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Introduction

Željka Doljanin and Máire Doyle

When John McGahern died in 2006 he did not bequeath a particularly large body of work. Written across five decades, his published work comprised six novels, three collections of stories, a memoir, two volumes of collected stories and one play – an adaptation of Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness*. He also scripted a number of radio and television adaptations. Reviews, essays and other prose pieces were brought together in an edited collection after his death.[1]

McGahern's relatively small literary output may be accounted for by his creative imperative and his commitment to style. He once said that 'rather than write novels or stories I write to see'.[2] This perception of writing as an act of seeing, of discovery or self-discovery, did not lend itself to a steady flow of finished work – or work that he was satisfied with. McGahern continuously refined and edited his work, believing that it was the writer's primary duty to write well. This commitment to the precision and refinement of style which, for McGahern, underpinned the writer's search for the elusive image, was evident in his earliest publishing experience: having found a publisher (Faber & Faber) for his first novel, 'The End or the Beginning of Love', he made the unusual and courageous decision to withdraw it, feeling dissatisfied with its quality. He offered in its place *The Barracks*, an extract from which won the prestigious AE[3] Memorial award from the Arts Council, and which won the Macauley Fellowship on its full publication. Much of the content of the unpublished novel, parts of which had been published in *X: A Quarterly Review*, later emerged in a refined form in his next novel, *The Dark*. McGahern also later rewrote the second half of his third novel, *The Leavetaking*, and republished it ten years after it first appeared.

The banning of *The Dark*, his quiet refusal to make a fuss about it (although he grieved in exile) and his subsequent return to Ireland in the

early 1970s rendered him a radical and courageous writer among peers and younger aspiring authors who also sought to emulate the particular exactitude and scrutiny of his prose. On the occasion of McGahern's death, Seamus Heaney said that he had established 'standards of artistic excellence and personal integrity that worked silently and strongly within the entire literary community'.[4]

Paula Meehan, who was inspired by McGahern in the formative years of her own career, pays homage to McGahern with a poem and a memoir piece included in this collection.

John McGahern is one of those writers whose work continues to be appreciated across a range of readerships. This appreciation has its source in the quiet, calm authority, the steady, patient hand of his writing, working always towards the vision which he describes as 'that still and private world which each of us possesses and which others cannot see'.[5] But McGahern's particular skill is that in striving to see he reveals, often with startling clarity, that private world. Only within that private world, the world of the self, can authority be claimed. It is the authority that young Mahoney aspires to in the closing stages of *The Dark* when, recognising the futility of seeking licence for his life from external sources, he retreats into a known world so that he may emerge again to find his own authority – his own 'state of mind'. For McGahern this is the task both of the writer and of the human being.

As a writer who eschewed the notion of himself as 'artist' he addressed his task through a commitment to style, what he called the 'revelation of the personality through language'.[6] Like Joyce, he also rarely gave his characters language that could not be claimed as their own, even when, like the dying Elizabeth Reegan in *The Barracks*, they struggle towards understanding. There is irony in young Mahoney's optimistic hope that authority may even manifest itself as 'calmness … in the face of the turmoil of your own passing',[7] but it is a calmness that has already been found in the character of the dying Elizabeth in McGahern's first novel. Like Elizabeth, young Mahoney too will have to find his way out of the dark into his own understanding of the world and his place in it. McGahern believed that this 'revelation of the personality through language' was best demonstrated by Joyce and Flaubert, whose writing he admired for its lack of judgement and self-expression.[8] However, in this detachment, this lack of self-expression and the full dedication to the exactitude of prose out of which the reader himself draws what is implied, McGahern saw the only possible way of achieving truth and authority. Within his own brand of realism, his writing derives authority from a similar detachment and ability to view the familiar with a curiosity of an outsider, yet with a sense of particular closeness to the subject – what

Declan Kiberd aptly defines as 'a combination of felt intimacy and achieved distance'.[9]

