

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Amplifying the Aural in Literary Geography

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**Abstract:**

Arguing that work in literary geography has so far concentrated almost exclusively on visualisations and the visual aspects of landscape and setting, this paper argues for more attention to be paid to the aural aspects of literary geography. Its discussion of sound and rhythm in literary space-time is divided into three main parts. The first part has to do with sound in the fictional world of narrative events and the contribution of reader auralisation to literary geography. The second part, dealing with the question of 'who, in the narrative world, is hearing', looks at cases in which reader auralisation is mediated through the perceptions of a character within the fictional world. Finally, moving away from questions of sound and hearing within the fictional world, the third part looks at the way in which the distinctive sound and rhythm of an underlying authorial narrative voice enable a coherent and convincing fictional space-time to emerge in the event of reading. It argues that even when the rhythms inherent in a specific narrative voice have no immediately obvious representational purpose, they nevertheless make a significant contribution to the creation of a unified fictional space-time. Assuming that the lack of appropriate critical terminology has been one of the factors inhibiting the recognition of an aural dimension to literary geography, the paper also explores how conceptual terms such as auralisation, point of audition, auscultation, and diffusion might enable new lines of work in the geographical reading of fictional setting, narrative, and author-reader collaboration.

**Keywords:** auralisation, Colum McCann, literary space-time, setting, sound, rhythm

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## Introduction

A young woman sits in a Manhattan bedroom, visiting an old lady coming to the end of her life. She notes the bed, the chair, the bedside table, the window, the curtains, the saline drip. As she remarks this accumulation of ‘fragments of a human order’, readers see the room with her and through her eyes: ‘the chipped edge of a photo frame, the rim of a mug, the mark of a stray tea line along its edge, a crossword puzzle sitting unfinished’ (McCann 2009: 34). But the vicarious experience of this moment goes beyond visualisation: the narrative also provides readers with the feel and taste of the room, and with its sounds. The young woman, Jaslyn leans over the old lady and senses ‘a waft of stale air’; crossing to the window, she feels ‘the curl of breeze on her skin’. Inside the room there is the tick of the clock and the rise and fall of the old lady’s gently rhythmic breathing; meanwhile, through the open window come audible fragments of the city outside—‘traffic . . . machine hum, cranes, playgrounds, children, the tree branches down on the avenue slapping each other around’. Seeing, feeling, hearing, sensing – in this narrative moment, realised on the final page of Colum McCann’s 2009 novel *Let The Great World Spin*, readers participate in an embodied literary microgeography that includes much more than a visualised location.

Literary geography dealing with the textual analysis of fictional worlds has so far tended to concentrate on the visible dimensions of setting and landscape description and the mapping of plots and themes. Relatively little work has been done on the aural dimensions of fictional worlds. One explanation for this comparative lack of interest in questions of sound and rhythm could be that literary specialists have tended to assume that geography primarily has to do with landscape and location – the world seen and the world mapped. So while there has been some work on the sounds of fictional worlds in recent years, particularly in relation to poetry/song (Attoh 2011) and modernist fiction (Cuddy-Keane 2000, 2005; Morrison 2013; Schweighauser 2006; Vandeveld 2014), these initiatives have not yet had much of an impact on common practice in literary geography. The strongly visual ‘landscape in literature’ approach that dominated early literary work with geographical concepts (Brosseau 2009; Hones 2008; Ridanpää 2013), and which to a considerable extent still characterises the popular understanding of literary geography, has no doubt reinforced this emphasis. Meanwhile geographers, despite an increasing interest in sound geographies (e.g. Revill 2012; 2013a; 2013b), have not taken up the question of sound and rhythm in literary geography either, perhaps because they have not been trained to pay as much attention in reading to aural and rhythmic aspects of text such as assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia, metre, stress, and rhythm. However, the rise in genuinely interdisciplinary work in literary geography, which in recent years has effected a merging of a geographically-based literary geography with a critical literary geography based in literary criticism (Alexander and Cooper 2013), suggests that the time is right for attention to be paid to a more aurally oriented literary geography.

Where the familiarity of the concept of visualisation encourages a collective analytical focus on landscape descriptions and mapping, the analogous concept of auralisation, which would enable work on sound and rhythm in literary geography, is relatively unfamiliar. Nevertheless, fictional worlds clearly include sound, and readers not only visualise settings and events but also auralise them. The term ‘auralisation’ seems to have first come into use about a hundred years ago. In a work published in 1913 on musical interpretation Tobias Matthay refers to ‘the ability . . . to auralise things apart from their actual physical happening outside of us’ (Matthay 1913). The idea that auralisation could function as a counterpart to visualisation was explicitly suggested in 1952 in a letter to *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, ‘Do You Auralize?’ which defined the process of auralisation as the formation of ‘a mental impression of a sound not yet heard’ (Martin 1952). For literary geography, the ‘yet’ could be deleted from this definition: readers are not imagining a sound they will actually hear at some point in future, but are instead auralising as they read, forming mental impressions of sounds that exist within the fictional world.

