Transatlantic Connections in John McGahern's *The Leavetaking*

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Abstract:

John McGahern is most often regarded as an artist of the local or the "self-enclosed world", as Declan Kiberd puts it. His works explore the lives and loves of characters in settings that correspond closely with the localities of McGahern's youth in the north-west of Ireland. Accordingly, the themes of his work are often aligned with those of other "provincial" Irish realists, in Kavanagh's sense of the word: religion, exile, and local identities or selves. This paper, however, focuses on instances where McGahern contrasts the self with the non-self in distinct national-cultural terms. Specifically, in *The Leavetaking*, as well as the short stories "Doorways" and "Bank Holiday", he introduces American characters (women in all three cases) as much, it would seem, to provide the spark of a love-interest for those stories' drifting male protagonists as to provide a commentary on Ireland by way of comparison with America and American perceptions of Ireland. In doing so, McGahern deploys a transatlantic vocabulary of circulation and movement that reflects the openness of his enclosed locality to the non-local, the self to the non-self.

Keywords: John McGahern; Irish literature; Irish identity; transatlantic literature; America and Ireland

In his 2005 autobiography *Memoir* and elsewhere, John McGahern tells an anecdote about Patsy

Conboy, a local man done good who built a dancehall near to where McGahern had grown up in the north-west of Ireland. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Conboy hired famous dance bands to play in the ballroom and became a "local hero". Although two later ventures proved ill-advised and financially disastrous – a motorcycle Wall of Death and an outdoors, unheated swimming pool in Leitrim (a county with hundreds of small lakes and "uncertain" weather, as McGahern euphemistically describes a climate rarely fit for outdoor bathing) – the dancehall was a huge success despite being denounced by the local clergy. At the end of the anecdote, McGahern hints at one of the reasons behind the ballroom's success and the source of the priests' opprobrium: "Couples met amid the spangled lights on the dusty dance floor and invited one another out to view the moon and take the beneficial air: 'There wasn't a haycock safe for a mile around in the month of July'". Patsy, however, was "more than able to hold his ground against the pulpits" and had this piece of advice for young men turning up for work with a letter from the priest asking Patsy to hire them because they had large families to support: "My advice to you, Buster, is to dump the priest and put a cap on that oil well of yours. They have been capping such oil wells for years in America. Families are smaller and everybody is better off". Patsy's knowledge of best practice in America concerning petroleum and prophylactics was, it seems, acquired at source. The money for the dancehall, McGahern points out, had been earned in America.[1]

Why is Patsy Conboy of any significance here? First, McGahern holds him up as exemplary of a localism and individualism in Ireland that took precedence over any state or religious superstructure: "In the communities, the local and the individual were more powerful than any national identity, and much of what was postulated was given no more than lip service, as shown by the success of Patsy Conboy and his ballroom" (*M* 211). Elsewhere, in his essay on Joyce's *Dubliners*, McGahern notes that "to live [in Ireland] is to come into daily contact with a rampant individualism and localism dominating a vague, fragmented, often purely time-serving, national identity".[2] This notion of the subservience of national to local identity, perhaps unsurprising given

