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# "Grave of the images of dead passions and their days": "The country funeral" as McGahern's poetic tombeau

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## "Grave of the images of dead passions and their days": "The country funeral" as McGahern's poetic tombeau

Josiane Paccaud-Huguet

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- 1 When John McGahern's *Collected Stories* were published in 1992, it was immediately recognized that the addition of "The Country Funeral", the new novella which rounded out the "rich whole" was "somewhat like the placing of "The Dead" at the end of James Joyce's *Dubliners*" (Sampson, 25).<sup>1</sup> The closing image of "The Dead" looks backward over space and time: from present to past, from Dublin, over the bog of Allen and farther to the West:

[snow] was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (*D*, 213-14)

- 2 To a certain extent, McGahern's story completes the cycle: the main character, Philly Ryan, is like Gabriel Conroy a figure of the prodigal son whose homecoming involves the revelation that he is not the self-sufficient figure he thought he was.<sup>2</sup> Unlike his fictional cousin, however, he does make the journey to Gloria Bog overlooked by the churchyard on Killeelan Hill in Western Ireland.
- 3 After months spent working at the oil-fields in the Middle-East, Philly returns to Dublin where he stays with his mother and his legless brother Fonsie whose life is confined to the wheelchair: an apt emblem of the "hemiplegia of the will" which Joyce meant to cure by handing out to his countrymen the "nicely polished looking-glass" of his fiction. Likewise, the narrator of "The Recruiting Officer" suffers from "a total paralysis of the will", the result of a feeling that "any one thing in this life is almost as worthwhile doing

as any other" (100): the phrase perfectly encapsulates the existential melancholy which is the dominant mood of this volume. The same story mentions a Miss Martin who "lived with her brother across the empty waste of wheat-coloured sedge and stunted birch of the Gloria Bog. Her brother made toys from used matchsticks in the winter nights." (107). By returning to Gloria Bog and to the man who made toys from used matchsticks as a possible figure of the artist, "The Country Funeral", as we shall see, revisits the symptom.

- 4 The news of their uncle Peter's death sets the three Ryan brothers (Philly, Fonsie and John who is a schoolteacher) on a trip to Gloria Bog whose image suddenly floods Philly's mind "and shut[s] out the day with amazing brightness" (377) in contrast to the "grey dull light" of the city's pavement: Philly is aware that if his homecoming breaks the monotony for a few days, still he does not belong (375). Like the young blonde woman painting her toenails red on her doorstep, indifferent to her own child in the motionless pram next to her (376), it seems that the good fairy Modernity has left ambivalent fingerprints on the urban landscape of Dublin – signs of both emancipation and reification of human ties. The story itself follows the wheel-pattern of a journey from city to country – the place where "they honour the dead" and where "people still mean something" (404) – and then back to the city, with a promise of return to Gloria Bog. As he drives back to town with his brothers, Philly announces his decision to take in at Peter's farm. Does this rehabilitation of older forms of the socially symbolic pact mean that the Irish symptom is incurable after all, that the same patterns will just repeat themselves mechanically? As Fonsie sarcastically observes of Philly, "The burly block of exasperation would always come and go from the oil fields. Now he would go out to bloody Gloria Bog instead." (408) The decision to *take in* at the farm, however, is not just the decision to buy it: there is a subjective implication here, which seems to give new momentum to the wheeling movement, as a wave of energy rises in Philly who drives with "the blind dominating passion of someone in thrall to a single idea" (405).
- 5 In many ways, "The Country Funeral" can be read as a reflection on the ethical implications of the artist's gesture of going through the symptom whose inertia ultimately seems to be reversed back to life, a gesture raising the wheel to the dignity of a rich symbol radiating beyond the local frame: what is simply needed is a hand that gives the impetus. Looking at the narrative structure, it is not too difficult to see that the story's own rhythm is the effect of a whole system of repetition-with-variations. Leaning on the Lacanian notion of *varity*, a coinage foregrounding the idea that the artist is the one able to introduce *variety*, to give play to some deeply hidden truth/*verity* locked in the symptom which rules the blind repetitions of our lives, this essay will explore the relation between melancholy and the "lost image" which according to McGahern all art strives for. In his famous development on "The Image" which he conceived of as a prologue to a reading, McGahern writes about the irretrievable image which is the cause of the artist's desire to write:
 

