



岡山大学学術成果リポジトリ

OKAYAMA UNIVERSITY SCIENTIFIC ACHIEVEMENT REPOSITORY

Title	'All sorts of wonderful impossibilities': Tracing the Genesis of John McGahern's 'Doorways'
Author(s)	Brian Fox
Published Date	Nov 2021
Publication Title	Irish University Review
Volume	51
Issue	2
Publisher	Published on behalf of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures
Content Type	Journal Article
DOI	10.3366/iur.2021.0523
Permalink	https://ousar.lib.okayama-u.ac.jp/63000

‘all sorts of wonderful impossibilities’: Tracing the Genesis of John McGahern’s ‘Doorways’

I was free in the Sligo morning. I could do as I pleased. There were all sorts of wonderful impossibilities in sight. And the real difficulty was that the day was fast falling into its own night.

‘Doorways’, *Getting Through* (1978)

I was free in the Sligo morning. I could do as I pleased. There were all sorts of wonderful impossibilities in sight. The real difficulty was that the day was fast falling into its own night.

‘Doorways’, *The Collected Stories* (1992)

Tracing the genetic evolution of a John McGahern story can at times feel like playing a literary version of spot-the-difference. The lines quoted above, from the conclusion to ‘Doorways’ as it first appeared in *Getting Through* and the later, revised version in *The Collected Stories*, are as good an example of this as any.¹ Typical of McGahern’s fine-tooth-comb approach to revision, the omission of a single conjunction in the final sentence constitutes the only amendment to this short

paragraph in the later version. Here and elsewhere, we see McGahern faithfully and consistently following Chekov's famous advice to 'cut out and simplify'.² But this approach is not limited to what Pierre-Marc De Biasi defines as the 'publishing phase' (which, strictly speaking, belongs to the field of *textual genetics*), as opposed to the 'prepublishing phase' (which, by contrast, concerns *manuscript genetics* or the *avant-texte*).³ McGahern also clearly applies these Chekhovian principles in the 'prepublishing phase' across several layers of typescripts in the final stages of composition before publication. Here, for instance, are the prepublication versions of this short, concluding paragraph in semi-diplomatic transcription (to make spotting-the-difference a bit easier) and provisionally presented in the sequential order in which they have been organized within the archive at NUI Galway⁴:

[...] There ~~was~~^{ere} all sorts of wonderful impossibilities in sight. And the real difficulties ~~seemed~~^{were} just about to begin. (P71/471)

[...] There were all sorts of wonderful impossibilities in sight. And the real difficulties^y ~~were~~^{were} ~~seemed~~^{seemed} just about to begin ^{were fast coming into sight}.
(P71/472)

[...] There were all sorts of wonderful impossibilities in sight. And the real difficulties ~~were~~^{were} ^{seemed} just about to begin. (P71/473, 474)

[...] There were all sorts of wonderful impossibilities in sight. And real difficulties were fast coming into sight. (P71/475)

[...] There were all sorts of wonderful impossibilities in sight. And ^{the} real difficulties^y ~~were~~ ^{was} fast coming into sight. (P71/476)

[...] There were all sorts of wonderful impossibilities in sight. And the real difficulty ~~was fast coming into sight.~~ ^{that the day was fast falling into its own night.} (P71/477)

The final sentence is clearly the focus for most of the revisions, which are generally handwritten amendments in either pen or pencil on typescripts that are in some cases (P71/73, P71/74) identical. The last typescript (P71/477) in the sequence records (what is for McGahern) quite a substantial revision for such an advanced stage, perhaps motivated by a last-minute desire to avoid the repetition of 'sight' from the previous line. But we also see evidence throughout of an even more granular and scrupulous approach, with McGahern fluctuating between singular and plural options for the 'difficulty' that was fast approaching, and whether it merely 'seemed' so or 'was' (a crucial distinction). It is precisely this kind of fastidiousness that will see him excise an errant 'And' from the *Collected Stories* version.

There are many other examples of such micro-revisions within the forty boxes of manuscripts that make up the archive. By and large, critics have treated such revisions as the marks of either a Chekhovian or Flaubertian perfectionist hard at work. For Stanley van der Ziel,

McGahern ‘was a scrupulous rewriter and refiner’ in the mould of Joyce and Flaubert.⁵ John Kenny too offers metaphors of refinement when he describes the process of ‘distillation’ the stories go through, adding that ‘McGahern continuously edited his already seemingly perfect prose even at the stage furthest from his initial handwritten drafts’.⁶ The work of refinement was, moreover, hard work. Denis Sampson points to McGahern’s ‘rigorous self-discipline’ as he ‘worked and reworked his material’ throughout his life.⁷ That the apparent perfection of the prose is ‘achieved only by dint of atrocious labour’, as Flaubert himself put it, is also highlighted by Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh’s assessment of McGahern’s achievements as brought about through the ‘single-minded pursuit of perfection, the careful, disciplined attention to the obligation of getting the language right, of getting the shapes to fit; the sense of application brought to a point almost of severity’.⁸ This assessment of McGahern’s writing practices as characterized by single-minded discipline and application is shared by Frank Shovlin, who describes McGahern’s ‘workman’-like attitude towards literary creation, adding that writing for McGahern is ‘a question of slow, patient work rather than sudden, flashing brilliance’; it is ‘a rejection of the spontaneous for the deliberate’.⁹ Hard, scrupulous work carried out with deliberate Flaubertian single-mindedness: this sums up the portrait of the artist at work.

