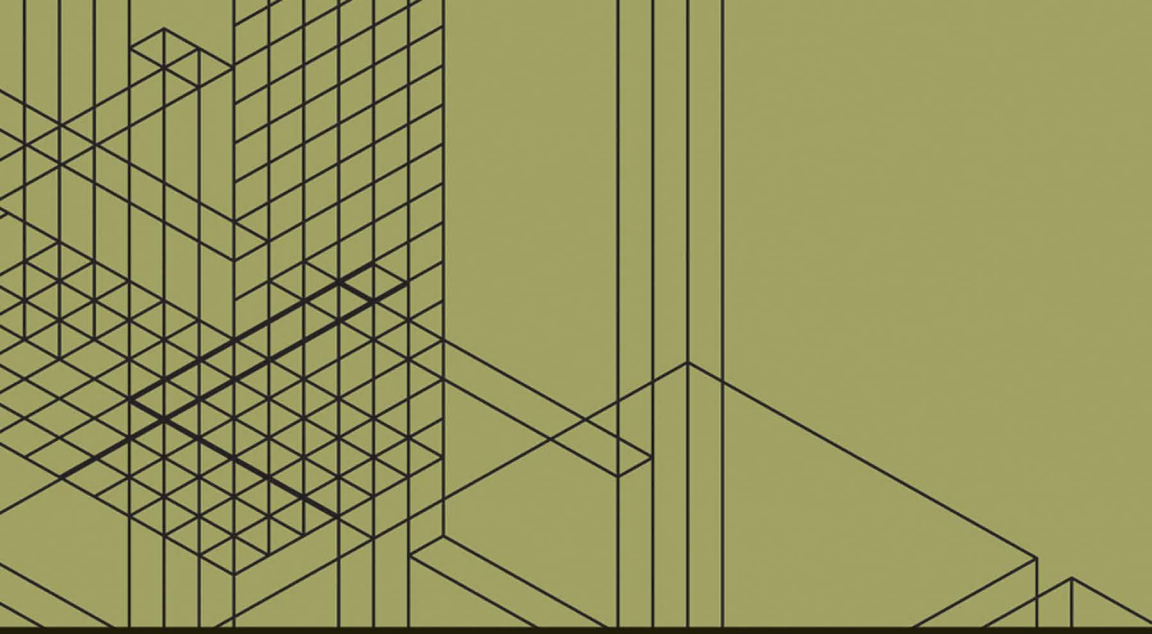
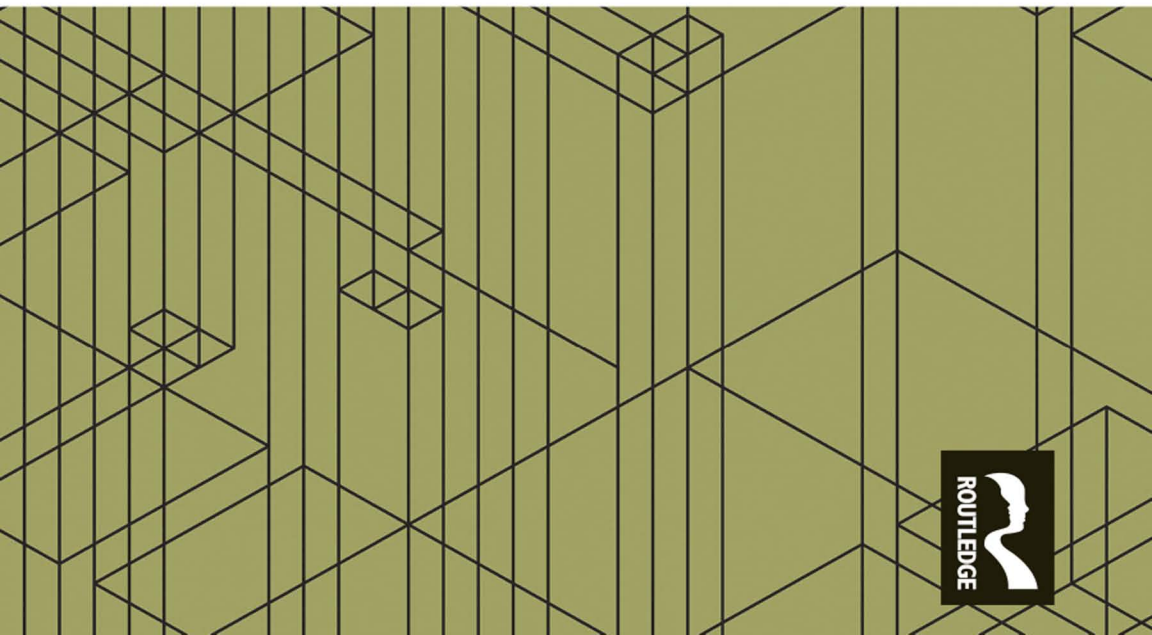


Routledge Studies in Irish Literature

JOHN MCGAHERN

WAYS OF LOOKING

John Singleton



John McGahern

John McGahern (1934–2006) believed that fiction could act as a window on the world. Such windows, however, frame our fields of vision, alter and shape our perspectives. Far from being static, the artist's perspective must continually evolve. This book provides a literary analysis of John McGahern's artistic and poetic vision – his 'ways of looking', examining the shifting focus of this vision: how and why it develops, what effects such developments have on the work's forms and how these forms evolve, at what times and in response to what stimuli. This volume demonstrates that such developments mirror an analogous social expansion during the latter half of the twentieth century and argues that McGahern's literary spaces relate to his efforts to realise a more accommodating form to envelop the structureless society. While the number of critical studies on McGahern has increased markedly in recent years, research still tends to fall into the well-established camps of social realism or literary aestheticism. This text aims to explore the common ground between the material context and social worlds of each work and the hermeneutics of a 'traditional' literary investigation. It traverses such divides through close readings of McGahern's work, with attention to the topopoetical production of images of the house, the home and the family unit. The book ultimately shows how attention to McGahern's literary spaces provides a greater understanding of the aesthetic, vision and form of each novel and allows us to understand those aspects relative to the social, cultural and political undercurrents of the works individually and collectively.

