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"The Entirety of the Shape Is Complicit" – A Diffractive Reading of Colum McCann's *Apeirogon*

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Abstract:
In a diffractive reading of Colum McCann's *Apeirogon* (2020), this article argues that the novel can be read as a narrative diffraction apparatus that highlights the complex spatial, temporal, and material entanglements of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Using the verbatim transcripts of its protagonists' real-world experiences of loss and suffering in the conflict as a narrative 'double slit,' it makes visible the myriad intra-actions of geography and history, humans and animals, mind and matter, and in particular of human grief and remembrance that are inherent to the notion of conflict. The novel's aesthetics heavily relies on such entanglements and serves to question the dichotomies and apparent causalities at the heart of the conflict. Through its complex form that fragments linearities and at the same time lays bare unexpected entanglements, the novel showcases what Karen Barad has described as the "fundamental inseparability of epistemological, ontological, and ethical considerations" (2007, 26). Both humans and the material world (in) which the conflict u/enfolds are implicated in it, and the novel's central practice of storytelling is simultaneously an aesthetic and ethico-onto-epistem-ological engagement with and answer to the conflict.

Colum McCann's *Apeirogon* is described by its author as a "hybrid novel" that "weaves together elements of speculation, memory, fact, and imagination" (2020, 461). In this manner, the novel addresses one of the most complex and contentious political topics of our times, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It approaches this topic through the real stories of the Palestinian Bassam Aramin and the Israeli Rami Elhanan: both lost a daughter to the conflict and both have since engaged as peace activists. 13-year-old Smadar Elhanan was killed in a suicide bombing in Jerusalem in 1997 and 10-year-old Abir Aramin died ten years later after being hit on her

way to school by an Israeli soldier's rubber bullet. Their fathers appear together at events to tell their stories and advocate for a non-violent resolution to the conflict. Two longer transcripts of their statements are at the centre of the book (2020, 217–227 and 231–243). Beyond this documentary core, however, the novel presents in a fragmentary fashion a multitude of facts and morsels of information on the conflict and the history of Israel and Palestine, on the stories of Rami and Bassam and their families, on non-human matter(s) linked to the land, and on many apparently unrelated entities, often connected by association. In this fashion, *Apeirogon* weaves a rich narrative tapestry of complex connections that has the stark fact of the girls' deaths at its core but extends far beyond – the novel's structure becomes the eponymous apeirogon, "a shape with a countably infinite number of sides" (2020, 82).

What makes the novel so interesting in the context of a (new) materialist approach is that it is not only *about* matter, but also uses its form to enact material entanglements and, furthermore, is also grounded in extratextual matter. For this reason, *Apeirogon* offers itself for a diffractive reading in Karen Barad's sense – a reading that seeks to make visible the entanglements of story and matter in and beyond the text and considers their ethical implications. By way of its 'infinite' narrative form, *Apeirogon* not only replicates the material-discursive entanglements of the conflict it describes, but highlights that the novel itself, just like its two storytelling protagonists, is part of an underlying diffraction pattern: Rami and Bassam's storytelling, the narrative of *Apeirogon*, and the extratextual reality in which readers find themselves are all inextricably entangled. This makes McCann's novel a prime example of how a work of literature may serve as a diffraction apparatus that lays bare such entanglements and, as a consequence, the entanglements of materiality and alterity and the ethical responsibilities these entail – responsibilities that implicate the reader in their entanglements.

