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Homesickness in John McGahern's short stories "Wheels" and "A slip-up"

Ellen McWilliams

- 1 In Eavan Boland's poem "Mise Eire", a work that represents a transitional moment in Irish literary feminism, Ireland appears as:

land of the Gulf Stream,
the small farm,
the scalded memory (7-9)

- 2 This is a description that resonates powerfully with the pastoral dimensions of the male-centred tradition strongly associated with writers such as W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge, whom Boland seeks to write back to in her work. This landscape, one that is immediately identifiable as Irish in the popular and literary consciousness, has an important place in John McGahern's writing, most particularly in his novels *The Dark* (1965), *Amongst Women* (1990), and *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002). In *Amongst Women*, which is perhaps McGahern's most acclaimed work, the patriarchal Moran defends the boundaries of his farm as if it were a garrison and the family home a fortress, and the small farm becomes a backdrop against which Moran's autocratic control over his family is exercised, and from which his children must escape in order to survive. The "small farm", so often the scene of internecine warfare in Irish literature and culture, receives an alternative treatment in McGahern's short stories, in particular in the stories "Wheels" and "A Slip-up". This article will investigate how these stories evince a relationship with the land that has much to say to that explored in novels such as *Amongst Women*. These stories return to the landscape of the novel and are primarily concerned with dramatizing the longing for, and consequences of, escape from such bleak confinement. The conflict between the need and desire for escape and a real or imaginary return to home is a central feature of these texts. "Wheels" depicts a young man's return from Dublin to his rural home place and his father's heartbreak at his son's refusal to allow him to join him in his new life (although what his father is not aware of is the extent of his son's disappointment and loneliness in the city). In dramatic contrast to *Amongst Women*, the returning son is punished with

silence, not because he has left home, but because he cannot see his way to taking his father with him. "A Slip-up", on the other hand, reveals how the memory of farming life haunts an elderly man who, though he has lived for years in London, remains close to his farm and native place in his imagination. In this story, the anguish and homesickness of the main character is vividly conveyed in the way in which the rituals of the farm, the cycle of living so carefully documented in *Amongst Women*, is replaced by a daily schedule punctuated by shopping trips to Tesco's. These stories respond to the enclosed space of "Great Meadow" in *Amongst Women* in ways that productively complicate the connection with the land so vividly represented in McGahern's work and mark a new development in his reading of rural Ireland in the late twentieth century.

- 3 It is well documented that Irish literature is, in a considerable part, a literature of exile. The attempt to evade "the nets" of "nationality, language, religion" (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 22) made famous by writers such as Joyce and Beckett remains important for more recent Irish writers, who have been compelled to take their place alongside these formidable forebears in a tradition of literary exile. John McGahern, like Edna O'Brien and other writers of their generation, suffered the full weight of the oppressive power of Irish censorship in the 1960s, and was made to leave his post as a school teacher following the publication of *The Dark*, a novel that takes a candid but sensitive view of young male sexuality in rural Ireland. The complicated situation of the Irish in exile (whether imposed or chosen) is a salient feature of discussions of Joyce, as Ireland remains forever at the heart of his work. The complex personal and literary paradigm of exile, laid down by writers such as Joyce, continues to haunt Irish literature and McGahern's work shows very Joycean symptoms of a tension between escape and return, excommunication and reconciliation. His short stories, in particular "Wheels" and "A Slip-up", express this most acutely.
- 4 "Wheels" reconfigures the expected relationship between the exile and those left behind and "A Slip-up" portrays an imaginative longing for a place that no longer exists. Both of these situations are explorations of Irish homesickness or nostalgia as the longed for state is always another place, always out of reach. Such longing is capable of reaching back into the past, as well as into a projected future, and comes to dominate the subject's day-to-day reality. These stories serve, on one level, as a literary counterpoint to the successful, sometimes melodramatic, packaging of nostalgic representations of the Irish past associated with the commercial end of the Irish literary market, but they also lend a new dimension to the representation of home and land in McGahern's own work. In *Amongst Women*, the Moran children's real home is suspended somewhere between London and "Great Meadow", between the meaning of their new lives and their preoccupation with their previous selves: "On the tides of Dublin or London they were hardly more than specks of froth but together they were the aristocratic Morans of Great Meadow, a completed world, Moran's daughters" (2). Their instincts for self-preservation mean that they are driven to escape their father's shadow; Moran controls the household with a megalomaniacal exactitude: "It was not so much that she took things from the house – though his racial fear of the poorhouse or famine was deep – but that she left the house at all. Any constant going out to another house was a threat. In small things it showed" (68).
- 5 Moran's need for absolute control over "small things" is continually displayed in the way that he micro-manages the life of his family until they find the strength to break free from his hold over them. At the same time, in an apparent reversal of this pattern in the second half of the novel, the Moran children's adult lives are punctuated by visits home

as, in spite of their father's tyrannical hold over the house, they cannot resist the lure of home and the thrall of his power.

