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Practices of Planetary Relationality in Colum McCann's *Apeirogon*

Abstract

For a number of critics, what we are witnessing in postmillennial Anglophone fiction is an attempt to do away with postmodern posturings of ironic distance and ethical non-commitment, and a renewed interest in questions of authenticity, empathy, responsibility and solidarity. According to Christian Moraru, one of the keenest chroniclers of contemporary culture, the shift is rooted in an understanding of the world as an interconnected system of relationality, which the critic discusses under the headings of cosmodernism and planetarity. Moraru locates the premise of this evolving cultural project in its ethical call for "a new togetherness, for a solidarity across political, ethnic, racial, religious, and other boundaries" (*Cosmodernism* 5), but recognizes it as leaving its imprint on the aesthetic and thematic choices made by contemporary authors. The aim of the paper is to analyze Colum McCann's 2020 novel, *Apeirogon*, as indebted to this planetary vision of relationality. In particular, my intention is to trace the impact of this mindset on the narrative structure and the imaginary of the novel.

Keywords: Colum McCann, *Apeirogon*, Christian Moraru, relationality, (the) planetary, planetarity.

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As a literary genre, the novel has often been characterized as a chameleon which owes its capacity to survive to its amazing adaptability. Virginia Woolf famously dubbed it "the most pliable of all forms" (611) and Mikhail Bakhtin saw it as developing in "a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality" (7). Adapting itself to new historical circumstances and responding to fresh developments in philosophy, science and other arts, the novel constantly renews itself, confirming its identity as "less a genre than an anti-genre" (Eagleton 1). Some of these generic changes are subtle and extend over long stretches of time; others occur relatively quickly and can be linked to specific points in history. For a number of commentators, one such large-scale paradigm transformation took place around the turn of the millennium, influencing the work of Anglophone writers including David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, and David Mitchell. Although the critics differ in their speculations as to the causes of the shift, in their assessment of whether it can be seen as a development within postmodernism or as a move beyond it, as well as in their recognition of the change as a purely literary phenomenon or as a manifestation of a more generalized "turn" across various areas of culture, there is a considerable degree of accord as to the direction this new phenomenon has taken. Terms multiply: some speak of the systems novel (LeClair), the mega-novel (Karl), the "world text" (Moretti), and the maximalist novel (Ercolino); others announce the advent of metamodernism (Vermeulen and van den Akker; Holland), digimodernism (Kirby), cosmodernism (Moraru), and planetarity (Spivak; Miyoshi; Apter; Moraru). The definitions, however, often overlap: what we are witnessing, the critics suggest, is the arrival of long, dense, intricately structured novels which testify to a move towards a new sincerity, an attempt to do away with the postmodern posturings of ironic distance and ethical non-commitment, and a renewed interest in questions of empathy, bonding, responsibility and "communicable meaning" (Holland 17).

According to Christian Moraru, one of the keenest chroniclers of contemporary culture, the shift is inextricably linked with a new understanding of the world as a domain of relationality, which the critic discusses under the headings of cosmodernism and planetarity. Originating in an ethical call for "a new togetherness, for a solidarity across political, ethnic, racial, religious, and other boundaries" (*Cosmodernism* 5), the new cultural paradigm has left its imprint on the work of numerous contemporary authors, determined to "read the world in terms of self-other interconnectedness" (6). Moraru associates cosmodernism with "American and other Euroatlantic cultures" of the 1990s but emphasizes its significance as "a transition to, harbinger of, and sometimes a blueprint

for" the larger, more complex project of planetarity (*Reading* 6).[1] Originating in essays by Spivak and Miyoshi, this new paradigm rests on the idea of the planet as "a fluid, multicentric, plural and pluralizing worldly structure of relatedness" (Moraru 51) and has developed as an alternative to globalization (and the concept of the globe), which depends on a very different model of relationality, or, what Moraru calls, a "worlding scenario" (25, 57). In planetary studies, globalization is defined "*qua* market, profit, and finance apparatus" (52) and envisaged as a tendency towards homogenization. Its project, to quote Moraru, is to fashion "the polymorphic world into a 'rounded,' sphere-like (*globus*) totality" whose polished surface facilitates the flow of capital, technology, labour and information (29). Planetarity, on the other hand, imagines the world as a constantly evolving, multifarious system "keyed to non-totalist, non-homogenizing, and anti-hegemonic operations existentially as well as culturally cognitive in nature" (Moraru 51). As a result, writers, artists and critics committed to this new paradigm steer clear of the disjunctive logic of such dichotomies as centre/margin, here/there, or us/them, and instead embrace "a conjunctive or relational model" focusing on "cross-cultural, cross-geographical, indeed, world-scale contacts, juxtapositions, borrowings, and barterings" and their ethical ramifications (Moraru 110).

