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John McGahern: Writer, Stylist, Seeker of a Lost World

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EAMON MAHER & DECLAN KIBERD

Eamon Maher: Professor Declan Kiberd, I am delighted to welcome you here this evening to discuss some aspects of the novelist, John McGahern, whom I know you hold in high esteem. You first came across him, not in his capacity of a man of letters, but rather as a primary school teacher in Clontarf. You retain happy memories of him from that time, don't you?

Declan Kiberd: Very much so, yes. He was the first in a series of inspirational English teachers I had. Although I didn’t think of him as a man of letters in those days, in a sense he was, because he always had responsibility in the school concert for a poetry section. And I remember when we were about eight years old, when we had Mr McGahern as our teacher in Second Class, we put on a performance of William Allingham’s ‘Up

1. John McGahern’s star has been in the ascendant since the publication of Amongst Women in 1990. Short-listed for the Booker Prize, it won The Irish Times / Aer Lingus Literary award before being made into a highly successful TV series with the late Tony Doyle excellent in the role of Moran. John McGahern’s latest title, That They May Face the Rising Sun (Faber & Faber, 2001), has a tenderness and lyric quality that make it another classic.

Eamon Maher lectures in the Department of Humanities at the Institute of Technology, Tallaght, Dublin 24. He has published widely on French and Irish literature and is the author of a comparative study of the two traditions: Crosscurrents and Confluences (2000, Veritas). He is at present working on a book for Liffey Press with the title, John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal.

Declan Kiberd, Professor of Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama in UCD, is the foremost commentator on literary developments in this country from the time of the Bards to the present moment. His best-known work, Inventing Ireland (Jonathan Cape), won the Irish Times Literature Prize for Non-Fiction in 1995 and his most recent book, Irish Classics (2000, Granta Books), was short-listed in the same category last year. He was also closely involved in the successful radio series, Reading the Future, which took the form of interviews with contemporary Irish writers (including McGahern) whose works will, it is believed, stand the test of time.

This interview was recorded at the ITT, before Professor Kiberd delivered the 2001 Humanities’ Lecture there.
the Airy Mountain, Down the Rushy Glen'. He engaged in a kind of Hollywood-style audition to see which boys would sit at the front imitating elves and fairies with large green leaves perched on their curled heads. And he extracted me from the chorus and he gave me my test and then he returned me promptly to the obscurity from which I should never have emerged.

You never made it.

Not on that occasion. I remember him saying, 'Put a bit more jizz into it, put more jizz into it, boys!' It was interesting because the other thing I recall from the classroom was, he would sometimes get almost as bored as we were with spellings or tables or whatever. And he would pull out a book - he had these books, *Fairy Tales of Ireland, Fairy Tales of Germany, Fairy Tales of Russia* - and he would read a story to the boys quite arbitrarily; it wasn’t part of the time-table. This was tremendous because he had a powerful voice and great range of emotion and mood in his delivery. And then the great thing about it was that, the following Christmas, at the exams, he gave the books as prizes, having read from them all term. So they really meant something. And I am sure he paid for them out of his own pocket because certainly in those days the INTO (Irish National Teachers Organisation) no more than the school, wasn’t supplying teachers with prizes to give to eight-year-old boys. So, yes, I have very happy memories.

He had quite interesting techniques too as a teacher. Almost Darwinian in some ways. I remember, at the beginning of the week, on a Monday, he would line the boys around three of the walls in the classroom. Basically, this was for spelling- and tables-tests. If you got a spelling right or a multiplication right you moved up one; if you got it wrong you moved down one.

The Darwinian element was that he didn’t tell the boys, as they assumed their positions at the beginning of the week, which was the top end and which was the bottom end. So if you had a gambling mentality you might go to one end and hope that you were near the top, because the first five or six got Jelly Babies and chocolate bars at the end of the week. Of course I, being cautious by nature, always headed for the middle - and was subject to great sarcasm and scorn, along with some other
However, it was rather interesting. He was a colourful teacher who had his own techniques which, I think, were very effective. And I was really sorry when he left the school. Of course I had gone by the time all that happened.

