

Encompassing the Intolerable: Laughter, Memory, and Inscription in the Fiction of John McGahern

John Keegan Malloy
Marquette University

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ENCOMPASSING THE INTOLERABLE: LAUGHTER, MEMORY,
AND INSCRIPTION IN THE FICTION OF
JOHN MCGAHERN

by

John Keegan Malloy, B.A., M.A.

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ABSTRACT
ENCOMPASSING THE INTOLERABLE: LAUGHTER, MEMORY,
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Encompassing the Intolerable examines John McGahern's depiction of individual consciousness struggling with postcolonial Ireland's three dominant and interconnected institutions: nation, family, and the Catholic Church. While McGahern's work, especially the early fiction, is often considered unremittingly bleak, this study argues that his exposure of abuse, repression, and disillusionment within these institutions does not finally entail a pessimistic vision. Instead, through close readings emphasizing character and epiphany, I contend that his texts use the motifs of laughter, memory, and inscription to demonstrate how consciousness can accommodate intolerable realities such as violence and loss rather than becoming defined or controlled by them. Moreover, these motifs trace a progression of subjectivity from survival (laughter) to private identity (memory) to public identity (inscription). Through this process, I argue that McGahern's fiction uncovers a guarded sense of continuity with the above institutions and the awareness that they provide the raw materials for (re)constructing a valid worldview.

Chapter 2 argues that for McGahern's physically or psychically wounded characters, a self-reflexive and dianoetic laugh functions as a minimum confirmation of subjectivity and prepares consciousness to encompass the intolerable. Chapter 3 examines McGahern's portrayal of the extraordinary power of memory to revivify images, refrains, or narratives, and argues that characters who successfully encompass a traumatic past do so by relinquishing the will to power expressed by silence or dogmatic interpretations of individual or collective history. Instead, these characters construct and continually revise open-ended narratives and find that meaning resides in the recounting of such narratives rather than in affixing a final and singular meaning to events. Chapter 4 looks at both the public role of the writer and his or her audience. I argue that McGahern's writing protagonists trace an approach to point-of-view that moves from a defensive posture of isolation and recrimination toward an open posture based on community and forgiveness, and that the latter elicits new ways to encompass the intolerable.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	i
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Defining “the Intolerable”.....	4
Violent Fathers.....	5
Absent Mothers.....	8
Absent God.....	12
Approaches to Reading: Character and Epiphany.....	16
CHAPTER 2: LAUGHTER, SURVIVAL, AND SUBJECTIVITY.....	22
Solidarity and Patriarchy in <i>The Dark</i> and <i>Amongst Women</i>	25
Pathways to Irony in “The Recruiting Officer”.....	35
<i>Risus Purus</i> as Response in <i>The Barracks</i> and <i>The Dark</i>	39
Self-Reflexive Laughter in <i>The Pornographer</i>	55
CHAPTER 3: MEMORY AND THE BURDEN OF INTERPRETATION.....	67
Loss, Memory, and the Individual Consciousness in <i>The Barracks</i> and “The Wine Breath”.....	72
Image, Narrativity, and the Other in <i>The Leavetaking</i>	86
Collective Memory and the Intolerable in “A Slip-up” and “High Ground”.....	100
CHAPTER 4: READERS, WRITERS, AND POINT-OF-VIEW.....	113
Process and Product in <i>The Barracks</i>	116
Writing, Sexuality, and Subjectivity in “The Beginning of an Idea” and “Peaches”.....	121
Theory, Practice, and Audience in <i>The Pornographer</i>	133
Writing and Forgiveness in <i>By the Lake</i>	144

BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 155

Chapter 1: Introduction

John McGahern (1934-2006) already occupies an esteemed place among contemporary Irish writers. No less an authority than John Banville, fellow novelist and 2005 recipient of the Man Booker prize, suggests that McGahern's best work will remain vital for future generations. Banville closes his laudatory review of McGahern's fifth novel, *Amongst Women*, by pronouncing simply: "It will endure" (22). Scholars of Irish Studies and contemporary fiction have also recognized McGahern's stature and produced a steady volume of criticism, with a noticeable increase in attention in the aftermath of *Amongst Women*'s shortlisting for the Booker prize. Such criticism thus far, however, has been eclectic. While commentators consistently allude to important contexts such as Catholicism, the patriarchal family structure in mid-twentieth century Ireland, or the literary influence of W.B. Yeats, James Joyce and Marcel Proust, critical conversations centering on one context and including a theoretical framework have only recently begun to form.¹

The present study aims to develop a phenomenological context by including contemporary philosophers and literary critics who consider subjectivity in the modern and postmodern environment.² Such an approach is justified by three factors. First, interiority is highly emphasized in McGahern's fiction over the vast majority of his career. His first four novels center on a single consciousness. The third-person narration of *The Barracks* (1963) is dominated by inside views of Elizabeth Reegan. *The Dark* (1965) offers significant access to the inner life of young Mahoney (the character's first

¹ Eamon Maher's forthcoming book, *The Church and its Spire: John McGahern and the Catholic Question*, is among the first monographs devoted to a single context for understanding McGahern's work.

² It is not without some irony that I use the latter two terms, for McGahern sometimes jokes that coming of age in the rural Ireland of his childhood was like "growing up in the nineteenth century."

name is never given), even with its shifts between first, second and third-person narration. Both novels of the 1970s, *The Leavetaking* and *The Pornographer*, are told from a first-person perspective and emphasize their narrator's interior responses to events and phenomena more than traditional novelistic action. The short fiction follows a similar pattern; for example, nine of the twelve stories in McGahern's first collection, *Nightlines* (1970), offer first-person narrators. It is only late in his career that McGahern begins to diffuse point-of-view across multiple characters, most notably in the story "The Country Funeral" and in his last novel *By the Lake* (entitled *That They May Face the Rising Sun* in the British edition).

Secondly, I am in agreement with those critics who suggest that a developing central consciousness links multiple texts across McGahern's career. Eileen Kennedy notes, for example, that in many ways Patrick Moran of *The Leavetaking* "could be young Mahoney of *The Dark*" ("Road Away" 122). Denis Sampson also believes McGahern's texts function in this manner, "with each new fiction echoing, mirroring, and overlapping other fictions, the whole oeuvre opening in new directions while remaining consciously grounded in everything that came before" (*Outstaring* 244).

Lastly, among McGahern's own refrains for discussing his writing is a version of the following statement borrowed from Proust: "[E]ach of us has a private world which others cannot see...the only difference between the writer and the reader is that [the writer] has the knack or talent to be able to dramatise that private world and turn it into words" (Maher, "Catholicism" 75). Taken together, these three elements justify a greater exploration of individual subjectivity in McGahern's fiction than has been yet undertaken.

Along with a focus on interiority and the “private world” of the individual, McGahern’s work is clearly preoccupied with existential suffering, violence, and bereavement. As Eamon Grennan notes, much of McGahern’s “major work takes some central absence as its source” (30). This study will examine McGahern’s depiction of consciousness struggling with these realities, all of which contribute to the definition of “the intolerable” developed below. Through a close examination of the cognitive processes associated with laughter, memory, and inscription, I will argue that McGahern’s fiction demonstrates how the mind can encompass the intolerable. Furthermore, I contend that these three motifs trace a progression of subjectivity from survival (laughter) to private identity (memory) to public identity (inscription) within the central consciousness that permeates McGahern’s *oeuvre*.

Chapter 2 argues that for McGahern’s physically or psychically wounded characters, a self-reflexive and dianoetic laugh functions as a minimum confirmation of subjectivity and prepares consciousness to encompass the intolerable. Chapter 3 examines McGahern’s portrayal of the extraordinary power of memory to revivify images, refrains, or narratives, and argues that characters who successfully encompass an intolerable past do so by relinquishing the will to power expressed by silence or dogmatic interpretations of individual or collective history. Instead, these characters construct and continually revise open-ended narratives and find that meaning resides in the recounting of such narratives rather than in affixing a final and singular meaning to events. Chapter 4 looks at both the public role of the writer and his or her audience. I argue that McGahern’s writing protagonists trace an approach to point-of-view that moves from a defensive posture of isolation and recrimination toward an open posture based on

community and forgiveness, and that the latter elicits new ways to encompass the intolerable. Moreover, I contend that McGahern's dramatization of the act of reading acknowledges the possibility that the language of narrative refers primarily back to itself, but that his work ultimately proposes that a text's most important reference is forward to the life of readers. I thus conclude that his fictional readers become capable of transfiguring their "real" lives by their detours through texts rather than emerging from the world of words unchanged.

The framework for each chapter is also intended to fill a gap in the contexts already under discussion among McGahern's critics. Chapter 2 expands McGahern's artistic context to include a greater role for Samuel Beckett and theorists who study his approach to laughter and tragicomedy; Chapter 3 develops a notion of memory based on the phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer rather than on the usual (if accurate) comparisons to Marcel Proust; Chapter 4 suggests that while McGahern's texts are fairly characterized as traditional realist narratives, they also carry a recursive thread often associated with modernist or postmodernist writing.

Defining "the Intolerable"

The intolerable realities that McGahern's characters and protagonists must contend with can be profitably broken down into the following categories: violent fathers, absent mothers, and an absent God. Each of these primary categories link to secondary sources of intolerable experiences for McGahern's characters: violent fathers are linked to a ruthless and naturalistic worldview; absent mothers to the loss of place or *motherland* due to widespread emigration from rural Ireland in the middle of the twentieth century;

an absent God is linked to the institutional Catholic Church, which McGahern's fiction critiques even as it recovers some of the values behind the institution.

Violent Fathers

Father figures in McGahern's fiction are nearly always prone to violence and abuse, both emotional and sexual. This character, usually a veteran of the War of Independence who has become a police sergeant, appears under various names in several works of short fiction and in novels across McGahern's career, from Reegan in *The Barracks* to Moran in *Amongst Women*. He is perhaps at his most caustic and violent in the early fiction, especially *The Dark*, which details not only his physical and sexual abuse of his children, especially his oldest son, but forecasts the difficulties that the children will encounter after such a traumatic upbringing. For example, when their father tries to win back their attention with an offer of a day on the Shannon boating and fishing, they struggle to respond: "They'd make no answer, they'd watch him and each other, they didn't trust" (12). He has so terrorized the children that they must take a consistently defensive posture. No understandable chain of events leads to their father's violence; therefore, trust is impossible. But the *yearning* to trust remains, in what is an early example of an important and consistent motif in much of McGahern's fiction. Reconciling the children's experience, in which trust in a vitally important human relationship is irrevocably lost, with their persistent hope that it can somehow be restored, becomes the kind of dilemma that must be worked out if a character is to encompass the intolerable.

The actions of Mahoney and similarly violent fathers have lasting effects on their children. For many of McGahern's characters, the struggle to recover from such

traumatic experiences persists well into adulthood, especially because such abusive fathers frequently possess a magnetic charisma that continues to attract their children. *Amongst Women* in particular offers a remarkably varied depiction of the adult children of an abusive father as they struggle, with varying degrees of success, to come to some accommodation with Moran's literal and psychological control over their lives. Although that novel is McGahern's most extensive portrayal of the daughters of such a father, inside views of the Moran women are relatively infrequent. Narratives that are either told by or focus on adult sons of abusive fathers are far more common in McGahern's *oeuvre*. These narratives not only detail experiential encounters with violence and abuse, but also often include an alarming awakening by sons to affinities with their fathers that are perhaps even more deeply encoded within them.

An example of such awareness occurs at the end of "Korea," a story in which a son in late adolescence is considering his future. His father, a disillusioned veteran of the War of Independence who ekes out a living as a commercial fisherman, encourages him to emigrate, but not for greater opportunity. Instead, he has learned that a neighbor has two sons serving in the U.S. Army in Korea, for which the family receives compensation. A third son has recently been killed, with the family receiving a sizable insurance payment from the U.S. government. Rather than considering the horror of losing a child, the protagonist's father, hoping for a similar financial outcome, encourages his son to emigrate. The son learns of this shocking plan, but instead of recoiling from someone who would risk sacrificing his child for financial gain, he notes, "I'd never felt so close to him before" (McGahern, *Collected Stories* 58) as the two journey out for a night of fishing. He continues, "Each move he made I watched as closely as if I too had to

prepare myself to murder” (58). The son’s awakening to commonalities with his father, especially his watchfulness and his assassin’s gaze, forecasts another manifestation of the need to encompass the intolerable: how does such a character live with these tendencies without becoming violent, or, at the very least, as selfish and cavalier about human life as his father appears to be?

Violent fathers form an important prototype for reading all of McGahern’s fiction because their characteristics seem to inform the naturalistic worldview that permeates much of his work. Many novels and stories feature characters driven or controlled by biological urges such as sexuality or an intense need for power over other persons. These two drives in particular are naturally linked and inform some of McGahern’s darker works from the 1970s such as the stories “Peaches” and “The Beginning of an Idea” and *The Pornographer*.³ McGahern’s fiction includes examples of women grasping for power and control, such as Josephine’s play for marriage in *The Pornographer* or Rose’s quiet assumption of authority at Great Meadow in *Amongst Women*, but in general the socio-historical environments he depicts are permeated by male expressions of naturalistic behavior. A representative example occurs in *The Barracks* as Elizabeth Reegan listens to a conversation among the policemen. The narrator reports that the discussion will end as it began, “with nothing proven, no one’s convictions altered in any way, it becoming simply the brute clash of ego against ego, any care for tolerance or meaning or truth ground under their blind passion to dominate” (28). In short, the need to dominate and control, to constantly protect oneself, and to use people as tools are not

³ All three narratives feature characters trying to write or writing and will therefore be discussed extensively in Chapter 4.

limited to father figures in McGahern's fiction, but rather are examples of intolerable behavior related to the most destructive characteristics of violent fathers.

Absent Mothers

Many characters and families in McGahern's fiction deal with the premature death of a mother or wife. Declan Kiberd suggests that this theme is essential to McGahern's formation as a writer.

McGahern always said that some people are born to be writers and that others become writers through a traumatizing event which calls out for final narration...McGahern's own fictions were probably not the work of a born writer but of one who had been made into an artist by the death of his mother when, he, her eldest son, was only ten. ("Introduction" xviii-xix)

The void left by an absent mother or wife permeates fiction from across McGahern's career. He dramatizes the situation of children who have lost their mother and been left in the charge of an abusive father in *The Dark*. Though Elizabeth Reegan's rich interior life and generosity (as well as her illness) link her with McGahern's portrayal of his own mother in his autobiography *All Will be Well* (entitled *Memoir* in the British edition), she is also the first fictional model of the suffering second wife and stepmother asked to fill an impossible void. This character recurs under the name of Rose in several short stories such as "Wheels," "Gold Watch," and "Sierra Leone" and is perhaps most fully realized in all of her ambiguity in *Amongst Women*. While the Rose in that novel breathes new life into Great Meadow and liberates the daughters of Moran into lives away from the family farm, she also reinforces their devotion to him and thereby to the authoritarian system of values he represents. In the end, Rose ensures that Moran is never held to account for how deeply he might have hurt his children, especially his oldest son Luke. At the same time, the novel clearly demonstrates the formidable personal price Rose is

forced to pay by occupying the role of lost mother and second wife to a charming but also cruel and abusive single father. Even in a novel in which much of the action features children well into adulthood, the biological mother's absence haunts the entire narrative, though she receives not a single mention in the text.

McGahern offers only occasional inside views of father figures suffering under such a loss. Such views are usually characterized by bewilderment or a desperate grasp after a replacement who will slavishly attend to his physical comfort and narcissistic emotions. For example, Moran's loss of control over his children is met with "scheming fury" as he sees each of them "gradually slipping away out of his reach" (22). The narrator continues, "Yes, they would eventually all go. He would be alone. That he could not stand. He saw with bitter lucidity that he would marry Rose Brady now. As with so many things, no sooner had he taken the idea to himself than he began to resent it passionately" (22). In "The Stoat," an adult son is forced to play the awkward and ironic role of chaperon to his widowed father as he entertains a woman he discovered via a personal ad. During their dinner together, the father's attitude turns on a remark Miss McCabe makes regarding the sea. The narrator notes that the remark "seemed to discomfort my father, as if her words belonged more to the sea and air than to his own rooted presence" (*Collected Stories* 156). The son recognizes that his father cannot abide the attentions of any potential spouse to ever be directed anywhere but at himself.

Ironically, for their extreme selfishness, none of these father figures appears very interested in understanding the loss of a spouse. When they do allude to the significance of the loss, it is usually only as a cover for abusive behavior, such as when Maloney tells his son at the end of *The Dark*, "It might have been better if your mother had to live. A

father doesn't know much in a house" (191). While the tone towards such characters generally grants a bit of sympathy for such bewilderment, overall such men rarely progress toward encompassing the loss of their wives. Though the pain of loss cannot be avoided, as one son laconically puts it, his father "would have been better off if he could have tried to understand something" (*Collected Stories* 156-7).

The interior effects of the premature loss of a parent are explored most extensively in McGahern's fiction via the character of the eldest son. That such a loss is especially formative and enduring is made clear in *The Leavetaking*. The narrator, Patrick Moran, considers the loss of his mother a "shadow" that falls "forever on the self of my life" and shapes it "as the salt and wind shape the trees the tea lord had planted as shelter against the sea" (71). Furthermore, this loss complicates the Oedipal drive because the mother has not merely been broken from but lost entirely. Yearning for a mother's love, idealized in part because of its premature loss, persists in characters like Patrick Moran.

Mothers are associated with two important themes in McGahern's work: a vocation to the priesthood and a sense of place. The former nearly always involves a Catholic mother's dream for her son. This is especially problematic for Patrick Moran in *The Leavetaking*, because his mother dies holding on to this expectation for her preadolescent son. His sense of duty to her informs his career choice as a teacher, what he and many in Ireland call the "Second Priesthood" (168). His loss of his teaching position (for marrying outside of the Church) is thus connected to his loss of a vocation, which is linked to his promise to his dying mother. A vocation in McGahern's fiction usually implies a kind of marriage between mother and son, in which the aging mother

returns to live with her son and take care of the presbytery while he guides his parishioners. While this path is closed to Patrick Moran due to his mother's death and his lack of a vocation, McGahern explores it in "The Wine Breath," a story in which an aging priest considers his mother's recent death and experiences a crisis of faith. I offer close readings of both *The Leavetaking* and "The Wine Breath" in chapter 3 because both dramatize the mind's effort to encompass the *memory* of a mother's loss rather than narrating the loss itself.

McGahern's desire for socio-historical accuracy demands dramatization of the widespread emigration from Ireland that characterized his generation in the decades following the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. However, in McGahern's writing, mothers are linked to lost places even before characters might face the difficult choice of emigrating for economic opportunity. In *All Will be Well*, McGahern's own mother is most commonly associated with routine walks through the rural lanes of his boyhood. The text even develops the names of these locales into a kind of refrain and occasionally repeats this sequence: "We went past Brady's pool and house, the house where the old Mahon brothers lived, passed the dark, deep quarry, across the railway bridge, and up the hill past Mahon's shop" (72). A similar situation is fictionalized in the story "A Slip-up," in which a retired emigrant living in London recalls walking the fields with his mother in Ireland. The character goes on to become completely immersed in a fantasy of returning to Ireland to restore those fields. While he does not necessarily encompass it successfully (as I will demonstrate in chapter 3), this experience illustrates how deeply severance from the motherland has affected him. An equally moving representation of this experience occurs through the character of Johnny Murphy in *By the Lake*. Johnny's desperation to

return to Ireland after his retirement from the Ford motor plant in London, and his own brother's inability to accommodate this request, are both finally encompassed through the act of writing and will therefore be discussed in chapter 4.

The longing of emigrants to return to Ireland is certainly not limited by gender. The daughters of rural Ireland seem equally troubled by the loss of their motherland. Both Elizabeth Reegan of *The Barracks* and Rose Brady of *Amongst Women* appear to have found independent lives and challenging work outside of Ireland, yet both also act on the opportunity to return home. As she considers possibilities after an evening with Moran, Rose strolls back toward her mother's house and reflects, "This narrow lane was dear to her. Sleepless in Scotland she had walked it many times in her mind. The wild strawberries, the wiry grasses, the black fruit of the vetches on the banks were all dear presences" (30). Both Rose and Elizabeth Reegan are warned off from the cruel and uncaring men whom they choose to marry, yet both refuse to heed those warnings in part because their urge to return to their home place is so intense and marriage offers the most plausible means of satisfying it. While inside views of Rose are relatively infrequent in *Amongst Women* (as well as in the other stories in which this character appears), Elizabeth's consciousness pervades the third-person narrative of *The Barracks*. The scope of her inner life, and the novel's forecasting of many of McGahern's most persistent concerns, justifies its appearance in all three chapters of this study.

Absent God

If fathers often form a violent presence, and mothers a ghostly absence, the latter also characterizes McGahern's characters' experience of God. Nearly all of his fiction

features an abiding agnosticism or atheism among characters who nonetheless experience a profound sense of religious yearning.

As early as *The Barracks*, McGahern offers a protagonist whose affection for Catholic rituals does not override religious doubt. Early on in the novel, Elizabeth Reegan reflects that “Her life was either under the unimaginable God or the unimaginable nothing; but in that reality it was under no lesser thing” (59). For McGahern’s characters, agnosticism or even atheism does not, however, obviate the need to pray. In fact, it almost seems to strengthen this urge. Formally, McGahern often negotiates this situation through careful grammatical constructions. Both of his novels from the 1970s end with the protagonists feeling an intense need for prayer. Patrick Moran, having just experienced the Catholic Church at its most socially oppressive (he is fired from his teaching position for marrying outside the Church), nonetheless turns toward God as he considers his imminent exile from Ireland and uncertain future. As he and his wife drift off to sleep, he says that he “would pray for the boat of our sleep to reach its morning” (171). The conditional enables the character to stop short of actually praying while expressing his deep need to do so. Similarly, as the unnamed protagonist of *The Pornographer* speeds back toward Dublin with Maloney, his employer, he reflects on his situation.

What I wanted to say was that I had a fierce need to pray, for myself, Maloney, 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. What I did say was, “Why don’t you watch the road?” (252)

The character thus neither prays nor even expresses his urge to do so aloud, but instead stakes out a position something like a privately spiritual atheism. The protagonist of “Gold Watch,” a story from McGahern’s 1978 collection *Getting Through*, can only

laugh at a spiritual yearning that simply will not give in to an atheist position. Like many McGahern stories, “Gold Watch” centers on a visit by an adult son to his declining but still often abusive father in rural Ireland. As the son walks the fields alone after another difficult day with his father, he reflects, “I stood in the moonlit silence as if waiting for some word or truth, but none came, none ever came; and I grew amused at that part of myself that still expected something, standing like a fool out there in all the moonlit silence” (*Collected Stories* 225).

The absence of God is perhaps too vague to “take its certain place” in the way that Patrick Moran, in *The Leavetaking*, suggests the images associated with the loss of his mother must do within his consciousness. Additionally, the instinct for God, like the innate love of a child for his or her parents (so often challenged by violence or loss in McGahern’s work), persists even in the face of unconquerable doubt. In his late essay “God and Me,” McGahern argues that an instinct for the religious “can be alleviated by material ease and scientific advancement but never abolished. Still sings the ghost, ‘What then?’” (*Love of the World* 151). In chapters 3 and 4 of this study, I will discuss the communion with memory or language that can yield an answer to this question.

I chose the term “encompass” to describe the relationship between consciousness and the intolerable for two primary reasons. First, circular images and structures are predominant in McGahern’s fictions. Many of McGahern’s narratives return to the same setting or action that began the story, and his entire *oeuvre* may even be said to describe a similar structure. After the fiction of the 1970s, which includes narratives set in Dublin, London, and on the European continent, McGahern’s late stories and last two novels return to Cos. Leitrim and Roscommon, the settings for *The Barracks* and *The Dark*.

Eamon Maher suggests that the circle is central not only to McGahern's art but even to "his philosophy of life" ("Circles and Circularity" 157). Maher goes on to say that "circular movement from present to past to future back to present is a feature of most of McGahern's fiction" (161). A passage from "Wheels," in which the narrator considers his aging and desperate father, emphasizes the temporal sense of the circle.

I knew the wheel: fathers become children to their sons who repay the care they got when they were young, and on the edge of dying the fathers become young again; but the luck of a death and a second marriage had released me from the last breaking on this ritual wheel. (*Collected Stories* 8)

Perhaps more important to my purposes is the spatial sense of the circle. Denis Sampson notes that "McGahern's work as a whole reveals a preoccupation with enclosures, shapes, circles, and doorways as analogues of aesthetic form" ("Open to the World" 144). I would add to Sampson's remark that such enclosures are analogues not only of "aesthetic form" but of the cognitive processes which might precede the creation of aesthetic form, especially the negotiation of memory. "Encompassing" is therefore my primary trope for the mind's effort to gain some perspective on experience, especially enduring and potentially damaging images of violence and loss.

To encompass an intolerable experience means to cordon off that experience in a way that both controls it and shields it, but also makes it available for some human understanding. Such an action creates the appropriate distance from which to review the experience but also to live with it in a productive way rather than live out of it in a destructive way. As Declan Kiberd puts it, a "second look at experience can transform a person from one who is imprisoned by it to one who is set free to place it in a far wider pattern of human significance" ("Introduction" xii). Given McGahern's penchant for returning to names, situations, conflicts and settings, one might argue that third, fourth

and still more “looks” can be continually productive in the effort to encompass the intolerable, though even then perfection is likely impossible. McGahern’s early story “Wheels” is again instructive here as the narrator closes the story with a reflective and lyrical passage infused with memories from childhood. He remembers “all the vivid sections of the wheel we watched so slowly turn, impatient for the rich whole that never came but that all the preparations promised” (*Collected Stories* 11). The “rich whole” can never finally come, as the circle may never be completed while the process of living continues. As the same character points out earlier, the best he can do is encompass and revise his experience in order to deliver, in this case to his friend Lightfoot, the “repetition of a life in the shape of a story that had as much reason to go on as stop” (10). He thus suggests a role for narrativity in encompassing the intolerable or the sometimes inscrutable sequences of events that characterize experience. Allusions to narrative’s capability for producing “a synthesis of heterogeneous elements” (Ricoeur, “Life” 426) inform the recursive undercurrent to McGahern’s fictions, which otherwise appear to eschew the more experimental techniques of late Joyce or Flann O’Brien in favor of traditional realism. I will explore this self-reflexive strain in chapter 4 in an effort to show that McGahern is interested in more than providing an accurate sociological picture of life in twentieth century Ireland, though that is what he is most known and admired for.⁴

Approaches to Reading: Character and Epiphany

My close readings of McGahern’s fictions depend on the formal devices of character and epiphany. McGahern’s focus on interiority generally emphasizes

⁴ Cf. Eamon Maher, “John McGahern and his Irish Readers.” *New Hibernia Review* 9.2 (Summer 2005): 125-36.

characters' responses to phenomena rather than the action of plot. In fact, important events in McGahern's plots are often clearly foretold and are thus devoid of conventional suspense.⁵ Instead, his narratives quietly gather momentum from the characters' varied responses to passing time, which is often documented by changing seasons or cyclical rituals such as market days or religious observation (the latter is explored from several angles as it is used both as an instrument of power and control as well as a source of genuine faith and community). The aura of inevitability which permeates such plots does, however, contribute to McGahern's fiction being labeled pessimistic, for his characters often appear to live in a deterministic world in which the individual's life is either prescribed by rigid social institutions such as family and Church or dictated by the physical body passing through the stages of childhood, puberty, maturity, old age, and finally death. These stages provide a linear counterpoint to McGahern's emphasis on circular structures, and this study will trace what characters may gain from the effort to discern both patterns of experience. I will suggest that epiphany can contribute to the recognition and perhaps even reconciling of linearity and circularity.

My notion of epiphany draws on the definition offered by Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Stephen Hero*: "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" (211). Stephen accounts for a religious dimension that is clearly important to McGahern's characters, and I would elaborate the "memorable phase of the mind" to include a lasting understanding of some phenomena. Such a notion of understanding shares some common ground with twentieth century philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer.

⁵ For example, it is clear that Elizabeth Reegan will not recover from her illness in *The Barracks*, and that Patrick Moran will lose his job in *The Leavetaking*. It seems similarly inevitable that Josephine will get pregnant in *The Pornographer* and that *Amongst Women* will culminate in the death of Moran.

Gadamer inquires not into the ‘I interpret it’ but instead into... ‘an interpretation occurs to me.’ When insight occurs to us, it is then that we understand. As a flash of enlightenment, the epiphany of understanding is not something we do but something that happens to us. (Weinsheimer 35)

But if understanding is epiphanic, if it “happens to us” rather than arising from an ordered and reliable hermeneutics, passivity and relativism become genuine threats.

McGahern’s characters clearly struggle with this, most notably the pornographer, who finally recognizes that “by thinking any one thing was as worth doing as any other...I had been the cause of as much pain and confusion and evil as if I had actively set out to do it. I had not attended properly. I had found the energy to choose too painful” (251). The pornographer’s isolation, self-protection, and passivity are carried over from other characters in McGahern’s early fiction, such as the narrator of “Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass,” a young emigrant who works on the building sites in London. He desires to “annul all the votes” within himself (*Collected Stories* 33) and maintain a “careful neutrality” (34) toward both his own past and the community surrounding him. He insists that his grinding and repetitive daily work is satisfactory despite a level of education well beyond his peers, saying, “Almost as good behind the [cement] mixer as anywhere else” (34). While the pornographer’s epiphany creates the possibility that he may emerge from such passivity and relativism, the aging Moran of *Amongst Women* offers a particularly sad return to it, most exemplified by his refrain of “Who cares anyhow?” Moran hides behind this expression in order to justify inaction, even within the only relationships he considers important, those with his children.