John Singleton was awarded his PhD in English from the National University of Ireland, Galway, in 2020. He has taught across various disciplines in the School of English and Creative Arts and the Centre for Irish Studies at NUI, Galway, since 2016. His main research interests are Modern Literature and Drama in English, Creative Writing, Irish Studies and Spatiality. His research has been published in the Review of Irish Studies in Europe, NPPSH Reflections and *The Graveyard in Literature: Liminality and Social Critique*.

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John McGahern
Ways of Looking

John Singleton

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Abbreviations

AW	*Amongst Women*, 1990.
B	*The Barracks*, 1963.
D	*The Dark*, 1965.
DW	*John McGahern, The Rockingham Shoot and Other Dramatic Writings*, 2018.
GT	*Getting Through*, 1978.
HG	*High Ground*, 1985.
L	*The Leavetaking*, 1974. Revised edition, 1984.
LW	*Love of the World: Essays*, 2009.
M	*Memoir*, 2005.
N	*Nightlines*, 1970.
P	*The Pornographer*, 1979.
PD	*The Power of Darkness*, 1991.
RS	*That They May Face the Rising Sun*, 2002.
TL	*The Letters of John McGahern*, 2021.
P71	The John McGahern Papers (c.1958–2006). *James Hardiman Library*, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Introduction

The house of vision: from darkness to the rising sun

> The soul, fortunately, has an interpreter – often an unconscious but still a faithful interpreter – in the eye.
>
> – Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*

Ways of looking

We come to writing literary criticism through reading. It seems an obvious path, yet much mystery and confusion surround such quests for a distinct way of looking at literature and the world. You venture into the great garret of the Self, armed with only the work and your intuition, and hope to emerge into the light of new knowledge or learning. In the utilitarian educational landscape, however, the importation of language and practices from the 'hard' sciences has unfairly diminished traditional modes of literary research. Studies that proceed along the secure paths of agreeable themes and concerns, guided by rigid frameworks and methodologies, can mitigate the erratic impulses and deviations of the individual intellect. Literature can be a school of suggestion and indication that dwells expectantly amongst the 'unknowable realities' of language (*B* 177). As critics, we should celebrate a work's spiritual qualities and inscrutable mysteries as ardently as its portals of discovery, rather than conform to sterile, pseudo-scientific investigations which approach literature like the dissection of a frog – and leave both in the same condition. Our primary *methodology*, then, should be to read, to think and to write as clearly as we can. Now more than ever, we must recover those qualities of gazing and reflecting – dare I say dreaming? – and return them to the centre of the critical approach.

It follows that there is no single ideology or theoretical framework to bolster the various perspectives that follow, nor do I pursue a distinct methodological formula that can be tested: where A + B = the butler did it! Instead, I offer my own intimate experience of each of McGahern's novels and his various public utterances about his art and the art of others. I focus on

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the traditional aspects of literary investigation, such as language, imagery, form, aesthetics and vision, using the first principles of textual analysis and the practices of devoted close reading. Readers will encounter strands of historicism, narratology, theories of space and gender, as well as literary and philosophical concepts, including Plato's Cave, the Heterotopia and the Fifth Province (which will be discussed in more detail later in this Introduction). Where specific terminology is called for, I hope such language emerges naturally from its context and provides the reader with greater clarity. I incorporate quotations from the primary texts consistently so that readers without detailed knowledge of the works under discussion will find enough grounding to follow the ideas and perspectives being advanced. But also so that those who are more well-versed in McGahern's oeuvre may likewise find new details and aspects embedded within the specifics of his language. In this way, I hope to be communicative to those with only a passing interest in McGahern and to those dedicated scholars, to form part of the conversation that uncovers the hidden paths and cuts back the clinging ivy and tangled vines that blind the windows and prevent us from seeing.

Perceptions of McGahern's writing are varied and wide-ranging, as evidenced by the recent collections of critical essays: *John McGahern: Critical Essays*, eds. Raymond Mullen, Adam Bargroff and Jennifer Mullen (2014); *John McGahern Authority and Vision*, eds. Željka Doljanin and Máire Doyle (2017); *Essays on John McGahern: Assessing a Literary Legacy*, eds. Derek Hand and Eamon Maher (2019), not to mention the voluminous contributions collected in the four editions of *The John McGahern Yearbook*, ed. John Kenny (2008–11). These collections show McGahern's fictions to dwell simultaneously within various encampments: social realism or naturalism, pastoral elegy, classical revisionism, Augustan sentimentality, autobiographical tracts, psychological catharsis, European existentialism, transcendent modernism or even postmodernism. Great works of art can, of course, be all these things to all people. Yet, critical consideration of his fiction has predominantly focused on its social realism. Major critics such as Patrick Crotty, Robert F Garratt, Eamon Grennan, Derek Hand, Eamon Maher and James Whyte all note the narrow compass of McGahern's work, suggesting it circles the cardinal point of mid-century rural Ireland's socio-cultural and material history. David Malcolm's *Understanding John McGahern* (2007) reviews the predominant critical receptions of McGahern's work, highlighting 'the degree to which [McGahern's] work can be seen as traditionally realist in orientation' (5), and so these positions will not be rehearsed here. Dermot McCarthy, in *John McGahern and the Art of Memory* (2010), augments his social realist reading with a psychoanalytical approach, aided by what he sees as the autobiographically fixed nodes presented in *Memoir* (2005).

