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Chapter ten

# Spectral voices in “Thirteen Ways of Looking”

(Colum McCann, 2015)



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**Abstract:** Colum McCann’s 2015 novella “Thirteen Ways of Looking” is haunted by a vast spectrum of questions, realities and possibilities but, perhaps most importantly, by a multiplicity of voices – a term which is used with a broad definition here. This paper focuses on these voices, trying to work out their natures, specificities and functions in the production and the reception of the text. Memories and references to Irish culture, geography and language, as well as the echoes they find in other traditions, are subterranean elements that regularly surface in the narrative, as do intertextual references; close attention is therefore paid to the links between what is intertextual and what is spectral. This article analyses the repercussions of these intrusions of spectral elements on the narrative and the narrative voice, all the while considering whether this ghost-like presence is stifling or invigorating for the reader’s reception of this text, but also for the writer, his novella, and his contribution to the Irish literary scene.

**Keywords:** Irish contemporary literature, Colum McCann, spectrality, intertextuality, narrative voice, stylistics, narratology

## Introduction



Colum McCann’s 2015 novella “Thirteen Ways of Looking” is a detective story centred on Peter Mendelssohn’s murder one winter day in New York City. He is an old man with little control over his body anymore and a mind which, while still agile, is starting to fail him too. The investigation that forms the main narrative frame is haunted by a secondary

storyline, following the victim's last hours from his own point of view. The text as a whole is haunted, diegetically and narratively, by spectral elements and above all voices.

This paper will tackle the forms and consequences of such spectrality on the production and the reception of the text, from the point of view of the reader but also from that of the observer trying to understand in what way(s) it can be considered as part of the Irish literary lineage. Reviewing the modes and roles of spectrality eventually raises the issue of whether these omnipresent spectral voices and elements turn out to be stifling or invigorating for the novella, its general reception and its author.

## Haunted Stories

### The Mendelssohn Storyline

At the beginning of the novella, Peter Mendelssohn is an old man who is prone to reminiscing. As someone who was born in Europe at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is no surprise that memories of his life-story should find echoes in history and indeed, many historical events are entangled in the memories which re-emerge throughout the text. The character, who is Jewish, for instance remembers leaving Lithuania at the time of World War Two (see page 31); 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomena such as (de) colonisation, globalisation and im/emigration are also often alluded to, as the protagonist and his family (his Irish-born wife, his daughter who lives abroad) experience them personally.

The character-focaliser's memories, whether they are related to historical or to more intimate matters, resurface most of the time through the numerous – and sometimes circumvolved – associations his mind makes between a present situation and a past one, as is the case in the following passage in which the protagonist is at the restaurant:

Another glass of Sancerre, please, my dear, then cut me off. Alexander the Great knew when and where to stop. It used to be, long ago long ago, that he could put away five, six glasses, but those days are gone, and his army has long since retreated. In his early years there was the curious practice of the three-martini lunch.<sup>1</sup>

1. Colum McCann, *Thirteen Ways of Looking*, London/New York, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 98.

As shown by the embedded passing reference to Alexander the Great – which creates a third layer of reality on top of the present and past of the character, and opens up not only to the Greek leader but also to his role and rewritings in our collective imagination –, the memories which are stirred up by random present situations are rarely univocal and one-dimensional. On the contrary, the reader is confronted with a text in which the protagonist’s psyche swarms with personal recollections often including inter- and extra-textual elements, creating a multi-layered narrative:

And how is it that the deep past is littered with the characters, while the present is so housebroken and flat? Wasn’t it Faulkner who said that the past is not dead, it’s not even past? Funny thing, the present tense. Technically it cannot exist at all. Once you’re aware of it, it’s gone, no longer present. We dwell, then, in the constant past, even when we’re dreaming of the future.<sup>2</sup>

The elderly character seems obsessed with the passing of time, especially as the lines between past, present and even future seem increasingly blurred to him, which is translated by the fluidity with which his thoughts flow back and forth. This resonates with the strange game of mirrors between his father, himself and his son, one which will be detailed in the following paragraph.

The spectre – and spectrum – of generations is indeed an omnipresent one, be it through references to history and the changes at work throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, or through complex father-son (un) likeness and relationships. Mendelssohn acknowledges his ageing bodily appearance by remembering how he could now be mistaken for the ghost of his paternal grandfather (“He caught a glimpse in the mirror the other day, and how in tarnation did I acquire the face of my father’s father?”).<sup>3</sup> Later, the confusion – which results in his death – is between him and his son Elliot, leaving him genuinely, one might even say philosophically, puzzled:

– Elliot Mendelssohn.

Yes. No. Of course not. Question or statement? [...] Was that my name? Am I my son? Surely not. Not in this lifetime at least. [...] Am I the son of my son? A better question. Though not one I’d like to answer right now.<sup>4</sup>

The protagonist’s line of descent and in particular his paternity regularly resurface as problematic topics which fuel the regrets he admits to

2. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 130-131.

having. The following extract takes place while he is waiting for his son – with whom he has a rather conflictual relationship – to join him at the restaurant:

Really what I want to talk to you about is those old days with your mother, when we were all together [...] but here we are, listening to you prattle about the *bitcharita* and yet another excuse for being late, and surely there's something else, son? Should I have another try at my memoirs? Should I give Sally James [Mendelssohn's caregiver] a raise? Would you like another glass of Cabernet? [...] No, no, tell me this and tell me no more: Do you miss your mother, son? Or tell me this: Do you recall the days we spent at the beach in Oyster Bay? Or tell me this: Do you ever return to the thought of her with the hint of a sigh?<sup>5</sup>

