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## A Place Apart, In Its Own Time: the Irish Pub As Portrayed in John McGahern's Short Stories

Aoife Carrigy

*Technological University Dublin*, [aoife.carrigy@it-tallaght.ie](mailto:aoife.carrigy@it-tallaght.ie)

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**A place apart, in its own time: The Irish pub as portrayed in John McGahern's short stories  
Aoife Carrigy**

In his introduction to the posthumous collection of John McGahern's non-fictional writings, *Love of the World*, literary critic Declan Kiberd writes of the 'colour of locality' that informs the dialogue '(and often the narrative)' of McGahern's fictional writings,<sup>1</sup> and of McGahern's appreciation for Synge's Aran, Kavanagh's Monaghan and Joyce's Dublin amongst other expressions of what McGahern himself once described as an island containing thirty-two independent republics.<sup>2</sup> As Kiberd explains it, the imposed ideals of 'nation' or even 'county' were arbitrary constructs to a man such as McGahern who had grown up criss-crossing the Leitrim-Roscommon borders on his bicycle and for whom, 'the real unit of culture... was the parish, the local church spire being its epicentre and the sound of its bells marking out the limits of its intimate, familiar world'. (xvii)

In one essay within that collection, 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing', McGahern writes that in the 1950s, 'people did not live in Ireland' but rather in 'small, intense communities' that 'could vary greatly in spirit and character, even over a distance of a few miles'. (130) And again in his beautiful non-fiction homage to County Leitrim, 'The Sky Above Us' – in which his home county is evoked as 'a place apart', at least a hundred miles from everywhere (19) – McGahern depicts a geography in which 'county divisions mean little' but where it is 'each single, enclosed locality that matters'; here, local people share a 'passionate interest' in the news of their locality and a distinct disinterest in anything beyond. (24) That local news is sought out with relish, as in McGahern's loving description of Mohill town in winter when the country folk gather to do the late-night Saturday shop: 'When the shopping is done, they go to the bars to meet the people they know and to discover the news, each locality to its own bar'. (26) If the spire was the epicentre of each of those communities, then local pubs were a tribal gathering point and social mart in which that vital currency of local news could be exchanged.

That tribalism might be dictated by the townland you hailed from, but it also might stem from old civil war politics. In the village of Fenagh in South Leitrim, 'two bars watch one another across a road: one Fianna Fáil, the other Fine Gael', and the public phone box would be positioned outside

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1 John McGahern, *John McGahern: Love of the World*, Ed. Stanley van der Ziel; Introduction by Declan Kiberd (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), p.xvi. (Page numbers in brackets hereafter.)

2 Kiberd references this description from an interview he conducted on RTÉ Television on 12 Nov 1985, entitled 'Exhibit A'. The reference appears in Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) p.496.

one or the other, depending on who was in power and shifting 30 yards across the road with every change of government. (25)

It is not surprising then – for a writer concerned primarily with ‘People and places. Places and people’, to quote critic Eamon Maher<sup>3</sup> – that the pub features frequently in much of McGahern’s writings. This paper explores McGahern’s representations of the pub in his short stories, and the colour of locality with which he infuses them, as places that are an essential part of the worlds and of the times that they inhabit but which also operate as places set apart from that wider world and within their own peculiar rhythms of time. McGahern’s non-fiction writings provide useful context for these stories – and for his personal relationship with the pubs that he inhabited, those he loved and those he rejected – and so this paper also draws from those vivid descriptions.

We speak today of ‘the Irish pub’ as if it is something knowable and distinct, a singular space albeit with multitudinous manifestations, but which share a readily identified commonality of traits and which serve as a unifying marker of Irishness where they are found. But as Frank Shovlin highlights, in McGahern, we are dealing with a writer who shared a distrust of what the poet Patrick Kavanagh called ‘the all-over lie that was Ireland’ and which he accused ‘some men of genius – Yeats and Joyce in particular’ of perpetuating.<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps inevitable that McGahern’s writings challenge that generalised notion of ‘the Irish pub’. Instead, he represents very specific local pubs, drawn from his personal life experiences and ‘subjected’ to what Maher refers to as ‘the prism of art’ in order to ‘assume a universal resonance’.<sup>5</sup>

