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Gone for Good? The theme of the Emigrant in John McGahern's novel

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As someone, a poet myself, who has been drawn to McGahern's work because of his faultless ear for language, I have also found an over-all trajectory. or story which could explain his popularity with a very wide readership. . Like E.M. Forster, the usual or common reader likes a story, but in McGahern the story is not usually linear, nor a straightforward narrative.

Commentators on McGahern's prose have traced in him parallels with his mentor Joyce, perhaps his fidelity to the speech of his locality being his most prominent cue from the master. McGahern belongs also to the symbolist and poetic tradition, and to modernism. I have been struck also not only with parallels with Joyce from the almost uncanny accuracy of his reported speech, but also from the mainsprings of his art tending to be circular, which, like a commodious vicus of recirculation, come back and revisit the same themes. However, the difference is that McGahern, in his work as a writer over the years, moves from death to life, from darkness to light, and his latest novel, from season to season. This novel shows his sure hand in evoking the daytime world of light and love more than any of his previous works, what Heaney calls "the daylight art" of poetics being most prominent on the page.

The narrative voice has many threads, including dialogue, but the one that records nature in an almost naturalistic way, and the dispassionate often wry tone of the commentator that records events, are uppermost. They are intertwined imperceptibly, save that the thread of narrative in this novel is more pronounced, and like his earlier works, can be linked to 19th century naturalism, or at times be compared to Proust in his evanescence and effects, sometimes even, like in the first paragraph of “The Barracks, the reader finding naturalistic descriptions of the interior and exterior more akin to painting and to the visual than either prose or poetry.

Just as Proust found an absence at times more telling than a presence, there is a theme at the edge of the story which McGahern circulates around, and I suggest that the theme is a story of emigration

All the human characters have a thumbnail, sketchy presence, suggested rather than stated, like a puff of wind, their history only hinted at, at first, then told in a circular motion. Like the lake itself, the consciousness of the characters does not meet with otherness, at times, their own remarks and feelings are like a wind across the lake, and are reflected in the weather or in the change of light or seasonal effects, tending to gather at the edges with a density and darkness as at the end of the day.

McGahern does not engage with the mythological as thoroughly as Joyce did, partly, I suggest, because he was still using the accoutrements of realism and naturalism, albeit consciously, as focal points marked for discourse in the circular narrative of the

lake. His symbolism is not clouded with doing work outside its concourse or its place, as it is closely interwoven with the naturalistic threads to tell the stories of lambing, harvesting, fairs, festive celebrations, and the daily round.

It would be unjust however, with this book, to view McGahern as a bucolic novelist, since in his characterizations he is totally a modernist. He grew to maturity as a novelist at a time of great social change, in the latter half of the 20th century, at a time of a search for justice in other parts of the world, where people were defined by socialist aims and propaganda., his main challenges, therefore, often lie in exposing these questions which lie beneath the surface, like his treatment of the IRA character Jimmy Joe McKiernan. What is interesting about McGahern apart from his acknowledged skills as being a masterful prose stylist, is that he lives out these conflicts in his stories, without couching them in the language of criticism or social commentary. What characterizes his novels, and his characters is often that the most fundamental things are left unsaid.

This novel is primarily a novel of what constitutes happiness, the emigrant's plight and inability to return to his community pointing up the unhappiness. Early on in the novel, McGahern reflects, through his character Joe Rutledge, on the nature of happiness:

”As he listened to the two voices he was so attached to and thought back to the afternoon, the striking of the clocks, the easy, pleasant company, the walk around the shore, with a rush of feeling he felt this must be happiness. As soon

as the thought came to him, he fought it back, blaming the whiskey. The very idea was as dangerous as presumptive speech: happiness could not be sought or worried into being, or even fully grasped; it should be allowed its own slow pace so that it passes unnoticed, if it ever comes at all. “ (192)

McGahern is existential in a way that Joyce is not, for example, his statement that “things just happen” in this novel is not what it appears to be at face value, a statement, but rather the statement itself is a kind of metafiction. Qua statement, it is not elaborated upon, but comes up against several instances where things *don't* just happen. What occurs in the novel are key moments when the suggestion of subjectivity in a character meets that of another character, and through that meeting, which offers possibilities for ethical exchange, engagement or responsibility, the opportunity for ethical resolution is made, or lost, as if, to all intents and purposes the characters have not been fully engaged with each other but instead have met all challenges in a purely selfish way. That is a kind of realism. The characters, to live in peace, must accept the compromises that living in a community bring with it. There are also acts of omission which have consequences for the story, profound consequences.