While McGahern’s fictions sometimes close with epiphanies in the manner of Joyce’s *Dubliners*, his novels especially emphasize the unpredictability of such moments by including them in the midst of a narrative. Two key examples are Elizabeth Reegan’s

experience with Guard Casey in the dayroom of the barracks and Moran's moment of insight as he walks the fields of Great Meadow. As Casey listens to a soccer match on an afternoon that could hardly be more ordinary, Elizabeth notes that the individual passing minutes lose their "pain" and are "gathered into oneness in the vision of her whole life passing in its total mystery" (59).

A girl child growing up on a small farm, the blood of puberty, the shock of the first sexual act, the long years in London, her marriage back into this enclosed place happening as would her death in moments where cigarettes were smoked. No one, not even herself, could measure it by slide or rule. (59)

Elizabeth's epiphany offers a glimpse of the "rich whole" by gathering the linear pattern of her life, marked by biological changes (menstruation) and social rituals (marriage), into the "oneness" associated with the completed circle. And yet, paradoxically, the encompassing of her life in this manner yields not a triumphant sense of control but rather a greater recognition of the utter mystery of her individual life. Such epiphanies occur in the "private worlds" of many of McGahern's characters, though few respond with Elizabeth's dramatic openness and capacity for finding joy amidst life's arbitrariness and uncertainty.

Though his response to it is quite different than Elizabeth Reegan's, Moran also experiences a widening vision of his own life in the middle of *Amongst Women*.

It was like grasping water to think how quickly the years had passed here. They were nearly gone. It was in the nature of things and yet it brought a sense of betrayal and anger, of never having understood anything much. Instead of using the fields, he sometimes felt as if the fields had used him. Soon they would be using someone else in his place. It was unlikely to be either of his sons. (130)

Rather than the "deep joy" (60) felt by Elizabeth in the aftermath of her epiphany, Moran responds with anger. While he recognizes that the linear time of his lifespan is about to reach its terminus and is part of the "nature of things," he remains angrily bewildered by

it all. That he has never understood anything much maintains a place for some level of reflection beyond epiphany, for some kind of response, what I will call the “burden of interpretation” in chapter 3. While epiphanies can initiate understanding, whether that understanding is met with bitterness or openness is equally important in McGahern’s fiction. This study will also trace a movement to achieve this openness and, further, incorporate it into a public identity. While both Moran and Elizabeth experience insight into the intolerable facts of mortality and the insignificance of the individual human life, Elizabeth is more capable of welcoming such mysteries and manages to turn outward from herself and include Guard Casey in the experience. Though she has no interest in the soccer match, she engages him in conversation about it because it matters to him. While *The Barracks* is infused with a deep sadness because Elizabeth’s generosity of spirit is rarely returned, and almost never by the people she tirelessly devotes herself to (Reegan and her stepchildren), her unrequited turns toward community remain important. McGahern’s fiction circles back to this theme in his final novel. Here, the epiphanies of his many protagonists, and their efforts to encompass the intolerable through laughter, memory, and inscription, are translated finally into a practical way of living in the world based on community, tolerance and forgiveness.

As Ruttledge, the fulcrum of the small community around the lake, and Patrick Ryan build a shed, on which work has continued intermittently for several seasons, Ruttledge notes that the rafters “frame the sky” (78). He continues: “the squares of light are more interesting than the open sky. They make it look more human by reducing the sky, and then the whole sky grows out from that small space” (78). My own trope of “encompassing the intolerable” elaborates on reflections such as this. Ruttledge

articulates the urge to cordon off a section of the vast and mysterious sky, notes the importance of an individual human consciousness to perceive and construct a frame, and expresses faith that a square of light can very nearly stand in for the whole sky, which can never be encompassed or understood entirely, like the “rich whole” of “Wheels.” Here, however, McGahern is careful to add irony, as Patrick Ryan responds, “As long as they hold the iron, lad, they’ll do... There was a time when people were locked up for saying less than that” (78). Rutledge’s ethereal and artistic view is juxtaposed with Patrick Ryan’s grounded and skeptical outlook, to humorous effect. Yet beneath the humor is a generous acceptance of multiple ways of looking at the world and a genuine belief that the representatives of such views can find a way to live and work together.

Chapter 2: Laughter, Survival, and Subjectivity

Certain words recur again and again in criticism of John McGahern's novels and stories: violent, dark, and claustrophobic are among the terms commonly used to describe his fictional world. Seamus Deane calls the early work "implacably bleak" and notes that McGahern's style furthers evokes such a feeling, with "the precision of the recorded details tinged at all points with a faint, cello sadness" (*Short History* 222). John Cronin, who believes that McGahern's art is occasionally compromised by a highly mannered pessimism, suggests that the author's writings do not "spread their sad signals through minefields of verbal humour in the manner of Beckett. McGahern's prose is not humorously resilient. It is, indeed, usually serious to the point of solemnity" ("Art and the Failure of Love" 203). While these characterizations of McGahern's style are broadly accurate, it is important to note that his characters often respond to their absurd, stifling or even violent circumstances with laughter. In fact, laughter seems essential to certain protagonists developing some understanding of those circumstances in what many regard as McGahern's darkest works: *The Barracks*, *The Dark*, *Nightlines*, and *The Pornographer*.

For such characters, laughter is an important initial response that can prepare consciousness to encompass the intolerable, which includes not only violence and emotional abuse but also the torment of consciousness of the kind often found in the work of Samuel Beckett.⁶ According to Tyrus Miller, late modernists such as Beckett present nothing less than "an image of subjectivity 'at play' in the face of its own

⁶ McGahern's admiration for Beckett is documented in several interviews and writings; he frequently remarks, as he does in his essay "The Solitary Reader," that during his years as a young adult in Dublin in the 1950s, "the two living writers who meant the most to us were Samuel Beckett and Patrick Kavanagh" (*Love of the World* 92).

extinction” (64). While Beckett’s later work is clearly haunted by wartime threats to subjectivity such as fascism and nuclear annihilation, McGahern seems to suggest that social institutions in neutral and insular Ireland, such as the family or the Catholic Church, were just as corrosive to the self as the vague machinations of modern nation-states or technology’s looming capacity for destruction. Thus, though the sources for such profound threats to subjectivity differ in some ways from those suggested by Beckett’s work, the earlier writer’s comments on laughter can form a starting point for understanding it as a response in McGahern’s fiction.

A well-known passage in Beckett’s *Watt* is helpful for its analysis of laughter, especially because it sets up a progression of understanding in which each kind of laughter represents a step. Arsene, the man who Watt will replace in Mr Knott’s house, delivers a rambling exit interview in which he describes three kinds of laughter, “the bitter, the hollow, and the mirthless,” which correspond to “successive excoriations of the understanding” (53). The mirthless or “dianoetic” laugh is the most profound: “It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs—silence please—at that which is unhappy” (53).

Arsene’s categories are not exactly airtight and one would go too far to say that his remarks comprehend Beckett’s theory of comedy. They do, however, provide a means of recognizing different species of laughter. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines dianoetic as “of or pertaining to thought; employing thought and reasoning; intellectual” and includes a citation in which the word serves to “denote the operations of the Discursive, Elaborative, and Comparative Faculty.” Thus, as Stephen Watt writes in

Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing, the dianoetic laugh “confirms the existence of a larger intellection and ironic consciousness” (27). In McGahern’s fiction, the emergence of such an ironic consciousness is essential to the subject’s survival under the damaging social forces mentioned above. His characters, however, must not only laugh at what is euphemistically called by Beckett “the unhappy” but what in McGahern’s realist fictional world includes terminal illness, violence, child abuse (physical, sexual, and emotional) as well as more philosophical concerns such as *timor mortis*. They must also laugh at themselves and their own roles in such a world. As Tyrus Miller points out, this is the most valuable kind of laughter: “It is the self-reflexive laughter (laughing at ourselves!) of the survivor in the face of alterity and death, the subject’s minimum self-confirmation, the minimal trace of the instinct for self-preservation. I laugh, therefore I (still) am” (49).

For McGahern’s physically or psychically wounded characters, a self-reflexive, dianoetic laugh asserts subjectivity and creates the cognitive distance needed to apprehend irony. It enhances perspective and usually helps characters see beyond the institutional structures which might have wounded them even as they recognize their own place and even complicity within such structures. As a result, consciousness can begin to encompass the intolerable rather than being encompassed by it. The laughing subject is empowered to put a shape to the intolerable through memory and the act of writing (to be explored in the following two chapters of this study).

The scope of McGahern’s fiction, however, necessitates differentiating such vital laughter from occasions in which it provides an escape from the pain of being rather than a genuine assertion of persistence in spite of it. As Stephen Watt writes, “it should be possible to distinguish those moments when comic business fills—or deadens—time

from those in which a purer laughter, a *risus purus* achieved through comparative thought, expands the dimensions of a subject's being" (27). In McGahern's fiction, this distinction frequently emerges from the conflicting appeals of individuality and solidarity. While secondary characters in *The Dark* and *Amongst Women* respond to violence and loss with laughter, these moments are less self-reflexive and usually based on a need for solidarity. On the other hand, Elizabeth Reegan, Young Mahoney, and the narrators of "The Recruiting Officer" and *The Pornographer* all laugh at significant points in their narratives. It is this laughter, emerging from both comparative thought and epiphany, that opens the way for a broader vision of the larger "tragicomedy" they are a part of, where "both solidarity and difference must find their future ground" (Miller 25).

Solidarity and Patriarchy in *The Dark* and *Amongst Women*

McGahern alludes to laughter's significance and capability as a response both inside and outside his fiction. In his view, laughter was a dangerous and disruptive force within the repressive social environment in mid-century Ireland.

There were few books in our house, and reading for pleasure was not approved of. It was thought to be dangerous, like pure laughter. In the emerging class in the Ireland of the 1940s, when an insecure sectarian state was being guided by a philistine church, the stolidity of a long empty grave face was thought to be the height of decorum and profundity. ("The Solitary Reader" 87)

A more dramatic example of the power of laughter in the face of violent patriarchy occurs in McGahern's memoir. There he details the pivotal confrontation between himself, the eldest son, and his mercurial father. His father strikes him "without warning. There did not have to be a reason" (202).

I remember feeling a wild sense of unfairness and a cold rage as I fell. I rose and went straight up to him, my hands at my sides, laughing. He hit me. I fell a number of times and each time rose laughing. I had passed beyond the point of pain and felt a strange cold elation. He was growing uncertain. I had passed

beyond fear. My sisters told me much later how terrible it was to watch as I got to my feet again and again, laughing. He broke and turned away...an extraordinary change had taken place. (202-3)

The passage is both harrowing and remarkable for two reasons. First, laughter seems integral to breaking the father's will to violence. Secondly, the narration struggles to represent such a horrific episode, evidenced by the later testimony of McGahern's sisters. One senses that laughter might appear in their version of the episode as very nearly what Tyrus Miller calls "pure corporeal automatism" (64). Miller remarks on the difficulties of representing such a state because it would feature "a pure laughter in which all subjectivity has been extinguished. Self-reflexive laughter may never cross or even reach this threshold" (64). This is almost the case here. McGahern's first-person narration allows a reader to witness his consciousness persisting even as his physical body seems to automatically rise and laugh after each blow, but even so it is difficult to imagine the sound of the laughter heard by his sisters. By McGahern's account, laughter is an extraordinarily effective response to patriarchal violence, but if the son has outmaneuvered the father and thus gained a measure of power in the household, there remains the possibility that he will abuse that power in the same way his father did. The paradigms of patriarchy are so deeply encoded that even pivotal moments of transgressive laughter such as this may not finally alter them. The families depicted in *The Dark* and *Amongst Women* illustrate this.

The devastating opening chapter of *The Dark* offers an authoritarian and sadistic father similar to that depicted in *All Will be Well*; here, however, he is at the height of his power. It is a chapter from which many readers "never recover" in the sense that they may not be able to follow young Mahoney's later expressions of admiration for his father nor accept depictions of laughter in the text. Having been caught uttering a curse, young

Mahoney is ordered to strip naked and prepare for a beating. The narrator reports that the father moves patiently and deliberately, “as if the stripping compelled by his will alone gave him pleasure” (8). Mahoney never actually strikes his son; instead, he repeatedly brings his belt down on the chair beside young Mahoney’s ear. The interval between strikes magnifies the terror and the son is reduced to incoherence: “He didn’t know anything or what he was doing or where the room was” (9-10). His loss of perception demonstrates the disintegration of subjectivity under the father’s reign of terror.

McGahern’s formal strategies in *The Dark* further this idea; readers are never given young Mahoney’s first name and they must contend with shifting points-of-view as the narrative moves from the third-person technique in the passage above to second-person for the majority of the novel, with a few examples of first-person included as well. The narrator’s quest for the appropriate “distance” from his subject lacks consistency, but it does mirror the protagonist’s effort to develop his own ironic consciousness from the trace of subjectivity that remains after his brutal childhood.

The father’s terrorizing extends to all his children and they are often beaten for no reason at all. While they usually retreat to the dark of the lavatory to cry, tears are not the only response to their father’s tyranny. They risk beatings because they often “laughed when he was in foul humour” (11). They endure his complaining with “grave faces: but once they’d turn to each other they’d smile cruelly” (11). After enduring another of his mercurial moods, the children’s quiet mimicry of their father causes “a stifled burst of laughing” as they do their chores. When he seeks them out for a game of cards, the children purposefully linger over their work and share “a grim smile of understanding” (16). The children are trapped in an absurd environment; their father’s moods and

manipulative actions are a mystery to them and as a result their laughter can hardly be characterized as one that extends vision. It is, rather, an automatic response that preserves group solidarity in the face of a visceral threat. The narrator notes that a strategy evolves out of this solidarity: the children learn to “close their life against him and to leave him to himself” (11). Their laughter initiates the strategy of isolating their father and a “grim smile” becomes a wordless admonishment against breaking ranks. It is also important to note that the narrator characterizes the children as one “life.” They are defined by their solidarity and as yet indistinguishable as individual lives or selves.

Laughter for children in *The Dark* is initially a group response to their father’s intolerable violence; later it becomes a habitual strategy for evading more troubling questions. As Stephen Watt puts it in his call for revisiting Beckett’s notions of comedy, readers must attempt to distinguish “between a *faux* exhilaration or resilience based in habit or self-deception, and an unblinkered, even philosophical humor in the faces of death and Time” (26). For McGahern’s characters, the danger generally resides in habit rather than self-deception. The victims of patriarchal violence must eventually do more than privately mock their abusers. They must laugh at the systems which sustain their abusers if they are to recognize how they are implicated in those systems. Only a more self-reflexive laughter leads to the possibility of truly encompassing the intolerable reality of violent fathers. For the children of both Mahoney in *The Dark* and Moran in *Amongst Women*, laughter rarely affords this combination of irony and vision. Rather than extending an individual vision into the mysteries behind institutions such as family, it maintains solidarity in way that reinforces those institutions, even those characterized by authoritarian violence.

In *The Dark*, the characters return to their childhood mimicry as a way of holding off their lack of understanding concerning their futures as they step tentatively into the world beyond their home. When the protagonist helps his sister escape sexual abuse within the home where she works as a domestic, the two are uncertain of how they will explain her return to her father's house. Bleakly torn between abuses foreign and known, she asks, "What'll I do then? Where'll I go next?" (104). The protagonist, frustrated by both the paucity of opportunity in Ireland as well as his own lack of direction, becomes impatient with her questions. Rather than carry on with what is probably a necessary discussion, the two turn instead to mimicry of their father's incessant complaining.

"Only for ye have your eejit of a father to come home to what would ye do? Then such thankless bastards the sun never saw."

"The poor-house, the poor-house, the poor-house," the girl was suddenly mimicking with real gaiety, taken out of herself, rocking with laughter when you took up where she stopped. (105)

The sister seems to achieve a kind of pure laughter, in that she seems so fully invested in the moment that she is "taken out of herself." The latter phrase, however, mitigates the value of the laughter and shows it to be an escape from the pain of deciding what to do next. Even though he initiates it here, young Mahoney has probably begun to recognize the limitations of this habitual mimicry, as Estragon does when Vladimir proposes playing at Pozzo and Lucky in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Estragon truncates this effort with a terse remark: "That's enough of that" (82). While laughter here briefly restores solidarity between brother and sister, it offers only an escape from troubling questions rather than promoting a more penetrating view into the mysteries behind those questions.

Another episode in *The Dark* illustrates the conflict between appeals to solidarity and the urge to assert individuality. Although father and son are out for a celebratory dinner at the Royal Hotel (young Mahoney has just earned a University scholarship), early on in the episode the inside views of the protagonist make solidarity appear to be an impossibility. The father embarrasses the son by talking loudly about the Scholarship and bullying the waitress. The narrator goes on to succinctly state that this attempt to celebrate together elicits “no union between them” (157). However, once out of the hotel and cycling home together, the son begins to study his father and enjoys his commentary as they skirt the local cemetery: “‘It gives me the creeps, that place! No matter what happens it winds up there. And you wouldn’t mind only there’s people dying to get into it,’ everybody repeated themselves but suddenly at the old joke he wanted to laugh with him and say, “You are marvellous, my father.” (160).

This is exactly the kind of *peripeteia* that often troubles readers of *The Dark*. Eamon Maher remarks that readers “remain somewhat sceptical of this protestation of filial love, which is not supported by previous evidence in the novel” (“Disintegration and Despair” 89). This is perhaps so, but even here there are hints of the appealing qualities Antoinette Quinn argues are more fully realized in the character of Moran in *Amongst Women*, where she finds “such redeeming qualities as the enormous energy he radiates, his anguish for the son who is lost to him, his gift of charm, [and] the metaphysical bafflement he betrays” (88). In fact, the carefully observant son seems to notice some of the same characteristics in Mahoney here. Having escaped the social pressure of the hotel, he can quietly watch “his father cycle by his side home, the head low into the wind over the dynamo lamp, pushing” (160). Here, and in the passage

above, the son admires his father's physical energy and resilience, his willingness to acknowledge death's looming presence over every human endeavor, and his willingness to respond to that presence with outgoing charm and laughter. The careful diction suggests that the son does not follow through in either laughing aloud or telling his father he is marvelous, but he undoubtedly acknowledges the appeal of solidarity here, available via the link of laughter.

McGahern's fiction frequently returns to this dilemma in which a wounded character or characters struggle with feelings of solidarity toward those who have wounded them. A comment from his memoir is helpful for understanding his preoccupation with and wariness of appeals to solidarity: "The life under our father forced us into a close band for our own protection. This closeness remained with them [his siblings] and grew after its initial need had disappeared" (190). While McGahern goes on to say that his sisters were still able to "flower individually" (190), there appears to be a subtle criticism here of cultivating this intense solidarity well beyond its necessity for survival. This viewpoint likely adds to the ambiguous final moments of *Amongst Women*, in which the solidarity of Moran's daughters may be interpreted as repressive. As Antoinette Quinn points out, their solidarity empowers them but also betrays "an assimilation of patriarchal values" (89).

As Moran's daughters exit the graveyard following the burial of their father, they pause "to wait for the men who lagged well behind on the path and were chatting and laughing pleasantly together, their children around them" (184). Michael, the youngest child of Moran, seems to be the focal point as his sister Sheila closes the novel with the disapproving remark, "The way Michael, the skit, is getting Sean and Mark to laugh

you'd think they were coming from a dance" (184). The end of the novel demonstrates how McGahern's text interweaves tragedy and comedy by showing multiple responses to loss. Moran's death warrants such nuance in part because the narrative illustrates not only his cruelty but also, as noted earlier, his humanity and complexity. As Eamonn Wall puts it, "Moran, because he is so complex, remains a compelling figure. One cannot but admire his intelligence. Like Hamlet, another hero manifested by his faults, he is a man gifted with great skills and a superior intellect" (307). As such, he perhaps deserves the reverence shown by his second wife and daughters as they attempt to set the tone of his funeral and burial. Husbands and brother are pushed aside in this effort, as they are "unsure of their place in the mourning" (183). This is consistent with the narrator's suggestion that for Moran's daughters and Rose "[i]t was as if their first love and allegiance had been pledged uncompromisingly to this one house and man and that they knew that he had always been at the very living centre of all parts of their lives" (183). But the final image of the laughing men offers a critique of this position, as does the narrator's comment that "it was as if each of them [Moran's daughters] in their different ways had become Daddy" (183), for the novel lucidly portrays Moran's tyrannical control and manipulative tactics alongside his charm and perseverance.

Just one of the ways of "becoming Daddy" is adopting the ethos of the "long empty grave face" McGahern describes in "The Solitary Reader." The fictional representation of this worldview may be partially drawn from Francis McGahern, John's father, at least according to *All Will be Well*. Speaking of his father and paternal grandmother, he writes, "Neither she nor my father had any sense of humour, and they hardly ever smiled or laughed, and they looked on any manifestation of enjoyment in

others as a symptom of irresponsibility” (8). Moran seems to share this quality, and perhaps more importantly, his daughters carry an updated version of it into the next generation.

The scene in which Michael finally departs Great Meadow after a physical confrontation with Moran illustrates this. He stops in Dublin and seeks out Sheila, who mobilizes her sisters. As the sisters discuss the matter, Sheila’s boyfriend Sean Flynn spontaneously jokes that Michael “fell at the last hurdle” (123). The narrator then reports that “Sheila met his laughter with a withering stare. He might be allowed through her into the family but it did not mean that he belonged. No outsider was allowed to laugh at anything so sacrosanct as the family” (123). Sheila very clearly chooses family solidarity here and the gravity with which she and her sisters abandon their responsibilities to take care of Michael receives the endorsement of the surrounding society, at least according to the narrator: “Such is the primacy of the idea of family that everyone was able to leave work at once without incurring displeasure” (123). While this might be seen as a creditable allusion to the institution of family in Irish social life, the rest of the novel demonstrates that it is not without irony. The narrative shows that in Moran’s case “the family” is used as a cover for violent and emotionally destructive behavior, much of which is driven by his childish and possessive egotism. As the narrator notes, he views his family as a “larger version of himself” (22). Conflicts within such a family must never be seen as comic or absurd. Moran’s daughters appear to adopt this posture as well: Sean’s spontaneous laughter has no place here and Sheila clearly sees it as a threat. But what she is actually defending is Moran’s childish neediness. The scene closes with the sisters weeping as they watch the boat take Michael to England. The cry because

they know their father cannot abide a house emptied of his children, not because he enjoys their company but because of his need to exert power over them. As Antoinette Quinn writes, Moran's daughters respond to "the charisma of patriarchy, which consists in its exercise of sole and absolute authority, the power to approve or disapprove, endorse or withdraw support, affirm or reject, and thereby, to nurture an emotional dependency" (87).

For Moran's adult daughters, laughter must be seen in light of their continual effort to balance their emotional dependency with their father's unpredictable moods. It is neither spontaneous nor philosophical, but rather defensive and tactical, similar to that of the children in *The Dark*. When the sisters return home after Michael's departure, Rose is clearly uneasy and glad to have their help in attending to Moran's bitter brooding. The facts of Michael's flight are "glossed over" and instead Rose prepares "a big fry for tea as if it were a special Sunday" and keeps "chatting and laughing all through the meal and afterwards" (126). Her insistent laughter draws Moran out of his bitterness and the solidarity of the family is restored against Michael. No one challenges Moran's dismissal of Michael's concerns with clichés such as "Now he'll have to learn his lesson from the world. The world will not care much about him" (127). Readers easily imagine such remarks accompanied by the requisite "long empty grave face".

The novel ends with two factions unified by gender but also by their responses to the loss of Moran. In the end, the novel does not necessarily endorse either position. The "grave face" of the women carries forward some of the stifling and claustrophobic world of Moran while the men seem appropriately situated with the children as Michael clowns for Sean and Mark. While the relationships between Sheila and Sean and that between

Michael and Nell Morahan feature glimpses of a frank sexuality unheard of in Moran's day, the episode that ends the novel still shows men and women divided with Moran's daughters prioritizing their late father over their living husbands and brother.

Unsurprisingly, the narrator does not offer access to the banter between Michael and his brothers-in-law, for *Amongst Women* is characterized by extraordinary reserve and sizable omissions. It is a work of "profound distillation" (Wall 313) that demonstrates McGahern's comfort with positing a significant interpretive role for his readers. In fact, a reader of McGahern's other work might even imagine Michael grotesquely mimicking his father for Sean and Mark's entertainment, as the children do in *The Dark* and *All Will be Well*, which the sisters would consider as inappropriate to this setting as Sean's joking after Michael's fight with his father. What is clear at the end of the novel is that Michael's laughter offers the men, who remain at "a hesitant, respectful distance" (183) the relief of their own kind of solidarity. This relief is legitimate but limited. While Michael and his brothers-in-law seem fully invested in their humorous banter, the scene is marked neither by a reflective resilience nor by a deeper understanding of time and mortality.

Pathways to Irony in "The Recruiting Officer"

To find a more self-reflexive, even dianoetic laugh, as opposed to the comforting laugh of solidarity, one must turn to other McGahern fictions, especially those in which the consciousness of a wounded character suffuses the narrative. "The Recruiting Officer," the closing story in McGahern's 1970 collection *Nightlines*, offers such a narrator, documents his day as a teacher in a rural school, and includes reflections on his own childhood and education. These are catalyzed by the visit of the "recruiting officer,"

a Christian brother who comes to the school seeking vocations. The unmarried narrator, who nearly became a Christian brother himself, has reached middle age and keeps his distance from the locals by living seven miles outside of the parish in Carrick-on-Shannon. The story's images combine an extraordinarily bleak view of mid-century rural Irish life with penetrating psychological insights into how that culture affects the individual consciousness. The narrator "having nothing to do but watch" (*Collected Stories* 100) observes his manager, Canon Reilly, cruelly beat one of his students. He chats amiably with a tinker who arrives to clean out the lavatory, promising to "bury it deep" to keep away the flies (107). The story provides an example of what McGahern defends in "Oldfashioned" as "bringing things to light that were in bad need of light" (*Collected Stories* 268) and joins his work with that of the previous generation of Irish fiction writers such as Sean O'Faolain and Mary Lavin. As Terence Brown puts it, these writers critique "de Valera's Gaelic Eden" by revealing "a mediocre, disheveled, often neurotic and depressed petit-bourgeois society that atrophied for want of a liberating idea" (122). In "The Recruiting Officer," clerical abuse is realistically detailed, while "burying it deep" is a metaphor for how the society deals with the effects of such brutal behavior. The narrator cynically notes, "There'd be no repercussions from the beating except Walshe'd probably get beaten again when the news travelled home, and, in a few days, if asked who'd scored his legs, he'd answer that he fell in a briars" (*Collected Stories* 104). The story offers the narrator as a wounded adult embodiment of this type of upbringing in this type of social environment. This is made clear by the narrator's reflection as he overhears the "recruiting officer" appeal to the boys: "I wonder who'll rise to the gleaming spoon and find the sharpened hooks as I did once" (108). The

physical and emotional scarring of his experiences as a youth appear to produce an extraordinarily passive and likely clinically depressed adult. Regarding his eleventh hour exit from the Brothers, the narrator reflects that “[h]aving neither the resolution to stay nor the courage to leave, the year before Final Vows I took to bed and refused to get up” (110). In terms of his profession, he has become “a clockwatcher” but teaching “seems to be as good as anything else and it is easier to stay than move” (106).

As extraordinarily passive and noncommittal as the character is, his enduring of each day is almost redeemed by its ending. After he dismisses the children for the day, he feels “born again” but then asks: “How, how, though, can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter a second time his mother’s bag of tricks? I laugh at last. Was it not said by *Water* and the *Holy Spirit*?”(111).

His evening routine of “[s]everal infusions of whiskey at the Bridge Bar” and “contemplation of the Shannon through its windows” (111) complete the puns on spirit and water. The narrator’s laughter at both the absurdity of the individual day and, more importantly, the succession of days that is his life at least demonstrates that his consciousness persists. He will go on, if only as reluctantly as Beckett’s characters often do. While the narrator’s laughter is solitary and philosophical, his passivity and failure to act in his own life raises the possibility that such laughter is an example of what Stephen Watt warns is “habitual.” Denis Sampson argues that this “study of a single man who has hidden his authentic feelings and thoughts inside the ironclad routines of his occupation and his society is a figure who has insulated himself from the pain of being” (*Outstaring* 107). The character has not, however, entirely adopted the ironclad routines of his occupation; he maintains a tenuous individuality by refusing to fully participate in the life

of the parish. Alcoholism, rather than the routines of his occupation, more likely insulates him from the “pain of being.”

