

**‘The Ireland that We Dreamed of’:
Rejecting Convention in John McGahern’s *The Dark***

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John McGahern’s second novel *The Dark*, banned upon publication in 1965, is remembered for shining a light on the darkest aspects of Irish Life: a confessional society that masked institutionalised physical, mental and sexual abuse, the full extent of which would be exposed in the Ryan Report (2009). Focusing on the depiction of individual moments of violence, however, encourages us to view the protagonist as a powerless victim and to disregard the novel’s central triumph: the rejection of social expectation and the realisation of a ‘real authority’, independent of family, faith and fatherland.

The Dark explores the unnamed son’s growth to maturity, in an oppressive farmhouse in mid-century rural Ireland.¹ The narrative reveals the pressures and insidious violence of convention and conformity that underpin the socio-political milieu. Themes of paralysis, nationality, language, and religion reveal the tensions between the conflicting powers of Family, Church, and State which lasted long into the latter half of the 20th century. The novel presents an immanent criticism of the repressive culture and social conditioning that maintained the delusion of Ireland as, in de Valera’s now infamous description, a ‘country worthy to be called the island of saints and scholars’ (1943).

The maturing son, however, rejects that convention and achieves a ‘real authority’, an individual sense of self, distinct from the hegemonic pressures exerted on him. He resists the bonds of convention, the nets flung that hold him back from flight:² the family farm, the priesthood, the University—those pillars of identity in mid-century Catholic Ireland—choosing, instead, a menial position within the E.S.B. in Dublin.

In McGahern’s meditation on familial and social constructionism, the fishing expedition in chapter two is a metaphor which foreshadows the narrative trajectory of the novel. The day begins in the convivial atmosphere and innocent play. Mahoney, the son’s violent, tyrannical father, is in an uncharacteristically good humour; yet, a simmering violence is ever present in his staccato orders:

“Watch now. Hold the lines tight. I hear a twenty-pounder coming round by Moran’s Bay on a motor bike,” he joked and they laughed but their fingers trembled on the white lines, feeling the vibrations of the spoons and then someone shouted.

¹ The family’s cousin, Father Gerald, situates the approximate date of the action contemporary to its writing and publication (1965) with a comment on the postcolonial civilisation in Ireland: ‘Absolutely no sense of taste, a very uncultivated people even after forty years of freedom the mass of Irish are. You just can’t make silk out of a sow’s ear at the drop of a hat’ (McGahern, 1965, p. 65).

² ‘—The soul is born, he said vaguely, first in those moments I told you of. It has a slow and dark birth, more mysterious than the birth of the body. When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.’ (Joyce, 2000, p. 220)

“I have one, Daddy. He’s pulling. Quick.”

“Watch you don’t give him slack line. Hold him,” he shouted back. He started to row fiercely, shouting, “Try and keep the boat shifting,” as he let go the oars to take the line. They tried to take his place at the oars but they were too excited to pull much.

[...]

“He’s a good one. He’s trying for the bottom.”

And the fish was sliding towards the boat on the surface, the mouth open, showing the vicious teeth and the whiteness and the spoon hooked in the roof of the mouth. He would make his last fight at the side of the boat, it was dangerous if the hooks weren’t in firmly, he could shake them free, the sinking of the heart as they rattled loose. But Mahoney had leaned out and got him by the gills with his fingers.” (McGahern, 1965, pp. 12-13)

The narrative of *The Dark* expresses how patriarchal authorities—fathers, priests, teachers—angle to emotionally and psychologically hook the son on the taut line of social expectation; their pull to control him no more than child’s-play, the landing of a fish.

As the day wears, Mahoney’s mood turns. Frightened, the children let loose the lines, which cross and tangle:

... he was tiring, cursing every time the waves fouled his stroke, and in the rough water they let the lines cross and tangle without noticing, they were so intent and anxious. When they did it was too late and once he saw the mess his growing frustration turned their way. (McGahern, 1965, p. 14)

The tangled fishing lines symbolise the intersecting strands of social pressure exerted on the maturing son, multiplying and overlapping: the nets flung to hold him back from flight.³ Throughout, the son struggles to loosen the knots of those pressures he experiences, unravelling the ideological constructs, about to discover ‘real authority’, a future and life of his own choosing.

