FEAR AND VIOLENCE – MEMORY REPRESSED
AND RECONFIGURED IN THE DARK BY JOHN MCGAHERN

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Abstract

For John McGahern's second published novel in 1965, fear and memory work in a framework defined by personal identity and social functions. This article aims at looking at the novel employing the means of social and communicative memory theories, while linking them to the use of narrative means. The journey to the protagonist's ego is an intricate journey with multi-layered connections and factors, and the incorporation of autobiographical elements resonates with the author's generation, or recent ones. Although based on a theory widely adopted in literary studies, this approach remains open to further interpretations and links with potentially new trends and views, demonstrating the value of fiction far beyond classical literary criticism.

Keywords: memory, violence, family, sexuality, education

1. John McGahern and the Anglo-Irish fiction

John McGahern has marked the twentieth century Anglo-Irish fiction by bringing in the literary scene elements from a painful past: recent histories, painful family relationships and challenging opportunities in a historical context featuring a massive emigration to England in the 1950s and 1960s. With a clear setup derived from his autobiographical context, *The Dark* (first published in 1965) remains in the memory of his readership not only because it was banned by the Censorship Office, but also because it brought to surface topics which used to remain under a silent veil: violence in domestic backgrounds, difficult educational issues, sexuality, belief and humanity. His heroes do not stand out for their extraordinary achievements and competitive nature: they are often vulnerable, shamed, abused and immature, unable to find easily an adult position and fill comfortably their space as expected, well-gendered heroes in family and society.

We aim to argue in the coming sections that the past encapsulates most individual memories and instances in McGahern's second published novel, especially dramatic ones, into the layer of social relations, various events having been

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discussed with his sisters, brother and wife, and his own memories shaped those of the others, as well as the other way round.

Before starting our analysis, it is vital to examine John McGahern's place in the tradition of post-colonial Anglo-Irish literature, because both his main themes, as well as the means of expression, come under the influence of great Irish poets and novelists. Reflecting on the vital tasks in the life of a poet, Thomas Kinsella suggests in *The Divided Mind* that the artist has to come out of the island and connect his writing to the world:

'Is there a way for a modern Irish writer to fight this danger – a danger he is more vulnerable to the more isolated he is content to be? I think there is ... it may be found in a willingness and determination to investigate one's self and one's world, to make relentless comparisons and to remain open at all costs to the teaching that life inflicts on us all.' (in Seán Lucy, 1973: 216)

In talking about McGahern's place in the line of contemporary Anglo-Irish writing, Declan Kiberd places him as following Tomás Ó Criomhthain, J. M. Synge, W. B. Yeats and Kate O'Brien, and sees him as part of a "culture that remained so separate and so sequestered as to evoke that intense form of writing that is poetic, even though it is formally offered as prose." (in Tymoczko and Ireland: 195)

2 From personal memories to fictional representations

Facts, stories, family and childhood, but also the pace of ordinary life, working the land, praying at home and at church are compelling themes in early twentieth century Irish literature; yet what makes John McGahern's childhood and youth unique is the transposition of such topics into an extremely emotional, poetically infused and unanimously praised writing. Places and histories filled by imagination come together in new shapes, and personal "memory" instils with sharp details his perceptions, both personal and collective, of both real items (family household, letter and documents) as well as thoughts, feelings, impressions and assumptions.

As one of the pioneers opening the framework of memory to a sociological view, Hallbwachs declares that this is not a mere act of personal recalling, it rather implies various influences and types of constructions: "as members change, die, or disappear, as the spatial frames change and the concerns of the time replace past concerns, the collective memory is continually reinterpreted to fit those new conditions" (Hallbwachs, 1992: 148). For him, memory turns into a social structure of *individual memory*, while *collective memory* implies the use of multiple instruments (impressions, past and present, reasoning and comparison) by a conscious individual; in its turn, collective memory is clearly marked by the social groups in which individuals are associated, and displays a clearly-formulated self-representation. This view, however, does not mean that individual memory must be

ignored, but that the overall approach to memory needs to consider the layers that remain part of the individual, and the parts that are incorporated, added, framed and re-created by social groups throughout the ages. *On Collective Memory* highlights the role of the reconstruction of the past, which consists of a re-shaping of the past, but this action relies on absorbing what is most relevant to social actors, eliminating the incongruities of what is already part of the past.

