

PLACE, TIME, AND PERSPECTIVE IN JOHN MCGAHERN'S FICTION

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The last few years have seen the publication of major new work by John McGahern, especially *That They May Face The Rising Sun* (2002) and *Memoir* (2005), confirming his place in the front rank of Irish writers. Substantial critical appraisals and appreciations appeared in the years immediately before McGahern's death in 2006 (*IJR*, Maher, Whyte). Rapid change in Irish society in the late twentieth century has altered the context in which we read McGahern. Eamon Maher praises *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, because it "manages to capture for eternity the rituals and customs of a rural Ireland that may not survive another few decades of globalisation," and suggests that McGahern, like Tomás Ó Criomhthain in his depiction of the Blaskets, is "attempting to build up a picture of a civilisation that will soon have disappeared" (Maher 132).¹

Too much emphasis on the elegiac aspect of McGahern's oeuvre and on its evocations of nature and landscape risks allotting it to the genre of comforting pastoral nostalgia. (*That They May Face the Rising Sun* was published in the USA under the title *By the Lake*.) To assert that his work's socially critical aspect has been "marginal" (Crotty 42, cf. Maher 58) is to misrepresent its nature and its reception. Against this risk, one must recall McGahern's own acknowledgement of the critical dimension of his early work – for example, the comments reported in Colm Tóibín's *Bad Blood* (86) and Julia Carlson's interview with McGahern (esp. 63-66). In a recent article, Grace Ledwidge has stressed the sheer patriarchal bleakness of the world of his first novel, *The Barracks*. While there was certainly an element of elegiac retrospect in McGahern's last two books, criticism should emphasise that McGahern's historical imagination, like Thomas Hardy's, is complex and dialectical. He avoids idealised retrospect and he is not in any simple sense the representative of the world about which he writes. McGahern is not one of the many rural or regional writers who have produced "partial" images and "idealisations" such as Raymond Williams deplored (Williams 37), but one of the few who resist the simple binary of bad metropolis versus good marginal place. His early work was received as that of "a realist, a naturalist, even, who wrote of [...] squalid and oppressive aspects of Irish rural life" (Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye* 6), and the banning of *The Dark* underlined its critical, indeed subversive, force. Twenty years ago, Colm Tóibín saluted him for writing about the north-west "so well, so accurately [...] that his work [is] almost more real than the places themselves" and for his integrity in sustaining an individual, critical voice during a long period when the Republic was a "monolith" that offered no comfort to "personal isolation and pain" (*Bad Blood* 85). The affirmative vision of his

1 For McGahern's admiration of Ó Criomhthain, see "What Is My Language?".

last novel depends crucially (if tacitly) on the perspective of an "outsider"; and a tension between the views of "outsiders" and "insiders" runs back through his fiction, suggesting how, when rural society is represented in writing, this involves a negotiation between marginal and metropolitan cultures.

That negotiation is my subject here. I explore some tensions which in McGahern's case, as in others (I briefly discuss Hardy's *The Return of the Native*), haunt representations that "capture" the marginal world of childhood only by attaining a certain distance from it. The self whose formation McGahern's novels portray comes to being not in "rural Ireland" alone, but in the relationship between marginal and metropolitan locations: between Ireland's north-western border region, Dublin and London – between the past and the native place, and the city and the future. The novels depict precisely localised experiences; and since (as the publication of *Memoir* confirmed) their authenticity is underwritten by their evident autobiographical basis, we know these are the experiences of a writer. However, their themes of voluntary and enforced exile and of overlapping local, regional, national and transnational identity resonate across twentieth-century rural Ireland. Not just the author, but many of his subjects and readers, are caught up in displacement and double vision, which is both disconcerting and enriching.