the state's abrogation of responsibility in so many areas of post-war Irish life, runs throughout McGahern's non-fiction and forms a basis for the discussion to follow.[3] Second, Conboy is one of several examples in *Memoir* of emigrants returning to Ireland from America (*M* 50, 53, 86–87, 87–88, 137–38), often with a lot more money than when they left and at a time when the scale of outward migration was, as McGahern himself notes, "far more than in any other decade in the entire century" (*LW* 129). In his reminiscences of Cootehall where his father worked as a police sergeant, for instance, McGahern recalls how an entire row of buildings in the village were all owned by Michael Henry who "had bought the grocery and farm with money he made in America". Henry had earlier appeared in fictional form in the short story "Doorways", and there he dispenses advice about travel and thrift as freely as Patsy Conboy does about faith and family planning: "I don't believe in shelling out good money to a hotel when you can be just as badly off at home. America teaches you those things" (*M* 174). Elsewhere, McGahern notes the rumours about his own grandfather returning from New York, where he was a bar owner who "had come home to marry the local beauty and returned to New York with the intention of selling the bar" (*M* 16). He never (re-)returned, except in literary form as part of the narrator's family history in *The Leavetaking* (1974). Clair Wills, in her discussion of post-war emigration and Irish culture, describes a pattern of a "ceaseless reiteration of departures and short-lived returns" in 1950s Ireland, quoting playwright Tom Murphy on his hometown of Tuam in the west: "Somebody always seemed to be arriving or going away".[4] It is precisely this recurring pattern, deeply woven into the social fabric, of a continual recirculation of people that will dovetail here with the discussion of an Irish identity that itself appears to shift between individual, local, and national states as the bearers of those identities themselves reiterate the patterns of departure and return.

In the 1950s however, as McGahern himself notes (*LW* 129, *M* 209), Britain was the destination for most of those emigrants, not America. So why the focus on America and the Atlantic here? Why not Britain and the Irish Sea? Specific allusions to American emigration can be readily

found in the short fiction, as well as the long, but so can allusions to emigration to Britain, or indeed from the rural west to Dublin.[5] The first reason is quite straightforward: in the novel under consideration here, relationships with American characters are central to its thematic preoccupation with concepts of the self and other (a key theme throughout McGahern's work).[6] Thus emigration itself is not the focus and discussions of Ireland's relationship with Britain can be provisionally put to one side. The second related reason is that these American characters are deployed in a manner that appears to contrast the self with the non-self in distinct national-cultural terms. That is, in these specific encounters with Americans, localism and individualism appear to give away, even if temporarily, to expressions of a more national character. Americans bring the national (and religious) superstructures into clearer focus, as it were. It must, however, also be pointed out that it is not the intention here to oppose the Irish Sea to the Atlantic or Britain to America, thereby creating a false dichotomy unrepresentative of how McGahern actually reflects in his fiction and non-fiction upon a wider, interconnected transatlantic world that encompasses Ireland, America *and* Britain. McGahern's last novel, *That They May Face The Rising Sun* (2002), is exemplary in that respect. There, one of the protagonists, Kate Ruttledge, is Anglo-American and has moved with her Irish husband Joe from London to the same north-west corner of Ireland that the latter grew up in and where rural decline is summed up as follows: "with the way this country is going I doubt but America will be the end of us all yet".[7] In introducing his American characters, it is precisely the interconnectedness of and movement within the wider transatlantic world he emphasises. In doing so, McGahern deploys (as we shall see later) a transatlantic vocabulary of circulation and movement that reflects exactly the fluid openness of the local to the non-local, of the self to the non-self.

The continual recirculation of people within this wider transatlantic world, once one includes rural-urban migration, is undoubtedly one of the most enduring themes in the McGahern oeuvre (indeed, for some three decades McGahern himself regularly crossed and re-crossed the

Atlantic to teach at Colgate University in upstate New York). Nevertheless, while such themes are intrinsic to the work, criticism has tended on the contrary to follow McGahern's own emphasis on "localism" and thus has recognised him almost exclusively as a writer of the local, specifically the "provincial Irish life" of what George O'Brien calls the "rather anonymous Upper Shannon region".[8] While this essay takes the significance of localism and individualism in much of McGahern's work as self-evident, it will also argue that the non-local has a significant role to play in that work, particularly where it is used to give fleeting shape to that vague, fragmented Irish national identity McGahern describes above. As Frank Shovlin points out, there is a "standard critical reception" of McGahern that effectively brackets the writer in categories such as "McGahern and Rural Ireland" and thereby limits his scope.[9] This article aims to open up such restrictive categories to examination in a manner arguably reflected in the novels themselves and in *The Leavetaking* in particular. In *That They May Face The Rising Sun*, another character notes: "The way we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived are often very different".[10] The lightness of the allusion conceals a probable nod to Joyce; the thought closely echoes that of Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*: "Am I like that? See ourselves as others see us".[11] This essay will argue that the gap between self-perception and the self as perceived by others is key to the role certain American characters play in not only *The Leavetaking*, which will be the focus here, but also in the short stories "Doorways" and "Bank Holiday", later expressions of the same intercultural dynamic between Irish and American protagonists. In all three cases, the American female characters are introduced, it would seem, as much to provide the spark of a love-interest for those stories' drifting male protagonists as to provide a commentary on Ireland by way of comparison with American perceptions of Ireland.

