



## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

53 | Autumn 2009

The Short Stories of John MacGahern

---

# Introduction – The art of Under-Exposure: “Out of the Depths, into the Depths”

Claude Maisonnat

---



### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/994>

ISSN : 1969-6108

### Éditeur

Presses universitaires d'Angers

### Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 décembre 2009

ISSN : 0294-04442

### Référence électronique

Claude Maisonnat, « Introduction – The art of Under-Exposure: “Out of the Depths, into the Depths” », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [En ligne], 53 | Autumn 2009, mis en ligne le 01 décembre 2010, consulté le 02 mai 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/994>

---

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 2 mai 2019.

© All rights reserved

---

# Introduction<sup>1</sup> – The art of Under-Exposure: “Out of the Depths, into the Depths”<sup>2</sup>

Claude Maisonnat

---

- 1 What better way is there to introduce a collection of essays devoted to the short stories of John McGahern than to quote his own words about what he was looking for when he read:
 

“The story was still important, but I had read so many stories that I knew now that all stories are essentially the same story in the same way as they are different: they reflect the laws of life in both its sameness and its endless variations. I now searched out those books that acted like mirrors. What they reflected was dangerously close to my own life and the society that brought me up, as well as asserting their own differences and uniqueness.”<sup>3</sup>
- 2 This insight into the arcana of his own literary creation is all the more valuable to us as it is one of the rare occasions on which he ventured to cover the ground of aesthetic principles. Indeed, in his *Memoir* (2005) John McGahern proves quite reluctant to mention the subject at all so that, concerning his artistic creed, apart from the rare reviews of books by Irish writers<sup>4</sup> that he consented to write, we only have a few interviews at our disposal, but most important of all three very short reflexive pieces on his textual practice. The first one is his well-known essay on the image, the second a short preface written on the occasion of the publication of his revised version of *The Leavetaking* (1974/1984) and the third the short preface reprinted here.<sup>5</sup> Brevity seems to be the soul of his *ars poetica*, but in his case brevity does not mean simplification or superficiality, quite the opposite in fact.
- 3 When he wrote the passage quoted above John McGahern did not specifically have in mind his short stories but books in general, yet the fact remains that his commentary on writing applies to both genres of which he was a self-conscious practitioner. If some critics believe that his fame will rest on his novels alone, the present collection of essays is based on the premise that there is no major difference apart from matters of space and concentration between the two genres, because they both rely on modalities of writing

that emphasise poeticity over narrativity. Intentionally or not, he was resorting to the opposition put forward by Seymour Chatman<sup>6</sup> between story and discourse, and he clearly states that his vision of creative writing gives pride of place to texts that assert their uniqueness against a backdrop of differences. However, in a work of fiction, such an assertion of uniqueness can only be achieved by giving primacy to the signifier over the signified, by allowing free play to the work of the signifier, in other words by emphasising what Jakobson called the poetic function of language. All of them constitute the modalities of writing that create an original voice – that used to be called style. Elsewhere, coining a phrase of graphic intensity, he called it “inner formality”<sup>7</sup>, a phrase that conjures up the image of an organic whole with dynamic properties, in relation to the writer’s most intimate depths, not to say his unconscious desires. The critics’ term for John McGahern’s phrase “inner formality” could well be textuality, and it is, in various ways, the main focus of all the essays presented in this volume. No attempt has been made at unifying the theoretical biases or methodological approaches, but all the contributors share the common ambition of shedding some light on what the texts are made of and the way they function rather than on contextual or historical matters. In this respect, though the Irishness of John McGahern’s fiction is part and parcel of his literary identity, it is the universal dimension of his art that has been emphasized, the better to explore the singularity of a literary achievement that can now be considered as finite.

- 4 From the start the academic appreciation of John McGahern’s fiction has always been a very positive one, and it is daily growing, particularly among French scholars. The enthusiastic response to this project testifies to the importance of his appeal. The recognition of his international status has been so wide that a number of proposals had to be rejected simply because they arrived late in the construction of the project. Approximately one half of the contributors in this volume represent the French critical tradition, and the other half the international dimension of his appeal. Obviously, it must have meant a lot to John McGahern, since he himself, in the preface he wrote in 1983 for his 1974 novel *The Leavetaking*, acknowledged the role of his translator<sup>8</sup> in the process of revision of the text of the initial English version. The diversity of origin of the contributions is only matched by the diversity of critical approaches retained so that the volume covers a wide range of versatile readings emphasizing various aspects of stylistic choices, patterns of imagery, intertextual connections, to the close reading of individual stories, not to mention the field of genetic criticism which is now open to the exploration of scholars all over the world with the availability of the McGahern archives, courtesy of the James Hardiman Library and the National University of Ireland, Galway. Special thanks are due to Fergus Fahey who is in charge of the archives, and who generously granted us permission to reprint some fac simile of his manuscripts.
- 5 Coming as it does only three years after his premature death, it was essential that the volume – offered as a steppingstone for further critical attention – should avoid the trap of moving reminiscences or hagiographic reviewing. A significant number of contributors to the volume actually met John McGahern and a few knew him on a more intimate basis, but all were struck by the profound humanity that is the prerogative of the truly great. However the reader will find that this knowledge of the writer, far from the giving in to the lures of the intentional fallacy, does not give up on the intransigence of critical demands and only serves to further a deeper comprehension of the texts and their “inner formality”. As a result this volume should be considered as a tribute to the author only in

so far as it is the very meticulousness of the critical attitude of the contributors that constitutes the value of the homage.