### **The case-study texts**

In order to explore the possibilities of an amplified attention to the aural in literary geography, this paper uses close readings of a range of case-study passages taken from two of Colum McCann's recent novels: *Let The Great World Spin* (2009) and *TransAtlantic* (2013).<sup>1</sup> The purpose is not so much to add to McCann scholarship as it is to explore the significance of auralisation for literary geography, by looking in turn at the representation of sounds in settings, the perception of sound by fictional characters, and the role of narrative rhythm in the creation of coherent fictional packets of space-time, taking the two McCann novels as sources for case-study material.

McCann's prize-winning 2009 novel, *The Great World*, is divided into 13 chapters narrated from twelve different points of view/audition—12 set in 1974 and one, the final chapter, set in 2006 and narrated by a character who appeared as a very small child in the earlier section. It is from this final chapter that the Manhattan bedroom scene discussed in the introduction above takes place. The multiple stories which together make up *The Great World* are linked by the fact that all the characters witnessed or were affected in one way or another by the performance of a wirewalk across the space between New York's World Trade Center towers; the highwire performance forms the narrative hub through which the multiple personal stories are connected.

McCann's subsequent novel, *TransAtlantic*, is divided into two halves of three chapters each. In the first half, Book One, the three chapters narrate versions of historical events, and are centred on versions of real-world characters: the first describes Alcock and Brown's record-breaking *TransAtlantic* air flight of 1919, the second deals with the visit made by Frederick Douglass to Ireland in 1845-6, and the third recounts the crucial last phase of Senator George Mitchell's work on the Good Friday agreement in 1998. The subsequent three chapters of Book Two weave the more explicitly fictional stories of a family line of women through the same history: the first, 1863-89, follows Lily, a domestic servant who left

Ireland for New York; the 1929 chapter continues the family story with Lily's journalist daughter Emily and granddaughter Lottie, a photographer; the third chapter, set in 2011, takes Lottie's daughter Hannah as the central character. The story lines of this fictional family line are woven into those of the more factual historical chapters: in the novel, Lily's flight to America was inspired by a brief encounter with Douglass; Emily and Lily were on the scene when Alcock and Brown took off from Newfoundland, heading for Ireland; Lottie and Hannah met Senator Mitchell in 1998 in Belfast.

### **Auralisation**

Both *The Great World* and *TransAtlantic* open with short chapters set somewhat apart from the rest of the narratives, and in both cases the intensity of the narrative here-and-now in these crucial opening sections is enacted in the event of reading as much through auralisation as visualisation. At the start of *The Great World*, for example, a crowd of commuters have gathered in the streets around the World Trade Center, holding their breath as the wirewalker steps out into the air above them: the novel's Manhattan streets are galvanised by affect and animated by sound. While the location of this opening scene is conventionally mapped, in the novel's second sentence, by a naming of the streets on which the commuters have stopped to watch—'Church Street. Liberty. Cortlandt. West Street. Fulton. Vesey' (*TGW* 3)—the very first sentence launches the novel not with a place or a sight but with the sound of a sudden quiet: 'Those who saw him hushed'. The story opens in this way with something like a pause, a breath before action, like the sudden stilling of noise and movement in a concert hall just before the conductor launches the orchestra. Plunged into the affect of the moment, readers know only that something is about to happen. And the impact of the word 'hushed' comes not just from what it means, but how it vocalizes the moment. The word is quiet, soft, the 'sh' sound emphasising the evaporation of the city's usual clamour. After this moment of abrupt hush come the street names, and then the description reverts to the aural: 'It was a silence that heard itself, awful and beautiful'. The silence is somehow 'awful', the participating crowd perhaps awed, with the open 'aw' sound of 'awful' also echoing, perhaps, a kind of communal oh-ah gasp from the crowd.

A few paragraphs of more visual description follow, and then the narrative returns to the sound of the moment: 'Around the watchers, the city still made its everyday noises. Car horns. Garbage trucks. Ferry whistles. The thrum of the subway. The M22 bus pulled in against the sidewalk, braked, sighed down into a pothole' (*TGW* 3-4). These sounds are specific and easy to hear: the subway thrumming, the bus sighing. Then, included in this paragraph on everyday noise, a 'flying chocolate wrapper touched against a fire hydrant'. Perhaps in the hush of the awful silence, the intensity of the moment, even punctuated as it is by car horns and ferry whistles, that brush of paper on metal is audible. What can be heard ranges from slammings to clinks: 'Taxi doors slammed. Sneakers found their sweetspots. The leather of briefcases rubbed against trouserlegs. A few umbrellas clinked against the pavement. Revolving doors pushed quarters of conversation out into the street'. But despite all this noise, the moment remains defined by its awful and beautiful silence: 'the watchers

could have taken all the sounds and smashed them down into a single noise and still they wouldn't have heard much at all: even when they cursed, it was done quietly, reverently' (*TGW* 4).