While the narrator may not fully understand his situation, readers note that his laughter results in a way of encompassing a wider reality far more daunting than his tedious workday. By centering its meaning on the mere existence of the living, flowing Shannon, the narrator’s pun undermines the systems of belief on which his society is based. Rebirth through Catholic baptism is mocked, and by implication so are both the recruiting officer’s threat of hell and the superstition that gives one of the narrator’s students, Luke Horan, the “power of healing ringworm” (107) as a result of a worm being placed in his hand during his baptism. His vision is thereby clarified by his laughter—he is able to see through what he sees as outdated metaphorical connotations into the simple reality of the Shannon. The narrator’s laughter appears to create the space for him to establish a tenuous but real alternative source of meaning when he says, “it rises in the Shannon Pot, it flows to the sea, there are stranger pike along its banks than in its waters” (111). The passage reads like a poetic refrain for encompassing his concerns: the mysterious, seemingly eternal Shannon and the curious people who live around it are now his focus rather than his deadening professional obligations. It is gazing upon such mysteries that keeps his “breath alive until the morning’s dislocation” (111).

At this early stage of McGahern’s career, it may be premature to expect his characters to fully break out of the “ironclad routines” of their society other than within their own cognitive space. In the fiction of the 1960s and even into the 1970s, his wounded characters need to laugh self-reflexively within their private world in order to reconsider their relationship to the public world. That public world is usually a rural

Ireland that is willfully quiescent following the upheaval and uncertainty associated with the struggle for independence and the Irish civil war of 1922-23. As Terence Brown argues, “the fact remains that Irish repressiveness...was extreme in those first crucial decades and that it severely stunted the cultural and social development of a country which a protracted colonial mismanagement had left in desperate need of revival in both spheres” (34). McGahern’s texts depict laughter as a legitimate response to such repressiveness, but the laughter’s self-reflexive quality prevents it from signaling only what John Cronin calls “intrusive mordancy” (“Art and the Failure of Love” 206). If characters laugh at the absurdity or even the violence of certain institutions, they are also laughing at themselves for their roles in such institutions, even if that role is primarily that of a legitimate victim. Laughter for them is a step, an assertion of a minimal continuing and a bulwark against responding to repressiveness with violence.

Risus Purus as Response in *The Barracks* and *The Dark*

While neither Elizabeth Reagan nor young Mahoney are able to establish a public identity that accommodates their experience of the “pain of being,” laughter is essential to the persistence and expansion of their private identities. Like the narrator of “The Recruiting Officer,” both characters may be understood as wounded: young Mahoney by the violence and sexual abuse of his father and Elizabeth physically by cancer and psychically by the demise of her relationship with Halliday as well as the indifference of Reagan and his children. *The Dark* suggests a cause/effect relationship between Young Mahoney’s violent upbringing and his social impotence upon his arrival in Galway as well as perhaps his final abandonment of the University; Elizabeth’s physical decline is inexorable even as her experiences with Halliday continue to inform her worldview.

Both characters, however, achieve something like pure laughter, which asserts their persistent subjectivity under extreme duress and demonstrates the survival and perhaps even growth of what Stephen Watt calls “ironic consciousness.”

The Barracks recounts the last year of Elizabeth’s life as her illness takes its course alongside everyday ways of marking time in mid-century rural Ireland. Individual days around the barracks are documented and the narrative alludes to changing seasons, routines of rural labor, and the Church calendar. Throughout such cycles, Elizabeth’s consciousness remains at the center of the novel and readers are given access to her sense of herself. Through such inside views, the narrative establishes exactly how tenuous subjectivity is for Elizabeth as illness tests her physically and the insular world of the barracks tests her psychically. In the late morning quiet of the book’s first morning, when “the children had gone and she had washed and swept and dusted” (48), the narrator gives access to Elizabeth’s thoughts.

She was Elizabeth Reegan: a woman in her forties: sitting in a chair with a book from the council library in her hand that she hadn’t opened: watching certain things like the sewing-machine and the vase of daffodils and a circle still white with frost under the shade of the sycamore tree between the house and the river: alive in this barrack kitchen. (49)

Elizabeth thus feels a need to assert her individual subjectivity in the most basic ways: naming herself and concluding that she is “alive” among the living things and inanimate objects surrounding her. While she already has a sense of what the pain in her breasts means, here she demonstrates the difficulty of coming to terms with the fact that what remains of her life still has to be lived somehow. The passage reads as if she is both subject and object; her ability to see herself in context will become even more important as the everyday lives surrounding her seem to become more and more detached from her own reality. As the policemen, their wives, and even her husband continually ply her

with clichés such as “You look powerful today, Elizabeth,” (207) she feels forced to “pretend to believe she was going to get well” (199). As the strain increases, Elizabeth privately tries to assert her subjectivity: “I am Elizabeth Reegan and another day of my life is beginning” (204). The social relationships within the barracks, including that with her husband, seem unable to accommodate the intolerable reality of her decline. When Reegan suggests, “With the nurse and the good weather comin’ on you’ll be on your feet in no time” (198), Elizabeth finally and significantly laughs inwardly.

Jesus Christ, she thought; that was rimming it—the good weather! She wanted to laugh hysterically. The good weather, that was rich. All the old tricks were being played back. It was always sunshine and summer for hope, never the lorry loads of salt and sand being shoveled on the slush of the street. Jesus, how often she herself had comforted the doomed poor bitches in the ward. (198)

While Elizabeth does not laugh outright, her urge to laugh is especially important because of its self-reflexive element. In fact, the absurdity of Reegan’s statement is not finally the focus; more to the point is her realization that she herself once delivered such clichéd nonsense to her patients in London. While the inner voice made available to readers here is never shared with other characters, Elizabeth’s recognition of how she fits in to the very system which causes her such consternation shows the persistence of an ironic consciousness.

The challenges to Elizabeth’s tenuous subjectivity come not only from her rigidly prescribed social role in the barracks but also from two key systems of meaning for her surrounding society: an emergent middle class consumerism represented by her doctor and the Marian, nationalistic Catholicism represented by her local priest. Elizabeth’s inward laughter at these institutions does even more than assert her persistence as a subject. It catalyzes the recognition that her consciousness fits into something more mysterious and complex than such systems of meaning will admit.

In what turns out to be his last visit to examine Elizabeth, the local doctor, like the denizens of the barracks, skirts the reality of her condition even though “he had little doubt that she suspected the worst” (208). Elizabeth, as readers of *The Barracks* know, fully understands that she has no reason to hope for recovery. She also recognizes the futility of trying to speak with the doctor about this despite her clear yearning for dialogue about it. Instead, she dutifully makes small talk and asks the doctor where he will go on his holidays. He mentions the South of France and does not hesitate to read his experience into what he sees as the new opportunities available in an Ireland now free of the British. Though he “was born with no silver spoon” he boasts that he is part of a “new class growing up in this country that won’t be shamed out of doing things because they haven’t come out of big houses. I could walk this day into the Shelbourne Hotel as if I owned it” (209).

Even though she does not outwardly mock this remark, Elizabeth finds it ridiculous that vacationing in the South of France or entry to the Shelbourne Hotel is invested with such significance. Her mind turns it into an ironic, self-reflexive refrain as she listens to him: “‘Woman, take up your bed and walk to the Shelbourne Hotel,’ played itself so fantastically in her mind that she nearly laughed purely when he ended” (209).

Although this “nearly” pure laughter is not public and Elizabeth fears that it indicates that she is becoming “cruel and malicious” (209), it still appears to create the space for the ironic words of Halliday to enter her mind. To a remark such as the doctor’s concerning the Shelbourne Hotel, Halliday would have responded with something like “How in the name of Christ do they keep afloat on those lunacies?” (209). While Halliday, as a kind of revenant in her mind, joins her in laughing at the absurdity

of the doctor's source of meaning, Elizabeth is not merely a conduit for uncritical transmission of his ideas. Though she acknowledges that Halliday awakened "[c]onsciousness, awareness, even vision" (209) within her, "what he had woken in her grew so different that it could barely be recognized as reflections of the same thing" (211). In fact, it can be argued that Elizabeth's laughter results in a higher plane of understanding, or at least a greater level of resilience, than Halliday ever achieves, for life's absurdity overwhelms him to the point of suicide via automobile crash. Elizabeth is able to at least go on, even in her depleted state and with the absurdities that destroyed Halliday delivered directly and obviously by the doctor. In her final days, she will deal one last time with her local priest, an even more aggressive purveyor of a system of meaning that falls short of encompassing her reality.

She and the priest have a history. This history is perhaps the one area of Elizabeth's rural, married life in which she did publicly resist, probably because "she'd been too short a time out of London" (163). She remembers the priest approaching her, soon after she had married Reegan, for the requisite enlistment in the local chapter of the Legion of Mary. She declined in part because she sarcastically views the Legion as "a kind of legalized gossiping school to the women and a convenient pool of labour that the priests could draw on for catering committees" (163). But perhaps more important is her fundamental desire for liberty and individuality cultivated during her time in London, and contained in her curt response when the priest continues to press: "I dislike organizations" (163).

That he sees her not as an individual person but simply a hard case is evidenced by his obliviousness to her genuine affection for certain Catholic beliefs and rituals. She

loves the Stations of the Cross and the “beautiful, beautiful ceremonies of Holy Week” (194). She reflects: “Christ on the road to Calvary, she on the same road” and sees “the unendurable pettiness and degradation of her own fallings raised to dignity and meaning in Christ’s passion” (194). She still considers herself a believer, “she’d only once fallen away, some months of bitterness in London” (194), but her belief exists alongside a more complex worldview that her environment cannot accommodate. Her consciousness entertains the possibility that “[h]er life was either under the unimaginable God or the equally unimaginable nothing; but in that reality it was under no lesser thing; and the reality continued, careless of whether the human accident was a child waking up in terror or two people bored together” (59). Her local priest seems incapable of either discussing such a view or accepting Elizabeth’s self-identifying with Christ’s role in the Passion. In her final moments, tormented by pain and her own existential questions, he offers not empathy or genuine dialogue but a directive that seems designed to assuage his conscience rather than Elizabeth’s. If he once failed to force her into the sodality, perhaps now she will submit to his wishes.

In one of his last visits to Elizabeth, he again becomes aggressive, imploring her to “pray to Mary” in part because Ireland is “one of the few nations in the world who understand Her importance” (218). Elizabeth’s patience is depleted and she goes “hot with resentment” (218). Rather than returning his aggression, however, she imagines “the ridiculous village presbytery, the hideous Virgin Mary blue of doors and windows in the whitewashed walls at the end of the lovely drive of limes...and she wanted to laugh” (219). While she again does not laugh outwardly, she is able to defuse her resentment by cognitively creating some ironic distance from the conversation. Her urge to laugh stems

from her recognition of how the priest is “housed” by his public role as nationalist champion of Mary. Her own experiences have demonstrated the limitations of such a hermetic view. Upon laughing inwardly at the image of the presbytery, she reflects that her looming mortality is “hard enough to accept” but that it “was surely the last and hardest thing to accept its interpretations from knaves and active fools and being compelled to live in them as straitjackets” (219).

Ironically, while she cannot abide Mary’s public representative, Elizabeth retains great affection for the rosary. The nature of this affection, however, could hardly be shared in such a dogmatic environment. In her view, “what it meant didn’t matter, whether it meant anything at all or not it gave the last need of her heart release, the need to praise and celebrate, in which everything rejoiced” (220). Elizabeth has come to find meaning grounded in the act of speaking the prayers rather than in their referent. Whereas the priest’s home represents the “straitjacket” of his literal and confining beliefs, Elizabeth’s consciousness pursues more difficult questions. She appreciates but is also wary of solidarity and the “dark comfort of the crowd huddled together for warmth in their fear of what must not be named” (210). Her inward laughter detailed above entails a vital recognition. Referring to the priest’s browbeating, she reflects, “[t]o be able to say yes to that intolerant lunacy so as to be able to go your own way without noise or interruption was to accept everything and was hardest of all to do” (219). Her enhanced perspective, catalyzed by inward laughter, enables her to recognize her status as an individual subject with her “own way” of facing mortality. She also perceives the broader irony of her circumstances: only by acceding can she resist.

I have suggested that Elizabeth's inward laughter leads to a greater insight than Halliday attained. The narrative also suggests that her private self-preservation through public self-abnegation might produce more satisfactory outcomes than Reegan's dramatic challenge to spurious authority in the book's final scene. While he immolates his public role as police Sergeant by finally unleashing his anger upon Quirke, his superior officer, Elizabeth's ironic consciousness allows her to turn away from attacking the doctor and the priest. She is aware of her capability to "make a hell for herself and every one about her if she didn't watch" (215). She recognizes that no one "had to move to her beck and call, they were all free. They came to her out of their generosity or loneliness; and surely she should try to meet them with some graciousness" (215). Elizabeth's desire for "graciousness" may simply mask her continuing subservience within the barracks and within a larger society that provides no possibility for a more complex public identity. James Whyte, for example, draws on *The Barracks* to argue that while McGahern's writing provides "a picture of oppressed and victimised womanhood, particularly through the figure of the stepmother, [his] fiction does not offer any narratives of liberation" (214). Although Elizabeth suffers within the stifling social roles of wife and stepmother, it is important to remember that Reegan hardly appears liberated once he is free of his maddening social role in the police force. When Guard Mullins excitedly explains that the district is already buzzing with the details of his humiliation of Quirke, Reegan is gloomy rather than triumphant. He is "quiet, a sort of bitterness and contempt on the face that leaned towards the fire in the failing light" (232). He then fixes a stare on Mullins and says "It's always easy to make a Cuchulainn outa the other fella, isn't it, John?" (232). Mullins does not understand and his face even shows "a shade of terror" (232).

Reegan certainly recognizes irony, but his violent challenge to public hierarchies has only elicited further bitterness and contempt. In fact, it may even entail more violence, as Reegan seems willing to turn such contempt toward the innocent, if ingratiating, Mullins. By contrast, in a narrative that vividly documents her own physical and psychological suffering, Elizabeth's resolution not to transmit her pain to others is admirable, even heroic. Self-reflexive laughter helps her accomplish this. She is stronger than both men: Halliday's similarly restless and ironic consciousness leads to self-destruction; Reegan's admirable resilience and yearning for freedom are destructive to others. If life has to be "endured like a plague or transformed by acceptance" (69), only Elizabeth's consciousness appears to have the power to transform.

In finding the priest, the doctor, her husband, and others unwilling to truly see her, Elizabeth tries to see herself. Her self-reflexive laughter at the systems of meaning offered to her seems essential to what is perhaps her climactic acceptance of what it means to live her own life. She reflects, "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; refusal to admit she knew nothing and was nothing in herself, a creature of swift passage, moving into whatever reality she had, the reality she knew nothing about" (211). She concludes that "[a]ll the apparent futility of her life in this barracks came at last to rest on this sense of mystery" (211).

Acceptance, rather than refusal, of this "sense of mystery" indicates not only Elizabeth's resolve to "go on" but also the extent of her vision, which both expands outward and penetrates inward. She sees her status as a unique subject even as she observes her utter commonality: "if the reality is this: we have no life but this one—she

could only reflect and smile, it must have been the same before her birth” (211-12). Elizabeth glimpses the mystery that lies behind the systems of meaning available to her, whether they be the clichéd optimism of the barracks, the social-climbing consumerism of the doctor, or doctrinaire Catholic belief in God and an afterlife. *The Barracks* documents Elizabeth’s consciousness traversing the limits of such systems even as McGahern’s realism shows exactly how single-minded the representatives of such systems could be in mid-century Ireland. Laughter seems essential to her survival and vision in the face of such pressure, as it does for Young Mahoney in the climactic scene of *The Dark*.

Once he finally decides to leave the University and for a staid civil service job with the Electrical Supply Board (E.S.B.), young Mahoney appears to reach the private high ground necessary to experience pure laughter, even as some would say his public ambition descends into the numbingly quotidian. Following a humiliating conversation with the Dean of Residence, he feels a desire to “give savage expression to one murderous feeling of defeat,” but he does not do so and instead notices “rage and futility gradually subsiding as you walked through streets of that wet day” (188). This is an indication that something has changed for young Mahoney, for the narrative repeatedly characterizes him as overwhelmed by hatred and “rage” toward those around him. For example, when his father disturbs him after confession, the narrator notes how “one wave of violent hatred came choking over prayer and silence” (43). During his time with Father Gerald, to whom he is sent to discuss a possible vocation, he is described as follows: “You’d listened with increasing irritation and hatred” (74). Later, when Father Gerald cruelly withholds any details of his own sins or struggles with faith, young

Mahoney feels “[r]age, you’d been stripped down to the last squalor” (75). As he helps extricate his sister from the situation noted above, his feelings toward Ryan, her employer, nearly explode into violence: “Rage rushed again. You wanted to smash Ryan’s face in” (92). Once the two depart Ryan’s house, violence having been narrowly avoided, the narrator offers, “You went the same road back, rage seething” (95).

His contrasting restraint after the encounter with the Dean of Residence allows him to observe that emotions ebb and flow like the inevitable tides and that they can be waited out. McGahern’s technique again reinforces such a reading through the inclusion of figurative language such as “wave” and “rushed” to describe the character and movement of emotions. The language related to Father Gerald also implies the continuing assault on subjectivity. If young Mahoney’s identity is crippled by patriarchy at its most violent and authoritarian, Father Gerald simply continues the process in his role as counsel to Catholic vocations. His vaguely sexual advances, combined with a cold reticence,⁷ leave young Mahoney “stripped down” and in “the last squalor.” This suggests that his laughter near the end of the narrative is in one sense simply that of the survivor, the minimum confirmation of subjectivity and humanity amid such squalor.

The narrator reports:

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. (188)

⁷ It should be noted that Fr. Gerald becomes remarkably forthcoming after young Mahoney announces he cannot pursue a vocation. Once the professional bond is refused, he becomes deeply reflective and even shares his own spiritual doubts with young Mahoney, but only with the *caveat* that he will “do Peter on this in public before I’d admit it” (101).

The passage displays McGahern's idiosyncratic syntax, which sometimes causes difficulty for readers and critics. John Cronin believes that the author has "lost objectivity and control" ("*The Dark is not Light Enough*" 429) and Eamon Maher argues that "the style is again imprecise here—the sentence never gets to its natural destination" (*From the Local* 28). But "unclear recognition" is perhaps a hint that McGahern wishes to shape the content of the passage accordingly, i.e., Young Mahoney remains well short of a perfectly lucid and well framed view. Laughter is, however, undoubtedly connected to his "recognition," even if it lacks clarity. Young Mahoney's laughter thus functions not only "to preserve and shore up—to "stiffen"—a subjectivity at risk of dissolution" (Miller 63) but also to enhance perspective, even if only slightly. That it is also self-reflexive and connected to the emergence of an ironic consciousness may be deduced from its position in the narrative. It appears to be a response to young Mahoney's recognition of an irony in which he is implicated, but it also creates the ironic distance he needs to cope with the one authority to which the narrative grants a continuing legitimacy: consanguinity.

The Dark appears to be a *bildungsroman*, which consequently sets up certain expectations for readers, among them the idea that the narrator will make some kind of pivotal decision or assertion that forecasts a trajectory for his or her life. McGahern's text undermines the latter with young Mahoney's insights once he is able to hold back rage and shame. Where he was once bitter at finding the trajectories available through the priesthood and the University unable to accommodate his growing consciousness, he ironically discovers a kind of absurdity that lies behind his own role in deliberating over those trajectories. Just before the laughter noted above, the narrator gives readers access

to his thoughts: “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” (188). Such a realization elicits his laughter because of how deeply the narrative emphasizes “the pain and trauma of the process of choosing” (Sampson, *Outstaring* 68). Young Mahoney’s own reflection perhaps summarizes it best: “all this deciding was a horror” (186). He can only laugh when he recognizes that the “horror” of deciding may be real but in a way it makes no difference. The agony of the decision which had so tormented his consciousness is dramatically deflated by his assessment of its implications.

While *The Dark*’s Irish setting, plot device of a possible vocation, and depiction of University life have lead to some critics to make the obligatory connections with Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, McGahern’s technique here is more profitably connected with a story such as “Araby,” with its memorable epiphany in which the protagonist notes, “I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (*Portable* 48). The moment hinges on vision, as the character is able to see himself from an ironic perspective previously unattainable. Where the protagonist of “Araby” witnesses a bitter irony and responds with anger, Young Mahoney, after experiencing a series of humiliations far more dramatic, finally manages to respond with laughter. His “unclear recognition” of his own reality may also help him see through the implications other characters attach to the lives available to him: certain salvation through the priesthood, upward mobility through the University, and inalienable security through the E.S.B. Such things are not the inevitable attachments to a life; instead, they are ironically encompassed in young Mahoney’s reflection that

“nobody’s life was more than a direction”. Stanley van der Ziel is surely right to note that such a reflection shows McGahern combining Joycean epiphany with echoes of Samuel Beckett. For Van der Ziel, the insight marks young Mahoney’s recognition that “life can be a continual linking of repetitive failures” (114) This is a profitable connection if one recalls how ironically affirming “failure” is in Beckett’s pithy admonition from *Worstward Ho*: “Ever Tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” (7).

At first glance, the brief final chapter of *The Dark*, which immediately follows the laughter detailed above, is difficult to accept in light of the opening chapter and the narrative’s overall depiction of Mahoney. As van der Ziel notes, McGahern’s protagonist seems almost diametrically opposed to Stephen Dedalus: where Joyce’s hero considers his soul’s imminent flight, young Mahoney appears to “plummet back down into his old paternalistically controlled life” (116). Father and son are literally in bed together again, albeit for the last time. If this image is repellent in light of Mahoney’s earlier actions, the dialogue may be equally troublesome for readers, especially young Mahoney’s declaration of love and his expression that he “wouldn’t have been brought up any other way or by any other father” (191).

Eileen Kennedy considers the close of the book “a quiet scene of reconciliation in which the father asks the son for mutual forgiveness” (“The Road Away Becomes the Road Back” 120). Mahoney may indeed be asking for forgiveness, but it is unclear exactly what outward actions of his son would require “mutual” forgiveness, outside of some typically adolescent recalcitrance. Exactly what is said in the conversation is less significant, however, than young Mahoney’s calm negotiation of it. The “hidden fury”

(185) he felt toward his father is replaced by “morbid fascination” (189). His blinding rage is replaced by cool observation: he notices “some obscenity” about his father’s long johns alongside small details such as “the curly hair of the leg between [knee] and ankle” (189). The narrator then gives access to young Mahoney’s thoughts: “Memories of the nightmare nights in the bed with the broken brass bells came, and it was strange how the years had passed, how the nights were once, and different now, how this night’d probably be the last night of lying together” (189).

The artless language such as “strange” and “different” may be indicative of a wounded and fragile consciousness trying to protect itself, but it is a consciousness that, through laughter, has not only asserted its survival but achieved a becalmed perspective from which young Mahoney can quietly outmaneuver his father and allow the older man’s words to stand in their euphemistic absurdity. This is again demonstrated through McGahern’s technique, which pares away everything but dialogue in order to mirror Young Mahoney’s stoic acceptance of what he is and might be. Given the narrative’s realistic depiction of Mahoney’s violence, readers might justifiably find his euphemisms such as “Tempers were lost” to be infuriating, but it is important to note that young Mahoney remains calm and expresses none of the rage and hatred that had characterized his responses to his father and other characters. When Mahoney says, “There were good times and bad between us, as near everywhere, but it’s not what counts much,” (190) his son simply agrees. When his father reflects, “That was one good day we had, the day we went to the Royal Hotel,” the son shares none of the angst or humiliation documented earlier in the narrative. Instead, he simply says, “It was a good day. I enjoyed that day very much” (190).

If young Mahoney appears to simply accede and say what his father wants to hear, he does so knowingly. If his laughter entails recognition of the “reality” that sets him free, its connection to “terror” may indicate that his tyrannical father remains a part of this reality, one who can never be fully rejected because young Mahoney cannot reject the blood flowing in his veins. McGahern uses the physical proximity of the two men to illustrate this inescapable blood bond and the need to come to terms with consanguinity.

The true “reconciliation” that occurs here is the tenuous one between young Mahoney and the Mahoney within him. The narrative quietly illustrates the characteristics the son shares with the father. The scene described above, in which he and his sister argue over their futures, details his predatory tendencies: “Now you saw how she drew away from your violence...it was only with someone simple and weak you were able to be violent” (105). This is made more explicit when he is preparing for the Scholarship exam which will determine his access to the University. He cannot control his anger as his younger siblings enjoy themselves while their father is out of the house: “No matter how you tried resentment rose, and you cried at them in rage...You were their tyrant in place of Mahoney now” (111). By the end of the narrative, young Mahoney may be set free not only by his placid, post-laughter perspective but also by the recognition that negotiation with his “inner Mahoney” cannot be eschewed alongside the authorities of the priesthood and the University. He can see that even the University’s promise of escape into a “dream” (172) of intellectual fulfillment cannot be realized without a metaphorical “getting into bed” with his father. If Eileen Kennedy is correct that in “McGahern’s world, sons do *not* become like their fathers” [Italics original] (“Sons and Fathers” 74), the final image of *The Dark* ingeniously represents an essential

step in such a process of becoming (or not becoming, as it were). Where the young Mahoney once evaded this reality by asserting that “no one finally knew anything about himself or anybody” (150), at the end of the narrative his perspective opens a real, if painful, avenue into understanding himself. As hateful as it might be, he must first be intimate with the “Mahoney within” if he is to understand how it might inform the trajectory of his life.

Self-Reflexive Laughter in *The Pornographer*

One such trajectory may lead to the adult life of the narrator in McGahern’s fourth novel *The Pornographer*, published in 1979. While earlier novels and stories often represent victims of child abuse or institutional Catholic oppression, here the protagonist is in some ways a perpetrator. He earns his living by writing pornography. The text includes excerpts of his work, which clearly causes difficulty for readers such as Michael Toolan, who finds McGahern choosing “a narrow and unimpressive fictional mode, which the reader finds at first disturbing, later degrading, and finally repulsive” (54). More challenging for contemporary readers, many of whom might find the pornographic excerpts to be as mundanely unremarkable as they would have been shockingly remarkable a few decades before (drawing our attention to this fact is surely one of McGahern’s purposes in including them) is the narrator’s reflection that, speaking of himself, “the dead of heart can afford to be violent” (13). The narrator, wounded by his rejection at the hands of a woman he loved, withdraws into an emotional passivity similar to that of the protagonists of *The Dark*, “Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass,” or “The Recruiting Officer”. While the narrators of the latter two stories are implicated in cycles of violence as they stand aside and watch the abuse of a homeless man and the thrashing

of a schoolboy, respectively, the narrator of *The Pornographer* directly inflicts some emotional pain himself when he cruelly rejects both his lover Josephine and their newborn child. Alongside this, however, is the tenderness and commitment the narrator shows toward his uncle and dying aunt. He visits her regularly and spends a small fortune on brandy, which is the only thing that comforts her while she is in hospital suffering from cancer. The narrator's genuine affection for his aunt extends beyond the personal and into the stoic, rural values she and her brother represent. In fact, *The Pornographer* traces the narrator's cognitive move from a critical view of such values to one in which he can detect the irony in his desire to "espouse" them by marrying Nurse Brady and moving back to the northern Irish midlands of his youth. His laughter at the end of the narrative is especially self-reflexive because he recognizes that the "deadness of heart" which characterizes his life in Dublin is simply an adopted posture in an environment mostly devoid of the honesty and unaffected worldview he observes in his aunt and uncle.

The narrative develops the urban world of Dublin as one defined by pretense. A continual emphasis on clothing cues readers to this component of city life. The narrator notes Josephine's "expensive brown leather coat and matching handbag" (36) as they depart the Metropole. He remarks on her "elegant tweed costume" (51) on the night of their next meeting.

Maloney's "costumes" are even more dramatically emphasized. If the narrative will eventually expose Josephine's hesitation at assuming the role of independent, sexually liberated urban woman, Maloney appears as a gleeful chameleon taking full

advantage of the freedom to dress the part. His first appearance in the narrative includes the following description.

He was in his all-tweed outfit, long overcoat and matching suit, gold watch-chain crossing the waistcoat which had wide lapels. The small hat was tweed as well, “English country”, and much the same colour as the coat and suit, a dead briar brown. The bow-tie was discreetly florid and the highly polished oxblood boots positively shone. (25)

Later, he wears a “beautifully cut dark pinstripe, hand-tailored black shoes, plain tie, a wine kerchief falling nonchalantly from the breast pocket” (124). And still later, the narrator relates that “[f]or the hot day he wore baggy flannels, an expensively ragged corduroy jacket, and his buttoned-down shirt was open enough to reveal a wealth of grey hair on the chest” (132).

The characters’ costumes include language suited to the roles. The narrator wonders why Josephine sometimes speaks with “a touch of an American accent” (57). She acknowledges having “spent half her life at the pictures” (57) and appears to borrow slang such as “O boy” from Hollywood films and her two best friends, the Americans Betty and Janey, who display their progressive credentials by endorsing the narrator’s profession and disregarding the couple’s age difference (the narrator is eight years younger than Josephine). Maloney’s aforementioned “English country” look is accompanied by the greeting “Ahoy, old boy” as he mimics “an English accent quite unsuccessfully” (25). Later, when Maloney shows up at his aunt’s funeral, the narrator finds him grinning “ear to ear beneath [a] big hat, mimicking a Negro blues accent” (240). The narrator sardonically describes the environment in the Elbow Inn, where Maloney holds forth with his stable of pornographers on Friday nights: “There was a tradition of wit on those Fridays which resulted in a killing and artificial tedium” (76).

Though they write pornography, the group is distinguishable from other white-collar Dubliners only because their “dress was perhaps that bit more attractively careless” (76).