More recent monographs by Stanley van der Ziel (2015), Frank Shovlin (2016) and Richard Robinson (2017) have championed McGahern

as a writer of literary fiction. They assess his work as an artistic endeavour indebted to the lineage and traditions of artisanal production and is removed from the overt material preoccupations of social realism. This scholarship has counterbalanced the materialist approaches which dominated much of the discussion of McGahern's fiction since the 'McGahern Affair', and which seemed to be encouraged by the publication of *Memoir*. Similarly, Niamh Campbell's *Sacred Weather: Atmospheric Essentialism in the Work of John McGahern* (2019) has expanded McGahern studies by developing 'atmospheric essentialism' as a template to investigate if there is such a thing as an essential Irishness which can be experienced. The immeasurable influence of Denis Sampson's original study *Outstaring Nature's Eye* (1993) and *Young John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist* (2012) is felt throughout this book. Sampson's article 'The Lost Image: Some Notes on McGahern and Proust' from the special issue of *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* (1991) first drew my attention to the quality of McGahern's 'vision' or 'way of looking' which has found some expression in the chapters that follow.

Typically, scholars assert their position and practices, sometimes aggressively, against other research within the field. I am guided, however, by my preference for close reading and primary texts. I try to offer my critical perspective in a positive light and avoid reductive tit-for-tat exchanges and games of intellectual ping-pong. This book does not ignore or claim to replace such critical conversations but instead privileges individual engagement with the primary texts. The foremost commentators are all represented on these pages, often implicitly, but their inclusion is limited in favour of McGahern's words. Secondary sources are included where they overlap with my discussion or have been instrumental in shaping my thinking – as a great many of them unquestionably have.

I have resisted the siren song of biographical quarry or psychoanalytical excavation and have skirted the dense wood of literary source hunting. I read McGahern's works neither as pure social realism nor as an etherised subject for theoretical dissection. Neither do I see McGahern as artistically detached, producing prose scrubbed of its social grounding. I approach McGahern as both social commentator *and* classical artist – a median course through the Scylla and Charybdis of those established approaches. McGahern's aesthetic and vision are grounded in the social world that each work charts. His thematic and formal concerns are explored and mediated through symbols that have their basis in the social realism of Austen, Dickens, Eliot and Hardy and the language and tradition of the European modernism of Beckett, Camus, Joyce, Kafka and Yeats, as others have convincingly demonstrated. McGahern writes about, what Frank O'Connor called, submerged populations and the fates of the individual or the family, which are tied to their local social contexts. These contexts are made symbolically resonant of broader social and national milieus. McGahern draws

on established symbols and signifiers to embed his poetic vision deeper within the society it charts. This results in a complex, uneven collusion of image and myth, social realism and poetic symbolism.

McGahern was faced with the daunting legacy of the Irish literary tradition after independence, which was characterised by the relentless experimentation on one side by the modernists Beckett, Joyce and Yeats and on the other by an often-nationalist myopia of Kavanagh or O'Faoláin. To depict a transitioning Ireland, McGahern sought a new form – a postcolonial realism of sorts. Just as Joyce, arguably McGahern's biggest influence from the Irish tradition, experimented with form to express a nation caught between colonial stasis and postcolonial possibility, McGahern's more subtle, but no less relentless, manipulation of form serves a similar purpose: to scrutinise the nation, its contradictions and delusions. Readers may find Neil Lazarus' thinking in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* instructive here. Lazarus broadly argues that the conflation of the abstract, surreal or magical with postcolonial literature deflects from very real efforts by authors to address residual inequities and falsehood across the postcolonial society and that authors have sought to redress this by adopting radical realist modes.

It is, by now, beyond cliché to say that any discussion of space and place in Ireland is necessarily political. The trauma of colonialism was compounded by the failure to secure a geographically unified state and political independence for the entire island at the close of the War of Independence (1919–21). The partitioning of the island emphasised existing geopolitical partitions – geography, religion, culture and language – and reaffirmed space, place and belonging as defining factors in socio-cultural understandings of identity. Despite a unifying discourse of Catholic nationalism emanating from the corridors of the *Dáil* or the Archbishop's Palace in Drumcondra, Independent Ireland was never succinctly unified by a single vision or creed. As McGahern notes in 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing': 'People did not live in Ireland then. They lived in small, intense communities, and the communities could vary greatly in spirit and character, even over a distance of a few miles' (*LW* 130).

In a nation where eviction and emigration, rack renting and vagrancy were deeply engrained in the national psyche, what could be more fundamental to an individual or communal identity than a sense of belonging? In the wake of partition, the divisions of the Civil War (1922–23), and the return of mass migration, Irish identity in the twentieth century was less a question of 'what is my language?' and more a case of 'where is my place?'

Interviews and non-fiction have made clear that McGahern was acutely aware of these divisions. He believed that this structurelessness, the absence of what he calls a unifying 'system of manners' (Maher, *Local to the Universal* 144; González 175; O'Toole 2), which James Whyte defines as a

'national ideology' and a 'coherent and generally accepted view of reality' (171–72), was the main challenge facing the Irish artist:

> Ireland isn't like other places where the novel has flourished, in that it is so structureless. It has no formed society, no system of manners. Because of that the form of the novel or the shape of the sonnet aren't available to the Irish writer in the same way, which is a pain in the arse because they are a great saving of time. This is true of the novel more than any other form: by its history and nature a novel is a whole world; it is more social than other forms.
>
> (O'Toole 2)

Deprived of a stable and structured society, those knowable communities available in other places where the novel has flourished, 'the Irish novelist has to invent his own forms' (McGahern attributes this quote to Stanislaus Joyce's 1957 book *My Brother's Keeper* (Whyte 227)).

