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"Getting the knack of the chains": the issue of transmission in "Crossing the line"

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"Getting the knack of the chains": the issue of transmission in "Crossing the line"

Claude Maisonnat

- 1 Initially published in the August 01, 1983 issue of *The New Yorker* before inclusion in John McGahern's first volume of short stories entitled *High Ground* (1985), this particular story has elicited only a modest critical interest and academic attention, possibly because of the lack of drama inherent in the theme chosen – a young teacher discovers his first job – and the low-keyed tone of the narration. Yet, beyond its obvious biographical dimension – after all McGahern, following in the footsteps of his mother, did become a national teacher too¹ – it evinces all the qualities that grant its author the literary status he deservedly enjoys.
- 2 The phrase chosen by the author as a title occurs in the text in a very specific and widely documented context, that of a seven-months unrest on the question of salaries during the 1946 teachers' strike. Kennedy the narrator's would-be mentor, has crossed the picket line regularly in order to keep the school open, when all his colleagues supported the strike action; an attitude for which he had to suffer unpleasant consequences that he claims to have withstood with unflinching determination. However there are more lines involved in the story than the mere picket line crossed daily by Kennedy would seem to indicate. The title is felicitously polysemic in that it suggests other possibilities of interpretation not only of the phrase itself, but most of all, of the whole story, the main point being that they can be contradictory and therefore problematise the import of the text. When he deliberately strayed from the straight and narrow path of solidarity, Kennedy was immediately turned into something of a social outcast; his transgression was of an ideological, not to say moral order in the eyes of his colleagues and it was felt to be a form of betrayal.
- 3 But Kennedy's moral quandary is not the real subject of the story, it must be seen as the backcloth against which the narrator's experience must be assessed. The title already

gives the reader a clue. Owing to the choice of the -ing form with its nominalising impact which conveniently eschews identifying the subject associated with the predicate, the crossing of the line cannot not be specifically attributed to Kennedy, an option which the text, however, perfidiously seems to confirm at the diegetic level, but which is far from being the only option. On top of that even though the presence of the definite article "the" would seem to refer to a particular event in the past it simply conceals the fact that this event cannot be accurately located in time. As a result, the question that is raised is twofold: Who crosses a line? And if it is the unidentified narrator, what line is being crossed? There's no need to have an in-depth insight into the text to realise that the young man straight out of training college who takes up his first job is crossing the shadow line that separates youth from maturity, innocence from experience precisely because of his association with a mentor in the guise of Kennedy, he is confronted to his dilemma, as it were by proxy. What side would he have been on, had he been a teacher at the time?

4 In fact, the real subject of the short story is that of problematic symbolic transmission. Received values and ideals are submitted to radical questioning and it turns out that it is the young man's desire to become a teacher that is at stake, as well as the surfacing of his deeper desire to become a writer. The aim of this paper is thus to highlight the reflexive dimension of the text and to show that, ultimately, the line that the young man, much in the way McGahern himself did, is the line that separates the teacher from the writer. The condition required to make the transformation possible is, of course, a clear awareness of the fact that the chains of routine, cynicism and material comfort – in short all those chains that shackle Kennedy – can be metaphorically reversed into the liberating chains of the signifier, so that recounting the experience of his teaching *début* is like coming to terms with the feeling of guilt that such a radical change could entail. By being a writer crossing out a line that is no longer up to his poetic demands and by creating a work of art out of the tale of his transformation, he thereby crosses victoriously the finishing line of the race he embarked on, perhaps without fully recognising it at the start, in order to become a fully-fledged writer.

5 As usual with McGahern, the narrative strategy is deceptively simple. The incipit is a gem of evasiveness that sets the tone but requires some decoding

A few of the *last* leaves from the almond saplings that stood at intervals along the pavement were being scattered about under the lamps as he met me *off the late bus* from the city. He was a big man, *prematurely* bald, and I could feel his powerful tread by my side as we crossed the street to a Victorian cottage, and *old vine* above its doorway as *whimsical here* in the very middle of the town as a patch of thyme or lavender.