- 6 The common complaint that the short story is a neglected genre seems to be somewhat exaggerated because, on the one hand writers continue to write them, publishers to publish them and, on the other, readers go on buying magazines or collections and critics reviewing them. John McGahern is certainly a case in point to disprove this received idea, in so far as his output never dried up during the time it took him to write his six novels. Altogether he penned 37 stories in the course of his career from 1970 to 2006, but critics have to face the fact that the publication history of his stories is extremely complex, and it does make a difference to the reader which version of the text he has in hand. He was such a great reviser of his prose that it gives the impression that it is impossible to imagine that we have access to what could be called a definitive version of his stories. This need not be a shortcoming, as one of the great qualities of his stories, which is also the basis for their enduring attraction, is precisely the fact that they can never be fully explicated, and there always remains a kernel of mystery which resists analysis. More often than not this silent core around which the story revolves concerns the unpredictability of human relationships and the vagaries of desire. Eudora Welty,<sup>9</sup> another major practitioner of the short story once formulated it in a way that captures the essence of John McGahern’s art wonderfully:

...the first thing we see about a story is its mystery. And in the best stories, we return at the last to see mystery again. Every good story has mystery – not the puzzle kind, but the mystery of allurements. As we understand the story better, it is likely that the mystery does not necessarily decrease; rather it simply grows more beautiful.” (May, 164)

- 7 Given this very important characteristic of John McGahern’s fiction it appears to be rather reductive and misleading to label him as a downright realist or a chronicler of rural Ireland, because if the background is invariably faithful to the author’s personal experience of country life and small town activities, the subtle and involuted textuality of the stories no less invariably introduces a wedge between representation and interpretation that invites the reader to question the immediacy of his response.
- 8 However such textual unreliability has also real critical drawbacks and raises serious problems that would require almost a book-length study in itself and they can only be briefly outlined within the space of this introduction. For a start, the titles of the collections or of individual stories may vary depending on whether the American or the British edition of the texts is used. The contents of the selections may also be different<sup>10</sup> and more problematically the texts themselves can be significantly altered<sup>11</sup>. On top of that his *Collected Stories* (1992) – allegedly a definitive version of the stories – does not include three late ones: “Creatures of the Earth”, “Love of the World”, and “The White Boat”.<sup>12</sup> Today, with the availability of the archives, scholars are entitled to expect the publishers to provide a new edition of the “really complete” set of stories, possibly with the relevant information about the textual variants.
- 9 On the face of it, John McGahern is not famous for his dazzlingly innovative technique in the handling of the genre, but on closer scrutiny the status of his stories challenges traditional generic distinctions between novel and short story in a manner that is certainly central to what one critic has called his “subdued modernity”<sup>13</sup>. He did not devote his reflections to a redefinition of the genre – a Sisyphean task<sup>14</sup> if ever there were one – but more usefully he concentrated on modalities of writing likely to enhance the

poeticity of the text. In this respect his textual practices demonstrate clearly that the demands on language which are the hallmark of poetry are similar to those that John McGahern applies to his short prose fiction and it is easy to trace them back to his early devotion to Yeats.

- 10 What is particularly remarkable about his short stories is that even though they are individual works that can be enjoyed independently, they also weave a discrete network of cross-references that ultimately creates the impression that they function as an organic structure, so that beyond the diachronic construction of the stories over a period of more than 30 years, the reader perceives a synchronicity of themes, imagery, character relationships, and locations. Because of the overwhelming presence of so many textual echoes and resonances, the case can certainly be made that the bulk of his stories constitutes a whole that is halfway between the novel and the short story cycle. Not only is this a ploy to deal with the question of temporality, and counterbalance the flight of time in a Proust-like manner, but it also functions on the principle of the rhizome,<sup>15</sup> according to which no part is more important than the whole, and what is of foremost importance is the mode of articulation of the parts itself. The notion of chronotope<sup>16</sup> could come in handy here to account for the fact that the centre that holds his fiction together is the rural Ireland in the 50’s, to which most of his protagonists return, as if time passed so slowly that changes were barely noticeable. Time and space seem to be indissolubly linked, the only changes taking place inside the heads of the protagonists. For John McGahern it was quite a deliberate strategy to suggest the presence of the many in the one, on the basis of repetitions and differences. With him universality is to be found in the local and vice-versa. This he stated quite unambiguously when he wrote:

Short stories are often rewritten many times after their first publication, novels hardly ever. This obviously has to do with length, economics, the hospitality of magazines and anthologies to stories, perhaps even convention: and I believe it to be, as well, part of the excitement of the novel. The novel has to stand or fall alone. Any single story in a collection of stories can lean on the variety and difference of the others, receiving as well as casting light. (Preface to the Second Edition of *The Leavetaking*, 5)

