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Introduction: Is This “the Ireland that We Dreamed Of”?

A typical John McGahern short story is narrowly local and specifically Irish in its setting, precisely imagined in its detail, seemingly casual in its plotting, obliquely resonant in its literary echoes, and surprisingly dark in its metaphysical and social implications. McGahern frequently focuses on a central character who undergoes a transforming crisis and is shocked to have his amorphous doubts about life confirmed. To be sure, McGahern’s characters deal differently with such realizations of disappointment. Responses run the gamut from incipient despair to stoical resignation, with many modulations in between.

Perhaps the most interesting reactions are found in stories like “Christmas” and “The Creamery Manager,” discussed in greater detail below, when this painful knowledge produces a sense of release. Experience having reinforced their intuitive understanding that life will always undermine their expectations however minimalist they are, these characters believe they have nothing further to lose, and so they experience disappointment as an ironic variant of freedom. Whatever the permutations of their individual responses, McGahern’s characters collectively accept, sometimes grudgingly, sometimes stoically, sometimes with relief, that they lead (and will continue to lead) lives of, at best, quiet desperation. (For other general treatments of McGahern’s work see Brannigan, Grennan, Goarzin, Kiberd, Maher and McKeon.)

Despite their focus on the individual sensibility, McGahern’s stories encourage both metaphysical and social extrapolation. Certainly the cumulative weight in story after story of so many depleted lives conveys a sense of, if not cosmic emptiness, then at least...
of a general cosmic indifference to the human condition. In the face of human suffering and need, the natural world continues uninterrupted and unmoved. There is no sentimentality in McGahern’s short story depictions of Irish rural life lived close to nature. In “Christmas,” for example, the birds make a “racket,” the lake is frozen, “rose streaks from the sun” are “impaled on the firs,” and ice fills the potholes, making work and travel dangerous (24, *Collected Stories*, my emphasis). There is nothing here that might be construed as consolation or assurance. The vision that informs McGahern’s stories is of a fallen world in which innocence is a fragile, temporary state, possibility is an illusion soon punctured by the reality of limitation, and fulfilment proves to be an unsustainable fantasy.

This dark vision incorporates a social as well as a metaphysical/spiritual dimension. McGahern plants many of his stories of struggling humanity in the heyday of Eamon de Valera, for many years Taoiseach (Prime Minister) (1937-48, 1951-54, 1957-59) and then President of Ireland (1959-73). Indeed, for all the seeming randomness of his plots, McGahern is a deliberate and subtle chronicler of the frayed seams and badly patched elbows of the mid-twentieth century Irish social fabric. He is a close observer of the small malignancies and minor cruelties concealed beneath the veneer of social propriety. By judicious implication and modulated irony, his stories offer a critique of the orthodoxies of Irish church and state in the late 1940s and 1950s.

As an enduring part of the Irish social landscape McGahern depicts, a conservative Catholicism provides a framework of rigid belief that in no way undermines or modifies McGahern’s naturalist metaphysics. In terms of religious practice, McGahern’s priests are too often inattentive to the needs of individuals under their spiritual care, offering them little to mitigate the prevailing darkness. Like the church, McGahern treats the apparatus of state as another defective hierarchical institution. To appreciate fully the degree to which McGahern’s stories undercut the dominant ideology of mid-twentieth century Ireland, those stories need to be read against the official government position in essence promoting rural backwardness as the embodiment of social perfection.

The ideology of the Irish government was most clearly and succinctly articulated in a now famous speech by Eamon de Valera, broadcast on St Patrick’s Day in 1943. In it, de Valera gave voice to his conception of an idealised Ireland:

> The Ireland that we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live.... (“On Language & the Irish Nation”)

It is widely appreciated that there was a serious discrepancy between those soft and sentimental words and the harsh reality of Irish rural life during the 1940s and 1950s, when poverty, disease, depopulation, clerical repression, male domination and cultural conformity created a world far different from the one projected by de Valera. In detailing the cultural conservatism, social backwardness, economic stagnation, bureaucratic insensitivity, and clerical hypocrisies that characterize that time, McGahern in effect contests and debunks post-revolutionary nationalist ideology.

McGahern advances the project of social, political and cultural debunking by his use of literary echo, hint and suggestion. McGahern is a sly manipulator of the Irish literary
tradition, subtly recalling, either by contrast or by coincidence, the work and also the
outlook of, among others, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett. Particularly in a story like
“Christmas,” he creates a network of intertextual literary reference and implication that
position readers within a heterogeneity of voices and social positions, all of which diverge
substantially from the official truths of the de Valera government and add further weight
to McGahern’s own critique of Irish life even though those voices may not agree in whole
or in part with McGahern’s own views.

