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"The Writer's Field: Patrols of the Imagination" John McGahern's Short Stories

Liliane Louvel

"Les images construisent le champ propre de l'écrivain"¹

(Images build up the writer's own field.)

"The image is the basis of all writing. The writer's business is to pull the image that moves us out of darkness"²

- 1 In "The Image," the unique piece of self-criticism that McGahern has written³, the image, the vision, the rhythm are linked in a dialectical movement. The image is presented as a screen that projects memory and emotion, but it is also used to screen them off, as a protective barrier. "Medusa's mirror" referred to in the short manifesto fends off "the intolerable." Like Perseus's shield, it has an apotropaic function. A screen and a mirror, art serves to ward off the blows of fate. The work is a mediation as well as a cosmos.
- 2 The writer "in search of the lost image," attempts "to create a world in which we can live," and to come to terms with our human condition, thanks to "a world of the imagination" over which we can reign "to reflect purely on our situation through this created world of ours." And "the world of imagination" is central to McGahern's short stories. Thus the creator may be able to see and to celebrate even the "totally intolerable" through the image, as shown in McGahern's most recent short story "Love of the World": "As she turned back she heard a sharp click, but did not turn to see him lift the gun. One hand was reaching for the door when she fell, the other closed tight. When it was opened, it held a fistful of small black currants." (p. 37).
- 3 Imagination has to go through the portal of image, which triggers it and is the result of it. Images located in the mind's eye, Yeats's "pictures of the mind" are made up of memory and hover over the writer's field. But the images are also linked to the rhythm and to the

voice, conveying the poetic vision in a broad sense, making up a whole held together by the shape of the short story. It could be called the Medusa's mirror of the short story, serving to deflect the intolerable through a strategy of deviation and obliqueness in a compact form. A finite piece of the infinite.

Patrols of the imagination

- 4 the phrase is coined in *The Barracks* to designate the guards' device to avoid going on rounds when the weather is bad or whenever they have another task to accomplish (usually minding their own gardens). A strategy of evasion, it forces them to invent, to substitute imagination for reality. The guards write fictitious reports⁴, which to Willie, the young boy, may well serve as an initiation to fiction. For instance, Reegan resorts to it to relieve the awkwardness when Elizabeth is going to hospital:

"Will you put me on a patrol? [...] Some place where not even Quirke's huarin' car can get."

"So it's a patrol of the imagination so," Mullins laughed the barrack joke.

"A patrol of the imagination!" Reegan laughed agreement. (B., p.105),

- 5 The phrase appears in italics: "Mullins and Brennan switched their *patrols of the imagination* to the bog, where Reegan already slaved." (p. 125) The embryo narratives offer minimal but detailed descriptions:

and the books brought up for them to write reports on these fictitious patrols:

"Winds from the south-west, sky conditions cloudy, weather showery with bright intervals. I patrolled Knocknarea Road to Woodenbridge and returned via Eslin and Drumgold. I noticed cattle grazing on the Eslin Road and made inquiries, discovered their owner was James Maguire (farmer), and issued due warning. Commencement of patrol 2. p.m. Conclusion of patrol 6.15 p.m. (Signed) Edward Casey" they ran. (p. 188-189)

- 6 The reports are very banal, the bad weather being nothing unusual in Ireland. A big event is finding cattle on the road. The patrol is supposed to have lasted over four hours. No great imagination is needed to write them; nevertheless "the patrols of the imagination," grounded in the memory of other "real" patrols and made up of remembered and reorganized material, produce make-believe. The reports are comparable to the same process as the one at work in McGahern's fiction, which is grounded in a recognizable reality, on a will to anchor fiction in the commonplace through names, places, habits, time reference, taking place mostly in mid-century rural Ireland, but also Dublin, London and the contemporary world. To talk of a world of imagination might be paradoxical, but it should be remembered that to create is to build up a world, assembling material and putting it all together to form a believable shape⁵.
- 7 Nothing glamorous, then, in "A Slip-up," a story in which an old man dreams he is working on his farm. Nostalgia in front of Tesco's. Yet ethics and esthetics are linked in a shape, a choice of place and people⁶. "This local texture of McGahern's fiction in voice and in the concretely referential detail, assumes a symbolic status that is at the heart of his vision."⁷ as Denis Sampson puts it. Voice, image, and rhythm, linked to a concern for the life of a family and of a community, make up a true, literary work, a microcosm, brought about by poetic vision. "The recurring preoccupation of McGahern's fiction is the writing of a contemporary epic"⁸. Meaning and sound, rhythm and meanings mingle together to find a wonderful shape in the short story as a poetic choice.

