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John McGahern: *Vision and Revisionism*

by EAMON GRENNAN

“There’s nothing more empty than a space you knew once when it was full,” says Fonsie Ryan, one of the three brothers who share the center of McGahern’s recent short story, “The Country Funeral” (1993). This is a truth Fonsie literally knows in his bones, since he has had both legs amputated as a child (we’re never told why). In a larger sense, however, it’s a truth that McGahern himself has been testing and imaginatively tasting from the start of his career. Much of his major work takes some central absence as its source. A great many of his short stories are marked by moments in which something is glimpsed that might make sense of, or compensate for, that which has been lost: moments in which a world that’s been deadened by loss is revived and granted value again by the sudden and unexpected apprehension of some affirmative meaning in the way things are. That such moments may be shortlived, and that they may be shown to be—from other, more skeptical, perspectives—illusory, does not negate them. By allowing different views of such visions, McGahern simply insists on the presence of this possibility of spiritual value—of the broken world being somehow made whole—in a context of agnostic circumstances.

An important subtext of all such moments is the way they, or their variously inflected consequences, seem to take the place of failed religious belief, take over from Catholic ideology as the agents of making sense of the world. They are the outward signs—the radical and secular sacraments—of nothing less than a new consciousness. In their composition, McGahern shows himself to be a true revisionist of the Irish spirit.

An early example occurs in *The Barracks* (1963), when the dying Elizabeth Reegan has her own muted experience of what the narrator calls elsewhere “the mystery of life.” In a moment free of the “business and distractions” of the day, she is able to experience herself in quietness. It is

an interval of pure rest. Such a quietness had come into the house that she felt she could touch it with her hands. There was no stir from the dayroom, where Casey was sunk in the newspapers; the noise of the occasional traffic on the roads, the constant sawing of the woods came and were lost in the quietness she felt about her. . . . In the silence the clock beside the statue of St. Therese on the sideboard beat like a living thing. This’d be the only time of day she could get some grip and vision on the desperate activity of her life. (*TB*, 41)

This recreative, redemptive pause sets Elizabeth aside from public and domestic history (sensed in the newspapers and the clock that beats now in

sympathy “like a living thing”). In this moment of minor key blessedness, she can have a “vision” of her life, instead of merely living in pain. As a moment of immanent repose, fully accommodating the actual and in tune with the natural world, it possesses some undeniably spiritual weight. And this seems to be offered by McGahern as a counterweight to those conventional consolations of the “always beautiful” rites of religion, whose practical failure overturns Elizabeth’s naive trust “that she’d discovered something . . . some miracle of revelation, perhaps”; instead, “she had been given nothing and had discovered nothing. . . . She couldn’t pray” (*TB*, 71; 102). The evacuated space of orthodox Catholic belief, then, is filled up with something for which McGahern gives Elizabeth the word: “mystery”:

There was such deep joy sometimes, joy itself lost in a passion of wonderment in which she and all things were lost. Nothing could be decided here. She was just passing through. She had come to life out of mystery and would return, it surrounded her life, it safely held it as by hands: she’d return into that which she could not know; she’d be consumed at last in whatever meaning her life had. Here she had none, none but to be, which in acceptance must surely be love. There’d be no searching for meaning, she must surely *grow into* meaning as she *grew* into love, there was that or nothing and she couldn’t lose. . . . All real seeing *grew into* smiling and if it moved to speech it must be praise, all else was death, a refusal, a turning back. . . . All the futility of her life in the barracks came at last to rest on this sense of mystery. It gave the hours idled away in idleness or remorse as much validity as a blaze of passion, all as under its eternal sway. (*TB*, 174; italics added)

What’s stressed here is the loss of self in a passion of wonder, a sense of transience, a surrender to the unknown, to mystery. Acceptance is being equated with love. The verb most repeated is *grow*, as if to underline the natural process, to reconcile her to dying by seeing it as a growth (more poignant in that her illness is a growth, a cancer). Seeing becomes smiling, speech becomes praise, futility comes to rest in mystery, under its “eternal sway.” The language suggests a translation from the idioms of orthodox Catholicism into a much more personalized idiom of natural understanding. The space left by the failure of the Catholic formulae (not aggressively rejected, just calmly felt as inefficacious) is filled by a sense of oneness with the natural world, with a unitary sense of things that sees life with a tranquil, almost Eastern, gaze.

