**John McGahern’s ‘Image’: The Genesis of an Aesthetic**

Those images that yet

Fresh images beget

– W. B. Yeats, ‘Byzantium’

‘The Image’ is a short essay by John McGahern, the closest thing he came to writing an artistic manifesto over the course of a literary life running to almost 50 years. It is also the single most opaque and puzzling thing he ever published in a career otherwise notable for its clarity and efficiency of expression. For all that, it would be foolish to dismiss it as early ephemera. As the piece appears in *The Honest Ulsterman* of December 1968 it runs to just one page. In this form ‘The Image’ was never again published in English during McGahern’s lifetime, though a slightly revised and marginally shorter version appeared in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* in 1991. A French translation of *The Honest Ulsterman* version prefaces *Lignes de Fond* (1971), which came out in English the year before as McGahern’s first collection of short stories, *Nightlines*, minus ‘The Image’ but plus the long story ‘Peaches’ which disappears from Pierre Leyris’ French translation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 Before discussing the essay itself in further detail, let us consider the context in which it came into being and was published. The earliest extant version of ‘The Image’ resides among the John McGahern papers held in Special Collections at The Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway. Written in pencil on Alfred A. Knopf letterhead, it has the look of something drafted hurriedly and was likely penned in early February 1966 as McGahern prepared to deliver it as the prologue to a lecture at the Rockefeller Institute, New York on 8 February. This was McGahern’s first visit to the United States; he travelled there reluctantly to promote his second novel, *The Dark*, which had been published in England by Faber and Faber the previous May, and had been banned in Ireland by the Irish Censorship Board, a move which, in turn, led to McGahern being dismissed from his post as a teacher at Belgrove Boys’ Primary School in the North Dublin suburb of Clontarf.[[2]](#footnote-2) By the time of his trip to America he was leading a precarious existence in London with his Finnish wife, Annikki Laaksi, working occasionally and unhappily in a Chingford boys’ primary school.

 It took a great deal of persuading on the part of McGahern’s editor at Knopf, Patrick Gregory, to get him to travel. Gregory, who had reluctantly rejected McGahern’s first novel *The Barracks* because he could not imagine it a commercial success, had stuck his neck out at Knopf for *The Dark*, and had succeeded in having them take it on board after it had been rejected in no uncertain terms by the American imprint of Macmillan – where *The Barracks* had been published in 1964 – as obscene. In order to help publicize the new novel and to offset the costs of the transatlantic visit, Gregory had tried – and mostly failed – to set up a number of readings for McGahern in American universities. However, one of Gregory’s successes was in lining up an appearance at the Rockefeller Institute on the Upper East side of Manhattan. At first, this might seem an unlikely location for this young, relatively unknown Irish writer to promote his new novel: the Institute (now a university) focuses primarily on the biological and medical sciences and is the oldest biomedical research institute in the United States.

The Rockefeller was approached by Gregory through a personal family friendship with the Shedlovsky family. Professor Theodore ‘Teddy’ Shedlovsky (1898-1976) and his wife Beatrice (1902-1986) were neighbours of Gregory’s parents in Snedens Landing, a community of intellectuals and artists on the Hudson river, north of New York city, today more commonly known as Pallisades. Patrick Gregory’s father, Horace Gregory (1898-1982), was a poet, critic and translator. Patrick’s Ukrainian-born mother, Marya Zaturenska, won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1938. Teddy Shedlovsky was a scientist, focussing his work on applying the techniques of physical chemistry to the study of biological processes. Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, he came to the United States in 1908, was a star student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and in later years was most associated with the Rockefeller Institute. Shedlovsky was involved in numerous non-scientific activities connected to the campus community. A great lover of music, he founded the Rockefeller University Concerts in 1958 and was happy to respond positively to Patrick Gregory’s approach to set up an event promoting this young Irish writer’s work.

As part of the planned event, Gregory encouraged McGahern to write a short lecture in addition to which he would read from his work. McGahern, though a teacher of some 12 years standing, had never before delivered a lecture to a university audience. Writing nervously to Gregory from his sisters’ Leytonstone home in late January 1966, McGahern worries about how to pitch his talk:

I try very much to write a lecture and have managed 300 words or so, but there’s so much sense of futility in the activity of writing, that when it comes to the secondary business – as I find too in translation – that it’s an unconfident damnation of the temporary gestures, at least in work it’s rooted – the temporary gesture – in the heart being watched over by the despairing head.