In their agential-realist philosophy, Barad suggests a diffractive methodology to highlight the ways in which ontology, epistemology, and ethics are entangled. This has a material foundation. In physics, diffraction denotes the interference patterns created by waves when they overlap, bend around an obstacle, or go through an opening. Given the complexity of such patterns, Donna Haraway has turned to diffraction as an epistemological metaphor that allows us to rethink the common optical metaphor of 'reflection' at the heart of much of Western epistemology (Haraway 1997, 16). Where 'reflection' suggests a reproduction of the same, diffraction is "the production of difference patterns" (1997, 34), although, crucially, a "diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but where the *effects* of difference appear" (Haraway 2004, 70; see Barad 2007, 71–72 and Thiele 2018, 40). The origin of any single wave cannot necessarily be inferred from a sufficiently complex diffraction pattern,

which is why Haraway uses the term as a metaphor for critique invested in heterogeneity and difference (1997, 273; see Sehgal 2018, 24). For Barad, however, diffraction goes beyond the merely metaphorical and needs to be understood as ontological: while diffraction is also (a metaphor for) their methodology, they understand diffraction as a quantum phenomenon that is almost omnipresent in the material world (2007, 72). Whereas classical physics claims that waves are fundamentally different from particles because they can be superposed and so amplify or cancel each other out, resulting in diffraction patterns, quantum physics has found wave-like behaviour in particles that are sent through a specific experimental setup called a 'diffraction grating' (2007, 71–85). Importantly, Barad stresses that this does not only apply to the atomic or subatomic level, but "at all scales" (2007, 85). Diffraction is therefore ingrained in the material world.

This raises key questions concerning the ways in which diffraction may be observed and what this means for the observed matter: already in the 1920s and 30s, Niels Bohr argued that the nature of the diffraction apparatus itself changes the outcome of any measurement of diffraction and even whether wave or particle behaviour is measured – something that has since been proven experimentally (see Barad 2007, 97–131 and 247–352). In Barad's interpretation, the consequences are momentous, because it means that in any attempt to observe diffraction not only the diffraction grating, or the material set-up of the experiment, but also the observer (and hence the entire experimental apparatus[1]) are already part of the diffraction – the observer, or agency of observation, who is taking the measurements, is inseparable from the observed (see e.g. 2018, 17–18). Observing diffraction 'from the outside,' from a non-involved vantage point, is impossible: any knowledge is already entangled from the start in what it purports to know, which is what makes diffraction an apt metaphor for Haraway's feminist thought. The epistemological inseparability of 'observed' and 'observer,' called "phenomenon" by Bohr, replaces the notion of clear and independent objective boundaries (Barad 2008, 132–133).

[1] What exactly constitutes an apparatus must remain somewhat indeterminate. On the one hand, the apparatus is Barad's term for an analytical tool used to explore diffraction (2007, 73), but on the other hand this tool is itself part of diffraction: apparatuses "have no inherent 'outside' boundary" or "closure" (2008, 134) but themselves are "*boundary-drawing practices – specific material (re)configurings of the world – which come to matter*" (2007, 140). Measuring device and 'object' of measurement are hence mutually co-constitutive, or entangled. In diffraction, there is no space for a permanently detached meta-level of observation. Instead, "at times diffraction phenomena will be an object of investigation and at other times it [sic] will serve as an apparatus of investigation" (2007, 73). Tellingly, Barad links the apparatus to Foucault's notion of *dispositif*, which can be translated as 'apparatus' and refers to "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses" and other practices, but also "the system of relations […] between these elements" (Foucault 1980, 194; see Barad 2007, 63; on the *dispositif*/apparatus in Foucault, see also Kelly 2013, 132–134).

Importantly, for Barad such phenomena are not only epistemological but also ontological: only through the practice of observing are boundaries between subject and object created, and these boundaries, the result of an "agential cut," are not universal but local (2008, 133).

This is then a performative understanding of matter: ontological differences are constituted performatively only, through what Barad calls "intra-action" (2018, 11). In Barad's words, "*phenomena* are the *ontological* inseparability of agentially intra-acting components," where the neologism 'intra-action' signifies "*the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*" and agencies do not exist independently, but only in relation to this entanglement (2007, 33). Matter is then "not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency" – it intra-acts to become, and is implicated in its own intra-active becoming, making such intra-actions iterative processes of mattering (2007, 151; emphasised in the original). The entire world is continuous intra-activity that (re)configures local determinacies in a never-ending process (2008, 135). The Cartesian notion of observing subject and observed object/matter is thus called into question and replaced with Barad's notion of mattering as entangled performativity, the result of local agential cuts.

