

THE MOVING IMAGE IN JOHN McGAHERN'S SHORT STORIES

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JOHN McGAHERN'S SHORT STORIES

By

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## Abstract

Alienation is the central predicament in the short fiction of Irish writer, John McGahern. On the whole, however, the stories do not represent and explore particular forms and origins of alienated consciousness. Rather, the stories emphasize the human struggle to find meaning in an inherently alien world. The disinterest McGahern's work displays in pursuing definitive answers, and hence techniques to overcome alienation, suggests that alienation is a constant aspect of the human condition. And this basic axiom is complemented by the inconclusive quality of his stories.

Of greater concern in McGahern's short fiction is how alienation motivates the symbolic power of the imagination because to reflect, perceive and envision are the only means to mitigate estrangement. Even though alienation, ultimately, is inescapable, imagining and creating stories are life-giving activities which sympathetically and patiently reveal, from a limited glimmer of light, 'natural processes of living' in one's own life as well as others. McGahern's stories celebrate the human struggle to find meaning in the world.

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## Introduction

The short story remains a fictional form without concrete definition. Frank O'Connor in his classic book about the short story, *The Lonely Voice*, states: "the very term 'short story' is a misnomer. A great story is not necessarily short at all, and the conception of the short story as a miniature art is inherently false" (27). O'Connor "crudely" summarizes: "the form of the novel is given by the length...[whereas] in the short story the length is given by the form" (27). He elaborates:

Because [the author's] frame of reference can never be a totality of human life, he must be forever selecting the point at which he can approach it...[this is] not essential form that life gives us; it is organic form, something that springs from a single detail and embraces past, present and future. (21-2)

Sean O'Faolain, another major Irish short story writer, defines the genre in similar terms: a "crack of light" that must be intense enough to "make a tiny bit do for the whole" (163). He and O'Connor view a purity in the relationship between the short story and life. Life is not lived in episodes; it is not a serial form, and the short story's power comes from a similar organic essence. It is the revealing deep focus of the individual frame and not the recounting of action that elucidates life's truths. O'Faolain states outright that the very word "episodic is a...convention...;its Greek meaning...is that which 'comes in besides'" (153). Arguably, one of the short story's primary delights is "seeing a craftsman doing a delicate job" (205) in shaping a "crack of light" to "*seem* more than an episode or disjunction" (155).

The craftsman, as O'Faolain sees him, is a technician first, and artist second. But the artistic manifestation is nonetheless "art." The distinction is not in the final form, but in

the starting place of the imagination. Does one start with a grand design, or build slowly with the tools at hand, confident that the vision will emerge? If there is a definitive truth in McGahern's short fiction, it is the way he celebrates and reveals the transcendent power of the imagination 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...allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable. (McGahern, "The Image")

It is McGahern's belief that life or art can hold little more than a momentary truth. At most, McGahern's grand design is one where "indeterminacy and process [are] the underlying reality connecting consciousness and nature" (Sampson *Outstaring* 23).

For a writer intent on "bringing to light things that were in bad need of light" ("Oldfashioned" 268), an indeterminant world renders futile the pursuit of objectivity. Although his fictions exude focus and authenticity, McGahern is well aware of their relative and subjective foundations. He alludes to this in a direct authorial comment in a later story, "The Country Funeral": "it is not generally light but shadow that we cast" (375), inferring that we all cloud observation with opinion and this obscures as often as it illuminates.

Indeed, there are similar passages embedded in many stories which collectively form a self-conscious discourse that mocks the notion that art can entirely transcend "private obsessions" ("Oldfashioned" 269). In "Sierra Leone," for instance, the narrator is resolved: "They say the world would be a better place if we looked at ourselves objectively and subjectively at others, but that's never the way the ball bounces" (321). Moreover, Paddy Mulvey, the pretentious Bohemian in "Parachutes," champions subjective observation as the universal track for 'getting through' life: "I am always making people up. People need a great deal of making up. I don't see how they'd be possible otherwise. Everybody does it" (235). This discourse regarding the inescapable dominance of the



author ultimately concurs with Sean O'Faolain's belief: "It is not the subject that a man writes; it is himself. I cannot say it too often" (179).

Hence, when McGahern speaks of vision he makes no claims to objectivity. Subjectivity is a given and optimism and pessimism are equally irrelevant; it is only the quality of vision that matters. And this quality is intricately aligned with "the essential nature of life which is change" (Sampson 186). In this respect, a phrase recalled by the central character in "Bank Holiday" can serve as the basis of McGahern's craft:

As he walked...a phrase came without warning from the book he had been reading in Webb's: 'What is he doing with his life, we say: and our judgment makes up for the failure to realize sympathetically the natural processes of living.' (355)

Specifically, McGahern's technical virtuosity is in his profound ability to focus on the image before him. His most successful stories are those that reveal a world of life "process" in a single, original, fixed image. This method is rooted in the program asserted by Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of an Artist* as McGahern stories seem to pass from point to point along the "bounding line" drawn about an apprehended image (cited by Sampson 20). McGahern renders a robustness of character and context through an adherence to the subtle, though evocative, adumbrations that the genre allows. Seemingly aware that any image is little more than a part of a much larger continuum, McGahern's acute depth of focus renders the image a "living stream" (*Amongst Women* 80). Indeed, McGahern shapes a "crack of light" to "*seem* more than an episode or disjunction" (155). This curious blend of stasis and movement is evident in varying degrees throughout McGahern's short fiction.

Jean Pickering in her article "Time and the Short" ruminates over the incompatibility of the short story and film. While novels have been marvellously rendered on the screen (Eliot's *Middlemarch* by the BBC, for example), short stories (save the primarily anecdotal

stories of O. Henry or Roald Dahl) tend to lose "a whole dimension. The film pulls against the nature of the short story, which is essentially towards stasis" (52). Though Pickering's overall concern is more philosophical, her comments do apply to the static, elemental origins which seem to motivate many of McGahern's stories. Like a pencilled contour being imbued with colour, his story "A Slip-Up," grows from within the frame of a single image. Indeed McGahern himself makes such a comparison: "Writing is just like drawing a picture or painting--you just want to get every corner the way it should be" (interview w. Tracey Sennett (1986), cited by Sampson 27).

Perhaps because of its anecdotal emphasis--a rarity in McGahern's fiction--"A Slip-Up" has been virtually ignored by critics. For the serious critic concerned with the whole of McGahern's vision, "A Slip-Up" is little more than what it is: it is void of conversation; it has no rigorous intellectual framework. Nevertheless, "A Slip-Up" is a crafted thing, born out of a single image of an elderly man. In "The Image," his statement about his art, McGahern is clear that to imagine is an involuntary way to overcome alienation and find meaning in the world. If living is conceptualized as making sense of strangeness and strangers, then the short story is the literary equivalent. In this respect, it corresponds to the everyday process of imagining. It is the short-story 'craftsman,' however, who can transform such pause into an organic, literary form. This affinity to common experience is a popular attraction of the genre.

"A Slip-Up" opens with a traditional story-telling device: "There was such a strain on the silence between them after he'd eaten that it had to be broken" (127). A narrator is thus conventionally poised not only to break the silence but to explain it. The first utterance belongs to Michael, the husband: "Maybe we should never have given up the farm and

come here." This comment is then followed by his unexpressed thoughts that are quickly circumvented by his wife, Agnes--an act suggesting the telepathic nature of long marriages.

"What had happened today..." requires an explanation which the narrator allows Agnes to convey. Her six paragraphs of recounting are emotionally detailed and immediate. Indeed, Agnes's attention to detail is a self-caricature; but it is none the less naturalistic, which on the one hand appears trivial, and yet on the other, in view of her anguish, it is personally significant. "I was...paralysed with worry....I couldn't stand it," "I started to cry" (127-8). There may not be great pathos elicited here, yet "the natural processes of life" are being conveyed. By the end of her talk, however, the reader is really no further ahead in terms of understanding the "slip-up": all the reader knows is that Michael was forgotten by her at the local supermarket, missed his lunchtime pint, and his dinner got cold. The emotional torment of the slip-up is fed to us in discrete, intense moments.

In order to explain the couple's daily routine, the second section of the story reverts to third-person narration with Michael as the centre of consciousness. Not surprisingly, in light of his earlier nostalgic remarks, Michael's present life is immersed in "those dead days" of the past, days walking with his "mother round the lake...the oilcloth shopping bag he carried for her in the glow of chattering" (129). In the present they are vividly re-lived, though

[n]ow it was Agnes who chattered as they walked to Tesco's, and he'd no longer to listen, any response to her bead of talk had long become nothing but an irritation to her; and so he walked safely...drawing closer to [his family's] farm between the lakes that they had lost. (129)

By the time he and Agnes reach the supermarket he "would have already have reached the farm between the lakes." Alone, and outside the "brands and bright lights [that] troubled

him," (129) Michael immerses himself in detailed reminiscences, giving each day an authentic chronology. When these recollections began, the farm was haggard from disuse: "There were no limits. Everything looked impossible. A hundred hands seemed needed" (129); this is long past, however, on the day of the story--the farm up and running, his work now a routine of habit and physical wear: "he felt himself leaning over the fork with tiredness" (130). And his memories are also interspersed with the present:

This morning as he walked with Agnes he decided to clear the drinking pool....For all that time he was unaware of the shopping bag, but when all the water flowed down towards the pool he felt it again by his side. He wondered what was keeping Agnes. (130)

Though Michael's detailed recollections caricature him no less than his wife's retelling did her, they are a symbolic retrieval of the past, a winning back of the farm "that they had lost when they came to London" (129), and, similarly, a retrieval of his mother. The present resumes once this section's narrative reaches the time when Michael is stunned out of his past, when Agnes picks him up. Though Agnes's "slip-up" gave him the extra time to "finish[.] such a long job," it also "caught" and pulled him ahead to the urban, motherless present.

Recalling what was referred to earlier as the short story's correspondence to everyday imaging, "A Slip-Up" exemplifies the point. Living entails wandering through strangeness, passing by strangers. Imagining contexts--pasts and futures--is a means of understanding the "natural processes of life." It is the 'delicate job' of the short story craftsman to give form to these involuntary narratives. While it is virtually impossible to fully understand an author's motivation for a story, "A Slip-Up" appears tightly moulded about a commonplace image, an elderly man standing outside a supermarket holding a shopping basket. Such a found-image can elicit a speculative, involuntary narrative in any passerby; yet for McGahern, it obviously possessed an "almost symbolic significance in

his mind" (O'Faolain 193), and from that image a story has been cast, shedding light on the whys and the wherefores of old age, marriage and death. Again, this process is a common occurrence--for writers and non-writers alike. All of us having experienced the process of imagining, yet unable or unwilling to solidify it, still know its power and appreciate the form given by the craftsman.