Dissatisfied with the failed attempts at the traditional realist Irish novel, McGahern sought a more accommodating form for the structurelessness of Irish society. From his earliest works, McGahern attempts to create a world of words that can express a society which has no communal identity to draw on and which lacks the real authority to define itself. The formal experimentations across his oeuvre reveal an artist striving to develop a form capable of enveloping a society that has no unifying context, culture or 'system of manners'. McGahern's development, in this light, becomes a quest to discover a way of looking that could unify the structureless society within the social form of the novel: 'to see if these disparates could in any way be made true to one another' (*L* Preface).

McGahern was conscious of the need for art and literature to have an appropriate form. With each new work, McGahern sought a form, space and vision that could envelop the structureless Irish society. In an interview with James Whyte, McGahern recalled a lecture by Patrick Kavanagh in UCD in which the poet 'described the sonnet as the envelope of love' and said that 'if a true letter was to be written it deserved to be sent in the proper envelope' (235). In the absence of a 'unifying system of manners', the family came to be defined as the primary and fundamental unit of Irish society. This understanding was typically framed around the maternal and domestic spaces. McGahern claimed that 'the closest we have to a society in Ireland is the family' (Whyte 233). The image of the family, therefore, offered a microcosm of the nation and its society. And, if the family could be understood as the true letter of society, then the domestic space must be understood as the envelope of the family.

In the absence of a system of manners, McGahern leans on 'the image' to create a narrative and symbolic form powerful enough to encompass the

geopolitical partitions of mid-century Ireland. In 'The Image', the 'dynamic quality of the vision' inspired a restless quest for truth that had to be continually remade across his fiction (*LW* 5). The artistic need to continually create, renew and remake such images has repercussions for McGahern's understanding of form. McGahern's novels depict a wide range of vision that is never at peace, consistently 'rejecting, altering, shaping, straining' towards new ways of looking and seeing (*LW* 7). Constant across these experimentations, however, is the awareness of the social nature of the novel form. McGahern frequently stated versions of his understanding of form: 'I think of the novel as the most social of all art forms, the most closely linked to an idea of society, a shared leisure and a system of manners' (*LW* 212). The social world of the novel and the novel's form itself, then, were inextricable; each one was dependent on the other. I am not suggesting that McGahern's fiction is bound to the socio-cultural environment in a transparently social-realist manner. Rather I am suggesting that, dissatisfied with the received formulas of the traditional realist Irish novel, McGahern continually experimented with form to accommodate the structureless Irish society *and* that those experiments are related aesthetically, formally and symbolically to broader socio-cultural developments across the latter half of the twentieth century.

For McGahern, vision and aesthetics are intertwined; a work's form, its society and the literary space are mutually dependent and cannot be separated. McGahern realised that as one shifted and changed in the turbulent winds of modernising Ireland, so too must he alter the others accordingly. Neglecting either poetic symbolism or the social materialism of the context will leave the reader detached from the aesthetic mode and way of looking in each work.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Irish society gradually modernised in a manner that was often clumsy and irregular. While the oversimplification of a tradition/modernity dichotomy has been complicated by Joe Cleary's *Outrageous Fortune* (2007) and Denis Sampson's *Young John McGahern*, amongst others, this book accepts the general understanding of the 'de Valera's Ireland' as the antipode of modernising Ireland after Lemass and Whitaker. It is undeniable that Ireland, while not perfect, is a more open and tolerant place today than even one generation ago. The waning power of the Church and dwindling parochial fears of the Other have allowed new forms of identity to flourish. While social inequality, austerity, mass emigration, lingering contentions with Britain and harrowing reports of clerical sexual abuse postpone any temptation towards self-congratulations, the emergence of women in local and national politics, The Health (Family Planning) (Amendment) Acts of (1992, 1993) extending access to contraceptives, the lapse of Section 31 of The Broadcasting Authority Act (1994) easing censorship restrictions, the passing

of the Divorce Referendum (1995), the Good Friday Agreement (1998), and Government patronage of Education, Healthcare, Sport and the Arts were seen as a firm rejection of the theocratic, navel-gazing Ireland that de Valera dreamed of.

As McGahern's career progressed, his aesthetic and vision evolved in a manner that loosely parallels the social modernisation of the Irish State. The forms of his novels and stories became less self-consciously confrontational as Irish society itself became more accommodating to those who had previously existed outside the magic circle. McGahern began to consider how alienated individuals might return to the social world. He invested his fiction with a pre-Catholic vision and values that emphasised communal responsibility rather than autonomous detachment and celebrated visionary women over blinded patriarchs.

