

2016-04-30

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Recommended Citation

Maher, E. (2016) John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition by Stanley van der Ziel review, *The Irish Times*, March 30th, 2016.

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John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition by Stanley van der Ziel review

The great Irish novelist and short-story writer was influenced as much by classic European literature as he was by his home place, argues a masterful new study

Eamon Maher

Wed, Mar 30, 2016, 11:08

On some rare occasions, creative writers have the good fortune to find literary critics capable of unveiling hitherto hidden and essential facets of their work. This masterful study of John McGahern by Stanley van der Ziel is one such example.

The author spent years working on a PhD dissertation on which this book is based and he also edited a collection of McGahern's non-fiction, *Love of the World: Essays*, for Faber and Faber, in 2009. While his knowledge of McGahern is thus clearly beyond doubt, what is particularly impressive is how van der Ziel displays almost equal familiarity with canonical figures of world literature such as Shakespeare, Austen, Wordsworth, Proust, Chekhov, Joyce, Yeats, and Beckett.

This book's originality stems from the fact that it moves beyond the tendency among reviewers of McGahern's work to foreground the extent to which his fiction draws its inspiration from real-life events and settings. The publication of *Memoir* in 2005 led many to draw parallels between fictional representations and autobiography, not unreasonably in my view. While acknowledging that there are undoubted links between the fiction and the writer's lived experience, van der Ziel's concern is to elucidate how McGahern's imagination was informed by his extensive reading of, and thinking about, classic literature.

To put it succinctly, the book posits that McGahern was not merely a chronicler of rural Ireland during the 1940s and 1950s, but also an artist who deserves equal billing with the best that European literature has to offer.

McGahern's pared-down style and his apparent embrace of the realist novel form disguise a sophisticated writer who used art to conceal art. His constant repetition that what concerned him primarily was "getting his words right" should not be read as an indication that he developed an aesthetic that was as local and grounded as its themes and landscapes. In fact, he devoted huge time and care into weaving intertextual references throughout his novels and short stories. Naturally, he did not merely import phrases and descriptions from other writers into his own work; rather, he took some of their ideas and used them to shape his artistic vocation.

Chronological path

The book follows a chronological path that begins with Shakespeare and ends with Beckett. McGahern would have studied Shakespeare during his years in secondary school in Carrick-on-Shannon. The figure of Lear looms large in the rantings of Mahoney in *The Dark*

(1965), and throughout McGahern's oeuvre the Shakespearean predilection for portraying the human race as puppets on "this great stage of fools" is tangible.

His admiration for Jane Austen is evidenced by the fact that *Mansfield Park* was the only book he brought with him on his final visit to the Mater hospital, where he died on March 30th, 2006. What appealed to McGahern in particular was Austen's emphasis on the importance of localised culture, her sense of "manners", as revealed in the tactful way in which she commented on her characters' behaviour. Van der Ziel likens this to McGahern's wonderful description, in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, of the preference among the lakeside community in which the novel is set for "avoidances and obfuscations", instead of dealing openly with the issues that preoccupy them. Two carefully chosen nouns convey the essence of what McGahern seeks to say in this instance.

The discussion of McGahern's romantic imagination is insightful. In an essay, *My Education*, he noted: "I think that the quality of feeling that's brought to the landscape is actually more important than the landscape itself." This is well illustrated by Moran in *Amongst Women*, who in the last weeks of his life keeps on walking the fields "like a man trying to see". The poignancy is beautifully drawn by McGahern: "To die was never to look on all this again . . . He had never realised when he was in the midst of confident life what an amazing glory he was part of."

His romantic imagination was probably augmented by McGahern's awareness of the limits of realism. Van der Ziel illustrates how his narrators are in many instances "unwilling or unable to continue in the tradition of 'transparent' realist language". Hence, a work of literature "should reflect only a selection of reality, because to look directly on all reality can only result in a form of intellectual or imaginative paralysis".

GO UNLIMITED ? Timeless

In the chapters on McGahern's "modernist mind", we are introduced to Proust's belief that "the perfect work of fiction" is timeless, which leads on to a perceptive discussion of "involuntary memory" in the work of both writers. Joyce and Yeats were not viewed as oppressive shadows but as a source of inspiration. McGahern sought to emulate the "scrupulous meanness" of Joyce's style and found inspiration in Yeats's use of place names as a way of giving the local a universal resonance.

The section on postwar philosophies covers figures such as Camus, Claude Simon and Beckett. Given that McGahern's admiration for Simon was "unstinting", the amount of space devoted to him is negligible. I would likewise have liked further discussion of how Camus was more an absurdist than an existentialist, a trait that he apparently shares with McGahern. But that is the problem when you cast your net as widely as van der Ziel does: there will inevitably be areas that are not covered in the detail some would wish for. Hence, whereas McGahern's incorporation of Beckett is made perfectly plausible, the Epilogue's attempt to prove that Beckett was also inspired by McGahern is far less so.

Overall, then, *John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition* is an illuminating text that brings McGahern scholarship to a new level. Given that this week marks the 10th anniversary of the writer's death, it is fitting that we now have such a substantial and groundbreaking assessment of his literary imagination.