- 6 The temporal structure of *Amongst Women* is cyclical. The repeated incantation of the rosary and the recurrence of very familiar domestic scenes foreground how time moves in circles, something that is echoed in the perennial round-trips to and from England in the later stages of the novel. While it seems a source of oppression to the Morans when they are young, each of the five children being obliged to contribute a decade of the Rosary (the family is bound together by the very pattern of the sequence of prayers), later on the rituals of home come to represent a much-needed fortification: "Each time they came to Great Meadow they grew again into the wholeness of being the unique and separate Morans" (94). Apart from each other and away from home, they feel unsure of their positions in the world; home guarantees a security, which, though it comes at a price, is absolute.
- 7 "Wheels" depicts another moment of return home, in this case to a small farm in the West of Ireland, where the narrator's father and stepmother subsist in a rapidly disappearing community. Travelling down from Dublin to his native home west of the River Shannon, he is joined by another returning emigrant on his way back from working on a London building site. They unexpectedly find themselves on common ground despite the national difference of their chosen exile; whether Dublin or London, in this story, the metropolitan centre proves to be the imaginative other of the rural landscapes of the West.
- 8 The narrator's father's smallholding, signified by the creamery cans attached to the trailer, and his continued manual labour in old age, contrasts starkly with the citified failure of his son. In spite of his discomfort, the son's return is not without its nostalgic moments, but he can only indulge in them at the end of the visit home, when safely on the train back to Dublin:

I walked through the open carriages. There was nobody I knew. Through the windows the fields of stone walls, blue roofs of Carrick, Shannon river. Sing for them once First Communion Day *O River Shannon flowing and a four-leaved shamrock growing*, silver medal on the blue suit and white ankle socks in new shoes. The farther flows the river the muddier the water: the light was brighter on its upper reaches. Rustle of the boat through the bulrushes as we went to Moran's well for spring water in dry summers, cool of watercress and bitterness of the wild cherries shaken out of the whitethorn hedge [...]. (10-11)

- 9 Fred Davis, in his study *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, suggests that nostalgia offers a means of revisiting and correcting the past:

The proclivity to cultivate appreciative attitudes toward former selves is closely related to nostalgia's earlier-noted tendency to eliminate from memory or, at minimum, severely to mute the unpleasant, the unhappy, the abrasive, and, most of all, those lurking shadows of former selves about which we feel shame, guilt, or humiliation. (37)
- 10 In this story, however, there is no elimination of such "lurking shadows", as the narrator's other predominant memory is of the small but lethal acts of cruelty that his father inflicted upon his stepmother in the days before his father regressed into the infantile role preferred by him in old age. There is no obliteration of the past, no room to rewrite history, as he recalls Rose's disappointment at not being able to have children of her own, and is reminded in excruciating detail of the malice that interrupted the flow of his father's relationship with his stepmother:

The noise of the blow came, she escaping to the fields, losing herself between the tree trunks till she'd grown cold and come in to sit numbly in a chair over the raked fire till morning. [...] The next day he'd dug the potatoes where the sheets hung on the line between the two trees above the ridge, scattering clay on the sheets she'd scrubbed white for hours on the wooden scrubbing-board. (7)

