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# Gesture and Gender : Theatricality, violence and self-assertion in Patrick McCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto*

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# Gesture and Gender : Theatricality, violence and self-assertion in Patrick McCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto*

Flore Coulouma

## PLAN

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2. Violence : “doing the wars” and taking action

Conclusion : Stroke of the pen, therapeutic writing and cathartic testimony

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1 This paper examines Patrick McCabe's 1998 novel *Breakfast on Pluto* through the question of gesture and its dual relation to language and the physical body in space. Gesture is not brute physical action, nor is it reducible to conventional sign language. From a literary perspective, the notion enables us to reflect on the processes of fictional representation through the act of writing<sup>1</sup>. Gesture, from the Latin *gerere*, “to carry,” refers to a “movement of the body or any part of it (...) expressive of thought or feeling.”<sup>2</sup> In earlier senses, gesture had to do with posture, i.e. a manner of placing one's body in space – this is particularly relevant to Patrick “Pussy” Braden's theatricalised world in *Breakfast on Pluto*. Finally, as in the French *beau geste*, a gesture can be a course of action taken to demonstrate magnanimity or generosity. Common to these definitions is the sense that a gesture is an intentional action and carries meaning. In other words, a gesture is both a choreographed movement in space and a speech act.

2 My understanding of a speech act here relies on J. L. Austin's classic definition, later refined by John Searle<sup>3</sup> : in any given utterance, a speaker combines three simultaneous actions. First, an utterance is a locutionary act : the speaker proffers articulated sounds to produce oral speech. It is also an illocutionary act, in that it transforms the intersubjective relationship between speaker and co-speaker. By saying something, we do something (order, promise, assert, and so on) and thus affect reality. Finally, speech acts have consequences and

motives beyond the literal and indirect meanings expressed in their utterances : they have perlocutionary effects. Speech Act Theory describes oral speech but is relevant to human language as a whole, and can therefore be applied to writing and gesture. In those cases, language no longer unfolds through articulatory gesture involving the organs of speech, but through hand gestures : tracing letters on paper, typing on a keyboard, or visually gesturing to form a recognisable, coherent system of signs in space, including, but not restricted to, conventional sign languages. Like spoken utterances, gestures can be deemed felicitous or infelicitous, depending on their ability to prompt relevant understanding and response in the co-speaker. The linguistic aspect of gesture has been bolstered in the past decades by anthropological research on the origins of language and its gradual development from gesture-based communication to oral speech throughout human evolution<sup>4</sup>. The gestural hypothesis is also an old philosophical tradition : English physician John Bullwer wrote of the “natural language of the hands” as early as 1644, while in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Condillac posited a (largely mythological) primordial language made of gestures, among others<sup>5</sup>. Today, articulatory phonology considers speech as “comprised of articulatory gestures rather than patterns of sound<sup>6</sup>,” confirming a “gestural turn” in contemporary linguistic investigations.

3 Gestures, however, carry more than linguistic and pragmatic meaning. The wide lexical range of the Latin term has left its mark on our understanding of their symbolic and aesthetic significance : *gerere*, “to carry”, also means “to gestate/give birth,” “to conduct (a plan of action),” “to wage (war),” and “to act (a role).” As a basic form of human interaction, gesture is thus linked to three aspects of life : meaning and language, performance and play, and finally, responsibility and ethics. Such lexicographic details will prove essential to our understanding of Patrick McCabe’s theatrical representation of violence and social oppression in his 1998 novel *Breakfast on Pluto*. In *Breakfast*, the underlying theme of transgressive gesture unfolds against a background of moving colour and sound, to the rhythmic beat of McCabe’s recurring references to popular music and fashion.

