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DISINTEGRATION AND DESPAIR IN THE EARLY FICTION OF JOHN MCGAHERN

Eamon Maher

I have often wondered about the lack of serious critical attention given to the writings of John McGahern in Ireland. The writer has been the recipient of many literary prizes and *Amongst Women* was made into a highly successful television drama with the late Tony Doyle excellent in the role of Moran. One encouraging sign of a change of attitude is the fact that the aforementioned novel is now on the Leaving Certificate English syllabus. That said, there is only one critical book on McGahern in English, Denis Sampson's and published in the US in 1993¹. A few years later, Sampson also published a study on Brian Moore², a contemporary of McGahern's and a writer who has also received a mixed reaction in the country of his birth. Both writers deal very much with the theme of disintegration and despair, but whereas Moore's fiction shows many experiments with literary genres, something which many readers, not to talk of critics, find disconcerting, McGahern's is consistent, both in quality and style. So why this relative silence? Some readers are possibly repulsed by the bleakness and pain that characterise the lives of his protagonists but this, in itself, would hardly be sufficient to ward off the critics. After all, Beckett's world-view is not exactly optimistic. It could be because the author is still alive and writing and, as such, capable of changing course completely, which might ruin any eventual thesis being developed in a critique. A more likely reason, in my opinion, is the problem he poses with regard to classification.

In spite of the fact that his second novel, *The Dark* (1965), has been described as a *Bildungsroman* and that comparisons with Joyce have been plentiful, McGahern's writings do not fit into the Joycean mould. In his article in *Studies*,³ Augustine Martin makes the point that Irish writers born in the first half of this century found the oppressive shadow of Joyce and Yeats hanging over them⁴. It was difficult to find new themes, difficult to deal with old ones in a new and fresh manner. Whenever there was a description of a young man coming to a new awareness about life, or realising an artistic vocation, the tendency was, and still is, to accuse the writer of re-writing *The Portrait*. The similarities drawn between *The Dark* and *The Portrait* are not justified, in my estimation: the itineraries of the two protagonists are very different as we shall see. In addition to Joyce, Denis Sampson draws comparisons between McGahern and Proust, Beckett, D.H. Lawrence and Yeats, a fact that irritates David Coad, writing in the French journal, *Etudes*

britanniques contemporaines. Coad puts forward a contentious thesis, that McGahern is largely ignored by the critics because he is simply not a good writer:

McGahern's style has hardly altered in 30 years. There is always the same monotonous, paratactic, uninventive string of nonperiod sentences, often bordering on cheap melodrama, or Barbara Cartland-type sentimental romance, as in the following: "She had loved him, still loved him, and would love him till she died, but how was she to tell him so?" ⁵.

The Reegans, Mahoneys and Morans of this world live in a time-warp, where rituals are important and where change induces fear. Simple, almost rural, prose befits such a setting.

Before criticising McGahern's style, Mr Coad would do well to review his own use of language which makes such generous use of literary jargon – *paratactic* is the type of adjective designed to reach only a sophisticated literary audience. Whereas I can see a reason for the reservations he expresses when comparing McGahern to some of the giants of modern literature, as Sampson does, I can find no justification whatever for the criticism of McGahern's style. If this style is 'monotonous', as Mr. Coad claims, it is because his themes are constant and are normally set in a rural landscape which has been largely bypassed by economic and technological developments. Simple, almost rural prose, befits such a setting. The Reegans, Mahoneys and Morans of this world live in a time warp, where rituals are important and where change induces fear. Coad takes no account of the poetry and music of McGahern's prose. The quote above from *The Barracks*, which he describes as Barbara Cartlandesque, is taken completely out of context. The heroine, Elisabeth Reegan, marries a widower with three children and is forced to sacrifice all to satisfy her husband's and his offsprings' needs. Early in the novel, she is diagnosed as having cancer, which, as a former nurse, she senses to be terminal. She is left to endure this revelation without the support of her husband, a disillusioned police sergeant, whose main purpose in life is to frustrate and undermine his Superintendent, Quirke. Elisabeth's major achievement in the novel lies in her eventual acceptance of death. The abyss she is faced with, the loss of control over her existence, the disintegration of her daily routine, are all conveyed with compelling intensity. She is alone with her suffering, alone with her dark thoughts and questions about what may await her in the after-life. She knows that her husband, having already lost one wife, is unwilling and unable to endure the thought of losing a second one. He is an aloof figure, but a man not without his good points. He loves Elisabeth, but in an unromantic, distant sort of way. So when the heroine wonders how she might reveal her feelings

for him to her husband, it is not a sentimental, romantic weakness that makes her want to do so, but rather a genuine desire to communicate on a deeper level with the man she loves. This is the context of the quote Mr. Coad extracts from *The Barracks* and which he finds melodramatic. I do not agree with his assessment. I find that sentence, in its context, deeply moving.

