

**A FRUITFUL EXCHANGE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF THE DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF JOHN MCGAHERN'S
THE LEAVETAKING AND ITS FRENCH TRANSLATION
JOURNÉE D'ADIEU BY ALAIN DELAHAYE**

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John McGahern's third novel, *The Leavetaking* (1974; 1984),¹ tells the story of Patrick Moran's last day as a teacher in a Dublin school. The chronicle of this last day is interspersed with long flashbacks that frequently interrupt the narration and delay the development of the story. Some crucial events are accounted for, particularly the death of Patrick's mother when he was a young child, and his more recent marriage to Isobel, an American divorcee, in a registry office in London, which eventually led to his dismissal.² Stylistically, this is mirrored by an alternation between present and past tense.³

Although both are told by the same first-person narrator (Patrick), the two parts into which the novel is divided are "deliberately different in style" (L2 5), as McGahern himself put it, in fact the more poetic and intense the first one, the more journalistic and detached the second, in the attempt

to reflect the purity of feeling with which all the remembered "I" comes to us, the banal and the precious alike; and yet how that more than "I" – the beloved, the "otherest", the most trusted moments of that life – stumbles continually away from us as poor reportage [...]. (L2 5)⁴

When *The Leavetaking* appeared, McGahern was standing at the centre of that experimental phase of his career which some critics have referred to as "the middle period" and which resulted in novels and short stories whose artistic achievement was debatable but still indispensable, so their argument goes, to the full development

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- 1 All parenthetical references marked *L1* and *L2* are to the 1974 and the revised 1984 edition of *The Leavetaking*, respectively.
 - 2 As is well known, McGahern's third novel is based on the author's own experience of losing his teaching post in 1965 after the censoring of *The Dark* and his marriage to the Finnish dramatist Annikki Laaksi. Arguably, Isobel's character also draws on McGahern's second wife, the American photographer Madeline Green.
 - 3 Michael J. Toolan observes how such a "format [...]" is compelling support for the novel's account of the narrator's long withdrawing tide of nostalgic grief for past deaths being gradually, but surely supplanted by a present- and future-oriented encirclement by a different sea, that of love and trust" (48).
 - 4 Dermot McCarthy claims that "the world of the beloved other in Part II would better have been narrated in a third-person voice if McGahern really wanted to communicate its 'irredeemable imprisonment ... in reportage'" (163).

of his art.⁵ Marianne Mays, for example, notes in *The Leavetaking* “a quality in the writing which might indeed be called ‘bad’: a clumsiness of sentence structure [...], which was only excused or validated by the sense of a powerful struggle to get the meaning through” (39). Yet she recognises that “with hindsight, this can be seen as a transition of necessary and fruitful experimentation” (39) and that what she had “characterized as ineptitude was, from McGahern’s point of view, conscious stylistic experiment” (41). The writer himself confirmed and supported this view on several occasions, admitting that “to some extent, *The Leavetaking* is a flawed book, but it was actually a book I had to write [...]. I would actually have stopped as a writer unless I had broken out of my own moulds in *The Leavetaking*” (Sampson, “A Conversation” 15-16).⁶ Dermot McCarthy underlines how, although “McGahern considered the writing of his third novel to be a turning-point in his career [...], it was the writing of *The Pornographer* [1979] that largely enabled the revisions that finally ‘broke the moulds’ of the early writing” (119). What interested McGahern was not experiment for experiment’s sake⁷: his writing, rather, strove to convey his philosophical and aesthetic concerns and mirror the individual’s quest for meaning and purpose in life. The difficulties McGahern tackled in *The Leavetaking* convinced him of the necessity to amend that work: “I had been too close to the ‘Idea,’ and the work lacked that distance, that inner formality or calm, that all writing, no matter what it is attempting, must possess” (L2 5).⁸

Some ten years after *The Leavetaking* first appeared, an upcoming French translation offered the writer an opportunity to take the unusual step of rewriting his novel – more exactly, its second half.⁹ As he explained in the *Preface* to the revised edition: “I found myself working through it again with its French translator, the poet Alain Delahaye” (L2 5).¹⁰ Curiously, *Journée d’adieu*¹¹ mirrored the revised *Leavetaking* closely, although its publication preceded the second English version. The question thus arises as to what role Delahaye and his translation played in McGahern’s revisions: was their contact just a starting point for the revised English edition, or was

5 See also Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*; Maher, *John McGahern*; Whyte. McGahern’s experimental work is usually identified with his novels *The Dark* (1965), *The Leavetaking*, and *The Pornographer* (1979), and with the short story collections *Nightlines* (1970) and *Getting Through* (1978).

