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John McGahern's attitude to many Irish writers from the first half of the twentieth century was often ambivalent. He instinctively disliked and distrusted the overt polemical stance adopted by many writers in the decades immediately following Independence, even if he could find in those same writers qualities of style or vision that he admired and, on occasion, even echoed in his own fiction.

His relationship with the poet Patrick Kavanagh is a case in point. As early as 1959 he wrote to Michael McLaverty that, "Kavanagh is an irresponsible critic and a careless poet. It is a pity he doesn't take more care with his poems because he is richly gifted."[1] On the one hand, McGahern deplored Kavanagh's part in the brash literary culture that existed in Dublin in the 1940s and 1950s. He later immortalized his youthful experience, both of being subjected to what he described in an autobiographical essay from the 1990s as "the doubtful joy of Kavanagh's company," and of the general atmosphere of that imaginatively and intellectually stifling Dublin-bohemian milieu, by re-imagining it in his fiction.[2] Such stories about rural drifters in the Hibernian metropolis as "My Love, My Umbrella" and "Bank Holiday" draw on the future novelist's youthful experiences of literary coteries in Dublin during his twenties, as does the brilliant satire on midcentury Dublin literary culture that is *The Pornographer* (1979).

Kavanagh appears as a character in both those short stories, and the portrait those fictions paint is not a flattering one. The unnamed poet in the Scotch House (the pub on Burgh Quay sometimes known as Flann O'Brien-Myles na Gopaleen's "office") in the earlier of the two stories, "My Love, My Umbrella," from *Nightlines* (1970), draws clearly on Kavanagh and his quirks. His appearance and his reliance on baking soda as a remedy for heartburn are obviously based on the Monaghan poet. Moreover, the snippets of his conversation overheard by

1. John McGahern to Michael McLaverty, 22 August 1959, in *Dear Mr McLaverty: The Literary Correspondence of John McGahern and Michael McLaverty 1959–1980*, ed. John Killen (Belfast: Linen Hall Library, 2006), 18; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*DMM* 18).

2. John McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 68; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*LW* 68).

the narrator and his lover are recognizably taken from Kavanagh's poetry and occasional prose—his attention to "the blossoms of Kerr Pinks" as objects of aesthetic beauty references the early seminal poem "Spraying the Potatoes," while the idea that "a man could only love what he knew well, and it was the quality of the love that mattered and not the accident" is loosely adapted from Kavanagh's 1959 essay "From Monaghan to the Grand Canal" (or perhaps from one of his lectures on poetry).[3] "Bank Holiday," from the 1985 *High Ground* collection, not only shares its title with one of Kavanagh's poems (as do two other stories from the same collection, "Gold Watch" and "A Ballad"); its plot also includes a confrontation between a middle-aged poet and a young civil servant which, as has been well documented, was based on a real meeting between McGahern and Kavanagh in a Dublin pub during the late 1950s.[4] A number of aspects of the failed poet and one-time provincial journalist Maloney in *The Pornographer* also replicate recognizable traits and habits both of Kavanagh and of his contemporary Flann O'Brien. Maloney attends the funeral of the narrator's aunt wearing a "wide-brimmed black hat [that] made him look more like an ageing dance-band personality than a mourner."[5] This ridiculous hat replicates the headgear considered to be "the badge of the literary man" in Dublin during the 1940s and 1950s, which was favored by both O'Brien and Kavanagh.[6] Maloney's fraught relationship with his readers draws on the same originals, as the different "acts of aggression" that Maloney perpetrates against the readers of his magazine column in the form of either "'rocks' or 'jawbreakers'" or unvarnished insults—"he despised [his readers] and was fond of describing [them] as 'the local pheasantry [sic], crap merchants and bull-shitters'" (*P* 26)—are reminiscent, respectively, of the belligerence of O'Brien's "Cruiskeen Lawn" columns and of Kavanagh's cantankerous occasional journalism in *Kavanagh's Weekly* and elsewhere.

On the other hand, McGahern harbored great affection and admiration for Kavanagh's achievement as a poet. He even acknowledged that its particular erratic nature could not have belonged to anybody possessed of a milder temperament—because who else but a man possessed of Kavanagh's "wild swing," he

3. John McGahern, *Nightlines* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 103–04; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*N* 103–04). See also Patrick Kavanagh, *A Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput, 2003), 273.

4. See Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001), 298–99, and Linda Collinge and Emmanuel Vernadakis, "John McGahern" (interview), *Journal of the Short Story in English* 41 (Autumn, 2003), 130–31.

5. John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 240; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*P* 240).

6. See Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989), 111, 188–89.

asked, could have rhymed "catharsis" with "arses"? (*LW* 92).[7] On many occasions in the autobiographical prose of his last decades, McGahern stressed how Kavanagh was, alongside Samuel Beckett, one of the "two living writers who meant most" to young writers and intellectuals coming of age in the 1950s. "Both," he wrote, "through their work, were living, exciting presences" (*LW* 92). Even as McGahern carefully avoided Kavanagh's presence on the street and in pubs, he eagerly awaited his new work published in literary magazines like *Nimbus*, *Encounter*, and *X*. He also sought out opportunities for hearing him lecture about poetry in more formal settings away from the public house. In 1956 McGahern attended Kavanagh's now-infamous lecture series at University College Dublin. Like many other members of the audience, he was in later years to recall Kavanagh's unprofessional, often boorish antics during those talks (on one famed occasion he turned on the racing results in mid-lecture). But he would also remember, for the rest of his life, the sometimes startling original insights that Kavanagh offered in passing during those same lectures.

