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John McGahern : his Time and his Places

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A Treasury of Resources



John McGahern: His Time and His Places

John McGahern was a writer who always demonstrated a keen sense of place. Readers of his fiction inevitably note strong similarities between the figures and landscapes it evokes and the people and places the writer knew in real life. He was acutely aware of how important it was to write from personal knowledge, from everyday experience, in order to capture the beauty that can be found in the ordinary experiences of people going about their daily lives in small rural communities, mostly located in the Leitrim/Roscommon area where McGahern spent the majority of his life. His characters and settings are at times painfully real, whether it be the stoical Elizabeth Reegan in *The Barracks* (1963), who, on the threshold of a painful death from cancer, really “sees” the beauty of nature for the first time; or the uncertain groping towards adulthood of young Mahoney in *The Dark* (1965); the tyrannical actions of the patriarch Moran in *Amongst Women* (1990); or the unrelenting womanizing John Quinn in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002). These characters are made of flesh and blood and we have a strong sense that, in creating them, McGahern borrowed certain traits from local figures whom he met regularly in Mohill or at pubs and marts around Leitrim. He also drew from his relationship with his parents and siblings, his education, and the birth of a literary vocation. At the base of all his best fiction is an imagined life with a strong basis in reality. When one reads McGahern’s work, one has the impression of hearing the sound of a real hammer on a real anvil: it rings true.



This article arose out of a collaboration between the two authors, Eamon Maher, a McGahern “expert,” and Paul Butler, a photographer who moved to Leitrim in the 1990s and who has been accumulating a pictorial narrative of McGahern’s home county ever since. As part of the Red Rua book festival in 2013, the authors decided to do an illustrated talk on McGahern’s work that would go alongside Paul’s exhibition, *Still*, which is a combination of images and text revolving around the writer’s native county. The literary expert and the photographer saw McGahern as a visual writer and felt that the canvass he constantly reworked mainly consisted of the northwest midlands of Ireland, where he spent the vast majority of his life. His descriptions of townlands, houses, vegetation, wildlife, birds, and animals, culminate in the production of unforgettable images of a community and landscape that, while they are in great danger of succumbing to the inroads of modernity, nevertheless remain largely unchanged in his literary depictions. What follows therefore will be a discussion of a narrow selection of McGahern’s texts—his first novel, *The Barracks* (1963), and the last main work published in his lifetime, *Memoir* (2005)—which will be embellished or enhanced, or both, by a selection of photographs that bring the writer’s evocative descriptions to life. In effect, this article proposes an interdisciplinary reading of McGahern, using the genres of literary criticism and photography to underpin its argument. The *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* seemed the ideal outlet for this type of approach, because of its obvious connection with the author, as evidenced by a special issue of the journal dedicated to McGahern, which included photographs by his wife, Madeline.¹

In the first paragraph of *The Barracks* we have a classic description of a house interior:

The bright golds and scarlets of the religious pictures on the walls had faded, their glass glittered now in the sudden flashes of firelight, and as it deepened the dusk turned reddish from the Sacred Heart lamp that burned before the small wickerwork crib of Bethlehem on the mantelpiece. (7)²

It is widely understood that people’s domestic and natural environments can exert a strong influence on their behaviour. Elizabeth Reegan, the heroine of *The Barracks*, married a widowed Garda (policeman), John, with a young family. While he is out on patrol in filthy weather, Elizabeth has responsibility for all the domestic chores, such as washing and cooking, looking after the children’s and her husband’s needs. On this particular evening, she feels exhausted, a feeling

that is exacerbated by the cysts in her breasts, which, as a former nurse, she thinks may well be cancerous. The house's interior is very typical of this period in Ireland, with the religious pictures and the Sacred Heart lamp taking centre stage. This is a religious community, or at least it would appear to be from the outside. The reality, however, is quite different. The characters in *The Barracks* are wounded, dissatisfied individuals who are always keen to score points over their friends or enemies. In many ways, they are the victims of their environment, an environment dominated by rigidity, hierarchy and a lack of freedom. The Catholic Church is a controlling influence, dictating how one should behave in church, at school, or in the bedroom. The Irish State born out of the War of Independence, in which John Reegan fought with distinction, has not delivered on the idealistic aspirations of its founders. British hegemony has been replaced by a different type of tyranny, one in which Church and State collude in order to keep people in subjection. The police force does not offer Reegan the career advancement that he might have hoped for. He is obliged to take orders from a superior officer, Quirke, who is far younger than he, and for whom he has no respect. All of this makes for a frustrated Garda sergeant who is so preoccupied with his own woes that he fails to notice how tired his wife is.

