



**HAL**  
open science

## “Absence does not cast a shadow”: yeats’s shadowy presence in McGahern’s “The wine breath”

Bertrand Cardin

### ► To cite this version:

Bertrand Cardin. “Absence does not cast a shadow”: yeats’s shadowy presence in McGahern’s “The wine breath”. *Journal of The Short Story in English / Les Cahiers de la nouvelle*, 2009, *The Short Stories of John MacGahern*, 53, [14 p.]. hal-02171928

**HAL Id: hal-02171928**

**<https://normandie-univ.hal.science/hal-02171928v1>**

Submitted on 3 Jul 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**"Absence does not cast a shadow" :  
Yeats's shadowy presence in McGahern's « The Wine Breath »**

John Mc Gahern's short story « The Wine Breath » was published for the first time in *The New Yorker* on April 4, 1977<sup>i</sup>, then in the collection *Getting Through*, which came out the following year<sup>ii</sup>, and finally in *The Collected Stories* in 1992<sup>iii</sup>. This is a particular story insofar as it deals with a priest who is the only character in the diegetic universe. Furthermore, the text is made up of thoughts, daydreams and memories. Transported to days lived a long time ago, the priest proves to be in search of lost time in a Proustian fashion. Yet, the few dialogues in « The Wine Breath », unlike those in Proust's *œuvre*, are only memories of an earlier time. As a result, the diegesis is particularly empty ; this emptiness is reinforced by the protagonist's anonymity. Indeed, the priest is most often laconically referred to by the personal pronoun 'he'. This emptiness highlights the overall melancholy which is at work in the universe of the narrative, all the more so as the latter is pervaded by death. This melancholy can be accounted for by the fact that the protagonist drinks too much. As a matter of fact, most analyses of « The Wine Breath » justify the title of the short story by the main character's alcoholism. This explanation may well be true but is not quite satisfying, for it overlooks an important allusion to « All Souls' Night », a poem Yeats wrote in 1920, which contains the following lines :

[...] A ghost may come ;  
For it is a ghost's right,  
His element is so fine  
Being sharpened by his death,  
To drink from the wine-breath  
While our gross palates drink from the whole wine [...]iv.

Much more than the priest's alcoholism which is nothing but a mere conjecture based on the fact alluded to in the story that some priests are so fond of whiskey that they neglect to say mass, « The Wine Breath » is a quotation-title and thus directly refers to Yeats's poem. It is surprising that the connection between these two Irish texts has never been mentioned, not even in Neil Corcoran's essay, *After Yeats and Joyce*, which focuses on the immense influence of Yeats's work on the styles, stances and preoccupations of those who have succeeded him in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, Corcoran mentions Yeats's influence, but exclusively concerning the big house novel, on the other, he perceives the traces of Joyce's bildungsroman, *A Portrait of the Artist*, in McGahern's work, particularly his novels. This paper aims at exploring the intertextual articulations within McGahern's story, « The Wine

Breath », in connection with Yeats's poem, « All Souls' Night », by paying particular attention to the motif of return. McGahern's interest in a piece of writing published several decades before « The Wine Breath » draws attention to the solitary protagonists who, in both texts, conjure up past episodes of their lives. Their 'dreaming back' is mirrored by the circular framework of the story and the refrains of the poem. With these characteristics, the two texts also suggest a return to the local Celtic perception of the land in which both of them prove to be rooted.

On a snowy day, the priest in « The Wine Breath » goes to meet some of his parishioners but turns back : « Making sure that Gillespie hadn't noticed him at the gate, he turned back » (180). To go back home, he uses a particular path : « In order to be certain of being left alone he went by the circular path » (181). His physical movement in space is in keeping with his inner thoughts made of remembrances of lost time, of a return on his own past which takes into account the cycle of life and death, mirrored by the significant structure of the chiasmus : « The arrival at the shocking knowledge of birth and death. His attraction to the priesthood as a way of vanquishing death and avoiding birth » (183). Most of the time, circularity corresponds to a strategy of avoidance, of evasion, a refusal of a linear progression. According to Richard Kearney<sup>v</sup>, there is a struggle in McGahern's fiction between linear and circular structure, between journey and sterile repetition, expressed thematically in the conflict between imagination – a vector line which keeps moving forward, irreversibly progresses and implies renewal – and memory, with its cyclical reassuring ritual : « the Mass he had to repeat every day » (185). The priest deliberately chooses the well-known, the familiar – the adjective 'familiar' is repeated three times in the same paragraph (185-186). He resurrects past things, but also some people he formerly knew and loved, particularly his mother. In a decidedly Proustian fashion, he travels back to his origins, to his mother's womb. Oddly enough, as if to confirm himself in his constant backward look, he retrospectively ponders over his mother's regression at the end of her life. Indeed, he remembers her lapse into second childhood and the resumption of her needlework which, like Penelope, consisted in undoing what she had done : « Then he came home one evening to find her standing like a child in the middle of the room, surrounded by an enormous pile of rags. She had taken up from where she'd been interrupted at the herring-bone skirt and torn up every dress or article of clothing she had ever made » (184)<sup>vi</sup>. This quotation opens with a verb which is significant of this constant homecoming, a characteristic in McGahern's fiction, as Cornelius Crowley puts it : « any departure is merely provisional, a setting-out which will, in any case, be