In this paper, I examine McGahern’s complex narrative practice using two stories from
opposite ends of McGahern’s literary career. “Christmas” was first published in The Irish
Press on 27 April 1968 and later revised and included in McGahern’s first short story
collection, Nightlines (1970). “The Creamery Manager,” one of McGahern’s late stories,
appeared first in The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies (July 1991) and then in The Collected
Stories (1992), his penultimate collection (Descriptive List). A revised version of “The
Creamery Manager” appears in the posthumous Creatures of Earth, but my analysis uses
the earlier, more familiar text. Separated by time, these two stories are nevertheless
connected by their preoccupations with rural Irish life, sullied innocence, human
vulnerabilities, social callousness and cosmic indifference. These commonalities testify to
the strength, durability and persistence of McGahern’s counter-hegemonic views.

I examine McGahern’s portrayal of that fractured rural Irish world in “Christmas” and
“The Creamery Manager” in three separate but related sections. In the first, I take up the
implications of McGahern’s diminution of the sacred. In the second, I explore McGahern’s
depiction of a society straight jacketed by rigid and parochial attitudes and badly served
by its social institutions. In the third, I discuss the adaptations and adjustments the main
characters make to these conditions.

I Interrogating the Sacred

Neither “Christmas” nor “The Creamery Manager” provides conventional religious
reassurance. Rather, both stories, in different ways, project a predatory naturalistic world
in which spiritual comfort in the here-and-now and reward and/or punishment in the
hereafter are absent. God may not be dead, but no character in these stories has heard
from Him.

1. So This Is Christmas?

“Christmas” is framed by the expectations implicit in its title. Both title and the holiday
to which it refers appear to affirm a purposive universe overseen by a beneficent deity.
By sentimental extension, the title evokes the special place of children in the holiday
celebration, the custom of gift giving, the habit of using lights, and a general hospitality
toward all living creatures. The story, however, does not sustain those holiday
associations; it subverts and denies them. In a series of carefully shaded vignettes,
McGahern plays the traditional expectations of Christmas off against divergent actualities.

In the rural Irish community in which “Christmas” is set, Christmas is a holiday everyone
is expected to observe. Candles are ostentatiously lit in every window, not only to
brighten the night literally and symbolically, but perhaps more importantly, to signal
conformity to prevailing community mores. The lit candles announce that the holiday is indeed being celebrated. For the same reasons, all attend Midnight Mass.

14 For all the public show of piety, there is a pervasive indifference to the sacredness of the occasion. Preparations for church-going involve Moran, the man who provides a home for the boy, the story’s central character, in preliminary fortification at the pub, and he is not alone in that activity. Mullins, the policeman, and Mrs. Grey, the rich American, also appear well-lit. For the boy, who narrates the story retrospectively, the burden of attending Midnight Mass cannot as yet be obviated by drink. He has to endure “hours of boredom” with nothing to relieve him (27). It is clear that he attends because it is required of him, but he lacks enthusiasm.

15 In terms of understanding McGahern’s religious perspective, the defining event of the Midnight Mass is not the boy’s initial boredom, but the interaction between the local representatives of church and state, the priest, who carries the honorific designation of Monsignor (a title that denotes a slight elevation above the ranks of the clergy and is, undoubtedly, one of the reasons for the priest being so affronted), and a very drunk Guard Mullins. Even before the service begins, there are strong indications that the service will not go as planned. As soon as Guard Mullins arrives, he makes his presence heard by offering several lewd but amusing comments about the anatomy of the schoolteacher’s wife. He then falls into a stupor, which is, unfortunately, interrupted by the opening words of the priest’s annual Christmas sermon. In a drunken haze, Mullins disrupts the service by shouting out his approval of the Monsignor, “a man after my own heart” (28), and, for no apparent reason, urging the elimination of hypocrites.

16 His observations may (or may not) be random. In particular, the reader is left to wonder whether Guard Mullins is merely making an off-the-cuff (or, just as likely given his state of inebriation, an off-the-wall) remark about hypocrites, or whether, in his capacity as law enforcer, he has some factual base for providing a warning. Regardless, another priest might have chosen either to ignore the comments of one so obviously incapacitated, or to incorporate them somehow into the sermon, especially since Mullins’s comment about hypocrites, however intended, echoes sentiments often expressed in the Old and New Testaments (see, for example, Matthew 22:18 and 23:18, Isaiah 9:17 and 10:6, Job 13:16, 17:8, 27:8 and Proverbs 11.9). This priest does neither.