McGahern focuses – as many other Irish artists – on the family and the home, presenting alienated individuals and fractured families dwelling within the inhospitable domestic space as a microcosm of twentieth-century Ireland. McGahern's way of looking and symbolic use of space create images that reflect an unacknowledged reality of Irish life. Such images are, what McGahern calls, the 'Medusa's mirror, allowing us to see and even celebrate the totally intolerable' (*LW* 7). This book, however, is not an investigation of the physical space but what Edward Soja, Robert Tally and Bertrand Westphal have called the 'real-and-imagined spaces' of fiction. From its earliest utterings, McGahern's work deals with questions of space, place and belonging, exploring aspects of that Irish word '*cumhaidh*': a combination of homesickness, melancholy, general longing for the home-place of one's upbringing (Svetlana Boym, in *The Future of Nostalgia*, suggest we may also see this a form of 'nostalgia'). McGahern's focus on place and belonging reveals a Heideggerian understanding of *Being-in-Place* and an awareness of the alienation the individual endures when displaced from the magic circle of social life. And his most enduring aesthetic and thematic question is: how can the individual (or the artist) realise the 'real authority' or an authentic form of space, place and belonging within the bad faith and structureless society of mid-twentieth-century Ireland?

Across his oeuvre, McGahern maintained an artistic fidelity to 'the image' and believed that the 'image is the basis of all writing. The writer's business is to pull the image that moves us out of the darkness' (Wallace 5). I have attempted to remain faithful to this sense of the spiritual and the transcendent quality of the vision and the image. McGahern's essays, collected in *Love of the World* (2009), continually shaped and reshaped my perspective. From 'The Image' and 'The Solitary Reader', I draw my understanding and use of key terms such as 'vision', 'way of looking', 'Medusa's mirror' and, of course, 'the image'. What Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) termed 'topoanalysis' is an obvious touchstone for my

interrogation of McGahern's poetic production of domestic spaces: 'Topo-analysis, then, would be the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives. In the theatre of the past that is constituted by memory, the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant roles' (30). However, I differentiate this analysis of poetic imagery from McGahern's act of imaginative creation through the term 'topopoetics' – literally 'place-making'.

The term topopoetic encompasses the poetic act of place-making but also the ways Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space* (1974), argues that all space is socially constructed. McGahern's understanding of the novel as 'the most social of all art forms' is linked to this topopoetic approach and intimately connected to his aesthetic and vision. The symbolic and poetic resonances of different spaces, from the structures of buildings to the arrangement of objects within such spaces, are related to the narrative, form and vision. The way protagonists negotiate these spaces, therefore, is implicitly related to deeper poetic and social productions of space.

From the outset, McGahern thought of himself as a poet and his work as a form of poetry. Denis Sampson calls him a 'poet who happens to write in the medium of realistic prose' (*Outstaring Nature's Eye* xii). In a statement submitted to the trustees of the Macaulay Prize in 1962, McGahern outlined his purpose and method in writing *The Barracks*:

> As it is not a novel, but an attempt to break that form down into a religious poem, I can only hope to indicate some of the tones as it moves to its end. The vision is all that matters in it, and the style, for a banality in it can assume as much importance as the beautiful. What happens matters very little, the real things that happen are inevitable, and the others should be inevitable in the laws of the work itself.
>
> (P71/28)

The topopoetic act of representation infuses real and imagined spaces with a symbolic resonance that transcends their materiality. As Robert Tally notes, 'creative writers engage in a form of literary cartography by which they figuratively map the real-and-imagined spaces of their worlds, both within the text and with reference to the space outside the text' (*Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space* 3). This is hardly a radical proposal. The setting of the texts frequently symbolises the narrative's poetic undercurrent: From Dracula's Castle in Transylvania to King Lear's cliff face, Dickensian London, Joyce's Dublin, Hardy's Wessex, Jane Eyre's various dwellings, and the storms and dislocating moors that surround Wuthering Heights, these literary spaces mirror the thematic and narrative content of the novels they comprise. Tally acknowledges that 'the focus on spatial or geographical aspects of literature has served to emphasise the dynamic

relations between the text and the spaces and places represented in it, bridging the divide between the word and the world' (*Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space* 5).

Windows on the world

The poetic act infuses any bare image from within the poet's field of vision with symbolic resonance. By dwelling on and reflecting on the image, however, the poet reveals the apertures which frame their ways of looking. In a moment of characteristic exaggeration and knowing pretension, John Banville claimed, 'I am trying to open a window on the world'. McGahern responded, 'Yes, and I suppose you think that I am trying to slam it shut'. Versions of this anecdote are dropped frequently into conversations surrounding McGahern's perceived isolationist writing and appear in print in Declan Kiberd's *After Ireland* (184), Stanley van der Ziel's *John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition* (20) and an essay by John Banville from *Unfinished Ireland: Essays on Hubert Butler* (142). The two friends are riffing on how critics and academics frequently represent their work. The image of the pair struggling at either side of the window, pulling in opposite directions, amused both writers, who were acutely aware of how European literary thinking – Camus, Flaubert, Proust, Tolstoy – shaped their work just as profoundly as their Irish themes.

The window is, in many ways, the ideal symbol for McGahern's art and this study. The window frames what we can see and shapes our ways of looking. It encourages reflection and observation, comes between two spaces and allows us to dream of other times and places. By day it allows the living light to permeate the darkest interiors, and by night, it forms a mirror that reflects light inwards upon the looking subject. And yet, such is the window's translucence, the imperceptibility of the glass, that it allows all these exchanges back and forth across the threshold without our awareness of its presence. When McGahern stated his belief, echoing Joyce and Kavanagh, that 'the universal is the local, but with the walls taken away' (*LW* 11), it must have occurred to him that, in a literary culture (and literal topography) permeated by the fixture of the 'Big House', windows *are* the spaces where the walls have been taken away.

