

# On the Cosmopolitan Ideals in *Let the Great World Spin*

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**Abstract:** In his novel *Let the Great World Spin*, Colum McCann sets the main story in the New York City during the 1970s, using the image of a tightrope walker treading between the World Trade Center towers as the primary thread to relate the interconnected stories of people with different identities and intertwining experiences. This paper holds that McCann seeks to connect different groups to emphasize the importance of communication with the “other”, write about moral justice to convey his humanistic concern, and outline a blueprint of the cosmopolitan community in the context of global crises. In the end, McCann tries to break out of the constraints of the historical context and conveys positive emotions of universal significance with his cosmopolitan ideals embedded in literary imagination.

**Keywords:** Colum McCann; *Let the Great World Spin*; cosmopolitanism

## 1. Introduction

More than two decades has passed since the terrorists crashed their planes into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, but the impact of this horrific incident has never been far away from us. For the American people, it is an unforgettable and traumatic memory; for the rest of the world, this terrorist attack marks the beginning of a new era characterized by more intense collision and conflict. As a historical record and aesthetic representation of social reality, literature explores the cultural psychology and national consciousness behind the event, which has led to the emergence of a unique genre termed Post-9/11 Literature. Among them, *Let the Great World Spin*, the masterpiece of the Irish-American writer, Colum McCann (1965-), focuses on the performance of the tightrope walker between the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and employs a bold “post-modern collage” to draw together more than a dozen characters who have either witnessed or heard of this performer in their own stories<sup>[1]</sup>. With most of the stories set in New York City in the 1970s, the author uses traumatic narratives to intertextualize with historical accounts, highlighting the themes of redemption and hope.

At present, academic research on this novel is predominantly concerned with trauma, memory, narrative style, spectacle, community, etc. Eóin Flannery believes that McCann’s creative narrative lies in “brachiated and democratic structure” and “it is a novel that is stalked by menace and violence, but one that rises to moments of grace and hopeful anticipation”<sup>[2]</sup>. Hamilton Carroll argues that the novel reveals “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”<sup>[3]</sup>. In addition, Chinese scholar Dan Hansong delves into the narrative dimension of the novel, arguing that the author presents the American spiritual history and the redemption trajectory epitomized by New York City in the 1970s on the diachronic axis<sup>[4][67]</sup>. Wang Wei and Piao Yu deal with the history and cityscape in the book, respectively, while Zeng Gui’e and Wang Fengyun approach the text from the theoretical perspective of community, holding the view that McCann “advocates ‘empathy’ among people and expresses a profound wish for equality and peace”<sup>[5][53]</sup>. Some studies have paid attention to McCann’s identity and discussed it through the lens of diaspora literature or transnationalism, but few references are made to McCann’s cosmopolitan stance in the era of globalization.

As an academic theory, cosmopolitanism boasts a long course of development. Etymologically, it is a compound of “cosmos” and “polis”, and the ancient Greek cynicism, which advocated breaking down the boundaries of city-states and sharing civil rights and duties, served as the prototype of simple cosmopolitan thinking. During the European Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, the German classical philosopher, elaborated the concept of cosmopolitanism in the modern sense, which became the philosophical basis of an abundance of subsequent cosmopolitan thoughts. He proposed a cosmopolitan law that transcended national boundaries with a view to maintaining permanent peace across the world<sup>[6][96]</sup>. However, it was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that cosmopolitanism became a real practice. With the

acceleration of globalization, it was once again thrown into the forefront of multiple disciplines at the end of the last century. In keeping with the process of globalization, modern cosmopolitanism calls for harmony in diversity, and seeks common ground while reserving differences, with its essence being unity and integration under the premise of respecting divergences. However, terrorist events are obviously dissonant voices against the trend, so how McCann imparts his cosmopolitan ideals through rewriting the incident is worthy of more attention. The purpose of this paper is to explore the cosmopolitan ideals present in the novel, examine how McCann applied imaginative and fictional literary narration to dispelling the terrorist nature of the event, as well as how he established positive emotions and depicted a common cosmopolitan ideal.