followed by a circling home. Coming home is inevitable »<sup>vii</sup>. McGahern's fictional world, like Proust's, appears to be irremediably cyclical. Literary critic Denis Sampson associated some of McGahern's texts with Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*<sup>viii</sup>, particularly when memory plays a creative role and surges in an unexpected way in the midst of a very imperfect life. This *rapprochement* is notably exemplified by « The Wine Breath » which closely echoes Proustian motifs. « The Wine Breath » is « an intricate and polished piece of prose »<sup>ix</sup> which reflects on memory, death, and the recovery of lost images, but also on art, time, and rituals of return. It depicts the movements of feeling from the many deaths experienced by the self to the intuitive knowledge of its spiritual essence through a translation of lost images : « his life had been like any other, except to himself, and then only in odd visions of it, as a lost life » (183), but on the evening which the story depicts, the old priest has an unexpected flash of images from many years before : « The day set alight in his mind by the light of the white beech, though it had been nothing more than a funeral he had attended during a dramatic snowfall when a boy, seemed bathed in the eternal, seemed everything we had been taught and told of the world of God » (180). According to Sampson, Proustian memory is associated with images of death. The memory is interwoven in the protagonist's mind with that of his own dead mother : « Ever since his mother's death he found himself stumbling into these dead days. Once, crushed mint in the garden had given him back a day he'd spent with her at the sea in such reality that he had been frightened » (180).

Like the taste of the Proustian madeleine, the scent of mint involuntarily recalls lost days. McGahern's descriptive style, moulded with radiant, sensuous reality, deals with all the versions available of material presence. « The Wine Breath » is composed of a diegesis narrating the priest's walk and five intermittent memories. Each transition period which causes the character, together with the reader, to leave the diegetic present to slip into a past memory is associated with a particular sense. Indeed, the five transition periods which are driving forces triggering recollections, correspond to the five senses : the sight of snow conjures up the memory of Michael Bruen's funeral (178), the taste of coffee Michael's house (181) ; the sense of feeling is also referred to with touching the curtains which arouses the memories of his mother's anxiety (185) ; in the same way, the priest feels as if he were hearing Peter Joyce's voice (186) and smelling mint (180) which, once again, rekindles a remembered period. These elements generate what Proust calls 'involuntary or instinctive memory' which opens the door to recollection, to profound reverie from which the character is suddenly roused after a while. These episodes of daydreaming are implicitly compared to deep sleep since the return to reality is depicted like an awakening : « when he woke out »

(179). As soon as he wakes 'out', the priest makes sure that he does not go 'back to sleep' : « he began to count the trees » (180) ; « he turned on the radio » (185) ; « he took up the battered and friendly missal » (185). In the narrative, the alternation between diegetic present and past recollections is quite regular. Indeed, the story is made of 400 lines. And the parts of the narrative dealing respectively with the past and the present each count approximately 200 lines. This clear structure mirrors the inner dichotomy of the priest who is torn between his past and his present. It is also noticeable that in the course of the narrative, the descriptions of the recollections are longer and longer<sup>x</sup>. This process of extension of what Genette called *amplitude*<sup>xi</sup> progressively slows down the narrative and highlights the inanity of the priest's present life which, compared with his past, is not so eventful. The recollections or analepses aim at showing the reader that the past makes it possible to account for the priest's difficulty in the diegetic present. It is also interesting to point out that, although the short story is based on alternation between past and present, the transition from recollection to reality is made without any change or any significant discontinuity in the narrative style. The return to reality is not marked by any temporal break, which is a way of making this daydream as real as the roaring of Gillespie's saw. In fact, whether it be to narrate the past or the present, the preterite tense is used. This unchanged tense highlights the fertile imagination of the priest who considers everything as fulfilled. Thus, the sequences of recollections are never felt as such by the reader as long as they are narrated : the idea that 'the character remembers' works as a connection with what precedes, then the recollection is read like a flash-back, as a mere chronological device which in no way weakens the feeling of reality. This absence of any temporal break highlights the fact that the fount of the recollection is to be found in the past experienced by the character. In a Proustian fashion once more, the priest has a moment of reminiscence. He is in search of lost time, transported 'beside himself', into ecstasy, a feeling of extreme pleasure mirrored by the suspension of the narrative movement. The narrative indeed seems to stop and suspend as if the narrator himself were gazing contemplatively at the recollected scenes. This suspension is reinforced by the absence of any human conversation. This daydream is conveyed by the contents and the nature of the description. It is no dream but a recollection, hence the clarity and accuracy of some details. This clear-cut material presence in subjective pictures where verisimilitude would rather require vague, elusive descriptions of memories is one of the significant characteristics of McGahern's style, particularly in his short stories. As a result, the reader strongly believes in an objective reality, even though the description partakes of hypothetical objectivity : « it was as if the world of the dead was as available to him as the world of the living » (180). The evocation of the