Stanley van der Ziel asserts in his editor’s preface to *Love of the World* that ‘McGahern’s fiction was always rooted in specific places’. His short stories are for the most part firmly rooted in the high hinterland surrounding the source of the Shannon, intersected with county borderlines and peppered with place names like Ardcarne and Arigna, Gloria Bog and Lough Allen. And the pubs and bars portrayed are typically the Luke Henry’s, Charlie Ryan’s and Royal Hotels of that landscape. McGahern wrote of that which he knew, and these were places that he knew and treasured. Sometimes he borrowed real-life observations from as far away as Enniskillen across the Fermanagh border, as we shall see, but in McGahern’s world, a town even 18 miles away might as well have been

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<sup>3</sup> Eamon Maher & Paul Butler, ‘John McGahern: his Time and his Places’, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 39, no. 2 (2016), pp.27–54, p.49.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, ‘On a Liberal Education’, *X: A Quarterly Review* 2, no.2 (August 1961), p.112–13. (referenced by Frank Shovlin, ‘Bohemian Rhapsody: Patrick Kavanagh and Generation X’, in *Touchstones: John McGahern’s Classical Style* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), p.105.

<sup>5</sup> Maher & Butler, p.39.

Syracuse – in Sicily or New York – in terms of how foreign and remote it felt,<sup>6</sup> never mind the cities of Dublin, Galway and Belfast.<sup>7</sup>

McGahern did also familiarise himself with the pubs of Dublin during his time spent in the city, before he retreated back to his birthplace in Leitrim. As Kiberd observes:

The Dublin pubs which he had known in the 1960s had been filled with writers, often embittered and spiteful because there was so little wealth to share: and McGahern, deeply unimpressed, chose to move away from the quarrels and alliances, even before the post-censorship culture of celebrity had taken hold.<sup>8</sup>

In his examination of the literary influences on McGahern's classical style, Shovlin echoes this sense of McGahern's distaste for Dublin's boozy literary scene and its veritable 'high priest', Patrick Kavanagh.<sup>9</sup> He quotes McGahern's characterisation of the 'barrage of insult and abuse that seemed the necessary initiation to the doubtful joy of Kavanagh's company'.<sup>10</sup> However Shovlin's nuanced articulation allows for a certain ambiguity in McGahern's regard for both pub scene and poet. Shovlin identifies the latter as the primary inspiration for the 'Kavanagheseque character' within short stories such as 'My Love, My Umbrella' and 'Bank Holiday'.<sup>11</sup> And he highlights the exhilaration felt by McGahern and his contemporaries that literature might be taken back from the establishment, and belong once again to the people on the street – and, by extension, in the pubs – conceding that 'although McGahern rejected the noise and hurry of the literary pub scene [...] he could also admire those, like Kavanagh, who took this world on and made it their own'.<sup>12</sup>

That ambiguity is palpable in McGahern's Dublin-based short stories. As with the Leitrim pubs, certain Dublin pubs appear as recurring motifs in many of those stories: some nameless but inferred by their descriptions and inhabitants, such as McDaid's, others name-checked specifically, such as Mooney's, the Scotch House and Mulligan's. It is no coincidence that McGahern chose to root these stories within pubs that have strong literary connections. Some draw their central themes directly from the 1950's literary scene dominated by Kavanagh and his cronies, as in 'Bank Holiday' (a story which borrows its name from a Kavanagh poem) in which both McDaid's and Mooney's of

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<sup>6</sup> McGahern, 'County Leitrim: The Sky Above Us', *Love of the World*, p.24.

<sup>7</sup> McGahern, 'County Leitrim: The Sky Above Us', *Love of the World*, p.19.

<sup>8</sup> Kiberd, in *Love of the World*, p.xvii.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Shovlin, 'Bohemian Rhapsody: Patrick Kavanagh and Generation X', *Touchstones: John McGahern's Classical Style*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), p.99.

<sup>10</sup> John McGahern, 'The Bird Swift', *John McGahern: Love of the World*, Ed. Stanley van der Ziel; introd. Declan Kiberd, (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), p.67–68.

<sup>11</sup> Shovlin, 'Bohemian Rhapsody', *Touchstones*, p.98–101.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113.

Grafton Street appear. Other stories are staged in pubs familiar to readers of Joyce's *Dubliners*, as in the case of the Scotch House and Mulligan's, both of which appear in Joyce's masterful and menacing 'Counterparts' (as well as McGahern's *My Love, My Umbrella* and 'The Country Funeral' respectively).