'The house *is tied* to the school', he explained. 'That's why it's not been bulldozed. We don't have any rent to pay.' (295)

6 This is a remarkably terse but dense opening that introduces the main issues of the narrative but cleverly blurs their perception. It purports to describe a beginning: the arrival of the young man to the town where he will start his career as a teacher, but the context is systematically associated with the idea of the end of something. The "last leaves" of autumn lie on the pavement, the young man leaves the late bus and the city for a new position, the cottage that should have been pulled down as the town modernised itself is decorated with an "old vine". The tenant Kennedy, is "prematurely bald" i.e. old before his age. What is implied here is that the world the young man is about to become part of looks towards the past rather than the future; hardly an auspicious welcome for a

beginning. It suggests that this beginning could well become the end of the young man if he allowed himself to fall into the steps of his self-appointed guide. Besides, the reader is given an important clue in the next paragraph. If the house is "tied" to the school it could well be that Kennedy is also tied to it, bound hands and feet to the institution and its sense of security which he seems to value above all else. The price he has to pay for that even though he ironically claims that he has no "rent to pay", is loss of freedom and self-integrity, which he seems to relinquish easily to enjoy the blandishments of material comfort.

- 7 Significantly, the end of the short story makes it clear that it is by no means certain that the young man will heed his elder's advice (stay permanently at the school, marry Eileen O'Reilly and take up surveying). Even if the young man is a first person narrator he is remarkably silent throughout the narrative, mostly responding to Kennedy's speeches, but rarely asserting himself, as if he were held in awe by Kennedy's presence and discourse or dared not contradict him. There is a remarkable lack of enthusiasm on his part to benefit from Kennedy's advice and practical help. At any rate the very last sentence of the short story provides yet another illustration of McGahern's scathing irony because the phrase "the knack of the chains" which Kennedy uses to convince the young narrator that he should in fact do what he himself did, can be turned against him. This is indeed an open ended narrative as we will know neither the text of his verbal answer to Kennedy's offer nor the choice the young man finally made, unless the biographical subtext suggests that the young man like McGahern gave up teaching and became a writer. In this perspective the story could be seen as a paradoxical autobiography.
- 8 As a matter of fact the whole of the story shows that Kennedy has the knack of making do with the chains he has wound around himself and which paralyse him. The irony is that he unwittingly sees himself as a convict tied to his chain and it is extremely doubtful whether the young man will avail himself of the opportunities so complacently offered by his senior colleague. On the contrary, if we construe the chains as an avatar of the signifying chain, "the knack of the chains" metaphorically refers to the art of writing, an art whose liberating qualities Kennedy would never be able to master, so caught up is he in climbing the social ladder and keeping up with the Jones
- 9 To do so we will first focus our attention on the ambiguous role model that Kennedy insists on offering the young man, before examining the equivocal response of the narrator, which could be interpreted as the emergence of a writer's voice.

A dubious role model

- 10 The mature man who meets the yet untried young teacher at the bus station late one evening can easily fall into the category of the forbidding father figures that people McGahern's short stories, not to mention his *Memoir*. From the very moment of his entrance on the diegetic scene he is presented as a forceful presence both physically and through his discourse. The narrator is immediately struck by his "powerful tread" (295), the respect shown to the "big man by [his] side" (296), and he prudently assumes a deferential attitude towards "...this excited, forceful man." (299) who seems to exercise his authority over him so naturally that he is reduced to silence: "No one had ever spoken to me like this before. I did not know what to say." (299)