17 Undeterred by the Christmas message of peace and good will, the priest is rendered nearly speechless with fury. He ends his sermon almost before it is begun, wishing his parishioners a happy and holy Christmas in “a voice of acid” (28). For the boy, the insincerity of the priest’s good wishes is trumped by its speed. It was, the boy notes happily, “the shortest Midnight Mass the church had ever known” (28). The service has been abandoned not because it was impossible for it to continue, but because the priest is affronted by the interruptions of a recalcitrant Mullins. The spoiled Midnight Mass, like the angry Christmas dinner in Chapter 1 of Joyce’s Portrait, reveals a narrow and vindictive Catholicism inconsistent with the sentiments of Christmas it ought to embody. Inasmuch as the priest in McGahern’s story does not practice what he preaches, nor does he act the role of a true priest, he provides a good example of the hypocrite Mullins warned against.

18 For the nameless boy whose consciousness is at the center of the story, Midnight Mass has ceased to be a burden of boredom and becomes, instead, an entertainment. His amusement is intensified by the drunken Mullins’s parting shot. Having condemned all hypocrites in his first outburst, Mullins becomes more specific in his second. As the
communicants walk down the aisle, Mullins points to the tax collector and identifies him as “the biggest hypocrite in the parish,” (28), a sentiment that finds considerable support among the other parishioners.

19 This remark aimed so particularly at the tax collector carries its own Biblical baggage. Like the practice of hypocrisy, tax collecting is Biblically suspect. Nevertheless, Jesus accepted the tax collector Matthew as one of his disciples, and Luke 5:27-32 records that Jesus dined with the tax collector Levi, to the dismay of the Pharisees. Although the Biblical message regarding tax collectors is equivocal, the drunken Mullins makes no subtle distinctions. More troubling, his finger-pointing negativity about the local tax collector is contagious. For the parishioners, the moment created by the Guard’s outburst provides the occasion for their own expression of ill will toward the man.

20 Later that night, the boy overhears the Morans, the people with whom he lives, criticizing Mullins’s behaviour. On display here is the same lack of charity the priest revealed. The Morans’ private criticism, like the more public anger of the priest, provides ample evidence of a spirit of communal intolerance toward what is, after all, mostly boorishness. In “Christmas,” McGahern presents a world in which religious belief and practice are a thin veneer over baser impulses. On Christmas Eve, the holiest night in the Christian calendar, both church and home are sites of anger and joylessness. If the holiday has any profound religious meaning, no character in the story is aware of it. Nevertheless, the destruction of the Christmas spirit has a positive effect on the boy. His delight about the foreshortened Christmas service is enhanced by the fact that representatives of church and state have behaved badly. He goes so far as to think of Guard Mullins as his friend because Mullins is now, like him, somehow outside the pale of social acceptability. Precisely because the community’s facade of conventional righteousness collapses, the boy is able to experience this anti-Christmas as a liberation.

2. Manufacturing Human Perfection: Turning Milk into Butter in “The Creamery Manager”

21 “The Creamery Manager” is more complex, compressed and impressionistic in its handling of religious issues than is “Christmas.” McGahern proceeds by indirection and implication rather than by the straightforward exposure he uses in his treatment of the Midnight Mass in the earlier story.

a. “The Other Darkness”

22 As he did in “Christmas”, so too in “The Creamery Manager” McGahern intimates that the universe is a cold, dark, void space. Certainly that is the view of the central character of this story. Darkness haunts Jimmy McCarron’s imagination in different forms, but always suggesting the blankness of a universe unlit by divine (or any other) purpose. Jimmy acknowledges that “sure,” he has “seen evil and around it a stupid, heartless laughing that echoed darkness” (370). That sense of meaninglessness was once a worry, but now, at least at one level, Jimmy appears indifferent. “[T]hat other darkness, all that surrounded life, used to trouble him once, but he had long given up making anything out of it...and he no longer cared (370). For Jimmy, both the cosmos and his life are empty. “It was not a pretty picture,” he opines (371). Moreover, there is nothing in the story that contradicts Jimmy’s understated nihilism.
b. Same Old, Same Old: “It’ll still go on taking in milk, turning our butter”

The story’s interrogation of religious belief is embedded in the specific modalities of Irish rural life. The existential angst created by Jimmy’s perception of “the other darkness” works itself out in his defrauding of the local creamery he runs. Taking of the money has nothing to do with greed or self-aggrandizement. Jimmy uses the money to bond with others and to create excitement in an otherwise numb and monotonous life. There is certainly nothing about running a creamery that might be construed as diverting, although as long as he steals the money, it is rewarding. In a telling remark, one of the policemen who arrests Jimmy describes the operation of the creamery as deadening, an endless, repetitive process of turning milk into butter, one that will continue whether Jimmy is there to manage or not.

