

‘A big, bad word’:

Sex, dissent and the fiction of John McGahern

Frank Shovlin

In 1963 sexual intercourse began, or so Philip Larkin would have it. The Beatles had come out of their Liverpool cavern to begin world conquest, the masses could feast on *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, the sixties were swinging. All the old trussed-up morality could be abandoned, and, for a dedicated misanthrope like Larkin, the role of voyeur ended up balanced painfully somewhere between jealousy and disgust:

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he’s fucking her and she’s
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives—¹

In May 1965, two years after this *annus mirabilis*, Larkin’s publisher, Faber and Faber, brought to the bookshops a novel called *The Dark*, which, in its frank and brutal depiction of one Irish boy’s sexual awakening, made D. H. Lawrence look like a Mills and Boon offcut. *The Dark* was the second book from the pen of Faber’s new bright young thing of Irish writing, John McGahern, then just thirty years of age and a great admirer of Hull’s hermetical librarian.

McGahern, from the moment he began reading Larkin till the end of his life, was an unstinting devotee of the English poet’s art.² Partly it was Larkin’s very straight and ordered view of the world that appealed to McGahern, and partly his acid commentaries on the stupidity of most human congress, particularly on the potentially destructive or numbing force of romance and marriage. In *The Pornographer*, Josephine, the woman whom the unnamed pornographer of the title has so casually seduced and impregnated, is desperate both to make

their relationship respectable and to secure what she has won through marriage. One hears echoes of Larkin's *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows* throughout:

There was a semi-detached house at the head of one of the roads around the Green Goose, shrubbery just beginning to appear above the front garden walls, two iron gates, concrete at the garage door. The roof was red-tiled and the walls were pebble-dashed. A lighted bell above the letter box went ding-dong. Behind the house, on either side of a thin concrete footpath, the long, competing back gardens ran to the glass-topped wall: a piece of lawn, some roses, a cabbage patch, rhubarb, cold frames for early lettuce, raspberry canes that needed cutting back, two apple trees that every year brought vandals. The narrow kitchen was up a step from the back garden, the formica-topped breakfast table, the radio, the clock, the whirring fridge. A carpeted room wasn't far away. There was a solid table and chairs for compulsory entertaining, some books on shelves, a drinks cabinet, a tiled fireplace, a TV set. Upstairs two cupids kept blissful watch above the double bed and waiting carry-cot. The curtains that hid the road were hung and frilled.³

The pornographer is horrified as he feels the self-made snare tighten, pushing him unwillingly towards the prison of domesticity, the dreaded pram in the hallway.

'Parachutes' sees the Larkinesque influence at its clearest. A story about the end of a love affair, and the narrator's attempt to find solace in drink and among bohemian Dublin friends, at one point it describes a memory of a dinner party with the ex-lover's sister and husband:

The bottles of wine we'd brought were handed over. Glasses of whiskey were poured. We touched the glasses in front of the coal fire. They'd gone to a great deal of trouble with the meal. There were small roast potatoes, peas, breadcrumb stuffing with the roast turkey. Brandy was poured over the plum pudding and lit. Some vague unease curdled the food and cheer in that small front room, was sharpened by the determined gaiety. It was as if we were looking down a long institutional corridor; the child in the feeding chair could be seen already, the next child, and the next, the postman, the milkman, the van with fresh eggs and vegetables from the country, the tired clasp over the back of the hand to show tenderness as real as the lump in the throat, the lawnmowers in summer, the thickening waists. It hardly seemed necessary to live it.⁴

This vision of a life, stilted and bleached of all spontaneity, hovers over a great deal of McGahern's work as a kind of threatening cloud. In the case of the above passage Larkin's wonderful poem 'Afternoons', written in dread of aging and the flatness of domestic family life, is almost quoted directly:

In the hollows of afternoons
Young mothers assemble
At swing and sandpit
Setting free their children.

Behind them, at intervals,
Stand husbands in skilled trades,
An estateful of washing,
And the albums, lettered
Our Wedding, lying
Near the television:
Before them, the wind
Is ruining their courting-places

That are still courting-places
(But the lovers are all in school),
And their children, so intent on
Finding more unripe acorns,
Expect to be taken home.
Their beauty has thickened.
Something is pushing them
To the side of their own lives.⁵

McGahern's pornographer decides to abandon his lover and their child, unwilling and unable to be pushed, as Larkin would have it, to the side of his own life. But a problem remains: the sexual instinct lives on, as powerful as the desire for life itself. How to marry the burning desire for sexual fulfilment and the quieter, slower need for a rich and meaningful life surrounded by loved ones and loved things is perhaps the single most consistent theme across the McGahern oeuvre, and reaches a happy apogee in the final novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*.

