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**LIFE, DEATH AND THE PASTORAL: METAMODERN
SENSIBILITIES IN MIKE MCCORMACK'S *SOLAR BONES*¹**

Abstract: Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016) is an award-winning Irish novel that highlights the ongoing engagement of contemporary Irish fiction with its rich literary heritage. While its single-sentence, stream-of-consciousness form recalls Joyce, the novel's thematic rejection of urban modernism aligns it with Oona Frawley's concept of the Irish pastoral. Marcus, the posthumous narrator, returns as a ghost on All Souls' Day to reflect on his life through a series of nature-infused memories that draw on both classical and Romantic pastoral traditions. This article argues that *Solar Bones* participates not only in a "metamodernist" aesthetics (James and Seshagiri, 2010) – through its revival of Joycean formal experiment, but also in "a metamodern structure of feeling," characterised by the re-emergence of Romantic sensibilities (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). By mapping neoromantic sensibilities in McCormack's representations of the protagonist's personal growth – mediated through his reflections on the natural world and his portrayal as a modern-age shepherd – the article posits *Solar Bones* as a work in which the new structure of feeling manifests primarily as an oscillation between the ordinary and the sublime, order and disorder, life and death, and the finite and infinite.

Keywords: contemporary Irish literature, pastoral tradition, metamodernism, Mike McCormack

1. Introduction

In the Introduction to the "Metamodernist" issue of *English Studies*, Dennis Kersten and Usha Wilbers (2019) draw attention to two seminal texts that offer

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contrasting conceptualizations of the new label: Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's "Notes on Metamodernism" from 2010 and the 2014 essay "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution." Vermeulen and van den Akker define metamodernism as a "structure of feeling" (p. 719), mapping its manifestations across the cultural landscape of film, art and architecture. James and Seshagiri, by contrast, use the label to refer to a "a body of artistic products" that "regards modernism as an era, an aesthetic and an archive" (p. 719). While the usefulness of James and Seshagiri's concept of metamodernism has been acknowledged, particularly in relation to "a resurgent modernism" in contemporary Irish literature (see Gilligan 2018, p. 775), testing of Vermeulen and van den Akker's conceptualization of metamodernism has been an ongoing process, encouraged by the critics themselves (see Vermeulen and van den Akker 2017, pp. 3-4).

In their early essay "Notes on Metamodernism" (2010) the scholars provide a variety of examples from contemporary cultural production to propose that the metamodern structure of feeling can be fundamentally characterized by the dynamic of metaxis and a revival of Romantic sensibilities. They draw their idea of metamodern in-betweenness from the Platonic understanding of human experience, as summarized by German philosopher Eric Voegelin:

Existence has the structure of the In-Between, of the Platonic metaxy, and if anything is constant in the history of mankind it is the language of tension between life and death, immortality and mortality, perfection and imperfection, time and timelessness, between order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence [...] (Voegelin quoted in Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010, p. 6)

Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) interpret the Platonic concept of metaxis "as a metaphor for a cultural sensibility that is particular to the metamodern discourse," manifesting primarily in the tension between "a modern desire for *sense* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all" (p. 6). They associate this sensibility with "the Romantic attitude," which, they argue, is also characterised by an oscillation between opposing poles, such as "finite and infinite, ... attempt and failure, ... [or] enthusiasm and irony" (p. 8). In their overview of contemporary works of art that they perceive as metamodern, the critics identify neoromantic sensibilities in the artists' "negotiations between the permanent and the temporary, ... [the] questioning of Reason by the irrational, ... [or] reappropriation of culture through nature" (p. 8). They also draw attention to the ways in which metamodern art engages with Romanticism through the representation of "the sublime, the uncanny, the ethereal, the mysterious, and so forth" (p. 10).

