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'Home Is where the Heart Is'

Arrivals and Departures in John McGahern's Short Stories

EAMON MAHER

READERS OF McGahern will be aware of how certain tropes are reworked and redeveloped throughout his *oeuvre*. He was punctilious about finding the exact word to describe a character, about creating the required ambience to convey the intricacies of Irish rural life or to transmit the importance of place to the development of his characters' personality.

Arrivals and departures constitute one of his particular obsessions and thus comprise an essential component of his writings; there are regular train journeys to and from various Western outposts, as people head towards a new life in Dublin, London and New York, or else return from these places in order to help with saving the hay, to attend a funeral or some other family occasion. Whether his characters have a positive or negative perception of their country childhood, the effect of the time spent there leaves an indelible imprint. The road away becomes the road back, departures herald future homecomings, or else the act of staying in one place makes of it an everywhere. As Jamie states in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*: 'I may not have travelled far, but I know the whole world.'¹

This article will examine the role of arrivals and departures in McGahern's *Collected Stories* and will underline how the Leitrim bard

1. John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p.296.

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captured in a succinct manner the fascination the West of Ireland exerts on people who, like McGahern himself, were brought up in this part of the world. In an interesting study entitled *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions*, Eamonn Wall notes how we have become accustomed to thinking of John McGahern 'as a writer of rural Ireland – of farms, country kitchens, harvest rituals, visits to Boyle for shopping and excursions to Strandhill for holidays.'

In fact, Wall continues, as is evident from Pat Collins' moving documentary, *John McGahern: A Private World* (2005), the writer was irresistibly drawn back to the lanes and fields of Roscommon and Leitrim, an area to which he returned to live with his wife Madeline in the late 1960s after the controversy surrounding the banning of his second novel *The Dark* had driven him out of Ireland in 1965.

Although McGahern always emphasised the importance of detachment in the creation of good fiction, Wall observes how Collins' documentary

challenges the distance that underlines this inner formality. It is simultaneously a reminder of the inseparability of the author from the personal background that underlines the work and a pointer toward McGahern's need, as a literary artist, to adopt the pose of the outsider so that his material will assume its required formal and moral frame.²

All of which is tantamount to saying that the writer drew closely on personal experiences when framing his fictional settings and characters, a not unusual device employed by writers of novels and short stories. It is difficult for someone who has never toiled in a freshly cut meadow turning hay to evoke the sweetness of the tea and sandwiches brought to the workers in the fields, or the back-breaking weariness that brings rapid and dreamless sleep at the end of the day. Similarly, it would be difficult for a writer who was not reared in the West of Ireland to understand the importance of the local train station as a locus for sad departures and joyous homecomings.

2. Eamonn Wall, *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), p.89.

'WHEELS'

By its very title, it is clear that 'Wheels' is a story that revolves around a journey, not surprisingly from Dublin to west of the Shannon. Kingsbridge (now Heuston) station is cold and dreary as the hung-over protagonist at the beginning of the story listens as two porters describe a failed attempt by a disillusioned man, transferred from the country to Dublin late in his career, to hang himself near Islandbridge.

After boarding the train, the young man finds himself opposite a middle-aged emigrant from the building sites of London, who is back in Ireland to bury his brother. Unaware that the third man in the carriage is a Catholic priest, the returned emigrant replies in foul, irreverent language to the priest's inquiry about whether he works in London: 'I do and fucken all, for the last twenty-eight years, on the buildings', he shouts.³ When he finally spots the Roman collar as the priest gets up to leave the carriage, the man is horrified and rushes after him to apologise: 'Still, he's a priest, isn't he?' he explains to the narrator, 'You have to draw the line fucken somewhere.' (CS, p. 4) It would seem that time away from Ireland has in no way diminished the respect for the collar, even though it may have coarsened the man's manners and language.

On arriving at his father's house, the narrator spots his step-mother Rose scrubbing the brown flagstones. There is tension in the muted greeting she offers, a mood that is heightened by the arrival of his father shortly afterwards: 'I wondered if the sweat-band stank as it used to or if it was rotten now', he muses. Stray thoughts flit through the mind, as he watches the old man descend from the tractor, that 'body that had started my journey to nowhere' (CS, p. 6).

The source of the disquiet between father and son lies in the young man's refusal to agree to live with the old couple if they came to live in Dublin, as his father had wished him to do. Such a response is viewed as a betrayal by the old man who wants to get away from what he views as a dead-end existence. Whereas the son thinks of his homeplace as 'quiet and beautiful', the older man has a different perspective: 'Quiet as a graveyard.... And stare at beauty every day and it'll turn

3. John McGahern, 'Wheels', in *The Collected Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 4. For subsequent quotes, we will use the abbreviation CS, followed by the page number.

sicker than stray vomit' (CS, p. 9). He laments the closing of the local Garda barracks, the huge number of funerals in the area, each one a reminder that his own turn cannot be far off. The son, for his part, is aware that he is being pressurised into assuming the role of carer, something for which he feels totally unsuited:

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. (CS, p. 8)

The journey home has revived memories of childhood and reinforced the preferability of his new life in Dublin to the claustrophobic existence he endured with his widowed father. He appreciates how fortunate he is that Rose is there to look after the old man, who has assumed many of the traits of a child, a state that is reinforced by the image of him soaking his feet in hot water while Rose scrapes his corns with a razor.

