The “Rich Whole”: John McGahern’s Collected Stories as Autobiography

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1 I will begin with a short passage from “Wheels.” We are at the beginning of three decades of writing short stories, or at least in the story placed in the opening position of Nightlines. The disaffected and scrupulously alert narrator is returning by train to the city following a visit to his home place in Roscommon.

Through the windows the fields of stone walls, blue roofs of Carrick, Shannon river. Sing for them once First Communion Day O River Shannon flowing and a four-leaved shamrock growing, silver medal on the blue suit and white ankle socks in new shoes. The farther flows the river the muddier the water: the light was brighter on its upper reaches. Rustle of the boat through the bulrushes as we went to Moran’s well for spring water in dry summers, cool of watercress and bitterness of the wild cherries shaken out of the whitethorn hedge, black bullrush seed floating in the gallons on the floorboards, all the vivid sections of the wheel we watched so slowly turn, impatient for the rich whole that never came but that all the preparations promised. (CS 10-11)

2 We are anchored in a country place that is named and concrete. More Yeats and Proust than Beckett, McGahern is attached to the poetic textures of placenames and to their reality beyond the text. The place is rich in natural, sensual, detail—the cool of watercress, the bitterness of cherries; the stone, the water, the light; the white, the blue, the black, the silver; the rustle and the singing voice; the forward movement of the train, the flowing river, and the felt cycle of the seasons. Anyone who has grown up on a farm, even in Ireland, will recognise the precision of that thirst for “spring water in dry summers”—a perfect McGahern phrase, quietly matter of fact yet evocative of primal currents, visceral and religious all at once.

3 Superimposed on this sensually realized childhood place is a shifting time sequence, present to past to future, for while the passage opens with the simple recording of what the narrator sees through the train window, the present is quickly displaced by the
recollection of a time in childhood which in turn leads to a yearning for a future that did not in fact happen.

The governing mood is one of loss, of melancholy, of disillusionment counterpointed with the unexpected surge of memory, the recollection being so very real in its sensual detail that it seems to contradict what the sceptical mind articulates. That watching of “the vivid sections of the wheel!”--apparently so futile since the opening paragraph, “nothing but wait and watch and listen”--has in fact stored up in memory that enriched time of childhood. And so even though there are suggestions of primal frustration and waste in the spilled seed of the bullrush, in the failure to preserve the light of childhood hope, or even in the futility of ambition and “preparations,” at the same time, there is a momentary arresting of all such feelings in the light of memory and in the light of art which fixes memory in words.

The final phrase, “the rich whole that never came but that all the preparations promised,” is in fact a recall of the concluding phrase of Yeats’s “Reveries Over Childhood and Youth”: “All life weighed in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for something that never happens.” (Yeats 71) The successive books of Yeats’s Autobiographies and the incremental enlargement of his power as a poet reveal that this phrase is an ambiguous one, not indeed a confession of waste or disillusionment, as it might appear, but a recognition of the mysterious process by which the hidden resources of imagination are made available to the poet. And, of course, that is the conundrum at the heart of McGahern’s work: how can the far-from-perfect life-materials, the “dunghills,” yield a perfection of artistic vision, a “gold watch,” a full moon, as it were, a Rose window?

There are many emblems in the fiction for that “rich whole,” the “vivid sections of the wheel,” but as well as offering the circular and arrested image, the wheel is also in motion. Even in recollection, the tense in which life is lived is overwhelmingly the eroding present--“I grew amused at that part of myself that still expected something, standing like a fool out there in all the moonlit silence, when only what was increased or diminished as it changed, became only what is, becoming again what was even faster than the small second hand endlessly circling.” (CS 225) The way that fact of life seems to empty all effort or ambition of lasting significance is the primal origin of the father’s murderous bitterness and moral squalor, exemplified with such frightening intransigence in “Korea,” “Gold Watch,” and in many other stories.

And so the double drama of the wheel, the atemporal nature of memory and art miraculously suspended in the chronology that is also our very nature, is a key emblem of the paradox and the symbolic reality that McGahern’s fiction articulates. Yet the stories from Nightlines to Getting Through to High Ground embody the story of McGahern’s own development as an artist, and that is another sense of “rich whole” I would like to speak of.

