since, being a metaphor for Ireland and it is said to belong to the "aisling" songs. The quote is one of the last lines of the short story:

I cleaned the windows, watched the clock, got myself together, paced the hall, wore a pathway, awaited the boys, sang this ditty. *Be not sad, Roisín, for all that happened thee.* I watched the clock, saw it strike, heard no footsteps, thought of suicide but the beauty of just about everything else took my courage away. (186)

- 6 Although the narrator cannot be said to be actually dialoguing with anyone in the strict sense of the word, the text is indeed dialoguing with the ancient *aisling*. Being framed by a reference to it in the title and by the address to Roisín in the last paragraph, the short story is presented to the reader within the perspective of the ancient poem. Moreover the last three sentences quoted above are by far the most optimistic of the whole short story. The horizon seems to be getting clearer as the windows are being "cleaned" and the clock can be watched. There is a watchful sense of expectancy ("got myself together, paced the wall, wore a pathway, awaited the boys, sang this ditty"), which strongly contrasts with the anxious or even violent agitation of the preceding paragraphs. This time, the idea of suicide, which was contemplated at the end of each of the preceding paragraphs, is brushed off, not out of a lack of courage but because of "beauty": "I watched the clock, saw it strike, heard no footsteps, thought of suicide but the beauty of just about everything else took my courage away" (186). Even the wronged expectations ("heard no footsteps") do not hinder the greater and wider sense of aspiration that pervades the end of the narrative.
- 7 This ending and the allusion to "the beauty of just about everything else" contrast optimistically with the endings of most of the other paragraphs which ended on notes of despair for which suicide seemed the inevitable logical conclusion. There are almost subdued echoes of Yeats' "terrible beauty"<sup>2</sup> emphasizing the Irish heritage of the text. In the first paragraph the narrator seems wretched as her children have gone away and she retraces her steps on her own, towards her empty home. The choice of verbs as she trudges back home contrasts with the happy activity of the beginning of the paragraph which described her preparing her boys for a day at school. Once they are gone, her daily tasks are turned into despondently meaningless chores:

I woke up, opened the curtains, found my nightgown, made the bed, tightened the sheets, fluffed the pillows, donned my slippers, boiled the water, brewed the tea, stirred the milk, climbed the stairs, woke the boys, combed their hair, straightened their curls, brushed their teeth, buttoned their buttons, zipped their zippers, checked their homework, poured their cornflakes, ladled the milk, toasted their toast, packed their lunches, checked their satchels, fixed their collars, tied their laces, wiped their noses, kissed their cheeks, unlocked the chain, crossed the threshold, tapped their bottoms, waved them off, ran the driveway, called their names, held their shoulders, kissed their foreheads, trudged on home, keyed the lock, climbed the stairs, brushed my teeth, washed my face, slipped on sandals, filled my clothes, ignored the mirror, jumped out the window and developed two huge wings on the way down. Of course I didn't. (182)

