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Pleasure and Knowledge

The pleasures and satisfactions of knowledge first came to John McGahern in his mid-teens, and the desire to pursue them arose from his own innate ability. School, for him, was not the same as for the others, as he makes clear in a late tribute to the Presentation Brothers who ran his secondary school in Carrick-on-Shannon: 'I look back on those five years as the beginning of an adventure that has not stopped. Each day I cycled towards Carrick was an anticipation of delights. The fear and drudgery of school disappeared; without realizing it, through the pleasures of the mind, I was beginning to know and to love the world.'¹ They were 'years of luck and privilege—and of grace, actual grace'. These were the years when he gained intellectual 'tools' and performed exceptionally well in examinations, ending with the top results in County Roscommon in his Leaving Certificate so that he won a scholarship to university and was also 'called to training' as a primary teacher. But they were also the years of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Tennyson, the required texts of his English syllabus, and of Dickens and other novelists, loaned to him by his English teacher. Frank Mannion, the teacher in question, was committed to introducing his students to the pleasures of reading and to teaching the recognition of those qualities that make for good and weak writing. While his teacher helped him awaken to language and literature as refined expression, it is evident that there was a more general awakening during his adolescence to the enabling power of knowledge, to the life of the mind.

The autobiographical account of this discovery of reading and knowledge as central, self-defining elements of the man and writer was written in the 1990s. The positive aura of delight, adventure, and love convey a powerful sense of freedom and

ease, the antithesis of the violence, fear, and repression he experienced at home in the barracks in Cootehall. The awakening to a 'love of the world' replaced 'the fear and drudgery of school', he writes in retrospect, yet an earlier retrospect, the dramatization of adolescence in *The Dark*, includes a vivid depiction of that 'fear and drudgery'. That novel, which explores the shame and anxieties of the brutalized young Mahoney, does not dramatize such luxuries of the mind: in the struggle with his father, school results will be his passport to a separate life. So much depends on his academic success that education is a ground of both dread and of fantasy:

The University was a dream: not this slavish push in and out through wind and rain on a bicycle, this dry constant cramming to pass the exam, no time to pause to know and enjoy anything... The University would be different, you'd seen pictures, all stone with turrets surrounded by trees, walks between the lawns and trees, long golden evenings in the boats on the Corrib. You'd be initiated into mystery.²

But when he does succeed in his exams, and does win a scholarship to the university, his first days in Galway extend the nightmare: he experiences 'the shambles of a dream' and abandons the romantic possibilities of higher education for a clerical job.

In deciding to leave the university, however, young Mahoney comes to a firm resolution, and in this moment one senses that he speaks for the author: 'One day, one day, you'd come perhaps to more real authority than all this, an authority that had need of neither vast buildings nor professorial chairs nor robes nor solemn organ tones, an authority that was simply a state of mind, a calmness even in the face of the turmoil of your own passing.'³ The bitterness and disillusionment that mark the humiliating withdrawal from the university are surely appropriate for this fiction of a bereft and impoverished adolescence. There is no happy ending here, no hint that dreams are fulfilled. It is a fiction marked by epiphany and irony, yet this narrative of young Mahoney's harsh beginning has embedded in it a portrait of the artist as a young man. He does not leave in triumph, determined to master his fate with 'silence, exile, and cunning', but the author makes clear that the accomplishment

of the novel itself is the proof that such an inner 'authority' can be achieved, even in the least promising circumstances.

This is the kind of authority that was gradually won during the Dublin decade, 1953–64. When McGahern referred to 'my years of training in the secret Dublin years', he meant not only intellectual training—the development of the 'tools' given him by the Presentation Brothers, or the extent of his education in St Patrick's Teacher Training College or in University College Dublin; more important than formal learning or even the *savoir faire* that comes with adult responsibilities was the formation of an adult self capable of writing *The Barracks*. In and out of educational institutions, as student and then, from 1955 on, as a teacher, McGahern was deeply sceptical of the value of formal education, for in his own case far more important were the development of his own spiritual life and the individuating power of knowledge. While he was lucky in the circumstances he found in that small school in Carrick, and he looked back in his final decade with a sense of delight at his younger self, many earlier versions of his self-portrait suggest that adolescence was a period of intense inner conflict and desolation, with hard-won interludes of 'grace'.

