

COGNITIVE (RE)MAPPING: SUPERSEDING UTOPIAN AND DYSTOPIAN SPACE IN *NOTES FROM A COMA*

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“The old options are exhausted.”
– *Notes from a Coma* (161)

Abstract

I suggest in this essay that affiliated cultural work can be found in the residual corners of the Western imaginary, such as Ireland, especially as Irish culture and politics has confronted the onslaught of disciplinary neoliberalism and xenophobic fascism in a series of rapid turns in the last two decades. From within a diverse project of tracking and tracing Irish science fictionality, I turn my attention to Mike McCormac’s *Notes from a Coma* (2005). Clearly a work of sf, but one contesting the Irish literary heritage and Irish society as well as the boundaries of utopian form, the book is not so much a utopian novel as much as it is a fictive meditation on the reality and the process of the utopian impulse.

Keywords: Cognitive Mapping; Utopian/Dystopian Space; Notes from a Coma; Irish Science Fictionality

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The dark times continue to get darker. With the planet facing into ecological and societal collapse, the ruling regimes of the patriarchal, capitalist, fascist nexus continue to preside over a world order that delivers lingering comfort for the very rich and increasing immiseration for the majority of humanity. Everyday life is engulfed in precarious suffering and virulent xenophobic hatred— even as outright war and the rising possibility of nuclear disaster cast a further pall over all life on Earth. And yet, people around the world, in all their intersectional diversity, continue to “stay with the trouble” (as Donna Haraway puts it) to confront and defeat those dominant regimes even as the tendencies and latencies of a better world are discovered and developed in order to move toward a better future horizon for all life on the planet, as the old world ends and a transformed one emerges.

In this struggle of stubborn hope, a rich outpouring of cultural practice and products is surging forward to express this shared project of denunciation and annunciation, of critique and vision. To be sure, the leading edge of this critical utopian work is found in emergent tendencies such as those identified in terms of afrofuturism, amazofuturismo, sertãopunk, ecofeminism, queertopias (or cuirtopias), and what John Bellamy Foster calls the “global environmental proletariat” (2020). However, along with these formations, I suggest in this essay that affiliated cultural work can be found in the residual corners of the Western imaginary, such as Ireland, especially as Irish culture and politics has confronted the onslaught of disciplinary neoliberalism and xenophobic fascism in a series of rapid turn in the last two decades.

In this regard, I want to share a reading of one of the most insightful works of Irish literary critique in recent times, a work whose rich cultural engagement was often discussed by those of us who are members of the Ralahine Centre for Utopian Studies at the University of Limerick. Since its founding in 2002, the faculty and postgraduate members of the Centre have been researching utopian expression in Ireland from the middle ages to the present.¹ Ralahine’s ongoing work is archival, critical, and interventionist. Alongside innovative articulations of the radical praxis of the utopian method, we examine lived utopian practice, such as the Irish ecovillage in Cloughjordan and other communities as well as the ongoing, potentially utopian, project of a social Europe. But we also address the tradition of Irish texts ranging from medieval voyage tales; to aisling poetry; eighteenth-century satire and social improvement tracts; nineteenth-century historical novels; the music, manifestoes, fictions, and films of Irish modernity (pre- and post-independence); and the ongoing work within the rapidly changing economy and culture moving into the 21st century.² Several members have focussed on science fiction, in Irish and English, and have traced this intertextual lineage from eighteenth-century “proto” sf such as Samuel Madden’s *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* (a work from 1733 that pre-dates the better known *L’An 2440* by Louis Sebastian Mercier published in 1770) to the more recognizable science fictional stories of Fitz James O’Brien, who was a contemporary of Edgar Allen Poe, up through work in the last century, again in both languages, that

was imitative of mainstream Anglophone sf by the likes of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne as well as more original work, showing the influence of the indigenous Irish traditions of Swiftian satire, Gothic horror, and Joycean modernism.³ Moving forward, studies of recent sf from the 1980s to the present (such as Sam Baneham's *The Cloud of Desolation* in 1982; Jason Mordaunt's *Welcome to Coolsville* in 2003; or Kevin Barry's *City of Bohane* in 2011) have traced the way in which a science fictional epistemology has produced insightful and critical cognitive maps of the problematic dimensions of Irish society at their time of writing, doing so with strong dystopian and latently eutopian overtones.⁴ In a significant project of developing this textual history, former postgraduate now colleague, Jack Fennell, published an inclusive study of Irish science fiction (2014), written in both languages, from the nineteenth century to the present and followed that with a second volume on Irish horror fiction (2019). For my own part, while I have written mainly on US science and utopian fiction, I edited a special issue of *Utopian Studies* on "Irish Utopias" in 2007 (Moynlan, "Introduction", 2007). Along with my own essay on the *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis* (*Voyage of St. Brendan*) (Moynlan, "Irish Voyages," 2007), which reads this mediaeval text as a precursor of the modern literary utopian form, there were essays by Ralahine colleagues, Michael J. Griffin (2007), Joachim Fischer (2007), Briona NicDhiarmada (2007), and Jack Fennell (2007).