- 11 Similarly, when the young man is introduced into the family circle of his Principal, the former realises that he is faced with an unmistakable patriarchal figure who lords it over every one in the house. He runs everything, decides for his children and his wife, and even speaks in their place. So overbearing is his presence that his son is greatly embarrassed in front of the newcomer. Oliver, the son who resembles his mother² is but "a frail presence beside his father." (295) The narrator does not fail to perceive the "discomfiture" of the son when his father tells the tale of the early days of his marriage. The reaction of the son, as noticed by the narrator, is proof enough of Kennedy's unchallenged ascendancy over his family: "Their son sat there, shamed and fascinated, unable to cry stop, or tear himself away." (299) In the same way, when the father boasts of the successful scholarly achievements of the son and insists on his sexual appetite, it makes the "...son writhe with unease on the sofa." (299)
- 12 As could be expected, the patriarchal control also operates upon the female part of the household. Not only does Kennedy run the family in an authoritarian way but his relation to females is one of instrumentalisation in favour of domination and sexual gratification. Women and girls are considered not so much as individual subjects with a desire of their own as they are viewed as objects that he can dispose of at his will, as the use of the ambivalent word "materials" illustrates. On seeing Kennedy's wife for the first time, the narrator gathers the impression that "There was something about her of materials faded in the sun" (295). As for his daughters, whom he refers to as: "These two great lumps..." (295), they are not merely expensive appendages to the family, as their education requires money, but they are also available for the sexual satisfaction of future husbands who will discharge him of his responsibility towards them: "He spoke about his daughters as if he looked upon them already as other men's future gardens." (295) Even Eileen O'Reilly, the enticing blonde secretary of the surveyor's office where he does an extra job to improve the usual fare, is the object of his paternalistic concerns: he would like the young man to marry her as if he could dispose of her future as he does for his daughters'. In short, Kennedy is really a man of his time, to the extent that he is an active member of the two main groups of oppression that dominate the society of the 50's in Ireland: family and church.
- 13 Under the pretence of playing the role of the benevolent elder who patronises a younger colleague by lavishing advice on him, Kennedy, on close scrutiny, appears to be a machiavellian narcissistic father figure who is bent on submitting the narrator to his plans as if it was a way to vindicate his choice or atone for the lack of solidarity he showed during the strike. As a result, from the beginning he framed his relationship with the younger man on the father-son pattern. This situation sheds some light on one of the main themes of the story, that of symbolic filiation. As a surrogate father he expects submission, approval and obedience from the young man, and for him giving advice is a way of asserting his power. When he warns the narrator that the Archdeacon makes it a point that all his teachers should be partial to porridge, it is but a way of suggesting that he pulls the strings from behind the scene, and is partly responsible for his appointment, as the conversation with the old priest makes it clear. During the meal the Archdeacon asks him: "Does he [Kennedy] find you all right?" 'I think so, Father.' 'That's good enough for me, then.'" (297)
- 14 Any questioning of Kennedy's authority is felt to be a threat to his ideal self-image and it leads him to over-react to quite banal situations. When he discovers that the narrator has already joined the union before coming to the town, he admits grudgingly: "That's your

own business, of course. I never found it much use', he said irritably." (296) Such overreactions border on the verge of paranoia, as happens when hearing that the young man has met Owen Beirne, a union leader. His attitude of mean revenge consists in refusing to accompany him to the school or talk with him during the mid-morning break in the playground. That he can't get over his vexation at being ignored by his colleagues, in the street or at Mass, is also illustrated by the too readily bandied and, as it turns out, unfounded accusation "I suppose plenty of dirt was fired in my direction." (303)