Two years before the appearance of *The Dark*, and coincident with Larkin's 'Sexual intercourse began/In nineteen sixty-three', McGahern's debut novel, *The Barracks*, had been published to widespread critical acclaim.⁶ Winning the AE Prize and a Macaulay Fellowship on the strength of it allowed McGahern to take a year's sabbatical from his post as a primary school teacher in a Dublin Catholic boys' school. Faber – and the company's richly talented and intuitive commissioning editor, Charles Monteith – were on a roll with new, young Irish talent: the year after *The Dark* was issued would see the debut collection of 27-year-old Derry

poet Seamus Heaney. Before the end of the month, *The Dark* had been seized by Irish customs officials, forwarded to the Censorship of Publications Board, and banned. The case immediately became one of the great scandals of Irish censorship history, and the fallout is well known: McGahern was dismissed from his teaching post on trumped up charges with Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, seeing to it that the young man from Cootehall, County Roscommon would not teach again under his watch.

On the 18th of May the case was raised in Dáil Éireann, with Brendan Corish TD, leader of the Labour party, asking the then Minister for Finance, Jack Lynch (former Cork Gaelic Athletic Association hero and future Taoiseach), to make a statement. What followed reads like something straight out of a Flann O'Brien parody:

Mr Lynch said that the book referred to was detained by an officer of Customs and Excise in accordance with sub-section (I) of Section 5 of the Censorship of Publications Act, 1946, for reference to the Censorship Board for examination as it was, in his opinion, a book which ought to be examined by the board under the Act. The book had not therefore been seized by the Customs authorities: they would be guided by the decision of the board as soon as it was received.

Dr J. O'Connell (Lab.) – Would the Minister say whether the book in actual fact was read by the Customs officer before the seizure of the book?

Mr Lynch – That could hardly be physically possible, but under the sub-section as quoted a Customs officer may detain on importation for purposes of referring to the Censorship Board any book which, in his opinion, ought to be examined by the board. He is not required to read it. That requirement is for the Censorship Board.

Dr. O'Connell – Will every new book arriving in the country be held up?

Mr Lynch – Not necessarily

Mr Dunne (Lab.) – How could he tell this book was suspect?

Mr Lynch – I am sure Customs officers do not live in the clouds.

Mr Lindsay (F.G.) – Without reading it, how could he form an opinion?

Mr Lynch – First sight is often a great help to people.⁷

That last rather gnomic statement of Jack Lynch's is interesting, and comic, in a couple of ways. First, although the printed book was banned by the Censorship Board, blind Irish fans of McGahern were free to read it as it was permitted into the country in braille. Second, as regards judging a book at first sight, McGahern had made it deliberately easy for the censors, using one of Philip Larkin's favourite words, 'fuck', on the opening page:

“SAY WHAT YOU SAID BECAUSE I KNOW.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Out with it I tell you.”

“I don’t know I said anything.”

“F-U-C-K is what you said, isn’t it? That profane and ugly word. Now you think you can bluff your way out of it?”⁸

Thus begins what the critic Neil Corcoran has described as the most frightful scene in all of Irish literature, with young Mahoney being forced to strip in front of his siblings and await a thrashing from his brutal and tyrannical father.⁹

The insertion of that one ‘profane’ word was only the start of what amounts to a truly remarkable challenge to Irish Catholic decency. The book is the first Irish novel that I am aware of to describe, openly, sexual abuse by father on son, employer on employee and, most significantly for our purposes, priest on younger boy. It also contains many graphic descriptions of masturbation as well as a series of teenage sexual fantasies, one of which involves a priest ravaging a woman on the floor of his church, having been excited by her confession. Frankly, there was no way this book was *not* going to be censored. It was, after all, just 24 years since Kate O’Brien’s admiring novel about convent life, *The Land of Spices*, had been banned for describing two men in ‘the embrace of love’, and five years since the banning of Edna O’Brien’s comparatively innocent bildungsroman, *The Country Girls*. *The Dark* was McGahern’s startling and dramatic rejection of the narrow, corrupt theocracy in which he had been raised. It is hard not to think that he was being somewhat disingenuous in a 1990 interview, when asked how he felt at the time about the ban: ‘I didn’t really care for myself because it was something of the time. If you were a writer, you half expected it; there actually would be no shock or surprise. It was something that you lived with. You wrote the way you wanted to anyhow.’¹⁰ In fact, McGahern has to have more than half expected it: the ban was probably inevitable, and his decision to bait the censors stems from a courageous determination to depict the reality of Irish life, but also from lessons he had learned when writing *The*