It is true that the policeman is trying to put a positive spin on Jimmy’s situation and mitigate the significance of the crime. He feels sorry for Jimmy, and guilt for having accepted Jimmy’s invitation to go to the Ulster Final so that he personally benefited from Jimmy’s malfeasance. The money used to pay for that lark was part of the funds Jimmy embezzled. Despite this special pleading, Guard Casey is undoubtedly correct in his assessment of the creamery, even though, in a low-key way, the management of a creamery was (and may still be) important to the local economy. Historically, the business of the creamery was the subject of government regulation, a source of Dail policy debate and a focus of lobbying efforts, all indicators that in an economically underdeveloped country like Ireland in the mid-twentieth century, the manufacture of butter was a matter of widespread concern, both at the grassroots and in the corridors of power (Dail Eireann, Dairy Produce Act, Jenkins, Ruth). Whatever its economic impact on the community and the country, the creamery and the job of managing it do not engage Jimmy.

It is not only the job that depresses him and denies him scope. Other means of structuring his life are likewise rejected. First, Jimmy declines the priesthood. He cannot “hand the pain and the joy of his own life into the keeping of an idea, and to will the idea true” (371). Like Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait, Jimmy perceives the priesthood as a dead-end. The phrasing “to will the idea true” reinforces the perception that, for Jimmy, religious belief is an artificial construct imposed on a reality that will not sustain it. The priesthood is not then a convincing response to “the other darkness.”

Next he declines marriage. There was a girl he loved, but she was “too wise to marry him” (371). Then there was a girl he did not love who he felt obliged to marry because she told him she was pregnant, but who turned out not to be. That weekend, Jimmy breaks off the relationship. There do not appear to be any other women in his life. The promise of sexual and emotional intimacy does not fill the void any more satisfactorily than the deadening job or the offer of the priesthood. The pattern of Jimmy’s life until his arrest is to evade conventionally regulated behaviour.

c. Excursions into Criminality

In place of the steady comforts of job, church and home, Jimmy opts for the schmoozy comradery of men in pubs and sporting events. Lacking the resources himself, he dips into the company’s cash to entertain himself and his ever-changing circle of putative friends; he gets caught, and he goes to jail. Crime becomes Jimmy’s existential experiment
in filling the void. It is intended to reflect what he calls “the whole shemozzle” (373), the
inchoate reality of existence in a Godless universe. He hopes through crime to find the
fulfillment that lawful activities do not provide. Seen another way, crime becomes the
means by which Jimmy attempts to alter his life so that the thinness of its milk becomes
the richness of butter. In this sense, then, Jimmy’s excursions into criminality are a
translation into existential metaphor of his literal job as creamery manager.

28 But as crimes go, this one is relatively petty, and unlikely to sustain the burden of
meaning Jimmy attributes to it. He knows that “the shareholders would write him off as a
loss against other profits. The old creamery would not cry out with the hurt” (370).
Jimmy’s assurances about the limited damage done ring true, particularly since one of the
arresting officers, Guard Casey, provides similar reassurance. “What’s an old creamery
anyhow?” he wants to know. “It’ll still go on taking in milk, turning our butter.” (373) The
irony of an agent of the law pooh-poohing a crime because it is insufficiently grand is lost
on Casey, but not on the reader. Whatever the unintentional irony, the crime lacks
significant impact. It changes nothing.

29 True, for a time, the money Jimmy embezzles from the creamery creates a glowing
alternative to “the other darkness.” Spending freely, treating people to drinks, he
becomes popular. People call his name, greet him on the street, put their arms around
him, and try to draw him into bars. The money he embezzles creates instant friendships,
momentary happiness, even a sense of belonging. In the end, though, Jimmy’s effort to
turn fallible human nature (milk) into more refined forms (cream, butter) fails. “He had
wanted love,” (370), human connection, some affirmation that would transform the dark.
But, according to Guard Casey, “‘[t]here were too many spongers around. They took
advantage. It’s them that should by rights be in your place’” (372). The nameless people to
whom Jimmy turned to shield him from the other darkness prove inadequate for the task.
Emptiness prevails.