The role of married women in Irish society at this time is not portrayed in a positive light. They don't have any real control over the family finances and are often reduced to the status of unpaid servants. For those of child-bearing age—Elizabeth never managed to conceive after her marriage to Reegan and so doesn't fall into that category—there was often a quick succession of children that had to be fed and cared for, mainly by the mother. Artificial contraception was forbidden by the Church and so avoided. Elizabeth inherits a ready-made family and any hopes of marital bliss soon dissolve when she settles into a life of hard work and monotonous routine which allows very little time for herself. The local parish priest attempts to enlist her services in the Legion of Mary, “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 she resists, a fact that does not endear her to the local clergy. What appealed to her about religion—and in this she resembles McGahern closely—were “the church services, always beautiful, especially in Holy Week; witnessed so often in the same unchanging pattern that they didn't come in broken recollections but flowed before the mind with the calm and grace and reassurance of all ritual” (123). The splendour of the church ceremonies, the rich colours of the flowers on the altar, the elaborate robes of the priest, the congregation dressed in their best clothes,



the intoning of the prayers in Latin, the candles and incense, all this appeals to Elizabeth's imagination.

When her cancer diagnosis is confirmed and she faces the prospect of dying, Elizabeth does not really turn to religion for solace. Instead, she employs her memory to transport her back to the time she spent in London, where she had a torrid affair with an unstable doctor called Halliday, who ended up committing suicide. Halliday had taught her to think independently, not to be swayed by the opinions of others, and on one occasion exclaimed: "What the hell is all this living and dying about anyway, Elizabeth? That's what I'd like to be told" (85). These words come back to Elizabeth as she tries to come to terms with her illness. Certain moments of epiphany help her along the way also, such as the occasion when she pushes her bicycle home from the post office and notices scenes that had previously escaped her attention:

She could see the village as she came downhill, the light staring her in the face, the woods across the lake, the mountains beyond with the sheds and gashes of the coal pits on the slopes, the river flowing through into the Shannon lowlands. The long pastures with black cattle and sheep, stone walls and thorn bushes came to meet her; and in a tillage field a tractor was ploughing monotonously backwards and forwards with its shadow. (97)

This detailed description emerges from Elizabeth's heightened recognition of the physical environment around her—the woods, lake, mountains, coal pits, river, walls, bushes and fields are all mentioned—a recognition that inspires a mixture of joy and sorrow; joy at the exquisite nature of the world, sorrow at the thought of leaving it all behind. This process comes to a crescendo the morning she looks out the window and sees through the eyes of a dying person a spectacle she has observed countless times before without noticing how unbearably lovely it was:

It was so beautiful when she let the blinds up first thing that "Jesus Christ," softly was all she was able to articulate as she looked out and up the river to the woods across the lake, black with the leaves fallen except the red rust of beech trees, the withered leaves standing pale and sharp as bamboo rods at the edges of the water. (170)

The familiar scene is firmly etched on her consciousness on this particular morning because its soothing presence is also charged with a visceral sadness. To die is never to contemplate this again; to die is to be separated forever from its beauty. McGahern is strong at depicting the starkness of death, its frightening finality. As she becomes increasingly ill, the Lenten period and Easter assume greater significance for Elizabeth. She ruminates on how the Resurrection and the Ascension “seemed shadowy and unreal compared to the way of Calvary” (195). Being confined to bed, she is touched in a hitherto unknown part of her being by the sounds of the outside world:

Outside the morning was clean and cold, men after hot breakfasts were on their way to work. The noises of the morning rose within her to a call of wild excitement. Never had she felt it so when she was rising to let up the blinds in the kitchen ... and now it was a call to life, life and life at any cost. (201–2)

