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Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Assessing a literary legacy: the case of John McGahern

Eamon Maher*

National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies, ITT Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

The John McGahern yearbook, vol. 2, edited by John Kenny, Galway, NUI Galway, 2009, 152 pp., €50.00 (hardback), ISSN 2009-1265

Love of the world: essays, by John McGahern, edited by Stanley Van der Ziel with an Introduction by Declan Kiberd, London, Faber & Faber, 2009, 448 pp., £20.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780571245116

Since he passed away in 2006, John McGahern's status as Ireland's foremost prose writer in English has been reinforced by the establishment of an International Seminar and Summer School by NUI Galway and a *Yearbook* that captures the highlights of this event. Enhanced by wonderfully expressive photographic material and the adroit editorial skills of John Kenny, the second volume of the *Yearbook* has an impressive array of contributors, including Denis Sampson, probably the leading expert on McGahern's work, David Malcolm, whose *Understanding John McGahern* was published in 2007, Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, and Christopher Murray.

In his Foreword, John Kenny recalls coming across a seemingly innocuous copy of McGahern's first novel, *The Barracks* (1963), in the Archive at NUI Galway. Closer examination revealed how many years after its publication the author had inserted a number of cuts and edits in black biro, an action that was completely in keeping with his fanatical quest for the perfect style. Kenny observes:

We know, especially from the distillation many of his stories went through, from first publication in individual collections to *The Collected Stories* to *Creatures of the Earth*, that McGahern continuously edited his already seemingly perfect prose even at the stage furthest from his initial handwritten drafts, helped perhaps by the eye-clearing effect that type on paper can have. (7)

This observation goes to the heart of what made John McGahern such a special writer. The first essay, 'McGahern's Irelands', by Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, begins with a discussion of De Valera's now famous 1943 Saint Patrick's Day radio broadcast in which he conjured up an idyllic image of a bucolic and self-sufficient Ireland that was very far from the reality at the time and is often evoked in almost mocking terms now. According to Ó Tuathaigh,

the corpus of McGahern's writing offers a *representation* and a *critique* of a habitat and a base-community that is anthropological in the closeness of its observation and that is fundamentally concerned with forces of continuity and change in Irish society (in particular the rural society of the west) in the decades between the late 1930s and the early years of this century. (18)

*Email: eamon.maher@ittdublin.ie

As a historian, Ó Tuathaigh clearly considers such a contribution worthy of examination and he discusses the role played by McGahern in chronicling the major changes that took place in Ireland in the decades from the 1930s to the end of the last century:

Even as he registers the changing economic landscape and social habits [...] of later twentieth-century Ireland, his focus remains firmly on the immediate post-war generation of his base-community as it encounters, and in one way or another comes to terms with, the changing Ireland of its own and of McGahern's maturity and later years. (19)

Ó Tuathaigh hails the courage demonstrated by the writer in coming to grips with issues that were taboo for the time. Towards the end of his life, McGahern put forward a more benign picture of Ireland, but he never forgot the repressive aspects of the society in which he grew up.

David Malcolm places McGahern in a European context. He shows how the settings and themes of his novels, with a powerful Church, the glorification of religious ritual, life on the land, poverty, the centrality of history, emigration to the cities, 'are the stuff of a pan-European experience' (54). He argues correctly that McGahern has found many of his most astute critics among French- and German-speaking critics – I think it is stretching things somewhat to mention the latter, who are far less numerous than the French cohort. Malcolm's main point is that McGahern wrote the same novel and short story over and over again, which is undoubtedly true. The analysis is more revealing at the end when he notes: 'His texts oscillate between the conventions of realism and an altogether more reflexive type of utterance' (61).

Christopher Murray provides an excellent analysis of McGahern's sole foray into theatre. The play, *The Power of Darkness*, was based on Tolstoy's drama of the same title and given an Irish setting. It was performed in the Abbey as the centrepiece of the 1991 Dublin Theatre Festival. The reviews were scathing in general, the main criticism seeming to focus on the excessive use of melodrama and what many saw as another Synge-like distortion of Irish life on the Abbey stage. Murray sees McGahern's basic problem as being how to reconfigure and make communicable to a modern Irish audience Tolstoy's theme, which was stereotypical and dated. The play was pulled after a few performances and Murray manages to fill in the background wrangling and theatrical inadequacies that contributed to its failure.

Denis Sampson, in 'Reading a Life', recounts his first encounter with McGahern who shocked him shortly afterwards by placing in his hands the typescript of his new novel. Sampson knew this was a test, one that he seemed to pass because the two men became firm friends after that. He sees *Memoir* as a mirror of the writer's self, the title 'means not just remembering or recalling what happened; it is also a celebration of the redemptive power of memory itself' (94). This is a very useful distinction, which is developed in more detail later in the article: '*Memoir* can be thought of as more myth than biography; critical choices were made in the style and shaping of the book, in the kind of self-portrait McGahern wanted to display at the end of his life' (95). Sampson explains how for McGahern the essence of life is not so much the years lived and the events experienced, but more 'Time arrested and celebrated, the ordinary moments placed in eternity' (97).

