

That They May Face the Rising Sun: *The Apex of John McGahern's Fiction*

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John McGahern can look back on an extensive corpus of most admirable stories, which are gathered in *The Collected Stories* (1992) and many of which superbly celebrate the significance of the mundane, the ordinary – that strangest of phenomena. In much of his writing, he is preoccupied with death, suffering, pain, lost faith, sex and love, the futility and transience of life, showing an awareness of the emptiness of existence as well as a sense of love's labour lost. Characters suffer from intellectual isolation and as a consequence choose internal exile. Often we find an embittered father and a put-upon mother; the son is almost always at loggerheads with his sexually frustrated, callous, egotistical bully of a father.

This constellation of characters is exemplarily realised in *The Barracks* (1963), which covers the last sixteen months in the life of Elizabeth Reegan, focusing above all on the ordeal the woman undergoes after the discovery of cancerous cysts in her breasts – an ordeal that leads her through disappointment, isolation, despondency and desperation, while at the same time helping her gain insight into her own life and the sense of life in general. The novel charts Elizabeth's development from an existence characterised by unhappiness, futility and monotony, a lack of purpose and a hatred of her husband, Reegan, to moments of contentedness, redemptive resignation and a positive emotional commitment to Reegan. *The Dark* (1965) was immediately banned in Ireland under the Censorship Act, not only for employing the f-word on its very first page, but more so for including masturbation scenes. The adolescent protagonist is caught up in two conflicts, in both of which he has to assert himself. One is the conflict with his father and the other consists of an inner struggle between a positive approach to life, in which the joys of life may be enjoyed to the full, and a fear of death and the Last Judgement indoctrinated by the Catholic Church. In a world of patriarchal, clerical and societal repressions, he searches for the right course through the darkness of his adolescence. *The Leavetaking* (1974) falls into two parts, the first showing the narrator-hero, Patrick, coming to terms with the symbolic shadows that have haunted the greater part of his life, and the second focusing on his beloved, the American woman Isobel, who also has to shake off the shadows which have made her life a misery. The story unfolds in the mind of Patrick, on his last day at a Catholic school in Dublin from which

he is about to be dismissed for moral reasons, his offence being that he was living with a woman in ,unholy‘ matrimony. *The Pornographer* (1979) charts a figurative journey that the unnamed first-person narrator undergoes as he matures from a writer of smutty pornographic stories to a serious-minded author of autobiographical fiction. Life in the city, as experienced by the narrator, his friends and his lover is pitted against life in the country, represented by the narrator’s aunt and uncle and Nurse Brady. *Amongst Women* (1990) offers a penetrating critique of patriarchy as the refuge of a socially maladjusted and emotionally immature man and asks probing questions about the cult of the family. Moran has transformed his inadequacies into a show of strength by making his home his castle. Denied a role as founding father in the Irish state, he has set up his own dominion. He is sustained solely by his desperate clinging to the fiction of family. His behaviour is conditioned by a frantic desire to preserve the *status quo* and keep the family together as a bulwark against change. He is portrayed frozen in time and incapable of adapting to face the threats to his precarious position of authority.

That They May Face the Rising Sun,¹ McGahern’s recent novel after a twelve-year silence, observes the quiet lives, during one year, of a group of characters who live around a lake in what could most possibly be the author’s own county of Leitrim. No spectacular, or even world-shaking, events occur, as is the case in most ordinary people’s lives. And that is the beauty of it. In a considerable section of his *œuvre* to date, McGahern has shown himself as a supreme celebrator of the ordinary, that strangest of phenomena, and nowhere has he done so more admirably than here. The narrative opens in the summer, when Johnny, the brother of one Jamesie, habitually arrives from England, where he is working in a Ford plant, to spend some time with his relatives. At the close Johnny has once more returned to Ireland, but never to go away again. For soon after his arrival his heart gives out and he dies. He is buried so that when he wakes he may face the rising sun. Which is to say: he is laid into the ground with his feet pointing eastwards, so that he can look to the resurrection of the dead. In between these two visits of Johnny’s, the characters are shown saving the hay, building a shed, selling their cattle and sheep, engaging in conversational play, partaking moderately, though frequently, of *uisce beatha*, preferably of the Powers class, chasing women and, most importantly, being good neighbours and caring for each other. In short, they are journeying through life as best they can, as if they were following Strether’s advice to Little Bilham in Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*: „Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to“. It is good advice, for after all there is death to contend with, and McGahern’s characters are forced to acknowledge the Grim Reaper.