availability of the world of the dead is introduced by a comparative conditional phrase – ‘as if’ – which conveys a hypothetical vision. Is the hypothesis in the character’s mind ? The evocation is not purely subjective. This ‘as if’ translates the priest’s lack of touch with reality and ushers the reader into unreal, hypothetical condition. These two words are enough to plunge the reader into reminiscence and prove that McGahern is not totally absent from the narrative. Similarly, the following phrase in brackets testifies to the author’s presence : « he felt himself (bathed as in a dream) in an incredible sweetness of light » (178). The comparative conjunction introduces the hallucinatory character of the reverie and transports the protagonist, together with the reader, three decades earlier, as the narration states : « He was in another day, the lost day of Michael Bruen’s funeral nearly thirty years before » (178). On the following page, the text specifies : « It was the day in February 1947 that they buried Michael Bruen » (179), which makes it possible to place the diegetic present in 1977, that is to say when the story was written and published. These narrative temporal details can be paralleled with the priest’s raptures which transport him not only beside himself, but also out of time. Indeed, his visions allow him to move freely in time « as if he’d suddenly fallen through time » (180). Here again, the phrase ‘as if’ suggests the presence of the author who, as for him, is deeply anchored in precise time. Besides, the priest himself claims to be « bathed in the eternal » (180) and his clerical identity does not fit into the scheme of time but of eternity : « You are a priest for ever, in the succession of Melchizedek »<sup>xii</sup>. Linked to the sacred, which escapes from any chronological determination, the cleric, whose priesthood is indelible, is in line with eternity, unless his reveries are the foretastes of his own death. When he is depicted as « immersed in time without end » (187), maybe the narrative implies that the priest enters eternal life. His dream is so powerful that it becomes reality, as it were. His vision or visitation of the deceased he used to love may be the sign that he joins them and shares their destinies, death being regarded as a coming home. In this case, the description of the snow-covered landscape in his recollection can be interpreted as an allegory of his entry into light :

his eyes were caught again by the quality of the light. It was one of those late October days, small white clouds drifting about the sun, and the watery light was shining down the alder rows to fall on the white chips of the beechwood strewn all about Gillespie, some inches deep. It was the same white light as the light on snow. As he watched, the light went out on the beech chips (179).

The recurrent words, « white » and « light », echo each other all the more so as they rhyme together and create a mirror effect between present and past on the one hand, and between present and future on the other, insofar as this extract can be read as the premonition that the priest's actual death is imminent. This dazzling whiteness on a mountain is also reminiscent of Jesus's Transfiguration. Indeed, in the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him, led them up a high mountain and he was transfigured in their presence : « his clothes became dazzling white, with a whiteness no bleacher on earth could equal »<sup>xiii</sup>.

Nevertheless, concerning the intertextual articulations of « The Wine Breath », one text is much more relevant than the Bible or Proust's work. Indeed, it is no accident that the short story, which focuses on the availability of the world of the dead, should be entitled « The Wine Breath » insofar as the expression is taken from a poem by Yeats which is precisely dedicated to the resurrection of dead days by a living man. Sampson himself reckons that it is to Yeats that McGahern is most indebted<sup>xiv</sup>, but the examples he gives to illustrate this influence surprisingly never refer to « The Wine Breath ». Likewise, in other publications, parallels are drawn for instance between McGahern's « The Wine Breath » and Joyce's « The Dead »<sup>xv</sup>. However, connections between « The Wine Breath » and Yeats's « All Souls' Night » are never established, whereas a comparative reading of both texts render the intertextual articulations obvious. Besides, McGahern clearly sees himself as a successor to Yeats : « The more we read of other literatures, and the more they were discussed, the more clearly it emerged that not only was Yeats a very great poet but that almost singlehandedly he had, amazingly, laid down a whole framework in which an indigenous literature could establish traditions and grow »<sup>xvi</sup>.