While he was neither determinedly nor deliberately a chronicler of social and cultural change, there is no doubt that McGahern's novels and stories are suffused with the consciousness and values of the time. His work acts as a form of poetic record of the middle and late decades of the twentieth century in a way that speaks to both individual and collective memories, while also addressing the transition to modernity. In his assessment of the modern Irish novel George O'Brien identified John McGahern as part of a new generation of Irish writers that emerged in the post-war period who were more concerned with narratives of individual rather than of national sovereignty.[10] O'Brien considers that the work of McGahern, along with that of Brian Moore, Aidan Higgins, and Edna O'Brien, demonstrated 'increased emphases on sexuality, passion and emotional life; on the existence of an autonomous, distinctive, conditioning-resistant inner life; on the presence of the spirit, not understood in religious or sectarian terms but more humanistically as a matter of energies, hungers and drives'.[11] The underlying universality of this very particular exploration of the human condition means that his work consistently transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

Despite the fact that McGahern's work had won awards and been held in high esteem by other writers since he first emerged as a published author in 1963, it did not begin to receive the critical attention it deserved until Denis Sampson's seminal study, *Outstaring Nature's Eye*, was published in 1993. The publication of Sampson's insightful and comprehensive book followed the 1990 nomination, and short-listing, of McGahern's fifth novel, *Amongst Women*, for the Booker Prize. For many readers, critics and other writers this novel was McGahern's ultimate stylistic achievement: he had, it seemed, found the perfect words. McGahern's next (and final) novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, marked a turn outward – away from the 'pool of Narcissus' that had hindered characters' journeys towards their place in the world in earlier work. The last novel and a number of late short stories continue his scrutiny of the individual's relationship to one's environment, but the focus shifts from the private to the public, or common, realm, and the yearning for self-knowledge through others – through the broader community of mankind – is explored.

The literary criticism that has emerged since Sampson's first book, and particularly since McGahern's death, underpins McGahern's status as an exceptional writer of rare vision who wrote with startling lucidity and moral clarity. This vision could be realised only through painstaking attention to detail, and McGahern shared with Henry James the belief that 'responsible lucidity can be wrested from [the darkness] only by

painful, vigilant effort, the intense scrutiny of particulars'.[12] It is this 'intense scrutiny', allied to a depth and breadth of vision, that invites interest from a broad readership that includes general readers, scholars from a variety of disciplines and prose writers from diverse cultural backgrounds. This collection harnesses that interest by inviting contribution by literary critics (new voices alongside well-established scholars turning to McGahern for the first time), as well as creative writers and academics from fields such as history, sociology and education. The critical diversity achieved offers the reader fresh readings of McGahern's work and influence through a variety of perspectives, interpretations and theoretical and critical approaches, whether the topics chosen address familiar themes in McGahern criticism or have not been previously explored.

This kind of analytical diversity could be achieved only through an essay collection. Since Sampson's first book, McGahern criticism has largely been configured around a number of scholarly monographs, which continue to be produced: three alone in 2016.[13] Since McGahern's death, monographs on Catholicism (Maher), his early writing life and influences (Sampson), memory (McCarthy), imagination and tradition (van der Ziel), modernism (Robinson) and McGahern's classical style (Shovlin) have been published. While these books demonstrate a sustained academic interest in McGahern's writing and provide scholars with an opportunity to assess his oeuvre in its entirety, and in a specific context, they attest to the depth, but not necessarily the breadth, of interest in his work.

Although our contributors have come to McGahern from different interests and disciplines, convergences between the themes of their essays are evident. McGahern's work was often concerned with the debilitating personal and societal legacy of the struggle towards national and self-determination, and three essays in the collection seek to respond to this struggle in their exploration of the post-revolutionary space and the lingering aftermath of a movement that promised so much. Nicholas Allen (Chapter 3) focuses on the physical landscape to show how the inadequacy of the State that emerged after 1922 is reflected in the characters' shifting relationship with the landscape, to which they are often very attached, even though the connection has been made vulnerable through trauma and painful memory. Allen is interested in how McGahern represents the after-effects of this trauma by using images of motion and water, particularly in *Amongst Women*, to suggest that, despite the seeming isolation and detachment of places like Great Meadow, these images of movement and fluidity actually point to a growing and unavoidable connection between the individual and the changing world.