Barracks, lessons usefully brought to light by Denis Sampson in his study *Young John McGahern*.

Sampson draws attention to McGahern's anxiety about possible trouble over his decision to use obscenities in *The Barracks*. He writes to John Montague, editor of *The Dolmen Miscellany*, in December 1961 about these concerns (Montague had agreed to publish an extract from the forthcoming novel): 'The *fucking* can hardly cause trouble, it has no sexual significance, it only lights the breakdown of civility'.¹¹ Montague had no issue with the word's use, but Charles Monteith at Faber was troubled by it. McGahern agreed to remove the word from Sergeant Reegan's dialogue, but refused to remove it from Dr Halliday's, Elizabeth Reegan's one-time English lover and the first of McGahern's many existential outsiders. Faber suggested a compromise of 'f-----', but McGahern would bend no further. 'Towards the end of the year, when proofs arrived', writes Sampson, 'he was shocked to discover that this was the form given to the word, and Monteith, blaming a prurient printer for this, agreed to allow the complete spelling'.¹² The offensive word appears thus in the published work:

There was such vital passion about him sometimes, and then again he often seemed perverse and stupid. She'd been sick of London at the time, its crazy rush wearing at her nerves, Halliday's cry to her, 'I'd come to the end of my tether and used you to get a short breather. I used you so as not to have to face my own mess. I seduced you because I was seduced myself by my own fucking lust to live'.¹³

While McGahern had won this small victory over Halliday's spoken expression, when it came to having *The Dark* published in the United States, there was even greater chariness about the use of obscenity.

Patrick Gregory, a reader at the publishing house Knopf, had reluctantly turned down *The Barracks* for publication, feeling that in its setting and subject matter it could not sell in

the US. But on being sent *The Dark* by Charles Monteith he felt he had to make an exceptional case, and his reader's report urges Knopf to take it on:

I happen to know that Macmillan here turned down the second novel with alarm: there is a big, bad word on the very first page (no more, I hasten to add) and a few scenes of adolescent sexuality that appear to have shocked the editor there. Nonetheless, Fabers, which is a highly conservative, even somewhat "churchy" house in fiction, are pleased to be publishing it, and the book is nothing if not a serious work of intellectual integrity and honest literary pretensions. Nothing here to appeal to the scabrous.¹⁴

Gregory's pleas for the novel's value paid off and Knopf agreed to publish. But he remained nervous of that 'big, bad word'. On 5 April 1965 he writes to McGahern urging a rethink on the novel's opening:

Now, John, I have a delicate point to put to you and one that may cause you to think me a "misery". On the first page of THE DARK, there is a certain famous word that appears in capital letters, set apart by dashes. The word is hardly a rarity today, especially in American fiction, and no one here would question your right to employ it as you see fit... but the question is: how are you employing it on page one? The punctuation seems to indicate that the word is being spelled by Mahoney. This is not entirely clear. If spelling it he is, why not alter it to read: "Eff, u, see, kay"(or however he would pronounce those letters phonetically). That would not only be clearer but also would, in my opinion, heighten the terror by eliminating the badly visual impact of the printed word.

But there is clearly an agenda here beyond the aesthetic, and Gregory admits as much later in the letter:

I won't pretend to deny that the present typographical arrangement of the word presents certain minor problems for the publisher: first of all, it automatically eliminates some library sales; secondly it will give some browsers the mistaken impression that the book belongs to a genre of literature that is currently very popular here. But please believe me when I tell you that my principal reason for urging this alteration is strictly aesthetic, and one that is offered in the cause of Clarity and Effect. If you strongly favor the present set-up, or if I am mistaken about the word being spelled, just let me know and we shall forget the issue. Naturally today, every publisher would rather print naughty words in red ink than be accused of prudery, ensorship or bourgeois prejudice.¹⁵