Colum McCann's biography and work abound in cross-cultural encounters, and so, naturally, lend themselves to planet-oriented readings. Since 1986, when he left his native Ireland to embark on a year-and-a-half, 12,000 mile bicycle journey across the States, the writer has spent much of his time roaming the world. Before settling in New York in 1994, he had lived in Texas and Japan, and he still continues to travel—to Russia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East—when researching his novels. Married to an American, he holds dual American and Irish citizenship, and enjoys the hybrid status of a "contemporary Irish-American novelist" (Armstrong 58). By referring to himself as "an international bastard" (Cusatis 13), McCann clearly suggests that his imagination does not depend on what Moraru describes as "a particular, well-contoured and largely stable territory" (6). In interviews, he also expresses his allegiance to the planetary understanding of relationality, for instance, when he speaks of his admiration for Michael Ondaatje, another "international mongrel" whose work respects "no boundaries and no borders" (Interview), or defines the role of literature as rooted in "the politics of empathy" ("Politics"). This planet-oriented mindset can also be traced in the author's work. First of all, McCann is the co-founder and president of Narrative 4, a global educational organization,

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[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent references to this author will be to this publication.

whose strategies can be phrased in terms of planetary relationality. Running its programmes in schools and communities across the world, Narrative 4 brings together young people from different sociocultural backgrounds and encourages them to share their stories in an attempt to foster empathy, combat stereotypes and overcome prejudices (Ingersoll and Ingersoll xi). Most pertinently for this essay, however, the planetary worldview also leaves its imprint on McCann's fiction. According to Alison Garden, his novels strive to create "inclusionary and redemptive intercultural and interracial spaces" (275–76), a view which is clearly shared by Eóin Flannery, who describes them as "endors[ing] intercommunal connections and interpersonal commonality in a world that circulates atomization as a daily condition" (18). Even the titles of his recent fiction, *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) and *TransAtlantic* (2013), point to the author's commitment to the idea of "the world as a relational domain" (Elias and Moraru xxiii). McCann's seventh novel, *Apeirogon* (2020), is no exception here. Although it moves to a Middle East setting and focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the book is clearly rooted in the planetary vision of the world as "pulled together by a logic of connectiveness" (Moraru 36). In what follows, I will trace the impact of this vision on the narrative structure of *Apeirogon*, and on its imaginary.[2] Given the scope of the novel, such an analysis will necessarily be selective. Hopefully, though, it will show the validity of reading McCann's work through the prism of planetary studies.

THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The narrative organization of *Apeirogon* is quite complex. On the one hand, the material is given an overall structure that suggests symmetry and order: evoking Scheherazade's relentless storytelling in *One Thousand and One Nights*, the narrative is divided into 1001 numbered sections that ascend from 1 to 500 and then go down from 500 to 1, with a section marked as 1001 poised in the very middle. On the other hand, the content of these sections is highly heterogenous, comprising, in the words of Ellen Akins,

> anecdotes from history; notes on religion, politics and art; extended meditations on saltpeter and gunpowder, bird behavior, mathematics and language; quotes from poetry and songs; glimpses of Artaud and Anaïs Nin; Kalashnikov on his deathbed and George Mitchell in Ireland; riffs on words like "operation" and "morgue"; the Song of Solomon, the Song of Songs, the Canticle of Canticles; solitaire.

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[2]   The imaginary is understood here, after Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru, as "a way of picturing the world" (xxv).