- 11 The exchange between the tearful old man and his son represents a central conflict in the Irish pastoral tradition, one that we are alerted to at the beginning of the story. The story opens with the image of "grey concrete and steel and glass in the slow raindrop of the morning station" (3), an image not so far removed from "the pavements grey" of Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (29). What follows, however, in contrast to Yeats's pastoral dreamscape, is an unflinching look at the realities of subsistence farming in the West of Ireland. The outrage and petulance of the father at his son's apparent reluctance to approve his hopes to live in Dublin is expressed in the terms of a sullen teenager: "I'd give anything to get out of this dump" (9). References to the father's regression recur in the story as he takes up the role of the abandoned child in relation to his son, while his relationship with his wife is increasingly one of complete dependence: "He sat there, her huge old child, soaking his feet in water, protesting like a child. 'It's scalding, Rose,' and she laughed back, 'Go on, don't be afraid.' And when she knelt on the floor, her grey hair falling low, and dried the feet that dripped above the lighted water, I was able to go out without being noticed as she opened the bright razor" (10).
- 12 The son's reply to the father's plea to allow him to be part of his life in Dublin is an inadequate cliché that clutches at popularized images of his home place: "it's quiet and beautiful". The same hollowness came, I was escaping, soothing the conscience as the music did the office" (9). His father's dream of a life in the city resonates with Aaron Santesso's reading of nostalgia and the idea that: "we can be 'nostalgic' for homes we never had and states we never experienced" (14). Santesso's expansion of the definition of nostalgia to include the unknown and the imagined is significant as the true feeling of homesickness manifest in "Wheels" is that of the father for a life beyond his reach.
- 13 McGahern's work shows a sensitive appreciation of rural landscapes in Ireland but is equally fervent in its commitment to representing the realities of the lives lived there. The father's speech in the face of his son's quiet resistance to his plans is an outpouring of anger at the place his son haplessly insists on calling "quiet and beautiful":
- "Quiet as a graveyard," he took up. "And stare at beauty every day and it'll turn sicker than stray vomit. The barracks shut now, a squad car in its place. Sometimes children come to the door with raffle tickets, that's all. But there's plenty of funerals, so busy Mrs McGreevy's coffin last month came out roped on the roof of the bread van, and the way they talked about her was certain proof if proof was needed that nobody seriously believes in an after-life. They were sure they'd never hear the edge of her tongue again either in hell or heaven or the duck-arsed in-between. I'd give anything to get out," he said with passion. (9)
- 14 The old man's angry stream of consciousness is a riposte to his son's refusal of responsibility, but is also a reply to the vocabulary of an earlier Irish literary tradition – the work of Synge and Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival, and the "small cabin" and "bee-loud glade" (28) of Yeats's vision in the pastoral utopia of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree". According to the imaginative paradigm of the Literary Revival, the West of Ireland came to represent Irishness in its most apparently untouched, native form. In the above diatribe, the disconcertingly comic image of the coffin strapped to the bread van and the uncontrolled anger of the old man serve to correct this in ways that are more direct and explicit than the descriptions of the vicissitudes of farm life in *Amongst Women*.

It has, perhaps, more in common with McGahern's unflinching representation of the brutality of rural life in the West of Ireland in his later novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, in which he depicts the mistreatment of the indentured farm labourers. "Wheels" portrays the realities of rural poverty in similarly uncompromising ways.

15 According to Davis's definition of nostalgia, it is an inherently conservative response to the flux and change of life: "It reassures us of past happiness and accomplishment and, since these still remain on deposit, as it were, in the bank of our memory, it simultaneously bestows upon us a certain current worth, however much present circumstances may obscure it or make it suspect" (34). The relationship between the father and son depicted in "Wheels" goes against the grain of this definition as the nostalgic investment on the part of the father is in a place that is as yet unfamiliar to him and, in the case of the son, it is a painful reminder of failed promise: "all the vivid sections of the wheel we watched so slowly turn, impatient for the rich whole that never came but that all the preparations promised" (11).

16 If in "Wheels" the old man's relationship with his farm is that of an indentured servant, desperate for escape, "A Slip-up" explores a very different, and even opposite dynamic. Davis describes the importance of nostalgia to creating and sustaining narratives of selfhood:

If, as I have maintained, nostalgia is a distinctive way, though only one among several ways we have, of relating our past to our present and future, it follows that nostalgia (like long-term memory, like reminiscence, like daydreaming) is deeply implicated in the sense of who we are, what we are about, and (though possibly with much less inner clarity) whither we go. In short, nostalgia is one of the means – or, better, one of the more readily accessible psychological lenses – we employ in the never-ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities. (31)

17 In some ways, "A Slip-up" speculates beyond the ending of "Wheels" to the life of an elderly Irish man who has left his farm for London. It also illustrates Davis's point that daydreaming is an effective medium for the expression of nostalgic sentiment as the main character, Michael, loses himself in an alternative world long past. The couple's address, 37B Ainsworth Road (in Hackney in London's East End), and Michael's regular trips to "The Royal" for a pint of Bass, is suggestive of a respectable but modest immigrant existence in London. The careful timetable of the couple's life, that ferries them from one day to the next, is interrupted by an incident where Michael has a momentary lapse and is inadvertently left behind at the supermarket. Indeed, the local Tesco's – a place of daily pilgrimage – is mentioned on every page, conveying a sense of the importance of the shopping ritual in the structure of their lives. What his wife, Agnes, doesn't realize is that, for Michael, their daily routine is blurred with another: with his day-to-day work on the farm they left behind. We learn, near the beginning of the story, that:

Every morning since he retired, except when he was down with that winter flu, Michael walked with Agnes to Tesco's, and it brought him the feeling of long ago when he walked round the lake with his mother, potholes and stones of the lane, the boat shapes at intervals in the long lake wall to allow the carts to pass one another when they met, the oilcloth shopping bag he carried for her in the glow of chattering as he walked in the shelter of her shadow. Now it was Agnes who chattered as they walked to Tesco's, and he'd no longer to listen, any response to her bead of talk had long become nothing but an irritation to her; and so he walked safely in the shelter of those dead days, drawing closer to the farm between the lakes that they had lost. (128-29)

- 18 The two landscapes – the city of London and home in the West of Ireland – merge, as Michael gives himself up to his homesick fantasy.
- 19 Michael suffers symptoms of a phenomenon that received much attention from an earlier generation of Irish writers who warned of the half-life that homesickness of this kind is capable of creating. George Moore's short story "Home Sickness", in his collection *The Untilled Field* (1903), depicts a character similarly lifted out of the present by memories of home. He returns to Ireland from New York and is seduced by the Irish countryside, but soon discovers that "home" is the place that is always out of reach. Having returned to his life in New York, he finds, late in life, that the memory of Ireland comes back to haunt him: "The bar room was forgotten and all that concerned it, and the things he saw most clearly were the green hillside, and the bog lake and the rushes about it, and the greater lake in the distance, and behind it the blue lines of wandering hills" (34). If Moore's work explores the complexities of perpetual displacement, his contemporary George Bernard Shaw is more directly damning of such sentimental attachment to place. *John Bull's Other Island* (1904) is particularly suspicious of the sentiment of the "melancholy Kelt" of the English imagination: "the dreaming! the dreaming! the torturing, heartscalding never satisfying dreaming [...] An Irishman's imagination never lets him alone, never convinces him, never satisfies him" (130). Throughout Shaw's play, this "dreaming" is shown to damage the capacity of the characters to function in real life. In "A Slip-up", Michael faces a similar dilemma; he steels himself against the city and, as he waits for his wife outside Tesco's, slightly dazed by the "brands and bright lights" of the supermarket, he makes an imaginary return home as a way of denying his present circumstances. The incongruity of the references to "Tesco's", immediately identifiable as a very modern British superbrand, and the reference to the aristocratic "Sir John Cass" of the school where he worked as a caretaker, makes his daily interior journey home all the more poignant as he attempts to retrieve the past through memory:

The farm that they lost when they came to London he'd won back almost completely since he retired. He'd been dismayed when he retired as caretaker of the Sir John Cass School to find how much the farm had run down in the years he'd been a school caretaker. Drains were choked. The fields were full of rushes. The garden had gone wild, and the hedges were invading the fields. But he was too old a hand to rush at things. Each day he set himself a single task. The stone wall was his pride, perhaps because it was the beginning. (129)

- 20 When, one morning, his wife accidentally leaves the supermarket without him, he continues to reclaim the farm in his mind and the fatigue he feels standing alone outside the supermarket becomes the tiredness of a man hungry after a day in the fields. While Michael stands, abandoned like a lost child, clutching his empty shopping bag, his younger, vital self continues the work that gave his life most meaning. McGahern successfully modifies Moore and Shaw's reading of homesickness in an Irish context. On one level, the old man's "slip-up" creates tension at home because of the unspoken fear of senility. At the same time, his interior journey home supports his life in the present, a life summed up by trips to the supermarket and bottles of Bass drunk in the same pub at the same time every day. His return to the farm in his mind is a moment of release that reinvigorates the present – it is only when the co-existence of his two worlds is troubled by the intrusion of the present upon the past that this equilibrium is disturbed.
- 21 These stories, in different ways, appeal very directly to the "scalded memory" of Eavan Boland's poem. The connection to home, reliant as it is on an attachment to the land, is of central interest in these texts. They explore respectively the longing for escape and

return that is a perennial anxiety in McGahern's work. This dynamic has a cyclical structure in *Amongst Women* in the characters' escape from but inevitable retreat to the home place and the self-contained family unit. "Wheels" and "A Slip-up" dramatize the two most crucial moments in this cycle, as the first engages with the paradigm of exile so powerfully associated with the Irish literary tradition, and the second envisions the loss of the land as a state of bereavement, a moment of finality from which return is only possible through imaginary reconnection.

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RÉSUMÉS

This article focuses on two stories by John McGahern, "Wheels" and "A Slip-up", and investigates how they relate to the representation of home and place in McGahern's novel *Amongst Women* (1990). It explores how the stories take up some of the most pressing concerns in *Amongst Women* in the way that they productively complicate the powerful connection with the land so vividly rendered in McGahern's work

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