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Although life may be intolerable for Michael, as a means for 'getting through' it, McGahern sympathetically speculates that the elderly man he observes finds sanctuary in an imaginary world of his memory. Although the protagonist's imaginative process is confined to a narrow re-creation of his childhood wholeness, and in this respect may not exact an "unearthly glow," his retrieval of the past none the less mirrors McGahern's conception of the artistic process and the power of the imagination as a whole. In his short essay "The Image: A Prologue to a Reading" McGahern defines this universal impulse to create as an involuntary resurrection of images from darkness:

The vision, that still and private world which each of us possesses and which others cannot see, is brought to life in rhythm--rhythm being little more than the instinctive movements of the vision as it comes to life and begins its search for the image in a kind of grave, grave of the images of dead passions and their days.  
("The Image")

Indeed throughout McGahern's work "the process of living is made analogous to the process of writing itself" (Sampson 29). Paralleling the writing of fiction with the process of living is fundamental to the first chapter of this thesis. Utilizing a 'literal' reading approach, each of the first-person narratives is read as direct manifestations of individual imaginations. In other words, each of the stories is representative of a narrator 'getting through' life by finding shape in it. Again, McGahern clearly articulates that art as a means to find 'shape' is an instinctual process:

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...allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable. (McGahern "The Image")

And this conception concurs with Frank O'Connor's notion that the short story is comprised of lonely voices from submerged populations. Similarly, Antoinette Quinn hears these voices in McGahern's short fiction, and argues that the author

engages the reader's sympathy for his morose heroes by mediating his fictions through a central consciousness or first person narrator. This is peculiarly appropriate technique for representing the alienated consciousness, defining the hero's own sense of his isolation from his world. McGahern's heroes are often anonymous and are rarely portrayed externally but they are always self-aware and self-analytic. The narrative, presented from their point of view, dwells on the discrepancy between their public personae and their private attitudes....Through the intimacy of the point of view technique the reader is encouraged to [sic] compassionate with these malcontents' strategies for 'getting through' life. In many instances we are led to respect their pursuit of alienated authenticity; their unwaveringly honest confrontation with the misery of their existence; they appear nobly ignoble. (Quinn 79)

Indeed, as Quinn states, McGahern engages the reader's sympathy for the many lonely voices in his short stories; but Quinn overlooks the degrees of narrator self-awareness. Thus she implies that his engagement of sympathy is ubiquitous and unconditional. More accurately, McGahern engages the reader's sympathy only for those 'morose heroes' whose narratives reflect self-awareness and self-analysis. The narrators' journeys to mitigate the "misery of their existence" involve a painful struggle to confront the deep self, the past or the limits of their vision. This self-analysis, as it yields the inevitable and often intolerable conclusion that life is indeterminate, is always preferred by McGahern. The mere storyteller is suspect. Passivity and nihilism mark his words, and while this may indeed abate the pain of the struggle, such "bandages" essentially "annul all votes" in the human spirit.

## Chapter One:

### Alienation and Imagination in John McGahern's Short Stories

The stories discussed in this chapter are all first-person narratives and read 'literally' as direct transcriptions of each narrator's imagination. This approach distills McGahern's fundamental notion that the alienated consciousness is the motivating force of the imagination because it is only the imagination that has the potential to create semblances of unity. In the following stories alienation is the central predicament, and the stories these predicaments produce are predominantly inconclusive, reflecting the indeterminacy of life. Such inconclusiveness recalls a comment made in "Wheels," the opening story of *Collected Stories*: "life in the shape of a story that had as much reason to go on as stop" (10).

This inconclusive quality also reflects McGahern's disinterest in exploring alienation in terms of just cause, culprits, blame. Rather, the contexts of many stories suggest that because alienation is intricately related to indeterminacy or "the natural processes of life" it is essentially beyond an individual's control. Nevertheless, the stories in this chapter represent the protagonist- and witness-narrators' attempts to abate the "misery of their existence" (Quinn 79) by reflecting on the past, perceiving the present and/or envisioning the future. And it is this McGahern 'celebrates.'

It is important to note that in all but one of the chosen stories the authentic quality of transcription is directly related to the absence of McGahern. Only in "The Recruiting Officer" and more so in "Doorways," the only story discussed in Chapter Two, does an

'assumed author' become present and relevant. At issue in these two stories is not the narrator's realization that alienation is an integral part of life but rather the form this realization takes. Specifically, the narrator's response to alienation manifests itself in a loss of faith in the imagination. And McGahern likens this to living death.

Although alienation is inescapable and the imagination offers only a limited remedy, McGahern's "morose heroes...appear nobly ignoble" (Quinn 79) in their efforts to abate the tensions and misery of an alienated consciousness by continuing to retrieve, perceive, and dream.

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"High Ground" is a story about a young man whose passage into adulthood entails accepting the loss of childhood wholeness. The narrator's predictable and secure rural environment is threatened by the encroachment of urban modernity, symbolically represented by a 'principle' bestowed on him by an arrivist Senator, Eddie Reegan. The senator's foreignness is implied through his "different relation to the land" (Bradbury 94):

I disliked him, having unconsciously perhaps, picked up my people's dislike...He had bulldozed the hazel and briar from the hills above the lake, and as I turned to see how close the boat had come to the wall I could see behind him the white and black of his Friesians grazing between the electric fences on the far side of the reseeded hill. (307-8)

Expressing a modern preference for efficiency over tradition, Reegan offers the narrator the local principalship on grounds that the present principal, Master Leddy, is providing an education only good enough "to dig ditches" (309). But the offer confounds the young narrator's experiences and loyalties and his reflections express an unwillingness to betray them--indeed, he recalls, Master Leddy "had shone like a clear star" (312).

While the narrator interprets the senator's offer as the definitive cause of the disruption in his life, as indicated by his "dislike," such a reading arguably oversimplifies



the predicament. Beyond threatening personal loyalty, the senator's offer symbolically indicates the nature of life is change. What Senator Reagan exposes is a truth about life and, like learning there is no Santa Claus, it is irreversible. Indeed, the contrast between a "reddened-face" present and a past that "had shone like a clear star" (312), confounds any certainty in the future:

I walked, stooping by [the Master's] 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...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's feelings reflect acceptance, if not defeat. Indeed, time is indifferent to its confounding effects on perception. Master Leddy has changed, or has he? On the other hand, perhaps it is only the narrator's perceptions that have changed and that is all. Regardless, the adult world is a fragmented one where the "rich whole" of childhood "never" comes again ("Wheels" 11). There is nothing to 'dislike.' It is a bold-faced truth and more significantly disruptive than any threat to personal loyalties and social traditions.

Disjunctions in the natural processes of life are also the theme of "Gold Watch"--a story that has been singled out by critics as the "quintessential McGahern story. It is the most ambitious and among the most achieved of his stories..." (Quinn 86). The story covers a time-span of a year and a half, or three visits home to the family farm by the narrator. The reader infers that his summer homecoming ritual, on the one hand, is a penitential exercise for the familial sin of pursuing an urban career and not carrying on the family farm. The decision destroys the father's sense of continuity because the passing on of Big Meadow was to be his final and most significant act, giving purpose and meaning to his life's work. Furthermore, the narrator suffers discontinuity as his "ungiving" father

refuses to grant forgiveness, to grant paternal release. Thus, the narrator returns each summer in the hope that something "will come" to make the transition into the next phase of his life seem seamless. On the other hand, the homecoming ritual may be read as simply an effort to avoid the pain of experiencing a fragmented world by symbolically re-living the unity of childhood.

The narrator's love affair which begins the story--"It was in Grafton Street we met..."--essentially motivates his narrative. Not surprisingly, at first, in the "happiness" of the affair's early months, the narrator imagines he has a parallax of vision, a perspective that "could outstare the one eye of nature" and envision a seamless transition into the next phase of his life. From this heightened state, however, his relationship actually exacerbates the disjunction he feels from about leaving his family to begin his own. Even though the brief descriptions of the relationship suggest it is secure and mature, it is disruptive because its success depends on the narrator coming to terms with his homecoming exercise. In fact it is his lover who queries his self-awareness:

'I don't know what to do,' I confessed to her a week before I was due to take holidays...

'What do you want to do?'

'I suppose I'd prefer to go home--that's if you don't mind.'

'Why do you prefer?'

'I like working at the hay. You come back to the city feeling fit and well.'

'Is that the real reason?'

'No. It's something that might even be called sinister. I've gone home for so long that I'd like to see it through. I don't want to be blamed for finishing it, though it'll finish soon, with or without me. By this way I don't have to think about it.'

'Maybe it would be kinder...and take the blame.'

'It probably would be kinder, but kindness died between us so long ago that it doesn't enter into it.' (215)

Not wanting to be blamed a second time, he is resolved to see this familial ritual through to its end--with or without him. Only fixed on finishing the exercise, he essentially champions

blind perseverance over self-knowledge. His partner's queries, however, force him to prepare for the transition their serious relationship demands.

In the atmosphere of this introspective thoroughfare the family heirloom appears: "the gold watch spilled onto the floor...without warning" (211). Its sudden entrance ushers a recollection that intensifies the childhood state he is already experiencing by coming home:

Waiting with him [his father] under the yew, suitcases round our feet, for the bus that took us each year to the sea at Strandhill after the hay was in and the turf home; and to quiet us he'd take the watch out and let it lie in his open palm, where we'd follow the small secondhand low down on the face endlessly circling until the bus came into sight...How clearly everything sang now set free by the distance of the years, with what heaviness the actual scenes and days had weighed. (219).

Like the homecoming ritual itself, the watch is a link "to a pleasurable state of childhood distilled from the 'weight' of actual experience" (Sampson 184). Through the act of imbuing the watch with the power he imagined it to have in the palm of his father's hand, it becomes for a time "a compensatory alternative" (Quinn 86) to the family farm and the narrator believes his pursuit for continuity is over. But he realizes, in due course, the 'power' he thought it would have does not sever the ties to his homecoming ritual. His sense of estrangement persists and the following summer he returns to Big Meadow.

The story concludes during this third trip. "Though I had come intending to make it my last summer at the hay," he says, his father beats him to the decisive moment: the haying is finished. Ironically, this gesture releases the narrator because it takes away the fundamental purpose to his homecoming ritual. The story ends with the narrator in a "perfect moonlit night...longing for all of life to reflect its moonlit calm... 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" (224-5). In realizing that time does "not have to run to any conclusion" (225) he has accepted the natural processes

of life and is thus able to proceed from Big Meadow, the emotional tyranny of his father and, most of all, his own childhood. Although the gold watch did not have the 'power' independently to sever the ties to home, that realization and the process through which he retrieved the watch's symbolic significance are life-giving.

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As evident in "Gold Watch," McGahern's short stories rigorously challenge a traditional view that love is the ultimate union and the end to alienation. In contrast, McGahern's conception of love is one that demands as much, if not more, imagination. On another level, he seems to assert that the intensity of a union between two people actually magnifies the absolute inability to be unified completely. In the stories such as "Gold Watch," successful relationships have a lot to do with each partner maintaining their own imaginative quest.

None the less, McGahern's view is less idealistic. Not only does he tend to dwell on spoiled affairs, but stories such as "Christmas" depict love as an impossible ideal. Even in love, alienation, like water, is "the first constant" (*The Leavetaking* 9) and thus the imagination is integral to its nature. Arguably, the estrangement in "Christmas" is the most tragic of all McGahern's fiction, but again his focus is not an inquiry into causes.

