

Traces of Hunger in Colum McCann's Dancer

Vestígios da fome em Dancer de Colum McCann

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Abstract: *Irish Writer Colum McCann introduces Rudi, the protagonist in Dancer – a fictionalized account inspired by ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev's biography. Impersonating what McCann coined as the 'century's greatest exile' (Cusatis 125), Rudi invites us to revisit Nureyev's saga, starting from Rudi's childhood during World War II in Russia to his stardom after he defected to the West. McCann organizes Rudi's life in a pendular parallelism between the scarcity and the excesses lived by the protagonist in economic, emotional, social, and cultural contexts and between the East and the West. Besides the theme of exile, hunger is another aspect of Dancer that is related to the Irish experience. Considering these transnational themes, the present work approaches foodways and hunger in this novel as a "system of communication" (Barthes, 1997) to analyse the sensuous, life-hungry protagonist in the West, including the indulgent lifestyle that accompanied it. Various gastronomic items, events, and behaviours will be approached connotatively to contemplate symbolic eating and converse with physical and metaphorical hunger. Throughout this work, the psychological and bodily instances of the character will dialogue with the political panorama that paved the way for his choices.*

Keywords: *Colum McCann; Dancer; Hunger; Foodways; Nureyev.*

Resumo: *O escritor irlandês Colum McCann apresenta Rudi, o protagonista em Dancer – uma narrativa ficcional inspirada na biografia do bailarino Rudolf Nureyev. Encarnando o que McCann chamou de "o maior exílio do século" (Cusatis, 2011, p. 125), Rudi nos convida a revisitar a saga de Nureyev, começando pela infância de Rudi durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial na Rússia até seu estrelato após ter desertado para o Ocidente. McCann organiza a vida de Rudi entre a escassez e os excessos vividos pelo protagonista em contextos*

econômicos, emocionais, sociais e culturais e entre o Oriente e o Ocidente. Além do tema do exílio, a fome é outro aspecto de Dancer que está relacionado à experiência irlandesa. Considerando esses temas transnacionais, o presente trabalho aborda as maneiras de comer e a fome neste romance como um “sistema de comunicação” (Roland Barthes, 1997) para analisar o protagonista sensível e faminto pela vida no Ocidente, incluindo o estilo de vida indulgente que o acompanhou. Diversos itens gastronômicos, eventos e comportamentos serão abordados conotativamente para contemplar a alimentação simbólica e conversar com a fome física e metafórica. Ao longo deste trabalho, as instâncias psicológicas e físicas do personagem dialogam com o panorama político que pavimentou o caminho para suas escolhas.

Palavras-chave: Colum McCann; Dancer; Fome; Maneiras de comer; Nureyev.

Introduction

Irish writer Colum McCann was inspired to write about the ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev through an anecdote told by an Irish acquaintance who recounted that back in the 1970s, his father, who often came home violent, surprised his family one night by returning sober with a television. As the family struggled with the reception, the first image they saw was of Rudolf Nureyev dancing. This mesmerizing vision left such an impact that even thirty years later, in Brooklyn, he remained captivated by Nureyev. McCann wondered what allowed a Russian dancer to penetrate the consciousness of a working-class Dublin boy. He stated, “I felt driven to write a novel that might try to cross all sorts of international boundaries and intersect, perhaps, with forgotten lives” (Cusatis 125).

McCann was then ‘attracted to the century’s greatest exile’ (*ibidem*), referring to Nureyev’s diasporic life after he defected to France in 1961. *Dancer* (2003) may be conceived as a fictionalized biography once McCann adds creatively to documented accounts concerning Nureyev’s life and facts that lay the ground for understanding historical passages in the book.

Rudolf Nureyev’s birth was “symbolic of his future statelessness and nomadic existence” (Kavanagh 2) as he was born on a moving train in 1938 while the Nureyevs were on their way to stay with his father at the Red Army’s Far Eastern Division. Deriving from Nureyev’s life, *Dancer* opens with facts surrounding the protagonist’s childhood during the

end of WWII and moves further until he defects to the West and, finally, when he pays a short visit to the extinct Soviet Union to see his sick mother.

Speaking of this Tatar artist means discussing the muscular grace of dancing as much as recklessness, exile, and hunger. In this work, organic and symbolic hunger overlap, engulfing a metaphorical state of need and want for something other than food that pertains to the same discourse of organic need. Drawing on a foodways framework that explores hunger and foodways, their polysemy will help investigate what they reveal about the protagonist and his context.