## 2. Connection and Communication: to Embrace Differences and Respect the “Other”

First and foremost, cosmopolitanism underscores the universal connection among people. Underpinned by the notion of sharing, it calls for people all over the world to break through national and racial boundaries to unite into a closely connected whole. In *Let the Great World Spin*, McCann changes the plight of ossification, stagnation and alienation besetting people via the performance of tightrope walking, thereby enabling his characters to forge multiple connections across time and space. As the central image, the tightrope walker horizontally bridges the twin towers of the World Trade Center, standing parallel to each other eternally in the city, with a steel wire. Therefore, the performer becomes a special symbol of connectivity in the urban landscape. McCann stresses that the effect of this amazing feat constitutes a breakthrough to the stagnant state: “Everything was rewritten when he was up in the air. New things were possible with the human form. It went beyond equilibrium.”<sup>[7]164</sup> The performer also vertically attracts the attention of the watchers below him and thus connects a wide spectrum of people. The first chapter of the novel, “Those Who Saw Him Hushed”, presents the complexities of social life in New York in that particular moment: people of all ages and from all walks of life are gazing up at the strange and daring performance hundreds of meters above in unison, with shared emotions and impulses, “all they needed to become a family was one millisecond of slippage.”<sup>[7]6</sup> In other chapters, the scope of this connection is illustrated by the fact that people who don’t live in New York are able to watch the scene at the same time through television and other mediums, with a group of computer hackers from the West Coast even overcoming the limitations of space easily through modern technology and getting in touch with one of the spectators by telephone. Moreover, the performance has not only achieved a universal connection synchronically, but also left a unique mark on the stories McCann told on the diachronic axis. To be more specific, Corrigan dies in a car accident on the day of the tightrope walk. Before he died, “he was saying when he whispered into the dark that he had seen something he could not forget, a jumble of words, a man, a building”<sup>[7]283</sup>; mothers who lost their children in Vietnam War gather at Claire’s house and look out in the direction of the twin towers; Tillie and Jazzlyn, the black prostitutes, are tried in the same courtroom as the tightrope walker; many years later, Jazzlyn’s daughter still cherishes a photograph of the tightrope walk. From the perspective of structuralism, the tightrope walk not only realizes the connection of the twin towers in an ontological sense, but also plays a pivotal role in shattering the boundaries of each story, linking characters of various races and classes, and constructing a network of time and space based on unified humanity in the context of multiculturalism in this novel<sup>[8]</sup>.

With the tightrope walker at the heart, this novel constructs a universal connection embodying people’s interactions across identities and backgrounds, many of which embrace racial and class differences. The tightrope walker is inspired by the French acrobat, Philippe Petit, who actually performed on the World Trade Center in 1974, but a conscious effort has been made to obscure his identity in the book. Some critics believe that the audience’s guess with regard to his nationality, “he was an Arab, a Jew, a Cypriot, an IRA man”<sup>[7]5</sup>, is a kind of “implicit writing of immigration”<sup>[9]</sup>. In addition, the various characters in other stories hail from different countries. As an Irish Christian, Corrigan leaves Dublin alone and he is willing to keep a small room for the black prostitutes who make an illegal living on the streets of New York. The old man he takes care of in the nursing home is a Jew from Hungary, while his secret romance, which conflicts with his religious beliefs, consists in a South American girl named Adelita. In Corrigan’s special monastic life, it is common to find intertwined national and ethnic identities. More importantly, the communication between diverse groups is actually maintained by a strong bond of belief or emotion. For example, Claire, a rich white woman, by means of a newspaper, meets her “companions”—mothers who are also deprived of their sons in the Vietnam War. She used to be at a loss when dealing with those poor black women floundering in the Lower East Side, but ends up letting go of her apprehensions in the course of communication. She has established an emotional connection with them and developed a desire to eliminate boundaries: “Why shouldn’t all our sons be in

the room all at once? Collapse all the boundaries. Why shouldn't they sit together?"<sup>[7]107</sup> When mothers meet face-to-face to share their miserable memories, they temporarily ignore their original labels of color or status, with only the common trauma of being a bereaved mother left, thereby attaining communication and resonance across race and class.

