"Along the edges": along the edges of meaning

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1 Nightlines, Getting Through, “Doorways”, “Crossing the Line”, “Along the Edges”... McGahern’s titles repeatedly and rather enigmatically at first, focus on lines, borders, limits, thresholds, eventually offering a precious invitation to metaphorical reading.

2 Crossing the line into the text, the reader, puzzled by the title, is further struck by the clear dividing of the short-story into two separate parts, emphasized by the use of capital letters: EVENING and MORNING. The chronology appears somewhat unusual, so does the privileged point of observation chosen, peripheral rather than central. Yet, evening and morning are soon to be interpreted as the edges of day in a narrative that tells about breaking up and coming together, the edges of love. “Along the edges” may therefore be considered as an invitation to a mimetic exploration of the hazardous ridge between separateness and togetherness.

EVENING, the dark edge of love

3 “Evening” opens on what looks like play before one is led into reading it as tension:

‘I must go now.’ She tried to rise from the bed.
‘Stay.’ His arms about her pale shoulders held her back as she pressed upwards with her hands. ‘Let me kiss you there once more.’
‘Don’t be silly,’ she laughed and fell back into his arms. ‘I have to go.’ Her body trembled with low laughter as he went beneath the sheet to kiss her; and then they stretched full length against one another, kissing over and back on the mouth, in a last grasping embrace.
‘I wish I could eat and drink you.’ ‘Then I’d be gone.’ She pushed him loose with her palms. They both rose and dressed quickly.
‘I’ll leave you home. It’s too late for you to go alone.’ Lately she had seemed to assert their separateness after each lovemaking.
‘All right. I don’t mind,’ she said, a seeming challenge in her eyes.
‘Besides I want to.’ He leaned to kiss her on the side of the throat as she drew on her jacket. They stole down the stairs, and outside he held the door firmly until the catch clicked quietly behind them. The fading moonlight was weak on the leaves of the single laurel in the front garden, and he grew uneasy at the apparent reluctance with which she seemed to give him her gloved hand on the pavement, with the way she hurried, their separate footsteps loud in the silence of the sleeping suburbs. (188)

Tension first centres on the female character: “I must go” vs. “she tried to”, before drawing the male character “his arms […] held her back” into an ambivalent choreography of love and possession, she falling “back into his arms” before pushing “him loose with her palms”. Her answer to his devouring desire: “Then I’d be gone” sounds like an ironic assertion of independence and a verbal act of “separateness”, translating tension on to the level of speech and perspective. The man, (vampire-like: “he leaned to kiss her on the side of the throat”), perceives the woman’s antagonistic desire, although acknowledging it fully remains difficult: “she had seemed to assert their separateness” or further on “[...] the apparent reluctance with which she seemed to give him her gloved hand”. What he does eventually acknowledge is the reality of his motivation for seeing her home after the provocative “All right. I don’t mind”; “It’s too late for you to go alone” changes into “Besides, I want to”. Yet, the difficulty of parting seems to be engrained in the very texture of the narrative voice, in this alliteration in /s/ to be found in the last sentence of the opening section: “their separate footsteps loud in the silence of the sleeping suburbs”. The lingering nature of the sound “speaks” this very edge between togetherness and separateness along which we, together with the character, stand.

Indeed, the narrator seems reluctant to cross over the edge. His voice blends with the male character’s, hesitating between narrative assertion and free indirect speech as shown by the use of the contracted form: “They’d met just after broken love affairs, and had drifted casually into going out together” (188), leaving the reader at a loss when it comes to identifying the speaker or evaluating the degree of awareness. “There comes a point in all living things when they must change or die, and maybe they had passed that point already without noticing. He had already lost her while longing to draw closer.” (189) is, rather unexpectedly, immediately followed by: “‘When will we meet again?’ he asked her as usual at the gate before she went in.” There seems to be some kind of logical breach here; awareness does not seem to alter behaviour. Yet, the exchange which follows:

‘When do you want?’
‘Saturday, at eight, outside the Metropole.’
‘Saturday - at eight, then,’ she agreed. (189)

in spite of, or rather because of, its extreme politeness reveals a deeply agonistic relation. The question is answered by a question, which itself sounds like a backfire of the “Besides, I want to” of the preceding exchange. This somewhat intuitive interpretation is confirmed by the ironic narrator, who surreptitiously manages to shift the anchor of the perspective from the male reflector to the female character.