4 *Breakfast on Pluto* mostly consists of the first-person narrative of Patrick “Pussy” Braden, a young transgender man from a fictional border town in 1970s Ireland. Patrick is a marginalised individual

whose own apartness highlights the hypocrisy of his oppressive rural town, and McCabe uses his transgender hero to shed light on a pathological society where individual madness mirrors the non-sensical brutality of institutional violence. In the novel, the many forms of *trouble*, including “female trouble,” gender trouble, and the Irish Troubles, directly affect Patrick’s understanding of reality, with lasting consequences on his sense of gesture and posture and on his narrative style. This results in a number of blurred oppositions throughout his story : reality versus fiction, beauty versus horror, sanity versus madness, intentional gesture versus uncontrolled spasm. The novel’s title – and first pop music reference – hints at McCabe’s literary objective and announces his hero’s self-conscious denial of an unforgiving reality. “Breakfast on Pluto,” a 1969 song by British musician Don Partridge, starts thus :

Go anywhere without leaving your chair  
And let your thoughts run free  
Living within all the dreams you can spin  
There is so much to see  
We’ll visit the stars, and journey to Mars  
Finding our breakfast on Pluto !<sup>7</sup>

- 5 The song associates the soothing gestures of a morning ritual with the exciting otherness of a different planet. From a meta-narrative point of view, it hints at the processes and purpose of fiction ; within the story, it prefigures Patrick Braden’s desperate need for fantasy and announces the novel’s schizophrenic tensions between war and peace on the one hand, hetero-sexism and gender-bending on the other hand. The two parallel plots develop and intersect like a two-part musical score, to produce McCabe’s own fictional song : his *chanson de geste*, in which hero and storyteller are one. Throughout his life, narrator Patrick “Pussy” elicits mockery from his peers who deride him for his “fairy tales” (BP, 32), thus bringing us to McCabe’s parallel between the queer postures of drag and the act of queering reality through fiction.
- 6 Surprisingly, there is no mention of “the Troubles” in the novel, but a generic reference to “the war”, while Patrick’s constant use of the term “trouble” to refer to his own experience provides an ironic reminder of the larger political situation : “Patrick Braden, Aged 13 –

The Trouble Begins in Earnest !” (BP, 10) It is also Patrick who asks his soon to be executed politician boyfriend to “Tell me all your secret troubles.” (BP, 33) Patrick witnesses sectarian violence first hand, but he depicts the war as a theatrical – albeit deadly – performance, a game of make-believe not unlike the mimicry of children’s games. McCabe in turn subverts the question of war through his gender-bending hero : by queering the war, Pussy partially exorcises its trauma and exposes the impossible task of the testimonial narrative. McCabe uses this at the meta-narrative level to subvert fiction and to reflect on the troubled relationship between an author and his story. I will address the question of queer gesture, violence and fiction in *Breakfast on Pluto* by examining in turn the transgressive performance of gender, the violence of action, and the duties of fiction.

## 1. Gender : transgression and performance

- 7 In her seminal study on gender subversion, *Gender trouble*, Judith Butler invokes Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that “one is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one<sup>8</sup>” to introduce her own hypothesis that “the gendered body is performative” :

Words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body (...). Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality<sup>9</sup>.

- 8 For Butler to say that the gendered body is performative means that it puts on a performance and that, like a speech act, it makes things happen. In *Breakfast on Pluto*, Patrick Braden both asserts and subverts an idea of femininity through the practice of drag. Butler posits that drag is inherently subversive and “mocks the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity<sup>10</sup>”. In *Breakfast*, Patrick’s relationship to gender is more ambiguous. His narrative does question the gendered distinction between men and women and

the traditional assumption that gender is constructed and circumscribed by sex : for Patrick "Pussy", gender is indeed a social construct, and his own cross-dressing is subversive because, as a performance, it does not postulate the existence of an implicit "normalcy". Butler states that "the parody is of the very idea of an original"<sup>11</sup> : in cross-dressing and drag, the mask signifies that the original itself is a copy ; thus, to perform genre as Patrick "Pussy" does, against social adversity, is to reveal the ontological absence of natural categories of genre and desire. If "gender identity is the stylised repetition of acts through time"<sup>12</sup>, its aim is to approximate an ideal and choreographed enactment. While Butler strongly posits that the implicit ideal is created and reinforced through performances of gender, *Breakfast on Pluto* shows a blurring of lines through its representation of ambivalent gender models.

