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Desire as slip-up in the Short-Story "Peaches" by John McGahern

Jacques Sohier

- 1 J. Lacan once said that desire is always to be found in the locus of the Other as the locus of speech, "Here is all the problematics of desire. This is what makes it subject to the dialectics and formations of the unconscious".¹The idea developed here is that most of John McGahern's stories, and particularly Peaches, explore this dialectics fraught with conflicts or the eschewing of conflicts.²
- 2 Desire as a concept covers the vast field of man's appetites that go beyond the strict need of self-preservation. Desire could be seen as a slip-up in the very ambiguous nature of this expression. Desire is what makes John McGahern's characters apprehend themselves and the world as disharmony. This is always a complex affair since the failure of "the speaking animal" in the "circuit of desire," as Lacan calls the human subject caught up in the field of desire, is the very stuff of the movement of life, all the more moving because writer and reader participate in their own life in this on-going process they see problematized in the stories.
- 3 To enter this process or 'To come into his Kingdom', as one title of John McGahern's story has it, we shall begin by commenting on the positioning of the self and the other in order to identify the lines of fractures preparing the slip-ups to come. Then we shall analyse one aspect of this slip-up, the slipping away of desire from the main character in what Lacan, after Ernest Jones, called the aphanisis of desire. Lastly, the political dimension of the story will be analysed along with its implications for the characters.

The Self and the Other

- 4 Peaches is rather a long story divided into a series of scenes representing a couple that finally takes on a universal dimension as they are simply referred to as 'the man' and 'the woman'. The problematic relationship between the couple constitutes the backbone of the story and builds up something like different scenes from conjugal life. But as the couple receive visitors in their private sphere or go out into the world there

is more to it than the conventional plot of the difficult communication between husband and wife.

- 5 Ostensibly, the couple has come to Spain to work and enjoy life, but from the outset it all goes awry. The man who is described as a writer has stopped writing for over a year. He lives in apathy in a round of duties that anchor him to reality. His wife jibes at him,
 You're either pumping water up. Or oiling the floor. Or walking on the beach. Or drunk in the rocking chair staring at the sea. Or running to the village for one thing or another. (81)
- 6 It may sound as a rather pleasant way of spending one's time, doing nothing in particular but keeping alive or pretending to be. Judged by Heidegger's philosophy, the man has chosen the better part. He has ceased to strive for worldly prize and self-satisfaction. According to Heidegger, "We must do nothing, only wait".³ And this is precisely what the man does. He spends time drinking cognac, buying the drinks for his friend while waiting for the fishing boats to come in and buys gambas before going back home. The man has driven out of himself all will but remains awake to life in what might be termed his awareness of his-being-for-death since he says, trying to soothe his wife for the loss of her father, "All lives are so fragile that when they go for ever we feel as if we had betrayed them in some way" (86). This statement is in keeping with a serenity that slips into complete negativity.
- 7 On the face of it, the man deliberately positions himself outside the realm of conflicts not only by not answering back his wife for her nagging, but also by adopting a life-style that makes him happy, making every day of the week into a Sunday. Not aiming for domination or recognition of any sort, this man could stand for pure wisdom. He could also represent "true subjectivity," as Sartre puts it, that is to say, a man who lives without an ego that seeks to reify the other.⁴
- 8 This man without an ego should not be thought of as devoid of a self however. He has a sharp aesthetic sense, being awake to and appreciative of his surrounding, "A candle burnt between the two wine glasses, and onion and parsley were already sprinkled on the sliced tomatoes in the long yellow dish on the table. [...] 'The table and house look very beautiful', he said" (91). Nevertheless, his generous nature produces consequences that impinges on the freedom of his wife. From the point of view of his wife, this man is almost indiscriminately hospitable. In one case, it suits his wife since she is flattered by their millionaire neighbour when he comes into their house for a chat bringing yellow roses for her and an empty tin for him. But in another case, a local guardia on his round enters the house for sociability and disrupts the equanimity of the woman who accuses her husband of offering her no protection, "you give me no support. You let that man come in and ruin the evening" (93).
- 9 The true subject who has privileged being over possessions can thus be seen as an interestingly ambiguous character. His serenity should not be overemphasized since his existence has ceased to be fruitful. The rotting shark whose description opens the story is to be related to the loss of inspiration for a writer, "The shark stank as far as the house, above it the screech of the sea birds; it'd stink until the birds had picked the bones clean, when the skeleton would begin to break up in the sun" (75). In the sub-text of the story an association is created as the same verb 'stink' is used to refer to a failed writer,
 In the sun of Spain not a line had been written or was likely to be. 'I have known writers who failed. Who stopped writing. And they stank to themselves and to

