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Circles and Circularity in the Writings of John McGahern

Eamon Maher

The circle is central to John McGahern's *oeuvre*, as it is to his philosophy of life. A writer who had to endure his second novel, *The Dark*, being banned by the Irish Censorship Board in 1965, and whose work has really only begun to attract the critical acclaim it deserves in the last decade or so, McGahern has always been something of an outsider in his country of birth. He left Ireland for a few years in the 1960s but returned to live in County Leitrim in 1974, thus following a circular path back to the area where he spent most of his youth. He has no truck with the idea that Irish writers need exile to fuel their creative talents and reckons that one can write as badly in Ireland as anywhere else! It is no coincidence that he chose to come back to live in Leitrim. Like his characters, his roots are deeply imbedded in his psyche and are important to his way of seeing. As the loveable Jamesie says in his most recent novel, *That they May Face the Rising Sun*: 'I may not have travelled far but I know the whole world'.¹

Geographical displacement does not of necessity lead to new insights. The important thing is to see beyond appearances and to be as happy as it is humanly possible to be. Happiness is not found, in McGahern's opinion, in material wealth and social standing. No, it has to do with interior equilibrium, appreciating the beauty of nature, neighbourliness, working in the fields, accepting one's fragility. In *The Pornographer* (1979), the narrator's uncle Cyril remarks after the death of his wife: 'Ah yes, when you think of it, life's a shaky venture',² a quote McGahern, in his *Reading the Future* interview with Mike Murphy in 2000, attributed to a friend of his who was a bone-setter. The interesting part of the sentence according to McGahern are the words 'when you think about it', because mostly we don't think about it. The fact that we are embarked on a 'shaky venture' should not stop us getting on with the business of living.

In the course of this article I will attempt to show the prevalence of the circle and circularity in McGahern's writing and to illustrate just why they assume such relevance in his work. The decision to choose this theme was prompted by my re-reading one of his short stories, 'Wheels', which relates

a visit to his home in the West by a young man working in Dublin. His relationship with his father, always strained, has become intolerable in recent years. When the old man spoke of moving to the city, the son made it clear that *he* wouldn't be requiring a room in the house. This was seen as a betrayal and a lack of filial loyalty. When he reaches home, he finds Rose, his step-mother, busy scrubbing the brown flagstones of the house. His greeting is given a restrained acknowledgement. His father is out working in the fields and when he comes back on the tractor, memories come flooding into the son's mind: 'I wondered if the sweat-band stank as it used to or if it was rotten now. I watched him take the cans off the trailer, then go inside, body that had started my journey to nowhere'.³ The problems between fathers and sons, prevalent in nearly all McGahern's fiction, are clearly in evidence in this story. Simmering resentment, a refusal to yield on any issue, psychological and physical abuse are often associated with McGahern's father-figures, and this may be explained partly by the fact that he had a very distant relationship with his own father.

The image of the sweat-band with its acrid smell of perspiration is a very strong one, as is the picture of the tired body of this old man that started the son's 'journey to nowhere'. He knows he owes this man respect, that he is responsible for him now that he has become feeble: 'I knew the wheel: fathers become children to their sons who repay the care they got when they were young, and on the edge of dying the fathers become young again; but the luck of a death and a second marriage had released me from the last breaking on this ritual wheel' (8). Rose's presence spares him having to live alongside his father, a duty for which he would have been ill-suited. After only a few hours in the house, he aches to be back in Dublin, drinking pints with his friend Lightfoot. He knows that life's road will often lead him back to this rural setting that is full of memories that are not all unhappy. Ultimately, he realises that life has many twists and turns, that relationships with other human beings are difficult and that we never really experience true happiness. As he looks out at the countryside from the train window on his way back to the capital, he notices the fields of stone walls and the river Shannon which are 'the vivid sections of the wheel we watched so slowly turn, impatient for the rich whole that never came but that all the preparations promised' (11). This is a good description of our struggle to attain the 'rich whole' that life promises but never delivers. The quest for McGahern's characters carries them along a circular path that is also a labyrinth. The answers to the questions thrown at them by existence are never definitively supplied, because none exists. The only hope is that the next life, if there be one, may provide some illumination.

But the idea of the 'road back'⁴ to one's roots, so successfully illustrated by 'Wheels', is captured also in *The Pornographer*, a book that enjoyed much critical success in France, where it was considered an existential novel.⁵ The main protagonist (who has no name) makes his money from writing pornography. Maloney, the man who commissions the work, told him not to bother giving the characters names, that he would look after that detail. He warned him to be dispassionate: 'Above all, the imagination requires distance [. . .] It can't function close up' (21). But while he worked away at creating situations in which his characters could indulge in sexual orgies, he found it increasingly difficult to dissociate his writing from his real life relationship with Josephine, a thirty-eight year old bank employee with whom he regularly has sex. These encounters often occur after he has become inflamed from describing the antics of his fictitious characters. He feels no love for Josephine but, to his credit, he tells her so. She refuses to allow him to wear a condom when they make love and ends up getting pregnant. She leaves her job and travels to London to have the child. He agrees to help her in any way he can but is not willing to marry her.