30 Even in the midst of his last pleasurable criminal interlude, the expedition with Guard
Casey and the Sergeant to the Ulster Final, an annual football event, he has a sense that
his life is unreal. “Such was the air of unreality he felt...that he was glad to buy oranges
from a seller moving between seats, to hand the fruit around, to peel the skin away, to
taste the bitter juice” (368). The experience of going to the game with two others, of
enjoying their company and the spectacle of the game, this is a kind of paradisial moment
that Jimmy already knows is unstable. The purchase and eating of the fruit is a
modernized re-enactment of the Fall. He tastes its bitterness as a reminder of what life
really is beneath his efforts to recreate it. There is nothing in either “Christmas” or “The
Creamery Manager” to suggest that life can be happily rearranged, that spiritual needs
can be satisfied, or that the cosmos will divulge meaning.

II Examining Civil Society: Hostility, Neglect,
Indifference

31 The corollary of so much spiritual and metaphysical desolation is a social world that
offers little in the way of compensatory support. Civil society does little to make life
tolerable. One of the questions addressed by McGahern’s stories is whether civil society
can, through individual interaction and/or social institutions, address satisfactorily the
human need for love, understanding, scope and achievement. The message the stories send back is a resounding “no.”

1. “Holy Infant so Tender and Mild”: “Christmas” as a Perverse Nativity Scene

a. Homeboy

“Christmas” is a first-person narrative told retrospectively by a boy with no name. He is both parentless and homeless. He has been raised in a state run Home, presumably overseen by priests, and remains a ward of the state until he reaches maturity. When the story opens, he has been sent to live with the Morans, who provide him with food, clothing and shelter in exchange for his labour. Moran makes his living buying uncommercial timber cheaply from a nearby sawmill, re-cutting it, and then selling it as firewood. The boy acts as Moran’s assistant and does most of the heavy carting.

When, occasionally, Mrs. Moran asks about life at the Home, he tells her, and “she’d sigh, ‘you must be very glad to be with us instead,’ and I would tell her, which was true, that I was” (23). Why life in such a Home should be so unhappy is now well understood. Life in these church-run, government-funded sanctuaries provided for children in dire need was appalling. Gross sexual and physical abuse were common. In this conversation, McGahern alludes to what would in the 1980s and 1990s become a public scandal. The well-publicized investigations of an independent Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, which completed its review in 2003, provide a hindsight gloss for the exchange between Mrs. Moran and the boy. Both church and state share responsibility for the crimes committed against these children.

In these circumstances, certainly the boy is better served with the Morans than he is at the Home. There is, however, equivocation in his recollection of life with the Morans. The qualifying phrase, “which was true,” implies that he is not prepared to give unqualified approval to the Morans’ hospitality. The meaning of his phrase is made clearer in his next sentence, when he notes that he typically went to bed before Moran came back from his routine evening visit to the pub because “they often quarreled then” (23). The home provided by the Morans falls short of domestic bliss. Nor does work with Moran offer much in the way of job satisfaction. The work is hard; the remuneration, small; the atmosphere, bargain basement and Moran’s business practices somewhat shady. To increase his profits marginally, for example, Moran arranges the wood on the cart to make “the load look bigger than it was” (24).

Shunted from institutional Home to private dwelling, the boy is protected by no institution or individual. There is no mechanism in place to oversee his welfare. He is simply abandoned to whatever the fates put in his way. The Christmas setting is McGahern’s way of underlining the social failure at the heart of this story.

b. Redneck Vox Populi

The Morans fall short of perfection, but they are better than other members of the community, who subject the boy to further punishment. When, as part of the Christmas Eve delivery to Mrs. Grey, the boy has to pick up paraffin from Murphy’s shop, he
encounters the locals, not for the first time. They are a tight-knit group of bullies who take advantage of the boy’s marginality and vulnerability.

They used to trouble me at first. I supposed it little different from going into a shop in a strange country without its language, but they learned they couldn’t take a rise out of me, that was their phrase. They used to lob tomatoes at the back of my head in the hope of some reaction, but they left me mostly alone when they saw none was coming. (24-5)

They not only pointedly exclude him, these louts try to intimidate him by making him the butt of their jokes.

The men in Murphy’s shop function as a kind of Greek chorus, revealing the undisguised attitudes of the larger community. The description of Murphy with his “limp black hair falling across the bloated face” (25), suggests coarseness and dissipation. The men gather in Murphy’s shop to pass time. Their conversation is crude, with an undertow of violence; their efforts at humour, puerile; their behaviour, rough. Instead of applauding the efforts of the boy, who is working late on Christmas Eve while they sit around doing nothing at all, they scapegoat him for not responding to their jibes: “‘He never moved a muscle, the little fucker. Those homeboys are a bad piece of work’” (25). The boy’s lack of standing in the community only encourages them to continue his victimization.

c. The Happiness of Horses

McGahern emphasizes the plight of the boy by contrasting his suffering with the pure pleasure available to the old jennet, Moran’s workhorse. Early in the story McGahern describes the jennet’s elemental enjoyment of fire. “The jennet squealed, a very human squeal, any time a fire of branches was lit, and ran, about the only time he did run, to stand in rigid contentment with his nostrils in the thick of the wood smoke” (23). At the end of the story, when the boy burns the toy plane in a state of profound disillusionment, McGahern returns to the old jennet. Oblivious to the boy’s suffering, the jennet wants to enjoy once again the pleasures of the fire. The welcome and release the boy could not find by the exertion of his cleverness is available effortlessly to the dumb animal.