In the novel’s opening, the son is symptomatically non-committal in his response to questions regarding his future: “What do you want to be in the world?” the priest asked as the evening wore. “I don’t know, Father. Whatever I’m let be I suppose.” (McGahern, 1965, p. 24). The passive voicing of the son’s response, his own internalised grammar of self-expression, exposes the oppressive pressures of social convention. His future is something that will be allowed to happen to him, divined by a higher authority, beyond his control. Still a teenager, he lacks a coherent sense of identity. His alienation is characterised by the aesthetically disorienting shifts of the personal pronoun: ‘I’, ‘You’, ‘He’. His self-identification is continuously dislocated

³ In *The Dark*, McGahern’s protagonist, like Joyce’s Stephen, must similarly break those bonds of convention in order to establish a true identity, his own ‘real authority’. Many critics have noted the similarities between the presentations of social, familial and religious repression of Irish-Catholic adolescents in *The Dark* and Joyce’s *Portrait of The Artist as A Young Man*. Denis Sampson, in *Outstaring Nature’s Eye*, offers the view ‘that *The Dark* registers an intimate reflection on the aesthetic theories of Stephen, on aspects of Joyce’s form and symbolism, and on how they relate to the intellectual and psychological development of Stephen’ (1993, p. 61).

when viewed merely as a conduit of national identity, tied to the direction of his becoming: to familial obligation, to priestly vocation, to academic initiation—‘to be called saint or scholar’. As the son struggles to achieve a cohesive sense of self, he narrates events through the second and third person pronouns. This displays a syntactical distancing between his understanding of self and the reality of the actions he describes. The son’s matriculation to that ‘real authority’ is the assertion of that narratological ‘I’, the claiming of an individual and self-created identity, distinct from the homogenising social pressures he experiences growing up.

The son reveals a developing emotional maturity when, stinging from another of Mahoney’s assaults, he resists the anger and shame, the sadness and self-pity he previously indulged in the smothered cursing and darkness of the lavatory:

What happened didn’t matter, you had to go on, that was all. You had to look it in the face. That was the way your life was happening, that was the way you were. There was no time for sadness or self-pity. The show of your life would be always moving on to the next moment. The best was to dress up and bow to it and smile or just look on but it was easier to say than do.

The night was cold. Away towards Oakport, above the Limekiln Wood, you began to watch the clouds cross the face of the three-quarter moon. (McGahern, 1965, p. 116)

This rejecting of the dark of the lavatory for the luminosity of the moon is a decisive moment in the novel. It establishes the son’s shift away from existential constraints and towards that ‘real authority’ and ‘calmness in the face of turmoil’, that is the novel’s central triumph (McGahern, 1965, p. 188).

The dream of the priesthood, originally tied to the dying mother and the promise that ‘one day I’d say mass for her’ (McGahern, 1965, p. 33), is the first opportunity to escape Mahoney’s violent oppression and the lines cast by familial obligation; the authority and power of the church is a medium to trump Mahoney and the poor hand of genetic poker:

He’d not be like his father if he could. He’d be a priest if he got the chance, and there were dreams of wooden pulpits and silence of churches, walking between yew and laurel paths in prayer, an old house with ivy and a garden, orchards behind. He’d walk through life towards the unnameable heaven of joy, not his father’s path. He’d go free in God’s name. (McGahern, 1965, p. 25)

The son longs to escape his father and the inherited obligations of the farm, the unappealing prospect of working himself to death for the man, who demands: “‘He’ll be like me I suppose. He’ll wear out his bones on the few acres round this house and be buried at the end of the road’” (McGahern, 1965, p. 25). Father Gerald exploits the son’s desire and conscripts him for the priesthood. Arrival at the presbytery, however, brings a series of images and allusions; the redolence of death fixed about the priesthood:

“We have the good company of the dead about us.” The priest smiled as if he’d read his mind, “but there’s no need for them to disturb you, they do not walk, not till the Last Day.” (McGahern, 1965, p. 63)

The son sees himself in the same position as ‘the dead’ — visiting the priest at night to beg, wanting a life which will not be given:

At night they left their graves to walk in search of forgiveness, driven by remorse, you’d heard many times. They came most to the house of the priest to beg: the flesh same as their own and able to understand, but the unearthly power of God in his hands, power to pardon. (McGahern, 1965, p. 69)

He lacks conviction and soon rejects the priesthood, with guilt, choice, and conformity inextricably wound in his thoughts, as well as words:

You couldn’t be a priest, never now, that was all. You’d never raise anointed hands. You’d drift into the world, world of girls and women, company in gay evenings, exact opposite of the lonely dedication of the priesthood unto death. Your life seemed set, without knowing why, it was fixed, you had no choice. You were a drifter, you’d drift a whole life long after pleasure, but at the end there’d be a reckoning. (McGahern, 1965, p. 77)

While rejecting the priesthood is a frustrated victory for the son, returning him to the control of his father, it is fundamental in his development beyond the closed social security of convention. As the son prepares to abandon the vocation, Father Gerald’s parting words are notable: ‘You’re on your own now’ (McGahern, 1965, p. 103).