The pretense of such characters, especially Maloney, is punctured by those who represent a kind of rural authenticity. While the narrator’s uncle and aunt have their flaws and blind spots (his uncle’s absolute view of marriage as a pointless entanglement and his aunt’s reflexive defense of her feckless husband Cyril are two examples), the two clearly see through the veils of clothing and posturing that characterize the book’s urban dwellers. His uncle finally meets Maloney near the end of the novel and politely notes that he “seemed a bit overdressed for the part” (241). Nurse Brady also sees through Maloney, remarking that it is “as if he’s always racing to keep up with some idea of himself that he never quite catches” (214). The narrator’s aunt observes sardonically but accurately that “[i]f you were to strip off those city manners you’d find that both of you [the narrator and his uncle] are the exact same breed. What passes for quiet is stubbornness and you’re both thick as ditches” (73).

While such comments direct readers in the novel’s critique of pretense, the events of the narrative and the actions of the characters also illustrate the persistence of what M.M. Bakhtin calls “authoritative discourse” in persons who attempt to play different roles.⁸ Josephine struggles to maintain her posture of sexually liberated woman by continuously repeating, in order to reassure herself, that she does not “feel guilty at all or anything” (42) after intercourse with the narrator. But sex still fits into a more traditional, even Catholic mode for her, evidenced by her refusal to use birth control and her absolute certainty that she loves the narrator. In a statement that combines her

⁸ Bakhtin writes that “the authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is a *prior* discourse” (342).

traditional view and her willfulness, she tells the narrator, “I have so much love for you that I believe you will come to share some of it, no matter how hard you try to fight it” (67). One night, just after sexual intercourse, she reflects on what she has been missing, saying, “I don’t know what I was doing all those years, making the nine Fridays, going to the Sodality, out on the streets with the Legion of Mary, always in for nine when my uncle was saying the Rosary” (79). However, the following morning, when the narrator excuses himself from spending Sunday with her, she says, “I think I’ll go to Mass like the other people” (82). It is an ironic moment which undermines Josephine’s mockery of Catholic ritual and dismantles her veneer of urban values.

Although readers of *The Pornographer* are likely troubled by the narrator’s absolute refusal to see the child he conceives with Josephine, his reasons for doing so are not entirely invalid. Josephine, like the narrator, seems to have adopted a predatory sense of values herself, and he surely recognizes her desire for him to see his child as another calculating maneuver by the “fierce and determined gambler” (Sampson, *Outstaring* 146) lurking beneath the generous and maternal lover. As Eamon Maher points out, Josephine “is in many ways an unsympathetic and manipulative woman who knows full well the probable consequences of her actions” (*From the Local* 51). While the narrator seeks only sex, perhaps at his best he looks for it to be some kind of mystical experience that takes the participants briefly beyond time. Josephine, on the other hand, uses sex to win love, children, and marriage for herself. This idea is developed through the gambling and horseracing language used to characterize sexual relationships throughout the novel.

The narrator describes the Metropole dance floor as pervaded by a “sense of the fair and the hunt and the racecourse” (31). He sees in Josephine a “wonderful healthy

animal” (34). Such terms eventually resonate sardonically through the larger implications of human relationships. After the two have sex for the first time, Josephine relates a humiliating story of her only other sexual experience prior to meeting the narrator. Her partner had ignored her crying and got out of bed to check racing results: his colossal indifference to her emotions is contained in the remark “I’ve just missed the crossed treble by a whisker” (41). The remark accumulates a crushing irony as the narrative proceeds, echoing through Josephine’s plotting for and near-miss of her own “crossed treble” of love, marriage, and children, as well as through her sarcastic refrain of “O boy, I sure picked a winner” once she understands the narrator’s unwillingness to submit to her plans for their future.

Maloney’s actions also draw a reader’s attention to the traditional views lurking beneath his joyfully amoral view of his work and sexuality in general. When the narrator’s stubborn refusal to see his child leads to a beating at the hands of Michael Kavanagh, the head of the family Josephine is staying with in London, Maloney comments, “I’m glad you got beaten up. You’ll get beaten up many times. You deserve to get beaten up” (244). As Eamon Maher points out, although “he likes to think of himself as a liberal, Maloney at times betrays a very strong streak of moral righteousness” (*From the Local* 49). While he is controlling, protean and perhaps even more hypocritical than Josephine, Maloney is not, however, entirely a windbag. In fact, his challenging of the protagonist’s changing views at the end of the narrative helps readers understand how the latter’s laughter is self-reflexive.

The remnants of the narrator’s own assimilation of Catholic discourse may emerge when he asks Maloney, “Haven’t I done enough?”, thus implying that his

physical wounds from Kavanagh's beating atone for the emotional ones he may have inflicted on Josephine (243). Maloney, however, goes beyond Kavanagh's basic premise that the narrator should physically pay for "having his fun": "Don't think you're washed clean by the beating. Don't imagine you've been washed in the blood of the lamb or any of those cathartic theories. Don't try to slip out in any of those ways. I know you" (243). Though oblivious to the fact that the narrator was simply treating sex according to the model provided in the pornography he himself publishes, Maloney reminds the narrator that his adopted role of Dublin apostate precludes invoking atonement here. While he does so in part for selfish reasons, Maloney persists in holding the narrator accountable for his cynical worldview in a way that helps the latter laugh at himself. When the narrator says, "I'm thinking of proposing marriage to a woman and coming back here" (250), Maloney mocks such a resolution: "O sweet suffering Switzerland. We must talk about it. There's a good hotel in Kells, if I can be seen with you so close to Dublin. Your outer aspects reflect accurately what must be an appalling inner moral condition" (251). In yet another irony, the role-playing, protean Maloney cannot accept the protagonist's attempt to discard his urban posture of the existentialist womanizer. Maloney's caustic humor appears to help the narrator see how easily categorized and summarized his role on the Dublin "stage" can be. More importantly, it leads to recognition that he is not simply acting in an innocuous play; in fact, his chosen role has been quite injurious to others and even to his own subjectivity.

He reflects that by "not attending, by thinking any one thing was as worth doing as any other, by sleeping with anyone who'd agree, I had been the cause of as much pain and confusion and evil as if I had actively set out to do it. I had not attended properly"

(251). Perhaps more importantly, he admits, “[b]roken in love, I had turned back, let the light of imagination almost out” (251). The narrator recognizes, first, how destructive a pure selfishness can be. While he had thought his world-weary, knowing reticence protected others, he now observes that such passivity is as destructive as the will to violence, a recognition that may elude the narrators of “Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass” and “The Recruiting Officer.” He also recognizes that such a view lessens him and nearly destroys his imagination, which is perhaps as close as a profoundly physical writer such as McGahern might come to naming what some might call the “soul” or the “spirit.” While his emotional wounding at the hands of his ex-lover was legitimate, he responded by assuming a public persona that actually warped and corrupted him further, deepening those wounds within himself to the point of gravely threatening elements of his humanity such as his imagination.

In the midst of such reflections as he travels the road back to Dublin with Maloney, the narrator grits his teeth “to try to stop the fit of laughter because it hurt so much, but the very pain was making it all the more impossible to stop” (252). Laughter literally pains him here because of Kavanagh’s disfiguring of his face, but the more it hurts, the more he laughs. His accompanying observations, detailed above, are hardly funny and in fact may be called entirely unhappy, thus bringing the laughter here closer to Beckett’s notion of the *risus purus*. That he can laugh upon reflecting that he had brought “evil” to others and had nearly destroyed his own imagination suggests that such laughter is a powerful response, capable of “‘stiffening’ the self against danger, marking that minimal ‘spatial’ difference between conscious life and the pure extensivity of dead nature” (Miller 63). His laughter also appears to entail an especially ironic recognition

for a character whose worldview Maloney sarcastically summarizes as “Blacken day with night. Tell the nodding plants they’ll grow just as well in the shade as sun. It’s all in the sweet quality of the mind, so forget the fucking circumstances, brother” (251).

Though he does not admit it to Maloney, upon laughing the narrator acknowledges to himself and readers that he has “a fierce need to pray, for myself, Maloney, my uncle, the girl, the whole shoot” (252). He seems to recognize that his desire to pray brings together many of the narrative’s ironies. Where prayer might once have represented the restrictive moral guidelines of the Church or a tedious rural conservatism, he circles back to it after discovering the limits of urban sexual liberation and protean social behavior. The extension of his vision allows him to see prayer in light of one of Elizabeth Reegan’s favorite refrains, borrowed from Halliday: “the same but different” (204). If the narrator can be different he can also create a different kind of prayer. While he had once defended his predatory sexual practices as simply addressing an instinct, “a need—like food or drink” (56), he now wishes to apply himself to the more gracious and humanizing religious instinct, even though he remains a committed atheist.

He also recognizes that he has perverted the stoicism of his aunt and uncle into passivity, solipsism, and pornography: now he will revisit their stoicism and begin again in a way that might allow a legitimate relationship with another person. While this cannot happen with Josephine, he will risk proposing to Nurse Brady, though it has taken him some time to recognize the depth beneath her unaffected exterior. He remains wary of her worldview for much of the narrative, evidenced by a conversation between the two regarding the narrator’s aunt. Nurse Brady tells the pornographer that his aunt “should have been dead about six months ago” (215). The exchange continues:

“She has this fierce will to live. I don’t understand it.”

“Life is very sweet.”

“I suppose it depends on how you’re situated in it. It can be sweet,” these were the sort of conversations that made me wince but I still fell into. (215)

The narrator’s worldview is clearly exposed in just a few lines here. He does not quite understand the source of his aunt’s resilience because he does not see life as inherently worthy of such tenacity. Not only that, but Nurse Brady’s comment makes him wince because it is a threat to his insistence on such a dark view. He can only see it as facile and clichéd at this point in the narrative.

Though he may struggle with her recitation of aphorisms such as “life is sweet,” the narrator detects an important quality in Nurse Brady even before he becomes acquainted with her. On the ward to visit his aunt, he overhears her laughter and admires its “confident affirmation of itself against everything vulnerable and receding and dying” (49). Especially important is the self-reflexive element. Her laugh “affirms itself” and, by extension, the self which laughs. Laughter in such a place is not intended to mock those afflicted with mortal illness; instead, it is a genuine and valid response to the absurdity and fragility of existence, one perhaps echoed by the narrator’s aunt when she finally returns home to die. During the trip, the narrator notes that she is “practically gay” and harasses her brother with “sharp wit” (223).

Though he plans to propose marriage to Nurse Brady, the narrator resolves to accept her answer with a resilience for going forward borrowed from his aunt and uncle. He laconically describes his new approach to potential rejection: “The world won’t stop. There’d be a chance of real adventure lost. I’d be sorry” (251).

He has brought together stoicism with a modicum of hope and a new acceptance of pure possibility. He recognizes, in a way that Josephine and Maloney seem unaware

of even as they themselves experience it, how the “old instincts” break through even as society appears to leave them behind and that such instincts need not be wholly oppressive. He has recognized and accepted his aunt’s assessment of what lay beneath his “city manners”—a character that shares much with his uncle and would do better to come to terms with this fact. He even understands how he is implicated in one of his earlier reflections: “All the doctrines that we had learned by heart and could not understand and fretted over became laughingly clear. To find we had to lose: the road away becomes the road back” (203). In fact, his recognition of this is another affirmation that he is an individual subject. He can only laugh at himself, for accepting such seemingly tired aphorisms was once impossible. They were meaningless to him and fueled his urban, world-weary mockery. Now he laughs at his failure to see into their depths, even though such a view would have been impossible without his intervening experience of the empirical. Circling back to them, the narrator can now see that such authoritative discourses are not as dogmatic as he thought, even grating clichés such as “life is sweet.” His own process of living has restored an individual meaning to them.

Like Elizabeth Reegan, who sees through the doctrinal duty of the rosary into the capacity of words to encompass her basic human need to praise and celebrate, the pornographer’s urge to compose a prayer for “the whole shoot” suggests that he too has penetrated into the mystery of himself as well as the systems of meaning surrounding him. The language and images at the close of the narrative quietly reinforce the emphasis on vision. Rain falls on the road ahead, but the narrator notes “the powerful wipers sweeping it imperiously aside as soon as it spotted the shining arcs, sweeping and sweeping” (251). More importantly, a phrase from Nurse Brady enters his mind: “You’d

have seen me if you had been paying attention” (251). He knows that his solipsism had reached the point of crippling his outward vision, a condition ironically echoed by the injuries from his beating, as he explains to his uncle, “I can only see properly out of one eye” (239).

The pornographer has not fully recovered from his physical or psychological injuries, but he absorbs Maloney’s jibes and articulates a desire to change the course of his life. Where he had once incorporated intolerable loss into himself by becoming “dead of heart”, he will now try to “make a go of it” (251) with Nurse Brady, even if it results in another failure. He also admits that his choice to express himself as luridly as possible through pornography was indicative of his warped vision. The end of *The Pornographer* suggests that he will find new ways to work with the materials of memory and language and thus forecasts the primary concerns for the following two chapters of this study.

As the narrator and Maloney become quiet, the image of his uncle disembarking from the train returns to him. It is the same image which opened the novel and suggests that the narrator is about to initiate a re-vision of all that he has observed, remembered, and told. As he is now willing to “fail again” or “fail better” in a relationship with Nurse Brady, he also seems willing to “fail better” in his narration of this story. The challenge facing him now is what to do, or re-do, with the fragment of memory that has returned to him. Self-reflexive laughter, having asserted his subjectivity and contributed to the restoration of his vision, might give rise to more productive use of such fragments. Rather than degrading his intolerable past by resorting to pornography, he will try to elevate it through something more like prayer.

Chapter 3: Memory and the Burden of Interpretation

I have argued that self-reflexive laughter helps John McGahern's characters assert their subjectivity, improve their perspective, and avoid responding to violence with violence. If laughter helps the subject survive the intolerable, memories of such experiences create a new set of problems for the survivor, especially when combined with the extraordinary power given to memory in McGahern's fictional world. His characters and narrators remark frequently on the mind's capability for clarifying or revivifying images from the past.

The pornographer states early on that an event becomes "part of our life again in the memory" where it is "doomed to live far more vividly than in the taking place" (13). The narrator of "Gold Watch" remembers an event from his childhood and distinguishes memory from experience: "How clearly everything sang now set free by the distance of the years, with what heaviness the actual scenes and days had weighed" (*Collected Stories* 219). In "The Wine Breath," memory has a similar clarifying capability and may even offer something that transcends time. The protagonist, an aging priest, experiences the shockingly vivid return of an image from his childhood, and the narrator claims that the memory "during the years he carried it around with him lost the sheltered burden of the everyday [and] had become light as the air in all the clarity of light. It was all timeless, and seemed at least a promise of the eternal" (*Collected Stories* 185). It is as if the image accrues radiance as it lies unaccessed by the mind and very nearly offers the protagonist evidence of God's existence. Memory's apparent power to overcome time in this and other McGahern fictions has elicited critical comparisons to Marcel Proust; Denis Sampson calls "The Wine Breath" a "perfect Proustian exercise" (*Outstaring* 17)

and Eamon Maher notes that any mention of “memory regained will inevitably invite a comparison with Proust, one of McGahern’s favorite writers” (*From the Local* 90).

McGahern also admired Samuel Beckett’s commentary on Proust,⁹ which contains a description of involuntary memory that, while hardly direct, certainly helps to explain experiences of memory like that detailed in “The Wine Breath” and alluded to by the other characters mentioned above.

Involuntary memory is explosive, ‘an immediate, total, and delicious conflagration.’ It restores, not merely the past object, but the Lazarus that it charmed or tortured, but more because less, more because it abstracts the useful, the opportune, the accidental, because in its flame it has consumed Habit and all its works, and in its brightness revealed what the mock reality of experience never can and never will reveal—the real. (Beckett, *Proust* 20)

The access to the “real” offered by memory, especially through its ability to “abstract” certain things and burn away others, can act as a restorative for some characters. The protagonist of “The Wine Breath” is briefly refreshed; in the immediate aftermath of his experience he feels “purged of all tiredness [and] eager to begin life again” (180). The narrator of *The Leavetaking*, a teacher ensconced a quiet moment while his students toil in silence, notes “what a coffin this schoolroom would be without the long withdrawing tide of memory becoming imagination” (45). This restorative quality is, however, offset by the risks associated with such a powerful, even intoxicating, notion of memory. As Aengus Woods puts it, “[m]emory always brings with it the possibility of two responses, nostalgia and regret” (71). An extreme example of the latter appears in “A Slip-up,” in which the protagonist spends part of every day doing imaginary labor on the property in Ireland he lost many decades before. In *The Barracks*, Elizabeth Reegan wrestles with not only nostalgia and regret but also experiences memory’s capability for overwhelming

⁹ In an interview with Sampson, McGahern calls the book “very interesting” but also suggests that it “tells more about Beckett than it tells about Proust” (Sampson, “Conversation” 17).

the present. The narrator notes her eagerness for a relationship with Reegan on the day she meets him; she enters a chapel but is unable to translate her longing into something appropriately religious: “she could get herself to say no formal prayer, all her habits and acceptances lost in an impassioned tumult of remembering” (14).

The “tumult of remembering” can be a distraction not only from duty but also from more difficult problems of being. As Elizabeth later asks, “But *was there use*, remembering can go on forever” (88) [Italics added]. Her question suggests that a more conscious engagement with the materials of memory is necessary in order to avoid the risks of nostalgia and regret. Even in narratives where McGahern depicts the intense return of those materials, such as “The Wine Breath” or *The Leavetaking*, he also dramatizes the struggle to interpret and understand them. In a sense, this struggle is an investigation of the problem of history within the microcosm of an individual consciousness, and may thus be profitably connected with the thinking of twentieth century philosophers who study hermeneutics, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.

Several key points from Gadamer’s study of how human consciousness understands the past undergird my readings of McGahern’s fictions. He argues that “[u]nderstanding begins...when something addresses us” (*Truth and Method* 298) and goes on to say that one’s goal should be to “listen to tradition in a way that permits it to make its own meaning heard” (304). This does not entail passivity; rather, it suggests both the capability of history or memory to initiate dialogue and the responsibility of the individual to attend to what is said. This raises another question, however, clearly articulated by the pornographer when he notes that he had not “attended *properly*”

[Emphasis added] (251). Gadamer helps to explain the distinction when he points out that the “hermeneutical consciousness culminates not in methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes experienced man from the man captivated by dogma...this readiness is what distinguishes historically effected consciousness” (*Truth and Method* 355). For certain of McGahern’s characters, such as Patrick Moran’s father in *The Leavetaking* or Moran in *Amongst Women*, “methodological sureness” usually means either affixing a certain interpretation to the past or attempting to control it through silence. Both are misguided, for they are an expression of the will to power rather than the desire to understand.

Gadamer’s famous metaphor for historical understanding is the “fusion of horizons” of the past and present. However, he acknowledges that because “we are always already affected by history” (*Truth and Method* 300), these horizons are actually projections and that even the “horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices” (*Truth and Method* 305). Even so, in “the process of understanding, a real fusing occurs—which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded” (*Truth and Method* 306). Joel Weinsheimer helps to clarify what Gadamer is attempting to work out when he writes, “[Gadamer] regards understanding...as the kind of fusion that occurs in metaphor, a fusion that respects plurality while not relinquishing claims of unity” (64).

Within the individual mind, therefore, a memory, isolated but also enriched by time, can almost become an Other (plurality) even as its links to identity remain intact (unity). My own metaphor of “encompassing the intolerable” works along these lines, in that the mind encircles a memory in order to both observe it and grant it its space even as

the present reality and that memory are fused inside a larger circle. For McGahern's characters, the line which links the observer and the observed is narrative. Those who successfully encompass the intolerable past turn away from dogmatic interpretations and toward construction and revision of open-ended narratives. In doing so, they contend with a question that also occupies Paul Ricoeur: "How is narrativity, as the construction or deconstruction of paradigms of story-telling, a perpetual search for new ways of expressing human time [and] a *production or creation of meaning*? [Emphasis added] ("Creativity" 218).

I will trace this question through McGahern's exploration of the individual mind's effort to encompass the intolerable past, emphasized in fiction from the early and middle parts of his career, and conclude with analysis of the capabilities of collective or community memory, which are foregrounded in later works. Alongside a turn toward narrativity and revision, other criteria for a character's success in encompassing the intolerable also come from Gadamer. In addition to the "readiness for experience" he describes above, he goes on to elaborate on the characteristics of the "experienced" person vs. that "captivated by dogma."

[E]xperience is experience of human finitude. The truly experienced person is one who has taken this to heart, who knows that he is master neither of time nor the future. The experienced man knows that all foresight is limited and all plans uncertain...Real experience is that whereby man becomes aware of his finiteness. (*Truth and Method* 351)

Characters such as Elizabeth Reegan and the protagonist of "The Wine Breath" gain insight into finitude in their attempts to fuse the horizons of the present and past through narrativity; however, both characters remain relatively isolated and thus their insights do not or may not find expression. Patrick Moran, the protagonist of *The Leavetaking*, achieves both insight into loss as well as the "readiness for experience"

Gadamer describes. The novel then demonstrates the challenge of bringing that readiness to another person, in this case Patrick's lover Isobel, whose own efforts to "narrativize" her past seem inscrutable to him. Two later stories, "A Slip-up" and "High Ground," illustrate McGahern's effort to address the issue of memory outside the individual mind or within a marriage (or what might be called a "community of two"). Here, he examines the risks and rewards of collective memory and posits a public role for a narrator capable of speaking for those whose voices are compromised by nostalgia or regret.

**Loss, Memory, and the Individual Consciousness in *The Barracks*
and "The Wine Breath"**

As I explained in Chapter 2, narrative urgency in *The Barracks* stems from Elizabeth's imminent death. Even if, early in the novel, she occasionally entertains the idea that she can recover her health, these moments seem to carry a knowing undercurrent of futility. The whole of the narrative is more accurately characterized as her struggle to make some sense of living, being, and personal history as the nearly fixed date of her death draws closer. Although Elizabeth has moments of nostalgia, the extreme urgency caused by a cancer diagnosis, combined with her existential curiosity, push her toward the more difficult questions of interpretation that accompany memory in McGahern's fictional world.

After her doctor recommends hospitalization in Dublin, Elizabeth sits in a café and considers her situation, knowing full well what his advice implies. She feels she must "try to grip the table or something, for it was absolutely inconceivable that she could die. What was it all about? Where was she going? What was she doing? What was it all about?" (85). The latter phrase echoes a refrain of Michael Halliday's, one

uttered frequently after “the affair between them had already failed” (85): “What the hell is all this living and dying about anyway, Elizabeth?” (85).

While Halliday is long dead, his words retain their vitality, embodied through Elizabeth and her recitation and revision of them. Another of his phrases, “the same but different,” even appears to become Elizabeth’s own, such that it is not necessarily accompanied by remembered images of him, but instead simply occurs to her as she attempts to understand something. This component of her consciousness illustrates McGahern’s working out of what Paul Ricoeur describes as the challenge of living in “human time,” which is “to live between the private time of our mortality and the public time of language” (“Creativity” 221). Ricoeur goes on to say that “[t]o rediscover meaning we must return to the multilayered sedimentations of language, to the complex plurality of its instances, which can preserve what is said from the destruction of oblivion” (229). Halliday’s words have an enduring public quality (even if only within a community of two), but as long as Elizabeth is alive she must accept not only their persistence but also their semantic shifts. In this case, the narrator reports that “[s]he had hung upon his words but they had different meaning then, she had seen them as the end of love, she was seeing them now with her own life” (86). Elizabeth recognizes that meaning must be continually *re*-discovered; she is in dialogue with Halliday’s words from the past and seems capable of letting such words speak rather than simply assigning meaning to them in a simplistic or controlling way. His question about living and dying catalyzes what will be a genuine attempt to understand how her past, especially the relationship with Halliday, is linked to the intolerable diagnosis implied by the doctor’s recommendation.

Where the narrative proceeds from here establishes Elizabeth's increasing recognition that the *loss* of Halliday is the most important memory to consider. She seems to be working through the idea that what one has to "learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but insight into the limitations of humanity" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 351). Given time and solitude in the café, she initially recalls the "richness and happiness of that summer and early autumn" (87) in which they fell in love and the excitement of "the concerts, the theatres, the first restaurants she had ever been in with wine and waiters" (88). However, she quickly disrupts the flow of such images: "Three week-ends they spent. ...But was there use, remembering can go on forever. It changed, it came to nothing. Halliday changed, as quietly as a blue sky can turn to cloud" (88). It is almost as if the optimism and joy of those early weekends with Halliday are so commonplace that an ellipsis can stand in for them. Her question regarding the utility of memory suggests that she wants and expects something more from it than nostalgia. The narrative form reflects her priorities in light of the news from the doctor. While Elizabeth recounts the happy events of her relationship with Halliday in a paragraph, the narrative now devotes seven pages to detailing its demise. She turns away from pleasant indulgence of memory and towards the more difficult task of interpreting loss.

These memories provide the raw material through which she might deepen her understanding of being. As she considers one of the evenings they spent after Halliday "changed," she asks, "Why couldn't he have let her go on in her illusions? Everything was stripped down to the bone now and there was the pure nothingness that he'd spoken about. Nothing could ever stay alive, nothing could go on living" (90). Her recognition is painful and deceptively simple. In fact, she has extended her vision past and through

her illusions to a sense of how she is joined to other living things by finitude. Moreover, memories of the end of her relationship with Halliday raise important questions for her.

Were the real problems faced and solved or declared insoluble or were they not simply lived in the changes of her life? She could live her life through in its mystery, without any purpose, except to watch and bear witness. She did not care. She was alive and being was her ridiculous glory as well as her pain. (94)

After the extraordinary suffering and physical pain of treatment in Dublin, Elizabeth comes to a less assured but perhaps more valuable means of “bearing witness” to memory.

As she recovers from surgery under watchful nurses, she experiences “such ease and peace and [a] sense of everything being cared for” (134). The inside views provided by the narrator show Elizabeth using this respite to organize her memories into a kind of reverse chronology beginning with “Reegan and the children and the policemen and the river flowing past the barracks and the ash trees” and proceeding through her work in London, the affair with Halliday, and on to “[f]arther away mornings when she was a country child and rising with the larks to go down to the sheep paddocks with a sweet can for mushrooms” (135). Most importantly, as with Halliday’s refrains, Elizabeth declines to affix a certain interpretation to such a narrative. She simply selects and encloses materials into it. She concludes that “it was all so mysterious and strange and unknowable; and it did not burden her, she confronting it as dispassionately as it confronted her” (135). She seems to have relinquished the will to power over memory, which might be expressed through a desire for certain meaning. Elizabeth has also achieved a way of looking at memory such that it is not only less burdensome but also less overwhelming than the “tumult” of the chapel noted earlier. Furthermore, her reverse narrative links losses, such as that of her country childhood and Halliday, with

her present and ongoing life with Reegan and his children in the barracks. This contiguity may not trace a perfect logic but it does trace a life. Elizabeth's open-ended narrativity mediates between the horizon of the past and the horizon of the present, between plurality and unity. The narrator leaves no doubt that Elizabeth has learned how to bear witness in a valuable way, noting that "surely this way she saw was a kind of human triumph" (136).

Even such triumphs are short-lived, however. Among Elizabeth's late insights is the following passage, which sums up much of what she has learned in considering her life and memory.

Sometimes meaning and peace come but I lose them again, nothing in life is ever resolved once and for all but changes with the changing life, calm had to be fought for through pain, and always when it was given it was both different and the same, every loss had changed it, and she could be sure it never came to stay, because she was still alive. (204)

Elizabeth articulates a view of meaning, which "comes" rather than being discovered through a systematic search, similar to Gadamer's assertion that "the epiphany of understanding is not something we do but something that happens to us. It is the effect of history" (Weinsheimer 35). She notes that a living observer's position is never finally fixed in regard to history as well as the privileged place of loss in that history. Halliday's language ("the same but different") survives him; it is revised and seamlessly incorporated into Elizabeth's own reflection. She acknowledges that the burden of interpretation persists and that resolution can be final only with death.

As I suggested in Chapter 2, the tragic thread in *The Barracks* emerges from Elizabeth's inability to find expression for such ideas.¹⁰ She has arrived at a nuanced

¹⁰ The novel includes one extraordinary attempt by Elizabeth to write a letter, which I will examine in Chapter 4's discussion of inscription.

understanding of what it means to bear witness to memory, but the ideas expressed above are likely too threatening to the narrow world of the policemen, their wives, and especially Reagan, who can consider little but what is immediately before him (namely, his supervisor and the impediments to his escaping the police force). Elizabeth's environment precludes a human relationship that can accommodate her understanding of the inexorable process of becoming. In a devastating irony, the one person who could accommodate it (Halliday) had to be lost for her to fully recognize this need. In "The Wine Breath," from his 1978 collection, *Getting Through*, McGahern depicts a similarly isolated character struggling with memory but does so from a slightly more elusive point of view. Whereas *The Barracks* offers relatively clear guidance for readers via Elizabeth's sincerity and thoughtfulness as well as through a sympathetic narrator, "The Wine Breath," especially its ending, may leave them uncertain as to how successfully the protagonist, an aging priest, responds to an epiphany drawn from a Proustian experience with memory.