It was within this diverse project of tracking and tracing Irish science fictionality that I turned my attention to Mike McCormack's *Notes from a Coma* (2005). Clearly a work of sf, but one contesting the Irish literary heritage and Irish society as well as the boundaries of the utopian form, the book is not so much a *utopian* novel (with a fully imagined alternative society) as much as it is a fictive meditation on the reality and process of the utopian impulse.

McCormack was born in London in 1965 and has lived in counties Sligo and Mayo in the West of Ireland, most notably in the village of Louisburgh in roughly the same location as that of the village in *Notes*. He graduated from the National University of Ireland, Galway in 1990 with a degree in English Literature and Philosophy, and he now teaches creative writing at Galway. To date, he has published the realist short story collection, *Getting it in the Head* (Jonathan Cape, 1996), which won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature and was voted New York Times Book of the Year; the magical realist novel, *Crowe's Requiem* (Jonathan Cape, 1998); and the science fictional *Notes from a Coma* (Jonathan Cape, 2005) and *Solar Bones* (Tramp Press, 2016).

Notes is a novel that explores the terrain of the latter years of the period known as "Celtic Tiger" Ireland, without naming that manic neoliberal economic surge which ground to a destructive halt by 2008. With its science fictional form – wherein its future temporal standpoint looks back at twenty-first century Ireland – the novel re-visioning Irish social space and exposes the competing and transforming forces that transect it. In this context, it is shaped by such developments as the "new Irish" immigrants of the 1990s (who were met with a conflicting mixture of traditional hospitality (informed by values based in Catholic

social justice teaching and the memory of earlier experiences of Irish emigration) and hypocritical racism (informed by the fearful protection of white racism); the impact of new technologies on everyday Irish life (in this case, disciplinary procedures and media); and the intensive force of neoliberal globalization with its practices of instrumental rationality and exploitation. As such, McCormack challenges Irish complacency through both the form and content of this work, and opens the way to a new sense of possibility and hope in doing so.

The plot centers around the character of John Joe (JJ) O' Malley, a troubled young man with a lingering sense of "being cast out without love or grace," who grows up in west Mayo after being adopted from a Romanian orphanage by Anthony O'Malley, "a forty-three year old bachelor farmer with neither niece nor nephew," just after he has lost his entire herd of cattle to the damaging results of BSE ("Mad Cow" disease) culling (46, 11). JJ's early deprivation is eased by his integration into the close community of Anthony's village. Well-cared for by his adopted father, he is also taken in as a second son by Anthony's friends, Frank and Maureen Lally, whose own son Owen becomes his constant friend, "his right-hand man beside him" (31). He flourishes with the love of Anthony, Owen, the Lally's, and later that of his girlfriend Sarah Nevin. He is well-regarded in the village; and he proves to be an able student with a questing mind that tests the patience and earns the admiration of his teacher. And yet, JJ's existential alienation lingers, heightened by the acuity of his mind and his insistent drive to interpret the world. As his teacher, Gerard Fallon, puts it: "JJ's problem was that he saw signs everywhere, he made too many connections, this was his difficulty" (46). Consequently, JJ grows up as a relatively happy yet critically uneasy member of his community; but when Owen tragically dies after a raging night of drink with JJ, the young man's unsatisfied, and often suspicious, mind proves unable to cope with the loss. Consequently, he withdraws into mental agony, with the fragile meaning of his life drained by fateful cruelty: "Everything I thought I ever knew amounts to the same pile of shite. I know nothing any more. Everything I've read, all my ideas, the same pile of shite" (84). Lingering in this state for two empty years, he volunteers as a test subject for a controversial European Union penal experiment called the "Somnos Project," which puts prisoners into deep coma as an economically "affordable" alternative to present system of incarceration. As he puts it: "I want to go to sleep, to take my mind off my mind. These last couple of years haven't been a happy time for me. I want to go to sleep so I can get a rest from myself and my thoughts" (173).

