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Incommunicability and Alienation in John McGahern's "My Love, My Umbrella": an Analysis of the Discursive Strategies

Dominique Dubois

- 1 Numerous critics have emphasised the conflictual nature of verbal exchanges in John McGahern's fiction. It is true that constructive dialogue is hardly a word one can use when referring to interpersonal communication in his works. Either the characters attempting to communicate resort to phatic language thus underlining the vacuity of what they have to say or else they use rude, abusive language that reveals the existence of a latent unresolved conflict. But critics have also underlined the importance of the silences that repeatedly punctuate the characters' conversations. They have shown that silence is as much part of the verbal exchange as the words themselves.
- 2 It is obvious that both categories (perfunctory utterances or protracted silences) are complementary in so far as they participate of the same strategy to express the characters' incapacity to communicate in a "normal" way. Not unsurprisingly, the more closely related the characters are, the most difficult they find it to communicate. The relationship between fathers and sons is a case in point but the same can be said of husbands and wives or even of next of kin. Communication between lovers may at first sight seem easier. After all, there is a natural attraction between two lovers that is bound to make interaction less strained.
- 3 And yet, it would be misleading to believe that communication is really successful between the various couples that appear in the short stories. Indeed, verbal exchanges often involve a high degree of implicitness that blurs the message and makes it just as indecipherable as when it is not expressed at all or conveyed in a flurry of abuse. And then, of course, silence is just as frequent between lovers as it is between complete strangers. Reluctance to speak out more than a few words, protracted silences are the

rule rather than the exception and bespeak a blatant difficulty to communicate which not even passion or sexual eagerness can seem to dispel.

- 4 The aim of our paper, which concentrates on "My Love, My Umbrella," will be to analyse the different discursive strategies used by McGahern in the short story to reveal the incapacity of his characters to truly communicate. Basing our study on the findings of pragmatics, we will examine the way the two lovers interact in the diegesis and we will show how each form of failure in communication reveals not just their incapacity to love but more specifically their alienation and ultimately the meaninglessness of their lives.
- 5 McGahern's *Collected Stories* offers a wide range of love affairs but they all display the same sad characteristic: they all end in failure and "My Love, My Umbrella" is no exception. Not surprisingly, the failure of the love affair recounted in the short story is clearly inscribed in its very beginning and verbal interaction plays a central role in the telling of this sad tale. In this respect, an analysis of the pragmatics involved in the exchanges that take place the first time the two young people meet is particularly revealing of that subsequent failure.
- 6 Careful observation of the pattern of adjacency pairs, i. e. the connected pairs of utterances pronounced in turn by the two speakers, shows the uneasiness of the two characters throughout the whole evening they spend together. Obviously, such uneasiness is even more perceptible in the very first words they exchange:

'It is strange, the band,' I said; her face flinched away, and in the same movement back, turned to see who'd spoken. Her skin under the black hair had the glow of health and youth, and the solidity at the bones of the hips gave promise of a rich seed-bed.

'It's strange,' she answered, and I was at once anxious for her body.

[...]

'They're watching the clock,' I said.

'Why?' her face turned again.

'They'll only play till the opening hour.'
- 7 What is striking in the opening scene is not so much the guardedness with which the young woman responds to the narrator's invitation to engage in conversation as the way she flouts the co-operative principle that has been defined by H. P. Grice as the foundation on which normal conversation is based. According to the founding father of pragmatics, conversations are characteristically co-operative efforts in which speakers attempt to convey the right amount of information in the clearest possible way so as to ensure their addressee's understanding of the meaning they are partaking and thus to get their active participation. This means that when speakers seem to breach those maxims of conversational behaviour, their purpose is not to restrict the meaning of what they intend to say but on the contrary to enlarge it by forcing their hearer to make inferences.
- 8 Even a brief analysis of the young woman's conversation during that first encounter shows that this is not a principle by which she abides. Either she is merely content to repeat the narrator's words (65) or she responds with a question of her own. Thus, she uses the interrogative word "why" in four of the six sentences she pronounces during this initial exchange as the two young people stand outside listening to the band. Ironically, the way she uses that word and the implicit tone of her voice seem to indicate she does not expect an answer as if an answer was not needed, would not affect the way she acted. It is significant that she agrees to go and have a drink with the

narrator although she claims she does not see any point in doing so (66). Her reaction is of course proleptic of what happens on one of the last times the two lovers meet. Prompted by the narrator to explain why she no longer wishes to see him, the young woman bluntly replies that she does not love him (72) and that going on having an affair with him would be a "waste of time" (72) thus reasserting her initial claim that she did not know why she had accepted his offer of a drink.