The framework in which McGahern's fiction grows is, indeed, a literature shadowed by the achievements of Yeats. « The Wine Breath » is a direct allusion to « All Souls' Night » and is stylistically and thematically indebted to this piece of poetry. As a result, Yeats is a central presence in McGahern's story.

In this « intense degree of cross-fertilization »<sup>xvii</sup>, different kinds of influences can be spotted. They range from modification to dependency, from admiration to imitation and can be compared to the influences which are at work in a father-son relationship, for this is precisely what it amounts to. Indeed, McGahern is at once a case of filiation with his native culture and affiliation with it through scholarly work, according to the distinction established by Edward Said : « The filiative scheme belongs to the realms of nature and of 'life' whereas affiliation belongs exclusively to culture and society »<sup>xviii</sup>. « The Wine Breath » demonstrates a return to

origins. The inspiration provided by an Irish poem for the writing in Ireland of a story on Ireland makes McGahern a parochial writer in the positive sense of the word, insofar as « Irish literature is [...] the scene of an intertextuality in which Ireland is itself read »<sup>xix</sup>. If McGahern feels so close to Yeats, it is because they both know and describe the same places in the northwest of the Republic of Ireland. More particularly, the counties of Roscommon, Leitrim and Sligo are familiar places for the two Irish men-of-letters. Both of them are associated with the same countryside, as McGahern says himself in a conversation with Sampson :

I think that there is a peculiar moment in everybody's growing up or growing down when there is that language change. From being marvellous stories, like movies, and marvellous songs, which words always are for me, you suddenly realize that these things are about your own life. Literature changes from being books in a library to something that concerns you. In fact, it loses some of its exoticism. That's when it becomes a more exciting activity, a moral activity. [...] If it did happen (for me) with anybody, it was with Yeats, because we used to go to the sea in Sligo. I suppose Yeats gives me more pleasure than any other writer, and more constant pleasure. To actually see the names like Knocknarea and Queen Maeve's Grave, and you know, 'I stood among a crowd at Drumahair, His heart hung all upon a silken dress', to actually know that those placenames were places that I knew, like Boyle or Carrick on Shannon<sup>xx</sup>.

McGahern's story and Yeats's poem are both located in Ireland and this reference point in the text is of immense importance for it is inseparable from the local Celtic tradition. The northwest of Ireland and county Sligo in particular are indeed ideal places for all kinds of Celtic myths and legends : « Sligo seems to have been a locale unusually rich in fairy lore and tales of hauntings, ghosts and eerie happenings »<sup>xxi</sup>. The unity of place matches the unity of time. It must be noticed that the diegesis in both texts is set on All Saints' Day, more precisely on All Saints' Night, at midnight as regards the poem, that is to say at the junction between two days and between two months. This public Christian holiday vouches for the dogma of the Communion of the Saints which, on the one hand, unites the living faithful to the saints and martyrs of all times on November 1<sup>st</sup> and, on the other, to all the deceased the Roman Catholic Church remembers and prays for, specifically on All Souls' Day, on November 2<sup>nd</sup>. The place and time of the diegesis, that is All Saints' Day in Ireland, are in line with the Celtic festival of Samhain which took place on this very day to celebrate the end of the Celtic year.



The tradition of Samhain is perpetuated in modern times with Halloween, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. As Miranda J. Green puts it in her *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* : « It is at the feast of Samhain on 1 November that the boundary between the earthly and the supernatural worlds is broken down ; spirits and humans can move freely between the two lands »<sup>xxii</sup>. McGahern's story, like Yeats's poem, are well established in a local tradition and are quite in keeping with ancestral, popular beliefs. These notions of place and time, what Bakhtin would call 'chronotope', are here of vital importance for they organize the major events of the narrative. The unity of place and unity of time are mirrored by the unity of a single character who fills his loneliness with ghosts. In both texts, place, time and the character's loneliness favour the invocation of imaginary creatures. Alone in both cases, the protagonist only has a virtual exchange with the dead or remembers past conversations, but the diegesis is devoid of any effective meeting between two characters. As a result, the diegetic present is particularly silent, as if, in these recollections, words were pointless, which is as a matter of fact confirmed by the texts : in the story, the priest, lost in his memories of a snow-covered landscape, which is particularly quiet, turns off the radio and silences « the disembodied voice on the air » (185), not refuting the aphorism in Yeats's poem : « Words were but wasted breath ». In both texts, the characters go into raptures and these phases are silent in two ways : because the protagonists avoid any noise to immerse themselves in their past, as the verbs that can be spotted both in the story and in the poem testify – « he thought, he remembered » - and because the interrupted dialogue and action suspend the narrative itself and absorb it for a while in some kind of voiceless questioning.