Union with the natural universe opens for Elizabeth Reagan the path to the centre, to the mystery. In other McGahern works, that path is opened not by something that, because it verges on nature mysticism, may be seen in a religious light (a quiet competitor to the dominant Catholicism of the context), but by a much more radical opponent to Catholicism—sexual love. The hero of *The Leavetaking* (1974) remembers the first time he made love (“a blessed chance,” he describes it as): “I rested within her as if I could not believe I’d entered the rich dark mystery of a woman’s body, this feeling of the rich mystery open all night to me far more than the throb of pleasure.” Later, the ordinary world takes on the quality of miracle: “I sat by the window in the indescribable happiness of wanting nothing whatever in the world over hot coffee and toast and marmalade” (*TL*, 93).

In the larger arc of this novel, McGahern plays out the replacement of orthodox versions of Irish history-cum-politics and Irish religion by authentically individual sexual love and the necessarily more complicated view of reality

it must generate. On the one hand, the fluent and truthful freedom of the narrator's marriage in an English registry office—for which he is to lose his position as a teacher in Dublin—is contrasted with the rigidity of the official instructions for the teaching of Irish history, in which “it's written down in black and white [that] the cultivation of patriotism is more important than truth.” In this light, history (which according to another character “stays still. It at least is settled” (*TL*, 187)) is a series of unchanging postures: “Britain is always the big black beast, Ireland is the poor daughter struggling while being raped” (*TL*, 186). To this, the narrative opposes the more complicated fluency and continuity of individual sexual life, underlined by the repeated mantra, “the first constant was water.”

In another strategic replacement, the remembered lost rites of the Mass cede to the warm domestic rites of love. Thinking of the house and the woman he is going home to at the end of the day, certain images occur to the protagonist. First, he remembers his mother's wish for him to be a priest: “In scarlet and white I attend the mysteries of Holy Week to the triumphant clamour of the Easter bells” (*TL*, 193). Then, he remembers the “second priesthood” of teaching, which is now “strewn about my life as waste.” These are immediately followed, however, by the image of the present, the house in Howth where “the table will have bread and meat and cheap wine and flowers. . . . We will be true to one another. . . . It is the only communion left to us now” (*TL*, 193). Sexual love has created a world of domestic sacramentalism, something of the values of the old ideology rediscovered within these decisively human facts and human actions. Even in the embrace of the new dispensation, however—as can be heard in the tone here and in the implicit allusion to Arnold's “Dover Beach” (a literary “touchstone” for the way sexual love replaces the lost world of religious faith)—the gravity of loss is acknowledged like a phantom limb. And as Elizabeth Reagan salvaged from the wreckage of her religion the emotional comforts of the rosary, the narrator of *The Leavetaking* admits at the end that “even now I feel the desperate need of prayer.” In the world of secular sacramentalism that McGahern has managed to bring into being, however, it is the beloved woman who replaces the Virgin Mary as recipient of prayer: “Oh soul full of grace,” thinks the man, “pray for me now and at the hour.”

In summary, then, this novel charts the replacement of one kind of sacramentalism with another, a fact which gives “the leavetaking” of the title a deeper resonance than it might at first seem to have. Near the start, the narrator has a valedictory experience of Benediction:

it was soon over, the altar boys in scarlet and white leaving the altar in twos in front of the priest bearing the empty monstrance, light from candles dancing on the gold of his cloak, small human bundle in magnificent clothes. In the sacristy they would be free of the mystery when the boys bowed to the cross and then to one another, as I did too when I was young. (*TL*, 16)

Drained of mystery, this ritual religious blessing is deliberately replaced by the human sacrament of sexual love and its domestic rituals, while the novel closes on a moment that displaces the image of Christian pilgrimage with the perilous journeys of human love, recited in the cadences of prayer: “The odour of our

lovemaking rises, redolent of slime and fish, and our very breathing seems an echo of the rise and fall of the sea as we drift to sleep; and I would pray for the boat of our sleep to reach its morning, and see that morning lengthen to an evening of calm weather that comes through night and sleep again to morning after morning until we meet the first death" (*TL*, 195).

