



## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

53 | Autumn 2009

The Short Stories of John MacGahern

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### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1000>

ISSN : 1969-6108

### Éditeur

Presses universitaires d'Angers

### Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 décembre 2009

ISSN : 0294-04442

### Référence électronique

Pascal Bataillard, « Love and solitary enjoyment in "my love, my umbrella": some of John McGahern's uses of *Dubliners* », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [En ligne], 53 | Autumn 2009, mis en ligne le 01 décembre 2010, consulté le 03 mai 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1000>

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# Love and solitary enjoyment in "my love, my umbrella": some of John McGahern's uses of *Dubliners*

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"Reading McGahern  
Abandon me to despair's surprise:  
To the open endings of my days."  
Paul Durcan, *Cries of an Irish Caveman*, 35.

- 1 Critics have often remarked on the affinities in method that exist between James Joyce and John McGahern. Denis Sampson, for instance, observes that experiments with fictional form in the wake of *Dubliners* are "the growing tips of McGahern's art in that first decade of his career" (Sampson 89). This is precisely the period when *Nightlines*, his first collection of short stories – which includes "My Love, My Umbrella" – was published. I wish, however, to explore this seemingly well-established genealogy, so as to go beyond certain obvious thematic or structural resemblances by questioning, or queering, or 're-dubbling,' the use of *Dubliners* as performed by McGahern.
- 2 To do so, I will focus on "My Love, My Umbrella." This story will be considered less as the narrative of "the failure of the love affair" (Dubois §5) than as the realization by the narrator-protagonist that he succeeded all too well in protecting himself from the possibility of love, of opening up to the other as well as to himself. The umbrella is here instrumental, both on the diegetic level – as the spring of the narrator's triumph and fall, the symbol of a glorious phallic assumption and the witness of a pitiful detumescence forecast by the inherent arrogance of the preceding stance – and on the interpretative level, producing conflicting and ambivalent meanings that the reader is called to enjoy with a degree of perplexity as well as perversity (the mockery of a phallic symbol, a regressive womb, a fetish, a dangerous supplement, a prosthetic sex toy...).
- 3 Studying the question of love in John McGahern's fiction would by far exceed the scope of an article. It would be very tempting to try to find an evolution from the early and middle works reputed to stage frustration, violence and failure (with the patriarchal figures looming large over *The Barracks* and *Amongst Women* that have inspired so much of the

critical work on this author), to the more sedate, reconciled tone of the late writings (*That They May Face the Rising Sun* now depicting domestic happiness and complicity despite the knowledge of the 'vanity of it all'). Although very neat and convenient, this vision would be reductive, missing the presence of a *polarity* present in McGahern's fiction as early as in *The Barracks*, where Elizabeth discreetly embodies a totally different conception and incarnation of love, not to say a mode of what, since Lacan, has been called *feminine jouissance* (S.XX). Conversely, patriarchal violence and a predatory vision of women are still present in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* in the guise of John Quinn, most of the time acting in plain, deliberate abjection.

- 4 Again, it would be somewhat simplistic to believe that this polarity coincides exactly with gender differences. As exemplified in many stories, women can be shown to act just as ruthlessly as men. Towards the close of "The Stoat," an almost allegorical tale in this respect, maybe deceptively so, the narrator's father is likened to the rabbit previously hunted down by the stoat on a golf course:

As if all the irons were suddenly being truly struck and were flowing from all directions to the heart of the green, I saw that my father had started to run like the poor rabbit. He would have been better off if he could have tried to understand something, even though it would get him off nothing (CS 156-57).

- 5 Having underlined some of the inherent difficulties of this work, I will now try to examine the mechanics of the power struggle at play in "My Love, My Umbrella" and the way in which violence is hinged to a degree of perversity, if not perversion. The opening sentence delineates the contours of the improbable *ménage à trois*, defining the *habitus* that made it possible:

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, the metal point bent where it was caught in Mooney's grating as we raced for the last bus out of Abbey Street (CS 65).