The reference comes from the brief essay 'The Local and the Universal', in which McGahern discusses his way of looking at and thinking about literature, the transcendent nature of 'truth', and the author's responsibility to 'get the words right' (Wallace 5). These concepts have been a secure handrail for scholars of his work, appearing in every major study of McGahern, and providing the title for Eamon Maher's *From the Local to the Universal* (2003). The most revealing insight from McGahern's essay, which often goes unmentioned, is McGahern's sense of the inherent instability of truth

and the need to revise and reform if the artist wishes to discover a general truth and avoid the cloying stench of imitation:

> Out of the particular we come on what is general, which is our great comfort, since we call it truth, and that truth has to be continually renewed. What is general and true has to be found again. If we resort to what is already general in this quest, all we are likely to find is the stale air of the imitative.
>
> (*LW* 11)

The sense that truth must be continually renewed and found again is central to McGahern's literary aesthetic and vision. The artist's task is a 'quest' of discovery; they must continually renew their ways of looking in the hope of finding once more what is general and true. Yet, all too often, 'vision' is discussed as a singular, unchanging entity that unites an artist's representations. Many studies assess McGahern's vision and style as singular, totemic entities which remain fixed and consistent despite changing forms and contexts.

If there is a singular thread that runs through my chapters, it is that McGahern's aesthetic and vision *do* consistently change and develop across his career. Perceiving McGahern's work as static ignores the vitality of the prose and the shifts in form, space and vision across his career and disparate works. (If we were to remove the author's name from the covers, a first-time reader might have difficulty concluding that the same hand was responsible for both *The Dark* and *That They May Face the Rising Sun*.) The evolution across the fictions sees McGahern's vision emerge from the dark nightlines of twentieth-century Ireland into the rising sun of modernity. If we treat McGahern's way of looking as something which is constantly shifting and refocusing, rather than singular and static, it brings to light deviations and divergences from novel to novel, opening a chink wide enough to admit some wonder.

The window as a symbol in McGahern's work echoes Henry James's conception of the novel as a 'house of fiction' from the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*. Although McGahern's praised 'the prose rhythms of Henry James' (*LW* 200), the influence of James on McGahern falls outside of the scope of this study. In the essay '*Dubliners*', McGahern also discussed James' belief that 'art and morality are two perfectly different things, and that the former has no more to do with the latter than it has with astronomy or embryology. The only duty of the novel was to be well written' (*LW* 202). McGahern no doubt noted the parallels with the Aestheticism Wilde outlined in his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all' (xi).

The statement to trustees of the Macaulay Prize makes clear that McGahern shared James' dedication to the pursuit of the 'art of the novel'. Such are the similarities between James' conception of the house of fiction and McGahern's way of looking that it is worth quoting James at length (it is also likely that it was such a window in James' house of fiction that Banville was trying to open):

> The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million – a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the window may *not* open; 'fortunately' by reason, precisely, of this incalculability of range. The spreading field, the human scene, is the 'choice of subject'; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the 'literary form'; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher – without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious. Thereby I shall express to you at once his boundless freedom and his 'moral' reference.
>
> (*The Portrait of a Lady* 8)

The house of fiction has 'not one window, but a million', and each window is a different frame through which the world is viewed. All of life is within the artist's field of vision; the artist has only to uncover the windows to draw from this field. But as every individual Self is different from the Other, so are the 'windows' which frame their vision. James's concept transforms the window into a material symbol of the uniqueness of an individual's (and the artist's) vision: their unique way of looking, the contemplative gaze that amasses 'the pressure of the individual will'. If the artist is to find general truth in the particular, they must change their frames and forms as

no single aperture can account for that 'need of the individual vision and the pressure of the individual will'. In 'The Image', McGahern stressed that it is 'the dynamic quality of the vision', even within 'that still and private world', which permits us 'to reflect purely on our situation', and noted how the image 'flows' in an agitated process of 'rejecting, altering, shaping, straining towards the one image that will never come' (*LW* 5). For McGahern, the artist (like the individual) must continually begin again.

When James suggests that by each window there 'stands a figure with a pair of eyes', he amplifies the intensity of their vision by adding a 'field-glass'. James emphasises that the artist's act of watching is not a mere passive reception of impressions and images. Rather the artist actively 'makes use' of this elevated space of watching with a 'field-glass'. Through the aperture of the window in the house of fiction, a passive way of looking becomes a more dynamic way of seeing – the more alert the mind, the more intense the impression received. James continues by adding that such active vision 'forms, again and again' and that the windows in the house of fiction offer a 'unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other'. James concludes that these windows and frames of vision, 'the pierced aperture', are intimately connected to 'literary form', but that, 'singly or together', they are 'as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher – without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist'. In 'The Solitary Reader', McGahern expanded this aesthetic claim to include 'that essential and potentially subversive figure alone with a book' for whom the windows in the house of fiction could also become 'mirrors', suggesting that 'what they reflect is something dangerously close to our own life and the society in which we live' (*LW* 90).

'The Solitary Reader' also details an initiation into a love of the world through literature. McGahern recalls the 'complete absorption' and the 'strange and complete kind of happiness' he discovered through reading: 'There are no days more full in childhood than those days that were not lived at all, the days lost in a favourite book' (*LW* 90). The 'luck' of finding that 'dear, blessed library' and his carefree time amongst the Moroney family is lovingly recounted in 'The Solitary Reader', 'My Education', and repeated almost verbatim some years later in *Memoir* (*M* 171–8). Following the loss of his beloved mother, reading would offer young McGahern an oasis of calm in that turbulent early life with his father in the barracks (detailed in *Memoir*). The essays describe, with fondness, McGahern's sense of being-in, yet out-of, the world, detached from time and space, through reading – and later writing:

> I remember waking out of one such book in the middle of the large living room in the barracks, to find myself surrounded. My sisters had unlaced and removed one of my shoes and placed a straw hat on my head. Only