In their later study (van den Akker, Gibbons, Vermeulen, 2019), they also address literary metamodernism, clarifying differences between their definition of the term and that of James and Seshagiri:

[...] in our work, metamodernism is a structure of feeling that manifests in literary works (and cultural and aesthetic forms more generally) through a mix of or oscillation between pre-modernist, modernist, and postmodernist tropes and devices[...]. Thus, whilst we too perceive

modernist tendencies, we also see the propensities of other movements – such as romanticism, realism, and postmodernism – as operative in metamodernist forms of cultural expression [...]. Thus, pre-modern, modern, and postmodern devices are – in varying combinations – put to new use, engaging with, and responding to, the social, ethical, political, economic, and environment material circumstances of the twenty-first century. (p. 48)

Their understanding of metamodernist literary work as a text that combines the revival of the modernist tradition with the incorporation of pre-modernist and postmodernist tendencies, appears particularly useful for the discussion about Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* that this paper seeks to provide. *Solar Bones* (2016) can be regarded as a prime example of the metamodernist aesthetics that David James and Urmila Seshagiri (2014) have identified in the efforts of contemporary authors to “extend, reanimate, and repudiate twentieth-century modernist literature” (p. 89). McCormack's novel is written as a single, stream-of-consciousness sentence presenting the flow of its ghost narrator's memories, a literary approach that several critics² have associated with the tradition of Irish experimental writing. In general, the critics agree on the function that this reappropriation of the modernist experiment fulfils in McCormack's novel. Joanna Jarzab-Napierała (2019) summarizes this function by reading *Solar Bones* as an example of contemporary Irish fiction that employs experimental modernist language “as a tool to express postmodern thought and perception of the surrounding reality” (p. 62). She further aligns this postmodern thought in McCormack's novel with the “nostalgia for the past” that “serves [the protagonist] as a defence mechanism against the current economic-crisis reality as well as his own tragedy of a lost life” (p. 63). Nevertheless, although McCormack's choice to structure his novel as a single sentence, formatted only by line-breaks, is undoubtedly an allusion to the experimental techniques of James Joyce, his decision to repudiate Joyce's modernist urbanism aligns his novel with another important strain of Irish literature: that which Oona Frawley (2005) has defined as the Irish pastoral.

Frawley (2005) sees the pastoral as a crucial element of Irish literature, a genre in which “nature and landscape [have] become signifiers, lenses through which it is possible to examine cultural and historical developments” (p.1). Frawley mapped the use of pastoral motifs throughout the course of Irish literature, ranging across the early medieval period, the Renaissance, the Revival period and into the 20th century, in order to illustrate how representations of nature, landscape and the land have been aligned with the historical milestones of Irish cultural and social experience, including English colonization, the Great Famine and the national revival of the 19th century. From this perspective, Joyce's “emphasis on urban space...represents an obvious point of departure within the Irish literary tradition that wrote so overwhelmingly of the rural” (p. 106). The combination of Joycean

² See, for example, Palmqvist (2016), Kirkus Reviews (2017), Boland (2016), Connolly (2021), Harrison (2022), Jarzab-Napierała (2019) or Reynolds (2024).

experimental narrative and a rural setting, a milieu which acquires a significance comparable to that of the city of Dublin in Joyce's masterpieces, positions *Solar Bones* as a piece of the "metamodernist writing" that "reactivates and complicates the aesthetic prerogatives of an earlier [modernist] cultural moment" (James and Seshagiri, 2014, p. 93, emphasis added). While establishing a significant link to Joycean modernism, McCormack's novel also engages with a longstanding literary tradition of portraying social crises by means of pastoral imagery, particularly through its thematic focus on the collapse of the Celtic Tiger.

Academic discussion of *Solar Bones* to date has predominantly explored the modernist aesthetics of the novel in relation to the novel's social concerns. The novel's important connections to other literary traditions, such as the pastoral, remain underexplored and its deeper, metaphysical dimensions have been largely overlooked. By focusing on the central role of nature and landscape in Marcus's stream-of-consciousness narrative, this paper explores the novel's turn towards pre-modernist traditions. Specifically, it considers the text's engagement with the classical pastoral – with its iconic motifs of the idealized shepherd and the urban-rural conflict – and its appropriation of the Romantic developments of the pastoral, which emphasize personal growth through immersion in and reflection on the natural world. The Romantic sensibilities, central to McCormack's reworking of the pastoral, are reinforced by his use of a ghost narrator who returns to his former home on All Souls' Day to reflect on his past life. Marcus's narrative unfolds as a flow of memories deeply attuned to the fragility of human existence, continually grappling with tensions between the ordinary and the sublime, order and disorder, life and death, and the finite and infinite. The protagonist's awareness of these tensions crucially depends on his perceptions of nature, which align with the neoromantic focus on "the sublime, the uncanny, the ethereal, the mysterious," identified by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010, 10) in metamodern artworks. As Vermeulen and van den Akker argue, the metamodern neoromanticism should be seen as re-signification: "the re-signification of the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seamliness of the unfamiliar, and the finite with the semblance of the infinite" (2010, 12). In this light, representations of nature in metamodern art resonate with metaphysical concerns and a desire for transcendence, which in McCormack's representation of the pastoral appear to take on a more tangible form. In the pages that follow, we examine McCormack's neoromantic engagement with the pastoral in two parts. The first explores how nature – conceived as a sublime unity of order and disorder – shapes Marcus's identity, directing the continual drift of his stream of consciousness towards the idea of collapse. The second argues that Marcus can be read as a neoromantic shepherd figure, a role disclosed through the counter-movements in his thought, which consistently engage with notions of order and harmony.