As shown here, besides the voice of regrets which seeps through the focaliser's thoughts, another phantom element can be distinguished: the spectre of other, (im)possible scenarios. Throughout the Mendelssohn chapters, such spectrality is brought about by the creation of subworlds.<sup>6</sup> In literary texts, a subworld “embodies a change in spatio-temporal factors compared with the matrix world it is connected to”.<sup>7</sup> Such a change is embodied in the text by a number of markers, such as “clauses that include modals and that are used by characters (or anyone belonging to the Discourse World)<sup>8</sup> who thereby refer to imaginary or hypothetical worlds. Negation can also create epistemic subworlds”.<sup>9</sup> Narrative choices such as the repeated use of ‘should’ (in the latest quotation)<sup>10</sup> and other modal auxiliaries, of the negative and/or interrogative mode (“No, no, tell me this and tell me no more”,<sup>11</sup> “Where in the world did I go wrong, did I ruin his childhood, did I neglect him, did I not read the right books to him?”)<sup>12</sup> and of linking words or phrases opening onto other (im)possibilities, or subworlds (“but”, “or”, “Really what I want to talk to you about is”)<sup>13</sup> all contribute to building up this complex spectrum of potential realities which seem to haunt the focaliser. This narrative strategy can also be noticed in the second plotline, the one which involves the detectives who investigate Mendelssohn's murder.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

6. As conceptualized and defined in Text World Theory in Paul Werth, *Text worlds: representing conceptual space in discourse*, London, Longman, 1999, and Joanna Gavins, *Text World Theory: an Introduction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2007.

7. Sandrine Sorlin, *La stylistique anglaise. Théories et pratiques*, Rennes, PU Rennes, 2014, p. 177 (my translation).

8. In Text World Theory, the Discourse World is the real, extra-textual world.

9. Sorlin, *op. cit.*, p. 177 (my translation).

10. See also for example McCann, *op. cit.*, p. 5-7.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 87-88.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 85.



Since the novella is a detective story, it is only natural that those who try to piece together who killed the old man should examine various leads and consider different hypotheses. Their guesses, second-guesses and considerations open up as many different potential subworlds. The following extract takes place after the detectives have noticed initials on the suspect's hat while watching the surveillance tape:

Perhaps it is not a Boston College hat at all, but it could have any number of meanings, British Columbia, or a rock band, or the comic strip, and endless litany of B.C.'s, maybe even personal initials, but it could also possibly be the Brooklyn Cyclones [...] and yes of course it must be the Cyclones, given that it's closer to home, and perhaps then the killer is from Brooklyn.<sup>14</sup>

The same mechanisms (using modals and linking words such as “perhaps” or “maybe”, as well as summoning up the semantic field of possibility) are used in multiple other instances, for example when the detectives contemplate whether the victim's son could be a suspect:

Could it be that Elliot himself wanted to hurry up the inheritance? Perhaps he has some financial problems? [...] Perhaps he was upset at something his father said to him? It is not beyond possibility that the anger built up inside him and he snapped.<sup>15</sup>

In these chapters too, negation (in the extract above, or in “There is a pipe on the desk but no tobacco box, matches, or ashtray”)<sup>16</sup> is regularly used to create subworlds. Some are more developed than others, as is the case here, where it is produced by the preterit and “would”:

If it had been another day – without the snow, the wind, the early dark – they would have seen him fall like a character out of an old epic, all hat and history. It would have been captured from the traffic cam atop the ornate limbs of the lightpole on Eighty-Sixth Street.<sup>17</sup>

The proliferation of hypotheses is tantalizing, all the more so as it is exacerbated by the numerous instruments which further expand the scope of possibilities.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

The text is punctuated by mentions of surveillance cameras, which seem to proliferate: the closing sentence of the novella is “More cameras in the city than birds in the sky”.<sup>18</sup> In the restaurant where Peter and Elliot Mendelssohn have lunch, there are no fewer than twelve (“a twelve-camera matrix”),<sup>19</sup> and a thirteenth is located just outside.<sup>20</sup> While this gives an impression of overbearing intrusiveness, the detectives remain at a standstill for a very long time as their investigation is crippled by blind spots, both figurative and literal:

On any day it might complement the restaurant footage [...] but today it is obscured by snow blowing directly onto the lens, [...] a gathering curtain of white [...] At the time of the murder the only thing that can be seen through the granules of snow are the headlights of the approaching cars [...] No figures. No faces. No men in baseball caps. No images of an assailant running down the street.<sup>21</sup>

The spectre of the invisible – what was there but cannot be distinguished, what could have been *if* – therefore haunts the detectives and overshadows their work, much in the same way as the mysterious blackbird from the poem by Wallace Stevens<sup>22</sup> which gives the novella its name casts its enigmatic shadow on the text. Traditionally, blackbirds are associated with mystery, bad omens and death (as a matter of fact, they are often linked with the number 13).<sup>23</sup> The blackbird thus represents another spectral, potentially ominous presence, at the same time as it acts as a golden thread for the text since a stanza from the poem opens each of the thirteen sections of the novella. The many references to birds’ eyes and to vision in the text reinforce this cohesive role, as does the author’s choice to regularly borrow words from the poem to integrate them in his own text: “A recurring phenomenon is that words used by Stevens in such or such stanza are taken up [by McCann] in the section [of the novella] that directly follows the epigraph”.<sup>24</sup> The eleventh section of the text is a striking example of such a process, which creates linguistic spectral echoes.

Besides cameras, mirrors also contribute to opening up new dimensions; as objects, they are frequently referred to in the text; on a more symbolic note, they are also to be found in the numerous – sometimes explicit – parallels which emerge between different situations or agents, for instance between detectives and poets:

18. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

20. See *ibid.*, 71.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

22. The full name of the poem is “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1917).

23. See Bertrand Cardin, *Colum McCann: intertextes et interactions*, Rennes, PU Rennes, 2016 ([doi:10.4000/books.pur.54818](https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.54818), also published in English as *Colum McCann’s Intertexts: ‘Books Talk to One Another’*, Cork, Cork U.P., 2016), p. 221.

