Evaluation in "High ground": from ethics to aesthetics

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“High Ground” is at the same time the title of the short story, the last words of the text, and the title of the collection in which the short story was originally published in 1985. It refers to a dominant geographical position which is specified in the concluding paragraph: “And we’re very high up here. We’re practically at the source of the Shannon.” (315)

Such a privileged position, the old school master claims, has a beneficial influence on the brains of the inhabitants. This vantage point offers a specific perspective and encourages an evaluative attitude. The story is full of unqualified judgements and evaluations made by the three main characters: the young teacher who is also the first person narrator, the middle-aged politician and the old headmaster. McGahern’s realistic prose relies on recurring types of characters to portray social groups and situations of conflict and “High Ground” could appear as a prototypical McGahernian story reflecting the personal sympathies of the author, aiming at passing them onto the reader; and, consequently lacking in originality when compared to other short-stories by the same author.

However, we may notice that the writing is balanced between conversation, narrative statements and silence and that doubt is more and more strongly suggested as we read on. Underneath the flat surface of declarations, chasms may be gaping, threatening to engulf character, narrator and reader.

After only two paragraphs introducing the first person narrator, the author defines one of the main topics of the story, i.e. school, by including the narrator in a group:

The Brothers’ Building Fund Dance had been held the night before. A big marquee had been set up in the grounds behind the monastery. Most of the people I had gone to school with were there, awkward in their new estate, and nearly all the Brothers who had taught us: Joseph, Francis, Benedictus, Martin. They stood in a black line beneath the low canvas and waited for their old pupils to go up to them. (306)
Within a few sentences, two groups – pupils and teachers – appear as forming part of a community. A sense of hierarchy conditions the attitudes of those involved and the pupils do not feel entirely free until the Brothers have gone. Although the principal of the school is at the top of the hierarchy, this has not prevented the narrator from establishing a personal relation with him: 

Master Leddy was the Principal of the school. He had been the principal as long as I could remember. He had taught me, many before me. I had called to see him just three days before. (309)

The world of school becomes more and more inclusive as we learn that the narrator is a qualified teacher and that the senator is so worried about the quality of the teaching his sons receive at the local school that he has decided to do something about it. As a matter of fact, the McGahern reader is quite familiar with this world since it is omnipresent. We are used to reading about young people anxiously waiting for exam results, promising youths opting for the security of a teaching job instead of choosing to go to university, a mother weakened by cancer who is determined to go on teaching as long as she can, and a teacher sacked because he married a foreigner outside the Catholic church. Even though boredom is sometimes mentioned, especially on the teacher’s side, this world is usually associated with very positive notions such as security, joy of learning, intellectual stimulation, good results, growing confidence, admiration for the teacher, here expressed by the narrator when reflecting about the headmaster: “He had shone like a clear star. I was in love with what I hardly dared to hope I might become.” (312)

In such a context, the subject of evaluation naturally crops up. The reader guesses that the senator congratulates the narrator about a scholarly achievement when the words “I applied for the grant” appear in the conversation and this interpretation is confirmed by the headmaster who praises one of his star pupils: “It’s a very nice thing to see old pupils coming back. Though not many of them bring me laurels like yourself, still, it’s a very nice thing.” (311)

The headmaster has the same attitude at the pub, when talking to much older former pupils and he seems perfectly at ease in the role of the judge in which he seems to have retained full authority as is underlined by the repetition of the same paralinguistic vocal feature. Sometimes he judges an individual: “You were a topper Johnny, you were a topper at the maths,” I heard the Master’s voice. It was full of authority. (314)

And sometimes a whole group with the same confidence:

“It was no trouble. Ye had the brains. There are people in this part of the country digging ditches who could have been engineers or doctors or judges or philosophers had they been given the opportunity. But the opportunity was lacking. That was all that was lacking.” The master spoke again with great authority. (315)

Throughout the story, the headmaster sticks to his institutional role without being aware that this very role is called into question by someone else’s evaluation. The politician too establishes a link between education and one’s position in society, and uses similar words and phrases but his opinion differs and his evaluation of the institution – which becomes that of the headmaster—is quite harsh:

“I’ll be plain. I have three sons. They go to that school. They have nothing to fall back on but whatever education they get. And with the education they are getting at the school up there, all they’ll ever be fit for is to dig ditches. Now, I’ve never dug ditches, but even at my age I’d take off my coat and go down into a ditch rather than ever have to watch my sons dig. The whole school is a shambles. Someone described it lately as one big bear garden.” (309)
The father is as confident and definite in his evaluation as the headmaster. The last two sentences suggest that even within the school, the authority of the headmaster is no longer recognised or respected and this contrasts with the sense of hierarchy present in the ceremony described at the beginning of the story, as if the image shown did not correspond to the reality of school life any longer. Ditches come to symbolise degradation and by their opposite situation on the vertical line, stand in contrast with other notions such as “high ground” or “toppers”.

It soon becomes clear for the reader that the politician aims at replacing the inadequate headmaster by someone he considers better suited to the job i.e. the young teacher. The politician pursues a personal goal – ensuring his sons’ future – and he considers that this can only be achieved by replacing the headmaster of the local school. The young teacher could thus become an instrument in his plan. The idea that school is the only way out corresponds both to McGahern’s personal experience and to a historical and social reality. In this respect, fiction is used here to refer to experience. Nevertheless, this general context essentially provides the backdrop to the story and what is foregrounded in the narrative is the way in which interpersonal relationships based on evaluation come into play.

The characters are prone to express their feelings, which creates patterns of relationships involving oppositions and kinship, distance and proximity as the firstwords of the narrator about the senator show: “I disliked him, having unconsciously, perhaps picked up my people’s dislike”. (307)

Opposition is strongly asserted and the senator’s interference is clearly perceived by the narrator as an unfortunate intrusion at a time when he wished to be alone. The reasons for these unfriendly feelings are developed in a paragraph levelling accusations of dishonesty at the senator. He is described as a ruthless speculator who got married to enter the local council, and is ready to do anything to further his own interests. The narrator condemns him on the grounds of immorality. This character recalls many others in the works of McGahern and stands for a new category of people who came to occupy political functions without having proved particularly dedicated to serving the country. Their accession to power was especially resented by ex-soldiers who felt deprived of the social recognition they considered they were entitled to. McGahern is often very ironical about the way such people came into power. “Bank Holiday” features one of them:

“What is the Minister like?”
“He’s all right. An opportunist, I suppose. He has energy, certainly, and the terrible Irish gift of familiarity. He first came to the fore by putting parallel bars on the back of a lorry. He did handstands and somersaults before and after speeches, to the delight of the small towns and villages. Miss democracy thought he was wonderful and voted him in top of the poll. He’s more statesmanlike now of course”. (361)

Whether it be in the Collected Stories or in the novels, no political figure is ever treated in a positive way, and, because of prior knowledge, the reader is all the more ready to share the narrator’s opinion about Senator Reegan. The latter is also used to chronicle the shift of power from the clergy to the politicians especially in the appointment of teachers. As a matter of fact, the figure of the headmaster is as much an archetype as that of the politician. Maher comments:

Leddy is an identifiably local character with no aspiration towards self-promotion. He is ignorant of the machinations of Reegan and the other parents of children in his school and lives in a type of time warp. He has charm in abundance, but no self discipline – how many men like him can be found scattered across the country even
today? However there is a sense in which they are a dying breed in a society that has embraced technological innovation and material prosperity in the last few decades. Sentiment no longer influences decisions as it did in the 1940s and 1950s. (Maher, 2003, 87)

By passing a mild judgement on the character, Maher seems to adopt the author’s point of view and share his affection for the prototypical character. As he points out, the hostility is not reciprocal and the senator proves sarcastic when forced by the narrator to consider the consequences of his actions for the headmaster:

The very worst that could happen to him is that he’d be forced to take early retirement, which would probably add years to his life. He’d just have that bit less of a pension with which to drink himself into an early grave. (313)

It is clear that the headmaster is at the end of his tether and that strength and power are on the side of the politician who will have his way as he always has. The third party is precisely the young teacher who becomes involved in the matter against his will by the politician’s offer to become head of the school and the story includes two conversations: one between Reegan and the teacher, and the other one taking place between the headmaster and his former pupil. As regards the structure of the text, the second conversation is inserted into the first one by means of a narrative flashback about the visit the narrator had paid the headmaster three days before. This visit is thus granted a central position in the story. Most of the action in “High Ground” is in fact verbal interaction that can be analysed along the lines of conversation analysis. Yule remarks:

In order to make sense of what is said in an interaction, we have to look at various factors which relate to social distance and closeness. Some of these factors are established prior to interaction and hence are largely external factors. They typically involve the relative status of the participants, based on social values such as age and power. (Yule, 1996, 59)

Assessing distance and closeness, and reflecting on social values clearly involves evaluations on the part of the participants. What is striking in “High Ground” is that the teacher and the senator do not view the relationship in the same way. The distance between the senator and the young teacher is objectified in space and explicitly referred to in the deixis of the first address before it is commented upon in the narrative: “Hi there! Hi! Do you hear me young Moran!‘ The voice came with startling clarity over the water, was taken up by the fields across the lake, echoed back.” (307)

The man starting the conversation is in a superior position because of his social status – which will be defined by the narrator – and because he intrudes on the other’s solitary meditation. He repeats his call for want of an answer and eventually asks Moran to come closer: “‘Since the mountain cannot come to Mahomet, Mahomet will have to come to the mountain. Row over here a minute. I want to have a word with you.”’ (307)

This attempt at reducing distance between the individuals exemplifies the next point in Yule’s analysis:

However there are other factors, such as amount of imposition or degree of friendliness, which are often negotiated during an interaction. These are internal to the interaction and can result in the initial social distance changing and being marked as less or more, during its course. (Yule 1996, 59)

The senator’s way of addressing Moran is blunt and goes against the rules of politeness because he directly imposes something on his interlocutor without the slightest apology for doing so. His address is a Face Threatening Act against Moran’s negative face taking the form of a bald on record. The demand is hardly softened by the biblical reference
which barely qualifies as a mitigating device. Not surprisingly, this face threatening act is met by a silence attributed to Moran and indicating awkwardness. Moran reluctantly obeys without explicitly (i.e. linguistically) granting the request: “I rowed slowly, watching each oar-splash slip away from the boat in the mirror of the water.” (307)

The inclusion of long narrative passages amounting to silence between the characters creates a heavy atmosphere leaving the reader in no doubt about Moran’s negative feelings towards Reegan. Even when Moran has come as close as possible to Reegan, the latter retains a dominant position preventing physical contact:

“The senator had seated himself on the wall as I was rowing in and his shoes hung six or eight feet above the boat.

“It’s not the first time I’ve had to congratulate you, though I’m too high up here to shake your hand.” (308)

After such a long approach, the conversation between the two men actually starts. Reegan asks direct personal questions and Moran answers cautiously. Moran’s silence and his vague answers do not deter Reegan from making his point i.e. a proposal to Moran: “And what I’m looking to know is – if you were offered a very good job, would you be likely to take it?” (308)

This proposal is the hinge of the short story. It is the expression of Reegan’s desire and it is made plain that the latter expects a positive answer. The proposal can thus be considered as a first part to be followed by a second i.e. an acceptance (preferred) or a refusal (dispreferred). The answer is delayed throughout the story. Yule explains:

“The delay in acceptance [...] is one type of indication that not all first parts necessarily receive the kind of second parts the speaker might anticipate. Delay in response symbolically marks potential unavailability of the immediate (i.e. normally automatic) expected answer. Delay represents distance between what is expected and what is provided. Delay is always interpreted as meaningful. (Yule, 1996, 78)

Delay is explicitly requested several times by Moran and the narrative comments and paralinguistic features allow us to interpret the demand as a face saving act to avoid a blunt refusal:

“I don’t see why you want my word at this stage,” I said evasively, hoping to slip away from it all. (309-310)

“I’ll have to think about it.” (313)

“I’ll have to think about it.” I was anxious to turn away from any direct confrontation. (313)

‘I know that but I still have to think about it’ (313)

It is only at the end of the long and tense conversation that Reegan finally adopts a more polite attitude taking into account Moran’s negative face: “Naturally you have to consider everything”. (313) However, this polite remark, which amounts to accepting the delay requested by Moran, is immediately followed by another proposal, another first part to be followed by a second:

“Why don’t you drop over to my place tomorrow night? You’ll have a chance to meet my lads and herself has been saying for a long time that she’d like meet you. Come about nine, everything will be out of the way by then”. (313)

Reegan obviously aims at creating some intimacy by introducing Moran into the family circle. It sounds as if the senator had understood that Moran was more sentimental than he was and tried to find ways around his diffidence, by making him meet the sons, put at
risk by the attitude of the headmaster. A new strategy seems to be at work. Although this would be most unlikely in everyday conversation, no answer is given in the short story and Moran simply goes away, as slowly as he had come to meet Reegan on the bank. In spite of the senator's determination, the conversation does not reach its aim and the interaction is in vain. Although Moran's refusal to co-operate is blatant and should be deciphered as a Face Threatening Act by his interlocutor, Reegan doesn't seem to care at all and stands his ground by not letting go. This failure of the verbal interaction shows that the characters are poles apart and do not share the same values. What is at stake between Moran and Reegan is the fate of the school's headmaster. Yule explains:

The basic assumption, from the perspective of politeness, is that face is typically at risk when the self needs to accomplish something involving other. The greatest risk appears to be when the other is put in a difficult position. (1996, 67)

In the conversation we have described, Moran's face is at risk because the headmaster is put in a difficult position by Reegan. The thoughts of the narrator are communicated to the reader in terms of evaluation: The very idea of replacing him was shocking. (309) And the same idea is expressed in the conversation: “I can't do that”. (309)

The core of the opposition between the two men is revealed in the speech items framing the flashback about the visit paid to the Headmaster:

“What'll happen to the master? What will he do?”
“What I'm more concerned about is what my children will do if he stays,” he burst out again. “But you don't have to concern yourself about it. It'll be taken care of”. (310)

The same question is repeated after two pages devoted to the visit: “Do you mean the Master’ll be on the road then?” (313)

Moran's interrogation raises the question of morality. How is one supposed to behave when someone else is involved? The headmaster’s words: “Loyalty is a fine quality. A very fine quality.” (311) become particularly relevant in the context in which Moran remembers them and are echoed by Reegan's declaration: “To hell with gratitude. Gratitude doesn't matter a dam.” (313) Because Moran and Reegan share opposite views (revealed by dialogue and narrative), the situation should be clear-cut provided Moran were ready to refuse Reegan's proposal. Yet, the weight of silence indicates a more complex dilemma.

The conversation between Moran and Reegan seems suspended while Moran remembers the visit he paid to the master and this flashback contains important information regarding the narrator's state of mind and his appreciation of what the master has become. It is obvious that the headmaster is not in good shape:

He was just rising, having taken all his meals of the day in bed, and was shaving and dressing upstairs, one time calling down for a towel, and again for a laundered shirt. (310)

Or,

All the time he seemed to lag behind my snail’s pace, sometimes standing because he was out of breath, tapping at the road with the cane. Even when the walk slowed to a virtual standstill it seemed to be still far too energetic for him. (311)

The physical decline lends credibility to Reegan's claim that the headmaster is no longer fit for the job, and Moran himself is ill at ease with what he cannot fail to notice:

I walked, stooping by his side, restraining myself within the slow walk, embarrassed, ashamed, confused. I had once looked to him in pure infatuation,
would rush to his defence against every careless whisper. [...] It seemed horrible
now that I might come to this. (312)

35 The urge to defend the master clearly belongs to the past and the fact that the narrator
foresees his own future through a comparison with Leddy’s present derelict state
indicates that he could very well occupy the same position. It is as if Moran had
contemplated Reegan’s proposal with terror beforehand. He is also shocked by the
master’s lack of self-discipline regarding alcohol to the point of voicing his disapproval:
“How can he know what he knows and still do what he does, I say to the sudden silence
before turning away.” (312)

36 What is unbearable for Moran is that he cannot but acknowledge the accuracy of Reegan’s
judgement on the master but this remains unsaid even though it is made obvious to the
reader who establishes connections between the conversation and the narrator’s
thoughts. Moran is actually caught between conflicting imperatives: being aware of
reality and yet remaining loyal to someone who once opened the world to him. Unable to
cope, Moran turns away from the master when he leaves him at the pub and never
answers Reegan’s proposals, choosing silence as a way out. How is the reader supposed to
react? What kind of evaluation is he meant to make?