In 1968, about the time “Wheels” and other, later, stories in Nightlines were written, John McGahern provided the key statements that must be the foundation of any critical reading of this and all later work--of the novels The Barracks and The Dark, too, for the statements obviously grow out of his previous experience of writing those novels. “The Image,” a brief passage he had reprinted as a Preface to the French edition of Nightlines, and which he revised as late as 1991 for inclusion in a special edition of the Canadian Journal of Irish Studies on his work, was first described as a “Prologue to a Reading”.

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“The image, that still and private universe which each of us possess but which others cannot see, is brought to life in rhythm,” McGahern writes. “By rhythm I think of the dynamic quality of the vision, its instinctive, its individual movements; and this struggles towards the single image, the image on which our whole life took its most complete expression once, in a kind of grave, grave of the images of dead passions and their days... Image after image flows involuntary now... straining towards the one image that will never come, the lost image.” (“The Image” 10)

This is McGahern describing how he works, or what the compulsion is to search for perfection in art—the resurrecting of that “lost image,” that “image in which our whole life took its most complete expression once”—but we might believe that we were actually reading Marcel Proust—in translation of course! When Proust writes of “another reality” beneath Chateaubriand’s sentences or of George Sand—“beneath the commonplace thoughts and hackneyed words, I could hear or overhear, an intonation, a rhythmic utterance fine and strange” (Proust/Montcrieff 32)—he is identifying the sign of the “moi profonde” that distinguishes them from all other writers.

It is no surprise to hear McGahern say that Proust’s essays are his favourite critical writing. This “Prologue” is the equivalent of Proust’s “Overture” in Swann’s Way. His “lost image” of the “dead passions and their days” that must be resurrected is of course the “lost time” of Marcel Proust. If Proust recovers that time, and tells the story of how his narrator was eventually enabled to recover it and recognise its definitive value, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu—In Search of Lost Time—is undoubtedly the “rich whole” which his life strained to bring into words. “The long and complicated journey of art” is endless for McGahern and yet that may be because of the “simple religious nature of its activity” (“The Image” 10), the effort to recover belief in an essential self that may be liberated from the deadening days of routine and mortality.

Proust writes of “the effect that love has of filling me with a precious essence, or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal.” (Proust/Montcrieff 34) Since The Barracks, in which the terminally ill Elizabeth Reegan recovers “the enriched and indestructible days” of her love affair with Halliday, McGahern has been recognizably a Proustian. In “the Wine Breath” the old priest, about to die, remembers days “so pure and perfect that he felt purged of all tiredness, was, for a moment eager to begin life again.”(CS 180) I am quoting now from the second volume of stories where such light of “the eternal” is allowed to play in many stories against the darkness, but even the darkness of Nightlines demands its opposite. It ends with an extraordinary note of comedy that looks back to “Wheels” and looks forward to Getting Through:

I feel born again as I start to pedal towards the town. How, how, though, can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter a second time his mother’s bag of tricks? I laugh at last. Was it not said by Water and the Holy Spirit? Several infusions of whiskey at the Bridge Bar, contemplation of the Shannon through its windows... (CS 111).

If these disaffected narrators of “Wheels” or of “The Recruiting Officer” are unable to believe in the existence of a “rich whole,” this is simply a challenge to their creator to find it, and to the reader to recognise it. Just before that passage from the conclusion of “Wheels,” the narrator has commented on his visit home to his embittered father: “I was meeting Lightfoot in the bar beside the station and would answer ‘How did it go?’ with how it went, repetition of a life in the shape of a story that had as much reason to go on as
stop” (CS 10). This is a further challenge to the reader to revise our sense of what a story is. If we stand back again from the narrator, we might recognise a Proustian, or perhaps it is a Beckettian, sense of a governing consciousness in all the fictions so that if this “repetition of a life” may appear to be shapeless, lacking in story, it is so since in the present tense there is no perfection: the process of searching is taken up each day. The scepticism of this first narrator regarding the convention of endings may be connected to his scepticism regarding the “rich whole.” But as I noted at the outset, even this study of a disaffected narrator ends with an enriched moment which negates his scepticism. In the classic McGahern play of opposites, the “rich whole” becomes imaginable because of its absence; in “The Wine Breath” the priest resurrects a “dead day” of his childhood when his actual death is imminent.