According to Ulrich Beck, prominent features of the cosmopolitanism process are the cross-border interconnection and interdependence between communities.<sup>[10]</sup> McCann's description of communication between different communities not only imparts the anticipation that people are capable of achieving mutual understanding and dependence through communication, but also implies the cosmopolitan ideals of embracing differences and respecting "others". In this novel, he uses the special narrative technique called "multiple voices", that is, relating the same scene from another narrator's perspective. It is instrumental in not only demonstrating the unreliability of a single narrative perspective through comparison, but also interlocking and mutually reinforcing the various strands of the plot. For example, in the eyes of his brother, the prostitutes who visit Corrigan's house are "leeches, worse than leeches, bedbugs that crawled from the wallpaper"<sup>[7]39</sup>, but Tillie's monologue after her arrest demonstrates to us that those prostitutes actually appreciate what Corrigan has done for them. A similar opposite can also be found in Claire and Gloria's friendship. When Claire's careless words offend Gloria, only from Claire's disordered monologue can readers comprehend that she is full of remorse, while Gloria can fully understand Claire after a few moments of contemplation: "she just flat-out made a mistake by running her mouth off, one silly little statement I was allowing to ruin everything."<sup>[7]301</sup> In other words, the black prostitutes and Gloria are no longer the "others" in Corrigan's and Claire's stories, but are treated as equals to the subjects. "Cosmopolitanism is distinguished from all the forms we mentioned before because embracing the 'other' has become its highest standard...The stranger is not rejected as a threatening and divisive force, but valued as a complementary and active factor. It is a kind of open mind full of curiosity and interest in others, and it regards the "other" as its irreplaceable supplement."<sup>[11]</sup> By making some major characters appear in different narrative perspectives, McCann also moves his writing away from flat and straightforward accounts into multidimensional and interlaced ones. People with similar experiences reach a connection with each other, then exchanges feelings on the basis of embracing differences. They are no longer isolated from others because of the common traumatic memories. It illustrates the ideal state of cosmopolitanism of equal communication and respect for others, and also implies the positive power of overcoming differences across nationalities and borders.

Through mutual trust and sympathy among people from diverse backgrounds, McCann shows his readers that embracing differences and communicating with others can help people heal their common wounds. To be honest, it is not easy for the two motifs, trauma and the "other", to be discussed in contemporary literary works, since the traditional perspective of trauma fails to be integrated with the backdrop of globalization, and it is taxing to take the focus on the "other" into the consideration of trauma. McCann chooses to write about the potential exchanges and mutual assistance behind the traumatic memory, so as to pave an ideal path of communication for those suffering. "The 'other' is often formed from the subject's limited point of view, and the way to surpass the "other" is communication."<sup>[4]70</sup> As McCann himself put it, "Great novels mean the process of establishing resonance with the reader and avoiding meaningless and disappointing things."<sup>[12]</sup> In the specific context of intertextuality with the attacks, McCann highlights the hope of salvation behind empathy with the cosmopolitan ideal of universal connection and equal communication.

### 3. Fairness and Justice: Shared Responsibility and Ethical Care

McCann not only gives prominence to the connection and communication among different kinds of people, but also focuses on the cosmopolitan ethical principles of fairness and justice that are shared in their transnational communications. Wang Ning points out that "cosmopolitanism primarily means that all human races and ethnicity, regardless of their political affiliation, belong to a large single community, and that they share common ethics and obligations across national and ethnic boundaries, and that this single community should be nurtured in order to be promoted as universal ethics and values recognized by all human beings."<sup>[6]97</sup> Cosmopolitanism aspires to build a harmonious and holistic order in the world based on widely accepted human ethics and values, but the terrorist attacks stand for a subversion of those global principles.

