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## A ‘Anticipating the Fall’: Art, Memory, and Historical Reclamation in Colum

### McCann’s Let the Great World Spin

A Hamilton Carroll

‘the good high-wire walker strives to make his audience forget the dangers, to lure it away from thoughts of death by the beauty of what he does on the wire itself.’  
~ Paul Auster, ‘On the High Wire’ (1995)

Published in the United States in June 2009, Colum McCann’s Let the Great World Spin was an instant critical success. In the year of its publication, the novel was awarded the National Book Award and, two years later, the prestigious International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Taking its title from the Alfred, Lord Tennyson poem ‘Locksley Hall’ (1835), Let the Great World Spin uses a series of ten interconnected narratives to construct an intimate history of New York at a very particular moment in time: early August, 1974. While the novel is focused very specifically on its time and place, it also makes a series of spatial and temporal shifts, most often in flashback and through the memories of its central protagonists, through which it both charts a longer history and brings the reader to the near present (in a final section set in 2006). The central event of the novel, which is drawn from real life, takes place on August 7th, 1974 when French tightrope artist Philippe Petit joined the north and south towers of the as-yet-unfinished World Trade Center with a steel cable and walked between them. Petit’s spectacular act serves as the central spine of the novel—both structurally and thematically—and is the core around which its disparate narratives interconnect. The novel uses the intersection of Petit’s wire walk and the lives of its central characters to examine a number of interconnected themes: the relationship between art and crime, between personal loss and national memory; history and its relationship to the event; and, finally, the recuperative capacities of art and literature.

McCann's novel further explores questions of cultural memory through a process of omission. For the novel does not mention the events of September 11th, 2001 until its final chapter, set in 2006, when it links Philippe Petit's 'small scrap of history' to the 'larger one' of the as-yet-unnamed terrorist attacks of September 11th (McCann 2009: 325). This glancing mention is the novel's only reference to September 11th, which never explicitly appears in its pages. As such, while that event is essential to the novel, it stands outside of it, annexed beyond the page. The destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001 is held apart in the novel, caught between a past (1974) that appears to fully anticipate it and a future (2006) in which it has already been overshadowed by the U.S.-led ground wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (both of which are named in the novel's final section).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the attack on the World Trade Center occupies a central place in McCann's novel and is the event through which—and towards which—its multiple narratives must travel.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, while Let the Great World Spin is not a novel about September 11th, it is undoubtedly a novel of September 11th, and it is that relationship I shall examine in this chapter, paying particular attention to the themes outlined above and to the novel's representations of the visual arts and performance. I argue that it is through its representations of art that the novel makes its most important interventions in the literary representations of the events of September 11th, 2001 and their aftermath. Through its representations of wire walking, photography, painting and literature, Let the Great World Spin meditates on the capacity of art to confront death.

## **B 'The Art is the Thing Itself': Performance and Death**

The novel represents Philippe Petit's wire walk between the north and south towers of the unfinished World Trade Center in two primary ways: firstly, in three short intersections, none more than eight pages in length, which bookend and divide the first two of the novel's four sections (which are called books) and, secondly, as a subject of discussion and of thought for

a number of the novel's main characters. Each of the novel's primary fictional protagonists is affected by Petit's wire walk in some way and a number of them are brought together by the event. In the three intersections, which are told in the third person, Petit is the primary protagonist. He is never named in the novel, however, and is referred to as 'he' throughout. The first intersection, which opens the novel, describes the moments leading up to the instance when Petit steps onto the wire at the beginning of his performance on the morning of August 7th, 1974. It is narrated in the third person from the perspective of the crowd of onlookers who witness the event first hand. The second intersection divides the novel's first and second books and appears almost at the exact centre of the novel. It describes Petit training for the walk and ends, like the first, at the moment when he steps out onto the wire. The third and final intersection, which comes at the end of the second book, describes Petit's life in New York before the walk and then gives the fullest description of the walk itself, concluding with its culmination as Petit is taken away from the scene in a police car. In their entirety, the three intersections (which total slightly fewer than twenty pages) give a relatively full account of Petit's wire walk, its preparation and planning, and present Petit himself to the reader as a fully-fleshed out character with his own motivations and desires. As such, Petit's wire walk is more than just the node through which all of the other characters in the novel intersect; it is foundational to the novel's meaning and is the source of many of its thematic preoccupations: art and death, spectacle and war, humanity and memory.