2. Shaping the Self: Nature, the Sublime and Marcus's Identity

As Oona Frawley (2005) points out in her study on the Irish pastoral, representations of nature in Irish literature have been intrinsically connected to the expression of concerns about the cultural and national identity of the island's colonized people. This central aspect of Irish pastoral narratives – the focus on social and cultural struggles – can also be discerned in *Solar Bones*. Marcus's reflections on the 2008 collapse of the Irish economy create a central motif in his stream-of-consciousness narrative, drawing the attention of several critics who have framed the novel as an example of post-Celtic Tiger fiction.³ Deirdre Flynn (2018) notes the novel's connection to Frawley's definition of the Irish pastoral, highlighting the primary role of the landscape in the novel as a source of stability for the protagonist within the chaotic times of the financial crisis. Drawing on Frawley's point that nature in Irish pastoral narratives often appears as "a steady and unaltered realm beyond the reaches of the fluctuating culture," Flynn (2018, p. 46) concludes that "Marcus must first find continuity in the landscape to piece together what it means to be Irish and learn what has been lost." Marcus's strong sense of belonging to Louisburgh, "the village in which [he] can trace [his] seed and breed back to" (p. 3) also reveals McCormack's preoccupation with the "fundamental link between Irish identity and the landscape," a connection that, as Gerry Smyth (2000, p. 16) notes, recurs throughout much of contemporary Irish literature. While in no way intending to diminish the importance of the connection between landscape and the novel's exploration of the problems of the Irish nation, the following discussion focuses on the relationship between nature and Marcus's personal identity.

Marcus's perception of nature aligns closely with the Romantic pastoral tradition, a more subjective and individualistic mode of writing than that found in Irish pastoral narratives where nature primarily functions, according to Frawley (2005, p. 3), as "a site from which to express the longing for lost culture or [...] unrecoverable past."⁴ Romantic representations of rural landscape serve a different purpose; as Michael Ferber (2010, p. 9) notes, Romantic depictions are used "for exploring one's self and its relationship to others and to nature," offering private and poetic insights into the subjective experience of reality. Marcus's perception of nature and its sublime qualities shapes his sense of self, and it can be argued that Marcus's search for stability, as emphasized by Flynn (2018), belies the fact that he remains acutely aware of the world's fragility and the persistent disruptive threat which chaos poses to its apparent order. This acceptance of the inherent instability of the natural world which permeates Marcus's perception of life suggests that the binary opposition between the permanence of nature and the volatility of human

³ See, for example, Harrison (2022), Huang (2022), Jarzab-Napierała (2019), or Flynn (2018).

⁴ This connection between the Irish pastoral and McCormack's novel is highlighted by Flynn (2018, p. 47) who notices how Marcus's narrative "is linked to nostalgia, to the past, to tradition, a time before the crash where he felt stability."

society that Flynn (2018) identifies in the novel, is continually undermined by Marcus's narrative voice.

As Marcus's posthumous memories reveal, his personal identity and understanding of his place in the world were profoundly shaped by his early encounters with the sublime in nature. A memory of a sailing trip with his father on the open sea evokes

[...] [his] childhood conviction that there was nothing greater than the sea, no other width or breadth which could surpass or encompass it because the older I got and the more I had advanced in my work as an engineer the more certain I had become that out there, on the blue bay was where my sense of scale and ratio was established during my childhood [...]
watching the land recede into the distance [...] I came to a full sense of the world in its broadest span, the sky overhead and the calm surface of the sea spreading out... the swelling immensity of the bay... (pp. 99–100)

The idea of the vastness of the natural world that humans inhabit and must learn to navigate, much as Marcus's father had learnt to navigate his boat across the immense surface of the sea, initiates what Liam Harrison (2023) describes as "the almost spiritual affinity [that Marcus] possesses with his local environment" (p. 1726). Viewing nature as a manifestation of a transcendent force that governs the world's order, he comes to see his father's life – as a farmer and fisherman – as the ideal of human existence: a daily coexistence with land and sea that reflects harmonious participation in that order. This ideal later becomes the cornerstone of his profession of an engineer; throughout his career, Marcus strives to preserve harmony between the landscape and the human interventions of roads, bridges and buildings which he designs and supervises.