- 15 On the contrary, anything that can bolster up his narcissistic reflection is used. Thus he takes great pride in the fact he alone refused to join the strikers, and successfully resisted the social pressure such a decision entailed, as if the mere fact that he was the only one in the town to do so increased his merit, justified the choice, and completed the flattering vision he has of himself. Thus, he conceitedly blows his own trumpet when he claims that he has no fear of inspectors who allegedly would not dare to control him, as he feels so certain that he is very good at his job, in strict opposition to Beirne whose story of Deasy's³ death, even if he admits that things have now changed, testifies to their alleged daunting power: "Full-grown men trembled in front of them at these annual inspections. Women were often in tears." (301-302)
- 16 His, possibly unconscious, ambition is that the young man should follow in his footsteps, become the Principal of the school, take up surveying, etc., as though it were necessary to reproduce the same pattern in order to prove the truth of his commitments. In a way it is but a form of unacknowledged male bonding. His wife does point out the young man's status as a potential figure of the double when she claims: "You were just like he was twenty-one years ago. Your first school. Straight from the training college. Starting out,..." (298) The same holds water for his boast of the sexual power and gratification that he enjoys and which are denied to the priests who employ him. For him teaching boils down to sticking to a job in order to make enough money to live.
- 17 The next feature that jeopardises Kennedy's self promoted idealised image is of course the selfishness inherent in any narcissistic position. Indeed, self-indulgence is his unabashed motto as he is obsessed with money to the extent that it can gratify all his desires. Money is for him the key to personal achievement. He is proud that he can tell the young man that: "...his son will make more in a few years than you and I will ever make in a whole bloody lifetime of teaching. (295) So convinced is he that money is the solution to all problems that he is ready to give up his surveying job in favour of the narrator. But what is most striking is his propensity to indulge his fantasies of a successful man as he betrays the truth of his desire during his conversation with the young man after the Mass where he has been overtly ostracised:
- "That summer we'll buy the car? We could buy it now but we decided to wait till we can do it right. It'll be no second hand. That summer we'll take the first holiday since we were married. We'll drive all round Ireland, staying in the best hotels. We'll not spare or stint on anything. We'll have wine, prawns, smoked salmon, sole or lobster or sirloin or lamb, anything on the menu we feel like no matter what the price." (305)
- 18 The insistence on the list of delicacies he promises himself to enjoy shows how far the satisfactions of the flesh and of the ego matter. The key to his life is material success supposed to bring happiness. Let us not forget that we are in the early days of the consumer society. Altogether, when looked at closely, this picture of a successful man who wants to pass himself off as an enviable model is far from flattering. In fact, the reader discovers that the subtle way in which textuality works in the short story almost⁴

amounts to a systematic deconstruction of the benevolent father figure. To hammer it in, the next stage in the demonstration consists in exposing the deficiencies of the teacher

The clockwatcher's predicament

- 19 John McGahern drew on his personal experience when he began teaching at a school in Athboy to provide the setting and context of the short story, as he once explained in an interview given to *JSSSE* in May 2003⁵, even if he takes great care to mention that the real man at the school had little to do with Kennedy. Only direct first-hand experience could lead to such a perceptive insight into the probing of what it is to be a teacher. In an earlier story: "The Recruiting Officer", he had already come up with a striking description of a certain category of teachers that he called the "clockwatchers" because they were so unhappy doing their job that they always kept an eye on the clock in the hope that the end of their ordeal was in sight. Remembering his days at college the narrator, now an older man, recalls the questions of one of the professors:

'Will you be an absorbed teacher? Will your work be like a game? Or will you be a clockwatcher?' Jordan the Professor of Education, asked, more years ago than I care to remember, after a lecture. It was his custom to select one student to walk with him through the corridor, gleaming with wax and the white marble busts of saints and philosophers on their pedestal along the walls." (106)