One other experience of delight and grace stands out even more than the years of secondary school. The essay 'The Solitary Reader' declares that he 'had great good luck at ten or eleven'—that is, in the years immediately following his mother's death and the move to live with his father in the barracks in Cootehall: 'I was given the run of a library. I believe it changed my life and without it I would never have become a writer.' *Memoir*, which reprints much of this account written fifteen years earlier, dates the experience to 'around the same time I began life in Carrick'. This refers to the commencement of his schooling with the Presentation Brothers in Carrick-on-Shannon in September 1948, when McGahern was almost fourteen. At any rate, whatever the exact age, the two experiences are joined in his mind because in both places he discovered the intense and liberating pleasure of reading.

He first discovered 'solitary reading'—the term is actually an echo of Proust—when he began to frequent the 'nineteenth-century library' of neighbours, the Moroneys. Willie, the aging father, and Andy, his unmarried, middle-aged son, were Protestant and lived an

impoverished lifestyle in an old stone house on a large farm, between the landed estates of Rockingham and Oakport, and not far from another, Woodbrook. Young John was often sent to buy apples at the Moroney farm, where he soon began to help out. The Moroneys' indifference to practical and professional matters, the personal preoccupations that took precedence, the devotion to a passion, all contributed to the charm which McGahern found in these individuals, and it was in their aura, and at Willie Moroney's suggestion, that he began to read for pleasure.

In addition to the singularly important event of providing a library throughout his adolescence, the Moroneys would supply McGahern with material for the Kirkwood stories in the 1980s, but his affection for these eccentric figures and the ambience of their lives may have had a more general early influence on him. Since they were Protestant and very poor, they were outside the sectarian and class structure of society, and as amateur philosophers and scholars they lived happily in a kind of timeless zone of decaying, ancestral security. Another way of life, a generation or two before, was embodied in the private library itself in the middle of the countryside, but McGahern reports nothing of its provenance. 'That library and those two gentle men were, to me, a pure blessing', he wrote, and so often did he credit the Moroneys with his very existence as a writer, it seems that they became symbolic figures, associated, perhaps, with Yeats and an aesthetic vision of an ideal way of life outside the stereotypes and conflicts of official Irish history and of the intimate conflicts with his father in the barracks.

'Given the run of' is the expression he used repeatedly for the adventure of exploring the Moroneys' library. It suggests the freedom he felt in being able to choose whatever he wished from the hundreds of books:

There was Scott, Dickens, Meredith and Shakespeare, Zane Grey and Jeffrey Farnol, and many, many books about the Rocky Mountains... I didn't differentiate, I read for nothing but pleasure, the way a boy nowadays might watch endless television dramas. Every week or fortnight, for years, I'd return with five or six books in my oilcloth shopping bag and take five or six away. Nobody gave me direction or advice.⁴

In recalling the pleasure of this formative experience, he expresses surprise that his father set no limits to what he read nor enquired into it at all whereas, in general, he was censorious and prescriptive; for many years, McGahern was a secret reader of comics, something his father thoroughly disapproved of as a waste of time. (This mildly subversive situation is captured in 'Strandhill, the Sea'.) In the matter of reading books from Moroneys', however, the young McGahern appears to have entered a privileged space, set away from his father's influence and interference: 'as long as they didn't take from work or prayer I was allowed to read without hindrance'. He was in his own private world of imagination, choosing books according to his own preference or at random, yet a criterion for judgement was being formed which undoubtedly remained with him and governed his later taste. That criterion was his own pleasure: 'Pleasure is by no means an infallible, critical guide, W. H. Auden wrote; but it is the least fallible.'⁵ When he wondered if he would have turned out differently had his reading been guided and structured, McGahern is really crediting the pleasure of those days as a foundation for his own very independent mind. Unhampered by any obligation to read books that had been approved of by authorities of any stripe—parents, church, or school—he became his own master and relished the freedom and power granted to him in the ritual of reading. That confident sense that he was free to make his own judgements remained for life, a necessary element, perhaps, of any writer's single-mindedness, and his likes and dislikes in literature were always fearlessly stated.

