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## It's Not A Mansion This House, But It's Our Own: Memory, Childhood and Domestic Space in John McGahern's Memoir

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**“It's not a mansion this house, but it's our own”:**

**Memory, Childhood and Domestic Space in John McGahern's *Memoir*<sup>1</sup>**

**Emily Smith**

Published in 2005, John McGahern's *Memoir* is indeed just that, a memoir. According to the critic Laura Marcus, a memoir is 'an anecdotal depiction of people and events', as opposed to the 'evocation of life as a totality', which one would expect from an autobiography.<sup>2</sup> On multiple levels a memoir is perhaps the most 'McGahern-like' way to evoke life as a totality. Speaking with Rosa Gonzalez, the author stated: 'All autobiographical writing is by definition bad writing unless it's strictly autobiography. Writing, fiction especially, is life written to an order or vision, while life itself is a series of accidents.'<sup>3</sup>

McGahern's reflections on his life is a sequence of vignettes, both ordinary and extraordinary laced together by the well-worn roads of Ballinamore, Aughawillan and Cootehall. He describes lovingly the many walks he took with his mother around the places that he mined for his literary inspiration: 'Past Brady's pool, by Brady's slated house and the old thatched house where the Mahon brothers lived, past the deep dark quarry.' (64) Variations on these lanes form a refrain within McGahern's text as they construct a psychological cartography moving to and from the most intimate places of his youth: his mother's house in Aughawillan, the barracks in Cootehall, his aunt Maggie's shop in Ballinamore. Whether as a toddler holding his mother's hand, steering a jennet, or whooshing along on his bicycle in the pouring rain, John McGahern's lanes convey both dynamism and permanence: decades later the pool is still Brady's, and for McGahern it always would be.

The topography of Leitrim is therefore a cartography of the author's intimate life. The critic Gaston Bachelard tells us in his 1958 *Poetics of Space* that '(i)n its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for.'<sup>4</sup> Memory and space have a reciprocal relationship; space both defines and is defined by what takes place and has taken place within it, and no more so is this the case for Bachelard than with domestic space. But by domestic space he does not mean just the four concrete walls of a house. Instead, Bachelard's exploration of the home takes into account the setting in which early childhood experiences and formative moments play out, alongside the spatial factors in issues of individual security, both in the physical and emotional

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<sup>1</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p.61. (Page numbers in brackets hereafter.)

<sup>2</sup> Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Rosa González, 'An Interview with John McGahern', *BELS: Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies*, 6 (1995), pp.173-181, p.177.

<sup>4</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p.8. (Page numbers in brackets hereafter.)

sense of the term. The cumulative result of these psycho-spatial elements comes to be known as the 'oneiric house'. Every individual has one that is constantly being shaped and reshaped, and as this paper shall set out to show, this building process is the framework of McGahern's *Memoir*.

Much has been made of landscapes in the work of John McGahern – indeed it could be argued that in *Memoir* in particular, Leitrim is a character in its own right – however, the primordial importance of domestic space in an investigation of the autobiographical is not to be underestimated. Bachelard defines the home as 'our first universe'. (4) Conventionally speaking, at birth our home is our mother's arms. Perhaps it then becomes a crib or a play pen and gradually, as our consciousness grows, so too does the home we know. Space may well exist beyond us, but until we can inhabit it, not simply physically, but psychologically, it means very little: 'A house that has been experienced is not an inert box.' (47)

So how is a house experienced and why does it matter? Bachelard's interest in domestic space focuses on the place where our early years take place. He defines the house of our childhood as 'the human being's first world', persistently attaching images of maternity such as 'the cradle' and 'the bosom' to our growing consciousness of its rooms and possibilities. (7) In the rhetoric of Bachelard, these discoveries are fundamental to our personal development: learning to open a door is not just a physical act, it is imposing that learning process, and subsequently the place where it occurs, onto our memories. Whenever we summon up the image of opening a door it carries the trace of those first encounters. These collected memories form what Bachelard calls the 'oneiric house'. This is 'a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past'. (15) Likened to our subconscious and forever with us, in essence it is a bank of images – memories, dreams, daydreams, which have been provoked by, and shaped within, the space that we come to understand and perceive as our home. These images are the building blocks of our oneiric home, they are a house enriched by the imagination. In many ways, the oneiric house is the perfect source for a memoir, and it is one which John McGahern summons up.