But life is finite and Elizabeth ultimately succumbs to cancer and dies. What is most striking about this novel is the manner in which a young man of twenty-nine could describe in such graphic terms the thoughts and feelings of a dying middle-aged woman. Clearly McGahern drew on his own mother’s struggle with cancer and her death when he was just ten years old. For the purposes of this article, however, what needs to be underlined is how, from the very start of his literary career, McGahern was adept at supplying an impressive snapshot of scenes and objects that in some ways encapsulate the most private feelings of the middle-aged Elizabeth Reegan. In the case of *The Barracks*, it is the home occupied for some years by the McGahern family in Cootehall, County Roscommon, that forms the interior backdrop, while the landscape of the surrounding area is the inspiration for the physical features he describes. This visual dimension became more and more pronounced throughout McGahern’s career and probably reached its high point in the last work published during his lifetime, *Memoir*.

When *Memoir* was first published in 2005, readers were able to recognize the extent to which McGahern’s fiction drew its inspiration from the counties of Roscommon and Leitrim, where he spent the majority of his life. This is not akin to saying that the writer indulged in a form of autofiction. In fact, were he to have directly transposed actual events and characters into fiction, the result would have been a disaster from an aesthetic point of view. It would have reduced the whole exercise to “mere journalism,” as he stated on more than one occasion in











interviews. Dermot McCarthy, in his excellent study of the art of memory in McGahern, makes the following point: “What *Memoir* helps us to see is that the ‘progressively more effective way’ McGahern found to shape his fictive world was not exclusively artistic or even a completely conscious development, but a style and form that developed in relation to a slowly evolving process of self-liberation from the grief, guilt and anger that haunted him from childhood.”³

The idea of McGahern developing a “style” and “form” in which to couch his particular world view is essential to gaining an appreciation of his art. Important, too, are the pain and trauma he suffered at the hands of an allegedly brutal father. Eamonn Wall, in *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions* (2011), remarks that we have become accustomed to thinking of John McGahern “as a writer of rural Ireland—of farms, country kitchens, harvest rituals, visits to Boyle for shopping and excursions to Strandhill for holidays.”⁴ As is evident from Pat Collins’s moving documentary, *John McGahern: A Private World* (2005), the writer was irresistibly drawn back to the lanes and fields of Roscommon and Leitrim, an area to which he returned to live with his wife Madeline in the late 1960s after a period spent in England and Connemara. Although McGahern constantly emphasized the importance of detachment in the creation of good fiction, Wall notes how Collins’s documentary “challenges the distance that underlines this inner formality. It is simultaneously a reminder of the inseparability of the author from the personal background that underlines the work and a pointer towards McGahern’s need, as a literary artist, to adopt the pose of the outsider so that his material will assume its required formal and moral frame.”⁵ All of which is tantamount to saying that the writer drew closely on personal experiences when framing his fictional settings and characters, while attempting at the same time to maintain the objectivity necessary for the creation of good art. The autobiographical element is clearly present in everything that McGahern wrote, but what is most important is the degree to which, when subjected to the prism of art, these biographical components assume a universal resonance.

A short discussion of *Memoir* will now attempt to draw out the wonderfully evocative nature of McGahern’s writing. The account opens with the following lines:

The soil in Leitrim is poor, in places no more than an inch deep. Underneath is daub, a blue-grey modelling clay or channel, a compacted gravel. Neither can absorb the heavy rainfall. Rich crops of rushes and wiry grasses keep the thin clay from being washed away. (1)⁶

This description of the soil is deliberately designed to anchor the narrative in a particular place. It serves to distinguish Leitrim from other parts of Ireland, to show what is unique about the countryside in this area. McGahern explains that the soil is poor as a result of the thick dominant daub that cannot absorb the moisture. It is an untamed, viscous type of topography, possibly a little like the inhabitants one encounters there. The narrative also emphasizes some positives, however:

The hedges are the glory of these small fields, especially when the hawthorn foams into blossom each May and June. The sally is the first tree to green and the first to wither, and the rowan berries are an astonishing orange in the light from the lakes every September. (1)