Background commentary, for instance, is exhausted in the opening paragraph:

As well as a railway ticket they gave me a letter before I left the Home to work for Moran. They warned me to give the letter unopened to Moran, which was why I opened it on the train; it informed him that since I was a ward of the state if I caused trouble or ran away he was to contact the guards at once. I tore it up, since it occurred to me that I might well cause trouble or run away resolving to say I lost it if asked, but he did not ask for any letter. (23)

Even though things were all right at his foster home--"Moran and his wife treated me fine" (23)--the young narrator's need to abate isolation persists:

There was no reason this life shouldn't have gone on for long but for a stupid wish on my part, which set off an even more stupid wish in Mrs Grey, and what happened has struck me ever since as usual when people look to each other for their happiness or whatever it is called. (23-4)

The narrator's choice of words reflects the extent of his disillusionment: the instinctual need to reach another is but a "stupid wish" that ends "as usual" in disappointment; and moreover it is a hardened soul that is unable to trust even the word "happiness." And, not surprisingly, the story recalls "mistakes," the first of which occurs when he refuses a Christmas tip of a pound note from Mrs Grey, Moran's best customer-- "playing for higher stakes," he recalls. Leaving the "preference" of his Christmas present to Mrs Grey, the homeboy-narrator is later presented with a toy airplane that he thinks is "useless" and begins to cry (27). That evening, Christmas Eve, he destroys it--"it took few kicks to reduce it to shapelessness" (28).

The story ends, however, not with dashed hopes, but paradoxically with a feeling "that a new life had already started to grow out of the ashes, out of the stupidity of human wishes" (28). This hopeful end suggests the narrative is self-fulfilling prophecy--the world is not to be trusted and it will be forever foreign. Hence, his "playing for higher stakes" was destined to fail from the beginning--love is an impossibility, and the narrator's experiences attest to this fact.

Generally speaking, romantic love is a precarious theme in McGahern's short stories. Specifically, the process is often so condensed that it is absurd--couples meet, the next minute they are making love, and shortly thereafter marriage is discussed. But when the reader takes one step back and sees these portrayals as an invective commentary on the faith people hold for love, then they are no longer absurd. In "Parachutes" and "My Love, My Umbrella," for instance, McGahern focusses on the disastrous end when love is

viewed as a refuge "to stand outside life" ("Parachutes" 229) or as a state of "complacency" ("My Love, My Umbrella" 72). Essentially, McGahern's love stories refute the traditional view that love can preclude alienation. Instead, love is a state that arguably demands an even greater deployment of imaginative energy.

The choice of first person for a 'break-up' story such as "Parachutes" further indicates McGahern's interest in the alienated consciousness as a universal fact of life and at the same time his disinterest in exploring its causal roots. He is not a moralistic writer; he does not hunt for blame. In "Parachutes," the conspicuous absence of the lover's side of the story seems to confirm the point. Again, the true cause of the relationship's demise is irrelevant; it is the effects of the predicament itself that the story conveys.

An end begins the story and the narrator's first transcription is vividly present and anonymous as neither tense nor personality is given to the brief discussion:

'I want to ask you one very small last favour.'

'What is it?'

'Will you stay behind for just five minutes after I leave?' (226)

This exchange is then contextualized by the narrator: "It was the offer of the blindfold, to accept the darkness for a few moments before it finally fell." The choice of definite articles--the offer, the blindfold, the darkness--broadens the reflection's scope from purely individual literariness to universal musing. The alternate case-- an offer, a blindfold and a darkness--would manifest as literary devices, and thus emphasise emotional particularity. Although emotion is certainly apparent in the narrative, it is kept at a distance. The tone is intensely objective, though emotionally vulnerable.

In the instant of his lover's departure, the narrator falls from "outside life" (229) to a static present: "The long hand of the clock stood at two minutes to eight. It did not seem to move at all" (226). In this "powerless" state, the narrator's indifference reflects his

alienation: "I saw the barman looking at me strangely but I did not care" (226). Out of the bar, the world is equally frozen, though urban artifacts betray the illusion: "the city, its maze of roads already lighted in the still, white evening, each single road leading in hundreds of directions" (226). Though lit, the city is listed through emotional emptiness: "I stared at the street. Cars ran. Buses stopped. Lights changed. Shop windows stayed where they were. People answered their names. All the days now would have to begin without her" (226).

In this maze of the present, he eventually hears his name called from within a crowded bar. With three casual friends--a Bohemian couple, Claire and Paddy Mulvey, and another man, Eamonn Kelly--he sits and drinks and joins in their wait for the future, "for Halloran....He owes us a cheque" (227). Upon mentioning his relationship's demise, Claire consoles him, "I'm glad you're here"--prompting an epistemological conundrum:

"Is he?" Eamonn Kelly shouted...

'Is he what?' Mulvey asked  
'Is he here? Am I here?' (229)

Out of love, the narrator remains bound in his sense of place to that of his former lover. Indeed, shortly thereafter, his sense of disorientation escalates to an "anxiety...[that] struck without warning" (230), manifesting itself in a need for god-like providence:

'Did you ever wish for some device like radar that could track a person down at any given moment, light up where they were, like on a screen?' I turned to Mulvey. (230)

In the apparent futility of this milieu and its seething violence under "arid, mocking words" (228), the narrator withdraws in mind to recount events of the love affair. The memory's attention to detail contrasts the smoke-filled environment of the present. From the "cold, spitting rain" to the appearance of his girlfriend's sister, to the meal and drinks they all shared that day, the narrator pursues an authentic fullness of the past, burrowing

beneath exteriors to "[s]ome vague unease [that] curdled the food and cheer" (228). Far from fond, the recollection pivots on this unease he felt while within the bonds of love. He admits that even then the future seemed horrifyingly inevitable: "It was if one were looking down a long institutional corridor; the child in the feeding chair could be already seen, the next child...the postman, the milkman, the van with fresh eggs...the tired clasp over the back of the hand to show tenderness as real as the lump in the throat, the lawnmowers in summer, the thickening waists. It hardly seemed necessary to live it" (228). In the wake of that dismal projection, the narrator criticizes the sister's house, saying on the walk home, "It's the sort...that would drive me crackers" (228). At this, he recalls, his partner withdrew her arm. Falling ahead to the present, he reasons: "I had been a fool to think that I could stand outside life" (229).

The present withers away--intoxicated with the narrator--into sleep, only to wake again in an empty room. "It was the first morning without her," he recalls. Having left the squalid Mulvey digs, the story drifts with those on their way to church, turning away once Mass has started. Sitting on some steps the narrator conceives reality as a set of alien, empirical correlatives, devoid of personal significance:

There were five steps up to each house. The stone was granite. Many of the iron railings were painted blue....They'd taught us to notice such things when young. They said it was the world. A lilac bush, railings, three milk bottles with silver caps, granite steps...I had to rise and walk to beat back a rush of anger. I'd have to learn the world all over again (231).

The story ends fittingly at the end of a memory which is paradoxically the beginning of the affair. The narrative present "glides" to this conclusion, atop the narrative's only explicit symbolic image. With his bar-room company, the narrator tries to imagine the origins--a kind of 'living stream'--of a group of thistledowns that float by the bar's window. Evanescent "parachutes" in a concrete environ echo the narrator's spatial



and temporal alienation; he too is out of place, seeking "to learn the whole world again" (231) through recalling the past.

While gazing at the thistledowns, the narrator sees "[a] hand reach out, the small fresh hand of a girl or boy, but before it had time to close, the last pale parachute moved on...as if breathed on by the hand's own movement" (238). That hand, that reaching, is a symbolic climax to a story which essentially reflects that writing, as a manifestation of 'seeing' and reflecting, is an exercise to "restore an authentic reality to the self" (Sampson 6). "Parachutes" is told by a self-conscious narrator, a narrator whose external world suddenly becomes foreign, a narrator who experiences the toxic effects when love is experienced as a mere refuge, where the imagination becomes dormant, when the "sky...[is] neither agate nor blue, just the anonymous sky of any and every day" (238). Out of this precarious safety, one is once again a 'lonely voice' yearning for the pure imaginative energy of childhood so as to reach and shape the infinite spaces into form.

"My Love, My Umbrella" is another urban love-story, and characterizes a self-conscious narrator in so far as he tells his story in a highly literary form--the mock-heroic. Again we hear an anonymous voice immersed in the present, though this time it is jocular, not anxious. In contrast to the meaninglessness expressed in "Parachutes," the present for this narrator proffers things to be associated: "It was the rain, the constant weather of this city, made my love inseparable from the umbrella, a black umbrella, white stitching on the seams of the imitation leather over the handle..." (65) and so begins the story. Unlike a highly developed literary identification, this abrupt opening manages to satirize itself and literary story-telling. The association between the umbrella and love is nothing more than commonplace: bad weather.

The satiric tone carries into the narrator's recollection of the "meeting" scene as well. A distracted conductor jerkedly waves his baton to an oblivious band. The Blanchardstown Fife and Drum "plodded on," and the narrator fuses a few of the tune's famous lines with his own satiric perspective:

They were playing *Some day he'll come along/The man I love/And he'll be big and strong/The man I love* at the back of the public lavatory on Burgh Quay...(65).

The nostalgic song's female perspective and yearning are undercut by the less attractive image of a public toilet.

With apparently little patience for 'romantic' longings or nostalgia, the narrator's tone of voice indicates a desire for the woman that is absolutely present and physical. As in "Parachutes," the envisioned future of the relationship is lifeless and uninviting:

a housing estate in Clontarf...in the drowse of food and drink to be woken up, 'You promised to take us out for the day, Daddy,' until you backed the hire-purchased Volkswagen out the gateway...(70)

Reflection is equally stunted and unimportant. Physical love (or "casual sex" as he refers to it later) offers pleasure in the moment; unfettered by the future or enlarged by the past, it is free of responsibility and understanding. Love-making is, like eating, an instinctual act: "a meal of each other's flesh" (67). And his physical needs seem insatiable: "They say the continuance of sexuality is due to the penis having no memory..." (65). These apparently confident, forthright admissions are, however, ultimately ironic as the penis becomes a phallic image (the umbrella) and re-tells a story.

Even though the affair ends, the narrator manages to get one more date:

The imagination, quickened by distance and uncertainty, found it hard to wait till the eight of the next day, but when the bus drove in and she was already waiting, the mind slipped back into its old complacency. (72)

Denis Sampson sees this passage as showing that reason and instinctive desire are in unison in the fallen state of complacency. By implication, the passage implies that "imagination is a more reliable gauge of love and meaning" (101). And this is further confirmed by the subtle change in tone over the course of the story. From being without memory, from being essentially his genitals, the narrator reflects less aloofly and more profoundly:

Through my love it was the experience of my own death I was passing through, for the life of the desperate equals the anxiety of death, and before time had replaced all its bandages I found relief in movement, in getting on buses and riding to the terminus. (CS 74)

It is exactly right that the relief he finds is one of movement, indicating he has recognized the inescapable necessity to find process in the necessarily static frames that mere observation provides. His getting on buses is symbolically a realization of the necessity to invoke the energy of the imagination in order to interpret the processes of life and proceed through them to a terminus. In effect,

the telling of the story of his affair is the closest he can come to being 'unknowingly happy under the trees' again, but now in the enrichment of memory he also discovers meaning that was absent from the experience itself. (Sampson 102)

However, the durability of his discovery is limited since he also waits for life's bandages to return--for routine, sex, and alcohol to mask the existence of inherent alienation.

The elliptical prose of "Strandhill, the Sea" reflects the narrator's abeyance of self--an effect that is also conveyed in "Wheels." This style of prose pushes a witness-narrator one step further from the society before him, fashioning him as a naive witness. By depicting the milieu through innocent, childhood eyes, the narrator deters cynicism from dominating the narrative. Consequently, the ridiculous nature of the occupants at a seaside guest house is conveyed under an illusion of objectivity, as the transcription of discussion

and the description of actions do not appear to compose a coherent, overall design. Rather, the narrative, complemented by its elliptical prose, reads as an incoherent, indeed childish, series of observations and recordings. And the illusion of objectivity is further reinforced as the child-narrator refers to himself once with an explicit "I" and once anonymously. This abeyance of self is mimetic of the adults' disinterest in him and, moreover, it aids the narrative's objective, ethnographic quality.