This is merely a sample of what you will find in the second McGahern *Yearbook*. It has a number of reminiscences from people who knew the writer and, equally important, the man. Val Nolan, who never had the pleasure of meeting him in person, nevertheless felt he knew him. He comments on how impressed he was with Pat Collins' superb documentary *A Private World* which shows McGahern in his home and local environment, places where he could be himself among his 'own' people. Nolan adds: 'With much of *A Private World* filmed indoors, in the house where McGahern lived his last thirty years, the one thing that defines the documentary is – no pun intended – the dark' (111). Dark it may be, but one that has an illuminating aspect.

John Kenny and NUI Galway are to be commended for the care with which they have set about building on the archive that McGahern donated to the college library. This *Yearbook* has within its covers engaging anecdotes, rigorous academic analysis and excellent visual aids. I will conclude with Ó Tuathaigh's fitting epitaph:

[T]he universality of McGahern's appeal lies in the fact that his attention to the deeper longings of the human spirit, the fundamental dilemmas, contradictions and imperfections of the human condition, in family and village and local community, as a traditional rural society takes the full charge of modernization and dissolution, is appreciated by and evokes a response in attentive readers from all societies working through their engagement with the modern world. (27)

It is always nice to read what others have to say about McGahern, but there is never any substitute for the words of the man himself. Since his death, there has been the publication of his – yet again! – revised short stories, *Creatures of the Earth*, and now a very useful collection of his non-fiction, *Love of the World*. The editor of this volume, Stanley Van der Ziel, has completed a PhD on McGahern's work and is a prescient and sensitive reader of the work. His editorial skills can be seen in the presentation and ordering of the non-fiction 'essays' – to use the subtitle of the book. Just as we need good critical analysis of his fiction, the writer's own views on the creative process, on literature, society, local people, places and events, are equally revealing of his main obsessions. As with the fiction, the non-fiction contains many of the same themes that recur in slightly different form. His interests and preoccupations remained consistent throughout his life. He was drawn to writers who shared his own literary credo and to people who were honest and plain speaking. *Love of the World* allows readers who would be less familiar with the non-fiction access to the best-known, and the less well-known essays.

Declan Kiberd, who is a former pupil of McGahern's, supplies a wonderful Introduction. He begins with the following lines: 'Thoughts and ideas seldom outlast the period in which they are enunciated, but a lucid style may live forever. For John McGahern nothing was nobler than an accurate description of the world as it is' (xi). The literary influences were found in classical writers such as Homer, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Yeats and Proust. But he also expressed a liking for less well-known writers such as Alistair McLeod and John Williams. Then there were the Irish references: Beckett, Yeats, Tomás Ó Crohan, Ernie O'Malley, Kate O'Brien, to name but a few. Kiberd notes: 'He was hard to please, but utterly generous about those whose work he admired' (xi). The Catholic Church forms the basis of many of the essays, one of which, 'The Church and its Spire', is a lengthy and illuminating reflection on the role that Catholicism played in McGahern's life. Kiberd is sensitive to this 'debt' (as the writer himself described it): 'The Catholic Ireland of his youth offered little by way of aesthetic experience, except through the sights, sounds and smells of the Mass or Benediction, May altars or Easter rituals. At its most moving moments, that church offered an altar but no pulpit, a ceremonial of flowers, incense and song' (xv).

His relationship with the Catholic Church is as good a place as any to begin our discussion of these essays. For someone who suffered as a result of clerical interference at the highest level when he was removed from his position as a primary school teacher after the banning of his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965, McGahern might have been excused for harbouring a grudge against the Church. However, this was not generally the case. He found the repressive attitude adopted towards sexuality injurious, as it undermined an essential and sacred aspect of life, and disliked the authoritarian and patriarchal attitude of the Irish clergy and Irish society in general. He regretted the fact that Ireland, rather than adopting the elevation of the soul encapsulated by Gothic spires pointing upwards into the sunset, settled instead for the Romanesque spirit – 'the low roof, the fortress, the fundamentalists' pulpit-pounding zeal, the darkly and ominous and fearful warnings to transgressors' (145). These reservations aside, he

regularly intoned his gratitude to his Catholic upbringing for imbuing in him ‘the sense of our origins beyond the bounds of sense, an awareness of mystery and wonderment, grace and sacrament, and the absolute equality of all women and men underneath the sun of heaven’ (133). It was a pity that such high ideals were rarely matched by the reality encapsulated by the domineering Irish Church that McGahern encountered during his life. He wisely made a distinction between the institution and the Gospel and rituals that underpinned the faith. When he left the Church his nostalgia for the latter elements was matched by his abhorrence of the fortress mentality of the former.