The poem is a magical invocation of the deceased friends<sup>xxiii</sup>. Yeats invites them to drink a glass of muscatel. Right from the first lines, he complains about the incomplete nature of the living man symbolized by his incapacity to drink from the wine breath. He successively invokes three friends of his : Horton who yearned for death because he could not turn his thoughts away from the lady he had lost ; Florence Emery (Florence Farr), the actress who left her country for Ceylon where she learned about Buddhism ; Mac Gregor Mathers, whose esoteric meditations had kept him away from his own kind. In their lifetimes, these three characters were interested in the occult and magic and did their best to communicate with the beyond. They shared the same mystical preoccupation, the same pathetic effort to learn from the dead. The poet needs their help to unravel « the mummy truths » : « Wound in mind's wandering / As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound ». The image of the mummy specifies that this knowledge escapes time and fits into the scheme of eternity. As for the verb 'to wind', it describes the spiral movement of the soul. Only the blossoming everlasting soul,

once purified, can reach the Truth, which is unattainable by the living. Significantly, this poem acts as an epilogue to *A Vision*, in which Yeats keeps seeking this Truth. Yet, does the poet manage to grasp it? The ghosts do not seem to come up to his expectations. Does it mean that occultism – or even the system outlined in *A Vision* – did not enable him to reach revelation? The reader keeps on wondering about this « marvellous » disclosure. In the third book of *A Vision*, « The Soul in Judgment », Yeats distinguishes between six different steps from death to reincarnation. The second one, ‘The Meditation’, includes three stages: ‘the Dreaming Back’, may have been suggested to Yeats by the *noh*, where the soul re-enacts the events of its incarnate life and gradually breaks away from them. The second stage is ‘the Return’, where the soul chronologically goes through the same events again with the purpose of grasping them fully, of exploring their causes and effects. In the third stage, ‘the Phantasmagoria’, the soul lives all that man had imagined without doing it.

Isn't this Yeatsian process followed by the priest in McGahern's story, with his experience of a meditation in which he is dreaming back and returning to past days? His mental images are clearly depicted as visions which anticipate the different steps gone through by a soul in the afterlife. Likewise, it is no accident that the words which can be picked up in both texts refer either to religion – « God, bell, wine, death, sun, fish »<sup>xxiv</sup> - with variants on eternity ('never ends' in the poem, 'without end' in the story) and blessing ('blessed' for Yeats, 'beatification' for McGahern), or to visionary meditation – « thought, vision, ghost ». Yeats's poem and McGahern's story are both steeped in a religious atmosphere in which mortals can penetrate the underworld and, vice-versa, the spirits of the other world can move freely from the *sidhe* to the land of the living. In his elaborate process developed in *A Vision*, Yeats describes the transmigration of souls from one life to another until they can escape from the cycle of rebirths to reach the final blessing. Their different reincarnations make death unreal. Besides, as Yeats writes himself in *On the Boiler*: « death is but passing from one room into another »<sup>xxv</sup> and the door between the two rooms is obviously wide open, as confirmed by *The Celtic Twilight*: « In Ireland this world and the other are not widely sundered: sometimes, indeed, it seems almost as if our earthly chattels were no more than the shadows of things beyond »<sup>xxvi</sup>. The barriers between the real world and the supernatural obviously dissolve: « The priest felt as vulnerable as if he had suddenly woken out of sleep, shaken and somewhat ashamed to have been caught asleep in the actual day and life, without any protection of walls » (179). The solitary priest in « The Wine Breath » has visions, revelations generated by the dazzling brightness of the snow which carries him to that day in 1947 when a neighbour by the name of Michael Bruen was buried. The snow obstructed the road to such an extent

that it caused a lot of trouble for the cortege to reach the graveyard. The description of the scene illustrates McGahern's poetic prose :

All was silent and still there. Slow feet crunched on the snow. Ahead, at the foot of the hill, the coffin rode slowly forward on shoulders, its brown varnish and metal trappings dull in the glittering snow, riding just below the long waste of snow eight or ten feet deep over the whole countryside. The long dark line of mourners following the coffin stretched away towards Oakport Wood in the pathway cut through the snow. High on Killeelan Hill the graveyard evergreens rose out of the snow. The graveyard wall was covered, the narrow path cut up the side of the hill stopping at the little gate deep in the snow. The coffin climbed with painful slowness, as if it might never reach the gate, often pausing for the bearers to be changed ; and someone started to pray, the prayer travelling down the whole mile-long line of the mourners as they shuffled behind the coffin in the narrow tunnel cut in the snow.

