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A Country Writer Exiled in the City: The Case of John McGahern

EAMON MAHER

THE WRITER John McGahern is far better known as the bard of his native Leitrim than as a Dublin writer. And yet, as we shall see, he spent some of the formative years of his life working as a national school teacher in Scoil Eoin Baiste (Belgrove), in Clontarf. Before that, he did his teacher training at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, and he also registered for an evening degree in English at UCD. Thus, he lived in Dublin from the early 1950s up until his controversial dismissal as a teacher after the banning of his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965. In addition to publishing what he described somewhat humorously as 'a dirty book', McGahern had also married a Finnish divorcee, Annikki Laaksi, during the sabbatical year he spent in London, made possible by the prestigious literary award, the MacAuley Scholarship. The combination of these two events conspired to make his position in Belgrove untenable, particularly when the then Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, became personally involved in the controversy and insisted that McGahern be dismissed.

The 'McGahern Affair' polarised public opinion in Ireland for the best part of a year. Having read *The Dark* and found nothing objectionable in it, Samuel Beckett was prepared to speak up for McGahern, but the latter declined the offer, preferring, instead, not to make a fuss and to leave Ireland until things had calmed down. Owen Sheehy Skeffington took up McGahern's cause in the Senate, where he railed at how the Catholic Church almost completely controlled the Irish educational system, whereas the government paid the teachers' salaries: 'The State pays the piper, but the Church calls

the tune', he noted perceptively. In Skeffington's view, McGahern could not be accused of producing pornography in *The Dark*:

The book itself is a sensitive, well-written, rather sad and poignant book, dealing with aspects of Irish life which officialdom prefers to pretend do not exist. Masturbation, homosexual tendencies, the sexual frustrations of many Irish men and women including some priests, are dealt with in a courageous and frank manner, but with a sobriety and seriousness of concern which are undeniable.¹

Skeffington's assessment of the novel is accurate, in my view, but there can be no doubt that the issues raised in *The Dark* constituted a heady cocktail for 1960s Ireland and really could only have resulted in McGahern's dismissal, especially once the banning became a cause célèbre for the liberal anti-censorship lobby which was openly opposed to Church interference in matters where it was considered to lack any real expertise. I have often wondered if McGahern knew exactly what his fate would be in publishing *The Dark* and whether he subconsciously triggered his dismissal. At this point, he had already embarked on a literary career and, while teaching is certainly one of the few professions that allows a fair degree of free time, I believe that McGahern wanted to devote himself fulltime to his literary endeavours.

FROM THESE FIELDS

I also think that he may well have had enough of Dublin, which he considered an unsuitable place to write in. It is no coincidence that when he returned from his self-imposed exile after the banning controversy, McGahern decided to settle, first in Galway, and then in his native Leitrim. He describes the reasons for his decision in *Memoir*:

1. Owen Sheehy Skeffington, 'McGahern Affair', in *Censorship: A Quarterly Report on Censorship of Ideas and the Arts*, 2.2 (Spring 1966), pp.27-30, p. 27.

My wife [at this point he had married Madeline Green] and I were beginning our new life together, and we thought we could make a bare living on these small fields and I would write. It was a time when we could have settled almost anywhere, and if she had not liked the place and the people we would have moved elsewhere. I, too, liked the place, but I was from these fields and my preference was less important.²

A big factor in the choice was the fact it would allow McGahern to contemplate on a daily basis a landscape he associated with his beloved mother. On certain occasions, when walking along the same lanes that he travelled on the way to primary school with his mother, McGahern felt himself transported back to the happy time of his youth. It enabled him to experience what he describes as 'an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace', something which he never seems to have experienced in Dublin. Leitrim and Roscommon are the areas that McGahern mined most successfully in his fiction. When he describes the people and the places there, they have the ring of authenticity, of lived experience.

I don't think one can say the same about the work situated in Dublin or London. When one reflects on why this may have been the case, a few possibilities come to mind. Firstly, McGahern is essentially a writer who was concerned with the local and who had the great capacity to make of one small place, the postage stamp of the north-west Irish midlands, an everywhere. Then there is the undoubted fact that the dominant literary milieu in Dublin during the 1950s was anathema to him. In his essay 'The Solitary Reader', he acknowledges how Beckett and Kavanagh were the main figures aspiring writers looked up to at the time:

They belonged to no establishment and some of their best

2. John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 2. Further excerpts are noted within brackets in the text, giving the page reference.

work was appearing in little magazines that could be found in the Eblana Bookshop on Grafton Street.

