

Frank McCourt's New York: Place, Memory, and the Performance of Identity

BY AOILEANN NÍ ÉIGEARTAIGH, PH.D.

Photo:

Frank McCourt's eventual acceptance of his role as member of the Irish diaspora manifests itself not as a leaving behind of place, but as an acceptance of a dual sense of spatial identity. It is when he accepts that both Limerick and New York are crucial elements of his identity that he embraces his status as an Irish-American.



Aoileann Ní Éigearthaigh is a Lecturer in the Department of Humanities, Dundalk Institute of Technology. She is a researcher in the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society and is vice-chair of the Irish Association for American Studies. She has published a number of works on Irish and American literature and culture. This essay is based in part on a paper presented at the ACIS annual conference held at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City in 2007. A longer version appears in her most recent book, *Rethinking Diasporas* (2007). ©2008. Published with permission of Aoileann Ní Éigearthaigh.

Frank McCourt begins *Angela's Ashes* with an intriguing statement:

My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four; my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone. (Mccourt, 1997:1)

Although this appears to be relatively straightforward declaration, it epitomizes a deep-rooted and ongoing antipathy McCourt feels towards Ireland and his own status as a member of the Irish diaspora in America. It is certainly a surprising way to begin a book set almost entirely in Ireland. The first sentence, in particular, suggests a rejection by McCourt of the country in which he grew up. The sense that he was unfairly pulled away from the land of his birth by his misguided parents echoes throughout the text, at times giving the impression that the years spent in Ireland were a form of purgatory to be endured until he could return to America.

Taking the opposing geographical poles of Limerick and New York as its framing narrative,

this article proposes to interrogate the role of place in McCourt's narrative of identity. It will argue that McCourt's relationship with Limerick and New York undergoes three main stages of development, which roughly correspond with his gradual acceptance of his status as member of the Irish diaspora in New York. In *Angela's Ashes* (1997), the first volume of his memoirs, McCourt is hostile and disparaging of Limerick and resolutely distances himself from his childhood home in order to emphasize his identity with his birthplace of New York. His perspective begins to change in the second volume, *Tis* (1999), which recounts his move back to New York and his gradual realization that the New York that figured so prominently in his childhood dreams existed only in his imagination and that in reality he would only ever be regarded as an outsider. This realization, and an unexpected homesickness for Limerick, causes him to question and reassess previously held assumptions about his identity. In the latest volume of his memoirs, *Teacher Man* (2005), McCourt celebrates his success as a New York teacher and, secure in this role, appears for the first time able to engage with the complexities of

his dual identity. It is only when he accepts that both Limerick and New York constitute crucial elements of his identity that he can embrace his status as an Irish-American.

PLACE AND IDENTITY

Place and its role as the signifier and the focus of both individual and communal identity is at the heart of narratives of diaspora formation. According to generally accepted definitions, a diaspora is formed through a two-part process: a group of people is displaced from its original homeland, and it then goes on to form a new community in its adopted homeland. This new community is characterized by its ability to retain elements of its original culture and identity, while simultaneously embracing elements of the culture with which it is now surrounded. Most crucially, memories of the homeland, its landscape and place names, continue to resonate with members of the diaspora for genera-



tions after resettlement. Cohen defines diasporas as migrant communities who "... acknowledge that 'the old country'—a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore—always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions."¹ In their seminal text on postcolonial literature, Ashcroft *et al.* note that a diaspora is characterized not only by an act of spatial displacement but by an engagement with the deep-rooted assumptions about identity and belonging that such displacement brings to the fore: "Diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which such displacement produces."² It is widely assumed that this engagement with—and, by

extension, challenge to—traditional narratives of identity liberates the diasporic subject and enables it to explore newer and more flexible models of self-expression. It is because of this emphasis on the potential for liberation from fixed and limiting categories of identity that narratives of the diaspora are often included within postcolonial criticism. In particular, the ability of the diasporic subject to exist in a flexible, borderless space is perceived as liberating and empowering:

*The "in-between" position of the migrant, and his or her errant, impartial perceptions of the world, have been used as the starting point for creating new, dynamic ways of thinking about identity which go beyond older static models, such as national identity and the notion of "rootedness."*³