- 8 Making up "fictitious patrols," writing as if staying inside the house of fiction, seeing it as a protection and only imaginatively venturing forth into the world, through the work of imagination and memory, this is also what is done in fiction-writing and reading. As expressed in a shizoid way in *The Leavetaking*: there are "two worlds: the world of the schoolroom in this day, the world of memory becoming imagination"⁹

Medusa's mirror¹⁰

- 9 Imagination sets memory to work and images arise. In "Wheels" the image comes as a reminiscence in much the same way as Proust experienced it. In this seminal story, shape, vision, image and rhythm, all contrive to cohere: the memory surges as the narrator is walking through the open carriages. Movement and vision are associated

Through the windows the fields of stone walls, blue roofs of Carrick, Shannon river. Sing for them once First Communion Day O River Shannon Flowing and a four-leaved shamrock growing, silver medal on the blue suit and white ankle socks in new shoes." (CS p. 10)

- 10 Depersonalized sentences juxtaposed paratactically as an enumeration cause the subject to leave pride of place to the detailed, remembered vision. The circularly-shaped story is clearly framed: "and I listened to the story they were telling" (CS p. 3), "repetition of a life in the shape of a story that had as much reason to go on as stop"(CS p. 10). The narrator fades into the background as another narrator tells about a failed suicide, a story similar to the narrator's life.
- 11 "[T]he loose wheels rattling" at the beginning and "all the vivid sections of the wheel we watched so slowly turn, impatient for the rich whole that never came but that all the preparations promised."(CS 11) at the end represent the slow movement of the story as the same becomes the other, parts make up a whole. It imparts a visual shape to the story and also evokes the shape of a collection of short stories, made up of "vivid sections of the whole." "Wheels" insists on cycles and circular structures, a recurring feature in John McGahern's fiction, which "Like All Other Men" illustrates too: "In my end is my beginning, he recalled. In my beginning is my end, his and hers, mine and thine," the biblical words here emphasizing emptiness, "endless as a wedding ring" (CS 280); but the chiasmus also reflects the structure of the story built on an intersection of lives and their sudden divergence.
- 12 In "Sierra Leone" the question: "Where now is Rose?" suddenly triggers an image of the dead woman
- I see her come on a bicycle, a cane basket on the handlebars. The brakes mustn't be working for she has to jump off and run along side the bicycle. Her face glows with happiness as she pulls away the newspaper that covers the basket. It is full of dark plums, and eggs wrapped in pieces of newspaper are packed here and there among the plums. Behind her there shivers an enormous breath of pure sky. (CS 330)
- 13 Rose on her bicycle, an image of happiness that recurs in *Amongst Women*, is vividly rendered present by minute details - and such trivial ones as the failing of brakes.¹¹ Thus memory provides an escape as the "patrols of the imagination" did, a way to come to terms with the intolerable. At times, the difference between fiction and reality is so slight that the reader is taken in by the characters' drifting away from the world of the senses.
- 14 In "A Slip-Up," Michael still grieves over the loss of his farm between two lakes. Each day while shopping with his wife at Tesco's, he slips back into daydreams and memories of

working on his former farm. Literally, through its reconstruction, the character manages to keep a hold onto the past and himself. One day, his wife forgets to collect him, and Michael works longer than usual. Thanks to memory, through a series of shifts he slips out of reality. The use of the active verbs in the preterite form, of concrete details, of time markers such as "now," "for all that time," "and then," blurs the distinctions between day-dreaming and reality.

Then he paved the sides with heavy stones so that the cattle would not plough in as they drank and he cleared the weeds from the small stream that fed it. When he followed the stream to the boundary hedge he found the water blocked there. He released it and then leaned on his shovel in the simple pleasure of watching water flow. (CS 130)

- 15 The reader is then invited to a free indirect discourse:

Agnes could keep all her roses in the front garden...and then he felt himself leaning over the fork with tiredness though he hadn't half the ridge turned. He was too weak to work. It must be late and why had she not called him to his meal? He stuck the fork in the ground and in exasperation went over to the barbed wire. The strands were loose[...]This year he must move the pit to higher ground. Last winter the rats had come up from the lake-but why hadn't she called him? had she no care? Was she so utterly selfish? (CS 130)

- 16 The powerful image of an old man standing in front of Tesco's without even seeing it and waiting with his empty shopping bag recurs in another story about the meaning(lessness?) of life. In "Why We're Here" Gillespie tells Boles: "The crowd up for Croke Park saw [Sinclair] outside Amiens Street with an empty shopping bag. They said he looked shook. Booked close enough to the jump."(CS 13), and in the same story: "And he ends up after all his guff with an empty shopping bag outside Amiens Street Station."(CS 14). Sinclair is a Protestant turned Catholic; the flavour of his speech is rendered in italics: "*It was no rush of faith, let me tell you good sir, that led to my conversion. I was dragged into your Holy Roman Catholic Apostolic Church by my male member.*" These words are an echo of another story "The Conversion of William Kirkwood." When Michael in "A Slip-Up" feels so ashamed of himself that he dreads joining the usual circle of acquaintances at the pub, he recalls the excitement people felt as they "all [...] were elated too on the small farms around the lakes for weeks after Fraser Woods had tried to hang himself from a branch of an apple tree in his garden."(CS 132) The failed suicide attempt echoes "Wheels":

he tried to hang himself from a branch out over the river, but the branch went and broke and in he fell roaring for help.[...]They'd filled the trolley, the smile dying in the eyes as they went past, the loose heels rattling less under the load, the story too close to the likeness of my own life for comfort"(CS p. 3).

- 17 One would need more time to study the differences between the occurrences of apparently similar incidents, of memories used in different ways.