It was the day in February 1947 that they buried Michael Bruen. Never before or since had he experienced the Mystery in such awesomeness. Now, as he stood at the gate, there was no awe or terror, only the coffin moving slowly towards the dark trees on the hill, the long line of the mourners, and everywhere the blinding white light, among the half-buried thorn bushes and beyond Killeelan, on the covered waste of Gloria Bog, on the sides of Slieve an Iarainn (178-179).

The slow rhythm of the procession is enhanced by the repetition of the adjectives 'long' and 'slow' and their derivatives – 'slowly, slowness'. The adjective 'slow' not only echoes, but also rhymes with 'snow', a word repeated seven times in this passage. This slowness is in keeping with the circumstances of the funeral which is recalled by the semantic field of death, with recurrent terms such as 'coffin, mourners' or 'graveyard', words which echo the ones that can be picked up in Yeats's poem – 'death, grave, end, mummies'... This use of echoes, and repetitions is conscious and poetic according to McGahern who, in his conversation with Sampson, points out :

I have always admired in verse this sort of refrain, 'Daylight and a candle end', when that's repeated at the end of every verse. I have always been fascinated by that because I actually think it is the truth, and I think that kind of repetition you are talking about

in prose, if it's successful, is the same kind of thing as refrain in verse [...]. All that matters to me is style<sup>xxvii</sup>.

This subtle pattern of echoes and repetitions recalls the image of the circle or the wheel. It must be borne in mind that « Wheels » happens to be the seminal first story of McGahern's very first collection, *Nightlines*<sup>xxviii</sup>. Twenty years later, in *The Collected Stories* which respects the chronology of McGahern's publications, « Wheels » also opens up the collection<sup>xxix</sup>. The wheel is the perfect image of a stylistic and structural trait typical of McGahern's writing – the circularity of the short stories and the novels, the insistence on cycles, circles, stylistic and rhetoric devices such as parallels, alliterations, chiasma – which « The Wine Breath » does not fail to exemplify : « it was out of fear of death he became a priest, which became in time the fear of life » (183). The symmetrical parallel of the antithetical terms – 'death' and 'life' – is added to the circular structure of the chiasmus (fear, became / became, fear) which highlights a major motif in the story. Indeed, the fear of death corresponds to the fear of the future, shown by the escape into the past. This fear of death is, according to McGahern, characteristic of the priesthood<sup>xxx</sup>. In another short story, « All Sorts of Impossible Things », for example, somebody tells the priest : « Your collar is the sublimation of *timor mortis* »<sup>xxxi</sup>, a Latin expression of which McGahern is particularly fond, maybe owing to the voicing of the syllables structured once more on the circularity of the chiasmus (ti-mor/mor-ti). Interestingly enough, the same stylistic device can also be spotted in two lines already quoted from Yeats's poem : « Wound in mind's pondering / As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound ». These serpentine lines establish a circular structure not only within the very lines through the chiasmus again, but also because the same two lines are repeated at the beginning and at the end of the verse. Furthermore, 'The Great Wheel' is also the title of the first book in Yeats's *A Vision*. The wheel stands for any cyclical process there : a unique life, in other words, incarnation. McGahern is undoubtedly highly influenced by these Yeatsian characteristics. By the same token, the words relating to wine – 'glass, muscatel, palate' – are also recurrent, like the expression 'drink from the whole wine' or the term 'ghost' which is a major element in the two texts<sup>xxxii</sup>. The ghosts of the dead are invoked in « All Souls' Night » as well as in « The Wine Breath » and their presence is friendly, expected, reassuring. Yeats's invocation of a « slight companionable ghost » is echoed by the priest's wish : « He would be glad of a ghost tonight » (185). This is why the ghost of the mother is invoked. The mother is clearly depicted as having played a major part in the priest's life<sup>xxxiii</sup>. Besides, if he became a priest, it was mostly to submit to her will : « His mother had