I was going to ask you that: You had left the school when he was retired – or, should I say? – when he was sacked.

Yes. In 1965 I would have been a year into secondary school. When I had John as my teacher it must have been about 1960, or thereabouts. He was regarded as an extremely good teacher by the local parents. It was also interesting in that I think he was virtually the only teacher in that school who didn’t come from Munster, the Cork/Kerry area. There was a tradition of headmasters and headmistresses hiring people from areas they knew, which had its own merits, obviously. And this must have been one of the few occasions when both the Reverend Patron of the school and the Headmaster went outside the designated area and took a man from the North Midlands. And probably never did again.

Indeed...

I know they held him in very high esteem, because I think he had a master’s degree even then, which would have been quite rare for a primary teacher in those days. He was regarded as a great teacher by the parents. When the controversy blew up, my brother Damien – a fair few years younger than me – was still in the school and had just been taught by Mr McGahern, had just come out of his class. I remember my father feeling that this was a terrible moment, that a good man was being let go for no very good reason.

One of the things about John was he didn’t have a singing voice. When the boys in our class, or in my brother’s class later on, were to do singing, they would go to another teacher, and he would take that man’s boys for geography or something like that. So my father said, ‘Look, if this whole thing about McGahern teaching religion is such a big problem why doesn’t he just swap?’ Lateral thinking. This didn’t cut any ice with the parish priest and didn’t save the poor man’s bacon. But it was very interesting to me at the time.

I always think it was a bit like the Christmas dinner scene for Stephen
Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I remember my parents engaged in very intense debate over dinner about this whole issue. And also my mother looking very grave. My mother always had a soft spot for Mr McGahern because I was a very forgetful school-boy and I often didn’t bring my lunch to school, and she would arrive at 10 o’clock or 10:30, at the first break, and she would hand it in through the railings. He was frequently on the yard, because he was one of the more junior teachers. He would be out there in the cold blowing his hands and walking up and down, and he would enjoy a bit of diversion if somebody’s mother arrived. At least it was someone adult to chat to. My mother became very fond of him, actually. Both my father and mother were very shocked by what happened.

It left a huge impression on me because I suppose by then I knew he was a writer and realized that if writing was as dangerous as this it must amount to something, and stand for something. And I suppose from that moment on he was almost a figure of romance as well as a former teacher.

*I am delighted that you have dwelt on this aspect of his life because he himself doesn’t ever go into any great detail about the experience. He mentions it, but to have those personal details is great.*

To my mind, he has always been remarkably free of bitterness about it. I think he actually admired the school and, quite rightly, thought it was a good school. It was a very good school. I think he kind of liked the parish priest even though the poor man had the job of announcing the dismissal. And I think P.P. said something like, ‘You have got us all into a right schamozzle here’. This word he loved to quote. And he was a colourful man, Fr Carton. I remember him well. Yes, I think John afterwards almost forgave everybody, and joked and said that, whenever he went past primary schools and saw all the Volkswagens and the Morris Minors, he heaved a sigh of relief and thanked the Archbishop for his liberation.

But actually it was a horrible way to go at the time, and also I am sure he missed it because he was a good teacher. And there must have been a bit of a shame. His mother was a national school teacher, and there had to be shame attached to the removal. In the Ireland of the time when
there was still great prestige, rightly, attached to the career of school teaching, to be put out of it was almost like losing your license to practice law or something nowadays. And particularly to be put out of it for actually showing talent and proficiency in one of the central subjects of the humanities. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

\textit{Having dealt a bit with the man, we might go on to John McGahern the writer, whom you came to know subsequently. How would you situate him, in terms of Anglo-Irish literature?}

Well, I would certainly consider him the foremost prose writer in English now in Ireland. I would say he has held that position for quite a number of years. And that is a pretty awesome achievement because there are some very fine writers I would have in contention for that particular accolade.