While the awe inspired by the vastness of the sea awakens a sense of divine order in Marcus – one which he later mirrors in his role as God's "fellow engineer" (p. 263) – a contrasting childhood experience also instils a lifelong fear of the disorder, chaos and collapse to which all things are ultimately susceptible. Watching his father dismantle a tractor, a symbol of human capacity to partake in the divine order by farming the land, he is "terrified at the sight" of the broken-down machine, "gutted of its most essential parts" (p. 21):

[...] I recoiled at the thought that something so complex and highly achieved as this tractor engine could prove so vulnerable, so easily collapsed and taken apart by this single tool and so frightened was I by this fact it would be years afterwards before I could acknowledge the engineering elegance of it [...]
this may have been the first moment of anxious worry about the world [...] (p. 22)

Instead of admiring his father's technical skills – the power to dismantle and reassemble the machine – or appreciating his father's curiosity about how the machine is constructed, Marcus intuitively sees the scene through a metaphysical perspective. The ordinary scene in his father's hayshed spirals outward into a darkly sublime image of a collapsing universe:

[...] my imagination took fright and soared to some wider, cataclysmic conclusion about how the universe itself was bolted and screwed together, believing how heaven and earth could come unhinged when some essential crotching pin was tapped out which would undo the whole vast assemblage of stars and galaxies in their wheeling rotations and send them plummeting through the void of space towards some final ruin [...] (pp. 22-23)

By revealing the inherent vulnerability of the world, the dismantled tractor awakens Marcus's awareness of mortality, producing a subliminal anxiety and fear of chaos that Marcus tries to suppress for the rest of his life. This fear resurfaces with far greater intensity when the adult Marcus watches a dismantled turbine being hauled through the streets of Louisburgh. Once again, a manifestation of the ordinary – a machine designed to allow humans to coexist with nature – is incorporated into a metaphysical, even apocalyptic, image. However, on this occasion Marcus's mind takes him beyond the image of a collapsing universe to the idea of the ultimate demise of its divine engineer. The dismantled machine appears to him

so lonely and monumental it might well have been God himself or some essential aspect of him being hauled through our little village on the edge of the world, death or some massive redundancy finally caught up with him so now he was being carted off [...] to some mid-Atlantic abyssal, down between tectonic plates, all these redundant gods lying crushed and frozen in the blackest depths with no surface. (p. 27)

Collapse, which Rob Doyle (2016) has described as the “the leitmotif of [McCormack's] novel,” thus reaches far beyond the historical reference to the ignominious end of the Celtic Tiger's boom years and functions instead as a key haunting element of Marcus's mind that shapes his adult personality. His attempts to find a sense of stability in simple daily rituals (as his father had done) testify to his effort to grapple with the inevitability of mortality. The daily ritual of listening to “the news on Midwest Radio [which are] followed by the death notices for the area” (p. 87) fills his existence with a tension between life, whose various energies are mapped by the news, and death, which has extinguished the life energies of those whose names are announced. The daily rituals, the rhythms of the village that he lives in and the awareness that there are “millions of men everywhere” (p. 87) participating in the same rituals, grant Marcus a peace of mind which although soothing, is ultimately only transitory. In perceiving the human world from a broader perspective, albeit as just a tiny element of the sublime unity of the natural world, he cannot help but steer his stream-of-consciousness towards a reflection on the shared fragility of both:

[...] just before the world collapses mountains, rivers and lakes acres, roods and perches into oblivion, drawn down into that fissure in creation where everything is consumed in the raging tides and swells of non-being, the physical world gone down in flames mountains, rivers and lakes and pulling with it also all those human rhythms that bind us together and draw the world into a community, those daily rites, rhythms and rituals upholding the world like solar bones, that rarefied amalgam of time and light whose extension through every minute of the day is visible from the moment I get up [...] (p. 85)