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The sections vary not just in content but also in length. Some also include photographs, aphorisms or literary quotations. In a rather hostile review of *Apeirogon* for *The New York Times*, Dwight Garner describes the narrative as broken into "shards" and likens the effect to a situation where, instead of being served a proper meal, we are confronted with "a table littered with ingredients: a paw of garlic, a frozen lamb shank, two potatoes, a big knob of celeriac, three peas." This is not quite true as even this reviewer has no difficulty in identifying the narrative thread that holds the book together, referring to what he calls "an uplifting true story" that focuses on the friendship between two real men who have each lost a daughter to the conflict. The first of them is Rami Elhanan, an Israeli whose daughter, Smadar, was killed by Palestinian suicide bombers in Jerusalem in 1997, two weeks before her fourteenth birthday; the other is a Palestinian, Bassam Aramin, whose ten-year-old daughter, Abir, died in 2007 after being shot by a member of the Israeli border police in front of her school. In offering a fictionalized account of their friendship, *Apeirogon* situates itself in what McCann describes as "this territory" where "the real is the imagined and the imagined is real" (McCann, "How"), prompting critics to read the novel, alongside *Dancer* (2003) and *TransAtlantic*, as representative of biofiction (cf. Lackey 23 and Costello-Sullivan 42).[3] *Apeirogon* describes Rami and Bassam's meeting in 2005 through Combatants for Peace (a movement whose aim is to end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories) and presents their current work through the Parents Circle (a joint Israeli-Palestinian organization gathering people who have lost immediate family members in the conflict). Their friendship marks the ethical core of the novel, transforming it from a harrowing account of loss, suffering and violence into what Alex Preston has described as "a story that buoys the heart."

Commenting on narratives that express the planetary imaginary, Moraru argues that they are "simultaneously descriptive and normative" as they engage with "a reality 'under construction'" (9). Their ethical impulse comes from a discrepancy between "what this world is" and "the planet this world should be" (59). Understanding the planet as a project in progress, he describes the texts as "aspirational" and explains: "I say 'aspirational' and not 'utopian,' for they do capture a reality, or at least its seeds, and, critical of its world context, point concurrently to a different world in the offing" (59). In McCann's *Apeirogon*, this opposition between "the world as it should be" and "the world as it is" is best visible in the contrast

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[3]   For McCann's views on the ethical challenges faced by biographical novelists, read his interview by Michael Lackey, "Colum McCann: Contested Realities in the Biographical Novel." At one point in the interview, the writer talks about the "moral responsibility" he feels towards the living, breathing people he writes about, referencing Bassam Aramin and his story (140–41).

between the story of Rami and Bassam's friendship and the countless narratives of violence it is interwoven with: not just the deaths of Smadar and Abir, rendered as they are in excruciating detail, or the bloody episodes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (such as the Deir Yassin massacre and the Naqba, the Intifadas, or Operation Cast Lead), but also the atrocities committed during the Crusades, the Second World War or the South American drug cartel wars. What I would like to suggest, however, is that the tension also affects the structure. In his astute essay on *Apeirogon*, Wit Pietrzak discusses the novel as shaped by a dialectic between centrifugal and centripetal forces, and recognizes narrative discontinuity as "instigat[ing] a centrifugal motion" that repeatedly steers the novel away from its main plot (2). On the other hand, he identifies three "centripetal" practices that allow McCann to counter this disjunctive dynamic: the novel's obsessive tendency to return to the deaths of Smadar and Abir (2), its foregrounding of what he dubs "the border-defying fraternity" between the girls' fathers (6), and its use of mathematical formulas and concepts, such as the notion of amicable numbers, the etymology of the word "algebra" (8), and the very idea of an apeirogon (9). What this list might suggest, however, is that the structure and the theme of the novel are not quite in sync, with the fragmentary, discontinuous and centrifugally-oriented narrative working against the ideas of interconnectedness expressed on the thematic level. What I would like to show is that the oscillation between these two contradictory impulses occurs at all levels of the text, and it correlates with the tension between its descriptive vision of "our multicentric, disjointed, and conflicted world" (Moraru 145) and its planetary, prescriptive impulse to bring together, to bridge the gaps, and to seek connections. In this sense, *Apeirogon* can be argued to prove Moraru's assertion that planetarily-minded novels serve as "synecdoches of the world," presenting themselves, often in an overt manner, as "ethical 'world containers'" whose function is to "piece together the world's broken body and cradle multitudes" (13).[4]

There are several ways in which *Apeirogon* tries to fashion itself into "a world container" whose structure not only reflects but also attempts to remedy the messiness of the world. Most importantly, the novel keeps

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[4]   There are clear parallels between Moraru's description of planetarity as "aspirational" and oriented towards the future and Flannery's assertion that "McCann's writing displays a critical utopian inclination" (17) even though the critics obviously speak about different "versions of utopianism" (17) when one rejects "utopia" as a valid description of the planetary project while the other sees it as characteristic of McCann's approach. Flannery's comment about "the imagination of redemption, the anticipation of a better life, and the prospects of solidarity being forged with previously 'othered' communities" are compatible with planetary ideals even though he characterizes them as "tangible *utopian* foci" (18, emphasis mine).