everybody else had once been said to him when he hadn't written for a long time" (89).

- 10 The stinking of the shark undergoing a process of corruption and a form of cannibalism in the open is a potent symbol to express the man's guilt-feeling ridden with death-anxiety. Guilt is felt for failure to produce work that is expected by others, his wife or his editor, and this failure is beginning to nauseate him. In that case, the portrayal of the man as completely serene is a distortion of perspective.
- 11 According to Lévinas, existence is only worthwhile so long as it is creative.⁵ Whether the man really lives his life remains to be seen. We shall presently see him as innerly torn by contradictions. He sounds as if he were in effect symbolizing the irreconcilable contradiction at work in Heidegger whose philosophy called for not forgetting being while his political choice in favour of nazism amounted to a negation and a forgetting of being.⁶ Before getting into the political aspects of the story, we shall investigate the man's disappearance of desire by wondering what might be the desire of a man without desire.

The Aphanasis of Desire

- 12 Before being political the contradiction that inhabits the characters are sexual or rather one should say that the sexual is the political and, to some extent, the other way round is valid too. The man's false serenity may just be the outward side of the disappearance or aphanasis of his desire. Aphanasis was first defined by Ernest Jones as the subject's fear of the complete vanishing of the capacity of enjoying life and less frequently as the fear of losing desire.⁷ This definition fits in with the man's anxiety that he drowns in alcohol. It is also in keeping with a lack of pleasure he derives from the sexual act,

he still came long before her; and then afraid he'd go limp, held her close for her to pump him until she came with a blind word in her own language, and as he listened to her panting it seemed that their small pleasures could hardly have happened more separately if they'd each been on opposite ends of the beach with the red house of the Canadian in between. (87)

- 13 The man's denigrating their love-making as being achieved in separation and lacking in intensity is illustrative of a desire that slips up. It is however more telling to see the concept of aphanasis as Lacan reshaped it to integrate the notion into his own frame of reference.
- 14 When Lacan took up the notion, he defined it as "the fading" of the subject and not of desire, "There are no subject without there being somehow, aphanasis of the subject, and it is in this alienation, in this fundamental split that the dialectics of the subject is instituted".⁸ In *Peaches*, this alienation is made manifest by symbolic representations that show how dependent on circumstances the man is. After he has metaphorically, and rather comically, pumped water up for shreds of his desire in the well of his unconscious, he creates a situation that highlights his fading as a subject. To make amends to his wife for recurrent tiffs with her, he proposes that she should accompany him,
- 'It'd be nice for me if you came to Garrucha'. He wanted to avoid argument at any cost. 'I thought it'd be nice to sit at the café and watch the sea and wait for the boats to come in to buy fish.'
- 'you want me to come with you, then?'

