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# John McGahern's Fictions

## A Chronicle of Four Decades of Change in Ireland

EAMON MAHER

THE POINTS which this article will attempt to argue may seem to be hindered by the fact that John McGahern does not see his function as an artist as being to reflect changes in society. This is something he made clear in the course of an interview with me in the year 2000:

I would see my business as to get my words right and I think that if you get your words right you will reflect everything that the particular form you're writing in is capable of reflecting. And, in fact, I think that if you actually set out to give a picture of Ireland that it would be unlikely to be interesting, that it would be closer to propaganda or journalism.... Art is a mysterious thing; the fingerprints of the writer are all over it and you can't fake anything from the reader.<sup>1</sup>

Essentially he is making two points here: firstly, that the writer who sets out deliberately to paint a certain picture of society will inevitably fall into the trap of producing mere journalism. But then he states that art, when it is deeply felt and formulated in a suitable style, conveys the image that will reveal the 'fingerprints' of the artist and capture some essential aspects of the society that has moulded him.

McGahern has often stated his belief that the lack of an accepted form of manners and structures in the Ireland of post-Independence made the role of the novelist difficult. He put it like this in an interview with

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1. 'Catholicism and National Identity in the Works of John McGahern'. Interview between Eamon Maher and John McGahern in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly*, Vol. 90, Number 357, Spring 2001, p. 77.

**Eamon Maher** recently published a monograph entitled *John McGahern: from the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2004). He was awarded a Small Project Grant from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and the Social Sciences to complete a second book on McGahern for an American publisher: *The Life and Works of John McGahern*.

Fintan O'Toole after the publication of *Amongst Women*:

Ireland isn't like other places where the novel has flourished, in that it is so structureless. It has no formed society, no system of manners. Because of that the form of the novel or the shape of the sonnet aren't available to an Irish writer in the same way, which is a pain in the arse because they are a great saving of time. This is true of the novel more than any other form: by its history and nature a novel is a whole world, it is more social than other forms.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the problems caused by the amorphousness of the society with which he was confronted, McGahern managed nevertheless to produce in his fictions a chronicle of many of the changes that beset our country in the last four decades or so. He did this in some ways in spite of himself. It is noticeable that many of his characters – from his first novel, *The Barracks* (1963), right through to his most recent publication, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) – tend to be individuals struggling to find meaning in their lives while remaining at a remove from the society in which they are placed. It is their interactions with the self-enclosed unit of family that are more important to them than anything happening on the outside. Maurice Harmon sees in McGahern's work an illustration of a general trend in the Irish novel since the 1950s in which the focus has shifted from the social environment and 'the struggle between society and the individual' to 'the private graph of feeling within the individual person.'<sup>3</sup>

#### RITUAL MEMORY

This can be seen clearly in the experience of Elizabeth Reegan, the heroine of *The Barracks*, whose 'graph of feeling' is so movingly and memorably recounted. On returning home on convalescence from her work as a nurse in London during the Blitz, she notes how little has changed in the years she has been away:

The eternal medals and rosary beads were waiting on the spikes of the gate for whoever had lost them; the evergreens did not even sway

2. 'The Family as Independent Republic', *The Irish Times*, 13 October, 1990.

3. Maurice Harmon, 'Generations Apart: 1925-1975.' In Maurice Harmon and Patrick Harmon (ed.s), *The Irish Novel in Our Time* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Publications de l'Université de Lille, 1976), pp. 55-6.

in their sleep in the churchyard where bees droned between the graves from dandelion to white clover; and the laurelled path between the brown flagstones looked so smooth that she felt she was walking on them again with her bare feet of school confession evenings through the summer holidays.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, Catholic rituals and customs predominate, with the Rosary beads placed on the church rails and her memory of school Confessions, but there is also an appreciation of the natural landscape in the mention of the trees, bees and flora. McGahern shows this landscape through the eyes of his characters, most of whom are struggling to find some meaning in their lives.

