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Introduction

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Introduction

Liliane Louvel

- 1 John McGahern's work has dominated the Irish literary landscape for almost forty years. First rendered famous by his first novel *The Barracks*, the writer then underwent the painful process of censorship and self-imposed exile after the banning of *The Dark*. If the following novels, *The Leavetaking*, *The Pornographer* and *Amongst Women* have aroused increasing interest in his work and attracted praise and controversy, the three collections of short stories, *Nightlines*(1970), *Getting Through* (1978) and *High Ground* (1985), together with the stories published separately, have definitely ensured McGahern's place as a master of the genre, a stylist and a poet. The shape of the short story has enabled the writer to build up patiently a microcosm through a microcosmic form and to refine his manner "increasingly experimental and conscious of its own patterns as poetic fiction" to quote Denis Sampson.
- 2 This is what the following contributions explore. D. Sampson tries to capture the essence of "the rich whole" quoted in "Wheels", the seminal first story of McGahern's very first collection *Nightlines*: "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 10-11). Sampson grants memory a creative role especially when it surges in an unexpected way in the midst of a very imperfect life. Marcel Proust's influence is recognizable in McGahern's work and acknowledged by the writer himself. Many instances of the power of the past recaptured through the emergence of a "lost image", a process similar to M. Proust's "lost time" can be found in the short stories. The priest in "The Wine Breath" experiences such a surge of the past when the light on the snow calls up a past episode of his life: "It was the evening light on snow. The gate on which he had 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. All was silent and still there." (CS 178)
- 3 Although conceived as separate units, the short stories are all connected and links can be traced between them. This is what Denis Sampson, Maguy Pernot-Deschamps and Liliane Louvel analyze in their essays. Although each story is of course complete and forms a rich

whole unto itself it is connected to its neighbours in a subtle pattern of repetitions and echoes. Toponyms, onomastics, historical references, all build up the portrait of a community, that of Irish society in the middle of the twentieth century. If the Roscommon-Leitrim countryside is the locus of many stories some of them also depict city life either in Dublin and London. M. Pernot-Deschamps confronts the ideals of the different generations, and the failure of the dreams of the older generation which entails a feeling of loss for the children of the Free State and later the Republic. The gaps between ideals and reality provoke a general sense of failure. The church is unable to provide a suitable model and the school as well as the political system cut poor figures: the politicians are opportunists, the teachers hopeless.

- 4 The failure of the dream extends to the few remaining members of the Protestant ascendancy who have lost their status. "Old Fashioned" and "The Conversion of John Kirkwood" show the Sinclairs and the Kirkwoods in a state of decline and the famous Big House is deteriorated. The younger generation is disillusioned too. Lost is the sense of purpose that drove their fathers and they are failures in their private relationships. This leads to conflicts and bitterness.
- 5 John McGahern's short stories mainly explore two types of conflictual relationships which the five papers identify and analyze: the confrontation between fathers and sons, and that between men and women. Resentment, misunderstanding and hatred often govern the rebellious sons in front of the father-figure driven by "bouts of fury"; this is what M. Pernot-Deschamps sees in terms of patriarchy. Brought back by traditions such as haymaking, the son has to regain his place in his father's house and submit to his whims. "Gold Watch", "Wheels", "Korea" stage in a poignant way the difficult relationships between fathers and sons.
- 6 What D. Sampson sees as "a drama of opposites" is central to McGahern's work: yearning and loss, desire and defeat, beginnings and endings, departures and returns, city and country form antithetical couples on a mode which also characterizes the relationships between fathers and sons, men and women. The "loss of certainties about love and the loss of traditional values" M. Pernot-Deschamps evokes, is minutely explored by Jacques Sohier and Dominique Dubois in their studies of "Peaches" and "My Love, My Umbrella".
- 7 In his Lacanian interpretation of "Peaches", J. Sohier sees desire as a slip-up and consequently studies the "slipping away of desire from the main character". In what could be called "scenes from conjugal life", the couple's problematic relationship reveals that the man, a writer, apparently enjoying being instead of trying to acquire possessions or doing, is actually "rotting away" as much as the carcass of a shark stranded on the nearby beach. Symbolism is structurally active in this story located in Spain, a very distant country from the usual McGahernian landscape. The confrontation between the self and the other, the disappearance of desire or its "aphanisis" (to speak in the language of J. Lacan), illustrated by the mind-boggling sentence: "what might be the desire of a man without desire", the political issue raised by the conflict of power in the diegesis between the man and the father-figure of the magistrate, the sadistic tendencies of the characters leading to the abolition of the other and to a master-slave type of relationship, all culminate in the disappearance of the subject pushed to flight. Symbolism organizes the story and has to be deciphered by the reader. J. Sohier shows how a coherent series can be traced between the stinking shark and the stinking sterile writer. The peaches of the title actually represent a symbolical rape when the magistrate forcefully pushes them down the woman's front pocket. The gash still showing below the woman's eye, a scar

from a former accident due to her husband's inadequate driving, may also be seen as a "murderous acting-out on a narcissistic woman" as Sohler phrases it. Water lavishly gushing out or on the contrary being strictly measured also effectively figures desire, "the most potent figure of all" being earth hankering after water.