Turning to McGahern's writing process, primarily his essay 'The Image', the author describes art as 'an attempt to create a world in which we can live'.<sup>5</sup> Whilst this may at first glance appear like quite a romantic notion – escapism into the literary – it is tinged with the painful implication that our own world is not always somewhere we can or, more honestly, wish to live. He depicts the writing process as a 'Medusa's mirror', an attempt to paralyse and ultimately master our surroundings. It is a response to the unpredictable and ephemeral nature of our lives, an attempt to capture in

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<sup>5</sup> John McGahern, 'The Image [1991]', *Love of the World: Essays*, Ed. Stanley van der Ziel (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), pp.7–9, p.7. [Kindle Edition].

perpetuity a happier and more manageable moment in our pasts. McGahern is wise to liken language to the Medusa with her snake-hair; unpredictable and vengeful, it is debatable to what extent the author ever has full mastery of his words on the page. Bachelard notes that, ‘We are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.’ (6)

In other words, we are never going to be able to perfectly recapture past lived moments, but we can do our best to paint the impressions that they left in our memories. We may delve into the oneiric house, but can only bring our reader to the threshold. This would seem to be bad news for the genre of autobiography. Laura Marcus notes that since the nineteenth century in particular, a reverence has been attached to autobiography as the purest form of truth telling, as it demands that one know oneself. Indeed she observes a contempt within early twentieth-century autobiographical criticism to the genres of ‘literary autobiography’ or ‘autobiographical fiction’ due to the fear that literary tricks and frills may in some way taint the self-truths that one may hope to nobly reveal.<sup>6</sup> If we take on board the beliefs of McGahern and Bachelard respectively, these truths can and will never be fully disclosed in text form. For McGahern, writing is the pursuit of ‘the one image that will never come, the lost image that gave our lives expression’, so why does he differentiate between autobiography and fiction, and why does he write a memoir?<sup>7</sup>

Writing on methods to critique autobiographical discourses, Marcus recommends that instead of assessing accuracy, our attention should be turned to intention: does the work set out to confront the truth.<sup>8</sup> Dermot McCarthy describes McGahern’s writing as: ‘An art of memory and its greatest achievement is the liberation from the grief, guilt and anger that entered his life with his mother’s death.’<sup>9</sup> But how does McGahern go about actually presenting these memories? Bachelard insists that childhood is ‘greater than reality’, it is a realm of its own unable to be pinned down by empirical processes such as history or geography. (16) He calls childhood an ‘immemorial’ space in that our memories do not necessarily fix themselves to specific time periods. (13) The duration of a moment is lost in its reconstruction: indeed, some of our childhood memories may have never even happened. Reading, listening to stories and daydreams are all also memories and, according to Bachelard, are of the utmost importance in the cultivation of our oneiric house.

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<sup>6</sup> *Auto/biographical Discourses*, p.4.

<sup>7</sup> ‘The Image’, p.7.

<sup>8</sup> *Auto/biographical Discourses*, p.3.

<sup>9</sup> Dermot McCarthy, *John McGahern and the Art of Memory* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), p.2.

For Bachelard, creative pursuits typify the unconstrained imagination of youth, a powerful force which allows us to explore our growing mental spaces and by consequence, to cultivate our own identities. Time and again in both his fiction and essays, McGahern has shown himself to be a proponent of this belief, arguing in particular that reading was essential to his perception of his surroundings and to his subsequent growth into an author. It is perhaps unsurprising then that his depictions of his formative years are littered with references to storytelling and making in the shape of dreaming, local lore and his encounters with fiction.

Although made up of vignettes and pieces of family history, one of the main structural threads of *Memoir* is in fact a dream: the shared aspiration of John and his mother that he will become a priest and they shall live together. It should be said that the role of the mother and depictions of maternity in McGahern's work would merit an entire thesis; however, the argument that this paper wishes to put forward is that his mother, and this dream that comes to symbolise their loving bond, is in fact the keystone to McGahern's oneiric house. Bachelard notes that 'an entire past comes to dwell in a new house' (5) and no more so is this the case than with John and his mother, Susan McGahern, with their run-down and 'thrown up' house in Corramahon. (43) The daydreams, habits and tender moments experienced here are carried with him elsewhere once thrust out of this space due to his mother's illness and eventual death. McGahern observes that '(n)othing could have looked more bare or un-lived in than the house in the middle of the field', and ye, their relationship is shown to have transformative properties for the sparse dwelling. (47) This transformative force is particularly drawn into focus by Susan's absence and presence, reinforcing the idea that homeliness is a psychological experience more so than a physical effect. This is nicely shown in McGahern's account of the first few nights they spend in the house: 'In wind and rain these frail rooms were thrilling at night because they brought us so close to the storm and yet kept us warm and sheltered and safe.' (62) In his mother's presence the house is imbued with warmth and life. Indeed the literal process of heating the house – their routine of collecting firewood and sitting by the hearth discussing their dream for John to become a priest – is a perfect symbol of life being brought into the house.