'The life was so different from mine'

The Leavetaking, first published in 1974 and substantially revised by the author ten years later, was

written as "a love story", as McGahern notes in his preface to the second edition.[12] But it is a love story sharply critical of the restrictions placed on love in an Irish society that was in many ways made "childish, repressive and sectarian" by a "collusion of Church and State" (*M* 240). Adhering to epic (or indeed Modernist) principles admired by its author, *The Leavetaking* is a one-day novel in which the I-narrator, Patrick Moran, describes his last day as a schoolteacher in Dublin before he is fired for "flying in the face of God" and marrying a godless American divorcee in a London registry office, when (as the priest firing him reminds him) "there are thousands of Irish Catholic girls crying out for a husband …Why couldn't you marry one of them?" (*TL* 166).[13] Also typical of the one-day Modernist novel, the narration ebbs and flows "on a tide of memory" (*TL* 25) as throughout the day Patrick recalls certain events that have led him to this day and this career-ending marriage. Foremost among these memories are those of a childhood dominated by an intense love for his mother who died when Patrick was a child, his training and teaching in Dublin, and finally his year-long sabbatical in London where he meets Isobel, a beautiful American woman with whom he falls in love and marries shortly before he is due to return to the job in the Dublin school from which he will now inevitably be fired. Much like Joyce's *Ulysses*, however, the day ends with an affirmation of love as the couple fall asleep in each other's arms, "our very breathing seems an echo of the rise and fall of the sea as we drift to sleep" (*TL* 170–71).

Images of the sea and water are integral to the realist symbolism of this novel (as they often are in Joyce's works too) and its language of cyclical repetition and change.[14] As John Brannigan notes in his discussion of what he terms "archipelagic modernism", tides and floods often function as "metaphors of powerful sexual and psychological drives".[15] In *The Leavetaking*, the imaginative space of the sea, frequently invoked, performs this role as well as functioning as a metaphor of simultaneous separation and connection between "[t]wo worlds" (*TL* 35): past and present, life and death, self and other. In the case of Patrick and Isobel, and preceding the unity of the final image of their breathing echoing the sea, what separates them most obviously at first is the huge disparity

between their lives and "worlds". McGahern emphasises the separation between the two by giving Isobel an American background that appears to Patrick utterly "unreal" compared to his own:

> "Since you're staying in London, would you like me to take you to a game on Saturday?" I asked. We change but little. I was bidding for the same security as the Dress Dance years ago, even though the world she spoke about was so outside my life, except in movies, that a yes or no would be equally unreal. (*TL* 105)

Although Isobel does indeed agree to go to the game, the unreality of their meeting and "the world she spoke about" is already shaping Patrick's recollection of the evening into something more cinematic ("in movies") and fantastically intangible: "The world of the evening, of her long and beautiful body that I could not touch, was already half imaginary" (*TL* 106). The more Patrick learns of Isobel's life before they met in London, the more he comes to realise that "[t]he life was so different from mine that it seemed out of history, a chimera" (*TL* 115). With only movies and mythology for comparison, the fabulous "unreal stories" (*TL* 131) of Isobel's life serve, initially at least, to emphasise the vast cultural distances between the two.[16]

