

MIGRATION, IDENTITY AND CHANGE FOR YOUNG HEROES IN JOHN MCGAHERN'S FICTION

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Abstract

Torn between traditions, the sense of belonging to local communities and the urge to find a better living, young adult migrants are in John McGahern's prose both heroes and victims. The purpose of this paper is to explore the connections and layers of their family environment and past, and of a fragile route to individual success and failure. Both male and female characters feel rather confined when placed in urban sites, and their education limits employment opportunities, while the degraded and degrading human topoi are bitterly scrutinized in a blend of tragic and comedy. Examples taken from the collections of short stories and novels attest that protagonists oscillate between physical and mental departures and arrivals, easy gain and shallow feelings that imprint characters a perceptible change and low self-confidence, despite a vibrant and apparently friendly urban fabric.

Keywords: identity, diaspora, Irishness, emigration, London.

1. Irish migration, diaspora and identity

The importance of memory in cultural studies in the last few decades is tributary to several elements, part of our past and identities: the impact of world wars, the geographical spread of migrants, an increased alienation and a re-found sense of community and belonging in a traditional society, such as the Irish one, facing multiple changes and accumulations.

This paper aims at exploring the complex connections and layers of John McGahern's prose when analysed through the framework of memory, migration and Irish studies connected to diasporic discourse. Valuable insights into this topic were provided by Paul Ricoeur, Homi Bhabha, and Donald Akenson (in Fitzgerald and Lambkin, 2008: 224-251). Irishness is about a world contained to itself, as well as defined in opposition to otherness (Englishness): 'civilized miracle' versus a complete 'boredom', or a 'looped' identity (Ricoeur, 1992: 28). In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur declares:

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Literary narratives and life histories, far from being mutually exclusive, are complementary, despite, or even because of their contrast. This dialectic reminds us that the narrative part is part of life before being exiled from life into writing; it returns to life along the multiple paths of appropriation and at the price of unavoidable tensions just mentioned. (Ricoeur, 1992: 163)

As Ellen McWilliams suggests in her study, the outline of the area revolves around the concepts of “exile”, “emigration” and “diaspora” as initially defined by international relations theorists (2013: 8), taking characters in contemporary fiction act as rake villains, prisoners of patriarchy, factors of irreverence and demystifiers of traditional identity.

The analysis of representations of emigrants in modern Irish writing indicates that “the majority of the London Irish were concentrated in the unskilled and lowest paid sectors of the economy” (Murray, 2012: 23). This view is enriched and complemented by Tom Herron’s introductory remarks, when he constructively notes that London needs to be seen as a complementary site for Irish writing, in addition to iconic places scattered across the homeland: “London is a place, an idea, a signifier, a nexus, an imagined and actual community” that “has in fact played as large a role in the Irish literary imagination as any city or place on the island” (Herron, 2013: 5), while McWilliams brings into the discussion feminine voices in the fictional universe, since Irish authors placed emphasis on a

diverse range of experiences of the Irish woman emigrant and capture her at different moments – on the verge of departure, looking back at the homeland, reconnecting with home by return or through memory, and more often than not engage with the same in ways that demonstrate keen a socio-historical specificity. (McWilliams, 2013: 3)

The theme is productive in fiction both in terms of content and aesthetics, as Yvonne O’Keefe and Claudia Reese note in their introductory observations to *New Voices, Inherited Lines*, pointing the connections with social relationships and feminine or masculine identities: “At the heart of many of these constructions of the Irish family are questions of power and agency, as well as issues of class, gender, ethnicities and sexualities” (O’Keefe and Reese, 2013: 1). For Clair Wills, visiting and re-visiting immigration experience is essentially connected to a new kind of fictional naturalism meant to suggest the detachment of young heroes from a patriarchal and archaic society:

protagonists are would-be modern young men and women, who are beset by the anachronism or the belatedness of post-war Irish society – it is as though the impulse to move into a newer, more modern phase of civilisation is continually dragged backwards, or not allowed to develop in the first place. (Wills, 2015:106).

In terms of statistics for the decades under question, the late 60s when the author left his homeland, worked and studied in London, and then moved for several years to Finland, France and Spain, demographic studies of the post-war era indicate a general noteworthy decline of population, many Irish leaving their homeland to work in Britain, with London as a first choice, as Delaney suggests:

Undoubtedly the majority of Irish migrants to Britain were from an agricultural background (. . .) Three-quarters of the decline in the 1960s may be accounted for by natural wastage, but the remainder can be attributed to the fact that twice as many people left the agricultural labour force as entered it. (Delaney, 2000: 235).