However, despite such wide recognition of and valuable insights into McGahern’s compositional methods, there has been little work done that is focused on the manuscripts and the writing processes they record, an anomaly this essay aims to address. With few exceptions, the manuscripts have been used to support critical interpretations of the published text(s) rather than being the primary object of analysis themselves.¹⁰ Moreover, implicit in the consensus view outlined above is a bias towards the more granular work of late-stage refinement and finishing touches, which in turn prioritises product over process in a manner that seems inconsistent with an

author renowned for having been, in the novelist Joseph O'Connor's words, a 'rewriter throughout his career'.¹¹ In his short prose piece 'The Image' (itself subject to several rewritings), McGahern contemplates the primary importance and ultimate transience of the image in literary creation: 'Image after image flows involuntarily now, and we are not at peace, rejecting, altering, shaping, straining towards the one image that will never come'.¹² In describing literary composition as a never-ending process of 'rejecting, altering, shaping, straining' towards this Godot-like image that never comes, McGahern thus provides a degree of authorial approval to a critical re-focusing away from what De Biasi refers to as the 'principle of a finalization' towards the 'extremely variable modalities and moments of the pretextual process'.¹³ It is precisely these modalities and moments that this essay will concentrate on. It will focus on the genetic evolution of just one of McGahern's short stories, 'Doorways', an account of a doomed relationship between an Irish man and an Irish-American woman (Kate O'Mara) that begins with the narrator's fascination with a pair of tramps he names Barnaby and Bartleby, who become an absurdist (or Beckettian) reference point for their drifting relationship. More specifically, it will concentrate on the earliest handwritten drafts when the work is at its most provisional and the modalities of the text are at their most uncertain. This approach does not necessarily contradict the consensus view, but it does show McGahern at his most distant from the Flaubertian perfectionist he is best known as. The 'Doorways' narrator as quoted above, like the writer before a blank page, is now 'free' to 'do as I pleased' and he contemplates the contradictory freedom of a blank future and its 'wonderful impossibilities'. Through an analysis of the 'wonderful impossibilities' present at the moment a story first takes shape on the blank page, it is hoped that this will open up new ways to reconsider how McGahern's works ultimately achieve their distinctive, deceptive, and hard-won appearance of refined delicacy and simplicity.

THE MANUSCRIPTS

The draft materials for ‘Doorways’ consist of five handwritten partial-drafts and nine typescripts with handwritten amendments (see table 1). The earliest handwritten drafts (P71/464-466) are focused on scenes involving the two main characters and their romantic vacillations, roughly corresponding to §ii, iii, v, vi, x, xi, and xii in *Getting Through*. It is only in P71/467 that the two tramps Barnaby and Bartleby are first sketched out and the sections of the story acquire numerical headings. Helpfully, the first typescript (P71/469) has ‘first draft’ typed at the foot of the last page. While there are minimal handwritten amendments to this file, P71/470 (identical typescript to P71/469) is heavily marked up for revision, initiating a pattern of revision that is replicated until and on the very last typescript (P71/477).

Table 1

File No.	Type	Title	Notes
P71/464	Handwritten draft	None	7 sheets A4 notepad (unpaginated)
P71/465	Handwritten draft	None	8 sheets A4 notepad (unpaginated)
P71/466	Handwritten draft	‘A Lily in the Wine Glass’	5 sheets A4 notepad (unpaginated)
P71/467	Handwritten draft	None	Section headings entered

P71/468	Handwritten draft	None	
P71/469	Typescript with handwritten amendments	None	'First Draft'
P71/470	Typescript with handwritten amendments	None	Typescript identical to P71/469
P71/471	Typescript with handwritten amendments	'Getting Through'	
P71/472	Typescript with handwritten amendments	'Getting Through'	
P71/473	Typescript with handwritten amendments	'Getting Through'	Typescript identical to P71/472
P71/474	Typescript with handwritten amendments	'Getting Through' 'Doorways'	Typescript identical to P71/472
P71/475	Typescript with handwritten amendments	'Doorways'	
P71/476	Typescript with handwritten amendments	'Doorways'	'Book Copy'
P71/477	Typescript with handwritten amendments	'Doorways'	