The three intersections provide the reader with a fictionalized recreation of Petit's wire walk. It is, though, a selective and partial account. There is no mention of any of the numerous accomplices who worked with Petit to stage the event, nor is there any attention paid to the collective nature of the endeavour. It is presented as a solo venture with Petit as its mastermind and only protagonist. As such, the novel's focus is on the nature of the act itself, on the virtuosity and artistry of the wire walk.<sup>3</sup> McCann devotes considerable attention to

Petit's skills as a funambulist and a conjurer. His beguiling sleight of hand is described on a number of occasions and he is seen as an artist. What is placed on display in the novel is Petit's capacity for self-belief in the face of danger. If, as Paul Auster contends, 'the good high-wire walker strives to make his audience forget the dangers, to lure it away from thoughts of death by the beauty of what he does on the wire itself,' the power of this forgetting only exists because of the power of what is forgotten. As Auster further states, the act of high wire walking presents to the audience 'a life in its most naked delineation.' This 'naked delineation,' however, is produced precisely because of the proximity to death and gains its power from it. 'The art,' Auster suggests, 'is the thing itself.' By this he means that the raw reality of the proximity of the artist to death is so apparent that it 'requires no explanation;' its meaning is there for all to see (Auster 1995: 91-92). If this is the case, Petit's wire walk is a work of art with no reference outside of itself; it is both unmediated and unmediating, speaking to nothing beside itself. And, in McCann's novel, Petit's performance is always represented in relationship to death and forms a significant part of the novel's meaning-making apparatus.

In addition to its representation in the novel's intersections, Petit's wire walk also appears within the bodies of the majority of the novel's ten primary chapters. Its first appearance comes in the second chapter of Book One, during a coffee morning hosted by Claire Soderberg, a wealthy Manhattanite whose son has been killed in the Vietnam War. The group of women that Claire is hosting in her Park Avenue apartment are all mothers of young men who have died in Vietnam. One of the women, Marcia, arrives at Claire's apartment flushed with excitement having just witnessed Petit's wire walk from the deck of the Staten Island ferry. Petit's walk is a subject of conversation throughout the course of the morning and is a repeated topic of thought for Claire. As such, it makes up the majority of the subject

matter for this section of the novel, where it is repeatedly addressed in relation to the Vietnam War and the needless deaths of these women's young sons.

The inherent danger of the act that the crowd watches Petit perform on that August morning is thematized almost from the very beginning of McCann's novel and the subject of death is a constant theme. There is, in the first instance, a thematization of the fact that the spectacular nature of Petit's wire walk lies almost entirely in its inherent danger, what Auster calls its 'naked delineation.' In the novel's opening pages, the crowds watching the figure standing at the top of the south tower are caught in an anticipatory state, many of them waiting to witness death:

None of them had yet made sense of the line strung at his feet from one tower to the other. Rather, it was the man-shape that held them there, their necks craned, torn between the promise of doom and the disappointment of the ordinary.

It was the dilemma of the watchers: they did not want to wait around for nothing at all, some idiot standing on the precipice of the towers, but they didn't want to miss the moment either, if he slipped, or got arrested, or dove, arms stretched.  
(McCann 2009: 3)

What brings the watchers, who become a group as the event unfolds, together is the anticipation of something out of the ordinary, triumph or tragedy, either of which would suffice. The potential for death is made concrete twice in the opening pages through the use of two symbolic portents. In the first instance, the crowd watches as 'a single pigeon swooped down from the top floor of the Federal Office Building, as if anticipating the fall' (McCann 2009: 5). In the second, a few pages later, the crowd's desire for spectacle is

seemingly fulfilled as a sweatshirt accidentally dropped by Petit is mistaken for a falling body:

Way above there was a movement. In the dark clothing his every twitch counted. He folded over, a half-thing, bent, as if examining his shoes, a pencil mark, most of which had been erased. The posture of a diver. And then they saw it. The watchers stood, silent. Even those who had wanted the man to jump felt the air knocked out. They drew back and moaned.

A body was sailing out into the middle of the air.

He was gone. He'd done it. Some blessed themselves. Closed their eyes. Waited for the thump. The body twirled and caught and flipped, thrown around by the wind.

Then a shout sounded across the watchers, a woman's voice: God oh God, it's a shirt, it's just a shirt. (McCann 2009: 7)

It is at this moment that Petit steps out from the edge of the building and begins his spectacular walk, only for the narrative to be interrupted, put on hold for another ninety pages when it returns within one of the novel's main narrative sections (discussed above) and then, another fifty pages later, in the second of the novel's three intersections. By twice halting the narrative at the moment when Petit steps out onto the wire, McCann both elevates the act—by keeping the reader in a heightened state of expectation—and places it in an altered temporal state, always imminent, never quite fulfilled.<sup>4</sup> This doubled move gives these descriptions a powerful narrative force by reorienting the event in its relationship to the other strands of the novel's plot.