McGahern was intent on delineating for his readers the scenes he observed for the majority of his life and that formed the basis of his artistic inspiration. He wanted to capture the colours, smells, and feel of the environment that moulded him and which he mined for his inspiration. What is remarkable is how little the surroundings changed from the time McGahern ran and played and worked in these same fields as a boy up and until his death in 2006. This may explain the capacity of the landscape to transport the writer back to the time when he used to walk through these fields and along those lanes with his beloved mother. They would pick flowers in the summer on their way to the school or else go a different route to collect milk from Ollarton's. The lanes were the most conducive when it came to prompting what Proust would refer to as "involuntary memory":

I must have been extraordinarily happy walking that lane to school. There are many such lanes around where I live, and in certain rare moments over the years while walking in these lanes I have come into an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace, in which I feel I can live for ever. I suspect that it is no more than the actual lane and the lost lane becoming one for a moment in an intensity of feeling, but without the usual attendants of pain and loss. These moments disappear as soon as they come, and long before they can be recognized and placed. (4)

Whereas for Proust the trigger was the taste of the madeleine he dunked in his tisane, for McGahern it was the atmospheric lanes that opened up a real treasure trove of memories. Inevitably they revolved around his mother, to whom he was very close and who died so young. Pain and loss are miraculously

transformed temporarily into the joy of being reunited with the “beloved,” to whom *Memoir* is an unashamed paean. Note how such moments can never be deliberately willed into being; the extraordinary “peace” that he feels is like fairy gossamer; it slips through his grasp as quickly as it comes. Given the close affinity between McGahern and his mother, and between both of them and the land of Leitrim, the lure of living near where he was brought up must have been strong. He never talks of being able to relive the past in other settings; involuntary memory was tied strongly to the lanes of Leitrim. Like Elizabeth Reegan, with the approach of death, a death he knew was imminent after he was diagnosed with cancer a couple of years before his demise, the awareness of the physical world McGahern was soon to leave behind became even more acute:

We grow into an understanding of the world gradually. Much of what we come to know is far from comforting, that each day brings us closer to the inevitable hour when all will be darkness again, but even that knowledge is power and all understanding is joy, even in the face of dread, and cannot be taken from us until everything is. We grow into a love of the world, a love that is all the more precious and poignant because the great glory of which we are but a particle is lost almost as soon as it is gathered. (36)

These few lines encapsulate McGahern’s approach to life. As we grow older we come to a greater appreciation of people and the physical environment. However, just as we are becoming aware of the great glory we are part of, it is time to leave it behind and face into eternity. In McGahern’s literary world, people are indissociable from places. Aughawillan, Ballinamore, Grevisk, Drumshanbo, Dromahair, Mohill, Drumkeeran, Carrigallen, Corramahon, Keshcarrigan, Fenagh, Dowra, Leitrim, all these towns and villages with their resonant names are imbedded in the mind of anyone who reads McGahern. They recur like a refrain, as though, in the act of naming them, the artist is attempting to immortalize the role they played in his emotional imagination. In what could be called his literary credo, “The Image,” McGahern emphasized the importance of literature in helping people to live. We read: “Art is an attempt to create a world in which we can live: if not for long or forever, still a world of the imagination over which we can reign, and by reign I mean to reflect purely on our situation through this created world of ours, this Medusa’s mirror, allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable.”⁷









It is fair to say that McGahern, like his close friend Seamus Heaney, with whom he shared many similarities, “reflected purely” on the human condition and created an art that opens out on a world that is as beautiful as it is “intolerable.” In an interview with Denis Sampson, McGahern underlined the essential role that writing played in his life: “It was through words that I came to see the little I do know about the world, and it was through words that I came to see the world. Rather than write novels or stories, I write to see. And the seeing is through language.”⁸

We share Dermot McCarthy’s insightful reading of *Memoir* as a work that makes clear how “the lost image,” like “the lost world,” is the mother-image, the mother-world, and that the “grave of dead passions and their days” where McGahern sought them is memory and the unconscious, the personal labyrinth that he entered through the portal of writing and somehow transcended through the art of fiction.⁹ There were issues that he needed to confront, particularly the death of his mother and his problematic relationship with his father, before he died. The gentle tone of *Memoir*, its almost pastoral air of celebration, is imputable to the fact that his mother is at the heart of the narrative, guiding the writer’s pen, showing him the splendour of nature, the goodness in people, the joy of living. Her family came from the Iron Mountains, near the village of Corleehan, and the interior of the house is described in the following manner by McGahern:

A few religious pictures and a shop calendar were on the whitewashed walls, and a small red lamp burned beneath a picture of the Sacred Heart on a narrow mantel above the hearth. The space above the lower room was open beneath the thatch and reached by a ladder. When I saw it as a child, the horse’s harness hung there, and it was where my uncles slept when they were young. (45)

From these humble origins, his mother Susan and her brother Jimmy managed to secure the King’s Scholarship, the first children to do so from the mountain. Only Susan was in a position to avail of the education it secured for her and she went on to become a primary school teacher. The religious pictures and shop calendar emphasize the significant role played by religion and the local community in the life of this close-knit family, which is described with great warmth throughout *Memoir*. There is a sense also that in going into such minute detail in his description of the house in which they lived, McGahern sought to pay homage to a way of life that was on its last legs. Paul Butler’s exhibition offers

a stark reminder of the ravages wrought by the abrupt end of the Celtic Tiger. Abandoned housing estates are one thing, but the prevalence of crumbling old houses whose inhabitants have long since left the area reinforces the notion of a lost generation. Who is left to recount their story? Does it just fade as the roofs cave in and the walls crumble? The house in which McGahern and his siblings lived with their mother near Aughawillan is no longer in evidence, the gate and lane that led down to it almost completely overtaken by vegetation. When trying to understand the constant naming of the landmarks that McGahern and his mother passed on their way to school, or to visit his aunt and uncle, one eventually comes to realize that it was a deliberate ploy on the part of the writer to preserve these loci in the memory of readers who might subsequently want to reimagine what the mother and her young son saw as they walked through this beautiful and highly evocative landscape. Here is one example of how this process operates:

We walked to Ollarton's with a can for milk. We wore coats, as the night had turned cold under a clear, pale moon. We passed Brady's pool where the horses drank. Across from the pool was Brady's house and the smaller house where the old Mahon brothers lived. In the corner of the meadow below Brady's was a dark, deep quarry. (63)

People and places, places and people, these are what mattered to McGahern. The Bradys and the Mahons probably no longer live in these houses, which in all likelihood are now in ruins. Similarly, the inhabitants have long since abandoned the custom of going to Ollarton's for fresh milk. But these customs and places were intrinsic to the shaping of McGahern's artistic vocation that would eventually culminate in a work that offers a wonderful evocation of what it was like to live in this part of Leitrim in the 1940s. And throughout the oeuvre, one can sense the kindly presence of Susan McGahern, whose first-born child cherished her like no other. He jealously sought to be alone with his beloved, whom he associated with unconcealed ecstasy:

The happiness of that walk and night under the pale moon was so intense that it brought on a light-headedness. It was as if the whole night, the dark trees, the moon in the small lake, moonlight making pale the gravel of the road we walked, my mother restored to me and giving me her free hand, which I swung heedlessly, were all filled with healing and the certainty that we'd never die. (64)



But of course we do die, if by death we mean the end of earthly existence. What McGahern is suggesting here, however, is that through an artistic re-presentation of such key moments it is possible to prolong them forever in the reader's imagination. Writing about the happy moments with his mother is counterbalanced by the reign of terror that Sergeant Francis McGahern inflicted on the children after their mother's death. So the idyllic walks with the mother are counterbalanced by the vicious beatings and unreasonable antics of the father described in the same book. With the latter, it was always a question of self-preservation:

When there was a bad beating and the storm had died, we'd gather round whoever was beaten to comfort and affirm its unfairness, and it lessened our misery and gave strength to our anger. We learned to read his moods and to send out warnings in an instant so that we could vanish or take some defence, such as the simulated appearance of abject misery. (159)