Several decades later, Pierre Nora explores the links to history and its meaningful entities assuming a symbolic dimension for any community. His position refers to *constructed history replacing true memory* as modern memory becomes archival; historical and literary memories coexist and there is no strict line of separation between the two. For the French historian, this involves a clear process of crystallization, and then the "acceleration" of memory, while memory and history appear to be in "fundamental opposition." (1989: 8) This is indeed supported by McGahern's perspective as well, whenever he mentions the disappearance of old, traditional small communities, with a clearly distinct character, yet sharing the same love for the land, a profound but unuttered sense of existence, a deep belief in Catholicism, and a gentle sense of humour. For McGahern the writer, the fictional space is taking memories to a new dimension, outside ordinary existence, generating a special kind of perception, a narrative that McGahern calls simply "the image": "One of my favourite definitions of art is that it abolishes time and establishes memory and, if you reflect on it, you couldn't have the image without memory. The image is at the base of imagination and it's the basic language of writing." (Maher in Guy, 2014: 90)

On the other hand, Nora's "acceleration" of memory induces a higher opposition between memory and history. Nora thinks that this opposition emerges from the inherent nature of the two concepts: memory is part of life, under ongoing change, manipulation and influence, while history consists of the re-construction, "always problematic and incomplete of what is no longer. Memory is always a phenomenon of the present, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past." (1996: 3) Furthermore, this opposition includes the way they work: memory relies on blurred images and representations, of bits and pieces, a vague sort of representations, while history is primarily an intellectual act of analysis and conceptual discourse. What is certainly complicated in looking at *lieux de mémoires* as cultural representations of the past is their changing function and nature in time.

As Assmann describes in his chapter on "Communicative and Cultural Memory", two new *modi memorandi* from Hallbwach's *collective memory* shape any writing connected to autobiography: first, *cultural memory*, seen as "an institution", which often incorporates what Assmann calls "symbolic forms" transmitted from one generation to the next, where symbolic elements are supported by "[e]external objects as carriers of memory" taken from the general cultural background of the subject – including, among others, ordinary items, but also artefacts and landscapes

- these operate as physical catalizers (Erll, Nüning, 2008: 111). In contrast, he sees *communicative memory* as "not supported by any institutions of learning, transmission and interpretation" (111); it simply resides in the constant, daily conversation and interaction, and is therefore effective for a rather limited time span; such contacts can only be remembered for eighty years, or the interval, in Assmann's view, in which three generations can store and recall them.

Looked upon from this stance, family relationships quoted in *The Dark* (1965) are revisited and complemented by family correspondence in *Memoir* several decades later (2005) and attached to the fiction itself, creating a compelling mix of life and imagination, which is partially the reason for which his readers see straightaway the autobiographical side of his novels and short stories.

3. Vulnerable heroes and illusory refuges

The young, main nameless character in *The Dark,* Mahoney's son, does not try to run away from the impact of his feelings, trying to compose a new identity, rather artificial, as Mahoney the father does: on the contrary, the young boy lives his composite identity as such (son, brother, student, believer, adolescent) in an uncertainty which holds no hypocritical masque, but which he fights with. His identity in terms of a first name remains concealed to the end.

His family operates for him very closely to a "house", namely a particular social group with its own rules: "And I see family as a sort of interesting half-way house between the individual on the one side and a larger society on the other hand, and one is not alone, and one is in a society but it's not a true society on the other hand, since certain things will be tolerated within a family that won't be tolerated in a larger society. And of course we all come out of families, and belong to families" (Gonzalez, 2013: 175). A strict house out of which the young boy cannot escape for the first half of the narrative, but when he does it, getting a scholarship for higher studies, he gives in at the first pressures in the academic world (being sent out of the classroom for alleged hooliganism).

The present and the past are therefore realms profoundly marked by the cultural institutions of identity, at formative and traumatic levels mainly: "Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies" (Hall, 2000: 17). The Irish identity of the character is filled with real visual elements, or verbal ones, such as the short, simple wording or tough replies, but also by emotional conflicts in the family.

In the opening scene, Mahoney the father threatens his son for bad language, first verbally, then conducts a disciplinary punishment in a scene meant to function as an example provided to the terrified members of the family:

'No, Daddy, no. I didn't mean,' he gave one last whimper but he had to lie in the chair, lie there and wait as a broken animal. Something in him snapped. He couldn't control his water and it flowed from him over the leather of the seat. He'd never imagined horror such as this, waiting naked for the leather to come down on his flesh, would it ever come, it was impossible and yet nothing could be much worse than this waiting.' (McGahern, 2008b: 9)

This brutal scene shows not only the opposition between the two characters, the aggressive and dominant father imposing his will into the space of actions and oral manifestation of his own child able to produce 'filth,' but also the vulnerability of the young boy, unable to face his father's hostility, taken for the example meant to teach everybody present a lesson. Although undecided and permanently anxious, young Mahoney tries to state his personality in opposition to his father: he dreams about a loving family, a house, a wife and a child in a comfortable home, a reality completely different from the family he knows.