Beckett was in Paris. The large, hated figure of Kavanagh was an inescapable sight around Grafton Street, his hands often clasped behind his back, muttering hoarsely to himself as he passed. Both, through their work, were living, exciting presences in the city.³

While McGahern admired Kavanagh's work, he was not enamoured with the Monaghan poet's lifestyle, so memorably evoked in Anthony Cronin's memoir, *Dead as Doornails*, which describes in some detail the petty jealousies and heavy drinking of Kavanagh, Myles na Gopaleen, Brendan Behan, and Cronin himself. When reading Cronin's account, one cannot but marvel at how these writers managed to produce any worthwhile work at all, such was the extent of their drinking. McGahern made a conscious decision not to fall into the trap of frequenting what he describes as 'the bohemian bars around Grafton Street'. In *Memoir*, he described the distaste he had for such places:

A single visit to McDaid's was enough to cure me of any desire for literary company for a month. Like all closed, self-protective societies, they believed that everything of importance took place within their circle, while all of them were looking outwards without seeing in this any contradiction. (*Memoir*, p. 243)

What put McGahern on his guard against this 'Freemasonry of the intellect'⁴ was the extent to which 'the megalomania and darkness of these bars were as familiar to me as the air around my father' (*Memoir*, p. 243). By this he meant that the atmosphere could turn to

3. 'The Solitary Reader', in Stanley van der Ziel (ed.), *Love of the World: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 92.

4. *Op. cit.*, p. 91.

violence without warning and leave a raft of victims in its wake.

ENJOYING THE CITY

For all the negative aspects I have been outlining, it would be wrong to say that McGahern did not like anything about Dublin. He was a regular frequenter of the cinema and theatre, where he had the opportunity to savour the type of avant-garde plays and films which one would associate more with cosmopolitan cities like London and Paris than with Dublin.

Then there were the numerous secondhand bookshops dotted around the city. Once more in 'The Solitary Reader', McGahern fondly recalls one bookshop in particular on a corner of Grafton Street where he found what would now be described as modern classics. He was friendly with the artist Patrick Swift, who was responsible for getting McGahern's first piece of prose published in *X*, which Frank Shovlin describes as 'an unapologetically elitist magazine that always championed the idea of poet as clerk or workman as opposed to tormented, Byronic genius.'⁵ Whereas wary of the McDaid's clique, McGahern did have his own group of artistic acquaintances, most particularly the Swift brothers. Hence, he could write:

Those were times when books were discussed in dance halls as well as in bars. It was easy then to get a desk in the National Library. The staff were kind and even would bring rare books on request. There were inexpensive seats at the back of the Gate theatre, and there were many pocket theatres, often in Georgian basements. Out in Dun Laoghaire, there was the Gas Company Theatre where we had to walk through the silent showroom of gas cookers to get to see Pirandello or Chekhov or Lorca or Tennessee Williams (*Love of the World*, p. 91).

5. Frank Shovlin, *Touchstones: John McGahern's Classical Style* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2016), p. 9.

It is thus clear that there was no shortage of cultural activity in Dublin for anyone interested in seeking it out. In this regard, one could claim with a certain justification that McGahern's evolution as a writer owes a lot more to the Dublin years than it might seem from the sparse references to this period of his life in *Memoir*. Whereas the main settings for his fiction are undoubtedly the areas of Leitrim and Roscommon where he was brought up and to which he returned as an adult, Dublin features regularly in McGahern's work. His characters tend to relocate to the capital to find work. They also tend to make full use of the freedom this move affords them to experiment with sex and to escape the generally repressive atmosphere of their rural background. The pubs and the dancehalls feature prominently – places like Gaffneys in Fairview, for example, or the Teachers Club in Parnell Square are frequently evoked.

In *The Pornographer*, the male protagonist works in Dublin. Towards the beginning of the novel, we discover how, flushed after an evening spent describing the sexual exploits of the fictional couple, Mavis and the Colonel, he decides to head out on the town:

I am impatient for the jostle of the bar, the cigarette smoke, the shouted orders, the long, first dark cool swallow of the cream against the lips, and afterwards the brushing of the drumbeat as I climb the stained carpeted stairs to the dancehall.⁶

On this particular evening, he meets the bank clerk Josephine, whom he describes as 'a wonderful healthy animal', and begins a sexual relationship with her. When she becomes pregnant after urging him not to use a condom during their lovemaking, the situation deteriorates and she heads to London, where she will give birth to the child. He visits her during the pregnancy and after the birth, but refuses to see the child, which earns him a serious beating from Jose-

6. John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 25. Further excerpts are noted within brackets in the text, giving the page reference.

phine's protector and fellow exile, Michael Kavanagh.