Indeed, the society the child narrator observes--middle-class adults in a seaside guesthouse--is completely foreign to him and therefore meaningless. McGahern, however, is not attempting to mimic a child's voice. Instead, the text is an obvious re-creation by the adult who witnessed this milieu. In contrast to the unity of childhood that is re-lived by the narrator in "Gold Watch" through his ritual homecomings, this imaginative re-creation finds meaning and continuity through listening, watching and story-telling. Consequently, in "Strandhill, the Sea" the narrator and implied author co-exist; and although the child-narrator effectively imbues the story's penetrating social comment with objectivity, the story's primary interest is an imaginative re-creation of an alienated consciousness by the implied, adult narrator.

The opening paragraph is a series of brushstrokes, condensing the setting into sensual details and yet at the same time elevated beyond personal affectation:

The street in front of Parkes' Guest House, grains of sand from the street coming on the grey fur of the tennis ball, the hopping under my hand idle as the conversations from the green bench before the flowerbed, red bells of the fuchsia vivid behind them and some roses and gillyflowers, the earth around the roots of everything speckled with sea shells, over head the weathered roughcast of the wall of the house. (39)

The paragraph itself is framed by architectural physicality--"the street" and "the...roughcast of the wall"--suggesting enclosure or perhaps entrapment. The generic description of these

framing elements complements the "idle" conversation they enclose. The word "idle" is as close as the narrator gets to judgment. In a dense paragraph, a single word can attain such distinction: next to "wall" and "street," "idle" is almost iridescent. There is light and colour in this paragraph, but these alone are confined primarily to living nature. And 'living' is apposite since the main verb of the paragraph is "speckled," and its subject is "the earth." This elliptical style reflects a rapid succession of subconscious sensations in the implied author, and at the same time is mimetic of a child's emotional experiences. It reads for the most part as a list of observations, devoid of verbs, and thus devoid of time conveying an effective immediacy to the telling.

The bouncing tennis ball mirrors the repetitive verbiage of the adults; it is also the narrator's only sound in the conversations. As the adult world scuttles itself further into nothingness, boredom takes hold: "The need to escape to some other world grew fiercer, but there was no money" (42). Impoverished and desperate, the narrator dashes off to a local shop to steal three comic books. Told with great haste, the adrenalin-enriched exercise is greeted upon arriving back at the guesthouse by a routine question that ushers a routine rebuke. These four lines of conversation are the extent of the narrator's involvement in the world of his parents. While the reader is left to suspect that one of the mentioned adults is the boy's father or mother, neither is explicitly recognized. They too simply melt into that alien, lethargic adult world.

As to thematic concerns, a reader at all familiar with McGahern will infer from the opening paragraph that a focus on the meaninglessness of human relations will be foregrounded against a "weathered roughcast" background of time and space. "Fear of the sky" holds the characters to green benches and to "conversations always the same...always informations, informations about everything" (39). O'Connor affirms the opinions of the

white-haired McVittie like a stray dog in need of a home; Ingolsby, the retired lecturer of English, "needing to live through his own voice this evening," rouses "impotent deeps of anger" in Ryan, the schoolteacher, with his incessant pontifications; Haydon studies the racing form; and Mrs O'Connor and Mrs Ryan knit Fair Isle pullovers. Immobilized in a tiresome competition for trivial information and reminiscences, this adult world is reflected in images of enclosure: "Rain would come, and walls close around the living evening" (39). With the rain, the talkers venture indoors, only to steam the windows of the sitting room. The apparently useless expenditure of breath, in "idle" conversation, condenses on the windows, entrapping the imagination--that human capability to see through and beyond the immediacy of one's own words and ego. Eventually the adults become their informations: "Cars ran miles to the gallon, still on the bench" (40).

Punctuating the abeyance of self and the narrative distance between narrator and subject, the first and only direct use of an "I" comes midway in the text. And he is anonymous the only other time he refers to himself :

The wash of rain on the windows, the light through their mist going dull on the blue sea of the wallpaper...and when a child wiped a clearing on the glass, cabbages showed between the apple trees in the garden, and the green cooking apples were bright and shining in the leaves with rain (CS 44).

It is the child who longs to see outside. It is the child who "steals" away, finding refuge in the world of "Rockfist Rogan and Alf Tupper and Wilson the Iron Man" (44). It is the adult whose breath condenses...

To close this chapter and prepare for the next, "The Recruiting Officer" will be discussed as a story which epitomizes living death. Though "The Recruiting Officer" was published a decade before them, it presents a narrator oppressed in the futureless existence anticipated in both "High Ground" and "Crossing the Line." The narrator is "an alcoholic,

failed Christian brother, eccentric and tired rebel" (Brown 295) whose tale of his exit from the Christian Brothers is "an instance of McGahern's technique of deploying anecdote as image" (Quinn 80): "nothing I've ever done resembles so closely the shape of my life as my leaving the Holy Brothers" (CS110). Ironically, it was non-action, a characteristic "paralysis of the will," (110) that instigated his unceremonious dismissal from the order.

Though ineffectual in the world he inhabits, his peripheral perspective is neither indifferent nor objective. This is not the "clean-slate" point of view attempted in "Crossing the Line." Anaesthetised by drink and the strictures of his occupation, the world is one where "any one thing...is almost as worthwhile doing as any other" (100). The schoolyard resembles a military camp: children "chant" (100); "voices come...from Mrs Maguire's infant prison house, *Eana, meena, mina moo, capall, asal agus bo*" (109); and punishment for sacrilege is primitive--"I...watch Canon Reilly shake a confession out of the boy Walshe, much as a dog shakes life out of a rat" (100). While he renders the world before him without reserve and with cynical self-assurance, he is less forthright when it comes to his own vices: "It is rumoured that I drink too much" (100).

The spatial and temporal limits circumscribed in "Parachutes" are freely transgressed here. As the present offers no contrast to the past, the narrator relies on memory. Having been a "CB recruit" himself, the arrival of the Christian Brothers' "recruiting officer" can be narrated in absence: "After lunch he comes, dressed all in black...If one could only wait long enough everything would be repeated. I wonder who will rise to the gleaming spoon and find the sharpened hooks as I once did [emphasis added]" (107). The present tense is exactly right: this is not an event but a representation of stasis. Similarly, the sighting of an approaching parent supersedes a distinct, present reality:

A mother coming to complain, I...instinctively start to marshal the reassuring cliches. 'The child is sensitive... You have nothing to worry about.'  
 'That was my trouble too at that age....I was never understood,' she'd reply  
 'Thank you for coming to see me.' (106)

Even local superstition is rendered lifeless. Unlike Luke Horan (one of his pupils), the narrator was not baptized with a worm in his hand and hence he has never been beckoned to cure the ringworm. But the mystery of the ritual is gone from his narration of what the young healer would do outside the classroom: "On Tuesdays and on Fridays, days of the sorrowful mysteries, he touched the sores thrice...killing the slow worm patiently circling" (107). Time is then condensed and Luke is back in the classroom, and within the narrative scope:

'Did you wash your hands, Luke?'  
 'Yes sir. I used the soap.'  
 'Show me them.'  
 'All right you can get on with your work.' (107).

While the narrator can liberally transgress the limitations of his story-telling conventions, his perspective is not enthralled by either the mysterious or the exotic. The narration is entirely reflective of the unimaginative teller. O'Faolain's description of prosaic fiction--"barren realism" touched with "idle verisimilitude" that cannot "release the imagination" (O'Faolain 163)--appropriately describes the narration. Paradoxically, for the narrator it is the world which is made of "barren realism" and hence it is his imagination that is not released. With stagnant vision, the world is bland and so too are one's stories. Nevertheless, the reader's imagination is released because of the presence of an implied author. In other words, there is more than just the narrative in the story's image. In "Gold Watch" and "Parachutes," the narrative reflects the teller exclusively in terms of action and scene. In "Strandhill, the Sea" how the story is told reflects back on the narrator but only



insofar as it suggests a great temporal gap between the event and transcription. Even though there may be two narrators (one a child-protagonist/ witness narrator and the other the adult creator), this adult presence is not the same as the implied author in "The Recruiting Officer." In contrast to virtually all the stories in *Collected Stories* this narrative most distinctly reflects back on the narrator's view of the world. While other protagonist- and witness-narrators exercise their imaginative abilities to overcome the alienated consciousness, the narrator's imagination in "The Recruiting Officer" is essentially paralysed. His surrender to alienation is also a loss of faith in the imagination, as his narrative reflects. This is evident in "Doorways" as well, the story discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter Two:

### The Storyteller as Image: An Ironic Reading of John McGahern's "Doorways"

"Doorways," the longest piece in *Getting Through* (1978), "knits a story of a failed love affair into a complex web of other relationships, other stories" (Sampson 176). And, as Sampson goes on to articulate, the narrative's situations "appear, at first, to be love stories, but each develops into a triangular situation in which the need for love is manifested while the difficulties of achieving it multiply" (177). The narrator meets Kate O'Mara, an Irish-American, at a party thrown by Nora Moran, "a singularly egocentric woman who is portrayed as being addicted to collecting new admirers" (Sampson 177). He becomes interested in Kate, learns she is involved with another man, suspects she notices his "desire or jealousy" (CS 161) and then senses a similar "light of competition" (161) in Nora's eyes when they meet next. The attempt to "detach himself" (Sampson 177) from both Nora and Kate, by escaping to visit a friend in Sligo, is futile. The triangular situations persist: even Jack of the Pint Drinkers' Association appears to be jealous of the time the narrator and Jimmy spend with their women friends. (This foreshadows the ultimate test of his love when Kate wills him not to visit Jimmy.) The "pleasant wallow"<sup>1</sup> of Sligo, and the "comfortable" ease he felt with Jimmy ("it was like walking in a continuance of days rather than in the broken worlds of ourselves") is precluded when Kate decides to join him. With her affair now over, their conflicting expectations for the relationship intensify. Demoralized by Kate's refusals to sleep with him and frustrated still

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<sup>1</sup>This phrase has been edited from *Collected Stories* (CS). It is found in *Getting Through* (1978), p.81.

by her equivocal explanations, the narrator's expectation to possess everything--"we could have all this and more" (170)--eventually falls away, laying bare a "painful lesson" (Sampson 177): that his feelings of love were little more than "a seed, thrown on poor ground, half wishing it might come to something, in the wrong time of year" (CS 176).

McGahern's urban love stories--"Sierra Leone," "Parachutes," "Along the Edges," and "Bank Holiday"--tend to meld around the same image: the urban, single male in search of reprieve from spatial and temporal alienation. Since the focus is so intense, preferring to extract only the nuances of urban alienation, the personalities of these centres of consciousness and "I as protagonist" narrators are barely discernible. "Doorways," though another Dublin love story involving yet another single male attempting to mitigate a sense of alienation, does present a distinctive story-teller. In order to characterize him, this critique begins with an analysis of his writing style as means of assembling the narrator's probable chronology of transcription. This line of inquiry ultimately renders the narrator unreliable and his narrative ironic. Subsequently, the image central to "Doorways" is one possessed by a greater authority, which consequently includes the narrator. In order to convey how the irony evolves, this critique will progress to its ironic reading.