What comes across very strongly in McCourt's writing, however, is an inability to transcend narratives of identity based on notions of place and belonging.⁴ Rather than embracing the purported sense of liberation offered by a release from traditional models of identity, McCourt insists on defining himself geographically and racially, the more narrowly the better. Foregrounding the American element of his identity, he refuses to identify himself with Ireland and resists any suggestion that he has the potential to embrace what he perceives, initially at least, as two conflicting heritages:

I'd like to be Irish when it's time for a song or a poem. I'd like to be American when I teach. I'd like to be Irish-American or American-Irish though I know I can't be two things even if Scott Fitzgerald said the sign of intelligence is the ability to carry opposed thoughts at the same time. I don't know what I'd like to be. (McCourt, 2000:360)

McCourt's eventual acceptance of his role as member of the Irish diaspora, as I will argue, manifests itself not as a leaving behind of place as contemporary postmodern theories of identity would suggest, but rather as an acceptance of a dual sense of spatial identity. In other words, McCourt frees himself from the pressures of conforming to a space-based sense of identity by allowing himself to live in and engage with two different cultures.

Photo:

McCourt's relationship with Limerick, as presented in Angela's Ashes, is extremely fractured. In this place of his childhood "...rain dampened the city from the Feast of the Circumcision to New Year's Eve.... From October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. Clothes never dried: tweed and woolen coats housed living things, sometimes sprouted mysterious vegetations."

THE CONCEPT OF HOME

Part of the problem McCourt experiences in expressing his sense of self, as stated above, relates to the antipathy he continues to feel towards his childhood home of Limerick. Central to the construction of identity is the concept of "home." McLeod suggests that our idea of "home" is what provides us with our sense of orientation and belonging: "As an idea it stands for shelter, stability, security and comfort (although actual experiences of home may well fail to deliver these promises). To be 'at home' is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves."⁵

The concept of "home" is problematized when the subject is living at a remove from it. For the diasporic subject, "home" is constructed primarily through memories of a homeland, which often attains a mythical, idealized status: "Home becomes primarily a mental construct built from the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past. It exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present."⁶ An added complication is the communal nature of diaspora identity, which means that the "home" imagined in diasporic discourse functions not to solidify an individual's links with his own unique past, but rather to unite all its subjects within one overarching narrative.

McCourt's relationship with his childhood home in Limerick is extremely fractured and is at the root of his inability to relate to narratives of home shared by the members of the Irish diaspora in New York. In *Angela's Ashes*, the text in which he recounts his childhood in Limerick, he demonstrates a strangely unemotional attitude towards the events he describes, reducing many of them to the kinds of pantomime-like tableaux common in Hollywood depictions of Irish rural communities. Summarizing his childhood at the start of the text, for example, he states:

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood. (Mccourt, 1997: 1).

This is an intriguing way to introduce one's memoirs. After all, the function of a memoir is to achieve reconciliation with the past. What McCourt suggests in this quotation, however, is that his aim is not to honestly interrogate his past, but to reduce it to a stereotypical tale of a stereotypical "miserable Irish Catholic childhood" that conforms to the expectations his Irish-American readers would have of this genre of text. The people who shared his childhood with him are also reduced to generalized representations:

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years. (Mccourt, 1997: 1).

As a "memoir," McCourt's text thus presents us with a problem, for his aim appears to be to distance himself from the environment in which he grew up, rather than to reconcile himself with it—who, after all, refers to their childhood as a "version" rather than as something unique and personal? Mahony makes an interesting comment about recent Irish autobiographical writing:

This newer form of Irish memoir, nearly exclusively male, is unusual in that it is very much connected with the current cultural debate on identity... This is not just the autobiographical essay or sketch, nor is it the summing up of advanced age. Rather these works are probings of self and country by men middle-aged or younger who wish to illuminate their caste or religion, or region and to, by extension, define national characteristics.⁷

If we apply Mahony's statement to McCourt's text, we are confronted with a problem because, as stated above, McCourt's exploration of his past constitutes not a reconciliation with, but rather a profound alienation from, the landscape of his memories. McCourt's descriptions of Limerick, for example, are all negative and have a vivid, cinematic—almost documentary-like—quality to them not generally associated with the emotional vagaries of a memoir:

Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the River Shannon and settle forever in Limerick. The rain dampened the city from the Feast of the Circumcision to New Year's Eve.... From October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. Clothes never dried: tweed and woolen coats housed living things, sometimes sprouted mysterious vegetations. In pubs, steam rose from damp bodies and garments to be inhaled with cigarette and pipe smoke laced with the stale fumes of spilled stout and whiskey and tinged with the odor of piss wafting in from the outdoor Jakes where many a man puked up his week's wages.