 It’s as solid as the temporary tree but in 186 autumns.[[3]](#footnote-3)

McGahern and Annikki flew into New York on 7 February and the Rockefeller event took place the next day. One suspects, given the existence of the pencil-written draft on Knopf notepaper, that McGahern got the stationery from Gregory and worked on ‘The Image’ right up to the last moment.

 Fortunately, a tape survives of McGahern’s performance at the Rockefeller that day – it is the earliest known recording of his voice, on a reel lasting 48 minutes and 30 seconds.[[4]](#footnote-4) McGahern begins by saying that he has been asked to prepare a lecture, but that “It’s not a lecture, it’s a simple statement.”[[5]](#footnote-5) He then reads so quietly from ‘The Image’ that an audience member has to ask for greater volume. Occasionally extemporizing, he sticks largely to the script as it eventually appears in *The Honest Ulsterman* and is ultimately published in his posthumous collection of essays, *Love of the World* (2009), where it is misidentified as having been first delivered in 1968. McGahern’s reading of ‘The Image’ ends at 7:16 on the tape in hesitant fashion: “If you like I’ll read that to you again. I said it was full of doubts. It’s something that I possibly believe.” And that, indeed, is what he does, first reading Chapter 20 of *The Dark* in which young Mahoney and his father have one of their many showdowns, this time over the nature of prayer and whether it ought to be used to ask for direct divine intercession. Once McGahern finishes this reading he returns again to ‘The Image’, this time reading it out more firmly and with greater volume, as though he has begun to convince himself of something. That said, he prefaces this second effort with a series of caveats:

One thing that privately obsesses me, I think more than anything else, in aesthetic language is ‘The Image’. When I went to university I never knew what it was. I still don’t know what it is, more than it’s a direction, and these are just a few scribbles and as I said as you can guess from the maybes and the possiblys and the probablys, full of doubts, and I’ll simply present them to you and if you find any little stimulation or pleasure from them I’d be delighted.[[6]](#footnote-6)

After reading the piece for the second time McGahern takes a few questions from the audience before being asked to recite something of his own choosing to which he responds after some thought with the opening stanza of W. B. Yeats’s ‘The Wild Old Wicked Man’.

 That McGahern should choose Yeats is not surprising given his great reverence for his countryman’s poetry and plays. And yet the choice takes on added significance in the context of the first public airing of ‘The Image’, working almost as a Freudian slip through which McGahern allows us to speculate on the conception of the ideas contained therein. We can say with some degree of certainty that McGahern had developed a devotion for Yeats at least as early as the mid-1950s and one’s suspicion that his interest in the image as the central building block of artistic creation comes primarily from Yeats is confirmed in later years by his work alongside, and great admiration for, Donald Gordon, a Yeats scholar and Professor of English Literature at the University of Reading where McGahern was a visiting fellow for periods in the late 1960s and early 1970s. McGahern especially admired *W. B. Yeats: Images of a Poet*, originally an art exhibition and catalogue curated by Gordon and his colleague Ian Fletcher in 1957 and four years later published as a slim book with further contributions from Frank Kermode and Robin Skelton. The section of that book titled ‘Persons and Places’ begins thus:

For Yeats, nature and experience were a book of images. Places and persons that had most deeply moved him took on a further dimension of meaning. Through physical appearance, historical association, act or gesture, they could become, if only for a moment, epiphanies of a truth beyond the limits of the accident that is Ben Bulben, Coole Park or Lissadell, Robert Gregory’s ‘lonely death’, or Constance Markievicz’s part in the struggle for independence.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Towards the end of that section we get one of McGahern’s favourite definitions of what art ought to achieve: “art that abolishes time and establishes memory.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The idea of Yeats’s work as a book of images returned to McGahern many years later in a brief memoriam for Gordon found among the papers in Galway: “In memory of Donald Gordon. For [W. B.] Yeats, nature and experience were a book of images – of a truth beyond the limits of the accident that is Ben Bulben, Coole Park or Ballylea! [sic]”.[[9]](#footnote-9)

 While Yeats’s poetry is certainly replete with thoughts and representations of the role of the image in the creation of artifice, Gordon, in using that phrase, ‘a book of images’, is likely thinking specifically about Yeats’s introduction to a book of drawings by his friend and fellow member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, W. T. Horton. *A Book of Images*, published in London by The Unicorn Press in 1898, consists of a series of line drawings by Horton with Yeats’s introduction which speculates on the magical nature of art:

All Art that is not mere story-telling, or mere portraiture, is symbolic, and has the purpose of those symbolic talismans which mediaeval magicians made with complex colours and forms, and bade their patients ponder over daily, and guard with holy secrecy; for it entangles, in complex colours and forms, a part of the Divine Essence.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Here we are getting close to McGahern’s thinking on artistic value. Like Yeats, he shares a suspicion of writing that is ‘mere story-telling’ and is always in search of deeper, more permanent, significance. It is for this reason that McGahern so infrequently fixes his work in an identifiable time – for some critics this avoidance is condemned as an unacceptable failure to engage with the political, particularly as he was writing at a time when Ireland was in a state of turmoil. But McGahern, like Yeats, is unafraid of equating art with a kind of sorcery: “all great writing has a spiritual quality that we can recognize but never quite define. […] Call it moral fragrance or style or that older, healing word – magic.”[[11]](#footnote-11) While Yeats sees the symbol as the magician’s most effective tool, for McGahern it is the image.

Yeats concludes his introduction by declaring of Horton that, his “art is immature, but it is more interesting than the mature art of our magazines, for it is the reverie of a lonely and profound temperament.”[[12]](#footnote-12) And that is the last we hear of Horton in Yeats’s work until the publication, more than 25 years later, of his great poem ‘All Souls’ Night’ that works as an epilogue to his mystical meditation on history and time, *A Vision*. Over the course of the poem, Yeats summons up the ghosts of three friends:

Horton’s the first I call. He loved strange thought

And knew that sweet extremity of pride

That’s called platonic love

The poem stands as one of the most notable intersections of Yeats and McGahern’s work. Yeats envies the dead who can “drink from the wine-breath/While our gross palates drink from the whole wine.” And McGahern then borrows this image to write one of his finest short stories, ‘The Wine Breath’, a reflection on involuntary memory and the priestly vocation. This is but one of many moments when McGahern draws down from Yeats’s unrivalled artistic storehouse, and one sees the hand of the great poet in much that McGahern argues for in ‘The Image’:

Image after image flows involuntarily now, and still we are not at peace, rejecting, altering, shaping, straining towards the one image that will never come, the lost image that gave our lives expression, the image that would completely express it again in this bewilderment between our beginning and our end [.][[13]](#footnote-13)

One is reminded immediately of the closing lines to Yeats’s ‘Byzantium’ where the poet again muses on the supernatural origins of art:

Marbles of the dancing floor

Break bitter furies of complexity,

Those images that yet

Fresh images beget,

That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

Or of the closing section of ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’, written some fifteen years earlier:

Because I seek an image, not a book.

Those men that in their writings are most wise

Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts.

This poem, a favourite of McGahern’s, prefaces Yeats’s intriguing essay *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* which acts in part as a consideration of the workings of imagination and its constituent parts:

If you suspend the critical faculty, I have discovered, either as the result of training, or, if you have the gift, by passing into a slight trance, images pass rapidly before you. If you suspend also desire, and let them form at their own will, your absorption becomes more complete and they are more clear in colour, more precise in articulation, and you and they begin to move in the midst of what seems a powerful light. […] Before the mind’s eye, whether in sleep or waking, came images that one was to discover presently in some book one had never read, and after looking in vain for explanation to the current theory of forgotten personal memory, I came to believe in a Great Memory passing on from generation to generation.[[14]](#footnote-14)

McGahern’s urgent search for the ‘the lost image’ as explicated first at the Rockefeller and subsequently in the pages of *The Honest Ulsterman* is something like this effort of Yeats to tap into a Great Memory or Anima Mundi. It is a process that is, inevitably, difficult to describe and it is not surprising that McGahern is so hesitant on that first New York explication of something that he feels instinctively but has not, as yet, fully rationalized intellectually. In the question and answer session that follows the second reading of ‘The Image’ that day, McGahern tries again to define the nature of his quest: “Some single, magical image that would simply absolve and reveal our state. I don’t think it’s possible – that’s why I describe it as a false God – to reveal our state in language… We can only ask questions, they cannot be answered. Religion simply states that this image is God.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

 But Yeats is far from the only possible source of the image as a founding principle of McGahern’s aesthetic as he makes clear in an essay on his friendship with Irish painter Patrick Swift who was co-editor, with David Wright, of *X: A Quarterly Review*, the first periodical to publish McGahern’s work. At the essay’s conclusion, McGahern recalls the excitement of London and his conversations with Swift in the early 1960s:

As we sat in the heat and noise and drank gin, the talk turned to Stendhal – Naples and Florence, *Memoirs of an Egotist*, the Journals. ‘It would be obscene to be anything but a romantic in this conformist age,’ Paddy asserted, and I disagreed, thinking it was more a matter of temperament and background.