- 18 These examples show the cohesion of the microcosm patiently built up by McGahern:

I think the novel is a wonderful form, because I think it's the closest to society. [...]The short story isn't social at all. It's just a small explosion, and in a way the whole world begins before the short story begins, and in a way a whole world takes place afterwards, which the reader imagines. And it generally makes one point, and one point only, and has a very very strict rhythm, and every word counts in it. Whereas actually a novel is looser, it can speed up, it slows down; I mean for two hundred pages, it would be intolerable to have the kind of tension, and it would be a very bad novel if it had the same tension as a short story.¹²

19 Yet, as the shape of the wheel shows, a collection of short stories is more than the addition of units, however explosive. It is a whole fragmented world reconstructed in the reader's mind that provides the cement the way as in a mosaic. Of course, the tension is greater than in a novel, the rhythm is strict and "every word counts," and this might serve to characterize the short story as we will see; but read as a whole, the collection is also "close to society." And engines work thanks to little explosions.

20 Of course, cohesion and repetitions are part of the linking process, but there never is such a thing as the same story. McGahern's idea of the writer as beginner rests on the difficulty of having to rework the same material

I think it's be very easy to perfect a type of short story or a novel that you could repeat very easily, but it would degenerate into bad work, because I think that a writer always is a beginner, you know, is that you never learn anything, and that in a sense like Yeats said: "Let difficulty be our plough," is that once you do anything, you almost have to raise the jumps so that it's impossible again. Because technique can be learnt but it's only a part of writing, and once you've learnt the technique, you actually can never repeat it, because you actually have to use the technique to actually do something else—even though it comes out as the same old song.¹³

21 What "A Slip-Up" shows, too, is the extreme concentration which possesses the dreamer to the point of forgetting the surrounding world, a point reached both through reading and writing, as McGahern once acknowledged

And one vivid memory I have is that I was reading and I must have had my back turned to the window in the barracks, and I was so lost in the book that I was obviously a figure of fun for my sisters, and they removed my shoes and put a straw hat on my head, and I still continued reading, and I only woke up to actually realise I was an enormous figure of fun with my book in the middle of the room. And actually, it's only when I'm writing, and very, very, seldom that I get that sense of being lost in work or lost in a book where all sense of time is lost, and three or four hours passes like a single moment. It's maybe once a year, or once every two years that happens when I'm writing, and there's nobody now able to test the quality of the concentration by removing my shoes and putting a straw hat on my head!¹⁴

22 It is precisely the wish to escape a boring time and place through reading that "Strandhill, the Sea" stages. The story twists the different voices, narratives, repeating the same pattern, twisting little comedies together as many different "strands" or topics at story level about sex, cars, geography, writers, names; and other strands which occur on an interpretative level, such as cruelty, power and sex games, idleness and idle talk, paralysis, and the image of the coming darkness of death:

Having come out of darkness, they now blink with informations at all the things about them, before the soon when they'll have to leave.

The sky filled over Sligo Bay, the darkness moving across the links and church, one clear strip of blue between Parkes' and Knochmaree, and when that would fill - the rain, the steamed windows, the informations, till the dark settled on their day. (CS 39)

23 As initiation to the world of imagination reading offers the only possible refuge. The end of the story is remarkable: the young boy enters the world of his stolen comics and the italics visually metamorphose the sentence, switching from the "Wilson" of the reading in the real world to the *Wilson* of the summed-up world of imagination.

The room, the conversations, the cries of the seagulls, the sea faded: it was the world of imagination, among the performing gods, what I ashamedly desired to become.

Alf Tupper put aside welder and goggles, changed into his country's singlet to leave

the whole field standing in that fantastic last lap, and Wilson, *Wilson, the Iron man*, simply came alone into Tibet and climbed to the top of Everest.

24 In "the world of imagination," the young boy whose "portrait of the artist as a young boy" is drawn, reigns with the "performing gods," while the people on the bench remain "stranded," unable to walk the mile that separates them from the sea, at Strandhill.

25 As we have seen, the image has a creative role, that of building up a world. Many stories also stage, often in a covert way, writers, books, words and their meaning, as well as storytelling. Among others, this is the case of "Wheels," "Strandhill, the Sea," "My Love, My Umbrella," "the Beginning of an Idea," "Parachutes," "Peaches," in which a writer is confronted with sterility and violence. Not forgetting stories in which the narrator's often bitter irony debunks canonical genres, as in "Christmas," the counter Christmas carol, or in the pathetic love-story of "The Stoat."

26 "Old Fashioned" offers an other view figure of the creator, a mixture of irony directed against so-called modern changes (CS pp. 269-271), a bitter-sweet remembrance of things past. The polysemic, ironical title also points to the fact that the story is not an old-fashioned one. The sergeant's son of the story has become a famous film-maker whose work is controversial. The criticisms echo reviews of McGahern's work

But later he made a series of documentary films about the darker aspects of Irish life. As they were controversial, they won him a sort of fame: some thought they were serious, well-made, and compulsive viewing, bringing things to light that were in bad need of light; but others maintained that they were humourless, morbid, and restricted to a narrow view that was more revealing of private obsessions than any truths about life or Irish life in general. During this time he made a few attempts to get on with his father, but it was more useless than ever. (C S, 268-269)

27 But when the producer "came with a television crew to make a film for a series called *My Own Place*," things had so changed that he was "out of touch [...] with the place."

They set up the cameras and microphones under the beech trees on the avenue where once he had happily burned leaves for the Sinclairs. It would be a dull film. There would be no people in it. The people that interested him were all dead.[...]