Many readers view McGahern's fictional universe as bleak, almost apocalyptic, but that is only one side of the picture. In this article, I will deal with the theme of disintegration and despair in his first two novels, *The Barracks* (1963) and *The Dark* (1965), which was, of course, banned by the Irish Literary Censorship Board. The consequences of this were far-reaching for the young novelist. At the insistence of the then Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, McGahern lost his job as a primary-school teacher in Clontarf. He was then forced to move to London to earn a living and did

not return to Ireland until some years later. During 1965 and 1966, his photo appeared regularly in the daily newspapers and he became a type of *cause célèbre*. He shunned the celebrity and the notoriety and has continued to live quietly. This fact may have alienated him from the Dublin artistic circles and the literary critics who probably found it hard to understand how someone could so shun the limelight. McGahern's prose, after the banning, never assumed a bitter tone against the parochial, small-minded forces that had combined to condemn his book. This is to his credit as a writer and as a man.

The Barracks is a powerful first novel, and one whose main focus is a woman. In the opening scene, we see Elisabeth Reegan busy with her sewing while her children argue among themselves as to who will have the privilege of drawing the blind. Her husband has not returned from his rounds in the pelting rain, and she knows that when he does reach the barracks he will bring with him all the bitterness that his unfulfilled ambition fuels in him. Elisabeth's own fatigue, her worry about the painful cysts in her breasts, will have to take second place to Reegan's desire to relate his most recent quarrel with Quirke. In the background she can hear the end of the Sweepstake programme (a type of National Lottery at the time) with its jingle: *It makes no difference who you are. You can wish upon a star*. Her whole existence is summed up in her reaction to this cliché:

It should all make you want to cry. You were lonely. The night was dark and deep. You must have some wish or longing. The life you lead, the nine to five at the office, the drudgery of a farm, the daily round, cannot be endured without hope ⁶.

We all need escape mechanisms that assist us to flee from the ennui of day-to-day living. Elisabeth has scant opportunity to dwell on happy thoughts, however. She knows she is ill, senses the professional dissatisfaction of her husband, the suspicions her stepchildren harbour towards her, the gloomy weather outside. But rather than spilling out her spleen to her husband, who is never shy of unburdening his problems to her, Elisabeth has the capacity to remain silent and to maintain an outward calm. Time moves inexorably towards eternity, an eternity she faces with stoical strength:

A simple trap this half hour of peace and quiet was, she'd have more peace if she'd kept busy to the point of physical breaking-strain. She couldn't ever hope to get any ordered vision on her life. Things were changing, going out of her control, grinding remorselessly forward with every passing moment. (The Barracks, p.50)

While life is harsh most of the time (as are McGahern's writings), there are moments of intense revelation, of 'epiphany', which put our human pain into the larger perspective of eternity.

This is powerful writing, reflecting Elisabeth's deep pain and her sense of powerlessness as she faces all alone her disintegration. There is not even a touch of sentimentality here, just a pure, simple expression of her private hell. What is lost sight of by many commentators in their treatment of *The Barracks* is Elisabeth's ultimate acceptance of her fate and her refusal to sink into a morass of despair. She has great inner strength and a dignity that increases in direct proportion to her suffering. When she knows she is on the threshold of death, she achieves a heightened awareness of the beauty of nature and experiences a deep-felt regret at leaving everything behind. One morning she awakens to the realisation that people spend most of their lives in glorious ignorance of the poetry that is at the heart of existence:

It was so beautiful when she let the blinds up that, 'Jesus Christ', softly was all she was able to articulate as she looked out and up the river to the woods across the lake, black with the leaves fallen except the red rust of the beech trees, the withered reeds standing pale and sharp as bamboo rods at the edges of the water. (The Barracks, p.170)