None of the drafts is dated, presenting the archivists with the considerable challenge of arranging them in chronological order.¹⁴ The challenges are exacerbated by McGahern's use of identical

typescripts in P71/472-474, even going so far as to make near-identical handwritten amendments to each file. Additionally, the handwritten draft P71/468 contains passages transferred directly to much later typescripts, suggesting one of three possibilities: one, they were written after the ‘first draft’ (P71/469) was typed up; two, they were written in this sequential order but not transferred until later; three, P71/468 was in continuous use in conjunction with several typescripts, making sequential ordering extremely problematic. Whichever the case, the *use* of material from P71/468 at various stages suggests its importance for McGahern as a kind of ‘text laboratory’ in De Biasi’s phrase.¹⁵ Provisionally, I shall group it together with second-stage typescripts in a four-stage arrangement of these materials (see table 2). The first stage involves the initial drafting of the basic elements of the relationship. The second stage includes a notable shift in emphasis, with the two tramps entering the text for the first time and the addition of numbered sections. This likely marks the watershed moment of the text’s ‘coagulation’, when it acquires enough ‘density and stability’ to police all further transformations.¹⁶ The third and fourth stages include some expansion, most notably the addition of an entirely new section in the fourth stage, but most revisions tend towards final-stage refinement of material drafted in stages one and two. In this refinement, we see McGahern in his most characteristically Flaubertian or Chekhovian mode scrupulously paring down and perfecting the text. But it is the first two stages that this essay will concentrate on, when some of the most interesting and revealing lab work occurs.

Table 2

Four-Stage Compositional Process		
Stage One	P71/464-466	Initial drafting

Stage Two	P71/467 [P71/468*] P71/469	Initial drafting and expansion
Stage Three	P71/470-473	Refinement
Stage Four	P71/474-477	Refinement

WORKING ON THE RELATIONSHIP: P71/464-469

Taken together, the files P71/464-466 arguably constitute the first handwritten draft of the story. It seems likely that P71/466 should be placed first among these drafts as, unlike P71/464 and 465, it bears a title ('A Lily in the Wine Glass') and covers the early parts of the story, whereas P71/464 and P71/465 cover roughly the middle and late parts respectively. This is the only version under this title, although it was not uncommon for McGahern to change titles or indeed character and place names (all in evidence in the 'Doorways' drafts).¹⁷ In this first version, the story begins with Nora Moran and her parties, immediately suggesting a desire on McGahern's part to introduce the narrator and relationship from a slanted perspective via a third party.¹⁸ This third-party role will be later supplemented by the introduction of Barnaby and Bartleby, but Nora remains integral to the story. In P71/466, she is both praised more highly (her early work had 'real talent') and criticised more harshly (her current work is 'worthless'). She explicitly panders to rich Americans only to put on an act of 'helplessness' that utterly fails to conceal her 'neurosis [sic] about money and success'. There are more hints of madness here; Nora also paints 'maniacally', but none of this survives into the final text. The paring down of the text clearly serves a purpose that McGahern has alluded to on several occasions: 'Sometimes I think all bad writing is statement and all good writing suggestion'.¹⁹ But the neurosis or mania McGahern originally ascribes to Nora is still

present in the final text, threaded throughout the whole story and re-emerging in contexts not immediately connected to Nora. In P71/466 again, for instance, the narrator asks Kate if she will marry her lover and her reply survives through to publication with only minor amendments: ‘No. I’m not ^{^that^} *crazy* but it couldn’t happen anyhow’ (emphasis added). In P71/467, Barnaby and Bartleby’s ‘vacant expressions’ and unchanging behaviour suggest a kind of mental vacancy not unrelated to madness. Some allusions to madness are obviously connected to Nora; both P71/467 and the later typescript P71/474 contain lines spoken by Kate about Nora (‘Well when that Nora Moran didn’t drive me crazy I don’t know’) and Nora’s mother (‘that little crazy old woman in the window’), but McGahern later cuts both lines. In P71/470, the narrator experiences something ‘like a madness in my blood’ and that remains unchanged through to publication, although McGahern revises it substantially for *Collected Stories*. The patients from the asylum we see at the end of the published story are initially sketched out in P71/468 and first appear in typescript in P71/471, where the following is also added for the first time: ‘But was not my present calm an equal and more courteous madness. What I wanted was a real sanity, even if it had to be ^{^a^} madness’. These lines appear in revised form in *Getting Through*, but not *Collected Stories* where the text is pared down even further. This paring down is quite typical of McGahern’s late-stage revision process. By contrast, it is the shuffling and seeding of discrete textual units tied to a central concept (in this case, allusions to ‘madness’) that is most remarkable in the early stages. Nora may be less explicitly neurotic by the end, but the text itself is not.²⁰ Rather, McGahern detaches these markers of madness from their original context and redeploys them elsewhere. This practice of decontextualization (detaching linguistic units from their original context within the drafts) and redistribution (re-using them in a different context) is one of the most striking aspects of the rough drafts and the aspect of McGahern’s drafting methods that this essay will now concentrate on.