- 11 Thus he acknowledges the fact that places and characters appear in one story and reappear in another but with a different status, creating the illusion of a world that is consistently mapped out in spite of the fact that the narrative voices are not the same. This introduces a major difference with the locations of other famous short story cycles like Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, Naipaul’s Miguel Street or Alice Munro’s Lake Huron, Ontario, without forgetting of course, Joyce’s Dublin whose influence is made even more pregnant by the fact that John McGahern chose as the final story of his *Collected Stories* “The Country Funeral” which is both an echo of “The Dead” in *Dubliners* and a final homage to his great predecessor. The major quality of the dominant chronotope of the tensions generated by the end of an allegedly stable rural world and the birth of a new Ireland is that it enables him to suggest the restlessness of the individual in his confrontation with historical changes, like the slow dying grip of the church over public life. By doing so, he successfully avoids the trap of the idealisation of an idyllic pastoral past that probably never existed, as well as the temptation of depression that the feeling of entrapment of the individual in a world over which he has little mastery could produce. No doubt, renting the veil of illusions can be a painful process, but it is presented as a necessary step in the development of the characters, who are now able to become free agents and assume the responsibility of the

choices they make. And if there are melancholy strains in the prose of John McGahern, they are but the mainspring of a new self-awareness in an undeceived future that the act of creation magnificently sublimates.

- 12 Not unexpectedly then, the telling of the stories operates on the modes of condensation and displacement in an endless conversation between texts that seems to generate one another as in a rhizome. For instance, the chainsaw that Gillespie tells the inquisitive Mr Boles he never bought in “Why We’re Here” reappears in “The Wine Breath” where the old priest experiences a revelation of sorts, as he is bathed in the sweet light of dusk and watches the beech chips flying off, which transports him in a Proustian way to the day of Michael Bruen’s funeral. The remembrance of this banal event will launch a chain of thoughts leading him to question the meaning of his vocation. Furthermore, the same Gillespie turns up again in “Gold Watch” where he rents the narrator’s father’s meadows.
- 13 Similarly, the creamery from which the narrator’s father is back at the beginning of “Wheels” when the son returns to introduce his new wife to the father turns up again in “The Creamery Manager” in which it plays a more central role in the plot. Thus throughout the collection a number of very local toponyms (Arigna, Ardcarne, the Gut, the Quarry, etc.) and patronyms (Moran, Lightfoot, O’Connor, Murphy etc.) circulate to build up a sense of unity of time and place which eventually constructs the image of a closed stable world whose pastoral innocence is nevertheless subtly undermined by the responses of the various characters to their cultural, social and intersubjective environment.
- 14 Albanian novelist Ismael Kadaré<sup>17</sup>, expatiating on the age-old stereotype of the writer as the master of a fictional empire over which he reigns more or less despotically, once suggested that a distinction could be made between those who limit themselves to a limited space and those with larger territorial ambitions, like Faulkner with his Yoknapatawpha County. He argued that the very image of the empire thus delimited could be seen as a mirror of his inner self and his desires. Indeed all kinds of relationships to such a territory could be possible, from protective self-enclosure to ambitious conquest of neighbouring domains. As far as John McGahern is concerned, his literary landscape is quite revealing. On the one hand, through the succession of short stories the reader becomes gradually familiar with a spatial framework whose elements regularly return: The river Shannon, Cootehall, the Gloria Bog, Killeelan Hill, etc. Down to the smallest detail – for instance the Bridge bar where the protagonist in “The Recruiting Officer” has a drink at the end of the story recalls the Bridge bar to which Beirne and the narrator repair in “Crossing the Line” – a coherent fictional world is built under the reader’s eyes and it resembles closely the actual Leitrim world where the author elected to live, and which he also chose to represent in most of his novels. It is exactly as if the whole sequence of short stories functioned as a novel. Yet this world is not as self-contained as it might seem. First the Irish world of John McGahern’s fiction is structured by the opposition between the rural pole of Leitrim and the urban pole of Dublin. If his protagonists have to travel – not infrequently – from one to the other, the opposition between them is not of the binary order. Dublin is not the hell of perdition that country people sometimes make it out to be, it is also the locus of possible changes. Work is available, opportunities are opened, and progress is on the way, perhaps at the cost of challenging the strict moral constraints which have their hold on rural society. Dublin is like a mirror sending back the image of all that is negative in the small villagers’ lives. No wonder that the church-ridden, parochial and bigoted society of the country is reluctant

to face that image. The return of the son in “Wheels” is one way of highlighting the narrow-mindedness of the father and the backwardness of his outlook on life. Conversely, the misadventures of the protagonists who venture to leave the quiet life of small towns provide an illustration of the risks inherent in the fascination for the – alleged – blandishments of urban life. In a poetic scene in “Parachutes” that reads like a muffled echo of Joyce’s portrait of Dublin, Mulvey looking at thistledown floating over Grafton Street wonders where they come from, in a speech that blurs the limits between the rural and the urban poles: “‘Just old boring rural Ireland strikes again. Even its principal city has one foot in a manure heap.’ The discussion had put Mulvey in extraordinary good humour.” (238)