According to Herron, the novelist and his younger brother and sisters “were among these 600,000 emigrants” (2013: 64) pursuing education and a better life than at home. Yet for the writer, emigration was to go one step farther than his siblings, because of the ban of his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965, when he was refused to continue working as a teacher in Ireland.

2. Emigrant heroes and urban topoi: between high expectations and sheer realism

Irishness is for McGahern a very down-to-earth perspective, a sharp eye for details and well-defined relationships for the people included in the local community, but also a different sense of distance and belonging. For those in Leitrim, the area he spent many years in, the other places located at about thirty miles around seem to be the borders of people’s universe, and what is mostly valued is the news part of each small community as proved in the appetite of the locals for freshly-delivered news:

though I have written only about a small area, less than thirty miles, it would nevertheless be considered enormous by the local people. (. . .) It is each single, enclosed locality that matters, and everything that happens within it is of passionate interest to those who live there. (McGahern, 2013: 24)

For McGahern, one of the few negative perspectives of early adulthood spent in Britain transpires through the experience of unqualified workers on London construction sites, namely the description of men consuming their health in a difficult working environment, yet being consumed, in their turn, by a false perception of gratification and love. In “Hearts of Oaks and Bellies of Brass”, young men are pleased to count their money on the pay-day while a relatively aged woman, Kathleen, tries to lure them to her place. Her face is flushed by alcohol and her presence is nothing but a revolt against the senses to the voice of the novelist rejecting her excitement: “Only for her practised old hands it would have been impossible to raise desire, and if it was evil when it happened, the pumping of the

tension of the instinct into her glycerined hole, then nothing was so extraordinarily ordinary as this evil" (1992: 37). The metaphoric title of this short story reveals the harsh condition of Irish immigrants living and working in the mid-sixties Britain through such paradoxically-depicted personae: once young, strong and frank, the Irish have turned their oak-wooded nature into a machinery devoured by the English capitalist society suggested by "bellies of brass", alluringly echoed by the ironic reference to the metallic badges they wore: "We each had a thin brass medal on which our number was stamped, a hole in the medal for hanging it in the nail in the hut at night." (1992: 36)

Men's boredom, paralleled by their acknowledged lack of hope for coming years is labelled unequivocally by their daily routine: "pork chops, pints of beer, and a good od ride before you sleep" (1992: 32). The characters in the story are not of the same age, but their perceptions are rather similar; the young nameless main character, as often the case in McGahern's stories, does not want to reveal his difference, though he is exposed to speak it out in a short dialogue about Shakespeare: "Do you think Shakespeare's all he's bumped up to be?" followed by an evasive reaction: "I told him that I didn't know if Shakespeare was all that he was bumped up to be, but people said so, and it was people who did all the bumping out or down" (1992: 34).

A clearly depreciative and gloomy tone in assessing a man's identity is displayed in *The End or the Beginning of Love*², the unpublished manuscript describing the life of Irish emigrants in London. Although the names of the main characters change from other stories with a similar topic, McGahern conveys his realism and keen judgement, though some of the opinions seem to reflect rather the view expressed by the English vis-a-vis Irishmen working and living with them in the 1960s "Most of the Irish over here are the lowest of the low; they're the dregs of the country. You'd be ashamed of them; you don't know what they are like" (Sampson, 2012: 61). This point of view supports Brah's vision about the identity of the emigrant as inexorably linked to the narrative flow when he declares that the "identity of the diasporic imagined community" in fiction is "constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively" (Brah, 1996: 183).

The *topoi* of vicious human background present on London building sites around the 1950s-1960s is satirized in "Faith, Hope and Charity" where two careless workers, Cunningham and Murphy, cause their own death because of sheer working negligence. Their naïve described behaviour consists of spending money lavishly each summer on women "again and again, in childish hope that somehow the next time they will find the root of all knowledge, and the equally childish desire for revenge since it cannot be found" (1992: 146); and their inability to

² See details in <http://archives.library.nuigalway.ie/cgi-bin/FramedList.cgi?P71>

enjoy pleasure and reject facile Eros makes them gradually become “full of hatred” and decrease the self-protection to the point of imminent danger:

they grew careless and their greed for money grew in order to make an even bigger splash this summer than before. Little by little the spaces between the metal bars lengthened. They felt invulnerable: no matter how careless they were the bad accident was bound to happen elsewhere. (1992: 146)