The rain drove us into the church—our refuge, our strength, our only dry place. At Mass, Benediction, novenas, we huddled in great damp clumps, dozing through priest drone, while steam rose again from our clothes to mingle with the sweetness of incense, flowers and candles.

Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we knew it was only the rain. (McCourt, 1997:1–2).

DEFINING IDENTITY

Mahony observes that defining one's sense of self is both an inclusive and an exclusive exercise. In other words, it is by creating categories of "us" and "them," and positioning oneself accordingly, that one begins to identity with certain shared characteristics.⁸ Again, McCourt's memoir appears to contradict this model. Certainly, the categories of "us" and "them" appear throughout *Angela's Ashes*. Whereas the normal impulse would be to identify oneself with an "us," however, McCourt repeatedly emphasizes his alienation from those surrounding him. This is most apparent in his constant rejection of the Irish elements of his heritage and his determination, against all the odds, not to allow himself to forget his connections to America, both real and imagined.⁹

Interaction with friends and family in Ireland is characterized by McCourt's sense of difference or otherness. The family's arrival "home" to Ireland is significant not only because they are perceived as Americans by people they

meet, but because of their own determination to cling to this identity. Arriving in Limerick station, the following exchange takes place:

One of the boys with the trunks said, God, are they Americans? And Mam said, They are. They were born in New York. All the boys were born in New York. The boy said to the other boy, God, they're Americans. (McCourt, 1997:56).

The McCourts also pride themselves on retaining the symbols of their former life in America. At a time when they literally have nothing else, they cling to the idea that their language and accents will eventually pull them out of their misery:

At night he helps us with our exercises. Mam says they call it homework in America but here it's exercises. (McCourt, 1997:238)... (Mam) always translates Irish money into American so that she won't forget and tries to convince everyone times were better over there. (McCourt, 1997:373).

This tenuous link to America thus becomes a kind of safety net for the family, an assurance that things will get better and that they will not belong in the slums of Limerick forever.

The America that resonates with such promise for McCourt and his family constitutes an interesting contradiction between what they know to be true and what they persist in believing. Despite having experienced for themselves the horrors of slum life in New York, their vision of America remains clichéd and idealistic. America comes to epitomize everything that Limerick is not:

You can do anything in America, it's the land of opportunity. You can be a fisherman in Maine or a farmer in California. America is not like Limerick, a grey place with a river that kills. (McCourt, 1997:238).

More specifically, the America they envision is the America of the cinema screen. This celluloid vision offers them the chance to escape from the horrors of their reality:

After the film we have tea and buns and we sing and dance like Cagney all the way to The Abbott's. Michael says it must be

great to be in America where people have nothing else better to do but sing and dance. He's half asleep but he says he's going there some day to sing and dance and would I help him go. (McCourt, 1997:367).

This identification with the signifiers of Hollywood is, of course, not in any way unique. America has, for a very long time, been represented globally by its cinematic image. What is strange, though, is that the McCourt parents did actually experience the horrors of American slum life for themselves. It seems inconceivable that they have allowed themselves to forget this to the extent that they continue to regard America as the land of dreams and opportunities for their sons.



COLONIZED IMAGINATION

It is unclear whether McCourt is aware of the extent to which he allows his memoirs to be dominated by such stereotypes. His determination to distance himself from his Irish past and define himself as an American can, however, be related to what Deane regards as a common reaction to the experience of colonialism: the sense of shame and inadequacy ingrained in those for whom the colonizing culture, although despised, would always be perceived as superior.

Commenting on the sense of dissatisfaction at the heart of many Irish autobiographical texts, Deane suggests that: "This incapacity to accept origin, this need to seek an alternative to it, is one of the symptoms of a culture that believes itself always to be provincial, always to be in need of a metropolitan world elsewhere."¹⁰ By presenting the Ireland in which he lived as a cliché of the Hollywood imagination, and by adopting an amused and slightly patronizing tone throughout, McCourt's narrative conforms closely to Deane's definition of the colonial autobiography.