Readers of McGahern will know about the many discussions he had with his beloved mother about his becoming a priest. The vocation to the priesthood was soon replaced by that of the ‘second priesthood’, teaching, and then by literature. There remained a residual guilt, however, at the breaking of a promise that had been made to his mother when he was young. During the 1930s and 1940s when McGahern was growing up, it was quite natural for young boys and girls to give serious consideration to committing themselves to the religious life:

All through this schooling there was the pressure to enter the priesthood, not from the decent Brothers but from within oneself. The whole of our general idea of life still came from the Church, clouded by all kinds of adolescent emotions heightened by the sacraments and prayers and ceremonies. Still at the centre was the idea: in my end is my beginning. The attraction was not joy or the joyous altar of God; it was dark, ominous, and mysterious, as befits adolescence and the taking up, voluntarily, of our future death at the very beginning of life. (142)

Literature was eminently preferable to the religious calling for McGahern. In terms of gaining an insight into his literary credo, one short essay, ‘The Image’, is revealing. The various versions of ‘The Image’ that the editor places at the beginning of the collection demonstrate the importance attached to it by both the editor and the writer. Throughout this manifesto, we are reminded of the importance of rhythm and vision:

The vision, that still and private universe which each of us possess[es] but which others cannot see, is brought to life in rhythm, and by rhythm I think of the dynamic quality of the vision, its instinctive, its individual movements; and this struggles towards the single image, the image on which our whole life took its most complete expression once. (5)

The more I re-read ‘The Image’, the more I realise that, for all his undoubted qualities as a creative writer, McGahern was not the best at capturing the theory that underpinned his literary philosophy. This is not meant as a criticism – far from it – simply as a comment on the demarcation between the writer as practitioner and theorist. Some are adept at both – Heaney and Banville immediately spring to mind – but they are in the minority. In the case of McGahern, we can see a lack of surefootedness rarely visible in the fiction when he delves into theory.

Clearly, vision, rhythm and image are central to all writers of fiction, as is memory, which played a particularly prominent role in McGahern’s oeuvre, to such an extent that some critics (including Sampson and this author) have drawn parallels with Proust. When he states that art is ‘an attempt to create a world in which we can live’ (5), once more one has to acknowledge that there is nothing too original in this. The created world he describes as a ‘Medusa’s mirror, which allows us to celebrate even the totally intolerable’, which is, once more, somewhat abstruse. Towards the end, things do become somewhat clearer, as the religious nature of his writing is conceded: ‘It is here, in this search for the single image, that the long and complicated journey of art betrays the simple religious nature of its activity: and here, as well, it most sharply separates itself from formal religion’ (6). Whereas religion promises us the eternal Kingdom, the Muse ‘may grant us the absurd crown of style, the “revelation” in language of this private and unique world each of us possesses, as we struggle for what may be no more than a yard of lead piping we saw in terror once’ (6).

The essay on Joyce's *Dubliners* contains extracts from a correspondence between George Sand and Flaubert in which the importance of style is underlined. Sand envied Flaubert his impartiality, his refusal to judge his characters: 'You, always, in whatever you do, begin with a great leap toward heaven, and then you return to earth. You start from the *a priori*, from theory, from the ideal' (203). McGahern was an avid admirer of Flaubert's ability in his novels to be like God in nature, 'present everywhere but nowhere visible' (201). This is compared to Joyce's approach: 'In *Dubliners* there is no self-expression; its truth is in every phrase' (201). He admires the way in which Joyce's prose 'never draws attention to itself except at the end of *The Dead*, and by then it has been earned' and, in a comment that echoes his own unique literary achievement, he notes: 'The quality of the language is more important than any system of ethics or aesthetics. Material and form are inseparable' (207). From these comments, I think one can conclude that one of the best ways of understanding McGahern's concerns about art is to read what he has to say about other writers. He invariably focuses on issues that are important to him. Thus, the enthusiasm with which he evokes the 'scrupulous meanness' of Joyce's style and Flaubert's expressed desire to write a book that would be held together by style alone, is not without significance. Similarly, his admiration for Tomás O'Crohan's *The Islandman*, with its evocation of a culture that was on its last legs, mirrors his own Swan Song to the traditional rural Ireland that he so painstakingly chronicles in his fiction.

Van der Ziel has done a masterful job of assembling this broad canvass of reviews, newspaper and journal articles, book Prefaces and Introductions and giving them an order and coherence. I really enjoyed McGahern's description of journeys to Enniskillen during the 1970s postal strike in the South which provided the excuse to visit Blake's pub, where you were assured of an excellent pint of Guinness and a unique atmosphere. I also like the essay 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing' in which he excoriates the closed mindset of the two states, North and South of the border, during the 1950s: 'The moral climate can be glimpsed in the warning catchphrases: "A shut mouth catches no flies"; "Whatever you say, say nothing", "Think what you say but don't say what you think"; "The less you say, the more you'll hear"; "Mind you, I have said nothing"' (128). The mischievous sense of humour, the capacity to appreciate the attitudes that take root in certain communities and to capture the local idiom, are all evident in this essay. Van der Ziel in his Preface states that McGahern's writing 'is always an act of love' (xlii), and this shines through in this memorable collection, unfortunately the last we are likely to read from the pen of one of Ireland's greatest exponents of the novel and short story genres.

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