This apocalyptic fantasy which emphasizes the essential interconnectedness of the human and natural worlds – each supported by the “solar bones” of its own kind – becomes a reality, though on a much smaller scale, when the local water supply becomes polluted and the life of the community is put at risk. The serious illnesses which many, including Marcus’s wife, suffer as a result of the ecological crisis reignites Marcus’s “childhood ability to get ahead of [himself] and reason to apocalyptic ends” (p. 28). Although Marcus approaches the crisis calmly and rationally in conversation with his children, even suggesting the possibility of a rapid solution, the reader’s insights into his private train of thought – such as his reaction on the dismantled turbine – reveal the melancholic and gloomy character of his metaphysical musings. The image of the dead God – evoked by the dysfunctional machine “being hauled through [the] little village on the edge of the world” (p. 27) – embodies his fear of the collapse of order and the impending destruction of the once-harmonious coexistence with nature, which, poisoned by human activities, now poses an existential threat. Symbolically, the dismantled turbine represents the demise of the divine force that had guaranteed the natural order of things, leaving the village and its human community abandoned, unprotected and cast into chaos.

The metaphysics of Marcus’s life-long engagement with the threat of collapse – perceived in both the social and the natural sphere – culminate in the image of his own death: a personal collapse caused by a heart attack. When recalled by the ghost narrator, however, death, the ultimate disorder of human existence is not experienced as a fall into an abyss of oblivion. In Marcus’s posthumous memories, dying – this ultimate journey into oblivion – is perceived as a return to nature through the body’s “[picking] up the rhythms of decay” (p. 263), the shedding of the social identities of “father, husband, citizen” and the reduction to an essence shared with “animal, mineral, vegetable” (p. 264). Through its presentation of Marcus’s death as a pathway to true unity with nature that resolves his existential tensions between order and disorder, life and death, mortality and immortality, the novel affirms its immersion in the Romantic sensibilities that permeate McCormack’s representation of Marcus’s identity.

3. The Pastoral Legacy: Landscape, Shepherds and Protection of Order

Scholars of the pastoral, such as Peter V. Marinelli (2018/1971) and Terry Gifford (1999), generally agree that the figure of the shepherd has remained an integral element of the pastoral tradition throughout the centuries of its development. In its early phases, originating in the works of Greek and Roman poetry, the shepherd and his flock occupied such a crucial position that, as Gifford (1999, p. 1) observes, Leo Marx’s quip that “No shepherd, no pastoral” aptly summarizes the pastoral narratives that draw on the works of Theocritus

and Virgil. In classical texts, the shepherd is an allegorical figure; in his simple farming life in the rural landscape of “golden Arcadia,” far removed from the social and political turbulence of courtly and urban life, he embodies the pastoral ideal of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. The Romantic pastoral narrative, a development of the Romanticists’ critical dialogue with classical models, challenged Arcadian images of rural life by introducing more realistic portrayals of the toil of the farming life. Nevertheless, a certain level of idealization – particularly of the simplicity of rural life and the farmer’s special relation with nature – remains central to the Romantic vision. This is perhaps most evident in the titular labourer of Wordsworth’s seminal pastoral poem *Michael*, who, as Martha Hale Shackford (1923) notes, is “[c]lose to the very substance of earth and stone, almost one with sun and wind and rain” (p. 275).

In *Solar Bones*, the characters of Marcus and his father evoke traditional representations of the shepherd figure, allowing us once again to trace Romantic echoes in McCormack’s engagement with the pastoral and to emphasize the centrality of neoromantic sensibilities in his stream-of-consciousness narrative. We also argue that while Marcus’s father, the farmer and fisherman, aligns conventionally with the pastoral tradition, Marcus, the engineer, can also be conceived of as a shepherd figure through his critiques of the threat which the urban world poses to rural existence and his search for harmony through a personal and social coexistence with the natural order.