- 6 In other words, the presence of the umbrella seems naturally justified by the rain, offering the couple the modern, urban counterpart of the bough of lovers of old. Its pragmatic usage, the protection offered against the rain, accounts for its otherwise incongruous company during sexual intercourse, made constantly manifest, literally mediating all the more or less assured moves of the male protagonist and similarly punctuating those of the young woman:

We moved under the umbrella out of the street light, fumbling for certain footing between the tree roots.  
Will you hold the umbrella?  
She took the imitation leather with the white stitching in her hands (CS 67-68).

- 7 It is as if the umbrella had created a common space or, rather, a micro-utopia, a place and time that are nowhere else to be shared, a time freed from history and memory, a time of pure repetition and enjoyment:

We went to cinemas or sat in pubs, it was the course of our love, and as it always rained we made love under the umbrella beneath the same trees in the same way. They say the continuance of sexuality is due to the penis having no memory, and mine each evening spilt its seed into the mud and decomposing leaves as if it was always for the first time (CS 68).

- 8 However, this timeless bliss is ruptured by the telling of stories, which seem to dwell in the protagonists' mind once they have been articulated, generating mixed feelings or

downright resentment, introducing or maybe just revealing a division between the lovers that the umbrella had so far contributed to conceal:

Sometimes we told each other stories. I thought one of the stories she told me very cruel, but I did not tell her (CS 68).

- 9 It should be noted that the allusion to the stories they tell each other is made immediately after the mention of semen dropping in humus, which, in the Aristotelian phrase revived by Roland Barthes, is a particularly clear case of the “*post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy” (McQuillan 326). The reader is made to sense that ‘story time’ is going to disturb the lovers’ blissful ignorance of each other. What is more, it is exactly at the same moment that James Joyce’s words to Grant Richards, his publisher for *Dubliners*, are echoed:

I think people might be willing to pay for *the special odour of corruption which, I hope, floats over my stories* (15 October 1905, SL 79) [emphasis mine].

It is not my fault that *the odour of ashpits and old weeds and offal hangs round my stories*.

I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass (23 June 1906, SL 89-90) [emphasis mine].

- 10 This echo is both very discreet, as if muffled by “the mud and decomposing leaves,” and quite distinct, that is, once the two texts have been brought together.<sup>1</sup> It is remarkable also that the same epithets used by Joyce to describe the atmosphere of his prose and times should be applied by historians to the period following World War II. For instance, Joseph Lee speaks of “the fetid atmosphere of the forties and fifties” (Lee 384) while Declan Kiberd describes Ireland in those years as a “Quaking Sod” (551-61). For Siobhán Holland, this simply characterises John McGahern's fiction:

[It] focuses on rural Ireland in the middle of the twentieth century and captures the torpor with which that period is popularly associated (Holland 186).

- 11 Joyce and McGahern can be called *realists* in that they force their readers to view something unpleasant about themselves, a reality that is obfuscated in and by their times with their willing participation. One of those realities concerns childhood and its “forbidden games,” to use René Clément’s famous film title. This is where the first story told by one of the lovers comes in, the one found “cruel” by the narrator. As a girl, she teased a neighbour until he lost his mind:

As she grew, feeling the power of her body, she began to provoke him, until one evening on her way to the well through his fields, where he was pruning a whitethorn hedge with a billhook, she lay in the soft grass and showed him so much of her body beneath her clothes that he dropped the billhook and seized her. She struggled loose and shouted as she ran, ‘I’ll tell my Daddy, you pig’ (CS 69).

- 12 The man, named Pat Moran, is put to such shame that, possibly drawing the wrong but unquestioned (and, in this sense, *Mora/onic*) conclusions, he “soon afterwards sold his farm and went to England though he’d never known any other life but that of a small farmer” (CS 69), dissolving – as we may guess from the reading of “Hearts of Oak and Bellies of Brass” – into the perfect anonymity of being just another ‘Paddy.’<sup>2</sup> It is thus no exaggeration to suggest that the budding girl effectively put him to death – like Salome, perversely exhibiting the head, not of John the Baptist but of Moran, on a silver platter by retelling the story with unabashed complacency and unmitigated pleasure:

She’d grown excited in the telling and asked me what I thought of the story. I said that I thought life was often that way (CS 69).