- 9 For Patrick Braden, the quintessential gesture of gender is the choreographed posture of the catwalk, in which he asserts his feminine performance as an object of spectacle and voyeuristic pleasure : "sweetness pussy kit-kit, perfumed creature of the night who once the catwalks of the world did storm as flashbulbs popped and, 'Oo !, she shrieked, 'I told you, *from my best side*, darling !' (BP, 2) ". In Patrick's reminiscence, the drag performer is no shrinking violet : she storms the catwalks and commands photographers, both mimicking and undermining female stereotypes. Patrick's golden days as a creature of desire echo the gender-ambivalence of a glam David Bowie circa 1970, in keeping with the old tradition of English camp – whose paradigmatic representative is Irish-born Oscar Wilde. Camp debunks the serious, thrives on its own artificiality and represents life as a theatre, yet its preciousness and seductiveness only partially explains Patrick's own stance in *Breakfast*. In her *Notes on camp*, Susan Sontag famously postulates that camp is also inherently apolitical, and, in its "pure examples,"unintentional<sup>13</sup>. In *Breakfast*, camp is both deliberate and strongly political, at two narrative levels. First, Patrick Braden's deliberate gender-bending and love of camp defy the oppressive conservatism of his time and reject sectarian violence. Patrick's unapologetic narrative and his determination to be himself as "Pussy" confirm his political stance, at a time when homophobia was one universally-shared belief in an otherwise divided society. At the meta-narrative level, McCabe uses his transgressive character to

denounce the violence of sectarian war and the social conformism of Catholic Ireland.

- 10 In its physical reality, Patrick's picture-perfect poise and feline gaze is a work of art crafted by the technical gestures of the artisan : make-up, costume, masks, all partake in a ritual transformation of the self :

[Puss] sat with Charlie's folks in front of the television watching David Bowie and the Spiders from Mars cavorting in their unitards. (...) We took our leave upstairs where Charlie's *salon* was in progress, Alice Cooper blasting through the open window. 'Lift your head, why don't you,' she said. 'I can't get at your neck !', foundation dab-dab-dabbing with her cotton ball. (BP, 53)

- 11 Bowie's glittery unitard symbolises the organic link between transgender cross-dressing and artistic performance, while this scene comically reminds us that the "foundation" of Patrick's new self is a dialogic enterprise : there can be no Pussy Braden without her ambiguously named best girlfriend Charlie, her primary interlocutor and a butch counterpoint to Pussy's feminine stance. Patrick's transformation into "Pussy" finally results in an all-round song and dance spectacle.

As out I wiggled – truly over the top, I swear ! – and launched into the most fabulous version ever of 'The Windmills of Your Mind', completely losing myself in it when I got to the bit about the world being just an apple whirling silently in space. (...) it simply became the highlight of my week, and for days before it I'd get myself into a right old tizzy trying to decide both what to wear and what I was going to sing. (...) Mostly I did the Supremes, Dusty and, of course, Lulu. I used to go crazy doing her number 'Shout !' – standing up on the tables and everything. And being a right old tart raising my sequined mini to drive them mad ! (BP, 88)

- 12 This scene features McCabe's recurring opposites : reality and dream, music and silence, and of course for Pussy, being at once "a right old tart" and a young man. Music is a necessary part of performance as it enables performers to "lose themselves" in their stage-identity and put on an authentic show. The signifying power of gesture meets that of singing in a symbolism detached from literal meaning and turned

towards the expression of the ineffable, captured in Dusty Springfield's line, "whirling silently in space." Dusty's song is also an invitation to McCabe's readers, who can identify to Pussy's titillated audience and to Pussy himself, replaying "Shout !" in their heads as they read while Pussy cries out against the stifling political and social oppression of her time. Impersonation is a substantial part of Patrick/Pussy's cross-dressing, starting with the make-believe "juke-box jury" with his childhood friends Irwin and Charlie. Patrick deliberately emulates Dusty Springfield, Diana Ross and Lulu, three gay icons whose silver-screen artificiality bolsters Patrick's own claim to fabricated womanhood.