There was no need to seek for more. His anxiety had been groundless. Wednesdays and Saturdays were always given. No matter how hard the week was, he had always Saturdays and Wednesdays to look forward to: he could lean upon their sensual ease and luxury as reliably as upon a drug. Now that Saturday was once more promised his life was perfectly arranged. With all the casualness of the self-satisfied male, he kissed her good night and it caused her to look sharply at him before she
went in, but he noticed nothing. He waited until he heard the latch click and then went whistling home through the empty silent streets just beginning to grow light.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle, in *The Philosophy of Nonsense*, asks what he calls “a simple question”:

> Since, more often than not, the surface of conversation is agonistic rather than irenic, why did Grice and Habermas choose a deep structure which is irenic? Why can we not replace the Cooperative Principle by a principle of verbal struggle [...]? [...] Although our verbal exchanges are not collections of desultory remarks, and can therefore be said to conform to a rational plan, this is not due to the fact that we make efforts towards verbal cooperation, but that each speaker has his or her own strategy and goal. So that a Principle of Struggle (PS) can be formulated, as a first approximation in the following manner – and like the CP it will be a general principle, which we can expect all participants to abide by: make your conversational contribution such as is required by your strategy, at the stage at which it occurs, and by the goal towards which you are moving, which is to defeat your opponent and drive him or her off the battlefield. [...] The principle of struggle - do not expose your position; adapt your verbal weapons to your strategy and to the context; never forget that your goal is to achieve recognition, to place yourself – is the mirror image of the cooperative principle. (76-80)

Indeed, most conversational exchanges from then on seem to be governed by a Principle of Struggle rather than any Cooperative Principle; as the narrator of “Doorways” has it “An edge had crept into the talk.” (168). Along the same lines, the Politeness Principle seems to have been replaced by a Selfishness Principle, in what both characters deem a survival strategy.

> 'I suppose I should pay my respects and let the pair of you away.'
> 'Don't put yourself out.'
> 'It'll be a pleasure,' but then his anger broke before he opened the door. 'If that's all our going out means to you we might as well forget the whole thing.'
> 'What do you mean?' she asked.
> 'We might as well break the whole thing off,' he said less certainly.
> 'That can be easily arranged.'
> [...] 'I hope you have a nice evening,' he said as they boarded the bus.
> 'That's what we intend.' Her lovely face was unflinching, but Margaret waved. He watched them take a seat together on the lower deck and waited to see if they would look back, but they did not. (191)

His paradoxical strategy is to vent his anger in order to maintain the link; but her desire to be free of him is thereby ironically strengthened, and when some time later, the relationship is re-established as cooperative, it is only achieved to be eventually destroyed.

> 'I'm sorry about the ridiculous fuss I made a few weeks back,' he said openly.
> 'It's all right. It's all over now.'
> 'Do you think you'll be able to come back with me this evening?'
> For a wild sensual moment he hoped everything would suddenly be as it had been before.
> 'Is it for- the usual?' she asked slowly.
> 'I suppose.'
> 'No.' She shook her head. (193)

"the usual" sounds as an ironically destructive echo of “sensual”. Yet, the breaking up is not violent; the narrator settles along the edge of the male perspective, along the edge of frustration, where the sharp reality of “what is” is still softened by the resilient hope in “what might be” and the hopeless longing for “what might have been”. Awareness stands on the double edge of dream and memory.
‘Is there no hope, no hope at all, that it might change?’ […]

We assemble a love as we assemble our life and grow so absorbed in the assembling that we wake in terror at the knowledge that all that we have built is terminal, that, in our pain, we must undo it again.