As we noted in the previous section, Marcus’s sense of being in the world is deeply shaped by his perception of his father’s harmonious coexistence with nature, reflected in his farming and fishing activities. The idea of his father’s unity with nature reemerges repeatedly in Marcus’s stream of consciousness, often in the form of symbolic images, such as the scene in which his father appears to merge with the land as he drives his tractor across a field: “getting smaller and smaller in the dim light before man and machine disappeared into a dip in the land as we watched from the gable of the house...” (p. 23). At other times the line of thinking appears in Marcus’s more focused reflections, such as his admiration for his father’s ability to navigate without modern equipment, using “the triangulating system he had used to navigate by, the old method by which three landmarks were aligned from sea [...]” (p. 103). From these memories, the father emerges as an embodiment of the wisdom that only a life lived in close contact with nature can provide. Yet at other moments, the father is remembered for introducing Marcus to the world of politics, offering a social commentary grounded in common-sense truths. This further underscores his connection to the traditional shepherd figure, particularly as portrayed in Renaissance interpretations of the classical archetype.⁵ Once again, Marcus

⁵ See, for example, Gifford’s discussion of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* and its portrayal of “the old shepherd Meliboe” (1999, pp. 28–29).

cannot help but admire his “father’s ability to comprehend the whole picture across all those contours and cycles in which our lives were grounded – family, farming and fishing and most memorable of all, politics... (p. 106).

From the idealizing perspective that Marcus adopts in these recollections, the father resembles the ideal of human life embodied by the “[classical pastoral] shepherd, the simplicity of whose life is the goal towards which all existence strives” (Marinelli 2018/1971, p. 4). Nevertheless, while the classical pastoral tradition presents the shepherd as “first and foremost an emblem of humanity, a general rather than a specific type,” whose “afflictions and joys are universal” (Marinelli 2018/1971, p. 4), McCormack’s depiction of Marcus’s father adopts a more individualized focus, aligning more closely with Wordsworth’s reimagining of the pastoral figure in the poem *Michael* – “a realistic and broader portrait of an actual person in an actual village” (Gifford, 1999, p. 7). Marcus’s memories thus reveal a more realistic image of farming life, a declining means of existence whose hard toils are now unable to provide sufficient means for survival; Marcus’s father is ultimately forced to seek additional work beyond the pastoral landscape and advises his son “to get an education” (p. 98), which ultimately leads Marcus to pursue a career in civil engineering.

If Marcus’s father, the embodiment of the ideal of life of simplicity and order, initially appears aligned with the classical shepherd – who represents “an emblem of humanity” (Marinelli 2018/1971, p. 4), this image gradually gives way to that of an individual increasingly diminished by his old age, ultimately stripped of his natural wisdom, common sense and, ultimately, his life. In contrast, McCormack’s portrayal of Marcus follows a different trajectory. As a shepherd figure, he seems more closely aligned with the Romantic pastoral tradition, which, according to Marinelli (2018/1971), “begins with the individual figure, concentrates upon his hard lot in life, and then magnifies him, almost insensibly, into a figure of titanic proportions, an emblem of general Humanity” (pp. 5-6). While the opening pages of his stream of consciousness introduce Marcus as a simple, ordinary man – husband, father, and member of a small rural community to which he feels deeply connected – he gradually emerges, through various pastoral, religious and metaphysical connotations, as aligned with the “modern shepherd [who] unites sublimity and reality” (Marinelli, 2018/1971, p. 2). Although, as Marinelli (2018/1971, p. 2) notes, the portraits of the “actual shepherd of the modern times” – created by Wordsworth in *The Prelude* and *Michael* to challenge the “fanciful creatures of the old pastoral” – are still rooted in images of farming life, later developments of the modern pastoral often replace the farmer with “some relatively simple figure, sometimes worker or a child” (Marinelli, 2018/1971, p. 5)

At first glance, Marcus’s profession as a civil engineer would appear to represent a decisive break from the centuries-long connection with the land of his farming forebears, a clear shift from the rural to the urban. As Marcus himself ponders, “[...] all I have done since I signed up to this job in my mid-twenties and