6 McGahern reiterated this same opinion about the novels of his middle period on several other occasions.

7 See also Kampen (341).

8 For McCarthy, that ‘Idea’ might be that of the lost beloved (121).

9 See also Mikowski (75).

10 In an interview (2002) with Eamon Maher, McGahern explained: “I was friendly with the translator and poet, Alain Delahaye. I asked him when he was working on the translation if he minded if I had another go at the second part, and then rewrote it for Alain’s translation. I did it for myself, to have another go at the idea” (Maher, *John McGahern* 146).

11 All quotations from *Journée d’adieu* are marked LF.

there, rather, some form of cooperation between the two writers? Can we call their meeting 'a fruitful exchange'? The only paratextual clues McGahern left us are the *Preface* and a few interviews, and in June 2009 I had the privilege to interview Alain Delahaye.

A quick look at the textual situation may be in order here.¹² In the second edition of *The Leavetaking*, Part One was left untouched. Part Two, on the contrary, was substantially reworked¹³ – with the only exception of the novel's last thirty pages or so (166-195 in *L1*; 143-171 in *L2*), which remained almost unchanged. Countless small changes affected the novel's linguistic texture, making it more fluid and brisk, but the most obvious alteration in the second section was a condensation, in fact a drastic foreshortening, from the original 110 to the eventual 86 pages. Some events were summed up drastically, with several pages often reduced to a single paragraph; other parts were omitted altogether. Both sentence structure and syntax are now much simpler overall, thanks to a more judicious use of punctuation marks.

As Mays observes, "the huge blocks of direct-speech narration are dispersed," and "many of the more embarrassing lumps of personal philosophy have been pruned off" (42). The major target of McGahern's cuts were, in fact, the protagonist's long reflections on the influence of his mother's death and the unfulfilled expectations in his adult life and relationships. Patrick's thoughts on the eve of his marrying Isobel, for example, are omitted in *L2*:

Much of the past came to disturb me as I prepared to go to the Registry Office and I was nervous. Phrases came, *Man born of woman shall endure for a time of trial here on earth in the hope of his eternal salvation*, and if I had not broken my link and was prepared to extend the blind chain there would have been music and a priest and altar and afterwards the images of aggression, shower of confetti and the battered kettle hurled after the bridal car; but she too had one day walked down the aisle looking the picture of death. Belief was as blind, I thought, as grief, one worn away by habit, the other becoming a habit. If I believed anything, and it was without conviction, it was that once upon a time we had crawled out of the sea and were making a circular journey back towards the original darkness. (*L1* 159)

McCarthy convincingly argues that "the revisions seem intended to 'discipline' the extent and intensity of the original confession" (150).¹⁴ It appears that McGahern decided to get rid of his more reflective and philosophical paragraphs primarily in order to

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- 12 Most critical comments on *The Leavetaking* are based on the second edition. The few existing reviews of *L1* can, therefore, provide us with interesting insights; see Sampson, "John McGahern's *The Leavetaking*"; Jebb; Broderick.
 - 13 Broderick praises McGahern as the greatest writer of his generation, and *L1* for its "poetic truth and strength" and "perfection." But he distinguished clearly between "[t]he first hundred pages [...] so brilliantly written that they constitute a triumph" and "the last eighty pages I am not so sure," an opinion he re-iterated three times in an only four-page-long article (Broderick 59).
 - 14 *L2* achieves, for McCarthy, a "careful re-shaping of the presence of the dead beloved" (148) and a "re-orientation" (153), that is, the removal of the sexual explicitness of *L1*, which can be linked to the writing of *The Pornographer*.

focus on language and on the central idea that we perceive ourselves and others in radically different ways. As he was given, as he put it, the “luck of a second chance” (L2 5), I believe he decided to use his third novel as an embodiment of his aesthetic principles. To do so, he eliminated all that was not relevant and functional to that specific purpose.