Denis Sampson describes the style of "Doorways" as "brisk and rather urbane" (176). For reasons that will be made more clear, the conscious absence of literary artistry in this narrative suggests that a more appropriate description would emphasize the style's immediacy and spontaneity; "urbane" and its association with refinement and literariness is misleading for it neglects the narrative's potential for irony. Throughout the text, the past is near to the telling: walking home and reflecting his day spent with Nora Moran, the narrator remarks, "Barnaby and Bartleby were far closer to my style than any of this day had been" (163); and while in Sligo he writes, "These days might have stretched into weeks..."

(167). The underlined deictics achieve meaning "in relation to the location of the speaker in time and space" (Martin 137). Although it has long been a practice of writers, writing in third person, to eliminate all self-reference in order to "cut deictics loose from their normal connection with an identifiable speaker" and thus allow them to gravitate freely "to the here-and now of the characters," this is obviously not an option in firstperson. In other words, the use of "this" and "these" in the above sentences is not a literary trick to bring the past tense into the present time of reading. Indeed this is foiled in the first example because of the past perfect, "had been,"--a tense generally used in narratives to serve "the function normally performed by the past tense" (Martin137). Rather, the illusion is one of immediacy. Even though the narrative covers a six-month period--from "winter" (CS159) to a "hot early summer" (164)--its numerically marked sections read in a style near to entries in a journal, indicating a relatively short time-span between event and transcription. In this respect, Sampson's term "brisk" is well-chosen.

The story's opening section, however, reads like a preface, presumably written after the events of the narrative proper:

There are times when we see the small events we look forward to--a visit, a wedding, a new day--as having no existence but in the expectation. They are to be, they will happen, and before they do they almost are not: minute replicas of the expectation that we call the rest of our life.

I used to panic when I saw my life that way, it brought the blind and overmastering desire to escape, and the religious life had seemed for long the one way out: to resign this life, to take on the habit of unchanging death-like days, the sweet passion; and when death came it could hold no terror. I had already died in life. (158)

In the first paragraph, the collective pronoun serves to universalize the experience of the narrator. Although these thoughts may indeed be perceived as mere truisms, they none the less exhibit a concern to involve the reader by suggesting that s/he and the narrator share this fundamental fascination with the ironies of time. After admitting his own sense of

panic "when I saw life that way," and his subsequent desire to escape into religious life ("to resign this life, to take on the habit of unchanging death-like days, the sweet passion"), the narrator retrieves the present:

I no longer panic when I see that way: nature, having started to lose interest in me, is now content to let me drift away, and no longer jabs me so sharply that I must lose myself in life before it is too late. (158)

These paragraphs are a traditional story-telling opening: "I used to...", but "I no longer...[and I will tell you why]..." The temporal gap between the second and third paragraphs, between "I used to..." and "I no longer...." is a space the narrative is prompted to fill. The narrator's pursuit of intimacy--to "have" the surrounding landscape "and more"--reflects the "panic" of the second paragraph--that "life" will somehow drift away. Yet the demise of the narrator's affair with Kate does not lead to panic but to understanding and "present calm" (177), which in turn generate a final paragraph that mirrors the third "I no longer" paragraph of the beginning:

I was free in the Sligo morning. I could do as I pleased. There were all sorts of wonderful impossibilities in sight. The real difficulty was that the day was fast falling into its own night. (CS 177).

This final paragraph also gives meaning to the story's first paragraph. The transformation of "expectations" in the first to "wonderful impossibilities" in the last suggests what Paolo Vivante calls a "change of atmosphere" which "brings a change in the aspects of the surrounding space which remains, of course, what it is and yet is now seen in a different and more penetrating perspective...things lean towards us and forthwith resume their indifferent stance" (Vivante 56). Hence, the opening paragraph acts as an objective comment: the human condition is such that the present "has no existence," situated always in the "wake of memories of hopes" (54). The two paragraphs which immediately follow articulate a spectrum of human responses to this narrative fact (in the

story of life), spanning from innocence to experience; in terms of narrative point of view, from naivety to authority, or unreliability to reliability. This spectrum is traveled by the narrator in "Doorways": from being "jabbed" by a personified "nature" and yearning for escape, he realizes a perspective that is resigned to temporal alienation and yet at the same time encouraged by "possibilities," however ethereal. (This spectrum will be elaborated in the discussion of the central symbols of the narrative.)

The narrative's chronology corresponds to the narrator's main purpose: a literary illusion complementing a movement from ignorance to self-knowledge. If the narrative, as Lubbock states, were to "expound its substance" as opposed to "the momentary appearance of...thought," then it "must at once give us the whole of it...without delay...or [the] exposition is plainly misleading" (Lubbock 163). Indeed, the narrator preserves the illusion of immediacy as the narrator's 'seeing' of each episode/image apparently changes over the course of the narrative.

The day spent traveling with his artist-friend, Nora Moran, to her country home and ending with a "goodnight" honk of the car horn at her mother's house, concludes in a union of hopelessness: "We grimaced and waved goodnight to one another like any pair of special monkeys. I was numbed by the day, I was probably numbed anyhow, and I hadn't even resentment of my own passivity" (163). And the dominance of banality is later reinforced when Kate relates the details of her own trip to the country with Nora: it was, to the narrator, "an exact replica of the day I had spent there" (168).

Although Nora's frantic ego-centricity characterizes her as easy prey for their ridicule--"Nora needs a fresh person everyday, the way some people need a bottle of whiskey,"--a hint of uncertainty emerges in the story-teller:

The more we talked the more I felt how real and honest was Nora's brutal egotism set against our pale lives... 'Still, in spite of it, she has something,' I was forced to say [emphasis added] <sup>2</sup>

The implied "something" is no more than a model for "getting through" life; it is not a plan or an image to be understood or evaluated from without. Its essence, imbued with a complexity of personal history, resists judgment, recalling again the maxim in "Sierra Leone": "They say the world would be a better place if we looked at ourselves objectively and subjectively at others, but that's never the way the ball bounces" (321).

The narrator's perception of deed is similarly challenged when he accompanies Kate to Mass in Strandhill, an act he can easily rationalize: "It makes a good impression around here" (169). And, like his trip with Nora, the present experience proffers no distinction from the past: "it was more like wandering in endless corridors of lost mornings than being present in this actual church and day, always in the same barn with wings to the left and right of the altar" (169). His outlook is indicative of a modern Ireland in conflict with traditional Catholic observances, as Antoinette Quinn states: "the philosophical divide between their anguished nihilism and the nonchalant Catholicism conventional in the society" (Quinn 79). However, the narrator's sense of emancipation from the church is far from resolved as there is an implied hesitancy when he recalls Kate saying once, "'I'm a bad Catholic but I am one because if I wasn't I couldn't bear all the thinking I'd have to do'" (169).

Ironically, his attendance at Mass yields, "In spite of what I said...a recovery of amazement" (169). Freedom from observance (or duty) is here complicated as it ushers forth an unexpected and "amazing prospect of pleasure and excitement" (169). Leaving the church with Kate, he is forced to admit that the (adult) Sunday was now "what it had been

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<sup>2</sup>Getting Through p. 87; edited out of CS p. 172.

once" (169)--which is to say, "a long, amazing prospect" of possibilities. This acknowledged reassimilation of the past is suggested, however, when he first arrives in Sligo. With his friend, Jimmy, they walk "in a continuance of days that had suffered no interruption" (165). Memories intensify over the course of the vacation, blurring with less and less resistance any epistemological foundation of the present moment:

Kate O'Mara sitting in the big dining room of the hotel. The Pint Drinkers' Association, Jimmy McDermott, the last three weeks in Sligo, the Kincora, the sea...everything seemed to be without shape. I understood nothing. Perhaps we had come to expect too much. (177)

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At the beginning of this critique, the plot was described as a series of triangular relationships, each a contention of forces directed at one vertice. For the narrator of "Doorways," "getting through" means learning the irreconcilable tension between dialectical forces: because the present vacillates between the past and future, the movements and rituals of other people resist static judgment--they do not translate into signposts or guides for the observing Self. Rather, they are generally understood as "those small acts of ceremony that help us better out of life than any drug. He paid at the cash desk and waited..." ("Like All Other Men" 280). The ethereal present precludes any static desire to have "all this and more" ("Doorways" 170).

Initially, the reader trusts the narrator's resolve, and consequently characterises him as reliable. There is a cool confidence, not bitterness, in his prefatory remarks: life is not unjust, vindictive or capricious; rather, it lumbers on, indifferent to individuals, anticipating the conclusion that "everything seemed to be without shape. I understood nothing" (177). The choice, as presented, is whether or not one wishes to participate in a world that resists shape. Emancipation for the narrator in "Doorways" follows from the realization "that what



I wanted anyhow was impossible--a real sanity--so maybe it had to seem like this impoverished madness." <sup>3</sup>

Release from the expectations of "nature" is a motif McGahern employs elsewhere, especially in the *High Ground* (1985) stories, "Parachutes," "Like All Other Men," and "Gold Watch." The ethereal qualities of floating thistledowns in "Parachutes" suggest an existence under an "anonymous sky" (CS 238) that is summarized by an exchange in yet another story, "All Sorts of Impossible Things":

'While if we'd to walk that distance along a straight line of road it'd seem a terrible journey.'

'A bit like life itself...[w]e might never manage it if we had to take it all in the one grasp. We mightn't even manage to finish it.' (135)

These wise old men are well beyond the "panic" of youth, having long realized the utility of patience in overcoming the "jabs" of nature. "Gold Watch" concludes with what can only be described as an anti-epiphany. As the narrator waits for some "sign" to prove that time is indeed meaningful, he capitulates to its indifference: lowering the watch back down into the poison, the narrator recalls, "I did it so carefully that no ripple or splash disturbed the quiet, and time, hardly surprisingly, was still running; time that did not have to run to any conclusion" (225). Time's meaning is in its "infinite course" (Vivante 56)--a conclusion reached in another Dublin love story, "Like All Other Men": "Thinking of her, he found himself walking eagerly towards the Busarus. But he knew that no matter how eagerly he found himself walking in any direction now it could only take him to the next day, and the next" (280)

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<sup>3</sup>Getting Through p.94 edited out CS p. 177.

In order to continue this critique of "Doorways" a distinction now needs to be made between narrator and implied author because it fashions the necessary gap wherein lies the story's irony. The story's title-metaphor simultaneously identifies process and stasis. As an architectural feature, doorways are both passageways between spaces, as well as defined spaces themselves. In these terms, the narrator's narrative, as a manifestation of his imagination, is preoccupied with static as opposed to fluid form. As was noted with reference to particular incidents shared with Nora and Kate, this static imaging of people and their deeds is, however, complicated by certain admissions that they are a part of processes that belie mere objectification. Attending Mass breaks any objective image the narrator could have conjured; this is not the case, however, with Nora's act of duty towards her mother since it remains (like the whole day, Nora and the narrator) completely encased by the whims of the narrator's perspective. This is why Kate's day with Nora can be easily dismissed as an "exact replica."