The development of the story reasserts that characters blend together in a mix of comedy and tragedy: Joe Cunningham’s family decides to bring his body home for the funeral, and then the priest calls them for support to raise the money needed to pay for the transport of the deceased; his idea to organize a dance and collection is agreed by and a small band is invited to play:

Faith, Hope and Charity were three old bachelor brothers, the Cryans, who played at local functions. They had been known as ‘Faith, Hope and Charity’ for so long that nobody now knew how their name began. Faith played the fiddle. Hope beat out the rhythm on the drums. Charity was strapped into an old accordion that was said to have come from America. (1992: 150)

The end shows the postman and the teacher engaged in a lively chat while the collection is completed and the dance is about to start on the music played by the Faith, Hope and Charity. The combination of a funeral with a dance party suggests the ambivalent yet pragmatic role of the Church mixed with that of the local band, in what may be seen a blend of devotion and hint to Celtic pagan rites still present until the early 20th century.

Cunningham’s sad end is illuminated by the name of the band playing at his funeral: his life was far from any faith, hope and charity, but the liveliness of the three old bachelors, as well as the postman nodding to the teacher in front of “empty crates of stout” that locals start to disappear when the three brothers go into “right old playing form” (1992: 150) makes the collection show that the burial becomes a “splash” for the deceased, but that this is, perhaps, what he might have wished for.

For several characters in *The Leavetaking*, most of whom are relatively young, life in London is all about a safe job, sexual freedom, and intellectual opportunities: “We were not worried. We were young. A jazz record was put on the gramophone. The glasses were filled again. We began to dance.” (McGahern, 2009: 141) while older individuals, the urban space implies the very distinction between the green, mild and generous fields in rural Ireland and the busy, rather selfish, though prosperous world of work from England.

The urban world has a different texture and a different kind of pace; it is mostly the space of characters in search of liveliness, change and restlessness. Such characters enjoy meeting each other briefly, going out to dance or film, making love, separating from each other, in search of another exciting experience. They live on higher or smaller earnings, but by sharing the same type of space, they render it a general feeling of fragmentation and lack of depth. Most of them do not stop to take a deep breath or reflect on their own doings and feelings, but when they do it, it takes them to a different layer of perception, as in *The Pornographer*:

The next day I put aside for what I liked doing best. I did nothing, the nothing of walking crowded streets in the heart of the city, looking at faces, going into chance bars to rest, eating lunch and dinner alone in cheap, crowded restaurants. (McGahern, 2009: 62)

Sampson too thinks that it is the very time of his early youth and days spent at St. Patrick's College which allowed the writer to come across a universe he had never thought of in the small places he had lived in his childhood:

This impassioned discovery of modern art, and the strength he drew from it, was not restricted to books, for he also began to go out into the city on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons and on Sunday to dancehalls and matches at Croke Park with friends, certainly, but also to the Gate Theatre and to the cinema. The private and solitary experience of reading, intensified by friendship in St. Pat's, opened out to the public culture of the city. (2012: 27)

Yet moving out of it from the relatively calm life in the small towns of Aughawillan, Carrick, or Drogheda, is not to take place without its toll: the young protagonist recurrently present in his prose takes this not only as an opening, and joy to the pleasures of the mind and of the world, but also as a form of long-term departure, determining him to return home after his second marriage with Madeleine:

This summer [of 1954, when his father remarried] also introduced McGahern to the experience of the exile. He will later show deep sympathy for people uprooted against their will, and the effort to accomplish a reorientation in estrangement will engage him deeply in his fiction. (. . .) The city came to represent in McGahern's fiction the other place, the place of uncertainty, where so many emigrants had to invent a new life, although still deeply attached to the original home in various parts of rural Ireland." (Sampson, 2012: 31)

This ambivalent feeling related to the city, and a deeper need to return to his homeland, among the people he liked and whom he relates to comes up with a fresh sense of humour in *Memoir*, when the novelist mentions the profound love

and deception perceived by a young man on the building site he was working on in 1954:

During a break from work a man was reading aloud from one of these newspapers. Another wet summer in Ireland was turning into a disaster and prayers were being offered in all the churches for the rains to cease. A young Clare man was in our gang. 'May it never stop', he said without a trace of humour when the reading finished. 'May they all have to climb trees. May it rise higher than it did for fukken Noah!' (McGahern, 2005: 210-1)

In *Irish Writing London, Volume 2*, Tom Herron notes the differentiation of status between female and male Irish migrants, linking that to what Freud had called a reduction of self-esteem and great loss of ego and deriving from their different social routes:

Male characters, used to the open Irish countryside and without training in domesticity, are more often than not confined to a particular stratum of London's social and economic life; a lack of education consigns the majority of them to hard labouring jobs in which there is little opportunity for advancement. Indeed, male characters seemed shamed by the very fact that they had to emigrate. (Herron, 2013: 66)

On the other hand, the above-mentioned challenge is not worthy a battle, and that is reflected evocatively by Ingolsby in "Strandhill, the Sea:" "Never feel you have to know anything because you happen to teach. Never let them bully you with their assumptions of what you should be. Say you don't know, that it can be discovered in books, if they're interested." (McGahern, 1992: 41)

McGahern's young Irish men working in London are often boisterous, loud in voice and action, proud of their maleness, and using rough language and frankness mixed with what they think is a must for ceremonial circumstances: "I don't know and I don't care what the king of the monkeys wears but we who are Irish should always be tidy when we sit down to tea," says Murphy in "Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass" (1992: 30). This rhetoric hides the misery of hard work and low pay, and the young main character reflecting on his year of experience on the London building sites is absorbed completely by the image of the banknotes he loves counting on the pay-day:

I love to count in money the hours of my own and precious life. I sell the hours and I get money. The money allows me to sell more hours. If I saved money I could buy the hours of some similar bastard and live like a royal incubus, which would suit me much better than the way I am now, though apparently even as I am now suits me well enough, since I do not want to die. (1992: 37)

The voice of the character places an ironic stress on "life," and that puts it in antithesis to what the character would like his life to stand for: selling hours of work and getting money is not what he aims at, but he needs to survive, and that makes him feel trapped; his adulthood is not the dream he had left with from Ireland to the world of opportunity and success he is placed in; his fate goes round a perverse circle of being consumed by labour for a minimal gain. Young and deprived of good prospects in their homeland, Irish men like the young hero above spend their days around the cement mixer, pints of beer and coupling with old and unattractive women. No beauty of landscape, no calm, the space is crowded with a dense but vain series of objects and actions.

McGahern's characters find this space incapable of responding their individual needs, and although they understand the pressure of working in an urban environment, they have taken a firm decision against a place they are not intimately related to: "What do you find wrong with England?" "Nothing but it's not my country and I never feel it's quite real or that my life there is real. That has its pleasant side as well. You never feel responsible or fully involved in anything that happens. It's like being present and at the same time a real part of you is happily absent." (McGahern, 2002: 25), "England never changes much. They have a set way of doing everything there. It's all more or less alphabetical in England" (2002: 83), "Anyhow all the priests in England are sociable. They are not directly connected to God like the crowd here" (2002: 86).

The complex nature of urban life spent in the city of Dublin for most of the year, while the summer is usually spent at home, in old rural areas, takes a new turn into "Sierra Leone" where the name is a puzzling challenge, but which McGahern clarifies simply: "Sierra Leone is elsewhere, and the point is that it is always much easier to deal with something that is elsewhere than in the life that's around you" (Collinge and Vernadakis, 2003: 9). In Lasch Carroll's view, this story "seems to sever the urban male protagonist's ties with his rural roots, the country home populated by the recurring gruff controlling father and timid anxious stepmother, but leaves him adrift in a Dublin where his lover severs ties with him because of his inability to commit" (Carroll, 2008: 4).

3. Departed heroes and regained sons

According to Sampson, it is likely for Nuala O'Faolain, another Irish writer of the time, to have been one of the women met by McGahern, whom he used to draw the character in this short story, possibly "Sierra Leone" as well. That double-sided reality is on the one hand a love story between Geraldine McCreedy, the wife of a popular politician, and the young male character who grows aware of the thinness of a love story despite his focus on the beautiful woman he feels attracted to, describing the confinement to the urban space they shared: "We were in the

condemned cell waiting for reprieve or execution, except that this time the whole world was the cell. There was nothing we could do. The withering would happen as simply as the turning on or off of a light bulb” (McGahern, 1992: 318). The beginning of their meeting is marked by the narrative shift, from the description of her beauty and his physical attraction to thoughts about the temporary nature of their joy: “We had struggled towards the best years; now they waited for us, and all was to be laid waste as we were about to enter into them” (*ibid.*). The perspective gets closer to that of a sailor navigating unknown water, and his freedom opens the door to both pleasure and danger. The short references to the time of the Cuban crisis and the doings of the military in the Pentagon only act as pinpoints for the distance between the two lovers and the rest of the world.