While *The Leavetaking* finds in sexual love and marriage some of the lost values of institutional religion, in *The Pornographer* (1979) sex itself is tested as a site of the mystery, as a replacement for religious loss. "Within her," says the narrator of the woman he makes pregnant but does not love, "there was this instant of rest, the glory and the awe, that one was as close as ever man could be to the presence of the mystery, and live, the caged bird in its moment of pure rest before it was about to be loosed into blinding light" (*TP*, 39). In *this* context, however, that possibility is consistently subverted. You can hear this in the actual composition of sentences like the following, in which achievement and loss are syntactically bound together: "We had climbed the crown of life, and this was all, all the world, and even as we surged towards it, it was already slipping further and further away from one's grasp, and we were stranded again on our own bare lives" (*TP*, 42). Sex itself, in its attempt at a kind of secular wholeness, does not allow one to keep a grasp on the mystery. The world in time loses its precious savour; human life is "bare."

Faced with such barrenness, McGahern reaches the limit of possibility for his secular sacramentalism, a last trace of which is salvaged by the narrator's own stern self-knowledge at the end. "I had not attended properly," he realises; "I had found the energy to choose too painful. Broken in love, I had turned back, let the light of imagination almost out. Now my hands were ice" (*TP*, 251). In turning, however, to the values of imagination, risk, and human choices (he decides he will return to live in the country, "to try and make a go of it"), he—like the narrator of *The Leavetaking*—finds in himself "fierce need to pray." And in his awareness of what "prayer" can mean when religious faith has been lost, he is granted a moment of epiphanal insight through which McGahern expresses not only his own kind of mystery, but a form of consciousness that has replaced Catholic ideology with a skeptical humanism that can still acknowledge something other than the simply material in our lives.

The narrator is given the chance, that is, to move from pornography to a new style of prayer: "What I wanted to say was that I had a fierce need to pray, for myself, for Maloney, for my uncle, the girl, the whole shoot. The prayers could not be answered, but prayers that cannot be answered need to be the more completely said, being their own beginning as well as end" (*TP*, 252). Here, and in the emphatic resolve to go on that marks the end of the book (the narrator remembers the start of the narrative, that "beginning of the journey—if beginning it ever had—that had brought each to where we were, in the now and the forever" (*TP*, 252)), McGahern shows that even in the world drained of the conventional consolations of religious ideology, human choices can possess a value that reverberates with "spiritual" meaning, as these last words vibrate with a faint echo of the *Gloria*: "As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be,

world without end, Amen.”

As far as the subversion of the old dispensation is concerned, then, this particular replacement is the most radical, yet bringing us into a world empty of divine assurance, whose inhabitants can yet live lives given texture and meaning by some of the traditional forms emptied of their traditional content. When one tries to describe the consciousness here, the only term that seems adequate is “*post-Catholic*,” suggesting a consciousness imbued by Catholic forms and meanings and assumptions, yet bereft of any primary belief in these, without any of the conventional props to a coherent and reassuring understanding of life that these might, to the believer, offer.

Finally, in two related short stories—“The Wine Breath,” and his most recent work, “The Country Funeral”—McGahern returns deliberately to this difficult but at the same time potentially exhilarating terminus. In the first, the protagonist (who is a priest) remembers through a moment of heightened Proustian recall and with “the solid world . . . everywhere around him,” a “lost day” from childhood, a day in which he had his most intense experience of “the Mystery.” It is the memory of a funeral on Killeelan Hill after the great snow-storm of 1947: “the coffin moving slowly towards the dark trees on the hill, the long line of the mourners, and everywhere the blinding white light, among the half-buried thorn bushes and beyond Killeelan, on the covered waste of Gloria Bog, on the sides of Slieve an Iarainn” (CS, 179). The day in this radiant memory stands for all purity and perfection, and although in this present he is cut off from it, the priest “felt purged of all tiredness, was, for a moment, eager to begin life again” (CS, 180).