There is an aural rhythm, a rise and fall, in the volume of sound in this opening chapter: the 'awful' hush expands into noise and then fades back again into silence. At first, it is the surprising quiet of the morning streets that is emphasised, then there is a rise in audible noise (chatter, sirens, helicopter rotors), voices rising 'to a crescendo, all sorts of accents, a babel', which peaks as a man leans out of an office window and shouts. This is followed by a momentary lull, 'a dip before the laughter', and then 'a torrent of chatter was released, a call-and-response', which seemed 'to ripple all the way from the windowsill down to the sidewalk and along the cracked pavement to the 'corner of Fulton' (*TGW* 6). The ripple of human sound pulses through the urban streets like an audible wave, 'a domino line of laughter', from Fulton 'down the block along Broadway', where 'it zigzagged down John [and] hooked around to Nassau'. Then, 110 storeys above the crowd, the wirewalker moves and suddenly the crowd falls silent again. 'They drew back and moaned'. But the shape the crowd has seen falling in mid-air is just a sweatshirt, not a body, and 'a shout sounded across the watchers, a woman's voice: God, oh god, it's a shirt, it's just a shirt'. The shirt falls and 'a new hush settled over the cops above and the watchers below, a rush of emotion rippling among them'. The wirewalker steps out on to the wire and 'the watchers below pulled in their breath all at once. The air felt suddenly shared. The man above was a word they seemed to know, though they had not heard it before' (*TGW* 7).

McCann's next novel *TransAtlantic* also opens with a very short section that is somewhat separate from the chapters that follow: set in 2012, this section, in terms of the novel's narrative chronology, appears to come after the events of the concluding 2011 chapter. Just over a page in length, the opening section is mediated through the eyes and ears of an unnamed female character, and for a first-time reader there is no clue to her identity. All the reader has is the woman's experience of a domestic, mundane and rural scene: a cottage, early morning, on the shores of Strangford Lough.

Following a simple statement establishing location, 'the cottage sat at the edge of the lough', the narrative then immediately moves into an embodied, personal and aural experience of place: 'She could hear the wind and rain whipping across the expanse of open water: it hit the trees and muscled its way into the grass' (*TrA* 1). The landscape is animated, the setting something lived and experienced bodily, and the reader's attention is directed in the opening sentence explicitly to the sounds of this literary geography: 'It was a house worth listening to'. Five sentences detailing the sounds of the house and the timing of those sounds follow, allowing the reader to auralise the house in all its scuttling, pinging, bouncing, jingling, rolling, tumbling, and cracking:

It was a house worth listening to. Odd sounds from the roof. She thought, at first that it might be rats scuttling across the slate, but she soon discovered that it was the

gulls flying overhead, dropping oysters on the roof to break the shells open. It happened mostly in the morning, sometimes at dusk.

The shells pinged first, silent a moment as they bounced, followed by a jingling roll along the roof until they tumbled down into the long grass, spotted with whitewash.

When a shell tip hit directly, it cracked open, but if it dropped sideways through the sky it wouldn't break: it lay there like a thing unexploded (*TrA* 1).

It is easy to auralise this landscape: the slate roof, the oysters cracking open, the daily rhythms – the pinging and bouncing that happens at daybreak or at dusk. The aural geography is created not only by description and performative sound (pinged, jingled) but also by patterns of stress: 'The shells pinged first, silent a moment as they bounced. . .'. At the beginning of this sentence, the 'the' is followed by four stressed syllables in a row 'the shells pinged first, silent a moment' – which allows readers to hear the shells landing, one by one, ping ping ping ping, on the roof. Audible patterns of stress are as functional here as they were in 'the thrum of the subway' in the wirewalk scene from *The Great World*. In that case, the repetition of the low rumbling vowel sounds, 'um' and 'ub', was reinforced by a rumbling rhythm: the thrum of the subway. The presence of the two unstressed syllables—'of the'—in between the accented pulse of 'thrum' and 'sub' added a rolling rhythm which stodd out in contrast to the more heavily accented and more static stress pattern of the preceding noises: car horns, garbage trucks, ferry whistles.