The following morning on the return journey to Dublin, the young protagonist sees through the train windows the fields divided by distinctive stone walls, the animals grazing along the banks of the river Shannon, images that bring him back to his First Communion and to boat trips taken with his father. He knows that this trip is similar to many others he has taken and will take, all being merely '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' (CS, p. 11). At this point, the narrator comes to terms with the effects of time on the individual, realising that change can only be perceived retrospectively, and even then, imperfectly. 'The rich whole' can only be achieved at the end of the life-long quest; in other words, beyond the grave.

'GOLD WATCH'

A similar experience to the one encountered by the young man in 'Wheels' unfolds in two other notable examples, namely 'Gold Watch' and 'Sierra Leone'.

In 'Gold Watch', there is, once more, disharmony between father

and son, a situation that becomes particularly acrimonious during a visit the young man makes home with his new girlfriend. The father suggests that she 'looks well on her way to forty' (CS, p. 213), a cruel comment that is deliberately designed to disconcert his son. The couple had previously visited her family in Kilkenny, where a quarrel had likewise ensued between mother and daughter, who remarked as they were heading back to Dublin: 'Unfortunately the best of these visits is always the leaving' (CS, p. 212). Similarly, there is a history of enmity between the two males, even though the son always went down to help with the hay during the summer: 'There was more caution than any love or charity in my habitual going home' (CS, p. 212), he comments, before adding: 'They had come to depend on me and I liked the work. My father had never forgiven me for taking my chance to go to university. He had wanted me to stay at home to work the land' (CS, p. 214).

Working together at the hay is the one thing the two men can do in harmony. The gold watch that falls to the floor during one of the visits brings the stress to the fore again, however, as the young man undertakes to get it repaired in the hope that 'I would possess its power' (CS, p. 219). The new watch he buys his father as a replacement is placed by the older man in a toxic mixture with a view to underlining its shortcomings. Subsequently, he lets out the meadow where they saved the hay to a neighbour, knowing that such an action will disrupt the annual visit home by the son.

Denis Sampson offers the following assessment of these two episodes:

The father's impolite and reluctant acceptance of his gift of a new watch is matched by his son's own discomfort; the old places remind him of his disappointment, of his awareness of what is missing, of rituals broken.⁴

The inalterable passage of time cannot be reversed, in the same way as the communal work on the hay cannot be replaced by something equally fulfilling. When he observes the meadow shorn of its grass,

4. Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), p.185.

the son knows that his next journey home might well be to attend the father's funeral.

'SIERRA LEONE'

In 'Sierra Leone', a telegram from home means that the protagonist will have to sacrifice a weekend away with his mistress. The discovery that his father merely wants to sign over the farm to him so that his second wife will have no right to it after his death infuriates the young man, who refuses to disinherit his step-mother in such a callous manner: 'We did not speak any common language' (*CS*, p. 325), he writes of his problematic relationship with his father. Before heading west by train, the protagonist once more employs the image of the wheel: 'the old wheel turned and turned anew, wearing my life away: but if it wasn't this wheel, it would be another' (*CS*, pp. 323-4).

Such philosophical musings are characteristic of the later phase of McGahern's literary output, as people begin to see the lack of control they exert over their lives and come to accept their fragility. Hence, as the train edges into Dublin along the back of Croke Park, the narrator observes: 'The weekend was over like a life. If it had happened differently it would still be over.' (*CS*, p. 326) He has come to the realisation that the relationship with his mistress may well be coming to an end, but he knows that it is not entirely due to his choosing to go home rather than spending time with her:

And it would be over and not over. I had gone home instead, a grotesquerie of other homegoings, and it too was over now (*CS*, p. 326).

He discovers at the close of the story that his girlfriend, who was also involved with an older married politician, is planning to join the latter when he takes up a post in Sierra Leone.

DISAPPOINTMENT

Homegoings are almost invariably tinged with disappointment and conflict in McGahern's short stories. Emigrants forced to leave Ireland because of mis-management and corruption in the country feel justifiably angry at the treatment meted out to them and resentful at the unlikelihood of ever being able to return to live in the place

of their birth.

The local Irish newspapers that are passed around the building site populated by Irish workers in 'Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass' announce that prayers have been ordered for good weather so that the farmers can save the harvest. The rough foreman Murphy retorts: 'That it may rise higher than for fukken Noah. That they may have to climb the trees' (CS, p. 33). This outburst encapsulates the sentiments of many who are forced to live in a foreign country and endure lonely, dangerous lives. When they do return home, they splash out on rounds of drinks in the local country pubs to disguise the hopelessness of their lives and to make people believe they are successful.