McGahern conducts the narrative to suggest perhaps that this funeral marks the passing of a whole new way of life. For the dead man, Michael Bruen, “had been a big kindly agreeable man, what was called a lovely man” (CS, 181), and, in McGahern’s evocation, his farm becomes a version of the peaceable kingdom, a genre painting of plenitude and satisfaction, a secular feast revealing the rich grace of the ordinary and sliding easily into another, religious, world of meaning. Cut off as he is now, however, the priest feels phantom-limbed, lives with the ache of amputation, knows his present time “as flimsy accumulating tissue over all the time that was lost” (CS, 182). His everyday existence is “tortuous,” the public world he lives in a scene of violence and outrage and uncertainty: “A man had lost both legs in an explosion. There was violence on the night-shift at Ford’s. The pound had steadied at the close but was still down on the day” (CS, 185). In this time-bound present world, from which the faith and the “promise of the eternal” represented by the funeral seem to have withdrawn, it is hard to locate a replacement comparable to those available in the other works mentioned.

And yet, at this bleak terminus (“When he looked at the room about him he could hardly believe it was so empty and dead and dry. . . . Wildly and aridly he wanted to curse” (CS, 186), even here McGahern manages to provide some affirmation, some faint but real compensation for loss, and in a medium that is resolutely human. And by doing so he once again succeeds in re-imagining Irish consciousness in a revisionist way, absorbing the conditions of something like

faith within circumstances that would have to be called agnostic. It is this combination that would seem to lend distinction to what, in McGahern's view, would be our contemporary possibility. For at the end of this story, the priest's bleak epiphany lies in the discovery of his own death. This is the visiting ghost that will drink (as Yeats reminds us in "All Souls' Night") of the breath of the wine: "He might as well get to know him well. It would never leave now and had no mortal shape. Absence does not cast a shadow" (CS, 187).

The expanded consciousness the priest shows here is to be understood as a willingness to live with death and to acknowledge absence, as Prospero—to be fully himself—must acknowledge Caliban, "this thing of darkness." What stems from this revised consciousness, however, is a resurrected gift for seeing the world as it is—in all its variety and as it happens. It is a capacity both to see the facts as they are and to imagine what might be. In this combination there is to be found a generosity of spirit that somehow—within straitened circumstances—touches in kinship the rich remembered Mystery of that "lost time." First, the priest has a vivid apprehension of things as they are: "All that was there was the white light of the lamp on the open book, on the white marble; the brief sun of God on beechwood, and the sudden light of the glistening snow, and the timeless mourners moving towards the yews on Killeelan Hill almost thirty years ago. It was as good a day as any, if there ever was a good day to go" (CS, 187). In the ordinary goodness of the day, in the way the one sentence contains past and present phenomena—different as their *meanings* might appear to be—within a single white embrace, we may find the resolved humanity of this replenished consciousness. Then, in the last surprising paragraph of the story, McGahern obliges us to see and to feel that the distinguishing mark of this consciousness is its gift for *imagining* other lives, for imagining, indeed, the life not lived—but knowing this not as an unhappy amputation but as a related presence, generously received:

Somewhere, outside this room that was an end, he knew that a young man, not unlike he had once been, stood on a granite step and listened to the doorbell ring, smiled as he heard a woman's footsteps come down the hallway, ran his fingers through his hair, and turned the bottle of white wine he held in his hands completely around as he prepared to enter a pleasant and uncomplicated evening, feeling himself immersed in time without end. (CS, 187)

In this wonderfully cumulative sentence that moves from the small space "that was an end" to the immense possibility of "time without end," McGahern lets us share in the capacious "negative capability" of the priest's re-animated consciousness. In the quiet swirl of tenses—from past through pluperfect to a virtual present (but I wish he had written "prepares") and off into a limitless future—we are allowed to feel something of the eternal as it informs, as it illuminates, this entirely human moment. The ordinary instant of love, that is, has been granted something of the spiritual vividness of the remembered funeral, of "the day set alight in his mind . . . [that] seemed bathed in the eternal, seemed everything we had been taught and told of the world of God" (CS, 180). At this conclusion, then, the day that the priest has already described as "the actual day, the only day that mattered, the day from which our salvation had to be won or lost:

it stood solidly and impenetrably there, denying the weak life of the person, with nothing of the eternal other than it would dully endure" (CS, 180), this day has been somehow charged with a force analogous to that emanating from that unforgettable day of faith and amazing snowlight, has become, strangely, full of grace, but of insistently *secular* grace. It is just such a post-Catholic consciousness that might say with the French poet, Phillipe Jacottet, and without any conventionally religious implication, that "this world is merely the tip / of an unseen conflagration."¹ Or, nearer home, might say with born-again Kavanagh—whose own post-Catholic awakening on the banks of the Grand Canal in Dublin surely (although that is another story) left its mark on McGahern (and on Heaney)—"I turn away to where the Self reposes / The placeless Heaven that's under all our noses."²

In "The Country Funeral" McGahern revisits "The Wine Breath." Here is another funeral to Killeelan graveyard, this one not enshrined in an almost legendary past, but plunged, forty years later, in the actual complicated present, in another "only day that mattered, the day from which our salvation had to be won or lost." What McGahern seems to be at, here, is visiting old ground again with a view to testing some of his conclusions, subjecting them to a number of different and opposed perspectives. (McGahern's obsessive habits of *reiteration*—of theme, of character, of situation, of language—offer a technical example, as it were, of how deeply the whole enterprise and practice of *revision* is planted in him.³) The funeral itself brings together various ways of seeing, chief among them those of Philly and Fonsie, two of the brothers. Philly, who occupies the centre of the narrative view, is—like a number of other McGahern protagonists—at an existential dead end, searching for something to assuage his parched spirit. The fact that he is home in Ireland on holiday from his job in the oilfields of Bahrain, as well as the fact that he spends much of his time drinking, give his spiritual dryness a satisfyingly realistic dimension, while these real facts become textured by McGahern's habitual inclination towards the symbolic. That style, compounding the actual and the symbolic in mutually enriching ways, might be taken as a kind of *literary sacramentalism* very much in tune with, indeed the apt embodiment of, the thematic presence I am outlining here.

For Philly (whose mind at the beginning of the story, at the first mention of Gloria Bog, had been "flooded . . . with amazing brightness and calm" (CS, 377), the funeral constitutes a moment of speechless revelation:

I felt something I never felt when we left the coffin on the edge of the grave. A rabbit hopped out of the briars a few yards off. He sat there and looked at us as if he didn't know what was going on before he bolted off. You could see the bog and all the shut houses next to Peter's [the dead man] below us. There wasn't even a wisp of smoke coming from any of the houses. Everybody gathered around, and the priest started to speak of the dead and the Mystery and the Resurrection. (CS, 405)

1. Philippe Jacottet, "Each Flower Is a Little Night," in *Selected Poems*, trans. Derek Mahon (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest Univ. Press, 1987), 73.

2. Patrick Kavanagh, "Auditor's Inn," in Peter Kavanagh, ed., *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh* (New York, 1972), 245.

3. For McGahern's revisions to the text of *The Leavetaking*, see Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1993), 131 ff.

In this view, nature, priest, community, and place, all make a single picture, all combining to address some deep new truth to Philly. That the priest speaks of "the Mystery" as well as of the more obvious "dead" and "the Resurrection" forges a link between this and "The Wine Breath," suggesting that Philly's view is, although in a more fragmented and colloquially naive mode, roughly analogous to the boy's in that story. The difference is that Philly doesn't belong to the picture in the same way as the boy did; while his "I felt something I never felt" is much more blunt and inchoate than the earlier version ("Never before or since had he experienced the Mystery in such awesomeness" (CS, 179). The point, however, is that Philly does feel *something*, that his contemporary and somewhat brutalised consciousness opens up to some unspoken thing in this ceremony, in this space, although obviously "I felt something I never felt" cannot count as a vision of profound religious implication. But it does, surely, imply a spiritual response of some sort, a spiritual dimension in Philly's way of receiving the facts.