> when they began to move the wooden chair on which I sat away from the window did I wake out of the book – to their great merriment.
>
> Nowadays, only when I am writing am I able to find again that complete absorption when all sense of time is lost, maybe once in a year or two. It is a strange and complete kind of happiness, of looking up from the pages, thinking it is still nine or ten in the morning, to discover that it is past lunchtime; and there is no longer anyone who will test the quality of the absence by unlacing and removing a shoe.
>
> (*LW* 90)

That McGahern chose to place his child self, totally absorbed in the world of reading, by the window can hardly be accidental given his aesthetic affinity with James' house of fiction. Throughout *Love of the World*, McGahern consistently critiques the emotional, intellectual, economic and social poverty of mid-century Irish life. The essays detail an existence which allowed little time for reflection, free from material or spiritual responsibilities. They suggest that such an environment was largely incapable of (and uninterested in) fostering an educated, clear-thinking population with dreams or ambitions. The fictions, however, portray visionary protagonists who, to greater or lesser degrees, shirk outward, coercive pieties and narrow understandings of faith. Yet these individuals retain a reverence for the prayers, ceremonies, customs and rituals of their upbringings and find a 'strange and complete kind of happiness' in their calm repetitions in quiet, church-like spaces. *Memoir* makes clear that McGahern located these visionary qualities in his beloved mother, Susan, and sensed that a protective dream-world was lost to him after her death. Throughout his fiction, images of the visionary 'mother' would act as a light against the darkness of life in mid-century Ireland.

Dreams and visions are notable features in Irish literature. The *aisling* (Irish for dream or vision) is a form of Irish language poetry. In the *aisling*, the poet encounters a vision of 'Ireland' in the form of a *Spéirbhean* or heavenly woman. The vision often laments the current state of the individual or community and envisages the return of better fortunes. The *aisling* can be traced back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It developed out of an earlier French genre of poetry, the *reverdie*, which celebrates the arrival of spring. *Reverdie* means 're-greening', and in these poems, the poet typically meets a beautiful, supernatural woman who symbolises spring, rebirth and the rejuvenating bounty of nature and love. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Revivalists recognised that the *aisling* could both ground their work in the traditions of the past and anticipate a revival to come. Yeats (who, like McGahern, also located his poetic muse in an unattainable woman, Maude Gonne) would revitalise the *aisling* tradition through figures such as Cathleen Ní Houlihan, Róisín Dubh and the

image of the Rose. If the *aisling* appears to the poet to help them see, then for McGahern, the act of writing itself is a form of *aisling*: 'I write because I need to write. I write to see. Through words I see' (*LW* 9).

It is easy to imagine how the *aisling* would appeal to McGahern's developing way of looking. That the *aisling* appears in a female form deepens the connection between vision and dreaming and the image of the mother. In the early twentieth century, when Church and State colluded to limit 'the woman's place' to the narrow circle of children, family and home, the mother and domestic space became inextricable. The figure of the mother, the domestic space and the *aisling* become intertwined in McGahern's developing poetic imagination. The portrayal of mother figures and the insubstantial familial spaces suggest McGahern conceived of the 'home' in Heideggerian terms. In 'Building Dwelling Thinking', Heidegger defines dwelling as: 'To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. *The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving*. It pervades dwelling in its whole range. That range reveals itself to us as soon as we reflect that human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth' (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 147). Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* similarly defines his sense of the proper function of the house: 'the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace' (28). Thus dreams, visions, the image of the mother and the domestic space become symbolically linked in one form.

McGahern's evolving vision progresses towards the realisation of a unified domestic space that transcends the structurelessness of Irish society and fosters a space that protects and sustains dreaming. This mature vision is realised in *Amongst Women* (1990) and *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. McGahern achieves a consummated vision of the home as a space that can foster the individual's dreams and the broader vision of a unified social world of manners. The 'home' transcends the mere house and becomes capable of maintaining that protective function of dreaming and vision, which McGahern first situated in his lost, beloved mother and then relocated through reading and literature in the Moroneys' library. These late works open the windows along the aesthetic corridor between darkness and the rising sun.

Envelopes of a quiet love

This study charts the development of McGahern's way of looking and the evolution of his form, space and vision through the images of alienated individuals, fractured families and insubstantial domestic spaces within changing social contexts. The trajectory of McGahern's fictions broadly parallels the chronological progress of Irish society – though I do not wish

to suggest that one is contingent on the other in a baldly realist fashion. The periodic development of McGahern's vision sees certain themes and concerns brought into focus in different manners in different novels at different points in his career. The following chapters proceed chronologically through the works for the most part and are arranged in four parts, enclosing thematic and periodic groupings. In this regard, a conventional periodisation is useful: early, middle/urban, late/mature phases. These phases are widely accepted, although some debate may remain about where divisions should be made. I have elected to omit an extensive consideration of a formational period as this has been conclusively detailed in Denis Sampson's *Young John McGahern*. The later novels, *Amongst Women* and *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, could arguably be considered diverse enough to warrant different periodisation – I have treated them in separate parts for this very reason. But, in terms of form, space and vision, I consider the former to be a halfway house on the road to the latter, so the designation of 'late' or 'mature' will suffice here for both novels. These periodisations remain alert to their potential overlap and to the appearance of ideas, images and symbols outside of the period or context I have specified. This is born out through the revised edition of *The Leavetaking* and the complex and disjointed composition processes of the story collections and the dramatic works, which complicate straightforward chronological demarcations.