'I do'

'That's different.' She was suddenly lit with pleasure. 'I don't want to go to Garrucha but I want you to want me to go to Garrucha' (93)

- 15 This is the formula of desire from the point of view of the "eromene," the one who is desired, "I want you to want me". The pronouns referring to the woman enclose the other, the 'you'. Desire is taken out into the open and explicated in much the same way the woman has of saying later, "Why don't we go in and have a fuck now?" (86). Immediacy and directness prevail in the woman's utterances whereas the man's sentences show him disconnected from his desire. The formal modality, the conditional tense with an impersonal subject as grammatical subject of the sentence and the very length of the sentence, "It would be nice for me if you..." produce a derealising and distancing effect. His utterance makes him sound as if he were bracing himself in the face of an untrustworthy Other that it is best to placate by passivity, "I thought it'd be nice to sit at the café and watch the sea and wait for the boats to come in to buy fish". With the buying of fish it is only the basic needs of the body that are met.
- 16 Their little excursion to Garrucha ends up in disaster as a mad magistrate spots the woman and forcibly invites them to see his peach orchard. The intrusion of the magistrate culminates in a symbolical rape as he thrusts peaches in the woman's breast pocket. Faced with the magistrate's authoritarian demand for another visit, the man gives in, accepts the invitation but plays for time as he plans to leave Spain for London with his wife before the appointed time. The disappearance of the man is firstly a physical vanishing as he leaves Spain rather than choosing to make a stand for his freedom.
- 17 But it is also a significant evasion in another sense as it takes place in reaction to a threatening father-figure, a figure connected with the law since the demanding voice is that of a magistrate. As an excuse for accepting a perverse invitation, the man says to his wife, "If I hit him and wound up in a Spanish jail it'd do us a lot of good" (99). Also, he never repeats what he thought at the time of accepting the invitation, "he heard that the magistrate's temper was dangerous if crossed" (96). These two statements expressing the tension between the man's outer self-justification and his inner fear belong to the man's subjectivity and will be shown to have incidence in the political realm, but they are above all the signs of an insufficiently articulated castration. Indeed, the man finds himself caught up in the position of what Lacan calls the 'vel' as the subject "appears on one side as meaning produced by the signifier, and on the other side he appears as aphanisis".⁹
- 18 As the exchange with the magistrate illustrates, the man refuses to make a stand against a father-figure. Meaning, therefore, becomes determined and appropriated, by the Other, who is fittingly a magistrate. Consequently, the man is relinquished to the side of unbeing and powerlessness. Repeatedly in fact, the story foregrounds this slippage of desire that places the man into a submissive position that curtails his freedom. For instance, the couple leave Barcelona not of their own freely determined choice, "But because those phoney painter bastards had to have a taxi because of their baby you came when you did. They wanted you to come to get you to pay half of their taxi fare" (78). And when the same painters come to visit them, "'They'd practically to shit all over the house before you asked them to leave', the woman taunted".
- 19 The intimate link between this passivity with castration is also suggested when the man reacts out of all proportions when he sees a scorpion,

Then suddenly he stiffened, gave a sharp cry of fear, and seized the shovel by the side of the pool, pointing a scorpion between two stones close to the wall of the house. In a panic he started to beat it with a shovel until he made paste of it against the bone-hard ground. (79-80)

- 20 The being close to the house of the little beast with a sting and the frenzy that seizes the man is an instance of the real coming back to haunt the man of what he has foreclosed from the symbolic.
- 21 And what has been foreclosed always insists in interfering in the subject's existence. It determines existence beyond the subject's conscious control and for ever creates the same slip-ups in different guises. The crash that is narrated at the beginning of the story has symbolic significance to interpret the disappearance of "a man who can neither talk nor work" (81). Because he was drunk during the slipping up of the Vespa on the rutted dirt-track, the truth of the absence of desire is all the more intensely revealed in the feeling he has during the crash, "he remembered the happiness of the certainty that nothing he could do would avert the crash" (76). Instead of attempting to protect his wife from the fall, he sadistically rejoices in the destructive course of things, "Shielded by his body she would have been unhurt". The man is so clearly on the side of aphanisis that he becomes physically diaphanous. His body vanishes to facilitate the fall, "Her face came across his shoulder to strike the driving mirror". What is being performed is a murderous acting-out on a narcissistic woman who ends up with a gash below her eye. The gash is strategically placed by the writer since this is the cut that cuts both ways. It is a literal cut that works on the level of the signified of the tale and it is a metaphorical cut expressive of the split of the subject, a cut the 'I' always strives to cosmetize and that never goes away in spite of the doctor's assurances that the scar will heal.