We do not know much of what the Ruttledge's did in London, other than they worked for the same firm of copyrighters. It is lightly alluded to as the occasion of their first meeting. They still survive on the work they are given from this foreign firm, so back in Ireland they are successful one time exiles, returned to the quiet life where they also do some farming. There is no reflection in this part on the world far away which has an impact on the community, beyond the fact that it furnishes the necessary economic underpinning of their household. It is indicated that at times it was difficult to manage, it

seems Rutledge's manliness is challenged by his wife's assumption that things were indeed difficult at the beginning. What marks subjects out for social discourse, however, are the level at which they impinge on the community, whether as comedy or tragedy. The inner dialogue goes unspoken most of the time. For whatever reason, the reader is not invited, unlike in "The Pornographer", to read any of the extracts from Rutledge's work, or hear much about Kate's artistic endeavours.

The story of the Shah's courtship is one where a larger silence is veiled by one remark - which will change everything for the Shah's girlfriend of nine years: when her mother dies, her brothers make it clear they want to marry, which would entail her leaving home. The Shah knows this, that this is the moment to propose and honour the relationship with its obligations. However, all he says in response to her fear of going to America, is that he is afraid many are going to end up there. The author makes the observation that never was a door so completely closed. The same words are used when Kate, Rutledge's wife, is offered more work in London - again, the closing of a door is mentioned "and it was not a pleasant sound even though she herself was doing the closing." (187) But perhaps the novel's real impact lies in another kind of silence, the silence of complicity in creating insiders and outsiders, like the silence that will not allow Johnny the emigrant back into his community.

On these occasions, where subjectivity meets with alterity, the engagement gives way to nihilism, showing that silence and absence of action have a result, even though things may appear to just happen. The lack of ethical balance is mirrored in the lake's

sudden agitations. In this way, I find that the absence of Johnny the emigrant from the main narrative actually underpins the whole story. If the story is about Nature, or the lake, then in this story, Nature has no conscience.

Many commentators have spoken this book and found the lake itself as being the real character in the novel. Of course, the lake is where myth begins, and where by a variety of means, it is circumambulated. It is also where reality is conjured up, where the sense of belonging is total in the everyday. The lake does have a central part in the unfolding of the narrative, as it links its seasonal changes, particularly the weather, to set reactions.

The novel opens with news of the exile Johnny's return, and before the first chapter we have learned how failure in love has marked him.. As in "The Barracks", the progress of time was marked day by day in suffering, here it is almost a ritual where the suffering is at the edge of the story, and not articulated directly.

Ritual could be said to take the place of reality, indeed this tactic shows us how contingent "reality" often is. . The rural scenes are marked by the inhabitants ritualizing the recurring visit of Johnny each summer, where he and Patrick Ryan meet together in song. The singing and dancing mark their hostility and is a cover for the fighting they are engaged in underneath. It is reminiscent of primordial energy more characteristic of primitive peoples. The meeting with Johnny Rowley's car, the quick conveyance to the table with the expected sirloin to mark the occasion, all are rigid motifs in a play where

the theme of estrangement is played down and masked by the exteriors of given and habitual gestures to cover over the abyss of non being and unreality that mark the exile's life apart from the people he grew up with.

The state of happy return from emigration is declared by the Ruttledges, who because they do not fear going back to London, can articulate the desolation at the heart of Johnny's exile. To the question: What do you find wrong with England? Ruttledge answers: "Nothing, but it's not my country and I never feel its quite real or that my life there is real. You never feel responsible or fully involved in anything that happens. It's like being present but a real part of you is happily absent." (20)