While this image of a boy in his own world may convey a sense of how he escaped from his father's aggression or began to develop a confident sense of self in adolescence, his capacity for concentration and pleasure is key to the formation of a distinctive self. 'There are no days more full in childhood than those days that were not lived at all, the days lost in a favourite book.' This often repeated sentence is an almost verbatim transcription of Proust's opening sentence in 'Ruskin and Others', and Proust's descriptions of his own mesmerized experience of reading permeates McGahern's account. It has, of course, the ring of lost time and the dream of memory giving to those days a fullness of meaning because of their link to the *moi profond*. It is in this sense that the days are 'full',

although ‘not lived at all’: we live through our imaginations, he means, the depth of pleasure in reading becoming a measure of the depth of the self.

He tells a story to illustrate his ‘complete absorption when all sense of time is lost’. So removed could he become from his physical environment that in the middle of the crowded barracks kitchen his sisters removed a shoe and placed a straw hat on his head while he continued to read unawares. He speaks of ‘waking’ out of a book, which suggests that the experience is a kind of hypnosis or sleep, or, perhaps, most of all, a kind of dream-state. Undoubtedly, his retrospective account of these years is shadowed by his later love of Proust’s essays on reading, yet in the depths of north County Roscommon, in the 1940s, a young man underwent a transformation that enabled him, in the aftermath of his mother’s death and in the surroundings of his father’s volatility and violence, to experience ‘a strange and complete kind of happiness’. Later, he associated this happiness with writing, although it came only in rare moments, yet it is not difficult to imagine that the transition from reading to the ‘secret vocation’ of writing was given purpose and energy by such ‘timeless’ episodes. These somewhat mystical experiences are the foundation of his later, again Proustian, view that the writer and the reader are identical when they become capable of accessing the timeless, hidden self, in which a spiritual life has its origin.

While he had the ‘free run’ of the Moroneys’ library and borrowed books for reading at home and in the rowboat which he would take out on Oakport Lake, the routine work and accomplishments of school added other dimensions to the formation of his imagination. Realizing that in those years of the 1940s secondary education was available only to ‘the rich or the academically bright’, McGahern considered it a further example of his good luck that in the summer of 1948, when he was thirteen years old, the Presentation Brothers opened the school in Carrick. He was, of course, one of the ‘academically bright’ and won a half-scholarship. A year earlier, his father had threatened to withdraw him from school and send him to work as an accounts clerk, and he had to be persuaded of the merits of further education for his son. Now, in September 1948, John—or Seán, as he was then universally known⁶—began to cycle each morning 8 miles from Cootehall to Carrick and back

each evening, 16 miles each day, yet he appears to have considered it no hardship, compared to the manual labour he was obliged to do for his father's small businesses: saving turf on the bog or picking potatoes on a rented field, the work of spring and autumn, which his father put ahead of schoolwork. His intellectual capacity was recognized—'at worst it appeals to one's vanity'—and he remembered the brilliance of his teachers, one in particular, Brother Placid. The teachers and the camaraderie of his fellow-students as they played handball or roamed the town opened another social world to the young McGahern. Through the education he received there, he broke free from his father's dark world, and the joy of imaginative and intellectual liberation was reinforced.

While his feeling about the whole experience at Carrick is rapturous, his English teacher and the literature curriculum appear to have struck a special nerve. Frank Mannion was an inspiring figure who 'had a feeling for language'. 'He gave us an essay to write every week. I suppose that was my first publication. It was part of the work that I probably enjoyed most. Mannion would read out good sentences and sometimes he might read out a whole essay. He would also read out bad sentences.'⁷ He lent his own books to his students and 'would talk to me about them inside and outside school hours'. The texts McGahern studied and memorized were of the traditional canon: '*Macbeth*, *Henry IV*, Wordsworth's "[The] Prelude", "Tintern Abbey", Tennyson's "In Memoriam", "The Ode to Virgil"—"Thou that singest wheat and woodland/tilth and vineyard, hive and horse and herd"'. Undoubtedly, such lines appealed to him, as he cycled through 'wheat and woodland', but the poetry of memory, of Wordsworth, must have had a lasting impact, and indeed he became a writer of memory, not only in his own fiction but also in his ability to recall and recite favourite lines and passages. This is true not only of passages learned at this time, but later, as he discovered the pleasure of Yeats, Auden, and Proust, certain lines and sentences were added to his store of literary quotations which remained a vital part of his life and would often turn up in conversation. Clearly part of the lasting pleasure of cycling to Carrick is captured here: 'I used to chant them aloud when I cycled alone in and out to school on those empty roads. Sometimes I chanted the Ordinary of the Mass, since I now knew the words by heart and they were beginning to take on

meaning through Caesar and Virgil and Cicero and Horace.³⁸ Above and beyond memorization for his classes, the pleasure of chanting, poetry or Latin deepened his pleasure in the literature itself, and memory was put to use in that special way to enlarge his imaginative perception. A further kind of private empowerment is associated with this ritual of chanting as he cycled through the largely unpopulated landscape. He made the classics of English and Latin his own.