28 Then he starts telling the story of the Sinclairs, and the camera does its job

"After the war, Colonel Sinclair and his wife came home from London to this parsonage. His father had been the parson here. They restored it, house and garden and orchard and paddocks and lawn. I think they were very happy here, but now all is wilderness again."

The camera panned slowly away from the narrator to the house and continued along the railings that had long lost their second whiteness, whirring steadily in the silence as it took in only what was in front of it, despite the cunning hand of the cameraman: lingering on the bright rain of cherries on the tramped grass beneath the trees, the flaked white paint of the paddock railing, the Iron Mountains smoky and blue as they stretched into the north against the rim of the sky. (CS 271)

29 In this short story that reconstructs a lost world, that of Protestant gentry and Catholic village people, the barracks, the village, Boyle, Rockingham estate and Ardcarne parsonage, as well as an episode in the life of the sergeant's son, the final image filmed by the camera turns out to be powerless. The sergeant's son is evoking memories and the dead. The camera can only show what is in front of it ; it can only register the presence of an absence. But the voice can do what the image can not: through the producer's comment, an echo of the beginning of the short story, and an echo is the aural equivalent of an image, images have been conjured up and a whole world revived during the span of

time it took to read the short story, rendering visible and readable the invisible world of fiction.

- 30 Thus, the rhythm and the voice supply what the image cannot. Twisted and stranded together they produce meaning in a complex and inseparable way. If the vision and the rhythm bring forth the image, the image is sustained by the rhythm and the voice.

Pike choked on hooked perch

- 31 In "Korea," the rhythm of blind violence is evoked by the use of alliterations working up to a chiasmus: "**—pike choked on hooked perch** they'd tried to swallow," reinforcing the image of animal greed and savagery, as pike try to swallow perch. The narrator is initiated into a world of primeval survival as he is plunged among primitive animals like worms crawling in clay, and overhears a conversation in which his father declares that he is ready to sacrifice his son:

He'd scrape the fare, I'd be conscripted there; each month he'd get so many dollars while I served, and he'd get ten thousand if I was killed.

In the darkness of the lavatory between the boxes of crawling worms before we set the night lines for the eels I knew my youth had ended. (CS 57)

- 32 This teaches him to be ruthless in turn, as the parallelisms in the ironical syntactic patterns seem to suggest when his voice echoes his father's.

"You won't be able to say I didn't give you the chance when you come to nothing in this fool of a country. It'll be your own funeral."

"It'll be my own funeral," I answered.[...]

I knew this silence was fixed for ever and I rowed in silence till he asked, "Do you think it will be much good tonight?"

"It's too calm," I answered.

"Unless the night wind gets up," he said anxiously.

"Unless the night wind gets up," I repeated. (CS 58)

- 33 Rhythm and image *are* meaning as ellipsis at the end shows too when silence is as loud as the voice.

As the boat moved through the calm water and the line slipped through his fingers over the side I'd never felt so close to him before, not even when he'd carried me on his shoulders above the laughing crowd to the final. Each move he made I watched as closely as if I too had to prepare myself to murder. (CS 58)

- 34 The ellipsis of the complement opens up meaning as the text becomes enigmatic: it may suggest, as D. Sampson remarks, that the son absorbed into the father's world, is ready to murder in his turn, having learned the law of the survival of the fittest¹⁵. It also implies that, like the young soldier of the beginning, young men are cannon fodder sent to war by their fathers too¹⁶. But the narrator survives, thanks to his stubbornness and unspoken knowledge, and, unlike Isaac, refuses to be sacrificed on the altar of another's survival¹⁷. Thus, there exists a faintest hint at murder, as the son "watched closely as if [he]too had to prepare [himself] to murder," that is to murder who? his father? at least symbolically, to grow. But ellipsis also shows clearly in its omission the power of silence, to choose to tell or not to tell a "secret," as the etymology of the word "secret" confirms: *se-cernere* means to set apart. Father and son are similar and set apart in their refusal to utter the truth.

- 35 Thus, silence, to quote Henri Meschonnic, is "to make of a word or the absence of a word, both rhythm and meaning."¹⁸ This occurs in "My Love, my Umbrella" where the body will

provide what language fails to give in a criss-cross pattern of repetitions and linking anadiplosis: "Perhaps *the rain, the rain* will wash away the poorness of our attempts at *speech*, our bodies will draw *closer, closer* than our *speech*"(CS 67)¹⁹ Image and rhythm are clearly intertwined in the structure both of the story and of its beginning and its end, carefully mirroring one another:

It was the rain (1), the constant weather of this city(2), made my love inseparable from the umbrella(3), a black umbrella(4) (CS 65),
[...and I gripped the black umbrella(4) with an almost fierce determination to be as I was before, unknowingly happy under the trees, and the umbrella(3), in the wet evenings(1) that are the normal weather of this city(2). (CS 74).

36 Between beginning and end, unfortunately, knowledge and misery have altered things: from "constant" the weather has become "normal," it is impossible to be as one was "before," as the chiasmic structure, to which a slight reshuffling of the terms is added, proves.

37 In "Strandhill, the Sea," the rhythm, both in the telling and in the sound, gathers momentum when the boy escapes Parkes' Guest House to steal comics while the boring conversations drag along.