The reader would struggle to draw a picture of John McGahern's house in Aughawillan, the descriptions are not incredibly detailed, but the elements mentioned do all have a role to play in their respective scenes: they are gateways to specific memories which furnish McGahern's oneiric house. The fireplace was a central feature of domestic life and as such is referenced on multiple occasions. It is interesting to note that McGahern employs personification in these moments: 'We'd sit in front of the fire, glowing and pleasurably tired from the exercise [...] The fresh wood hissed,

and spat and roared in the flames.’ (65) As John and his mother daydream, the house is becoming inhabited, as shown by the active verbs; memories are being made and his oneiric house is being built.

It is worth looking more closely at the details of John and Susan’s dream: ‘We’d live together in the priest’s house and she’d attend each morning Mass and take communion from my hands.’ (63) This sentence affirms what we have already seen to be true – for the young McGahern, home is where his mother is. ‘We’d live together in the priest’s house’: looking at the syntax of this phrase, the stress is very much placed on their being together rather than the prospect of becoming a priest. The priest’s house could be any house as long as they remained close to one another, together forever. In fact, within the applications of Bachelard there is an argument to be made that the dream could actually be any dream, as long as mother and son went through the process of mentally reconstructing it together. As his mother’s illness worsens, McGahern notes:

Seldom an evening went by that we didn’t talk about our life together, when I would be a priest and we’d live in the priest’s house beside the church [...] Looking back I think I must have sensed instinctively that something was wrong and I was talking out the dream to try and hold her in my life. (109)

One very justified reading of this situation is that by plotting a future together, young John hoped his mother would not be able to die. However, a secondary reading may also suggest that he was subconsciously protecting his childhood. Bachelard states: ‘It is on the plane of daydream and not on the facts that childhood remains alive and poetically useful within us.’ (16) Speaking of his mother McGahern declares that he ‘had but the one beloved, she was all I had’. (101) He even remarks that being reunited with her after her second spell of hospitalisation was ‘my lost world restored’. (61) It makes perfect sense that he should attempt to retreat into the world of daydream which the two have cultivated together, for this is his true childhood home. It is within his mother’s presence that he has both the freedom and security necessary to even begin to daydream and to explore his own childhood hopes and fears.

With all of that said, however, perhaps what makes McGahern’s attachment to his mother the key to his oneiric house is not the depictions of life when she is there, but what occurs when she is gone. With Susan gone, John is forced to redefine the limits of his shelter: both physically and psychologically. The brutality of this separation is represented in the form of his father who long before his wife’s illness is shown to be an external threat to their domestic space. It would be easy

to paint Frank and John McGahern's relationship as somewhat oedipal. McGahern openly acknowledges fantasizing about a life with his mother without his father. His father is shown to at times violently keep them apart. One such incident is when Frank, dressed in his uniform, cuts young John's hair because he 'had a head of curls like a girl'. (9) To carry out this act, McGahern's father locks both his protesting mother and grandmother in the living room. This radical assertion of his son's gender serves an act of patriarchal aggression in that it not only affirms Frank's physical dominance over his son as both father and man, but it de-stabilises the security of the realm of the maternal for his son: neither his mother nor his grandmother could protect him. This is something that Frank's presence does time and again. During his volatile, unpredictable visits to Aughawillan the once 'stark house above the bog' which John and Susan have so lovingly brought to life is left 'silent and frightened'. (24) Note that it is the house, not just the inhabitants, that Frank disrupts. He upsets the entire domestic space. It would be reductionist, however, to dismiss the role of McGahern's father as simply alpha-male dominance, for this is to ignore another spatial element entirely: that of the conflict between the public and private sphere.

As a Guard, Frank McGahern literally inhabits a strange limbo of belonging to both the public and private sphere, and as such it is no accident that he was wearing his uniform when imposing his will on John. As a living situation, the fragile and tenuous nature of this division is repeatedly depicted by sounds travelling along the short corridor between the kitchen and the day room: sometimes the sound of work boots; in other instances, the sounds of a child being beaten. In many respects, the barracks is a perfect model of what the critic Nancy Duncan, in her work *Body Space*, identifies as an unnatural and deliberate split in our everyday world which serves to only reinforce heterosexist and patriarchal power structures. She argues that in twentieth-century western society, the dichotomy of public and private has merely served as a way to camouflage the further marginalisation of the oppressed, by protecting the powerful with concepts of private property and familial sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> This is very much the case for the McGahern children and is made manifest in where they come to realign their limits of shelter.

As a physical space, there are two key details of the barracks worth noting: the entrance and the sideboard mirror. Addressing the entrance, in one of his narrative detours McGahern recounts the story of Chidley Coote, a landlord who hung his tenant's two sons in an archway by the entrance to the barracks for next to no reason. McGahern chillingly notes, '(w)e passed under it every day', in order to access the living quarters. (27) This is precisely what Bachelard means when he speaks of

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<sup>10</sup> Nancy Duncan, 'Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces', *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.127–145.

images being ‘a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly’. (33) Although the children never directly witnessed this act, they are touched by its legacy. The image of the archway is forever stained by a postcolonial violence yet to be overcome; it is integrated into how the children experience the barracks on a daily basis. This violent legacy is expanded upon with the idea that living in the barracks is now being under McGahern's father's ‘direct rule’. (35) Just as Duncan observes, hegemonic violence does not disappear, it merely rebrands.