Throughout the pregnancy, the pornographer has also been visiting his dying aunt in hospital. The care he lavishes on this stoic woman is noticeably different from how he treats Josephine. The trips to the hospital are also the pretext for making contact with Nurse Brady, to whom he is instantly drawn. One of her main attractions is that she reminds him of his country roots, the scent of her body resembling that of freshly cut hay. The death of his aunt brings the transience of life into sharp focus for the pornographer. His uncle, who knows him better than one might think, encourages the young man to come home and work the land, telling him on numerous occasions: "After all, the city is more of a young man's place" (*The Pornographer*, p. 147). In the country he would have the opportunity to lead a more meaningful life with Nurse Brady, if she will have him. Making love to this woman has a mystical aspect, as is obvious from the following description:

This body was the shelter of the self. Like all walls and shelters it would age and break and let the enemy in. But holding it now was like holding glory, and having held it once was to hold it – no matter how broken and conquered – in glory still and with all the more terrible tenderness. (*The Pornographer*, p. 177)

RETURNING WEST

After *The Pornographer*, McGahern made the conscious decision to locate all his fiction in the West of Ireland, as if he realised that this was the world he knew best. The novel ends there and the writer does not stray again from this location. Whereas they may yearn to escape from the country initially, McGahern's characters do not tend to look on Dublin as home. They gravitate more and more towards their rural roots, especially as they get older. Take for example the son in the short story 'Gold Watch', who returns home every year to

help his father with the hay. On one occasion, he arrives to find the meadows cut and the hay saved. His father had let the fields without saying anything, which leaves the son surprisingly nostalgic for the rhythm of physical labour and the strange satisfaction it gave him. Back in the house of his childhood, he can't concentrate on the book he is reading and feels uncomfortable in his city suit: 'missing my old clothes, the smell of diesel in the meadow, the blades of grass shivering as they fell, the long teeth of the raker kicking the hay into rows, all the jangle and bustle and busyness of the meadows.'⁷

In many of McGahern's novels and stories, people return during their summer holidays to help out on the farms they have often been forced to leave in order to seek employment elsewhere. The work is hard, but the shared endeavour and the sense of achievement at the end of the day when looking over the freshly mown fields and the hay heaped in neat stacks makes up for the blisters and the aches all over their bodies.

However, the appreciation of the countryside is not so obvious to those who are permanently resident there. The short story 'Wheels' begins, like many of McGahern's stories, with a train journey from Dublin to the West. Once more, a son is going to see his father, with whom he has a fraught relationship. On this occasion, the tension is caused by the father's rather strange plan to move to Dublin. The younger man does not relish the idea of taking a room in his father's house in the city, having become accustomed to his independence. In an attempt to placate his father, he mentions how 'quiet and beautiful' it is around their farm, a comment which elicits the withering riposte: 'Quiet as a graveyard ... And stare at beauty every day and it'll turn sicker than stray vomit.' (*Collected Stories*, p. 9). For the father, the only excitement in the area is when funerals take place, and that

7. John McGahern, 'Gold Watch', in *The Collected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 223. Further excerpts are noted within brackets in the text, giving the page reference.

has become an all too regular occurrence. He probably realises that his own death is imminent and hence his desire to escape from what to him resembles nothing more than 'stray vomit'.

BEAUTY

We have seen how the pornographer only began to grasp the possibilities afforded by returning to the land after he had spent a protracted period in Dublin. Others who have never left do not enjoy this advantage. The most poignant moment in McGahern's masterpiece, *Amongst Women*, is when the main character Michael Moran, on the threshold of death, glimpses at the luxuriant meadow at the back of his house and sees its beauty for the first time: 'He had never realised when in the midst of confident life what an amazing glory he was part of.'⁸ The same is true of Elizabeth Reegan in McGahern's first novel, *The Barracks*, who in the wake of receiving a cancer diagnosis looks out one morning at a scene she had observed several times without noticing how unbearably lovely it was:

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 beech trees, the withered leaves standing pale and sharp as bamboo rods at the edges of the water.⁹

To die was to be separated forever from this splendid landscape, which, in the busyness of her working day, had escaped her attention. McGahern was very skilled at conveying the visceral feeling of sadness that takes hold of people when they come to the realisation that they never savoured the beauty that was in plentiful supply all around them, often because they had to eke a living from the land or

8. John McGahern, *Amongst Women* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 179.

9. John McGahern, *The Barracks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 170.

were too busy to see it in anything other than a utilitarian manner.