There had been that moment too that might have been grasped, and had not […]

He thought he saw that moment, as well that moment now as any other: an evening in O’Connell street, a Saturday evening like any other […] (194)

11 The tone is gentle; the parting desperately polite:

‘Ring me sometime,’ she said as she got on the bus outside.

‘Right, then.’ He waved and knew neither of them would. (194)

12 The waving that she, agonistically, had refused earlier, he, cooperatively, performs here; yet, ironically, cooperation fails… taking us on the very edge of the cliff. The final musing comments stand as a puzzling invitation to interpretation:

They had played at a game of life, and had not fallen, and were now as indifferent as one another, outside the memory of pleasure, as if they were both already dead to one another. If they were not together in the evening how could they ever have been so in the morning...

And if she had come to him instead of leaving him, those limbs would never reach whomever they were going to… And why should we wish the darkness harm, it is our element; or curse the darkness because we are doomed to love in it, and die…

And those that move along the edges can see it so until they fall. (194)

13 The rhythm of the text, the suspension points, narrative discourse slipping into Free Indirect Thought and vice versa, hypotheses, direct address… deny the reader the satisfaction of stable evaluation, eventually questioning the very notion of involvement. The characters, and particularly the male reflector of the story stay on the edge of life: “Exams should be held in winter, he thought tiredly, for he seemed to be looking at the people walking past him, sitting on benches or on the grass as if through plate glass.” (190); on the edge of love and awareness: “he began to feel that by now there should be more than this sensual ease” (189) is followed a few lines later by: “he could lean upon their sensual ease and luxury as reliably as upon a drug”. “Now that he was about to lose her she had never looked so beautiful.” (192) precedes: “But I love you. And I thought – when things are more settled- we might be married.”(193). The narrator stays on the edge of narration; the story begins in medias res, the characters’ names are not given, perspectives are blurred in a strategy to force the reader to remain along the edge too. “Moving along the edges” might be a way not to fall; yet, falling is falling… in love. The desire to step over the edge is absent from the text; the fall is not the object of desire, it is not even perceived as a process, only as the almost unexpected result of instinctive behaviour:

Through the sensual caresses, laughter, evenings of pleasure, the instinct had been beginning to assemble a dream, a hope; soon little by little, without knowing, he would have woken to find that he had fallen in love. (193)

14 The Other is irrelevant. It is even discarded by a supposedly omnipotent Self, in an ambiguously possessive movement of longing (partly genuine, partly self-reassuring, partly illusory):

And if she had come to him instead of leaving him, those limbs would never reach whomever they were going to… (194)

15 What matters here, in the dark textual night separating “evening” from “morning”, is the edging of the reader’s awareness that, in Lacan’s famous words, “man’s desire is the desire of the Other”.

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MORNING, the bright edge of love?

The beginning of this second part is as puzzling as the opening of the short story, if not more so; it can even be considered narratively agonistic... Although it is entitled MORNING, it takes place in the evening, even late at night; the decor is the same as in the first part, “Bernardo’s” and the blind piano player is there too; yet, no explicit connection is made. “The man” remains as anonymous as the “he” in the first part; so does “the blonde woman”. The reader, who is prone to make connections, is soon lost in conjectures, left with unanswered questions and nothing but hypotheses. Does the scene take place on the same evening? On another evening? Are “the man” and “he” the same person? But is it really important we should know for sure? The refusal of any stable deictic anchor must eventually be considered as part of the narrator’s strategy to invite us to experience radical Otherness.

In the text-world, the relationships between the characters once more seem to be governed by a Principle of Struggle, to the point of gratuitous violence:

[... without warning she leaned across the table and placed the burning tip of the cigarette against the back of the man's hand.