..., that still and private universe which each of us possesses but which others cannot see, is brought to life in rhythm. By rhythm I think of the dynamic quality of the vision, its instinctive, its individual movements; and this struggle towards the single image, the image on which our whole life took its most complete expression once, in a kind of grave, grave of the images of dead passions and their days. [...] Image after image flows involuntarily now [...] straining towards the one image that will never come, the lost image. ("The Image", 10)
- 6 Clearly enough, the image in this case is not a question of representation, it is part of our oblivious memory which is sometimes accidentally revived. Here the vision, to which

William Wordsworth once gave the name of *spot of time*, drives a hole in the familiar fabric of the reality we live wrapped in. It may however be the source of a new poetic creation binding together language, affect and memory. As McGahern observes in "The Image", the Muse:

... under whose whim we reign in return for a lifetime of availability, may grant us the absurd crown of Style, the revelation in language of the unique world we possess as we struggle for what may be no more than a yard of lead piping we saw in terror or in laughter once.

- 7 The enigmatic piece of lead piping, some left-over of what McGahern elsewhere calls the "dunghill" of human experience, is a possible wink to the letter picked from a heap of litter by the hen of *Finnegan's Wake*. It is also a human artefact, the possible remainder of some violent scene, whether actual or imagined: of a traumatic encounter with the shapeless real glimpsed in joy or terror, like the knowledge of one's own death.
- 8 In "The Wine Breath" for example, the young protagonist who is a priest goes through a "memorial epiphany" (Beja, 69) which has little to do with a religious revelation:

Suddenly, as he was about to rattle the gate loudly [...], he felt himself (bathed as in a dream) in an incredible sweetness of light. It was the evening light on snow [...] He was in another day, the lost day of Michael Bruen's funeral nearly thirty years before. [...] High on Killeelan Hill the graveyard evergreens rose out of the snow. [...] Never before or since had he expected the Mystery in such awesomeness. He did not know how long he had stood in that lost day, in that white light, probably for no more than a moment. He could not have stood the intensity for any longer – when he woke out of it the grey light of the alders had reasserted itself. (178)

- 9 Even though the moment of vision leaves the priest, "purged of all tiredness, eager to begin life again" (180), it would certainly be a mistake to interpret the scene in terms of the recovery of faith, as Claude Maisonnat notes.<sup>3</sup> The vision, "light as the air in all the clarity of light" (185) is closer to Joyce's secular epiphanies which, according to the famous words borrowed from Aquinas, endow in a flash any odd object with *integritas, consonantia, claritas*.<sup>4</sup> What is it that triggered the moment here? A little something in surplus, a trivial detail indeed: the snow-like beech chips milling out of the saw-chain of the young priest's neighbour. In McGahern's fiction technological objects (a saw, a car, an aeroplane) are often associated with a violence done to the natural rhythms of life. The litter falling from the cut wood reminds the priest of his own death as if it were his own body undergoing mutilation and dissemination – or, in psychoanalytical terms, castration:

Never before though had he noticed anything like the beech chips. There was the joy of holding what had eluded him so long [...] part of a greater knowledge, and what did the beech chips do but turn back to his own death? (183)