- 13 Because Patrick's stance threatens the very definition of sex-based gender, it is a subversive force to be quashed. Patrick is well aware of this, and the third chapter in his narrative, entitled "In Flagrante Delicto, 7.03 p.m., Sept 13, 1968", playfully boasts of his transgression :

the door came bursting in (they must have heard me 'la-la-laa-ing' !) and who's there only - yes ! - Caroline going : 'My dress ! He's wearing my favourite dress !' and putting on quite a performance, I have to say (...) - as Whiskers gets a grip of me and starts yowling and - *slapping* me, would you believe ! - saying that this is it, this is definitely the end - and then, can you believe, collapsing hopelessly into tears ! (BP, 13)

- 14 Flagrante delicto, a blazing offence, from *delinquere*, to fail in one's duty, reminds us that Patrick's crime is not so much dressing up as a girl as failing the standards of boyhood. Punishment is necessarily inflicted on his body to set him straight in every sense of the word. However, the final admission of failure comes not from the child but from his foster mother, who "collapses" : Patrick's original sin sets ablaze the social conventions and hypocritical certainties of his family and neighbours, and paves the way for his ultimate transgressions as a "high-class escort girl." (BP, 1) Later, Patrick's "Piccadilly Escort Services" (BP, 71) add to cross-dressing the equally threatening taboo of venal sex. While prostitution and show-business are in fact his sole means of subsistence as a transvestite man, Patrick's disingenuous memoir also reminds us that in a patriarchal, misogynistic society, the female body is commonly regarded as an object of consumption. Patrick's experience of sexual violence as a prostitute thus echoes his



mother's rape at the hands of Father McIvor and symbolically completes his own female identity – and identification to his mother. To readers, his candid account provides a scathing satire of society as a whole.

- 15 Throughout his story, Patrick contrasts his subversive gender-performance with the acceptable transgressions benevolently looked on by the community. When a thirteen-year-old Patrick steals his neighbour's underwear, his gesture is misinterpreted as a sign of precocious heterosexual curiosity :

Stealing Mrs O'Hare's smalls off the washing line, pretending this time that I was dancing with Lorne Greene out of *Bonanza* ! (...). It didn't take long for word to get around the town and all you could hear going up the street was : "Ooh ! Cheeky !" and "Lovely boy !" It was pointless explaining to them that I wasn't all that interested in sex (...). (14)

- 16 Transgression is acceptable within the confines of clear-cut gender boundaries and heterosexual normalcy – or when perpetrated by the Catholic Church. No punishment befalls Father Bernard McIvor for raping sixteen-year-old Eily Bergin : he sends her away. New-born Patrick is left in the care of "Mrs Whiskers," (BP, 7) a brutal woman whose facial hair and manly appearance make her the evil counterpoint to Patrick's idealised mother ("so beautiful ... not unlike Mitzi Gaynor, the well-known film star" BP, 8). Patrick's obsession with the outside appearances of womanhood make him keenly aware of other people's ambivalence, starting with his foster mother's moustache and his father's clerical robe. Father Bernard's ritual gestures and songs during mass is in fact not radically different from his son's love of dress-up and artistic performance :

Father Bernard McIvor will be busying himself inside his sacristy. Donning the starched vestments which, it would later be the contention of ill-formed psychiatrists, were partly responsible for his son's attraction to the airy appareil of the opposite sex. (...) Once upon a time, as a young curate, he remembered, he would have held his congregation in thrall (...) with one of his truly awe-inspiring renditions of 'The Holy City' or perhaps 'O Holy Night', for which he was

renowned throughout the length and breadth of the country. (BP, 7-8)

- 17 Patrick denounces the hypocrisy of social acceptability while pointing to the actual perversion of the priest hiding his own crimes behind the sanctity of his dress. Queering the priest and Patrick's butch, alcoholic foster mother enables McCabe to question the conventional gestures of religious devotion and care and to denounce the pathological nature of Irish society itself<sup>14</sup>.
- 18 Patrick's tale concludes with a final grand gesture when he gives up his wardrobe and relinquishes spectacular performance in favour of quiet assertion.