JJ is the only "innocent" subject amongst the five European candidates, all in their 20s. In this set of "typical" young people encased in the disciplinary apparatus and "reduced to a sameness," the others include Haakan Lufting, leader of a Scandinavian death metal band who was arrested for copyright infringement; Emile Percec, a public school bus driver serving time for a string of driving offences; Jimmy Callanan, a young Scottish joy rider doing fifteen months for driving a stolen Mercedes with tax discs registered to the Republic of Pictland; and Didac Jorda, an FC Barcelona football supporter arrested for

carrying a concealed weapon to a match (199, see 33-36). Floating in the prison ship docked in Killary fjord (near McCormack's Louisburgh), the test subjects are constantly monitored and their comatose bodies and brainwaves are broadcast to the nation as part of the project's propaganda campaign. Of them all, JJ catches people's interest and imagination, no doubt as the only Irish citizen but especially for his sheer innocence, heightened by his never explained choice to enter the trial. In this morphing from disciplinary subject to reality TV celebrity in the mode of the popular television series, *Big Brother*, JJ becomes a national icon and a symptomatic focus of collective hopes and fears in a time of socio-economic change – as the subjectivity and imaginary of Irish life increasingly gave way to the forces of globalisation, here registered by way of the “partnership between media corporations and state penal systems” (193). Inevitably, JJ's ordeal is cast in tropes from Ireland's Christian culture; and he is directly regarded as a Christ-like figure, “dying” and rising again from his prison-tomb, suffering as an innocent (but in this case for no apparent reason). As McCormack puts it in the very first paragraph of the book, JJ's “name, blurring through the nation's print and electronic media, is ... one of those synapses at which the nation's consciousness forms itself” (1). It is in this social reception and more so in JJ's emergence from the ship and his subsequent choices that we find the utopian inflection of the novel, as JJ returns to his village community and to Sarah's love, of which he says he has remained “mindful” (200). Framed in this postsecular appropriation of Christian tropes, JJ, by not only surviving but transcending the disciplinary power of the experiment, emerges as both agent and recipient of a redemption and salvation found in the life of his nurturing village.

Formally, this account of change, crisis, and ultimately of hope is developed by the contrapuntal structure of, on one hand, the narrative of JJ, his village community, and the prison ship rendered in a realist mode resonant with the tradition of Irish naturalism and, on the other, a running series of footnotes that comment, form a future temporal perspective, on JJ's background, the prison ship project, and the nation's and JJ's responses to the “experiment” that are crafted in a science fictional mode (reinforced by allusions to the work of sf writers such as H.G. Wells, Arthur C. Clarke, and William Gibson). However, narrative and report are not merely juxtaposed. Instead, the sf notes with which the book begins and ends, and which therefore frame the apparent “main” narrative, not only reflect on the events of that narrative but also interrogate and challenge the limits of Irish naturalist writing and indeed of Irish consciousness. Through this clash of forms (a conflict between the styles of John McGahern and Philip K. Dick, as one web response put it), the text opens up an epistemological/interpretive contest that plays out in the author's interrogation of eutopia and dystopia, as he refuses both and yet sketches a utopian horizon that dialectically supersedes them. As a result, JJ's village acquires the emergent novum of a utopian structure of feeling after its settled way of being is first disrupted by the dystopian tenor of the prison ship but then renewed by the return of its lost son from the depths of that dystopia.

There are several ways to approach this intriguing and powerful novel from what we now know were the closing years of the Celtic Tiger – for the work challenges many of the contradictions of Irish life, working as it does from the cultural hegemony of a naturalist literary genre that, as Joe Cleary (2006) argues, ends up preserving an ominous sense of submission or resignation and closing itself to emerging possibilities (see Cleary 88); to the provinciality that refuses the cosmopolitan possibilities of new subjectivities and cultures in Irish life (see Kuhling and Keohane, 2007); to the rejection of the resilience of traditional culture in the face of the vulnerability produced by a commodified and rationalized globalisation (see Gibbons, 1996; Kirby, 2006). For my part today, I want to focus on McCormack's engagement with, interrogation of, and, in his own way, refunctioning of the utopian problematic as it unfolds within the novel's overarching science fictional form.

In discussion, McCormack has readily admitted that he is “no fan of utopias,” seeing them in light of their dominant ideological misattribution as “totalitarian” and thus the “enemy of individuality and color” even as he has also acknowledged that utopias are “the human project par excellence” (see “Technology as Utopia”, 2008). I argue here that in *Notes* McCormack draws on this equilibrium of suspicion and acclamation (of denunciation and annunciation) to realize that hopeful utopian impulse in the form and content of the text.