Several important ontological, epistemological, and ethical consequences arise: first, commonly-held supposedly ontological distinctions between, for example, human and non-human or subject and object, are, in fact, the result of the enactment of agential cuts and are constituted only performatively and locally, in the act of observing, which in turn is an intra-action in which entangled agencies are mutually constituted; there is then no *a priori* difference between 'observer' and 'observed.' Second, ontology and epistemology are inseparably entangled, they mutually constitute each other: observing enacts matter and matter enacts observation. This is why Barad speaks of "onto-epistem-ology" (2007, 89). It follows that "*practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world*" (Barad 2007, 91) – knowing is/shapes being and being is/shapes knowing. Third, this also means that the material and the discursive are likewise inseparable. Reading Michel Foucault's notion of discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (1972, 49) against Bohr's conception of phenomena, Barad arrives at an understanding of discourse as intra-action, and hence as entangled with matter (2008, 136–142). It follows that "materiality is discursive" (2007, 151) and discourse is material. Diffraction itself is such a material-discursive phenomenon (2007, 88).

Crucially, for Barad this entanglement of matter and meaning is relational, which is why it must also have ethical implications. Entanglement implies alterity[2] and hence entails the sense

[2] This is a notion of alterity that is not one of separation, but still founded on difference. In intra-actions, agential cuts locally enact difference that at the same time depends on the ontological inseparability

of ethical obligation that springs from the encounter with alterity. For this reason Barad argues that the entanglements at the heart of intra-actions are not to be seen as erasure of otherness but rather as "relations of obligation – being bound to the other" and therefore as "irreducible relations of responsibility" (Barad 2010, 265; see 2007, 391–396).[3] If ontology and epistemology are entangled and boundaries are only ever enacted locally in agential cuts, then it matters "*which* cuts are made" (Thiele 2018, 41) – and this is what we are responsible and accountable for. As agential cuts are constitutive of any mattering, so is this ethical responsibility. As a consequence, there is no longer any hierarchy or relation of precedence between ethics, ontology, and epistemology: they are entangled, which is why Barad speaks of "ethico-onto-epistem-ology" (2007, 90; see Thiele 2018, 39).

Such an ethico-onto-epistem-ology of matter(ing) must have implications for literary studies. If matter and meaning, or the discursive and the material, are fundamentally entangled, then reading would appear to be an agential cut and itself an ethico-onto-epistem-ological process. Reading then is a form of observation that is entangled with/in the observed – it is always already diffracted.[4] This has to be taken into account in the practice of reading diffractively, which, as Kai Merten argues, takes on a double sense in Barad's work. On the one hand, there is the textual or metaphorical sense, which refers to a practice of 'reading *through*' – reading one theoretical/textual position through another, and vice versa, so that the positions involved mutually co-constitute each other in the process (Merten 2021, 5; see Barad 2007, 71). On the other hand, diffractive reading also has a material sense: if observer and observed, or reader and read, are diffracted with each other, then "diffractive reading is really the entangled (co-)creation of matter by observing, or *reading* it" (Merten 2021, 6). Reading in this sense is a material practice – and reading diffractively is a practice that draws attention to the entanglement of reader, reading, and text in a material-discursive intra-activity of meaning-making. As Birgit Mara Kaiser puts it: "If world is intra-active, reading is too. It does not occur at a *reflexive* distance from world or text but is one form of *diffractive* intra-action with/in it"

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of the mutually constitutive components of the intra-action (Barad 2007, 392–393; 2010, 264–265) – entanglements are neither unifying nor do they establish fixed boundaries.

[3] This ethical sense of responsibility for the other with whom we are intra-actively entangled ultimately derives from Emmanuel Levinas's ethics, which can be understood as "a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person" (Critchley 2002, 6; see Barad 2014, [8–9] and, for example, Levinas 1996). However, Barad stresses their understanding of ethics goes beyond Levinas's humanism and involves responsibility for and by the non-human as well – it is an ethics "predicated on […] entanglement" (Barad 2012, 50).