My escort work I gave up yonks ago, one night just breaking down in the arms of some poor unfortunate man (...), and the next day presenting the Kilburn War On Want shop with the entire contents of my delicious wardrobe ! Except for my housecoat and headscarf, of course, which provide so much amusement around this home for tufty-nosed labourers. I was coming in from the shop the other day and ran into a few of them on the stairs. 'Ah, there you are, Mrs Riley !' one of them shouts as another whispered : wired to the fucking moon !' (BP, 198)

- 19 Patrick no longer emulates Dusty Springfield. His nickname "Mrs Riley" refers to British music hall show *Old Mother Riley*, a popular drag act performed on stage and film from the 30s to the 50s, in which a male actor plays the role of an uncouth Irish washerwoman, Mother Riley. In this instance, gender-bending functions as ethnic stereotyping, and the stage-Irish(wo)man embodies the masculine/feminine inversions that categorise colonial otherness. Ultimately, Patrick's victimisation as a transvestite and as an Irish "terrorist" in London shows the dangers – and courage – of individual self-assertion in a context of social and colonial oppression.
- 20 Beyond the performance of self, Patrick's fantasies betray his desperate longing for his mother. His obsession with pregnancy and birth reminds us that gesture is akin to gestation : it is a process of anticipation and elaboration. Patrick's gestures of femininity are thus in keeping with his dream of motherhood. Significantly, his narrative is

also a gestation, as it builds up through painful memories, suffering and loss, to a final outcome of birth and love.

What my fondest wish would be (...) – to wake up in the hospital with my family all around me, exhausted after my ordeal maybe, but with a bloom like roses in my cheeks, as I stroke his soft and tender head, my little baby, watching them as they beam with pride, in their eye perhaps a tear or two – who cares ! – hardly able to speak as they wipe it away and say : ‘He’s ours.’ (BP, 199)

- 21 Patrick concludes his story with an impossible dream in which he is both mother and child, thus rewriting his own life and his mother's fate, writing off the shame and pain of rape to restore pride and joy and the ultimate gift of motherly love. Patrick's picture-perfect dream is not devoid of performance : it is a Hollywood happy-ending complete with blushing lead actress and the token tears that signify emotion on screen. This is not to say that Patrick's dream is a fake, but rather, that it lies in the realm of the utterly impossible. The gaping discrepancy between Patrick's dream and his real-life experience only matches the intensity and tenacity of his transgressive gender-bending. In *Breakfast on Pluto*, the performance of fantasy comes head to head with that of everyday violence and death. Patrick looks up to the stars – he is, as his neighbours remark, “wired to the moon” (BP, 198) – to survive the grim violence of reality, offering gestures of love and art to combat the act of war.

## 2. Violence : “doing the wars” and taking action

- 22 Patrick's individual gender struggle unfolds within a community torn apart by the Irish Troubles. As Patrick recalls his childhood games “doing the wars” (BP, 18) with his friends Charlie and Irwin, he announces the irreversible fracture caused by sectarian violence when peaceful civilians become collateral damage to the alienating obsession of their peers.

there wasn't a word out of him about the perfume and the international modelling as long as we promised to keep doing the wars. (...) He was going clean mad over them ! He had even taken to wearing

his James Connolly rebel hat around the town and going off over the fields on his own to practise drilling. (BP, 18)