McLoone, commenting on American dominance of filmic representations of Ireland, points out that "In a situation where Hollywood cinema has dominated the screens of Ireland unchallenged by indigenous filmmaking, the only cinematic images of Ireland with which the Irish were familiar were the representations that flowed out of the Hollywood industry."¹¹ This is an idea with which observers of the Irish film industry are familiar. More crucially than merely

ceding representational control to Hollywood, however, is the effect this process has on the Irish psyche. McLoone claims that:

The Irish experience also clearly shows the repressive and suffocating tendencies of dominant, metropolitan culture. This is the problem of cultural imperialism, the colonization of the unconscious, in which, to adapt Albert Memmi's formulation, the colonized cultural being can finally only recognize itself in the image promoted in the first instance by the colonizing culture itself.¹²

Like Deane, McLoone's conclusion is that the colonized subject inevitably internalizes colonial stereotypes and finds it difficult, if not impossible, to transcend them. In *Angela's Ashes*, Limerick, epitomizing bleakness, damp and poverty, symbolizes McCourt's sense of shame and inferiority; New York, in all its celluloid glory, represents modernity and the opportunity to transcend the shame of his childhood. In an interview he gave shortly after being awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt states that

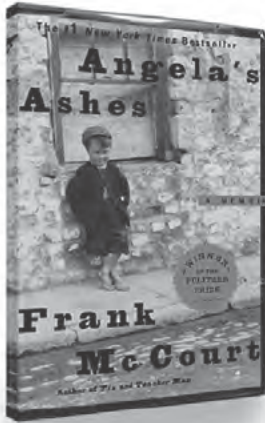
We didn't want to tell anybody what we came from because we were ashamed of it. And concurrent with shame is anger. When we joked about this in New York, my brothers and I, my mother would say 'Will you stop talking about that? That's the past.' Eventually we got over the shame and we started talking about it. It took me a long time and then I started writing about it in my notebooks and that led to Angela's Ashes a long time later on.¹³

According to this statement, McCourt himself regards his memoir as a successful reconciliation of the different strands of his difficult upbringing. In fact, I would argue that the publication of *Angela's Ashes* was only the start of McCourt's coming-to-terms with his legacy of shame.

DISPLACEMENT AND EXILE

More interesting than *Angela's Ashes* and more revealing of his struggle to define himself amidst the tangle of different identities and loyalties which surround him are *'Tis*, published in 1999, and *Teacher Man*, published in 2005, which recount his adult life in America. *'Tis*, in particular, is both a humorous and poignant account of

Photo:
America, unlike Limerick, was a place of endless promise for young McCourt: "You can do anything in America, it's the land of opportunity. You can be a fisherman in Maine or a farmer in California. America is not like Limerick, a grey place with a river that kills." Courtesy of *Acoupleofblaguards.com*



what happens when reality and expectations collide. McCourt arrives in America expecting to be embraced as a returned son. It is hardly surprising, given the extent to which he has internalized cultural representations of America, that when he finally does sail into New York Bay, he does so almost as a spectator at his own movie:

I'm on deck the dawn we sail into New York. I'm sure I'm in a film, that it will end and lights will come up in the Lyric Cinema. (Mccourt, 1997:422)

To his surprise, however, what he experiences is not a sense of returning "home," but on the contrary a profound sense of displacement and homesickness for Limerick—the place he had spent his childhood (if his account in *Angela's Ashes* is to be believed) waiting to escape:

I'd try to see 5th Avenue... but Limerick would push me into the past. (Mccourt, 2000:4) ... What in God's name was wrong with me that I should be missing Limerick already, city of grey miseries, the place where I dreamed of escape to New York. (Mccourt, 2000:6)

Whereas McCourt had spent his childhood dreaming of America, he now finds himself taking comfort in his memories of Limerick:

It's magic to go back to Limerick in my mind even when it brings the tears. (Mccourt, 2000:55)

McCourt's confusion and inability to feel at home in New York constitutes an excellent example of the often unacknowledged difficulties inherent in embracing a diaspora identity.