37 The control of sympathy is mostly dependent on the question of narrative point of view
and the reader naturally tends to follow the first person narrator and reflector in his
evaluations, all the more so if the latter sounds reasonable enough and tends to draw the
reader’s sympathy because of his own engaging nature or behaviour. McGahern’s heroes,
though not devoid of failings, are no unpalatable figures and Moran is no exception. His
characterisation is positive in many ways: he is praised for his intelligence, he
disapproves of dishonesty, which makes us think that he is honest, he cares about people,
since he still visits his old master, is able to enjoy a dance as well as work on a roof with
his father. As a result, the reader does not question his evaluations of the politician or of
the declining headmaster. We can even share his disarray when faced with old age or a
most embarrassing proposal because we have most probably experienced similar
situations and reacted in similar ways. For all these reasons, closeness may be assumed
between narrator and reader and yet we cannot help feeling estranged, deprived, and
uncomfortable. These feelings are attributable to a lack of information about Moran’s
decision. The proposal put to him by Reegan creates, as already explained, the
expectation of an answer (a second part) so that the reader comes to share the senator’s
impatience and frustration when deprived of it. From a stylistic perspective, fiction
involves interaction between the narrator and the reader. In this respect, Moran’s
silence, interpreted as a face threatening act towards Reegan, is also to be construed as a
face threatening act towards the reader.

38 However, the short story does not end with the conversation and fictional interaction
continues. On the last page, Moran’s role changes. He gives up the “narrative floor” to
become an eavesdropper:

I let the bucket softly down in the dust and stood in the shadow of the church wall
to listen. I recognised the Master’s slurred voice at once, and then voices of some of
the men who worked the sawmill in the wood. (314)

39 It is as if the narrator retreated before the end of the story but remained the reflector,
thereby casting the reader in a similar position, that of someone overhearing a
conversation. Apart from reporting clauses, the only sentence attributable to the
narrator is purely descriptive and entirely devoid of evaluation: “There was a lull again in the voices in which a coin fell and seemed to roll across the floor.” (315)

Hence the reader bears entire responsibility for any kind of evaluation of the conversation taking place in the pub after hours. We can notice that the last words are left to the headmaster, the object of a previous conversation, which in itself strengthens his position in the story. These last words are the answer given by the headmaster to the question put to him by one of his former pupils: “If you had to pick one thing, Master, what would you put those brains down to?” (315) The second part is deferred by an interruption and an incident, which make it all the more prominent:

Well the people with the brains mostly stayed here. They had to. They had no choice. They didn’t go to the cities. So the brains was passed on to the next generation. Then, there’s the trees. There’s the water. And we are high up here. We’re practically at the source of the Shannon. If I had to pick one thing more than another, I’d put it down to that. I’d attribute it to the high ground. (315)

The rules of English intonation tell us that, in this last sentence, in direct speech, the nuclear stress of the utterance is on “high ground”. We have already mentioned the fact that the last words, “high ground”, take us back to the title of the story, thereby creating circularity inside the short story, and to the title of the collection, granting the story prominent place in the volume. The notion of end-focus can be extended from the last words of a sentence to the last paragraph of a text which is expected to convey important information, what Leech & Short (2007, 179) call “the principle of climax”. Yet, at first sight, the reader’s expectations are once more frustrated. These words do not make sense if we try to be rational. There is no logic in them: the environment has no impact whatsoever on genetics or on intelligence and the explanation given by the headmaster is seriously flawed. We could discount it as nonsense uttered after too much drinking, strengthening the senator’s evaluation. The attitude expected from the reader would then be either cruel amusement at so stupid an answer or pity for the headmaster who is totally unaware of what is awaiting him. The absence of the narrator could then be interpreted as a final withdrawal of support. Nevertheless, it is possible to suggest another interpretation, more in keeping with the notion of end-focus. In spite of the very simple and naive wording, the last lines of the short story seem to take on a poetic quality that runs against the idea of a harsh judgement passed on the speaker. The repetition of syntactic structures and lexical items creates a specific rhythm and the general message conveyed is praise, praise of the people and the environment. A fusion between the different elements is brought about, as if people and the environment were part of a whole and so tightly connected that they were no longer discrete. The idea that the aim of writing is praising is paramount for McGahern. In *The Barracks*, Elizabeth Reegan makes several attempts at writing a letter and appears as a figure of the author struggling to find the right words:

She’d have to write about herself too: her relationship with Reegan at odd moments now, her heart gone weak, the cancer, the futility of her life and the life about her, her growing indifference. That was the truth she’d have to tell. Things get worse and worse and more frightening. But who’d want to come to a house where times got worse and no one was happy? And on the cold page it did not seem true and she crossed it out and wrote, everything gets stranger and more strange. But what could that mean to the person she was writing to – stranger and more strange, sheer inarticulacy with a faint touch of craziness. So she crossed it out too and wrote: Things get better and better, more beautiful, and she smiled at the page that was too disfigured now to send to anyone now. Her words had reached praised of
something at last and it did not appear more false or true than any of the other
things she’d written and crossed out. (187)

In this passage, the character begins by assessing her own writing in terms of truth i.e.
relation with the reality of experience and meaning. The words “inarticulacy” and
“craziness” could apply to the headmaster’s declaration. She then moves to another type
of evaluation which is no longer based on truth and reality but on aesthetics. Because the
headmaster’s words are the conclusion of the short story, they necessarily sound true to
the author but their truth is poetical and the implication is that though certainly a poor
teacher and headmaster, Leddy retains an essential quality, the capacity to praise the
world. In that respect, he supersedes the tentative narrator who once praised him but
remains silent in front of the senator. Leddy, the old headmaster, thus becomes a figure
of the artist who has created his own world in which he can reign as McGahern explains
in *The Image*:

> Art is an attempt to create a world in which we can live: if not for long or forever,
> still a world of the imagination over which we can reign, and by reign I mean to
> reflect purely on our situation through this created world of ours, this Medusa’s
> mirror, allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable. (12)

Like the narrator, the reader thus moves away from confident down to earth evaluations
to frustration and uncertainty. He is finally forced to listen to the headmaster and form
his own judgement about the characters. As is often the case in McGahern’s short stories,
“High Ground” is open-ended and therefore upsetting for the reader. He is first made to
expect a piece of realistic writing foregrounding social issues, psychological insight and
moral evaluations but he is finally led, through metafictional hints, to look beyond
realism and ethics towards aesthetics and to revise his own judgements. This is what
Bataillard (1995) called John McGahern’s “subdued modernity”. At the end of “High
Ground”, we are encouraged to go beyond the issue debated between the characters and
to question the roles of all the participants. We turn from a kind of evaluation that we
would produce about real people to a more poetic appraisal. Reading a literary text is in
itself a process of evaluation that according to Stockwell leads us from interpretation to
reading:

> Interpretation is what readers do as soon as (perhaps even partly before) they begin
to move through a text. Their general sense of the impact of the experience could
range over many different impressions and senses, some of which are refined or
rejected. It is this later, more analytical process that produces a reading. Some
interpretations (especially those rejected early) can be simply wrong: mistakes,
errors, miscues that are demonstrably not supported by any textual evidence at all.
Readings, however, are the process of arriving at a sense of the text that is
personally acceptable. These are likely to combine individual factors as well as
features that are common to the reader’s interpretative community. (Stockwell,
2002, 8)
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RÉSUMÉS

The McGahern reader tends to approach “High Ground” as a prototypical story depicting a familiar universe. The Irish rural context in which school plays a crucial role gives rise to many, sometimes conflicting, evaluations and the reader is encouraged, through the handling of point of view, to side with the reflector, who happens to be a young teacher. However, conversation analysis leads us to qualify our judgements and to recognise truth in the words of the unpalatable politician. The silence of the young teacher both reveals and creates embarrassment. The end of the short story offers no solution but suggests a new perspective that has less to do with ethics and more with aesthetics.
Vanina Jobert-Martini is Senior Lecturer in Irish Studies in the English Department of the University Jean Moulin – Lyon 3. She wrote her PhD on John McGahern’s prose fiction in which she explores time as a thematic as well as a formal device. Her main areas of research are modern Irish Literature and stylistics.