There are numerous other examples of McGahern developing clusters of key terms and concepts in this manner in the early drafts of 'Doorways'. For instance, a scene in P71/465 that corresponds to §xi in the published texts has a long passage of expository dialogue in a pub between the narrator and two additional characters that does not survive beyond this draft level but is tied to the story's key concerns with *not knowing* or *not understanding*, a kind of epistemological or existential emptiness that figures throughout. In this scene, the narrator is talking about Kate ('Alberta Whelan' here) with these old friends:

"Isn't Alberta coming?" she asked brightly.

"No. She went to bed."

"Is she not well?"

"No. I can't make head or tail of it. She didn't want me to go to Sligo and when I did she got upset".

"She's in love with you. That's it," she struck me on the knee [...]

"No, she's just a friend."

"But have you tried. That may be just what you think."

[...]

"No [...] She's not sensual enough and I'm not brutal enough. It couldn't work."

(P71/465)

Here, 'she' explicitly states what is left implicit in the final text: the possibility that Alberta is in love with the narrator but fails to understand the nature of her love or need, just as the narrator fails to 'make head or tail' of the whole situation. Furthermore, he adds his own explicit statement on the lack of sensuality and brutality that apparently makes the relationship unworkable. The narrator's failure to understand might be owing to a kind of solipsistic shortcoming on his behalf ('That may be just what you think'), but the familiarity and closeness of the relations between the narrator and this couple offset the narrator's confusion and subjective isolation in a way that the final text does not. Omitting such secondary, outsider-viewpoint statements about the narrator and Alberta's state of mind from the final text is thus not merely replacing explicit statement with gnomic suggestiveness but also reproducing that state to an extent by projecting it onto the reader. McGahern's paring away of statement, in this instance, appears precisely aimed at enhancing a sense of suggestiveness that is not only a stylistic imperative but a philosophical one too, grounded in ideas of a meaningless and accidental world redeemed and given shape through artistic vision. Indeed, that the characters are moving in a shapeless and accidental world is implied in the dialogue that follows in this abandoned draft passage:

"We had no idea what we were letting ourselves in for. And when our first child was born Seamus was so shocked when he heard I had to get stitches in [...]."

["] Maybe it's the best way," I said. "Not to know."

"I think it's the only way," he said in his soft quiet way, and it was my turn to go up for the drinks.

(P71/465)

Not knowing and *not understanding* are the key concepts here and it is the concepts rather than the dialogue that survive into later drafts but, again, in a different context to their initial expression. Thus we see in P71/468, the narrator translates his failure to ‘make head of tail of it’ into more existential terms in a passage corresponding to §xii this time:

I do not understand this life, I never have and never will because we’ve been taught to expect too much, but somehow I understand Barnaby and Bartleby, perhaps if I became Barnaby and Bartleby I might begin to understand, because so far I’ve understood nothing.

It is the concept embedded in this passage rather than the dialogue above that survives in revised form into the final version, where the narrator concludes at the end of the story: ‘everything seemed to be without shape. I understood nothing’ (*GT* 93). At first glance, then, the scene in P71/465 constitutes something of a dead-end as these characters and dialogue go no further. But through this dialogue, McGahern clearly enunciates themes that will re-emerge in other parts of the story and later draft stages.

This flexible drafting technique allows McGahern to redeploy not only key concepts but the precise language in which they are expressed too. A good example of this occurs in P71/465, in a section corresponding to §xii, as narrator and Alberta part for the final time:

“I am sorry,” she said. “I had just to do it this way, I couldn’t do it any other way. Some time I’ll explain. I can’t now.”

“It’s all right. I don’t mind.”

(P71/465)

The narrator’s reply (‘I don’t mind’) is soon revised to ‘Whatever you please’ (P71/469) and then finally ‘Don’t worry about it’ (P71/471; *GT* 92). Indeed, two instances of the phrase ‘I don’t mind’ are deleted from this scene; the following also does not survive into the first-draft typescript:

“Listen”, she said [tensely?²¹] as the bus came into Sligo. “Would you mind if we split up for now? I just need to be on my own.”

“I don’t mind at all”, I said [...].

(P71/465)

Despite these cuts, the phrase ‘I don’t mind’ has clear intertextual and thematic significance in the published texts where it appears in §ix (again, twice in close succession). There, Kate follows a frustrated outburst about the Irish with an apology to the narrator, who answers:

‘I don’t mind at all’.

‘That’s part of the trouble. You should mind’.

‘I don’t mind’. I thought that if we were Barnaby and Bartleby we could hardly be further apart.