a steady focus on Rami and Bassam, interweaving stories of their past lives and current activism, with those that centre on their dead daughters, and on the surviving members of their families. Unlike the avian-themed accounts that dominate the opening sections of the novel or numerous other stories that are picked and then abandoned by the novel's narrator (such as Philippe Petit's 1987 Walk for Peace over the Hinnom Valley, Wael Zuaiter's assassination by Mossad in 1972, Senator Mitchell's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Christopher Costigan's exploration of the Dead Sea, or the 1944 Red Cross delegation to the Theresienstadt concentration camp), the accounts of the two families provide lines of connection and continuity that counter the fragmentariness of the novel. From the structural point of view, the most significant of these stories is the one that takes us all the way from the opening to the concluding section of the book and can be traced in sections 1–2, 12–13, 64–67, 176–80, 183, 330–33, 335, 418–20, 491, 493–94, 497, 499, 470, 469, 371–64, 362, 361, 253, 245–41, 52–49, 45, 44, 6, 4, 2 and 1,[5] and is recounted in summary form twice, in the central section numbered 1001, and again in the second section 4, as if to make sure that the reader does not miss its presence. The plotline begins with Rami travelling towards Beit Jala, on his way to "a meeting with an international group—seven or eight of them, he has heard—in the Cremisan monastery" (33), and ends with Bassam watering his orchard after coming back home from the same meeting. The story can be conceived of as Ariadne's thread that guides the reader through the labyrinthine narrative, offering—quite literally—a single path that leads to the novel's centre and back.

 Its presence also allows us to recognize the novel's debt to James Joyce's *Ulysses*.[6] Like its modernist predecessor, *Apeirogon* can be read as a single-

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 [5] The list is not conclusive: some of the sections can be read as either integral to the narrative or external to it. For instance, section 2 reads like a traffic direction sign (2): it only forms part of the plotline, if we interpret it as "focalized" though Rami, that is, as a record of what the character sees while travelling on his motorbike.

 [6] In an article that has been brought to my attention following the completion of this piece, Kathleen Costello-Sullivan reads *Apeirogon* as engaged in an intertextual dialogue with W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming." McCann's novel, she argues, utilizes both "the structure and imagery of the earlier poem" (42). In particular, she refers to Yeats's reference to "a widening gyre" as driving the structure of the novel, images of birds (especially falcons) that can be found in both texts, and their "common geographical location" (42). Much of her interpretation seems to me to be compatible with my own reading, including the tension between "chaos and order" that she detects in the narrative (41), and her identification of the central three chapters of the novel as "the difficult, unflinching, and quiet center of a narrative maelstrom" (47). In fact, since I feel fully convinced by her argument that Yeats's poem provides an important intertextual refence for the novel, the only point I would like to take issue with is her claim that there is no linear narrative in *Apeirogon* (42). As I am arguing here, there is (albeit hidden by virtue of being interspersed with so many other

day novel since all the events in this central plotline take place on 29 October 2016,[7] beginning before sunrise and ending well after dusk. Like *Ulysses*, too, the novel uses the motif of the journey to trace the movements of its characters not only across a recognizable topography but also in terms of self-other relationality. However, while *Ulysses* is usually read as a narrative that struggles against "the anxiety . . . of disconnectedness" (Bersani 177) but ultimately depicts Stephen's long-awaited meeting with Bloom as concluding in "a miserable failure" (Jameson 149) and "a sabotaged climax" (Norris 199) when Stephen sings an anti-Semitic ballad and then refuses Bloom's invitation to stay the night at Eccles Street, *Apeirogon* offers a more optimistic version of relationality. Bassam and Rami's friendship exemplifies the connection that Stephen and Bloom glimpse but ultimately fail to achieve. The relational trajectory of both novels is quite similar: "the displacement of our attention from Stephen to Bloom and then to Molly" (Wright 140) finds an echo in a similar shift of focus from Rami, whom we follow in the first half of the day, to Bassam, who becomes the central figure in its second part of the plotline, and, briefly, to his wife, Salwa, who becomes "the central consciousness" near its end. In both novels, as Margot Norris claims in reference to "Bloom's encounters on the way to 'Cyclops,'" there is also a general movement "from a largely one-person world into an increasingly multiperson world" as solitary characters are brought into "complex social spaces" where they interact "with a variety of friends, acquaintances, and strangers" (101), a movement, it is worth adding, that is reversed in the second part of the novels. These structural similarities, however, only foreground the differences. Although *Apeirogon* ends with Bassam alone in his garden, there is nothing in the novel to suggest even a hint of the social isolation experienced by Bloom. Instead of the two separate monologues given at the end of *Ulysses* (Bloom's story of his day in "Ithaca" and Molly's soliloquy in "Penelope"), Bassam and Salwa recount the events of the day in what takes the shape of a two-page-long paragraph where their voices blend and merge into a single story, once again emphasizing the ideas of dialogue and togetherness:

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stories). What is more, since the trajectory of this plotline is clearly modelled on Joyce's *Ulysses*, its presence allows us to recognize what I see as one of the most crucial intertextual influences on the novel. Interestingly, Costello-Sullivan picks up a fragment of this line when she writes: "From chapters 490 to 499, six of the chapters present a linear narrative of Bassam's and Rami's arrival at the meeting that anchors the text" (46–47).

7   The date is not given, but it can be deduced for textual clues. The year 2016 is provided on the first page of the novel, and the events are identified as happening in "late October" (31) and again "at the end of October" (229). We also know that Rami arrives one hour too early for the Cremisan meeting, because Israel has already gone off daylight saving time while Palestine has not (10). There was only one such day in 2016, and it was 29 October.

> It is a rapid-fire between them then, the pulse of the day, the phone call, the visits, the dramas. She went to the market. He went to Beit Jala. She paid Muhammad's phone bill. Rami was early, he messed up daylight saving time, he drove around for an hour, went to the Everest Hotel, got himself a coffee. She bought an anniversary present for her sister, a new perfume from Oman, it came in a ribboned box, it was a little expensive but it was worth it, she found it in the little stall in the market. The monk showed them around the monastery, you should have seen the thickness of the walls, the paintings, they went downstairs later to look at where the wine was made long ago, he brought her some olive oil, a gift, he left it in the car, he'll get it for her tomorrow. (454)

In the concluding sections, the novel also departs from *Ulysses* in that it looks forward to the future (the "tomorrow" of the passage above) when Bassam and Rami will meet again, to share their stories with new audiences: "West Jerusalem, he thinks, by two thirty, a school this time" (454). Such references emphasize the idea that, for Rami and Bassam, this single day is in no way special: it is just "another long day" in a string of similar days that extend backwards and forwards in time: "Yet again tomorrow. And again after that" (452). Although Bassam in section 500 compares their activism "to draw[ing] water from the ocean with a spoon" (242), there is dignity and courage in their unwavering pursuit of justice, and there is hope in their undaunted conviction that "peace is a fact. A matter of time" (242).

Moreover, since the numbering of the sections suggests that the pull of the narrative is towards the centre rather than the end, it can be argued that the actual climax occurs over the three sections placed in the very middle, which bring together three separate narrations. Two of these, both in sections numbered 500, come from Rami and Bassam, respectively, and contain their stories alongside their manifestos of peace and reconciliation. Within the structure of the novel, these narratives are presented as transcripts of the talks the men give at the Cremisan monastery.[8] Section 1001 returns to the third-person narrator that *Apeirogon* mostly relies on. Here, however, the narrator reveals himself as one of those who have arrived

> . . . from as far apart as Belfast and Kyushu, Paris and North Carolina, Santiago and Brooklyn, Copenhagen and Terezín . . . to listen to the stories of Bassam and Rami, and to find within their stories another story, a song of songs, discovering themselves—you and me—in the stone-tiled chapel where we sit for hours . . . our memories imploding, our synapses skipping . . . (229)

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8   In reality, as explained in "Author's Note," their texts are "pulled together from a series of interviews in Jerusalem, New York, Jericho and Beit Jala" (ix).

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The section consists of only one long sentence, and focuses on the moment when people are brought together to share their stories, showcasing what Flannery identifies as McCann's lasting "commitment to the ethical and 'community-creating' potentials of storytelling and/or shared narrative acts" (17). Foregrounding the collective aspect of storytelling (as signalled by the pronouns shifting from "themselves" to "you and me" and then to "we" and "our"), the scene depicts the act of transmitting a story from one human mind to another as an instrument of relationality, allowing strangers from "far apart" to participate in the "throbbing, ever-changing, and kaleidoscopic worldly togetherness" (Moraru 14).