In parallel to these happenings, he regularly visits his aunt in hospital where she is dying of cancer. He is attached to this woman who bravely faces up to the reality of her death and whose one desire is not to discommode her husband Cyril, an unfeeling drunkard who doesn't deserve her love and devotion. The narrator associates his aunt with his home in the West. There is a house and some land waiting for him whenever he wishes to return to claim his inheritance. In spite of his promiscuity, the young man is not totally unfeeling. His aunt's suffering leads him to reflect on life's transience and he makes the following observation:

Our last conscious moment was the moment when our passing nonexistence and our final one would marry. It seemed felicitous that our going out of life should be as similarly arranged as our coming in.
(*The Pornographer* 13)

In his relationship with Josephine, the narrator shows few, if any, redeeming qualities – perhaps because he doesn't love her. She mistakenly believes that when she becomes pregnant he will come round to her way of thinking and marry her. She finds his refusal to see the baby after its birth unfeeling in the extreme. It is when he is with his own people, especially his aunt and uncle, that he displays a warmth that is absent in the persona of the cynical writer of pornography and the predatory stalker on The Metropole dance floor. All of which makes the attraction he feels for Nurse Brady, whom he meets when visiting his aunt, more plausible. Like him,

she hails from the country and has about her the healthy glow of a spring meadow. There is a poignant moment in the book when he accompanies Miss Brady back to the Nurses' Home and passes by the window where his aunt is facing death:

I was going past that same window in a taxi, a young woman by my side, my hand on her warm breast. I shivered as I thought how one day my wheel would turn into her section, and I would lie beneath that window while a man and woman as we were now went past into the young excitement of a life that might seem without end in this light of the moon. (*The Pornographer* 172)

He associates his nurse friend with the smell of freshly cut hay and his relationship with her is devoid of the callousness that characterises his liaison with Josephine. He thinks of the women in his aunt's ward who were giving birth to their own death while Josephine was preparing to bring a new life into the world in London: one circle ending and another beginning. He begins to see how his life is leading him back to his starting point:

All the doctrines that we had learned by heart and could not understand and fretted over became alarmingly clear. To find we had to lose: the road away became the road back [. . .] All, all were travelling. Nobody would arrive. The adventure would never be over even when we were over. It would go on and on, even as it had gone on before it had been passed on to us. (*The Pornographer* 203)

And thus he makes the decision to return to live on the land that was bequeathed to him by his parents and to begin a life there with Nurse Brady, if she'll have him. Such is his emotion that he feels an urge to pray, even though he knows that his prayers cannot be answered. The novel concludes by his circling back to the first page of the book which described his uncle getting off the train in Dublin about a year previously with the air of a man who was uncomfortable to be out of his natural environment. That was 'the beginning of the journey – if beginning it ever had – that had brought each to where we were, in the now and forever' (252). So the novel itself assumes a spherical movement in the same way as happens in *The Barracks* when the children ask their father instead of Elisabeth, their step-mother, who has died after a long illness, if it's time to light the lamp. Similarly, in *The Leavetaking* the image of water starts and ends the narrative. In fact, *The Leavetaking*, which describes the last day of a teacher in school before his dismissal, contains many flash-backs and

memories of the events that have led to this point. Patrick Moran sees that each day is a mirror of many other days that combine to form a whole:

Two worlds; the world of the schoolroom in this day, the world of memory becoming imagination; but this last day in the classroom will one day be nothing but a memory before its total obliteration, the completed circle.⁶

This circular movement from present to past to future back to present is a feature of most of McGahern's fiction. The completed circle is never quite what it might seem, however, as that would imply immobility and inertia, the end of the search. As we have seen, the quest never ends until we die. Thus, the circle never comes full circle: it hovers, hesitates, goes forward, then backwards, desperately seeking a meaning that constantly evades it. Art, no more than life, cannot attain the perfection of the completed sphere. A brief look at McGahern's most recent novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2001), will show how this theme is constant from his first novel, *The Barracks* (1963), to the present day. The *oeuvre* has a timeless quality and a consistency of treatment and tone.