The Political

- 22 It is John McGahern's poetical way to let the reader connect details to point out the contradictions in the characters. For instance, the woman who has been reified by the magistrate nevertheless calls for a master. She declares herself a communist and married the man so as to escape the theatre she saw as a "system of exploitation [...]"It's pure fascism" (84), she says. When she comes to think of her dead father she cries and compares her husband unfavourably with her father. Her husband is "a weak man" (99) because he offers her no protection from the world, "If I was married to a strong man like my father it would be different" (99). What the depressive woman unwittingly calls for is a strong man that would create for her a space in which to expand her self. Since she calls for "complete participation for everybody" (84) in the professional world, it seems her public sphere ethics is at odds with her ethics for the private sphere.
- 23 While talking with her husband's friends, José and Tomas, both communists, the latter being the owner of the café where the man spends time drinking, the woman even calls for a revolution, "Why don't the people of Spain do something, overthrow the fascist government?," (94) she says. Read within a lacanian framework, she unwittingly calls for a master, a strong man, that would discipline everyone, purging everyone of false ideals, making things work. As Lacan said to the young 1968 revolutionaries that were heckling him, "What you want as revolutionaries is a master. You will have him".¹⁰

- 24 This is not unlike the contradiction that lies in José's views expressed in his reaction to the statement, 'the communists lost the war'. José says, "The communists did not lose the war. The people of Spain lost the war" (94). This character universalizes the communists' interests by absorbing the people of Spain. The political community becomes completely unified as the communists become identified with the people. The distinction between civil society and the differences within the political community vanish as the Other becomes the Same.
- 25 In the story communists and fascists are dismissed in the same breath for their intolerance of the Other. José shot two priests and is ready to do so again, "We took them out and shot them against the wall of the church. And we'd shoot them again if we got the chance, ' José confided." (94). The magistrate, too, who is a fascist thinks in terms of hierarchical oppositions, 'I like foreigners. I hate Spanish scum" (94). Probably because he exports his peaches to all parts of the world does he appreciate foreigners, let alone the support the fascists received from other governments during the war. Appropriating the water for his orchard, he monopolizes it, "these scums do not have water for their houses," he laughed in crazy triumph' (95). His ideology is that of the sadistic master who objectifies the Other, man and woman alike, making the Other suffer the pain of existence, since as Lacan puts it, "sadism is the expelling in the Other of the pain of existence".¹¹ The magistrate is reported as having been sadistic, beating prisoners during the Spanish war,
- We shot his two brothers, and when the fascists won he went into the Murcia jail with a bundle of birches. And he went from cell to cell till he broke every birch he had on the prisoners' back. My brother was a prisoner there but not even a fascist pig beat shackled prisoners'. José was clinched in hatred even when he broke off to translate for Tomas who nodded it was true. (97)
- 26 Communists and fascists are therefore united in a common hate that precludes a positive relation. The petrification of José when the magistrate enters the café ("José sat in petrified dignity on the chair" p. 94) is illustrative of the ineradicable tension produced by the hated other. Instead of a peaceful and egalitarian co-existence, what remains is the negative relation that thrives on the suppression of the one by the other. In that case desire aims at finding the absolute position of a freedom without limits, of a world with no other. It is the "triumph of hate" as Sartre puts it, the making of the other into someone unessential, it is "the abolition of the other".¹²
- 27 This suppression inevitably produces oppression for the vanquished as the fight for recognition institutes in the end a master/slave type of relationship. That the man should favour this unequal relationship as he says, "You'd never get anything done if someone didn't impose his will" (84), is in keeping with the shifting and shifty position he occupies throughout the story. The oppression he submits to in order to save his life is thus on its opposite side an alienation that escapes consciousness but emerges in speech as cynicism, as when he says "I don't believe there are solutions" (93). Refusing the fight for recognition that hopefully would establish complete reciprocity of consciences, he takes refuge in the basic freedom that remains open to him: to come and go as he pleases. But this basic freedom that seems his last refuge, is even taken away from him. In the end, the decision he takes to leave for England is a constrained choice as someone has imposed his will on him.
- 28 The complete lack of personal inner freedom of the man as well as his authoritarian political opinion show desire as torn against itself. It is a case of desire reinforcing