Some of those insights and ideas were later worked into McGahern's fiction. One example of this is the inclusion of a snippet from a Kavanagh essay or lecture in "My Love, My Umbrella." Another is the way McGahern returned more than once in subsequent decades to an idea about poetic form by which he had been struck when Kavanagh proclaimed that the sonnet was the "envelope of love" (*LW* 311); the poet then explained this idea by further elaborating that "the perfect way of wrapping up your love letter and sending your love was in the envelope of the sonnet."[8] McGahern would later incorporate that simile into one of his novels. When the narrator in *The Pornographer* reflects on how the familiar coats and dresses of the girl with whom he is in love "had become the envelopes of a quiet love" (*P* 218), the echo of the Kavanagh lecture is clear. Using it in the very novel that also contains such an overt satire on midcentury Dublin literary circles in general, and on the figure of Kavanagh in particular, is McGahern's even-handed way of paying tribute to an aspect of Kavanagh he admired.[9]

Obviously, McGahern's relationship with Kavanagh was deeply conflicted. What is more, his twofold response to Kavanagh's legacy forms a template for

7. McGahern often cited that rhyme, from the poem "A Summer Morning Walk" (first published in *Arena* in 1964), as evidence of Kavanagh's unique "wild swing." The rhyme may have been "wild," but Kavanagh was not the first to employ it: that honor belongs to Joyce, who used it in his early satirical poem "The Holy Office" (1904). See Patrick Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1972), 315, and James Joyce, *Poems and Exiles*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 104.

8. McGahern's memory of that Kavanagh lecture is recorded in Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh*, 353.

9. For other occasions in *The Pornographer* on which McGahern assimilates phrases from Kavanagh in his descriptions of love and art, see Stanley van der Ziel, *John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2016), 94–95.

a pattern that he regularly repeated in his appreciation of other Irish authors of the Revival and post-Revival period. Irish writers of the first half of the twentieth century all too often wrote to a social or political agenda, such as the one McGahern identified in Kavanagh's approach to the material of *The Great Hunger*—a poem he described in a 1999 seminar as "*almost* a great poem" because, he explained, although three quarters of it is "marvellous," he believed "it deteriorates into a sociological rant at the end."[10] Other writers spent their time forging abstract aesthetic guidelines theorizing the "Irishness" of the literary products of past and present, in the process expending the creative energies that might have been better applied elsewhere. Writers whom McGahern censured on one or both of these counts included not only Kavanagh, but also Daniel Corkery and Frank O'Connor, a writer who McGahern privately believed had "wasted his talent."[11] His harsh assessment of O'Connor undoubtedly referred to the nature of some of the stories written expressly for the conservative tastes of the high-paying *New Yorker* magazine—but also to O'Connor's insistence on overtly expressing himself, in his stories as well as in works of criticism, on matters that McGahern believed should properly be the concern of journalists and sociologists.[12]

McGahern engaged in parodies of, and comments on, the theoretical foundations underlying the literary and cultural Revival from his earliest fiction onward. His first novel, *The Barracks* (1963), not only contains an unrelenting critique of the institutional power of the Catholic church (as many of his books do); it also concludes with a sly dismissal of the ease with which the Cuchulain myth can be put to work in the pursuit of self-aggrandizement.[13] His most sustained engagement with the cultural tropes of the Revival and post-Revival period, however, can be found in *The Pornographer*. It is striking that the Cuchulain myth—which had yielded such rich narrative fruits for Yeats—is again parodied by McGahern near the end of that novel. Maloney's suggestion that turning back time and reversing the ageing process would be like "thrash[ing] the tide back

10. John McGahern, lecture on Patrick Kavanagh, UCD, March 3, 1999. I wish to thank Catriona Clutterbuck for providing me with copies of her seminar notes.

11. Madeline McGahern, personal communication with author, April 2008.

12. In a letter to Michael McLaverty on March 9, 1960, McGahern complains about a "bad" story (possibly by Benedict Kiely) which seems "strung hurriedly together for the fat fee the *New Yorker* pays" (*DMM* 20). In another letter written later in the decade, McGahern complains that one of his own stories had fallen victim to the meddling hand of a *New Yorker* editor trying to bring it in line with the conventions of its house style, because "I think they think my work is too rough or something." John McGahern to Brian Friel, n.d., Brian Friel papers, National Library of Ireland: MS 37,259.

13. John McGahern, *The Barracks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 232.

with mere sticks" (*P* 205) obviously references Cuchulain's battle with the sea in Yeats's *On Baile's Strand*.[14] Most of McGahern's lampoon of Revivalist and post-Revivalist pieties in *The Pornographer* is concentrated, however, in and around the story-within-a-novel called "Mavis and the Colonel Take a Trip on the Shannon," which the protagonist writes for Maloney's pornographic magazine. "Mavis and the Colonel" is not just a parody of the boredom of "remarkably badly written" pornographic prose, as McGahern has said.[15] It is also a satire on the familiar tropes of the Literary Revival, and especially on the didacticism and the "sociological rant[s]" of 1930s and 1940s post-Revivalist social realism.

McGahern—like one of his literary heroes, James Joyce—frequently sent up the cultural stereotypes associated with the West of Ireland in the literary discourse of early twentieth-century Ireland.[16] In *The Pornographer*, he evokes the "journey westward" in the imagination on which Gabriel Conroy feels he must embark at the conclusion of Joyce's "The Dead." There, Joyce substitutes the Revival's romantic-nationalist convention of a merely physical retreat to the supposedly unspoiled Irish-speaking West, with a subtly different kind of metaphorical "journey" away from the "solid world" of the living to a site of acceptance, understanding, and communion between all the living and the dead that Joyce, though Gabriel Conroy, also situates beyond the "dark mutinous Shannon" in the West.[17] The conclusion of "The Dead" both conforms to and breaks with the Revival's central trope of journeying westward. *The Pornographer*'s version of a Gabriel Conroy-like "journey westward" cannot be found in the pornographic story about a weekend-trip to the West that the hero writes, but rather in his private resolve "to go inland, in the solitude that is both pain and joy, and there make our own truth" (*P* 203). The intentions of the pornographer's literary efforts contrast starkly with this possibility for a meaningful westward journey inland, which he hopes could bring about a transformation in his private life.

In the short story that the pornographer writes for Maloney's magazine, Mavis and the Colonel's "journey westward" is emphatically not a conventional Revivalist search for a site of moral and cultural purity among Irish-speakers in the rural West, of the sort found in those stories about "beautiful, pure faithful,

14. The Yeatsian allusion is clear from the inclusion of a reference to Yeats's theatrical collaborator Florence Farr on the preceding page. See van der Ziel, *Imagination of Tradition*, 166 and 267, n. 46.