the vocation for him » (183). The mother seals the fate of her son who lives his life by proxy to a certain extent. His priesthood is no act of personal choice. Here again, this scenario keeps cropping up in McGahern's fiction as the sentence, repeated verbatim in another story ('The Creamery Manager'), testifies<sup>xxxiv</sup>. It is also significant that the mother's death causes the priest's total collapse. This is implied in the narrative with the repetition of the pronoun 'nothing' which directly follows the mention of the mother's death : « ... then she died. There was nothing left but his own life. There had been nothing but that all along » (184-185). In order to fill the gap left by her death, the priest invokes his mother's ghost and justifies his reaction by interpreting it as something usual : « wasn't it natural to turn back to the mother ? » (183) His recourse to the past, his retrogression is accompanied by regression to an early stage in his personal growth. This appeal to the mother's ghost is to be spotted within the diegesis and can be considered as intra-diegetic, whereas extra-diegetically, it is the father's ghost – Yeats himself – who is invoked. Indeed, McGahern seems to be in need of an authority who makes him feel secure, a comrade who shows him the way and ensures him not to be mistaken.

Homecoming, circling backwards as well as rituals of return carefully structure the short story. This can be noticed in stylistic, thematic and literary terms, not only through McGahern's return to Yeats's work who both send their readers back to old Celtic traditions that are lost in the mists of time, but also in our own reading of texts published decades ago. Today's readers are travelling back in an endless movement which can make them dizzy and intoxicated as if they were also drinking from the wine breath. It is worth mentioning that the wine is associated with blood, Christ's blood in particular, and is a symbol of rebirth according to Celtic beliefs. In « The Wine Breath », was McGahern's purpose not to re-read Yeats's poem, in other words to revive, to resurrect it to make the poet come back to life, by drawing his inspiration so obviously from such a piece of poetry ?

Bertrand Cardin

Université de Caen, Basse-Normandie.

## NOTES

- <sup>i</sup> John McGahern, « The Wine Breath », *The New Yorker* (4 April 1977) 36-40.
- <sup>ii</sup> John McGahern, « The Wine Breath », *Getting Through* (London : Faber & Faber, 1978) 95-106.
- <sup>iii</sup> John McGahern, « The Wine Breath », *The Collected Stories* (London : Faber & Faber, 1992) 178-187. All quotations are from this edition and page numbers are given parenthetically in the text.
- <sup>iv</sup> William Butler Yeats, « All Souls' Night » (1920), *Collected Poems* (London : Macmillan, 1989) 256.
- <sup>v</sup> Richard Kearney, « A Crisis of Imagination : an analysis of a counter-tradition in the Irish novel », *The Crane Bag*, vol. 3, n°1 (1979) (Dublin : Blackwater Press, 1982) 397.
- <sup>vi</sup> Similarly, the priest remembers his neighbour, Michael Bruen, and particularly his homecoming which cancelled his attempt at self-establishment which leavetaking had enacted. Indeed, Michael « had been a policeman in Dublin (...) and had come home to where he'd come from to buy the big Crossna farm » (181).
- <sup>vii</sup> Cornelius Crowley « Leavetaking and Homecoming in the writing of John McGahern », *Etudes britanniques contemporaines*, N° spécial « John McGahern » (Montpellier : SEAC, 1994) 65.
- <sup>viii</sup> Denis Sampson, « The Lost Image : Some Notes on McGahern and Proust », *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* (special issue John McGahern) vol. 17, N°1, July 1991, 57-68.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.
- <sup>x</sup> The recollection of the burial is narrated in 25 lines. The recollection of Michael's parents requires 50 lines, that of the priest's stretches over 71 lines.
- <sup>xi</sup> Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris : Seuil, 1972).
- <sup>xii</sup> Psalm 110, verse 4.
- <sup>xiii</sup> The Gospel according to Mark, 9/3.
- <sup>xiv</sup> « It is the poetry of Yeats which is most often echoed in the fiction of McGahern », Denis Sampson, « Introducing John McGahern », *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, *op. cit.*, 4.
- <sup>xv</sup> Stéphane Jousni, « Aube ou linceul ? Les chemins de neige chez McGahern et Joyce », *Cahiers des études irlandaises*, n°1, 1997, 97-108.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Jacqueline Genet & Wynne Hellegouarc'h (eds), *Irish Writers and their Creative Process*, Irish Literary Studies 48 (Gerrards Cross : Colin Smythe, 1996) 107-108.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce. Reading Modern Irish Literature* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1997) ix.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1983) 20.
- <sup>xix</sup> Neil Corcoran, *op. cit.*, vi.
- <sup>xx</sup> Denis Sampson « A Conversation with John McGahern », *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, *op. cit.*, 13.
- <sup>xxi</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth* (London : Penguin, 1993) xx.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Miranda J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* (London : Thames and Hudson, 1992) 168.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> « All Souls' Night » is commented upon in an article by Jacqueline Genet, « Yeats et la mort », *Etudes irlandaises* 30-1 (Villeneuve d'Ascq : Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2005) 37-54.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Traditionally, the fish is a Christian symbol because the Greek word for fish, 'iktus', stood in primitive church for Iesu Kristos Theou Uios Soter (Jesus Christ Son of God and Saviour). It was used as an ideogram.
- <sup>xxv</sup> William Butler Yeats, *On the Boiler* (Dublin : The Cuala Press, 1939) 32.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, *op. cit.*, 131.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Denis Sampson, « A Conversation with John McGahern », *CJIS*, *op. cit.*, 14.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> John McGahern, « Wheels », *Nightlines* (London : Faber & Faber, 1970) 2-13.
- <sup>xxix</sup> John McGahern, « Wheels », *The Collected Stories* (London : Faber & Faber, 1992) 3-11.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Throughout McGahern's work, the choice of the priesthood is repeatedly motivated by this fear of death : « I never met a priest yet who wasn't afraid of death » says Moran at the end of *Amongst Women*, and Rose remarks : « Maybe that's why they become priests ». John McGahern, *Amongst Women* (London : Faber & Faber, 1990) 179.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> John McGahern, « All Sorts of Impossible Things », *The Collected Stories*, *op. cit.*, 139.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> It is no accident if McGahern's short story « The Wine Breath » also appears in a collection edited by Joseph Hone entitled *Irish Ghost Stories* (London : Grafton, 1979) 103-116.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> In McGahern's fiction, sons admire and adore their mothers, a characteristic which has its roots in the very life of the author, as his last book testifies : John McGahern, *Memoir* (London : Faber & Faber, 2005).
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> « His mother had the vocation for him », John McGahern, « The Creamery Manager », *The Collected Stories*, *op. cit.*, 371.