Step after step and rigid step and no blow, a cash register ringing and then the warning bell above the door and the breathing relief of the wet out-of-doors to the sea blurred beyond the golf-links, rain coming down same as ever before. Past Huggards and over the sodden sand of the street, raindrops brilliant in the red ruffles of the roses by the wall. (42-43)

38 Thus sensations and movement, registered paratactically, and the power of alliteration, is brought to the fore as the subject takes the background. The images erupt together with breathless rhythm, and then become structure when "the hopping of the ball" indirectly points to the boy as a subject ; and by its alternate movement the ball also points to the shape of the story, twisting various strands into a braid, alternating past and present, reality and imagination, telling and feeling. "The hopping under my hand idle as the conversations from the green bench" (CS 39), becomes: "while the tennis ball hopped or paused" (CS 40), and then: "The ball was idle in my hand." Form and flux are linked together as well as rhythm, voice and meaning.

39 The unrelenting ticking of a new watch in "Gold Watch" could represent a paradigm of the intertwining of image, rhythm and meaning

The ticking of the watch down in the barrel was so completely muffled by the spray that only by imagination could it be heard[...] I stood in that moonlit silence as if waiting for some word or truth, but none came, none ever came; [...] I drew the watch up again out of the barrel by the line and listened to it tick, now purely amused by the expectation it renewed-that if I continued to listen to the ticking some word or truth might come. (CS 225)

40 The narrator's expectation is disappointed as "time did not have to reach to any conclusion"(CS 225). Measured time immersed in a flow, a flux, beats a rhythm immersed in a blue maceration of the poisoned flow that will corrode and stop. Another way for the father to try to escape time, to change the human condition. "The intolerable" has been deflected once more and time forgotten during the reading of this compelling story.

The weight of words, the voice

I came to writing as a sort of game, because words had always a physical presence for me; I mean, they had a certain smell, a shape, and above all they had a weight. You know that each word has a different weight, and what always fascinated me, even if you change a small word in a sentence, is that all the other words demand to be rearranged.²⁰

- 41 To speak of the weight of words points to their ponderous existence as in those "Solid Objects" Virginia Woolf writes about. To render their weight and to give words their full meaning, the voice is best, because eloquence is the flesh of rhetoric, as vowels and consonants are the flesh and skeleton of words. The voice gives a body to language, like colour in painting. The energizing power of the voice is best exemplified by "shovel or shite, shite or burst," the formidable leitmotiv in "Hearts of Oak, Bellies of Brass," the story in which the title beats rhythmically a ternary and binary pattern: an amphimacer followed by the mirror sounds of trochee and iamb, inverted in the shouting "shovel or shite, shite or burst": trochee/iamb, amphimacer).
- 42 While reading McGahern's short stories one hears truly a voice uttering the text, "voicing" it, a scanning and a rhythm. Some sounds would have to be lengthened and metrically scanned: this is truly the art of the story-teller when language includes the whole being, when the flavour of speech is meaningful, so that language is full-bodied, as one says of red wine. The local voice, and that of a whole community, is the flesh of language, a subjectivity one has to pay heed to, as in "Korea": "I was wary of the big words, they were not in his voice or any person's voice."
- 43 Hence, the importance of dialogue and the choice of words that reflect people's speech; for example, from "Why We're Here."
- "Went to the auction."
"See anything there?"
"No, the usual junk, the Ferguson went for a hundred. Not fit to pull you out of bed."
[...]"Surprising what even a little can do, as the woman said when she pissed in the sea." Gillespie laughed aggressively(CS13-15)
- 44 One has to allow for the humour and irony which come as critical counterpoints and attract the reader's attention to different levels of meaning. For instance, in "Old Fashioned" the narrator expresses regrets
- As in other churches, the priest now faces the people, acknowledging that they are the mystery.[...]The words are in English and understandable. The congregation gives out the responses. The altar boys kneeling in scarlet and white at the foot of the altar steps ring the bell and attend the priest, but they no longer have to learn Latin. (CS 269)
- 45 Through the loss of the use of Latin, not only have the words lost their mystery but the incomprehensible words, which was a way of imagining the unreachable beyond, become banal. The voice one hears throughout the story is truly a calling. Like a religious formula it can be intoned and repeated: truly the Word made Flesh. And the role of religious celebration, as a structural principle, an initiation into a form of mystery through ritual and patterns of repetitions and words, must not be underestimated
- I suppose the two ceremonies that I most remember are the Stations of the Cross and Lent in the Church, [...] at each Station the priest would intone "Oh Jesus, who for love of me didst bear Thy Cross to Calvary, in Thy sweet mercy, grant me to

suffer and die with Thee." And of course that's very close to the whole notion of the Catholic Church which is summed up for me: "in my beginning—in my end is my beginning." [...] And of course there was the Corpus Christi processions, [...] and I often see that Corpus Christi procession as the Divine meeting the Human for one mortal-immortal hour beneath the village sky. And those were extraordinary influences, because there were, at that stage, no books.²¹

- 46 "Art and religion satisfy similar yearnings for meaning," Denis Sampson states²². Religion as a means of apprehending transcendence and a sense of mystery, naturally leads to an initiation into music, poetry and rhythm, into representation. Vision as meaning is experienced. In "The Image," McGahern clearly states what art and religion have in common and where they diverge:

It is here, in this search for the one 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.²³

- 47 Art and religion link a community and give it a voice as well as expression. "Phoné," hearing poetry approximate the rhythms of speech, and feeling too that it is as much a part of one's own life and mind as poems that have been memorised.