His re-elaboration affected both the form and the content of *The Leavetaking*.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, the simplification of sentences sometimes corresponds to a different connotation of the situation described. This is the case, especially, with Patrick’s feelings towards his girlfriends: his fear and anxiety of the first edition disappear almost totally in the second. So, for example, a passage like

The days that followed passed in dangerous happiness, so much so that the thought as I hurried home – for the room had become a home – was that I would find her gone. When I opened the door I felt touched by the same panic as the idea that one day I’d have to die caused. (L1 124)

now reads simply as “we had lovely hours in that big room” (L2 113).¹⁶ Similarly, in the first edition, Patrick employs the term ‘death’ regularly to describe metaphorically every important change in his life, notably the end of a love affair; by contrast, the occurrence of the word ‘death’ in L2 is fairly limited. Patrick’s comment on the meeting with the school manager, who will formally dismiss him from his teaching post, for instance, changes from “this farce is another of the deaths” (L1 190) to “this farce is another of the steps” (L2 166).

Some significant parallelisms that punctuate L1 are suppressed in L2. This is particularly true of the characters of Isobel and Patrick, who need help to overcome their parents’ (her father’s and his mother’s) ambiguous influence, a help which she finds in psychoanalysis¹⁷ and he in love. Both varieties are referred to metaphorically in L1 through the image of a limb: Isobel admits that “without that artificial limb I would never have been able to walk into my own life” (L1 133), whereas Patrick says that he was “as happy as a broken limb miraculously made whole again as [he] saw her step on the gangplank of the boat” (L1 167). There is no trace of such parallelism in

15 The plot features some slight variations in details such as the reason why Patrick requests a year’s leave of absence; the jobs he finds in London; the person he talks to when he explains the complex relations between the educational system and the Catholic Church in Ireland. Some curious changes also occur – to mention but one, Patrick’s meeting with the school manager is at eight o’clock in L1 (187), but at nine o’clock in L2 (163).

16 Similarly, “‘But I love you,’ I said out of the shadow of losing her” (L1 169) becomes “‘But I love you,’ I said” (L2 146). “A new excitement that is the seed of danger” (L1 95) and “I was afraid that if I changed anything the magic I’d started to feel about the first night might go away” (L1 95) are both omitted in L2.

17 McCarthy shows that McGahern’s repeated and insistent claim that personal therapy and self-expression have no place in art seem contradicted by his *Memoir*, which unveils the clear connections between his autobiography and his fiction and which therefore “should be read as a coda [...] [and as a] code” to his fiction (McCarthy 23).

L2. The same can be said of the link between Isobel's father and the school manager, the two male authority figures that Patrick must confront and reject, through the image of the brass lion's claw decorating the front door of both their houses (L1 139; L1 189).

If, in the second edition, the space devoted to Isobel's past is reduced considerably and if her father is not as prominent a figure as he was,¹⁸ this is possibly because, as Terence Brown suggests, McGahern realised that, in the rendering of Patrick's and Isobel's relationship with their parents, "his psychologising was a little too schematic to be wholly convincing" (162-163).¹⁹ Again, it appears that McGahern actually wanted his two main characters to stand out more clearly to highlight that dichotomy in the perception of self and other that he refers to in the Preface. Therefore, the secondary characters are reduced to mere walk-ons or at least to poorly designed figures of very little weight in the text.

McGahern's wish to clarify his artistic agenda through this novel becomes tangible in the significant additions to the new *Leavetaking*, despite the above-noted general foreshortening of the novel for the 1984 edition. Such additions echo the Preface, through "an ironic act of self-plagiarism" (McCarthy 162)²⁰ that becomes clearly obvious when one compares the Preface with the following new passage:

When I thought of how poorly I had grasped the images of Isobel's early life, how I had to translate them into my own and how clear my own were [...], it grew clear that different images must be as vivid in her own mind. I had grasped the movements with her father at secondhand too [...]. The whole dear world of the beloved comes to us with the banality of news reports, while our own banalities come to us with the interest of poetry. It did not seem right. The contrary should be true, but it would be as impossible to reverse as to get trees to lean towards the sea. (L2 143)

The author's aesthetic view is thus echoed through the main character, and the novel's internal cohesion is reinforced. Not only the interrelation of memory and imagination (the latter filling the gaps of the former), but also Patrick's overcoming of his mother's shadow (the old 'beloved other') and his starting a new life with Isobel (the new 'beloved other'), are now clearly identified as thematic kernels.²¹

The French translation by Alain Delahaye, *Journée d'adieu*, reflects the revised *Leavetaking*: "I did not work on the 1974 text," Delahaye explained, "since John had

18 The 1974 edition is richer in details about Isobel's relationship with her previous partners and with her father. The whole episode of Patrick's meeting with Isobel's father on the train back to Ireland (L1 161-166) is missing from L2.