- 9 Even when the young woman agrees to comply with what the narrator has to offer or when she accepts to engage in talk, she does so in the curtest possible way thus preventing conversation to develop any further. A good example is when the narrator points out a famous poet to her in the pub. True, she seems ready to engage in conversation as she asks him whether he likes poetry but when he answers in a way that allows her take her turn as in any normal conversation, she then simply replies "not very much" which puts an end to the discussion. Clearly, the way she reacts is typical of a refusal to seriously engage in conversation which goes beyond mere bashfulness and it obviously foreshadows the inevitable failure of the relationship.

- 10 But her performance is amply matched by that of the young man, whose conversational behaviour is fraught with ulterior motives. The narrator is the one who initiates the conversation and the illocutionary force of his utterances is obvious enough. As the crudeness of his initial remark about her hips giving promise of a rich seed-bed" (65) suggests, he is visibly attracted by the young woman's sensuality. His whole conversational strategy is clearly dictated by his desire to secure the young girl's acceptance of intimacy. It no doubt explains his guardedness and restraint in everything he says or his care not to break the silence that settles between them when he asks her to hang on behind the church for a while:

Behind the church was a dead end overhung with old trees, and the street lights did not reach as far as the wall at its end, a grey orchard wall with some ivy.

'Can we stay here a short time, then?'

I hung upon the silence, afraid she'd use the rain as excuse, and breathed when she said, 'Not for long, it is late.' (67)

- 11 Despite his caution, the narrator cannot hide his craving for the girl's body as everything he says is revealing of it, from his remark about the rain reminding him of candlesticks to his insistence that she should hold his umbrella. In a context in which he views sexual intercourse as nothing but the consumption of one another's flesh (67), it is indeed hard not to see these references as phallic symbols expressive of his sexual appetite. In terms of pragmatics, the narrator's strategy has clearly paid off since he succeeds in bringing the young woman to have sex with him. But this success cannot dispel the somewhat gloomy atmosphere that prevails throughout the evening. As the narrator implies when he remarks "that was the way our first evening went" (67), their life together has already settled into a routine.

- 12 Characteristically, the sex scene has little dialogue as if the characters were at a loss for words to express the intensity of the moment. Thus, the woman responds to the narrator's proposal of sex by pressing her lips hard on the narrator's while the latter can barely control his trembling as he starts undressing her. In fact, the two characters only exchange two brief sentences during the intercourse itself and one afterwards to decide about their next meeting. This terseness is symbolic of the incapacity to share their emotions and feelings with one another as if each were entrapped in their own selfish world. Sex then appears as a mere palliative for the vacuity of their lives. The

narrator acknowledges this fact when he explicitly refers to the feebleness of their verbal interaction:

Perhaps the rain, the rain will wash away the pooriness of our attempts at speech, our bodies will draw closer, closer than our speech, I hoped, as she returned on the throat my kiss in the bus, and that we'd draw closer to a meal of each other's flesh; and from the bus, under the beat of rain on the umbrella, we walked beyond Fairview church. (67)

- 13 The paucity of the couple's conversation is highlighted by their eagerness to overhear the conversations of others as if they were content to feed on other people's words rather than engage in genuine sharing of personal information regarding themselves, which would have been only natural considering they had just met. In fact, they seem unable to enter a truly interpersonal relationship and look out for a third party to fill in the silences that settle between them:

She asked me if I could hear what the poet was saying to the four men at his table who continually plied him with whiskey. I hadn't heard. Now we both listened. He was saying he loved the blossoms of Kerr Pinks more than roses, a man could only love what he knew well, and it was the quality of the love that mattered and not the accident. The whole table said they'd drink to that, but he glared at them as if slighted, and as if to avoid the glare they called for a round of doubles. (66-67)

- 14 It is significant that the young woman should be more interested in the verbal exchange that is taking place at the table next to hers than in talking with the man she has accepted to have a drink with. Characteristically, when she asks the narrator if he overheard what was being said at the next table, he stops speaking and both start paying attention to what the poet is saying. In doing so, they relinquish their position of speaking subjects and they become little more than the men who are listening to the poet's soliloquy and are scolded by him when they do not respond appropriately. If at the diegetic level, this does not bode well for the future of the relation, it is obviously at the structural level that the scene matters most.