The novel does not explore how moral justice is trampled by terrorism directly, but rather reflects on the conflicts through Joshua's letters to Claire during the Vietnam War. As a programmer who counts death tolls, Joshua's letter exhibits that he has gradually come to understand the truth of war: "it was, he claimed, the most un-American of wars, no idealism behind it, only about defeat."<sup>[7]102</sup> McCann bluntly

unveils that any war is nothing more than confrontation and hatred, and recounts its devastation to the human spiritual world in further detail. For example, Joshua is prone to the feeling of being on the verge of losing control after several battles. His parents, Soderberg and Claire, who grieve for Joshua's death, display some PTSD symptoms: Soderberg avoids talking about the war but sometimes cries in the bathroom; Claire sits in front of the open refrigerator in the middle of the night, letting the cold air soothe her pain. McCann cites the Vietnam War as the background in other stories too, suggesting that the memories of war can escalate into collective trauma. "What is commonly accepted by cosmopolitans is that no regional loyalty can force people to forget that each person still has a responsibility to others."<sup>[13]9</sup> By depicting the scars of war in Joshua's family, McCann opposes the radical nationalism and patriotism represented by regional war and appeals to people to cherish each one's life, shoulder moral responsibilities and advocate the cosmopolitan ideals of justice and peace.

In addition to writing about the war, McCann also satirizes the chaotic society which defies legal authority and violates fairness and justice. As a graduate of Yale University, Soderberg works as a judge with the lofty ambition of becoming a paragon of morality, but over time he realizes the filth beneath the seemingly attractive facade. He finds himself bound by the relentless judicial system and reduced from an aspirant to a "part of the parts". In the end, he gives up pursuing justice and repeatedly makes similar decisions in the courtroom to finish as many cases as possible so as to fill his "quota sheet" because "the heroes of the system were the judges who disposed of the most cases in the quickest amount of time."<sup>[7]257</sup> McCann reveals the workings of wheeling and dealing under the legal system and exposes the indifference and cruelty of legal officials<sup>[5]55</sup>. Tillie and Jazzlyn experience Soderberg's ruthless trial. For her daughter Jazzlyn and her two young granddaughters, Tillie voluntarily confesses to the crime, so she is put into jail. Throughout her prison days, she keeps asking herself why she has turned her daughter into a street girl. Following a nervous breakdown, she commits suicide in the end. Tillie's spiritual journey shows the helplessness of the little people struggling to survive in New York City, and her confusion and grief constitute an outcry against the specious justice and righteousness. McCann exposes the squalor and decay behind the glamorous veneer of New York, calling for the restoration of ethics and moral principles such as fairness and justice via urbanites' tragedies and complex sensibilities including disillusionment and trauma.

In contrast to the above, the novel extols some common virtues. For example, Corrigan, a monk who is devout to his religion, never asks for anything in return for good deeds, "We found out later he was a priest. Not really a priest, but one of those guys who lived somewhere because he thought that he should, like he had a duty thing, morals, some sort of shit like that, a monk, with vows and shit, and that chastity stuff."<sup>[7]224</sup> As the couple who are responsible for Corrigan and Jazzlyn's death in the car accident, Blaine and Lara break up due to their divergent attitudes towards the accident. Lara decides to go to Jazzlyn's funeral and visit Tillie because of her inner guilt. In this process of "atoning for her crime", she gradually finds her conscience back and bids farewell to the depraved life of drinking and taking drugs with Blaine every night. Finally, Lara and Corrigan's brother Ciaran fall in love with each other, with their union signifying "redemption" and "forgiveness". On the other hand, Claire and Gloria adopt the two little girls left behind by Jazzlyn by coincidence. They also find healing and comfort in charitable acts: "Nothing felt better than that, not in a long time."<sup>[7]322</sup> McCann regards Corrigan as a real priest with pure ideals who is always selfless, and also exhibits the good qualities of the three women. By demonstrating the marvellous turns of fate in which people help and save each other with emotional care, he intends to reconstruct the cosmopolitan ethical dimension of responsibility and morality. According to Gillian Brock, "the core principle of cosmopolitanism is that each person, regardless of citizenship and other social relations, all have a global status as the ultimate unit of moral concern and therefore deserve the same respect and care."<sup>[14]</sup> McCann confronts the enormous war wounds and social injustice with the microscopic presentation of moral concern and inclinations towards benevolence, contrasting the small but firm moral power of the individual with the huge shadow of history and intangible social oppression, so as to awaken the sense of moral responsibility and value recognition coexisting in people's minds, and hammer home the humanitarian concept shared by all human beings.