There is a presumption sometimes that a diaspora identity is necessarily more liberating and positive than a more rigidly constructed identity based on spatial or cultural elements. Bhabha, for example, conceives of the diaspora as a liminal space, existing between the old country and the new country, in which hybrid identities can be explored and celebrated:

These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity.¹⁴

However, as McCourt's experience demonstrates, this embrace of flexibility and possibility is neither as facile nor as straightforward as Bhabha appears to suggest. Unable to celebrate the liberation afforded by the possibilities of this new liminal identity, McCourt's initial reaction on his arrival in America is to shut down these possibilities and express himself in as specific a manner as possible. In fact, he complains of the lack of limitations that characterize American

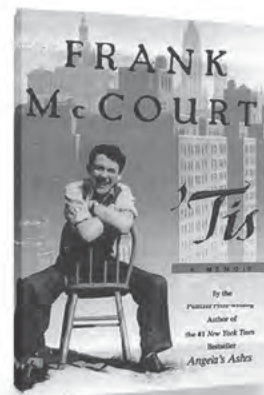


Illustration:
(top left): *Angela's Ashes* was published in 1996 and became a controversial best seller. It won a Pulitzer Prize in 1997 and was made into movie in 1999.

Illustration:
(left): In 1999 *Tis* was published to a mixed reception. Reviewing it for New York Irish History, Maureen Murphy found the book "beautifully written, a good read... the memoir of an Irish immigrant who hit New York in the 1950s and rounded the three bases of upward mobility: the draft and service in the United States military, the G.I. Bill, and... college education...."

society and finds himself confounded by the idea that he can choose to define himself with whatever and as many identities as he wants:

I can't answer him because I don't know where I want to be or what I'm supposed to do. That's what you're faced with when you come to America, one decision after another. (Mccourt, 2000:61).

McCourt, in other words, does not want the opportunity to celebrate possibilities. On the contrary, he wants to retreat behind the solidity

of one specific, easily defined signifier of identity. He wants to be “merely American” in other words, and to escape the pressure of having to be Irish as well:

I don't know what to say to people who smile and tell me that their mothers and fathers and grandparents are Irish. One day they're insulting your mother, the next they're bragging their own mothers are Irish. Why is it the moment I open my mouth the whole world is telling me they're Irish and we should all have a drink? It's not enough to be American. You always have to be something else, Irish-American, German-American, and you'd wonder how they'd get along if someone hadn't invented the hyphen. (McCourt, 2000:113).

There are a number of different reasons for McCourt's inability to embrace the full range of identities apparently open to him. The first is his inability to confront and move on from the hardships of his childhood. He struggles throughout *Tis* to find some way of dealing with his past:

I'm so ashamed of the past that all I can do is lie about it. (McCourt, 2000:226)

And he is still resolutely blaming his childhood for the difficulties he experiences as an adult in *Teacher Man*:

There were reasons for the hangdog look: I was born in New York and taken to Ireland when I was four.... (McCourt, 2006:25)

In fact, what McCourt is displaying here is a profound and deep-rooted sense of inferiority, caused, I believe, by his entrapment within a network of various narratives of colonialism. Growing up in Ireland, McCourt was subject to feelings of inadequacy on a daily basis due to his not being fully Irish (he was born in America) and not being fully Catholic (his father was a Northern Irish Protestant). Escaping from these rigid categories of identity was one of the reasons he came to America. Demonstrating the degree to which the colonized subject internalizes such repression, however, McCourt find himself unable to escape from the shame engendered by his inability to fit in. The narratives of both *Tis* and *Teacher Man* are punctuated by references to

his inherited legacy of inadequacy:

Except for the books in my suitcase, everything I wore or carried off the ship was secondhand. Everything in my head was secondhand too; Ireland's sad history, a litany of suffering and martyrdom drummed into me by priests, schoolmasters and parents who know no better. (McCourt, 2006:33)

A “HYPHENATED IDENTITY”

This inability to get beyond these narratives of “Ireland's sad history” is compounded by a contradiction that lies at the heart of narratives of diasporic identity: specifically that the supposed flexibility of identity offered to the diasporic subject is in fact as strictly regulated as the traditional forms of identity the diaspora is supposed to oppose. McLeod notes:

It is important to understand that this space is not some kind of postmodern playground of “anything goes,” where all kinds of identities are equally valuable and available as if in a “multicultural supermarket.” Discourses of power which seek to legitimate certain forms of identity and marginalize others by imposing a logic of binary oppositions remain operable and challenge new forms of identity from emerging. We must not forget the troublesome politics of diaspora identities when promoting their possibilities.¹⁵