- 10 If we bear in mind the post-Joycean equivalence between letter and litter, we can infer the relevance of the lost image to the ethics of writing. McGahern once compared books to coffins of words enclosing a loss, as if the dead wood of the coffin-word, the material part of the signifier, awaited the reader's breath to flame into being.<sup>5</sup> If "The Country Funeral" takes us "as close as John McGahern has come to the elusive lost image" (Sampson, 25), it has to be an engraved image, a memorial of "dead passions" confined to the grave by letters, literally a *tombeau*. The example that comes to mind is Mallarmé's "Tombeau d'Anatole" dedicated to the beloved son whose death and impossible mourning are associated with the obsessively recurring image of sun/son-set in Anatolia. As explained by François Regnault in his introduction to Jo Attié's *Mallarmé le livre*, the

difference between the poet and the neurotic subject is the way in which the former elaborates upon the symptom whose underlying fantasy appears as it were in the open air:<sup>6</sup> In this case it is not the highlands of Anatolia but Gloria Bog – a rather enigmatic placename, a kind of oxymoron which combines sublime radiance with the death-in-life of the bog. Its pulsing image which recurs a dozen times in "The Country Funeral", is surely part of "that still and private universe", the fantasy to which the symptom is knotted, which has no shape until it is "brought to life in rhythm" on the fictional stage.

- 11 We must differentiate at this point the diegetic from the meta-diegetic levels as far as the impact of melancholy is concerned. What seems to paralyse McGahern's people, whether in town or in country, is a sense of shapelessness. In "Why we're here", the narrator comments upon Sinclair who suffers from "the melancholy" (13):

'No reason why we're here, Mr Boles, why we were born. What do we know? Nothing, Mr Boles. Simply nothing. [...] Try to see some make or shape in the nothing we know.' (14)

- 12 This "nothing" is, literally, the absence of a cause to human life. In "Wheels", the main character sees his useless life "in the shape of a story that had as much reason to go on as to stop" (10), the father being nothing but "the body that had started my journey to nowhere" (6) – one of the questions raised by McGahern's art being how to get a human story started and how to keep it going. The same mood affects the young priest in "The Wine Breath", whose mother, he feels, had given him a life he had not wanted. She had the vocation for him, and he embraced the priesthood as "a way of vanquishing death and avoiding birth" (183). His mother's death has left him forever stumbling into the "dead days". A smell of crushed mint is enough to give him back a day when he went to the sea with her:

... it was as if the world of the dead was as available to him as the world of the living. It was also humiliating for him to realize that she must have been the mainspring of his days. Now that the mainspring was broken, the hands were weakly falling here and falling there. (179)

- 13 The story perfectly enacts the famous Freudian image of the shadow of the lost object, here the maternal object, looming over the melancholy subject for whom the wheel of time has stopped. Death has become his silent partner, the passage from loss to lack which itself sets desire and time into motion is impossible. The young priest desires... precisely nothing: "being a man he had no choice, he was doomed to die; and being dead he'd miss nothing, being nothing." (178)

- 14 One may of course suggest here an autobiographical reference to the fact that the author lost his mother at the age of ten, a loss which is often felt as abandonment by the parent figure. But this would be missing the essential point, the artist being the one who makes use of the materials of his life not for self-expression, but rather as simple materials<sup>7</sup> "to mark the passage of a life spent searching in new ways for that "lost image" in which the vital self is anchored" (Sampson 16), then to be shared by the reader. In other words, the artist does not give up on the knowledge of the real enclosed in the lost image which (s)he attempts to shape out. Unlike Philly who like the poet welcomes the bright vision of Gloria Bog, his brother John significantly turns his back on the melancholy landscape:

... what met his eyes across the waste of pale sedge and heather was the rich dark waiting evergreens inside the black wall of Killeelan where they had buried Peter beside his father and mother only a few hours before. The colour of laughter is black. How dark is the end of all life. Yet others carried the burden in the bright day

on the hill. His shoulders shuddered slightly in revulsion and he wished himself back in the semi-detached suburbs with rosebeds outside in the garden. (402)

15 In-between the culture of death and its denial in the modern city where "the whole thing is swept under the carpet" (385), the artist interposes the screen of fiction which performs the role of Medusa's mirror, both reflecting and keeping at bay that "nothing".