24. Cardin, *op. cit.*, p. 220 (my translation).



Poets, like detectives, know the truth is laborious; it doesn't occur by accident, rather it is chiseled and worked into being, the product of time and distance and graft. The poet must be open to the possibility that she has to go a long way before a word rises, or a sentence holds, or a rhythm opens, and even then nothing is assured [...] Sometimes it happens at the most unexpected moment, and the poet has to enter the mystery, rebuild the poem from there.<sup>25</sup>

It is not only with poets that detectives can find echoes; another, implicit parallel can be noticed between detectives and readers:

They play it again in their minds, in light of everything they already know. It is their hope that each moment, when ground down and sifted through, examined and prodded, read and re-read, will yield a little more of the killer and the world he, or she, has created. They go forward metrically, and then break time again. They return, judge, reconfigure. [...] The breakthrough is there somewhere in the rhythmic disjunctions, in the small resuscitations of language, in the fractured framework.<sup>26</sup>

The task described here is the detectives', but it is easy to notice the similarities with the readers' role as decoding agents whose mission it is to solve the riddle of a text – more specifically of a detective story. They can therefore be perceived as the detectives' doubles, hovering almost like ghosts over the elements of the puzzle, lingering on details to try and solve it.

Metatextual questioning is thereby encouraged, as is reader involvement in general, in order to make sense of such a multi-layered – and, as such, haunted – text: while spectrality is a major thematic motif and a driving element for the plot, it is also intrinsically woven into the narrative structure of the novella.

## Textual spectres, spectral readers

### A Multi-layered Narration

First and foremost, the two storylines which make up the novella – the one following Mendelssohn's last hours and the one focusing on the

25. McCann, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 95.



investigation – echo each other as the mysteries and questions raised by one are usually answered by the other. It can therefore be argued that they haunt each other, much in the same way as doubts regarding some characters' involvement in the old man's death haunt both detectives and readers. The indeterminacy which characterises the nature of voices and perspectives put forwards in both the Mendelssohn and the investigation storylines is a further indication that the novella is a profoundly haunted narrative.

In the chapters where the old man acts as the focaliser, the narration almost always involves his stream of consciousness. However, this inner voice is in no way simple as readers seem to witness a fission in the character's self, one which is translated through randomly alternating subject pronouns (I/he):

Still and all, she has enough, his Katya, and how in the world did I get here anyway? Alzheimer's. That's the thing. Don't have it now, probably never will. Would forget about it if I did. Isn't that right, Eileen? What an awful thing it would be to forget your own wife, though. Though, there are times when he opens a door, or wakes in the morning, and he's sure she's still there. Good morning, *mo chroi*.<sup>27</sup> What am I doing out here on my own?<sup>28</sup>

Such a phenomenon can be observed almost systematically. Perhaps it can be explained by the man's old age; perhaps this duality reflects the conflict between his past and present self, or between what was and what he wishes could have been. Be it as it may, the reader is under the impression that Mendelssohn is haunted by himself.

Perhaps more surprisingly, something similar occurs in the chapters focused on the detectives: voices and perspectives are even more complicated to identify unequivocally,<sup>29</sup> especially because of the significant porosity between different types of speech<sup>30</sup> (direct, indirect, free direct, free indirect):

The detectives stop to whisper in English and then Pedro tells her that he understands perfectly, he'd be happy to do the interrogation in either language. She says that, yes, Rick, her partner, is a bit rusty. We appreciate it, Pedro, she says, we really do. Still, she maintains

27. An affectionate phrase in Irish Gaelic, literally "my heart".

28. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

29. A significant part of the analyses in this section are borrowed from Marion Bourdeau, "Spaces and interstices in Colum McCann's works of fiction: ethics and aesthetics of balance", University of Caen Normandy Library, 2019 (PhD Thesis, unpublished).

30. See Geoffrey Leech & Mick Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, Harlow/New York, Pearson Longman, 2007 (first published in 1981).

a lilt to her questions, as if her English has just swum through the Caribbean. She is interested in clean states, she says. She avoids the word *murder*. It is an assault, a serious assault, a tragedy really. Is he aware of what happened? Yes. Has he heard anything come along the grapevine? No. Some people just lose it, you know? I suppose so. Did you ever lose it yourself, Pedro? No, I'm a quiet man, I live a quiet life.<sup>31</sup>

Within the main frame of the narrator's tale, indirect speech ("he understands perfectly, he'd be happy to do the interrogation in either language"; "her partner"; "She is interested in clean states, she says") alternates with direct speech. The latter, unconventionally, does not use quotation marks, but can still be defined as such since there is no shift in pronouns and since there are reporting-speech verbs ("We appreciate it, Pedro, she says, we really do"). The authorship of some segments ("Still, she maintains a lilt to her questions, as if her English has just swum through the Caribbean"; "She avoids the word *murder*") remains unclear: they could be the female character's free indirect thoughts or they could be the heterodiegetic narrator's,<sup>32</sup> punctually taking over the narrative. The end of the extract also includes the detectives' and the suspect's free direct speech ("It is an assault, a serious assault, a tragedy really"; "Yes"; "No"; "Some people just lose it, you know? I suppose so. Did you ever lose it yourself, Pedro? No, I'm a quiet man, I live a quiet life") and indirect speech ("Is he aware of what happened?"; "Has he heard anything come along the grapevine?"). In this extract, however, even if the voices are mingled, it is still possible to identify them. It is not always the case:

Together, brother and sister step toward the funeral home and are soon engulfed by others who have arrived almost simultaneously in a polite wave: judges, office workers, neighbors [...] Among them, too, the restaurant manager, Christopher Eagleton, and the busboy, Dandinho, who, upon his appearance, is marked as a person of significant suspicion: why in the world would the busboy arrive at the funeral?