- 8 Dominique Dubois also chose to explore the difficulties of communication between lovers and the failure of desire in another short story "My Love, My Umbrella", by resorting to the findings of pragmatics, particularly Grice's theory, and his maxims of conversational behaviour. D. Dubois thus concentrates on the characters' utterances and silences. He examines the different discursive strategies used in "My Love, My Umbrella", a love story complete with encounter, fulfillment and breaking apart. The homodiegetic narrator remains nameless which is also the case of his partner. In "Peaches", as well, the two protagonists were just called "the man" and "the woman" thus acquiring a generic quality. Concerning "My Love, My Umbrella", D. Dubois sees this absence of naming as a proof of the characters' inability to share personal feelings and ideas. The failure of communication reflects the characters' incapacity to love, their alienation and the meaninglessness of their lives. D. Dubois shows that the failure of the relationship was already encapsulated in the beginning of the short story when in the characters' first exchanges the woman was reluctant to answer the young man's eagerness and constantly flouted the maxims of conversation as defined by Grice. She refuses to engage in conversation and either merely repeats the narrator's words or provides inadequate replies refusing to keep the conversation going. The narrator's inadequacy and reluctance to engage in any form of social commitment, in this case marriage, brings the relationship to an end. Indirect comment is passed on the characters' failure at interpersonal relationship by dint of a conversation overheard in a pub: "Now we both listened.[the poet] was saying[...] it was the quality of the love that mattered and not the accident." (CS 66-67). Another indirect comment is provided by the lyrics of the well-known song "The Man I Love" which picture the portrait of a man totally antithetical to the narrator. The two characters are unable to evoke personal topics; they let their bodies achieve a relationship which turns out to be too frustrating and incomplete to go on. Indirection is a strategy characteristic of McGahern's work and finally, it is through the telling of two stories that the two characters eventually confront their own ill-assortment and inability to understand one another as they each fail to react to the other's story in the expected way. Again in this story, the reader's quest for meaning has to follow the path of symbolism. The rain and the umbrella are phallic symbols and reflect the narrator's own inadequacy. D. Dubois recalls that the umbrella stands for a timorous refusal to any form of fecundity and also for escapism. Thus, through the manipulation of dialogues, diegetic situations and symbolism, McGahern manages to picture a doomed-from-the-start story and the impotency of a pathetic narrator.
- 9 McGahern's constant preoccupation with human relationships and the power game his characters are engaged in is carefully analyzed by all contributors. Subtle strategies of evasion are traceable in dialogues, silence, body language when characters find themselves in the midst of conflicts, personal contradictions leading to deadends. The writer listens to the world and records it, recapturing its fragrance thanks to a fine poetic shape. This is what L. Louvel tries to show in taking up McGahern's only piece of criticism "the Image" and by showing how the work of memory fuels imagination rendered in its turn by powerful images which structure the text. The image is linked to the rhythm and to the voice as, according to L. Louvel, the short stories truly are the work of a story

teller. Thus the voice gives the text its flesh; one only has to read aloud McGahern's text to hear a very particular voice.

- 10 The short story being a form conditioned by its length has to resort to all sorts of tricks to be able to say more thanks to less; hence the careful use of stylistic and rhetoric devices such as chiasma, alliterations, parallels as well as that of metaphors, metonymies and symbolism, a trait acknowledged by all the contributors. McGahern's short stories testify to a mastery of this problematic genre which thus justifies and rewards all research work. In truly McGahernian fashion, let us end as we began, with the image of the wheel which opened up the first collection. Not only is it the perfect image of a stylistic and structural trait typical of McGahern's "manner"—the circularity of the short stories and the novels, the insistence on cycles, circles and repetition erected to the level of metaphysics— but it also shows what a collection is, i.e., a whole represented by its exterior circle, made up of smaller parts, its spokes, eventually mixed up all together as the wheel turns and progresses forward by slightly replacing the same by the other.

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