- 20 Kennedy readily falls into this category if we are to believe his endless deprecatory comments on an exacting profession that is not adequately recognised or remunerated. Hardly has he met the narrator than he complains of his insufficient salary and advises him to consider another better-paid career: "If I was in your boots now I'd do something like dentistry or engineering, even if I had to scrape the money." (300) Incidentally this is an echo of what he had said earlier about his son: "...once he's qualified he'll make more in a few years than you and I will ever make in a whole bloody lifetime of teaching." (295) The underlying irony is of course that this piece of "sound" advice comes too late for the young man to think of another career and is thus null and void. His contempt for the job is endless for it does not deserve the efforts you put in it, and he expresses it clearly through his lexical choices. For instance, voicing his hatred of private tuition by exclaiming: "Every hour of private tuition going round the place I took, and that's the lousiest of all teaching jobs, face to face for a whole hour with a well-heeled dunce." (304) is but a way of complaining that for him in general teaching is a lousy job. Once more, ironically because obliquely, the text hints that according to him teaching is a violent form of relationship between pupil and master by associating it frequently to the adjective "bloody" which is employed as a mild form of slang in ordinary conversation, even if it was still considered rude at the time and remained metaphorical, but which in the context of the story reverts to his initially forceful meaning, as if the teacher/pupil relationship was a fight to death. Thus he speaks of "a bloody lifetime of teaching" (295), of "A bloody miracle to have any sort of job" (300), not to mention the fact that for him the position is hell. No wonder then that when the narrator, answering one of his questions, tells him about the ideals of his vocation he launches in a diatribe that deprecates both the young man and the career:

'What made you take up teaching?' he asked. 'I know the hours are good enough, and there's the long holidays, but what's the hell good is it without money?'
'I don't know why,' I answered. "Some notion of service... of doing good.'

'It's easy to see that you're young. Teaching is a lousy, tiring old job, and it gets worse as you get older. A new bunch comes at you year after year. They stay the same but you start to go down. You'll not get thanked for service in this world.'
(300)

- 21 There is an element of contradiction⁶ in the fact that Kennedy urges the young man to take up the job and start a teaching career, when at the same time he does his best to depreciate the task. In fact through the dialogue between the two men, Kennedy speaking most of the time, McGahern allows the reader to get an understanding of the deeper nature of the vocation. Indeed, if the role of schooling and education is crucial both for the child and for society, the fact remains, as sociologists have noted, that school is one of the main groups of oppression of the individual. Society needs to channel the uncharted life force, the primal energy which keeps the children alive and eager to grow. This is discreetly alluded to in the remark of the young teacher referring to the children "milling about them in the playground or in his comment: "The time had already gone several minutes past lunchtime. The children were whirling about us on the concrete in loud abandonment, for them the minutes of play stolen from the school day were pure sweetness." (300) It is one of the functions devolved on schooling: education as a mode of civilising the untamed in man, shored up by the acquisition of knowledge which is meant to be a mode of symbolic transmission whose purpose is to reconcile the individual and society, enabling them to co-exist for the mutual benefit of both.
- 22 However, to reduce education to that, as it seems it is the case for Kennedy, would be a serious mistake and it is the role of the narrator in the short story to point out that the privileges, inherent in the function, how few they may be cannot be separated from the duties. The presence of the narrator as an intra-diegetic character serves as a reminder – to Kennedy and to the reader – that the ethics of teaching require more than just doling out knowledge or keeping the small community in order. The attributions of the true pedagogue also consist in not giving up on the delicate task of structuring the minds of children in such a way that they find pleasure and fulfilment in the very act of curbing their baser human instincts so that they can open up to the demands and constraint of community life and eventually bloom in a society where they will find their proper place and whose continuation they are meant to ensure on their own terms. In short, the ethics of teaching lie not only in maintaining order in class and offering knowledge to young heads, although these may be prerequisites, but it is to do so in such a way that the small individual becomes aware by himself of the necessity of both, which therefore will not be felt as constraints but as instruments of liberation. In this perspective the process of transmission concerns not only knowledge and rules, but most of all transmission of "being". That is the reason why the role-model dimension of the teacher is so important and why he has to come to terms with his narcissistic impulses. If Kennedy has lost sight of these fundamental aspects of the job, McGahern has clearly not, as the beautiful following passage in his *Memoir* conveniently reminds us:

The school I was teaching in was well run. The teachers got on well with one another, and most of the children came from homes where learning was valued. Teaching is always hard work, to bend young minds from their animal instincts and interest them in combinations of words and numbers and histories; but it has its pleasures – seeing the work take root and grow, encouraging the weaker children so that they grow in trust and confidence, seeing them all emerge as individuals. I liked the eight-year-old boys I taught, and I believe most of them grew to trust and like me. (*Memoirs*, 242)