McGahern, in reply, sees the point and is willing to bend:

Change the fuck so. It is spelled. And I think what you say is right. There's only one danger I see – of making the same violence in the opposite direction and creating fuzziness; and perhaps the comma is too weak. “Eff-u-c-kay” What do you think? Will you write and tell me! I'm very grateful; it does enforce the terror more in the real.¹⁶

Gregory wants to break up the spelling of the word using commas. ‘I don't think that there would be any difficulty over the arrangement, “Eff, u, see, kay”’, he argues, ‘especially if it were italicized. It looks a bit strange, but it makes perfectly clear that Mahoney is spelling it; and there should, perhaps, be a very slight pause in comprehension – the same pause that the boy would experience as the sounds reach his ear.’¹⁷ Ultimately, when Knopf published the book in 1966, they changed the original ‘F-U-C-K’ to ‘Eff-you-see-kay’.¹⁸ Later American editions returned to the original Faber typography.

While Faber were unhappy about the banning of *The Dark* in Ireland, Charles Monteith, one of the canniest editors in London, could see a possible upside:

THE DARK has got off to an excellent critical reception here – I enclose photostats of the leading reviews we've had so far – but, as I half expected it would, it's run into trouble across the Irish Sea. The entire consignment which we'd shipped to Irish bookshops has been seized by the customs; and we now await a decision from the censorship board – which we may not get for a month or so, or even longer. It's quite unprecedented, apparently, for a book to be seized in advance by the customs in this way and the whole thing is turning into quite a cause celebre. If the ban is eventually raised – the chances are fairly bright, I think – it should help Irish sales quite considerably. And in the meantime, I've little doubt that the railway bookstall at Belfast is laden with copies.¹⁹

The ban took longer to be lifted than Monteith hoped for, but the whole affair did the novel's sales very little harm, and McGahern was now a famous name in his native land. One suspects that Gregory's instincts were right: the ‘F-U-C-K’ of the opening page just could not be forgiven by the Irish censors as the treatment of McGahern's debut novel suggests.

The Barracks, despite its use of obscenity, did not attract the ire of the Irish Censorship Board, but it did fall victim to the perhaps even more powerful unofficial censorship at work in the country. McGahern recounts the book's fate on his home patch:

When *The Barracks* was published, my aunt had a sweetshop beside the school in Ballinamore, and the priest in charge of the school removed my book from the public library in the town on his own authority. The reason was that a married couple had made love in affectionate tiredness on Christmas evening, and he took this as unfit for consumption.²⁰

McGahern despised the environment that could give rise to such an event and though his public statements about censorship were always civil and breezily dismissive, one cannot help but see a furious anger in much of what followed from his pen over the next thirty and more years.

The two most direct consequences of the ban on *The Dark* for McGahern were that it led to him losing his job and having to move to England where he worked variously on building sites, in schools and eventually in universities at Newcastle and at Reading; he also suffered writer's block and did not publish another book for five years, the short story collection *Nightlines*. It took nine years from the banning of *The Dark* for another novel to appear, *The Leavetaking* in 1974. In *The Leavetaking*, the censorship controversy reappears obliquely through the central character of Patrick Moran who, in part one of this two-part novel, is serving his last day as a school teacher, dismissed because he has married a divorcee in a civil ceremony. This mirrors precisely McGahern's own life – he married the Finnish theatre director Annikki Laaksi in a London register office while writing *The Dark* and dedicated the book to her. This secular bond made him even more of a target for his Church employers. He later regretted writing *The Leavetaking* too soon after the sacking and rewrote sections of it for publication ten years later. This revised edition was issued with a preface in which McGahern commented on the need for the author to remain emotionally aloof: 'the work lacked that

distance, that inner formality or calm, that all writing, no matter what it is attempting, must possess.’²¹

This statement registers one of McGahern’s central artistic credos, borrowed from his great hero, Gustave Flaubert in a famous letter of 1857: ‘The artist in his work must be like God in his creation – invisible and all-powerful; he must be everywhere felt but nowhere seen’.²² The idea is filtered through James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Wandering along Dublin’s streets with his college friend Lynch, Stephen Dedalus, trying to describe the development of his artistic theories, says ‘The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.’²³ McGahern borrows this for his 1990 essay on *Dubliners*, which he admires deeply as a book and which he describes as having ‘no self-expression; its truth is in every phrase. “The author is like God in nature, present everywhere but nowhere visible.”’²⁴