Aesthetics and Displacement

That They May Face the Rising Sun opens with an evocation of landscape: "The morning was clear. There was no wind on the lake." To consider this foregrounding of aesthetic response leads into the wider questions about place, time, and the regional novel with which we are concerned. None of McGahern's earlier novels starts by evoking rural scenery, but representation of nature and landscape has always been significant in his fiction. Again and again, from *The Barracks* (1962) to *Amongst Women* (1991), he revisits the same area of County Roscommon a few miles east of Boyle. Even in *The Leavetaking* and *The Pornographer*, which deal mainly with urban life, the protagonists' rural childhoods remain a key point of reference. In *The Barracks*, Elizabeth Reegan's awareness of the natural setting in which she is living, and dying, counterpoints her social experience as wife and step-mother. The ageing Moran in *Amongst Women* stares into "the emptiness of the meadow" at the back of his house, conscious of the "fresh growth, a faint tinge of blue in the rich green" and of the fact that others will live to see the new grass mown, but he will not (178-79). McGahern's notations of place, light, weather, and season are never rhetorical or effusive, but their aim goes beyond the rendering of material detail: as in the high tradition of romanticism, contemplation of nature evokes Wordsworth's "sense of something far more deeply interfus'd." The writer's concern is not only with a particular landscape, but with the power of nature to provoke reflection on mutability and to offer aesthetic pleasure and a sense of cyclical renewal (as Sampson, in particular, has emphasised in his readings).

The full sensuous evocation that makes the native place an object of pleasure and a token of spiritual elation for the reader draws on the insider's intimate memory. However, that kind of aestheticised vision has often been regarded as the prerogative of the outsider – the metropolitan tourist, artist or writer, who frames the rural world in culturally alien terms. Scenic tourists visiting marginal places have had the leisure and the disposition to admire scenery that for local people was the site of labour and daily life. As Denis Cosgrove puts it, the country dweller "does not enjoy the privilege of being able to walk away from the scene as we can walk away from a framed picture or tourist viewpoint" (Cosgrove 19; see Ryle 8-9; see also Jacobs). The country labourer may know nothing of the conventions of aesthetic perception that unite the artist with metropolitan patrons and readers.

Assumptions about the privileges of visitors apply less generally today, within and between prosperous European nations: for a century, rural "natives" have been getting educated, with consequences that preoccupy McGahern (as they preoccupied Hardy). Yet that process has been uneven, partial and divisive. The protagonist of Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn* (1948) claims that his insider's knowledge of the land he farms allows him to appreciate it better than the "visitors" whose admiration of "what were called beauty spots" he finds incomprehensible (63-4). But Tarry's responsiveness to nature is linked with his love of reading and writing – exceptional pastimes, which set him apart from almost everyone else in the townland. John Wilson Foster describes Tarry as "an insider who has [...] gained the objectivity of an outsider" (34). In a pattern found from *Jude the Obscure* and *Sons and Lovers* to Edna O'Brien's early work, the sensibility that makes protagonists objectively aware of their native place – in aesthetic, cultural or social terms – also sets them apart. When (as often) the novel has an autobiographical basis, we sense the near-identity between protagonist and writer-to-be: in "writing a novel whose hero flees the land [...] the author is apt to be drawing upon the facts or aspirations of his own life" (Foster 40). This writer, a "deracinated, déclassé exile," who breaks into print by telling a metropolitan audience about "those who have stayed at home" (George O'Brien 36), is the paradigmatic insider-become-outsider, seeing with double vision and speaking with a double voice.

Nevertheless, such experiences of displacement are not peculiar to writers. Many people have lived lives of departure, memory, and ambiguous belonging in the region McGahern depicts, and across rural Ireland, during the twentieth century. (Ireland in the early 1960s had "the highest emigration rates [and] the worst unemployment rates [...] in northern Europe," Lee 24-25.) This ambiguity of belonging is crucial in McGahern, whose novels invariably involve the viewing or remembering of the native place by an "insider" who is becoming or has become an "outsider." *Amongst Women* might seem an exception, but Moran's second wife, Rose, who marries him after coming back from twelve years in Glasgow, is central to the novel's play of perspectives.

Double vision is already vital in *The Barracks*. Elizabeth Reegan's heightened awareness of the Roscommon village to which she returns is the fruit of her self-development as a nurse in London, where she was able to discover "her uniqueness" through sexual, emotional, and intellectual experiences unattainable in Ardcarne (86). While Ledwidge argues that Elizabeth is "the most interesting and complex of McGahern's female characters" (92), she is at the same time typical of a general pattern of growth through displacement – and typical, too, in that her departure proves to have been provisional and temporary. Many outsiders prove unable or unwilling finally to break with the rural past. McGahern differs from his literary precursors and contemporaries (Joyce, Beckett, Edna O'Brien, Brian Moore) who chose permanent exile. His fiction, in reflecting this, mirrors a common experience, in which ruptures rarely have the absolute quality we might hope for or fear.