- 15 The butt of John McGahern’s criticism is of course the self-deception that threatens those who are too self-confident in what they call their identity. It must be pointed out however that his irony is not meant to damn those characters who yield to the lures of self-deception and whom he sees more as victims than culprits, but its purpose is mostly to open the possibility of redemption for them. Whether they will avail themselves of the opportunity is quite another story.
- 16 This two-way mirror game is indeed the main strategy used by John McGahern to prevent any form of idealisation of Irish life and Irishness, whose contradictions are therefore exposed to the reader’s eyes. As for those who occasionally foray into foreign territories like Eva Lindberg<sup>18</sup> in “The Beginning of an Idea” or the female protagonist in “Peaches”, they find that the “other” world, where they thought they would find peace and quiet, turns out to be even more dangerous for their integrity than the one they felt they had no option but to leave. Besides, it is probably not innocent that both characters are female and, most of all, stand as figures of the artist who has to confront alterity (their own as well as that of the others) in order to achieve a truly creative status. A particularly dramatic case of the aforementioned threat to integrity is that of Cunningham and Murphy in “Faith, Hope and Charity” who met their death in Reading, digging trenches.
- 17 For all that, John McGahern does not give in to the temptation of falling back upon the – illusory – safety of the nest. The absence of any form of outrageous jingoism is remarkable in the fictional world he creates. As a result, there is no flamboyant pride in the Irish identity, no flaunting of Irishness, no display of the national flag, no regression into the cradle of the mother tongue. Apart from the conspicuous exception of *The Leavetaking*, McGahern rarely resorts to the use of colourful colloquial Gaelic expressions to assert the pride of the characters in their roots and, when he does it, the intention seems to be mostly parodic or ironical. Like Gabriel in Joyce’s “The Dead”, he is reluctant to approve of the Celtic revival as a corner stone of the modern Irish identity, probably because it has been enlisted in the cause of the nationalist ideology.
- 18 It is indeed a testimony of the profound humanity of the man that it should be the very notion of identity that his fiction questions, and this allows us to see in a new light the theme of the return that haunts his stories. Indeed, if a significant number of characters are inevitably drawn to return to their birthplace like the protagonist in “Wheels”, it is probably in “Gold Watch” that the subject is treated with greater insight. The mother of the narrator’s fiancée represents the old world and traditional values or conventions, as she objects to a simple marriage. Her daughter says: “She’s not given to change herself, except to changing other people so that they fit in with her ideas.” (220), and in reaction to her fiancé’s wish to go back to the farm to help with the haymaking, the young woman exclaims rather condescendingly: “And in the meantime, have a wonderful time with



your father and poor Rose in the nineteenth century at the bloody hay.” (217) No wonder then that McGahern should make her say: “Unfortunately the best part of these visits is always the leaving’, she said as we drove away.” (212) Consequently, the outcome of such visits is never reintegration into the world they have left, because they have been too deeply transformed by their self-imposed exile not to feel out of place. More importantly it is the narrator himself who unwittingly reveals the truth of the situation when, explaining to his future wife that as usual he will return to the farm, he uses the ambiguous phrase: “I suppose I’d prefer to go home – that’s if you don’t mind.” (215) For him home<sup>19</sup> is not yet the place where he lives with his fiancée in Dublin, but is still his father’s farm. This speaks volumes and implies that such a return “home” is not definitive and will be followed by a his return to his new “home” as if it were necessary to build the new one on the traces of the former. Returning home as the locus of origin the better to leave it in order to build a personal home is indeed a metaphor of human life that is as old as the biblical commandment and the prohibition of incest which Freud saw as the cornerstone of civilisation. Through the drama of his characters having to cope with this fundamental question, John McGahern succeeds in challenging the clichés about Irishness and the problematic fidelity to origins. It is a tribute to the deeply felt psychological dimension of his art that all the journeys undertaken to and from the characters’ places of origins can be read as metaphors of the basic paradox that all speaking subjects need to depend on a representation of their origin the better to lose it and, in the very process of losing it, construct a new identity based not on mere repetition but on difference, since difference pre-supposes the existence of an initial image from which to distance oneself without relinquishing it completely.

- 19 The problem is more complex than might appear at first glance if we take into account the fact, as psychoanalysis has shown, that the subject’s origin is an image that is always already lost, as French novelist Pascal Quignard brilliantly demonstrated in his book: *La Nuit Sexuelle*. He argued that all human beings come from a scene from which they are radically excluded, (a scene which Freud called the Primitive Scene) and that art was one way for them to attempt a representation of what can basically never be represented. I would argue that this is precisely what John McGahern does in a subliminal way through the stories of his characters trying to come to terms with their vanishing ancestry and shifting allegiances. His fiction clearly explodes the myth of identity as a stable construct, fixed forever in time and space. It betrays an intimate conviction that identity is but a series of imaginary identifications which may be necessary to provide a narcissistic image of the subject so that he should acquire a minimal sense of existence, but this impermanent self-image ought to be overcome lest it should hold him prisoner, a state of things which philosophers call alienation. The case of the old priest in “The Wine Breath” is a very good illustration of this predicament, as he ends up questioning his vocation, all the while suspecting the vanity of his whole life, in which his mother played the most crucial and dubious role.
- 20 In the same way, I wish to put forward that John McGahern’s short stories, with their emphasis on the social background of the characters, give evidence of the fact that the imaginary identifications which they accumulate are *in fine* produced by the communities that shelter them – family, church, work, traditions etc. – and that may threaten to hold them prisoners of the false security of their embrace. As a consequence, in order to be real individuals and free agents these characters must take into account the unpalatable truth that the image that is at the core of their so-called identity is but a void. And