- 8 In the first paragraph as reproduced above, the narrator wakes up and undertakes her daily activities with enthusiasm. The choice of verbs betrays energy, and even joy, as she prepares herself and her boys. The verb "opened the curtains" directly follows the mention of her waking up, thus opening the short story on a jolly note. What follows is both casually and happily done, with a concern for a certain neatness of action: "found my nightgown, made the bed, tightened the sheets, fluffed the pillows, donned my slippers, boiled the water, brewed the tea, stirred the milk, climbed the stairs, woke the boys, combed their hair, straightened their curls, brushed their teeth." Just as the sheets are tightened, the boys' curls are straightened. The eagerness verges on fervour and is further accentuated by the alliterations and echoes in the trine of words, such as for example: "kissed their cheeks, unlocked the chain, crossed the threshold, tapped their bottoms" or the collocations 'buttoned their buttons, zipped their zippers, toasted their toasts.' In sharp contrast, once the boys have left, the narrator does not seem to inhabit her life anymore. Whereas she "donned" her slippers at the beginning of the paragraph, she casually "slips" on her sandals and "fills" her clothes at the end. No desire is expressed in the words chosen at the end of the paragraph, as she symptomatically avoids her own reflection in the mirror and is tempted by the idea of suicide. Although the rhythmic pattern remains the same, the words have transformed the merry ternary rhythm of the beginning into a plodding and depressed one, making the succession of trines and the never-ending sentence sound like a sigh or even a gasp. Then all of a sudden, as the first long sentence is still being continued, the ternary rhythm is brought to an end. The narrator seems to be holding her breath while imagining herself jumping out the window, or rather refraining from doing so, thanks to the vision she has of herself as a mythical bird. In the reader's eye, the image of the two great wings opening as she goes down might trigger the vision of a big swan opening its large wings to bring her back home where she belongs. "Of course I didn't" (183): the second and last sentence of the first paragraph initiates a pattern of conclusions in the short story. At the last minute, she has not mustered enough courage to commit suicide and moves on to another vision in the following paragraph. The second paragraph is the most violent of the whole short story and it also ends on a hint at a possibly failed suicide. The narrator has just evoked her husband, as well as the fact that she mutilated him twice, apparently guiltlessly. She suddenly escapes the dire straits of her gloomy apartment on board a private jet, which has transformed itself into a nightingale by the time the sentence has reached an end:

(...) shook a cocktail, drank it down, recalled my husband, mutilated him twice, fair is fair, what he deserves, wept an aria, made another drink, iced it up, held the sink, poured it down, heard it gurgle, guilt and grace, phoned my friend, forgot her number, ordered a private jet to bring me all the way up to Cornelscourt and flew

along through Monaloe Park on the back of a very handsome nightingale. Well at least I tried. (183)

- 9 Again the reader is engulfed in the same ternary rhythm but this time in a frenzy of violent action. And at the end of the paragraph, the bird is this time explicitly the legendary nightingale whose song is reputedly a sad and woeful one and whose fame reaches back to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and before him, to the violent story of Philomela in Greek mythology. In those ancient tales, Philomela had been changed into a nightingale after being raped by her brother-in-law. Here it might be made to echo Ireland's tragic fate under the boot of the British Empire but also under the oppression of a global economy and civilization. But again the worst is avoided and the narrator escapes a doomed fate in flying away both from a suicidal death and from the sombre reality of a hopeless life. Fantasy and myth are the ways in which the narrator escapes reality and transports her reader into the depths of ancient lore, wrenching the narrative from the contemporary reality of modern day Ireland. And yet it is far from being an easy journey for the reader as he is carried from one paragraph on to the apparently disconnected next paragraph. The landscape of Ireland he is presented with is a torn and paradoxical one, as the narrator is torn between the yearning for home and the desperate urge to escape what seems a doomed fate.
- 10 As much as there is no apparent logic in the way in which the six paragraphs of the short story are presented, there is hardly any more logic in its chronology or the representations of space. The logic is that of the subjective mental space of the narrator. Each paragraph seems to present different periods of modern day Ireland. The first recalls life in the 1950s or 1960s while the second paragraph jumps forward to a modernized Ireland, in which home appliances and electronic devices have thrust their way into the home. The shock of the irruption of modernity into Ireland is highlighted by the choice of the vocabulary and the semantic field of violence to which most of the verbs belong and which hint at all sorts of physical and psychological violence:

I nuked the tea, blew it cold, sipped it down, junked the teabag, threw it out, made some toast, spread the marmalade, flicked the television, jumped the channels, killed the remote, dialled the radio, broke the static, heard the weather, turned it off, ached for rain, waited for sunshine, rinsed the cup, cleaned the plates, separated the forks, licked the knives, sliced my lip, bit the blood, loaded the dishwasher, hit the switch, heard the hum, boiled the kettle, made more tea, rifled the cupboards, found the gin, opened the freezer, broke the ice, shook a cocktail, drank it down, recalled my husband, mutilated him twice, fair is fair, what he deserves, wept an aria, made another drink, iced it up, held the sink, poured it down, heard it gurgle, guilt and grace, phoned my friend, forgot her number, ordered a private jet to bring me all the way up to Cornelscourt and flew along through Monaloe Park on the back of a very handsome nightingale. Well at least I tried. (183)