Roy Foster (Chapter 4) further explores this sense of resentment and disillusionment in McGahern's novels, drawing parallels between the

revolutionary memories of McGahern's protagonists and McGahern's own family experience. These protagonists, in *Amongst Women* and *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, voice a generational anger and distrust of the new regime which, Foster suggests, reflects the resentment expressed in the literature of disillusionment of the 1920s and 1930s. Similarly touching on memory and the ways in which events are remembered, mythologised and commemorated, in his philosophical reading Ciaran Ross (Chapter 5) draws attention to the unresolved ethical issues now at the heart of the legacy of revolutionary Ireland. In his study of the relationship between Joe Ruttledge and Jimmy Joe McKiernan in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, undertaken through the lens of Levinas's theory of the 'other', Ross explores the place of an 'ethics of violence' in late twentieth-century Ireland – and beyond.

With a different emphasis on the 'other', Catriona Clutterbuck (Chapter 11) addresses the issue of the (an)other life – the afterlife. In a detailed study, Clutterbuck's excavation of both novels and stories opens the collection to the innate spirituality of McGahern's vision. Clutterbuck challenges existing ideas of the afterlife and transcendence in a deeply thought-provoking essay.

Educationalist Kevin Williams (Chapter 8) mines interviews, essays and *Memoir* for accounts of, and reflections on, McGahern's educational experience. Williams juxtaposes McGahern's institutionalised education with the more informal, but deeply meaningful and influential, exposure to his physical and religious environment through the guidance of his mother. Williams demonstrates how McGahern's schooling and broader educational experience shaped his sensibility, his view of himself and of the world.

Tom Inglis's essay (Chapter 9) offers a sociological reading of McGahern's representations of love, courtship and sex. Drawing on a few key texts, Inglis aims to show how McGahern chronicles and dramatises cultural shifts and attitudes in twentieth-century Ireland, particularly the sometimes fraught transition from a repressed, traditional, Catholic society to one striving towards a more fully formed sense of self and more open to the pursuit of love, passion and sexual pleasure. Marital love and its complexities form the core of Máire Doyle's exploration (Chapter 10) of how McGahern's final works of fiction – his final novel and last two published short stories – may be read together as a way of understanding the trajectory of his late vision. Through the prism of different kinds of relationships Doyle questions the role marriage plays in the search for authenticity and a way to be in the world.

The playwright Frank McGuinness (Chapter 12) provides an intriguing comparison between McGahern and Flannery O'Connor, a chronicler of

the deep American South, known for her economical, dead-pan, reportorial style. Yet McGuinness ably reveals the striking similarities to be found when the stories are read in the context of Catholic origins. The essay illustrates how two stories so diverse in style, but sharing an underlying current of brutality, demonstrate their respective authors' preoccupation with a human propensity towards evil.

Through a close reading of 'Oldfashioned', a story that explores displacement and cultural shifts, David Clare (Chapter 7) considers McGahern's representation of a Protestant family in a small Irish community. He argues that McGahern, through a series of subtle references, pays homage to the Anglo-Irish cultural tradition and its literary cannon, thus going above cultural divides to emphasise a series of cross-cultural connections in place of the notion of a 'separate' or 'estranged' Anglo-Irish community. Consideration of strangeness and otherness lies at the heart of Željka Doljanin's essay (Chapter 6), which puts McGahern's *That They May Face the Rising Sun* into the context of other novels and stories written in Ireland during and after the Celtic Tiger. Doljanin juxtaposes fiction that includes immigrant characters with McGahern's novel of quiet rural life, to suggest that McGahern, even though he writes of a monocultural world, is deeply invested in and curious about the idea of foreignness and the complexity of migrant experience.

In his insightful essay on McGahern and modernism, Tom Walker (Chapter 2) removes McGahern from the familiar surrounds of Leitrim and Dublin and situates him in the very different and exuberant cultural milieu of the 1950s and 1960s London, particularly amongst the writers and artists associated with the magazine *X: A Quarterly Review*. Walker examines McGahern's nascent career, his first publications in *X* and his early prose writings, and reads these in the context of newly researched correspondence between editors and contributors to the magazine. In this in-depth study Walker reveals much about McGahern's reception of modernism and the shaping of his views on the role of the artist and the relationship between art and reality.