precisely because it is a void, it opens for them the possibility of a future, as it is dynamic and not static or smothering. In other words, John McGahern’s characters go through the experience of being sufficiently attached to it to afford losing it, granted that losing it is also *having* lost it. But to do so requires some force of character, and many are those who, like Kennedy in “Crossing the Line”, Moran in “Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass” or the narrator’s father in “The Stoat” to name but a few, fail to detach themselves from their imaginary identifications and remain alienated. This does not mean that his outlook on life is necessarily pessimistic because most of those who react in such a regressive way represent the old generation, the fathers. Contrary to them the younger generation, mostly consisting of sons, as the narrators in “Wheels” and “Gold Watch”, are ready to face the uncertainty of the future. More often than not, these younger men are figures of artists as emblematised by characters like the narrator and the Mulveys in “Parachutes” or the narrator in “Crossing the Line”.<sup>20</sup> As for McGahern himself, through writing so sagaciously about such identity games and through circling round the void that is at the heart of his textual images, he sublimates it by inscribing it in the Letter of the text.

- 21 Reflexivity is one dimension of John McGahern’s prose that is not frequently brought to the fore and yet it is central to his art. One of the reasons for this relative neglect is the reluctance of the author himself to express his views on the subject. Few stories indeed exhibit an open metafictional bias like “The Beginning of an Idea” or “Parachutes”, both staging the predicaments of writers or would-be writers. As is the case with all great artists, John McGahern’s fiction has in fact an inherent self-reflexive quality that broadens the scope of his stories, and it is mostly accessible through the way he uses what he calls images. However, in his case, images have very little to do with the stylistic devices that usually go by that name, they are above all visual scenes endowed with vivid qualities that make them memorable. They spring from unconscious sources and they impose themselves upon the artist through the medium of memory. In this perspective it can be argued that they are not only visual, but what makes them valuable and artistically effective is that they have a temporal dimension. Because their appeal is so strong, they are the channel through which a voice can be heard, a voice that urges the writer to build up a story from the initial scene. To put it even more bluntly, such images are nothing less than represented affects, which explains their power to move both writer and readers. They are thus seminal in John McGahern’s craftsmanship. In the 2006 preface printed here, he does explain how stories like “The Wine Breath” “The Stoat”, “Parachutes”, “Korea” came to be written. The images that triggered off the writing of these stories undoubtedly recall the age-old Celtic tradition of “the vision” but they are not esoteric and make sense only in so far as they are included in a larger narrative form. The proof of this is brought by John McGahern himself when he acknowledges the fact that the initial image that served him to find the idea of a story could eventually disappear from the final narrative. It implies that it is meaningful not by or in itself but as an incentive. What must be borne in mind is that such seminal images need not be central to plot or narrative strategy. In the instance of “The Wine Breath” it was, according to John McGahern, “the sound of a chainsaw” that impelled him to tell the story of the old priest. The chainsaw episode is a minor incident in the chain of events, but it turns out to be essential to the interpretation of the story, and it must be pointed out that the impetus is less of a visual nature than an acoustic one, as if gaze and voice were intricately woven into a verbal construct. The status of these images is thus complex and problematic. Consequently, a closer look at the way such images operate textually would seem to be useful, even if the field has already been explored to a large extent by Denis Sampson.