The development of a memory for literature became a part of him that had vital significance. ‘What is good writing but memorable speech?’ McGahern asked, in talking about the importance of teaching young children to memorize poems the teacher liked, and he stressed the importance of the teacher developing an individual feeling for poetry. He goes on to mention lyric poems he taught successfully himself, and his choice surely reflects what he had loved and memorized earlier: ‘Some of Shakespeare’s, like “Under the Greenwood Tree”’; some of Hardy’s. “Ariel’s Song” from *The Tempest*; some of the early Yeats. “Though You Are in your Shining Days”.’ This line, from Yeats’s poem ‘The Lover Pleads with his Friend for Old Friends’, also comes into the mind of the teacher/mother in *The Leavetaking*, and this ‘secret’ lover of poetry explains something that must surely represent McGahern’s own view: ‘What gives me most pleasure still from my own schooling are the poems I learned by heart then; constantly I find them passing through my mind, not unlike old friends or stray strands of music.’³⁹ This short episode in the novel, focused on the decision facing the young teacher to continue with her engagement to the sergeant or to break it and become a nun, seems to include a characterization of the mother which is actually autobiographical: the choice between being a priest or a poet/teacher was the one actually facing McGahern himself as he neared the end of secondary school. This is not the place to explore the ideas of the teacher/mother on poetry, mostly derived from Yeats, but her appreciation of ‘some magical twist, which I believe is the infusion of the poetical personality into the words’¹⁰ is surely apropos at this point. The pleasure, the chanting, the memorization are all intimately related to this discovery of ‘poetical personality’ in language and to the appreciation of something mysterious, akin to magic, that could become available to the writer.

The fears and dreams of young Mahoney in *The Dark* draw on what was certainly part of McGahern's experience at Carrick, and many circumstantial details in the novel are repeated in interviews McGahern gave and in *Memoir*. There are two versions of his secondary schooling. *The Dark* dramatizes very intimately the way the boy felt, trapped in his father's world, and trapped too in a competitive examination system, the outcome of which would determine his future. The reader shares the boy's existential struggle to manage his feelings as he faces an unknown future, but when McGahern recalled his own schooldays, he knew the outcome and the future. He speaks of this period as a time of liberation from his father's world and from his childhood, but it would only be his own later success that would allow him to read his past definitively in this light.

That liberation came to him through Shakespeare and the other classic texts he studied. The solitary pleasure of reading books from the Moroneys' library certainly stayed with him, and he often spoke of it as the definitive experience that made him a writer, but it is also worth considering what he may have absorbed from those years studying English. *The Dark* suggests that what is learned for exams is quickly forgotten:

I gathered and put away the books that night. The nights of slavery, cramming the mind for the exam, most of it useless rubbish, and already being forgotten. The most that was left was some of the Latin lyrics, their strange grace; *Macbeth*; some poems; and the delight of solving the maths problems, putting order on their enclosed world, proving that numbers real and imaginary had relationships with each other.¹¹

The pleasure of abstract reasoning, of an 'enclosed world', of finding relationships between the real and the imaginary suggests that he might have become a mathematician, although his account seems to set little difference between mathematics and writing a poem, except perhaps for the 'grace' of the final text. The narrator seems to say that little is worth remembering, and memorizing passages from Shakespeare seems to fit that formula, and yet this is highly unlikely. Apart from the training of the memory, and the storing of what is memorized, how was McGahern's literary sensibility influenced by the poems and the plays, the classic texts that he studied and memorized?