The pieces from Linden MacIntyre (Chapter 13), Paula Meehan (Chapter 14) and Melvyn Bragg (Chapter 15) together form a more personal response to McGahern and his work. As creative writers, MacIntyre and Meehan explore McGahern's art and influence on their own artistic development, while Melvyn Bragg invites us to meet and appreciate an emerging talent. MacIntyre draws parallels between his own childhood in a village on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia (a region with strong Scottish and Irish tradition) and the formative years of Seamus Heaney, McGahern and the Scottish Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean to examine the role of their insular formation and their burdensome histories on the shaping of their identities.

MacIntyre questions to what extent this kind of insular life often implies a sense of inferiority.

Paula Meehan remembers the Galway of 1979, when she, a poet-in-making, was a chosen participant at the National Writers' Workshop, conducted by John McGahern. In a thoughtful piece Meehan recalls McGahern's strong voice, his views on the practice of writing and the accompanying isolation, his sound advice, his fondness of apparently random connections and synchronicities; but above all she brings us closer to McGahern the kindly mentor, and the McGahern that her generation saw as the 'trailblazer' and the 'groundbreaker'. Finally, in a short, 'parting' piece, Melvyn Bragg brings us back to 1966, when he sought McGahern out for a BBC television interview. A friendship was formed and Bragg leaves us with vivid pictures of days and nights in London and Dublin of the 1960s, of McGahern the great conversationalist in the London pubs, the knowledgeable guide in the labyrinth of Dublin streets – a vigorous McGahern, fierce yet generous, greatly talented yet appreciative and encouraging.

Stanley van der Ziel's 2004 valuable interview with McGahern (Chapter 16) brings this collection to an end. The interview also brings together many of the topics covered by our contributors – McGahern's literary influences, his style, critical writing, his views on painting, on ritual, Dublin circles of the 1960s and the process of 'getting the words right'.

A decade after McGahern's death, these essays came out of an endeavour to probe and reassess how McGahern's legacy and his standing among contemporary audiences might be defined; out of a need to re-interpret or re-affirm the singularity of his vision; and out of a continuing need to explore and re-appreciate the many levels and nuances of his fiction. Although the essays in this collection offer a diversity of interests and critical approaches, they are united in reading McGahern as an important writer whose work continues to invite a wealth of new interpretations and analyses – a testament to the sustained and unfaltering relevance and resonance of his art.

Notes

1 See John McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).
2 Denis Sampson, 'A conversation with John McGahern', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies,* 17:1 (1991), p. 13.
3 Irish writer George William Russell wrote under the pseudonym AE.
4 A tribute from Seamus Heaney following the death of John McGahern on 30 March 2006. See 'The Tributes: the King is Dead', *Irish Times* (31 March

2006). Available at: www.irishtimes.com/news/the-tributes-the-king-is-dead-1.1290022 (accessed 14 June 2016).

5 John McGahern, 'The image (1991)', in *Love of the World: Essays*, p. 7, previously published as 'The image: prologue to a reading at the Rockefeller University' (1968), in *Honest Ulsterman*, 8 (1968), p. 10 and revised for inclusion in a special edition of the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* (1991).

6 John McGahern, 'What is my language?', *Love of the World: Essays*, p. 263.

7 John McGahern, *The Dark* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965).

8 See John McGahern, 'Dubliners', *Love of the World: Essays*, pp. 200–7.

9 Declan Kiberd, 'John McGahern's *Amongst Women*', in Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland (eds), *Language and Tradition in Ireland: Continuities and Displacements* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), p. 199.

10 George O'Brien, 'Contemporary prose in English', in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (eds), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, *Vol. 2, 1890–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 426.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 428.

12 Henry James. 'Preface', Preface to *What Maisie Knew*, ed. Paul Theroux (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 30.

13 See Select Bibliography for details.