In fact, one of the most difficult challenges McCourt has to overcome in his bid to forge a new identity for himself is the rigid nature of the diaspora identity offered to him by both the Irish and American communities in New York. Far from being given the space to engage with and explore a range of different identities, he finds himself subject to a core narrative of identity even more rigid than that he had struggled against in Ireland. Comically revealing of the power of a diaspora to impose a whole range of identifiers on its subjects are the examples McCourt gives of his experiences in his Irish literature classes:

If professors look directly at me and ask questions I can never finish the answers with the way they always ask, oh, do I

detect a brogue? After that I have no peace. Whenever an Irish writer is mentioned, or anything Irish, everyone turns to me as if I'm the authority. Even the professors seem to think I know all about Irish literature and history....It's the same with Catholicism. (McCourt, 2000:237).

McCourt's Irish accent thus confers on him the status of expert on Irish literature, in spite of the fact that he never finished his secondary education. This presumption is perhaps indicative of a more important flaw in diasporic identity, namely the generalizations it makes about its constituents.

As well as the assumptions made by the Americans he meets, McCourt is also subject to the views of the Irish diaspora who expect him to fit in with the identity they have constructed for themselves:

There was an old man smoking a pipe on the stool beside Paddy and he said, that's right, son, that's right. Tell your friend there that you have to stick with your own....Paddy leaned towards the old man and they talked about home, which is Ireland, though the old man hadn't seen it in forty years and hoped to be buried in the lovely town of Gort beside his poor old Irish mother and his father who did his bit in the long struggle against the perfidious Saxon tyrant. (McCourt, 2000:273).

This extract provides a fascinating summary of the concerns and contradictions inherent in Irish diasporic identity, containing as it does a narrowing of the possibilities of a supposedly fluid mode of identity ("stick with your own"), a concept of home so fractured and constructed it requires an explanation ("home, which is Ireland"), a sentimentality that overrides reality (the old man has not been "home" in forty years and yet wishes to be buried there) and a marked inability to overcome residual colonial hang-ups ("the perfidious Saxon tyrant"). This desperate need to retain links to the original homeland is indicative of the way in which diasporic identity is not at all illustrative of a liberation from traditional constructs of identity, but on the contrary of a solidification of such constructs. What McCourt discovers, in fact, is that the categories of identity available to him as a presumed member of the Irish diaspora in New York

are as narrow and inflexible as those he attempted to avoid in Limerick.

McCourt thus finds himself existing within an extremely complicated web of different identities and narratives of nationality. He is reluctant to embrace either the insistently hybridised identity being offered to him by American society or the surprisingly fixed and limiting identity being proposed by the diaspora. His confusion deepens when he returns to Ireland only to find himself yet again (and unexpectedly this time) in the role of outsider:

I'm a visitor, a returned Yank. (McCourt, 2000:273).

It is thus of little surprise that he begins to despair of ever figuring out an identity for himself:

The plane lifts into a western sun which touches the Shannon with gold and even though I'm happy to be returning to New York I hardly know where I belong anymore. (McCourt: 2000,375).

EMBRACING HYBRIDITY

It is only in the third and latest volume of his memoirs, *Teacher Man*, that McCourt finally begins to come to terms with the different strands of his identity and to face up to what they offer him rather than attempting to deny them. It is perhaps significant that *Teacher Man* focuses on his professional development as a New York literature teacher: the success he begins to make of his chosen career offers him for the first time something tangible on which he can begin to base an identity independent of that being offered to him by the diaspora. It is ironic that it is only when he no longer depends on his nationality to define himself that he begins to reconcile himself to its complexities.

During an extended visit to Dublin, where he has registered to study for a Ph.D. in Irish-American literary relations in Trinity College, he begins to realize for the first time that he is at least partly responsible for his own isolation and that by refusing to acknowledge both strands of his identity he is consigning himself to a marginal position:

It was dawning on me that I was an outsider, foreigner, returned Yank and, on top of it, a Limerickman. I thought I'd come

back a conquering hero, a returned Yank with college degrees, bachelor and master, man who survived nearly ten years in the high schools of New York. I made the mistake of thinking I'd fit into the warm life of Dublin pubs. . . . It was not to be. If there was a circle I was never part of it. I prowled the periphery. (McCourt, 2006:174).