The detectives return again to the restaurant footage, but Dandinho never leaves the building, not once, he simply has his animated conversation with Pedro Jiménez by the dishwashing station, and he is most certainly located on the footage by the bar when the punch is thrown outside the restaurant. Dandinho is, in fact, one of the first to go to Mendelssohn's aid when he falls. He is calm and controlled when questioned, not a hint of guilt about him, keen to point out that M was one of his favourite customers, that he always took home

31. McCann, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

32. See Gérard Genette, *Figures III*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1972.

his leftovers for his housekeeper, tipped well, was old-world, polite, a hint of a twinkle still in his eye. He did not witness the actual punch, although he heard the thump of the old man's head on the pavement, he thought at first that maybe M had just slipped on the ice, but knew immediately he was dead, he felt very sorry for him, a terrible way to go, he went to the funeral to pay his respects, it was the Christian thing to do. [...]

And so, like the snow, or the latter point in a poem, the theories drift across the screen, opposition and conflict, so many possibilities available to the detectives, all of them intersecting in various ways, a Venn diagram of intent, the real world presenting itself with all its mystery.<sup>33</sup>

Different types of speech are used here: the less frequent are what is in all likelihood the detectives' free direct thoughts ("why in the world would the busboy arrive at the funeral?"; "not a hint of guilt about him"), Dandinho's free indirect speech ("M was one of his favourite customers", "he always took home his leftovers [...] it was the Christian thing to do") and perhaps even his free direct speech ("a terrible way to go"). As for the rest, the problem lies in determining whether it consists in the omniscient narrator's voice or the detectives' free indirect thoughts. The confusion arises due to the evaluating remarks that punctuate the excerpt. They clearly stem from a precise consciousness and denote a form of subjectivity ("polite"; "too"; "simply"; "most certainly"; "calm and controlled"; "keen"; "not once") – the question is whose. Some elements of distancing seem to signal a return to the narrator's consciousness ("who, upon his appearance, is marked as a person of significant suspicion"; "The detectives return again to the restaurant foot"; "He is calm and controlled when questioned"). This is all the more noticeable at the end of the extract ("And so, like the snow [...] mystery"), which seems characterised by a deictic pop<sup>34</sup> that can be identified thanks to the use of "the detectives" and to a way of formulating things which has a more lyrical quality than other passages. Yet, in the vast majority of the excerpt, the emphasis laid on the detectives' subjectivity and logic, as well as the phrasing of the segments that underline the logical links in reasoning ("so"; "but"; "in fact"), cast doubt on whose perspective is adopted, especially since the phrasing often bears traces of orality – all of which would tend to point to free indirect

33. McCann, *op. cit.*, p. 92-93.

34. A "deictic pop" is what happens when the omniscient narrator stops adopting a character's perspective (as if the narrative were an internal focalisation) and returns to the main narrative frame, which is organized around the narrator's (and not the character's) deictic centre. The reverse phenomenon is called a "deictic push". See Mary Galbraith, "Deictic shift theory and the poetics of involvement in narrative", *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective*, Judith F. Duchan, Gail A. Bruder & Lynne E. Hewitt (Eds.), Hillsdale, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995, p. 19-59; see also Lesley Jeffries & Dan McIntyre, *Stylistics*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 2010, p. 160.

thought. However, it seems impossible to settle the matter for sure. Such porosity and lack of absolute certainty are not inherently problematic in the sense that they are part of a narrative strategy obviously aimed at creating the *whodunnit* suspense; doubt continues to haunt the readers' minds, much in the same way as the narrator's spectre remains an omnipresent element. The multi-layered narrative voice resulting from these mingling perspectives hints at polyphony, a phenomenon which plays a key role in another process making the text a spectral one: intertextuality.

### Intertextuality and spectrality<sup>35</sup>



While this section focuses on references to textual works only, it is necessary to mention that numerous extra-textual references to other forms and works of art are to be found in the novella. Mendelssohn's surname is an obvious nod to the German music composer; various other musical references can be listed, from allusions to political pieces (such as "My Country Tis of Thee" through the line "Let freedom ring, Sally, from the hilltops" page 127; in turn, this song evokes the spectre of "God Save the Queen" since they share the same arrangements) to the folk songs Eileen used to sing. Numerous paintings are also mentioned, which creates a wide artistic spectrum reinforcing the multi-layered nature of a text that is characterised by a proliferation of embedded – and, as such, one might argue spectral – references and, thereby, artistic voices. Still, to better answer the set of questions raised by this article, this section will subsequently focus on the literary voices whose spectres are invoked.

Several spectral literary voices filter through the novella, the most prominent being Joyce's. McCann's novella also borrows many elements from *Ulysses*; this will be developed in the ultimate subsection of this article, which focuses on the impact of the Joycean intertext. Besides, two references to *Dubliners* are particularly salient. The first is an evocation of *Eveline*:

He glanced backwards through the rear window and there she was, Eileen Daly, all eleven years of her – or was she ten? – waving to him from the window of her living room. The white curtains bracketing her face. Her head slightly tilted. A few wisps of dark hair around her shoulders. He wanted to turn to wave to her again, but the hackney

35. This section by no means pretends to be a comprehensive listing of all the intertextual references in the novella; it simply aims to evoke the examples which are the most striking and significant as regards the issues raised in this paper. For a detailed studied of the intertextual references in the novella – and in McCann's work in general –, see Cardin, *op. cit.*

had already reached the corner and he waved instead at a dirty brick wall.<sup>36</sup>