15. Eamon Maher, "An Interview with John McGahern," in *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: Liffey, 2003), 149.

16. On this aspect of Joyce, see Frank Shovlin, *Journey Westward: Joyce, Dubliners and the Irish Literary Revival* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012). McGahern discussed Joyce's engagement with the theme of Irish cultural nationalism, in the famous exchange between Miss Ivors and Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead" and elsewhere, at the start of his essay "What Is My Language?" (*LW* 260–61).

17. James Joyce, *Dubliners* (1914; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 225.

Connacht girls and lithe, broad-shouldered open-faced young Connacht men" that Joyce ridiculed in one of his letters.[18] Nor is it a metaphorical search for "solitude" and "truth" like that of the pornographer's own journey, or that of Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead." Rather, Mavis and the Colonel's "Trip on the Shannon" is the starting point of a no-holds-barred sex romp that forcefully counters the Revivalist myth of the moral, spiritual, and physical purity of Irish country-folk in the rural Irish-speaking West.

The pornographer's short story also revisits and restates the terms of other well-known Irish cultural debates of the early twentieth century. Maloney's facetious description of Michael, a secondary character in "Mavis and the Colonel" who is the victim of one of the titular heroes' perverted sexual power games, as "the very heart and soul in person of my dear friends, the plain people of Ireland" (*P* 162) confirms that the story is intended by McGahern as a parody of Revivalist cultural values. The epithet "plain people" directly invokes a running joke in Myles na Gopaleen's "Cruiskeen Lawn" columns. These columns—like the satire of the language revival in *The Poor Mouth* (1941)—savagely satirized the rhetoric of a dominant national discourse (that of the Literary Revival of the early decades of the century, and of de Valera's pastoral social vision in the 1930s and 1940s); the lives of peasants from the western seaboard in such idealized accounts bore little resemblance to the squalor and ignorance in which many in the rural West actually lived.[19]

Michael in "Mavis and the Colonel" is a character in a crudely drawn piece of pornographic trash, not in the literary novel in which that fiction is couched. As such, he is allowed to be much more crudely representative of a certain type of character from the social-realist literature of the period. Rather than a fully rounded character in his own right, he is little more than a cipher, not only of the sexual fantasies of the pornographer and his readers, but also of the preoccupations of the sociologically minded writers of the 1930s and 1940s whose arguments are ventriloquized through him. The pornographer's story, after all, repeats a number of the major concerns of Kavanagh, O'Connor, O'Faolain, and other writers who engaged with social inequality and sexual mores in the post-Independence decades—so much so that one critic observed that McGahern's character wrote "mighty didactic pornography."[20] Its lessons are primarily concerned with the area of sexuality, and the damage done to that part of human in-

18. James Joyce to Stanislaus Joyce, 20 November 1906, in *Selected Letters*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 134.

19. Many of the "Plain People of Ireland" columns are reprinted in Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles: A Selection from "Cruiskeen Lawn,"* ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Flamingo, 1993).

20. Lori Rogers, *Feminine Nation: Performance, Gender and Resistance in the Works of John McGahern and Neil Jordan* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), 69.

teraction by generations of church teaching and by economic hardship.[21] Thus, Michael can get drunk and boast that he has never "'gone in for the girls . . . in any serious way. I stick to this,' he raised his glass triumphantly. 'It's all right for the rich. But my generation, seeing the hardship our parents had to go through, decided to stay clear. Maybe we were as well off . . . '" (*P* 158). The Colonel, in turn, can affirm the same twisted psychology when he observes that it is "No wonder the country is in such a poor state. . . . An old boy like that, drinking all round the country, laughing at women, boasting he'd escaped—escaped from what?" (*P* 158–60). Both statements replicate the attention to the veneer of self-deception that covers the immense sadness of the Irish countryside arising from its fear of sex and procreation, a concern that also forms the central theme of Kavanagh's *Great Hunger*.

The social concerns of the pornographer's story—the male fear of sex and procreation as a direct result of famine or deprivation—replicate those of important poems like *The Great Hunger* or Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mheán-Oíche* (*The Midnight Court*), the great eighteenth-century satire on sexual repression. But with its heavy-handed didacticism "Mavis and the Colonel" is not, as Maloney acknowledges, in the same "untranslatable league" as the latter (*P* 162–63)—a comment that alludes to the controversial banning of Frank O'Connor's English translation of Merriman's poem under the Censorship of Publications Act in 1945. The adjective "untranslatable" refers to the irony by which Merriman's original Irish was venerated as a pinnacle of indigenous literary achievement, one suitable to be taught to the nation's schoolchildren, while O'Connor's English translation of the same text was banned for its alleged obscenity and likelihood to corrupt.[22] If self-righteous anger, judgement, and self-expression "stink" like Flaubert's metaphorical chamber pot, then the pornographer's cheap didacticism is well placed in the gutter end of the literary marketplace.[23] This is not to say of course (as McGahern implicitly acknowledges) that literature should never contain forms of social critique; the same

21. Especially in interviews, McGahern often stressed his belief that the church in Ireland "caused most serious damage in the area of sexuality." See for example, *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*, ed. Cliodhna Ní Anluain (Dublin: Lilliput, 2000), 140.

22. This irony was most forcefully articulated by Senator Owen Sheehy Skeffington during the infamous Senate debates over the Censorship of Publications Bill. See *Seanad Éireann* 63 (7 June 1967), 348.

23. McGahern greatly admired Flaubert's letter, and quoted it at length in his essay on *Dubliners* (*LW* 202–04): "You have made Art an outlet for passions, a kind of chamber-pot to catch the overflow of I don't know what. It doesn't smell good! It smells of hate!" Gustave Flaubert, letter to Louise Colet, 25 November 1853, in *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1830–1857*, ed. and transl. Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 202. McGahern often spoke out against the place of "self-expression" in art. See for example *LW* 14.

points, differently made, can certainly have their place in great art. What Maloney calls the "gusto" of Merriman's "effort"—that is, his commitment to language and truth and literary form—elevates *The Midnight Court* from a mere "sociological rant" into a great poem. The pornographer's formulaic attempt at sexual titillation and self-expression pathetically fail to emulate such a feat.