As she heads in a taxi to hospital where she will undergo surgery for breast cancer, Elizabeth summons up the strength to face the trauma that awaits her with the thought: 'She had a rich life and she could remember.' (*Barracks*, 115) Memory will serve as a coping mechanism as she undergoes doubt about the future and suffers post-operative pain in the present. A deeply spiritual woman, she is also rebellious by nature, as can be seen by her refusal to join the local branch of the Legion of Mary which she viewed as being: 'a kind of legalized gossiping school to the women and a convenient pool of labour that the priests could draw on for catering committees.' (*Barracks*, 163) She is, however, conscious of the capacity of religion to help her to transcend her suffering. What appealed to her about her religion were 'the church services, always beautiful, especially in Holy Week; witnessed so often in the same unchanging pattern that they didn't come in broken recollections but flowed before the mind with the calm and grace and reassurance of all ritual.' (*Barracks*, 123)

This is what distinguished her from the doctor, Halliday, with whom she had an affair in London and who once asked her: 'What the hell is all this living and dying about anyway, Elizabeth?' (*Barracks*, 85) Halliday didn't ever find an adequate response to his existential question, whereas Elizabeth's commitment to her faith serves as a comfort to her when she's on the verge of despair. She loves the Rosary which 'had grown into her life: she'd come to love its words, its rhythm, its repetitions, its

4. *The Barracks* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 14. Henceforth will be referred to as *Barracks*, followed by page numbers.

confident chanting, its eternal mysteries; what it meant didn't matter ... it gave the last need of her heart release, the need to praise and celebrate, in which everything rejoiced.' (*Barracks*, 220)

She doesn't seek any intellectual understanding of her faith, no more than she expects consolation from her visits to the church: 'There were no answers ... she'd no business to be in the church except she loved it and it was quiet.' (*Barracks*, 165)

From his first novel, therefore, we can see McGahern is sensitive to the inner life of his characters but also to their relationship with the outside world. Thus, before Elizabeth departs for hospital, she is resentful of the manner in which the wives of the other policemen invade the barracks: 'They were excited, the intolerable vacuum of their own lives filled with speculation about the drama they already saw circling about this new wound.' (*Barracks*, 106) They show no desire to leave the spectacle of another human being's suffering and only depart when Reegan makes so much noise that they can't hear themselves talking.

Episodes like this illustrate the power of social ritual in rural Ireland. McGahern's fictions have always tended to concentrate on the local and for reasons he outlines in the following manner:

I think all good writing is local, and by local I don't differentiate between Ballyfermot and north Roscommon. If the writer gets his words right, he'll make that local scene universal.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in his second novel, *The Dark*, we encounter a similar setting to the first but it is seen through a completely different lens. This time we are presented with an adolescent, Mahoney, who is the victim of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of his domineering father. The novel was published in 1965 and it contains passages that still have the power to shock some four decades later. The paternal abuse follows the same pattern, referred to as 'the dirty rags of intimacy.'<sup>6</sup> The father strokes his son's stomach and genitalia, causing both to reach orgasm.

#### HIDDEN LIVES

It took great courage to write clearly about this in the Ireland of the

5. 'Catholicism and National Identity', art. cit., p. 81.

6. *The Dark* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p. 19. Will be referred to subsequently as *Dark*, followed by page numbers.

1960s, a society that McGahern has described as a 'theocracy', totally dominated by the Catholic Church. So to describe sexual abuse by a father, masturbation, and to even go so far as to hint at clerical sex abuse, as he did in *The Dark*, was to place oneself at a remove from the dominant ideology of the period. The big sin in the eyes of the Church at that time was sex. Louise Fuller points this out very well in her study, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture*, where she writes:

The bishops repeatedly warned about the dangers of the modern world – dangers arising from dancing, 'evil literature', modern song, drinking and so-called 'company-keeping'. In the minds of the bishops, these seemed to constitute the concrete symptoms of the advancing tide of materialistic and secularist attitudes which had already engulfed neighbouring countries and which they were determined to resist at all costs.<sup>7</sup>

Such rigorous views led to the incarceration of many young women who found themselves pregnant outside of wedlock and ended up in institutions such as the Magdalene Laundries. A preoccupation with 'sins of the flesh' was common to both lay people and clergy and it is something to which McGahern was particularly attuned. In his essay, 'The Solitary Reader', he wrote:

In the emerging class in the Ireland of the nineteen forties, when an insecure state was being guided by a philistine Church, the stolidity of a long empty grave face was thought to be the height of decorum and profundity. 'The devil always finds work for idle hands', was one of the warning catch phrases. Time was filled by necessary work, always exaggerated: sleep, Gaelic football, prayer, gossip, religious observance, the giving of advice – ponderously delivered and received in stupor – civil war politics, and the eternal busyness that Proust describes as Moral Idleness.<sup>8</sup>

*The Dark* presents an unappetising and, at the time of its publication, a hidden face of provincial Ireland. Everything is couched in an atmosphere of fear and loathing. Mahoney harbours illusions about becoming

7. Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2002), p. 52.