(GT 86)

Linking the narrator’s ‘numbed’ (GT 76) passivity to that of Melville’s Bartleby especially, the phrase is evidently important in McGahern’s conception of his narrator and the philosophical outlook of the story in general.²² Thus, having initially cut the phrase from P71/469, it re-emerges in typescript P71/472 (from handwritten draft P71/468). Moreover, to emphasize its importance, the narrator also voices the phrase in §iv (GT 76), which is first transferred from P71/468 to P71/475. Thus, what we see again and again in the ‘text laboratory’ of the *avant-texte* is McGahern’s willingness to detach discrete linguistic units with thematic significance from their original context and redeploy them elsewhere, in some cases verbatim.

The narrator’s comments above on their want of brutality and sensuality are another good illustration of this practice. In P71/467, the earlier dialogue is transformed into interior monologue as the narrator considers Kate’s rejection:

I wondered if she did not think of her sex as a wound, and that she could not accept it. A man that would deal with her brutally and perfunctorily she could transpose it all on to him. Or beyond all this probing it might be just an unexplainable whim, as some one who can’t eat oysters, ‘I just don’t fancy him in that way’.

(P71/467)

Here, the narrator's psychological 'probing' is immediately self-sabotaged by raising the possibility that Alberta's reluctance is merely 'an unexplainable whim', without shape or meaning. But in the first-draft typescript (P71/469), McGahern initiates a fascinating shift in emphasis and tone:

Instead of reading, the powerful savage, lines of the later Yeats crossed and re-crossed my mind. [...] I saw her long lovely virginal form on the grass, and wondered for the first time if she did not in fact resent her sex like a wound she'd never earned. She could only accept it with some man who'd take her brutally and perfunctorily, so that she could transpose it all on his low strength. Or was all this conjecturing just hurt vanity, she did not want me that way, as some people cannot eat shell fish or certain meats.

Brutality is still clearly on the narrator's mind as he recites Yeats's 'savage' late poetry to himself, compounding a shift in focus away from Alberta's 'unexplainable whim' to the narrator's own 'conjecturing' and 'vanity'.²³ This latter term in particular seems to be another key philosophical-artistic concept for McGahern, one with probable connections to his reading of 'Bartleby' and Melville's 'beautiful shocking vision of all-is-vanity' therein, as McGahern himself described it.²⁴ The term has already been textually embedded in the earlier P71/467, in a passage where Alberta describes how her own 'vanity' was 'hurt' after her lover left her (a line that survives with only minor changes through to publication). Indeed, we find it again in the same draft in the narrator's comments on the lover: 'That person's vanity could never stand an equal relationship' (not

transferred to the next draft level). Later, in P71/471, the narrator's 'hurt vanity' is amended to, 'This might all be vanity', bringing the thought much closer to McGahern's comment on the 'vision of all-is-vanity' in Melville's 'Bartleby'.²⁵ It is not until P71/476, a typescript marked 'Book Copy', that the line (as well as those on Yeats and brutality) drops from the text.²⁶ Vanity, or *vanitas*, does however survive in other forms, as the rough drafts again reveal not only McGahern's fidelity to principles of cutting and simplifying, but also his tendency to redeploy certain key concepts and the language that expresses them in contextually divergent settings. From P71/467 onwards, the empty doorways that Barnaby and Bartleby stand in are introduced and retained through to published text. But it is in P71/468 where those empty doorways accrue their full significance as still-life objects in a literary *vanitas* artwork. There we hear for the first time the narrator's observation: 'How empty the doorways were, empty coffins stood on end' (identical to *GT* 93, *CS* 177). Moreover, from P71/468 onwards McGahern has his narrator observe the emptiness of his hands at the close of the story, another detail that survives through to *Collected Stories* (*CS* 177). The etymology of 'vanity' lies in the Latin *vanus*, meaning 'empty'.

One final example. In P71/466, the narrator notes that he and Kate 'took to going out casually together [...] just meeting for company, *making no demands on one another*' (emphasis added). This last phrase is of particular interest, as it clearly prefigures Kate's outwardly unreasonable demand on the narrator later in the story that he should not go to Sligo to see his friend. The narrator, in both published texts, then meets her demand with one of his own: "'Is there any good reason?" I demanded' (*GT* 88, *CS* 173). But the phrase 'making no demands on one another' is not transferred to the next draft level (P71/467), where these lines are condensed into a version that closely resembles the final text and seems tailored to match the purposeless drifting of Barnaby and Bartleby, also introduced for the first time in P71/467: 'Aimlessly, like old people, we went