In McGahern's own work, too, there is a place for well-directed social critique, though never for "self-expression." Memories of Kavanagh's astute social observations even bleed into McGahern's taut early masterpiece of the short-story genre, "Korea," from *Nightlines.* In that story, the father's advice to his son to leave home for England or America because "All there's room for [in this poky place] is to make holes in pints of porter" (*N* 88) echoes the warning of Tarry Flynn's travelled uncle about the dangers of staying in the native countryside in Kavanagh's autobiographical novel: "the only thing a man could do in a place like this is drink himself to death."[24] The pornographer's concerns with sexuality and culturally sanctioned celibacy, too, had already been treated by McGahern in that earlier volume of short stories in a more impartial spirit. Through Michael's crass comments in "Mavis and the Colonel" McGahern is effectively revisiting the tragic case of Lavin, the title character of another *Nightlines* story, whose life has been marred by sexual frustrations straight out of *The Great Hunger*.[25] McGahern's reworking of the same material in the later story-within-a-novel demonstrates how different the result can be when a writer indulges in the sin of self-expression by making his story into a "sociological rant," instead of an exercise in Chekhovian or Flaubertian objectivity like "Lavin."

The passing reference to the banning of his translation of *The Midnight Court* is not the only reference to Frank O'Connor in that section of *The Pornographer*. The memory of one of O'Connor's most influential cultural interventions is subtly invoked elsewhere in "Mavis and the Colonel." When Michael, after a few drinks, shows Mavis and the Colonel around a Shannon cruiser on behalf of his English employer, he tells them that "Mr Smith" is

> A gentleman. The English are a great people to spend money. They're pure innocent. But your Irishman's a huar. The huar'd fleece you and boast about it to your face. Your Irishman is still in an emerging form of life. (*P* 84)

This damning assessment is perhaps specifically reminiscent of the conclusion of one of Sean O'Faolain's editorials in *The Bell*, which proposed the existence of a contrast between the "long-stabilised, and therefore complex, form[s] of life" that may be found in other countries, with a country like Ireland, "Where the

24. Patrick Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn* (1948; London: Penguin, 2000), 188.

25. See Stanley van der Ziel, "John McGahern: *Nightlines*," in *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story*, ed. Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm (Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 491.

forms of life are still in their childhood": between "Life and non-Life, the healthy organism and the diseased growth."[26]

More important, the same kind of binary thinking about the presence or absence of social coherence that exists in different countries had led in turn to the rediscovery, first by O'Faolain in his 1948 book *The Short Story* and later by O'Connor in *The Lonely Voice* (1963), of an idea about the suitability of different genres of prose fiction to different cultural experiences that had been coined by Henry James in the late nineteenth century.[27] The novel's usual setting, according to Ian Watt's classic study of the origins and defining characteristics of the genre, is "in a stable and cohesive pattern of social relations."[28] The short story, on the other hand, belongs to what O'Connor famously describes in the first chapter of *The Lonely Voice* as "submerged population groups." O'Connor's definition of this group stresses the unattractive individualism of such a society made up of isolated individuals:

> it does not mean mere material squalor, though this is often characteristic of the submerged population groups. Ultimately it seems to mean defeat inflicted by a society that has no sign posts, a society that offers no goals and no answers. The submerged population is not submerged entirely by material considerations; it can also be submerged by the absence of spiritual ones. . . . Clearly, the novel and the short story . . . are distinct literary forms; and the difference is not so much formal . . . as ideological. . . . The novel can still adhere to the classical concept of civilized society, of man as an animal who lives in a community, as in Jane Austen and Trollope it obviously does; but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community—romantic individualistic, and intransigent.[29]

McGahern reprises O'Connor's analysis of the dominant psychology of twentieth-century rural Ireland in his 1995 essay "The Christmas Rose," in which he connects the "blind rancour against neighbours coupled with an equally blind grasping after even useless advantages" that he had witnessed during his own lifetime with the enduring memories of the Famine (*LW* 155). More important, it is visible in the obsession with "security" and the fear of the poorhouse shared by most of the father figures in his novels, from Mahoney in *The Dark* (1965) to Moran in *Amongst Women* (1990), and including also Josephine's boring uncle

26. [Sean O'Faolain], "Attitudes," *Bell* 2, 6 (September, 1941), 12.

27. O'Faolain acknowledges his debt to Henry James's argument in his autobiography, in which he quotes from James's 1879 study of Nathaniel Hawthorne. See Sean O'Faolain, *Vive Moi! An Autobiography*, ed. Julia O'Faolain (1963; London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993), 244–45.

28. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957; London: Pimlico, 2000), 66.

29. Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (London: Macmillan, 1963), 18, 20–21.

in *The Pornographer*, who repeatedly insists that his niece take a job in a bank because "it's secure, and you can't beat security" (*P* 32).

The opposition in McGahern's story-within-a-novel between gentlemen on one side, and "huars . . . emerging form[s] of life" on the other, rewrites in comical terms—its coarse colloquial idioms a world removed from the polite discourse of conventional literary criticism—the well-known opposition between those nations and cultures where a social structure is sufficiently established to support the novel, versus the "submerged population groups" whose experiences are ideally expressed in short stories. That oversimplified trope—popularized in Ireland by two writers who, as Derek Hand has pointed out, not coincidentally excelled in the shorter rather than the longer form—has taken deep root in the consciousness of critics of Irish fiction in the second half of the twentieth century.[30] It has even on occasion entered criticism of McGahern's fiction.[31]

It is true, of course, that McGahern himself paid lip service to this familiar cultural trope on several occasions. He did so most notably in his 2001 foreword to Alistair MacLeod's *Island*, where in an argument clearly written under the sway of *The Lonely Voice* he wrote that:

> I think of the novel as the most social of all the art forms, the most closely linked to an idea of society, a shared leisure and a system of manners. The short story does not generally flourish in such a society but comes into its own like song or prayer or superstition in poorer more fragmented communities where individualism and tradition and family and localities and chance or luck are dominant. (*LW* 212)

And yet, McGahern's simultaneous unease with the convenient simplicity of that argument is also clear—not just from his lampooning of those binaries in the "Mavis and the Colonel" story in *The Pornographer*, but also from the way in which, in some of his other fiction from the same period, generic form is often matched with subject matter in ways that deliberately depart from the binary thinking of that old argument.