8. 'The Solitary Reader.' In *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, July 1991, p. 19.

a priest but feels unworthy because of his problems with masturbation. In the summer before his Leaving Certificate, he goes to stay with his cousin, Fr Gerald, in order to discuss his vocation. On his first night in the presbytery, the cousin arrives in his room and gets into bed alongside him. The narration changes into the second person singular as the hero attempts to analyse his feelings:

... you stiffened when his arm went round your shoulder, was this to be another night of midnight horrors with your father. His hand closed on your arm. You wanted to curse or wrench yourself free but you had to lie stiff as a board, stare straight ahead at the wall, afraid before anything of meeting the eyes you knew were searching your face. (*Dark*, 70-71)

In the end, nothing untoward happens but the reader, like the adolescent, feels that the situation is at best compromising. Fr Gerald explores in an intrusive manner Mahoney's sexuality, interrogating him in relation to his fantasies about girls and getting him to admit his problems with masturbation. Afterwards, the boy feels his unworthiness in the face of God all the more acutely, as he reflects: 'You'd dream of the ecstasy of destruction on a woman's mouth.' (*Dark*, 84)

It is not just the clergy who are found prurient in this novel. Fr Gerald secured a position for Mahoney's sister, Joan, with an upstanding family in the parish, the Ryans. The young man and priest stop off at this house on their way to the presbytery where Joan's appearance is a source of concern to her brother. When she whispers to him: 'It's worse than home' (*Dark*, 63), his suspicions are aroused. Later he discovers that Mr Ryan has been making lewd comments and generally behaving in an inappropriate manner towards her. In spite of being outwardly devout, this man is portrayed as a lecher. In one of the few uplifting moments of the novel, Mahoney rescues Joan from the clutches of the Ryans and brings her home with him.

Space does not permit me to go into detail about the many other ways in which McGahern's fictions offer a chronicle of four decades of change in Ireland. I will merely take examples from some of his other novels.

*The Pornographer*, published in 1979, was McGahern's attempt to see if sex could be written about: 'So the pornography was a kind of backdrop

to see if the sexuality, in its vulnerability and its humanness could be written about. My own feeling is that it probably can't.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Mahoney in *The Dark*, the pornographer, who is never provided with a name, does not suffer from residual feelings of guilt with regard to his sexual promiscuity. He stalks the dance floors of Dublin as a means of carrying out the fieldwork for his writings. This novel shows the distance that has been travelled in Ireland in a short space of time. Bars, dance halls, casual sexual encounters, heavy drinking have replaced the traditional Catholic, family-centred activities of the early novels set in the country.

Josephine, a thirty-eight-year-old bank official, who is described 'a wonderfully healthy animal',<sup>10</sup> becomes the lover of the exploitative young protagonist. She declares after they have made love: 'I don't feel guilty or anything,' (*Pornographer*, 41) but refuses to allow him use condoms saying: 'It turns the whole thing into a kind of farce.' (*Pornographer*, 56) When she gets pregnant, her partner's initial reaction is to 'take the blame for the whole business' but his friend, a doctor, suggests an abortion or giving the child up for adoption. The fact that these options, especially the former one, are even being discussed openly shows the culture swing in Ireland since the publication of *The Dark*. What is remarkable also is that the later novel, which contains some genuinely pornographic passages, was never banned. McGahern's own explanation for this is that, instead of banning him, the Board just chose to ignore him.

#### INDEPENDENCE

There is a sense also in which the freedom to write such a novel without incurring widespread reprobation from the Irish public is symptomatic of burgeoning independence from Church interference in public and private affairs. Young people in this novel are openly engaged in permissive sexual activity without any obvious signs of remorse. This is why I believe that Maloney, who publishes the pornography written by the main protagonist, is wide of the mark when he says:

9. 'An Interview with John McGahern.' In Eamon Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003), p. 149.