out together that winter'. McGahern, however, evidently wanted to retain both the phrase itself as well as its abstract connotations on the nature and obligations of love. Thus we see in P71/468 that the line is redeployed almost verbatim to a section corresponding to §iv in the final text, in which the narrator visits Nora Moran's house in the country.²⁷ There, within dialogue that closely matches the published versions, the narrator asks Nora if she ever misses being married and Nora replies that she doesn't but wishes she had 'some one [sic], a young man making his way in the world [...]. I'd set him up close to me. *We'd make no demands on one another*' (emphasis added). It's difficult to say precisely when McGahern drafted this passage in P71/468, but we see other cognate instances in apparently close sequential proximity (P71/468 again and P71/469) that, taken together, suggest a desire at this point to retain both thought and expression and perhaps to create something akin to Nabokov's description of Pushkin's 'conspiracy of words signalling to one another... from one part to another'.²⁸ In P71/468, McGahern drafted four separate versions of the ending of the story. In one of these, we read: 'How empty the doorways were. *They demanded filling*' (emphasis added). In P71/469, McGahern adds the following line to the narrator's reflections in §x: 'Yet what she'd demanded had been unreasonable' (a line that remains almost unchanged through to *Collected Stories*). Again in P71/469, a passage corresponding to §xi when the narrator returns from Sligo to the hotel he is staying at with Kate and she refuses to come out for a drink, we read the narrator's reaction (*Getting Through* version follows for comparison):

Slowly I retraced my steps down the narrow creaking corridor, all the days with her, her coming to the sea, *her demand in the rain that I should not go to Sligo*, now this locked door, all incomprehensible, and turning to the taste of bloodless meat or

chewed paper: but, for the time being, nothing seemed in my hands. There was nothing to do but wait for morning. There was nothing to do but wait in the doorways.

(P71/469, emphasis added)

Slowly I retraced my steps down the narrow creaking corridor. There was nothing I could do but wait for morning.

(GT 90)

Again, in typical fashion, the text is pared down to the barest, most suggestive, minimum. The direct statement concerning Kate's 'demand' is cut but what an examination of these rough drafts shows us is that while several instances of a 'demand' are ultimately cut from the text, McGahern also actively works to retain this key term by redeploying it elsewhere as the drafting process develops. Indeed, such is the importance of the idea of 'making no demands' in love that he reuses the phrase verbatim in another short story in the same collection.²⁹ The intense repetition of 'nothing' above is another such example, cut down to a single instance in the published text but also redistributed through word-images of emptiness and vacancy, and that it was 'all incomprehensible' (P71/469) also clearly re-emerges in the narrator's final-text declaration that 'everything seemed to be without shape. I understood *nothing*' (GT 93, emphasis added).

CONCLUSION

The narrow scope of this essay (just one short story) necessitates that its analysis remain provisional and in need of testing on other stories, but it also raises the possibility that in addition

to the already-familiar characteristic processes of late-stage refinement we might add this practice of decontextualization and redistribution to McGahern's most significant and distinctive compositional methods. While the early drafts contain several dead-ends, they also contain both concepts and language that are redeployed elsewhere in different contexts. This suggests that in certain cases the concepts that form the basis of the artistic vision and the language that expresses them take precedence over the actual mechanics of plot and scene. The evolution of 'Doorways' as a whole is thus tied to the development of such clusters of key terms and concepts.

Moreover, the analysis here suggests significant implications for the evolution of character and subjectivity in McGahern's work more broadly. McGahern's fiction and the interpretation of that fiction is, to a remarkable degree, concerned with the writing of the self. As is well known, critics are faced with a body of work that consistently draws upon 'the same basic set of broadly autobiographical story materials'.³⁰ These 'fundamentals' are clearly integral to the work and criticism needs to account for the fictionalisation of the fundamentals in the multiple 'versions of his self-portrait' that McGahern produced throughout his career.³¹ Of course, McGahern himself rigorously opposed any reductive application of biography to fiction and wrote in his preface to *Creatures of the Earth* of the need to create 'distance' between the life and the story: 'The most difficult [stories to write] were drawn directly from life. Unless they were reinvented, re-imagined and somehow dislocated from their origins, they never seemed to work. The imagination demands that life be told slant because of its need of distance'.³² The point here is not that criticism (genetic or otherwise) must try to undo this process of dislocation to recover the autobiographical self at its origin. On the contrary, draft analysis highlights the degree to which the compositional process itself constitutes an 'unceasing' exploration of a selfhood that is constantly under construction across multiple self-portraits and remains always a work in progress, suggestive even of the

emergent, permeable modernist self as illustrated for example in the multiple versions of himself that Joyce embodied in the Stephen Dedalus of *Stephen Hero*, *A Portrait*, and *Ulysses*.³³ Crucially, from a genetic perspective this notion of a subjectivity dispersed across multiple texts and multiple fictionalised versions of himself underpins key questions regarding the intersection of artistic vision and compositional technique in McGahern's works in general, in which it could be argued he repeatedly *decontextualises* the 'fundamentals' of the life material and *redistributes* them across multiple works and multiple selves.