What the representation of Petit's walk does in the novel—as it does, albeit in different ways, in each of the post-September 11th texts in which it appears—is transform the potential for death into the possibility of life.<sup>5</sup> The grey pigeon and the black sweatshirt both serve as premonitions, reminders of what the final outcome of Petit's actions might be: a spectacular fall followed by a moment of death. What is actually produced is a moment of affirmation. The ultimate power of the performance lies in Petit's ability to move so far beyond the limits of danger that the event becomes transcendent, an act so superhuman that it humanizes. He did not merely cross the wire once, he spent almost thirty minutes on it, repeatedly crossing and recrossing the span between the two towers, at times lying down and even running. 'Dancing,' as one of the policemen who witnessed the feat from the top of the south tower put it. The experience of watching a good wire walk, Auster contends, 'reduces us all to our common humanity' (Auster 1995: 97). Its ultimate power, then, lies in the singular ability of an extraordinarily talented individual to bring a group of strangers together. In McCann's novel, Petit's singular act creates a community of watchers bound together by the act of witnessing. No longer a disparate group of individuals, journeying through the morning rush hour, but a crowd, an audience, a community; a multitude become singular, just as the two towers had become one. The crowd, hoping to see something spectacular and outside of the everyday, are rewarded with a feat of human endeavour that affirms life precisely because of its proximity to death. In Let the Great World Spin, art affirms life by allowing us to see beyond death. And this, on the most basic level, is what McCann's novel likewise aims to do: bring together a disparate group of people in their common humanity, witnesses all to a spectacular and life-affirming event.

## **B 'One Small Scrap of History': Photography and the Fall**

While the novel celebrates Petit's accomplishment in its own right, it also positions it as a portent of the ultimate fate of the twin towers some thirty years later, thereby yoking it to another spectacular act, the meaning of which lies in its relationship to death. In the first chapter of the novel's second book, entitled 'Tag,' a young would-be street photographer, Fernando, has been riding the gap between two subway cars on his way to work downtown. Hoping to capture some underground tagging on film, Fernando sees a group of cops running down along the platform of a downtown subway station. 'Someone's gone and bought it' (McCann 2009: 174), he thinks at first but context allows the reader to realise that the policemen are heading above ground towards the World Trade Center and Philippe Petit. The section ends a paragraph later with Fernando, camera in hand, following the cops in order to see what the commotion is all about. Some sixty pages later, inserted between the end of the second book and the final intersection on Petit, is a photograph of Petit walking across the wire (McCann 2009: 237). The photograph resonates powerfully because it depicts not only Petit but also, in its upper-left-hand corner, a small commercial airliner, which, as it is put later on in the novel, seems to be disappearing 'into the edge of the building' (McCann 2009: 325). The building is, of course, the south tower of the World Trade Center into which, thirty years later, another airplane actually would 'disappear.' While the photograph used here is a real-world artefact that was taken by the photographer Vic DeLuca, it is credited in the novel to the fictional character, Fernando (in the form of a copyright attribution given below the reproduction of the photograph). One of only a relatively small number of photographs that remain of Petit's walk, the image not only offers a visual record of Petit's feat but also conjures the spectre of September 11th that haunts the novel.<sup>6</sup> The photograph is doubly interesting then in that, while it is a real-world artefact inserted into the novel, it is credited to a fictional character. As such, it brings the real world into the fictional realm of the novel in a striking and powerful way. But if that is what it does, the question remains as to why; what

does the inclusion of this actual photograph do here? What does the visual record allow that the linguistic does not?<sup>7</sup>

A first answer to these questions lies in the perceived failure of language to properly or accurately record or portray the events of September 11th. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, a whole host of writers called into question the capacity of words, and of literary fiction more specifically, to do justice to such an overwhelmingly visual and spectacular event. Don DeLillo, for example, famously claimed ‘the event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile’ (DeLillo 2001: 39). Writing in a similar vein, Richard Powers stated, ‘There are no words. But there are only words.’ ‘No comparison can say what happened to us,’ he continues, ‘but we can start with the ruins of our similes, and let ‘like’ move us toward something larger, some understanding of what ‘is’” (Powers 2001: 23). Jay McInerney suggested that ‘for a while, quite a while, fiction did seem inadequate to the moment.’ Despite this inadequacy, McInerney believes that ‘we desperately want to have a novelist ... process the experience for us’ (McInerney 2005: 4). Like DeLillo, who finds the writer ‘desperate’ (DeLillo 2001: 39), Powers and McInerney see a necessity in fiction that is coupled to a seeming inadequacy: we have what we have, we need it, but it is not enough.