- 23 Like Patrick's catwalk, Irwin's "wars" are a dress-up game, yet one that is tragically condoned as acceptable and harmless. Irwin later joins the IRA like a child "doing the wars," oblivious to the fact that his deadly fantasies have irreversible effects on the fabric of reality. While Patrick's dreams remain artistic and romantic, Irwin finds himself trapped in a horrifying nightmare. Patrick is keenly aware that absolute identification to an attributed gender stereotype – or religious denomination, for that matter – is dehumanising and destructive, and he denounces the warrior stance as a damaging symbol of masculinity. Unlike Irwin, Patrick cannot be recruited into the IRA, because he does not comply with the masculine ideal of virile violence.
- 24 From a meta-narrative point of view, Patrick cannot die, although his story is one of constant victimisation and social exclusion. First, he is a witness, not an actor of the war : he must live to tell the tale. Secondly, he is neither a man, nor completely a woman : men are tortured and executed, women are raped and killed, but Patrick survives bomb attacks and psychopathic clients. His transsexualism makes him an outcast in society's strict gender-based structure, but it also makes him immune to the gender-specific fate befalling his friends and neighbours : Pat McGrane, whose girlfriend is a Protestant girl from North of the border, is kidnapped, tortured and killed by unidentified men "attired in military dress", who "didn't like him associating with protestants – or 'their' kind as they put it" (BP, 163). Laurence, Patrick's Down syndrome neighbour, is executed and his mother, raped, after their assailants find rosary beads in their home. Patrick himself is the result of rape. In Tyreelin, girls are used and abandoned, like fifteen-year-old Marina : "The estate in Tyreelin is full of them. Barely over fourteen, some of them, already pushing buggies and looking years older than they are." (BP, 106) Patrick understands the logic of violence in a way that his contemporaries do not, precisely because he questions the fundamental categories of social norm. His minute record of the banality of evil thus turns his memoirs into a Book of Evidence whose compelling testimony forces readers to rethink their own certainties.

- 25 Violence turns meaningful gesture into nonsensical action, and Patrick's transsexualism elicits violent reactions from men and women alike ; for them, suppressing the "fairy boy" (BP, 71) means re-asserting binary gender-roles and silencing the nagging fear that they might never be up to their own gender, and that Patrick's subversive stance might be contagious :

How the dancehall fight started I haven't the faintest idea, to be honest with you ! I do seem to remember someone pulling my sleeve and enquiring as to my gender. After that, all I remember is : "Skree !", and the women losing their minds as the bikers tried to get a kick at me. You can picture the scene, I'm sure - leather jackets, hefty boots and "Kill the hooring nancy queen !" (BP, 50)

- 26 The bikers' raging homophobia reasserts the "natural" link between gender and desire. In London, Pussy's psychotic client also vents his rage : "You fucking Irish bitch ! I'll murder you !" (BP, 69), thus placing Patrick in the position of the objectified (foreign) female, a disposable recipient of sex and violence. Patrick's description of his mother's rape by Father McIvor shows the psychological damage of sexual violence, presenting it as a schizophrenic symptom of society as a whole. During the rape, Eily has an out-of-body experience : "Who is this girl ?' she kept asking herself as she looked down from a height (...). It wasn't her, that was for sure, for she kept pleading : 'Stop ! Stop !' It was obviously someone else, someone else who looked like her" (BP, 127). Murder victim Pat McGrane also has an out-of-body experience when he is tortured by the UDA, and Patrick similarly tells the story in the third person yet from the victim's point of view. Such shifts from first to third person and from direct to free-indirect speech emphasise the schizophrenic fragmentation of the whole narrative, reminding us that Patrick's recollections are in fact his therapeutic diary at the psychiatric hospital. Schizophrenia is a recurring theme in *Breakfast* and in McCabe's other novels, in which violence is both the cause and symptom of individual and national psychosis. Here, Patrick's extravagant tales and convoluted narrative style are both symptomatic of his traumas and a protection against real life.
- 27 McGrane's murder scene, of unbearable violence, exposes the inhuman savagery and utter meaninglessness of the war :

They told him that they didn't mind him "riding taigs" (...) but when it came to clean, God-fearing protestant ladies, they could not stand by and countenance Catholic cocks squirting the poison of Rome into their spotless, untainted vaginas. It just wasn't right (...). Whose idea it was to start chipping at him, Pat didn't know. (...) It turned him into a solid block of flesh, a sculpture they kept tapping away at with seemingly infinite patience. (BP, 164)

- 28 The killers' arbitrary "it just wasn't right" ironically confirms their gratuitous viciousness even as they try to legitimise their actions. Stripping their victim of his humanity to turn him into a "solid block of flesh" has made them dehumanised zombies. The unspeakable horror of Pat McGrane's death contrasts with the meaningful silence of Patrick's mystical singing and dancing. Patrick confirms this language v. chaos dichotomy when he reports Irwin's fate at the hands of the IRA :