---

## WORKS CITED

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination : Four Essays*. Houston : University of Texas Press, 1975.
- Corcoran, Neil. *After Yeats and Joyce. Reading Modern Irish Literature*. Oxford : Oxford Univ. Press, 1997.
- Crowley, Cornelius. « Leavetaking and Homecoming in the writing of John McGahern », *Etudes britanniques contemporaines*, N° spécial « John McGahern ». Montpellier : SEAC, 1994, 63-76.
- Genet, Jacqueline & Hellegouarc'h, Wynne. (eds). *Irish Writers and their Creative Process*. Irish Literary Studies 48. Gerrards Cross : Colin Smythe, 1996.
- Genet, Jacqueline. « Yeats et la mort ». *Etudes irlandaises*, n°30-1. Villeneuve d'Ascq : Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2005, 37-54.
- Genette, Gérard. *Figures III*. Paris : Seuil, 1972.
- . *Narrative Discourse*. Ithaca, NY : Cornell Univ. Press, 1980.
- Green, Miranda J. *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*. London : Thames and Hudson, 1992.
- Hone, Joseph (ed.) *Irish Ghost Stories*. London : Grafton, 1979.
- Jousni, Stéphane. « Aube ou linceul ? Les chemins de neige chez McGahern et Joyce ». Université de Caen : « Cahiers des études irlandaises », n°1, 1997, 97-108.
- Joyce, James. *Dubliners* (1905), *The Portable James Joyce*. London : Penguin, 1983.
- . *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *The Portable James Joyce*. London : Penguin, 1983.
- Kearney, Richard. « A Crisis of Imagination : an analysis of a counter-tradition in the Irish novel », *The Crane Bag*, vol. 3, n°1 (1979). Dublin : Blackwater Press, 1982.
- McGahern, John. *Nightlines*. London : Faber & Faber, 1970.
- . *Getting Through*. London : Faber & Faber, 1978.
- . *Amongst Women*. London : Faber & Faber, 1990.
- . *The Collected Stories*. London : Faber & Faber, 1992.
- . *Memoir*. London : Faber & Faber, 2005.
- New English Bible (the)*. Oxford : Oxford Univ. Press, 1972.
- Proust, Marcel. *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (1927). Paris : Gallimard, 1954.
- . *Remembrance of Things Past*. New York : Random House, 1934.
- Said, Edward. *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard Univ. Press, 1983.
- Sampson, Denis. *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* (special issue John McGahern) vol. 17, N°1, July 1991.
- Yeats, William Butler. *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*. London : Penguin, 1993.
- . *Collected Poems*. London : Macmillan, 1989.
- . *A Vision* (1937). London : Macmillan, 1978.
- . *On the Boiler*. Dublin : The Cuala Press, 1939.
- . *The Celtic Twilight* (1893). London : Penguin, 1984.