While there are of course commonalities between the parallel pub cultures of the city and the parish, there are many more differences – albeit subtle ones – and it is interesting to compare McGahern's treatment of both class of pubs. Many of the themes that arise in this dualistic portrayal of Irish pubs can be found in one of McGahern's later short stories, 'The Country Funeral', in which both country and city pubs feature. This road-trip tale relates the return of three Dublin-born brothers to their mother's family home at Gloria Bog where they are to wake and bury their late Uncle Peter. None of the three brothers have particularly fond memories of their bachelor uncle, with whom they spent unhappy childhood summers escaping their 'unreliable father'<sup>13</sup>: not the fiercely independent and wheelchair-bound Fonsie, nor the careful schoolteacher John, nor the extravagant and lonely Philly, who is home on a break from life on the oil rigs. But the age-old rituals surrounding any death in this close-knit community draw the brothers under their spell, and the return leg of the trip turns into something of a cross-country pub-crawl as the three attempt to integrate the subtle internal shifts that the journey to and from their rural roots has induced in them. It is almost as if they are divers, resurfacing from an unfamiliar atmospheric pressure; and each of the many pubs that they stop off at on the way back to Dublin acts as a decompression stop, to allow them to equalise their bodies and souls and to avoid getting the bends that come with too fast a transition from one state to the other. The distance between urban city and rural village cannot be measured in mere miles on an asphalt road; for the brothers, the true distance can only be marked by acknowledging the multitude of 'small, intense communities'<sup>14</sup> along the way and paying their respects in some of the tribal gathering points that make up the nationwide network of local pubs.

In 'The Country Funeral', the narrative pivots on the central rural scenes in Henry's grocer-pub, from where Uncle Peter's next-door neighbours have ordered those supplies considered essential for any country wake: whiskey, stout, beer and sherry and the makings of tea and sandwiches. But that narrative is book-ended by opening and closing scenes in Mulligan's of Poolbeg Street in Dublin's city centre, where some of the central tropes around McGahern's treatment of the pub as place are established. Within the first few pages of the story, we have seen the pub represented as a refuge

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<sup>13</sup> John McGahern, 'The Country Funeral', *Collected Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p.379. (Page numbers in brackets hereafter.)

<sup>14</sup> McGahern, 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing', *Love of the World*, p.130.

to which people escape the relentless grind of time and daily life; a physical space defined by both its delineation from, and push-and-pull with the world beyond; and a place with its own distinct rules of engagement, where talk is a currency that is skillfully managed by authoritative bartenders.

Finding himself ‘alone and companionless in just another morning’ and with ‘nothing better to do than walk to Mulligan’s’ (375), Philly heads directly after breakfast to the pub, that refuge of the lonely, where he joins several other solitary drinkers nursing pints along the bar. Fonsie is too rooted in the rhythms of his daily life to join Philly – he has the breakfast plates to wash, and the shopping to do – whereas Philly is as unrooted in time as he is in place. In the pub, he engages in open conversation with the other barflies about how the daily newspaper always lacks worthy news: how “‘there’s never anything in those newspapers’” but “‘you always think you’ll come on something’” and “‘(t)hat’s how they get your money’”. (375) This unanswered craving contrasts starkly with the great satisfaction offered to patrons of those Mohill pubs described by McGahern where local news is feasted upon by each tribe.<sup>15</sup> There is a sense that, like Philly, his co-drinkers may also be second-generation refugees exiled from rural communities in which their people were until recently so utterly rooted. The drinkers are repeatedly disappointed by the daily news because none of it seems to pertain to their own lives.

As he dispatches his morning pint, Philly watches the doorway – the feet passing it by and the grey dull light that the concrete gives back when it empties. Unlike the owners of those feet, Philly has nowhere to be; soon that emptiness becomes too much to bear: The waiting silence of the bar became too close an echo of the emptiness he felt all around his life. As he sipped and turned the pages he resolved to drink no more. The day would be too hard to get through if he had more. (375)

Philly may have come here to escape the yawning day, but in the push-and-pull tension between the rhythms of ‘pub time’ and ‘real time’, the latter has dominated – this time around at least. Unlike other McGahern characters in other pub scenes, Philly has enough self-awareness to intuit the danger posed by succumbing too readily to the pull of pub time.<sup>16</sup> As soon as Philly banishes himself from the pub, the barflies take up some loose talk, passing remarks on Philly’s capacity for spending and his brother Fonsie’s capacity for drinking, but the barman puts a sharp stop to this chat: ‘There were few things he disliked more than this ‘behind-backs’ criticism of a customer as soon as

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<sup>15</sup> McGahern, ‘County Leitrim: The Sky Above Us’, *Love of the World*, p.24.