The outward action of the story consists simply of the priest's attempt to carry out the basic errand of notifying his neighbor and parishioner, Gillespie, that a bed is available in the hospital for his wife's operation. He never delivers the message, having been carried into a remembered day by the image of sunlit beechwood chips gathering around Gillespie's feet as he saws. The image conjures a memory from his childhood. It is the day of a neighbor's funeral, which he recalls so vividly now because it followed a blizzard which covered the country with several feet of snow. The present all but disappears and he becomes immersed in "the day in February 1947 that they buried Michael Bruen" (*Collected Stories* 179). When the light changes and he awakens out of

the lost day, the priest is embarrassed by the possibility of being caught in public reverie. He retreats from Gillespie's gate and returns home. The remainder of the story is devoted to other memories and the tension between them and the immediacy of the present.

McGahern draws his title from W.B. Yeats' "All Souls' Night," in which the speaker invites a series of ghosts to, in a sense, join him for a drink. The poem's first stanza closes as follows:

For it is a ghost's right,
His element is so fine
Being sharpened by his death,
To drink from the wine-breath
While our gross palates drink from the whole wine (lines 6-10)

The speaker proceeds to call forth specific historical figures such as Florence Emery and MacGregor Mathers but then asserts that "names are nothing" (81) and admits that as long as someone or something takes the "fume of muscatel...no living man can drink from the whole wine" (230). This revision of line 10, and especially its insight into limits, may inform McGahern's memorable closing line to "Wheels," in which the narrator remarks on "the rich whole that never came but that all the preparations promised" (*Collected Stories* 11). The protagonist of "The Wine Breath" also craves something outside of human limits. He remarks that he too, like Yeats' speaker, "would be glad of a ghost tonight, be glad of any visitation from beyond the walls of sense" (185). The closest he comes to such a visitation in the story is the astonishing and enveloping image of Michael Bruen's funeral, which he initially connects to something like a restoring glimpse of the "rich whole": "the day set alight in his mind by the light of the white beech, though it had been nothing more than a funeral he had attended during a dramatic snowfall when a boy, seemed bathed in the eternal, seemed everything we had

been taught and told of the world of God” (180). Memory’s capability for refining an image is clearly on display here and shares much with Samuel Beckett’s explication of Proustian “involuntary memory.” Beckett explains that given “favorable circumstances,” such as

a relaxation of the subject’s habit of thought and...a generally diminished tension of consciousness following upon a phase of extreme discouragement...then the total past sensation, not its echo nor its copy, but the sensation itself, annihilating every spatial and temporal restriction, comes in a rush to engulf the subject in all the beauty of its infallible proportion. (*Proust* 54)

While the priest’s remembered day has clearly acquired the “infallible proportion” Beckett describes and thus briefly restores his alacrity for “the world of God,” these comments also illuminate the priest’s state of mind *prior* to his experience and help to initiate analysis of the larger concerns of the story.

If the priest’s “habits of thought” are defined by orthodox Catholic belief and doctrinal duty, the opening lines of the story illustrate that such habits have lost their effectuality on this, the actual day.

If I were to die, I’d miss most the mornings and the evenings, he thought as he walked the narrow dirt-track by the lake in the late evening, and then wondered if his mind was failing, for how could anybody think anything so stupid: being a man he had no choice, he was doomed to die; and being dead he’d miss nothing, being nothing. It went against everything in his life as a priest. (178)

The priest views death as total and final, which, as he ironically notes, repudiates his vocation. That he senses his own death approaching is made clear again once he awakens out of the lost day. He skulks away from Gillespie’s gate and returns home circuitously in order to avoid human contact. He brews coffee in his darkened kitchen. The narrative continues, “Always when about to give birth or die cattle sought out a clean place in some corner of the field” (181). This may very well be a moment of free indirect discourse rather than a narrator’s comment, for it is consistent with the priest’s reflections

at the opening of the story. In an almost brutal assessment of the futility of the conventionally spiritual life, the priest's actions are compared to those of livestock. His salvation and immortality, guaranteed by his vocation, seem chimerical in light of this comparison. A final indicator that his habits of thought have eroded is that it is "only by a sheer act of will, sometimes having to count the words, that he was able to finish his [daily] office" (186). These insights into the mind of the priest from both before and after the experience of the remembered day begin to explain why this particular memory struck him so vividly and, more importantly, point toward what it might mean for him on this particular day.

Bruen's life is given a kind of rural opulence in the priest's reflections, as he has a large family and his farm rings "with work: cans, machinery, raillery, the sliding of hooves, someone whistling" (181). The protagonist also recalls visiting the farm as a boy to deliver a message from his father, whereon Bruen insists that his attractive daughters prepare an extravagant meal for the young man: "The butter melted on the fresh bread on the plate. There were sausages, liver, bacon, a slice of black-pudding and the sweetest grisceens" (182). The Bruen farm seems to shout the rewards of the life the protagonist will decline as a priest: collaborative labor close to the land, a house teeming with activity, and most importantly, Bruen's wife and growing children. In contrast, as he struggles to complete his daily office, he looks "at the room about him and he could hardly believe it was so empty and dead and dry, the empty chair where [his mother] should be sewing, the oaken table with its scattered books, the clock on the mantel" (186).

The sense of futility he feels reinforces a salient memory of his mother just prior to her death. An inveterate seamstress, near the end of her life he finds her “standing like a child in the middle of the room, surrounded by an enormous pile of rags. She had taken up from where she’d been interrupted at the herring-bone skirt and torn up every dress or article of clothing she had ever made” (184). For the priest, the doctor’s curt diagnosis that “it’s just the onset of senility” (184) does not account for her violence toward her life’s work. It is possible that she has awakened to some sense of the futility of her goals for her son as well. The priest remembers the voice of the community: “‘His mother had the vocation for him.’ Perhaps she had, perhaps all the mothers of the country had, it had so passed into the speech of the country, in all the forms of both beatification and derision” (183). When she comes to live with him after his father’s death, mother and son settle into routine in which she waits on him as he busies himself with “the many duties of a priest. The fences on the past and future were secure. He must have been what is called happy, and there was a whole part of his life that, without his knowing, had come to turn to her for its own expression” (183). The “fenced” past may suggest that he has successfully encompassed it, but for this particular character this is an illusion, for he has not yet gained adequate insight into finitude. He has shut out the past rather than listening to it or incorporating it into narrative. This “part of his life” seems to have some destructive element that his mother expresses for him through the violent undoing of her life’s labor. The question for him is whether the story’s ultimate epiphany will lead to a similar violence. If he is truly successful in encompassing the intolerable through memory, he will find some middle ground between violence and the illusory security of a fenced past and future.

Anxious for a sign from the “world of God,” the priest sees only images drawn from human memory and voices drawn from his living experiences, such as that of his colleague, Peter Joyce, with whom he had argued about the vernacular Mass. While this unsatisfied need may be intensified and complicated by the priest’s vocation, it is not limited to such a character. Like the priest and the protagonist of “Wheels,” the central character of “Gold Watch” articulates a similarly persistent spiritual yearning as he too tries to navigate a difficult adult relationship with his father and a general sense of “time that did not have to run to any conclusion” (*Collected Stories* 225): “I stood in that moonlit silence as if waiting for some word or truth, but none came, none ever came; and I grew amused at that part of myself that still expected something” (225). A similar silence leads to the priest’s epiphany in “The Wine Breath” that “he had a ghost all right, one that he had been walking around with for a long time, a ghost he had not wanted to recognize—his own death. 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” (187).

The priest’s failure to “recognize” connects him with the pornographer, who has not “attended properly.” But like that character, the protagonist of “The Wine Breath” is beginning to understand his complicity in living a certain way. Catalyzing images such as that of the sunlit beech chips were all around him daily, but he avoided them: “he’d been too ashamed or bewildered to notice” (180). He now begins to understand why, since his mother’s death, he has “found himself stumbling into these dead days...it was as if the world of the dead was as available to him as the world of the living” (180). It is as if his own mind is bringing him the materials needed for insight into finitude but he

has resisted them; he is less open than Elizabeth Reegan to the Gadamerian notion that understanding is something that “occurs to us.”

The narrative does not, however, end with the protagonist’s recognition that his vocation has failed to insulate him from death, as valid and important as this occurrence of understanding is. Instead, the story’s conclusion shows the priest beginning to work out the problem articulated above: how does one “get to know” one’s death, which has “no mortal shape” and is described as an “absence”?

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. (187)

The story thus ends with a beginning. The memory of Bruen’s death, and its attendant restoration of images of an abundant earthly life, has finally brought the priest back to the start of the life he declined: one rich with possibility for intimacy and sexual fulfillment with another. The bottle of white wine is an elegant echo of Yeats’ image, but with the suggestion that a drink with the living may be a better means of satisfying our spiritual yearnings, as may the “preparations” for the narrator of “Wheels” even though he knows that the “rich whole” can never come.

The ending leaves readers to decide whether the priest is immersing himself in a fantasy, perhaps analogous to the orthodox Catholic belief and vocation which insulated him from mortality, or whether such an evening will further deepen his understanding of finitude. That the passage resembles the start of a narrative may ground an argument for the latter. While David Malcolm believes that it is “the ultimate failure of hope [and] the disappointment of life that is emphasized in the conclusion” (75), it is possible to read the

story's end as part of the protagonist's effort to "get to know" death well. The power of narrativity, as I have discussed above with regard to Elizabeth Reegan and will below with regard to the protagonist of *The Leavetaking*, may yet help the priest encompass the metaphorical death of this young man who declined the invitation to pass through such a threshold into the world of the human Other. If the protagonist can continue the narrative and link such a *loss* to the reality of the present day, he may yet avoid seeing his life as a waste, as his own mother appears to do when she destroys her handiwork. He may yet achieve what Elizabeth calls "the calm that had to be fought for through pain" and which is profoundly characterized by the fact that "every loss changed it" (204).

If the protagonist of "The Wine Breath" finds encompassing such a loss to be daunting, the experiences of Patrick Moran in *The Leavetaking* make clear that the loss of a vocation can be similarly troublesome, especially because of its intertwining of the goals of Irish mothers and sons.

A vocation is almost invariably connected to the mother in McGahern's texts and it informs the typical dichotomy that appears to challenge his protagonists: a choice between the "death in life" implied by the isolation and celibacy of the priesthood and what might be called "life then death" of a secular path dominated by the pursuit of love and sexual fulfillment with another person. The narrator of *The Leavetaking* summarizes the dilemma, which is extended in "The Wine Breath" to involve all the mothers and sons of Catholic Ireland. As a boy, Patrick Moran promised his mother that he would say Mass for her one day, thereby reducing her time in purgatory. When he leaves his mother's bedside as she is dying, he regrets that he has forfeited even a moment of her earthly life. Part II of the novel begins with this reflection:

‘One day I’d say Mass for her.’

I felt I had betrayed her in that upstairs room. Through the sacrifice of the Mass I would atone for the betrayal, but that in its turn became the sacrifice of the dream of another woman, became the death in life, the beginning only in the end. That way I would make good her dream. That way I would deny her death with my living death. That way I would keep faith. But I was not able to keep faith. The pull of nature was too strong, taking its shape in sweet, sickly, dreaming. I had not the strength to make the sacrifice. I could give up all dreams but the dream of woman. (85)

Although his maintenance of the “dream of woman” receives the endorsement of “nature,” the appeal of a vocation cannot simply be dismissed through an easy rejection of celibacy. In fact, McGahern’s characters come to see a vocation as a way of maintaining the terms of a relationship they know (i.e., mother and son) even if belief in salvation from a literal heaven and hell is no longer the essential factor. The priesthood is more a metaphorical marriage to one’s mother (with all the attendant Freudian overtones) than a decision to serve God the Father. As a young boy, when Patrick Moran considers the implications of his promise to his mother, what develops is a picture of domestic happiness.

She’d come with me to my first parish, to live in an old ivy-covered presbytery, a walk of white gravel through the cemetery between the church and the presbytery, an apple garden with some plum and ornamental fuchsia at the back. In moonlit nights the gravestones would shine white but they’d hold no terror for us. Grandfather clocks would strike the hours. Summers we’d read on the lawn and as the summer went watch the red fall of rose petals on its margins. She’d keep the altar, take the Dutch tulips from their thin cardboard boxes, arrange flowers and candles on the altar, be the constant worshipper and communicant at daily Mass. (28)

Time and death are hardly threatening here, with grandfatherly clocks gently tolling the hours, the gravestones benignly reflecting the moonlight, and summer lazily taking its course. While this is not the course Patrick ultimately chooses, he must encompass the memory of its loss, along with its inevitable connection to his duty to his mother, if he is

to go forward in his relationship with Isobel. This adds a certain irony to the notion that the young man described at the end of “The Wine Breath” stands at the threshold of something “pleasant and uncomplicated.”

Image, Narrativity, and the Other in *The Leavetaking*

While the protagonists of *The Barracks* and “The Wine Breath” experience insights into loss and finitude, both characters remain isolated and do not outwardly express such insights. In *The Leavetaking* (1974), McGahern investigates the problems that arise when the effort to encompass memory does find expression within a human relationship, namely that between the book’s lovers, Patrick and Isobel.

Patrick summarizes one of the key problems addressed in the novel. He notes that the lives of others, even a lover, come to us “with the banality of news reports, while our own banalities come to us with the interest of poetry” (143). In his Preface to the second edition of the book, McGahern restates the problem, albeit less succinctly. He calls *The Leavetaking* an “attempt to reflect the purity of feeling with which all the remembered “I” comes to us, the banal and the precious alike; and yet how that more than “I”—the beloved, the “otherest”, the most trusted moments of that life—stumbles continually away from us as poor reportage, and to see if these dispartes could in any way be made true to one another” (5). This preface, as well as McGahern’s extraordinary decision to revise the novel,¹¹ suggest that the formal strategy used to attempt the integration of Patrick’s and Isobel’s individual histories may be unviable. This has caused several critics to consider the novel an unsuccessful experiment. Michael Toolan finds the portrayal of secondary characters lacking: “Isobel’s father is often difficult to accept, as

¹¹ All the quotations in this study are from the 2nd edition of *The Leavetaking*.

indeed is Isobel herself” (52). Eamon Maher agrees, writing that readers are never made aware of what makes “Isobel so different from the other women with whom [Patrick] has had relationships” (*From the Local* 39). Careful readers will, however, notice a symmetry between the lives of Patrick and Isobel, even though Patrick himself seems only slightly aware of it. Both characters have a problematic relationship with their opposite sex parent, and while McGahern’s formal strategy purposefully keeps parts of Isobel’s history obscure, the novel does document Patrick’s successful encompassing of his troubled past. That he is successful is shown through his state of mind as the narrative concludes. Not only does he resist affixing a conclusive interpretation to his past, he displays a readiness for new experiences informed by what might be called an extreme trust in human relationships.

Patrick’s attempt to understand his life prior to the single day covered in the novel focuses mostly on the loss of his mother. That it is the most pervasive and important event in his life is expressed by the metaphors he uses to characterize it. He calls it a “shadow” that falls “forever on the self of my life” and shapes it “as the salt and wind shape the trees the tea lord had planted as shelter against the sea” (71). He elaborates on the image, saying that such trees stay “stubbornly bent away from their scourge the sea, their high branches stripped of bark and whitened, and in the full leaf of summer they still wear that plumage of bones” (71). The loss amounts to a deprivation of light to a living being. It defines Patrick “forever” and shapes him as constantly and as astringently as the turbulent sea. But his view of the shadow, the trees, the sea, and other images associated with his mother’s death will change throughout the novel as he responds to the burden of interpretation, which will be traced in due course below.

Patrick's father seems similarly defined by the loss of a parent. His father (Patrick's grandfather) went to America and earned enough as a bar owner to return to Ireland and buy a cottage. When Patrick's father is three, his father receives a letter from America "saying there was trouble with the partner he'd left in charge of the bar, and that he'd to return to New York at once" (53). He departs immediately and sends money regularly for some time. This stops inexplicably, however, and he is never heard from again. For Patrick's father, this coalesces into "the story of the shopping bag, told so obsessively often over the years that we [Patrick and his siblings] grew to know it as our own story, though in each telling old details were dropped in favor of the new" (52). The shopping bag is, for McGahern, an image that seems to retain a public currency usually reserved for refrains or fragments of language. It recurs in his short stories "Why We're Here" and "A Slip-up" as an emblem of displacement. Denis Sampson offers a summary of its implications, calling it "an image of starvation and fear and emigration, of hope and emptiness, associations which take on an archetypal image of the social history of the west of Ireland and the psychological traces left by famine" ("The Lost Image" 66). Such traces are legitimately powerful even as they may weaken in subsequent generations. In *The Leavetaking*, McGahern examines possibilities for dealing with these psychological remnants through a contrast between father and son and their respective memories.

The depths to which Patrick knows the "story of the shopping bag" as his own story is made clear through a formal shift in the novel. As he stands in his classroom while his students do exercises, Patrick retells the story to himself. Third person pronouns give way to a first person narrative in which Patrick is his father. His willingness to inhabit this role shows some effort on Patrick's part to accept how deeply

linked he is with his father's history. It is as if he understands that he is "always already affected by history" and that he might as well listen to it. Metaphorically speaking, the shift in point-of-view could be seen as a parallel to Gadamer's "fusion of horizons," which he argues is exemplary of effective-historical consciousness. In the larger scope of the novel, the retailing of the shopping bag story also illustrates one of the key risks associated with memory—the temptation to attach a fixed interpretation to it, which is usually indicative of the will to power and is demonstrated through the character of Patrick's father.

Indeed, Patrick's father usually introduces the story with what is for him its one and true meaning: "The old woman that's gone and I knew what want is" (52). The dramatic loss of his own father, as well as the inevitable poverty that followed, defines him, but it can also be made trivial through rigid interpretation. He bookends the story with a similar "moral" in the passage marking Patrick's transition back from first-person to third.

When I grow up we'll never be poor mother," I said to her, and though she is gone I'm not going to be poor now either, and "we'll have to make a serious effort to save," he said to my mother smoothing out the two fivers as they went back to his bicycle that leaned against the wall of the house. (56)

Patrick's father is uninterested in what the story can tell him about himself. It is no longer a figure in a continuing narrative but has instead deteriorated into dogma. He responds to the loss of control he felt at the moment he became aware of the finality of his father's absence, represented in the story by his mother's becoming "violently sick" (55) and vomiting into the shopping bag, by using the story to justify extreme control over his wife and children. On the occasion recollected by Patrick, he uses it to extract the "two fivers" from his wife, with which she had hoped to buy shoes for their children.

Patrick's father has not successfully encompassed this memory in his consciousness; rather, a nearly irrational fear of poverty seems to circumscribe his actions. This ironic result of an attempt to master the past is revisited by McGahern through another Moran, the patriarch in *Amongst Women*.

Where Patrick's father turns narrative into dogma, Moran's means of mastering history is usually silence or what the narrator metaphorically calls an "embargo on the past" (177). Very early in the novel, readers learn that Moran "resented any dredging up of the past. He demanded that the continuing present he felt his life to be should not be shadowed or challenged" (3). Although Moran does finally break the "embargo" and speaks to his daughters about his experiences during the War of Independence, for Robert Garratt, "[t]he fact that he waits almost an entire lifetime to confront and speak about his violent past suggests a form of belatedness and repressed traumatic neurosis" (133). Garratt believes that this psychological state governs Moran's "desire to live in the continuous present in Great Meadow where he exerts a supreme control of house and family" (133). Moran's tyrannical need for control may indeed be the result of violent but unexpressed memories; however, his effort to live in the "continuous present" in part causes the *loss* of control over the family member that perhaps matters the most to him, his eldest son Luke, who is finally and fully estranged from him.

Their conflict is not detailed in the narrative but rather its effects. This is unsurprising given McGahern's comfort with radically distilling his material. One of the reasons the tone of the novel is so assured is that the narrator seems to grant these two characters the positions they desire in the narrative. The story centers around Moran and Great Meadow while Luke is on the periphery. The novel includes inside views of

Moran, but in acknowledging that he “had never been able to go out from his shell of self” (12) the narrator also seems to accept that even he cannot always penetrate this shell. Luke’s position outside of Great Meadow limits readers’ access to him but we are given just enough to conclude that he has successfully encompassed the loss of his father while Moran’s consciousness remains encompassed by the loss of his son.

Outwardly, Moran is certain that he has successfully encompassed his history with his children: “Anything I ever did was done for what I thought was the best interests of those concerned. Sometimes what I did might have been misguided but it was always meant for the best” (126). His view that the ends justify the means mask what is in fact utter bewilderment. It is similar to Reagan’s inability to cope with the memory of his first wife as he learns of Elizabeth’s illness in *The Barracks*: “Her haggard appearance, her wanting to see the doctor, disturbed him with the memory of his first wife who had died in childbirth. Elizabeth could not die, he told himself; it was impossible that two could die; it would be ludicrous” (47). For Moran, the idea that a son could redefine cruelty or place a limit on it is impossible if it implicates his father. Because he refuses, even when given the opportunity, to put this prejudice into dialogue with Luke’s view of the history that has actually led to estrangement, it is never productive of understanding. Instead, he more likely “experiences the power of the prejudices that completely dominate him as a *vis a tergo*” (*Gadamer in Conversation* 44).¹² The contrast between father and son is made most clear by the images associated with their vision as well as by their ultimate postures toward the possibility of reconciliation.

An exchange with his daughter and son-in-law demonstrates how Moran’s need to control both the present and the past closes off perspective. Maggie and Mark have

¹² Richard E. Palmer translates *vis a tergo* as “power operating behind one’s back.”

returned to Great Meadow with their first child, but Moran “evince[s] little interest in his grandson” (147). Instead, he persistently asks Mark about Luke’s life in London. Mark begins to explain what he knows, but Moran interrupts, “I’m sure I don’t want to know about it, Mark. There are people who say we have had other existences than our present life. If that is so I must have committed some great crime in that other existence. That is all I can put Luke down to” (148). Moran’s hunger for information regarding Luke is so intense that it overwhelms interest in his grandson. However, once he has the information he no longer wants it; instead, he needs to demonstrate to Mark that a narrative in which a son becomes estranged from his father is impossible. He is unwilling to link the past with the present situation. While he makes an outward show of having Luke “summed up,” Moran will continue to be tormented by Luke’s absence from Great Meadow. In a metaphor that elegantly outlines Moran’s position vis-à-vis his history with Luke, the narrator describes him at Sheila’s wedding (the one occasion in the book where he and Luke share the same space) as standing in “a cloud of moral injury” (155). The loss of Luke envelops him and fogs his vision; by contrast, when Maggie and Mark meet Luke in a bar to try to persuade him to go home to Great Meadow, the narrator notes that “his eyes were clear” (143). More importantly, Luke, while he is “taut, watchful and hidden,” (143) and thus may resemble his father in ways that readers might see but that he does not, maintains some openness to going forward with his father. He tells Maggie that if Moran had come to London for her wedding, he would have met him and the two “could have taken it from there” (143). It is a tiny opening but an opening nonetheless and it suggests that Luke can be trusted when he says, “I hold no grudge. That would be stupid. But I have a good memory” (143). Although the

narrative does not provide enough inside views of Luke to understand exactly how a “good memory” successfully encompasses the “death-in-life” of a parent, the experiences of Patrick Moran in *The Leavetaking* do so in greater detail.

Lightfoot, a friend of the Patrick’s, alludes to a key issue in the narrative when he argues that history “stays still. It at least is settled” (163). In a larger context, Patrick admits his difficulties with this “settled” view of history in his penultimate interview with his headmaster, in which he says, “when we teach history Britain is always the big black beast, Ireland the poor daughter struggling while being raped, when most of us know it’s a lot more complicated than that” (162). Eamon Grennan, mindful of the images used here and their perversion of an important motif of the novel, notes that to this view of history, “the narrative opposes the more complicated fluency and continuity of the individual sexual life, underlined by the repeated mantra, ‘the first constant was water’” (32). Even this refrain, however, contains within it one of the key tensions the novel explores—can water be ever be constant? The comments of Lightfoot, who is a sympathetic character, also allude to the tension within the novel between a desire for a fixed, settled history and the fact that this is probably impossible. This is worked out in the narrator’s insistence that his school fire him rather than resigning. He continually expresses his need to “see it through” so he can be sure that “it happened this way and no other” (158). His desire for certainty, fixity, or “settledness,” does not produce much, however, if his immediate reaction to his firing is any guide. He reflects, “In the rain of the street I finger the letter I forced them to give me and wonder was it worth it, and the answer that comes is probably not” (168). But there is some compensation in what Grennan calls the “continuity” of the committed sexual life. Patrick’s refrain of “We are

not departing. We are continuing” (170) suggest that the novel ultimately sees history as fluid because the individual, even in breaking with the Church, the Irish education system, and Ireland itself, is in constant motion and his history, carried within the mind, is constantly changing as he assimilates new experiences and attempts to bring that history into a shape by which it is connected to those new experiences. While the losses of job and country alluded to above are significant, over the course of the novel Patrick’s experiences of the key image associated with the loss of his mother, the breaking apart of iron beds, trace how he has come to successfully encompass this intolerable memory.

Patrick is troubled by the fact that, in his mind, he forsook his mother during her final hour. This, along with the fact that he is prevented from entering the deathroom and attending the funeral because of his age, clearly informs his tenacity, later in life, to “see it through.” He is not entirely responsible for his absence from his mother’s bedside, however, for his father cruelly orders the children and their belongings moved out of the house on what turns out to be their mother’s final day alive: “The deathroom alone was to be left alone and necessary pails and cutlery and pots. The children and maid with the beds and rest of the furniture were to move to the barracks. Owing to pressure of duty he couldn’t come but he was sending men and a lorry. She would die alone with the nurses” (69). It is this situation that leads to the iron beds being hammered apart while Patrick waits on the lorry outside. It is a violent, disturbing sound and image on which settle many things: the cruelty of his father, the farcical “bells” tolling his mother’s death, and the multiple meanings inherent in the image of broken beds.

Patrick’s effort to understand these meanings is notably different from his father’s approach to the defining image of the shopping bag. While Patrick senses the

significance of the “breaking of the beds,” he declines to attach a fixed meaning to it. Instead, he tries to integrate it into an open-ended narrative. As Terence Killeen points out, *The Leavetaking* is “future-orientated: everything in it is intended to lead up to the start of a new life, which begins, paradoxically, on the last page” (71). But Killeen also argues that for such a future to be plausible, “everything that has constrained the spirit, the entire burden of the past, has to be removed” (71). The latter term may go too far; Patrick’s negotiation of the image of the broken beds suggests that the burden of the past is not removed but dealt with in time through narrativity.

The image occurs to him as he returns to Ireland to face a certain firing from his position as a schoolteacher.

My mind was as full of shapes as the racing wheels of the train beneath my feet and they all kept returning to the one shape. I had met my love in London. A whole spring and summer of happiness. Eventually the beating apart of those rusted sections of the iron beds would claim its certain place. I did not find it depressing. The very contrary. The acceptance of that end gave the strength to make that summer last a whole life long whether it ran to three days or forty years. (143)

The passage offers a glimpse of a narrator seeking a shape for the images in his mind. He does not distinguish the “one shape” that all the others return to, unless it is that of the wheel itself.¹³ The shape may be only a vague outline because he has not yet established the links between recent events and the indelible image of the broken beds. He has intimations of one possible reading of the image which suggests that the loss of his mother makes possible the investment in his relationship with Isobel. But this interpretation may be as fleeting as the perspective from the windows of the moving train. The only thing truly “settled” about the image is its continuing presence in his

¹³ Images of wheels recur again and again in McGahern’s fiction. See Eamon Maher, “Circles and Circularity in the Writings of John McGahern,” *Nordic Irish Studies* 3.2 (2004): 157-66.

mind. A new narrative that includes Isobel will have to grant the broken beds their “certain place.” His acceptance of this demonstrates that the sense of possibility he feels with Isobel is not due to a removal of the past but to an encompassing of it. The image of the broken beds may be defining and enduring for him, but its meaning will be altered by its re-narration from some future position on what McGahern would likely call “the wheel.”

When the image returns to him a second time, Patrick’s reflections illustrate that there will be no final and objective meaning attached to the image but only a continually changing urge toward narrativity. Whereas aboard the train he wove the image into a narrative of future happiness with Isobel, here it is linked to memories which culminate in the disappointment and futility he feels upon losing his teaching position.

I hear the beating apart of the iron beds with the priest by her head on the pillow. In the laurels I follow her coffin on the last journey and think of her dreams for me. Dressed in scarlet and white I pour wine and water into the chalice in the priest’s hands on the altar. In scarlet and white I attend at the mysteries of Holy Week to the triumphant clamor of Easter bells. I see the priest addressing us again as we prepared to leave the Training College, trained to teach the young, the Second Priesthood, and this evening it all seems strewn about my life as waste, and it too had belonged once in rude confidence to a day. (168)

Whereas the sundered beds, with their suggestions of irretrievable loss, ironically informed possibility in the first narrative, here the aural component is emphasized in order to connote a burdensome responsibility, not unlike the bell Patrick and his headmaster use to demand the submission of their pupils. It recalls Patrick to his dedication to his mother’s goals for him, made permanent by her death at an age where both he and she still shared them. While his duty to her desires finally ends on the day of his irreversible firing from the “Second Priesthood,” the experiences that led to its end are not removed but rather go forward to be revisited and re-narrated in the future. What

links the perspectives of optimism (“I did not find it depressing”) and pessimism (“it all seems strewn about my life as waste”) is their inherent transience and, more importantly, narrativity. Regardless of the overall mood such a narrative takes on, “[t]o ‘repeat’ our story, to retell our history, is to re-collect our horizon of possibilities in a resolute and responsible manner” (Ricoeur, “Creativity” 222). McGahern seems to be using Patrick’s reflections to elaborate on Elizabeth Reegan’s more general comments that “nothing in life is ever resolved once and for all but changes with the changing life” (204) as well as perhaps forecasting some of the problems he will explore in *The Pornographer*. The later novel ends with the protagonist’s memory bringing him the same image that opened the narrative (his uncle on the train platform) and is a kind of admonition that his perspective in the preceding tale was flawed. If by the end of the novel he comes to believe that he has not “attended properly,” his compromised perspective is perhaps best represented by his inability to refrain from turning his houseboat tour of the Shannon with Josephine into saleable pornography for Maloney. His resolve to somehow mitigate “greedy watching” (250) appears to bring with it the burden of re-narrating the events of his life that have brought him to this point.