Patrick Kavanagh's epiphany along the banks of the canal in Dublin occurred after a life-threatening illness which instigated him to write poetry extolling the splendour of the everyday and the mundane. It was not just Inniskeen in Co. Monaghan that provided the inspiration for his lyrical evocation of nature: Dublin too had its beauty spots if one had but eyes to see them. With McGahern, one well-known Dublin tourist destination that is regularly described is the Hill of Howth. But this location is usually associated with pain for his protagonists. For example, in *The Leavetaking*, the husband suggests to his bride that they might spend the day after their wedding climbing the hill. She agrees, distractedly thinking of the significance of how changed her life is after marriage:

'Has it happened to me?' was all her mind could frame over the tea and toast and brown bread of the North Star Hotel breakfast the next morning, the mind already trying to change the sheets and blood and sexual suck of the night into a sacrificial marble on which a cross stood in the centre of tulips and white candles.¹⁰

The stark contrast between the religious ceremony and the consummation of the wedding night suggests that all her dreams may not have been realised. Years later, her son finds himself with his wife (whom he married in a registry office) on the same path that his parents had walked years previously. His experience is different, as he watches the wind blow in his wife's hair and contemplates the splendid vista stretching before his eyes: 'Below us the lighthouse on the sea rocks, a freighter chugging out past the Pigeon House into the bay and nearer small boats tacked with the shadows of their sails' (*Leavetaking*, p. 43). The young man in this instance is able to take in the calmness of the scene, its serenity, something that is not possible

10. John McGahern, *The Leavetaking* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 42.

for his mother.

Similarly, in the short story 'Korea', the former combatant of the War of Independence takes his new bride by tram up the hill of Howth from Sutton Cross during their honeymoon. While a prisoner in Mountjoy in 1919, he had observed a boy of no more than 16 or 17 being executed. As the bullets ripped into his body, the buttons of his tunic flew in the air before he collapsed to the ground. The scene in Howth brings back that horrific memory, as the man explains to his son: 'The sea was below, and smell of the sea and furze-bloom all about, and then I looked down and saw the furze pods bursting, and the way they burst in all directions seemed shocking like the buttons when he started to tear at his tunic. I couldn't get it out of my mind all day. It ruined the day' (*Collected Stories*, pp. 54-5). Once more, the lovely scene he observes does not lift the spirits of the character because of its association with the horror of the execution he witnessed as a young man.

I could choose many other examples of places in Dublin that are present in McGahern's work, but I believe that the ones I have discussed show the disparity between city and country in the work of one of Ireland's foremost literary figures of the twentieth century. Whereas Dublin was important to his development as a writer, it was really Leitrim and Roscommon that supplied the memories and images that fuelled his artistic imagination. Before his death in 2006, McGahern organised with his cousin Fr Liam Kelly for a funeral Mass to be said in the little church in Aughawillan. Afterwards, there was a decade of the Rosary at the graveyard before he was laid to rest alongside his mother. Not surprisingly, *Memoir* ends with a tribute to this woman:

I would want no shadow to fall on her joy and deep trust in God. She would face no false reproaches. As we retraced our steps, I would pick for her the wild orchid and the windflower (*Memoir*, p. 272).

We are far from the hustle and bustle of the city in this idyllic setting. This is the true 'McGahern Country', the setting that best fitted his artistic talents and temperament. For all that it was in Dublin that he began his artistic apprenticeship, the real inspiration for his work was the landscape and people of his youth. Like so many of his characters, it acted like a magnet that drew him back irresistibly to its warm embrace.

EAMON MAHER'S most recent collection of essays, *Tracing the Cultural Legacy of Irish Catholicism: From Galway to Cloyne and Beyond*, which he co-edited with Eugene O'Brien, is now available from Manchester University Press.

Decentralization and Vatican I – When Bismarck accused Prussian bishops of having become “branch managers” of the pope after the Vatican I declaration of papal primacy, the bishops responded with a defense of their episcopal function, with Pius IX confirming their interpretation of papal primacy. This exchange is a key part in the interpretive history of Vatican I; it was printed in the famous collection of Church teaching, the *Denzinger*, and was also cited in the footnotes of *Lumen Gentium*, supporting a crucial chapter on the papacy and episcopal collegiality. In other words, the exchange has become integral part of the Catholic tradition. As paradoxical as it may sound, over these last one hundred and fifty years, the path of decentralization of the Catholic Church also went through Vatican I, the epitome of ultramontanism and of the “Romanization” of Catholicism.

One of the differences between 1875 and today is that the Kulturkampf is now inside the Catholic Church. The “*dubia*” against *Amoris Laetitia* and the campaign by some Catholic media to delegitimize this pope are pretty much without precedent in the history of the modern papacy. But this has not stopped Francis.

Massimo Faggioli, in *Commonweal*