As indicated by the phonetic similarities in their names, Eileen can be seen as Eveline's double, especially since this extract mirrors the Joycean text ("She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. Her head was leaned against the window curtains")<sup>37</sup> with mentions of a young female character by a window, of curtains, and with the phonetic echo between "Eileen" and "leaned". Even more striking is the almost *verbatim* reference to *The Dead* (which is hinted at earlier in the novella, page 54: "The dead are with us"). Here is the text from Joyce's short story:

A few light taps upon the pane made him [Gabriel] turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general in Ireland [...] It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.<sup>38</sup>

And here is McCann's rewriting in "Thirteen Ways of Looking":

All life slowed down to this. The drip. The drop. The snow white feet.<sup>39</sup> Slowly falling, falling slowly. Out of the window now. Big white flurries against the glass. That was a story she loved so much, too, snow general all over Ireland, Michael Furey singing at the window, poor Gabriel left alone, the descent of his last end.<sup>40</sup>

A second, crucial figure of authority whose spectre steers the text is, obviously, Wallace Stevens, through the title of the novella and the *verbatim* quotations which punctuate McCann's text.

36. McCann, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

37. James Joyce, *Dubliners*, London, Grant Richards, 1914, p. 29.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

39. This phrase creates further spectrality as it may be a reference to W.B. Yeats' poem *Down by the Salley Gardens*, or *Gort na Saileán*, which he reconstructed from a traditional song he heard a peasant woman sing (see M.H. Abrams & Stephen Greenblatt (Eds.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2, New York, Norton, 2005, p. 2024). Mendelssohn's caregiver is called Sally, which could be another nod to this poem – which, incidentally, is about an old man's regrets – especially as it stems from a song and Sally is always associated with a song (Mendelssohn never gives its title but keeps repeating the lines "lovely once and always, with moonlight in her hair").

40. McCann, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

These come on top of mythological and biblical references, which is anything but surprising especially since Joyce's and Stevens' texts themselves are infused with such allusions. Mythological elements are borrowed from Greek (Elliot having an unwilling hand in his father's death is reminiscent of Sophocles' tragedy) as well as from Gaelic culture (the legend of Cuchulain is evoked through the reverted image of a father unwillingly killing his children).<sup>41</sup> Biblical references take the form of parodic references to well-known episodes or figures which are slightly subverted – one could say ironically undermined – due to their juxtaposition with trivial, contemporary elements:

Oh, for crying out loud, Elliot, get off the phone and stop embarrassing me, please. The temptation of the Apple, the glory of Eve, the confusion of Adam, and what is it with me and the Garden of Eden today? Let me remain with my BlackBerry, dangling on the vine, and did they have any blackberries in Eden, I wonder, to complement the apple trees, and where is it, by the way, the phone?<sup>42</sup>

As illustrated by the extract above, they often occur in relation to the father/son relationship; ironic allusions to the prodigal son and to Cain can be identified: Elliot, like Abel's brother, has a dark mark on his forehead, signalling him as guilty – at least by association – of murder.<sup>43</sup> The detectives' investigation involves another biblical reference: Pedro (Peter, in Spanish), while interrogated, denies the charges against him three times in a row ("I didn't punch no one"; "I didn't punch no one"; "I told you, I didn't touch him")<sup>44</sup> although he is in all likelihood indeed guilty, evoking the denial of Peter – which, ironically, also happens to be the victim's name, giving the impression that Mendelssohn<sup>45</sup> died at the hands of his double with both fathers having been dragged into this situation because of their offspring's faulty behaviour.<sup>46</sup>

The reason why it is relevant to link intertextuality to spectrality is to be found in Gérard Genette's definition of intertextuality as "a relationship of copresence"<sup>47</sup> between two texts. It is based on the idea that "any dis-

41. See Cardin, *op. cit.*, p. 224-225.

42. McCann, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

43. Cardin, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

44. McCann, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

45. Mendelssohn – the composer – wrote a famous oratorio called *Elijah*, in reference to the prophet who happens to be known for bringing people back from the dead. McCann has not explained why he chose to name his protagonist after the musician but this might be an explanation, one which would contribute to make spectral elements key features of the novella.

46. It appears that Peter Mendelssohn dies at the hands of Pedro Jimenez who thought he was attacking Elliot Mendelssohn to avenge his own daughter, Maria, whom Elliot had wronged following the end of their affair.

47. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes : la littérature au second degré*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1982, p. 8 (my translation).



course necessarily involves two subjects, and thus a potential dialogue”.<sup>48</sup> Expanding upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of dialogism,<sup>49</sup> Todorov argues that intertextuality means that “whatever is being said or discussed has, in one way or another, already been said; and it is impossible to avoid coming across the discourses that have already been enunciated on this particular topic”.<sup>50</sup> Such a vast array of embedded spectral authorial voices is not without consequences: Linda Hutcheon argues that “[a]mong the many things that postmodern intertextuality challenges are both closure and single, centralized meaning”.<sup>51</sup> The narrative quality of the text and the message it conveys are kaleidoscopic,<sup>52</sup> which implies increased depth, texture and complexity, but also more blind spots. This points to spectrality since intertextuality thereby helps build a text that is haunted by presences and possibilities, some of which are difficult or impossible to notice by the reader.

### Effects on the reading process



The multiplicity of layers and possibilities may seem like a hindrance to the reading process as it forces the readers to always doubt the existence of the “single, centralized meaning” mentioned by Hutcheon. At the opening of the first of the Mendelssohn-focused chapters, the old man comes up with the following statement: “*I was born in the middle of my very first argument*”.<sup>53</sup> The readers naturally take this at face value but then, several alternative versions are given by the same reflector: “*I was born in the middle of my first public failure*”; “*I was born the first time I made love to Eileen. I was born when I touched the hand of my baby son Eliott. I was born when I sat in the cockpit of a Curtiss SOC-3*”; “*I was born in the middle of my first jury argument and I came out onto Court Street with a spring in my step*”; “*I was born in the middle of my first jury argument though sometimes I feel I’ve been born at other times too*”.<sup>54</sup> Faced with this proliferation of seemingly contradicting elements, the readers have to pause. Being

48. Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtine : le principe dialogique, suivi de : Écrits du Cercle de Bakhtine*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1981, p. 98 (my translation).