As always, as he counseled in his essay "The Solitary Reader," McGahern was consciously discarding old "tenets that we have been told" in order to think things out for himself (*LW* 90). His early novels are studies of sensitive individuals at odds with the larger social reality that surrounds them; as such, they are not, in

30. Derek Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2–4. For brief histories of the novel-versus-short-story trope in Ireland, see for example Terence Brown, "After the Revival: Seán Ó Faoláin and Patrick Kavanagh," in *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays* (Mullingar: Lilliput, 1988), 91–116, and John Kenny, "Inside Out: A Working Theory of the Irish Short Story," in *Frank O'Connor: Critical Essays*, ed. Hilary Lennon (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007), 99–113.

31. See for example John Cronin, "John McGahern's *Amongst Women*: Retrenchment and Renewal," *Irish University Review* 22, 1 (Spring–Summer, 1992), 169–70.

emphasis or approach, unlike the novel genre in the hands Modernist writers like Joyce or D.H. Lawrence. What is more, his last two novels increasingly turn the novelist's steady gaze to the broader social canvas of the nineteenth-century novel—a model that should not, according to O'Connor and O'Faolain and their followers, be available to the indigenous Irish writer. With its steady focus on the Moran family fortunes against the realistic backdrop of the social and political nuances of twentieth-century Ireland, a novel like *Amongst Women* can hold its own beside the social and psychological depths of classic English family dramas like *Wuthering Heights* or *Mansfield Park*, while the panoramic encompassing of an entire community in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is akin to the art of *Middlemarch*.[32] The narrator's repeated emphasis on the "enclosed" or "completed" nature of the world of Great Meadow in *Amongst Women* may even be read as a sly reference to some critics' descriptions of the generic properties of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel as an "autarkic world."[33] But if McGahern's novels deal with situations and characters belonging to a social background that is—according to O'Connor and O'Faolain—the natural subject of short stories, then the opposite is often also true. In certain early works, like "Why We're Here," from *Nightlines*, and especially in the later triptych about dwindling Protestant communities from *High Ground*, McGahern also shows, as Declan Kiberd has written about William Trevor, how "the people about whom novels had once been written—the Anglo-Irish, Protestant ministers—were now sufficiently marginal to be fitting subjects for the short story."[34] It has also been said, moreover, that those later *High Ground* stories, in their scope and narrative pacing and subject matter, resemble "nineteenth-century novels in miniature."[35]

McGahern's awareness of the traditional distinction between "individualistic" and "intransigent" Irish short-story writers, and the "civilized" novel writers who may be found among the middle classes of England, is also clear from his 1990 interview with Arminta Wallace, in which he quipped, "The obvious case is Jane Austen: you couldn't imagine Jane Austen writing a short story."[36] This

32. On the significance of Austen in McGahern's late work, see van der Ziel, *Imagination of Tradition*, chapter 2. For specific links with *Wuthering Heights* and *Middlemarch*, see van der Ziel, "Medusa's Mirror: Art, Style, Vision and Tradition in the Fiction of John McGahern," PhD diss., University College Dublin, 2008, 273–34, 330–32.

33. Roland Barthes comments that in the novel "we find the construction of an autarkic world which elaborates its own dimensions and limits, and organizes within these its own Time, its own Space, its population, its own set of objects and its myths." Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology*, transl. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Cape, 1984), 26.

34. Declan Kiberd, "Demented Bachelors," review of *The Hill Bachelors* by William Trevor, *London Review of Books*, 8 March 2001, 31.

35. Van der Ziel, *Imagination of Tradition*, 66.

36. Arminta Wallace, "Out of the Dark," interview with McGahern, *Irish Times Weekend*, 28 April 1990, 5.

observation was grounded in his appreciation of the conventional wisdoms of Irish literary criticism. What is more, the implications of what seems at first to be no more than a casual humorous observation may be much more far-reaching, because the structure of McGahern's thought radically repositions the terms of that old argument in a subtle, almost imperceptible way. Writing in the immediate aftermath of Irish independence in the midcentury, O'Faolain and O'Connor—despite their position as eminent short-story writers authoring academic studies intended to vindicate the artistic merit of the genre—had still treated the novel as the norm against which the short story is measured. In such a comparison, the latter is inevitably found wanting, as it is judged against the critical norms of a different literary enterprise. O'Faolain and O'Connor ultimately betray a form of provincialism, the insecurity of those from the margins of a culture who look to the center for validation.

McGahern, by contrast, approaches the same division from the point of view of the parochial (in the sense in which that word is used by Patrick Kavanagh), who is confident of the cultural validity of his own forms of artistic expression.[37] His comment that one could not imagine Jane Austen writing a short story is in its own quiet way a radical act of revision of the terms by which literary history is written. Its brilliance as a revisionist account of the history of prose fiction lies in the way it repositions the relative significance of the two genres. For McGahern, it is no longer Irish short-story writers who are found tragically lacking for their collective inability to write novels: instead, it is the foremost of mannered, "civilized" English novelists who is so utterly incapable of working in the shorter form that to imagine her even attempting such a thing seems ridiculous.

In an interview, McGahern observed that he believed Daniel Corkery "is a better short-story writer than he is a critic. . . . I think he is a wonderful short story writer of a certain type." Corkery's tragedy, he agreed, lay in being remembered chiefly for his polemical criticism, rather than for his fiction.[38] McGahern had discovered Corkery's short stories after attending a lecture by Michael McLaverty at UCD in 1958, when, following McLaverty's advice, he read the stories in the National Library.[39] One story in particular stood out. In a letter to McLaverty on January 13, 1959, and then again decades later in essays and interviews, he singled out Corkery's story "Vision" (*DMM* 16; *LW* 75). The ghost of that story can be detected in one of McGahern's own earliest stories, "Christmas," the story of a

37. For Kavanagh's distinction between the "provincial" and the "parochial," see Kavanagh, *A Poet's Country*, 237.

38. Stanley van der Ziel, "An Interview with John McGahern," appendix II in *Medusa's Mirror*, 374.

39. Van der Ziel, "An Interview with John McGahern," 374.

boy who has been outplaced from an orphanage and his disillusionment with the world of adults.