Return to the Margins

Because they never definitively leave the native place, McGahern's protagonists remain caught in a double time-frame. In her paper "Can the Native Return?" Gillian Beer explores how place/time relations in *The Return of the Native* intersected with late-Victorian ideas of progress. Beer focuses on Clym Yeobright, the educated country-dweller who leaves remote Egdon Heath for Paris and whose return sparks the novel's tragedy. Clym is said to be "in a more advanced state of development than his neighbours," and Beer shows that anthropologists then saw "country-dwellers [...] as existing in an earlier phase of cultural development than that reached by cosmopolitan European man" (9). Place equals time: the metropolis represents the present and the future, against the backward margin. Beer comments, too, on Hardy's double vision: his writing "enters a claim to be at home on the heath," but requires us to "sustain our outsider's gaze" (19).

In these cultural relations, the "outsiderly" metropolitan perspective may dominate because it is identified with a "more advanced" phase. As the acquired voice drowns out original speech, how can the author not misrepresent the birthplace? For Irish writers published in London – as McGahern, Edna O'Brien, and many others have been, often from the start of their careers – this problem has a post-colonial dimension: Eve Patten recalls J.T. Leerssen's remarks on "the destinator vector towards an English audience" whose powerful influence has tended to make the Irish writer into an intermediary and a "detached observer" of the country she or he comes from (Patten 137-38; cf. Kiberd 136, on nineteenth-century precedents).

Any writer so placed must find some accommodation between metropolitan culture's power and the power of native memory. This is all the more problematic if what is intimate has the weight of constraint, while what is foreign figures as emancipation. For all that, the work may ultimately contest the claims of the metropolis. Displacement may make the exile aware of the native place's virtues as well as its limitations. Com-

parison may encourage a critical assessment of metropolitan modernity and a rejection of its exclusive claim to define the future. Clym surprises his uneducated fellow dwellers on Egdon Heath and upsets his socially ambitious mother, when he expresses disillusionment with life in Paris, admiration for some old Egdon ways, and determination to return and live where he was born. Paradoxically, it is his "advanced state of development" that makes him reject the acquisitive materialism of the metropolis, epitomised in the jewellery business (or "nick-nack trade," as the heath-dwellers call it) to which he was apprenticed. Clym raises, and Hardy raises through him, the question of whether metropolitan "development" is true progress. The same question is increasingly posed by McGahern's fiction, especially his last novel. *That They May Face the Rising Sun* celebrates a place that might seem behind the times, but might equally be seen as somewhere it is still possible to live well, because the future has not yet caught up with it.

This celebration of rural life – and it is now an unequivocal celebration, springing from the new prominence given to the beauty of nature – is hard-won. The writing works through vividly realised particulars, as Sampson shows in his fine close reading ("Open to the World"), and it successfully challenges the general suspicion of pastoral modes. Critical receptivity towards the rural-elegiac is a very recent turn in Ireland: only a decade ago, Declan Kiberd claimed Irish ruralism had been "like other forms of pastoral [...] a wholly urban creation" (481). Realist writing about the Irish countryside, since the early fiction of Edna O'Brien and of McGahern himself, has stressed backwardness and repression, as well as community and natural beauty. Mary Dorsey's story "A Sense of Humour" (1989), with its image of sexist, beer-swilling rural Ireland, is as canonical in its way as were the Kerry autobiographies of Ó Criomhthain, O'Sullivan, and Sayers in the aftermath of Independence. Dorsey's heroine, who has left her husband and returned to live and work in her parents' depressing small-town pub, ends up standing by the Dublin road: she has walked out of the bar and exults in the sudden realisation that she need no longer be held "prisoner" by a misplaced belief in "place." "She had allowed herself to be bound by the trappings of situation: this sky, these patched, stony fields ..." But now, she will leave, and be free (Dorsey 42-3). The only other rural story in Dorsey's collection, "A Country Dance," which paints a similarly negative picture, was chosen by Toibín for inclusion in his Penguin anthology of Irish fiction.