<sup>16</sup> See later for the discussion of ‘High Ground’ and the character of Master Leddy, who does not see the danger he is in.

he left.’ The authority of his ‘silent disapproval’ is absolute, though it is notable that he draws on the external forces of the newspaper which he rattles noisily and that grey strip of light which he stares out at, like two allies summonsed to quell this ‘little insurrection’. (376) The barman might be the absolute authority within this place apart, but he seems to draw that authority from the outside world within which this place is situated.

Many of those themes – of a place apart, in its own time and with its own rules – re-arise in the rural setting of Luke Henry’s pub, when we eventually get there via the house in Gloria Bog where Uncle Peter is laid out. As always with McGahern, that rich ‘colour of locality’<sup>17</sup> evokes a vivid sense of a place and its people, the rhythms of its land and the patterns of their speech. Unlike the nameless barman’s silent suppression of loose talk in Mulligan’s, Luke Henry coaxes conversation with his own echoing patter – repeating ‘each scrap of info after Philly as soon as it was given between his own hesitant questions and interjections’ (387) – but his authority is no less effective, and neither Philly or Fonsie are capable of resisting his insistent hospitality.

Maher suggests that there is ‘a sense in which the landscape around Gloria Bog... is transforming the men without their realising it’<sup>18</sup>. This is exemplified in how Fonsie is forced to ask for Philly’s help in negotiating the ‘strange ground’ (393) outside his late uncle’s home later that night – help that he would refuse Dublin, but which is necessary in this more primal place where people must pull together to get by. It is not just the landscape that is transformative, however, but the people within it and their age-old rituals and rules of engagements. These ritual and rules are primarily communicated through that social mart of the local pub, where it is not just news that is exchanged but the social bond that comes from knowing how to behave appropriately. By ‘taking his cue’ (401) from Jim Cullen and Luke Henry, Philly eventually begins to learn how to rein in the feverish generosity that his co-drinkers in Dublin have willingly indulged, if privately criticised. Here, under the gentle tutorage of the local barman and his trusty regulars, Philly’s fever is transformed into something more socially appropriate, a measured and reciprocated gesture of mutual respect and appreciation rather than what was in danger of being interpreted as the ostentatious extravagance of a man with more money than sense.

Meanwhile, Luke Henry’s insistent hospitality gently transforms Fonsie from his self-imposed exile as a literal outsider into a socially integrated co-dependant. From his stance as a solo figure, sitting

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<sup>17</sup> Kiberd in *Love of the World*, p.xvi.

<sup>18</sup> Eamon Maher, ‘The Local is the Universal Without Walls: John McGahern and the Global Project’, in *Cultural Perspectives on Globalisation and Ireland*, Ed. Eamon Maher (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 211–231, p.217.

outside the pub and refusing to share a drink, he grudgingly accepts the offer of a pint of stout on the house, though drinks it alone in the front seat of the rented Mercedes. He finally softens enough to allow Philly carry him into the pub in his arms, accepting both his own vulnerability and his brother's support in it.

Curiously, that striking image of the solo drinker sitting in a swanky car outside their local rural pub reappears in another of McGahern's longer stories, 'Oldfashioned'<sup>19</sup> – this time with the figure of the eccentric but locally respected Mrs Sinclair who prefers to take her three nightly gin and tonics sitting in the Jaguar outside Charlie's, with the engine running, the heat on and BBC World Service keeping her company. Meanwhile her husband, the Colonel, takes his Black Bush indoors at the round table of Charlie's parlour, typically as solitary as his wife except for the 'doubtful benefit' (38)<sup>20</sup> of occasional company from 'a local priest or doctor or vet or solicitor out on the razzle'. (39) The only company that the Colonel tolerates is the tactful presence of Charlie himself, who knows to keep the conversation to 'fruit trees and vegetables and whiskey'. (39) It is interesting to note that, once again, it is the barman who is depicted as the master of conversation, in this case being the only local who can be trusted to restrict the limits of conversation to appropriate topics and by all means away from the fraught theme of religion.