This longing for the coolness of distance, for the invisibility of the author God, was not McGahern’s only debt to Flaubert. The French author, too, had had his brush with censorship via his classic debut novel *Madame Bovary*. First published in periodical format in 1856, the book was brought to trial the following year for constituting an offence against morality and religion. Unlike in the case of *The Dark*, Flaubert’s novel avoided a ban and his publishers were acquitted. We see McGahern conscious of this in his essay on *Dubliners* where he quotes from a letter written by Flaubert to George Sand: ‘If the reader doesn’t draw from a book the moral it implies, either the reader is an imbecile or the book is false because it lacks exactitude. For the moment a thing is true, it is good. Even obscene books are immoral only if they lack truth.’²⁵ McGahern repeats a version of this stance when asked his opinion on censorship by the author Julia Carlson: ‘A book should be judged on whether it’s entertaining or whether it’s

useful or whether it's well written. I actually happen to think that if something is well written, it can't but be moral by definition.'²⁶

McGahern's next novel, while moving away somewhat from the near autobiographical strictures of *The Leavetaking*, is again informed by the fight against censorship. Surely we must read the very title of *The Pornographer*, published in 1979, as another gauntlet thrown down at the feet of the censors. The novel is, in part, an attempt to make the reader see the difference between literature that happens to involve a description of sex, and pornography. It wounded McGahern deeply that *The Dark* had been essentially labelled pornographic and lumped in with other banned books in 1965 with titles such as *The Playboy Cartoon Album* and *Satin and Stiletto No. 1*. Far from seeing his own novel as sexually or morally inappropriate, McGahern considered it a spiritual work. In August 1965 he wrote to his friend, the Belfast-based writer Michael McLaverty: 'The Appeal Board have rejected the plea for *The Dark*. I may be asked to leave. What disturbs me very much is that the book's a religious work if it's anything at all.'²⁷ And despite all its sexual explicitness – maybe even because of it – 'religious' does seem like an entirely appropriate word to use of *The Dark*. At its core is the confusion in a sensitive adolescent boy's mind between whether he should choose a life in God, as a priest, or a life in pursuit of what in one Catholic prayer is called 'the world, the flesh and the devil'. 'If you could be a priest', the boy thinks to himself, 'you'd be able to enter that choking moment without fear, you'd have already died to longing, you'd have already abandoned the world for that reality.'²⁸ In an attempt to make up his mind he goes to stay with his father's pompous cousin, Fr Gerald, who gets into the boy's bed at the parochial house and caresses him on his first night as a visitor. Besides this initial shocking introduction to a casual abuse of power, Fr Gerald is actually drawn sensitively and seems to understand very well the nature of the boy's turmoil; he speaks openly with him to such a degree that the boy feels able to ask the priest if

he ever struggled with the sin of self abuse. Fr Gerald avoids the question, but answers instead – and very tellingly:

The only thing I see wrong with you is that you take things far too serious, and bottle them up, and brood [...] Most of those in my youth who became priests were gay. They kicked football, they went to dances in the holidays, flirted with girls, even sometimes saw them home from the dances. They made good normal priests.²⁹

‘Gay’ as a synonym for homosexual was still largely unused in Ireland at this point, though it had been widely in use in certain quarters since at least the 1930s, and was common currency in London’s Soho where McGahern was socializing in bohemian circles through the mid-sixties. It is likely to have seemed entirely innocent to the Irish Censorship Board and to most Irish readers, were they permitted to read it.

The Pornographer, though McGahern’s most experimental novel, is as surefooted in its bare and cool prose style as everything else he wrote. He allows us to see just how boring, banal and silly pornography actually is through the central narrator’s characters, the sexual gymnasts Mavis and the Colonel, whose erotic adventures in such far flung spots as Majorca and a cruiser on the river Shannon might offend old-style moralists but could only excite a reader starved of all other entertainment or lacking an imagination entirely. He is making a point he perhaps did not need to make. Things had moved on, he would have no more books banned, and Irish censorship culture was already beginning to seem a relic of times gone by. But McGahern never quite lost that desire to shock and subvert that appeared in the F-U-C-K of *The Dark*’s opening page. His final novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, often misinterpreted as a valedictory pastoral, contains the most shocking scene in McGahern’s corpus and one of the most disturbing in all of Irish literature: the public rape of a woman on her wedding day by her brutal and sadistic husband, who, we are told, will continue raping her throughout their marriage, sometimes in front of their children, leading to her early death and the complete destruction of her parents and their idyllic home. This scene seems to break a