In the case of Joe Cunningham, his final homecoming will be in a coffin, as he dies from injuries sustained when a ditch in which he is working collapses and breaks his back. He and his friend Murphy, from the West of Ireland, spent a month in Ireland every summer and ended up embittered at their enforced exile: 'It's a kind of a sort of a country [Ireland] that can't even afford a national eejit so they all have to take turns' (CS, p. 146), a typical observation exchanged by the duo. Joe Cunningham's father travels to London to bring home his son's body prior to burial in the local cemetery:

A long line of cars met the hearse on the Dublin road to follow it to the church. After high Mass the next day, young people with white armbands walked behind the hearse until it crossed the bridge, where it gathered speed, and it did not slow until it came in sight of Ardcarne, where they buried him. (CS, p. 149)

The futility of a life of hard graft, the fruits of which are frittered away on drink, prostitutes, wild holidays at home, all these elements are well captured in this moving story.

'THE COUNTRY FUNERAL'

But there are some homecomings that are not so tragic, as we will see in our discussion of what is probably McGahern's best short story, 'The Country Funeral'.

Philly Ryan comes home from working on the oil rigs every year 'in a fever of excitement' (CS, p. 374) that lasts a few days and then turns

to boredom. Usually he then resolves to return earlier than anticipated to the oil rigs. On one fateful occasion, the death of his uncle Peter provides Philly with the opportunity to revisit the area around Gloria Bog, a frequently evoked landscape in McGahern's fiction and the place where the Ryan brothers went every year for the summer holidays. The wheelchair-bound younger brother Fonsie has no desire to attend the funeral, as he remembers how their uncle made him feel as a child: 'He never even liked us', Fonsie rails. 'There were times I felt if he got the chance he'd throw me into a bog hole the way he drowned the black whippet...' (CS, p. 377). In spite of his protestations, the three brothers – the other brother, John, a teacher, is picked up en route to the funeral by Philly in a rented Mercedes – set off towards the west: 'Not until they got past Leixlip, and fields and hedges started to be scattered between the new raw estates, did they begin to talk' (CS, p. 379). The journey westwards becomes a journey of self-discovery for Philly who begins to yearn for the simple life of his uncle, surrounded by a beautiful landscape and tactful, caring neighbours.

But the youthful memories were not all happy ones. Thus, as they crossed the bridge in Carrick-on-Shannon, the brothers fell silent: 'They were coming into country that they knew. They had suffered here' (CS, p. 381).

Greeted on their arrival at their uncle's house by Peter Cullen and his wife, the Ryan brothers are struck by the tact of the couple and their desire to help out in any way they can. Already Peter's body has been laid out and the house prepared for the wake. Philly starts to feel a strong attachment to this piece of land and the neighbourly community. The idea begins to form in his mind that he will eventually buy his uncle's farm from his mother and settle here after he has finished on the oil rigs. He explains his decision to his brothers: 'It'll be a place to come home to' (CS, p. 407).

Something has changed in Philly as a result of this return to his maternal roots. The beautiful landscape induces a calm in him that he has not known previously: 'The moon ... lit the pale sedge. He could see the dark shapes of the heather, the light on the larger lakes of sedge...' (CS, p. 397) He has reached a crossroads in his life and yearns for a place where he can feel at home.

The evocation of the topography around Uncle Peter's house is a type of foreshadowing of the atmosphere of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002). Gone is the bitterness that characterises the early novels and short stories to be replaced by a tenderness, an appreciation of all that is wholesome about rural Ireland, its customs and practices. Philly knows that this would be a good place to live and die in, a feeling that is reinforced by his having entered middle age and being still what he describes as a 'rough unfinished man' (CS, p. 396).

Fonsie is horrified by his brother's announcement. He can see the transformation in Philly and fears that he will lose him if he carries through with what he views as a hare-brained scheme. The country represents something barbaric to him, a place where he could never feel at ease in his wheelchair. And yet, as he watches the funeral cortege making its way unsteadily up Killeelan Hill to the cemetery, he cannot disguise the emotion the scene instils in him: '[...] he found the coffin and the small band of toiling mourners unbearably moving as it made its low stumbling climb up the hill, and this deepened further his irritation and the sense of complete uselessness' (CS, p. 400).

RETURNS

There is a definite shift in mood in relation to journeys back to the country in the latter phase of McGahern's work. This begins at the end of *The Pornographer* (1979) with the decision of the main protagonist to return to live on the farm that was left to him by his parents in the West of Ireland. It is further reinforced by Philly's discovery of the warmth of the community living around Gloria Bog, their affability and calm certainty about what is important in life.

With *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, a paean to McGahern's mother, an artistic alternative to the Mass he promised he would one day say for her, we have the culmination of the ultimate homecoming, the definitive arrival in the soil of his native Leitrim where he would be reunited with Susan McGahern in the cemetery of Aughawillan. The wheel had thus come full circle and the journey ended for the writer where it had begun. A natural outcome when one thinks about it.