For mateless Johnny it was the lonely struggle of to keep his identity, something which is wrested from him daily by a huge and grasping metropolis, the time quickly stolen from him on the assembly lines, the lonely journeying to Jessie Connors in Birmingham for Christmas, that marks the author's engagement with the story of emigration. It is the only allusion to the so called Christian duty of charity, which is given only lip service, as in all McGahern's books. Joe Ruttledge is not a believer, even though it might mean greater acceptance from the community if he went to Mass. Kate is an atheist. Therefore the social value of Christianity in this writer is very muted. Only in summer can Johnny resume his former identity and return to his own place. It is a tragedy for Johnny that he cannot return to stay. The desire of the neighbours not to infringe on the reality of Johnny's predicament and his relationship with his family is a form of prudent tact. Declan Kiberd has suggested, in an essay in the Irish University's

Review last year dedicated to McGahern's work, that tact and trust are what marks a community. One never knows when one will need someone in the community, and therefore not to interfere is best from the long term view, in that the cooperation of those who stayed behind might be more urgently needed than those geographically unable to be of immediate assistance. They may as well be Gone for Good.

The loss of confidence in the spirit and permanence of the community is a felt indicator in McGahern, as it is in nearly every Irish writer of this period, even after a hundred years after the Famine. But he is not a typical writer of the Diaspora, since Johnny's emigration was not necessary. Therefore the tone is muted somewhat. The incipient lack of balance in Johnny's relationship with the community is perhaps a delicate way of maintaining the status quo, and their acquiescence in a cruel fate brought about by the accident of love and the resulting story of emigration. The primordial nature of love, and the giving and withholding of nourishment – these rub together in the personality of the villagers, making them unable to be truly carefree and welcoming, making them unable to react to Johnny's *amour fou* other than by cautious and unrelieved disdain, though covert. Their deeply felt cynicism marks the silent despair, and reminds us of the protagonist of an earlier novel by McGahern, particularly the father in "The Dark". Except here it lives at the edge of the narrative.

However it is because Johnny has rejected them, by refusing the common assumptions about his girlfriend and his inability to see through her, by the fact that his emigration was not necessary is insulting to their own sense of viability and a reproach to

them which they will never allow to be said but which underlies their attitude. They think him foolish indeed, from shooting his two dogs to his wild goose chase after the girl to England.

But sometimes things happen, or are allowed to happen, out of silence. The turning point in the story is when the time comes for Johnny to retire, and he longs to return to his native place. His sister in law is rendered sleepless at the request, and she goes to Rutledge who writes a letter putting Johnny off. Therefore Rutledge himself, for all his intended passivity in the role of unhappiness, is himself precipitated into action which will affect another's happiness. It is an action in which all the participants are seen as selfish. But this is what Johnny has to realize, he can't go back, even though his situation in England is becoming more and more difficult as he grows older. He longs for re-absorption into the community but they will not grant him that easily. They are content to try and exorcise their fears that nothing has changed, that he is really fine in the other country, doing well without too much being asked or expected, surviving on the periphery of his identity and on the cheap change of being Irish in Britain, where his existence is compounded with the hard faced identity of IRA bombers, at worst, or tourists, at best. He has become a fiction to his own community, a fiction fed by his annual visits which do not deviate from the agreed on pattern. And he ends by becoming a fiction to himself, as he parodies the letter saying how much better off he is in England. He has become a character out of his own story, existing only to entertain, or placate the consciences of the village. As soon as he demands some sort of reciprocity ranks are closed. People do not want to move out of their comfort zone, and confront the reality of

failure, for that would imply they might be able to do something about it. Or that they had failed, perhaps in more significant ways but these ways are not mentioned, for example, by not developing themselves beyond the neighbourhood. Again their lack of acceptance of Johnny mirrors their own lack of confidence, typical of the generations which grew up after the famine.

He is gone for good. That means permanently, and it means his leaving the community must be seen by them to be a good. He has lost face, and his loss of face is irretrievable. Even a single deviation from the ritual of his annual visit, the request he be allowed to stay at home is met with a detached and ironic cruelty, symbolized by the cut off quality of his relationship with his in-laws.