That They May Face the Rising Sun is not a novel in the traditional mode. It has almost no plot and lacks the tension and finely developed characters that make *Amongst Women* so memorable. There is no central consciousness, no Moran to whom his daughters turn to give themselves a feeling of importance and permanence. Nothing much happens in the new novel, a fact that has disappointed some readers used to a strong story line and organic development of character. It seems to me that McGahern set out deliberately to write something that would capture for all time a civilisation that is on the threshold of extinction, that of the rural Ireland of his youth. Declan Kiberd, in the course of an interview I conducted with him, expresses the view that McGahern is part of a strong Irish literary tradition of lyric utterance by people speaking out of cultures which are on the verge of disappearance. McGahern clearly sees that rural Ireland is in a terminal phase. In Kiberd's words:

Where art comes in is this: I suppose most artists have a sort of theory of the Swan Song – that, just before any truly complex culture goes under, it often achieves a grace of lyric utterance which in some way encapsulates all its values, all its aspirations and, of course, its achievements before it finally agrees to lie down and die.⁷

These comments were made before the publication of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* and they show a prescience that is characteristic of Ireland's

best literary critic. When one examines the Irish writers that McGahern admires, you have to return to people like Tomas Ó Criomhthain, Kate O'Brien, Ernie O'Malley. Each of these is describing a culture that is on the way out. Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach* is the classic account of the end of life on the Blasket Islands; Kate O'Brien's novels mark the end of the intense world of narrow genteel Catholicism that was not destined to survive into the twentieth century; Ernie O'Malley's *On Another Man's Wound* describes the struggle for Irish Independence. Many of McGahern's characters are veterans of the same conflict and feel great disappointment when they discover that their efforts have been largely in vain, that the Ireland that has emerged has merely led to the creation of a new Irish *comprador* class. It's almost as if the British transferred responsibility for the management of the crisis of Irish rural society to this group. And so we have characters like Moran who, in their youth, said 'Revolution or Death!' and who end up fighting against the death of their Revolution. McGahern has written about Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach* in a way that betrays the empathy he feels for the manner in which a largely uneducated man could capture so poetically life on the Blaskets. The book has all the hallmarks of an epic with Ó Criomhthain as the warrior figure fighting for survival. The style, which is according to McGahern 'a persistent way of seeing'⁸ is what makes Ó Criomhthain so attractive to him. As he says:

Places are seen in their essential outline, which is inseparable from their use or function. Sometimes a place is seen as friendly to whatever action happens to be afoot, more often it is hostile. Always place and action are inseparable.⁹

He goes on to say that description is never indulged for the sake of conjuring up pretty images. 'A strand is there to be crossed, a sea to be fished, a town to be reached, a shore to be gained, walked upon, lived upon. These are all near and concrete realities, but so stripped down to their essentials because of the necessities of the action as to seem free of all local characteristics'.¹⁰ What McGahern clearly admires about such writing is its control and the fact that it refuses to over-indulge verbiage. Ó Criomhthain manages also to master his own capacity to feel and to suffer. He describes the deaths of his wife and two children in one short paragraph! McGahern circles back to writers like the ones I have mentioned because he identifies with their literary project and the approach they adopt. His epic of rural Ireland began with *The Barracks* in 1963 and is still ongoing. All his novels and short stories are an attempt to capture the sights, sounds and smells of his youth, the characters with whom he came in contact, the

struggles with the land and within families, the beauty of nature. *That They May Face the Rising Sun* has definite autobiographical overtones. The main character, who also happens to be the narrator, is Joe Rutledge, a man who returns with his wife, Kate, to live on a small farm beside a lake in Co. Leitrim. The setting is almost identical to that inhabited by the writer and his wife Madeleine. Rutledge has much of the aloofness and powers of observation of the writer and shares many of McGahern's own personal traits. He is a good listener, a fact that ensures that his house becomes a focal point for many of the inhabitants of the area, especially the good-natured and sensitive Jamesie who rarely lets a day pass without visiting his friends. The atmosphere of the book is one of sadness at the realisation that after the inhabitants pass away, their way of life will go with them. The affable Jamesie, the local handyman, Patrick Ryan, Rutledge's uncle and local businessman, 'The Shah', Bill Evans, the product of a children's home who was hired out as a farm labourer and poorly treated, Johnny, Jamesie's brother who came home ever summer from London, John Quinn, the sex-craved widower, these are the last of their ilk and they could justifiably claim in Ó Criomhthain's words: '*Ni bheidh ár léithidí arís ann*' ('Our like will not be here again'). This explains the elegiac quality of the writing. The reader has the impression of witnessing the passing of a way of life. All the inhabitants of the area are quite elderly and there is no hope that young people will replace them. In the closing pages of the book, the new telephone poles that have been placed in the ground, obscuring the view of the lake, indicate that technology will soon replace the visits to neighbours' houses and the sense of community that is so strong in someone like Jamesie.