Robert Sibley has written that: "Cosmopolitanism as a moral quest extends our specific concern to the distant, general sense of 'others'... This notion may give us a warm and vague feeling, but it definitely does not want to drive us to wage a war."<sup>[13]236</sup> McCann takes a clear-cut stand against the acts of war and penetratingly exposes the dark side of American society, but he does not blame the war and social disorder explicitly, stressing that each person has a moral responsibility to others instead. "The only way to fight it was with charity, justice, and goodness."<sup>[7]145</sup> Ultimately, the cosmopolitan principle at the ethical level reaffirms the centrality of the values of fairness and justice in the worldwide moral system. There is no doubt that the cosmopolitan ideal guided by moral and ethical requirements is mainly aimed at building a stable and harmonious global order. More importantly, McCann denounces war and

terrorism using the principles of justice and responsibility, and at the same time, he illustrates the redemptive power of morality, which suggests that the cosmopolitan ideal can convey humanistic care and positive feelings.

#### 4. Ideal and Future: Cosmopolitan Community

Gerard Delanty have noted that the new era opens up a space for redefining the cosmopolitan community<sup>[15]</sup><sup>124</sup>. “Cosmopolitan community are produced in the mixing of the local and global, the chief characteristic of which is a form of community that is not limited by space or by time. Community has become de-territorialized and scattered in many forms and places. But what is distinctive about these new expressions of ‘community beyond propinquity’ is that they are also interlinked by communicative and transnational processes.”<sup>[15]</sup><sup>119-120</sup> In the last chapter of the novel, McCann tries to paint a panorama of the increasing interconnectedness and accelerating transnational exchange in the context of globalization, outlining the initiation of a cosmopolitan community. More precisely, Jazzlyn’s elder daughter Janice is dispatched to the embassy in Baghdad while the younger one Jaslyn travels frequently across the world. The author also references the status quo of other characters, for instance, Ciaran has already risen to be the CEO of an Internet company... New stories in the 21st century symbolize a new stage of cosmopolitanism. “The world spins. We stumble on. It is enough.”<sup>[7]</sup><sup>349</sup> McCann’s literary narrative manages to break out of the constraints of the historical context, placing emphasis on the overall destiny of mankind based on a sense of crisis and urgency resulting from the attack in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The title of the final chapter, “Roaring Seaward, and I Go”, comes from the last stanza of the famous poem “Locksley Hall” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. The original lines convey the poet’s romantic imagination of a global community, which echoes with McCann’s expectation of the world’s future at the end of the novel. Different from the previous chapters, he deliberately sets the last chapter in 2006, juxtaposing the tightrope walk with the historical event:

“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.”<sup>[7]</sup><sup>325</sup>