Notes is given shape not only by its realist/sf formal contestation but also by the failure of the binary opposition of state utopias and a dystopian experiment that presents itself as the solution to anti-social behaviour in the brave new twenty-first century world. Only after this binary is fully developed and then transcended does a new strain of utopian hope emerge. McCormack begins the novel with an attack on what he would regard as a prime example of the so-called totalitarian utopia in the form of Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romanian state. With the fall of that regime, which has “destroyed an entire country,” “three decades of shame and privation” come to an end, “history fractures,” and a “new epoch” begins (11, 12). Having dismissed this systemic “utopia,” the birthplace of his protagonist, McCormack shifts into dystopian gear as he introduces the prison ship project, the temporary “tomb” of the same protagonist. He locates this new dystopian reality after the fall of the Romanian utopia and the “Twin Towers collapse,” centering it amongst “the gathering iconography of twenty-first century anxiety” (30). Thus, the “first image of the new millennium” is dystopian. Traces of this dark imaginary therefore abound in *Notes*: from the Focauldian prison ship, to the Orwellean evocation of a Big Brother that is now the face of a “friendly” fascism, to the Huxleyan bargain for a loss of anxiety by way of the suspension of critical thought, to the cyberpunk ambience of death metal, the science fictional notes in *Notes* both frame the internal naturalist narrative and provide a dystopian back beat that raises the scope of the unhappy tale of JJ's personal life to the larger scale of a verbal map of the Irish political unconscious and its potential traces of future possibilities.⁵

In this explosive fusion of utopia and dystopia, certainties end, belief systems are devalued, and something new slouches into existence in the form of JJ's step beyond innocence, as an "ur-politics" grows in the nation's reception of his apparently "passive" agency (36, 46).⁶ Out of this new technosphere (with its cyborg overtones), McCormack writes a new moment of hope into Irish culture. The prison project is emptied of its "positivist remit" and inadvertently makes "common cause with a generation anxious to move beyond the cowl and candle" (80); JJ as a post-secular savior occupies the "nation's dreamscape"; and a new way of being is suggested, active in a "new tense," no longer that of the "present perfect continuous" but now entering into and reviving history (81, 83). As in a utopian novel where the visitor to eutopia returns to tell the tale of the better place to his contemporaries, JJ steps off the ship and meets Sarah, again able to speak for himself. However, the ex-prisoner does not tell the tale of the ship but rather looks silently forward to a life beyond his recent misery and beyond the authoritarian states and globalized societies that have impacted on his world. After the old utopia, out of the depths of the contemporary dystopia, hope arises. "The old options are exhausted," and a new historical possibility hovers at the event horizon with which McCormack begins his book (161). Post-cyborg, post-human, postsecular, the new-born JJ stands as a sign, an example, an agent of a utopian hope that finds home in the village that took him in from his failed "utopian" origin, that nurtured him in its collective identity and love, and that warmly welcomes him back. JJ, in a very Blochian manner, comes "home" on the last page, for the first time.⁷ Tracking this spatial trajectory, McCormack's novel locates its hope in this new Irish subject who is both global and local, orphan and local hero, victim and agent: JJ is the figure of an Irish novum that goes beyond its historical period and points forward to the Not Yet of a transformed society.

Thus, the binaries of the main text and notes and of a rural west invaded by global forces from the urban east are superseded by JJ's choice to enter the coma. At the formal register, the more open cognitive and narrative possibilities of this sf text negate the limits of the widely-celebrated, and deeply insightful, lineage of Irish naturalist writing – a literary tradition which, as Joe Cleary argues, draws on a "constitutive problematic" wherein human agency and the "forces that shape society... are always perceived to thwart and compromise each other," leading to a "tragic predicament that must then be aborted or smothered since the demands of verisimilitude dictate that the predicament in question can never become the subject of serious intellectual deliberation" (Cleary 94, 131). Against the limits of this aesthetic, sf such as McCormack's, as the popular underside of modernism, has the formal capability to break the subservience of narrative realism; and utopian sf especially has, as Ernst Bloch (1986) would put it, the potential to articulate the latent tendencies that can lead into a radically new, not yet known or lived, historical moment.

In *Notes*, then, the sleeper awakes; and he re-enters a strange new Ireland as a cultural icon *and* as his own self. Yet, in the ellipses that end the text ("All this in the nth year of what is still termed without irony the Age of Restored Salvation

...”), this post-ship moment refuses naturalist closure and points instead to a science fictional engagement that breaks reality’s provincial limits (200). As is the case in close-knit rural communities, JJ’s story is one that will be told and retold; and yet it is also, at the same time, one that transcends its known limits and runs off the page into what we do not yet know.

