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Maguy Pernot-Deschamps



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REFERENCES

Eamon MAHER, John McGahern, *From the Local to the Universal*, Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2003, 191 pp., ISBN 1-904148-40-9.

- 1 In the latest book published by The Liffey Press, in their Contemporary Irish Writers Series, Eamon Maher sets about covering the forty or so creative years in John McGahern's life, from his first novel, *The Barracks* (1963), to the latest to date, *That They May Face The Rising Sun* (2002), through his *The Collected Short Stories* (1992), which includes three short story collections that had been published separately – *Nightlines* (1970), *Getting Through* (1978) and *High Ground* (1985).
- 2 Maher devotes about forty pages – out of 191 – to the short stories, which are both different from, and the same as, the full-length works. McGahern's definition of what a short story is all about – as opposed to what is aimed at in a novel – is clearly exemplified in *The Collected Short Stories* and Maher is right to quote it in the introduction to his analysis of the stories: 'I think the novel is a wonderful form, because I think it's the closest to society... The short story isn't social at all. *It's just a small explosion* (italics mine), and in a way the whole world begins before the short story begins and, in a way, a whole world takes place afterwards, which the reader imagines'. The chapter is therefore aptly entitled 'Snapshots of Existence'. The story 'Parachutes' is then used as an example among many. The 'explosion' is here the end of an affair between the first-person narrator and a young woman met at a dance hall. In the course of the narrative, the reader gets a glimpse of 'the whole world... before the short story begins', with flashbacks, particularly to their first meeting, while the 'whole world [which] takes place afterwards' is suggested through the image of the

‘parachutes’, the thistledown being blown about in the streets. In the same way, the narrator is ‘drifting’ into a future that the reader is left to imagine.

- 3 Many more examples of ‘snapshots of existence’ are mentioned by Maher in his presentation to convey the difference between short stories and novels but, at the same time and right from the start, he hits on what, in McGahern’s works, makes them intrinsically the same – the central vision of ‘the wheel’. He starts his chapter on the short stories with his own commentary on the story entitled ‘Wheels’ and then his various headings – ‘Doomed Relationships’, ‘Family Tensions and Social Commentary’ and ‘Memory Regained’ all point to the basic circular structure and essence of McGahern’s whole work. In the beginning is the end and, in the end, the beginning. The whole process through which memory is regained – ‘The wheel that allows [one] to relive the past in the present’, p. 94 – and then reinvented by imagination is ‘the completed circle’ (p. 35) that Morans refers to, on his last day in the schoolroom, in the first part of *The Leavetaking*. Apart from a few pages (pp. 73-77) that would probably benefit from some synthesizing, Maher’s thesis on the quest for wholeness throughout McGahern’s works, and particularly in the short stories, is entirely convincing.

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