golden rule that McGahern himself lays down for fiction in his preface to *Creatures of the Earth*, his posthumously published collected stories: ‘Among its many other obligations, fiction always has to be believable. Life does not have to suffer such constraint’.³⁰ Why does he include this scene in a novel otherwise entirely and deliberately devoid of drama? Is it the old anger returning, that old desire to say ‘fuck off’ to anyone who would say ‘this far and no further’? Perhaps.

McGahern would of course deny this and he tended to play down the impact that censorship had on him till the end of his life. Frequently he made a joke of the whole thing, as he does in a favourite anecdote about *The Dark*. Though McGahern himself did not wish to raise any great public or political storm over the banning of the book there were others who did. A copy was sent to Samuel Beckett in Paris by his friend, the academic Con Leventhal, to see if his support could be garnered. Beckett read the book and said he would be glad to support it, but only if McGahern himself wanted a petition – which he did not. McGahern recalls this affectionately and then turns his comic ire on a member of the Appeals Board, Professor O’Brian:

He [Beckett] was the only person that really thought of asking me if I wanted to have a petition, and I said, no. When O Briain came to Paris and they were having dinner, Leventhal said to him, ‘What in the name of God is wrong with you in Ireland banning McGahern’s books? Will nothing else do?’ O Briain was very defensive at this stage, and he says, ‘Well, we can’t have people running round the country with their flies open!’³¹

From our vantage point, some fifty years after this conversation took place, it can be hard to credit that senior figures in Irish intelligentsia of the 1960s held such points of view.

But it would be wrong to think that only Ireland had to rid itself of sexual inhibition and puritanical conservatism. To return to Larkin, his ‘Annus Mirabilis’ of 1963 celebrates (or does it?), among other things, the widespread availability of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in

paperback. He did not quite know what to make of that sudden change in English society and his poems reflect a painful tension between sexual inquisitiveness and prudish disgust. It is a strain evident in one letter about the nearness of literature to sex, written to a friend when he was just 18:

A poem is written because the poet gets a sudden vision – lasting one second or less – and he attempts to express the whole of which the vision is a part. Or he attempts to express the vision. [...] As for the vision itself, it's got something to do with sex. I don't know what, & I don't particularly want to know. It's not surprising because obviously two creative forces will be in alliance. [...] I should think poetry & sex are very closely connected.³²

This summoning up a vision is very close to McGahern's 'The Image', his short but vital credo about the workings of the imagination:

When I reflect on the image, two things from which it cannot be separated come: the rhythm and the vision. The vision, that still and private world which each of us possesses and which others cannot see, is brought to life in rhythm – rhythm being little more than the instinctive movements of the vision as it comes to life and begins to search for the image in a kind of grave, grave of the images of dead passions and their days.³³

In that final phrase, there is a hint of Proust as well as of Larkin: McGahern, like both of these artistic ancestors, knew that sexuality formed a key part of what it meant to be conscious and fully human. As he writes in another short essay, 'We are sexual from the moment we are born until we die'.³⁴

That statement opens McGahern's posthumously published non-fiction essays and forms part of an important paragraph that he reworks in five different versions, each of them trying to come to grips with what it is he thinks is the significance of the sexual instinct for humanity. He is unsparing about the doleful influence of the Irish Catholic Church on this most natural of human needs:

The church I was brought up in turned this powerful and abiding instinct that suffuses everything we feel as precious or hold dear into the functional act of human reproduction, surrounding it with shame and sin, as it sought to turn the human act of becoming, which is modified moment by moment and day by day, away from the love of what is merely human into the love of God.³⁵

On other aspects of Irish Catholicism – its role in education, for instance – McGahern could be much more forgiving. ‘I have nothing but gratitude’, he writes, ‘for the spiritual remnants of that upbringing, the sense of our origins beyond the bounds of sense, an awareness of mystery and wonderment, grace and sacrament’.³⁶ But he saw the Church’s insistence on the tawdriness of sexual pleasure as a fatal error that had left its disfiguring mark on the Ireland of his youth and early adulthood. Sexual desire, the sexual self, is at the very heart of what it is to be human, and yet it is also more than that – it is exalted. ‘I see sexuality as just part of life’, said McGahern in an interview towards the end of his life. ‘Either all of life is sacred or none of it is sacred. I’m inclined to think that all of life is sacred and that sexuality is a very important part of that sacredness.’³⁷