When Fonsie offers his far more cynical response, however, McGahern draws our attention to the relativity of these reactions, and by implication, to the essential absence of any certain, absolute or objective value in the ceremony itself. "The Mystery" of "The Country Funeral" is seen to depend on the onlooker for its efficacy. The priest, says Fonsie in his jaundiced, bitter, disappointed way, "is paid to do that" (CS, 405) puncturing any possibility of the priesthood as an agent of "Mystery." And furthermore, goes on Fonsie,

it was no Mystery from the car. Several times I thought you were going to drop the coffin. It was more like a crowd of apes staggering up a hill with something they had just looted. The whole lot of you could have come right out of the Dark Ages. (CS, 405)

From the car in which the cripple sits, this was the mercilessly factual view. In an interesting twist, however, McGahern complicates the issue by making Fonsie not entirely truthful. For when he actually sees the cortege, we are told that "In spite of his irritation at the useless ceremony . . . he found the coffin and the small band of toiling mourners unbearably moving as it made its low stumbling climb up the hill, and this deepened further his irritation and the sense of complete uselessness" (CS, 400). This complex response is further exacerbated by the sight of the priest hurrying away from the funeral with the two "most solid looking and conventional of the mourners. . . . The long black soutane looked strangely menacing between the two attentive men in suits" (CS, 400). By including this vignette, McGahern drains the official side of the ceremony of any efficacy, letting priest and conventional parishioners be seen as mere agents of this mechanical apparatus of power-conscious social obligation dressed up as religious ritual.

From this point of view, then, Fonsie's disdain is valid, properly insisting on the relative nature of the experience, the lack of any objective certainty of value in it. And yet, independent of this skeptical view, and quite detached from the functionaries (who represent the conventional pietistic but hollow remains of Catholicism operating as ideology within the community), are Philly's spiritual

stirrings. Fonsie's own sense of the whole thing as "unbearably moving," and even that of the conventional and repressed John, who "said carefully, 'I have to say I found the whole ceremony moving, but once is more than enough to go through that experience'" (CS, 405). So, all the brothers *are moved* in some more or less intense way. But by *what*, it is impossible in any objective sense to say: the source in each case is a sort of absence. The different knowledges of this absence, however—including the satirical, cynical knowledge spoken by Fonsie—represent a sort of spectrum of post-Catholic consciousness. And such consciousness can, it is suggested, internalise something speechless and of unknown value (but still *there*, like the phantom feeling of an amputated limb). But it can only know this in private, and even then perhaps it leads to nothing, being, as it is in Fonsie's final response, "completely useless."

In the end, however, it is Philly's response, not Fonsie's, that McGahern leaves with the reader, and that, no matter how limited or suspect, is an affirmative one. For, like the narrator of *The Pornographer* (who also had a significant, culminating experience at the funeral of his dead aunt), Philly decides to settle in the country, to buy the dead man's house and live there: "Gloria is far from over. . . . I'm going to take up in Peter's place. . . . It'll be a place to come home to. . . . I'll definitely be buried there some day" (CS, 406-07). It is to Philly, too, to whom the very last word in the story goes: "'Anyhow, we buried poor Peter,' Philly said, 'as if it was at last a fact'" (CS, 408). Coming to rest in *fact*, where this post-Catholic consciousness has mostly to reside, the story nonetheless has granted a glimpse of something of a different, non-factual kind of value, some small vibration deep in the psyches of each of these men, each one living out painfully an existence of circumstance and complication, but each one also feeling in some unspoken way the truth of Fonsie's off-hand remark that, "'There's nothing more empty than a space you knew once when it was full.'"

Part of McGahern's achievement is to have raised on that empty space a revisionist simulacrum of contemporary Irish consciousness (more especially Irish male consciousness, although that imbalance has been somewhat corrected with the publication of *Amongst Women* (1990). I began by quoting Fonsie's remark about emptiness. What the remark actually refers to is the cutting down of "huge evergeens that used to shelter the church" (CS, 386). I find my conclusion in the brief remainder of that passage, where McGahern imagines the following exchange:

"'There's nothing more empty than a space you knew once when it was full,'" Fonsie said.
 "'What do you mean?'" [asks a puzzled Philly]
 "'Can you not see the trees?' Fonsie gesture irritably."
 "'The trees are gone.'" [says Philly]
 "'That's what I mean. They were there and they're no longer there. Can you not see?'" (CS, 386-87)

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