"It's not in you to kill someone !" (...) Jackie had to push [Irwin] out of the way, snatch the gun from his hand and put three in your man's head. (...) from that night on, things were never going to be quite the same again. (...) he wasn't sleeping anymore and couldn't think straight. Half the time he didn't even know what he was doing. Clearly it was only a matter of time before he started singing like a canary. (BP, 82-3)

- 29 For his IRA friends, Irwin's instinctive rejection of murder and his "singing" betray his failure to uphold the masculine value of silent execution. His sin must be punished because humane compassion has no place in the war : "What had happened to Irwin, I forgot to describe, was that everybody decided he had given enough information - 'sung enough' as they said - and Jackie and the Horse Kinnane took him out to the bog to kill him." (BP, 102-3)
- 30 Here singing is associated with failed masculinity, and Patrick makes it the very symbol of his self-assertion, in keeping with his understanding of femininity as a sacrificial gift of the self. Patrick sings for his audience as he offers his body to his clients, much as he imagines child-birth as a sacrificial ordeal. Yet love and forgiveness are not Patrick's sole aspirations ; his tales of the "Lurex Avenger" imagine a day of reckoning for Tyreelin, complete with burned-down church

and wiped-out murderers. However, this remains a fictional revenge – Patrick is not “man enough” to be a real murderer – written down for psychiatrist Dr Terence : “‘Write it for me,’ Terence said. ‘Write it as best you can – it’ll help me understand.’” (BP, 165) Ultimately, Patrick’s salvation from the silencing threats of violence is his writing, a gesture both therapeutic and performative in its illocutionary force of self-assertion.

## **Conclusion : Stroke of the pen, therapeutic writing and cathartic testimony**

- 31 At the beginning of his tale, Patrick explains that his memoirs are the result of a therapeutic diary started on the advice of his psychiatrist : “Write it all down, Terence told me. ‘Everything ?’ I said. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Just as it comes to you.’ (...) That was what he called me – the scribe ! (...) I don’t regret writing all this (in the end I put a name on it – *The Life and Times of Patrick Braden* – original, eh ?) because some of it he definitely did like.” (BP, 3-4) Patrick’s story is therefore a gesture towards his very first reader ; it represents writing as a selfless act of love.
- 32 Following his breakdown and post-traumatic stress disorder, Patrick’s writes his memoirs in an attempt to piece himself back together. Patrick’s fragmented identity results in a form of narrative apraxia : digressive sentences, frequently inverted canonical word order and incomplete sentences are paired with a seemingly uncontrolled use of emotive markers, starting with the novel’s very first sentence : “Although I’m afraid I don’t get too many clients these days !” (BP, 1) Apraxia is a neurological disorder defined as the inability to execute voluntary gestures and action, or to execute a gesture following command. In *Breakfast on Pluto*, Patrick is at pains to express and exorcise the traumas of his life in a coherent written narrative, mingling retrospective digressions and meta-narrative comments with the chronological order of his life-story. At the meta-fictional level, Patrick Braden is a mirror image of Patrick McCabe, revealing the angst-ridden relationship of an author with his own text and with his readers, and the status of writing as performative gesture.

- 33 *The life and times of Patrick Braden* is a witness testimony pointing an accusatory finger at the actors of sectarian violence, from executioners and torturers to the corrupt politicians supplying weapons to both sides (“Eamon Faircroft – o no ! I’ve gone and told you his name !” (BP, 43)). Patrick’s story is also a direct address to his father, clergyman Bernard McIvor. Patrick’s accusatory letters and essays are included in the final manuscript to document his own psychological trouble, but they also have a performative power of their own, shaking Tyreelin’s social fabric to the core :

Peepers Egan, the English teacher and acting headmaster, was on the verge of losing his mind as he paced the floor of Class 2A, St Martin’s Secondary School (...). It was unfortunate that I had now learned the truth once and for all about my clerical parentage, for I really was becoming quite obsessed with it. Hence the persistently colourful titles of my submitted essays, e.g. ‘Father Stalk Sticks it in’ and ‘Father Bernard Rides Again !’ (BP, 10)