### **Auscultation and diffusion**

These two examples from the opening sections of McCann novels show the importance of the aural in the author-reader co-creation of fictional world, setting and event. But analysis of reader auralisation can be fine-tuned by zooming in on the question of the narrative source of information about sound in the fictional world. For example, a reader's auralisation of sound in the crowd scene at the beginning of *The Great World* will differ significantly from the auralisation of sound in the opening section of *TransAtlantic*, simply because the sounds of the house are presented in the narrative as perceived through the senses of a particular character, actually located inside the house, whereas the sounds of the wirewalk scene are offered much more directly to the reader in the third-person voice of a narrator positioned somewhere outside the fictional setting. This means that what is heard and described in the wirewalk scene cannot be identified with a particular character, or with a particular location.

This distinction opens up a potentially new dimension to the analysis of narrative space-time, but the problem—as Melba Cuddy-Keane has pointed out—is that while narrative theory has 'established a range of terms . . . to address the question "who sees?" . . . there is no comparable terminology for addressing the question "who hears?"'. To be clear, she is talking here not about auralisation by a reader but to the production and reception of sound inside the fictional world. The absence of a shared critical vocabulary attuned to the aural has been one of the key factors impeding the recognition and analysis of

narrative sound and rhythm not only within literary geography, but until recently in narrative studies more generally. In order to understand narrative aurality ‘we need an appropriate language for its analysis’, because as composer and media theorist Douglas Kahn has noted ‘the subject in recent theory has been situated . . . in the web of the gaze, mirroring, reflection, the spectacle, and other ocular tropes’ (Cuddy-Keane 2005, 385; Kahn 1992, 4). But this language is not yet in large-scale circulation: the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005), for example, has entries for ‘point of view (cinematic)’ and ‘point of view (literary)’, but no equivalent entry allowing sounds to be identified with character or location, and the only detailed reference to soundscapes comes in an entry on radio narratives, where the useful idea of an ‘aural fixed point’ is associated with microphone position. The entry on radio narratives does, however, suggest some of the ways in which a critical focus on the aural in literary geography might move forward: ‘radio narrative creates a sense of spatial relationships and mise-en-scene – in other words, a “soundscape” – by manipulating the distance between the microphone and performers, music, or sound effects’. Sound in radio narrative can be used in ‘creating aural equivalents of zooms, close-ups, and wide-angle film shots’ while ‘voices, sounds, or music can be manipulated to create special effects, such as a “hollow” quality to indicate a memory’ (481).

In order to fill the gap in critical terminology and thereby enable more detailed analysis of the aural in narrative fiction, Melba Cuddy-Keane proposes a range of new terms, including ‘auscultation, auscultize, and auscultator’ to refer to ‘the listening subject’, to parallel the existing terminology of focalization, focalize, and focalizer. Again borrowing a term from film studies, we might refer to the auscultator as the character who provides the narrative point of audition, as opposed to the narrative point of view (Chandler and Munday 2011: 325). With auscultation used in this way to refer to the reception of sound in the fictional world, Cuddy-Keane suggests that the term ‘diffusion’ could be used to identify where sound comes from in the fictional world, ‘the emission of sound from its source’. She further suggests that the analysis of ‘narrative acoustics can also be enhanced by employing the sonic vocabulary developed in the 1970s by the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University: soundmark instead of landmark, soundscape instead of landscape, sound signal and keynote sound in place of figure and ground’ (Cuddy-Keane 2005: 385). Cuddy-Keane’s point – and this is strongly relevant to literary geography – is that exposure to new terms will enable new lines of analysis. As she points out, ‘a specialized terminology can help us to discriminate the sense-specific elements in the text’. In the same way that the deployment of technical terms taken from narrative theory can assist literary geographers to break down and analyse the spatiality of narrative visualisation and point of view (Hones 2011) so the adoption of these aurally-orientated technical terms will enable more precise descriptions of where and by what sounds in the fictional world are produced as well as where and by whom in the fictional world those sounds are heard, and this in turn will enable the amplification and analysis of the presence of the aural in literary geographical analysis.

Returning briefly to the wirewalker passage and the bedroom passage from *The Great World*, we can now hear how in the first the point of audition is floating, mobile and collective, while in the second it is static and individual. In the wirewalker scene, the point of audition is not only non-specific and mobile, but also appears to zoom in and out, able not only to pick up the thrum of the subway and the honk of car horns but also the sound of paper brushing against metal and the rub of leather on clothing. In contrast, in the bedroom scene the point of audition is precisely located in the fictional setting, and this provides the auralisation with specificity in space as well as in time. Because the point of audition is fixed and consistent—rather like a static radio microphone—reader auralisation here can include a sense of distance and proximity. Sound in this scene thus not only extends the geography of the fictional moment beyond the immediate frame of the bedroom to the city outside, but also suggests the unevenness of aural extension in fictional space. In other words, while the source of the sound of the clock and of Claire breathing are diffused from the small-scale location of the auscultator, the ‘city outside’—coming from a variety of more distant locations -- are present in the room but diffused at a distance. It is in this sense that the aural geography in this scene is uneven: while Jaslyn hears the children outside, they will not hear the tick of Claire's clock. The city is aurally present in the room, but the room is not aurally present in the city.