From the outset the reader is persuaded by the narrator's confident tone to believe that the freedom he implies in the preface and expresses in the final paragraph is substantial. Consequently, he fashions himself like one of those dispirited, McGahern narrators (or centres of consciousness) who engage in the small-scale heroic struggle "to outstare the one eye of nature" ("Gold Watch" 212). But always the end to this struggle is less a conquest than a capitulation; hence it is really no end at all. Rather "time [is] still running; time that [does] not have to run to any conclusion" ("Gold Watch" 225). Although he indeed surrenders, there is a glaring lack of struggle in his text. Unlike the narrator in "Gold Watch" who confronts his own passivity, the story-teller of "Doorways" does not. His conclusion that the world lacks "shape" is directly related to his process. In contrast to the narrator in "Parachutes," he is unaware of the limits of his own perception, and the

incompatibility between static imaging and "the natural processes of life." Consequently, his capitulation and release are little more than failure. Moreover, the reader does not sense either that he realizes that the static means he employs to find shape are limited, only that shape itself is impossible.

The above argument facilitates then an understanding of the story's central symbolic characters and furthermore the placement of their introduction into the narrative. This reading argues that the narrator displays what Henry James refers to as "inconscience," as he "believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him" (Booth 159). Consequently, the narrator of "Doorways" cannot be separated from the text; he is an integral part of the implied author's larger ironic image--that of a desperate story-teller creating a desperate story.

Unlike the "sudden" appearances of the family heirloom and the thistledowns in "Gold Watch" and "Parachutes" respectively, the street dwellers, Barnaby and Bartleby, in "Doorways" are labored into the narrative and stand like Roman obelisks in an Irish cityscape. Although the reader is urged to accept that these two men "highlight what we're all at" (165), their symbolic connection to the narrative continually needs explicit reference. (The report of Jimmy's query regarding "The gents of Abbey Street" (165) comes off as a lame attempt to affix these street dwellers as Dublin icons.) In fact, they are not created but "found," and subsequently named by the narrator "Barnaby and Bartleby...though I don't know their [real] names." Although they exist "all day and everyday in the doorways of Abbey Street" (158), they do not associate with a context in the same casual manner as the umbrella does in "My Love, My Umbrella."

Barnaby and Bartleby are unimaginative, if not simplistic, "symbols of detachment...secular saints, much like the priests who 'resign this life, to take on the habit

of unchanging death-like days' (158)" (Sampson 178). They are far from ingenious creations; rather, they are prosaic and obvious. The romanticism of destitution is one thing; objectifying people, rendering them story-less, is arguably worse. The narrator of "Doorways" does both. For example: "Later, Barnaby did start to sport a plastic yellow cap, such as girl bicyclists wear in the rain" (164),

As merely objectified role models, personifying "human life at its most basic" (Quinn 85), these "secular saints" exhaust their worth to the narrator. They have no other existence beyond a symbolic significance that is entirely dependent on the narrator's state of mind. They serve only to represent the eternal present: an unachievable state of being for "us" who frequent "small events...a visit, a wedding, a new day" (158). They are recalled into the narrative like faithful mascots, their destitute lives serving some existential and literary purpose. Following his "poor day" with Nora and in the wake of aimless ambulations with Kate, the narrator likens himself to "[t]he gents of Abbey Street" (165): "Barnaby and Bartleby were far closer to my style than any of this day had been" (163). When Kate's refusals to sleep with him exacerbate the tension between them, he takes a "keener interest in Barnaby and Bartleby" (164). Exactly what that interest is the reader is not told.

Predictably, the narrator's image of Barnaby and Bartleby abruptly dissolves along with all others when the end of his relationship with Kate is imminent:

even now in their Dublin doorways patiently watching the day fade, all seemed to be equally awash in time and indistinguishable, the same mute human presence beneath the unchanging sky...for one moment I could not see how anyone could wish another pain. We were all waiting in doorways. (174)

The narrator remains oblivious to a doorway's potential to connect spaces, people, subject and object, individual and surrounding space, preferring instead to intensify the stasis as they then become upright coffins as soon as his relationship with Kate is broken:

She would almost be 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. Already Barnaby and Bartleby would be in their doorway in Abbey Street firmly fitting them all night, when they would silently leave. (177)

In the end, the narrator is "free in the Sligo morning" (177). But the reader will infer that the release is temporary. He is released from his sexual tension and longing, Nora's "competitive stare," his own expectations and nature's as well. The authenticity of this freedom, however, is suspect as his final comment is simply a continuation of a reliance on ill-fated static observing. This time it is "a crowd" of "presumably harmless [mental] patients":

One patient seemed to be having a wonderful time....laugh[ing] uproariously. I felt my empty hands were as worthy of as much uproarious mirth. Wasn't my present calm an equal, more courteous madness? (177)

In conclusion, the opening preface sheds a confident tone, and indeed it is this which motivates the telling; but the ensuing story is not one of revelation and release. In fact, a retrospective reading of the preface confirms this. Following the three opening paragraphs, a lengthy description of Barnaby and Bartleby begins: "And I have found Barnaby and Bartleby...." Coming after the confident and self-analytic opening paragraphs, the reader expects a description reflecting the narrator's apparent calm and apparent understanding that the nature of life is change, that people are a part of processes that are impossible to comprehend in totality. But the narrator's perception of these street dwellers remains static and there is no sense that they are any less objectified, though supposedly his experiences have taught him that such imaging is destined to fail. Indeed, the narrator's passivity is still evident: "Often I want to ask them why have they picked on this way to get through life, but...I soon see it as an idle question and turn away" (159). He is not "free" (177) of the naive, static conception of life (as God, as nature) as an

objective governing entity that embraces the individual and paradoxically stands also to be embraced; his panic will resurface, will again observe existence and constrict it, deny the life in it, ignore "the natural process of living."

### Chapter Three:

#### "The Country Funeral": The Work of a Craftsman

Nicola Bradbury observes that the spatial and temporal concerns of the title-story in *High Ground* are complemented by its placement within the collection: between "Crossing the Line" and "Gold Watch," between space and time. A similar kind of observation can be put forth with respect to "The Country Funeral"--one of only two stories in *Collected Stories* not previously published in a collection, the other being "The Creamery Manager."

The wheel-metaphor and the circularity it identifies recur in various forms throughout *Collected Stories*; placed as the collection's final story, the circular narrative of "The Country Funeral" serves as a cul-de-sac, reverting any linear momentum back into the collection. Keeping in mind *Collected Stories* begins with "Wheels," "The Country Funeral" seems, in retrospect, to have been anticipated from the start.

There are, however, just a handful of stories that follow such a strict, circular pattern. Although "Doorways" and to a greater extent "My Love, My Umbrella" end more or less where they began, the most effective circular-narratives are told from an omniscient perspective. "Like All Other Men" is a story about a single sexual encounter between a former Christian Brother and a woman who, unknown to the male-protagonist, is soon to enter a religious order. While the encounter pacifies the man's desire for physical intimacy, his reflections that conclude the story seem unsharpened by the experience: "He knew that no matter how eagerly he found himself walking in any direction it could only take him to the next day and the next" (280).

The failed-artist story, "The Beginning of an Idea," is about a theatre director in Moscow, Eva Lindberg, whose expectations for a writing career are based on the evocative image of Chekov's burial. Ironically, the sentence she constructs--"written in a large childish hand" (112)--though motivating her to leave Moscow for Spain, is the beginning and end of these geographical and vocational journeys. In Spain, seized by writer's block, the image never takes form. And the voyages immediately cease after her brutal rape by two Spanish constabularies. Although it is "unclear whether [this] final experience of Eva Lindberg will be the beginning of her real life as a person or as an artist" (Sampson 169), the narrative concludes with her returning to Moscow.

"A Slip-Up" follows "The Beginning of an Idea" in *Getting Through* as it does in *Collected Stories*. "The Country Funeral," like "A Slip-Up," leaves bare its central and motivating image. Like the elderly man holding an oilcloth bag with far-away eyes, the still of a country funeral is vividly discernible. McGahern's vision is focussed; as a symbolic journey to the past, the image of the country funeral, motivated by alienation, is a quest to recover lost meaning and regain continuity. And McGahern's craftsmanship is profoundly revealed as he allows the image to reveal gradually its rhythms and assume a form. His treatment of the image consequently concurs with the thoughts of Ellen Glasgow: "To be too near, it appears, is more fatal in literature than to be too far away; for it is better that the creative writer should resort to imagination than that he should be overwhelmed by emotion" (cited by Friedman 1168). Although the narrative utilizes a variety of voices, points of view, direct and indirect discourses, the omniscient license is subservient to authenticating the image through vision and rhythm; using O'Faolain's words, the narrative "clings to the original idea" (194). The three unities of place, time and character "weld everything like a handgrip" (203-4).



In her article, "Time and the Short Story," Jean Pickering states: "we critic-readers tend to minimise the process of reading" (48). While it is virtually impossible to reconstruct the process of reading and "the accumulation of expectation" (48) it fosters, the compression of style, evident from the very beginning of "The Country Funeral," initiates an intimacy between reader and narrator which quells any expectation that the story will stray very far from the recognizably predictable. The opening scene is brought to life through McGahern's acute perceptions as they capture only that which time allows---the kitchen table, the moving of a hand, the roll of a wheelchair. These brisk and subtle descriptions do more than render realism; rather, they engender an intimacy between reader and narrator, creating an illusion that both have simultaneously entered the scene.

This immediacy consequently anticipates a narrative that will begin more or less where it began. Indeed the plot begins in Dublin, follows the three Ryan brothers as they travel to their place of childhood summers to attend the funeral of an uncle, and ends back in the city. Geographically, nothing has changed from beginning to end; but to transfigure this into a deterministic axiom is to "annul all the votes" ("Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass" 33) in the Ryan brothers--a position the text does not reflect.

Once again beginning with a notion of the story's general image, what McGahern 'sees' is a trip made by three young men to a country funeral. He shapes them into nephews who exhibit, in varying degrees, indifferent responses to their uncle's death. Indeed, the news of his death has little or no impact on either of the three nephews: only Philly "seemed in any way moved by the death" (384). The funeral is a fortuitous diversion for John and Philly, and an inconvenient one for Fonsie. And these reactions carry over to the event: though Philly speaks "emotionally," the instances are few (383, 384); Fonsie,

wheelchair-bound, broods in silence; and John is content to move back into corners, and listen "with perfect attention to anybody who came to him" (391).

Although the nephews' words and actions consistently conform to the narrative's subtle opening adumbrations, original agitations are also implied. It is these submerged conflicts in each of the nephews that the narrative and the characters carefully reveal. Complementing the narrative's subtle and patient tone, however, the nephews' general indifference towards the event effectively thwarts death's inherent power to evoke sudden and invariably extreme emotional responses in people which in turn engender dubious intellectual and spiritual contemplation. While on the one hand such reactions are naturalistic, they are fictitious in so far as they are, more often than not, momentary. This air of indifference also creates an illusion that the reader is co-experiencing just another day in the lives of three Ryan brothers. This is complemented more and more by a narrator who consistently surrenders any opportunity to impede the narrative with an authorial, providential voice. In a word, everything seems recognizably ordinary to characters and reader alike.