Chinese scholar Wang Wei maintains that McCann intends to break the “symbolic violence” of an unchanging ritualistic and mythical historical landscape, and blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional, the subjective and the objective, here and there, past and present, so as to dispel the anxiety in an age of crisis<sup>[16]</sup>. This juxtaposition also shows that he regards human beings as an unbroken and continuous whole which keeps forging ahead through the twists and turns of fate. To name a few in the storyline, Jaslyn can be regarded as a continuation not only of her mother and grandmother, but also of her adoptive mother, Claire and Gloria. Although, out of fear for her birth mother’s special profession, she used to labour the apprehension that the “tradition” of being a street girl might come back to haunt her one day, she still travels to Corrigan’s hometown in Ireland, trying to understand all the past associated with her mother. McCann’s characters create a better reality by seeking a world that embraces human thought across different historical periods and geographic areas<sup>[17]</sup>. Jaslyn’s journey of tracing her “roots” breaks the limits of time and space, linking the past to the present on the basis of blood relationships. The relation between Jaslyn and her “mothers” is not only a connection, but also a positive construction of “moving on” to get rid of the shadow of the past. For example, Claire sells the paintings on her wall, which may remind her of her son. However, despite depictions of people struggling against past trauma, McCann is not an innocent optimist, as evidenced by his references to some implicit clues about the present, such as “another six dead in Iraq” and “shortly after the attacks on Afghanistan”<sup>[7]</sup><sup>340-341</sup>. These indicate that, as even more crises loom ahead, the world is actually “stumbling” forward. The author’s anticipation of a worldwide community implies a prospect of human beings adapting to uncertain changes together united in times of crisis.

In this sense, by looking at the truth again on which the novel is based, we can see how McCann uses the artistic imagination of post-9/11 literature to deliver a common concern for society, history, and the fate of humanity in general. The cosmopolitan ideal of community that McCann embraces not only embodies the writers’ interpretation of the event, but also signifies the role of contemporary American literature in a world after the incident. It tells us that there are many ways to ponder over the crisis of human existence and explore the future under the backdrop of a new stage of globalization. Therefore, McCann’s literary work transcends wounds and traumatic memory caused by the attack itself with its

far-reaching concerns, and draws attention to the crisis of human destiny behind the terrorist attacks with a broad perspective. His unique approach stands for the shift from looking back to forward, and from history to the present.

While in the new stage of globalization, supported by more advanced transportation and technologies, human beings may share a similar destiny and be related to anyone in the world. At the end part of the novel, Jaslyn meets an Italian doctor during an international trip. They become acquainted and intimate very quickly, but soon get separated. The serendipitous experience is probably a metaphor for people's ambivalent state marked by both familiarity and strangeness in the context of approaching cosmopolitanism. This also implies the potential uncertainty in the universal connection of the future world. A cosmopolitan community may be McCann's answer to the uncertain future. According to Yin Qiping, "excellent writers and critics all have a 'common impulse' to look forward to a better society in the future, an organically generated, vibrant and community form that transcends blood ties and territory"<sup>[18]</sup>. McCann notes that the prospective path for cosmopolitanism is that a worldwide human community joins forces in confronting challenges together. It still contains the communicative expectation of transcending racial, national, and class boundaries and upholding the moral quest for freedom, equality, and justice. Moreover, on the basis of those cosmopolitan ideals, he hopes that mankind will take the initiative to build a cosmopolitan community in which human beings' destiny is closely related to each other while living harmoniously in a cosmopolitan home with mutually accepted differences.

## 5. Conclusion

In *Let the Great World Spin*, McCann extends his literary imagination to a panoramic picture of history and society, depicting the ideals of promoting communication, maintaining moral justice, and building a cosmopolitan community in an age fraught with crises. Some scholars have argued that he is a representative of "community literature"<sup>[5]58</sup>. More than that, this paper holds the view that he is also a cosmopolitanist who embraces differences. In his writing, McCann's cosmopolitan ideals help the story get rid of restrictions imposed by the historical context of the attacks, thus enabling it to reflect on the conditions of all human beings on the basis of the catastrophic event. Moreover, it bears testament to the unique power of literary works to indicate the writer's humanistic concern. In this sense, the novel heals the pain of history, conveys the hope of redemption, and shares positive emotions with its cosmopolitan ideals. Facing a world that keeps "spinning" despite setbacks, McCann's cosmopolitan ideals is not only an answer to the past, but also an expectation for the future.

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