The wirewalker and bedroom passages in this way suggest the analytical potential for literary geography of paying attention to points of audition and the aural performance of literal and relative distance, a line of enquiry which amplifies the specificity in analysis enabled by more conventionally visual cues to narrative position. The point can be developed with an example from *Trans-Atlantic*: here, the character through whose perceptions readers vicariously hear the action, Hannah, is indoors, sitting in a kitchen. But events ‘outside’, out of sight, are audibly present in the interior, and just as the bedroom scene quoted above includes proximate sounds (the ticking of the clock) and distant sounds (the trees) so here also the aural geography includes sounds diffused within the domestic space and also from the world outside. In this case, however, the reduction of relative distance performed by the intrusion of exterior sound into a domestic interior relates significantly to the geopolitics of the narrative setting. Hannah is having breakfast with her mother: Lottie ‘sits in the kitchen, with Hannah at the table, the red-and-white-chequered tablecloth spread out in front of them’. Hannah’s son Tomas is reading by the fire (*TrA* 235). This is a domestic moment, and the visible details are mundane and reassuring, but the moment is violently interrupted by a sudden sound from outside: ‘Random gunfire punctuates breakfast’. Here the exterior world breaks into the domestic moment, with the rifle shots, despite their distance, as fully present in the kitchen as the ‘inevitable teapot, the butter, the scones’. In the context of Northern Ireland in 1978 the aural simultaneity of the mundane and the violent, the teapot and the gunfire, adds a painful intensity to the contrast between what can be seen here and what can be heard, despite the fact that in this case the gunshots have been made by duck hunters. And it is not just the description of the sound that matters in this microgeography; the tempo of the sentence (‘Rapid gunfire punctuates

breakfast') rhythmically dramatises Hannah's auditory experience of the explosion of the gunshot sounds into the kitchen. The sentence begins with a pair of two syllable words, each starting with a heavy stress, rapid gunfire, duh-du duh-du. The effect is of something sudden, unexpected. Then a three-syllable word generates a shorter, more staccato rhythm, 'punctuates', duh-du-du. It sounds like gunfire. And then we return to the first pattern, duh-du, breakfast. The effect of the stress patterns in this sentence is very different to the effect produced by a phrase about the same lakeside cottage: 'the wind off the lough moving through the house'. Here also, the rhythm adds significantly to the embodiment of the setting at a particular moment, but the narrative impact of the auralisation is different. 'The wind' opens the phrase with a launching unstressed-stressed pair of words; then, 'off the lough' varies the pattern with an anapest: unstressed-unstressed-stressed. Where 'punctuates' sounds like staccato gunfire, 'off the lough', sounds like a rolling wind.

### **Narrative rhythm and author-reader space-time**

In this final section, the focus shifts from the production and reception of sound within the fictional world to the literary geography of the author-reader space-time generated in the event of reading. The argument is that even when setting and event are mediated through auscultators within the fictional world, there may at the same time be an underlying narrative rhythm which can be identified with a narrative voice functioning to sustain a consistent literary space-time despite shifts in point of audition and auscultation. Colum McCann's fiction is particularly helpful here, because while both *The Great World* and *TransAtlantic* are divided into chapters with identifiable fictional auscultators, the characteristically lyrical narrative style of his authorial persona remains audible throughout.

This double level of diffusion within the narrative (auscultator and narrator) is evident, for example, in the first full-length chapter of *TransAtlantic*, which describes the build-up toward and then achievement of Alcock and Brown's 1919 record-breaking non-stop transatlantic flight in their Vickers Vimy. The chapter begins with a sentence followed by two fragments: 'It was a modified bomber. A Vickers Vimy. All wood and linen and wire' (*TrA* 3). The thundering noise of the plane in flight and its stunning impact on the pilots will become significant later in the chapter, with the reader allowed to auralise the experience via the mediation of auscultation, but this opening sentence does not include any aural description. What it does have, however, is a particular sound, which is to say, a particular rhythm, which emerges from the fact that the 14 word beginning can be auralised as forming two 10-syllable lines, variations on the standard Shakespearean rhythm of the 10-syllable, 5-stress iambic pentameter. 'It was a modified bomber a Vick / ers Vimy. All wood and linen and wire'.