THE PLANETARY IMAGINARY

If the form of *Apeirogon* is predicated on the tension between the world as it is and the planet this world aspires to become, the discrepancy is recreated in the imaginary of the novel. Here, the present-day reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict finds itself reflected in textual representations of the local landscape as scarred by violence and divided by borders and walls. At the same time, the progressive vision of a peaceful Israeli-Palestinian future can be glimpsed in scenes that depict people convening to talk, to exchange ideas, and to cooperate.

One of the most powerful representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the novel is the Separation Wall, which the Israeli government claims to constitute a security measure aimed to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks, but Palestinians perceive as an instrument of land grab and racial segregation. The Wall, they insist, deviates widely from the Green Line that marks Israel's pre-1967 border and cuts deep into the West Bank territories, encompassing illegal Israeli settlements, encircling Palestinian villages and isolating their inhabitants from their farmland and water supplies; it also creates the reality of military checkpoints and epitomizes Israel's apartheid policy (Spangler 46). The wall casts its shadow over numerous settings in the novel, and its construction affects the lives of its characters. The Palestinian town of Anata, where Bassam lives with his family at the time when his daughter is killed, is described as "an odd urban archipelago . . . surrounded almost totally by the Separation Wall" (12), and Abir's death can be correlated to this fractured geography. First of all, the construction of the Wall across the yard of Abir's school, which starts when prefabricated sections of the barrier are delivered to the site, is the very reason why the border guards (one of whom later shoots the girl) are sent to patrol the area (174). Secondly, the ambulance that takes the girl to the nearest hospital

is stalled at the checkpoint for over two hours, drastically reducing her chances of survival (67). Anata, however, is not the only physical space that the novel represents as ruptured by the Wall. The same is true for the valley which hosts the monastery where Bassam and Rami meet with their international group: since the Israeli government has already issued a decision to construct the Wall right through the heart of the valley, the vineyard adjoining the monastery is to be cut in two, separating the monastery from the nuns' convent (171). Elsewhere in the novel, McCann draws attention to the arbitrary nature of borders, telling the story of how the Green Line was first drawn on a map, in 1949, with "thick coloured pencils" that turned out to instigate a boundary that cut "right through the middle of villages, splitting streets, houses, gardens" (167): "It was possible that a woman might love her husband in Palestine before midnight, and roll across the bed to find herself in Israel for the rest of her life" (167). Much attention is also given to human rights abuses that take place at military checkpoints where food rots in trucks (123), ambulances are delayed (14), illegal crossings may lead to people getting detained or shot (13), Palestinians are subjected to questioning and downgrading strip searches (323), and humanitarian lanes for women, children, the sick and the elderly open for forty-five minutes a day (172) while soldiers sit in air-conditioned watchtowers (171). During their visit to Germany, Rami and Bassam see the remains of the Berlin Wall and then, in his speech at the Shalom Rollberg centre, Rami speaks to the audience against "a world of walls" and defines his task as that of trying "to insert a crack in the one most visible to him" (401).

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The local landscape, however, is not only fractured by the Separation Wall: it is also marked with visual reminders of violence: the "broken, dusty" streets of Anata with "smashed pavements" and "piles of rubble" (57), "olive trees ripped up by a bulldozer" (123), "demolished ancient houses in Ramallah, Jericho, Jenin" (381), Palestinian dwellings "blown asunder with sticks of dynamite" (138), a street in Jerusalem which turns into "a scattered human jigsaw" (53) following an attack by suicide bombers. McCann's narrator quotes Borges's remark that "it only takes two facing mirrors to form a labyrinth" (136) to suggest how the logic of retaliation feeds the conflict and traps the "two sides" involved in an endless, hopeless circle of violence where "a stone leads to a bullet" and "another suicide bomber leads to another air strike" (220). Indeed, in *Apeirogon*, stories of violence multiply, lists of grievances expand, and images of fragmented, ruined landscapes proliferate, producing an impression that the destructive, entropic forces that derail the peace process between Palestinians and Israelis are mirrored not only in the fragmentary narrative but also in the spatially heterogenous imaginary.