[4] For a fuller account of diffractive reading than can be given here, see Merten (2021) as well as the other contributions in that volume and the articles in Kaiser and Thiele (2018).

(2021, 46). This means reading is also necessarily ethical – at least in the sense of the ethico-onto-epistem-ology of all intra-actions – and, as Kaiser argues, political: it is invested in concrete spatial, temporal, and material situations that are read, which is what creates "the *stakes* implicated in the reading of the text and the patterns formed in the reading" (2021, 32). Reading through these stakes while making transparent their configuration through reading is the ethical task of diffractive reading – it is how/why diffractive reading matters.

Apeirogon is a novel whose presentation of entangled agencies and diffracted form seems to demand such a diffractive reading. Through its narrative mode it draws attention to the material entanglements enfolding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and calls into question the political dichotomies that fuel the conflict. The novel consists of 1001 short sections, some of which are no longer than a sentence. The sections – numbered 1–500 in ascending order in the first half of the novel and 500–1 in descending order in the second half, with a central section numbered 1001 – do not present a continuous linear narrative: they gather pieces of seemingly unrelated information, including occasional images, interspersed with the story of a day on which the two protagonists meet, the stories of their lives, and stories of their daughters' lives.

In the course of the narration, the conflict's many political, cultural, and geographical dichotomies between the Palestinian and Israeli sides are challenged and replaced with the notion of inseparable entanglements. From the very beginning of the novel, the separation between the two sides is thematised and linked to the land itself, when Rami takes his motorbike "toward the tunnels, the Separation Barrier, the town of Beit Jala. Two answers for one swerve: Gilo [an Israeli settlement] on one side, Bethlehem [a Palestinian town] on the other. Geography here is everything" (2020, 3). Similar geographic division is highlighted in the different accessibility of roads and entire areas, through roadblocks or the border wall, or in the discrepancy in the availability of water for Palestinians and Israelis that *Apeirogon* describes. At the same time, the intra-connections between the supposedly separate entities become apparent in their juxtaposition. Consecutive sections are not always connected by a narrative thread but rather associated by their subject matter, which creates unexpected links. For example, the novel begins with a description of Rami travelling on his motorbike towards the town of Beit Jala; section 2 gives the text of a road sign he encounters; section 3 is an extensive description of the migratory bird routes over Beit Jala (the geographic location serving as a link) and ends with the remark that sometimes when these birds land on the border wall they are targeted by Palestinian stone throwers; this is followed by a section on the use of slings in ancient times, first by shepherds protecting their flock, then in warfare; next, a reader learns that during such battles children were employed to shoot down birds on the edge of the

battlefield to prevent them from interfering with the battle and that some of these birds were then eaten; this is followed by an account of the last meal of former French President Mitterand – allegedly a pair of ortolans, rare songbirds that can occasionally be found migrating over the Beit Jala area; when section 7 describes the ways in which large flocks of migratory birds interfere with Israeli air traffic, it becomes more and more clear that it is not just in the detailed protective measurements taken by air control that "[e]verything matters" (McCann 2020, 7) but that this is an apt description of the novel as a whole. *Apeirogon* seems to exemplify Barad's claim that everybody, and matter in general, "is made up of all possible histories of virtual intra-actions with all others" (2017, 80). The roads, the geography, the history of the places, the birds, the buildings, and much more, are all intra-acting, creating patterns of diffraction. As diffraction "troubles dichotomies" (Barad 2018, 4; see 2010, 246) due to its suspension of notions of difference and permanence, this is *Apeirogon*'s way of challenging the dichotomies of the conflict. Both sides, the implication is, share in the entanglements of land, culture, and history.