This familiar scene, to which until now she had scarcely paid any attention, is firmly etched on her consciousness. The reader shares intimately the misery and the insights of the heroine through whose eyes most of the narrative is seen. Her experience is reminiscent of Kavanagh's rebirth after his long operation when he rejoiced in the banal beauty of sticks and green water in the Grand Canal. Mr. Coad would not presume, I hope, to describe the above

passage as 'monotonous'. His criticism of the presentation of the main protagonist in *The Barracks* is, again, crude and insensitive. He maintains ⁷ that there is little, if any, change or development in Elisabeth's character, that she seems just as blighted, run down and uninspired in chapter one as she does on her death-bed at the end. This is patently not the case. Through her anguish and despair, Elisabeth achieves a kind of epiphany, a heightened awareness of the meaning of existence. Nature is an aid in this moment of self-revelation in a process that has strong overtones of transcendence. She is a far more mature woman at the end of the novel than she was at the beginning – there has been obvious evolution in her character. Her distrust of organised religion does not yield to frenzied piety and repentance before her death. She does not seek the ministry of a priest during her last agony. Nevertheless, she does come to a certain accommodation with God:

It seemed as a person grew older that the unknowable reality, God, was the only thing you could believe or disbelieve in with safety; it met you with imponderable silence and could never be reduced to the nothingness of certain knowledge. (The Barracks, p.177)

This was Elisabeth's type of religion, one where there were no rosy convictions about a God who abolished suffering. Silence met her at every turn: the silence of her husband, her step-children, God Himself. How she must have wished she could shout at them all and make them feel what torment she was enduring. When she exclaimed 'Jesus Christ' at the beauty of this world, she was acknowledging the divine nature of creation as well as the fact that there can be moments of joy in the midst of the most intense suffering. So everything is far from black and white in this first novel. The dark at times opens on to the light of wisdom and acceptance.

We now come to the aptly named second novel, *The Dark*. Here there is very little to relieve the despair of the main character, Mahoney, who passes from adolescence to young adulthood without finding any real solution to the existential anguish which grips him. His attempts at finding solace through bouts of masturbation only serve to increase his guilt and feed his low self-esteem. At the core of his problems lies his abusive, bullying father, who cannot bear to think of any of his children escaping from his draconian influence. The opening scene of *The Dark* is one of the most shocking I have ever read. Mahoney has been heard to utter an oath under his breath and his father, in a mad rage, instructs him to remove his clothing and bend over a chair. He then proceeds to simulate a beating, by striking the ground beside his son:

He couldn't control his water and it flowed from him over the leather of the seat. He'd never imagined horror such as this, waiting naked

*for the leather to come down on his flesh, would it ever come, it was impossible and yet nothing could be worse than this waiting*⁸.

The opening pages set the tone for the rest of the novel, even if, quite understandably, the intensity is not maintained at this extremely taut level. Young Mahoney never achieves the self-knowledge of Elisabeth Reegan, partly because he is far younger than she, partly because he remains throughout crippled by his widower father's abuse. He is thus incapable of any type of genuine liberation. He experiences no healing relationship; no significant encounters illuminate his path. Elisabeth's brief relationship with Dr. Halliday, a sad yet vicious nonconformist, taught her not to accept blindly the value-systems handed down to her. Mahoney has no one outside his immediate family to instruct him in this way. Believing that he wants to become a priest, he visits Fr. Gerald, a cousin of his father's, who comes into his bedroom late one night under the pretext of discussing his vocation. Like Mahoney's father, Fr. Gerald is seen to have latent homosexual tendencies. He urges the boy to reveal his sexual peccadilloes and portrays himself as a friend and confessor. When asked, however, if he ever fell prey to the temptations of the flesh himself, the priest quickly ends the conversation. Mahoney then feels doubly betrayed.

There is a similar movement from disintegration and despair to a kind of catharsis in both *The Barracks* and *The Dark* - less convincingly portrayed in the latter.