Food consumption informs much about people as it is a product of and is affected by cultural, economic, and political issues (Ashley et al. ii, 2004; Sceats, 2000; Corvo, 2015). Roland Barthes articulated the symbolic unfolding of foodways and their communicative power, explaining that food is a cultural item that establishes a communication system about the societies where it is found (Barthes 24). Food is “... charged with signifying the situation in which it is used” (29). So, it is both nutrition and protocol. The ubiquity of food and hunger constitutes a valid lens from which to look into foodways critically; to underscore similarities and differences between people and peoples and inform of contexts in which they occur.

The novel’s food-related quotations are divided into themes regarding food and famine in the following sections: “Sugar”, “Hunger”, “Voracity,” and “Remains.” The latter includes passages that intersect topics discussed in the previous divisions, and final considerations.

Sugar

Rudi’s first public Tatar folk dance performance occurred when he was about six, sometime around 1944, at the soldiers’ hospital. He immediately caused a roar of interest among the patients, who propped themselves up in their beds to watch the vibrating squatting and feet stomping. Veterans whistled, cheered, shouted, applauded, and one even came to emotional tears as he felt taken away from the context of death and sickness for a while. Someone rewarded Rudi with a sugar cube, a horse’s treat. The firmness of the horse-like steps of Bashkirian folk dance and the hair on the child’s face ran counter to the soldiers’ trials described in the novel’s first chapter. The reader learns about horses that accompanied the battalions, starved, and so many died along the way, and that soldiers “ate the horsemeat with great sadness” (13). The dance provides a stark contrast that highlights Rudi’s performance. The reader understands that Rudi made a significant contribution to the nation, not as a

fighter, but as an enchanter. It was the end of World War II, a period of limitations when the Soviet State took hold of provision distribution. In *Hunger and War: Food Provisioning in the Soviet Union during World War II*, the authors explain that provisioning hierarchies existed. It followed a principle of labor, "... which aimed to reward those who expended more calories at work with more food" (Filtzer; Goldman 56). People were organized into four different groups to receive ration cards: "workers, white-collar employees, dependents, and children under twelve" (*ibidem*). The distribution system followed lots of intricate norms once each food group was allotted in ranks. Although sugar was a more equally distributed element, it was not as abundant, as nothing was.

During the war, hunger and starvation-related mortality were spread nationwide; distributing nutritious resources saved the population and, consequently, national perpetuation. At that moment of Rudi's life, offering any ingestible, despite the rank it occupied, meant a special gift not only due to its scarcity but also because it meant giving up a privilege not easily acquired. In subsequent presentations, Rudi took home leftovers and increased portions of cubes. Barthes (23) declared that sugar is 'more than foodstuff.' It is an attitude in moments of enjoyment, energy, or relaxation. Gustavo Barcellos in *O Banquete de Piqué* (2017), a study of foodways through psychology, explains that sugar and everything that tastes sweet brings up the archetypical child as it has to do with desserts and treats and their elaborated colourful appearance, the coronation of a meal, a playful sight. Sweet nourishment can potentially elevate the soul, affirms Barcellos, providing a joyful experience with promises of transcendence. It is a way of combating undesirable bitterness in the palate as well as in the soul. It echoes in the language: Lovers call each other "sugar"; It is possible to make a rough situation acceptable by sugar-coating it; A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down; A sweet person is a loving person; "home sweet home" is a synonym for happiness.

No other children who danced in the hospital wards got any reward, so Rudi's gifts encapsulated treat and power, a solid remain of an immaterial artistic reality, an announcement of his future grandeur. In this scenario, sugar was a praise for the young boy who counterattacked the bitter panorama of injuries and broken hearts.

Rudi came home one evening flaunting his possessions. His mother stated that the cubes would dissolve, to which he remarked – "No, they won't," (30) – a symbolic statement about the materiality and solidness of his future artistic career.

Hunger

Rudi dreams of opening a packed lunch box at school, but his meal typically consists of the remains of a potato carried in his pocket. As his father, the military Hamet Nureyev, is away due to war missions, and his salary goes to the efforts for the national cause, the family tries to survive on very little by selling all their belongings. His mother, Farida, supports her husband's actions, explaining to Rudi that "... sacrifices must be made" (24) and that "... hunger will make him [Rudi] strong" (*ibidem*). Nonetheless, the six-year-old boy has a different idea: "... to him; hunger is the high feeling of emptiness when the trains emerge from the forest and the sound bounces across the ice of Belaya" (*ibidem*). Three different meanings of hunger unfold in those speeches: physical – for the lack of nourishment; cultural – for the sacrifice to be made and emotional – as the boy misses his father and waits for the train that will bring him back home, fearing he would be broken "just like the ones they were lifting from beneath the steam and the bugles" (*idem* 12).