- 11 Not only do most of the words denote sheer violence ("nuked," "junked," "threw," "killed," "ached," "sliced," "mutilated"), but there is a contamination of violence in the most mundane activities. Hence, "loaded the dishwasher" strangely echoes "rifled the cupboards" a few words further on, in a crescendo of crime, while all this time the narrator has not left her Dublin kitchen. The paradoxical permeability of the most ordinary activities to violence finds an illustration in the chiasmic patterns of sounds or letters in words such as nuked/junked or flicked/killed. More generally, words echo visually and phonologically, as the bouts of violence resonate and intensify across the

paragraph: "licked the knives, sliced my lips, bit the blood, loaded the dishwasher, hit the switch, heard the hum, boiled the kettle, made more tea, rifled the cupboards." In those first two paragraphs, the down-to-earth actions are literally lifted off the ground in the last few words by wings that carry both narrator and readers above the scene. And just as the narrator travels above and across from Monaloe Park to Cornelscourt, so do the readers become familiar with this part of Dublin and make their way with the narrator down the aisles of the shopping mall. Ireland by then seems to have gone global, and the age of consumerism has penetrated all aspects of life, as the narrator tediously fills her trolley and trawls on home. The geography of modern Dublin is very precise and the reader is able to imagine her taking the overpass over Clonkeen road and walking down her driveway. And yet the narrator's imagination is even more versatile, as her visions take her back to a time when she might have met the nuns from Loreto Foxrock on a daily basis and got instructed by them of the moral and religious codes she was to obey:

(...) trawled on home, took the overpass, walked down Clonkeen, used the doormat, ate a pill, skipped the stairs, thought of visions, destroyed all trinitities, had a love affair with a tar-dark Gypsy who rang the doorbell and afterwards, in the driveway, had a minor collision with fifteen hundred nuns from Loreto Foxrock, oh my darling you're a child of the Immaculate Mary and you don't have to kiss him until you're entirely ready. But I very well might. (182-183)

- 12 This raving incursion into memories that are presented as moral and religious constraints of a youth she wishes to forget, leads to the fourth paragraph, which is an explicit flashback. The narrator here distinctly remembers looking at photos of herself as a young girl doing her homework and running to mass, then growing up, breaking up with her parents, getting rich but then marrying "the hard-working boy who came up from the country" and leaving her old self behind. For once the fourth paragraph seems to precede the fifth logically, as the last but one paragraph opens with the narrator telling of her life as a mother: "I went to hospital, had the children, settled in Monaloe" (185). And yet, in those two paragraphs, the apparent chronology ends up with a strange vision of the narrator's body. At the end of the fourth paragraph, as she marries the boy from the country, the text alludes to her life before as the body of a dead girl flying off in the shape of a question mark: "thinking well you can eat around the bruised part, my dear, but the core is still altogether dark I fear" (184). Paragraph 5 also ends on a bizarre vision of the narrator's body as her heart is described being filled with petrol and pouring out into a styrofoam cup: "filled my heart full of petrol and poured it out into a styrofoam cup" (185). Narrating pain creates strange visions of the narrator's body in a juxtaposition of anatomical elements and vegetal metaphors, as she appears like a bruised fruit with a black core. Or it triggers hyperrealist images of modern day consumerism, a self-service gas-station cafe with petrol and styrofoam cups. Reliable, geographical space dissolves into a poetic space as pastoral or romantic echoes merge into a hyperrealist landscape.
- 13 And yet, it is not so much the specific space of Dublin and the landmarks near Monaloe Park, Foxrock and Cornelscourt which are of interest here, but the perspective on those particular places as they embody a sense of home and belonging. The disrupted chronology illustrates the tension between Ireland entering an era of all-out consumerism and globalization and an Irish sense of home and domestic love, a need to nurture and tend the garden, as in paragraph 1 and at the beginning of paragraph 5:

I went to hospital, had the children, settled in Monaloe, painted the walls, planted the garden, weeded the lawn, bought some secateurs, clipped the begonia, fertilised the floribundas, plucked the weeds, changed the vasewater (...). (185)

14 The narrator's grasp of her garden, weeding, planting and clipping, goes hand in hand with a certain hold on space and hence on events of the world as it moves on. As opposed to this sense of control on things and events, the reader witnesses the narrator's body being submitted to the strangest contortions as it strives to reconcile its past and its present while contemplating a possible future. Torn between two ages and avoiding the mirror in the first paragraph, the narrator aches and weeps, loves and mutilates, offers her bruised body and her black heart, and yet wakes up alive, although almost mad, thanking God for the beauty around her and the life that lies ahead. Through all this chaos, just as she can grow wings and become a nightingale, the narrator portrays Ireland as it outgrows its tensions and undergoes a metamorphosis. The conversion and radical change, the metamorphosis from a lamented and lost past to an unknown future take shape in the actual form of the narrative as the short story in fact unfolds into a poem.

15 The very shortness of the short story "Aisling" might from the start question its status as a piece of fiction, or at least present it as a very peculiar piece of fiction. But there is more to it than just its length. Implicit and elliptical as it is, the rhythm and rhyming patterns make it all the more striking. In manipulating language in such a minimalist way, McCann is creating a poetic device which in turn becomes the poetic world in which the narrator is going to perform her ritual verbal performance. The most obvious common point between the six paragraphs is their repetitive structure: each paragraph is made of one extremely long sentence followed by one or two very short ones, and each sentence is itself based on the juxtaposition of several, often more than twenty, three-word kernel sentences. The same pace and rhythm is found all along the narrative, while only the meaning of the verbs changes, thus giving more weight to the overall meaning. For example, just as the jolly "donned my slippers" (line 2) becomes a casual "slipped on sandals" at the end of the first paragraph, the shift from the maternal "boiled the water, brewed the tea, stirred the milk" (line 2 and line 3) emphasized by the [b] sound alliteration, to the violent 'I nuked the tea, blew it cool, sipped it down, junked the teabag' with its harsh [k] sounds at the beginning of the second paragraph, leads the reader to experience musically, and almost physically, the change of era and the change of world. A similar sensual, almost tactile experience can be made by the reader as he goes on the exciting errand of shopping at Cornelscourt mall behind the narrator's trolley:

squeezed some apples, filched a grape, shook a cereal, eyed the ham, flirted with watermelons, lingered at lemons, checked the calories, avoided all fats, filled my trolley, wandered the wine, grabbed the Bordeaux, queued at checkout, flicked the magazines (...). (183)

16 As in the preceding paragraphs, the visual and phonologic play on words and sounds between the collocations and words is striking, as "squeezed" echoes "shook" and "checked" and "filched" resonate with "flirted," "filled" and "flicked." The poetic form of this short story strengthens the links with its ancestor, the aisling, and therefore highlights the dimension of this narrative as a lament for the dispossessed, for Ireland's fate and what it has become. McCann wrote "Aisling" in 2010, well into the recession that hit Ireland as early as 2008. This poetic narrative therefore brings on new weight and a new modernity to the aisling poetic form. Ireland's latest plight and suffering, as



well as waves of exile, are inscribed within the long train of similar sorrow and torments over the centuries.