However, just as Rami and Bassam's single-day plotline manages to infuse the otherwise disjointed narrative with a sense of continuity and progression, images of scarred, brutalized landscapes contrast with representations indebted to the planetary imaginary. Foregrounding the collective spirit of collaboration, they testify to what Moraru refers to as "unparalleled density and extensiveness of connectedness, of *what relates*, joins, and binds together often above, across, and . . . against ordinary, nation-state-territorialized and akin administrative-epistemological units, bonds, ties, and allegiances" (37, emphasis in the original). To begin with, *One Thousand and One Nights* is applauded as a particularly "splendid" literary achievement precisely on the grounds that it is a product of a collective effort, gathering together stories created "at different times, in myriad places . . . and from different sources too" (McCann, *Apeirogon* 50). Collected within a single volume, these previously independent tales live on, translated into different languages and entering new cultures (50). Citing Borges, McCann likens them to spatial elements within "an endless cathedral" or "a widening mosque," "strengthening one another" as they form "a random everywhere" (50). While the metafictional passage can be read not only as a comment on *One Thousand and One Nights* but also as a manifesto for *Apeirogon*, it seems to be premised on the idea of what Moraru refers to as "planetary culture" and sees as the product of "transculturation," defined as "a rewriting of the world archive into an overall flexible system of cultural relations where what counts and occurs most is that once-separated cultural producers and discourses are now able to interrelate instead of simply fading into one another" (65). Such collaborative enterprises are repeatedly celebrated in *Apeirogon*. One account, for instance, goes back to the year 700 BC when King of Judah, Hezekiah, ordered his men to dig out a tunnel to bring water from the Gihon springs to a reservoir inside the walls of Jerusalem. The two teams began their work on opposite sides of the mountain, but they would need to stop and listen for the other team to make sure they would finally meet in the middle (103). In another section, the novel details the concerted effort that allowed people in the nineteenth century to transport blocks of ice all the way from the frozen lakes in Turkey, Iran and Iraq to Palestinian houses where they were stored in the basements of windcatcher towers (357).

A particularly impressive example of the redemptive power of cooperation is offered in the story of the minbar of Saladin. Described in the novel as "a masterpiece of sacred geometry, wood carving, marquetry and calligraphy," the pulpit was "fashioned by hundreds of guilded craftsmen" and consisted of "sixteen thousand finely carved blocks" (392) whose interlocking pieces were joined "without a single nail or screw or any glue holding it together" (93). Both intricately composite and

fantastically coherent (392), the minbar resembles *One Thousand and One Nights* in that it represents another complex, collaborative artwork that *Apeirogon* sets out to imitate, but it can also be read as an epitome of the planetary future, complex yet harmonious, heterogeneous yet premised on the principles of cooperation and interconnectivity. Constructed in the 12th century and installed at the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalam when Saladin reclaimed the city from the Crusaders, the minbar survived over 800 years till, in 1969, it was destroyed in a fire started by a Christian fanatic. Its history, however, did not end there as, once again, craftsmen came together to breathe "new life to that which had disappeared" (397). The novel emphasizes the collaborative nature of the reconstruction: "teams of architects, mathematicians, computer experts, calligraphers, biomorphic designers and even theologians" were consulted to tap into the lost secret of the ancient joinery skills (396), and then "a team of the world's best craftsmen" arrived in Amman (396). The project took 37 years to complete, but finally all the 16,000 pieces were put together, and the world could admire again the "almost unfathomably intricate" geometric patterns: "spiralling rosettes, honeycombs, circles, squares, triangles, arabesques" (393). In bringing back to life what seems to have been irretrievably lost, the reconstruction of Saladin's minbar represents a triumph of human cooperation over religious fanaticism, destruction and violence. At the same time, the enormous scale of the project allows us to read it as one of the most striking examples of planetary relationality, one where the "logic of connectiveness" gives rise to a vision that is both inspiring and empowering, containing as it does the seeds of "a world whose continuum is much less interrupted by divides like the Berlin Wall," or the Separation Wall, one might add, "and in which the connection, the nexus, the relay, and the intermeshing of lives and human expressions over all sorts of gaps have become the ontocultural norm" (Moraru 38).