It's easy to say, of course, that this is purely accidental, and that English speakers talk in iambic rhythm all the time, without any conscious intention. The Shakespearean beat is so natural in English that it is hard to avoid. English speakers tend inevitably toward an iambic swing in their sentences; English-language texts are animated by the iambic du-duh du-duh, unstressed-stressed rhythm, and iambic rhythm is mundane: the cab is here to pick you up;

this tea is good and hot but rather weak. And of course English speakers vary this rhythm all the time, without thinking and usually without intending or generating any particular effect. This tea's a bit weak but at least it's not cold. The shift in rhythm, from an unvarying du-duh to a dominantly du-du-duh (anapestic rather than iambic) pattern here, would not be particularly interesting or meaningful in everyday conversation. But in literary fiction – and of course in poetry and drama – patterns and variations in rhythm are likely to be much more interesting and meaningful, whether or not the author crafted those rhythms with conscious intention. An author may write a sentence a particular way just because it sounds right; an inherent rhythm is not necessarily evidence of deliberate manipulation.

Narrative sound and rhythm in this way work together, not only performing a literary geography that allows for auralisation and for subtle variations in diffusion and auscultation, but also rendering description in a rhythmic prose that allows for an undercurrent of narrative coherence. This rhythmic grounding can be almost hypnotic: readers can be drawn into a fictional world by a consistent metageographical beat. Returning to the very first line of this novel, 'the cottage sat at the edge of the lough' (*TrA* 1), we can hear now the way in which it presents a reader not only with a visualisable location (in the fictional world), auscultated by a particular character, but also with an audible rhythm which can be located not in the fictional world but in the metageographical world of the author-reader collaboration. Because what we have here is another ten-syllable line, conforming to the basic beat of the iambic pentameter, or blank verse. In this case the line has four stresses, 'the cottage sat at the edge of the lough', where a completely regular line would have five, but the variation is effective. The first three words put the cottage squarely down in place, in four syllables of regular iambic rhythm: du-duh du-duh, 'the cottage sat'. The second half of the sentence has six syllables but only two more stresses: du-du-duh du-du-duh, 'at the edge of the lough' – if this line were, in fact, taken from a text with a consistent poetic metre, these six syllables would form two anapestic syllable groups (feet). So while the first half of the sentence put the cottage in place, with the strongly grounded iambic rhythm, the second half adds a rolling rhythm that may take the reader aurally from the firmly placed house to the tidal inlet and the beat of water. 'The cottage sat / at the edge / of the lough!'. Critically, this rhythmic manipulation is generated in the dimension of author-reader space-time, not inside the fictional world of the auscultator.

Whether or not a phase of syntactic rhythm has been consciously crafted by an author, and whether or not it is consciously registered by a reader, rhythm in fiction can thus have meaningful effect in two dimensions of literary space-time: not only enabling a reader's auralisation of fictional event ('the thrum of the subway'), but also enabling a sense of a textual metageography, a coherent narrative space-time. Another passage from the 1919 chapter (*TrA* 32) exemplifies both of these functions of rhythm at work. The aviators are coming to the end of their traumatic, freezing, exhausting, almost fatal flight, at the limits of their endurance, when suddenly land comes into view:

Rising up out of the sea, nonchalant as you like: wet rock, dark grass, stone tree light.  
Two islands.

The plane crosses the land at a low clip.

The beginning of this first view of land is heavy, earthbound: the whole first line— ‘wet rock, dark grass, stone tree light’—is one stress after another with no lifting lilt at all. The heavy stresses continue and then the prose falls, as if with relief, into an unstressed syllable: ‘Two islands’. Then the next line speeds up, moving along like the plane ‘at a low clip’.

But as the aviators bring the Vickers Vimy in to land, they realise they are in fact moving at too low a clip: ‘they know straightaway they are slowing too suddenly’. Here the rhythm of the description embodies the danger in its rhythm: four anapests in a row— ‘But they know /straightaway /they are slow / ing too sudd’ perform an effective rhythmic recreation of a moment in which the pilots (like the anapestic syllable groups) are heading for a crash. But in the end the line ends not with a crash but a slow fade, a safe landing: ‘sudd/en/ly. . .’. And so eventually Alcock and Brown make safe landfall, the nose of the plane embedded in a peat bog but nobody hurt.

First of all, the rhythm of the sentences in this scene, in which Alcock and Brown make land, show how sound contributes to setting and also to mirror action and affect, embodying in rhythm the sensations of the pilots. But it also generates a metageographical coherence. McCann’s frequent use of fragments rather than syntactically complete sentences (here, ‘wet rock, dark grass, stone tree light’) has annoyed some readers, but because these fragments ride on a strong underlying rhythm, the overall effect is not fragmentary at all. ‘Rising up out of the sea, nonchalant’ is a ten syllable, basically iambic line; ‘as you like: wet rock, dark grass, stone tree light’ is another. Alternatively, if this section is read from ‘wet rock’, then the end of this description taken together with the next sentence falls into place as a different but equally regular pair of ten syllable lines:

. . . wet rock, dark grass, stone tree light.  
Two islands. //  
The plane crosses the land at a low clip. (*TrA* 32)

It is of course very unlikely that most readers would notice the moments when McCann’s narrative line suddenly resolves into these rhythmic patterns. But this does not mean that they do not have an effect on the event of the text. The emergence of phases of poetic rhythm in his narratives not only adds to the geography of the fictional world, it also lays down a rhythmic foundation that affords the narrative as a whole an embodied coherence.