- 13 Her story should not be taken as just proleptic of the way she will later exercise her power over the narrator. Apparently unimpressed by the clear signs of her potential sovereignty which the latter has been left to glimpse into, the young male misses the point of her "scrupulous meanness," as Joyce says (SL 83), reluctant to admit there is any 'originality' in her tale. It is, nevertheless, difficult to decide whether he is simply endorsing Oscar Wilde's words, that "life imitates art" (when, asked his opinion of the story, he argues, that "life was often that way," CS 89), or whether, unaware of it, he is simply signing his own death warrant, ironically playing the part of the martyr-prophet. We should, however, envisage another reading: the male protagonist fails to read all these signs because it is just inconceivable for him to lose his monopoly of perverse experiments, not to be the only one introducing that type of initiative. If the reader could be inclined to think he is just a victim, he or she is made to think better of it when presented with the narrator's own tale. Indeed, his own story, falsely 'impersonal,' betrays, so to speak, what lies on the other side of the protective umbrella:

She then asked me if I had any stories in my life. I said I did, but there was one story that I read in the evening paper that interested me most, since it had indirectly got to do with us (CS 69).

- 14 The story appears almost surreal, as odd as the umbrella – standing erect in all its matter-of-factness between the two lovers – as if partaking of the strange beauty that Lautréamont saw in "the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella" (Lautréamont 256). It is about highly respectable men who suddenly jump at each other's throats and inflict severe wounds upon one another with their umbrellas. They are brought to court where the judgement borders on casuistry:

The question before the judge: was it a case of common assault or, much more serious, assault with dangerous weapon with intent to wound? In view of the extent of the injuries inflicted it had not been an easy decision, but eventually he found for common assault, since he didn't want the thousands of peaceable citizens who used their umbrellas properly to feel that when they travelled to and from work they were carrying dangerous weapons (CS 69).

- 15 The sentence issued by the judge is meant to reinstate umbrellas into their *normal* function (a gesture both normative and normalising), as if indeed they had to be returned to their emblematic function, indispensable to define a respectable citizen. In exactly the same way as he has diverted the sexual act from the reproductive ends sanctioned by society, the narrator has been able to put his umbrella to a totally different, even deviant, use. This has been possible as long as it was raining – the permanence of the rain providing the ideal alibi, plausible enough in Dublin it is true, but so stretched that it ultimately creates a dreamlike, surreal atmosphere. At this point, we have to acknowledge that everything is still open, that "all sorts of impossible things" can still happen. Although his lover resents the story, the possibility of love-making remains, both in the carnal sense and in the sense of bringing love into their relation:

In the rain we made love again, *she the more fierce* [emphasis mine], and after the seed spilled she said, 'Wait,' and moving on a dying penis, under the unsteady umbrella in her hands, she trembled towards an inarticulate cry of pleasure (CS 70).

- 16 It is quite manifest that, up to this moment, the woman's desire is still whole and raw. The umbrella is more than ever the pivotal point of her sexual pleasure. What destroys it all is her dissatisfaction with the narrator's words, his avowed motives for marriage. His question about the relevance of marriage is brought about by his sense of "habit" ("we had so fallen into the habit of each other") so that his question sounds terribly lame:

'Would you think we should ever get married?' 'Kiss me.' She leaned across the steel between us. 'Do you think we should?' I repeated. 'What would it mean to you?' she asked.

What I had were longings or fears rather than any meanings (CS 70).

- 17 The young woman clearly gives the narrator a possibility to remain on the equivocal level of the flesh but he just prefers to repeat his question. Repetition does not necessarily herald the infamous 'death drive' but it is difficult not to see the question about "meaning" as the direct interpretation of his reiteration, likely to trigger off a number of interrogations – 'what do you mean with this question about marriage?', 'what is on your mind?', 'are you not, like all other men, "all palaver and what [you] can get out of [us]?"' (D 178), to use Lily's words in "The Dead," in response to Gabriel trying to be nice while actually being patronising. For there are here other unpleasant truths or realities – some of which may be quite obvious by now, some infinitely less so – that have fuelled agony columns in popular magazines or 'high-brow' essays before or ever since the publication of *Nightlines*. Love is not just about being 'nice,' nor just about having pleasure or not getting enough, or, to speak like Lacan, "there is no sexual ratio" (S.XX).... Unfortunately, Lacan's words have too often been congealed into a negative mantra, taken to spell out the absolute exclusion of any possibility for lovers to ever connect but, and yet, as Joan Copjec points out:

[Lacan] fully acknowledges that sexual encounters happen, that the drive, working blind, without guide or goal, does occasionally stumble on a satisfying object. And though jouissance may be a solitary business in the sense that one only ever experiences one's own jouissance, this does not mean that this experience is not made available through the subject's relation to another. Erotic love does exist (Copjec 71).

- 18 The narrator is ultimately punished for no other reason than that his words – his ready-made discourses and fantasies about men and women, his "longings and fears" – constitute an unbearable anti-climax or counterpart for the unorthodox love-making he has induced. The narrator's evasive answer to her question, following his lame move towards a certain form of normalisation, does not *answer for* their desire and certainly precludes any form of love from then on. Seen from the woman's perspective, the fragile scene or screen of their love-making has been punctured beyond repair and all its efficacy seems to have dissolved and vanished.
- 19 Before analysing the ending of the story and the male viewpoint, I would like to return to the ruling of the judge mentioned in the narrator's moral tale. His decision is meant above all to defend the existing order – here prevalent views concerning the destination of common objects – that is to say, *ideology* in its purest form. This interpretation gains even more consistency if we compare the nature of this sentence with another case narrated in *Dubliners*. In "A Painful Case," a court has to investigate into the death of Mrs Sinico years after Mr James Duffy had put an end to their relation because Mrs Sinico had perceived his *meaning*, however much "he thought that in her eyes he would ascend to an angelical stature" (D 107). Indeed, a far more competent reader of Nietzsche than Duffy, whose bookshelves accommodate *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Mrs Sinico does not fail to read Duffy's theories in direct relation to his symptom, applying Nietzsche to the letter of Duffy's desire:

The unconscious disguise of physiological needs under the cloaks of the objective, ideal, purely spiritual goes frighteningly far – and I have asked myself often enough whether, on a grand scale, philosophy has been no more than an interpretation of the body and a *misunderstanding of the body* (Nietzsche 5)<sup>3</sup>

- 20 Mrs Sinico could then be seen as the true midwife of Duffy 'the philosopher,' helping him to be born to his desiring body. The truth – that his body is not just a carnal envelope but the message itself – is yet too shocking, too scandalous for Duffy to receive. Ironically enough, this is precisely the status of an angel – who is both message and messenger – to which he aspires:

The end of these discourses was that one night during which she had shown every sign of unusual excitement, Mrs Sinico caught up his hand passionately and pressed it to her cheek.

Mr Duffy was very much surprised. Her interpretation of his words disillusioned him (D 107).

- 21 The parallel between Mrs Sinico and the female character of "My Love, My Umbrella" is striking in that they both administer a painful truth to the male characters, which is no more than the answer that their verbal and physical questioning is begging for.
- 22 It is now time to examine the male perspective towards the close of each short story, first in "A Painful Case" and then in "My Love, My Umbrella." As regards James Duffy, it is only several years after he brutally dismissed Mrs Sinico that he incidentally reads about her death in the newspaper. He does so through the detailed account of the hearing that follows what no one wishes to call 'suicide.' The court examination of the case goes to grotesque convolutions, reflecting the underlying insistence to exonerate everyone of any kind of responsibility. For instance, it could seem to be enough to say and write that the "intemperate" woman's death "had been probably due to shock and sudden failure of the heart's action" (D 110). However, something in this 'tragic' death threatens to accuse each and everyone. Through its construction, the whole newspaper article strives to duplicate the hearing – pretending to be totally transparent, a pure mimesis of a question and answers game conducted impersonally – and makes the verdict even more final by ending with its very words: "No blame attached to anyone" (D 111).
- 23 More than anyone else, James Duffy is eager to read about his own innocence so as to prove its case. He even tries to inflict the "second death" Lacan discusses apropos Sophocles' *Antigone* (S.VII 315-29) on the memory of Mrs Sinico, utterly denying her very right to have ever existed:

Just God, what an end! Evidently she had been unfit to live, without any strength of purpose, an easy prey to habits, one of the wrecks on which civilisation had been reared. But that she could have sunk so low! Was it possible he had deceived himself so utterly about her? He remembered her outburst of that night [when she had caught his hand and brought about Duffy's "disillusionment"] and interpreted it in a harsher sense than he had ever done. He had no difficulty in approving of the course he had taken (D 111-12).