For Patrick Moran, the transience of perspective is even further emphasized as his reflections quickly shift again from failure to possibility. As laconic as he is in the following passage, Patrick seems to understand the necessity of revision as he considers the remainder of the evening and the following day.

My love waits for me in a room at Howth. The table will have bread and meat and cheap wine and flowers. Tomorrow we will go on the boat to London. It will be neither a return nor a departure but a continuing. We will be true to one another and to our separate selves, and each day we will renew it again and again and again. (168)

He eschews the regressive implications of “return” and the finality of “departure” for “continuing”. More importantly, he emphasizes the need to renew, which is given a greater urgency here because *The Leavetaking* accumulates serious questions about the seeming unreality of narratives not informed by individual memory or the blood bond of parent and child. As a result, the greater part of the lovers’ “separate selves” will probably remain unknown to each other. As forecast by his Preface, McGahern uses the second half of the book to illustrate this as Patrick struggles with the narratives of the woman he loves. Isobel’s life seems “out of history, a chimera” (115) and her father’s tales are “a bad echo of his daughter’s unreal stories” (131). While he has absorbed the memories of his parents even to the point of occupying the first-person role in his father’s story of the shopping bag, Isobel’s memories seem completely disconnected from “the woman who was walking with me between these actual trees in this London park on this May day” (115).

Marianne Koenig Mays argues that in *The Leavetaking* “the mother’s spirit is finally laid to rest in the last pages...because her values are to be transmuted and re-embodied in Isobel” (48). The narrative certainly emphasizes the relevance of Isobel’s father and Patrick’s mother to their respective searches for a romantic partner, but the suggestion that Isobel is simply replacing Patrick’s mother seems too narrow. It is the relationship and not Isobel herself in which the mother’s values are transmuted. This is made clear by Patrick’s ironic recognition that because Isobel’s own memory and history seem locked away from him, his relationship with her demands very nearly the literal faith of which his mother was the most profound example.

The narrative ends with the couple drifting into sleep after making love, and Patrick says that he “would pray for the boat of our sleep to reach its morning” (171). The conditional exempts him from actually praying, but he has ironically realized that a relationship with a human Other requires something bordering on prayer. His turn toward a resolutely human love is just as empty of empirical evidence as the ironclad faith and salvation of the life in the priesthood he has turned away from. This is ironic but entirely appropriate. Where the protagonist of “The Wine Breath” may gain insight into “the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 351), Patrick’s urge to pray arises from his recognition that the barrier that separates the human from the human can appear equally as absolute.

Such a realization makes the novel’s final scene, in which the bed is restored to a site of union and possibility rather than fragmentation and loss, even more dramatic and illustrative of Patrick’s success in encompassing the intolerable loss of his mother. His memories of such a loss are granted their “certain place” but in a way that leads to an extreme, almost religious, trust even in the face of the inscrutability of the human Other. Building on imagery and language from Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” a poem in which the speaker expresses a similarly fragile hope that romantic love can provide some compensation for a loss of faith, Patrick says that he and Isobel are “leaving harbour to trust to the open sea” (170). He also recognizes that “no boat needs so much trust to put to sea as it does for one body to go human and naked and vulnerable into the arms of another” (170). Within the spheres of commitment and erotic love, he displays both a readiness for experience and a relinquishing of control. Unlike his father, who turns his past into a selfish and dogmatic view of poverty, or the pornographer, who spends much

of his narrative enforcing a rigid interpretation of his romantic history (i.e., that loss has made him irrevocably “dead of heart”), Patrick seems to understand that his dialogue with the past will continue and that its images must engender future reinterpretation and re-narration.

Most importantly, what Denis Sampson calls the novel’s exploration of the “egocentricity of remembering to the point of solipsism” (“The Lost Image” 65) is challenged by Patrick’s turn outward toward community, even if it is only a community of two. He and Isobel may be able to create a tiny version of collective memory which may offer something more than the relative obscurity of their individual memories to each other. Romantic relationships can, however, take on an all-or-nothing quality, which is emphasized in the experiences of the pornographer as well as in the story “Doorways,” where the protagonist is surprised to find himself closed off from the possibility of such a relationship with a woman he feels he has much in common with. As they part, he notes that “[s]he would be almost back in her own world before her train left, as I was almost back in mine. How empty the doorways were, empty coffins stood on end” (*Collected Stories* 177). It is perhaps this view that spurs McGahern to begin, in the latter half of his career, to explore collective memory outside the binaries of such relationships.

Collective Memory and the Intolerable in “A Slip-up” and “High Ground”

In “A Slip-up,” McGahern delivers a micro-reading of what the massive “second-wave” (following the famine-induced nineteenth century “first wave”) of modern Irish emigration might have done to the psyches of the participants. He seems interested in letting Michael and Agnes, the two central characters, stand in for those forced to leave

their home place. While the story's tone is gently satirical, the narrator is also sympathetic to their situation. McGahern clearly wishes to counter certain perceptions of Irish emigrants, at least according to his own recollections of how some in Ireland viewed the reality of mid-twentieth century emigration to England and the U.S. In an interview with Eamon Maher, he describes the social hierarchy in the early decades of the Irish Free State as follows:

And it was a very unattractive minority, I think, that did well out of the State, in that they were shopkeepers, the medical profession, the Church. People were looked down on that had to go to England to earn a living as if they had committed sin in some way, as if it was any virtue to have the luck to remain on in Ireland. ("Catholicism and National Identity" 78)

Michael and Agnes fit the profile of those marginalized in the Free State and subsequent Republic of Ireland, having given up their rural property many years ago and come to London to find work. Michael has retired from his job as caretaker of the Sir John Cass School and the two of them live a very steady and quiet routine centering around trips to a Tesco's grocery store and nightly visits to the Royal, their local pub. As the narrator points out, their departure for the Royal at "exactly twenty to nine" is repeated "on every evening of their lives" (*Collected Stories* 132). On this particular night, Michael nearly refuses to participate in the ritual because of an embarrassing incident earlier in the day. Now that he is retired, he is thoroughly preoccupied with an imaginary life on his old property and his indulgence of this fantasy has led to a moment of public embarrassment.

Their daily trip to Tesco's begins as usual. For Michael, the walks bring him "the feeling of long ago when he walked round the lake with his mother" (128). The image of the shopping bag figures again here as the link between Michael's past and present. He once carried it for his mother and now, due to his dislike of the "brands and bright lights" within Tesco's, "on dry days he stayed outside with the empty shopping bag if it wasn't

too cold” (129). The shopping bag contributes to the picture of Michael as a sort of childish man whose days are carefully managed by his wife, who has seamlessly absorbed this role from his mother.

Michael’s indulgence of memory, however, goes far beyond a pleasant recalling of these childhood days in Ireland. In fact, the narrator notes that during these daily walks with Agnes, the “farm that they lost when they came to London he’d won back almost completely since he retired” (129). The form of the story in part reflects Michael’s consciousness, for he seems uninterested in reflecting on what has happened in his decades of living in London. Instead, he is shocked by “how much the farm had run down in the years he’d been a school caretaker” (129). It is as if imagining nature’s reclamation of the farm is his only way of interpreting or giving shape to his past.

Exactly what he accomplishes in this fantasy world is minutely observed and detailed, to the point that readers may struggle to separate the imagined from the actual: “But after the wall was built he cleared the weeds and bushes that had overgrown the front garden, cut away the egg bushes from the choked whitethorns, pruned the whitethorns so that they thickened. Now between wall and whitethorn hedge the front garden ran, and he’d gone out from there, task by single task” (129). On the day of the narrative proper, he has decided to “clear the drinking pool which was dry after the long spell of good weather” (130). The “slip-up” occurs when Agnes forgets to collect him outside of Tesco’s. After he has seen to the drinking pool in his mind, during which he is “unaware of the shopping bag,” he finally feels it “again by his side” and wonders “what was keeping Agnes. He’d never finished such a long job before outside Tesco’s” (130).

He decides to carry on “working” by turning the field garden but begins to tire and asks, “why had she not called him? Had she no care? Was she so utterly selfish?” (130).

When Agnes finally returns to collect him, she arrives by car with Denis, the operator of the Royal. Michael has completely lost track of the time and Denis seems to be enjoying the spectacle when he says, “Five after three, Michael... You’ve missed your bottle of Bass, but hop in and I’ll run you home” (131). Later, when Michael reflects on this, he “flush[es] like a child with shame” and thinks “that’s how it goes, you go on as usual every day, and then something happens, and you make a mistake, and you’re caught” (131).

He is so concerned about the gossip his mistake will generate that he only returns to the Royal that evening at Agnes’ insistence. To some extent he is right, as the “regulars looked unusually happy and bright as they greeted the old couple in the Royal” (132). As his memories are dominated by his home place, so even is his outlook informed by the rural community he was once a part of, where news and gossip were consumed ravenously. The community in the Royal returns him to Ireland again as he gloomily recalls that “All the people were elated too on the small farms around the lakes for weeks after Fraser Woods had tried to hang himself from a branch of an apple tree in his garden” (132).

Yet a community bound in part by a particularly Irish form of *schadenfreude* is not entirely negative, as McGahern will demonstrate in great detail in his last novel, *By the Lake*. Denis Sampson finds in the stories of *Getting Through* the beginnings of the exploration of community McGahern will undertake in later fiction, going as far as stating that the author “approves of the moral code manifested in the pub in ‘A Slip-up’”

(*Outstaring* 171). This moral code suggests that collective memory, even with its privileging of embarrassing mistakes and incidents one might rather forget, provides a useful check on self-image. McGahern alludes to this in a favorite anecdote included in his non-fiction piece entitled “County Leitrim: The Sky above Us,”¹⁴ in which “[a] man visits the Garda station, complaining about the trespassing of cattle of a close neighbor” (*Love of the World* 24). Advised to have a word with the neighbor himself, the man claims that the two have not spoken in years, even though the reason for the impasse happened “such a long time ago that I can no longer remember” (25). After laconically and almost maliciously comparing the situation to that between Republicans and Unionists in Northern Ireland, McGahern writes, “Their neighbours would not have forgotten” (25).

Although the contingent in the Royal appears to enjoy a laugh at Michael’s expense, and probably will for years to come, McGahern is careful to add a sympathetic note to the story. Even as his indulgence of memory seems to entirely occlude space and time (he stands outside Tesco’s for nearly three hours), Michael’s returning to his community at the Royal in spite of his embarrassment must be seen as a positive. Even though it is at Agnes’ urging, and even though she soothes him in a motherly way, Michael’s effort to absorb the humiliation he feels, and to make it less dramatic by admitting to Agnes that it was just a “slip-up” (132) returns him to some grounding in the actual day. Agnes also steers him away from his feelings that it “wouldn’t have happened if we’d kept the farm. At least on the farm we’d be away from people” (131). Solipsism, like that which envelops similar men such as Patrick Moran’s father in *The Leavetaking* or Moran in *Amongst Women*, is thus narrowly averted, even though Michael

¹⁴ The piece was published in various forms and under various titles over the years 1989-94.

cannot be said to have discovered a sense of the *meaning* of his loss of the farm. He cannot interpret it in a way that allows it to both “have its certain place” as well as fit contiguously into his present reality; instead, nourished by intense regret, it overtakes that reality as the native plants seem to have overtaken the farm in his imagination.

While the story depicts the danger of regret, the greater criticism here is probably of urban life itself, which is consistent with the circular movement of McGahern’s career in which the appealing anonymity of the city is explored during the writing of the late 1960s and 1970s and ultimately critiqued by *The Pornographer* and subsequent fiction. “A Slip-up” implies that the natural rhythms that seem so important to characters like Elizabeth Reegan are so muted in an urban setting it is almost as if they do not exist. The human-created rhythms of the Royal are some compensation, however. While Michael does not come any closer to a productive way of encompassing the loss of rural Ireland that so torments his consciousness, his decision to absorb the hidden jibes of the Royal regulars prevents him from amplifying his “slip-up” into something worse and points toward the capability of the community to encompass the intolerable. It is exactly this endurance of criticism that may earn him the right to do what Patrick Ryan, a central character in *By the Lake*, does when confronted with a reminder of his own unflattering behavior. Ryan simply says, “I disremember that” (79).

“High Ground,” which appears in McGahern’s 1985 collection of the same name, offers a first-person narrator who seems to empathize more explicitly with the “victim” of memory than does the narrator of “A Slip-up.” It is perhaps representative of McGahern’s late fiction, which displays deeper concerns about what a society will deem worthy of preserving even as it acknowledges the inevitability of change. If “A Slip-up”

is sympathetic to the displaced rural Irish in London, “High Ground” shows a concern for those who stayed but seem endangered by the aggressive plans of Ireland’s new elites. McGahern explores this through his narrator’s ambivalence about replacing “The Master,” whose job he is offered through the maneuvering of an ambitious local politician, Senator Reagan. The narrator once admired the Master but observes that he has deteriorated into an alcoholic who spends virtually every evening in Ryan’s bar immersed in brandy and nostalgia with former students. Reagan thus justifiably wants to replace him, but McGahern’s positioning of the narrator between the Senator and the Master raises the question of who will speak for the latter, even if “progress” will inevitably shunt him aside.

Senator Reagan is portrayed as an outsider, perhaps the kind of ambitious, protean man most capable of stepping into the gap left by the dismantled British colonial authority. His version of a native Irish “mini-Ascendancy” is summed up as follows:

He had come poor to the place, buying Lynch’s small farm cheap, and soon afterwards the farmhouse burned down. At once, a bigger house was built with the insurance money, closer to the road, though that in its turn was due to burn down too, to be replaced by the present mansion, the avenue of Lawson cypresses now seven years old. Soon he was buying up other small farms, but no one had ever seen him work with shovel or spade. (*Collected Stories* 307)

The implication of arson illustrates the Senator’s view of history, especially human-built structures, as something to be eliminated. His desire for control is exercised not only in his succession of houses but also upon the natural elements of the landscape around him. The cypresses are arranged into an “avenue,” he has “bulldozed the hazel and briar from the hills above the lake,” and his Friesian cattle graze “between electric fences” (308). In the narrative proper, Reagan’s desire to obliterate history and control the future now extends from dwellings and livestock to the symbolic elimination of a person, Master

Leddy, from his position as principal of the local school. He tells the narrator, “It’s bloody necessary. I’ll be plain. I have three sons. They go to that school. They have nothing to fall back on but whatever education they get. And with the education that they’re getting at that school up there, all they’ll ever be fit for is to dig ditches” (309).

That no one has “ever seen him work with shovel or spade” exposes the Senator as a kind of hypocrite in his posture as a prominent local farmer and is picked up in his own use of “digging ditches” as a metonymy for a wasted life. He is certain that removing the Master is the most important factor in his sons avoiding such a fate. His narrowness and hubris are exposed through the counterexample of the Master’s adult sons. Indeed, one of the sources of the narrator’s sympathy for the Master, though he too is exposed as a hypocrite, is his acceptance of and even insight into the futility of the kind of control attempted by the Senator. Rather than rigid avenues and electric fences, the Master’s home is described as follows: “the whole effect was of a garden and orchard gone completely wild, but happy” (311). Despite his prominent role in education, the Master’s own children have little aptitude for school and none of the ambition represented by aggressive elites such as the Senator. They appear content to work the fields on their father’s farm. He confides to the narrator, “None of my own family were clever...It was a great disappointment. And yet they may well be happier for it. Life is an extraordinary thing. A very great mystery. Wonderful...shocking...thing” (312). This admirable acceptance of life’s unpredictability seems to be a source of the narrator’s affinity for the Master.

When readers first encounter him, the narrator is floating lazily on the river, content to “let the boat drift” (306). While this kind of passivity could become toxic and

solipsistic, as I have shown in the discussion of *The Pornographer* in Chapter 2, the narrator here avoids this through the realization of some commitment to community. As Nicola Bradbury writes, “he lives amidst drifting and making do, amidst continuities and reciprocity” (94). On this day, he has gone to the river for solitude and reflection on the recent past. He has spent the previous evening with his lover, and he wants “to go over the night, to try to see clearly, which only meant turning again and again on the wheel of dreaming” (307). He seems to recognize that a clear perspective, which only results from continual revision (“turning again and again”), is more valuable than the imposition of fixity on either the past or the future.

The narrator’s affinity for the Master, however, does not prevent him from “seeing clearly” what he has become. He notes this to himself during his visit three nights previous to the narrative proper: “he had failed since last I’d seen him, the face red and puffy, the white hair thinned, and there was a bruise on the cheekbone where he must have fallen” (311). More importantly, the Master once formed a clearly defined image of his own future time. As he walks with him into town, the narrator reflects

I walked, stooping by his side, restraining myself within the slow walk, embarrassed, ashamed, confused. I had once looked to him in pure infatuation, would rush to his defence against every careless whisper. He had shone like a clear star. I was in love with what I hardly dared to hope I might become. It seemed horrible now that I might come to this. (312)

The narrator is clearly aware of the power the Master once held, and still appears to hold over the nostalgic men who ply him with drinks in Ryan’s on a nightly basis. McGahern uses the device of an overheard conversation in order to allow the narrator to remain outside the thick fog of alcohol-fueled nostalgia. The strategy also heightens the ironic characterization of the Master and clarifies the narrator’s sense of his own role in the community.

He walks into the village late one evening to fetch spring water and notes that the “whole village seemed dead under a benign moon” (314). He then hears voices and traces them to “Ryan’s bar. It was shut, the blinds down, but then I noticed cracks of yellow light along the edges of the big blue blind. They were drinking after hours” (314). A few days earlier, when the narrator’s conversation with the Master concluded outside Ryan’s, the older man had said, “Though I set a poor enough example, I want to bring no one with me. I say to all my pupils: *Beware* of the high stool” (312). The narrator exasperatedly asks the silence outside the bar, “How can he know what he knows and still do what he does?” (312). The Master knows he is a hypocrite but is still unable to act any differently. Where his earlier conversation with the narrator had shown an admirable, if clumsily articulated, acceptance of what might be learned from his own past, here the Master, fueled by alcohol and an environment that seals out the public world of the Senator, can interpret the past wildly and fancifully. There is none of the grounded acceptance the narrator observes in his remarks concerning his sons. He overhears the Master praising a former student and notes that his voice is “full of authority. He seemed to have no sense at all that he was in danger” (314). Comfortably enveloped in nostalgia, the Master and his students cannot see beyond the closed shades of Ryan’s. The Master’s restored authority, spurious though it is, allows him to come to a definitive interpretation of why his students were so talented and bright, which is exposed as ridiculous through the ironic connection between “high ground” and “high stool.”

Urged on by nostalgic former students, he notes that teaching them “was no trouble. Ye had the brains. There are people in this part of the country digging ditches

who could have been engineers or doctors or judges or philosophers had they been given the opportunity. But the opportunity was lacking” (314). In a sense, the Master’s audience here are the men who “dig ditches” or perform the necessary, if unglamorous, manual labor so disparaged by the Senator when he used the same phrase earlier. He then draws a confident conclusion that directly contradicts what he has learned about his own sons. Because “the people with the brains mostly stayed here...the brains was [sic] passed on to the next generation” (315). He continues, becoming ever more fanciful as he explains why his students were so perspicacious: “Then there’s the trees. There’s the water. And we’re very high up here. We’re practically at the source of the Shannon. If I had to pick on one thing more than another, I’d put it down to that. I’d attribute it to the high ground” (315).

The above passage closes the story and is allowed to stand without comment from the narrator. It needs none in the sense that the Master’s blindness to the Senator’s plans contradicts the vision one might normally associate with the phrase “high ground.” In this closed environment, the “high stool” ironically affords the Master a lofty position from which to pronounce his absurd interpretations of the past. The narrator’s position “outside” allows him (and readers) to hear these absurdities as absurdities; however, he also seems to recognize some kernel of value in the Master’s nightly ritual, if only such a pronounced nostalgia could be peeled away.

The narrator acknowledges that the Master has been principal of the school for “as long as I can remember” (309). Such a comment is a quiet indication of the narrator’s inchoate awareness of limits at the outset of the story. The Master and his cohorts in Ryan’s, as misguided as they might be, come to represent a kind of collective memory

that can traverse these limits, in the same way that “Lynch” can maintain a presence in the community through the narrator’s affixing of that name to the Senator’s property. The narrator thus seems aware of both the limitations of the kind of control over history attempted by the Senator but also of the importance of the human observer or agent in what a culture preserves. When he overhears one of the Master’s former pupils mention the “sixth class in 1933” (314) he reacts viscerally: “I shivered as I listened under the church wall. Nineteen thirty-three was the year before I was born” (312). The narrator seems to recognize that the men here, as nostalgic as they are, are also vessels of a time beyond his reach. This gives them and the Master a certain power, but they seem to need the narrator to speak for them as aggressive newcomers such as the Senator wish to marginalize or eliminate them. The Senator’s ambition undervalues the lives of such men while the Master’s nostalgia overvalues them. The narrator, caught in between these two views, appears to recognize that the Master acts as a fulcrum for the narratives of these men. If he is deposed, perhaps their memories will go unnarrated. The protagonist may understand that even in his small corner of rural Ireland, the “existential and historical implications of narrativity are very far-reaching, for they determine what is to be ‘preserved’ and rendered ‘permanent’ in a culture’s sense of its past, of its own ‘identity’” (Ricoeur, “Creativity” 218)

McGahern declines to include the narrator’s final decision regarding the Senator’s offer, but a moment in the middle of the story indicates a decision that may be even more important for him. Whether the Senator’s plot, or simply time, illness, or alcoholism remove the Master from his position, the narrator recognizes the need for some public voice on his behalf. If the discussion in Ryan’s is not fit for public hearing, perhaps he

can translate it into something that is. He takes the first step towards doing so when, under heavy pressure from the Senator, he chooses to *speak for* the Master. Offered a “guarantee...this very evening that you’ll be the Principal of that school when it opens in September” the narrator notes that for “the first time it was all coming clear to me” (310). Significantly, however, for a McGahern character, he does not stop at recognition. He asks, “What’ll happen to the Master? What’ll he do?” (310).

The narrator here seems to be suggesting that it is not quite enough to “watch and bear witness,” as Elizabeth Reegan hoped to do, nor simply “attend properly,” as the pornographer had resolved. “High Ground” suggests that some kind of utterance of memory is necessary and thus implies its translation into what Ricoeur calls the “public time” of spoken or written language. McGahern’s fiction traces this struggle to translate and raises the questions that catalyze the next phase of my discussion. What is the public role of the translator, and moreover, how does he or she develop the kind of satiric/sympathetic vision necessary to avoid turning memory into the equivalent of pornography? How does inscription contribute to a community’s ability to encompass the intolerable?

Chapter 4: Readers, Writers, and Point-of-View

For most commentators on contemporary Irish literature, John McGahern's style and themes are easily categorized. His narratives are grouped with, for example, those of Edna O'Brien and Bernard MacLaverty, who "broadly conform to the structural requirements of classical realism" (Kearney 199) as opposed to authors such as Aidan Higgins or John Banville, who explicitly contend with the self-reflexive questions raised in the more radical modernist experiments of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Flann O'Brien. But McGahern's work also includes an undercurrent of questions regarding the acts of reading and writing, even if those questions are woven into narratives in which the dominant technique is that of traditional realism.

McGahern's fiction dramatizes not only the writer's struggle to create an alternative "world of the text" but also the reader's traversal of the boundaries between that world and the world of action. The fact that the alternative world, rendered in a realist mode, shares much with the world of action seems to make these struggles more vexing rather than less. A broader concept of *mimesis*, such as that developed by Paul Ricoeur, is thus needed in order to comprehend the challenges faced by both reader and writer under these conditions. In Ricoeur's hermeneutics, *mimesis* includes the entire "set of operations by means of which a work arises from the opaque depths of living, acting, and suffering, to be given by an author to readers who receive it and thereby change their own actions" ("Mimesis" 139-40). Ricoeur goes on to develop three corresponding terms for this circular process: *prefiguring*, through which life is always already informed by signs, symbols and cultural norms; *configuring*, whereby experience is shaped in the act of telling; and *transfiguring*, a term capacious enough to suggest not

only a changed reader but perhaps even a “real world” changed by the revised perspective of that reader. McGahern’s fictions dramatize the challenges that arise at key points on Ricoeur’s circle: characters struggle to recognize the ways in which their lives are prefigured, to develop or recover the imaginative techniques necessary to configure a text, and to become open to transfiguring their lives after reading.

Whether readers can or will change their actions after a detour through a text is a key question for McGahern. Does seeing the “real world” differently translate into acting differently, as Ricoeur suggests it might? McGahern’s fictions leave open such a possibility, but developing the necessary approach to reading can be difficult. Several characters, such as the protagonist of “The Beginning of an Idea” and Maloney, the pornographer’s publisher, struggle to fully admit the actions of configuring and transfiguring; for them, a text’s value lies in its reference to the life of the writer. Readers who do better emphasize the other side of the circle: though it may be tempting to remain in the enclosed, alternative world of the well-configured text, they accept that its most important outward reference is to the conditions of their own lives.

McGahern is equally interested in the challenges faced by writers struggling to configure a textual world with the only materials they can know: their experiential roles in the real world, which Ricoeur describes as the “mixture of doing and undergoing, of action and suffering which make up the very texture of life” (“Life” 432). McGahern’s focus on the latter terms in Ricoeur’s pairs causes difficulties for his protagonists who attempt to comprehend their experiences in writing. The passage from object to subject to writing subject is arduous indeed, especially for characters who encounter barriers based on gender or family dynamics. A unifying thread, however, for McGahern’s

fictional writers is the search for perspective on the events drawn from their lives. While no work spells out exactly how the intolerable is encompassed in writing, tracing this search for perspective sheds light on the approach to configuration that makes it possible.

Effective writing for McGahern's characters starts with an appropriate quantity of lived experience and applies to it the manual labor of revision. Revision helps the writer avoid voyeuristic looking or promiscuous reporting, both of which characterize a perspective that has become excessively satiric or recriminatory. While it offers no guarantee, revision is a means of bringing calmness to a configured text, a way of mitigating the agitation that accompanies a physical existence dominated by naturalistic urges and a spiritual existence characterized by the loss of God. Moreover, revision can help a text encompass the multiple and contradictory impulses associated with these planes of existence, as a person yields to or resists naturalistic urges or oscillates between yearning for God and a persistent agnosticism or atheism. Encompassing such multiplicity in a text is a difficult task, and McGahern's fictional writers struggle with the temptation to simply assign blame for their place in a naturalistic hierarchy or to segregate impulses which are better seen as components of an integrated network. Those who succeed strive for a perspective on lived experience that emphasizes integration over isolation and protection of others over self-protection.

This chapter will proceed chronologically but also somewhat circularly, for McGahern's *oeuvre* does not lay out a linear trajectory to such a perspective. *The Barracks* sketches "where to write from" through the actions of Elizabeth Reegan, but this perspective seems lost to McGahern's fictional writers in his most recursive work

from the 1970s.¹⁵ I will demonstrate that the effort to recover the writing and revising strategies suggested by Elizabeth Reegan emerges from their loss by the pornographer (as well as the fictional writers portrayed in the stories “The Beginning of an Idea” and “Peaches”) and culminates in the characters of Joe Rutledge and Johnny Murphy in McGahern’s last novel, *By the Lake*. Figuratively, this circular journey traces a perspective moving from an inchoate representation of the lover’s gaze through a predator’s gaze and finally returning to the former with greater maturity and generosity.

Process and Product in *The Barracks*

As I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, Elizabeth Reegan’s experiences in *The Barracks* include both self-reflexive laughter and intense encounters with memory. Both of these contribute to her sustaining subjectivity in a stifling environment which cannot seem to accommodate all that she is. One of her experiences with memory even entails an attempt to write a letter to an old friend in London. While she becomes frustrated with the process and discards the letter, her effort to compose forecasts several of the problems that will bedevil other characters who attempt to encompass the intolerable in writing. Elizabeth senses the importance of an imagined perspective that can somehow be at the “heart of everything” and simultaneously “laughing and crying and calm” (186-7). She recognizes that she must write about the truth of her condition, especially her illness and encounters with despair, even as she resists definition by these experiences and fears her correspondent will find them too bleak. She experiences both the imaginatively generative and truth-seeking power of revision. Lastly, she struggles to turn words into

¹⁵ This period follows the banning of *The Dark* in Ireland and McGahern’s firing from his teaching position for marrying a divorcee in a registry office. Despite such heavy-handed treatment by religious authorities, *The Pornographer* finds McGahern returning to Catholic paradigms to articulate the actions and role of the writer.

something like a prayer of praise. While the public implications of Elizabeth's attempt to write will be broached only in subsequent fiction, in these ways she outlines a perspective to which several characters, even those with once or future literary aspirations such as the pornographer, will struggle to return.

