2018-02-27

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Eamon Maher
Institute of Technology, Tallaght, eamon.maher@ittdublin.ie

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John McGahern: priceless insights into his art

Melvyn Bragg, Roy Foster, Paula Meehan and others offer a refreshing diversity of critical approaches to a great writer

Eamon Maher

Tue, Feb 27, 2018, 10:53

John McGahern has been the subject of a number of monographs in recent years, but this is the first essay collection dedicated to his work since the three volumes of UCD Galway’s The John McGahern Yearbook, edited by John Kenny, and the critical essays assembled by Mullen, Bargroff and Mullen in a Peter Lang publication from 2013.

Like the yearbook, the editors of this timely compilation deliberately set out to encourage people from a variety of backgrounds to write about McGahern. While the majority are what can be loosely described as literary critics (Nicholas Allen, David Clare, Catriona Clutterbuck, Željka Doljanin, Máire Doyle, Declan Kiber, Ciaran Ross, Stanley van der Ziel and Tom Walker), one can also read the opinions of broadcaster Melvyn Bragg, historian Roy Foster, sociologist Tom Inglis, journalist and writer Linden MacIntyre, educationalist Kevin Williams and writers Paula Meehan and Frank McGuinness – the latter being also an academic.

The result is a refreshing diversity of critical approaches and some priceless insights with regard to McGahern’s art. The editors’ stated ambition in the introduction, “to probe and reassess how McGahern’s legacy and his standing among contemporary audiences might be defined” and to “re-interpret and re-affirm the singularity of his vision”, is largely achieved.

The collections opens with Paula Meehan’s poem in memory of McGahern, The Woodpile. In her subsequent essay, the poet explains how a writing workshop given by McGahern in Galway that she was invited to attend in 1979 left an indelible mark on her evolution as a writer. She never forgot his supportive presence or the sage advice he offered to the group: they should write, he advised, with the table to a blank wall so as not to be side-tracked from the task in hand. He claimed that “distraction was the enemy of writers” and enumerated the numerous distractions a day in Fenagh, Co Leitrim might hold.

Meehan mentions the distinguished visitors that were lined up by McGahern to address the workshop participants, chief among them Neill Jordan and Nuala O’Faoláin. She recalls how young writers like herself looked up to McGahern at the time (he had recently published his fourth novel, The Pornographer), seeing him as a trailblazer. He warned them against publishing before the material was mastered, adding: “Judge yourself not by your successes but by the grandeur of your failures”.

There is a convergence between certain themes covered by the various contributors, although it can at times be difficult to appreciate the links and filiations, because the material is not divided into sections. The hard-fought battle for self-determination in the years after Irish independence from colonial rule forms the basis of a number of essays. Nicholas Allen’s contribution on landscape and the post republic starts off intriguingly by underlining McGahern’s innate sense of place: “The tension between intimate attachment to a particular place and the social codes of the surrounding community can generate conflict and claustrophobia. Resignation is the sum motion of this equation and McGahern is a master draftsman of the taut lines that join character, setting and the reader in his stories”.

He tellingly observes that “narrative is a balm to the anger expressed by individuals who were damaged in the historical moment of Irish independence whereas his compelling accounts of rural life can lull the reader into the imagination of some eternal connection between land and people”. Allen points out how the apparent idyll that is rural life in post-revolutionary Ireland was sometimes disturbed by the continuing war waged on their families by the veterans of the conflict, for whom the outcome of their sacrifice was disappointing: an example being IRA veteran Michael Moran in Amongst Women telling his children the whole enterprise was a “cod”.

This is a theme that is taken up by Roy Foster who draws attention to the faded tricolour that is draped around Moran’s coffin at the end of the novel and compares it to the opening pages where the intensity of his actions as leader of a flying column is evoked. “Things were never so simple or clear again,” Moran remarks. He and others like him had great difficulty readjusting to life after the struggle. Foster finds the absence of any real reference to politics in Memoir quite striking and he argues that the contempt of the politicians who stand at a remove from the crowd at Moran’s burial shows how a new order has replaced the old: “This is the world inherited by the post-revolution generation along with the censorship, Puritanism and clerical power which McGahern himself, in his writing, as in his life, knew and witnessed all too well”.

Using Emmanuel Levinas’ theory of the ethical “face à face” with the “other” to explore McGahern’s sceptical attitude to 1916, Ciaran
Ross argues that the writer, as writer, declines to pass judgement on his characters, thus taking "full responsibility for the other, for apprehending the other as other". Catriona Clutterbuck’s article continues the ethical debate in her discussion of redemption and transcendence in McGahern’s afterlife vision. She comments on the unusual phenomenon whereby “belief in an afterlife is held onto after religious faith per se is let go.”

The laying out of Johnny’s body in That They May Face the Rising Sun and the coming together of certain members of the lake community to dig his grave is emblematic of how rituals persist long after belief in organised religion has passed. She cites Rutledge’s observation that “The world is full of things I don’t know”, which betrays the possibility, at least in his mind, that there may well be an afterlife. “We look to the resurrection of the dead”, he says to the men around him.

Tom Inglis argues that McGahern “reveals what it was like to make love and have sex in Ireland during a shift from a Catholic culture of self-denial to a modern, urban, cosmopolitan culture of self-fulfilment and self-indulgence”. As such, it is not surprising that his work should attract the interest of one of Ireland’s leading sociologists. Inglis shows the vast difference in attitudes to sex between Dublin and rural Ireland. Sex in the country was something that could not even be talked about, never mind indulged in outside of marriage. Inglis ends by asking what is the relationship between maternal love and sexual love, before concluding: “In the time and places in which he (McGahern) lived, they are worlds apart”. There is definitely room for a Freudian reading of McGahern’s extremely close relationship with his mother and the way in which that may have impacted his portrayal of sex in his writings.