McGahern has traced that path of revulsion and departure. However, his major protagonists – as opposed to many second-order characters – never fully embrace the city, even in anticipation. He writes no parallel to O'Brien's defiant sentence in *The Lonely Girl*: "And the ship named *Hibernia* moved steadily forward through the black night, towards the dawn of Liverpool" (252). In *The Pornographer* (1979), memories and loyalties associated with the hero's country childhood connote compassion and authenticity. In their unresolved tone, that novel and *The Leavetaking* (1974) reflect an uncertain literary purpose and an underlying ambivalence as to whether the city (Dublin and London) offers liberation or ensnares the characters in falsity.

When McGahern returns, in *Amongst Women*, to his old terrain, the perspective remains critical. Moran is a fuller, subtler depiction of the inarticulate, manipulative and violent father-husband who dominated the early novels. The patriarch is himself a victim, the damaged embodiment of a dominant – though weakening – structure of feeling and character. In this he resembles Eamon Redmond, the protagonist of Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing*, which came out the following year. Tom Herron's view of Redmond as an "aphasic," purely pathological figure (Herron 189, fn. 25) misses, I think, the ambiguities and the empathetic quality of Tóibín's novel. The authority these patriarchal men feel compelled to exert diminishes not only those who must obey it but those who exercise it. All Moran's children must escape that authority's shadow and leave the place where it held sway (Roscommon or Ireland). Two end up in Dublin and three in London. Luke, the eldest, maintains to the end a complete silence about his life in England. Thus, the tensions of the early novels remain: tensions in the "family romance" and national story that began with the War of Independence; tensions between escape and memory. But they are presented here with a new evenness of tone.² The character closest to the narrator, in her watchful reticence and psychological insight, is Rose, Moran's second wife. She resists and outlives Moran and will inherit Great Meadow (aspects of her resistance are discussed by Siobhan Holland and by Robert F. Garratt). As we have noted, Rose, like Elizabeth Reagan, has spent years abroad before returning, in a "more advanced state of development," to the native place.

Foster has noted that Irish writing displays "recurring topophobia, hatred of the place that ensnares the self," even as "the memory of place" remains a central inspiration (31). The comment's aptness to McGahern is obvious. The "hatred" in *Amongst Women* is the unexpressed, inexpressible hatred felt by Luke, the successor to the abused son in *The Dark*. But Luke's voice is unheard. The reticent Rose and the impassive narrator are the speakers we remember. This achievement of objectivity is a settling of accounts with the past, a transcendence of "hatred." From one point of view, it marks the narrator/subject's final transformation into the writer as "exteriorised, detached observer." Yet it is this "more advanced state of development," achieved by way of exile, that makes it possible for the native to return, and even – in the books that follow – to celebrate the place of birth.

That They May Face the Rising Sun: A Note on Reticence

After a period in London, Europe, and North America, McGahern returned in the early 1970s to the northwest of Ireland, buying a farm in Leitrim, near Mohill (see the chronology in Maher xi-xiv). This district eventually became the setting of *That They May*

2 As Sampson notes, the new lucidity and objectivity of *Amongst Women* owed much, stylistically, to McGahern's work in the short story form (see *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, 189, 192-93; and see also Garratt, especially 127).

Face the Rising Sun, whose central character, Joe Rutledge, has come back to Leitrim after a career in London. In the novel, Mohill is never named, but a reference to the "statue of the harpist," Carolan, identifies the town – at any rate to those, mostly "insiders," who know the statue (206). Joe is closely identified with the narrative point of view: the only scene in which he is not present is an early conversation in which his neighbours Patrick and Johnny speculate about what has brought him and his wife Kate to live here. I therefore think it mistaken to argue that Rutledge is "not a focalizing consciousness" (Sampson, "Open to the World" 150). However, the novel never explicitly encourages us to reflect on how and why Joe is central to the vision that it embodies, or on the differences that set him and Kate apart from their neighbours.