While the reading of one story repays one’s attention with so much, to read one story after another in each collection and then in the Collected Stories is to become aware of more than simply the “repetition of a life.” The recurring instinct to remember or retell, to give meaning to random events through finding an appropriate narrative form, is clearly an instinctive as well as a social impulse. This is made very clear in the layers of embedded stories which make up the texture of The Leavetaking, the book that followed Nightlines. McGahern has said that “any single story in a collection of stories can lean on the variety and difference of the others, receiving as well as casting light” (L 5), and regarding Dubliners, the first model for his storytelling, he commented “I do not see Dubliners as a book of separate stories. The whole work has more the unity and completeness of a novel” (“Dubliners” 36) And so each story is both complete and incomplete at the same time. Our reading is enriched by deliberate echoes of earlier work and by those placenames which constantly suggest that a contained poetic world is only an embroidered screen through which the more enduring character of the earth itself shines through as the mysterious whole.

The “repetition of a life” as story draws attention to McGahern’s revisionary and self-referential impulse. There is an evolution in narrative voice, in the status of the narrator/protagonist, and in the dialogue established with the reader who moves forward with a consciousness of the earlier work. While he appears to return to well-examined situations and characters, the treatments are always changing, the style evolving although always unmistakeably McGahern. Here, before I leave Dubliners, I should note how McGahern’s essay ends, after speaking of the classical style which characterizes Joyce: “Only in the great passages of Ulysses was Joyce able to surpass the art of Dubliners. In many of these, like the Hades episode, his imagination returns again and again to his first characters, his original material” (“Dubliners” 36). The work of a lifetime, it seems, is the refinement of original images.

When I speak then of “autobiography,” I mean that John McGahern’s work consciously includes within it, in the manner of Proust’s A la Recherche, or indeed of Joyce or of Yeats, versions of the artist’s earlier selves, and that there is a movement forward towards a more inclusive and more mature sense of how the truth of perception may be embodied. There are mirrors of McGahern in his work, but they are not there for self-expressive reasons but rather the opposite; they are there to mark the passage of a life spent searching in new ways for that “lost image” in which the vital self is anchored.

The Roscommon-Leitrim countryside and the family situation in the fiction of the sixties remain recognisable as the reference point for all of McGahern’s later work, although each collection also includes stories of city life, in particular as a place in which love is
discovered and, often although not always, lost. The atmosphere of abuse and despair changes, however, so that already in the seventies the handful of stories which present a cast of country characters add up to a more comic view of that world, and in High Ground, McGahern achieves a kind of anthropological perspective on the life of groups and communities. This sense of a social and historical overview of the circumstances of Irish country life gradually deepens, and stories like "Oldfashioned" and "The Conversion of William Kirkwood" prepare the way for Amongst Women.

These changes in distance and perspective mirror a vision which is simultaneously freed from the static and dark world of the early fictions and also aware that what appears to be linear development is, in another perspective, circular. While the contrast between the provincial and the metropolitan modes of life is marked, in many stories the two are interwoven. It becomes evident in the stories, as in the novels, that a drama of opposites—an unending drama of yearning and loss, desire and defeat, beginnings and endings, departures and returns—is central to McGahern's work. The ritualised movement from city to country, first introduced in "Wheels" and reintroduced in "Sierra Leone" and "Gold Watch," reappears in many forms—of home holidays, of emigrants returning, of going back in memory, of going back to die—and these processes are central also to the novels.

The reader is called on to respond to a type of fiction which is increasingly experimental and conscious of its own patterns as poetic fiction. It becomes evident in the stories of the seventies, in Getting Through, and then of the early eighties, in High Ground, that his vision is constantly changing. He calls on the reader to recognise that change by introducing each collection with a striking story on the nature of art and the character of the artist: "The Beginning of an Idea" and "Parachutes." These stories are urbane and satirical explorations of failure in love and failure in writing, and, implicitly, they instruct the reader on how to read the symbolic parables which follow.

"Parachutes," for instance, the opening story in High Ground, indirectly and significantly recalls Chekhov whose presence in Getting Through had been explicitly evoked in the opening story of that collection. It is not the Chekhovian style—in translation—of sentiment and irony that is recalled but the artist whose moral balance is inherent in his symbolic realism. The celebrated letter in which he speaks of "dunghills as artistic materials" is clearly in McGahern's mind in "Parachutes." This study of an abandoned lover is combined with a satirical study of a cynical artiste manqué who comments, "Just old boring rural Ireland strikes again. Even its principal city has one foot in a manure heap" (CS 238). The dejected narrator suddenly undergoes a regeneration of faith in life, however, when he has a vision: "The state was so close to dreaming that I stared in disbelief when I saw the first thistledown, its thin, pale parachute drifting so slowly across the open doorway that it seemed to move more in water than in air" (CS 237). The parachutes that drift up from the hidden dunghills of Dublin become an image of innocent wonder, set against the cynical disgust, the desolation and self-destruction, the bitterness of the habitués of the pub.