Regarding death as a central event in short stories, Pickering observes: "It seems that the short story, emphasising stasis as opposed to process, lends itself to depicting death, that moment that fixes human beings, removing us from time altogether (49). Interestingly, McGahern achieves both a sense of being and becoming in "The Country Funeral." By delicately poising death as "a representative moment" (48) McGahern exploits what V. S. Pritchett calls the short story's capability to expose "the inner life...unguardedly" (cited by Pickering 48). The funeral, its episodes blended, is an image outside time. Immersed by the locale and its evocative associations with their childhoods, the three brothers, affixed to the past, are characterised not as three adult men but three

young, fatherless boys. Thematically, the assumed roles imply a pessimistic stasis of being, and yet in the character of Philly, the narrative is novelistic, expressing, as Hillis Miller says, "the temporality of the present as a reaching towards the future which will contain a reassimilation of the past" (cited by Pickering 49). This point will be expanded upon in a discussion of Philly's character.

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The image of the country funeral is subservient to the dramatisation of the central characters. It emerges entirely as scene, within a specific time-place frame. The satiric potential of a rural Irish funeral is not seized by the author. And although McGahern makes little of the urban/rural dichotomy, the funeral rite is, however, imbued with a metaphysical dimension. Terence Brown, commenting on the effects of urbanization on the symbolism in *Nightlines*, sees McGahern as attentive to "major social changes in the country [and creating] an art that more appropriately reflects the complex psychological currents that stir in its turbulent waters...inducing in the participants of ritual an emotional awareness of metaphysical depth" (Brown 293-4). In varying degrees, the funeral affects each of the three brothers suggesting that their initial collective indifference is a guard against recognizing the effects of the past.

Simply in terms of length, no preference is given to any one funeral-related event. The result is a narrative that does not confound itself with varying tempos: it does not stall in its descriptions, background summaries or dramatic scenes, quicken with its authorial intrusions, or funnel to a metaphoric kernel.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently the reader is neither engulfed nor dictated by authorial commentary; rather, it predominantly supplies narrative summary

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<sup>4</sup>The longest piece of narrative summary occurs while the three nephews are in the car, traveling to their Uncle's homestead, Gloria Bog. Interspersed with their discussion, the background summary and descriptions of landscape precis the brothers' discussion and culminate in an authorial comment regarding Gloria Bog: "They were coming into country they knew. They had suffered here" (381).

by way of "stage directions"--the background and substance of internal thoughts necessary to enhance the dramatic quality of the narrative that in turn foster a union between characters and reader. The narrative is essentially without the presence of not only an author but a narrator. And because there is more than one centre of consciousness, the appropriate technical term for its point of view is "multiple selective omnipotence" as opposed to "selective omnipotence" (Friedman 1176, 1177).

As the rented Mercedes leaves the city for Gloria Bog, the reader is in close proximity to the characters and drama. The opening scene with Philly, the quick contours of John and Fonsie, and the general disinterest felt by them all, prepare the reader to expect an ordinary funeral, to expect the journey will come full circle and return to Dublin. Yet any reader inevitably expects at least a glimpse of something more.

Where the reader's sympathies should lie as the narrative departs in the rented Mercedes remains ambiguous. At best Fonsie's outburst ("I don't see why we should have to go. We haven't seen the man in twenty years. He never even liked us" (377)) and Philly's calculation that the funeral is a fortuitous diversion are so in character that the true nature of Uncle Peter remains a mystery. And if one thought John would shed some light, his indifference must come as a disappointment. Technically, however, his entrance into the story is brilliant in its economy and adroit use of multiple voices--those of the narrator, of other characters and of John alone.

In the rented Mercedes, Fonsie and Philly engage in some idle chat about the brother who has yet to enter the narrative. In three sentences, and one short exchange of dialogue, their brother is contoured:

John was waiting for them outside his front door, a brown hat in his hand, a gabardine raincoat folded on his arm, when the Mercedes pulled up at the low double gate. Before Philly had time to touch the horn John raised the hat and hurried down the concrete path. On both sides of the path the postage stamp lawns

showed the silver tracks of the mower, and the roses were stacked and tied along the earthen borders.

'The wife doesn't seem to appear at all these days?' Philly asked...

'Herself and Mother never pulled,' Fonsie offered...

'What's she like now?'

'I suppose she's much like the rest of us. She was always nippy.'

'I'm sorry for keeping you,' John said as he got into the back of the car.

'You didn't keep us at all,' Philly answered

'It's great to get a sudden break like this. You can't imagine what it is like to get out of the school and city for two or three whole days" (378-9).

The descriptive paragraph, coupled with Fonsie and Philly's exchange, contextualizes John's motivations and prepares his entrance into the narrative. His first utterance is a compulsive apology--hardly surprising from a man whose yard is inoffensively ordinary. As to his gratitude for a "sudden break," there is nothing mournful in his words. Rather, in light of his brothers' quips regarding his wife, the reader infers that it is his narrow marriage and homelife from which he is most in need of reprieve.

The narration of the burial belongs to Fonsie. The carrying of the coffin, the priest's blustery arrival and the burial itself are told from within the rented Mercedes, and as such the narrative is cinematically cropped: "it was only the coffin itself and the heads of the mourners that could be seen until they were lost in the graveyard evergreens" (400). Attention to the limits of Fonsie's perspective are furthered when he turns on the radio and fills the car with rock-and-roll music, drowning out the priest's words and any other audible resonances. Later, Fonsie--perhaps unknowingly--expresses the limitation of his perspective: "It was no mystery from the car....It was more like a crowd of apes staggering up a hill with something they had just looted" (405). Of the six funeral-related events, only this one is presented through a centre of consciousness exemplifying a subtle, "mental movement of camera angle" (O'Faolain 204). While this change adds variety to the telling,

its primary purpose is to dramatise Fonsie, especially since the narrated events hitherto have been devoid of such subjectivity.

Although he too is patiently developed, Philly is the story's most complex character. Although he does not dominate as a centre of consciousness, his brothers are what Henry James refers to as "ficelles" (cited by Booth 102) insofar as they function primarily to supply other points of view--not necessarily undermining Philly's perceptions and memories, but rather intensifying their relativity.

Philly's initial lines, drafted prior to the news of Uncle Peter's death, are infused into a brief digression of background while he walks to the local pub after the story's opening breakfast-scene:

Three weeks before, Philly had come home in a fever of excitement from the oil fields. He always came home in that high state of fever and it lasted for a few days in the distribution of the presents he always brought home....the meetings with old school friends, the meetings with neighbours, the buying of rounds and rounds of drinks....(375)

The ambiguity implicit in this description is then diminished when the narrative resumes in the present and Philly is in the bar: "The waiting silence of the bar became too close an echo of the emptiness he felt all around his life" [emphasis added] (375). This rare note of interiority is further validated once Philly vacates the pub. Rather than follow him, the narrative remains as some locals engage in "behind-backs" criticism:

'He made a great splash when he came home first...He bought rings around him...'  
'Too much. Too much,' a second drinker added forcefully though it wasn't clear at all to what he referred. (376)

And these remarks are not taken kindly by the barman who "stared in silent disapproval at his three customers. There were few things he disliked more than this 'behind-backs' criticism of a customer as soon as he left" (376). This deft inclusion of the barman's

reaction serves as a moral basis for the entire story and queries, rather self-consciously, the basis of judgment.

The hint of provincialism is arguably more poignant since it surfaces in Dublin--the "other," more cosmopolitan Ireland. Neither sympathetic nor understanding, the locals' prattle foretells that the person of Philly is destined to fit within a character-mould so defined by social decorum. The "Too much. Too much" comment obviously attests to the incongruity between Philly's flamboyant persona and a provincial preference for moderation. But McGahern satirizes the remark by claiming ignorance as to its meaning. (Indeed the meaning is made clear later in the story when Philly is again extravagant, this time in buying supplies for the wake: "'It's too much, too much,' he [Luke, the publican] kept muttering..."(CS 388).)

To summarize, there are three narratives in the above sequence: a summary of background, followed by an internal narrative, and finally a dramatic presentation. Of the three, the second is highly conventional in the third person mode as it masquerades as an internal, first-person dialogue. None the less, all three successfully reinforce and elaborate one another. Ending this sequence as he does with the silent condemnation of the locals, McGahern seems to be exposing idle gossip.

This story insists on a "sympathetic" reading of all the characters. In the reality of the text (as a social milieu) this is transfigured into the moral principle displayed by the barman. Diagrammatically, the above sequence looks like this: 1) narrator's observation (implying judgment); 2) interiority of consciousness of character; and 3) dramatic judgment (based on observation).

Nevertheless, with respect to the fundamentals of literature, an author, in order to simulate imagination and speculation, will entice the reader into making a moral judgment.

Using the above sequence as an example, we can see how this is working. Initially, the narrator supplies in the guise of an objective summary an ambivalent comment on Philly's character: on the one hand, it suggests virtue--convivial generosity; on the other, something desperate and lonely. Although the latter reading is affirmed by the moment of interiority, the text remains subservient to the narrator's omniscient privilege. Hence, to discourage cries of selectivity the narrator summons judgment from within the text--that of some unnamed locals. But the text ultimately discourages the definitive judgment expressed by the local drinkers. Instead, it prefers to encourage ambivalence--for the reader to infer a tension between opposing perspectives. Put simply, the acknowledgement of this tension is the root of sympathy. In "The Country Funeral," this strengthens the union between reader and text: engaged initially by the narrative's common tone that suggests a predictable and recognizable sequence of incidents, the reader is further engaged by this implied ambiguity of character. This union creates a space for what Terence Brown calls a discourse "welcoming digression and expansion, proffering intimacy...a conversationally-managed movement away from particulars to social generality" (Brown 293, 294).

The first of two explicit addresses to the reader occurs in the early summary of Philly's background:

his own fever for company after the months at the oil wells and delight in the rounds of celebration blinding him to the poor fact that it is not generally light but shadow that we cast [emphasis added] (CS 375).

Aside from its particular relevance to Philly's flamboyant persona, its images reflect the tension of opposites: between knowledge and ignorance; public persona and private self; and perceptions of truth.



The space between these is apparently mitigated when the crippled and embittered brother, Fonsie, sees past Philly's public mask, declaring without reservation the basis of the locals' judgment. The outburst expands beyond the particularities of the scene, to another direct address to the reader:

'That's why people in Dublin are fed up with you. You always have to make the big splash. You live in a rathole in the desert for eighteen months, then you come out and do the big fellow....'

There are no things more cruel than truths about ourselves spoken to us by another that are perceived to be at least half true. Left unsaid and hidden we feel they can be changed or eradicated, in time. Philly gripped Fonsie's shoulder in a despairing warning that he'd heard enough [emphasis added].(CS 389)

The opportunity for this direct address has been carefully prepared hitherto by the narrative. With the reader poised in the tension of sympathy and identification, Fonsie's remarks can be confidently judged by the narrator as "cruel" because they unsympathetically usurp that tension. Subsequently, Philly's gesturing plea is vividly dramatic.

From the beginning, "the natural processes of life" are manifest in the implied tension between Philly's flamboyant public persona and "something long buried" (406). Because of the elasticity of its character-adumbrations and its limited use of an authorial voice, the narrative patiently anticipates Philly's and to lesser extent his brothers' acknowledgements of these tensions. It is these the narrative seeks to reveal. With his mask torn, Philly is forced to confront the "emptiness" it has for so long concealed. And this he does, alone after the wake in Uncle Peter's empty house:

He thought of Peter sitting alone here at night making the shapes of animals out of matchsticks, of those same hands now in a coffin before the high altar of Cootehall church. Tomorrow he'd lie in the earth on the top of Killeelan Hill. A man is born. He dies. Where he himself stood now on the path between those two points could not be known. He felt as much like the child that came each summer years ago to this bog from the city as the rough unfinished man he knew himself to be in the eyes of others, but feelings had nothing to do with it. He must be already well out past halfway. (396).