Books too were a source of happiness, a means of being transported into the world of the imagination. McGahern's sisters often found him in a trance-like state when reading and on one occasion even unlaced and took off one of his shoes and placed a straw hat on his head without his realizing it, so engrossed was he in his book. He sometimes had the same experience when writing. He described it as "a strange and complete happiness when all sense of time is lost" (178). There were occasions when such evasion from the real world was more than welcome. Religious rituals served a similar purpose: "In an impoverished time, they were my first introduction to an indoor beauty, of luxury and ornament, ceremony and sacrament and mystery," he wrote (201). Corpus Christi was the feast of summer, when rhododendron branches were cut from the Oakport Woods and used to decorate the grass margins around the local village. Banners and flowers, white linen on the altar, massive crowds heading to the church where the Host was taken from the tabernacle and carried by the priest beneath a gold canopy, solemn benediction, all these are recalled as sacred moments. Secondary education with the Patrician Brothers in Carrick-on-Shannon imbued a love of learning in young McGahern that would last a lifetime. Life in the training college in St. Pat's did not compare favourably, but at least it afforded him the freedom to sample the social and cultural scene in Dublin and to make his first tentative moves towards becoming a writer.





Then the wheel came full circle and he found himself back among his people, in a house located a few miles from where he had lived with his mother. It was like a homecoming: “The people and the language and the landscape where I had grown up were like my breathing,” he admitted (260). He would live there happily with Madeline until his death years later. Reading *Memoir* is a stark reminder of the transience of life, the elusiveness of happiness, the preciousness of love. Not surprisingly, the memoir ends with the writer and his mother walking on the lanes, where he shows her fish bones and blue crayfish shells at the lake’s edge. As if anticipating their imminent reunion after his own death, when he was laid to rest alongside her in the grave near Aughawillan church, the last lines read:

Above the lake we would follow the enormous
sky until it reaches the low mountains where
her life began.

I would want no shadow to fall on her joy and deep trust
in God. She would face no false reproaches. As we retraced
our steps, I would pick for her the wild orchid and the
windflower. (272)

One can almost imagine mother and son floating above the Leitrim landscape, each ecstatic at being once more in the comforting presence of the other, looking down at the flowers and the animals, the trees and the lanes, in the eternal state where pain is banished and love reigns supreme. For those left in their wake, there is still the fictional work, with its lyrical and detailed portrayal of Leitrim and Roscommon. McGahern’s legacy is not one that should be underestimated—namely his capacity to make of one small place an everywhere.

Paul Butler’s photographic exhibitions serve therefore to reinforce the close connection between time and place in McGahern’s writing.¹⁰ Photographs of deserted, crumbling houses still contain the remnants of a disappearing culture and mirror the artistic inspiration of McGahern. Pictures of the Sacred Heart and holy water fonts, images of Padre Pio and Popes John XXIII and John Paul II, rusting razors, curtains framing windows with no glass, cattle grazing in a field, startlingly beautiful sunsets and skies, atmospheric lanes with their hedges teeming with life and vegetation, all these bring McGahern’s world into sharp focus. The close connection between the written word and the visual images



underscores just what a keen observer John McGahern was of his local environment and how valuable his contribution is to our understanding of life as he knew it during his youth and adulthood. His appeal is both local and universal, time and places being constant and familiar for those who come to know and appreciate his literary universe through his fiction and prose writing. ¶

ENDNOTES

- 1 Denis Sampson, guest editor, special issue on John McGahern, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 17, no. 1 (1991).
- 2 John McGahern, *The Barracks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963). Citations to this work will appear in the text.
- 3 Dermot McCarthy, *John McGahern and the Art of Memory* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 5–6.
- 4 Eamonn Wall, *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 89.
- 5 Wall, *Writing the Irish West*, 89.
- 6 John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005). Citations to this work will appear in the text.
- 7 John McGahern, “The Image,” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17, no. 1 (1991), 12.
- 8 Denis Sampson, “A Conversation with John McGahern,” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17, no. 1 (1991), 13.
- 9 McCarthy, *John McGahern*, 10.
- 10 Paul had another exhibition, *The Deep Well of Want*, on display at the Backstage Theatre in Longford. He wrote about the inspiration for this work in Paul Butler, “John McGahern and The Deep Well of Want: Portraits of the Artist’s World,” *IrishTimes.com*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/john-mcgahern-and-the-deep-well-of-want-portraits-of-the-artist-s-world-1.2592043>