Elizabeth's urge to write emerges from memory in a passage that will be revisited in McGahern's later works such as "The Wine Breath." Like the priest in that story, Elizabeth finds "processions of dead days" returning "as compensation" (186) for her declining health. The "dead days" again organize themselves into a kind of narrative, but instead of linking losses (as in the passage I examined in Chapter 3), here Elizabeth remembers the "midges swarming out of the trees" in her childhood and the "Jewish names on the lintels" in London (186). While memories of loss remain vital to her self-understanding, the details Elizabeth recalls here suggest a kind of abundance even within a life some might consider mundane or blandly dictated by social convention. A similar experience a few weeks later, in which Elizabeth is "ecstatic with remembrance," (187) impels her to write. The remainder of the experiment, however, becomes a struggle between fidelity to an imagined perspective on remembered experiences and fidelity to the reality of her declining health and alienation from those around her.

She'd have to write about herself too: her relationship with Reegan at odd moments now, her heart gone weak, the cancer, the futility of her life and the life about her, her growing indifference. That was the truth she'd have to tell. *Things get worse and worse and more frightening.* But who'd want to come to a house where things got worse and no one was happy? And on the cold page it didn't seem true and she crossed it out and wrote, *Everything gets stranger and more strange.* But what could that mean to the person she was writing to—stranger and more strange, sheer inarticulacy with a faint touch of craziness. So she crossed it out too and wrote: *Things get better and better, more beautiful,* and she smiled at the page that was too disfigured with erasures [sic] to send to anyone now. Her words had reached praise of something at last, and it didn't appear more false or true than any of the other things she'd written and crossed out. She'd leave it so,

it was a ridiculous thing to want to write in the first place, how could she have ever imagined that she'd carry it through. She rose from the table and dropped the sheet of notepaper into the fire, watched the flames crumple it like a hand closing into a fist would, and the charred fragments float in the smoke. (187)

The injunction to honestly “write about herself,” which necessarily includes intolerable facts (her marriage to Reagan is largely unfulfilling and she is deathly ill), is important for Elizabeth because it is another assertion of subjectivity in inhospitable conditions. She cannot simply detail the landscape for her correspondent, even sources of affection such as the old “church that had celebrated its centenary in its grove of evergreens and tombstones” or “the river flowing out of the lake in the shelter of the hill” (187). She insists that the landscape is incomplete without Elizabeth Reagan, thus inserting an ephemeral, individual human life into an image of more enduring elements such as the church and even abiding natural phenomena such as the river. Furthermore, she cannot exclude intimations of futility from her writing; these feelings must be woven into the text because they are genuinely part of her vision, thus suggesting that the writing must retain some referential link to the writer’s life. It is here, however, that Elizabeth encounters the necessity of re-vision, for the idea that things get inexorably worse does not seem entirely “true” after its inscription on the “cold page.”

Her first revision appears to fail as well, as she feels the written perspective declines into “inarticulacy” and near “craziness.” While readers of *The Barracks* might sense that Elizabeth’s first two lines are probably closer to the “truth” of her experiences than her final assertion that things get “better and better,” in her mind the latter seems equally as valid as the two previous statements. Elizabeth is quick to dismiss her effort as ridiculous, but in fact her revision has yielded lines which might be called “paradoxical” rather than strange or nonsensical. In fact, as contradictory as they are, the

revisions do not negate each other but rather build toward a text that more genuinely comprehends Elizabeth's experiences. The three statements might even be rewritten one more time as follows.

Things get worse and worse and more frightening
Everything gets stranger and more strange
Things get better and better, more beautiful

Poetic and symmetrical in spite of the absence of referential detail, the lines do express the constant and overlapping sense of process that characterizes Elizabeth's experiences. All three statements might even be true over the course of one day or even one hour, but Elizabeth is unwilling to ask her correspondent to apply her reader's imagination to this challenging idea. In fact, such a paradox might even be more intolerable than the stable trajectory implied by each line if it were read individually.

In an exchange with Reegan about a month before she writes the letter, Elizabeth models the reader's perspective that she is sadly unable to expect from her old friend in London. As Christmas winds down, the atmosphere becomes tense as the feast day is slowly reduced to just another day in the lives of Reegan, Elizabeth, and the children.

Reegan finally admits, "I hate the day. A whole year of waitin' for it and then it goes like a wet week. Whatever people be waitin' for anyway?" (184). Elizabeth borrows the question not in order to answer it but to use as a refrain. In its repetitions, it brings "neither despair nor desperation" (185). Instead, "the words remained calm and complete as a landscape that she could gaze dispassionately on for ever" (186). Elizabeth seems to have transcended semantics and even the need for reference; the phrase is a kind of enclosure in which the words refer back to themselves but, ironically, also suggest the eternal.

While Elizabeth has detached Reegan's phrase from reference to the "real" world, her experience of language here cannot be characterized as "the unceasing celebration of its coming" (Barthes, "Introduction" 124). Language instead offers a respite from both the naturalistic tumult of the body and Elizabeth's bouts of despair. The words remain "calm" and quiet Elizabeth's passions rather than inflaming them. She views the "text" not intimately but from a distance, like a landscape, and she responds to it not with ardor but "dispassionately." Elizabeth uses the phrase like a prayer, but in doing so she revises what a prayer is and can do. God is perhaps present only in the sedimentation of the words "complete," implying wholeness, and "for ever," suggesting eternity. Elizabeth's emphasis is instead the language itself, which is compared to a vista she would gladly contemplate forever. The alternative world of the text, even one of just a few borrowed words, thus balances a powerful allure with an invitation to quiet contemplation. In this case, McGahern's narrative does not detail Elizabeth's return from the world of the text to the world of action, but such an experience of language may be exactly what she hopes to transmit to her correspondent by shaping the words of her letter into "praise of something at last" (187). Instead, the crushing demands of her domestic life return to overwhelm her resolve to comprehend her life in writing.

She notes that "all her life she had to work with her hands" (188), whether it be nursing patients in London, raising Reegan's children, cleaning, cooking, etc. She goes on to consider her "praying and her thinking and reading" as "pale little sideshows" (188). As I have shown, however, Elizabeth's ideas about language and writing border on the artistic/poetic. But she does not have the time, or is not given the time, to inscribe the capacious perspective characterized as "laughing *and* crying *and* calm" [emphasis

added] for an audience. She achieves it cognitively, but not finally in writing. The reading posture she has grown into and which allows her to engage with language in a spiritual way is also stifled here—it is difficult to imagine her expressing her experience of Reagan’s refrain to anyone in the barracks without being ridiculed. It is likely for these reasons that some critics, such as F.C. Molloy, conclude that *The Barracks* is finally pessimistic. For Molloy, Elizabeth “cannot break out of the confines of her existence” (11) and becomes “increasingly overwhelmed by the ordinary” (12). Though I believe Elizabeth’s experiences with laughter, memory, and language do provide her with private compensation for the restrictive existence she endures, her own dismissal of religious, intellectual, or philosophical pursuits as “sideshow” offers support for Molloy’s view and implies that she has made a disastrous mistake in returning to Ireland and especially to this particular corner of it.

But removing the writer from this environment for allegedly more fertile ground and sympathetic compatriots provides no guarantee of success where Elizabeth Reagan fails. McGahern’s narratives, especially *By the Lake*, ultimately arrive at a far more generous view of the inhabitants, communities, and environment of the northern Irish midlands, but this revised perspective depends upon the travails of the exiled writer as he or she detours through Dublin, London, and the Continent.

Writing, Sexuality, and Subjectivity in “The Beginning of an Idea” and “Peaches”

Writing, sexuality, and sexual violence intersect in these two stories in a way that is consistent with the subject matter of *The Pornographer* and thus establishes a link between these actions. Allegedly free of its associations with conjugal duty or the

legalistic prescriptions of the Irish Catholic Church, sexuality for these characters, however, becomes not liberating but enervating or even destructive. As I will show in the discussion of *The Pornographer* below, McGahern comes to suggest that the writer's gaze may deteriorate in a similar way through inordinate attention to the most lurid elements of what he or she observes. Such a perspective fails to imaginatively configure the intolerable and instead only transmits it for the shallow amusement of readers. The characters here, however, struggle even to arrive at such a problem; the protagonists must first try to change their position as objects of those who possess some power over them to that of subjects capable of the generative imagination necessary to effectively configure a text. Their relationships offer a remarkably dark version of the Yeatsian dilemma: "Perfection of the life, or of the work" ("The Choice" 246). For these characters, the "life" alternative offers no "heavenly mansion" (Yeats 246); instead, it offers merely a struggle to survive in a world peopled by predatory characters driven by sexual instinct and a raw desire for power. As the unnamed protagonist of "Peaches" laconically puts it, "Now in this house they were busy making miserable their passing lives, when it should be as easy to live together in some care or tenderness" (McGahern, *Collected Stories* 86).

Eva Lindberg, the central character of "The Beginning of an Idea," resigns her position as a theatre director in order to write. Her decision is also motivated by her exasperation with her married lover, an aspiring politician named Arvo Meri. Eva has been his mistress for two years and she finally ends the relationship, bound for Spain with the goal of writing "an imaginary life of Chekhov" (McGahern, *Collected Stories* 114). It is a lofty goal that she hopes to reach on the slender basis of two sentences she repeatedly writes in a notebook: "*The word Oysters was chalked on the wagon that carried*

Chekhov's body to Moscow for burial. The coffin was carried in the oyster wagon because of the fierce heat of early July" [Italics original] (112). Eva believes she has discovered an attractive symmetry between this biographical detail and Chekhov's short story entitled "Oysters." In her reading of the story, "Chekhov was that boy [the protagonist] outside the restaurant with his father in the autumn rain, was that starving boy crunching the oysters in the restaurant while they laughed, was the child in the bed woken by thirst at noon, watching the father pace up and down the small room waving his arms around" (114). Having established a neat circular frame, that the story will "begin with oysters and end with oysters" (114), Eva believes she can imagine (and write) the life in between.

The generative imagination of an artist, however, is more characteristic of a mature subject, and the story indicates early on that Eva is better described as a naïve object. The narrator explains that the two sentences above are written in a "large childish hand" (112). When readers first encounter her, Eva is re-reading the sentences as she "wait[s] for Arvo Meri to come to the small flat" (112). After some consideration of the plot of Chekhov's story, she returns her notebook to a drawer: "Then she showered and changed into a blue woollen dress and continued to wait for Arvo Meri to come" (114). These details begin to establish deeper reasons as to why Eva's writing project will not succeed. While Denis Sampson is correct that she "seems to be unaware of the symbolic resonance of the oysters" and that her "failure to write represents a failure to read [Chekhov's story] with care" (*Outstaring* 166), Eva's struggles are equally the result of her inability to "read" her own life.

Her own life story is “pre-figured” by an intense yearning for a committed sexual relationship, similar to that of Patrick Moran in *The Leavetaking* and not unlike the metaphysical yearning dramatized in “The Wine Breath” and “Gold Watch.” Eva fails to recognize that “[h]uman action is always figured in signs, interpreted in terms of cultural traditions and norms” (Ricoeur, “Creativity” 224). Eva mistakenly believes that her contemporary notions about sexual freedom can override entrenched cultural traditions and norms, even within herself. In fact, Eva’s progressive ideas about relationships and sexuality do not produce greater satisfaction and autonomy but rather greater exploitation by the contemptible men in her life. The passages above, in which Eva continually turns away from writing to idly wait for Arvo, lead to a bleak sexual encounter later in the evening: “She grew impatient with his tired fumbling and pulled him on top of her, provoking him with her own body till he came” (118). It is to Eva’s credit that she recognizes the need to leave Arvo; however, her resolution that “it was for her own life and not for his that she yearned” (122) is easier said than done. For this too entails an act of the imagination, and Eva’s actions to this point demonstrate that she has little capacity for imagining her own life, much less a life as historically distant as Chekhov’s. For example, she claims to want a future with Arvo, but when pressed as to a vision of that future, she can offer only that she could “take a larger flat” (115). She claims marriage is irrelevant, telling Arvo that she does not “care about a divorce” (115), but cannot suggest any other way of establishing the commitment she wants.

Even so, Eva’s first few weeks in Spain augur well as she lives a carefully ordered life in preparation for the day on which she must “face the solitary white page” (123). That day finally arrives. Eva rewrites her two sentences but cannot proceed: “She rose

and looked at her face in the small silver-framed mirror. Yes, there were lines, but faint still and natural. Her nails needed filing. She decided to change into a shirt and jeans and then to rearrange all her clothes and jewellery [sic]. A week, two weeks passed in this way. She got nothing written” (123). The passage brings Eva to a childish variation of the Yeatsian dilemma. Attending to her appearance overtakes her desire to write. Eva fears she has aged in the few moments needed to rewrite her sentences and she ironically checks the mirror for signs that, as Yeats puts it, “the toil has left its mark” (247). These actions ironically echo the scene in which she waits for Arvo and suggest that Eva views Chekhov not as a “life” which she must imagine and create but as a lover who will appear if she is attractive enough. Her life in Spain has already begun to re-enact the paradigms of her previous life.

In the weeks after her failure to write, Eva becomes acquainted with Manolo, a local *guardia*. After initially visiting to deliver a telegram, he becomes a useful distraction for Eva and begins to “come almost daily” (123). Readers recognize, though Eva does not, that she responds to Chekhov’s failure to appear by waiting on Manolo. Through their conversations, she becomes invested in him and generously wonders “why someone as intelligent as he had become a *guardia*” (124). Manolo, however, like the other men in the story, sees Eva as a sexual object and is simply maneuvering for an opportunity. He complains of alienation from his wife due to “two babies in less than two years” (124) and Eva offers to acquire contraceptives for him because she believes that such a rate of childbirth is “criminal in this age” (124). In fact, the contraceptives are a criminal matter, being illegal in Spain at the time, but Eva procures them from her old theatre’s editor anyway. It is only a matter of hours before Manolo returns with his

superior officer to give Eva a choice of sexual assault or prosecution for importing illegal materials. Confronted with this brutal reality, Eva's past life again seems idle and insulated: "How often had she heard this problem argued. Usually it was agreed it was better to yield than to get hurt" (125). In fact, too many things in Eva's life, from artistic aspirations to birth control, have been treated as "problems to be argued" in comfortable and safe surroundings. The reality of the "solitary white page" has already confronted her; now the reality of sexual assault does the same due to her failure to attend to her environment: she is a foreign woman alone in a culture she does not understand, a culture as brutal and naturalistic as that of the rural Ireland McGahern depicts in *The Barracks* and *The Dark*.

But there are positives for Eva in the midst of what is a devastatingly dark story. Although she cannot fully feel it, Eva finds a calmness by which she will endure the assault. She also finds the limits of a referential view of language as her two sentences about Chekhov help her survive the absolutely intolerable. Lastly, her suffering seems to entail a change in roles: she becomes the protagonist of Chekhov's story rather than his metaphorically jilted lover. If Eva fails to become a writing subject in the story, these factors at least suggest progress toward a greater subjectivity in general.

Eva follows the line of argument that it is "better to yield" to the threat of sexual violence but not without some negotiating: "'All right. As long as you promise to leave as soon as it's done.' Her voice stopped him. It had a calm she didn't feel" (125). In these desperate circumstances, Eva is trying on a perspective that she cannot fully inhabit, and this should actually be seen as a positive rather than a criticism. In fact, the terror of imminent violation is somewhat mitigated: the men now remind Eva of

“mastered boys” (125). Afterwards, they depart “subdued and quiet. It had not been as jolly as they must have imagined it would be” (125). There is no escaping the reality of the assaults, however, even if Eva’s negotiations “stop” the men in some ways.

Eva endures the unspeakable by turning to writing. During the assaults, she fixes her attention on the two sentences she has written, “her mind moving over them from beginning to end, and from beginning to end, again and again” (125). The sentences provide a calm and quiet alternative space for the mind while the body suffers a hideous violation. Moreover, the words are freed from reference to Chekhov; instead, the narrator suggests that they refer primarily back to themselves in a repetitive and circular fashion, not unlike Elizabeth Reegan’s prayerlike appropriation of her husband’s phrase “Whatever people be waitin’ for anyway?” (184). While language appears to help Eva survive, she must return from the world of the two-sentence “text” to the world of action. There is no escape from the emotional and physical wounds of the assault.

The story ends with Eva’s departure from her seaside retreat the morning after the rape. She simply moves on, unsure of where she will go next. Aboard the train to Granada, after a “woman in a black shawl on the wooden seat facing her” (126) offers her a morsel of sausage and some wine (she cannot take the latter because her hands are still unsteady), Eva dozes. As she awakens, the details of Chekhov’s story combine with her own two sentences but with an important difference: Eva is now the protagonist.

[W]hen she woke she thought the bitter taste of oysters was in her mouth and that an awful lot of people were pacing up and down and waving their arms around. She had a sudden desire to look out the window to see if the word *Oysters* was chalked on the wagon; but then she saw that the train had just stopped at a large station and that the woman in the black shawl was still there and smiling on her. (126)

While Eva is probably no closer to becoming a *writing* subject, taking the role of protagonist here, even if it is within a dream or a fictional story, suggests that she may finally abandon the role of credulous object who is always waiting for a man. Rather than trying to find Chekhov's life within "Oysters," she might try to find her own. According to Paul Ricoeur, Eva's appropriation of the protagonist's role in a fictional story can contribute significantly to identity and self-understanding.

[I]t is certainly true that life is lived and the story told. An unbridgeable distinction remains, but it is, in part, abolished through our capacity to appropriate in the application to ourselves the intrigues we received from our culture, and our capacity of thus experimenting with the various roles that the favourite *personae* assume in the stories we love best. And so we try to gain by means of our *imaginative variation* of our *ego* a narrative understanding of ourselves, the only kind of understanding that escapes the pseudo-alternative of pure change and absolute identity. ("Life" 437)

Though the "pseudo-alternative of pure change" still hovers nearby, implied by the fact that Eva simply awakens at a momentary stop on a journey with no clear destination, her detour through Chekhov's fictional story synthesizes what the story has to say about language and reference. First, Eva reads Chekhov's fiction as pure biography; during the assault, she reads her own sentences as language which refers only to itself; finally, she finds Chekhov's language referring to her own experiences and circumstances.

McGahern's story ends at the moment of transfiguring suggested by Ricoeur's circle of mimesis. It offers no certainty that Eva will change her actions, but her occupation of the protagonist's role at least suggests the possibility that she will do so. If she can realize her position as a "hungry child" yearning not for food but for intimacy, love, and commitment, indeed how these more spiritual yearnings are bound up with instinctual urges such as hunger and libido, she might escape the cycles of objectification which characterize her "real life."

In light of *The Barracks*, one of the ironies of “The Beginning of an Idea” is that Eva’s international career in the arts and life as a theatre professional have brought her no closer to becoming a writing subject or artist than has the narrow domestic life of Elizabeth Reegan. In fact, Elizabeth possesses an almost intuitive understanding of the materials and process necessary to produce communicative writing capable of encompassing the intolerable. This is perhaps the result of her more honest struggle with suffering and loss. Though Halliday gently mocks her for identifying *too* strongly with what she reads, Elizabeth immediately understands that part of the value of fictional narratives is their reference to her experiences rather than that of the authors: “But they’re real! They’re not stories even. They’re about my life” (87). Though she will proceed to a more nuanced understanding of such texts, Elizabeth seems to start from a point which advances her subjectivity beyond that of Eva Lindberg. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, she does not hesitate to place herself into Christ’s role within the Catholic narratives she continues to find meaningful, much to the consternation of the local priest, who prefers her safely confined as maternal accessory to the hero.

If Eva’s two sentences were no more than the “beginning of an idea,” the story’s final image suggests a merciful end to that idea but not without some suggestion of the beginning of a better idea: attending properly to one’s own life and surroundings. If Eva is ever to write with vitality or power, she must begin to see her life as Elizabeth Reegan does, from a perspective “at the heart of everything” not unlike that sometimes provided by a fictional protagonist. Even then, the raw materials of lived experience and memory must be patiently and diligently reworked in order to achieve the imaginary scope (“laughing and crying and calm”) that characterizes Elizabeth’s reverie. While Elizabeth

is far closer to McGahern's idea of a writing subject and even to the mindset of an artist, in the end neither she nor Eva Lindberg delivers a document to an audience. Other McGahern protagonists do, however, and subsequent works thus explore the public implications of these demands. What does drawing from lived experience do to the writer? How does one inscribe the generosity of spirit suggested by Elizabeth's perspective, especially if experiences of suffering and loss remain essential?

"Peaches," a story roughly contemporary with "The Beginning of an Idea," places a pair of expatriate writers in the same brutal and naturalistic Spain experienced by Eva Lindberg. In fact, the young wife resembles Eva, being of Scandinavian descent, having worked in theatre, and now toiling primarily on translations. Neither she nor her husband is ever named in the story, which reinforces their alienation from their surroundings and from their few acquaintances in Spain. That they remain unnamed also exposes their deterioration into objects in a dysfunctional marriage. While documenting the decay of the marriage into vindictiveness and recrimination is the primary theme of the story, the husband is a frustrated writer who briefly addresses concerns that will be more fully unpacked in *The Pornographer*.

He is a novelist who has not been able to write for over a year, if his wife's bitter taunts are accurate. The irony of a letter from his editor in London, who suggests that "in the sun of Spain [his new work] should ripen into something exciting" (*Collected Stories* 89) is not lost on him: "In the sun of Spain not a line had been written or was likely to be" (89). As he reflects on the letter and the enclosed reviews of his previous book, the character alludes to the implications of taking the deeply personal view of writing suggested by Elizabeth Reegan to a public audience: "To publish was to expose oneself,

naked, in an open market, and if the praise was acceptable he could hardly complain of the ridicule, since one always had the choice to stay in original obscurity” (89). This is both a risky and communicative view of writing and illustrates how deeply fiction is connected to the writer, even if his or her material is diligently revised and embellished by imagination. It implies the need for an absolute trust of readers, not unlike the kind of trust suggested by Patrick Moran at the end of *The Leavetaking* as he considers sexual intimacy. At the very least, the writer must have something like a loving relationship with readers, which involves not only a willingness to accept some criticism but even mandates tolerating readers (like Eva Lindberg) who cannot but view fiction as autobiography. If this writer/reader relationship requires a kind of generous reciprocity, the couple’s husband/wife relationship in “Peaches” provides a bitterly ironic counterpoint to it.

Neither character can grant the other any space, nor will they conform to what the other wishes them to be. The husband feels preyed upon and vigilantly protects himself. He is bewildered by his wife’s changing moods. However, when she suggests they get help, he resentfully declines: “If he had to go to an analyst he would return to the Catholic Church and go to confession, which would at least be cheaper” (88). Their alienation from each other is nearly total and is emphasized by their awkward sexual encounter midway through the story: “[T]heir small pleasures could hardly have happened more separately if they’d each been on opposite ends of the beach with the red house of the Canadian between” (87).

Their treatment of each other within the marriage appears to spread outward and include those around them, as the stench from a dead shark permeates the beachfront near

their house. They seem to draw predatory and destructive characters to themselves. In the story's climactic scene, the couple is coerced into visiting the local magistrate's peach grove, where he boasts of his access to water while the "Spanish scum" he loathes [due to lingering resentments from the Spanish civil war] "do not have water for their houses" (94-5). The magistrate then begins plucking peaches from the trees and "ramming [them] into the breast pockets" of the wife's dress (95). The husband manages to stop this act, probably avoiding further violence only because the couple are foreigners, but he is still more interested in protecting himself than his wife, for later he pleads, "If I hit him and wound up in a Spanish jail it'd do us all a lot of good" (99). His wife cruelly torments him, but she is also somewhat accurate when she points out "how awful it is to be married to a weak man" (99) and taunts him for failing to eject presumptuous acquaintances from their house: "They practically had to shit all over you before you did anything" (78). But if he accepts regular insults to his person or masculinity under the guise of pragmatism, she sees herself as an object bound to endure the kind of violation imposed by the magistrate. As the couple prepares to abandon their rented property in order to avoid further contact with him, she mutters: "Yes. It was no more than I deserved" (99).

This bleak cycle of objectification in part explains why both characters struggle to write. Their way of looking has become predatory as they circle each other and seek out weaknesses to exploit. The story implies that such a perspective must be repaired if either character is to not only write effectively but perhaps write at all. McGahern's subsequent fictional writers will experience the challenge of shifting from a perspective characterized by self-protection and recrimination to one of reciprocity and protection of

others. These alternatives will be explored through the characters of Moran in *Amongst Women* and Joe Rutledge in *By the Lake*, both of whom attempt to comprehend intolerable matters in writing. But before proceeding to those examples, it is necessary to look at *The Pornographer*, which further explores the connections between writing and sexuality.

Theory, Practice, and Audience in *The Pornographer*

In chapter 2 I concluded by noting that the pornographer suggests that the narrative he has just told is deeply flawed and his need for prayer in part expresses a sense of hope that he might improve that narrative with further revision and a more refined perspective. He seems to be trying to find a way back to some of the things Elizabeth Reegan grasps intuitively about memory, language and writing. The novel concludes without any certainty of whether or not the protagonist can achieve better writing outcomes (similar to the endings of “The Wine Breath” regarding encompassing the intolerable via memory and Eva’s effort to transfigure her life after a detour through Chekhov’s text in “The Beginning of an Idea”). It does, however, present two distinct writing failures through Josephine’s letters and the narrator’s pornography.

In an interview with Eamon Maher, McGahern discusses his artistic approach to sexuality in the novel: “Basically, it was a very old theory I was working on: You can trace the progress of the sun better by examining the dust or the shade than by looking directly up into the sky” (*From the Local* 149). The same strategy is at work in the novel’s depictions of writing. Josephine’s letters and the narrator’s pornographic stories are mere shadows of what writing can or should be. Josephine’s letters are characterized by indiscriminate selection of details, a clumsy imposition of her worldview that prevents

her from seeing into people and their motivations, and transparent rhetorical gestures designed to manipulate the narrator's emotions. The narrator's own writing, however, may be even more dramatically corrupted. When he configures his Shannon excursion with Josephine as pornography, his imagination is exposed as vindictive, as the most salient enhancement to the events of the trip is a lurid violation of an old bachelor bartender the two had encountered on the river.

If Josephine's writing is marred by reportage and rhetoric, the narrator again may do worse, for he produces writing that may actually corrupt his audience if they try to transfigure their lives along the lines of Colonel Grimshaw and Mavis Carmichael. The pornographer tries to block Elizabeth Reagan's genuine instinct that writing must strive for "praise of something at last," but the novel demonstrates his failure to do so. His instinct to write a certain way, to believe in language's power in a certain way, cannot be completely stifled even through his self-imposed paralysis. He finds that he must readmit a spiritual and even Catholic dimension more fully and consciously to writing and perhaps life. Only then can he retell his narrative from a perspective characterized more by generosity and forgiveness than by solipsism and recrimination.

While the narrator is given the capacity to rehabilitate his writer's perspective, Josephine is granted little or no potential to do so. Josephine's letters extend an idea articulated by Patrick Moran in *The Leavetaking*, that "the world of the beloved comes to us with the banality of news reports" (143), but with a twist—if this is how another person's stories appear when we genuinely love him or her, they are unbearably inane when written by a person whom the audience has decided he cannot love. The unnamed

narrator of *The Pornographer* transmits them in faithful paraphrase in order to show Josephine's posturing and naïve faith in the forces that move people.

Although Josephine appears to produce competent journalism for *Waterways*, the magazine she writes for, her approach fails when the material becomes more difficult and the audience more skeptical. Rather than strategically choosing details and images, she simply reports everything in an unpleasant mirroring of the incessant talk the narrator finds so suffocating: "Jonathan had met her at the airport. They had taken a taxi to his Kensington house" (147). The narrator, fairly or unfairly, seems to want her to translate her experiences into something that transcends the "banality of news reports" but she seems unable to do so, even in conversation. When she finally tells the narrator about the end of the relationship with Jonathan, he notes that he finds the incidents "hard to follow not knowing the people involved" (182). His commentary also alludes to Josephine's unwillingness or inability to see into the motivations of the "characters" in her story.

Josephine's lack of insight stems from her insistence that people are simply good or bad, even though these categories seem to be based on whether or not a person will submit to her plans. Her instinct for control extends to her portrayal of Jonathan, an aging acquaintance who has long been attracted to her and who promises to act as father to her unborn child. Despite his cruel treatment of his dying wife and desperate play for marriage to Josephine, she writes that she "did not know that such a genuinely selfless and good person existed in the world" (147).

Because she is still trying to persuade the pornographer to submit to her vision for their domestic life together, Josephine's portrayal of Jonathan as well as of her life in London in general are exposed as transparently rhetorical. Although she ultimately

admits that Jonathan is “very much the businessman too, ruthless and self-centred” (182), her early insistence that he is a “purely good person” (149) is another attempt to correct what she sees as the narrator’s cynical outlook. Even when she tries to strategically select details from her life in London, the results are desperate attempts to incite a fundamental emotional reaction from the pornographer. She writes that she is stunned by “the number of men who’d asked her out, and one or two had even made passes” (149). She cannot help but deliver the “moral” of the story: does this detail make the pornographer “jealous at all?” (149). In a sense, Josephine’s unearned appeals to emotion mirror the pornographer’s own perversion of writing into hackneyed attempts to get a rise out of his readers.