16 But why Killeelan Hill and Gloria Bog? Like Mallarmé's *Tombeau d'Anatole* which associates the death of the son with the sunset setting fire to the landscape,<sup>8</sup> such poetic nameplaces are like ciphers which condensate the fantasy in which the melancholy symptom is rooted: the intolerable idea of a parent figure wishing death for its own child. Fathers and mothers in McGahern's stories are seldom loving figures and "The Country Funeral" is no exception. The name of Gloria bog is reminiscent of painful memories to Fonsie who during the summer holidays would feel rejected by Uncle Peter, "worse than useless":

There were times I felt if he got a chance he'd throw me into a bog hole the way he drowned the black whippet that started eating the eggs. (377)

Every time I caught Peter looking at me I knew he was thinking that there was nothing wrong with me that a big stone and a rope and a good bog hole couldn't solve. (386)

17 The three boys' mother, married to an unreliable father, is not a figure of tenderness either: with her "remarkably erect" posture and her "steely voice" (376), she is not ready to give up to the pressure which Peter tries to put on her and her children. More than this, she seems eager to compel her children to suffer the resentment of Uncle Peter who himself derives great enjoyment whenever she scolds him (380). The summers were peaceful only when the grandmother was still alive, but looking forward to the moment when she would rejoin her parents on Killeelan Hill:

Often before she came in she'd look across the wide acres of the bog, the stunted birch trees, the faint blue of the heather, the white puffs of cotton trembling in every wind to the green slopes of Killeelan and walled evergreens high on the hill and say, 'I suppose it won't be long till I'm with the rest of them there.' (380)

18 It won't be long, till she belongs too.

19 Clearly, then, Killeelan Hill is the place indexed by the mother's death wish – both for herself and for others. Back to the city, Fonsie relates how he watched the funeral procession from his wheelchair, and was afraid lest the coffin should fall off the shoulders and roll back down the hill. The mother evokes the funeral of Johnny *Whelan* whose name evokes, by metonymy, Fonsie on his *wheelchair* – a kind of coffin too:

Once it did fall off. Old Johnny Whelan's coffin rolled halfway down the hill and broke open. They had to tie the boards together with the ropes they use for lowering into the grave. Some said the Whelans were drunk, others said they were too weak with hunger to carry to coffin. (408)

20 Philly suddenly remembers how Mary Whelan, the wild black-haired girl, had once challenged him to fight on the bog road, another image of aggressivity between the sexes. Not surprisingly, the images of Gloria Bog which turn up in "The Country Funeral" are frequently associated with a violence muffled by the sublime undertones of the landscape with its "stunted birch trees" on which the shadow of the object hovers:

Without any warning, suddenly, they were out of the screen of small trees into the open bog. A low red sun west of Killeelan was spilling over the sedge and dark heather. Long shadows stretched out from the small birches scattered all over the bog. [...] 'Just look at the bog. On evenings like this I used to think it was on fire. Other times the sedge looked like gold. I remember it well. (389)

21 The bog, then is the image whose pulsing beat brings us closest to the irretrievable, the intolerable image ciphered in the letters of *Killeelan Hill*, a name evoking a murderous wish. We need to turn to another story, "Christmas", to understand why the bog can be the "grave of the images of dead passions and their days", in relation to the son's passion – including in its religious sense.