As Cleary argues, “one of the functions of any strongly radical art is not to ratify the apparently inexorable order of things, but to imagine how life might possibly be otherwise, to wrest some sense of alternative from the meshes of the actual”; and in McCormack’s novel we find such a work, one that speaks in a new tense to emergent tendencies in Irish society (133). Utopia for McCormack lives in his negation of invasive economic and carceral systems of exploitation and alienation and in his affirmation of the nurturing milieu of everyday life in a local community – a still traditional (in Luke Gibbon’s positive sense of that word) community but one that nevertheless transcends itself in this new moment, in a space wherein bachelor fathers can nurture adopted children, wherein Romanian orphans can become new Irish heroes, and (to risk the cliché) wherein a village community is able to raise a healthy child. If there is still hope in the unredeemed world, authentically critical then it lies in this anticipatory matrix of critical thought, human love, and communal well-being: the stuff of any authentic utopia worthy of the name. In its post-naturalist, anticipatory aesthetic that resonates with the spirit of both the critical eutopia and dystopia, McCormack’s *Notes* challenges utopian closure, finds its way through dystopia, and gives new life to the utopian impulse itself – a move which at its time in the cruel wealth of the Celtic Tiger and now in the even crueller impoverishment of the years following the Tiger’s death, offers a hint of where resilience, dignity, and agency can still be found.

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Notes

1. The Centre was founded in 2003 by Tom Moylan after his 2002 appointment as Glucksman Professor in the School of English at Limerick.
2. See, for example, the study of the cultural and political iconography of the Irish harp as it has impacted on the formation of Irish identity undertaken by Ralahine PhD student, Mary Louise O’Donnell, and published as *Ireland’s Harp: The Shaping of Irish Identity, 1770 to 1880*. U C Dublin P, 2014.
3. See the extensive study of Madden’s *Memoirs* by Ralahine PhD student, Dierdre Ní Chuanacháin, *Utopianism in Eighteenth-Century Ireland*. Cork UP, 2016.
4. For more on *science fictionality* as an epistemological method and not only a textual form, see Istevan Csicsery-Ronay’s *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008, in which the author speaks of the “kind of awareness we might call science-fictionality, a mode of response that frames and tests experiences as if they were aspects of a work of science fiction” (2) as well as Rebecca Evans’s argument that the cognitive estrangement capacity enabled in readers by science fictionality can be turned back on their own society so as to break through the presumptions of its ruling narrative. See: “Nomenclature, Narrative, and Novum: The ‘Anthropocene’ and/as Science Fiction,” *Science*

Fiction Studies, vol. 45, no. 3, 2018, pp. 484–499. Indeed, Kim Stanley Robinson has argued eloquently for recognizing and deploying the pedagogical potential of science fictionality, a potential that especially in its utopian mode enables authors and readers to revision their own world and to explore collective responses and possible solutions to the problems facing humanity and all of nature. As he put it in “Symposium on Science Fiction and the Climate Crisis”: “The need is clear, the solution is obvious: we have to invent a just and sustainable civilization ... Putting any such new system into practice against the intense resistance of currently existing privilege, greed, stupidity, and fear will be very difficult. We will blunder and fight our way to any better state. Those are good stories to tell, that’s the science fiction we need now” (427). See: “Symposium on Science Fiction and the Climate Crisis,” *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2018, pp. 426–427.

5. See Bertram Gross’s *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America*. New York: M. Evans & Company, 1980, for an insightful study of the revival and replay of fascism in the United States in the 1970s, serving as a prescient study of the emerging neoliberalism of the Reagan/Thatcher era.
6. This shift is also indicated in the sf allusion to the Arthur C. Clarke novel, *Childhood’s End*, as the Notes assert that humanity is now “ready to move on, beyond our childhood’s end, into some transcendent forgetting of ourselves” (31). This argument from a so-called “maturity” is a familiar one in contemporary Ireland, as neoliberal culture endeavors to erase the rich critical and creative traditions on the island going back hundreds of years, rendering the earlier expressions and struggles as infantile as opposed to the new “adult” behaviors of properly neoliberal subjects.
7. Ernst Bloch regards *heimat* as that utopian “home” that humanity only arrives at for the first time in the transformed future of the Not Yet. It lies therefore not in a nostalgic past but at the hopeful horizon. He famously ends his extensive study of utopia in *The Principle of Hope* with this invocation of the home that lies before us: “True genesis is not at the beginning but at the end, and it starts to begin only when society and existence become radical, i.e. grasp their roots. But the root of history is a working, creating human being who reshapes and overhauls the given facts. Once he [sic] has grasped himself and established what is his, without expropriation and alienation, in real democracy, there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all in which no one has yet been: homeland” [*Heimat is etwas, das allen in die Kindheit scheint and worin noch niemand war.*] (1375-1376).

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