19 See also Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye* 115. In McCarthy's words, Isobel is developed "as a gender-mirror inversion" of both Patrick and McGahern (156).

20 Interestingly, in *Memoir* McGahern recycles language and imagery from his novels and short stories. The recollection of his mother's death and funeral, for example, is taken, almost word for word, from *The Leavetaking*.

21 In a new passage, Patrick compares his life as a priest with the life as Isobel's partner that he chooses for himself (L2 156).

asked me to destroy it.” His is a very accurate translation, despite some clear instances of “domestication” (Venuti 21). I will mention just a few examples: the English “two miles” (L2 97) are ‘converted’ into “trois kilomètres” (LF 149); “claret” (L2 103) becomes “Bordeaux” (LF 155; 160), and “brandy” (L2 105; 129) becomes “cognac” (LF 163; 201). Similarly, “the river” (L2 108) is translated as “la Tamise” (LF 168), and “before being taken to the Mater” (L2 86) as “avant d’être emmené” (LF 131). As for “Powers Gold label” (L2 100) and “Glenlivet whiskey” (L2 140), Delahaye explained that he rendered them simply as “whiskey” (LF 155; 220) to comply with a French law “which forbids the use of trademarks in books (it could be considered advertising).” Through such an “oblique translation” (Vinay & Darbelnet 31) of, or “dynamic equivalence” (Nida 159) to, McGahern’s text, Delahaye thus overcame “the problem [...] to give an idea of something totally unknown in France [...] a very specific Irish custom” (Delahaye interview). The translating procedure known as “adaptation” (Vinay & Darbelnet 39-40) can be seen where he translated “*Last Orders* was called” (L2 111) as “À grand renfort de cris les clients furent invités à commander leur dernières consommations avant la fermeture” (LF 173); or where he rendered “you’ve never obtained a Letter of Freedom” (L2 161) as “Vous n’avez fait aucune demande aux autorités religieuses concernant un mariage” (LF 254).

I would argue that what deserves our critical attention most here is the presence of some “deforming tendencies” (Berman 280), in the passage from English to French, of McGahern’s keywords ‘memory’ and ‘leavetaking.’ ‘Memory’ is translated by Delahaye both as ‘mémorie’ and ‘souvenir,’ even in the novel’s *leitmotif* of “memory becoming imagination.” Despite the accuracy of such translation, the lexical variation it implies produces a “qualitative impoverishment” (Berman 280) of the original text and unavoidably breaks its internal rhythm.²² As for ‘leavetaking,’ it is always translated as ‘congé,’ but in the title it is rendered as ‘journée d’adieu.’ Delahaye explained that the choice of the title was partly connected with his publisher’s “commercial imperatives” (i.e., the need for an appealing title), but it is undeniable that another internal echo of McGahern’s work thus vanished.

Journée d’adieu is a highly poetical text, but it produces a different effect than *The Leavetaking* in that it lacks the insistent – almost obsessive – complex scheme of repetitions, echoes, and resonances that reinforce the internal cohesion of the English original. Delahaye humbly admits that “to translate is a very despairing job, because one is constantly forced to destroy a lot of beautiful things”; and that, with *Journée d’adieu*, “a great part of John’s very subtle music, of his secret poetry, of his unique art of making beautiful sentences” went lost. He also maintains that he played no role in McGahern’s revision of *The Leavetaking*, that “it was his decision only, and I took no part whatsoever in the elaboration of the new version”; “we did not at all work to-

22 An analogous modulation can be observed in the verb tenses, since the English simple past has two French equivalents, namely the “prétérit” and the “imperfait.” The English language in general is more economical than French.

gether on this." They "became rapidly good friends," he concludes, and "we never talked much about literature, we were more interested in sharing our experience of life: [...] we had lived rather similar things in our childhood and adolescence. So we had more or less the same way of understanding (of not understanding) life."