 By way of the many beautiful girls that passed along Bayswater Road, the talk turned to Balbec and the sea, to the great passage on memory in St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, and finally to the Image, how all artistic activity centres on bringing the clean image that moves us out into the light. On that we could agree. We could even order a large gin on the strength of it. Paddy quoted Aquinas: ‘The image is a principle of our knowledge. It is that from which our intellectual activity begins, not as a passing stimulus, but as an enduring foundation.’ And the 8.40 out of Euston was still hours away.[[16]](#footnote-16)

That the image should have formed part of the two men’s conversation will come as no surprise to anyone who has studied the seven extant issues of *X* at any depth – one scholar to have done so to impressive effect is Tom Walker.

 Walker, in a recent essay on McGahern and *X*, brings attention to bear on the aesthetic praxis of the magazine and how it might have impacted on McGahern’s thinking. Looking in particular at essays by Helen Lessore and Georges Duthuit, Walker argues carefully for a possible line of influence:

The magazine’s contributors persistently emphasised the need for a relationship between art and reality. When praising Bacon’s development away from his earlier ‘fearful and shadowy evocations’, Lessore describes how: ‘Francis Bacon has at last brought out into the clear light of day images… fully realised images of the human being.’ In the next issue of *X*, the editors explained that they were enlightening the magazine’s readers as to how ‘painting has its being ineluctably – beginning and end – in the image’ by printing an essay translated from the book *L’Image en souffrance* (1961) by the French art historian and critic Georges Duthuit.[[17]](#footnote-17)

While Walker makes it clear that he is not arguing for a direct influence on McGahern’s thinking via these and other articles appearing in *X*, he is happy to assert that an “advocacy of the necessity for a connection between art and reality, and its recurrent alignment to a stress on the importance of the creation of the image, occurs throughout the short run of the magazine.” Walker concludes his thoughts with a very concrete example of how the magazine, under the sway of representational art and its emphasis on the image, interprets McGahern’s technique: “In terms that clearly echo Lessore’s piece on Bacon, the débutant writer’s work is praised as ‘bringing the image that moves us out into the light, uncluttered by adjectival, philosophical or explanatory junk’.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

 That McGahern and Bacon should be linked in this way, even if unintentionally, is interesting. *X* admired the two men for the same sorts of artistic endeavour, that is, an attempt to winnow abstraction out of their work and push for a more representational, figurative art. On the subject of the image, Bacon is remarkably close to McGahern, stating in one 1962 interview with David Sylvester: “I’m just trying to make images as accurately off my nervous system as I can.” And again, returning to the same subject in 1979: “I’m lucky in that images just drop in as if they were handed down to me. Really, I think of myself as a maker of images. The image matters more than the beauty of the paint.” In an even clearer parallel between McGahern’s and Bacon’s thinking, that 1962 interview sees Bacon muse on the essential absurdity of his endeavours:

You see, all art has now become completely a game by which man distracts himself; and you may say it has always been like that, but now it’s entirely a game. And I think that that is the way things have changed, and what is fascinating now is that it’s going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all.[[19]](#footnote-19)

McGahern, in ‘The Image’, comes to a similar conclusion about art, describing the search for the one, clear image as “the whole mortal game of king”, a game where “we cannot live, we can only absurdly reign”.[[20]](#footnote-20) Like Bacon, he too wishes to deepen the game while acknowledging that literature is a luxury pursuit.