Nature is a strong force in all the characters' life. The ripples that the wind blows across the lake towards an unknown destination are a metaphor for the uncertainty of life. Working on the land, the lambing season, travelling to the mart, saving the hay, all these rituals are closely scrutinised. Nothing major happens but the atmosphere is beautifully captured, the warmth of the human relationships, the changing seasons, the various rituals that give life a meaning and a structure. The following lines give a taste of the quality of the writing:

The night and the lake had not the bright metallic beauty of the night Johnny had died: the shapes of the great tree were softer and brooded even deeper in their mysteries. The water was silent, except for the chattering of the wildfowl, the night air sweet with the scents of the ripening meadows, thyme and clover and meadowsweet, wild woodbine high in the whitethorns mixed with the scent of the wild

mint crawling along the gravel on the edge of the water. (*That They May Face* 296)

In another fifty years, descriptions such as this will prove invaluable for anyone who desires to experience the Irish rural landscape of the beginning of the twenty first century. For McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* was a labour of love, a chronicle of all that he holds dear in life. Place is important in all his novels and so the life in small villages in rural Ireland that he evokes attains a universal significance. In this regard, he is in harmony with the observation of the Portuguese writer, Miguel Torja, whom he likes to quote. Torja said: 'The local is the universal, but without walls'. It reminds us once more of the ripple that starts at a specific small point and then spreads outwards before forming a semi-circle. It has no walls and its perfection is something for which most of us yearn. This may explain why Joe Rutledge, after a lovely day spent in the company of Jamesie and his wife, Mary, wonders if he is experiencing perfect happiness and then quickly dismisses the thought: 'The very idea was as dangerous as presumptive speech: happiness could not be sought or worried into being, or even fully grasped; it should be allowed its own slow pace so that it passes unnoticed, if it ever comes at all' (183). The same is true of the circle whose perfection is elusive and whose elliptical path is never revealed to mere mortals.

When reflecting on McGahern's *oeuvre* to date, it is clear that he only writes about what he knows intimately. That is why the tone, the way of seeing, the precision, are all so authentic. He knows that the greatest contribution he can make to Irish literature is to capture and chronicle a way of life that has all but disappeared. Declan Kiberd once more provides a telling assessment of the issues at stake for the writer:

A tradition will live on in the lament for its passing; the account of the collapse of one code can become the master narrative of the next code. [. . .] He is shrewdly aware that the story he is producing will be part of the next culture. It isn't merely a howl of lament. It's also a piece of procreation.¹¹

This is particularly true of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, which, as well as being a Swan Song for a lost world, is also a foretaste of a world to come. Bill Evans' suffering while in care and after being taken in as a glorified slave on a local farm is a reminder of some of the abuse that went on in many Irish institutions in a past that is uncomfortably close to the present. Efforts to get Bill to talk about his experiences do not meet with any success because the pain of recall is too intense. At least he has the

pleasure of moving in to his own house in his twilight years. Change can be an agent for healing as well as destruction.

Bill Evans could no more look forward than he could look back. He existed in a small closed circle of the present. Remembrance of things past and dreams of things to come were instruments of torture. (*That They May Face* 167)

I trust this short exposé of the circular path of McGahern's fiction has shown the timeless universal quality of his writing. I think that the universe whose circling motions he captures is close to the achievement he notes of Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach*: 'So free is all the action of everything but what is essential that it could as easily have taken place on the shores of Brittany and Greece as on the Dingle Peninsula'.¹² I will conclude by quoting a few lines from Goldsmith's 'Deserted Village' that sum up the circular route followed by McGahern's writing:

And as the hare, whom hounds and horns pursue,
Pants to the place from whence at first she flew,
I still had hopes, my long vexations past,
Here to return – and die at home, at last.

Notes and References

1. John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber, 2001) 296. Further references to this work will be included in the text.
2. John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (London: Faber, 1979) 247. Further references to this work will be included in the text.
3. John McGahern, 'Wheels', in John McGahern, *The Collected Stories* (London: Faber, 1992) 6.
4. This idea of the 'road back' has been well-explored by Eileen Kennedy in her article, 'The Novels of John McGahern: The Road Away Becomes the Road Back', *Contemporary Irish Writing*, eds. James Brophy and Raymond Porter (Boston: Iona College Press/Twayne Publishers, 1983) 115-126.
5. When this point was put to him, McGahern wisely replied: 'I'm not sure what that word (*existential*) means'. *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*, ed. Ní Anluain (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000) 151.
6. John McGahern, *The Leavetaking* (London: Faber, 1984) 35.
7. Eamon Maher and Declan Kiberd, 'John McGahern: Writer, Stylist, Seeker of a Lost World', *Doctrine and Life* (February 2002): 86.
8. John McGahern, 'An t-Oileánach/The Islandman', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 12.2 (June 1987): 7.

9. McGahern, 'An t-Oileánach' 7.
10. McGahern, 'An t-Oileánach' 7.
11. Maher and Kiberd, 'John McGahern' 96.
12. McGahern, 'An t-Oileánach' 8.