No wonder "bugles" are brought into play as it is an instrument, like a trumpet, used in the army to announce that activities are about to begin, including mealtime. The bugles herald the provider's absence, pointing to the intersection between physical and emotional needs. Rudi deeply incorporated a state of lack, translating it into an irretrievable desire that constituted him personally and professionally. For example, at 22, he had achieved some notoriety in the dance circles and was given an apartment, a good salary, and food privileges. Yulia, his first teacher's daughter, attended a performance in Leningrad when "Rudi's name fluttered in the air" (158). She describes the event: "When Rudi entered, exploding from the wings to a round of applause, he tore the role open, not so much by how he danced, but by the manner in which he presented himself, a sort of hunger turned human" (159). At that moment, the Dancer epitomized multiple connotations of hunger that prefigures his lonely future. The "feeling of emptiness" did make him stronger as it opened up a rogue chain of desire for more: he "exploded," "tore," and stupefied people. The astonished audience's face overlooked the still defective way he danced at the occasion to the greedy dancing impersonation.

Voracity

On the first night, his father, Hamet, is at home, and all four Nureyevs sleep on the same bed. Rudi prefers to sleep next to his mom, who smells of "... kefir and sweet potatoes" (33). That

night, the boy wakes up at the throbbing movement of the bed and Hamet's whispers. Such a passage opens a connection between food (Kefir and potatoes) and sex, which will dialogue with Rudi's eroticism in subsequent chapters. Years later, during a vacation in Paris, Rudi went to a famous club and performed fellation on "... six Frenchmen in a row, stopping for a glass of vodka between each" (225). As he learned Victor, his friend, and alter-ego in the novel, had already bettered him by two, he "... dragged the first three men he could find, lined them against the wall ... and went at them in the same way he danced, all elegance and ferocity" (*ibidem*). He refers to them as "Such fine French cuisine! So deliciously tender!" (*ibidem*).

In order to understand what is communicated by French Food, Russian national drink, and Rudi's 'artistic' sexual performance, it is necessary to elaborate upon the semantics of hunger. First, there is a meal metaphor for men, implying the "consuming" of the other through sex, which is hunger applied to sexuality. Nonetheless, such appetite is a simulacrum as it is dislocated to voracity that, according to Kaplan (2012 57), is an obsession with consuming rather than enjoying a meal, which refers to increasing the number of partners to beat a friend in sexual performance. The concurrence between sexual desire and appetite for a typical Russian alcoholic beverage sets the body as a connecting medium interweaving nation and art, which is all about an unsatisfying craving for both. Second, the body parts involved in the sexual congress described in the scene are the mouth and the digestive tract, the same ones employed for eating and digesting a food item. It is like he was in the oral stage, "...conceived as the first stage of libidinal development when nutrition is inseparable from the love relationship with the mother" (Sceats 38), in this case, the motherland. A fantasy is at play: Rudi is incorporating his partners, the Frenchmen, as enemy soldiers, all lined up while he performs to them. All in all, that is what it is: a fantastic impossibility of having both East and West, and for this, it is a source of suffering for the motherland that failed to protect him.

In 1987, Rudi got permission to go to Russia to visit his sick mother. Tamara, his sister, gives her best to make the preparations. She walked the department stores to get the scant appliances. "There were rumours of a shipment of toaster ovens, but none came" (287) – alluding to the constant hearsay about Rudi's life before and after his defection. Tamara thinks of darning the tablecloth; she gets desperate as there is no sugar to be found and asks, "What can we use to sweeten the cakes?" whereas the underlying question is, 'How can the whole situation be better'? Moreover, she dreams of a miracle of truckloads of sugar arriving

just in time along with “herring, sturgeon, and we will celebrate under a large tent, drinking champagne to the music of an orchestra” (288).

Nonetheless, her fantasies are about not having a dying mother, and that her brother had stayed, that she could have a better life, ‘a life away from this life’ (29), as her mother hoped many years back. As her husband finds half-kilo sugar in the market, she thinks “all is not lost” (289), meaning she hopes something good will come from Rudi’s visit. Driving along the streets of UFA, Rudi did not recognize many places at first, and although he whispered to Tamara, “I am home” (291), it meant hope more than a genuine feeling. To illustrate, he got some sunflower seeds as he had not eaten them in years. He “ate two, spat out the shells, and threw the rest away” (294), devising that he was detached from the sunflower oil the soldiers used to lube their artillery and from the babushkas huddling over baskets of the seeds at the train station. He was closer to “the heads in the crowd” (195) on Fifth Avenue, which “turned like a field of sunflowers” to see him. For him, everything looked smaller at home. As he entered his semi-conscious mother’s room, he kept whispering, “Mother. It’s me. Rudik”, but his mother did not open her eyes. She wants Tamara to tell the mother it was him as if saying he was a foreigner now who could not be recognized as the Rudi that had left. Although Tamara pleaded with him to enjoy the banquet she had so effortlessly prepared, he decided not to move until the mother recognized him despite Tamara’s insistent entreaties. Rudi justified that he was not hungry and decided to eat when ready. However, he never did, as his mother did not interact with him. Farida epitomizes the motherland with which Rudi felt he did not identify. He was a stranger in a strange land. His inappetence alludes symbolically to his inability to incorporate the nation into his life. It was a traumatic experience expressed later; after some drinks of Vodka, he dared to admit to an old friend, “You know, my own mother didn’t recognize me” (304).