- 48 The reader the writer seems to have very much in mind, in a way calling out to the other's necessary presence. The reader is the writer's privileged addressee: "The final thing you put on any work is shape, which to a certain extent is a formal shape. It's almost like arranging the material. In shaping the work you betray the fact that you're hoping for an audience because the shape is the social form of the work"²⁴. This implies the function of "the shape" as part of a situation of utterance the presence of a potential addressee conditioning the shape of the work, as it is to be read, to reach a destination. Thus the writer escapes tautology and solitude, as he wants to make a certain *impression* on his reader: "to find order in life." Thus McGahern sees the role of the reader as an active one, a cooperation:

I see the book itself as a coffin of words, and it doesn't come to life until it actually comes to life in a reader's mind. because the writer's work is finished where the reader's work begins. And if it's a true reader, he actually takes up in his own life and works where the writer leaves off. And basically I like to think that a work is just a suggestion that's not finished until it's actually taken up and done by the reader within his own private world that others cannot see (licorne 26-27)

- 49 The reader has to draw from the material of his own life, as much as the writer does, to flesh out the work, as it were.

Poetics of the short story

- 50 McGahern's latest short story called "Easter" will serve as the last example to encapsulate what we have tried to understand regarding the poetic quality of the imagination²⁵, both visual and aural, together with a generic question. A strong framing effect of the beginning and end in the reference to the sun shows a slight but important difference: "The whole of heaven is dancing in its joy that Christ is risen" becomes "The sun was now high above the lake. There was still no cloud. A child could easily believe that the whole of heaven was dancing."(17). The story is about resurrection, it being Easter, and the main story is told by an intradiegetic narrator, Jamsie. He recalls an episode that happened in his youth when, he helped in the "resurrection" of a man wounded by "the Tans" and rescued by villagers, like Moses from the river. The whole story resurrects the violent

past of the community while a march is about to take place from the IRA Monument to the graveyard. The repetition of the same fragment: the "line of young men coming up through the bog in single file with the guns," resurrects the memory of the young men fallen in an ambush. The calling out for help of the wounded man, repeated three times - "Hel-loo...Hel-loo...Hel-loo"- and appearing three times in the text, together with the vividness of the dialogue, show the importance of orality and the human voice as the text reproduces its tone and enunciation. The villagers react to a cry for help and rescue a wounded Republican soldier, who turns out to be ungrateful, which leads to retaliations on a harmless member of the Protestant community. Cruelty is the ultimate lesson of this parable, in defiance of Christ's message. "Easter" could read as a counter Easter story (recalling Easter Rising). Its bitterness evokes the beginning of "Korea" and the execution of young men, prefiguring the father's desire to sacrifice his son for money. Writing is truly "the search of the lost image in a kind of grave, grave of dead passions and their days."²⁶ As Proust's own search of lost time, a quest for "resurrection" through art.

- 51 These pages printed in last year's *TLS* are actually pages from John McGahern's work in progress, a novel the provisional title of which might be "That He May Face the Rising Sun." The pages are presented as a short story and can work as a short story, being a well structured narrative unit, with a neat progression and conclusion. A comedy of characters full of humour - and bitterness, too, at the folly of men. This text raises again the theoretical question: what is a short story? how can one define it as a genre: in terms of length? unity of effect (Poe)? tension of the voice²⁷? It is close to the novel and poetry because of its brevity and necessary compression of rhetorical devices, and close to drama as it also fits the theatrical form. One recalls John B. Yeats's letter to his son about his play: "It is natural to an Irishman to write plays, he has an inborn love of dialogue and round him is a dialogue as lively, gallant and passionate as in the times of great Eliza..."²⁸.
- 52 Short story writing is akin to the work of dreams: that is, condensation, displacement, analogy. A strong encoding of the text through a well-knit structure, metaphors, figures of construction such as chiasma, parallelisms, gradations, repetitions, but also ellipses and figures of omission are strictly necessary because of the brevity of the genre. To say more with less words. The short story is also close to poetry through its rhythm, images, sounds, alliterations and assonances. No wonder, then, that McGahern, a true poetry lover and a born orator, should have chosen a compact form similar to that of the poem, because of its density and brevity, its spareness and maximum use of rhetoric. Truly, it is a microcosm, metonymic of the world, like Medusa's mirror, a finite piece of the infinite, a synesthesia combining image and sound.
- 53 The rhythm, then, signals the presence of a subject, a story-teller. One can forget the typographical layout and listen to the cadence of the rhythm. Then one hears the lyrical voice. A simple change in the layout, and the image in all its detail, the rhythm and the metre, become self-evident.