The implacability of nature is mirrored in the story of Johnny's exile.. It is a Darwinian reading of Nature, where a man like John Quinn glories in the masculine will to power by deflowering his bride in public. No one says anything, he is accepted because his will to power and mastery is stronger than love. just as it is in Nature. The strength of Nature has a real hold over their imaginations. It is the survival of the fittest where couples like the Ruttledges are well placed and their financial independence protects them from being too demanding of the community. Success does not have to trumpet forth, unlike Johnny, who bears the mark of sexual disappointment for having declared himself and followed the woman to England without making sure of her affections. For that he is a permanent exile from a country where conservative values are strong. That is the exile's unforgivable sin. To put love before prosperity and work, to

chase after someone who is treating him badly – the village knows well that this is no way for a man to survive and once he has cut loose, he can never come back in Johnny did not leave out of necessity, but like all those who have left the idyll, or fairy tale for the grand ambition of the city are somehow failures. They have failed in the eyes of their compatriots in the community, because by emigrating they have in some sense outraged the common assumption that each life in the village is irreplaceable and from that viewpoint, beyond criticism. He threatens their idea of survival so profoundly that they can never entertain him seriously ever again as a person with a stake in the community.

The least successfully adapted, Johnny is excluded from being a serious contender, absent from dialogue, engaging only in ritual as primitive source. In this way he belongs entirely to the global village of modern times, part of the dispossessed and uprooted. Putting love before prosperity marked him as a permanent stranger to his own people. Success is the criterion - “You could have been on the pig’s back if you stayed here” said Patrick, Ryan, (80), playing with him in song to put at bay a hostility towards what is strange for him would be quite a lonely place to be, not feeling real most of the time one could say.

McGahern does not strive to show us what is beyond time, what lies invisibly at the centre of the lake, only that there will be clouds reflected, mist will be formed, wild birds will come and nest, and all will change with the seasons, however, what is unchanging are the lives of the surrounding inhabitants in its concern with human

happiness. And human happiness and the story of the emigrant are the real tale in the novel, albeit almost hidden under a charming fatalism bordering on existentialism.

It does seem that human happiness is inconsequential as to its causes or effects, almost a force outside of human control, when in fact it is not. Witness Rutledge's intervention to keep Johnny away. McGahern the author is non-judgmental about Johnny's sister in law refusing him while deep in her heart knowing of his predicament. Inevitable therefore that he should die in this place in a community where he has lost his reality and to which he can only return to in the ritual and dignity of death where they can once more claim him as their own.

They remain a community that is circular. Many of the questions that afflict modern relationships of men and women, are ostensibly missing, beyond an easy participation like a fictional account of themselves the characters might lightly interrogate in a spirit of irony rather than acquiescence. Modes of thought are gently suggested, but fade away as through lack of energy at the centre, rather as the lake reflects clouds but does not stir itself, and at the end of the day they simply fall off the centre, or disappear from you in the larger story of the weather and the seasons. In this novel, therefore, there is a respite apparently from modern concerns, as if in no way can the community entertain and accommodate any thought patterns or ideology outside, - this is also central to McGahern's work as a novelist, typical of all his novels.. Nature is respected, even supreme where the reader of the book makes contact with its theme of

self sufficiency, and the price of working in harmony both with the seasons and with one's neighbours.

In his essay in the Irish University Review volume, published the year before he died, McGahern alludes to the Blasket Islanders, and apart from the way this writer is struck by the correspondences between his work and the sagas of early Irish, where repetition, rhythm, rhyme and assonance feature largely in the oral tradition, there is a noticeable link in the culture of survival between these islanders and the people depicted by McGahern in his novels. In his essay, McGahern alludes to the practical view the islanders took of marriage, seeing it as a form of social utilitarianism., in that O Cromhain, the Islandman, himself married, not his beloved, but into a family who were geographically nearer to him on the same island, and were therefore within call should anything go wrong. This utilitarian view of romance underlies much of the romantic comment in McGahern's work, serving as a contrast and juxtaposition to modern readers, and to McGahern finding his own place in that acerbic Irish tradition which has to do with basic survival rather than any feelings.

It is McGahern's strength that he does not court ideology but rather visits the limits of ideological utopianism in a spirit of wry irony on what it is to be human, the lake and its community serving as a mirror image of all human society – the inside. It is difficult to draw conclusions about the time of his writing, it is as if McGahern is questioning whether it was ever the right thing to do to seek independence not only from Britain, (as in "Amongst Women") but from the modern consumerist society that has

grown up in Ireland since the Civil War: Nature itself has shown the immutability of the human being when confronted with every kind of situation - it still evinces the substance of Nature itself and is beyond final improvement save the grasping of the immediate and the urge to conserve what is helpful to happiness in general.

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