alienation and intensifying repression. Far from depicting the juiciness and lusciousness of peaches, the story problematizes the slippery nature of desire. It seems John McGahern endows desire with true aesthetic positivity even as he explores its meandering uncertain course. Desire is given a spontaneity and an autonomy that recalls Deleuze and Guattari's politics of desire. According to Deleuze's iconoclastic conception, desire is beyond the formation of a subject and an object. "flows alone are the objectivity of desire itself," says Deleuze.¹³ Once a "plane of consistency" has come into being, desire can flow according to its own momentum, be it a frantic pace or a leisure one.¹⁴ Whatever the field it invests, it seeks new connections and lines of flights. And this for Deleuze and Guattari makes desire revolutionary as it encourages the formations of new discourses and compositions, disrupting individuals and fixed positioning.

- 29 Whether in the characters themselves or in the system they form when they interact, this 'plane of consistency' becomes vibrant with the tension and rigidity of some lines. When the Canadian millionaire comes to visit the couple, what Deleuze names "the real-desire" becomes manifest. The event itself constitutes a plane which is criss-crossed by different intensities, such as the narcissism of the woman when she is about to receive the roses or the failure of the man that is suggested by the empty tin box of fig rolls which is preferred. Simultaneously, worlds of 'micro-politics' come into existence. As the Canadian millionaire walks back to tend his roses and his capital, the strife-ridden couple reassemble. By laughing at the absurd gift of the tin box, the couple reunify their desire,

'We won't fight, will we?

'I don't want to fight.'

'Don't worry about the eyes. We'll never have the divorce.

'Never'. (77)

- 30 This peace-keeping arrangement is however temporary as other lines of flights are explored. The woman who is an actress has left the theatre because she felt exploited. She now translates plays into English and, at the same moment, the man himself fails to find inspiration for another work. As the woman chose translation work to experience autonomy, the man's desire founders in the face of the other's assertion of desire. Desire is thus fundamentally dependent on the Other. When the woman wants to improve their relation by undergoing a psychoanalysis, desire is apparently taken home,

'Maybe we could both go to the analyst', she said. If he had to go to an analyst he would rather return to the Catholic Church and go to confession, which would at least be cheaper." (87-8)

- 31 In the space of two sentences, John McGahern has orchestrated the letter of his spirit. Two contrasted attempts to recover desire are presented in the same breath. Ironically, psychoanalysis is shown as "a flow of words against a flow of money," as Deleuze says when dismissing the interminable psychoanalytic contract.¹⁵ Confession that predates psychoanalysis is also ironically presented as a money-saving device. Here, it seems, a flow of guilt is exchanged for a flow of forgiveness. Finally, flow for flow organizes the force of desire.
- 32 It is altogether frighteningly anti-humanist, this undoing of the stable formations of the subject, but whether seen in deleuzian terms as deterritorialization of repression or in lacanian terms as the manifestation of the truth of desire, desire does slip up and not necessarily in beneficial forms. In the story, water is probably its most effective symbol

as it is lacked by some, abused and wasted by others, it spills out of containers or seeps through them, it is also a commodity and can be bought and sold. You can also dive and swim in it for the mere pleasure of it. But the most potent figure of all is when the earth itself hankers after water as dear life,

the magistrate waved an arm, and when he shouted at the two workmen they ran and turned several water taps on. Water is magic in the south of Spain. As it gushed into the channels, the red clay drinking it as fast as it ran [...] (95).