### **Rhythm and intensity**

While the argument here is that a consistent underlying narrative rhythm can add a coherence to the fictional space-time co-produced by author and reader, I am not suggesting that this rhythm is present at all times—McCann does not write novels in steadily rolling blank verse. Rather, strongly rhythmic moments emerge in the fiction at moments of narrative intensity, adding a layer of aural depth at key points: endings, for example, and

narrative turning points. The conclusion of *TransAtlantic* provides a case in point. As Hannah confronts the painful truth that she will have to sell her beloved lakeside house and leave, her friends Aoibhann and Manyaki, who are staying with her overnight, are talking intently across a table. While Hannah guesses that they are thinking of buying the house, she tells herself ‘I wasn’t interested in their mercy. Nor would I stay, if they stayed’ (*TrA* 295). But nevertheless, their presence and their understanding are important to her. The novel ends with this moment. ‘When I sat down beside them, their silence was lined with tenderness. We have to admire the world for not ending on us’. This final paragraph signals its significance, the depth of its intention, not only in patterns of assonance (I, beside, silence, lined, admire) but also in patterns of rhythm: a prose paragraph of two sentences, it can also be read (or heard) as three ten-syllable lines: ‘When I sat down beside them, their silence / was lined with tenderness. We have to ad / mire the world for not ending on us’. The beginning is iambic: ‘when I sat down beside’ but the next foot reverses the pattern, so that ‘them’ is stressed and ‘their’ is unstressed. The effect is to place a weight on to ‘beside them’ which embodies in its rhythm the sitting-down, slowing-down, calming effect of Hannah’s sitting down with her friends. The paragraph ends with two pairs of stressed syllables: ‘for not ending on us’. Five stresses in the last six syllables of the book: if the final stress (‘us’) is read as slightly lighter than the previous three, then this balances the finality of the heavily stressed ending with a sense that nothing, in fact, has ended – which is, after all, what this paragraph is overtly stating.

*The Great World* comes to a similarly conclusive and yet forward looking conclusion. As she sits and waits with Claire in her Manhattan penthouse bedroom, Jaslyn notices the visual details of the room, the ‘fragments of human order’, and marks the ambient sound, but at the same time also senses a subtle shift in the rhythm of the moment, a change in the sound of the room, and so (experiencing this scene with Jaslyn) the reader recognises it too. The old lady, Claire, ‘parts her lips ever so slightly. Not a word, but a difference in her breathing, a measured grace’. Claire’s life, like the unfinished crossword puzzle, the slivers of sound from the street, an unread novel, is a fragment. ‘We stumble on, thinks Jaslyn, bring a little noise into the silence, find in others the ongoing of ourselves. It is almost enough’. She sits on the bed with Claire, fixes a pillow, thinks suddenly of an apricot, ‘the savor, the sweetness’, and finds that the ‘almost’ of ‘almost enough’ has gone: ‘The world spins. We stumble on. It is enough’. The novel ends with Claire’s breathing in the quiet room (*TGW* 349).

With *The Great World* ending in this way, in a microgeography of care and kindness, the narrative circles back to the moment McCann has identified as the novel’s central turning point of rescue, when Jaslyn and her sister Janice were adopted by Claire’s friend Gloria. According to Colum McCann, the heart of *The Great World* is not the structurally necessary narrative hub of the wirewalk, but an altogether different moment of bridging and connection. ‘The story comes right down to the ground, in the very dark of night, in the roughest part of New York’, he has said, ‘when two little girls emerge from a Bronx housing complex and get rescued by strangers. That, for me, is the core image of the novel. That’s

the moment when the towers get built back up' (McCann and Englander 2009: 363). In this crucial scene, the unlikely partners Gloria and Claire – one from the Bronx projects and the other from a Manhattan penthouse – come across two small children whose mother and grandmother have both just been arrested for prostitution; the children, Jaslyn and Janice, are being wrenched away from their home by officials from social services. 'Hold on', says Gloria, stepping boldly forward into a new life and a new responsibility:

'You know these kids?' a policeman asks:  
 I guess I said yes.  
 That's what I finally said, as good a lie as any: 'Yes' (*TGW* 322).