- 17 And yet, more profoundly, this poetic narrative also gives a new perspective on Colum McCann's work of fiction and literary work as a whole, as an author who has been writing about Ireland from the distance of the exiled outsider for more than two decades. It is almost as if Colum McCann were lending his voice to a female allegory of Ireland as a way of lamenting what Ireland has become, mourning what has been lost, fretting about the faults it has brought upon itself while at the same time, despite all the sighs and sorrows, describing it skipping into the future, gasping for hope. It is as if this lamentation could not be done from the outside and could only be achieved after the writer himself had embodied the voice of Ireland and become a poet in the process, borrowing from a long train of ancient poets before him. 'Aisling' then appears as McCann's utmost artistic accomplishment so far and in more than one sense.
- 18 I have studied the aesthetics of dance in McCann's writing and the fact that the function of dance in his fiction is most obvious in his bestselling novel *Dancer* (Mianowski, "The Choreography of Exile"). Any attentive reader will have also noticed how Clarence Nathan danced, already doing what the narrator of *This Side of Brightness* called "crane-dancing" (247) in the final page of the novel. Dancing has been prominent in all of McCann's fiction since *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* in 1998, skips and jumps expressing the exiles' fear and hope for the future when words went amiss and failed to tell the heart-wrenching experience of exile and the anguish before the unknown lying ahead. "Aisling" embodies the rhythm, music and the very breathing of dancing. Words not only skip, bounce and dance, but after many a sigh and a gasp, they eventually cry out for hope.
- 19 According to Alain Badiou, dance is the perfect metaphor of thought, because like dance, thought is an intensification of actual experience (57-58). But dance also suspends time into space, and because it is an absolutely ephemeral art form, dancing has to do with eternity. Nureyev's urge was to tell a story and dance at the same time. As early as his short stories, Colum McCann seemed to be ready for an encounter with the hero of his novel *Dancer*. As the poet Yves Jouan stated in an interview with the Colombian choreographer Alvaro Restrepo, artistic categories always strive towards what they cannot express: painting towards the invisible, writing towards the "unspeakable" and dance towards the "speakable." One of the characteristics of art is always to try and push limits beyond what it could reasonably reach. McCann's writing carries words to the limits of words, towards what cannot be told nor spoken: gesture or movement. When words fail to tell what emerges from the past because it has fallen into oblivion or it is too cruel to be spoken out, bodies come along and dance out a few skips and leaps. As Giorgio Agamben argued in his essay "Les Corps à venir," dancing is then simply a form of bodily writing. But this becomes a real feat when it concerns a fictional character. In 'Fishing the Sloe-Black River', the eponymous short story of the 1998 collection that took place in Ireland, the writing is extremely concise, and the allusion to the exile of the sons of the women fishing in the river is very brief. The meaning is revealed by the tragic choreography of those motherly bodies throwing their lines in unison. The movements of their bodies lined along the river banks tell how vain their waiting is, but also how much all those daily individual and collective rituals link them to that other place where their exiled children now live: "they waited the women, and they cast, all of them together" (56). The syntax and the inverted verb

and subject, as well as the symmetrical repetition of the pronoun 'they' give a particular rhythm to that sentence which literally almost dances. In the same collection, the short story "Step We Gaily On We Go" describes Flaherty as an ex-boxing champion and the word "dance" is used to describe the movements of the boxer on the ring: "Wait for the hole. Spare the right. Dance a little. Jab. Atta boy. Move away. Dance. Throw that shoulder" (60).