- 34 Patrick’s attitude directly affect his biological father, who, despite being eaten up with guilt, is unable to express contrition or even love for his son : “[Father Bernard] – Terence kept coming back to this – must have been tormented, not only by my persistently vindictive missives but by the sight of me strutting about the town in the ostentatious manner I did.” (BP, 57)
- 35 Patrick’s ostentation finally brings us back to the purpose of his narrative : while his introductory chapter suggests a confession (“I was a high-class escort girl” (BP, 1)), his posture is in fact one of unrepentant self-assertion. Writing his own story enables Patrick to break the shackles of hetero-normative conformism and (post-)colonial racism : he is no longer a “fucking queer” in Tyreleen and a “terrorist Paddy” in London. By appropriating the derisive monicker “Mrs Riley,” Patrick subverts the colonial, sexist stereotype, and, following in Myles na gCopaleen’s footsteps, he “rescues the buffoon from the Victorian stage and makes him articulate.”<sup>15</sup> Beyond his transgressive transsexualism, Patrick’s writing represents his ultimate gesture of subversion, eventually drawing up an alternate reality in which he can start his life again, in a world at peace :



What we see before us is a fine, stone cottage, built by the labouring hands of a gentle, strong man who is husband to the woman who now softly reads to her bright baby boy whose name is known to all as Patrick. (...) upon the walls a picture with the words *Chez nous*, embroidered with blue entwining flowers. (BP, 109-10)

- 36 *Breakfast on Pluto* is a tribute to the illocutionary force of fiction and to the empowering function of literature. Patrick Braden's gesture of fiction profoundly alters reality : as he expresses his true self through transvestism and performance, his self-conscious artificiality becomes the very enabler of his authenticity as a subject. Like his character Patrick Braden, author Patrick McCabe draws on the implausible tales of his Bog Gothic signature genre, the better to reach fictional truthfulness. McCabe too is "wired to the moon," extending to us his invitation for a breakfast on Pluto as his own grand gesture of literary fiction.

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## NOTES

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1 I will be using the cognate English word "gesture" as an equivalent to the French "geste" throughout this paper, although the two words are not perfectly synonyms, as attested by the recent English translation of 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologist Marcel Jousse's seminal work on orality and gesture (*The anthropology of geste and rhythm : studies in the anthropological laws of human expression and their application in the Galilean oral style tradition* [1974-78] [Trans. E. Senaert and J. Conolly], Durban, South Africa : Centre for Oral Studies, 1997). Considering that Leroi-Gourhan's 1964 *Le geste et la parole* is now widely known in its translation as *Gesture and speech* [Trans. A. B. Berger], Cambridge, Mass : MIT Press, 1993), I will stick to the English "gesture" and avoid the French "geste."

2 *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, s.v. "Gesture."

3 Austin, John L., *How to do things with words*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1962 ; Searle, John R., *Speech acts*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1975.

4 Armstrong, David F., and Sherman E. Willcox, *The gestural origins of language*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2007.

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6 Corballis, Michael C., "The gestural origins of language," in *The origins of language : unravelling evolutionary forces*, in Masataka, Nobuo (ed.), Tokyo : Springer, 2008, 13.

7 Partridge, Don, and Alan Young, 1969 (single) ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPGwBxSlydM>, accessed May 30, 2014.

8 De Beauvoir, Simone, *The second sex*, quoted in Butler, Judith, *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity*, New York : Routledge, 1990, 8.

9 Butler, Judith, *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity*, *op.cit.*, 136.

10 *Ibid.*, 137.

11 *Ibid.*, 138.

12 *Ibid.*, 141.

13 Sontag, Susan, "Notes on camp," *Partisan Review*, XXXI (Fall 1964), online text, <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>, accessed May 20, 2014.

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15 Kiberd, Declan, *Inventing Ireland*, London : Jonathan Cape, 1995, 497.

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