Like Luke Henry, Charlie tries to insist that Mrs Sinclair would be more comfortable inside the bar, but, like Fonsie, hers is a place of self-inflicted exile and one that she is happy to occupy. "No, Charlie," the Colonel explains. "She'd not like that. Women of her generation were brought up never to set foot in bars," and the matter ended there; and though it caused a veritable hedgerow of talk for a few weeks, it provoked no laughter.' (38) With this subtle delineation and sleight-of-hand, Mrs Sinclair is carefully positioned to occupy both a place apart (being outside) and a time apart (being from another time) from the physical and temporal space of the pub, and yet becomes both an integral part of the rituals of that social place and an extension of its spatial and even temporal presence within the greater place of the village.

The Sinclairs are creatures of impeccably reliable habit, and their neighbours learn to expect that black Jaguar as it appears 'every evening except on Sunday, at exactly nine o'clock... It was so punctual that people began to check their watches as it passed, the way they did with the mail van

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<sup>19</sup> John McGahern, 'Oldfashioned', *High Ground and Other Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), pp.35–58. (Page numbers in brackets hereafter.)

<sup>20</sup> Note the echoing of the 'doubtful joy of Kavanagh's company', as quoted from McGahern in Shovlin, *Touchstones*, p.99.



and the church bells...’ (37) Their absence is felt when they leave after Christmas to winter in England (and ‘missed like any familiar absence’), and their return is welcomed (‘with relief as well as genuine gladness’) when they reappear in March, like migrating birds heralding the shifting of seasons. (38) The Sinclairs have become part of the landscape – or at least their visits to the pub and their curious straddling of the threshold between inside and outside have become defining features of this locality’s spatial characteristics: locals reflect ‘on the mystery of the woman sitting alone drinking gin in the darkness, the car radio on and the engine running wastefully, the way they might pause coming on the otters’ feeding place along the riverbank, its little private lawn and scattering of blue crayfish shells’. (38)

That instinctive sensitivity that McGahern displays in his observations of the push-and-pull tension between a pub and the wider world it occupies is intimated within a wonderfully evocative non-fiction essay, ‘Blake’s of the Hollow’, which reads as a love letter to the eponymous historic pub in Enniskillen. Describing the striking ‘handsome front and fireman’s red paintwork’ of what he thinks of as ‘one of the happiest and most beautiful bars in the whole of Ireland’, McGahern observes that ‘(w)ithin the swing doors the bar is in perfect agreement with the front’.<sup>21</sup>

He details the pub's ancient sherry casks, which were still in use until the 1920s since its days as a bonded warehouse; the once-gas-filled lamps; the wooden edifices of the overlooking office and the snugs that resemble private carriages or cabins; and the beautiful tiles laid out in patterns identical to the local Catholic church and which, despite being more recent than those of the church are also more well-worn – an observation that speaks volumes of local habits and patronage.

For all the physical impressiveness of Blake’s, however, there is a real sense here that, for McGahern, no small part of the pub’s inherent happiness and beauty lies within the harmonious balance it achieves between its inner world and the outer world that surrounds it. This is underscored, in no small way, by a real sense that this harmony is fastidiously maintained by the ‘extraordinary pair’ of characters of Johnny the barman (who ‘was kind, but could be sharp’) and his boss William Blake (who could assert his authority ‘without any obvious word or gesture’). (41)

The peculiar combination of regularity and eccentricity expressed by the Sinclairs in ‘Oldfashioned’ finds echoes in another striking non-fiction passage about Blake’s, this one appearing in ‘The Sky Above Us’. McGahern had become a regular during a long postal strike in the 1970s when he used

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<sup>21</sup> John McGahern, ‘Blake’s of the Hollow’, in *Love of the World*, p.41.

the County Fermanagh pub as a 'poste restante'. Every Thursday at about noon, a fellow regular would appear in his 'tweed suits with a flowing bow tie' to take up residence in his usual snug and study the Financial Times while consuming a leisurely bottle of champagne.<sup>22</sup> It wasn't just the aristocracy who indulged such rituals however. Another non-fiction passage in the same essay remembers a certain Mr Gallagher, a tall and handsome local farmer who would take his pony and trap into town every Thursday and, shopping done, retire to the Royal Hotel to drink their finest whiskey. (20) And McGahern writes with as much fondness and respect for another regular, Mrs Rankin of Florencecourt (who lived to at least one hundred and eight years old, and was a loyal fan of De Kuyper's gin) as he does of Michael the barman's ability to 'draw a perfect shamrock in the cream of the stout with a flourish so neat and quick it cannot be followed'. (43)