This is another intriguing statement which reveals much about McCourt and, though he is still trying to deny it, the extent to which he has finally begun to internalize the values of the diaspora. In his belief that he would "fit into the warm life of Dublin pubs," he exhibits the classic

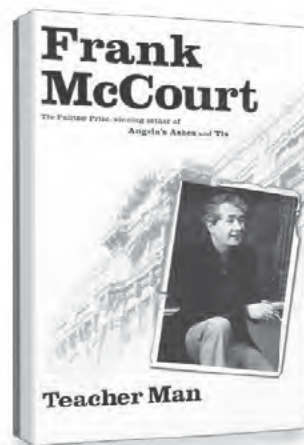


Illustration:
Frank McCourt's *Teacher Man* was published in 2005. It was reviewed in *New York Irish History* by Ann M. Garvey who judged it "entertaining" and "irreverent," with many examples of McCourt's "provocative teaching" at New York City's Stuyvesant High School. For McCourt, storytelling about his Irish childhood in Limerick became his "classroom management tool."

presumption of the returned Irish-American, whose warm feelings towards his homeland blind him to the fact that in moving away, his relationship with that homeland can now only be fractured, incomplete and to a large degree constructed in his own imagination. Moreover, in his disappointment that he was not welcomed back as "a conquering hero," he demonstrates an (albeit unconscious) sense of superiority over the Irish people and again a presumption that because he has achieved something in America, the Irish people he meets must be envious of that. His choice of Trinity College as the location for his study of Irish American literary relations is also an interesting one, revealing that the long-held grip Catholicism had had over his imagination has now perhaps been replaced by the regard Irish-American academia has for Trinity College—a regard which successfully airbrushes the problematic perception in the Ireland of the time of Trinity College as an anti-Irish and anti-Catholic institu-

tion (remember that it was only in 1970 that the Catholic Church lifted the threat of excommunication from Catholics who enrolled in Trinity without special permission). Finally, in forgetting that as a Limerickman he would always be considered an outsider by Dubliners, he illustrates that he has reduced Ireland, in all its complexities and regional difference, to a coherent, easily assimilated whole. This statement brilliantly captures the profound similarities between the traditional colonial attitude towards Ireland which reduced its subjects to a voiceless mass and simplistic neo-colonial definitions of identity and place imposed on Ireland by its diaspora. In short, McCourt reveals the extent to which he has forgotten the specifics of life in Ireland and has internalized Irish-American assumptions and attitudes towards the mythical homeland.

Once McCourt begins to embrace his identity as an Irish-American, his integration into American society becomes much easier. Interestingly, it is through the mode of literature that he manages to forge a role for himself. Firstly, in succeeding as a high-school teacher, he finally begins to respect himself and to feel a sense of achievement and belonging. Secondly, his research for his PhD dissertation enables him to see that it is not necessary to confine himself to one strand of his identity, and that he does in fact have the capacity to embrace both his Irish and American parts. In fact, what he begins to realize is that neither element of his identity can make sense in isolation:

When I read Irish history I filled index cards with any reference to America. When I read American history I filled index cards with any reference to Ireland. (McCourt, 2006:175).

McCourt's research does not lead to a Ph.D., but when he returns to New York, he does so with a stack of index cards on which he has amassed a wealth of evidence of the profound links that bind Irish and American cultures together—a symbol surely of his blossoming realization that he is the product of two interrelated narratives of history and identity. This realization leads him on to the ultimate act of reconciliation when he begins to shape his past into a coherent narrative through the memoirs he begins to write.