There is, in such claims, a question of sufficiency. It is in such concerns that novels like McCann’s find themselves and that explain, in part, the turn to the visual record that is so common in post-September 11th fiction. As an ostensibly unimpeachable representation of the real, the photograph shores up linguistic description. In McCann’s novel, however, the facticity of the photograph is troubled by its direct attribution to a fictional character. The significance of this blurring of the photograph’s representational limits is highlighted by McCann’s decision not to represent Fernando either witnessing or taking photographs of Petit but to make that fact apparent to the reader sixty pages after Fernando is presented as a character within the narrative; and only through the inclusion of the photograph. It is

important, moreover, that the photograph is placed outside the narrative, interstitially, and sandwiched between the end of one of the novel's books and another—itself interstitial—section (Petit's narrative), only to be described in the narrative proper some ninety pages later. The photograph is attributed to a character but has not yet appeared as a described object in the body of the novel; while it is itself a representational object, it is not yet an object of representation. As such, it floats free, not yet moored definitively to either its textual or paratextual references.

When the photograph does appear in the narrative itself, it is as a possession—a photograph owned by another character. In its representation in the final section of the novel, the photograph is no longer merely a visual representation of a historical event but has become a family heirloom and a nostalgic reminder of a prior time. As such, the photograph ties together the novel's twinned concerns with national memory and personal loss, yet remains neither entirely fact nor fiction. It inhabits, moreover, an equally uncertain temporality. When reproduced as a photograph, it is unmoored from any direct referentiality. The reader is given no context for it and, as such, has no way of positioning it in time. Does it refer to the chapter about Fernando? Or foreshadow the intersection about Petit that follows it? Is it a pictorial representation of the copy of the photograph that appears as an object at the end of the novel? None of this is entirely clear; the photograph is all of these things and none of them at the same time. That the photograph also references the events of September 11th only strengthens its power. It is a temporally unstable object with multiple reference points, not all of them available to the reader at the place in which it is included in the novel.

As such, it is also important that the description of the photograph that opens the final chapter of the novel, which is set in 2006, places Petit in the present tense. 'She often wonders what it is that holds the man so high in the air' (McCann 2009: 325), the chapter begins. The 'she' in this sentence is Jaslyn Henderson, the daughter of one of the novel's

other characters, an African-American prostitute who dies in a car accident on the day of Petit's wire walk. Raised with her sister by Gloria (one of the grieving Vietnam mothers and the protagonist of the novel's penultimate section), Jaslyn attended college at Yale and now works for a small foundation that provides tax preparation assistance for people displaced by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. When the photograph enters the narrative at this point, it is as a personal possession, found by Jaslyn at a San Francisco garage sale some years before and kept as a reminder of her mother. There is an important progression to be charted here: from fictional photographer to reproduced photograph (attributed to the fictional photographer) to representation of that photograph within the novel's narrative. The photograph is not attributed to Fernando here and, as such, its fictional taker—or his real counterpart, for that matter—drops away and it is the photograph itself that becomes important.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the photograph reminds Jaslyn of her mother despite the fact that it is a representation of an event related to her death only by the coincidence of time. For Jaslyn, the photograph is a representation of a thing that it does not represent. But, as I have already suggested, it is also this for the events of September 11th, 2001 and, as such, the photograph is a referential object for an event that does not take place until a quarter of a century after it was taken.

While it is presented in these pages as a personal memento, the photograph provides the only direct—albeit oblique—link made in the novel between August 7th, 1974 and September 11th, 2001. It is in the representation of Jaslyn's thoughts about the photograph that the relationship between the novel's multiple and intertwined storylines and the events of September 11th are made clear:

A man high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building. One small scrap of history meeting a larger one. As if the walking man were somehow anticipating what would come later. The intrusion of time and history. The

collision point of stories. We wait for the explosion but it never occurs. The plane passes, the tightrope walker gets to the end of the wire. Things don't fall apart.