It is impossible to trace such formative influences, or to answer a question such as why did he not become a poet, if poetry was central to the curriculum. In spite of this, certain speculations may serve. For instance, young Mahoney's last evening before the exams begin is almost unbearable: "Yes, tomorrow", I nodded. "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow", started to beat to the mind out of *Macbeth*.¹² He had to learn off the passage, and he will remember its echo, but apart from the dramatic power of character and action in that play, the unforgettable Macbeth and Lady Macbeth or the three witches, the madness and fierce ambition, the suspense, all the ingredients of the drama, these words are not simply a worn tagline, for—like so many lines from Shakespeare which have entered common speech—they carry a depth of resonance. Is it too much to believe that the whole passage entered McGahern's memory, its eloquence, its poetry, and its existential meaning:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
 To the last syllable of recorded time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
 And then is heard no more; it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.

Macbeth, V.5.19–28

Young Mahoney's fearful sensibility, and that of his anguished father—"This is my life, and this kitchen in the townland of Cloone is my stage, and I am playing my life out here on", and he stood, the eyes wild, as if grappling for his lines¹³—appear to reflect something of these sentiments; he has not simply memorized a speech for exam purposes. The urgent questioning of meaning and purpose that all Shakespeare's tragedies dramatize is surely reflected in his father's life and in his own humble life.

And so, when we know that McGahern studied *Henry IV*, it is hard to believe that he was not moved to absorb into himself such lines as: 'But thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool, / And

time, that takes survey of all the world, / Must have a stop' (*Henry IV, Part One*, V.4.80–2). Or that the sonnet beginning 'Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, / So do our minutes hasten to their end' did not colour and bring to articulation a sensibility that was already preoccupied with such sentiments. The memorable poetry of Shakespeare's vision may have stayed with McGahern, more vivid even than the great characters of the tragedies, the affairs of state of the history plays, the sense of fate and tragic flaws that bring the house down. Woven into *The Barracks* is a second-hand reference to Falstaff, used to characterize one of the guards: 'Who are they to say that we shall have no more cakes and ale?' It is a sentiment as close to McGahern's adult outlook as the other more lugubrious one, but the point is similar: he had a repertoire of Shakespearean allusions to draw on, and it is likely that they became part of him at this time.¹⁴ Although he may not have studied *Hamlet* or *King Lear* for his Leaving Certificate curriculum, they do appear on his third-level curricula, and the great soliloquies of those plays are echoed in his fiction. Indeed, it is the status of interior monologue as a technique for dramatizing character that suggests what he really took from Shakespeare. His characters, much like Hamlet, ask themselves 'To be or not to be' and the fiction represents the struggle to find answers to that conundrum. Rather than being novels and stories grounded in plot or action, they are fictions of consciousness, the drama being, like drama in Shakespeare, a poetic expansion of the felt inner life of the characters.

Over and over in interviews, McGahern referred to fiction as the *dramatization* of the inner life, and the success or failure of writing depended on the depth and clarity of that revelation. Interior monologue on a large scale is central to McGahern's own vision, but it is also worth considering that his love of the theatre during his years in Dublin may reflect an early desire to use the theatre as his literary medium. At many times during his career, he tried his hand at plays for radio, adapted some of his own stories, and, in 1972, his version of Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness* was broadcast on BBC radio. He had also prepared a stage version of Tolstoy's play at this time, and a revision of this went on at the Abbey Theatre in 1991, but he continued to rework it to the end of his life, as if for more than thirty years he had struggled to get this one play right. But in many ways

his fiction incorporates important elements of poetic drama. If he took an intense pleasure from the novels he borrowed from the Moroneys and from his English teacher, his literary training in poetry and drama ensured that they—perhaps more than plot or character—would be the foundation of his fictional method.

‘In the beginning was my mother’, he wrote in *Memoir*, in echo of the biblical ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.’ Mother, Word, and God. It is surely interesting that the mother/teacher in *The Leavetaking* is dramatized as someone who might have been a nun, whose love of poetry is paramount, is, in fact, a private faith: ‘It can be felt, but not known, as we can never know our own life or another’s in the great mystery of life.’¹⁵ Her poems and prayers are one, her literature equal to her gospel. She is an autobiographical image, of course, expressing ideas and referring to Yeats in ways that we associate with the author of the novel. At the same time, the mother/teacher is imagined as an ideal reader who brings to her love of poetry a profound faith in its power to communicate a sense of metaphysical reality, ‘the great mystery’. McGahern would refer to his first novel, *The Barracks*, as ‘a religious poem’, and even *The Dark*, so notoriously banned on the instigation of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, he described as ‘a religious work if it’s anything at all’.¹⁶ Long after he was no longer a believer, and long after his mother’s death, he still thought of writing in relation to her image, and, whatever he might mean by ‘religious’ in literary terms, it is clear that one way of thinking about his identity as a writer is to consider the lasting place in his imagination of his mother’s pious faith, her intuitive sense of the ‘great mystery’.