 So there is something astir in that period of the late 1950s and early 1960s, some artistic movement or set of ideas to which McGahern is closely attuned, whether via Donald Gordon, the *X* circle, Francis Bacon or others. One final example from that period can be found in Frank Kermode’s *Romantic Image*, a book owned by McGahern and forming part of his library at the time of his death in 2006. As the title of the book suggests, Kermode’s thoughts turn to the role of the image in the formation of a series of writers’ development:

the artist who is vouchsafed this power of apprehending the Image – to experience that ‘epiphany’ which is the Joycean equivalent of Pater’s ‘vision’ – has to pay a heavy price in suffering, to risk his immortal soul, and to be alone, ‘not only to be separate from all others but to have not even one friend’. These two beliefs – in the Image as a radiant truth out of space and time, and in the necessary isolation or estrangement of men who can perceive it – are inextricably associated.[[21]](#footnote-21)

I do not wish to assert that what appears in *The Honest Ulsterman* of December 1968 is inspired by Frank Kermode, but there is no denying that we see here in this crucial decade of McGahern’s life a growing interest in the image and its direct corollary, the imagination. Ownership of a book does not, of course, necessarily infer agreement with its contents, but Kermode’s concluding remark tally with Yeats’s famous rejection of the literature of the point of view, his concern that the “young English poets reject dream and personal emotion” and that “they have thought out opinions that join them to this or that political party”.[[22]](#footnote-22) Kermode also tallies with McGahern’s suspicion of writing that fails to maintain the necessary distance to remain pure and aloof. “The utter failure of the propaganda of poetry of the thirties to survive”, writes Kermode, “is proof that we still cannot bear poetry that has a design upon us. Its design must still be upon a truth which is not relative or customary, but finite and knowable in terms of the Image.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

 McGahern spent his writing life pursuing such solidity. We see this right through from ‘The Image’ to the final masterpieces of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* and *Memoir*, that last autobiographical effort which concludes with McGahern picking for his mother (or the memory of his mother) “the wild orchid and the windflower”.[[24]](#footnote-24) One 1992 interview sees McGahern at perhaps his clearest on how that one, clear image might work in the composition of literary art:

I see the whole function of writing as circling on the image. The shape comes last; it is the intellectual quality in the work. Part of writing is technique, but it is only a part. You have to try to pick the image that's sharp, that can dramatise or bring into the light what is happening, be it a wedding ring, or a Coca-Cola bottle, or someone rolling an orange across the floor. As well as having technique, you have to be able to feel and to think clearly in order to find the right words.[[25]](#footnote-25)

For the talk at the Rockefeller Institute, McGahern focussed in his conclusion on “a yard of lead piping”. Why he should choose this one image is unclear, though he considered its retention in the published version of the talk crucial, as a letter of October 1971 to his French publisher reveals:

I am very disturbed to learn that the last paragraph was cut out of my The Image in the preface to Lignes de Fond.

 As the last paragraph brings together all the threads of the argument, and reveals the image as possibly something concrete – a yard of lead piping – the piece as a whole is nonsense without it, and while I dislike interfering with a publishing house I admire as much as the Mercure de France, I have to insist in this instance that the paragraph be restored.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Denis Sampson – the earliest critic to write a book-length study of McGahern – argues that this image is “clearly an allusion to the ironic epiphany granted to the boy in ‘Araby’ whose romantic and religious quest leads him to the old priest’s rusty bicycle pump”.[[27]](#footnote-27) While Sampson has some marvellously perceptive things to say about McGahern in general and about ‘The Image’ in particular, it is hard to agree with him on this reading as Joyce’s boy narrator is neither terrified of the priest’s bicycle pump and nor is it made of lead. So McGahern’s insistent choice of that lead piping must, for now, remain obscure. What is certain is the very solidity of the image, and we get that same solidity in the chapter of ‘The Dark’ read by McGahern in New York on 8 February 1966.

 The chosen section, the twentieth chapter of the book, revolves around an argument between the novel’s central protagonist, young Mahoney, and his difficult, irascible father about the rights and wrongs of praying for God’s help while sitting exams. The father objects rather churlishly to his sons’ prayers, they argue, and young Mahoney is left alone in the kitchen of the family home while his father retires to bed:

Stupid vanity had caused it all. The house had gone to bed. You were alone in the kitchen. You wanted to say to him you were sorry but you weren’t able.

 His boots, wet from grass, stood drying by the raked fire. They started to take on horrible fascination.

 They were your father’s boots, close to the raked fire. They’d been put there to dry for morning. Their toes touched where the ashes spilled out from the fire on the concrete, boots wet from the grass. Your father’s feet had been laced in their black leather, leather over walking flesh. They’d walk in his hopes, be carried over the ground, till they grew worn, past mending, and were discarded for the new pair from Curley’s, on and on, over the habitual fields, lightly to the football matches in Reegan’s field on Sundays, till the feet themselves wore, boots taken off his dying feet.[[28]](#footnote-28)

And so it goes on, this meditation on the image of the boots, for a further eighteen lines. While the yard of lead piping in ‘The Image’ is seen ‘in terror’, these boots, considered anew in the light of yet another bitter falling out with his father, ‘take on a horrible fascination’ for young Mahoney.