49. See *ibid.*, p. 95.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

51. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, London/New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 127.

52. While according to Todorov (*op. cit.*, p. 102), “for Bakhtin, the novel, as a genre, is the epitome of prose, which is why it constitutes the most fertile ground for intertextuality” (my translation), Cardin (*op. cit.*, p. 40) argues that in the Irish tradition, and in McCann’s corpus in particular, novellas and short stories have a high intertextual potential precisely due to their association with the notions of fragmentation and dislocation: “In McCann’s work, the genre [of the short form, be it short story or novella] is all the more fragmentary as typically, the writer’s short story is a kaleidoscope of quotes reinforced by scattered references to other writers’ names and to titles of literary works. The intertextual process translates a phenomenon of dislocation at the literary level: inserting an alien text into one’s own amounts to fracturing, interrupting and fragmenting both.” (my translation).

53. McCann, *op. cit.*, p. 5 (italicised in the original text).

54. *Ibid.*, p. 6, 6, 8 and 22 (all quotations are italicised in the original text).



suspended and constantly shunted around from one version to the next, or from one to the until-then-unsuspected scenario might even make them feel paralysed in their understanding of the text – in a way, this is a case of suspension of *belief* rather than of disbelief. This persisting span of explicit and implicit possibilities reinforces the spectral, potentially opaque nature of the text while also helping the suspense last until the very end. The reading process is also constantly haunted by the implicit, by what can be felt but not read – much in the same way as the detectives cannot see what happened on the surveillance tapes. That is the case from the first line of the novella (“The first is hidden in a high mahogany bookcase”)<sup>55</sup> as it is an *in medias res* beginning, forcing the readers into an active role right away as they have to infer what the mysterious “the first” refers to (it turns out to be a camera).

Consequently, the reader becomes a spectral but essential, structuring presence whose in(ter)ferences prove crucial as they are what allows the reader to make sense of the multi-layered, multi-dimensional text:

Conversational inference (or ‘implicature’) involves taking the meaning of the sentence uttered, in conjunction with background knowledge, inference rules, and the above set of general pragmatic maxims, to work out what the speaker might have meant.<sup>56</sup>

This mechanism is made even more necessary by the intertextual dimension since “intertextuality replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself”.<sup>57</sup> The reader’s spectre thus becomes a key element by playing the role of the revealing agent, processing the information and trying to recompose the puzzle of each of the two storylines, as well as attempting to understand how they are interwoven. Such a serpentine process means that the readers, who have gradually become haunted by the uncertainty born out of the vast spectrum of possibilities, voices and perspectives, are forced to voice variable hypotheses and opinions – including regarding the empathy and sympathy they may or may not feel towards the characters –, adding their views to the pre-existing ones.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

56. Raymond W. Gibbs Jr, “Mutual Knowledge and the Psychology of Conversational Inference”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11, 1987, p. 563; see also Paul H. Grice, “Logic and conversation”, *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. 3, *Speech Acts*, Peter Cole & Jerry L. Morgan (Eds.), New York, Academic Press, 1975, p. 41-58. David Bordwell differentiates between interpretation and inference as follows: “I shall use the term *interpretation* to denote only certain kinds of inferences about meaning. [...] Introducing the concept of inference enables us to flesh out a common conceptual distinction. Most critics distinguish between *comprehending* a film and *interpreting* it [...] Comprehension is concerned with apparent, manifest, or direct meanings, while interpretation is concerned with revealing hidden, nonobvious meanings” (David Bordwell, *Making Meaning. Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Cambridge, Harvard U.P., 1991, p. 2-3).

57. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

While it may seem like an obstacle at first, spectrality therefore turns out to constitute a dynamic factor in the reception as well as in the production of the text. Is it also the case regarding the role and status of the text as part of a specific literary lineage on today's Irish cultural stage, or is this spectral dimension a paralysing factor?

## Spectrality and the Irish Literary and Cultural Spectrum

### Ireland's Spectral Call

While the novella is entirely located in Manhattan, Ireland's presence can be felt throughout the Mendelssohn chapters. It permeates the old man's memories, as illustrated by the long analepsis which runs from page 33 to page 35 and which takes the reader back to the two summers he spent in Dublin as a child. He also married into the Irish culture through Eileen. Ireland's spectral omnipresence, which is exemplified by the fact that his last thoughts bring him back to Dublin ("The canal was easily the best place to cannonball"),<sup>58</sup> therefore acts as a leitmotiv. The musicality of Ireland is evoked by references to Irish folk songs, such as "Marie's Wedding",<sup>59</sup> by the inclusion of Irish Gaelic words and phrases (for instance the affectionate "A *chuisle mo chroi*" Mendelssohn uses to address his late wife), but also by frequent references to the sonorities of the Irish accent, which remain part of the protagonist's sound environment: "They thought of him as Hibernian Jew: his accent still had a faint hint of the Dublin days and of course there was Eileen, reading aloud to him, putting what she called the *rozziner* in his language".<sup>60</sup> The Irish and Gaelic literary and mythological intertextual references also contribute to making Ireland an essential piece in the puzzle of Mendelssohn's identity, all the more so when these references are explicit: "[Eileen] always said that his early court performances in Brooklyn were full of patience, guile, and cunning. A literary reference somehow – she was a fan of Joyce. Silence and exile";<sup>61</sup> "He can remember Heaney at the Waldorf, Muldoon too".<sup>62</sup> Ireland's spectral call thus pervades the old man's memories and, thereby, the text, which can also be read as a commentary on today's Irish literary and cultural spectrum.