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NOTES

1. J. Lacan, *Les Formations de l'inconscient, le séminaire V*, Paris: Seuil, 1998, p. 442. I will translate French texts throughout.
2. J. McGahern, "Peaches," *The Collected Stories*, New York: Vintage, 1994, p. 75-99. Page references will be integrated to the text.
3. Heidegger, *Questions III*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975, p. 188.
4. J.-P Sartre, *Les Cahiers pour une morale*, ed. A. Elkaïm, Paris: Gallimard, 1983, p. 430.
5. G. Bailhache, *Le Sujet chez Emmanuel Lévinas, Fragilité et subjectivité*, Paris: Puf, 1994.
6. Concerning the controversial relationship of Heidegger with nazism see V. Farias, *Heidegger et le Nazisme*, Paris: Verdier, 1987.
7. E. Jones, *Théorie et pratique de la psychanalyse*, (1948) , Paris: Payot, 1997, p. 386.

8. J. Lacan, *Les Quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Le Séminaire XI, Paris: Seuil, 1973, p. 201.
 9. *Ibid.* p. 191
 10. J. Lacan, *L'Envers de la psychanalyse*, Le Séminaire XVII, Paris: Seuil, 1991, p. 239.
 11. J. Lacan, *Ecrits*, Paris: Seuil, 1966, p. 778
 12. J.-P. Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, Paris: Gallimard, 1943, p. 463
 13. G. Deleuze et C. Parnet, *Dialogues*, Paris: Champ Flammarion, 1996, p. 96. See also by the two writers, G. Deleuze et F. Guattari, *L'Anti-Oedipe*, Paris: Minuit, 1972. and *Mille Plateaux*, Paris: Minuit, 1980
 14. *Dialogues*, p. 108
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 103
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ABSTRACTS

Lacan sees desire as constituting the fundamental dialectics and formation of the unconscious. This idea is developed in a reading of John MacGahern's 'Peaches'. This short-story explores desire as slip-up in all the ambiguous meaning of this expression. Firstly, it is in terms of the self and the other that the dimension of desire is analysed. The relationship between the man and the woman is presented as not simply scenes from conjugal life but as showing the man's false serenity behind which lurks an anxiety of death. Then, aphanisis or the disappearance of the man's desire is shown and reinterpreted in terms of Lacan's conception of aphanisis as the fading of the subject. This aphanisis is then seen in relation with castration. As contradictions are at work in the characters' speeches, the political aspect of the story is taken into account to show desire as being skewed differently in each character as desire seeks different routes to recognition and freedom. Lastly, Deleuze and Guattari's iconoclastic view of desire is contrasted with that of Lacan to explain further John MacGahern's complex structuring of desire.

Lacan décrit le désir comme constitutif du sujet et dialectique fondamentale à l'oeuvre dans l'inconscient. Cette conception guide l'analyse de la nouvelle 'Peaches' de John MacGahern. La nouvelle problématise le désir comme bavure dans toute l'ambiguïté de cette expression. Dans un premier temps, la relation entre le moi et l'autre est commentée pour montrer que la relation entre l'homme et la femme ne constitue pas uniquement des scènes de la vie conjugale, mais trahit l'inauthentique sérénité de l'homme qui dissimule une angoisse de la mort. Ensuite, le concept d'aphanisis est utilisé selon la conception lacanienne qui fait de l'aphanisis une disparition du sujet reliée à la castration. La contradiction qui marque le discours des personnages nous conduit à aborder l'aspect politique de la nouvelle. Le désir fait subir une torsion à l'être et révèle un désir qui emprunte des chemins différents selon les personnages pour atteindre la reconnaissance et la liberté. Enfin, la conception iconoclaste de Deleuze et Guattari est confrontée à la conception lacanienne du désir pour élaborer davantage encore la "dansité" (Lacan) de l'écriture du désir de MacGahern.

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