- 15 Indeed, the topic of the conversation prevents us from treating the scene as a mere instance of eavesdropping on the part of the two lovers. Love, or rather its impossibility, is the theme of the short story and the poet's words are of obvious structural import. By stressing that in love what matters is the depth of one's feelings born of long acquaintance and not the superficiality of chance encounters, the poet passes an indirect criticism on the young couple's attitude towards love. It is significant that at the end of the novel the narrator will explicitly acknowledge his mistake in his handling of the love affair by confessing that he understood how much the young woman meant for him once that he had lost her:

Little by little my life had fallen into her keeping, it was only in the loss I had come to know it, life without her, the pain of the loss of my own life without the oblivion the dead have, all longing changed to die out of my own life on her lips, in her thighs, since it was only through her it lived. (72)

- 16 Still, the reader may doubt that the episode serves him a lesson since his despair at having lost the young woman is first and foremost expressed through his jealousy at imagining another man making love to her. Once again, the narrator confuses sexual attraction for love and his distraction borders on the ridiculous as he wishes he had the power to make casual sex a capital offence:

The body I'd tried to escape from became my only thought. In the late evening after pub- close, I'd stop in terror at the thought of what hands were fondling her body, and would, if I had power, have made all casual sex a capital offence. (73)

- 17 It is significant that the narrator should spend the next few months riding up and down the bus line clinging steadfastly to his umbrella. Traditionally, the umbrella symbolizes a timorous refusal of any form of fecundity, be it material or spiritual as well as escapism. It is therefore a fit image to associate with someone who, throughout the story, has tried to escape his responsibility by having his girlfriend hold his umbrella for him and who has conscientiously spilled his seed on the ground (68), (71).
- 18 Ironically, the narrator's inadequacy is spelled out as early as the first paragraph. Not only does the precise description of the umbrella with its imitation leather over the handle and its metal point bent suggests the narrator's lack of depth and maturity, but the lyrics of the song that the band is playing is a cruel counterpoint to the love affair that is about to start. For one thing, the narrator is hardly the big, strong man of the ballad. And then, the fact that the band is performing at the back of the public lavatory in front of a handful of people hardly smacks of romanticism and simply reinforces the prevailing impression of an impending disaster:
- The band was playing when we met, the Blanchardstown Fife and Drum. They were playing *Some day he'll come along / The man I love / And he'll be big and strong / The man I love* at the back of the public lavatory on Burgh Quay, facing a few persons on the pavement in front of the Scotch House. (65)
- 19 This extensive analysis of the lovers' first encounter shows how pathetic their love affair is from the start. It therefore comes as no surprise if the pattern of non communication that the two lovers establish at their first meeting is repeated on their subsequent encounters. The paragraph that immediately follows the narration of the couple's first encounter is in the iterative mode and insists on the routine pattern that they have fallen into. More interesting in terms of pragmatics, their routine involves the habit of telling each other stories. This calls for several comments.
- 20 First, this seems to confirm their incapacity to speak about personal things. Thus, the reader never knows anything about the young woman except that she comes from the countryside and that her father uses baking soda for his stomach just like the poet. In this respect, it is significant that the autodiegetic narrator of the story does not provide her name. Not only does he not use in the narration, but he also never calls her by her name when they meet. All this shows that the two young people's conversation is not based on real exchange but rather on an indirect form of communication which is reminiscent of their eavesdropping on the poet's conversation at their first meeting.
- 21 Second, it is revealing that the two stories that lead to the final separation of the young couple should be related by the narrator rather than told directly by the teller. Such a device obviously increases the impression of incommunicability between them, especially as it is reinforced by the narrators' failure to tell the woman how uneasy her story has made him. It is the first of a series of missed opportunities on his part to actually speak out his mind honestly and show how much he loves the girl. His problem is that he is of course prevented from doing so by fear of social commitment.
- 22 It is interesting to note that according to the narrator, the woman got all excited as she told him her story of how she lured a neighbour of hers into fumbling her breasts. In fact, this is the only moment in the whole short story when the girl really seems to be enjoying herself. Her behaviour is revealing of both an obvious fascination for sex and a definite cruelty, which becomes perceptible later on in the story when the two young people start quarrelling.

- 23 The quarrel is prompted by the narrator's story about the two gentlemen fighting and assaulting one another with their umbrellas. The girl's resentment at listening to the story surprises the narrator — although it hardly surprises the reader — and leads him to propose to the young woman. But he does so in the most circuitous way, using two modals in the same sentence, thus revealing his reluctance to make the move:

as we walked into the street lamp I asked, we had so fallen into the habit of each other, 'Would you think we should ever get married?' 'Kiss me.' She leaned across the steel between us. 'Do you think we should?' I repeated. 'What would it mean to you?' she asked. (70)

- 24 His lack of sincerity is amply confirmed by an inner monologue that gives access to the narrator's unvoiced thoughts regarding his fears of the future as a married man. In terms of pragmatics, it is interesting to note that the inner monologue is not only wedged into the dialogue between the two lovers but also takes up twice as much space. Once again, what gets revealed is the characters' incapacity to communicate and reach out to the other. It is therefore hardly surprising that the young woman should not respond positively to the narrator's half-hearted proposal. Instead, she resorts to an empty questioning, which is more a sign of her helplessness and anger than of a genuine desire to get things clarified.