At first, those distances are most obviously felt and expressed through a disparity in wealth. Patrick, of a respectable lower-middle class Irish background, is working as a barman to make ends meet while on sabbatical in London. Isobel, on the other hand, comes from an extremely wealthy American family, with both parents from "rich families". She recalls her grandfather's "big house on the Sound outside New York, with servants, enormous rooms, and cats, many cats, Persians and Siamese". These exotic cats are perfectly at home with equally exotic stories of "a yacht trip to Cuba, [and] some story of a missing emerald" (*TL* 114). Her first husband was extravagantly wealthy too (*TL* 115). When she meets Patrick, Isobel is living in a suite at the Hilton. "It must cost a fortune", Patrick wonders aloud when she takes him up to see it. "It does", Isobel confirms with a laugh (*TL* 105). Isobel's own amusement is partly attributable to the fact that her father pays for the

suite and he himself is dependent on a far richer English woman, Caroline, who appears to be in love with him and funds his spendthrift lifestyle. This itself is an interesting twist on that well-travelled fictional journeyman, the rich American in Europe. Indeed, after Patrick suggests Isobel's father "must make a great deal of money", Isobel quickly corrects him: "He doesn't. That's the trouble. He has no business sense". He is, if anything, slightly fraudulent, and his brand of rapacious American capitalism is largely funded by landed English wealth. His spendthrift habits also stand out in contrast to Patrick's obsessively frugal father. "It must be nice to be so rich", Patrick naively observes (*TL* 104). But Caroline, it emerges, has also paid for Isobel to go into psychiatric analysis, which leads Patrick again to blurt out his amazement at the cost of this lifestyle: "But doesn't analysis cost a fortune?" (*TL* 116). Patrick can't help himself again when Isobel's father buys a "luxuriously furnished" flat for the couple in an expensive part of town: "I hate to think what it cost" (*TL* 125).

The narrative purpose served by this separation of the characters through the disparity in wealth in particular is perhaps most clearly revealed late in the novel, when the couple return to Ireland at the end of Patrick's sabbatical. They spend an utterly miserable afternoon traipsing around Howth looking for accommodation amid the grim, leaky options available to them. Isobel has cut all ties with her father at this point, including financial ones, and the couple give up in despair and frustration towards the end of the day. Anger creeps into the conversation; when Isobel asks Patrick if he feels he "took on too much taking me back to Ireland", he replies testily: "Do you mean that the life and rooms here are too poor for you?" (*TL* 145–46). As Patrick's narrative voice intervenes in the simmering argument, images of the sea recur: "For a moment we were as separate from one another as we were from the sea chopping against the blocks of granite below us, as separate from one another as we would be in our future deaths" (*TL* 146). This grand, outward metaphorical gesture towards the sea and death suggests that up to a point the gap highlighted by wealth functions here simply as an alternative symbolic means of emphasising a more fundamental

human separation and central theme throughout McGahern's fiction, the ultimate unknowability of the other to the self. Isobel's life is "unreal" insofar as the reality of any life is ultimately beyond the intellectual grasp of an other, or even itself. But in this case, the gap between self-perception and the self as perceived by others is presented at least in part in distinct national-cultural terms.

Religion also plays a significant role in *The Leavetaking* in dramatising the oppositions between the Irish and American characters. In his non-fiction especially, McGahern has repeatedly represented the Ireland of his youth and early adulthood in particular as "a theocracy in all but name" (*LW* 128). Ireland was a "God-ridden" (*LW* 149) country where a "childishness in religion and politics and art was encouraged to last a whole life long" (*LW* 97), and there are many indications throughout *The Leavetaking* of a pervasive infantilisation. Much of this is reflected in the manner with which most of the teachers in the novel are shown as having never really become adults themselves. One teacher is memorably described as a "fifty-five-year old schoolboy with heart condition" (*TL* 20). The teacher training college was run "like a seminary" and is, moreover, a striking mirror-image of the schools these young men would be heading out to teach in: "Then there were classes, classes, the bells between classes, and the long hours of the studyhall quickened with thrillers and crosswords". On Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, these adult schoolboys "were let out into the city" where they would then go to dances and perhaps "walk out to the Phoenix Park with a young typist". There, a "kiss was frighteningly amazing … We next daringly opened our eyes. We giggled as our eyes met, like catching one another at the biscuit tin … We were even younger than our years" (*TL* 85–6). When Patrick is later accepted by the headmaster of the school from which he will eventually be fired, he proposes that they celebrate with a drink. The headmaster's "face fell: fear that he'd just hired a drunkard". Patrick has to quickly offer an excuse and a more acceptable alternative for his teetotaller headmaster: "'I didn't mean in a pub', I quickly corrected. 'An orange or lemonade in a sweet shop'". On their way to the sweet shop, they pass the pub "as if it was a house of shame" (*TL* 18). Later, as he prepares to leave the school on sabbatical,