'I felt like it. I suppose I should be sorry.'

'No,' he changed.' Not if you come home with me.'

'To sleep with you?' she parodied

'That would be best of all but it's not important. We can spend the morning together,' he said eagerly.

'All right.' She nodded.

They were both uneasy after the agreement. They had left one level and had not entered any other. (195)

The conversational edge is sharp, but, contrary to what happens in the first part of the short story, it opens on to the intermediary space between individuals. The two main characters accept to explore the territory in-between edges, the territory of otherness. The blind man, who goes almost unnoticed as an element of the background in EVENING, is here a primary object of concern, and a subject of conversation; so is Marion, even if the points of view disagree:

They stood a while in conversation there before the star went in and the blonde woman turned back towards the man.

'It always makes me uncomfortable. Being part of the couple, leaving the single person alone,' he said.

'The single person is usually glad to be left alone.'

'I know that but it doesn't stop the feeling.' He had the same feeling passing hospitals late at night. (196)

The emerging relationship, neither selfish nor exclusive, displays a new capacity to take into account the third party, and conversation reverses back to the more traditional rules of cooperation. The aim is not to assert oneself, but to listen to the Other, an Other who is no longer perceived as a threat to the individual’s integrity but as a promise.

What hung between them might be brutal and powerful, but it was as frail as the flesh out of which it grew, for any endurance. They had chosen one another because of the empty night, and the wrong words might betray them early, making one hateful to the other; but even the right words, if there were right words, had not the power to force it. It had to grow or wither like a plant or flower. What they
needed most was patience, luck, and that twice-difficult thing, to be lucky in one another, and at the same time, and to be able to wait for that time. (196)

20 Their gestures sketch the harmonious lines of reciprocal love: “She pulled him towards her” (197) is mirrored in “He drew her towards him” (198). They no longer stand, as their earlier counterparts on the hazardous edge of love; they have somehow fallen… on new territory, where they stand, edge to edge. Love-making, as moving along the other’s edge…:

‘Wait,’ she said softly, and her arms leaned heavily round his shoulders, as if she had forgotten him, and was going over her life to see if she could gather it into this one place. Suddenly she felt him trembling. (197)

21 Love-making, as discovering and accepting the other’s sometimes sharp edge:

[...] ‘That must sound pretty poor stuff.’

‘No. It sounds true.’

That hard as porcelain singleness of women, seeming sometimes to take pleasure in cruelty was a part of the beauty. (197)

22 The characters’ keen awareness and know/ledge of each other lead to a humorous renewal of vision:

When they rose and washed in the flat in all its daylight, it seemed as if it was not only a new day but the beginning of a new life. The pictures, the plates, the table in its solidity seemed to have been set askew by the accidental night, to want new shapes, to look comical in their old places. The books on the wall seemed to belong to an old relative to whom one did not even owe a responsibility of affection. Gaily one could pick or discard among them, choosing only those useful to the new. For, like a plant, the old outer leaves would have to lie withered for new green shoots to push upwards at the heart. (198)

23 “Seem”, which worked in EVENING as a marker of distance, illusion and challenge is here the sign of a luminous change of perspective. In the same way, the dark overtones of “separateness” have been transfigured:

They had come from four separate people, two men and two women, lying together in two separate nights; and those two nights were joined in the night they had left, had grown into the morning. (198)

24 There is no need now for narratorial distance and the agonistic dissonance that was sometimes to be heard between the narrator’s and the characters’ voices in the first part has been silenced by the blending of perspectives. Clear-sightedness is no longer an issue in the text-world and the narrator’s words echo the characters’ in prose edging into ironic music:

‘Maybe we’ll begin to learn a little more about one another then.’

‘As long as we know it’ll be more of nothing. We know hardly anything now and we may never be as well off.’

They would have to know that they could know nothing to go through the low door of love, the door that was the same doorway between the self and the other everywhere.