58. McCann, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 56; see also Cardin, *op. cit.*, p. 223-224.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 11.



Indeed, the novella explores the spectrum of possibilities as to what Irishness means today, presenting a version that is multifaceted and inclusive. This might seem paradoxical at first, notably given the huge shadow cast by Joyce, as was explained earlier. His spectre is often deemed paralysing for the following generations of Irish writers, who might feel they will never be able to rival this overwhelming, some might say overbearing father figure.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, Joyce is an artist with a modernist, western-centric, Catholic Dublin identity, whose most famous novel is based on the parody of classical Greek myths; in 21<sup>st</sup> century terms, this does not amount to a particularly inclusive version of national identity. However, it would be misleading to limit the scope of his work and of his take on Irishness to such a vision.

Rather, it seems that McCann is invoking Joyce's shadow precisely as the sworn enemy of paralysis. The Joycean connection has already been described, but what needs emphasising here is the fact that in the novella, intertextuality in general and allusions to the Joycean intertext in particular are in no way stifled nods; on the contrary, they bring dynamism to the Irish (literary) identity, much in the same way as the source material, through the parodic process, which is defined by Linda Hutcheon as follows: "This parodic reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic; [...] Through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference".<sup>64</sup> The distance thus taken was part of Joyce's strategy, just as it is now part of McCann's, in keeping with postmodernist politics: "Postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations".<sup>65</sup> Through intertextuality and parody, these representations underlie the text, but their spectre is a dynamic rather than a paralysing one. The very concept of *paralysis* actually needs to be re-examined: besides its commonly-used meaning, it can also denote "an idea of dissolution, of an un-binding (*para-lyein*, 'to release, to unbind')",<sup>66</sup> as when Mendelssohn is murdered :

What in the world has gotten into this man, someone help me now,  
what's he saying, the snow blowing hard around us, a cyclorama,

63. See Cardin, *op. cit.*, and Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland – The Literature of the Modern Nation*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard U.P., 1995.
64. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London/New York, Routledge, 1989, p. 89.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
66. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *James Joyce: Authorized Reader*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U.P., 1991, p. 29.

and it's impossible to hear what the man is shouting, spittle coming from his mouth, [...] I can't hear a word in the thunderous roar, calm yourself down, hold on one second, you don't look a bit like Tony at all, who are you, where are you from, where have I seen you before, and oh the leftovers are shifting that's my son's name you're shouting my treacherous son you are unaproned and oh all over the street that white coming down not even the snow can stand up straight and oh – The canal was easily the best place to cannonball.<sup>67</sup>

While a snowstorm is paralysing Manhattan, the protagonist's reflexes and senses are also slowed down, so much so that he cannot fully understand the situation, nor defend himself. This is paralysis in the usual sense, but the second intervenes when the character lets go and loses consciousness; the syntax actually mimics this "release", this "unbinding" ("and oh –") which accompanies the protagonist's death. Including this little-known dimension contributes to McCann's re-dynamizing of the Joycean motif, showing again that his forefather's shadow is not a suffocating one.

Above all, what plays a fundamental role in expanding the spectrum of Irish identity is McCann's choice to invoke Joyce's spectre through the prism of the Mendelssohns. Writing a text prominently driven by an ageing male character's ramblings and favouring a parodic and/or ironic tone turns the protagonist of "TWoL" into a possible avatar of Leopold Bloom's, but while the latter's identity is a complex one, Mendelssohn's is even more kaleidoscopic. This allows McCann to transcend the mere intertextual reference to Bloom and to further widen the scope of Irish identity. Mendelssohn indeed embodies McCann's "international mongrel" ("a peculiarly 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century condition – [a] person who wanders through different geographies and cultures, somewhat lost, and yet invigorated by curiosity").<sup>68</sup> a Jewish Lithuanian exile named after a German musician, he moved through Europe as a child before going to New York where he married an Irishwoman, and does not seem to be particularly interested in nationality, following his parents' example: "His mother had dropped early all tradition behind her. It didn't interest her to be Lithuanian, or Polish, or Russian or anything else for that matter, not even Jewish. His father, too, was a stern atheist".<sup>69</sup> His is therefore a multifaceted – and unproblematic – identity:

He had married a Catholic woman, and the children were raised between religions, and Mendelssohn himself had confessed to being

67. McCann, *op. cit.*, 132-133.

68. Colum McCann, "Everything in This Country Must interview", published on C. McCann's website, 2000.

69. McCann, *Thirteen...*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

Jewish when he wanted to be, and Lithuanian most of the time, but Polish if he needed to be, a touch of Russian if so charged, an American in most respects, an occasional European, even Irish every once in a while by virtue of his wife. A mongrel really, a true New Yorker [...].<sup>70</sup>

Using such a character as a rewriting of one of Irish literature's most famous protagonists effectively opens the horizon of Irish identity and literature,<sup>71</sup> especially as Mendelssohn's mobile life experience is further diffracted by his daughter's, who works in the Middle East, and his Irish wife's, whose cultural environment is also multiple:

Eileen read the Russian poet [Pasternak]'s books aloud many nights, with her Irish lilt and a blanket pulled up around her neck, soft wool, Avoca, where the rivers met, or so she told him. She was a fount of Irish knowledge at times, a Helicon indeed, with some Greek thrown in and a smidge of Latin.<sup>72</sup>

Eileen is the embodiment of a cultural and a linguistic converging point, one which is also suggested by the similarities between the sonorities of Mendelssohn's name in each of the three (English, Lithuanian and Gaelic) languages that are part of his environment ("my real name is Peter, Petras, Peadar".<sup>73</sup>). Such linguistic echoes point to resonances between the experiences thereby translated, hinting at connections between different countries and cultures:

Poor Eileen hated to see any news of Northern Ireland. [...] Over there blowing the heads off one another for no sane reason either [...] All war, any war, the vast human stupidity, Israel, Ireland, Iran, Iraq, all the I's come to think of it, although at least in Iceland they got it right.<sup>74</sup>

By implying that as suggested by the same initial, Irish history might be similar to other countries', the author spins a web of connectedness and opens up the spectrum of the Irish experience. Language is his tool to do so, as the span of connections and possibilities created by language is a key part of his strategy. This is particularly noticeable in the Mendelssohn sections:

70. *Ibid.*, p. 89-90.