PERFORMING DIASPORA

There is, as I discussed above, a profound difference in the attitude McCourt displays towards his Irish roots in *Angela's Ashes* (1996) and in his subsequent two texts. In *Teacher Man* (2005), McCourt reflects on the ways in which his life changed after the publication of *Angela's Ashes*, and gives us some insight into why his attitude towards Ireland changed so dramatically:

I wrote a book about my childhood and became mick of the moment. I hoped the book would explain family history to McCourt children and grandchildren.... I never expected Angela's Ashes to attract any attention, but when it hit the best-seller lists I became a media darling. I had my picture taken hundreds of times. I was a geriatric novelty with an Irish accent.... I traveled the world being Irish, being a teacher, an authority on misery of all kinds, a beacon of hope to senior citizens everywhere who always wanted to tell their stories. (McCourt, 2006:3-4)

What is clear from this assessment of his life after the success of *Angela's Ashes* is that McCourt finally seems to have found his place in the world. After going to absurd lengths to resist, deny and deride his Irish identity in *Angela's Ashes*, its success seems to have liberated him from his shame of being Irish and allowed him instead to embrace all it entailed. "I traveled the world being Irish" is a significant phrase, suggesting that McCourt has finally—and proactively—embraced his identity. Bell notes that a willingness to display or perform the characteristics of one's communal identity is a prerequisite for belonging: "One does not simply or ontologically belong to the world or to any group within it. Belonging is an achievement at several levels of abstraction."¹⁶

Moreover, a social construct such as nationality or a diaspora is dependent on the willingness of its constituents to perform or bring it into being. According to Bell "The effects of forms of performative belonging can work to maintain religious affect and community...such that the question of belonging necessarily incorporates the issue of how common histories, experiences and places are created, imagined and

sustained."¹⁷ The diaspora, according to Bell's argument, is ultimately a construct that depends on the willingness of its members to perpetuate itself. What McCourt finally realizes is that it is only by performing his own narratives of identi-



ty that he can release himself from their grip and explore their potential.

CONCLUSION

Frank McCourt is an extremely interesting character to examine in the light of debates about the relationship between Irish identity and the needs of the Irish diaspora. Through his writing, we gain an insight into the profound contradictions at the heart of the identity offered to the Irish diaspora, torn as it is between the desire to offer more flexible definitions of identity suited to the contemporary world of migration and multiculturalism, and a need to impose strict limits on the expression of identity in order to retain its links to the homeland. It is useful to situate McCourt's changing attitudes towards his Irish roots in the context of what is regarded by many critics as a significant change in the patterns of Irish emigration. Hamill makes a very interesting statement about the differences between Irish emigrants of McCourt's generation and the generations that followed:

The newest Americans are part of another phenomenon. The old tale of immigrants and their American children was based on an interrupted narrative. That explained the often dreadful gap between Irish fathers and American sons, Irish mothers and American daughters. The Irish American, for example, had the

Photo:
In Dublin, while registered at Trinity College, McCourt began to realize he was at least partly responsible for his own isolation: "It was dawning on me that I was an outsider.... I thought I'd come back a conquering hero, a returned Yank with college degrees, bachelor and master, a man who survived nearly ten years in the high schools of New York. I made the mistake of thinking I'd fit into the warm life of Dublin pubs.... It was not to be. If there was a circle I was never part of it."

*confident sense of having come in at the beginning of the story. The immigrant, however, had left behind another country—its places, weather, legends and myths—and had left it behind forever. For the immigrant, a story that had its beginnings in the fogs of history had permanently broken. A new identity was impossible; only a system of masks could bring comfort and safety. The Stage Irishman was the creation of people who need masks.... The new Irish immigrants don't require masks. They can be themselves, create their own American narratives, and with the help of technology, maintain a powerful connection to the old.*¹⁸

My reading of McCourt's quest to find his identity closely reflects the process described by Hamill. It is only when he engages with the complexities of living between two different cultures and accepts it is possible to have two different "homelands" that he can stop hiding behind clichés and celebrate the richness his different heritages have to offer him.

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Notes

1. Cohen, 1997: ix
2. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2004: 217–8
3. For a detailed discussion of McCourt's inability to embrace or engage with his identity as a member of the Irish diaspora in New York, see Ni Éigeartaigh, 2007: 5–19
5. McLeod, 2000:210
6. McLeod, 2000:211
7. Mahony, 1998: 269
8. Mahony, 1998: 269
9. For a detailed discussion of McCourt's internalization of American values in Angela's Ashes, see Ni Éigeartaigh, 2004/5: 81–91
10. Deane, 1991: 383
11. McLoone, 1994: 151
12. McLoone, 1994: 152
13. Interview with Frank McCourt conducted June 19, 1999
14. Quoted in McLeod, 2000: 218
15. McLeod, 2000:225
16. Bell, 1999: 3
17. Bell, 1999:3
18. Hamill, 1998: Foreword