This "parachute" is fused with another, the love-affair that has ended but can now be lived in a new way, through the translation of a memory of its beginning into a permanent image: "As we kept turning to the music, we moved through the circle where the glass dome was still letting in daylight... out beyond the draped curtains until we seemed to be turning in nothing but air beneath the sky" (CS 238). This memory of harmonious movement lifts the couple into a higher plane of existence, out of the
restriction of enclosed spaces to the air and the natural light, an imaginative and
metaphysical space in which they become inseparable from the music of the spheres. The
first image of the parachute is eventually transformed through the accretion of personal,
natural and mystical elements into a modernist image of music and dance, and the
mysterious growth of love becomes analogous to the creative process through which the
dunghills are transformed into a symbolic art.

While Chekhov’s thinking about symbolic realism seems to lie behind this story, the
image of the dance and the discovery of “fresh images” again recalls Yeats. The “foul rag
and bone shop of the heart” yields up images of “the dancer and the dance,” that
triumphant moment in modernism when the “questioning” that dominates the poem is
subsumed in a knowledge grounded on the image of the “great rooted blossomer” and of
the dance. This story introduces a collection, High Ground, in which individual lives,
marked by pain or love, despair or hope, are woven into a tapestry with other lives, all
mirroring each other, meeting and parting in a kind of dance.

Nowhere is this later phase of McGahern’s development more strikingly evident than in
the new novella which rounds out the collection, ”The Country Funeral.” The suffering
and the absurdities of adult life are not denied, and the decision of one brother to return
from working in the oil-fields to live on the small farm next to Gloria bog is muted, but
there is an implicit sense of eternal rightness in the accommodation to death which the
story enacts through the funeral rites and through the symbolic position of the cemetery
in the landscape. This novella recapitulates many situations, themes and motifs in earlier
stories, in particular “The Wine Breath,” but most strikingly of all, it mirrors and reverses
the vision and meaning of the opening collection. It is as if the artist himself has travelled
in a great circle of experience and perception.

One image, among many, which can illustrate the change is Gloria Bog. In “The Recruiting
Officer,” the narrator refers to a Miss Martin, a visitor to his school to avail of the services
of a faith-healing student: “she lived with her brother across the empty waste of wheat-
coloured sedge and stunted birch of the Gloria Bog. Her brother made toys from used
matchsticks in the winter nights” (CS 107). More than twenty years later, this same frugal
craft is given to Peter, the dead uncle whom the three brothers come to bury, but now the
bogland is not seen as a place of “empty waste” and stunted growth: “It was a clear
moonlit night without a murmur of wind, and the acres of pale sedge were all lit up,
giving back much of the light it was receiving, so that the places that were covered with
heather melted into a soft blackness and the scattered shadows of the small birches were
soft and dark on the cold sedge” (CS 393). Philly, the brother who is most moved by his
uncle’s death, has earlier had childhood memories, “pictures of Gloria Bog that flooded
his mind shut out the day and the room with amazing brightness and calm” (CS 377). It is
a moment that recalls so many in the stories, but now that mysterious darkness at the
heart of the landscape, the cemetery shrouded in trees, restores a calm in the face of
mortality; art and nature are at peace.

With the addition of “The Country Funeral”--somewhat like the placing of “The Dead” at
the end of Dubliners--this collection is designed to be the ”rich whole” that all the
preparations promised. “The Country Funeral” is as close as John McGahern has come to
the elusive “lost image.”
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ABSTRACTS

“Wheels,” the opening story of the Collected Stories, provides a key to the paradoxical accomplishment of McGahern’s fiction—its achieved sensual texture and the skeptical reasoning that appears to abort human wishes. The “rich whole that never came” is symbolized by the wheel and its analogues, a vision rooted in memory which confounds the passage of time.

McGahern’s thinking about art is Proustian, as “The Image” reveals, and the Collected Stories may be read as a large-scale autobiographical project focused on memory, time, and the changing status of the narrative voice in relation to certain recurring images. The images, which highlight the revisionary nature of McGahern’s progress through three volumes and on to “The Country Funeral,” are typically drawn from rural and familial scenes and situations. They are the anchor of McGahern’s imagination in his first world of childhood experience.

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