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The idea of the planet as a worlding project in the making is also represented in the novel in scenes that focus on physical spaces that bring people together. The most significant of these is the Cremisan monastery, where Rami and Bassam meet with the international audience to share their stories and deliver their message of non-violence and cooperation. On the whole, however, such meetings and such spaces feature prominently in *Apeirogon*. Quite early on, for instance, an account is given of how representatives of "the two sides," "four Palestinians, seven Israelis" (26), gather in the rooftop restaurant of the Everest Hotel to establish what will become the Combatants for Peace. The account describes how the men gradually work their way from initial suspiciousness and distrust, through "uneasy laughter" (27) and conversations that never venture beyond the safe perimeters of small talk, towards the moment when they recognize

their shared humanity: "an idea so simple that Bassam wondered how he had ignored it for so long: they had families, histories, shadows" (*Apeirogon* 28). Later, a similar space is created in the yard of Abir's school in Anata where a group of Israeli soldiers arrive over three successive weekends to construct "the only playground in the town" (301). Transforming the yard fractured by the Wall and chosen for its proximity to where Abir was fatally shot into a place where children can come to meet and play is a particularly meaningful gesture, allowing the reader to catch in the otherwise gloomy present a glimpse of a more hopeful planetary future. However, not all such encounters bring about positive results or make proper use of the potential for change that they carry. Rami's wife, Nurit, occasionally meets Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel and the leader of the right-wing Likud party, at the swimming pool at the Hebrew University. Even though they used to be close friends in college, the rift between them is so great that they only "nod to each other and pass by in separate lanes" (363).

When discussing the ethical underpinnings of the planetary project, its proponents, Moraru included, often refer to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, and the meeting spaces in McCann's novel are constructed in a way that brings to mind the philosopher's idea of the face-to-face encounter as invariably fraught with risk. When we open ourselves to the other, when we signal our readiness to communicate, Levinas says, we place ourselves "at the risk of misunderstanding . . ., at the risk of lack of and refusal of communication" (120). We also enter the realm of the Saying, which Levinas associates with extreme exposure, vulnerability and a sense of defencelessness (15) but also with the birth of ethical commitment and, with it, of "pity, compassion, pardon and proximity" (117). It is this extreme openness to the other that *Apeirogon* applauds in Rami and Bassam and associates with the transformative potential of these spaces of encounter. It is only when people enter them with "nothing but the desire to communicate" that each of these physical locations can turn into "a worldly *mise ensemble* that opens up a meeting space and thereby 'instigates' a coming together—if not a wholly new 'social contract,' then surely new forms, possibilities, and arenas of sociality" (Moraru 14).

Suspended between the bleak picture of our fragmented, conflicted world and the planetary model of a more harmonious future (both of which shape its structure and its imaginary), *Apeirogon* reveals its affinity with planetary ideas. The future its protagonists look forward to and, even more importantly, attempt to create is neither that of globalized sameness nor that of saccharine utopia. Rather, it is the planetary future best expressed in a section focalized through Rami's wife, Nurit Peled-Elhanan, a thinker, an activist and a scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a future in which she once saw herself as belonging in

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> . . . a vast mosaic, Jew Christian Muslim Atheist Other Buddhist,
> call it what you will, a country that would be complicated, nuanced,
> democratic, visionary, a place where the idea of hate letters . . . would be
> anathema to the patriotic imagination, the idea of patriotism applying
> not necessarily to a country or a nation, but to a state of being which
> could only rightfully be called human . . . (331)

If we look at the present-day reality of the Middle East, this youthful
dream, as Nurit herself admits, seems "almost . . . preposterous" (331).
However, if we focus instead on what Rami and Bassam have managed
to build on the micro level of their relationship, we can find the planet's
future already realized in the world's present. To quote from Moraru one
last time, their friendship can be seen as one of the "sites in which, however
small, unassuming, and geographically and politically circumscribed
these gestures, occasions, and places may be, the world 'worlds' itself
nevertheless, gathers itself together, and . . . shows its face *as* world"
(Moraru 14; emphasis in the original). Therefore, even though *Apeirogon*
(and its *Ulysses*-driven single-day plotline) opens with a gloomy image of
"the hills of Jerusalem [as] a bath of fog" (3) and closes with that of "the
hills of Jericho [as] as bath of darkness" (456), the novel refuses to be
engulfed by despair, finding hope in the planetary future that Rami and
Bassam's friendship encapsulates. Rejecting the simplistic, binary logic
of conflict and confrontation, it chooses to focus on lines of connection,
images of human collaboration, and inclusive spaces of encounter. Given
this "apeirogon" approach, it only seems right that McCann's engagement
in practices of planetary relationality also involves a recognition of his
Irish heritage as exemplified by *Ulysses*.

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