

“A new, painful excitement”:

John McGahern, *The Reader and Reading*

Last year I had the good fortune to be awarded a Study Abroad Fellowship by the Leverhulme Trust to go and work through the Irish fiction writer John McGahern’s papers. These papers were originally acquired by the National University of Ireland, Galway in 2003 and have been added to by his widow and others since McGahern’s death in 2006. Though I worked hard on the archive for nine months, I came nowhere near examining everything – at a guess I think it would take me at least one more calendar year of nine to five reading to do it justice.

There are 1495 catalogued documents in the archive as well as a small number of yet to be catalogued items (these can all be consulted at <http://archives.library.nuigalway.ie/cgi-bin/FramedList.cgi?P71>). Some of the documents are as short as a page, others as long as a book, or draft of a novel. Many are handwritten, some in pencil, others in almost illegible red biro, others, more helpfully, in black pen on yellow paper; many more are in typescript. The penultimate item in the catalogue, number 1494 is listed thus:

Handwritten draft of a public address beginning 'The central theme of this address is that if style is the most important element in writing'. Written on the back cover of *The Journal of The English Association North*.

When I first read this entry online I was puzzled as I was not aware of any such journal and I wondered what it was doing in McGahern’s possession. The more alert

and loyal readers of this magazine will know, of course, that the journal on which McGahern was scribbling is *The Reader*. I was reminded of this fact by Philip Davies in his recent editorial for the 50th issue which revealed that the magazine almost became *The Abercromby Pig*. Oddly, perhaps, this copy of *The Reader* is one of the only literary magazines I came across in the entire McGahern holding.

I do not know how or why John McGahern had a copy of *The Reader* in his possession – it was issue number 4 from Spring/Summer 1999. But he was obviously short of writing paper – perhaps travelling on a train between Dublin and his home in County Leitrim – when a series of thoughts struck him about the nature of the creative act which he felt urgently the need to jot down. How these observations were eventually used is also unclear, though much of what he wrote in haste that day on the back of the magazine chimes with his stated views on literature which were eventually collected and published as the posthumous gathering of essays, *Love of the World* in 2009. The scribbled remarks begin thus:

The central theme of the address is that if style is the most important element in writing and is the reflection of personality in language the quality of the personality is more important than the material out of which the actual pattern is shaped [...] style itself must be an outcome of a view of reality.

What he goes on to do over the remainder of these quickly collected thoughts is to reject the Romantic outlook in favour of the Classical, just as one of his great artistic heroes, James Joyce, had done. He feels that the Romantic literature of the Celtic Revival period in Ireland led, ultimately, to violent extremism. “A mythic Gaelic past was resurrected”, he writes, “which was at best tangential to any reality, the

dispossessed nobleman tending shop, the wandering poet deprived of his patron. This became linked in turn to armed struggle validated by the idea of blood sacrifice.”

Such sentiments are consistent with remarks made by McGahern both before and after 1999. He was a classical writer, rejecting romantic notions of inspiration in favour of viewing the writer not as a magician or seer but as a worker, a clerk. And that clerk is indebted to a tradition, to the canon of great literature that has preceded him. For McGahern, his own touchstones in the canon included poets like William Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, Philip Larkin and W. B. Yeats, and prose writers like Hermann Melville, Stendhal, Thomas de Quincey and Samuel Beckett. McGahern has always been forthright about his enormous indebtedness to the work of others, and about the impact that reading as a boy had on his imagination and on the course of his whole life. After the death of his mother, when McGahern was aged nine, he grew up in a house highly suspicious of books and of reading, and in an Ireland under the sway of an active State literary censorship encouraged by an all powerful and morally ultra-conservative Catholic hierarchy. Then, suddenly, into his life in around 1945 came the gift of reading, a gift he reflects on in one of his best essays, ‘The Solitary Reader’, the opening paragraph of which sets the scene in characteristically modest style:

I came to write through reading. It is such an obvious path that I hesitate to state it, but so much confusion now surrounds the artistic act that the simple and the obvious may be in need of statement. I think reading and writing are as

close as they are separate. In my case, I came to read through pure luck. I had great good fortune when I was ten or eleven. I was given the run of a library. I believe it changed my life and without it I would never have become a writer.