The controlling presence of Guard McGahern is emphasised by the author’s distinct memory of the sideboard mirror. Speaking of their morning routine, he observes how his father would take his breakfast staring into the mirror, while ‘(i)n silence we ate at the table under the window on Coote's archway. Any squabble or sound from us would bring a quelling look.’ (58) There is an implied code of disciplinary violence already in place within the barracks. The children's interaction with their father is limited to the maintenance of his law and order. With his sideboard mirror there is an almost Foucauldian panopticon at play: although most likely admiring his own appearance – the morning routine is also devoted to preening and militaristic inspections of turn-out – their father may also be observing them. Either way, it is guaranteed that should the children disrupt the carefully cultivated tension that their father has imposed on the living space, retribution will follow. And that is all that matters. They are forever observed. As such, their options for shelter are incredibly limited. McGahern outlines how the lavatory at the bottom of the garden becomes a makeshift refuge during their father’s angry outbursts. Nevertheless, over time, and particularly with the death of their mother, this space becomes insufficient. In the wake of his grief, John observes that ‘(e)ven this space was too open’, and he instead opts to lock himself into a cupboard under the stairs. (128) Bachelard stresses the importance of these corners as a ‘resting-place for daydreaming’, and yet so great is McGahern’s grief, that there is very little psychological refuge to be found. (15) The days of fireside daydreams are gone. Indeed, it is poignant that on the day of his mother’s burial, the only place that the young boy can appear to find shelter is on a hillside among laurels. It is here, with little cover from the elements, that the 10-year-old John McGahern must begin the process of reconstructing his own domestic realm by imagining in real-time the funeral of his beloved, the eternally benevolent landlord of his oneiric house. (133)

As *Memoir* progresses, there is a definitive shift from the interior to the exterior: the barracks never replace Corramahon, John is forced to do a never-ceasing amount of farm labour and for a long time he finds refuge in a tarred boat on the Shannon. Indeed, it is only through the discovery of literature that McGahern begins to find any sort of comfort in the barracks – in fact, he eventually takes



possession of a room in the house for himself and his studies. Befriending Willie and Andy Moroney, John takes full advantage of their ‘Blessed library’ and is teleported to his own sheltered space. (173) ‘There are no days more full in childhood than those days that are not lived at all, but lost in a book.’ (178) Here Bachelard and McGahern are very much in sync: ‘Centres of boredom, centres of solitude, centres of daydreaming group together to constitute the oneiric house which is more lasting than the scattered memories of our birthplace.’ (*Poetics* 16) Through literature we embrace solitude; we retreat exclusively into the imagination, the words with which we are presented unlocking for each one of us rooms untouched. So special is this process for McGahern that it allows him to re-enter rooms he had long left derelict with the loss of his mother: he therefore remodels his dream of priesthood, the promise he made to the woman who first helped him to embrace the shelter of imagination:

Instead of becoming a priest of God, I would be the God of a small vivid world. I must have had some sense of how outrageous and laughable this would appear to the world, because I told no one, but it did serve its purpose – it set me free. (205)

To conclude, I wish to return to Bachelard, who wrote: ‘We cover the universe with drawings we have loved. These drawings need not be exact. They need only to be tonalized on the mode of our inner space.’(12) This paper started by addressing some issues of autobiography and language more generally, questioning how – in a genre that is given to expect the truth – we ever actually accurately represent our realities. The short reply is that we don’t. But that does not mean that the images we offer are wrong. Indeed, they are the best we can do at the time. As we have seen, a reciprocal relationship exists between our external surroundings and our inner workings of our memories – our oneiric house is forever being remodelled. Sometimes rooms get closed off, sometimes new rooms open up, sometimes the shelters we come to seek out are barely shelters at all. McGahern’s memoir is but another extension to his oneiric home, closing with a daydream of walking down the lanes of Leitrim with his mother. It is a far cry from the funereal daydreams of a scared young boy but, as Bachelard guarantees us: ‘Come what may the house helps us to say: I will be a habitant of the world, in spite of the world.’ (46)

## **Biography**

Emily Smith is undertaking a Masters of Arts by Research under the supervision of Dr Eamon Maher in the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies. She completed her undergraduate studies in Trinity College Dublin in French and English Literature, and is a recipient of the President's Award scholarship from the TU Dublin - Tallaght Campus. Her current thesis research centres on the works of George Moore and John McGahern and their depictions of gender and sexuality with an emphasis on French critical theory. - [Emily.smith@postgrad.it-tallaght.ie](mailto:Emily.smith@postgrad.it-tallaght.ie)