I suppose what interests me most about him is that he is part of a long tradition of, if you like, lyric utterance by people speaking out of cultures which are on the verge of disappearance. I would say John regards rural Ireland as pretty much in a terminal phase. And certainly the rural Ireland he writes about. Because he is patient and philosophical, he would take a very long view of this, and probably believe that that decay began around, or even before, the Act of Union. And that it has been continuing ever since, slowly, drip by drip. If you take that analysis – and actually politically it’s very interesting, and it’s never been properly explored by political science or sociology here, even though it’s implicit in its writings – you would then have to conclude that independence in 1921 wasn’t really independence as we might want to mean it. It was actually the British transferring responsibility for the management of the crisis of rural society to, if you like, an Irish \textit{comprador} class, as Mao Tse Tung would say. But the underlying problem of the continuing decay of the rural areas continued under new masters. And I would say myself that is the way that John looks at it.

Where art comes in is this: I suppose most artists have a sort of theory of the Swan Song – that, just before any truly complex culture goes under, it often achieves a grace of lyric utterance which in some way encapsulates all its values, all its aspirations and, of course, its achievements before it finally agrees to lie down and die. If you look at the books that
John has always been interested in and cited as inspirations to himself, they tend to have that element about them.

He came to University College, Dublin, a few years ago and did a beautiful course of talks and seminars on various texts. They were very different when you looked at them superficially. He did Ó Criomhthain’s *An tOileánach*, Synge’s writings on the Aran Islands, Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man*, about the death camps in Germany. He did *Purgatory* by Yeats, Kavanagh’s poems about Monaghan, and so on. An amazing, a really, truly amazing range of texts. And very different. Except that they had one thing in common: that they were about people in cultures that were on the verge of extinction. The Nazis, the poor people in the death camps, were almost like the clue. If you look at *Purgatory* by Yeats, it’s really about the end of the Big House tradition, how at a certain moment the only energy people have left is sufficient energy with which to bring the line to an end. And that seems to be a great Yeatsian theme that John tapped into. That would also be true of, say, Synge’s observations of life on Aran—that that life was beautiful to precisely the extent that it seemed to him to be doomed. And he is almost like a cultural mortician moving in to capture the intense beauty of this exquisitely dying thing.

And of course Ó Criomhthain ends his book with the famous statement, ‘*Ní bheidh ár leithéidí arís ann*’—‘Our like will not be there again’. So I think that John McGahern does actually fit very well into a very potent tradition, not a mortuary tradition but the tradition of the Swan Song—which is common to both writing in Irish and in English in the last few hundred years. And it is really about the death of rural Ireland.

*It’s interesting you mention An tOileánach, in that I read today, or re-read McGahern’s piece about it, and it was very much a world in which nothing really happened and where events were almost extraneous to what was essential. I mean description wasn’t there as pure description. The landscape was there as a reality, as a mountain that had to be climbed, a shore that had to be crossed. It struck me then, just as you pointed out so well, that, yes, this was a world that was doomed. McGahern’s rural Ireland—it’s interesting that you should say it too—has all but disappeared now.*

It has, and the Ireland that is disappearing was one based on an oral culture whose values in some ways were epic values. People used to say
about Ó Criomhthain that he had the kind of mentality of the warrior or the hero. For instance, there is an astonishing passage in *An tOileánach* where he narrates the death of his wife and children just in a single paragraph. It's as if he is completely controlling his own capacity to feel as well as his capacity to suffer. It has that almost Hemingwayesque feel about it. Along with that, there is, of course, an extreme control over language: that you don't over-indulge verbiage, every thing is exact, and there is a kind of steely, latinistic quality to the exactitude with which the words in Irish are used. This is a massive influence on John McGahern: he is noted properly for his incredibly sparing and focused use of words. I think it comes out of that whole tradition. In many ways, maybe the influences from Irish therefore are even deeper than the influences from predecessors in English. And he has found a way indeed to carry over some of the energies of the Gaelic tradition into the English language, which is a tremendous achievement.

*Ernie O'Malley is also one of his favourites, On Another Man’s Wound in particular. It depicts the struggle for Irish independence, and the disappointment is palpable at the end of the book because the activity has been so intense – they didn’t know if they were going to survive the next day. It must be that there is something like that in McGahern too, where veterans of the War of Independence don’t like the Irish society that has come out of it, and their life never again regains the intensity of the times spent during the struggle.*

I think what happened there was that that generation, his father’s generation, believed that they were in fact inventing Ireland, that they were trying to be the origin of a new kind of Ireland. And yet, although they thought they were in a narrative of origins, what they discovered was that they really were also part of the sense of an ending. These people who in their youth said ‘Revolution or death’, ended up in their middle and older years fighting the death of their revolution, and its betrayal, its fizzling out, its failure.