The library in question belonged to a neighbouring Protestant family, a kindly and down-at-heel father and son named Moroney, the last of a passing squirearchy in rural County Roscommon. The writers stocked there ranged from the solidly canonical Shakespeare, Dickens, Meredith and Sir Walter Scott to the more populist and contemporary writers Zane Grey and Jeffrey Farnol. Young McGahern, coming from an almost bookless home, devoured this library, unusual in its very existence in the Ireland of his youth. McGahern speculates as to the reasons for his boorish father's tolerance of such reading:

At the time, Protestants were pitied because they were bound for hell in the next world, and they were considered to be abstemious, honest, and morally more correct than the general run of our fellow Catholics. [...] For whatever reason, the books were rarely questioned, and as long as they didn't take from work or prayer I was allowed to read without hindrance.

Patrick Kavanagh, one of the Irish writers most beloved of McGahern, has his comic alter ego confess to a priest that his greatest sin is the reading of books in his 1948 autobiographical novel *Tarry Flynn*. There are complex historical and theological reasons for the Catholic suspicion of reading – happily by the time I was growing up in rural Ireland it was an outlook that had all but disappeared.

One of McGahern's six published novels, *Amongst Women*, became an important cornerstone of my own reading life and in my broader development as a human. It was given to me as a gift by my sister when I was in my second year as an

undergraduate at university in Galway. I was an unenthusiastic, unmotivated student, shuffling along through my early twenties in a kind of fog. I had no idea what I wanted to do after my studies were completed – strangely I cannot recall ever even thinking about it. Then in 1992 I spent a summer waiting tables in Chicago and feeling homesick from time to time. I began to read *Amongst Women* and something came alive inside me, some magical recognition. The book seemed to be describing and validating aspects of my own life from small observations about the playing of cards, the making of a mixed grill or the saying of the Rosary, to more profound insights like the impossibility of stopping time or the complicated and often painful love between father and son. From this moment on, my reading changed. It is something that happens to every lover of reading and is described better by McGahern than by anyone else I can think of:

A time comes when the way we read has to change drastically or stop, though it may well continue as an indolence or pastime or drug. This change is linked with our growing consciousness, consciousness that we will not live forever and that all human life is essentially in the same fix. We have to discard all the tenets that we have been told until we have succeeded in thinking them out for ourselves. We find that we are no longer reading books for the story and that all stories are more or less the same story; and we begin to come on certain books that act like mirrors. What they reflect is something dangerously close to our own life and the society in which we live.

There is no going back from this epiphany once it happens: “A new, painful excitement enters the way we read”.

By a stroke of unmerited luck, much like that experienced by McGahern in his access to the Moroneys’ library, on my return to university for my final year all of us

English literature students were invited to apply for access to a class in the second semester that would be taught by none other than John McGahern. I gained a place in what was a small seminar group and in January I became McGahern's student. It was a wonderful educational experience, the best of my life. Class was very relaxed with little in the way of formal examination and consisted of McGahern choosing a few books for us to read and then talk about from week to week. Among these books were *The Aran Islands* by J. M. Synge, *Friends of My Youth* by Alice Munro and, most importantly for me, *Rock Springs* by Richard Ford. I had never heard of Ford before this, but was immediately enraptured by the stories that make up *Rock Springs*. They are tales of down on their luck chancers set mainly in contemporary Montana and Wyoming, but they are also much more than that. There was something in Ford's pared back style that seemed startlingly true to me. I cared what happened to his narrators, I learned from their faltering lives and I remembered individual phrases from these stories like prayers. It was another of those epiphanic moments McGahern describes when a book moves from being a picture to being a mirror.

These two books, McGahern's *Amongst Women* and Ford's *Rock Springs*, set me on my way, opened up a world to me, cut through the fog. I've gone on to read pretty much everything written by both writers: funnily enough my love affair with McGahern has endured and matured, but with Ford it faltered with some of his later novels. Why? I don't know, but it must have something to do with what we see in those mirrors, how our own lives change, how we grow up, fall in love, have

families, small victories and defeats. I have recommended both writers to friends and students alike, but it would be wrong of me to expect that the magic will work on them the way it worked on me. For there will be a book out there for each of us that will wake us from our slumber, bringing us to a new and heightened consciousness.