Rather, reticence is the novel's preferred strategy for negotiating difference, a strategy pursued by the narrator, by Joe and Kate, and sometimes by the other characters too. The Rutledges differ from their neighbours in ways that reflect both their metropolitan experiences and their decision to leave the city (like Yeobright) for the country. Topics which mark difference and evoke reticence include watching TV (Joe and Kate seem not to have one, but this is never stated, and they never discuss it with their friends Jamesie and Mary, who do); the violence in the North (Joe deplors it, but is more than once told that, on this matter, silence is wiser than speech); sexual mores, reflected in turns of phrase that Kate finds hard to listen to, but seldom objects to explicitly; the ethnic diversity of London, described by Jamesie's brother Johnny in terms that Kate and Joe appear to find troubling or quaint, but do not directly challenge; and religious observance, with Joe declining to give a reasoned response when Jamesie affectionately mocks his refusal to attend Mass.

A final difference, central to the book's own appeal, concerns pleasure in the natural world. This is surely what brought the Rutledges to Leitrim and keeps them there. However, they do not speak often or at length about their delight in their new home. Invited to resume their London careers, they turn down the opportunity, knowing it will be their last. We do not hear the conversation in which this decision is reached – although we are told of it following a paragraph describing the lake, "an enormous mirror turned to the depth of the sky" (186). Later, Joe looks back on his day and feels that "this must be happiness." Yet he resists articulating such an idea: "As soon as the thought [that he was happy] came to him, he fought it back ... happiness could not be sought or worried into being, or even fully grasped" (192; cf. 136).

As we have seen, aesthetic delight in nature and landscape, and the happiness this can bring, has been regarded as the prerogative, or foible, of outsiders. This seems to be the view of Patrick and Johnny, in the scene I have referred to – the only scene from which Joe is absent:

"Another thing that brought them here was the quiet. Will you listen to the fucken quiet for a minute and see if in the name of God it wouldn't drive you mad?"

As if out of a deep memory of timing and ensemble playing, both men flung themselves into a comic, exaggerated attitude of listening, a hand cupped behind an ear, and stood as frozen as statues in a public place. (81)

Here, too, the difference between the returned natives and the insiders remains, clearly visible, but not something to talk about between neighbours.

Do we conclude, then, that the novel shows, unchanged, the persistence of the space-time gap between "advanced" metropolis and "country-dwellers [...] in an earlier phase"? I think not: it implies, though it does not explore this, that things are on the verge of change. It is set in 1987 and 1988, a dark time in the Irish north-west. Tóibín, walking in the mid-80s in north Leitrim, along "the road between Rossinver and Kiltyclogher, the heart of rural Ireland," saw only desolation and depopulation: final evidence that de Valera's dream of prosperous rural Ireland was mere mockery, "a joke from a bitter satirical sketch." Tóibín notes that the county's population, having fallen from 150,000 to 27,000 in the 145 years after the 1841 census, was falling still at this time (*Bad Blood* 75-76). The war in the North, whose repercussions either side of the Border are his main subject, was intense. The sole evidence allowing us to date *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is Joe's angry comment on the Enniskillen Remembrance Day bombing of 1987, which he refers to as a recent event (238).

However, the novel was addressed to, and published in, a very different moment. By the time it came out in 2002, the war in the North seemed definitively over, and the long-depopulated north-western Border region was sharing in Ireland's unprecedented prosperity. As second-home owners or year-round residents, as returned natives or incomers, people are moving to Leitrim, even to small towns like Manorhamilton or Drumshanbo. In doing so, they are expressing an aesthetic choice. To be "brought here by the quiet" is no longer such a comical eccentricity; perhaps love of "nature" will no longer be such a mark of the outsider. The book's movement of reverse emigration, from the metropolis back to the "margins," reads now like an anticipation of the present.

This present, with the future it portends, raises its own new questions. Why is the metropolis becoming, in Ireland as elsewhere in Europe, a place some people are no longer seeking, but leaving? If country-dwelling becomes a privilege of the mobile classes, what will this mean for "the country" as a cultural and ecological terrain? How long will it take before intensive rural development alters irreversibly even places like Leitrim which have so far been relatively unaffected? These are among the questions implied by the generalised mobility and opportunity, whose rhythms have taken over from the intimate, familial ebb and flow, the movements of personal escape, memory, and return, that McGahern's fiction charts.

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