In McGahern's world, family order is paralleled by chaos and death co-exists with love, as two natural sides of a shared coin by all humans. The learning experience of sexual practice brings both pleasure and guilt, and young Mahoney alternates between the two, aware of the teachings of the Church but unable to stay away from his physical natural impulse:

Five sins already today, filthiness spilling five times, but did it matter, the first sin was as damning as a hundred and one, but five sins a day made thirty-five in a week, they'd not be easy to confess. Bless me father, for I have sinned. It's a month since my last Confession. I committed one hundred and forty impure actions with myself. (31)

The young man finds himself vulnerable when desire holds him, and this is several times described as a fight, mainly in the restrictive perspective of Catholicism against any sexual involvement outside marriage: "You could get no control. You'd go weeks without committing any sin, in often ecstatic prayer and sense of God, again replaced by weeks of orgy sparkled by a fit of simple boredom or unhappiness." (53)

Violent physical abuse is the very reason for which young Mahoney decides to study hard and try his luck at national exams, and he is warmly encouraged by Father Gerard Malone to pursue this track. Growing physically and mentally finally makes the young boy able to confront his parent in a memorable, highly cinematic scene:

He did hit, swinging his open palms with his whole strength across the face, and this time you went sideways to crash against the dresser. (. . .) "Hit and I'll kill you," you said and you knew nothing, there was no fear, you watched the hand come up to hit, your own hands ready and watching the raised hand and the throat. You knew or you felt nothing, except once the raised hand moved you'd get him by

the throat, you knew you'd be able, the fingers were ready. (. . .) Mahoney fell back without striking, as if he sensed, mixture of incomprehension and fear on his face. The world was a shattered place. (36)

Memories are throughout the novel a means to reject dogmatism and conformism in all that concerns natural human life: the flow of the narrative alternates between images describing a whole series of characters displaying sheer conventionalism: Mahoney the father, as he believes that aggression can operate as a constructive tool; father Malone, who uses his authority to turn the adolescent into a passive victim and appeals to dogmatic instruments only in what concerns the teenager's potential for becoming a priest, incapable of supporting a real, genuine vocation; the university professor who uses a conventional appeal to discipline but the result of his action is young Mahoney's abandon of higher education, and finally Ryan, a local, in whose place Joan, young Mahoney's sister, goes to work and live, only to find herself trapped in the sexual assaults of the owner. Mahoney the adolescent forgets his own distress and worries, and goes to take his sister back home, while the father seems disappointed by her return, an additional mouth to feed and take care of.

Male authoritarian fathers, priests or military officers are recurrent figures in McGahern's fiction, and the author often reworks and produces similar narrative threads based on analogous core "images", as Moran, a former IRA veteran, appeals to his son's support in *Amongst Women*; mirrored by Mahoney the father working on the same line of speech:

A man working alone was nothing. If the boy wanted to come in with him the two men could do anything. They could run this place like clockwork. They could in time even take care over other farms, a dream he had once had about his eldest son: together they could take over everything. (2008a: 108)

and

'There's nothing the two of us mightn't do together,' Mahoney said as they went, blobs of sweat on his forehead, a weariness in the set of the body, the eyes hunted. Hard to imagine this was the same man who'd made the winters a nightmare over the squalid boots, the beatings and the continual complaining. (2008b: 150)

Young Mahoney focuses on getting good results at school exams, since a high score would allow him to leave the house for good and continue his education. This seems for a while the only possible solution compared to his previous choice of embracing priesthood: "Though what was the use, there was no escape. You were only a drifter and you'd drift. You couldn't carry the responsibility of a decision. You were only a hankerer. You'd drift and drift." (84) As soon as he realizes the impossibility of taking up a priest's life, young Mahoney thinks of going to university as a second viable option, and he throws himself into study as if this

cleared his own mind and took him to a better future. It is clear that he needs outstanding results to be able to qualify for a secure position. When the admission letter from the university comes, it surprises the whole family, especially the father who, all of a sudden, takes up the role of a parent proud of his child's performance. For the adolescent, the University remains at a clear mental distance, which makes it even more desirable: "The University was a dream: not this slavish push in and out through wind and rain on a bicycle, this dry constant cramming to pass the exam, no time to pause to know and enjoy anything, just this horrid cram into the brain to be forgotten the minute the exam was over." (124)