While the novel may place Josephine’s journalistic writing and the narrator’s pornography on roughly the same level, the narrator is exposed as a failed poet, which, according to a conversation in “Peaches,” is a “failure worse than any other” because writing is “more personal than any other [occupation]” and the “egotism is so fierce” (89). At the outset of *The Pornographer*, the narrator seems to think he has found a safe distance from his artistic aspirations as well as from the naïve person who “loved one woman” and did not understand that love has nothing to do with sexual intercourse (42). Like Josephine’s letters about Jonathan, the narrator’s writing initially imagines a fantasy world he would like to inhabit. He begins the novel thinking of himself as a minor league version of the sexual athletes in his stories. During his first encounter with Josephine, he hopes that he “might be a poor Colonel Grimshaw, and she, excited and awkward by my side, might be his Mavis” (42).

But the part of him that wishes to make art out of language persists, even as he believes he abandons it to write wholly commercial pornography. In the same way that he feels he can sever sexuality not only from love but from tedious moral concerns, social conventions, and procreation, he also feels he can detach writing from its connection to what McGahern calls the “religious instinct” (*Love of the World* 151). Like Eva Lindberg, the pornographer discovers the impotence of one person’s will against decades or even centuries of prescribed sexual and social behavior (especially in his relationships with Josephine and Maloney, who are very traditional beneath their urbane and sexually liberated exteriors, as I discussed in Chapter 2). Moreover, he is forced to accept a similar failure of will within himself: he cannot separate language and writing from the sacramental.

Just prior to the first example of pornography in the novel, the narrator describes his preparations for writing: “I washed and changed, combed my hair, and washed my hands again a last time before going over to the typewriter on the marble, and started to leaf through what I had written” (21). Considering the story that the narrator is about to pick up, a curious recollection then intervenes.

We used to robe in scarlet and white how many years before...The wine and water and hand linen had been taken out onto the altar. The incessant coughing told that the church was full. The robed priest stood still in front of the covered chalice on the table, and we formed into line at the door as the last bell began to ring. When it ceased the priest lifted the chalice, and we bowed together to the cross, our hearts beating. And then the sacristy door opened on to the side of the altar and all the faces grew out of a dark mass of cloth out beyond the rail. We began to walk, the priest with the covered chalice following. (21)

Even the kind of writing he is about to do is thus associated with an eager anticipation of the sacred by both its facilitators and its audience. The passage emphasizes the chalice, the vessel for the transubstantiated blood of Christ. The narrator gives himself the role of

acolyte because he has not yet ascended to the central role as consecrator of the wine. Subsequent allusions to blood suggest that he believes the true writer combines the roles of Christ and priest: he or she must not only bleed for the work but also consecrate that blood for an audience. This is remarkably ambitious and may explain why failing as a writer is viewed so dramatically in the exchange from "Peaches." Instead of consecrated bread and wine, genuinely failed writers leave behind something more analogous to the rotting shark in that story. This is why they "[stink] to themselves and to everyone else" (89).

Sacramental imagery recurs when the pornographer reflects that his "words had to be mixed with my own blood. How could the dried blood of the words be turned back into blood unless they had once been bound by living blood?" (50). Maloney dismisses this idea, calling it "poetry talk. And you know what I think of that nowadays" (50-1). The narrator, however, simply cannot jettison this approach and it leads to one of the novel's many ironies: when he does begin drawing more literally on his own life for his pornography, Maloney finds it less successful on a first reading, noting that the Shannon episode does not "phosphoresce with your usual glow" (162).

Perhaps even more important here is the implication that reading can be a transubstantial act based on the sacrifice of the writer. The narrator may have thought he could shield himself from the public implications of his insistence on putting his blood into his work by producing wholly commercial entertainment, but even then Maloney gleefully troubles him with constant questions about the biographical accuracy of his pornographic episodes. While the narrator is less than forthcoming, what little he offers still increases Maloney's interest in the pornographic rendering of the excursion with

Josephine: “I’ll have another look at your Shannon story. Knowing that real people are involved gives the spice of pornography a very satisfying solidity. It might even phosphoresce a little more this time” (165). The narrator thus finds himself dogged by biographical readings even when he turns his experiences into the lurid sexual escapades of “characters [who] were not even people” (21). Part of his problem, then, is finding a way to accept that such readings are an inevitable consequence of an approach to writing he cannot change.

If he insists on a Eucharistic or Catholic view of writing and reading, he not only must find a way to make the writing “reach praise” but also to treat the congregation more generously. As frustrating as it might be, he has to grant them some space, even readers such as Maloney who wish to pick over his life for the biographical details they require for a narrative to “phosphoresce.” Maloney cannot help himself from the kind of narrow biographical reading initially favored by Eva Lindberg, though he seems to insist on this approach in part to annoy the pornographer. Patrick Moran’s landlord, Mr. Logan, is another character satirically portrayed as this kind of reader. Patrick notes that Mr. Logan’s day revolves around his library books, but that he

never gleaned anything from these books...Odd information stuck. Somerset Maugham was his favourite author. They shared the same aversion: when walking out with his wife he hated it when she’d take his arm, and he had read in the *Autobiography* that Somerset Maugham hated anybody to take his arm too. (158)

The pornographer believes he resides safely in the “original obscurity” described in “Peaches,” in part because he has abandoned his poetic ambition. But his poetic ambition has not abandoned him, and his choosing the obscurity of pornographic hackwork is mocked by Maloney’s grating biographical questions. If he is to readmit an approach to writing based on sacredness and sacrifice, he will have to tolerate readers

such as Maloney who wish to know to the milliliter exactly how much blood has been expended on the work. He will have to translate the affection he shows for his aunt and uncle, whom he shows in their contradictions but with a degree of sympathy nearly absent from the portrayals of Josephine and Maloney, into a broader written perspective. These concerns are tied together by a key component of the pornographer's flawed perspective: in writing and in life, protecting himself often overrides protecting others. He is rarely able to combine attention and care with restraint, as he does when his uncle disembarks in Dublin: "He had need of all his own space, without interference from my eyes, as he came up the long platform" (9). The failure to more broadly apply such a perspective helps to explain McGahern's decision to use the device of pornography in the novel.

The Pornographer suggests that a failure of point-of-view can cause the allegedly impartial observation of sociological realism to be perverted into voyeuristic, greedy consumption of other people's lives. A failure of the writer's perspective can turn readers into the audience for pornography; in other words, anxious to dispense with everything but the graphic sexual gymnastics or the equivalently lurid elements. And it may turn the writer into a cruel witness who shows no care for either the object of observation or the audience. Even worse, it may turn him into a vindictive moralizer focused on punishing his characters for their stupidity or unwillingness to accept their Darwinian dominance by "the body whose one instinct is to survive and plunder and arrogantly reproduce itself along the way" (McGahern, *The Pornographer* 24). This is evidenced not only by the narrator's pornographic retelling of his Shannon excursion, in which an aging country bachelor is punched out by the Colonel, bound, and brought to

orgasm by Mavis in order to punish him for his asexual life, but even by the protagonist's own vindictive portrayal of Josephine in the narrative proper. As I have suggested in the discussion of her letters above, he seems to insist that readers see how absolutely insufferable Josephine is to him. He cannot extend to her the space and sympathy given to his uncle and aunt; instead, he seems to insist that she be punished for her submission to the instinct to "arrogantly reproduce" in the same way that he, in Maloney's words, must be "punished for behaving stupidly" (244). By the end of the novel, the narrator recognizes the limitations of Maloney's facile notion of cause and effect; he may even recognize the need to reshape his narrative in order to demonstrate more complex interrelations between actions or, at the very least, better reflect a kind of mystery that goes beyond cause and effect. These two ideas, the sense of mystery associated with religious practice and the generative effects of revision, permeate the novel's final scene.

While the narrator acknowledges his "fierce need to pray" as he and Maloney drive back to Dublin after his aunt's funeral, he is certain that his "prayers could not be answered" (252). Thus, instead of actually praying, he focuses on mentally revising an image.

And in the silence a fragment of another day seemed to linger amid the sweeping wipers and grow: the small round figure of my uncle getting out of the train away down the platform, childishly looking around, the raincoat over his arm, at the beginning of the journey—if beginning it ever had—that had brought each to where we were, in the now and forever. (252)

The end of the novel is not only circular but future-oriented. This image not only returns readers to the scene that began the novel, but suggests that the narrator must rewrite the narrative he has just completed. The material might be the same, but he seems to promise that his imagination will now let such images "grow" more naturally outside of what had become a withering or even predatory gaze. Moreover, the "now and forever" that

surrounds him and his uncle implies the eternal, even if that eternal is linked not to God but to the memory, the words, or the narrative they are ultimately shaped into.

The above fragment may not be enough for readers to genuinely understand how the pornographer will rewrite this story. If he has circled back to Elizabeth Reegan's understanding that writing must "reach praise of something at last," he has not necessarily explicitly detailed how to achieve this. He has implied the necessity of a genuine readmitting of certain elements of religious practice into himself along with the imperative of revision, but he does not necessarily elucidate the idea of "attending properly" (251). This appears to have caused some problems for early readers and reviewers of the novel, such as Tom Paulin, who believes the narrator's "moment of moral awareness" at the end of the novel "sounds hollow" (61).¹⁶

Reading through later novels, however, helps to explain the implications of the change in perspective suggested (perhaps too vaguely) by *The Pornographer*. The writer's perspective that avoids recrimination and vindictiveness, and treats both subject and audience with greater generosity, is elaborated through the character of Joe Rutledge in *By the Lake*.

This evolution of perspective, should not, however be seen as a total redaction by McGahern of his earlier works. A brief examination of the story "Oldfashioned," written during the 1980s, illustrates this. The story places the protagonist's memories of his childhood in Roscommon inside two passages that glide over the profound changes that

¹⁶ Paulin sees *The Pornographer* as promising a "new beginning" for McGahern but for different reasons than those I suggest above. Paulin believes the novel shows McGahern's recognition that the subject matter and motifs of the novel, such as "the saw mill, the woman dying of cancer, the merging of sex and death" have become "predictably familiar" (61) and that he must abandon them. I contend that the pornographer's recognition is that the material should not be abandoned but rather reworked and revised from a more generous perspective.

have come to the area over his lifetime. Johnny, the protagonist, is again the son of a police sergeant and spent part of his childhood living in the barracks. The memories of his childhood focus on his fruitful acquaintance with the Sinclairs, a Protestant couple who hire him for light work around their garden. Colonel Sinclair takes such a liking to the boy that he offers to help him into a career in the British Army. Johnny shows an interest but knows the sergeant will forbid it: “The years his father was most proud of were the years of the War of Independence when he was the commander of a small company of men on the run” (*Collected Stories* 258). The boy’s interest is probably based on more on the kindness and gentility of the Sinclairs, which is in stark contrast to the “endless flow of conjecture and criticism” (257) that characterizes life in the barracks, than on any genuine interest in a military career. Even so, the Colonel broaches it with the boy’s father, and he not only dismisses it out of hand but forbids his son from returning to work at the Sinclair home.

This personal loss is both linked with and contextualized by the more documentary passages which surround it and which take up more general changes to rural Ireland such as the now widespread automobiles and television, the disappearance of the Latin Mass, and the shift of power from the parish priest to the local politician. Brian Leyden remarks that this strategy “offers McGahern the chance to vindicate his methods” (99), including a focus on personal grief and loss as starting point for shaping larger narratives. Johnny goes on to become a filmmaker and a short passage near the end of the story bears out Leyden’s assertion:

[H]e made a series of documentary films about the darker aspects of Irish life. As they were controversial, they won him a sort of fame: some thought they were serious, well made, and compulsive viewing, bringing things to light that were in bad need of light; but others maintained that they were humourless, morbid, and

restricted to a narrow view that was more revealing of private obsessions than any truths about life or Irish life in general. (268-9)

Taking filmmaking as analogous to writing, the passage appears to clarify the role of reference in the language of narrative. The critique of biographical readings is more direct than the satirizing of such readings through the characters of Eva Lindberg in “The Beginning of an Idea” and Maloney in *The Pornographer*. The narrator here notes how critics and readers continue to find only the “private obsessions” of an individual within the work. They insist on reducing reading to a search, “through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, [for] the voice of a single person, the *author* ‘confiding’ in us” (Barthes, “Death of the Author” 143) [Italics original]. The narrator here, however, may not go as far as Barthes does in suggesting that “the function of narrative is not to ‘represent,’ it is to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us but in any case not of a mimetic order” (“Introduction” 123-4). Instead, the passage maintains a mimetic and sociological function for fictional texts by defending the realist portrayal of “darker aspects of Irish life” at an historically identifiable time and place. The absence of regret here suggests that the increasingly generous perspective that informs stories such as “High Ground” only becomes possible via passage through the writing failures and bitter recalcitrance of *The Pornographer*. This revised perspective culminates in *By the Lake*. In McGahern’s final novel, the writer encompasses the intolerable not by shining a bright light into every corner but rather by acknowledging that even darkness must sometimes be protected rather than obliterated.

Writing and Forgiveness in *By the Lake*

The violence or seemingly amoral behavior of *The Dark*, “The Beginning of an Idea,” and *The Pornographer* remain a part of life around the lake, but the narrator

quietly keeps some distance between such incidents and readers. Seamus Deane notes that “there are enough acrid moments for any connoisseur” but that the characters’ “cruelties and contradictions...are not exposed for satiric purposes” (Rev. of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* 9). If there is a locus for the intolerable in the novel, it is the character of John Quinn, whose self-protective monologues and sexual obsession suggest an aging and unreformed pornographer. Yet Quinn retains his place among his neighbors, as Denis Sampson points out:

Quinn’s rapacious lechery leads to callous treatment of women, and the gossip often turns on his latest womanizing escapades; he is spurned early in the novel by Kate, and his latest wife quickly abandons him, yet his portrayal seems to accept his nature as a given, and conversational play allows for his inclusion in the community. (“Open to the World” 139)

It is important to note, however, that Quinn’s worst acts are generally told by other characters. Even the proposition to Kate Ruttledge cited by Sampson is outside the narrative proper; it is recollected by Ruttledge in conversation with Jamesie. Much of what readers know about John Quinn’s history comes through Jamesie, thus what can only be called the public rape of his first wife on their wedding day is experienced at both a temporal and spatial remove. Jamesie’s story also complicates the picture of John Quinn by showing that his need to cruelly dominate is offset by a genuine love for his children. According to Jamesie, Quinn politely but firmly intervened to prevent the corporal punishment that would have been a daily occurrence at most schools in mid-century Ireland.

While Declan Kiberd believes Jamesie’s appetite for gossip makes him a “surrogate” for readers (“Fallen Nobility” 167), he also models the more generous perspective that the narrator of *The Pornographer* struggles to extend to characters other than his uncle. Jamesie’s investment in the community around the lake seems to require

him to participate in a social system with clear expectations. It is almost as if these relationships concretely realize the level of trust that is nearly a matter of religious faith for Patrick Moran as he contemplates the “community of two” at the end of *The Leavetaking*. Sampson summarizes it as follows:

They are critical of each other, they tease, they make dismissive judgements (many characters are described as ‘childish’) so that no character is allowed to be exactly who he would like to believe he is, yet in spite of such—often humorous—deflations of conceit or arrogance, they are allowed to be what they are...individually and collectively, they reinforce the principle of secure selfhood, for they accept themselves, and others accept them also. (“Open to the World” 139)

Kiberd goes as far to say that this ethos is so pervasive that “it doesn’t really matter” who is telling “in a society where so many utterances, jokes, and stories are shared” (“Fallen Nobility” 165). This may be so, but Jamesie is perhaps the most persistent example of the combination of satire and sympathy that McGahern’s narrators seem to be struggling toward, notably in *The Pornographer* and in “High Ground” (cf. my discussion of this story in closing Chapter 3 of this study). By refusing to deliver a one-dimensional portrait of John Quinn, Jamesie shows how to infuse “objective narration” with genuine caring for the object of observation. This is not to say that Jamesie dismisses the devastating consequences of Quinn’s intolerable acts, for there are genuine victims such as the young wife and her parents. But Jamesie narrates from a perspective that manages to emit care for both victim and perpetrator. It is likely for these reasons that Rutledge, who is a writer by trade (though most details of his career reside well outside the periphery of the novel), calls Jamesie “my sweet guide” (333).

In the same way that the actions of John Quinn are experienced at some remove, the narrator of *By the Lake* does not wish to bring readers too close to the process or product of the writer. It is as if the interiority and first-person point-of-view of *The*

Pornographer made the narrator doubly complicit in the kinds of writing that novel criticizes.¹⁷ Writing in *By the Lake* receives a significantly reduced role and simply takes its place alongside the other tasks of rural life such as haymaking and caring for livestock. An exchange between Ruttledge and Jimmy Joe McKiernan near the end of the novel illustrates this. Asked how he and Kate manage to earn a living from their modest property, Ruttledge explains that he takes “outside work” (322).

“What work?”

“Writing work.”

“Is that hard?”

“Hard enough. Being out and about in the fields is much more pleasant.”

“Would the birds and the quiet over there be useful to that kind of work?”

“No.” It was Ruttledge’s turn to smile grimly. “The quiet and the birds are no use.”

“What are you doing over there, then?”

“You mean I should live closer to my markets? It is where we live, a place like any other. You asked me about the birds as well that first day you showed us the place.” (322)

The two men quickly move on to other subjects and Ruttledge seems glad to do so. But if this exchange suggests that writing can be difficult, even grim, work, and that there is no longer a need to expose exactly what it involves, *By the Lake* also includes a key example of the mediating capability of texts. Unsurprisingly, the narrative does this not by including the texts themselves but by showing the characters refiguring their lives as they return from the world of the text to the world of action. The exchange of letters between Jamesie (his ghostwritten by Ruttledge) and Johnny thus demonstrates that the intolerable may be encompassed by writing in a way that grants a measure of protection to both subject and audience.

¹⁷ In “The Solitary Reader,” McGahern worries that writing is like “gold in the ground—or in the alchemist’s mind—it is probably wise not to speak about the pursuit at all” (*Love of the World* 93).

The public role of the writer here is not the courageous and astringent social commentator suggested by the narrator of “Oldfashioned,” but rather that of a gentle mediator. The impasse between Jamesie and Johnny is certainly less dramatic than Mahoney’s violence in *The Dark* or Moran’s estrangement from his oldest son in *Amongst Women*, but it contains an element of the intolerable nonetheless: Johnny is about to retire from the Ford motor plant in England and wants to return to Ireland and live with Jamesie and his wife. Jamesie and Mary cannot abide this arrangement but also cannot bear to reject Johnny. The narrator summarizes the situation.

They could not live with him and they could not be seen—in their own eyes or the eyes of others—to refuse him shelter or turn him away. The timid, gentle manners, based on a fragile interdependence, dealt in avoidances and obfuscations. Edges were softened, ways found round harsh realities. What was unspoken was often far more important than the words that were said. Confrontation was avoided whenever possible. These manners, open to exploitation by ruthless people, held all kinds of traps for the ignorant or unwary and could lead to entanglements that a more confident, forthright manner would have seen off at the very beginning. It was a language that hadn’t any simple way of saying no. (210)

In the spirit of reciprocity that characterizes this community, Ruttledge offers to help. Though he and Kate initially think the only way to confront the situation is to “speak straight” (211) to Johnny, in the end Ruttledge adapts his writing to this system of manners. He roughs out “a simple letter, explaining the situation clearly but softening it enough to give Johnny room, suggesting that when he thought about the idea more he’d see how hopeless it was from his own point of view. Without a car or telephone and far from town he’d be stranded now beside the lake” (212).

Giving Johnny some “room” is a successful strategy and he decides to stay in London. In a gentle irony, he later explains to the Ruttledges how this came about. He says that Jamesie and Mary “did their level best to get me to throw up England altogether

and come home for good...I was tempted at first but the more I thought about it the more I saw it wouldn't work out...Once you get used to London, a place like the lake gets very backward" (293). He goes on to say that "it was a great thing to know all the same that in a tight corner you were still wanted by your own" (293). Ruttledge and Kate know differently but also know that the community's "fragile interdependence" requires them to stay silent.

If Ruttledge's letter encompasses an intolerable reality even as it partially shields Johnny from that reality, it is important to note that Johnny's correspondence does the same for Jamesie and Mary. While readers of *By the Lake* have a sense of Johnny's peripheral and lonely existence as an apartment manager in London, he characterizes the arrangement as delightful in order to protect Jamesie and Mary. He may have had to beg Mister Singh (his landlord and boss) for some kind of arrangement, but he writes with "care" in a way that brings "a small world to life" (220). If Elizabeth Reegan had an almost innate sense of how to turn her experience into something like a prayer (or poem) of praise, Johnny seems to have constructed something like an effective short story, even managing to include the necessary amount of his "own blood" to reanimate his "small world." But where Elizabeth could not finally trust the audience for her letter, Johnny knows exactly what is needed here and is generous enough to deliver it in a way that gives Jamesie and Mary the same space that Ruttledge gave him.

Both Jamesie and Mary buy the whole narrative and find within it what *they* need, evidenced by the palpable relief they show after reading. Mary says, "He fell on his feet. The poor fella deserved some bit of luck in England" (220). Jamesie adds, "Johnny thinks the world of Mister Singh...and Mister Singh stood by him in the end" (220).

Jamesie and Mary are not satirized as credulous in the manner of Josephine in *The Pornographer* or even Mr. Logan in *The Leavetaking*. Instead, they are allowed to receive Johnny's text for what it is, a bestowal of forgiveness for turning him away.

A detour through a text is thus not to be dismissed as an escape into fantasy but rather a very practical means of maintaining a fragile system of manners and an ethos of reciprocity in the "real" world. This system of manners supersedes "the truth" about the proposed arrangement between Jamesie and Johnny. Ruttledge summarizes this ethos upon listening to Patrick Ryan upbraid Johnny for making the "mistake of [his] life" (86) by leaving Ireland. Ruttledge, rather than joining in, reminds Patrick that "the truth isn't always useful" (86). Ruttledge's public role as a writer might be quite different in the distant worlds of Dublin or London, but within this community he plays the role of generous facilitator. This system of manners turns T.S. Eliot's reminder that "human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality" (176) into an unqualified virtue, because everyone in this community knows precisely how much intolerable reality the others can bear and will intervene when a person reaches his or her limit. The letters of Ruttledge and Johnny may not demonstrate the capacity of texts to be dangerous, "as when Solzhenitsyn's telling of the story of the Gulag shatters our conventional view of death and life, of hatred and love" (Ricoeur, "Mimesis" 152), or, it might be added, when McGahern shatters his society's complacent view of corporal punishment and sexual abuse in *The Dark*. But they do offer small examples of texts' capability to offer *both* an alternative "world in which we can live" (McGahern, *Love of the World* 7) as well as a more "productive form of reference" (Ricoeur, "Mimesis" 152) back to the lives of

readers. Rather than shattering a destructive view, here texts refer to and help protect an ethos worth preserving.

Both Rutledge (on behalf of Jamesie and Mary) and Johnny handle a harsh reality with a delicate touch. Somehow they are able to accommodate that reality in a way that places protection of others over self-protection. They are able to encompass the paradox that combines great love and care with the need for a safe distance between people. With Rutledge's help, the brothers appear to succeed where Moran and Luke cannot in *Amongst Women*. While the narrator explains that Moran's moving speech at Sheila's wedding results because his "old practice at writing letters stood him in good stead" (154), with Luke this practice never reaches what Johnny is capable of in *By the Lake*. His letters to Luke never fully conquer self-protection. In the first example in the novel, despite spending "a long time composing the letter" Moran "could not resist adding recrimination" (51). Even when he is dying and wants desperately to see his son, Moran cannot write from perspective that conveys care and protection. This last letter is a rare example in which McGahern includes the text itself rather than the narrator's paraphrase.

Let me say that I had no wish to harm you in the past and I have no wish to harm you in the future and if I have done so in thought, word or deed I am sorry. The daffodils are nearly in bloom, also shrubs, flowers, fruit, etc. It'll soon be time for planting. Tired now and of that thought, who cares anyhow? Daddy. (176)

Moran's way around "harsh reality" comes off not as generous to Luke but rather as protection of himself. He cannot apologize without a qualifying "if," and he cannot resist closing with the disingenuous implication that he does not really care what Luke decides to do (the narrator has shown that estrangement from Luke regularly torments him).

Whereas the brothers Jamesie and Johnny can rely on the communication paradigm

clearly outlined by the narrator of *By the Lake* and ably translated by Ruttledge into writing, fathers and their adult sons in McGahern's fiction are generally locked into an impasse such as that between Moran and Luke.

The family paradigm at Great Meadow, and its attendant communication patterns, probably places such an impasse beyond the scope of writing. It is the model adopted by Moran's daughters and explicitly reinforced by Rose, one in which the generosity always flows toward Moran and rarely outward from him. The absence of reciprocity means that neither Moran nor Luke can offer each other a meaningful detour through one another's writing. When Luke replies to Moran's last letter, he can only write back "in kind" that there is "nothing to forgive" but knows "[i]t is not what he wants but it will have to do" (176). While both men know what the other wants, neither can grant it. Moran cannot encompass the intolerable in writing because whatever happened between he and Luke (the narrator does not detail this, thus forecasting the distance placed between readers and John Quinn's worst acts in *By the Lake*) is never truly given what the narrator of *The Leavetaking* calls its "proper place." He shields his acts from himself and thus cannot link them to the reality of decades of estrangement. It is almost as if Moran, because he once held absolute power over Luke and the entire household, must do what Ruttledge and Johnny need not: write the intolerable with all the sociological realism he can muster without regard for self-protection. Such exposure, culpability, and humility are finally beyond him.

In McGahern's fictional world, a family community rarely evinces the reciprocity that characterizes Jamesie and Johnny Murphy and the neighbors in *By the Lake*. History and loyalty are often too problematic and complicated among close blood relations.

Despite the insularity of the community around the lake, the claustrophobic atmosphere of the barracks, the pornographer's unholy *atelier*, or the house at Great Meadow finally lifts in McGahern's last novel. As Seamus Deane puts it, the narrative offers a "capacious style that has all the lucidity and intensity we have become accustomed to in McGahern, but inflected by a tone of forgiveness and acceptance that adds an amplitude and serenity rarely achieved in fiction" (9).

Such a tone seems anathema to the younger McGahern, and as a result some commentators are less willing than Deane to admit the more generous perspective that begins to inform McGahern's narrators around the time of "High Ground." John Cronin complains of McGahern's inconsistency in portraying Protestant families such as the Sinclairs, writing that the author "accords them a benevolent indulgence which betrays him into surprisingly clichéd views which seem untypical of his customary tone" (Rev. of *High Ground* 220). But McGahern clearly sees the writing of fiction as a progressive process¹⁸ and thus the experiments with tone undertaken in the stories of *High Ground* are perhaps necessary to reach the more assured perspective of *By the Lake*.

As I suggested above, the self-reflexive comments by the narrator of "Oldfashioned" suggest that McGahern stands by the sociological role his earlier fictions might have performed. His work after "High Ground" is thus not a negation of earlier strategies but rather an expansion of possibilities for fiction, represented primarily via the formal device of point-of-view. The scathing, retributive personality behind first-person narrators such as the unnamed pornographer as well as third-person narrators in "Peaches" and "The Beginning of an Idea" persists to variable degrees in characters such

¹⁸ Speaking of his writing in the 1970s, McGahern tells Eamon Maher, "I don't think I could have gone on and written *Amongst Women* or the other books if I hadn't written *The Pornographer*" (*From the Local* 149).

as Mona Moran in *Amongst Women*, Fonsie in “The Country Funeral,” or Patrick Ryan in *By the Lake*, but such personalities are now part of larger ensembles and are not the dominant note of their respective narratives. Several of the earlier narrators seem interested in punishing characters like Eva Lindberg for their stupidity, thus causing her sexual assault to perhaps feel like an inevitable consequence of literary plotting rather than an intolerable reality to be encompassed. A similar criticism might be leveled at *The Pornographer*’s portrayal of Josephine. While the novel is future-oriented and few characters other than the narrator’s aunt come off as admirable, from a feminist perspective Josephine could be read as that especially insidious kind of accessory, one whose existence serves solely to advance the male protagonist’s growth.

The more balanced third-person narration of “The Country Funeral,” *Amongst Women*, and *By the Lake* does not thus indicate McGahern turning away from the intolerable but rather expanding possibilities for seeing it and for encompassing it in writing. There is, after all, rape, violence, and death in *By the Lake*, and sociological realities like emigration, institutional abuse¹⁹ and the Troubles in Northern Ireland hover around the narrative proper. But the novel as a whole seems to bring together the perspective that McGahern’s fictional writers are consistently striving for. By diffusing the satirist’s gaze across multiple perspectives, the lover’s gaze can permeate the entire narrative. The result is a novel that offers readers the same care and generosity that the neighbors around the lake extend to each other.

¹⁹ For example, the cruel system by which orphans such as Bill Evans were assigned to farms where they were overworked, underfed, and often beaten.

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