- 23 In the end, with this portrait of Kennedy, McGahern sketches the disastrous image of a teacher defeated by the weight of the responsibilities that the function requires, because he has given up on his own desire and given way to the lure of selfish enjoyment. Through such a discourse it becomes apparent that he indulges in the fantasy of unbounded *jouissance*⁷ that is a perverse form of the death drive. The litany of treats that he promises himself for the coming summer can be read as an aspect of this threat of *jouissance*. The new car, the wine, prawns, smoked salmon, sole, lobster, sirloin, lamb, expresses his satisfaction for the just reward of long years of arduous labour, but subliminally they take the form of an open list to which new items can endlessly be added. Therefore, the narrator's perception of the truth of the situation appears to be extremely lucid when he remarks: "I was beginning to think that people grow less spiritual the older they become, contrary to what I thought. It was as if some desire to plunge their arms up to the elbow into the streaming entrails of the world grew more fierce the closer they got to leaving." (305) Kennedy is shown to have lost the ability to sublimate appetites and lusts that is the hallmark of culture. He has relinquished the desire to share and to promote solidarity, on which civilisation is founded and which Slavoj Žižek summarizes in this way: "Sublimation is equated with desexualisation, i.e., with the displacement of libidinal cathexis from the "brute" object alleged to satisfy some basic drive to an "elevated", "cultivated" form of satisfaction." (Žižek, 83)⁸ In this light Kennedy's obsessive talks about his own sexual powers take on a new dimension.
- 24 As such he is a potentially threatening model for his younger colleague and it is worth looking closely, now, at the latter's response to his mentor's influence.

Problematizing symbolic filiation and the emergence of a voice

- 25 It is significant that at no point in the story we are given any hint about the narrator's origins, his mother and specifically his father, as if it were a deliberate attempt at opening a vacant diegetic space that Kennedy could occupy. He is thus given the role of surrogate father to the young man. As a consequence, because the older man is at the same time his superior - his Principal - and a likely father figure, the younger man is torn between two antagonistic attitudes: on the one hand one of caution and respect in order to safeguard his job and his future and, on the other hand, the necessity of asserting himself as a full-grown man and a competent colleague. Their relationship is biased from the start because of this situation and it comes as no surprise that in the course of the story, he moves from a circumspect, polite, reserved attitude to a gradual distancing from the demands of Kennedy's devouring ego.
- 26 From the outset the narrator is confronted to adults (mostly older men) who cast him up in the part of a son figure. It all starts with Kennedy who gives him practical help in order to have a successful interview with the archdeacon whose favourite fad is to test the trustworthiness of his new teachers. To do so Kennedy warns him that he makes them swallow a large bowl of porridge. He seems to sympathise and adds: "I hope you like porridge. Whether you do or not, you better bolt it back like a man and say it was great" (295) The ambiguity of the word "like" in "like a man" is betrayed shortly after when he rubs it in by saying: "The one thing you have to remember is to address yourself like a boy to the stirabout." (297). He saw the narrator as a young boy in need of help and when

he had said "like a man" he had meant "pretend to be a man" because you are not yet one.