It strikes her as an enduring moment, the man alone against scale, still capable of myth in the face of all other evidence. (McCann 2009: 325-6)

These sentences provide both a description of the photograph and an interpretation of it. The language is explicitly interpretative—'it seems,' 'as if'—and Jaslyn is the provider of these interpretations. This description, moreover, links history to the act of storytelling. As a 'myth,' Petit's wire walk substitutes for the act of terror, perpetrated almost thirty years later, that was the direct reason for the novel's creation. In the photograph, as he does in the novel, Petit inhabits the present tense. He is, like the photograph, a prophylactic against the fall. Holding the towers together, he also holds them up, still there and made new again; offered at the moment of their creation in order to memorialise the moment of their destruction. As a 'small scrap of history', both Petit's walk and the photograph open up the World Trade Center to the possibility not only of what McCann calls here 'myth' but also of the transcendent possibilities of referentiality. Art precedes the fall.

### **B 'That Moment of Purity': Painting and Catastrophe**

If Petit's wire walk and its photographic representations are represented in the novel in relation to death and the possibilities of life, Let the Great World Spin is also concerned with the relationship between painting and catastrophe. This relationship is represented most fully in the chapter of the novel devoted to the story of Lara Liveman, a young artist and her husband, Blaine. Entitled 'A Fear of Love' and told in the first person, the section provides a valuable discourse on the relationship between art and catastrophe that is so central to the

novel. In an attempt not only to capture ‘the pulse of the trees..., the journey of grass, some dirt’ (McCann 2009: 126) but also to kick their drug habits, the couple flee New York city and relocate to the countryside and attempt to live in the manner of the 1930s. In their turn away from the city, the focus on the urban that had marked their earlier art (and Blaine’s short films in particular) is replaced by an attention to the natural world. A successful avant-garde filmmaker, Blaine ‘had decided it was time to go back to canvas, to paint in the style of Thomas Benton, or John Steuart Curry. He wanted that moment of purity, regionalism’ (McCann 2009: 126). But it is also a turn away from the contemporary toward the past, a reactionary turn intended as a rejection of the postmodern in art and the socio-political upheavals of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal that surround the young couple (but from which they keep a well-studied distance). The turn toward nature is a turn toward the past. It is a nostalgic turn and, as such, a retreat. But it is also a failure. Not only do Lara and Blaine return to the city, hoping to sell their new art (something that they fail to do), but they are also directly responsible for the car crash that kills John Corrigan and Jazzlyn Henderson, the two characters that are the primary subjects of the novel’s first chapter. As the couple retreat in defeat from the city, still high from the drugs they consumed the night before, Blaine sideswipes Corrigan’s van, forcing it off the road and into a fatal spin. The couple flee the scene and return to their upstate cabin. It is at this point that the relationship between art and catastrophe is represented in two interrelated ways.

In the first instance, Lara (who has fled the house seeking an escape both from Blaine and her own feelings of guilt) finds herself looking at an account of Petit’s wire walk in the previous morning’s newspaper. Reading in the account of the event Petit’s claim that ‘if he saw oranges he wanted to juggle them, if he saw skyscrapers he wanted to walk between them,’ Lara ‘wondered what he might do if he walked into the diner and found the scattered pieces of me, lying around, too many of them to juggle’ (McCann 2009: 131). In the second

instance, the rain ruins the paintings that Lara and Blaine produced in the regionalist style of Benton and Curry when the couple accidentally leave them outside upon their return from the city. Rather than the catastrophe that Lara sees, Blaine sees in the ruined paintings a new form of art, what he calls a ‘comment on time’ (McCann 2009: 133). ‘What happens,’ he asks Lara, ‘if we make a series of paintings and we leave them out in the weather?’ (McCann 2009: 134). He answers his own question, enlivened by the possibilities:

We allow the present to work on the past. We could do something radical here. Do the formal paintings in the style of the past and have the present destroy them. You let the weather become the imaginative force. The real world works on your art. So you give it a new ending. And then you reinterpret it. It’s perfect, dig? (McCann 2009: 134)

There is a doubled relationship being represented here: between two artistic styles, on the one hand, and between different temporal moments, on the other. It is the transformative nature of time that is of the most significance here. If you give something a different ending, Blaine says, it becomes new (McCann 2009: 132). And McCann’s novel is itself a reworking of a prior artistic moment—a relationship between the past, present, and future in which the present works on the past, transforming it. But that is also what the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 did to Petit’s wire walk in 1974: they gave it a new ending, transformed it, reimagined it. After September 11th, Petit’s walk becomes something new entirely. If art represents the world, it is also transformed by it, gaining in the fullness of time meaning that the artist could never anticipate.