At the centre of the motley crew of figures are Joe Ruttledge and his wife, Kate, who have come to Ireland from London in search of a different life. Joe’s uncle, nicknamed the Shah, bought the farm for the Ruttledges, whose every move, when they first arrived, was carefully observed by the locals, resentment fuelling an innate intolerance of anything strange or foreign. Now, however, they have been fully accepted, not least on account of their good relationship with Jamesie and his wife, Mary. Joe Ruttledge used to be a copy writer in London and he now supplements his income

through freelance writing. Kate is a designer, good enough at her work for her old boss to visit, in the hope of tempting her back to London. Significantly, they came to live in Ireland when others left for England or America. They work their land, raise embarrassingly well-tended stock, keep bees, are open to each event or small local drama as well as each neighbourly drink. They are, in fact, ideal witnesses. Much of what we learn about them is derived from watching them engage with their neighbours.

The Shah never learned to read or write, but was already in business of some kind when he was a boy. At twelve he made his first shillings by borrowing the family horse to draw stones to make a road to the new national school where his sister taught. His first job was in the local sand and gravel pit, where he learned to weld and fix machinery. Soon he was driving a sand lorry for the pit, and then purchased an old lorry of his own, delivering merchandise to and from Belfast and Dublin. At the outbreak of the war he switched into tillage contracting and made serious money. At thirty he owned a small empire and had no debts at a time when only the old established traders, the priests, the doctors, the big farmers had money. Now he is at an age where he wants to retire and sell his business, preferably to the man who has been working for him for over twenty-five years. But that is not easy because the two men have not exchanged a single word between them during all that time. Eventually the deal is managed with Ruttledge's help. Yet before that comes about there is much cause for involuntary mirth. Every Sunday, the Shah comes cruising in his big Mercedes to the Ruttledges' house to enjoy his dinner there and indulge in pleasant conversation. There is nothing the Shah likes better than eating.

The gentle Jamesie and his wife, Mary, embody the spirit of the place. They have never left the lake and know everything that ever stirred or moved there. Jamesie is a great talker and a simple philosopher, with a crude, good sense of humour, a love of gossip and a joy of life. For example, when the Ruttledges bemoan the accidental death of a late black lamb, which shortly before the incident they saw with its mother as a picture of happiness, Jamesie sensibly remarks: "These things happen. Anybody with livestock is going to have deadstock. There's no use dwelling. You have to put all these things behind you. Otherwise you might as well throw it all up now and admit that you're no good." (251) Mary's frame of mind is well captured by one of her own statements: "People we know come and go in our minds whether they are here or in England or alive or dead. [...] We're no more than a puff of wind out on the lake." (115)

Jamesie's brother, Johnny, was a capital shot, in fact "the best shot this part of the country has ever seen" (4), as Jamesie acknowledges, and a dab hand at darts. He followed the woman he loved to England and found himself in for a sore disappointment, because "[compared] to what he saw in her he put no value on his own life. He thought he couldn't live without her" (6).

There is Bill Evans, one of life's innocents, a simple soul of a farmhand, who as regularly as clockwork pays a visit to the Ruttledges when fetching water from the lake in two pails, each time cadging food and drink and a contingent of cigarettes, which he is given to smoking furiously. His kind is now as extinct as the corncrake. Bill exists in

a small circle of the present. Remembrance of things past and dreams of things to come are instruments of torture to him. Jimmy Joe McKiernan is an undertaker, auctioneer and the head of the IRA, under permanent surveillance by two detectives, a man who would not harm a fly unless it stood in his way or the way of the Cause.