The nameless male character has a short moral impulse, discussing with Geraldine their affair taken for a betrayal, but she simply enjoys their time spent together; he is however, perfectly aware on their temporary furtive relationship:

Our easy thieving that was hardly loving, anxiety curbed by caution, appetite so luxuriously satisfied that it could not give way to the dreaming that draws us close to danger, was wearing itself naturally away when a different relationship was made alarmingly possible. (McGahern, 1992: 322)

The son’s return home is also an opportunity for the father to discuss the ownership of their farm with his son, and his intention is to sell the place to him so that his second wife and her relatives would not be able to get anything after his death. The son’s disinterest and disappointment over such issues express his resentment and critical view in a question followed by an answer unfolding the difficulty of family life and uncertain love: “Where were we to go from there, our pleasure now its grinning head? And it would be over and not over. I had gone home instead, a grotesquerie of other homegoings, and it too was over now” (McGahern, 1992:326). The juxtaposition of issues about truth and consistency is replicated towards the end of the story through direct reflections and rhetorical questions addressed to the self, in the attempt to clear intentions and determine following actions when the young man realizes, one evening later, that Geraldine would not come to the usual meeting place:

Before any pain of her absence could begin to hang about the opening and closing doors as the early evening drinkers bustled in, I got up and left; and yet her absence was certainly less painful than the responsibility of a life together. But what then of love? Love flies out the window, I heard them say. (McGahern, 1992:328)

They perceive their separation as they part “as easily as two leaves sent spinning apart by any sudden gust” (McGahern, 1992: 329). Once again the vision of life like a dream turns into a universal and memorable pattern: “All things begin in dreams, and it must be wonderful to have your mind full of a whole country like

Sierra Leone before you go there and risk discovering that it might be your life" (*ibid.*).

McGahern's use of apparently misleading titles is to be noted in *The Collected Stories* collection. "Korea" has no connection to Asia, but describes the deceitful behaviour of a father. While his son attempts to restore a relationship through a discussion about war memories (which the father used to reject), the father's mind is simply set on persuading his son to leave for America as a soldier, perfectly aware of the solid monthly income and the value of the life insurance; in a similar way, "Sierra Leone" describes altering relationships, in a changed, modernized Irish society where a father makes plan to disinherit his second wife, while his son looks with increasing hostility to his stepmother; the son's affair with Geraldine is interrupted when her husband's work takes him to Sierra Leone.

4. Conclusions

McGahern's heroes do not perceive their departure to Dublin or London as an exile; yet the impact of living far from their traditional community, green pastures and rivers and strong family relationships bring them often on the edge of despair. Financial gain helps them to have a better standard of living compared to previous generations, but the psychological changes incurred by such a change fluctuate between joy and difficult adjustment, even if they enjoy the lack of religious and family restrictions compared to the homeland of their childhood.

What connects and re-connects Irish fictional emigrants presented in McGahern's stories and individuals living away from their home is the writer's ability to encapsulate the Irish *l'ineffable* in a prose operating along realist representations and existentialist touches, as openly declared by Sampson in his introduction to *Young John McGahern* speaking about acknowledging an "anguished voice that searched relentlessly for meaning and calm in bewildering personal circumstances", which re-sets the critic's own perception: "It was this recognition that drew me searching for an appropriate way of appreciating the work and for an understanding of the literary traditions and models in which he had found inspiration and clarified his own place" (Sampson, 2012: vii).

McGahern's unique ability to present the reality of young adults living in Dublin and London is far from being a solely gloomy and alienated picture, its complexity is directly highlighted by the confession of his first day in England, an intellectual reverence to his great predecessors, close to a believer's fervour:

Religious feeling does not die easily. When I walked off the boat at Holystead to the waiting London train – and thought of Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, all the great English writers I had read and studied – I felt awe, as if I was stepping on to sacred ground. (McGahern, 2005: 213).

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