The relationship between art and the world that features so strongly in the novel’s representation of the visual arts is also a prominent feature of its representations of Petit. In

one example, which is discussed twice in the novel, the effect of the newly built World Trade Center towers on the migratory patterns of birds is described. These moments are worth quoting in full because they are an important part of the novel's meaning-making apparatus, serving, as they do, to bring together a number of its central concerns. In the first instance, Claire ruminates on the negative effect that Marcia's description of Petit's walk has on her:

This walking man, she can't shake him. The bubble of discontent in her mind. She is being ungenerous, she knows, but she just can't get rid of it. What if he hits somebody down below? She has heard that at night there are whole colonies of birds that fly into the World Trade Center buildings, their glass reflection. The bash and fall. Will the walker thump with them?

Snap to. Enough.

Pull your mind together. Pick up all the feathers. Guide them gently back into the air. (McCann 2009: 105-6)

For Claire, Petit has not only placed himself in danger, but also anyone below him. The walk is, therefore, an immoral act and one of reckless endangerment. Moreover, linking Petit's walk to the catastrophic effect the towers have on migratory birds raises the issue of unforeseen (or disregarded) consequences. Petit is making art but his actions also carry with them the possibility of danger; the World Trade Center is advancing humankind but is also transforming the natural environment in unforeseen ways. But there is also a crucial relationship being drawn here between Petit's actions and Claire's mental state. She is 'ungenerous' because she wishes to talk that morning about her dead son and not about Petit, who has so recklessly placed his own life in danger while the sons of Claire and the other

women have been killed in Vietnam. His story has intruded into her son's, displacing it. For Claire to 'pick up all the feathers' she will need to learn how to see things differently, to see the value in what Petit has done and not the risk. Petit's act serves as a spur to Claire's overcoming grief; as such, it is redemptive.

In the second instance in which the plight of migratory birds is discussed, it is Petit himself who is given cause to think about the relationship between the birds and his own actions:

He was checking the perimeter of the south tower one dawn, marking out the schedules of delivery trucks, when he saw a woman in a green jumpsuit, bent down as if tying her shoelaces, over and over again, around the base of the towers. Little bursts of feathers came from the woman's hands. She was putting the dead birds in little ziploc bags. White-throated sparrows mostly, some songbirds too. They migrated late at night, when the air currents were calmest. Dazzled by the building lights, they crashed into the glass, or flew endlessly around the towers until exhaustion got them, their natural navigational abilities stunned. She handed him a feather from a black-throated warbler, and when he left the city again he brought it to the meadow and tacked that too just inside the cabin wall. Another reminder. (McCann 2009: 162)

As with Claire's ruminations, there is a clear link being drawn here between Petit's wire walk, death, and the unanticipated. For Petit, the black feather also serves as a reminder of the danger that he faces, that death—his own—is one possible outcome of his actions. For the reader, who is encountering the story of the birds for the second time, a strong link is being formed between the World Trade Center towers and death—one that encompasses but also

transcends Petit's actions. From the very beginning, these descriptions suggest, the World Trade Center was a site of death and, no matter how small or inconsequential, there were always lives lost at the site. After September 11th, of course, the image of flying objects colliding with the World Trade Center takes on an entirely different resonance and, as with Vic DeLuca's photograph, this imagery provides a strong foreshadowing of what is to come, in World history if not in the novel. At the same time, the image of dead birds falling to the plaza below, what Claire thinks of as the 'bash and fall,' also evokes the memory of bodies falling from the towers on September 11th. As such, and much like the description of the grey pigeon and the falling sweatshirt discussed earlier, it serves a mnemonic function, calling to mind that which has displaced it in the cultural imaginary of the United States. Petit's wire walk on August 7th, 1974 is an example of the phenomenon of the 'real world work[ing] on ... art' that inspires Blaine; but in this instance it is not the natural progression of time and the elements but an act of terrorism that transforms the meaning of the work of art. But if Petit's performance is transformed by the act of terrorism that it so uncannily anticipates, that act is itself transformed for the relationship cuts in both directions. And it is in this doubling that the power of McCann's reclamation of Petit lies.