- 22 To begin with, the main characteristic of these images is that they are remembered scenes having deeply affected the narrator figure through the senses, and moved him to put words on his experience, however inadequate these words may be. It serves as a reminder to the reader that both texts and human subjects are mainly moved by affects. Secondly, the most overwhelming feature of John McGahern’s images is their enigmatic dimension. Readers and characters alike are arrested by what they see and are at a loss to provide a plausible explanation for their interest in the scene or even for the scene itself. As a consequence, these images function as grey areas in the narrative, or spots of textual obscurity that resist meaning and interpretation. To focus on “The Wine Breath” once again, when the old priest passes Gillespie’s farm he feels suddenly removed from “the solid world” that was everywhere round him and transported into another world: “Suddenly, as he was about to rattle the gate loudly to see if this would penetrate the sawing, he felt himself (bathed as in a dream) in an incredible sweetness of light.” (178) Whether the scene is an epiphany of sorts remains a moot point in the light of the end of the story, and the precise meaning that must be attributed to it ultimately eludes the reader’s grasp, or rather is so plural as to preclude any definitive interpretation. In other words, images in John McGahern’s prose function much in the same way as photographic pictures do according to Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*.<sup>21</sup> In this essay he opposes the two dimensions of the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* refers to the mimetic dimension of the picture and of discourse, the attempt to reproduce reality, whereas the *punctum* is that irreducible element in the picture that “pierces” the viewer and the reader, in the sense that it irresistibly draws his attention to a mysterious spot in the picture that cannot be elucidated, and thus calls for his immediate involvement through affects and rational thought. My assumption is that the main reflexive dimension of John McGahern’s fiction is to be found precisely in his theory of the image. In this respect, it must be remembered that the word ‘theory’ is derived from the Greek *theorein* which conjoins a root *horan* meaning to look at something attentively and a second *thea* suggesting an image in which something shows itself. Image and theory are therefore one and the same thing in his artistic credo, and if images are so central to his art, it is because their appearance in the text is an event that opens up the possibility of an encounter for characters, readers and writer alike with the Real of desire. As such, images in John McGahern’s fiction are really the textual *punctum* that pierces the more conventional *studium* of representation that is the realistic framework on which narrativity is based.
- 23 The final yet equally significant idiosyncrasy of John McGahern’s use of images that will be considered to conclude this introduction is the nature of their close association with the affects that produced them. The most overwhelmingly present of these affects is melancholy, and it is not giving away a secret to say that the major trauma that he encountered early in life, and which was to determine many of his conscious or unconscious decisions, was his mother’s death. There is ample evidence of this in his *Memoir* and in his first novel *The Barracks* in which the detailed account of Elisabeth Reegan’s slow death by cancer derives from his personal experience. In many ways this first novel can be considered as the emotional matrix of his literary creations. However, this death is not the only subject of his fiction and if he could contend that “... all stories are more or less the same story...”<sup>22</sup>, it is precisely because melancholy is at the source of all his creation, like the umbilicus of his stories. Indeed, when we come to think of it, a number of obsessions run through his fictions, but they all boil down to the trauma of

this initial and irrecoverable loss. These melancholy-ridden obsessions are manifested on the mode of dissemination throughout the stories by the recurrence of certain images associated with conventional themes like death, funerals, guilt, self-accusation, self-loathing, gloom, general unhappiness, mourning, uncertainty, etc. It is of course impossible to list them all here but one example will suffice to illustrate the point. At the beginning of “The Wine Breath”, the image of the white beech chips, the sweet light and the sound of Gillespie’s saw that McGahern identified as the origin of the story does not seem to be related to death, yet because of its mysterious nature, it was an opportunity to trigger off the old priest’s meditation on Michael Bruen’s funeral and later on the death of his mother. Textual images operate then much in the manner described by Freud. If the dreamer is represented by all the protagonists of the dream, it can be argued that all the melancholy-related images in his fiction represent a way of coming to terms with the initial trauma on the mode of displacement and condensation, as if the shadow of the lost object fell on the writer’s unconscious self. In that sense images constitute a way of reintroducing meaning and coherence into a scene (in an imaginary way but still) whose contingency is radically unexplainable: Why did *his* mother have to die so young? The repetition of more or less directly melancholy-induced images is thus a way of alleviating the pain, sharing the ache with the reader, but not by appealing to melodrama or sentimentalism, quite the opposite, by treating the initial affect, that is by sublimating the core of silence around which such images are constructed, so as to produce stories out of them. It is a reminder that what the artist needs is to find suitable metaphors through which his anxieties and his confusion can be relieved, while at the same time sharing their apotropaic dimension with his readers. However by doing so, by giving shape to the void that his images conceals, he comes dangerously close to the truth of the human condition which is that the self is an illusion and that the human subject is predicated on a void, a situation which only his relation to language and creation can enable him to endure. Fiction is John McGahern’s chosen calling to face that predicament as an artist.

- 24 As the cliché goes, the only consolation left after the death of a great writer is that we can always turn to the texts themselves, and the series of essays presented here is certainly meant to show that readers and lovers of literature all over the world will never cease taking advantage of this possibility. Moreover, it is my guess that if John McGahern eventually agreed to have his archives made public, it is because he was deeply convinced that, however useful to the critic these archives may be, the secret of his genius did not lie buried there waiting to be unearthed, but was made available to anyone ready to scrutinise the textual surface of his fiction. As a great reader himself, he knew that the truth of fiction lies partly in the reading itself, seen as an endless quest for a final message that is bound to remain elusive forever. John McGahern’s “subdued modernity” thus precludes all flamboyance of style, flashy imagery and cheap rhetorical effects, but relies on subtle textual games that correspond to a more intimate vision of life and art. If indeed life is just a flash out of eternal darkness, McGahern’s images that emerge from the nothingness of the unspeakable to last the space of a transient moment before darkness closes in again, out of the depths, into the depths, as Bernard McLaverty said suggestively, they nevertheless manage to throw an oblique ray of light on the human condition and the crucial role of art. But this light is never a blinding one and, if under-exposure is one way of filtering the violence that pervades McGahern’s fictional world, the narrator’s comment on Marlow’s tales in *Heart of Darkness* seems to fit perfectly McGahern’s textual practice: “... to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of those misty halos that

sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.”<sup>23</sup>In the end, if McGahern’s images are under-exposed, it is the better to keep their sense of mystery and capture the reader’s long-lasting attention, and by portraying ordinary men leading ordinary lives, McGahern’s short stories illustrate the Beckettian filiation of the writer. For him, as for Beckett, the true heroes of today are those who lead “lives of quiet desperation” but refuse to yield to the fascination of the death drive, and who, as a result, have no choice but to say, as the narrator at the end of *The Unnamable*<sup>24</sup>:

You must go on.  
I can't go on.  
I'll go on.