- 24 Later in the tale it seems that Duffy is finally caught up by Mrs Sinico and becomes guilt-ridden, her death calling for a strong revision of his body of doctrines, as well as for a subjective shift. His interpretive stance, however, comes out undefeated. The last words of the story ("He felt he was alone," D 114) underline the fact that he has resumed his familiar attitude, that of the solitary man excluded from "life's feast" (D 113) but really feasting on this sense of absolute alienation and blissful feeling of being *the* exception.
- 25 In "My Love, My Umbrella," the narrator's attitude is strikingly similar. While the rift is clearly opening, the narrator first enjoys a feeling of control, deciding himself that time is ripe for the break-up: "I thought maliciously, and decided to break free from her. Summer was coming and the world full of possibilities" (CS 71). At this point, the umbrella seems to play the part of a "transitional object," in Winnicott's well-known words, first

concealing the loss, as the narrator even feels "clownishly elated" (CS 71), but then turning into a painful reminder of her absence. After a period during which the sense of loss seems to be insuperable, the narrator's wounds heal, stitched up as they are in a way reminiscent of the handle of the umbrella. Nothing is more secure than the previous beliefs to which he can now safely return, "hardened about the growing absurdity of a man standing under an umbrella" (CS 74), no power can equal the rage to persist in his obtuse symptom, the wish to restore "his majesty the self:"

.... And I gripped the black umbrella with an almost fierce determination to be as I was before, unknowingly happy under the trees, and the umbrella, in the wet evenings that are the normal weather of this city (CS 74).

- 26 It remains that in spite of the apparent regression to his previous state, the words of the narrator are infected with the presence of his lost love – lost though never actual–, with all the ambivalence language is capable of, affirming wholeness and challenging it at the same time, manifesting loss as well as denying it. It is the ambivalence of language which contests the inertia of the symptom and courts desire into love, or a song of love when love is lost, which, momentarily at least, pulls the subject away from his or her solitary enjoyment. We also should note a major difference between the young Joyce and the young McGahern. Joyce's irony towards Duffy ironically mirrors his character's sense of aloofness and it will take him the writing of "The Dead" to be able to relinquish the old garb of the "high priest of imagination." On the other hand, the limitations inherent in the protagonists of "My Love, My Umbrella" do not constrict McGahern's writing, as if Spinoza's motto, *non ridere*, had gone without saying into his poetics.

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## RÉSUMÉS

Critics have often remarked on the affinities in method that exist between James Joyce and John McGahern. It is necessary, however, to explore this seemingly well-established genealogy, to go beyond certain obvious thematic or structural resemblances by questioning, or queering, or 'redubbling,' the use of *Dubliners* performed by McGahern. This is what a close reading of "My Love, My Umbrella," in relation to "A Painful Case," is meant to produce. On the theoretical level, it relies in particular on the concept of *sinthome*, coined by Lacan in his groundbreaking seminar devoted to Joyce.

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Pascal Bataillard is Maître de conférences (Associate Professor) of contemporary British and Irish literature at Université Lumière-Lyon 2, France. He is the author of articles on James Joyce but also on such diverse authors as John McGahern, Raymond Carver, and Ann Radcliffe. He was the co-editor of a collection of essays (*Dubliners*, James Joyce. *The Dead*, John Huston, ed. Pascal Bataillard and Dominique Sipièrre, Paris, Ellipses, 2000) and a member of the team supervised by Jacques Aubert who produced a new translation of *Ulysses* into French. His current projects are provisionally entitled *Joyce's Ethicacy and Tinker-ing with Irish Tradition*. Joyce, Beckett, & Co.