Two options remain for the young man in the stringent environment: get to University or get the boat to England. Where vocation offered the constraints and simplicity of a living death in the sarcophagus of the priesthood, the University seems a life of limitless opportunity. Yet, before the dream of the University can be realised, the reality of the Leaving Certificate must be overcome. A relentless programme of rote learning and memorisation gains the scholarship for the son, only for him to lose the love of learning. Language, history, literature, life: all are boiled down to the mechanical abstraction of the exam. Facts are memorised, only to be forgotten moments after the exam:

The University was the dream: not this slavish push in and out through wind and rain on a bicycle, this dry constant cramming to pass the exam, no time to pause to know anything and enjoy anything, just this horrid cram into the brain to be forgotten the minute the exam was over.

[...]

The University would be different, you’d seen pictures, all stones with turrets surrounded by trees, walks between the lawns and tree, long golden evenings in the boats on the Corrib. You’d be initiated into mystery. (McGahern, 1965, p. 124)

On arrival, however, University life offers only another grind towards convention and security, reality again undermining the dream of untrammelled exploration, the initiation into mystery, longed for throughout the narrative:

You were only hours here yet, and it was not easy to keep hold of the dream, wild grass and sea and broken fish-boxes same as anywhere, this was the University town, but it

was more solid concrete and shapes and names with sea and sky and loneliness than any dream. (McGahern, 1965, p. 167)

That sordid reality grounds the vision and mysticism. We learn: ‘The dream was torn piecemeal from the university before the week was over. Everyone wanted as much security and money as they could get’ (McGahern, 1965, p. 173). Like all dreams in *The Dark*, it bears no resemblance to the real experience. The University, like the priesthood, offers only another hook of convention, the other barb on that hegemonic lure: independence at the expense of liberty. A decision is made, the telegram sent: ‘WANT TO TAKE E.S.B AND LEAVE UNI., WILL WAIT FOR YOUR CONSENT’ (McGahern, 1965, p. 182). Once more, he is under the control of father and family. Even here, in this final self-penned deceleration, that ‘I’ is still distinctly absent.

The son’s decision to leave University is the rejection of that final social convention in post-independence Catholic Irish Identity, ‘the island of saints and scholars’. In a cultural context where ‘Irishness’ was uniquely tied to the West of Ireland, an ancient uninterrupted Gaelic historiography, he does not ‘arise and go’ West to a metaphysical and mythologised ‘Innisfree’ but descends East to the bottom, the ‘West-Briton’ urban capital.⁴ The closing of *The Dark* mirrors the plight of many men and women of mid-century rural Ireland, who journeyed east in hope of employment. It confronts the uncomfortable truth that while the national consciousness was fed a discourse of aristocratic Irish peasantry, the nation’s bodies were fed in England.

The Dark is the narrative of the son’s growth into maturity: growth towards the ‘true authority’ of the self that allows him to ‘fly by the nets’ of social convention and ideology. The closing of the novel shows the son developing beyond the world of his father and the paths marked out for him by ideologies of ‘saints and scholars’, of the priesthood or the University. The struggle throughout *The Dark* is not just the son’s coming of age, but the son’s discovery of a personal liberation, the acceptance of that vital sense of self, that ‘I’, an individual cohesive identity beyond social convention, the prescriptive mores and pressures of Family, Church, and State. The narrative charts that process of transition towards autonomy. In acting against convention, in choosing the E.S.B. and life in the urban East over convention and the mythologies of a Gaelic West he understands that:

One day, one day, you’d come perhaps to more real authority than all this, an authority that had need of neither vast buildings nor professional chairs nor robes nor solemn organ tones, an authority that was simply a state of mind, a calmness in the face of the turmoil of your own passing.

You could go to the E.S.B. If it was no use you could leave again, and it didn’t matter, you could begin again and again all your life, nobody’s life was more than a direction.

You were walking through the rain of Galway with your father and you could laugh purely, without bitterness, for the first time, and it was a kind of happiness, at its heart the terror of an unclear recognition of the reality that set you free, touching you with as much foreboding as the sodden leaves falling in this day, or any cliché. (McGahern, 1965, p. 188)

⁴ Yeats, W. B. Lake Isle of Innisfree.

The narrative trajectory rejects the discourse of ‘saints and scholars’ and exposes an essentialist delusion that maintained it. The central triumph of the novel is the son’s realisation of that ‘real authority’. His identity is no longer governed by nationalist rhetoric or the security of convention. In choosing the E.S.B., the son boldly asserts his own aspirations and displays a determination and self-belief that has been lacking through his development. His future is now a game of chance, the fall of the dice he himself has rolled.

The Dark begins and ends with questions about the future. The opening is marked by the son’s passivity, a narrative distancing from the actions of self: He will be, whatever he is let be (McGahern, 1965, p. 24). The novel’s conclusion, in contrast, is not. The son forcefully asserts his individuality and independence, his developed sense of self registered in the decisive, active voicing, the confident claiming of the ‘I’. His father, Mahoney, directs a final question. The blunt answer severs, finally, the connection: to family, faith, and fatherland, that comely delusion of an island of saints and scholars:

“You’re going out into the world on your own now?”
 “I am.” (McGahern, 1965, p. 190)

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