- 25 The 16 essays gathered together in this collection could not possibly deal with all the stories that compose the *Collected Stories*, but 24 out of the 37 are the objects of more or less extended commentaries, which provides the reader with a significant coverage of John McGahern’s production. Great care has been taken to avoid overlapping commentaries of the short stories, not because the confrontation of different interpretations of the same text would have been uninteresting, but simply to take into account as many individual stories as possible. Not on totally arbitrary grounds the papers have been divided into three groups of almost equal size. The first group (five essays) tends to focus on general considerations on the origins of the texts and way their textuality is constructed. The second group (five essays) considers the intertextual networks that contribute more or less openly to structure the texts of the stories while the third group (six essays) is a series of close readings of individual stories examined from a variety of theoretical standpoints ranging from stylistics to philosophy and psychoanalysis.
- 26 In his essay entitled “Reinvented, Reimagined and Somehow Dislocated”, a quotation from McGahern’s 2006 preface, Fergus Fahey surveys the recently opened McGahern archives and, through his comments on two specific stories “Christmas” and “The Recruiting Officer”, he shows how the wealth of information now available to the general public can be put to use from the perspective of a genetic approach, inevitably closely related to biographical concerns. Liliane Louvel’s essay: “Reading John McGahern’s ‘Love of the World’” is an account that is not only technical and theoretical, but also full of empathy and comprehension. With her intimate knowledge of the author and of his textual practices, she uses the short story “Love of the World” as a springboard to study how meticulously the author worked on the construction of the images he chose to focus on, in order to achieve the effect he wanted. The page references are to a manuscript version sent to her by John McGahern. As for Ellen McWilliams in “Homesickness in John McGahern’s Short Stories: ‘Wheels’ and ‘A Slip Up’”, she explores the theme of exile and of the return that is so omnipresent in and characteristic of McGahern’s fiction in relation to the novel *Amongst Women* and *The Barracks*. She shows how various forms of betrayal, bereavement, humiliation and failure, etc. can lead to a misleading nostalgia that threatens the treacherous surface of the pastoral ideal. Pascal Bataillard in “Love and Solitary Enjoyment in ‘My Love, My Umbrella’: Some of McGahern’s Uses of *Dubliners*” bridges the gap between the first and the second sections of this collection by proposing a Lacanian reading both of the short story in general and of the main protagonist’s predicament in particular, by showing how McGahern’s own reading of Joyce’s short story “A Painful Case” influenced his writing beyond some by now well-documented thematic resemblances. In his essay: “‘Fellows like Yourself’: Fathers in John McGahern’s Stories”, Michael Storey uses biographical evidence from John McGahern’s *Memoir* as well

as from his novels like *The Barracks* or *Amongst Women* in order to trace the recurrent features of all the ferocious fathers that haunt McGahern’s fiction back to his problematic and often violent relationship with his own father.

- 27 In “‘Absence does not Cast a Shadow’: Yeats’s Shadowy Presence in McGahern’s ‘The Wine Breath’” Bertrand Cardin brings to light the so far unsuspected influence of William Butler Yeats’s poem: “All Souls’ Night”, and explores in great detail the intertextual articulations that enrich the interpretive potential of the story within the context of a Proustian relationship with the priest’s past, mostly in connection with Michael Bruen’s funeral. This allows him to offer a reading of the short story that emphasizes its metafictional dimension. Bernice Schrank’s essay: “Legends of the Fall: John McGahern’s ‘Christmas’ and ‘The Creamery Manager’” chooses to establish connections between the early story and the later one through the presence of a network of Biblical references. The religious dimension is examined both from a sociological angle and an intertextual one, the two being sometimes at variance, the better to show how the end of all the great metadiscourses and particularly that of religion can generate feelings of nostalgia and failure because no return to an original stable world is possible. Recalling the complex textual history of “The Stoat”, which was revised several times by the author who never found it satisfactory artistically, probably because it was too close to his own conflict with his father, Danine Farquharson closely examines the textual variants. In “Violence and Ontological Doubt in ‘The Stoat’” she argues that the violence that pervades McGahern’s fiction in general, and “The Stoat” in particular, cannot be satisfactorily integrated into a worldview, a situation which generates what she calls an “ontological wound”. In this light she proposes to read the short story as a moral fable, a “stoat/rabbit” allegory. In “Art, Biography, and Philosophy: Three aspects of John McGahern’s Short Fiction as Exemplified by ‘Gold Watch’, ‘Like all Other Men’, and ‘The White Boat’”, Michael Prusse in the wake of his paper on “Korea” delivered at the 2006 Lyon Conference on Rewriting/ reprising in literature, (to be published in 2009 by the Cambridge Scholar Press), examines the impact of Hemingway’s short stories on McGahern’s short fiction in terms of circular and chiasmic structures that highlight their “quasi-Palladian quality”. Margaret Lash Carroll in her study entitled: “‘The Road Away Becomes the Road Back’: Prodigal Sons in the Short Stories of John McGahern” offers a sweeping survey of the stories, many of which she sees as new versions of the parable of the prodigal son from Luke’s Gospel shedding some light on the history of the collection as well as on the archetypal themes of the return which is omnipresent in the fiction of the author.
- 28 As for my own article, it offers a close reading of the less studied story “Crossing the Line” that aims at showing that the role-model figure embodied by Kennedy, the older teacher is systematically derided by the narrator, thus making more problematic the process of symbolic filiation that is at the heart of the narrative. Moreover, the ambivalence of the chain imagery makes it possible to suggest a self-reflexive approach to the story, the younger man appearing as a potential figure of the artist. Arthur Broomfield in “The Conversion of William Kirkwood” looks at the troubled relations between Protestants and Catholics in the small rural community that serves as a background for the plot of the story to unfold. Concentrating on historical, sociological and ideological notions, he takes issue with the conventional post-colonial position presenting the Catholic community as the victim of Protestant colonial oppression, and he reverses the binary opposition by showing, through the individual case of the protagonist, William Kirkwood, that the situation is more complex than is usually