### **B 'An Act of Grace': Literature and Redemption**

If Let the Great World Spin devotes a great deal of attention to the visual and performing arts, it is also a deeply literary novel, concerned with the capacity of literature both to transcend and to make meaning of the 'real world'. Not only does the novel draw its title (and those of its interstitial sections and one of its chapters) from Tennyson's poem 'Locksley Hall,' but also its pages are rife with quotations, paraphrases, and allusions from and to a plethora of literary works, from Shakespeare to Philip Larkin. Like the visual arts that I have already discussed, literature is understood in the novel to have recuperative properties. The novel's

repeated allusions to Tennyson's poem are without a doubt its most direct engagement with the question of the West's relationship to Islam, which might contextualise the events of September 11th. However, in the poem—as in the novel—this relationship is not explored in much depth, if at all. The poem provides the titles of the novel and two of the three intersections devoted to Philippe Petit, 'Let the Great World Spin Forever Down' and 'The Ringing Grooves of Change' (the first intersection is entitled 'Those Who Saw Him Hushed,' which is also the novel's first line). It also provides the title for the novel's final chapter, 'Roaring Seaward, and I Go.' With the exception of the last, these titles both are taken from a single line in Tennyson's poem, 'Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change' (Tennyson 2006: 192). As such, it would be prudent not to make too much of them. However, they do suggest—as does the poem more broadly—themes that are central to the novel, most particularly the relationship between history and personal memory.

Consisting of ninety-seven rhyming couplets, 'Locksley Hall' is a first-person account in which a young soldier travelling with a group of comrades is given the opportunity to reflect on his life when the men pass nearby Locksley Hall, the place where he spent part of his childhood. Born in 'the Orient,' the young man (who claims not to have known his mother) was orphaned as a boy after his father was killed in battle. Taken in by his 'selfish uncle,' the youth falls in love with his cousin, Amy. Rebuffed, he escapes by joining the army. The poem describes the experiences of childhood and youth from the perspective of increased, if still youthful, experience. Railing against the travails of his young life, the protagonist fantasizes about returning to the 'Orient' and fathering a new race of 'iron-jointed' and 'supple-sinewed' sons. By poem's end, however, he has retreated from this dream and is content to side with the progress of European civilization over the atavistic paradise of the East. It is at this point that the line from which McCann's novel gets its title appears, followed by the lines, 'Thro' the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger

day; / Better fifty years of Europe than one cycle of Cathay' (Tennyson 2006: 192). These lines offer a standard, racist narrative that positions the West—enlightened, rational, and progressive—against the East, which is trapped in a childlike state of savagery. In the closing lines of the poem, the speaker finds himself able to move on with his life, having cast off the shadows of his past and imagines a thunderbolt striking Locksley Hall as he turns and walks away from it. Aside from the one or two slight thematic similarities, there is little in the poem's content to connect it with McCann's novel. McCann, himself, has stated:

I had some difficulties finding the title, but then I came across the Tennyson quote: 'Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change ...' And, as luck would have it, Tennyson had been influenced by a series of sixth century pre-Islamic poems, the Mu'allaqat, which asks the question: 'Is there any hope that this desolation can bring me solace?' And when I found that line, my heart skipped a beat or three, because it was exactly what I wanted. (Johnston 2009: n. pag.)

This description of McCann's reaction to finding the title for the novel suggests the novelist's desire to eradicate boundaries such as those drawn in Tennyson's poem. While the 'desolation' contained in Tennyson's poem is related to the bitter experiences of one man's youth, the novel seeks to bind together a multitude of experiences, and thereby produce solace, what McCann calls, here and elsewhere, 'grace.'

Elsewhere in the same interview, McCann states:

the book comes down to a very anonymous moment in the Bronx when two little kids are coming out of a very rough housing project, about to be taken away by the state,

and they get rescued by an act of grace. That's it, not much maybe, but everything to me. And there's hardly a line in the novel about 9/11, but it's everywhere if the reader wants it to be. (Jonston 2009: n. pag.)

This 'act of grace' is the decision of Gloria, one of the Vietnam mothers, to adopt Jaslyn and her sister. While the novel does not make it explicit, it does suggest that Claire—who is with Gloria when she sees the young girls being led away by social workers and decides to intervene—provides financial support throughout the girls' childhoods (and may, in fact, have funded Jaslyn's studies at Yale). In any case, she is certainly bonded with Gloria at this moment and is a significant figure in the girls' childhoods, coming to visit 'in a chauffeured town car' (McCann 2009: 330). During one of these visits, Claire watches Jaslyn 'run along with one foot on the pavement and the other on the road.' 'It took some gymnastics,' McCann tells the reader, 'she had to extend one leg and keep the other slightly bent, running at close to full pace.' This image is then used to describe the relationship between Claire and Gloria, two women from strikingly different backgrounds who have joined together not only in their grief for their lost sons but also in the recuperative act of rescuing the girls from the state. 'They looked so different, Claire in her neat skirt, Gloria in her flowered dress, as if they too were running on different levels of pavement, but in the same body, the two of them combined' (McCann 2009: 330). It is in this doubled description—Jaslyn as gymnast, Claire and Gloria as one—that the novel finds its 'act of grace' and connects Petit's wire walk in 1974 to the post-September 11th world of 2006.