The novel approaches these entanglements through the deaths of Abir and Smadar and their fathers' shared sense of grief and yearning for peace that serve as an anchoring point and grating through which the conflict may be read diffractively – an experimental narrative setup, but also a jarring, unpleasant truth of the conflict: it kills innocent people. The narrative is arranged around a concrete spatiotemporal setting: the first half of the novel follows Rami taking his motorbike to a meeting where the central stories of the violent deaths of the two girls and their fathers' grief are presumably[5] being told to an international audience; the second half tracks Bassam driving home afterwards. Both men's routes are presented in a disrupted but chronological sequence interspersed with all the other stories and bits of information. Thus, each of the routes cuts through other places, (hi)stories, and matters. In their storytelling, both men want to use "the force of their grief as a weapon" (2020, 74) to eventually achieve peace. Their mourning is thus the agential cut through which the conflict takes shape for readers – a cut that highlights how violence is "written into the very fabric of the world" (Barad 2017, 76). Time and again, the narrative returns to details of the girls' lives and the aftermath of their death, like the noise of the rollers of the bier in the morgue where Rami had to identify Smadar's body (2020, 45, 48, 93, 219), or the candy bracelet Abir bought in a shop moments before she was fatally shot (2020, 11, 14, 22, 66, 83–85, 238–239, 302, 314, 434). In this way, Smadar and

[5] The context in which these statements are presented suggests that they are talks given to an international audience at one of their events, but the Author's Note at the beginning of the novel states that the transcripts were "pulled together from a series of interviews in Jerusalem, New York, Jericho and Beit Jala" (McCann 2020). This makes clear that even the apparently 'solid' documentary core of the narrative is, in fact, an entanglement of different spaces, times, matters.

Abir, and their memories, are shown as intra-acting with the world. For example, one narrative thread describes Bassam carrying the candy bracelet with him and taking it to his talks until one day he is stopped at an Israeli checkpoint and his hands have taken on the pinkish colour of the candy, which is mistaken by border guards for traces of Semtex – the explosive in the bombs that killed Smadar (2020, 83–85). Rami and Bassam's storytelling is then a "re-turning" in Barad's sense: "not […] returning as in reflecting or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again – iteratively intra-acting, re-diffracting, diffracting anew, in the making of […] new diffraction patterns" (2018, 4). It is a foregrounding of the material entanglements of the girls' lives, their deaths, the conflict, their fathers' stories, and the reading of *Apeirogon* and simultaneously of the ethical responsibility arising through these very entanglements: responsibility for Abir and Smadar, for their memory and for preventing future deaths, for the migratory birds, for all the human and non-human agencies the novel presents, for peace – ethics is "embodied in the very worlding of the world" (Barad 2007, 160).

In this way, storytelling becomes a diffraction apparatus. Like the slits in a double-slit experiment (the type of experiment central to quantum physics, see Barad 2007, 73), Rami and Bassam's verbatim accounts sit at the centre of the novel and their stories diffract all the other accounts and enact the agential cuts that co-create the matter of the conflict. They encourage reading through the novel's diffractions in such a way that the emergent patterns are traced for their contingencies and entanglements, just as Rami cannot but wonder which minute differences might have saved Smadar on the day of the bombing. Following a section in which readers learn about the Nagasaki atomic bomb originally being intended for a different destination but then being dropped on Nagasaki due to weather conditions on the day, Rami wonders, "but for an accident of cloud vapor – a small defect in the weave of atmospheric weather – seventy-five thousand lives were lost in one place and preserved, then, in another" (2020, 79). This is followed by a section that highlights the contingencies surrounding Smadar's death: "But for a turn toward the book store. But for an early bus. But for a random movement on Ben Yehuda Street […]" begins a lengthy list that is again followed by the observation that "[g]eography is everything" (2020, 79) and by a similar list of contingencies connected with Abir's death: "But for an early recess in the Anata school. But for multiplication tables. But for a long wait at the shop counter. But for two shekels in her pocket. […]" (2020, 79). The material world in and through which the conflict is carried out thus appears as diffracted with the girls' deaths. It is then perhaps no coincidence that the central sections, in which the transcripts of Rami and Bassam's stories are presented, are set off from the rest of the novel with images of waves in the ocean, as if to make visible the multiple diffractions of the stories in yet another

way (2020, 215, 244). Only at the end of the novel, after the last/first section, does it become clear that the two photographs of waves are in fact the two halves of a larger wave photograph (2020, 459) – the novel's concluding image, just like the entire narrative, gives readers then a (slightly) bigger picture of entanglements.