As aesthetic development is, by and large, unrelated to publication dates (although there is bound to be *some* correlation), I define these periods by the form, space and vision of the works rather than strict dates. Many of McGahern's ideas, themes and concerns appear and reappear in the different works, but his vision in each period causes him to approach the works differently. I delineate these periods by the chronological evolution of McGahern's vision which, if not contingent on socio-cultural development, is at least organically related to it. I argue that McGahern's symbolic representations of the social worlds of his fictions reflect ideas about the nature of Irish society that were working themselves out in the zeitgeist contemporary with the composition and publication of each work. I map the 'early', 'middle' and 'late' phases through their distinct productions of literary space, which I relate to the topopoetical concepts – Plato's Cave, Heterotopia, Fifth Province. (The correlation between these concepts and periodisations is outlined in the following.)

No single work of criticism can hope to include the total breadth of great works of literature and so thematic, structural and formal selections are inevitably made. Research can as often be defined by what it *is not* as what it is. One justification for this selective vision goes that literary criticism is something of a love letter to the work it beholds. The chapters of this book, then, are the envelopes of that love in the case of myself as a long-time McGahern (re)reader.

Part I focuses on McGahern's earliest works: 'The End or the Beginning of Love', *The Barracks*, *The Dark* and *Nightlines*. These formative works expose the inward-looking and anti-intellectual environment of mid-century Ireland. The narratives portray insubstantial domestic spaces that cannot sustain clear thinking or Bachelardian dreaming, using Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' to symbolise the blindness and delusions of these worlds (514a–520a). McGahern reveals partition and alienation within supposedly unified spaces while exploring socio-cultural understandings of family and home and establishing his topopoetic production of space. *Nightlines* expands beyond the domestic spaces of the novels and explores broader societal issues, introducing a wider range of characters, settings and themes. The stories reveal the inescapability of utilitarian worlds devoid of dreams or ambitions, undermining structured forms of social ascent. These fictions highlight the inability of received formulas to accommodate McGahern's way of looking, signalling a shift towards more inclusive narrative forms in his middle works.

Part II examines McGahern's middle or urban period, including the novels *The Leavetaking* and *The Pornographer*, as well as two collections of stories *Getting Through* and *High Ground and Other Stories*. McGahern's focus shifts to urban settings and the professional, emotional and sexual lives of unmarried men and women who appear caught between two worlds as their modern existences are confronted by their pasts. These characters' psychological detachment and the competing impulses of autonomy and unity are reflected in the narratives' literary spaces, as McGahern investigates how the forces and limitations of one place shape how life is lived in another. Against the bad faith of Plato's Cave, McGahern establishes Foucauldian heterotopias: spaces that are somehow Other, parallel to society, containing 'deviant' bodies making a utopian space possible. New forms of domestic space allow individuals to counter the alienation and dislocations of modern life by emerging beyond the Self, encountering the Other, and recreating their lost home. These chapters focus on characters navigating rapidly changing worlds and attempting to break free from old ways of envisaging existence while examining the role of customs and rituals in overcoming social, cultural, temporal and geographical divisions. Overall, Part II shows how McGahern's works of the middle urban period act as a heterotopic threshold, opening onto the more mature social vision of his late works.

Parts III and IV cover the late or mature period, in which McGahern's focus returns to the submerged rural space and family units that characterised his earliest fiction. These narratives explore themes of place, belonging and responsibility to the Other within the social world. McGahern's way of looking reflects a Heideggerian understanding of dwelling and *being in the world*, emphasising the importance of responsibility for Others and social

manners and the realisation of a home in the Fifth Province. The familial home is transformed into a place of inclusion and unity, a protective space that encourages dreams and dreaming, as McGahern responds to broader socio-cultural developments across the Irish State in the last decade of the twentieth century.

The chapters on *Amongst Women* and *They May Face the Rising Sun* show how a sense of place and belonging can be achieved through participation in social customs and rituals and the acceptance of communal responsibilities. They also reveal more accommodating forms and visions than those achieved in the earlier works. McGahern transforms previously inhospitable domestic spaces into accommodating homes, creating a metaphysical Fifth Province that is open, inclusive and strengthened by diversity. Postcolonial scholars may recognise this as something very close to Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space. The chapter on *Creatures of the Earth* analyses the four new, late stories in light of the aesthetic development seen in McGahern's novels. The self-absorbed individuals and insubstantial spaces depicted in his late stories contrast with the more optimistic, socially focused way of looking found in the late novels. The chapter argues, however, that these late stories serve as a bridge between the aesthetic developments of his earlier works and the final consummated conception of society found in his late novels. Chapter 9 explores McGahern's lesser-known dramatic works and charts the evolution of his formal and technical skills as a dramatist. It analyses how his way of looking was influenced by the demands of dramatic writing. It uncovers links and divergences between his plays and prose works and argues that the dramatic works should be viewed as part of a creative continuum rather than a separate venture.

A short Conclusion considers *Memoir* and the unique challenge it presents for readers and critics as McGahern revisits his own life, bringing early visions and thematic concerns to the surface. Blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, memory and imagination, and interrogating the nature of the creative process, *Memoir* is perhaps McGahern's supreme Bachelardian work and the culmination of his artistic journey. McGahern poetically reflects on his childhood and, through the protection of dreaming, pulls the image into the light. He poetically reunites with his mother in the house of his fiction, thereby closing the circle on his writing career.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, the critic Frank Kermode suggested a distinction between the responsibilities of the critic and the poet: 'It is not expected of critics as it is of poets that they should help us to make sense of our lives; they are bound only to attempt the lesser feat of making sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives' (3). The study of literature is hardly served by reducing its manifold intentions to a singular purpose. Still, Kermode's sense of the critic's responsibility would stand as an approximate