So again, the O’Malley story is a story of someone who was a warrior and to that extent an epic figure. There are really powerful passages in *On Another Man’s Wound*, descriptions of the rural landscape, particularly at night time when he is moving through it, on one of his dangerous secret errands. Seeing the lights flashing in the windows of country
kitchens. And feeling, on the one hand, a tenderness towards the people but also a tremendous sense of estrangement from them. He cannot afford to mingle with these people in whose name, nevertheless, he is fighting to free a country, and to re-shape the meaning of Ireland. I suppose there is a touch of the artist about that predicament: that you are, on the one hand, bound up with the people, but, on the other hand, by virtue of trying to represent them, forever estranged from them. So I think this is part of, if you like, McGahern's identification with Ernie O'Malley. It's certainly not political. I don't think he would share too many of his political ideas.

My next question was that: Would there have been a political affinity?

No. I think it's much more to do with the fastidiousness of mind, a belief in self-sufficiency, and relying utterly on yourself. The powers of observation that a rebel IRA man would have required in the War of Independence – when you met someone to be able to sum them up very quickly and accurately, because your life depended on it – these are the same powers of summation that are essential to a novelist.

People often say, there is the criminal in the artist, but there is a sense in which I think McGahern would be excited by those elements in that book. Also maybe the sense of betrayal. Yeats once said a very interesting thing, and I often think of it in terms of John. He said, 'Whenever a country produces a man of genius, that man is never like the country's official idea of itself.' And that was certainly true of Ernie O'Malley, who was increasingly unhappy in the Ireland that emerged.

I think also that John McGahern's own early struggles with authority bear that stamp on them, that he was a real product of the central energies of Ireland. And yet, by virtue of that very fact, official Ireland couldn't deal with him.

It's just like the problem Whitman had in America. He is now seen as the generic representative of an American poet; but when he was young he was so isolated, and he was writing epic. *Leaves of Grass* is the American Epic. He could not get anyone to acclaim him in his own country and so he had to review and acclaim himself. He wrote two reviews of his own poem, in fact. It was celebrated outside the country before it was celebrated back in America.
This is also true of John McGahern in one sense: he had a fantastically loyal following in places like France, and was in many ways the prophet in his own country who was accepted first overseas. Then people learned how to catch up with him and become his contemporary. But it has been a more recent development.

Yes, because actually I became interested in McGahern initially because of his popularity in France, and he speaks very highly of Flaubert and Proust in particular and I am wondering do you see their influence in his careful style and preoccupation with memory?

I do. Flaubert once said that the ultimate ambition would be to write a book that was held together only by style. And one of the great nostra of nineteenth-century French criticism is that style is the immortal element in a work of literature. Content is mere journalism: it changes like the stories in the newspapers. But people read Gibbon now because of the style rather than because of any particular historical thing he has to say. Most of that is out of date.

I think John always recognized that style was the challenge. And the style must never be self-conscious. The greatness of Flaubert was, I suppose, in some ways his transparency. I remember reading an essay once in which he said that if a really good writer describes a flower you shouldn’t think: what fine writing; you should think: what a fine thing a flower is. That is the way John writes. I am not saying it’s an influence: I think he just agrees with Flaubert, that that is the right way to do it.

On the question of Proust, obviously memory is hugely important, but, more than that, I think, the idea of redeeming lost time – that nothing should ever be wholly lost, and that the past has potentials and energies in it which are still unused, and which, if we return to them, can be of benefit to us in the present. So it’s almost like two molecules in chemistry, the past and the present molecule, colliding into each other and creating a third energy which opens up the future. Proust actually said that in a great story. He said: ‘People say that the reason you get wrinkles in middle and old age is because of all the nights of debauchery you spent in your youth. But it’s not true. The reverse is true: people get wrinkles because of all those occasions when the passions knocked and we were not in!’ This is a much more interesting model – that certain
things in the past were left aside and despised but they have energies that are still not used up. And if we return to them, they will redeem us.