Grey concrete and steel and glass
in the slow raindrop of the morning station,
three porters pushing an empty trolley
up the platform to a stack of grey mail-bags,
the loose wheels rattling, and nothing
but wait and watch and listen,
and I listened to the story they were telling. (CS 3)

- 54 As we began with one Yeats, let us end with another, Yeats the father, John Butler Yeats. John McGahern has written an introduction to a new edition of his *Letters*²⁹, depicting the

life and character of the painter and of his gifted sons and devoted daughters. The choice of the character of the father tells a lot about McGahern's admiration and taste. J.B. Yeats was a failed artist who never compromised with his own desires and feelings. He squandered money and ruined his portraits, disregarding success and the sitters' good will. His eldest son, the poet, engaged with his father in "a long battle of minds and formidable wills that was to last his lifetime"(6):

the differences were irreconcilable since they were rooted in character and conflicting visions of life. [...] To WBY the idea of a purely private artist was unthinkable. His finest verse play, *Purgatory*, has only a father and son on stage, their natural roles subverted. In its starkness of symbol and setting it presages *Waiting for Godot* based on a Sligo ghost story, *Purgatory* contains many of Yeats's recurrent ideas. A play as powerful and rich will act as many mirrors, and it has always fascinated me that every line of *Purgatory* is filled with the drama of opposites.³⁰

- 55 This is the only first-person reference on the part of the essayist. And no wonder it appears when evoking the conflict between father and son, the much revered poet, on stage in a play called *Purgatory*. Then the essayist turns story-teller as he recounts J. B. Yeats's death in a moving way not foreign to a famous fictitious picture, that of Dorian Gray.

When he died later in the upstairs room of the Petitpases boarding house, the self portrait that had been commissioned eleven years before to the very day stared down from the wall at the lifeless body. In the light of his belief that nothing is ever finished since everything is continually changing, it could not be said to be finished or unfinished. On February 1922, the artist and his portrait had just both 'stopped'.

³¹ (21)

- 56 The Yeatses were close to Oscar Wilde's family as the first letter testifies. A smooth link is thus provided between introduction and first letter and the power of images mimicking the passage of time reasserted and debunked. Both life and picture have ceased their metamorphosis.

- 57 McGahern's comments on Yeats's letters underscore his preference for restraint and his interrogation of art and the Good, as well as the importance of dreams and memory as the necessary compost of affection:

he can never be accused of that exhibitionism when the means of expression is in excess of what is being said.[...]

[The letters] are always immediate. Never far away from the absorbing questions of the day is an infinite curiosity about those questions that are concerned with the nature of art and thought: What is the good and the nature of what is good?

The facts are always situated in a dream of becoming never in mere being (quote from JBY)

And affection springs straight out of memory:

"Now a most powerful and complex part of the personality is affection and affection springs straight out of memory. For that reason what is new whether in the world of ideas or of fact cannot be subject for poetry, though you can be as rhetorical about it as you please—rhetoric expresses other peoples' feelings, poetry one's own."

In abolishing time and establishing memory the letters of J.B. Yeats go straight to the very heart of affection.³²

- 58 In "rhetoric expresses other peoples' affection, poetry one's own," we find again what was expressed in the interview about the writer as beginner. The writer has to resort to technique up to a point. Poetry is the speech of a subject not something learnt from

books. Creation is a need not an ornament. And the letters of J.B. Yeats are the closest one may come to a man's voice and his writing rhythm once he has gone the way of all flesh.

- 59 The reader called upon to join in "the patrols of the imagination" draws the cartography of a whole world in which McGahern's characters pass and pass again, tracing another map, that of "the writer's field," regularly marked by images. Another story, that of an imaginary field hovering above the fields and meadows of County Leitrim and Roscommon is being whispered over the lakes and trees and meadows. And still to leave the last world to the poet resting near Sligo under Queen Maeve's grave: "The grass blade carries the world on its point"³³ The short story as a leaf of grass trembling in the writer's field.

NOTES

1. Pascal Mougin, *L'effet d'image*, Claude Simon. Paris, L'Harmattan.
2. "Out of the Dark: an Interview with John McGahern," *The Irish Times*, 28 Apr. 1990 quoted by Denis Sampson in *Outstaring Nature's Eye, The Fiction of John McGahern*, Dublin The Lilliput Press, 1993, p. 14.
3. John McGahern, "The Image: Prologue to a reading at the Rockefeller University," *Honest Ulsterman*, 8 (December 1968) p. 10, reprinted with revisions in *Lignes de fond*, pp. 17-18, and with further revisions in *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17, n°1 (July 1991), 12.
4. The phrase "fictitious reports" also appears in "The Key," another short story concerned with life in the barracks and the baleful power of the father: "These inspections usually found the Sergeant at work in his garden. As he'd almost certainly have been signed out in the books on some fictitious patrol he'd have to run for cover of the trees along the river and stay hidden until the car left."
5. Thus, three short stories "Eddie Mac," "The Conversion," "Old Fashioned" make up a trilogy proving the coherence of the microcosm. A whole world, that of the protestants having to live within a majority catholics.
6. "Mc Gahern's anchor in the local reflects a conscious decision of the artist, for it is intimately associated with the moral commitment, and the aesthetic principles of his art," D. Sampson, op. cit., p. 12.
7. id., p. 12.
8. id., p. 13.
9. John McGahern, *The Leavetaking*, London, Faber and Faber, 1975, p. 35
10. Concerning the image let it be noted that some stories are closer to a narrative ("My Love, My Umbrella," "Like All Other Men," "Lavin," "The Beginning of an idea," "The Stoat") some are like instants suspended in time and memory: what predominates in them is an image as in "Wheels": "Why we're Here," "a Slip-Up," "Strandhill, the Sea," "Korea," "Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass," "A Country Funeral," "A Finished Man." Others are in-between because a powerful image arises from them at the same time as a story has been told: "Gold Watch," "Easter," "Love of the World."
11. The image of Rose happily arriving on her bicycle loaded with plums is framed by two references to the impossibility of moving away from the father's home and leaving Ireland whereas the narrator's love has gone to Sierra Leone: "I suppose we might as well try and stay