 McGahern’s artistic technique of bestowing near human powers on inanimate household objects might also be seen as his being in communion with one final poetic predecessor, the German-language lyric poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Here we need to return briefly to that first public airing of ‘The Image’ in New York. Having read from the piece twice in addition to giving the audience Chapter 20 of *The Dark*, McGahern takes a number of questions from the floor. In attempting to answer a question on why he insists on just a single image he refers the audience to Rilke’s one published novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, and the moment in the novel when Malte’s mother appeals to him that he must never forget to make a wish for himself. Moving from Malte’s wishes to think of his own, McGahern returns to the image: “Things I have wished for myself that I’ll never find is this one image from which I think my life in some form or other took its full expression, its most complete expression.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Why does Rilke appear in McGahern’s thoughts here and how does that appearance help us to interpret some of the more gnomic pronouncements of ‘The Image’?

A great deal might be said about Rilke’s presence in the formation of McGahern’s literary imagination, but for the purposes of this essay one point alone is worth dwelling on, and that is the poet’s devotion – like Yeats, like McGahern – to the centrality of the image. Four years after Yeats’s introduction to Horton’s *A Book of Images* (1898) appears Rilke’s *Das Buch der Bilder*, or *The Book of Images* (1902). W. H. Auden expresses Rilke’s methods of dealing with the non-human thus:

Rilke thinks of the human in terms of the non-human, of what he calls Things (*Dinge*), a way of thought which, as he himself pointed out, is more characteristic of the child than of the adult. To the former, tables, dolls, houses, trees, dogs, etc., have a life which is just as real as their own or that of their parents.[[30]](#footnote-30)

It is difficult to say how or when early Rilke entered McGahern’s orbit: the first letter to mention him comes from Spring 1964, and through the 1960s he made generous gifts of both *Letters to a Young Poet* and *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* to a variety of friends; a heavily marked up copy of the latter title published in 1964 by The Norton Library series forms part of McGahern’s library.[[31]](#footnote-31) Of Rilke’s essays, one of McGahern’s favourites was ‘Some Reflections on Dolls’, the single most searching treatment in the oeuvre of that aspect of Rilke’s work picked out for examination by Auden, the strange power of the inanimate:

I pass over the intimate, the touching, the deserted, thoughtful aspect of many things, which, as I passed them, moved me deeply by their beautiful participation in human living; I will only cite in passing quite simple things: a sewing clamp, a spinning-wheel, a domestic loom, a bridal glove, a cup, the binding and the leaves of a Bible; not to speak of the mighty will of a hammer, the self-surrender of a violin, the friendly eagerness of horn spectacles, -- indeed, only throw that pack of cards on the table, with which patience has been played so often, and it forms at once the centre of melancholy hopes, which have long since been realized in ways not hoped for.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Mahoney’s boots of *The Dark* are viewed with the same sort of sympathy and human solidarity argued for by Rilke in the case of dolls, once loved and now abandoned. And so it goes throughout McGahern’s work.

How and why ‘The Image’, this short but crucial essay, found its way into the pages of *The Honest Ulsterman* must remain open to speculation. McGahern may have met with figures associated with the magazine when he gave a reading at the Belfast Festival in November 1967, but as yet no correspondence around his manifesto’s publication has emerged from the archives, though the 1960s saw McGahern engage with a wide variety of literary magazines on both sides of the Atlantic: in Ireland *The Kilkenny Magazine* was the first to publish one of his stories in 1963; in the US he had work accepted by *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*; in Britain by *X*, *The London Magazine*, *Encounter* and *Review*. *The Honest Ulsterman* number in which McGahern appears is worthy of an essay all of its own, coming as it does at a key moment in modern Irish history, its lead writer fearful that Ulster Orangeism is becoming straightforwardly fascist. And John D. Stewart, who wrote that opening essay, could not have known that as 1968 became 1969 he was being overly optimistic in stating that “By peaceful and unarmed marching, by multi-mini-martyrdom, by displaying their sufferings on television to the public of Britain and the wide world, the people of Northern Ireland are already well on the way to some of their stated objectives.”[[33]](#footnote-33) And it is not just in the field of politics that the December 1968 number represented a sort of turning point, but in literature too, with a new poem from Derek Mahon, his work reviewed by Edna Longley and another one-page manifesto similar to McGahern’s ‘Image’ from the pen of the Leitrim man’s stable companion at Faber, the young Seamus Heaney, whose ‘Writer at Work’ acts as a preface to the first publication of one of his best loved poems, ‘The Forge’:

All I know is a door into the dark,

Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;[[34]](#footnote-34)

Heaney’s chosen images are not so far away from that mysterious yard of lead piping seen in terror once.