But it was not just the Church that attempted to control sexual behaviour in Ireland. In an essay on language as it is used in Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s *The Islandman*, McGahern is interested in judging how the very delicate social ecosystems of Ireland’s western islands were kept running smoothly. The power of the family with its rigidly observed customs was crucial, and these customs even reached as far as control of sexual life:

The sexual instinct, too, is subordinate to the family. It is a healthy instinct. We see it so in the nights of dancing, the uninhibited encounter with the girls on the mountain, and Ó Criomhthain boasts that in all his years on the island, in spite of health and youth and the long nights, not once did a sexual irregularity occur.³⁸

McGahern sees the same patterns of familial control being described by J. M. Synge in his 1907 travelogue, *The Aran Islands*:

The direct sexual instincts are not weak on the island, but they are so subordinated to the instincts of the family that they rarely lead to irregularity. The life here is still at an almost

patriarchal stage, and the people are nearly as far from the romantic moods of love as they are from the impulsive life of the savage.³⁹

In all of this McGahern strongly suspects – despite his own tussle with Church power – that the rural Irish people among whom he came to maturity are actually closer, at least in matters sexual, to a kind of ancient, sun worshipping past than they are to the edicts of the Vatican. ‘Most ordinary people went about their sensible pagan lives’, he writes, ‘seeing all this as just another veneer they had to pretend to wear like all the others they had worn since the time of the Druids’. And he then recalls of Fenaghville, a local dancehall of his youth: ‘In spite of being denounced from several pulpits, Fenaghville prospered [...] Couples met amid the spangled lights on the dusty dance floor and invited one another out to view the moon and take the beneficial air. “There wasn’t a haycock safe for a mile around in the month of July”.’⁴⁰

The dancehalls of Dublin become the site of sexual jousting in McGahern’s fullest novelistic treatment of the sexual instinct and its impact on man, *The Pornographer*. Peter White, the eponymous pornographer’s doctor friend, to whom he turns for help when fearing that he has got his newest dancehall conquest, Josephine, pregnant, declares, ‘If you can tell where instinct ends and consciousness begins you’ll make us all our fortunes’.⁴¹ And instinct is there as an insistent note right to the novel’s final pages when the pornographer, in the aftermath of his beloved aunt’s funeral, meditates on his errors:

‘You’d have seen me if you had been paying attention,’ she’d once said to me, the night she came towards me across the floor of the Metropole. By not attending, by thinking any one thing was as worth doing as any other, by sleeping with anybody who’d agree, I had been the cause of as much pain and confusion and evil as if I had actively set out to do it.

Reason, then, has conquered instinct. ‘Not to have a reason’, the pornographer concludes, ‘is a greater reason still to follow the instinct for the true, to follow it with all the force we have’.⁴²

When it comes to pornography as a mode of representation, McGahern is influenced by W. H. Auden's rejection:

One sign that a book has literary value is that it can be read in a number of different ways. Vice versa, the proof that pornography has no literary value is that, if one attempts to read it in any other way than as a sexual stimulus, to read it, say, as a psychological case-history of the author's sexual fantasies, one is bored to tears.⁴³

The Pornographer, in its conclusions, and despite its title and subject matter, returns to the idea of the sexual as sacred. The pornographic writing throughout is shown to be stilted and absurd, though one cannot help but feel that in the following return to that 'big, bad word' that had frightened Patrick Gregory fifteen years earlier, McGahern was settling a little score in this example of the pornographer's trade:

'Fuck me, O fuck me, O my Jesus,' he feels her nails dig into his back as the hot seed spurts deliciously free, beating into her. And when they are quiet he says, 'You must let me,' and his bald head goes between her thighs on the pillow, his rough tongue parting the lips to lap at the juices, then to tease the clitoris till she starts to go crazy again.⁴⁴

As in Larkin's *High Windows*, published by Faber five years earlier, the last restraint on what was once considered obscenity had been lifted, the swinging sixties had broken through the final remaining vestiges of official moral conservatism and the seventies heralded a new, unbridled age. While 1979 was the year that saw Ireland's first Papal visit and a mass in the Phoenix Park attended by more than a million of the country's citizens, it was also a year in which McGahern knew the censors were all but dead and nothing was now off limits.