Physical and psychological abuse, masturbation, guilt, inertia, betrayal, there is little or nothing in this novel to elevate the spirits. Mahoney does achieve a university scholarship, which affords him the opportunity of expanding his intellectual and social horizons. But, after a short period in UCG, where he lacks the courage to even attend the first student dance, he decides to choose the safe option of a career in the ESB. His father, for so long the object of his son's hate and disdain, becomes his unlikely ally as they walk through the streets of Galway: "I wouldn't have been brought up in any other way or by any other father", (p.191) Mahoney declares, most unexpectedly. The reader remains somewhat sceptical of this protestation of filial love, which is not supported by previous evidence in the novel. For example, on page 17 we read:

*The worst was to have to sleep with him the nights he wanted love, strain of waiting for him to come to bed, no hope of sleep in the waiting - counting and losing the count of the thirty-two boards across the ceiling, trying to pick out the darkened circles of the knots beneath the varnish. (*The Dark*, p.17)*

Granted, the father has grown old at the end of the novel and Mahoney has found a certain freedom now that he has embarked on adulthood, but the open wounds of the abuse endured are still apparent. It strikes me that such misdeeds are not so quickly forgiven or forgotten. John Cronin⁹ makes the point that *The Dark* is so determinedly bleak that the novelist runs the risk of finding it impossible to bring it to any kind of convincing conclusion. Certainly, the change of mood from despair to arrogant defiance at the end of the novel is out of sync with what we have seen of the young protagonist throughout. The point of view changes from the third to the second-person singular, for no apparent reason and to no particular effect:

You were walking through the rain of Galway with your father and you would laugh purely, without bitterness, for the first time, and it was a kind of happiness, at its heart the terror of an unclear recognition of the reality that set you free, touching you with as much foreboding as the soöden leaves falling in this day, or any cliché. (The Dark, p.188)

This lack of cohesion is not usual in McGahern's work and I must admit to being less than satisfied with the sudden change in Mahoney's character. (However, the exposure to the sophisticated world of university life definitely frightened the young man and may have drawn him closer to his father, a figure who represents consistency and immutability.) John Cronin observes: "There is inconsistency of character and incident here the novelist fails utterly to justify this particular *epiphany*."¹⁰ In the case of *The Barracks*, Elisabeth's joy and acceptance of her cruel fate are consistent with the evolution of her character and her thoughts about life. She remains credible throughout. In the case of Mahoney, this cannot be maintained to the same extent. There is a similar movement from disintegration and despair to a kind of catharsis in both *The Barracks* and *The Dark*, even if it is less convincingly portrayed in the latter. That said, no perceptive reader of McGahern's early novels could, in my view, accept this simplistic assessment of his works, once more posited by David Coad:

*There is no hope in a world of facts, penury, emotional cripples and victims of the system. The 'withering constriction' not only denotes Irish society, but it can also allude to a mediocre talent, a depressingly dismal view of the world where hope is non-existent*¹¹.

My reading of *The Barracks* and *The Dark* illustrates for me that out of the disillusionment and disintegration, the despair and the anguish, hope does emerge, and from the pen of a most accomplished talent. The critical acclaim heaped on the recent television film adaptation of *Amongst Women* and the literary prizes the same novel has won for its author, place McGahern to the

forefront of contemporary Irish writers. He does not indulge his readers: the harsh realism of his writings makes us recognise that while life is a struggle most of the time, there are the moments of intense revelation, of 'epiphany' (as one critic recently called it)¹², which put our human pain into the larger perspective of eternity.

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Notes

- ¹ *Outstaring Nature's Eye. The Fiction of John McGahern*, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1993.
- ² *Brian Moore. The Chameleon Novelist*, Dublin: Marino, 1998.
- ³ Augustine Martin, "Inherited Dissent: the Dilemma of the Irish Writer", in *Studies*, Spring 1965.
- ⁴ In the interview in this issue of *Studies*, McGahern says that, rather than being shadows, these authors are to him a major source of pride and sustenance.
- ⁵ D. Coad, "One God, one disciple: the case of John McGahern", in *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, Université de Paul Valéry, Janvier 1995, p.61.
- ⁶ *The Barracks*, London: Faber & Faber, 1963, p.32. All my references will be from this edition.
- ⁷ "One God, one disciple", op. cit., p.61.
- ⁸ *The Dark*, London: Faber & Faber, 1983, p.9. In the film version of *Amongst Women*, this scene is borrowed although it doesn't appear in the later novel.
- ⁹ John Cronin, "The Dark is not Light Enough", in *Studies*, Winter 1969.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.430.
- ¹¹ "One God, one disciple", op.cit., pp. 61-62.
- ¹² Eamon Wall, "The Living Stream: John McGahern's *Amongst Women* and Irish Writing in the 1990s", in *Studies*, Autumn 1999.