"Christmas" abounds with suggestions of intertextuality. Two of these have been the subject of prior criticism of McGahern's work. First, as one of *Nightlines*' stories that "recall a past experience, the pivot of which is initiation and disillusionment," it has often been linked with the influence of Joyce's *Dubliners*.[40] The revelation with which the story concludes—"I felt a new life for me had already started to grow out of the ashes, out of the stupidity of human wishes" (*N* 46)—certainly recalls the final paragraph of "Araby": "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger."[41] Secondly, critics have recognized the presence of W.B. Yeats's "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory"—"Some burn damp faggots, others may consume / The entire combustible world in one small room / As though dried straw"—behind the boy's burning of Mrs Grey's gift in a handful of straw in the story's denouement. The ghostly presence of those lines points to the theme of awakening artistic intensity that is one of McGahern's recurring themes.[42] In addition, the naming of Mrs Grey may contain another Yeatsian allusion. The boy's reception of a painted wooden toy from a character named Mrs Grey, and his subsequent destruction of that toy in response to the revelation of the terrible truth about the sordid and unfair nature of adult reality, may gesture to the quatrain from "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" that opens Yeats's *Collected Poems*. This takes as its subject the substitution of mundane reality for romantic dreaming:

> The woods of Arcady are dead,
> And over is their antique joy;
> Of old the world on dreaming fed;
> Grey Truth is now her painted toy . . .[43]

The recurrence of the word "Grey" side by side with the image of "her painted toy" in McGahern's story can scarcely be coincidental.

Critical assessments of "Christmas" have been naturally drawn to identifying Joycean and Yeatsian examples; these are the authors whose significance

40. Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 87.

41. Joyce, *Dubliners*, 28.

42. W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (London: Macmillan, 1984), 134. The echoes of "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" have been pointed out by Belinda McKeon, "'Robins Feeding with the Sparrows': The Protestant 'Big House' in the Fiction of John McGahern," *Irish University Review* 35, 1 (Spring–Summer, 2005), 82–83, and Frank Shovlin, "The Ghost of W. B. Yeats," *John McGahern Yearbook* 2 (2009), 50.

43. Yeats, *The Poems*, 7.

McGahern continually emphasized in essays and interviews. But these are not necessarily the only intertexts at work in this tale of "initiation and disillusionment." The plot and the character of the prepubescent protagonist place "Christmas" just as close to the example of the unfashionable Corkery as to that of Joyce or Yeats. Specific elements of language, imagery, and plotting are unmistakably indebted to McGahern's memory of reading Corkery's "Vision." In both stories, the boy protagonists' final moments of disillusionment are arranged around the gift of a new wooden toy. McGahern's focus on a single, particular detail in the sentences that introduce the gift— "Mrs. Grey came Christmas Eve with a large box. . . . A toy airplane stood inside the box, it was painted white and blue and the tyres smelled of new rubber" (*N* 43)—evokes Corkery's description in "Vision" of the toy lorry given to the protagonist by his father: "The papered-up box contained a toy lorry, a real lorry . . . those wheels themselves had rubber tyres, you could smell the rubber."[44] The shared detail of the smell of the rubber tires cements the connection. In "Vision," the boy's new toy lorry becomes implicated in the determining moment of his loss of innocence, when he realizes that his father is not, after all, a "good judge" of worldly affairs:

> "My father is a good judge," he whispered, in a changed tone, however, as if he were remembering things. He stood there in the darkness puzzled, as still as stone; his brows fixed, his eyes intent, his head tilted; as for the toy in his hands, it might as well have been a bit of an old ashplant.[45]

McGahern's "Christmas" simultaneously invokes both "Araby" and "Vision." In McGahern's story, as in Corkery's, a beloved toy becomes implicated in the protagonist's devaluation of human existence, and in the process loses its unique appeal before finally becoming the butt of the distraught boy's revenge as the "pretty toy" is reduced to the "shapelessness" of a piece of firewood with just a few kicks (*N* 46). Thus, the burning of straw and toy in the barn in McGahern's story's contains allusions both to the violent feeling of disillusionment in Corkery's "Vision," and to the awakening of a new passionate intensity that we see in "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory."

In his account of discovering Corkery's short stories in 1958, McGahern recalls he was already familiar with Corkery's other work at that time. He had liked his novel *The Threshold of Quiet* (1918), which, as he recalled in an interview with Joyce Andrews, had been among the very few books kept in his mother's house.[46]

44. Daniel Corkery, *Earth out of Earth* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1939), 14.

45. Corkery, *Earth out of Earth*, 16.

46. [Joyce Andrews], "John McGahern" (profile), in *Education and the Arts: The Educational Autobiographies of Contemporary Irish Poets, Novelists, Dramatists, Musicians, Painters and Sculptors: A Research Report*, dir. of research Daniel Murphy (Dublin: Trinity College Department of Higher Education, 1987), 130.

Though he had been "put off by the nationalistic essays, which at that time were more in vogue than his fiction" (*LW* 75), McGahern's fiction invokes each of those aspects of Corkery's work.