I think that John actually believes that. It's a very old idea in Gaelic tradition, it goes back to the Four Masters, the people who wrote out of the wreck of Gaelic culture in the early 1600s. They were literally trying to save the codes and the culture before it disappeared, to turn it into a book so that at least there would be a record kept. I think of John in that way. I think of him as very like Keating and the Four Masters: he takes the long view. And he knows that he is going to be one of the people who will have told the story of rural Ireland's long decline.

Many of his characters and themes recur in several different novels: it's almost as if it's all one big novel. I think that would concur with what you said there — that it's the chronicle. Do you think it makes any difference that the theme is the same, in that it's a continuation of the same? Some people, if they were to be hyper-critical of John, might say this is the same as the last book, even the characters' names haven't changed. We still have a Moran and a Maloney, or whatever. It's the one oeuvre, the one work of art, and he is continually chiselling away at it and getting better at it, as he goes on. I think, for example, the style has evolved a lot from The Barracks — which is a very fine first novel — to attain a limpidity and a transparency in Amongst Women that are really the hallmarks of a great writer, I would venture.

Absolutely. I think when you read Amongst Women, what you feel is the pressure of a felt experience, whereas when you read a lot of other very good novels about the same basic subject, you often think 'What nice writing'. Back to the point I just made.

McGahern gives the image he receives. And the experience comes through his words with a kind of directness which, I think, makes for its immortality. I would say that Amongst Women is one of the major books of the last fifty years in Ireland. And it may, in fact, be the book that most fully gathers together the feeling of what it was like to live through that process in Ireland. And yet it's only a bit more than two hundred pages. It's all been chiselled down, as you say. I know that in an earlier version it was six hundred or seven hundred pages, maybe more. It's the iceberg effect. You feel all the bits that are gone even though they are not there in front of your eyes so that even the conversations seem to have an
almost telegraphic quality. Yet they sound real as conversations. It’s as if these people have learned to speak in shorthand, and so has the writer learned to write in shorthand.

I go back to Ó Criomhthain because I think that to say a little but to imply a lot — that is the art of the oral culture. And there is no doubt that John McGahern was always very disciplined, even as a very young writer, remarkably so, especially in a culture of novel writing which assumes that a young novelist in Ireland will probably have an audience in London and then maybe, if they are lucky in New York, in *The New Yorker*, and that you should produce a bit of wit, and word-play, and a bit of richness in language because that is what the Irish are supposed to be good at. There is, in McGahern’s work, an almost wilful refusal of that kind of gorgeousness.

*Because he could easily have done it. He could have produced that type of writing.*

Of course he could, I think it’s got to do with what Joyce himself said: it’s a style of ‘scrupulous meanness’. Joyce was the first major Irish writer to refuse to be colourful for overseas readers. And it’s very interesting that both Joyce and Beckett ended up with a very strong French audience, in the way that McGahern has.

But on the theme of repetition: Beckett has a character say, ‘The old questions, the old answers — there’s nothing quite like them.’ I think it is a sign of McGahern’s integrity as an artist that he keeps returning to the same central, universal themes which emerge no matter what the particular shape of the story is that he is trying to tell. I would say that he is like those painters of the Renaissance who tried to do one painting over and over until they got it near to perfection. And I think *Amongst Women*, well one of the reviewers actually said that, it was just a centimetre short of perfection. But I think that is probably a harsh judgment.

*You are talking about his popularity in France, which is undoubted, but a lot of readers see McGahern as the quintessentially Irish writer. I am wondering is this merely because we associate Irishness with the western sea board and religiosity and the struggle with the land? Or is it, as I suspect, more complex than that?*

There are all kinds of superficial ways in which he would fit the para-
digm. His early struggle with authority, with censorship and so on; exile, and producing a work of art that was rejected by an officialdom that then repented. That is the paradigm of a national writer across the world, not just in Ireland. Go back to Whitman for a minute. Yeats said that what was interesting about Whitman was that, although he was rejected in his youth and his writing wasn’t properly celebrated in his own country, he wrote out of so deep a life that he was accepted there in the end. That was a phrase Yeats used.