- 25 The scene of the quarrel is typical of the two young people's incapacity to understand each other, which is the case throughout the short story. Not only do the lovers repeatedly find it hard to express their feelings but when they do, they are regularly at odds with one another. He does not like her story, she resents his but neither of them bothers to explain why. They seem to live in two different worlds that only come up into contact during their lovemaking. Of course, the quarrel is the turning point in their relationship and from then on, it starts deteriorating to the point when not even sex will be able to redeem the anger and frustration they feel at being together. Lovemaking becomes a fierce, awkward affair and conversation a slanging match.

- 26 The measure of their growing estrangement is powerfully conveyed by the adverbs used to describe the way they act or speak to each other. The climax is, of course, the episode when the young woman angrily refuses to hold the narrator's umbrella during their lovemaking as it is a clear night. Instinctively, the woman perceives the narrator's incapacity to commit himself to a steady relation. Verbal interaction is once again reduced to a few sharp words and the curtness of the exchanges leaves no room for further discussion. What is striking is that suddenly words are clearly aimed at hurting.

- 27 Paradoxically, the more estranged they get, the more reckless the narrator becomes in his handling of the situation. To the woman's angry resentment at being taken for a mere extension of the narrator's umbrella, the latter responds by deciding to temporarily put an end to their affair as if he wanted to punish her for not complying with his whim. He deliberately excludes her from his projects by shamelessly lying about what he will do during the coming holidays. This has the effect of further antagonising the woman and her banging the door in his face at the end of the scene seals the end of their relationship:

I did not lead her under the trees behind the church, but left after kissing her lightly, 'Goodnight.' Instead of arranging to meet as usual at the radiators, I said, 'I'll ring you during the week.' Her look of anger and hatred elated me. 'Ring if you want,' she said as she angrily closed the door. (71)

- 28 After that, the two lovers only meet three times but each time it is at the entreaty of the narrator who is visibly obsessed by the girl to the point of being ill. The last

meeting but one is ironically the very opposite of the first one. This time, it is the young woman who takes the initiative and the narrator who pleads and tries to elicit an explanation through his questions. When it comes, the words are as sharp as a knife and the reason she gives for no longer wanting to see him is final: she does not love him (72). To his questions and entreaties, she responds unambiguously, flatly refusing any further intercourse, be it sexual or social.

29 Appropriately, all her answers are in the negative form and powerfully express the finality. Of her rejection of him and the future life he is now willing to offer.

30 The narrator is left to his sorrow, clinging helplessly to his umbrella. Foolishly, he attempts to go back to their old spot behind the church in order to regain the old magic of standing in the rain under an umbrella. The irony is that this time he is on his own and has no opportunity to make amends. Clearly, he has paid a high price for the illusory freedom he thought he had gained since he now finds himself in the grip of an obsession that thoroughly alienates him from his surroundings. All he is left to contemplate is the absurdity of life, a life that nothing seems to be able to redeem but death:

I often rang her, pleading, and one lunch hour she consented to see me when I said I was desperate. We walked aimlessly through streets of the lunch hour, and I'd to hold back tears as I thanked her for kindness, though when she'd given me all her evenings and body I'd hardly noticed. The same night after pub-close I went - driven by the urge that brings people back to the rooms where they once lived and no longer live - and stood out of the street lamps under the trees where so often we had stood, in the hope that some meaning of my life or love would come, but the night only hardened about the growing absurdity of a man standing under an umbrella beneath the drip from the green leaves of the trees. (74)

31 The last paragraph of the short story tells the reader how the narrator spends the next few months ceaselessly riding the bus to give himself the illusion of movement and life. The last sentence seems to indicate that he finally recovers from his all-consuming passion. But the words he uses bespeaks a somewhat grim, caustic vision of life, which is often characteristic of John McGahern's writing. There is a violence in the way he grips his umbrella that suggests that life is a battle for the individual as he confronts himself and the others, even when they are next of kin, friends or lovers as we have seen in "My Love, My Umbrella."

32 The analysis of verbal interaction in the short story clearly shows that communication is difficult, even impossible, in such a harsh universe. Verbal violence, silences or mere terseness of speech are clearly all characteristic of the incommunicability that prevents the characters from expressing their inner feelings in a way that would make them acknowledgeable by others. Entrapped in a meaningless routine, they seem unable to reach out to the latter, however close they may be to him or her. The result is growing misunderstanding that leads to irredeemable estrangement. That is why we can say that incommunicability is the measure of the characters' individual alienation as well as the expression of the absurdity of the world in which they live.

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