Storytelling is the two protagonists' method of performing agential cuts, of coming to terms with these entanglements, with what is at stake in the conflict. By necessity, such agential cuts must fail in providing definitive, determinate answers, and *Apeirogon* seems to admit as much when it quotes Jorge Luis Borges speaking about language's inability to "catch the sheer simultaneity of all things" (2020, 451) – or as Rami puts it, "Things go on. […] We have words, but sometimes they're not enough" (2020, 227). This is how the stories in *Apeirogon* take on the function of diffraction apparatuses, which "measure the effects of difference, […] highlight, exhibit, and make evident the entangled structure of the changing and contingent ontology of the world, including the ontology of knowing" (Barad 2007, 73). Such a highlighting of entanglements is what *Apeirogon* constantly enacts: reading about the migration patterns of birds in a novel that describes, or rather materially circumscribes, the violence that led to the deaths of two girls raises the question how the two are linked and lets readers search for intra-connections and to follow the fathers in their attempts to make the girls' deaths matter. At the same time, it serves as a reminder that entanglements are "irreducible relations of responsibility" (Barad 2010, 265) for both human and non-human others and entail obligations toward the world with/in which they are diffracted: it matters which agential cuts are made, which stories are told, which separations are created or overcome – too often, this is a matter of life and death.

Crucially, just as they re-turn to these entanglements, *Apeirogon*'s many instances of storytelling themselves become embroiled in their materiality through the very form of the telling. Since "[a]pparatuses are not passive observing instruments […, but] productive of (and part of) phenomena" (Barad 2007, 142), this further entanglement seems inevitable. Bassam and Rami's telling of their stories is itself necessarily entangled with and constitutive of the way they experience the conflict as bereaved fathers and "Combatants for Peace" (thus the name of their group of activists; 2020, 25). Their stories emerge as interwoven with the world they address, and the emerging diffraction pattern becomes ever more complex to create the novel's form of infinite entanglement. Over the course of the novel too many traces of stories, cultures, history, and matter appear to follow them all. In encyclopaedic fashion, sections on the restoration of the Sistine Chapel or Constantin Brâncuși's sculptures are included as well as a picture of an abandoned Israeli water park, information on the flight behaviour of the

frigatebird, the manufacturing of Semtex, or the history of gunpowder, a story about a British colonial commander's prize falcons and modern practices of falconry, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philippe Petit's 1987 crossing of the Hinnom Valley on a highwire, water harvesting practices in Chile's Atacama desert, or perfidious Nazi misinformation campaigns instrumentalising Czech and Jewish prisoners to obscure the existence of concentration camps. Every re-reading of the novel seems to uncover new connections. McCann's image for this is the infinity of the apeirogon:

> As a whole, an apeirogon approaches the shape of a circle, but a magnified view of a small piece appears to be a straight line. One can finally arrive at any point within the whole. Anywhere is reachable. Anything is possible, even the seemingly impossible.
>
> At the same time, one can arrive anywhere within an apeirogon and the entirety of the shape is complicit in the journey, even that which has not yet been imagined. (2020, 417)

As a metaphor, the apeirogon highlights the open-ended, infinite nature of storytelling, the possibility to find "always something new to be said" (2020, 218) in the same story, which at the same time in every repetition "becomes something new because somebody else hears it" (2020, 227). However, the entanglement of McCann's novel with the apeirogon goes further than that: the entire novel is materially constituted as an apeirogon, an unendingly connected shape that is "complicit" – or entangled – not only in the journey a reader may take anywhere, but with/in all other matter.