Just as beauty is a bar whose interior world is in harmony with its exterior, so too is happiness a place in which the rhythms of those two worlds are in agreement. But too often one dominates in its push against the pull of the other, causing discordance in place of harmony. We see this in McGahern's short story 'High Ground', when the march of progress sped along by Senator Reegan is ushering in a bright scholarship student, Moran, to replace his master as the principal of the local school. Master Leddy doesn't intuit his dangerous fate ('He seemed to have no sense at all that he was in danger'<sup>23</sup>) because his life's daily rhythms have become fully dominated by the pull of 'after-hours' lock-ins at Ryan's bar; this is contrast to the character of Philly at the start of 'The Country Funeral', who still has some sense of the danger he is in:

When we meet Leddy, he is rising in the evening, having taken each of the day's meals in bed. He walks young Moran back to the village, but firmly deposits him outside the bar, saying 'I won't invite you inside. Though I set poor enough of an example, I want to bring no one with me.' (99) There is a sense of an unspoken word here: that he wants to bring no one *down* with him. Leddy continues: 'I say to all my pupils: Beware of the high stool. The downward slope from the high stool is longer and steeper than from the top of Everest. God bless and guard you, young Moran. Come and see me again before you head back to the city.' And with that he left me. I stood facing the opaque glass of the door, the small print of the notice above it: *Seven Days Licence to Sell Wine, Beer, Spirits*. (100)

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<sup>22</sup> McGahern, 'The Sky Above Us', *Love of the World*, p.22. (Page numbers in brackets hereafter.)

<sup>23</sup> John McGahern, 'High Ground', *High Ground and Other Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), pp.82–103, p.102. (Page numbers in brackets hereafter.)

In this story, it is Moran who hovers in the space between these two worlds, lingering outside the pub on the way to attend to one of life's daily chores (the fetching of fresh well water), his eye caught by the 'cracks of yellow light along the edges of the big blue blind' that is drawn to conceal the late-night drinkers, and his ear by the noises in the still night: the slurred voices and rolling coins as the master pawns his flattery of some ex-students in exchange for a large brandy. Moran's acute awareness of his own potential fate keeps him hovering on that periphery: 'It seemed horrible now,' he says, 'that I might come to this.' (99) There is an inferred suggestion that the life, role and social positioning of the local schoolmaster – a position that Moran had once 'hardly dared to hope I might become' (99) – comes hand-in-hand with the mutual role as regular patron of that bar stool from which the descent is as cruel as it is inevitable. And there is a sense that the incapability of the former to fully satisfy a bright soul and curious intellect such as Moran's – or his predecessor Leddy's – makes that life especially vulnerable to the gravitational pull of the barstool and of 'pub time', as if that life were not weighted enough to keep those doomed individuals sufficiently anchored in 'real time'.

While that off-kilter discordance and push-and-pull tension between two worlds is hinted at in the Leitrim-based stories, however, it is particularly and tellingly prevalent in the Dublin-based stories. It is there in the opening scenes of 'My Love, My Umbrella', when the plodding music of a Fife and Drum band playing on the quays begins to quicken to the music of opening hour at the Scotch House pub: the jangling of the keys, the clashing of the shutters transforming band and audience into thirsty punters who hurry inside to wait 'impatiently on the slow pulling of the pints'.<sup>24</sup> And while at first the rituals of the Dublin pub scene provide a refuge for the protagonist and his new love, soon those rituals become dominant habits that harden and restrict their love from truly blossoming or finding roots to sustain it.

That same tension is invoked in the opening scene of 'Parachutes', in which another man's beloved is leaving him and asks him to stay in the bar for five minutes after she leaves, to make physical the emotional distance that is already between them. As he waits, the 'long hand of the clock stood at two minutes to eight. It did not seem to move at all.'<sup>25</sup> He seems suspended in 'pub time', trapped or even exiled here as his loved one moves forward into her 'real time' life. That emotional distance has become a temporal distance also. In echoes of Philly's behaviour in 'The Country Funeral', the protagonist proceeds to blow his money on a prolonged drinking spree, finding refuge from his heartbreak and bewilderment in the literary pubs off Grafton Street and the willing drinking buddies

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<sup>24</sup> John McGahern, 'My Love, My Umbrella', *Collected Stories*, pp.65–74, p.66.