The climax of his uncertainty erupts when, after difficult exams and the exhilaration of being accepted, one of the professors drives him out of the classroom because of an alleged disrespectful attitude. For the young student, this confrontation shows again his mental vulnerability, and suddenly he asks his father to come and take him out of the place for good. The novel ends with both father and son leaving together the campus and the young man ready to work in a junior position at ESB, a company in Dublin. The end is simple, back-to-routine narrative, including a short dialogue between the two men now at peace with each other. At this point, young Mahoney has the opportunity to reflect on his own route, yet the narrative follows his open yet unpredictable nature. He is not far from pursuing ambitious alternatives, but is for the moment unable to face a complex, highly challenging daily environment; his current setting puts him under a different pressure, rather diffuse yet constant, than the acute moments of aggression, with his parent, he had been used to.

The end of the novel places the young male hero in an opposite state to McGahern the author who managed to overcome similar difficult moments. The writer confesses simply how fiction can embed a failed hero, a vision his own father might have expected of him; this is a subsequent observation of consistent differences of personality between Francis McGahern, the sergeant, and his son, the future novelist, not only in their approach to religion, marriage and responsibility for others, but also in their opposite appreciation of studies: "My father had never forgiven me for taking my chance to go to university. He had wanted me to stay at home or work the land. I had always fought his need to turn my refusal into betrayal. And by going home each summer I felt I was affirming that the great betrayal was not mine but nature's own." (McGahern, 2009: 292)

The Dark is but a mirror derived from McGahern's own memories and efforts to grow by the means of education; though he does not plan that when joining the school in Carrick-on-Shannon, it is clear that he realizes that schooling is the only way out to the world, to change his life: "These were the years when he gained intellectual 'tools' and performed exceptionally well in examinations, ending with the top results in County Roscommon in his Leaving Certificate so that he won a scholarship to university and was also 'called to training' as a primary teacher". (Sampson, 2012: 1)

4. Conclusions

The Dark is as much about present, as about past and future: the young, anxious teenager confronts a violent father, and tries to encourage his own brothers and sisters to rally against silent or manifested brutality. What he cannot cope with is his own insecurity, which becomes an intrusion, if not a violence, to his own formative years to adulthood. At the surface, characters present rather black-and-white features, since the father emerges as a predator, a protagonist unable to control his own emotional flows and psychological monsters, while children are depicted as apparently submissive victims.

The fiction grows gradually more complex than this preliminary reading, into a piece in which we see how family and social relationships are intertwined, and how a potential ally (the priest) joins the camp of assailants to identity and intimacy. In between the desire to escape and the desire to explore his sexuality, the young nameless character fights his own battles against a difficult mental ground based on son-father conflictual standpoints, finding at a certain moment that his choice to see education as an escape means did not alleviate his problematic journey to his self. When looking at this story, and at other pieces authored by McGahern, one of the main critical voices approaching his universe, Denis Sampson, confirms that his fiction is tightly connected to social and communicative memory as tools employed by an outstanding creator:

I did not discover the reality of McGahern's work for myself until I had left Ireland and was living in Canada in the 1970s. (…) I could read my own inner life and formation in The Barracks, The Dark and the stories of Nightlines that followed. I could recognize the rural culture that was reflected in them and the anguished voice that searched relentlessly for meaning and calm in bewildering personal circumstances. (2012: vii)

For many of the generations born after McGahern, his world is as close to their minds as it was to the author, because they had heard and accumulated similar visions of life through their own experiences, so this fiction is a painful, yet familiar canvas. Happiness and drama mix and last together in multiple social circles including numerous female and male characters in two intersecting worlds: the smaller, inner circle of family including the father and his children; and secondly, the larger, equally complex social circle, yet different in terms of pressure and challenges, made of students, teachers, lovers, priests or neighbours placing their own demands and expectations upon young Mahoney. There is no strict demarcation between these two worlds; silence, refusal or acceptance happen tacitly among the members of either world. Young Mahoney's identity is simultaneously built by the blurred boundaries of the two spheres, and McGahern sees personal identity being constantly about the meaning of one's existence.

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