As a diffraction apparatus, the novel is necessarily an "open-ended practice[]" (Barad 2008, 134)[6] and this is likewise expressed in its material-aesthetic form, its texture. Texture is a term that describes "the dynamic interwovenness of material form and immaterial processes of signification by anchoring acts of reading in the differentiable layers of materiality and mediality in a given text" (Reinfandt 2016, 319). As such, in an agential realist understanding, texture itself must then be seen as an entangled intra-action of matter, medium, aesthetic form, and readers. This is precisely what *Apeirogon*'s apeirogon enacts in its combination of stories, pictures, long lists (e.g. of birds; 2020, 4 and 451), intermedial references (e.g. to art by Picasso and Banksy or music by John Cage or Palestinian artists; 2020, 151–152, 308, 285, 375, 324–328), and particularly in its inclusion of the entire novel in the infinite sides of the apeirogon with which it intra-acts. It does so perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the central 1001st

[6] In fact, *Apeirogon* can be seen as an example of a narrative whose structure implies its own infinity via a cognitive metaphor identified by George Lakoff and Rafael Núñez called the Basic Metaphor of Infinity (2000, 155–180). See Riedelsheimer (2023) for a more detailed argument on this.

section.[7] In a *mise en abyme*, it presents the 'action' of the novel in a single, page-long sentence that describes Bassam and Rami's storytelling to an audience that has

> come from as far apart as Belfast and Kyushu, Paris and North Carolina, Santiago and Brooklyn, Copenhagen and Terezin, […] to listen to the stories of Bassam and Rami, and to find within their stories another story, a song of songs, discovering themselves – you and me – in the stone-tiled chapel where we sit for hours, eager, hopeless, buoyed, confused, cynical, complicit, silent, our memories imploding, our synapses skipping, in the gathering dark, remembering, while listening, all of those stories that are yet to be told. (2020, 229)

Here, at the centre of a novel that has an infinite (and hence centre-less) structure, the readers are drawn into the narrative: fiction and fact, stories and places[8], past and future, (e)merge as entangled, as the complicated complicity of the apeirogon. Reading as remembering, as re-turning, as reading diffractively is written into *Apeirogon*, which thus implicates its readers in its diffractive reading(s).

Reading *Apeirogon* diffractively then means reading a reading of a reading, where each instance of reading is also one of diffraction: the protagonists' (real-world) storytelling itself necessarily is also a form of reading that is entangled in, diffracts, and re-turns to their experience and their daughters' lives. McCann's 'hybridisation' of their stories in the form of his novel, is likewise a reading process of these stories that re-enacts their entanglements while further diffracting them – which makes *Apeirogon* a reading of a reading, in which matter and meaning, ontology and epistemology, or being and reading coincide. Meanwhile, reading the novel implicates readers in the very entanglements the novel makes visible: this happens both through the ways in which the text demands engagement with its form and storied matters and through its entanglements with the extratextual reality readers inhabit.[9] In this way, a sense of ethical responsibility for the material entanglements through which we read and live arises. If, as Barad claims, "[a]n ethics of entanglement entails possibilities and obligations for reworking the material effects of the past and the future" (2010, 266), then this is not only what Bassam

[7] Through its numbering this section creates new intra-connections, in this case to *One Thousand and One Nights*, which presents its own version of storytelling against death and is one of several prominent intertexts (or perhaps rather intra-texts) in *Apeirogon*. For more on the inter-/intra-textuality, see Costello-Sullivan (2022), who focuses on how W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" is entangled with McCann's novel.

[8] All of the locations mentioned appear at least once elsewhere in *Apeirogon* and so are part of the entanglement not just as the homes of a fictional (and possibly real) audience.

[9] As one avenue of extra-textual, material engagement for readers, McCann's acknowledgements contain a call for donations to various non-profit peace organisations (2020, 463).

and Rami do in their storytelling, but what *Apeirogon* enacts in its infinite reading of and through matter.

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