<sup>25</sup> John McGahern, 'Parachutes', *High Ground and Other Stories*, pp.11–24, p.11. (Page numbers in brackets hereafter.)

he finds there. Time takes on a dreamlike quality in these liminal spaces, as the characters become suspended like each ‘thin, pale parachute’ of thistledown ‘drifting so slowly across the open doorway that it seemed to move more in water than in air’. (22) There is a seductive Sirens-like beauty at play in this temporal space, but also a real danger: people drown in water.

That tension is there in ‘Bank Holiday’ too, a story in which the atmospheric interior space of Mooney’s is defined by its contrast to the world:

Outside the Sunday streets were empty, and the stones gave out a dull heat. [...] There was a sense of a cool dark waiting in Mooney’s [...] It was pleasant to sit in the comparative darkness, and eat and sip and watch the street, and to hear in the silence footsteps going up and down Grafton Street.<sup>26</sup>

This is perhaps the most hopeful of all the Dublin stories, thanks to a mutual rejection by the protagonist Patrick McDonough and his young American beau, Mary Kelleher, of the ‘(m)ania, egotism, vanity, aggression’ that she identifies in the literary milieu of McDaid’s and which reminds her of the Cedar Bar in New York. ‘Those places are the same everywhere,’ she continues, noting the ‘people searching madly in a crowd for something that’s never to be found in crowds’. (150)

That line seems to underscore and echo another spoken by Declan Kiberd in an interview with Eamon Maher about McGahern’s writings. Kiberd observes what he describes as:

... the mistake of seeking to achieve through social arrangements a kind of fulfillment that is properly possible only in religion [...] I think McGahern feels that the great mistake of modern culture has been to conduct these searches in inappropriate forms, that people now seek from sex or politics a kind of meaning that they will never get from them. They will humiliate sex and politics by putting these things under far too much pressure, the pressure of their own excessive expectations.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> John McGahern, ‘Bank Holiday’, *High Ground and Other Stories*, pp.140–156, p.147. (Page numbers in brackets hereafter.)

<sup>27</sup> Eamon Maher & Declan Kiberd, ‘John McGahern: Writer, Stylist, Seeker of a Lost World’, in *Doctrine and Life* 52, no. 2 (2002), pp.82–97, p.95.

It is possible to read the above insight in relation to the place of the pub in Irish life, both rural and urban. It is perhaps our excessive expectations of what pub life and its social arrangements can offer that serve to humiliate and distort what happiness and beauty the pub can offer to us. The pub, in McGahern's world, does offer a refuge from the daily grind, a well-deserved reward for a hard-working life, and a space in which to commune with your own, to find your people and to feast on the news relevant to your locality. It is a place in which the reciprocal nature of Irish hospitality and the social bonds that this encourages and fosters can become a benign and sometimes even transformative force, reminding us that we are all co-dependents in this world, and that there is a strength to be found in the inherent vulnerability of that state. It can indeed be a locus of happiness and beauty, but if we seek too much from it, if we overload it with excessive expectations and seek from it a fulfilment that it cannot offer, we risk being pushed out of 'real time' and away from a functional place in the greater world, and pulled under into the suffocating temporal space of 'pub time', a place in which we risk drowning.

Yet, despite these reservations and concerns that McGahern's writing expresses regarding the sometimes Sirens-like pull of pubs within Irish society, that ambiguity is tempered by what is at times nothing less than unfettered delight, as his final lines about *Blakes of the Hollow* encapsulates: 'The whole bar is as happy and beautiful as when I was first drawn to it by the handsome front almost twenty years ago. I hope it continues forever.'<sup>28</sup> And of course it will, being immortalised forever by McGahern's reverent invocation.

### **Biography:**

Aoife Carrigy is currently undertaking a Masters of Art by Research on 'Cultural Representations of the Irish Pub', under the supervision of Dr Brian Murphy with the co-supervision of Dr Eamon Maher, both of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies in TU Dublin – Tallaght Campus. She holds a BA (majoring in English Literature and Philosophy) and MA in Anglo-Irish Literature, both from University College Dublin. Aoife has lectured in journalism at the Independent College (at under-graduate, post-graduate and diploma levels) and in communications and English Literature at Dublin Business School (at certificate and under-graduate level). Aoife also works as a freelance journalist and editor specialising in food, beverages and travel. She is WSET certified (Advanced) and is currently the Out-Going Chairperson of the Irish Food Writers' Guild.

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<sup>28</sup> McGahern, 'Blakes of the Hollow', *Love of the World*, p.44.