‘Well, anyhow we have to face the day,’ she said, dispelling it in one movement; and they took one another’s hands as they went to meet the day, the day already following them, and all about them. (199)

25 Yet, looking over the edge of the page, one cannot but think that, if “morning” follows “evening”, “evening” follows “morning”…
The two-edged (s)word of fiction; dividing to relate

26 The two-part division of this text remains problematic to both reader and re-reader. Is it to be considered as a clear divide or rather as an interface? The narrative voice has the same inflexions on both sides of the textual border, the same affection for assonance and alliteration; textual echoes are so numerous that linear reading gives way to a more complex back and forth movement, which can eventually lead to the intimate conviction that the male character is the same and that both parts are chronologically distant, allowing for psychological maturing. On the one hand, “‘Even coming from the races you look very beautiful,’ he said by way of appeasement.” (192) is a pragmatic use of the compliment which is reiterated in the second part: “‘It doesn’t make her so to me,’ the man said doggedly, ‘though I think you are beautiful.’” (195) in the same sort of antagonistic context. On the other hand, “If they were not together in the evening how could they ever have been so in the morning…” (194) sounds like a bitter, resentful earlier version of the now hopeful and clear-sighted: “She stood as she was, belonging to the morning, as they both hoped to belong to the evening. They could not possess the morning, no more than they could disagree with it or go against its joy.” (198) Yet, there is no basking in the nirvana of secure happiness for the reader, constantly reminded of the transient nature of joy: “and they took one another’s hands as they went to meet the day, the day already following them” (199).

27 The reading experience we are facing is not the familiar reassuring movement that takes us from distress and conflict to a cathartic purging of emotions. It maintains us on the edge of discerning what Henri Cartier-Bresson called the “decisive moment”; indeed the text works like two incisive snapshots of the exact moment of change in a love relationship that mirror each other, following a principle of inversion. One can be interpreted as the photographic negative of the other, never allowing us to forget that what seems light on the negative will turn out to be dark and reciprocally. “Composition must be one of our constant preoccupations”, the photographer explains, “but at the moment of shooting it can stem only from our intuition, for we are out to capture the fugitive moment, and all the interrelationships involved are on the move. [...] photography [...] fixes forever the precise and transitory moment.” (Cartier-Bresson, Introduction to The Decisive Moment). So much can be said of McGahern’s writing.

28 The narrative choice which is made to divide in order to articulate and relate is also a way to explore to the full the polyphonic dimension of narration, moving along the edges of voice. Not only does voice refer to the narrator’s or the characters’ in this text; one can also perceive that of the author, in the recurrent use of gnomic present and direct address. An author who chooses to avail himself of Jakobson’s conative function to make himself heard along the edges of his work. This privileged dialogue with the reader shatters the border between fiction and non-fiction, turning what is traditionally-and more often than not rightly- held a sacred hedge into no more than an edge…inviting the reader along the edges of radical otherness, taking him “through [...] the door [...] between the self and the other [...]” (199) towards his own Otherness. Like the Word of God, McGahern’s “word” in this short story is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Hebrews, 4,12)
Yet, no matter how sharp the word, how keen the awareness, knowledge will forever “move along the edges” (194) That [We] May Face the Rising Sun.

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RÉSUMÉS

This paper is an invitation to read John McGahern’s short story “Along the Eges” as a mimetic exploration of a hazardous ridge between separateness and togetherness. The narrator settles along the edge of perspective, denying the reader the stability of interpretation. The experience is that of radical Otherness, dark and dazzling

AUTEURS

CLAIRe MAJOLA-LEBLOND

Claire Majola-Leblond is Maître de Conférences at Lyon3 University, France, where she teaches Irish literature, discourse analysis and a course on contemporary short stories. She wrote a thesis on point of view in Dylan Thomas’s short stories. She has written articles on J.M. Synge, B. McLaverty, W. Trevor and is currently working on women Irish writers.