There is not much in the mundane exchange to mark these lines as highly significant, as performing the novel's central moment of rescue, but nevertheless Gloria's words have a weight, and a resonance, that can only be explained by their rhythm. Somewhere, behind or inside Gloria's repetition of what she said, there are two lines of iambic pentameter. 'I guess I said yes', has five syllables; 'that's what I finally said, as good a lie as any: 'Yes'', fifteen syllables. Put together, Gloria's words make two lines of ten syllables, each with five stresses, which is to say, yet again, iambic pentameter, with the critical 'said yes' and the final, repeated 'yes' thudding in the narrative as a pair of heavily stressed syllables put together and one more stressed affirmative at the end.

I guess I said yes. That's what I final  
 ly said, as good a lie as any: 'Yes'.

This moment of rescue and affirmation, Gloria's 'yes', marks the beginning of a new life for all four characters, Gloria and Claire and Jaslyn and Janice. And where once Gloria, with the help of her friend Claire, took on the care of Jaslyn and her sister, at the end of the novel Jaslyn has come back to Manhattan to be with Claire at the end of her life. The narrative offers readers the look, the aroma, the sound, and the rhythm of this moment, offering its resolution to the reader in four sentence fragments in which the sound and the rhythm of that bedroom are palpable: 'The clock. The fan. The breeze. The world spinning' (*TGW* 349). Surely readers can hear this moment: the repeated 'k' sound of 'the clock' sounds a tick-tock, while 'the fan' adds a softer sound and the long 'e' of 'the breeze' sighs into the sentence: the clock ticks, the fan whirrs, Claire breathes, and the breeze stirs the curtains. But these four fragments again fall into ten syllables: five stressed and five unstressed. So in the tempo of those syllables readers can also feel the rhythm of the ultimately coherent, unfragmented space-time the novel generates and validates (Hones 2014): the steady movement of the clock, the steady spinning of the world. Ten syllables to end the novel: ten syllables with a rhythm so familiar to English readers that it is almost the rhythm of breathing. The rhythm of the final ten syllables and five stresses of *The Great World* resonate even when unrecognised; an iambic undercurrent—du-duh du-duh—enabling meaning in variation. Here 'the clock the fan the breeze the world' rolls along in

regular iambic rhythm (the clock the fan the breeze the world) and then the final two syllables, ‘spinning’, reverse the stress order, finishing the line and the novel with a trochaic rather than iambic grouping, ending with an unstressed syllable and in that way lurching into the future: ‘we stumble on’, ‘the world spinning. . .’.

## Conclusion

The visual, aural, and rhythmic dimensions of the final few paragraphs of *The Great World* in this way suggest the importance of sound and rhythm for literary geography. First, the setting is audible as well as visible: the sounds of the room and the street outside are part of the geography of the fictional world. Second, these sounds are auralised by the reader via the mediation of an auscultator, the character who is doing the hearing inside the fictional world. And third, the sound and rhythm of the storytelling themselves add an important dimension not only to the coherence of that world but also to the coherence of the story. The fictional world can be heard as well as seen, pictured, mapped, and these details of sound and tempo in narrative are important elements of the poetics of literary geography (Saunders 2011), both at the scale of microgeographies of setting and at the scale of metageographies of author-reader interaction.

In *Novels, Maps, Modernity: The Spatial Imagination, 1850-2000*, Eric Bulson argues that ‘literary maps give readers something that novels do not: an image, a structure, a way to visualise form and narrative design’ (Bulson 2006: 3). This exploration of sound and rhythm in literary geography suggests that the reverse is also true—novels give readers something that maps do not: first, sound but then also rhythm, and (as a result) a way to auralise form and narrative design. Narrative space-time, in other words, is audible as well as visible. And this is true not only in relation to the space-time of literary form and narrative design but also in relation to the space-times of scenes, settings, and fictional worlds: in acts of creative reading, they can be heard and sensed as well as seen. Description in fiction, after all, is rarely purely visual: characters speak, traffic roars, clocks tick, waves crash. At the end of *The Great World*, Jaslyn comes to believe that despite everything (death, tragedy, hurricanes, 9/11) ‘things don’t fall apart’ (*TGW* 325). According to McCann, ‘really the ending of this particular book says: There is no end. There is grief and there is love and they spin together in this human body’ (McCann and Englander 2009: 364). And while McCann concludes the narrative in this scene, he insists that the event of the book doesn’t end, but rather lives on in endlessly various acts of reading. The aural and rhythmic aspects of the ending of *The Great World* provide a compact example of how the sounds of a fictional world and the rhythms of its telling come together and come alive in embodied acts of creative reading that generate an audible literary geography.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Subsequent references to *Let The Great World Spin* will be noted as *TGW*; references to *TransAtlantic* will be noted as *TrA*.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for this paper for their critical readings of an earlier version of this paper, which were very helpful. I am also grateful to my colleague Richard Carter-White for reading and commenting on the original draft and several revisions.

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