- 20 The dancing movements there are meant to fill in the moments between the actual boxing actions in which anything can happen. In this moment of dance, the movement of bodies also translate the imminence of a metamorphosis. At the end of the short story "Sisters," one of the many discoveries Sheona makes as she is reunited with her sister Brigid, is that her sister has learnt how to dance (18). This episode is crucial, as it shows that dance is a language that has become common to both sisters over time. Sheona is standing at the foot of Brigid, her dying sister's bed and she is handling Brigid's feet as if they were puppets and as if her feet were going to talk to her:

Her feet are blue and very cold to the touch. I rub them slowly at first. I remember when we were children, very young, before all that, and we had held buttercups to each other's chins on the edges of brown fields. I want her feet to tell me about butter. As I massage, I think I see her lean her head sideways and smile, though I'm not sure. I don't know why, but I want to take her feet in my mouth. It seems obscene, but I want to and I don't. (21)

- 21 Sheona then looks towards the window and thinks of her future. The metamorphosis and the possibility of a future have been expressed through a gesture, in a movement of feet like dancing puppets. In "Aisling," McCann leaps higher still in creating the poetic frame for a female "I" narrator, inheritor of the age old "Aisling" poetic form who performs verbal actions, embodying a sort of allegorical Ireland. In a few skipping sentences and half a dozen paragraphs all ending with imaginary visions of flight, the voice brings together ancient and modern Ireland, the ordinary and the revolutionary, the peace and quiet of home with the irrational violence of change, the need to nurture and the abyss of suicide and finally the tenacious and powerful never-dying glimmer of hope.
- 22 In all of Colum McCann's short stories from the first in 1997 to the latest in 2010, dancing movements seem to help bodies reconcile the individuals with the actual space and time in which they live, thus suspending for a while their turmoil and agony in a leap, a skip or a twirl. In *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Alain Badiou defines dancing as forgetting, because bodies forget their weight. For him, dancing is a beginning because any dancing gesture should look as if it were inventing its own beginning; it is a game because it frees bodies from any social constraint and can be compared to the cycle of a wheel. In his writing, and in "Aisling" especially, Colum McCann is as much a poet as a choreographer, words tracing a choreography of the times to come. The experience of otherness seems like a deep chasm that only art can hope to bridge. More powerfully still than in describing the arabesques of dancing bodies in his earlier narratives, in "Aisling" McCann sublimates time, space and the shortcomings of memory by conjuring up visual references, musical echoes and linguistic tropes, and taking his reader along in a swinging jig, for an extraordinary breath-taking four-page journey.

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## NOTES

1. "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" (1997), "Sumac" (1999), "As If There Were Trees" (1999).
2. W. B. Yeats' famous "Easter 1916" poem uses the anaphorical repetition of the phrase "a terrible beauty is born" to describe the ambivalent power of the 1916 insurrection.

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## ABSTRACTS

"Aisling" est la dernière nouvelle en date publiée par Colum McCann dans la revue *Paris Review* en 2010, puis dans l'anthologie *New Irish Short Stories* de Joseph O'Connor en 2011. Elle mérite toute notre attention car dans cette nouvelle l'écriture de McCann semble atteindre un point d'accomplissement particulier. "Aisling" est une nouvelle très brève qui donne la parole à une allégorie de l'Irlande contemporaine et s'inspire de "l'aisling" une forme poétique ancienne, florissante au XVIIIème siècle. Cette nouvelle met au jour une double métamorphose. La première est la métamorphose de ce texte de fiction en un poème, alors que le romancier incarne la voix d'une Irlande éternelle tout en faisant des emprunts à une forme poétique traditionnelle. Le récit recule peu à peu derrière la puissance des images et le rythme, laissant le lecteur captivé par les suggestions visuelles et sonores, la respiration du texte, ses soupirs et halètements. Dans cette nouvelle, Colum McCann se métamorphose lui aussi en poète, dessinant une véritable poésie de l'espérance, poussant la dynamique et le souffle de la danse jusqu'à sa plus pure expression poétique.

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Marie Mianowski is a senior lecturer at the University of Nantes where she teaches Irish and British contemporary literature as well as translation. She is the author of many papers on the subject of Irish contemporary literature, including Colum McCann's work. In 2012, she edited *Irish Contemporary Landscapes in Literature and the Arts* (Palgrave Macmillan) and is currently working on a translation into French of five short stories by Colum McCann, as well as writing a book on the landscape of exile in William Trevor's work.