1. A French translation of ‘The Image’ almost identical to the later *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* version appears in *L’Œil-de-boeuf: Revue littéraire trimestrielle*, 9-10 (May 1996), 74-5. Both English language versions of ‘The Image’ are reproduced in the posthumously published John McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, int. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 5-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Catholic church authorities who oversaw the school also objected to McGahern having married his non-Catholic Finnish wife, Annikki Laaksi, in a secular ceremony in Helsinki the previous year. Whether it was the publication of the book (which, among other things, was the first Irish novel to shine a light on clerical sexual abuse) or the marriage that led primarily to the dismissal must, for now, remain moot. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Undated letter from John McGahern to Patrick Gregory [January 1966]. This letter forms part of the Patrick Gregory papers at NUI, Galway and will be published in full in *The Letters of John McGahern*, ed. Frank Shovlin (London: Faber and Faber, forthcoming). The final lecture as reproduced in *The Honest Ulsterman* ran to under 450 words. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am grateful to staff at the Rockefeller Archive Center, New York for making a digitized version of this recording available to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ‘John McGahern - Forum: The Image’, 1966 February 8, Box 1, Tape AV 15020, FA953, Rockefeller University Press, Audiovisual Materials, Lectures and Assorted Events, Rockefeller University records, Rockefeller Archive Center. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. D. J. Gordon and Ian Fletcher, ‘Persons and Places’, in Gordon et al, *W. B. Yeats, Images of a Poet: My permanent impermanent images* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid*., 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John McGahern papers, NUI Galway, P71/1260. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. W. B. Yeats, ‘Introduction’, in W. T. Horton, *A Book of Images* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1898), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John McGahern, ‘Playing with Words’, *Love of the World*, 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. W. B. Yeats, *A Book of Images*, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John McGahern, ‘The Image (Prologue to a Reading at the Rockefeller University)’, *The Honest Ulsterman: monthly handbook for a revolution*, no. 8 (December 1968), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. W. B. Yeats, ‘Per Amica Silentia Lunae’, *Mythologies* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 344-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ‘John McGahern - Forum: The Image’, Rockefeller Archive Center. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. John McGahern, ‘The Bird Swift’, *Love of the World*, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Tom Walker, ‘*X: A Quarterly review* and McGahern’s Modernism’, in Željka Doljanin and Máire Doyle (ed.), *John McGahern: Authority and vision* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid*., 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Quoted in David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon 1962-1979*, new and enlarged edition (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 88, 166, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. McGahern, ‘The Image’, *Honest Ulsterman*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. W. B. Yeats, ‘A General Introduction for my Work’, *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 525. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid*., 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Quoted in James Whyte, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. John McGahern letter to Mercure de France, Paris (21 October 1971). He was successful in his appeal that the final paragraph as it appeared in *The Honest Ulsterman* be retained in *Lignes de Fond*. This letter forms part of the privately held Madeline McGahern papers and will appear as part of my edition of *The Letters of John McGahern.* [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature’s Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 13-14. Sampson is much more surefooted in his argument for seeing Proust as an important influence on some of the key ideas in ‘The Image’. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. John McGahern, *The Dark* (1965; London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. ‘John McGahern - Forum: The Image’, Rockefeller Archive Center. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. W. H. Auden, ‘Rilke in English’, *Prose, Vol. II 1939-1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The edition in question is Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1964). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘Some Reflections on Dolls’, *Where Silence Reigns: Selected Prose*, trans. G. Craig Houston; fwd Denise Levertov (New York: New Directions, 1978), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. John D. Stewart, ‘How it is: a brief analysis of the Northern Ireland Problem today’, *The Honest Ulsterman*, no. 8 (December 1968), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Seamus Heaney, ‘The Forge’, *The Honest Ulsterman*, no. 8 (December 1968), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)