We have already seen how McGahern recycled important textual units not only across draft levels but also across separate stories within *Getting Through*. Determining the relationship between these texts is key to this kind of genetic approach, as Tim Conley argues: 'Genetic inquiry is above all else the determination of the relationships between texts that are in some sense variants of one another'.³⁴ It is key, moreover, to determining the relationship between McGahern's various works, which to an unusually high degree are 'in some sense variants of one another'. What, for instance, is the relationship between 'Doorways' and 'Bank Holiday', a story published in *High Ground* (1985) that also focuses on a relationship between an Irish man and American woman? And how do these stories relate to the two versions of *The Leavetaking* (1974, 1984), another narrative that is clearly 'dislocated' from its origins in McGahern's own life, in which an Irish man in a profession that McGahern himself took up meets and marries an American woman?³⁵ 'Doorways' was published after the first version of that novel, 'Bank Holiday' after the second. It would appear that they are 'in some sense variants of one another', but in what sense exactly? Are they revisions of the novel (or of each other)? Alternate versions? Regardless of how we define them, the four narratives display a remarkable elision of form and content as the permeability of the national borderlines that the characters cross and recross is replicated in the

permeability of the textual borderlines across ostensibly discrete narratives. The genetic approach taken in this essay thus suggests that McGahern's compositional principles (decontextualization and redistribution) apply not only to word/image-clusters at the micro-genetic draft level but also to the life material of the permeable self that is scrupulously decontextualised from autobiography and redistributed across the permeable boundaries of multiple fictional works.

This essay began by considering the 'wonderful impossibilities' with which McGahern ends his story. The contradictions inherent in this darkly perorative phrase also suggest another kind of possible contradiction raised by the analysis of the drafts, one hinted at in McGahern's 'The Image', quoted above. There, he described the artist at work, 'rejecting, altering, shaping, straining towards the one image that will never come'. As this short piece (and the textual history of his revisions to it) suggests, McGahern's method of composition is fundamentally connected to an artistic philosophy of vision ('image') and re-vision ('rejecting, altering, shaping, straining'). There is an insistence on the return to and revision of the 'one image' that never comes, even when those revisions are not intended for publication.³⁶ If McGahern is indeed in some way a Flaubertian perfectionist, then his is a wonderfully contradictory form of perfectionism that ultimately denies the perfection of form. Such recursive methods thus strongly recommend a genetic approach that privileges process over final product, an approach this essay has argued seems highly appropriate to an artist for whom the final product seems endlessly deferred and as elusive (and illusive) as 'the one image that will never come'.

¹ McGahern, *Getting Through* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009) and *The Collected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), hereafter abbreviated as *GT* and *CS* respectively and cited parenthetically in the text. 'Doorways', for reasons that remain unclear, was not included in *Creatures of the Earth*, although Margaret Lasch Carroll discusses the implications of McGahern's omissions. Additionally, Stanley van der Ziel notes McGahern's debt to Beckett is 'most explicitly signalled' in 'Doorways'. Given McGahern's tendency to cover up such explicit signals as well as its obvious allusions to Melville, perhaps the story's open indebtedness is behind its omission from *Creatures*. See Lasch Carroll, "'the road away becomes the road back": Prodigal Sons in the Short Stories of John McGahern',

Journal of the Short Story in English 53 (2009). <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1013>. Accessed 23 March 2021; van der Ziel, *John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2016), p.236.

² Michael McLaverty, letter to John McGahern, 23 March 1961, *Dear Mr McLaverty: The Literary Correspondence of John McGahern and Michael McLaverty, 1959-1980*, ed. by John Killen (Belfast: Linen Hall Library, 2006), p.22.

³ De Biasi, 'What is a Literary Draft? Toward a Functional Typology of Genetic Documentation', trans by Ingrid Wassenaar, *Yale French Studies* 89 (1996), p.37.

⁴ John McGahern Archive, James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway, hereafter cited parenthetically according to archival file number. Many thanks to the Special Collections staff and archivists for their invaluable help. My thanks also to the Estate of John McGahern for permission to cite from published and unpublished materials. Work on this archive was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 19K13107.

⁵ Van der Ziel, *Imagination of Tradition* p.134.

⁶ Kenny, 'Foreword', *The John McGahern Yearbook*, vol 1, compiled and ed. by John Kenny (Galway: National University of Galway, 2008), p.6

⁷ Sampson, *Young John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.xv, 90.

⁸ Ó Tuathaigh, 'Honouring John McGahern', in *John McGahern at NUI Galway* (2007), p.44. Flaubert, letter to Louise Colet, 14-15 August 1846, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1830-1857*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p.65.

⁹ Shovlin, *Touchstones: John McGahern's Classical Style* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), pp.23-4, 161.

¹⁰ Notable exceptions include Fergus Fahey's 'Reinvented, Re-imagined and Somehow Dislocated: The Evolution of Two John McGahern Short Stories', *Journal of the Short Story in English* 53 (2009). <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/995>. Accessed 27 November 2020.

¹¹ O'Connor, 'Approaching the Silence', *The Guardian* 23 December 2006, web. Accessed 27 November 2020.

¹² McGahern, 'The Image', in *Love of the World: Essays* (London: Faber, 2010), p.5.

¹³ De Biasi, 'What is a Literary Draft?', p.36.