It is this idea of grace and community that is most important for McCann's novel, its capacity to affirm life in the face of death. As a series of ten interconnected narratives, each told from the perspective of a different character, Let the Great World Spin is most especially concerned with finding the thread that connects the disparate lives of each of its principal

protagonists. It finds that connection in Petit's wire walk. Vastly different in their life experiences and expectations, social and economic fortunes, racial and ethnic subjectivities, each of the novel's central characters is brought into contact with the others through Petit's wire walk. It is the central spine through which the tissue of each individual life is connected to each of the others. The novel is itself, then, a narrative actualization of the wire walk itself: a bringing together of different lives in order to assert their common humanity, an attempt to find grace in discord, the solace to be found in desolation. And it is in art—the performance, the photograph, the painting, and the novel alike—that Let the Great World Spin finds that ability. In spite of the misery and death contained within its pages—and the horrific central event it need not name—the novel is an attempt to move the reader away from the anticipation of the fall and towards the celebration of life.

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<sup>1</sup> The novel's references to the ground wars in Afghanistan and Iraq begin with a somewhat general reference to a 'small mobile clinic set up for veterans home from the wars' (McCann 2009: 328) and then become more explicit, with references made to 'another six dead in Iraq' (McCann 2009: 340), 'the attacks on Afghanistan' (McCann 2009: 341), 'a jet coming in with dead bodies from the Middle East' (McCann 2009: 341), and 'the embassy in Baghdad' (McCann 2009: 343).

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, it is important to note that in McCann's novel the simultaneous attack on the Pentagon and the hijacking and crash of United 93 have—as they do in the broader public memory and most other fictional accounts—dropped out of the picture. The spectacular nature of the attack on the World Trade Center, and the extraordinary visual archive we have of 'the most photographed day in history' (Tom Junod, 'The Falling Man,' Esquire, September 2003), have ensured that the World Trade Center and September 11th are synonymous for many people.

<sup>3</sup> In its focus on Petit as a solo artist, McCann's novel tells a very different story than the one told by James Marsh's documentary Man on Wire (2008), which very explicitly casts the event as a heist. For more on Marsh's film, see my 'September 11 as Heist' in the Journal of American Studies 45.4 (2011): 835-851.

<sup>4</sup> In Falling Man (2007), Don DeLillo similarly splits the events of September 11th by bookending his novel with a description of the collapse of the Twin Towers, thereby creating what he calls in the novel a 'state of abeyance' into which he inserts his narrative (DeLillo 2007: 4). On DeLillo's novel and representation, see my "'Like Nothing in this Life'": September 11th and the Limits of Representation in Don DeLillo's Falling Man', Studies in American Fiction 40.1 (Spring 2013): 107-130.

<sup>5</sup> While never entirely forgotten, Petit's wire walk certainly gained a renewed significance in the aftermath of September 11th and was the subject of a variety of other cultural texts. Petit's own account of the walk, To Reach the Clouds was published in 2003. Mordicai Gerstein's Caldecott Medal winning children's story, The Man Who Walked Between the Towers, also was published in 2003. James Marsh's documentary, Man on Wire, mentioned above, was released in 2008. Finally, at the time of writing, Robert Zemeckis' fictional account of Petit's wire-walk, starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Petit and entitled The Walk, was due for release in October of 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Petit's own account of the event, To Reach the Clouds, contains a relatively wide range of photographs and other documents. There is no film footage of Petit's walk. While film was planned, in the excitement of the day the accomplice who was supposed to operate the camera forgot and the only visual record exists in the form of still photos. See, Philippe Petit, To Reach the Clouds. London: Faber and Faber, 2003.

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<sup>7</sup> In order to answer these questions, it is important to note that McCann is not the only author to insert photography into the pages of a post-September 11th novel. Perhaps most famously, Jonathan Safran Foer's Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2005) includes a number of photographs of bodies falling from the World Trade Center in its pages and, at its end, a 'flip book' constructed through the manipulation of an image of a falling body. While it does not include any actual images, Don DeLillo's Falling Man (2007) does give an extended description of perhaps the most famous photograph taken on September 11th, Richard Drew's 'the falling man' (from which the novel gets its title).

<sup>8</sup> There is, of course, a question here about whether or not the reader recognizes that Fernando is given a copyright attribution here, and about what difference that makes to the photograph's meaning.

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