10. *The Pornographer* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 34. Will subsequently be referred to as *Pornographer*, followed by page numbers.

'Look at today – isn't the whole country going round in its coffin! But show them a man and a woman making love – and worse of all enjoying it – and the streets are full of 'Fathers of eleven', 'Disgusted' and the rest of them. Haven't I been fighting it for the past several years, and giving hacks like you employment into the bargain.' (*Pornographer*, 50)

Maloney does have a point about the unwillingness of many Irish people to adopt a relaxed attitude to sexuality up until quite recently, but this is a mind-set that began to wane with the advent of the 1960s with its emphasis on sexual liberation, the campaign for world peace, and, of course, the culture of drugs and rock 'n' roll.

Even in *Amongst Women*, where time appears to stand still, the younger Moran son, Michael, is seduced as an adolescent by a returned emigrant, Nell Morahan, with whom he visits some of the dance halls that were beginning to spring up all around Ireland. Her motor car is one of the main reasons the affair is possible, as it facilitates mobility and freedom.

So change reaches as far as Great Meadow, that bastion of permanence. Sexual liberation, less commitment to Catholic rituals and customs, emigration, materialism, the abandonment of farming the land as a means of making a living, these are not the things that Moran and his comrades risked their lives fighting the English for:

'What did we get it for it? A country, if you'd believe them. Some of our own johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen. More than half my own family work in England. What was it all for? The whole thing was a cod.'<sup>11</sup>

Eamonn Wall reckons that *Amongst Women* 'is a mirror to the century – from the War of Independence to close to the present. Here is a work which functions both as a chronicle of the fortunes of the Moran family and also as a chronicle of the fortunes of the nation in its progress through fifty years of change.'<sup>12</sup> The point is well made, even if not everyone would agree with it fully. What McGahern does is show us, through the microcosm of one family, the universal experience of living at a certain time in

11. *Amongst Women* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 5.

12. 'The Living Stream: John McGahern's *Amongst Women* and Irish Writing in the 1990s'. In *Studies: An Irish Quarterly*, Autumn 1999, p. 305.

a certain part of Ireland.

He continues this chronicle with *That They May face the Rising Sun*, his swan song to the disappearing culture that is rural Ireland at the beginning of the third millennium. Eileen Battersby described McGahern's most recent novel as a 'superb earthly pastoral' and concludes that McGahern is 'a supreme chronicler of the ordinary as well as the closing chapters of traditional Irish rural life.'<sup>13</sup> Seamus Deane concurs and notes how in his last novel there is a serenity and a gentleness that were not in evidence in the earlier fiction:

The book is a strange and wonderful mixture of various genres of writing – narrative in the basic sense, but also a meditation, a memoir, a retrospect, an anthropological study of a community ....., a celebration of an Ireland that had formerly been the object of chill analysis as well as loving evocation.<sup>14</sup>

*That They May Face the Rising Sun* brings McGahern's chronicle of an Ireland in flux to a relaxed and elegant conclusion. His message was not always warmly received by an Irish public that found his fictions uncomfortable and his vision bleak and desolate. Now he is acclaimed and lauded by those who initially refused to ratify him. A member of Aos Dána and the Arts Council, the recipient of numerous literary awards, he is hailed today as 'the foremost prose writer in English now in Ireland' by no less an authority than Declan Kiberd,<sup>15</sup> a critic who has always seen the merit of McGahern's artistic quest.

I will conclude with some of the writer's own comments about the critical reception of his work which were given in an interview with Joe Jackson after his play, *The Power of Darkness*, was staged in the Abbey Theatre in 1991:

I always was attacked on the grounds that the world I wrote about did not exist and it's only in the last five or ten years, here in Ireland, that my work is seen to be actually true.<sup>16</sup>

13. *The Irish Times*, 8 December, 2001.

14. 'A New Dawn', *The Guardian*, 12 January, 2002.

15. 'John McGahern: Writer, Stylist, Seeker of a Lost World.' Interview between Eamon Maher and Declan Kiberd, in *Doctrine & Life* 52 (February 2002), p. 86. This text provides one of the best critiques to date of McGahern's oeuvre.

16. 'Tales from the Dark Side', *Hot Press*, 14 November, 1991, p. 19.