assumed. Claire Majola-Leblond’s essay: “‘Along the Edges’: Along the Edges of Meaning...” gives a reading of the short story based on the exploration of the various forms of limits or edges that can come into play in a literary text, from the typographical division of the story into two parts to the vexed question of love understood as an intersubjective game between separateness and togetherness. The paper submitted by Vanina Jobert-Martini and entitled “Evaluation in ‘High Ground’: From Ethics to Aesthetics” uses a stylistic approach of the short story based on the analysis of verbal interaction in conversation analysis as defined by George Yule. Thus, the references to pragmatics lead her to assess the various ways in which the characters attempt to monitor the dialogues in a bid to control verbal exchanges and to expose the ethical problems raised by the various strategies of manipulation. Douglas Cowie’s analysis of the short story “Korea” which - along similar lines - reads the story as a rural elegy, focuses on the various manipulations of point of view that contribute to the building of the tension between father and son as they both try to come to terms with their perception of death against a background of a vanishing rural world. Josiane Paccaud-Huguet’s essay: “‘Grave of the Images of Dead Passions and their Days’: ‘The Country Funeral’ as McGahern’s Poetic *Tombeau*...” fittingly brings this collection to a close by offering a literary approach to the text based on the late Lacanian notion of “varity”, one of those pregnant plays on words conjoining the notion of variety (diversity) and Verity. She first establishes a parallel between the character Philly Ryan and Gabriel in Joyce’s “The Dead”, and singles out Uncle Peter, the seemingly cranky character who makes objects out of matchsticks, to suggest that he might well be a figure of the artist trying to come to terms with the symptoms of his melancholy, without having to repeat them on the mode of *automaton*, but on the contrary by sharing them with the readers through his idiosyncratic handling of the image.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHIE

- Badonnel, Patrick, Maisonnat Claude. *La Nouvelle Anglo-Saxonne: Initiation à une Lecture Psychanalytique*, Paris: Hachette Supérieur, 1998.
- Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography*: New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, Grove Press, 1994.
- Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Fiction in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1978.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Deleuze Gilles, Guattari Félix. *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 1. L'Anti-Œdipe*, Paris: Minuit, 1972.
- Holquist, Michael. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*, London, New York : Routledge, 1990.
- Joyce, James. *Dubliners*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2007.
- Kadaré, Ismael. *Invitation à l'Atelier de l'Écrivain*, Paris: Grasset, 1991.

- McGahern, John. *Collected Stories*, New York: Vintage, 1992.
- . *The Barracks*, London: Faber and Faber, 1963.
- . *The Leavetaking*, London: Faber and Faber, 1974/1984.
- . *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories*, London: Faber and Faber, 2006.
- McLaverty, Bernard. *A Time to Dance*, Harmondsworth: King Penguin, 1982.
- May Charles E. *Short Story Theories*: Ohio University Press, 1977.
- Quignard, Pascal. *La Nuit Sexuelle*, Paris: Flammarion, 2007.
- Sampson, Denis. *Outstaring Nature's Eyes: The Fiction of John McGahern*, Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993.

## AUTEURS

### CLAUDE MAISONNAT

Claude Maisonnat is Emeritus professor of contemporary Anglo-saxon literature at the Université Lumière Lyon 2, France. A Conrad specialist, he has published more than 30 articles on his works and a book on *Lord Jim*. Also a specialist of the short story, he has written on contemporary writers, including Bernard McLaverty, Edna O'Brien, Hemingway, Alice Munro, Antonia Byatt, Angela Carter, Dylan Thomas, Malcom Lowry, R. Carver, P. Auster, V.S. Naipaul, Olive Senior, etc. With Patrick Badonnel he has also written a book on the psychoanalytical approach of the short story, and co-edited a volume on textual reprising.