However, Delahaye also talks of a correspondence with McGahern about the translation and reports that "John's wife, Madeline, who knows French very well, was sometimes of great help when I had difficulty finding the right word" (Delahaye interview), which suggests that indeed some form of collaboration between the Irish writer and the French translator did occur.

Also, a translator's job is not merely to transfer words mechanically from one linguistic code to another: a deep understanding and penetration of the author's mind-set and personal background is necessary to the rendering of the work's true meaning in translation. And when Delahaye says that "we had more or less the same way of understanding (of not understanding) life," we feel somehow authorised to suppose that he *did* fully understand McGahern's intentions.

On the basis of this, I think it can be concluded that, *even if* the question remains unanswered, whether McGahern *would or would not* have issued a revised edition of *The Leavetaking* had its upcoming French translation not existed, it appears nevertheless quite plausible that contact between the Irish writer and his French translator played a decisive role.

It is well-known that McGahern was a demanding artist, who reworked his materials continuously: his obsession with formal perfection is one of the reasons why, in over forty years, he only published a relatively small number of works.²³ McGahern outlined his aesthetic principles as early as 1968, in his artistic manifesto "The Image." For him the artist's journey is "long and complicated," because "image after image flows involuntarily [...] and still we are not at peace, rejecting, altering, shaping, straining [sic] towards the one image that will never come, the lost image that gave our lives expression [...]" (McGahern, "The Image").²⁴

In a Proustian quest for "the lost image," McGahern, as Eamon Maher put it, "chisels away at his work in an attempt to get his words right" and produces "a style that is

23 For a comprehensive and annotated bibliography of primary and secondary works, see van der Ziel. McGahern's *Memoir* (2005) and *Creatures of The Earth: New and Selected Stories* (2006) have been published since then, as well as four volumes of *The John McGahern Yearbook* (2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011, ed. John Kenny), the collection of McGahern's non-fictional essays, *Love of the World* (2009, ed. Stanley van der Ziel), and Eamon Maher's *'The Church and Its Spire': John McGahern and the Catholic Question* (2011).

24 Sampson sees McGahern's *œuvre* as an extended autobiography in which the writer includes different versions of himself in the search for the Proustian lost image (Sampson, "'Rich Whole'"). For McCarthy, "*Memoir* makes clear that 'the lost image,' like 'the lost world,' is the mother-image, the mother-world" (10).

deceptively simple and clear" (3).²⁵ His patient and tireless search for accuracy, truth, and "calm" brings him close, Declan Kiberd suggests, to "those painters of the Renaissance who tried to do one painting over and over until they got it near to perfection" (Maher & Kiberd 91-92).

In this context, the rewriting of *The Leavetaking* is completely understandable and, arguably, somehow typical of a writer like McGahern. Delahaye remembers how "it was of vital importance to him to rewrite that second part, [...] simply a necessity" (Delahaye interview). What is *not* typical, though, is the fact that McGahern's re-laboration affected his third novel *after* it was published and eventually led to the issuing of a revised edition, which did not happen for any other of his works of fiction. Not even the writing of *The Pornographer*, then, or his friendship with Delahaye would have encouraged or allowed McGahern to acknowledge the limits of the formal experimentation he had attempted in 1974.

In this sense we can arguably describe McGahern's encounter with Delahaye as a *fruitful exchange*, in fact the starting point, if not the engine, of that process of condensation, of narrowing down, of reduction to the essential, that characterises not only *The Leavetaking*, but McGahern's work as a whole, with its relatively small number of characters, places, names, themes, and situations (Cronin 113; Maher & Kiberd 92; McCarthy 27). Also, if we look at translations as "rewritings" (Lefevre 9; Munday 126) and as works that give the originals a new and continued life through recreation (Benjamin 77; Munday 169), we can possibly read *Journée d'adieu* almost as a third edition of *The Leavetaking*, in between the first and the second English editions, a functional "farewell journey" (to paraphrase the French title) from one to the other, ultimately a crucial step in the shaping of John McGahern's aesthetics.

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25 See Andrews 132-133.

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