And that is exactly what has happened to McGahern. People first of all shuddered and then they realized, ‘My God, he has told our innermost story.’ It’s like that Don McLean song about ‘I felt he had read my letters and read each one aloud.’ I think people have that feeling when they read McGahern: in some way the history of their own families has been told with a kind of tenderness and honesty and a mixture of wistfulness and longing, that is appropriate to the dignity of the experience. So they actually feel ratified by him, they who refused once to ratify him. I think that would be partly why he is seen as an Irish writer, but it also has to do with this tension thing I was talking about. When they produced him initially he was not like the country’s idea of itself. If you are too acceptable too early, the paradox is that you don’t get celebrated in the end as a national writer.

I was reading my father’s memoirs—they have not been published and probably won’t be—of a youth in north Tipperary. At times I said to him, ‘Dad, it’s almost as if I was reading McGahern. When you write well and when you write about your family, about what was most personal to you, you could be confused with McGahern.’ Which really reinforces what you say: it’s the story of so many of us, any of us who have come from a rural background—which most of have done.

I think what is interesting also is what you say: it’s your father. I think McGahern probably wrote even more the experience of his father’s generation than of his own. That is a fascinating thing that also is quite Irish, that there is a certain reluctance to engage with the present moment, or if one engages with it one simply uses the recent past as a way of exploring the present at a certain remove. But John has tended to write about periods twenty, thirty, forty or even more years ago. That is also true of a lot of the more ‘poppy’ kind of literary productions of recent years, like
Frank McCourt, Nuala Ó Faoláin, or whoever.

It is a strange and interesting thing how few of our artists deal with the immediate. There is no really good novel about the Celtic Tiger. There is no one writing about Dublin the way Jay McInerney writes about New York in the 80s or 90s. There is no Tom Wolfe, no *Bonfire of the Vanities*, poking fun at the Celtic Tiger. I don't know why that is. I think there are various reasons. I think there is a kind of truce at the moment between the business class and the art class.

*Because of patronage…*

Partly that. But also, I think, business people in Ireland are much less willing to interface, to get involved in a debate with intellectuals. In America and in France, you have got people like Iacocca, who will publish their memoirs: "You can make a million, son, if you just live your life the way I live mine". But that is a basis for a debate and some of them have quite strong intellectual credentials when they write these books. There is nothing like that produced here in Ireland. There are no business people writing literature, for a start. But then the literary people in general seem to have a fairly well-developed contempt for the business class, and don't know them well enough either to heroise them or criticise them with any kind of rigour. So there is a kind of standoff.

But it would be very interesting to imagine someone like John McGahern who has been so accurate in his portrayal of rural business people – cattle-jobbers, small-time politicians – if he were unleashed on that particular world. I think he could write a fantastic book.

*I would say there would be a lot of people running for cover, alright.*

But I don't think he ever would. I once said to him, slightly fearfully, when he was in UCD, 'I hope we don't all end up in a short story of yours.' And he said, 'No, I only write about what I know well.' I think that is true; he has been very careful. Someone said attention is a form of prayer and in that sense all his writing is prayer. Because he never writes about something he doesn't know back to front.

*And really it's impossible to write with the intensity which he uses about something you haven't experienced personally. He paints a very different picture of*
Jones to that of many of his contemporaries, like Brian Moore, Edna O'Brien, John Broderick. How would you rate his depiction of Irish mores in relation to theirs? Or can one compare? One isn’t comparing like with like, I know, but they were writing at the same time, sometimes on similar themes. With Moore it was more Belfast and he set many of his novels outside Ireland. What differentiates McGahern from them, in your opinion?

I think it is actually the difference between an epical and a novelistic imagination. John McGahern isn’t really, for all his brilliance, all that social in his interests. He is somewhat solitary and he is interested in solitude. And in the quality of aloneness of his central characters. That is an epical thing—man or woman in stark outlines against the background. And he knows that comes with a terrible price. He explores it in someone like Moran, very sympathetically.