The world-view and practices of Catholicism pervaded McGahern’s familial and communal life, a form of inherited knowledge available to him in adolescence, just as much as the landscape of the Shannon region and the people he observed there were givens. In her life and in her death, Susan McGahern provided her son with an image of trust in a universal and transcending knowledge, and his participation in church rituals and ceremonies were for him, he repeated many times, a source of sensual pleasure and delight. ‘The church dominated the little village’, he wrote, ‘an extension of the house and the barracks, but with different laws and a

higher authority, and it opened outwards... The church ceremonies always gave me pleasure, and I miss them even now. In an impoverished time they were my first introduction to an indoor beauty, of luxury and ornament, ceremony and sacrament and mystery.¹⁷ He refers to a young visiting priest whose sermons introduced him to the idea that 'reflection on the mystery of life was itself a form of prayer', and this may be the sense in which *The Barracks* and *The Dark* are religious in a more fundamental way than the 'empty formulas' of common worship. He went on to say that:

before the printed word, the churches were the Bibles of the poor, and the Church was my first book. The story of Christ as I followed it through these ceremonies gave meaning and depth to both the year and our lives. The way was travelled not only in suffering but in ecstasy. I was introduced to all I have come to know of prayer and sacrament, ceremony and mystery, grace and ornament and the equality of all women and men underneath the sun of heaven.¹⁸

He wrote as if the rituals and ceremonies, and the cosmic knowledge associated with them, remained all his life as an inheritance, an orientation that underlay all later forms of knowledge, but this conviction is associated primarily with his mother's faith and his memories of her.

One of the most powerful and affecting scenes in McGahern's work is the recreation of the days of his mother's death and funeral. The public rituals follow the Catholic observances so that everyone moves within a well-known structure for mourning. This begins as soon as her death is announced in the barracks. Frank McGahern leads his family in a recitation of the rosary for the repose of the soul of Susan McGahern. The long public prayer in which everyone participates, reciting in turn the five decades of ten Hail Marys, the responses, and the litanies, was a daily event in the McGahern family, as in most Irish Catholic families at the time. The family, the community, the country, and the whole world, according to the statements of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, were given a means to bear bereavement and suffering, to find hope and justice in an afterlife. But if this communal prayer provides the father with a ritual that structures his feeling, the children's grief cannot be contained by it. So intense is the boy's reaction that it

follows a different path, from the moment he experiences 'the unreal memory that yesterday she died'.¹⁹ His memory runs over the years of his life with her, all those images of childhood recalled with ease, his grief embedding them deeper in him, so that when he writes *The Leavetaking* thirty years later and *Memoir* sixty years later, they reappear on the page in arresting detail and are the substance of his childhood with his mother.

But these recollections of days actually spent with her are followed the next day by a concentrated and panic-stricken imagining of the two stages of the funeral service, which the young boy was not allowed to attend. First he imagines her body being removed from the deathbed, placed in a coffin, and the lid closed; then the carrying of the coffin to the hearse, the journey to the church, and the prayers. Next day, the day of her burial, he takes the kitchen clock at the hour of her funeral mass, and, hidden in the laurels, lives the minutes by imagining step by step what is happening in Aughawillan church. He can cope with his grief only by imagining the scene, by participating in it, although he is not there. The temporal gap between the boy of nine and the writer many decades later is blurred; the boy holding the clock is the writer making time stand still. Imagining of such intense vividness is as real as actually living, perhaps, indeed, more real than living itself for space and time are abolished in this hour when the boy/artist transports himself to his mother's graveside. The aura of a spiritual reality is as much rooted in his own mind as in the rituals and myths of the Church. His mother is an image of another order of reality, which is both mortal and immortal, subjective and objective. She exists in a reality which is at once religious and imaginative.