put for a time" the narrator offers his father whereas he "saw the tall colonial building on a hill above the sea, its white pillars..." an image of happiness and exoticism, and impossible escape. many other short stories offer instances of memory becoming an image through its reworking by imagination. "The Wine Breath" /also works in a very Proustian way "The gate on which he has his hand vanished, the alders, Gillespie's formidable bulk, the roaring of the saw. He was in another day, the lost day of Michael Bruen's funeral nearly thirty years before." (CS 178).

12. John McGahern, "An Interview" by Liliane Louvel Gilles Menegaldo and Claudine Verley, 17 November 1993, *John McGahern*, La licorne, Faculté des Lettres et des Langues, Poitiers, Hors série, 1994, p. 29

13. John McGahern, "An Interview" by Liliane Louvel, Gilles Menegaldo and Claudine Verley, 17 November 1993, *John McGahern*, La licorne, Faculté des Lettres et des Langues, Poitiers, Hors série, 1994, p. 28

14. id., p. 21.

15. D. Sampson, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-98

16. A fact hinted at in "Old-Fashioned" too where both Colonel Sinclair whose son has been killed in the army and the sergeant, although disagreeing, are ready to sacrifice young men.

17. Isaac's sacrifice by Abraham in the Old Testament has its counter part in the New Testament by God's sacrifice of His Son, sent to redeem the sins of men. Recall Christ's appeal on the cross: "Father, Father why hast Thou forsaken me?."

18. For a discussion of the notion of rhythm, see Henri Meschonnic, *La rime et la vie*, Paris, Verdier, 1989. In this instance "faire d'un mot ou d'une absence de mots, à la fois le rythme et le sens" p. 24.

19. This short story displays several instances of chiasma showing the paradoxical thought of the narrator longing for what he does not possess and desiring what is no longer his as in the alternation between life/loss/death: "Little by little my *life* had fallen into her keeping, it was only in the *loss* I had come to know it, *life* without her, the pain of the *loss* of my own *life* without the oblivion the *dead* have, all longing changed to *die* out of my own *life* on her *lips*, in her *thighs*, since it was only through her it *lived*." (CS 72 my italics).

20. "Interview," *la licorne*, *op. cit.*, p. 26

21. "Interview," *la licorne*, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

22. D. Sampson, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

23. John McGahern, "The Image," *op. cit.*, p. 12.

24. Tracey Sennett, "Rhythm, Images and the Fiction of John McGahern: An Interview" *An Gael* (New York) 3, nov.2 (Winter 1986): p.11," quoted by Dennis Sampson, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

25. "J. McGahern, "Easter," *TLS*, April 30, 1999, pp. 16-17.

26. John McGahern, "The Image," *op. cit.*, p. 12.

27. In his reading of "Easter" at Belmont University (March 2000), McGahern acknowledged that "Easter" had been fashioned to fit the short story form. Actually it comprehends both the beginning and the end of the future novel. The question of the genre remains posed by some chapters of Thomas Hardy's work, for instance, which can be read as short stories.

28. *Letters of J.B. Yeats*, ed. Joseph Hone, Abridged and with an Introduction by John McGahern, London, Faber and Faber, (1944), 1999, p. 42.

29. *Letters of J.B. Yeats*, *op. cit.*

30. *Letters of J.B. Yeats*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

31. id., p. 21.

32. *ibid.*, p. 24.

33. William Butler Yeats, (*S Jousni thèse* p. 471).

ABSTRACTS

McGahern's short stories build up an imaginary world paradoxically anchored in a very banal reality. The medium is less banal when one closely looks at it. As he declared in "The Image," McGahern starts from a founding image. The power of imagination rests on a reworking of memory as source of inspiration. But one must not forget the importance of the rhythm and the texture of a voice which can be heard from within the text. McGahern's stories are the work of a born story-teller, they also show to what extent the short story is a hybrid genre oscillating between narration, poetry and drama.

Les nouvelles de McGahern construisent un monde imaginaire paradoxalement ancré dans une réalité des plus banales. L'écriture, elle, l'est moins, lorsqu'on y regarde de près. Fidèle à la définition qu'il a donnée de son travail, dans "The Image" McGahern part de l'image qui structure son œuvre. Le pouvoir de l'imaginaire repose sur un travail de mémoire comme source d'inspiration. A cela s'ajoutent le rôle du rythme et la sonorité d'une voix qui s'entend résonnant depuis l'intérieur du texte. C'est ce côté conteur qui fait aussi des nouvelles de McGahern un régal pour l'oreille et montre en même temps comment la nouvelle est un genre hybride oscillant entre le narratif, le poétique et le théâtral.

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