But also, I suppose, you would have to say that that kind of depiction is not really about the interactions of one person and another. He himself has used a very good phrase to explain the point, a phrase he got from The Greeks and the Irrational, the book by E.R. Dodds where he distinguishes between the religious and the moral imagination. The moral imagination is actually interested in the quality of human relationships, people relating to one another and whether they do so ethically or not. The religious imagination is actually interested in one person’s relation to the mystical, the supernatural. I actually think that McGahern is much more interested in that than in any social theme. In the end, a character like Moran could not, even if there had been a successful republican revolution, have been at ease in the world—because his yearnings were deeper still. He was actually making the mistake of seeking to achieve through social arrangements a kind of fulfilment that is properly possible only in religion.

Again, I think McGahern feels that the great mistake of modern culture has been to conduct these searches in inappropriate forms, that people now seek from sex or politics a kind of meaning that they will never get from them. They will humiliate sex and politics by putting these things under far too much pressure, the pressure of their own excessive expectations.

I think of him, therefore, as a religious writer even though he is sort of seen in the cliché as someone who was creamed by the religious estab-
lishment and as hostile to any forms of Catholicism himself. But actually he is totally interested in ritual and in the religious mind.

And admits it. He admitted it in a few words I had with him.

His hostility to the sort of religious formation of his childhood in the 30s and 40s and as a young man in the 50s, is really to the way in which they betrayed the mystery and all that is the sacramental. That was religiosity, as opposed to religion. And the power structure was a kind of ecclesioc-racy which briefly he suffered from, but ultimately I think he recognized that it has nothing to do with one’s spiritual life. While other people in his books are working out their relations with one another, his main characters—from Elizabeth Reagan in The Barracks right through to Moran in Amongst Women—are actually a bit like the chorus in a Yeats play. They are working out their relationships with God.

That brings us on nicely to my last question. Elizabeth Reagan exclaimed ‘Jesus Christ!’ one morning as she became acutely aware of the beauty of nature, and this awareness is heightened by her imminent death. Similarly, shortly before he died, Moran notes ‘the amazing glory he was a part of’. I wonder what, in your view, are the links between epiphany and nature in McGahern’s writings.

I think it’s fascinating, and very subversive of you to have used the word ‘epiphany’, which is, of course, in literary terms a Joyce word. But it’s a word that Joyce stole from religion in order to put to artistic and secondary use.

What I think McGahern does in some ways is to return the word to the religious context. So a character like Moran has that wonderful vision of the creativity of the world all around him in the bloom of nature in the fields. Although he is a sick man—because he is a sick man—in some way he is restored by this feeling that things will go on. A tradition will live in the lament for its passing; the account of the collapse of one code can become the master narrative of the next code. And that is where you see McGahern lamenting, making the Swan Song, lamenting the decline of some code. He is shrewdly aware that the story he is producing will be part of the next culture. It isn’t merely a howl of lament. It’s also a piece of procreation. And I think this is the feeling that Moran has at that moment in the book.
Now what is fascinating is that his own children, particularly his daughters, who would be expected to understand this, don’t. They think the old boy is just bananas, gone, lost it. It reminds me of the scene in Riders of the Sea, where old Maura actually finally summoned the wisdom to bless all her drowned and lost sons, and to bless even Bartley, the recently drowned one, whom she had refused to bless when he went on his last journey. She actually achieved a kind of stillness and sense of acceptance in that moment, but her two daughters didn’t realise this and thought she was just numbed with grief.

I think it probably is an influence on McGahern. But it’s a very brilliantly deployed one, to make the same point: That both Moran and old Maura are, literally, an example of duine le Dia, and that those who remain on the earth are, mentally as well as physically, unable to understand. So you get this sense with Moran at the end of the book that he is not going to be deprived of life, he is going to be set free of it. Life itself had become the problem.

Declan Kiberd, thank you very much for sharing these thoughts with us.

IN DOCTRINE & LIFE NEXT MONTH

The Liturgy as Battlefield
WHAT DO ‘RESTORATIONISTS’ WANT?

★ REMBERT WEAKLAND, O.S.B.