In addition to his early tribute to Corkery as an exemplary short story writer in "Christmas," McGahern on a later occasion turned his satirical attention to the polemical criticism for which Corkery is better known. Keegan, one of the laborers in McGahern's early short story "Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass," is in the habit of repeating the phrase "We who are Irish" (*N* 56) as part of one of his endlessly repeated mantras. The notion of Irishness may seem stable in the mind of that character—but the author was certainly aware that the question of who exactly are Irish, and who are not, is as hotly contested as any other in the literary and cultural criticism of the first half of the twentieth century. In an interview with Julia Carlson, McGahern commented on the insular and insecure cultural climate of the midcentury:

> It was a young, insecure state without traditions, . . . and there was this notion that to be Irish was good. Nobody actually took any time to understand what to be Irish was. There was this slogan and fanaticism and a lot of emotion, but there wasn't any clear idea except what you were against; you were against sexuality; you were against the English.[47]

The nature of Irish national identity was extensively theorized during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century in such polemical pieces of essentialist criticism as D. P. Moran's *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland* (1905), and later, in the decade following the civil war, in Corkery's now-notorious introduction to his *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (1931), where he introduced the idea of "three great forces which, working for long in the Irish national being, have made it so different from the English national being."[48] The simultaneous decline of Protestant Anglo-Ireland, in the meantime, was accompanied by the obsessive repetition of its own set of cultural stereotypes in the late flourishing of the genre of the Big House novel.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, McGahern would self-consciously return to the oversimplified binary oppositions between planter and Gael, native and colonizer, that had been established during that period and which were in the process of being further enshrined in the postcolonial criticism of the 1980s and 1990s. The supposedly clear fixed boundaries of national identity upon which nationalist discourse is built are frequently subverted in McGahern's later fiction. In *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002), for example, Robert Booth, the son of an Ulster draper working in London who returns from England every year to

47. *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer*, ed. Julia Carlson (London: Routledge, 1990), 63.
48. Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature: A Study* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1931), 19.

spend the summer with Kate and Ruttledge in the Irish countryside, is described without malice by Jamesie simply as "the big Englishman."[49] McGahern's most sustained blurring and inversion of the traditional markers of national identity can be found, however, in *Amongst Women*—a novel in which the central character, Moran, ironically shares his surname with the philosopher of Irish Ireland.

During a conversation with one of his sons-in-law, Moran is twice told that his eldest son Luke is "turning himself into a sort of Englishman."[50] The remark is intended as an insult, although the precise nature of Luke's supposed Englishness remains rather ill-defined. A number of Moran's own actions, in the meantime, problematize the supposedly clear-cut boundaries between different nationalities, religious groupings, and social castes. In the introductory chapter of *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, Corkery identifies the three pillars of Irish national identity as "(1) The Religious Consciousness of the People; (2) Irish Nationalism; and (3) The Land."[51] Moran breaks all these sacred commandments of Irish national being. The first is problematized by Moran's waning religious faith. An exchange shortly before his death reveals that he has lost much of his belief in orthodox Catholicism; yet he continues to make full use of the social and domestic rituals associated with Irish Catholicism to strengthen his own position in the household.[52] The second of Corkery's three "great forces" is revisited in McGahern's anatomy of Moran's disappointment with the outcome of the nationalist struggle for independence.[53]

The third of Corkery's "great forces" of Irish national being, "The Land," is both the vaguest, and, at first glance, the most preposterous of his claims. It seems inevitable, then, that it should be the one most comically parodied in one of *Amongst Women*'s agricultural set pieces, where Corkery's third law for separating the genuine Irish from foreign interlopers is knowingly reversed. The Catholic nationalist Moran conspicuously fails to make a connection with the land with which he is supposed to feel such a mystical affinity. Instead, he views the land he farms as a hostile force much like the English troops he had fought in his youth. When the family is making hay in the meadows, Moran breaks two of the pins

49. John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 157.

50. John McGahern, *Amongst Women* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 148; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*AW* 148).

51. Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, 19.

52. Several critics have observed that the novel continually acts out the pious slogan of the Rosary Crusade of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Fr. Patrick Peyton's "the family that prays together stays together." See for example Siobhan Holland, "Re-Citing the Rosary: Women, Catholicism and Agency in Brian Moore's *Cold Heaven* and John McGahern's *Amongst Women*," in *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories*, ed. Liam Harte and Michael Parker (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 70.

53. See, for example, Antoinette Quinn, "A Prayer for My Daughter: Patriarchy in *Amongst Women*," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17, 1 (July, 1991), 79–90.

of the tedder on the rough ground near a tree. When his son suggests that he could change the pins, his response is that "You can't change the ground" (*AW* 162)—perhaps suggesting that if that were an option, he would be all in favor of such a scheme. Moran, the narrator observes, has "no confidence" in his ability to impose his will on the uneven ground (*AW* 163), and it is more than obvious that he has no affinity for the work either. Crucially, his ineptitude with the land stands in contrast with the gentle touch with which his Protestant neighbor Rodden makes some small adjustments to the machinery, and the instructions he gives Moran for operating it. In a radical act of literary-historical revisionism, the Protestant Rodden experiences none of Moran's difficulties connecting to "The Land." Rodden possesses exactly the instinctive understanding of and connection with the land that Moran lacks, but which, according to Corkery's theory of "Irish national being," he should possess in spades as a devout Catholic freedom fighter.

Rodden's connection with the land he farms is more tender and more thorough than that of many of the Catholics around him—a trait he shares with the gentle Kirkwoods in the *High Ground* stories "Oldfashioned," "Eddie Mac," and "The Conversion of William Kirkwood." In those stories—which appeared in the 1980s, leading up to the publication of *Amongst Women*—McGahern similarly reverses some of the traditional roles and traits assigned in nationalist discourse to Catholic tenant and Protestant landlord. The eponymous cattle thief in "Eddie Mac" is a case in point. Although he is certainly not a noble and virtuous Revivalist peasant, he may initially appear at least to be a roguish hero from a Walter Scott novel. Ultimately, however, he turns out to be more Dracula than Rob Roy when, after first threatening the honor of Irish womanhood with which early-twentieth-century Abbey Theatre audiences had been so concerned, he escapes from the native soil to seek his fortune by swindling and exploiting the all-too-gullible inhabitants of "the teeming cities of the North" of England. [54] The reference to the "teeming cities of the North" in the concluding paragraph of McGahern's story echoes the urban "teeming millions" on whom Bram Stoker's Dracula intends to feed after his journey to England.[55] It is England, not Ireland, which gets the rough end of the deal when it has to accommodate the likes of Eddie Mac. This particular rural Irish exile in urban England, at least, is not cast as a victim of native economic crisis or clerical oppression—as so many of McGahern's Irish abroad are—but rather, as a single exception to that predominantly tragic narrative about the experiences of a generation "lost" in exile.[56]

54. John McGahern, *High Ground* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 81. Hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*HG* 81).

55. Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. Maurice Hindle (1897; London: Penguin, 2003), 60, 191.

56. McGahern referred to the "lost generation" who disappeared into England during the 1950s in Ní Anluain, 149.

If the Protestant Rodden in *Amongst Women* is capable of making the kind of mystical connection with the land that so completely eludes Moran, then the reversal of traditional roles in the novel is completed when Moran in turn takes on some of the habits and mannerisms traditionally attributed to the landlord class. *Amongst Women*—a dynastic novel with gothic traits whose action centers on the fortress-like structure of "the house"—reads in some ways as a variation on the classic genre of the Big House novel from the other side of the political and religious divide.[57] On many occasions Moran behaves more as a stereotypical Protestant landlord during the decades of Anglo-Irish decline than an ex-guerrilla fighter made good. When he comes in from the fields with Michael and announces that "This man and me are after slaughtering a few trees out there" (*AW* 47), he is conforming to a cultural stereotype about impoverished Anglo-Irish landowners selling their trees in order to pay the mounting bills encumbering their estates. And when, immediately after, he jokes that he is so hungry that he could "tackle a live child" (*AW* 47), he is unwittingly casting himself in the role of one of Swift's cannibalistic Protestant landlords and Englishmen from *A Modest Proposal* (1729). The social airs and graces he teaches his daughters also mark them as belonging to a different social class from those around them. The Moran girls' belief in their own unique superiority is comically indicated during the farewells on the local railway platform, and sanctioned on that occasion by another strategically placed literary allusion to one of the great exponents of Anglo-Irish culture. The feeling of embarrassment that Maggie experiences when Rose warmly greets so many people at the train station (*AW* 62–63) is borrowed straight out of the first volume of Yeats's *Autobiographies*, in which the poet recalls how one of his snobbish Pollexfen aunts had taught him to look down on what they regarded as the vulgarity of the English: "My mother had shown them to me kissing at railway stations, and taught me to feel disgust at their lack of reserve."[58] It is no wonder that Moran's daughters have come to think of themselves as "the aristocratic Morans of Great Meadow" (*AW* 2).

Not all of Moran's aristocratic traits in the novel are unattractive, or even undesirable; his appropriation of some of the properties of Anglo-Irish culture may be read as a sign of his class's inevitable social development. In Rose's eyes, one sign of the "separateness from the people around [him]" that she finds so attractive is his ownership of a car. Most people would, as the narrator relays Rose's thoughts in free indirect speech, "buy a cow or a few more fields. In these parts

57. See Eamonn Hughes, "'All That Surrounds Our Life': Time, Sex, and Death in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*," *Irish University Review* 35, 1 (Spring–Summer, 2005), 147–63. On the Big House novel, see Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998).

58. W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), 34.

a car was prized more than flowers or an orchard or a herb garden: it was the symbol of pure luxury" (*AW* 30). Most of McGahern's fiction is set in the harsh rural world of mid-twentieth-century Ireland, the mentality of which had developed out of the experience of the Great Famine. In that milieu, the acquisition of wealth and property had been the traditional goal of the aspirations of the social class to which the Morans belong. "Leisure and luxury," on the other hand, "were looked upon suspiciously," as McGahern was to write in "The Christmas Rose" (*LW* 155). Amid that prevailing mentality, Moran's purchase of an object of "pure luxury" that has no real utilitarian purpose—there is no mention of his using the car for business ends, only for outings to the seaside—aligns him with the various leisured Protestants in the *High Ground* stories, with their interests in astronomy, flower-arranging, bee-keeping, and the cultivation of orchards that yield more produce than they can use or sell; in anything, in short, that may be "guaranteed to be perfectly useless" (*HG* 73, 77), as the crass title-character of "Eddie Mac" scornfully remarks on more than one occasion about his aristocratic neighbors.

Like Rose with her taste for curtains and Michael in his cultivation of a flower garden in *Amongst Women*, and like the boy in "Oldfashioned" who can appreciate the beauty of Mrs Sinclair's carefully arranged basket of apples (*HG* 41), Moran is beginning to raise life, as Elizabeth Bowen remarked about that way of life, "above the exigencies of mere living to the plane of art, or at least style."[59] In these analyses of the tentative early emergence of a culture that could begin to accept luxury—and which might, one day, even come to accept the more radical concept of pleasure—McGahern consciously moved away from the pious monkish asceticism in whose image the nation had been created in the early part of the twentieth century, and which had then been criticised by the harsh social realism of the generation that followed. He did so in more incisive ways than those writers—many of them from younger urban or suburban generations—who simply rejected or ignored the Revivalist image of the poor and pure peasant as an anachronistic irrelevance, or who forgot that it had ever existed.

Amongst Women, then, contains McGahern's final sustained treatment of the stale markers that had, for such a long time, been used to delineate the perceived divide between cultural, religious, and political groupings in twentieth-century Ireland. McGahern knew that cultural and historical truths, as much as artistic one, are—to quote Oscar Wilde's Algernon—rarely pure and never simple. This

59. Elizabeth Bowen, "The Big House," in *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Hermione Lee (London: Vintage, 1999), 27. The connection between artistic vision and aristocratic manners in "Oldfashioned" was first made by James Whyte in *History, Myth and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2002), 55–56; it was repeated by McKeon, 74–77.

is why much of his creative energy throughout his career was directed into reading the inherited "tenets" (*LW* 90) of Irish cultural discourse against the grain by debunking of the myths, theories, and generalizations upon which popular ideas of nationhood were erected. It remains one of the great ironies of McGahern's critical reception that, in a novel that was condemned by no less eminent a critic than A. N. Wilson as a glorification of nationalist violence, McGahern was actually in his own quiet way engaged in an act of revisionism of some of the divisive cultural tropes that were at the very root of such violence.[60]

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60. See McGahern's account of a brush with A. N. Wilson at the 1990 Booker Prize ceremony in "The Solitary Reader" (*LW* 94–95).