71. Furthermore, it is not as though Joyce were the only author whose spectre is present in the text. On the contrary, the latter includes other, non-Irish intertextual references such as Dante, Pasternak, Burroughs and Shakespeare.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 21

74. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

He [Mendelssohn] can hear Sally, already up and at it in the kitchen. [...] The juice. Sally says he should call it a smoothie, but he doesn't like the word, simple as that, nothing smooth about it. He was on a shuffle in the park the other day – no other word, every day a shuffle now – and he saw a young woman at the park benches near the reservoir with the word *Juicy* scrawled in pink across her rear end, and he had to admit, even at his age, that it wasn't far from the truth. With all apologies to Eileen, of course, and Sally too, and Rachel, and Riva, and Denise, and MaryBeth, and Ava, no doubt, and Oprah, and Brigitte, and even Simone de Beauvoir, why not, and all the other women of the world, sorry all but it was indeed rather juicy, the way it bounced, with the little boundary of dark skin above, and the territory of shake below, and there was a time, long ago, when he could've squeezed a thing or two out of that, oh don't talk to me of smoothies. He had a reputation, but it was nothing but harmless fun. He never strayed, though he had to admit he leaned a little. Sorry, Eileen, I leaned, I leaned, I leaned. It was his more conservative colleagues in the court who gave him the evil eye. [...] What did they think, that a man must hide his life in the judge shroud? [...] No, no, no, it was all about taking the rind of life. Extract the liquid. Forget the pulp. Juice it up. The Jew's Juice. A smoothie.<sup>75</sup>

This importance given to puns, the playfulness and the plasticity of language as well as its musicality, together with the fact that random associations – thematic or phonetic – are the only driving force behind the flow of thoughts, testify to Joyce's dynamic influence on this text in particular. Indeed, it is the first of McCann's texts in which this can be noticed, especially this frequently. While metalinguistic remarks can be found in his earlier works, the phenomenon is exemplified in this novella:

[Elliot] shuts the phone and says: Jesus H.  
And why in the world is the *H* always thrown in here? *Our Father, who art in Heaven, Harold be thy name*. Eileen once said: Why not A for Art? *Our Father, who is Art in Heaven*. Or sling them both together? Jesus H. A. Christ.

This invokes the spectre of religious, cultural and textual legacy at the same time as it expands its spectrum. This is the basic functioning principle of rewriting and intertextuality, yet it is still worth highlighting here precisely because "Thirteen Ways of Looking" stands out in McCann's corpus due to its genre and to the importance given to the impression of freedom and fluidity given to thoughts through language. While most of his texts are characterised by internal focalisations and some do contain

75. *Ibid.*, p. 36.



inner monologues (Victor's section in *Dancer* for instance), only in this one is the character's flow of consciousness generalised to such lengths, and only in this one is such a flow spurred by language itself rather than by plot-centric elements.

## Conclusion

It is therefore possible to argue that from spectre to spectrum, spectrality in "Thirteen Ways of Looking" is a factor of depth and scope in terms of diegesis, production and reception: while spectres coming from the past and echoes between the two main storylines give the reader the impression of a text that is haunted both in terms of plot and of production, the narrative strategy also compels the reader to invade and appropriate the text in order to recreate its full meaning. Its reception is all the more characterised by spectrality as the reader is encouraged to recognize inter- (and extra-)textual sources and expand their understanding of the text in the light of these other works.

For the author, through the possibly surprising prism of the detective story, the novella is also a means of going back to his roots as an Irish author and to Joyce's spectral figure of authority, playfully exploring this lineage and widening its horizon by internationalising it – the choice of the genre of the novella itself can be understood as a literal expanding of the short form that is so closely associated with the Irish tradition. He thereby produces a text which is as Irish as it is global, in keeping with contemporary authors such as Colm Tóibín, Joseph O'Connor or Donal Ryan, contributing to opening the Irish cultural and literary scene to transnational experiences while acknowledging their particular national legacy. I would argue that this has had a revitalizing effect on McCann's writing and that *Thirteen Ways of Looking*, and more particularly the eponymous novella, is a shifting point in his trajectory. It was written following *TransAtlantic*, which can be called a "major mode" novel aiming to tackle serious historical issues involving real-life characters and which was symmetrically divided into two parts, each subdivided into three. "Thirteen Ways of Looking", while it is also fractured, is divided in an uneven number of chapters, giving it a less balanced, one might argue less clinical structure, and unfolds on a much smaller scale with more trivial matters and characters – Mendelssohn's main problem at the opening of the novella is not remembering when his caregiver put him in a diaper. This renewed focus on minor, human details, coupled with the rediscovery of the playful potential of language, and with the use of association of words and ideas as a powerful driving force for the text, point to McCann's reappropriation of Joyce – among others –'s spectre. This does not coincide with a dead end:



one might argue that the novella experimented with these tools, preparing the ground for McCann's next work, a novel entitled *Apeirogon* (2020) which conjugates them with the wide scope that characterises the author's novels to manage to produce a text which finds its balance, despite invoking the spectres of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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