22 On first reading, "Christmas" belongs to the now well-known genre of the anti-Christmas story (Louvel, 71). It is about wishes, but strange wishes indeed as the narrator warns:

A stupid wish on my part, which set off an even more stupid wish on Mrs Grey's, and what happened has struck me ever since as usual when people look to each other for their happiness or whatever it is called. (23-24)

23 Mrs Grey, a rich woman in the neighbourhood, who has lost a son in aerial combat over Italy is clearly a surrogate mother figure to the narrator who regularly delivers wood at her home. At Christmas time she offers him an aeroplane toy which for mysterious reasons, he rejects in a gesture of rage. He wanted a gift from her, but certainly not that one: clearly, the aeroplane places him in the symbolic position of the sacrificial son. Once she has left, he takes the toy and a box of matches to the stable. But the jennet in the Christmas stable has an idiosyncrasy, he enjoys the smell of smoke and this enjoyment makes it very communicative, nearly human:

I gathered dry straw in a heap, and as I lit it and the smoke rose the jennet gave his human squeal until I untied him and he was able to put his nostrils in the thick of the smoke. [...] I put the blue and white toy against the wall and started to kick. With each kick I gave a new sweetness was injected into my blood. For such a pretty toy it took few kicks to reduce it to shapelessness, and then, in the last flames of the straw, I flattened it on the stable floor, the jennet already nosing me to put more straw on the dying fire.

As I quietened I felt glad that I'd torn up the unopened letter in the train that I was supposed to have given Moran. I felt a new life had already started to grow out of the ashes, out of the stupidity of human wishes. (28)

24 The scene of course revisits the familiar, peaceful image of the Christmas stable, but it also takes us beyond the Freudian pleasure principle: the three details of the boy keeping the letter for private use, the ambivalent *jouissance* of his kicks and the jennet's joy at the dying fire clearly point in the direction of the death-drive. The sense of relief, the possibility of "a new life" out of that enjoyment beyond words, also indicates that we are close to the lost primal scene of artistic creation.

25 In "The Country Funeral", the fundamental fantasy buried under the layers of the images flowing toward the lost image nearly comes in the open air of Gloria Bog during the night of Peter's wake, when Fonsie signals to Philly that he wants to go outside to relieve himself:

It was a clear moonlit night without a murmur of wind, and the acres of pale sedge were all lit up, giving back much of the light it was receiving, so that the places that were covered with heather melted into a soft blackness and the scattered shadows of the small birches were soft and dark on the cold sedge. High up and far off they could see an aeroplane and soon they picked it out by the pulsing of its little white nightlight as it crossed their stretch of sky. The tall evergreens within the pale stone wall on the top of Killeelan were dark and gathered together against the moonlight. As if to give something back to his brother for accompanying him in the night, Fonsie said as he was relieving himself on the shadowed corner of the house, 'Mother remembers seeing the first car in this place. She says she was ten [...] (393)

- 26 To which Fonsie adds that Uncle Peter, who would spend his evenings making matchstick toys to kill time because he disliked TV, never wanted to drive a car: he noticed that many who drove cars had died. The passage is truly a "dream of death": the free associations, condensations and displacements (the airplane over the bog, the mother, cars, death by driving, the soft darkness, the scattered shadows of the small birches), unmistakably recall the image of the lost scene of a young man's death in aerial combat: Gloria Bog and its glorious radiance and soft shadows at sunset dominated by Killeelan Hill, is the screen memory set up against the intolerable, the mirror/shield for confrontation with Medusa's head – art being "this created world of ours, this Medusa's mirror, allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable."
- 27 There now remains to be seen the question of the artist's role in recovering what has been lost with modernity and the violence of its technological objects: the acknowledgement of death, punctuated by symbolic rituals like a wake and a funeral which are different from the rich gifts and rounds of celebration at the pub which seem to blind Philly "to the fact that it is not generally light but shadow that we cast" (375). If the socially symbolic fiction of the country funeral crowns the *Collected Stories*, its position at the close of the volume also draws a parallel with the ethics of writing, a specific mode of knotting together the three registers of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real, the "intolerable" which we all have to face. Here as in most of the stories, the dialogic exchange among the characters is truly symptomatic, shared between angry, resentful silences betraying some "darkness seething within" whose dark flow sometimes bursts out "like released water" (385). Gradually a new discursive economy appears, making room for silence and containment, pointing to another value of communal speech. As the three brothers enter Peter's house everybody stands up and comes towards them to shake hands with the set phrase, "I'm sorry for your trouble" (382). John, the careful listener who knows to keep his silence and drinks less than the others, gets on "famously" with the people gathering for the wake (389). When the moment of thanking Peter's kindly neighbours, Philly reaches "far back to his mother or uncle for the right thing to say" (395). Which is less a question of politeness than of relief, when signifiers are just there to confirm a sense of belonging.
- 28 The wake also brings to the foreground the questions of narrative and memory, essential to McGahern's art as secular religion. In "The Image", McGahern insists on the religious nature of art which also relies on formal patterns, among which a certain, repetitive use of speech and motifs which aim less at personal expression, than as commonly shared symbol, in the Greek sense of the material *symbolon*. The grotesque, philistine figure of the priest is clearly left out of the ritual<sup>9</sup> which begins in Peter's house, ruled by "some hidden signal or law" (384). The secular rite requires human care represented by the kind neighbour's wife, Mrs Cullen who regulates the flow of the visitors, so that someone will always be by Peter's side on his last day in the house:

All through evening and night people kept coming to the house while others who had come earlier quietly left. First they shook hands with the three brothers, then went to the upper room, knelt by the bed. When new people came in to the room and knelt by the bed they left their chairs and returned to the front room where they were offered food and drink and joined in the free, unceasing talk and laughter. Almost all the talk was of the dead man. Much of it was in the form of stories. All of them showed the dead man winning out in life and the few times he had been forced to concede defeat it had been with stubbornness or wit. No surrender here, were his great words. (391)



- 29 The repetition of markers of temporality is crucial here to indicate the value of the ritual movement to weave continuity where death has ripped up the fabric, and where the act of story-telling places a veil, a useful fiction over an absence. The symbolic function of the wake to bind together temporarily what has been severed is never more visible than in one of the story's most poetic passages:

It was as if the house had been sundered into two distinct and separate elements, and yet each reflected and measured the other as much as the earth and the sky. In the upper room there was silence, the people there keeping vigil by the body where it lay in the stillness and awe of the last change; while in the lower room that life was being resurrected with more vividness than it could ever have had in the long days and years it could have been given. Though all the clocks in the house had now been silenced everybody seemed to know at once it was midnight and all the mourners knelt except Fonsie and two very old women. The two rooms were joined as the Rosary was recited but as soon as the prayers ended each room took on again its separate entity. (392)

- 30 It ultimately belongs to the "rough, unfinished" Philly to respond to the mystery encountered on top of Killeelan Hill, and to take up the thread that has just been cut. No mystical encounter with the divinity here, but a simple acceptance of what is, met at the moment of encounter with a gaze which is *subjectless* but not inhuman:

'I felt something I never felt when we left the coffin on the edge of the grave. A rabbit hopped out of the briars a few yards off. He sat there and looked at us as if he didn't know what was going on before he bolted off. You could see the bog and all the shut houses next to Peter's below us. ... Everybody gathered around, and the priest started to speak of the dead and the Mystery of the Resurrection. (405)

- 31 Philly goes back alone to sleep in Peter's house where he finds the old parchment deeds tied with legal ribbon which he takes next morning to the solicitor. The latter, who has inherited his practice from his grandfather and father finds out that the place is in Philly's grandfather's name, and that the document was drawn by his own grandfather (399). This leap backward to the last generation but one is a leap over the trauma of modernity, like a darning thread which joins the two sides together again without denying the rent in the fabric.