¹ Philip Larkin, 'High Windows', in *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 17.

² McGahern put Larkin's *Collected Poems* on the curriculum for a course he taught at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. Other writers he taught included W. B. Yeats, Ambrose Bierce, Hannah Arendt, Carl Jung, James Joyce and Marcel Proust. See P71/1420, the John McGahern Papers, Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway.

³ John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (1979; London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 103.

⁴ John McGahern, 'Parachutes', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 153-54.

⁵ Philip Larkin, 'Afternoons', *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 44.

⁶ Larkin, 'Annus Mirabilis', *High Windows*, p. 34.

⁷ 'Seized Book Question', *The Irish Times* (19 May 1965), 6.

⁸ John McGahern, *The Dark* (1965; London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 7.

⁹ See Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 88.

¹⁰ From McGahern interview with Julia Carlson, in Carlson, *Banned in Ireland: Censorship & the Irish Writer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), p. 55.

¹¹ Quoted in Denis Sampson, *Young John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 156.

¹² Sampson, *Young John McGahern*, p. 156.

¹³ John McGahern, *The Barracks* (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 90.

¹⁴ Patrick Gregory's reader's report for *The Dark* (19 February 1965), Knopf archive, Harry Ransom Center (HRC), University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁵ Patrick Gregory to John McGahern (5 April 1965). Knopf papers, HRC.

¹⁶ John McGahern to Patrick Gregory (n.d. April 1965). Knopf papers, HRC.

¹⁷ Patrick Gregory to John McGahern (13 April 1965). Knopf papers, HRC.

¹⁸ See John McGahern, *The Dark* (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 7.

¹⁹ Charles Monteith to Patrick Gregory (10 May 1965), Knopf papers, HRC.

²⁰ From McGahern interview with Julia Carlson, in Carlson, *Banned in Ireland*, p. 56.

²¹ John McGahern, 'Preface to the Second Edition', *The Leavetaking* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), n. p. [5].

²² Gustave Flaubert letter to Mlle. Leroyer de Chantepie (18 March 1857), in Flaubert, *Letters 1830-1857*, selected, ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 230.

²³ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 215.

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- ²⁴ John McGahern, 'Dubliners', in *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 201.
- ²⁵ McGahern, 'Dubliners', p. 204.
- ²⁶ McGahern in Carlson, *Banned in Ireland*, p. 67.
- ²⁷ In *Dear Mr McLaverty: The Literary Correspondence of John McGahern and Michael McLaverty 1959-1980*, ed. John Killen (Belfast: Linenhall Library, 2006), p. 42.
- ²⁸ McGahern, *The Dark*, p. 77.
- ²⁹ McGahern, *The Dark*, p. 74.
- ³⁰ John McGahern, 'Preface', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. vii.
- ³¹ From McGahern interview with Carlson, *Banned in Ireland*, p. 61.
- ³² Philip Larkin to J. B. Sutton (20 December 1940), in Larkin, *Selected Letters 1940-1985*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 6.
- ³³ John McGahern, 'The Image', *Love of the World: Essays*, p. 7.
- ³⁴ John McGahern, 'Five Drafts', *Love of the World*, p. 3.
- ³⁵ John McGahern, 'Five Drafts', *Love of the World*, p. 3.
- ³⁶ John McGahern, 'The Church and Its Spire', *Love of the World*, p. 133.
- ³⁷ Quoted in Eamon Maher, 'Religion and art', *The John McGahern Yearbook*, 1 (2008), p. 117.
- ³⁸ John McGahern, 'What Is My Language?', *Love of the World*, p. 268.
- ³⁹ J. M. Synge, *The Aran Islands* (1907), quoted in McGahern, 'What Is My Language?', p. 268. McGahern taught Synge's book side by side with *The Islandman* for an undergraduate course at University College Galway in spring 1993.
- ⁴⁰ John McGahern, 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing', *Love of the World*, pp. 130, 131.
- ⁴¹ John McGahern, *The Pornographer* (1979; London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 113.
- ⁴² McGahern, *The Pornographer*, pp. 251, 252.
- ⁴³ W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 4.
- ⁴⁴ McGahern, *The Pornographer*, p. 23.