- 27 As for the Archdeacon he openly calls him "son" when the young man responds quite evasively to his query on the functions of the heart: "You'll never be convicted on that answer son, but it has one main business." (297) Conversely, the situation compels him to call the Archdeacon "Father" throughout their conversation and, if it is a well-known social code, it does not prevent McGahern from availing himself of the possibility of adding a symbolic meaning to a perfectly banal form of address in a catholic community.
- 28 This infantilising process is pursued even further on when the rite of initiation performed by the old priest in order to introduce him symbolically to his new function boils down to a sort of quiz. The irony is that the quiz reveals self-centeredness⁹ of the Archdeacon instead of actually assessing the truth of the younger man's vocation. The purpose of the first question about William Bulfin's book *Rambles in Erinn*, is less meant to check the knowledge of the young man, as it is to enable the priest to reminisce about his past and his tour of Ireland on bicycle. Indeed the only thing the trip had taught him was that the west was: "... - a fine dramatic part of the country, but no fit place at all to live, no depth of soil." (296), as if the soil mattered more to him than the people who lived there, as indeed the young man did not so long ago. The second question is a non-verbal one; the priest wants to know whether the young man drinks or not,¹⁰ and therefore raises the whiskey bottle to pour him a glass which the latter knows better than to accept. As for the third question about the business of the heart it is simply meant to be a springboard for the old man to justify his own drinking habits. Eventually the last one is a trick question; by showing him the trick painting the old man has an unfair advantage over the narrator that shows him who really is in control. Altogether the young man appears to have been, like any student, submitted to an exam which, fortunately for him, he passed successfully.
- 29 Yet, for all his desire to comply with the requirements of the two men who rule the institution that is going to employ him, the young man stubbornly stands his ground and refuses to be subservient and to fall into line too easily. When Kennedy wants him to side with him against the union members and ostracize Owen Beirne he answers: "He seemed very decent to me, I refused to give way." (303) Proof of his independence of mind is made textually explicit when he resorts to the same phrase to take his distance from Beirne as well as from Kennedy. When the former warns him that because of his association with the Principal he might find himself blackballed, he exclaims: "I don't mind". Significantly when the latter tells him that he was blackballed because he was in the wrong company, the answer is the same. That he should give one and the same answer to the two rival father figures testifies to his moral strength and independence of mind. He resists the "all or nothing" logic which can only end up in open conflict, and asserts his own personality and choices. By refusing any form of allegiance he keeps his freedom, which does not prevent him from having opinions of his own. In this respect he greatly differs from his Principal who, in spite of the fact that he read *The Independent* actually lost this independence to be symbolically tied to the school and the priests.
- 30 Furthermore, his difference with Kennedy is also revealed when he voices his conception of teaching. How sketchy it may seem, it nevertheless compares favourably with Kennedy's. When Kennedy wants to know why he took up teaching he replies: "I don't know why, [...] 'some notion of service ... of doing good.'" (300) It is far more idealistic and promising than Kennedy's pragmatic insistence on security and money, and he

recoils before the vision of himself as another Kennedy: "Sometimes I shivered at the premonition that days like this might be a great part of the rest of my life: I had dreamed once that through teaching I would help make the world a better place." (299)