¹⁴ Reddan, Marie and Fergus Fahey, 'The McGahern Archive at the James Hardiman Library', in 'John McGahern at NUI, Galway', National University of Ireland, Galway (2007), pp.18-19. <http://hdl.handle.net/10379/15>. Accessed 27 November 2020.

¹⁵ De Biasi, 'What is a Literary Draft?', p.29.

¹⁶ De Biasi, 'What is a Literary Draft?', p.30.

¹⁷ While lilies are rich in symbolic and allusive potential, I can find within the drafts no additional clues to the significance of this curious interim title. However, the image itself suggests perhaps a still life with connotations of death (*nature morte*), and both sexual purity and fatal attraction. The 'roses and lilies under globes of glass' that the narrator of *The Dark* notices in a graveyard are similarly entangled in a floral symbology of death and passion; McGahern, *The Dark* (1965; London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p.85. Later, in a handwritten amendment to P71/471, McGahern added the title 'Getting Through' to what was an untitled typescript. On the next page, he amended part of the text as follows: 'Often I want to ask them, "Why have you ~~chosen~~ ^picked on^ this way to deal with the situation ^get through life^?'. Regarding these particular amendments, it is very difficult (if not impossible) to determine which came first, which inspired the other, or why McGahern later dropped 'Getting Through' as the story title only to recycle it later as the title for the collection. Significantly, however, this kind of recycling of textual material is, as we shall see, evidently key to the evolution of both 'Doorways' and *Getting Through* itself.

¹⁸ In his preface to *Creatures of the Earth*, McGahern wrote: 'The imagination demands that life be told slant because of its need of distance'. I discuss this point in more detail in the conclusion.

¹⁹ See for instance, interview with John McGahern, *Journal of the Short Story in English* 41 (2003). <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/314>. Accessed 30 November 2020.

²⁰ See also McGahern's late prose piece 'Madness/Creativity' (1995), in which he reflects on how works such as Melville's 'Bartleby' 'use madness as a method to show what we call reality or the human condition in an uncompromising light', in *Love of the World*, pp.13-14.

²¹ McGahern's handwriting is extremely difficult to decipher at times, especially in the earliest material that often shows signs of rough drafting (repetitions, orthographical errors, etc.). I will indicate such cases with a question mark in square parentheses.

²² See Adam Bargroff, "'I don't mind at all": The Case of Bartleby in Ireland', *English Language Notes* 52 no.2 (2014), pp.97-112. doi: 10.1215/00138282-52.2.99.

²³ The earlier drafts are often more aggressive in tone and atmosphere than the published texts. P71/466, for instance, has the narrator wonder to himself after he leaves Kate behind at the hotel to go to Sligo: 'I was if [sic] I'd

left some threatening violence behind me, yet I could not be easy till I was sure it was appeased'. In the 'Bank Holiday' drafts too, some backstory material on the narrator's wife that is eventually cut includes the information that she tried to kill him with a razor (P71/575).

²⁴ Letter to Michael McLaverty, 7 December 1963, qtd in Fahey, 'Reinvented, Re-imagined and Somehow Dislocated'.

²⁵ The phrase 'all is vanity', of course, derives originally from Ecclesiastes (1:2) and '*omnia vanitas*'. Another reference to Ecclesiastes can be found in P71/467, where Jimmy says to the narrator: 'Where the bloody old tree falls there it lies', echoing Eccles 11:3. While not my focus here, this suggests an intriguing intertextual connection to the Old Testament that is surely worth exploring further in another setting.

²⁶ The term 'brutal' does occur in the final text, but (again) in an entirely different context. There, the narrator reconsiders Nora's 'brutal egotism' (GT 87), but an unrelated reference in P71/467 to 'her brutal egotism' suggests McGahern may have originally conceived of this epithet for Kate/Alberta before transferring it to Nora.

²⁷ This entire section first appears as a handwritten addition to P71/468 but is not found in any typescript until the late-stage P71/475. This suggests either McGahern composed and added it quite late in the drafting process, or he composed it at an early stage but did not return to it until later.

²⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, trans., *Eugene Onegin*, by Aleksandr Pushkin, 4 vols. with a Commentary, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), III, p.59.

²⁹ In 'Along the Edges', another couple who had 'drifted casually into going out together' are also described as 'making no demands on one another' (GT 108).

³⁰ Van der Ziel, *Imagination of Tradition*, p.14.

³¹ Sampson, *Young John McGahern*, p.xv, 3.

³² McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.vii.

³³ Sampson, *Young John McGahern*, p.xv.

³⁴ Conley, 'Revision Revisited', in *James Joyce and Genetic Criticism: Genesis Fields*, ed. by Genevieve Sartor (Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2018), p.12.

³⁵ McGahern's second wife Madeline Green was American.

³⁶ John Kenny notes that McGahern revised a copy of *The Barracks*, but none of those revisions was included in reprints and they appear 'private and self-imposed'; see Kenny, 'Foreword', p.6.