2. Who is the Real Criminal: No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

The same jaundiced view of society diagnosed in “Christmas” reoccurs in “The Creamery Manager.” Jimmy’s crime is not solely an individual act, but implicates the community, which encouraged his profligacy and shared in the fraudulently acquired spoils. He loves the popularity, the recognition, the sense of belonging that nothing else in his world but the distribution of money and the purchase of free drinks provides. The crowd plays to his weakness, uses his generosity to their own advantage and then does not reciprocate. “[W]henever he was known to be flush all the monies he had loaned out to others would flow back as soon as he called, but whenever he was seen to be in desperate need, nothing worthwhile was ever given back” (371). Even when money is returned, the sums are never equivalent to what he spent. Jimmy defrauds more than the business; he tries to defraud himself by pretending that those who benefit from his generosity are worthy of it.

It is not just that the various debts are never repaid, it is that when he is arrested the community, with the exception of Guard Casey, turns its collective back on him. The Sergeant, who spent a wonderful Sunday in Clones with Jimmy, will now not speak to him. Even more painful is the refusal of the creamery employees to acknowledge his
existence once the police arrive. Jimmy remembers the effort he made when he first became creamery manager to learn the names of the men who drove the creamery trucks. The men were appreciative. “The rough, childish faces would look up in a glow of pleasure at the recognition when he shouted out their names” (366). Yet when the police come, nobody wants to know him. “No one looked up, but he could see them observing him in their mirrors” (366). He is reduced to a reflection on glass. When Jimmy had money, however ill-begotten, the whole world was his friend; now that he is in trouble, no one wants to know him. In McGahern’s rural Ireland, the old Aesopian adage that no act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted is ironically reversed to show that no good deed goes unpunished. Both “Christmas and “The Creamery Manager” share this harsh view of communal failure.

III Adjusting to Reality: Desiring Escape, Realizing Confinement

Despite significant differences of outlook and methodology, McGahern is deeply indebted to James Joyce. The most obvious nod in the Joycean direction in the two stories I examine here involves McGahern’s exfoliations of the related concepts of imprisonment and escape. Both Joyce and McGahern agree that the multiple constraints of life in Ireland generate an urgent need to escape; they differ on strategies of withdrawal and on desired outcomes. Whereas Stephen’s response, like Joyce’s, is to embrace flight and exile, McGahern’s characters discover that physical flight is either impossible or unlikely to produce the desired liberation and autonomy. Unlike Joyce, McGahern spent most of his life in the same countryside in which he set so many of his stories.

McGahern’s stories are written against the buoyancy and hope of Stephen Dedalus’s declaration of independence at the end of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. In full rhetorical flight, Stephen announces his intention to soar beyond the inhibiting nets of Irish nationality, language and religion. In contrast, at the end of McGahern’s “Christmas,” the nameless boy burns the toy plane, symbolically obliterating any chance of following Stephen’s trajectory. In “The Creamery Manager,” Jimmy finds release in the confines of his cell. For McGahern there is no effective exit strategy. McGahern’s characters remain in place in rural Ireland. Their exile is internal. In the absence of alternatives, they escape into their outlaw consciousness, careful observers, unrelenting critics of themselves and of those around them, and, as with the boy in “Christmas,” articulate recorders exposing the deformations of the status quo. The boy and Jimmy find relief as criminals of perception. Show and tell are their weapons.

1. The Snare of Christmas Gift Giving

In “Christmas”, McGahern gives narrative form to the interconnected motifs of entrapment and flight through the practice of Christmas gift giving. There are three Christmas gifts in the story: the sweater, the pound note and the toy airplane. Each one in a different way reinforces the boy’s wish to escape from his present circumstances, and each illustrates the impossibility of his doing so. In the weeks leading up to Christmas, after his work with Moran is done for the day, the boy sits with Mrs. Moran in front of the fire. He listens to the radio while she knits him a sweater for Christmas. This is a nice, practical, uninspiring gift that goes along with the Wellingtons, overcoat and cap with
flaps that the Morans previously provided. The boy does not value this gift or the cold, dark work-weary life that makes it necessary.