Remains

During young Rudi’s first performance in Moscow, he stays in a hotel, and Farida travels four days to meet him there. It is a magnificent building decorated with red drapes and a chandelier with “giant portraits of the Heroes of the Soviet Union” (105), which intimidate her. Premier Khrushchev had just given a speech as part of the events taking place at the hotel, which included a feast whose remnants were on display:

Farida shuffles alongside the table: a splotch of beluga caviar on a starched white cloth; a plate with a touch of duck pâté rimed to it; the smell of sturgeon, herring, beef, truffles, wild mushrooms, cheeses; Krendeli biscuits in their broken figures of eight; a single Black Sea oyster on a glistening tray. She lifts a slice of salted meat to her mouth, decides against it, moves on, noticing empty silver ice-buckets for Champagne, crumbs on the floor, cigar ashes on the windowsill, cigarette butts, lemon wedges in empty glasses, bent and broken toothpicks, a display of red chrysanthemums in the center of the room.

...

She goes to the window, looks down at her boots, worn and salt-stained (105-106)

It is worth concentrating on some of the food items listed above because of what its subtextual meaning reveals. Beluga Caviar is an expensive delicacy consisting of the roe of the beluga sturgeon found mainly in the Caspian Sea (Nowel 36), thus a Russian ingestible. Other Russian items include herring, commonly served salted, and a single oyster from the Black Sea between Russia and the rest of Europe. There is a symbolic overlapping between the oyster and the Soviet Union in its isolation from Europe and another between Rudi as the shining tray, meaning he was already a star but still unknown by the rest of the world. The “splotch” on the whiteness reminds of blood or corpses crushed on the snowy battlefields as a symbolic stain on the nation’s glories. Such analogies can be augmented by referencing other countries in the same passage. Champagne, truffles, duck pâté, and cheeses so allusive of France, with which bloody battles were fought. It is important to note that the biscuits are “broken,” which dialogues with little Rudi’s fears that his father would come home “broken” as the other soldiers. The toothpicks, similar in appearance and commonly organized side by side, evoke the image of a battalion and, as happened to the humans they metaphorize, are “bent and broken.” Cigarette butts, ashes, and crumbs, alongside the stiffness of the tablecloth and the flowers, provide imagery that alternates between a battlefield and a cemetery because the fields have been soldiers’ graves. McCann employed the word “remnants” which means ‘leftovers’ of the food and the debris of a repast of human flesh. It is something to be thrown away, not feasted upon anymore. Farida, shuffling along as if attending a funeral, perceives some rottenness in the salted meat she refuses to eat, which signals the corpses of soldiers as “dead meat.” It implies that she does not acquiesce to the antagonism between the protective

motherland and the metaphorical cannibalism she is witnessing. She refuses to acknowledge the paradoxes and remains a loyal citizen who believes in the honesty of her nation despite the display of total disregard for both soldiers and citizens.

Conclusion

Dancer is about a man whose home lies on the stages around the world, carrying the burdens and the glory of his diasporic existence. He was in emotional exile before defection as he rejected his history of “stale bread, soaked in vodka and tears” (159) referring to the Soviet shortcomings. His life then was all about the future. He hoped he could shine in places that could offer him the grandeur he expected. When he returned home as an older man, Russia had become the past he did not want to reenact. His present was his artistic achievement – it was about the freedom he so effortfully tried to conquer. Still, at the same time, he felt an impostor among the present “fifteen types of champagne” (*ibidem*) and “more caviar than ever seen before” (*ibidem*), the Western plenty did not fulfil his sense of belonging, as there he felt like a persona before being a person.

Whereas the precariousness of the Soviet Union made him physically and emotionally hungry, the Western superabundance was a constant reminder of the distance from his roots. His voracity indicates the constant void fought by his body’s assertiveness. Rudi was cannibalized by the manipulative state power and public demand, but his dance epitomized a counter-discourse, a survival strategy that sends a redeeming message.

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