Maire Doyle, in a very welcome discussion of the short story that supplies the title to the posthumously published Love of the World collection, views it as “the most overtly socio-political of McGahern’s stories”. It is certainly daring in its treatment of a GAA legend whose career in the Garda Siolchána ends in the same type of acrimony as his marriage to a local beauty because of his inability to accept his shortcomings. Whereas he feels totally justified at engaging in extramarital affairs with female German tourists, he cannot abide the thought of his wife working in close proximity to a local auctioneer who is clearly attracted to her. He locks her out of their house, only allowing her limited, supervised visits to see her children, and eventually kills her. The story ends with Maggie, the murdered woman’s mother, remarking how, in spite of the pain she has endured, she remains content: “... even now, it’s all still very interesting. Sometimes far, far too interesting”. This attitude, in Doyle’s view, sums up McGahern’s affirmation of life and what it is to properly exist.

Frank McGuinness’ decision to write a comparative article on McGahern’s The Beginning of an Idea and Flannery O’Connor’s A Good Man is Hard to Find unearths similarities one would never have suspected. Both share a fascination with the sinister and violent side of human nature, which, according to McGuinness, betrays “their authors’ unease with any hope of salvation in and for this earth”. For someone who is often portrayed as one of America’s great Catholic writers, O’Connor’s world view is invariably pessimistic. McGuinness is correct to point out that O’Connor had no time for sentimental faith, a trait she shares with McGahern. Their attempts at “writing violence” unleash at times tensions within them of which they may well have been unaware and which can be disturbing to read.

Between the editors’ introduction and Declan Kiberd’s afterword, the importance of some of the 15 essays not covered in this review is highlighted. Each is worthy of attention and brings its own unique perspective on McGahern’s work. However, it is the transcript of Stanley van der Ziel’s interview, conducted in the Gresham Hotel in October 2004, that really offers a unique insight into how McGahern viewed his art. As a renowned McGahern scholar (he edited the prose collection, Love of the World, as well as producing a significant monograph, John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition), van der Ziel carefully steered the conversation down the path of how the literary process evolved and the main influences on McGahern’s work. For example, when asked about his experience of involuntary memory, McGahern admitted that it brought him “a kind of strange feeling of security and happiness, which is obviously the actual day and the lost day joining together in an intensity of feeling without the usual attendants of pain and loss”. Such moments could not be willed into being, but there were particular places, such as the lanes of Leitrim, which acted as triggers that allowed lost time to be relived in the present.

The writer’s comments about Kate O’Brien are also revealing. He frequently mentioned that he was a fan of her work and confides that their first meeting was facilitated by his cousin and fellow writer John Broderick, from Athlone. Both Broderick and O’Brien were very drunk, which made for an awkward evening. But the admiration for O’Brien’s work did not wane afterwards. McGahern’s admission that he found all sorts of literary gatherings “quite painful” is borne out by his comments in other interviews, and yet Melvyn Bragg points out his “appetite and talent for often wicked gossip”, especially about other writers.

His self-deprecatory sense of humour shines through in many of his responses, but he was always deadly serious when discussing his art. In that regard, the revelation that he read a number of French writers, who were accepted in Ireland “because they were considered more Catholic than English writers”, is very interesting.

There is nothing surprising about his having read Camus and Proust, or Balzac for that matter, but the comment that he loved
Céline's Journey to the End of the Night leaves much food for thought, given the controversy that text and others by the same author elicited in France and elsewhere. Also, Céline was a very experimental novelist, and McGahern stated on numerous occasions his dislike of the nouvelle vague of French writers, especially Nathalie Sarraute, believing that it was "all gimmick". François Mauriac, as a Nobel Prize winner, was a must read, but it was not his characters that appealed to McGahern so much as the "sense of place" evoked in the early novels, which he found "quite magical". Often the qualities McGahern admired in other writers were ones that he excelled at himself, whether it be the importance of style and objectivity in Joyce and Flaubert, authentic human experience as portrayed by Camus and O'Crohan, characterization in Balzac, humour in Beckett, and so on.

He supplied the following answer to van der Ziel's comment that his last novel was to an extent outside history: "I suppose as you get more confident you're less tied to your society and you're more closely connected with your language. I think there's quite a bit of history in That They May Face the Rising Sun, but it's by suggestion and innuendo, which I think is always more powerful than statement".

Surefooted and helpful in his comments, McGahern was also prone to going back over the same ground in different interviews and giving slightly different shades of meaning to his answers. It's almost like each interview was for him a draft that he came back to again and again until it conveyed the exact meaning he was looking for.

John McGahern: Authority and Vision is a publication that will undoubtedly appeal to students of literature and anyone with an interest in discovering that qualities that made McGahern one of Ireland's foremost prose writers of the second half of the twentieth century. The collection is a credit to both the indefatigable work of the editors and the vision of Manchester University Press in seeing the value and interest of literary essays when they are written to the high standard one encounters in this volume.

Eamon Maher's most recent book is an edited selection of essays entitled The Reimagining Ireland Reader: Examining our Past, Shaping our Future (Peter Lang, Oxford). He is also co-editor, with Derek Hand, of Assessing a Literary Legacy: Essays on John McGahern (1934-2006), which is forthcoming from Cork University Press.