- 31 The process of transmission, which the short story illustrates, makes it clear that the events take place at a moment when times are changing. Kennedy and the priest look towards the past. The dotty old priest has nostalgic memories of the days he was ordained and cycled round Ireland, when Kennedy regrets the good old days of his early married life. Both look back to a world where things seemed simpler and try to maintain the illusion that the old order was synonymous with a stable identity that they would like to maintain. Doesn't the Archdeacon exclaim: "I dislike changes." (297) However, Beirne's story of his father and of the tragic misadventures of a fearsome inspector testify that this was never the case, that conflict was always already present. In this light, the young man represents the future of the institution and he means his own future to remain open. That is the reason why he refuses to assent to or dismiss Kennedy's proposal in the concluding paragraph, so that the future remains entirely his own. With the transferring of the surveying job into his hands and the promise of a beautiful wife, with undoubtedly many children and happiness ever after, Kennedy promises him a fairy tale life, but the young man probably realises that there is a price to pay for it: the abdication of all intellectual pursuits.
- 32 In this respect McGahern's use of the acronym INTO that refers to the Union of Teachers is far from being innocent, as it is clear that the simple acronym is also a preposition that encapsulates the problematic of transmission that is at the heart of the story. The alternative left to the young man is clear. Either he opts for integration into the system, safety and the safe materialistic philosophy of Kennedy or he chooses to launch into the more adventurous life of a poet.
- 33 Indeed, contrary to Kennedy who does not seem to have any book in the house the young man is regularly associated with books. First by the Archdeacon who discovers that he knows about *Rambles in Erin*, then by Owen Beirne who engages with him in a literary discussion: "He wanted to know what poets my generation was reading. He seemed unimpressed by the names I mentioned. His own favourite was Horace. 'Sometimes I translate him for fun, as a kind of discipline. I always feel good in spirits afterwards.'" (302) Decidedly, in spite of the drinking problem, Beirne seems to offer a more convincing model to the young man because the spirit¹¹ of culture and beauty has not disappeared from his world. As a result, it is the ironical import of Kennedy's criticism which gives us a clue: "Every penny he has goes on booze or books and some of the books are far from edifying, by all accounts." (303) This is the kind of derogatory remark that Kennedy – a man who presumably prefers to read account books as his critical statement ironically seems to imply – would make if he ever were to read the book entitled *The Pornographer*, (1979) by a new young writer called McGahern. The autobiographical undercurrent that runs through the text confirms that the young narrator is truly a double for McGahern himself if we bear in mind that, like the young narrator, he comes from the West, and the old priest's words seem to echo the very incipit of *Memoir*: "The soil in Leitrim is poor, in places no more than an inch deep. Underneath is daub, a blue-grey modelling clay, or channel, a compacted gravel. Neither can absorb the heavy rainfall." (*Memoir*, 1)
- 34 In this light it seems only fair to assume that the young man in the story who refuses to pledge allegiance to both the conservatism of Kennedy and the professional militancy of Beirne will choose a third way which is the way of artistic creation, and turn into a writer.

To be a writer he needs to retain his freedom of thought and must throw off the heavy chains of conformity and convention that constantly threaten the creative urge. This is precisely what Kennedy was unable to do, shackled as he was by his strictly materialistic outlook on life. The text of the short story, much like the trick painting the narrator is shown at the beginning of the story and which has the function of a "mise-en-abyme", says it clearly through another set of images. "...[T]he heavy iron gates of the presbytery" (296) inevitably suggest the image of a prison, and the chains on which Kennedy insists loudly: "I must have walked half the fields within miles of this town with the chains." (304), conjure up the status of a convict. If Kennedy managed to cope with his mediocrity: "There's nothing to it once you get the knack of the chains" (305) in order to enjoy material success, it is essential that the young man should refuse the (tempting?) offer of the chain to become a true artist. But, when all is said and done, I think we can offer an optimistic interpretation of the story because if Kennedy crossed the line of social solidarity (and his guilt may serve to explain why he tried to atone for it by being relatively¹² generous with the young man), and if the latter refused to toe the line of conformity, he nonetheless did cross the bridge to the other side (gave up teaching and took up writing) so that he could enjoy the freedom of the artist.

- 35 The image of the chain could then be endowed with two antagonistic meanings. On the one hand it is ironical, as it locates Kennedy on the side of surveying, that is applying an abstract map on reality that precludes imagination and fancy, and on the other it is positive as it may suggest that the signifying chain, as the only medium available to the writer, is also the instrument of the freedom of creation and there's no disputing that John McGahern made the most of such freedom. After all, the various chains and lines that kept cropping up in the narrative turn out to be the metaphorical representation of the writer's craft, so that the
- 36 short story is obliquely endowed with a significant reflexive dimension that illustrates the author's elevated conception of his art.

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RÉSUMÉS

The aim of this paper is to show that beneath the surface of the familiar small town world that is represented as the background of the arrival of young teacher to take up his job, and in spite of the subdued tone of the narrative, two major issues are dealt with through the omnipresent issue of symbolic filiation. The first one concerns the duties and privileges of the teaching profession as they are distorted by the young man's would-be mentor Kennedy, who becomes the butt of McGahern's satirical intention. Thanks to the ambivalence of the chain imagery introduced in the very title, the story can also be read as the dramatisation of McGahern's decision to quit the profession and become a writer

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