John Quinn, adhering to what the Lord God has said in the Holy Book: “’Tis not good for man to live alone”, will stop at nothing to ensure a flow of women. When he married his first wife, he caused a scandal by possessing her in full view of the wedding guests in a nearby meadow. After her untimely death, he had other women, and in the narrative present, he marries a well-heeled widow in her fifties, who to his utter amazement soon shows him who is wearing the trousers in their relationship: a day or two after the wedding, having made love to him, she realises that she has made a mistake, and she leaves him. He follows her, tail between legs, to her own place for a time, but they fail to make a success of things, and John returns, continuing in his usual unperturbed manner to observe his favourite Commandment.

Patrick Ryan is a kind of will-o'-the-wisp and one of the most unreliable of builders imaginable. The Ruttledges have, for an inordinately long period of time, been waiting for him to finish their shed. At the opening of the book, he puts in an appearance and does some work to the place, but then he disappears again, and by the time the narrative comes to a close, the building still awaits its completion. However, the Ruttledges do not mind. Things are simply done differently around the lake. Patrick drives to Carrick to visit his dying brother in the hospital, not because he cares for him, but in order to forestall any chance for the people to wag their tongues.

The crew of the characters is a motley one, indeed. Perhaps Patrick Ryan is right when he remarks to Joe Ruttledge: “‘After us there’ll be nothing but the water hen and the swan’” (45). This is a novel of voices. For much of what we learn we gather from the conversations of the characters, and each one of them has their own superbly idiosyncratic blend of colloquial speech. This, however, does not mean that McGahern is not so successful at description. For, indeed, the opposite is the case. There are most exquisite passages, often when nature itself is the subject. Nature and the landscape are rendered in a way that helps them assume the power of living presences. Here is one example:

The warm weather came with its own ills. The maggot fly had struck, each stricken sheep or lamb standing comically still as if in scholarly thought. Then suddenly they would try to bite back at the dark, moistened patch of wool tantalising out of reach. (56)

Mary’s father was in the habit of driving to town every Thursday in the pony and trap in order to do some shopping and after that have a few drinks in Hoy’s Hotel. This is how McGahern beautifully describes the old man’s death:

On a wet soft evening in October, veils of mist and light rain obscuring the hills as well as the water, the pony trotted safely home from the Thursday outing to the town, but life in the trap had died somewhere along the road. (90)

Here is one of those wonderful descriptions of the natural scene:

The hard burnt colour of the freshly cut meadows softened and there was a blue tinge in the first growth of the aftergrass that shone under the running winds. The bullfinch disappeared with the wild strawberries from the bank. The little vetches turned black. The berries on the rowans along the shore flowed with such redness it was clear why the rowan berry was used in ancient song to praise the lips of girls and women. The darting swifts and swallows hunted low above the fields and the half-light brought out the noisy blundering bats. (147)

Furthermore, there is the marvellous delineation of the mart on Monaghan Day and the convivial drinking after the selling and buying. But the most impressive, even haunting, scenes involve poor Johnny's death, wake and burial near the close of the book, scenes to whose excellence it is impossible to do justice by summarising them here in a few lines. They show McGahern at his very best.

The novel is crafted in masterly fashion. Ring-like compositional patterns inform its structure and lend it formal shape. Thus, there are Johnny's visits at the outset and the close. Moreover, Patrick Ryan and the infamous shed figure both at the start and the finish. Jamesie twice mockingly reprimands Kate for having employed "wilya", according to him "a very bad word" (pp. 3 & 239). Twice, too, Jimmy Joe McKiernan's opinion about whether or not Ireland is free is of relevance (cf. pp. 7 & 286). Everything is enclasp'd by time. *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is a pastoral of the first order. It is a pastoral in the sense in which Ivan Turgenev's *A Sportman's Notebook*, that most excellent collection of tales, is a pastoral. In fact, McGahern, through a distinctive similarity of narrative approach, testifies to the impact of the great Russian master storyteller and novelist on Irish fiction, an impact fully acknowledged by Frank O'Connor in his study *The Lonely Voice*. The book makes one wish that McGahern will not keep us waiting for his next offering another dozen years.

Note

- 1 John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. London: Cape, 2002.