which, year by year, I have lent my name to, projects which if taken all together, would amount to a fully serviced metropolis with adequate housing for a hundred-thousand souls [...]” (p. 205). Nevertheless, Marcus’s professional life, like his entire character, remains deeply rooted in the simple daily rhythms and rituals of rural life. His frequent conflicts with local developers and politicians over the engineering projects in which he is involved in rural West Mayo create part of his personal battle against disorder – a struggle that ultimately becomes a symbol of the heroic human effort to confront the vulnerability of existence. Filled with the idea of transcendence – first introduced to him through the childhood perception of the sublime sea and later affirmed through his understanding of his father’s life as a form of participation in a higher order which lies beyond human design – grants him a kind of immunity from the fear of “being pressured from one side by politicians and the other by developers, both of them squeezing out all engineering and environmental considerations” (p. 135). After devoting his professional life to preserving harmony between the natural landscape and human construction, and to protecting the safety and lives of those who use the roads, bridges and buildings which he oversees, Marcus comes to see his profession as a “religious vocation with its own rituals and articles of faith” (p. 205). Guided by his religious feelings – first explored unsuccessfully through his abortive theological studies – and by the common-sense wisdom of his father’s farming life, Marcus transforms his secular vocation into a form of priesthood. In doing so he aligns himself with the ultimate shepherd figure of Christianity: Jesus Christ, the embodiment of divine protection for humankind against the threat of disorder, chaos and collapse in the world. Marcus’s engineering thus unites the realistic and the sublime aspects of human life in a way that draws attention to the “happy coincidence of meanings in the word *pastor*, shepherd and priest,” which, as Marinelli (2018/1971, p. 8, original emphasis) observes, helped to turn the classical shepherd into a key figure of the Christian pastoral tradition.

Both Marcus’s connection with God the Creator, as depicted in his self-perception as “God’s fellow engineer” (p. 263), and his association with the protective aspect of God the Shepherd emphasize the crucial ethical dimension that McCormack’s protagonist shares with the Romantic version of the shepherd figure created by Wordsworth in his poem *Michael*. McCormack’s character, like Wordsworth’s, appears to possess “a maturity, integrity and dignity that is both produced by work and extends beyond it” (Gifford, 1999, p. 6). They both show the ability to preserve these qualities throughout lives permeated by disappointment and existential fear. Although Marcus himself had turned away from the hard toil of farming life, he experiences a similar sense of disappointment in his son – who like Michael’s son, abandons the land of his forefathers in search of new life overseas – and similar feelings of defeat when a lifetime of effort is interrupted by the moment of death. While Michael’s inability to finish the construction of his fold leaves his sheep unprotected, Marcus’s premature death prevents him from completing his

efforts to protect the children whose lives will be at risk if the structural faults in a school building are left unaddressed. Although the lifelong efforts of both shepherds – Wordsworth’s literal and McCormack’s symbolic – might appear as futile attempts to resist the gravitational pull of disorder in the natural and human worlds, it is their ability to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature and the universe that lends their human existence a heroic aura. In the end, Marcus achieves the status that Gifford (1999) attributes to Wordsworth’s shepherd: “the ‘honourable gain’ of moral responsibility and a fulfilled vitality as a human being that connects him with the life force itself” (p. 7). Marcus’s ghostly return on All Souls’ Day to reflect on his fulfilled and unfulfilled responsibilities – as son, father, husband, and engineer – suggests that it is the moral dimension of our interactions with both the natural and human worlds that McCormack’s novel highlights as having the potential to transcend the crude materiality of our existence.

4. Conclusion

Mike McCormack’s *Solar Bones* offers a compelling example of contemporary Irish fiction’s engagement with the legacy of earlier literary traditions. While the novel’s revival of experimental modernism has received considerable critical attention, its engagement with the pastoral tradition remains largely underexplored – an oversight which this article has sought to address. As we have argued, the novel’s pastoral motifs reveal a metamodern structure of feeling, as defined by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010), particularly through its revival of Romantic sensibilities. This revival is most evident in the portrayal of nature as the sublime force that shapes Marcus’s personal development and in the parallels between his character and that of the Romantic shepherd – a figure whose personal confrontation with vulnerability and mortality expands into a universal meditation on the human condition. The novel’s engagement with the pastoral also reveals that Marcus’s stream of consciousness is marked by a persistent oscillation between his life-long yearning for order and harmony and his acute awareness of the forces of disorder pulling his life and his world towards collapse.

This tension between order and chaos, life and death, permanence and impermanence not only profoundly shapes Marcus’s worldview, but also renders him a ghost narrator who participates in the “metamodern discourse,” marked by the tension between “a modern desire for *sense* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010, p. 6). Although Marcus’s sudden and premature death highlights the futility of his endeavours and ironizes his search for a deeper meaning in life, his posthumous narrative voice nonetheless affirms that such meaning can be created through engagement in life’s ethical dimension. From this perspective, McCormack’s ghost narrator emerges as a “metamodern subject” that represents “an aesthetical commitment: a refusal to accept the current state of

the world, asking readers instead to think critically and defiantly about the ways in which world events are connected and how their own involvement figures in such a world” (van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen, 2019, 52).

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