Then there is the anticipated gift of a pound note from Mrs. Grey, a wealthy American who lives in one of the neighbourhood’s great houses. The boy regularly delivers kindling to her. As he prepares to make the last delivery of wood before Christmas, Moran tells the boy to expect a good tip for his efforts. Moran points out that “We could use money for the Christmas” (24, my emphasis), thereby appropriating for himself what was to be the boy’s reward. The boy does not contradict, but thinks to himself that Moran will use the money “to pour drink down his gullet” (24), a crude but undoubtedly accurate assessment. More desirable than the sweater, this gift is nevertheless made problematic by the boy’s knowledge Moran will be its sole beneficiary, and gives added urgency to the boy’s desire to free himself from the Morans and embrace another life.

The trip to Mrs. Grey’s home is arduous. The boy picks up a tin of paraffin for her at Murphy’s store, enduring the abuse of the hangers-on, he pushes on through the night on a badly rutted road, he arrives long after dark, he stacks the wood, he knocks at the door, and, when Mrs. Grey answers, he reminds her that the delivery is the last load before Christmas. Mrs. Grey responds as expected by holding out a pound note, which the boy declines to accept:

“You must have something’...
‘I don’t want money.’
‘Then what would you like me to give you for Christmas?’
‘Whatever you’d prefer to give me.’ (26)

The boy does not specify what gift he wants, in part because he does not know exactly what he wants, and in part because he suspects that by not specifying he will get more. Both longing and greed motivate him. In his mind, he has anticipated and rehearsed this encounter with Mrs. Grey, and he has scripted the dialogue, down to his selection of the word “prefer,” which he regards as “well put for a homeboy” (26). His intentions are threefold: (1) to escape from the shadow of the Home; (2) to escape from his dead-end life with the Morans; and (3) to improve his life socially and economically by some undefined relationship with Mrs. Grey, what he means when he says he is “playing for higher stakes” (26). Naive and inexperienced, he leaves it up to Mrs. Grey to figure out what is appropriate. Mrs. Grey agrees to give the matter some thought, a promise that leaves the boy “delirious with stupid happiness,” “stupid” because he assumes that Mrs. Grey is capable of understanding his need to escape and that she has the intelligence and sensitivity to figure out what, in those circumstances, might constitute a suitable gift (26).

The last gift, provided by Mrs. Grey in lieu of the pound note, is, however, the least satisfactory of the three. Mrs. Grey arrives at the Morans’ house on Christmas Eve with an expensive toy airplane for the boy. The toy plane, she thinks, will delight him because model planes always delighted her son, who received one every Christmas. It does not seem to occur to her that there is no basis for equating the desires of her son at Christmas with the more enduring needs of this nameless, homeless boy.

For Mrs. Grey, the gift of the toy plane has little to do with the boy at all. Mrs. Grey’s son was a pilot whose real plane was shot down over Italy during World War II. Clearly, Mrs. Grey’s gift to the boy of the kind of plane that would have delighted her son is invested with her own deep emotional needs, signaled by the tears she sheds when she delivers the gift. At some level, she would like to use the boy for her own sentimental gratification, hoping to see in his delight a reminder of the way her son would have reacted to the gift.
To the boy, the toy plane is a parody of his desire to fly beyond the snares that bind him to the Morans. The boy is beside himself with tears of rage and frustration at being given such a useless gift. Like the boy in Joyce's "Araby," this boy's eyes burn "with anguish and anger" at what he now sees as the stupidity of entrusting to another the task of authoring his own life. When, moreover, it becomes clear to Moran that the boy refused the pound note, and, subsequently gives offense to Moran's best customer by spurning her next offering, his situation is immeasurably altered for the worse. Moran intends to rid himself of a child he now regards as undesirable. Given what the boy knows about Moran, Mrs. Grey and the rest of the community, leave-taking has no horrors for him. Despite all his miscalculations, the boy is not defeated. At the very least, he is no longer possessed of false dreams of salvation. Escape to another life, he now understands, is an unrealizable fantasy. As he burns the toy plane in the final moments of the story he senses a transformation in himself. He "felt a new life had already started to grow out of the ashes, out of the stupidity of human wishes" (28). Neither religious nor social norms any longer constrain him. Having rejected the priest, the Morans, and Mrs. Grey, he embraces the anarchy represented by Guard Mullins, who he now thinks of as a friend. With greater verbal skill than that demonstrated by Mullins at Midnight Mass, the boy uses the act of narration to give form to the role as disrupter of the social order. He looks forward with a certain glee to the fact that he “might well cause trouble” (23). The story is his pay-back.