The irreconcilable conflict between felt self-conception and known public image--between subjective and objective truths--is resolved through an appeal to a single unequivocal fact: that the passage of time needs no validation, no reference to the individual. It is, rather, the individual who must capitulate to time's indifference. The musing's conclusion--"He must be..."--is the only truth; hence the voice is universal: it is Philly's, the author's and the reader's.

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Uncle Peter is characterized entirely by the townspeople within the reminiscences of his own funeral: "There were no sides to poor Peter. He was straight and thick. We could do with more like him" (388)). This respect is a tenuous foundation, as Fonsie bluntly reminds: "Respect, my arse. Everybody is respected for a few days after they conk it because they don't have to be lived with any more. Oh, it's easy to honour the dead" (404). In contrast to the townspeople's niceties, their uncle's domineering presence is at the forefront of the narrator's summary of the nephews' childhood experiences at Gloria Bog:

He hardly ever looked at Fonsie in his wheelchair, and it was fear that never allowed Fonsie to take his eyes from the back of his uncle's head and broad shoulders. Whenever Philly and John took him sandwiches and the Powers bottle of tea kept warm in the sock to the bog or meadow, they always instinctively took a step or two back after handing the oilcloth bag. (380).

In spite of Philly's fonder memories--on two occasions he recalls the day his Uncle plopped him on a barstool and told the patrons he was a "great gosson" (381)--John's one expressed recollection is arguably the thematic kernel of the whole story:

'It's terrible when you're young to come into a place [Gloria Bog] where you know you're not wanted....I used to feel we were eating poor Peter out of house and home every summer. When you're a child you feel those sorts of things badly even though nobody notices.' (381)

On one level, these different recollections query the reliability of memory--the subtext of a brief exchange between Fonsie and Philly :

'What are you stopping for?' Fonsie demanded.  
 'Just looking at the bog. On evenings like this I used to think it was on fire. Other times the sedge looked like gold. I remember it well.'  
 'You're talking through your drainpipe,' Fonsie said as the car moved on.  
 'All I remember of these evenings is poor Mother hanging out the washing.'  
 'Wouldn't she hang it out in the morning?'  
 'She had too much to do in the morning. It shows how little you were about the house.' (389-90)

Rather than dwell on the reliability of memory, however, the text seems to test the brothers' individual willingness to mine their pasts. John simply wants to forget:

'It's over now. With Peter it's all finished. One of the things that made the last days bearable for me was that everything we were doing was being done for the last time,' John said with uncharacteristic volubility... (406).

It is really only Philly, during his evening alone, who feels the existential emptiness that is explicitly noted to surround him, though it is also implied to envelop his brothers. But the bereavement is not a result of their uncle's death; rather, it must relate to the conspicuous absence in their memories of their "unreliable" (379) father. To the extreme, however, such psychologizing risks undermining a natural fluidity of character the narrative continually nurtures. This is apparent in Philly's self-consciously limited conclusion: "As far as I can make out nothing is ever over" (406). To seek reductive cause in the nephews' being belies their own efforts to find shape, to become.

The childhood experience of feeling unwanted, which John asserts "nobody notices," manifests in Philly's announcement to his brothers that he intends to buy Gloria Bog. Perhaps it is little more than an attempt to preserve the attention he received at the funeral:

I'll never forget it all the days of my life, the people coming to the house all through the night. The rows and rows of people at the removal passing by us in the front seat of the church grasping our hands" [emphases added] (405).

Regardless, Philly's decision is the logical conclusion to a narrative that presumes to be no more than the recognizably predictable. While it disposes John's hope that "it's all over," his plan to buy the farm is also a symbolic reaching "towards the future which will contain a reassimilation of the past" (Miller cited by Pickering 49). This hope for the future is a desire to overcome the terror of "those infinite spaces." Hence, it fits his character; the reader expects it. Fonsie, however, does not: "He had always thought he could never lose Philly. The burly block of exasperation would always come and go from the oil fields. Now he would go to bloody Gloria Bog instead. As he was put in the car, his tears turned to rage" (408). And Fonsie's reaction in turn confirms the "hidden closeness" (405) between them that the text continually implied.

McGahern has produced a narrative that nurtures its own climactic moments. As incremental as those moments are, it is the union of sympathy between reader and author (and characters) which makes them poignant. Ironically, the story seems to end in an air of incredulity, querying the authenticity of the experience, perhaps even story-telling, recollection, and perception: save the "fact" (CS 408) that Uncle Peter is underground, the story ends more or less where it began.

## Conclusion

Because of the novelist's god-like providence, the scope of a novel is unnaturally comprehensive. In contrast, the short story craftsman is limited to a glimmer of light from which an 'unearthly glow' (O'Connor 21) must be cast. In this respect the short story is the literary equivalent to life itself as the short story writer, like the non-writer, is confined to a limited view of the whole. Although the short story writer contends with aesthetic and formal issues while crafting his/her art, the essential process of imagining, of expanding an image into something greater, is instinctive and thus experienced by writers and non-writers alike.

In the throes of anxiety precipitated by the demise of his romantic relationship, the narrator of "Parachutes" yearns for "some device like radar" (230). This symbolic plea for expansive vision reflects the inherent limitations of human perception. In terms of literature, the first person point of view is mimetic of this natural limitation as the licence of omniscience is formally denied. In "High Ground," the narrator is similarly limited as his perception of the present is confounded by the indifferent passage of time which in effect severs continuity between past and present identities. What is apparent in the present contradicts perceptions made in the past. The result is again anxiety as the narrator's perception is rendered unstable. Hence the narrator's confident projection of the future is similarly tenuous.

To reflect the inherent limits of human perception and understanding, McGahern's stories rarely funnel to definitive conclusions. The implication is that the alienated

consciousness is an eternal fact of life. And this basic premise sheds light on McGahern's less than idealistic conception of love. The extreme view, expressed in "Christmas," is that love is an impossible ideal. While this may be the case, such resolution essentially 'annuls all votes' in the human need to commune intimately with other people--a nihilistic outlook that McGahern's stories do not uphold. Rather, McGahern's stories focus on challenging the simplistic belief that the power of love can single-handedly preclude alienation. At best, as indicated in the stories "My Love, My Umbrella," "Parachutes" and "Gold Watch," love is only a temporary refuge from alienation. The first recounts a relationship, and the process of shaping it into a story not only increases the narrator's understanding of love, but there are hints also that the imagination is "a more reliable gauge of love and meaning" (Sampson 101) than reason or instinctual desire. This presence of the imagination is indicative of its ubiquitous nature. And since the imagination is basically motivated by alienation, its presence in love suggests that love is not a union free of alienation.

Finding unity in a world that is perceived in bits and pieces is the essence of the symbolic power of the imagination, whether it be in unifying the various identities of oneself through time, or simply making sense of strangers and strangeness. "Gold Watch" exemplifies the process as a family heirloom initiates the narrator's retrieval of his past in an effort to find the instinctive roots of the debilitating relationship with his father. Furthermore, in the process, the meanings of his yearly homecomings are also illuminated. Specifically, they are exposed as futile efforts to stall the passage of time by freezing the wholeness of childhood.

Similarly, "Strandhill, the Sea" is an imaginative re-creation of childhood by an implied adult narrator. And again the process of telling is aligned with increased understanding. The story ends with the child-narrator escaping the adult milieu of

'information' and immersing himself in a fantastical comic book world. The linking of the imagination and children is a motif that is implied in many of McGahern's stories. This correspondence between children and imagination is even more poignant when it is coupled with the unified state of childhood conveyed in "Gold Watch." The assertion is that the self of childhood is unified not necessarily because of ego-centricity but because it is a self that is brimming with imaginative energy. Consequently, a desire for the unified self of childhood is a yearning for the symbolic power of the imagination.

This thesis is framed by two stories that exhibit McGahern's own artistic process. As a crafted short story, "A Slip-Up" displays McGahern's sympathetic observance of the natural limits of his own perception and knowledge, as he takes a single, fixed image of an elderly man and delicately imagines a much larger whole. Coincidentally, the 'whole' he creates is none other than the observed old man similarly engaged in the imaginative process of recollecting childhood. This sympathetic process is also evident in "The Country Funeral," as three brothers are sympathetically characterized as processes, as beings with histories and hopes. The funeral for their Uncle Peter gradually evokes past feelings of estrangement which in turn exacerbate present ones. And like the elderly man in "A Slip-Up," these feelings, in varying degrees, stimulate their imaginations in struggles to construct semblances of unity in their lives.

In contrast, the narrators of "The Recruiting Officer" and "Doorways" either render the world static or objectify it. Indeed the nihilistic truths uncovered by the two narrators merely reflect a capitulation to alienation, and moreover a loss of faith in the imagination. Although McGahern's presence is generally unintrusive in his first-person narratives, his presence increases when a narrator surrenders his imaginative potential. Hence, an ironic distance is created between narrator and author. Subsequently, in "The Recruiting Officer"

and "Doorways" the stories told are of less interest than the story-tellers. In fact, it is hard to believe that the lethargic narrators, exemplified by their stunted imaginations, would have brought pen to paper. But aside from this perfunctory inference, the presence of an implied author is more greatly felt in these stories and hence authorial judgments are made on the self-awareness of story-tellers themselves.

On the whole, however, McGahern's short stories are not judgmental. Preferring instead to accept the alienated consciousness as a universal tension created by the human limitation to comprehend the entirety of existence, McGahern writes stories which display imaginative processes. And what further marks the stories is the non-heroic status of the narrators. Comprised of lonely voices, confined to narrow environments, and told with acute personal detail, McGahern's narratives champion the instinctive, universal quality of the imagination.

Ironically, beneath this championing is not victory, but endurance. To reiterate, alienation is insurmountable. There is no clear victory: life is a process of "rejecting, altering, shaping, straining towards the one image that will never come" ("The Image"). By subduing his own presence in not only the first- but also the third-person narratives, McGahern exhibits a disinterest in utilizing an omniscient voice to cast judgment on the alienated consciousness of his average, and sometimes ignoble, narrators and protagonists. Instead he chooses to exhibit their imaginations. The mere appearance of the imagination is what he truly celebrates as a victory. And although there is a conspicuous lack of moralizing in his stories, the faith he invests in the power of the imagination implies that it nurtures patience, sympathy, empathy and understanding.

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During a reading in New York City in March 1994, McGahern explained the significance of this esoteric passage in his social narrative, "Oldfashioned":

Suddenly the war was over....The countryside emptied towards London and Luton....

At home a vaguely worried church joined a dying language to declare that learning Irish would help to keep much foreign influence out....A secondary school was opened by the Brothers in the town. The word *Salamanca*, having endured for most of a century as a mighty ball booted on the wind out of defence in Charlie's field, grew sails again on an open sea, became distant spires within a walled city in the sun. ("Oldfashioned" 251)

Aside from being the name of the famous Spanish seminary, "Salamanca" was also the common cry when a Gaelic football player made a clearing kick. In retrospect, McGahern sees it as illustrative of the social, economic, and political constraints on the imagination of a rural Irish population. Certainly for young men, becoming a teacher at a Christian Brothers' school or a Catholic priest were as far as one could dream beyond the family farm. Despite these constraints, McGahern and his narrators search in that and other limited worlds and repeatedly find "the images of dead passions and their days" ("The Image").

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