- 32 Can Philly's decision to take in at Peter's farm be interpreted only in terms of the ultimate acknowledgement of the fact of death at the outset of the burial.<sup>10</sup> The assertion that he is going to *takein* at the farm clearly binds him to the life energy and to the motif of hands, recurrent in the story whose tone is set by the opening image of Fonsie's "huge hands" gripping his wheelchair, repeated by the protruding detail of the dead man's hands:

The room was empty. A clock somewhere had not been stopped. He looked very old and still in the bed. They would not have known him. His hands were enormous on the white sheet, the beads a thin dark trickle through the locked fingers [...] The three brothers blessed themselves, and after a pause John and Philly touched the huge rough hands clasped together on the sheet. They were very cold. Fonsie did not touch the hands. (383)

- 33 It is as if the thin dark trickle locked in the cold fingers awaited the possibility to flow again through an act of transmission and revival entrusted to Philly who speaks "as if he was already in possession of his dead uncle's knowledge and presence." (386). The question will be to see what makes of him a potential figure of creative transmission, out of a reversal of the deadly inertia locked in the symptom.

- 34 What did Uncle Peter do with his hands? He would spend his evenings making toys out of matchsticks which he would give to the children of the neighbourhood:

He was always looking for matches. Even in town on Saturdays you'd see him picking them up from the bar floor. He could do anything with them. The children loved the animals he'd give them. Seldom they broke them. Though our crowd are grown we still have several he made in the house. He never liked TV. That's what you'd find him at on any winter's night if you wandered in on your *ceilidh*. He could nearly make those matches talk. (392)

- 35 Two things to be noted here: like the letter/litter or the yard of lead piping, the matches picked up from the bar floor are the spoils, the trivial bits and pieces on the dunghill from which the artist picks his material to shape figures so lively that "he could nearly make these matches talk":

From the top of the drawer a horse had been made from matchsticks and mounted on a rough board was taken down. The thin lines of the matchsticks were cunningly spliced and glued together to suggest the shape of a straining horse in the motion of ploughing or mowing. A pig [...] several sheep that were subtly different from one another ... a tired old collie, all made from the same curved and spliced matchsticks. (392)

- 36 The curved and spliced matchsticks here are not used to set fire as in "Christmas" but as humble remainders diverted from their primary use, not for money but "out of some primary need" (405). What we recognize here is the impulse toward sublimation which diverts the energy of the death-drive, raising the handcrafted object to the dignity of the thing, or rather the *nothing*, the void which is thus enclosed and outlined according to Lacan's famous formula. Philly thinks of Peter sitting alone at night making the shapes of animals out of matchsticks, "of those same hands now in the coffin before the high altar of Cootehall Church" (396). Now his turn has come:

On a whim he went and took down some of the matchstick figures that they had looked at the night before – a few of the sheep, a little pig, the dray-horse and cart, a delicate greyhound on a board with its neck straining out from the bent knees like a snake's as if to pick a turning rabbit or hare from the ground. He moved them here and there on the table with his finger as he drank when, putting his glass down, his arm leaned on the slender suggestion of a horse, which crumpled and fell apart. Almost covertly he gathered the remains of the figure, the cart and scattered matches, and put them in his pocket to dispose of later. (396)

- 37 The matchsticks are the poet's letters awaiting to be *disposed of* – to be destroyed or composed into a new whole by a careful hand.
- 38 Like Mallarmé's "signifiant fermé et caché, qui habite le commun",<sup>11</sup> the humble materials of common language commemorate and engrave the shattering encounter laid to rest in the elusive lost image. They cannot respond to the question of "Why we're here" – I am referring to the title of one of the stories in the volume – but they do try to make us see "some make or shape in the nothing we know" (14).

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## RÉSUMÉS

This paper first examines the symbolic filiation between the character of Gabriel in "The Dead" and the figure of Philly Ryan in the short story. Both characters go through the sobering experience of shedding the idealised self-images which helped them to go through life so far. However, Philly actually returns to the Gloria Bog to start a new life by taking in at Peter's farm. Then it makes the point that the image of Uncle Peter and his matchsticks could well be interpreted as a reflexive comment on the ethics of writing, if we agree to see it as one of McGahern's successful "lost images", to the extent that they enable him to come to terms with the repetition of the symptoms of his melancholy by displacing them through a succession of images endowed with a poetic quality.

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