2. Cell Life

McGahern's concern with entrapment and escape in "Christmas" continues in "The Creamery Manager." If anything, McGahern's treatment is more ironic and intense in "The Creamery Manager" than it was in "Christmas." Jimmy is literally as well as metaphorically imprisoned. Yet after the initial embarrassment of his arrest, Jimmy welcomes jail time as a way of releasing him from his otherwise formless and empty life. Confinement is his release. “He had been afraid of his own fear and was spreading the taint everywhere. Now that what he had feared most had happened he was no longer afraid. His own life seemed to be happening as satisfactorily as if he were free again among people” (373). The elimination of fear, which is part of the overall simplification and reduction of his life, brings with it a sense of safety, stability and finality that he finds reassuring. He no longer has to hold stage center; the kaleidoscopic shifts of mood, place and activity are finished; he has no one he needs to impress, and no one on whom he needs to rely.

Confinement to a cell offers Jimmy a concrete realization of what he regards as the existential condition. Life, he comes to appreciate, is inherently limiting, a kind of trap: “Coming into the world was, he was sure now, not unlike getting into this poor cell” (370) Limitation, failure, entombment in flesh, these are what Jimmy now sees as the underlying truth of the human condition. Life has always been a cell; it is just that humans are clever at disguising the truth.

In place of the frenetic activity of his fraudulent life as creamery manager, he experiences the stripped-down version as apprehended criminal as an opportunity for contemplative understanding. The narrative moves from a recounting of Jimmy's indulgences with the embezzled money to a more detached and philosophical assessment of his life and of life
in general. The transition is from the profoundly unfulfilling life to a resigned acceptance that borders on satisfaction. Guard Casey releases him temporarily from the cell, offers him the simple pleasures of wholesome food, the warmth of a fire, the comfort of a surrogate family, consolation, conversation and the possibility of friendship: “‘There’s no need to go in there [the cell] yet, Jimmy. You can sit here for a while in front of the fire’” (372). Despite the decency of Guard Casey, Jimmy rejects further contact. “He liked the guard, but he did not want to draw any closer” (373). Faced with the opportunity to continue socializing with the sympathetic Guard Casey, Jimmy opts to return to his cell. The decision is Jimmy’s. The story that began with his loss of freedom ends with him achieving a deeper understanding of the human condition and thereby regaining a measure of personal autonomy.

Obviously, that autonomy is circumscribed. On the one hand it is an enforced divestiture of Jimmy’s embezzled life, however painful; on the other, it is a willing acceptance of what is real, however narrow. As Jimmy now knows, life is inherently limiting. In seeking to return to the cell in the last moments of the story, Jimmy accepts the human condition of isolation, separation, distance. Striving ceases. In place of the turmoil of his previous life, the cell brings him a welcome peace.

Jimmy’s life before his arrest was a long and doomed effort to escape the burden of consciousness of “the other darkness.” In an act of narrative compression and expansion, McGahern allows the prison cell that Jimmy enters at the end to morph into a monastic cell, simple cellular life, a womb and a tomb. Jimmy voluntarily choosing cell life is simultaneously a vision of shrinking outer life, and an expanded inner understanding.

The continuities of theme that connect “Christmas” to “The Creamery Manager” reflect a strain of stoicism that shapes McGahern’s narrative practice. His view of the world is bleak; his characters are fallible. He records the loneliness of the man in the crowd and the desperation at the heart of what is called happiness. In these and other stories, McGahern describes the interior journey the self is forced to make to separate and liberate itself from the snares of a conservative religion and a rigid society, both of which lack the capacity to respond adequately to the needs of the individual. He eschews large dramatic gestures and catastrophes. What he offers instead are temperate ironies, cool understatements, and the evidence of characters with the courage to endure despite the fullness of their knowledge of life’s deficiencies. The nameless boy in “Christmas” and Jimmy in “The Creamery Manager” are disillusioned, but they are undefeated.

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RÉSUMÉS

This paper examines the continuities of theme and meaning that unite McGahern’s early story “Christmas” and his much later story “The Creamery Manager”. Both reveal a strain of stoicicism that informs McGahern’s entire narrative practice. These and many of McGahern’s other stories record the social and metaphysical loneliness of the man in the crowd, and the desperation at the heart of what is called happiness. Typically, McGahern contextualizes and localizes this existential unease within a mid-twentieth century rural Irish society which is both socially conservative and religiously oppressive. The stories are controlled and compact; they avoid large dramatic gestures and catastrophes. In their place, McGahern offers temperate ironies, cool.
understatements, and low-keyed evidence of characters who have the ability to endure and survive, despite the fullness of their knowledge of life’s defects and deficiencies

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