McGahern's recreation of his lost mother became a private ritual in the years following her death, and the images that are recalled and the ways in which the culture structured his memories for him gave him his earliest material for fiction, but it is surely the power of memory itself and its capacity to recover lost knowledge involuntarily that is most fundamental to his work. It is for this reason that he found in Proust's great novel, his essays, and his letters a supreme value in recreating one's own earlier experience.

When John McGahern reflected on his emergence as a writer, he often credited luck and accident as the key conditions, including the 'good luck' of having an offer from Faber and Faber in March 1961 to publish *The Barracks*, at this stage only just begun. In his final written statement, he declared 'The god of life is accident', and went on to say: 'Fiction has to be true to a central idea or vision of life.'²⁰ In his own case, certainly, and in the vision of life embodied in his fiction, it is easy to see the central place occupied by the random events of life—his mother's illness and death, in particular—but equally central are the predictable forces of nature and culture: time passing, human instincts, the imprints of history. In that statement, written as a Preface to his final selection of his stories, he admits to uncertainty and improvisation in the way fiction emerges according to its own lights, but he also insists that it must be 'true to a central idea' and insofar as that is so, fiction is shaped by clear thinking. The parts played by talent and poetic sensibility are, obviously, unfathomable—the province of the 'god of accident'—but the part played by intelligence in shaping fiction around a central idea may be traced. There is a place for knowledge and for 'training' in the clarification of poetic 'vision' and in the critical discriminations of literary traditions.

In the private pleasure of unrestricted reading, and the memorization and chanting of poetry, he was apart from his five sisters and from everyone in the barracks home. He would withdraw to the Boyle river behind the house and drift out into the lake to read in the boat, or he would simply become absorbed in the midst of things. Over the years, the nature of his reading changed 'to a different order of pleasure that was both recognition and discovery and sometimes a pure unfathomable joy'. This is how he described the change in *Memoir*, but a decade earlier he had written: 'this change is linked with our growing consciousness, consciousness that we will not live forever and that all human life is in the same fix. We have to discard all the tenets we have been told until we have succeeded in thinking them out for ourselves.'²¹ This increasing knowledge of a distinct selfhood appears to reflect a stage of questioning in adolescence, although when McGahern speaks of discarding received understanding or 'tenets' (a word that appears to be shorthand for

religious beliefs), he does not introduce any sense of intellectual or emotional crisis. Rather, this stage of 'recognition and discovery' is linked to joy, as if the imaginative pleasure of reading and intellectual enlargement are continuous, as if for him the 'adventure' of learning and knowledge expanded awareness in a way that he welcomed and was not disruptive or alienating in its erosion of given truths.

Years earlier, he had spoken of this stage in a slightly different way. '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.' Associating this change primarily with Yeats, he goes on to explain: 'I do think that the pleasure that words give is the comfort of generality. Each person lives in his own isolation and out of that the particular is given the grace of ceremony, is given the grace of the general.'²² 'Grace, actual grace' was the word he used to describe what he was fortunate to receive in his school in Carrick-on-Shannon, and here that word appears to be explained: 'the grace of the general'. In other words, it seems that solitary reading did not feel to him an isolating activity; rather, he found through it that his own isolated experience could be generalized; that, in reading, he could discover others who understood and sympathized and explained his own experience to him, or at least helped him to see that underlying the personal was the communal, which was, perhaps, the common experience known as human nature.

The 'moral activity' of reading in this new stage was, then, the discovery that reading and thinking affirmed a knowledge that one was not alone even in one's most isolated moments. Literature offered a 'ceremony' that linked the individual to the common experience of humanity at large. And so, the obvious next step was to discover through reading how one might become a writer who could share this moral experience, as well as a liberating joy, with others:

We begin to come on certain books that act like mirrors. What they reflect is something dangerously close to our own life and the society in which we live. A new, painful excitement enters the way we read. We search out these books, and these books only, the books that act

as mirrors. The quality of the writing becomes more important than the quality of the material out of which the pattern or story is shaped.²³

As often, in McGahern's allusions to his own evolution and practice as an artist, the words of Proust shadow his language—as here, 'books that act as mirrors'—but the young man had experienced such an awakening already in Shakespeare and Yeats before he came upon Proust. The searching-out of those special books, learning how to recognize the unique quality of writing, the particular style in which personal value lay for him, became central to John McGahern's apprenticeship in the Dublin years.