Patrick reflects that his life up till this point has been "a continuing childhood" (*TL* 101). McGahern, reflecting on his own life, notes simply: "It was a childish world" (*M* 138).

This certainly explains some of the surprise and naivety with which Patrick greets the stories of Isobel's life before they met. While the former was sipping lemonade in sweet shops and giggling with girls in the park, the latter had "been married when she was eighteen"; there had been "a long affair in New York"; and there had been "a 'business' with an older man" (*TL* 109). Two of those relationships ended after pregnancy and abortion, her first marriage with divorce.[17] We are also told that Isobel's father was "an American who had been through several affairs and marriages" (*TL* 104), fitting a stereotype also conjured up in the later short story "Doorways" (published in the 1978 collection *Getting Through*). There, the Irish narrator notices American Kate O'Mara's "ringless fingers" and asks:

> "Were you ever married?"
> "No. Why do you ask?"…
> "No why. It's probably stupid. We think of Americans as much married".
> "My mother would have a fit if she heard that. We're Catholics from way back. Nuns and priests galore. "No one was ever divorced in *my* family", my mother is fond of boasting". (*CS* 160, emphasis in original)

As this suggests, the much-married American is a stereotype that fits Isobel's father far more comfortably than Kate O'Mara, whose Irish-American Catholic background is prominent from the outset. Divorce and marriage also recur in "Bank Holiday" (published in *High Ground* in 1985), where American Mary Kelleher asks the Irish Patrick McDonough:

> "Are you divorced? Or am I allowed to ask that?"

> "Of course you are. Divorce isn't allowed in this country. We are separated … And you? Do you have a husband or friend?"...
> "Yes. Someone I met at college, but we agreed to separate for a time".
> There was no silence or unease. (*CS* 354)

In all three cases, the emphasis on nationality and place appears pointed. In McGahern's Ireland, the prohibition of divorce was not removed from the constitution until 1996, and in 1983, when McGahern was revising *The Leavetaking*, an "abortion referendum" was held that resulted in an 1861 law prohibiting abortion being in effect strengthened through an amendment to the constitution.[18] Indeed, McGahern's revisions to that novel arguably register contemporary debates over abortion and sexuality as the 1984 second edition includes additional references to abortion not present in the first edition (*TL* 117). As McGahern observed a decade later, Irish religious and political leaders displayed "an obsession with morality, especially sexual" (*LW* 146). Sex "was seen, officially, as unclean and sinful" (*M* 18). It is precisely this damaging preoccupation with sexual morality and its clouding in darkness and sinful secrecy that *The Leavetaking* seeks to expose.

Initially (and certainly for readers in the early seventies when *The Leavetaking* was first published), one would suspect that it is precisely the stereotypical free-loving Americanness of the Americans that is being highlighted and contrasted with the repressed, childish Irishness of the Irish in order to achieve this. Again, however, what's most interesting is how McGahern resists the easy stereotype: Isobel is far from a straightforward example of sexual liberation and openness, just as her father (although much-married) is not simply a successful American businessman nor Patrick a faith-befuddled man-child adrift in heathen London. Indeed, Isobel's sexual history is just as dark as that described by McGahern in many of his Irish characters. "I was disturbed by the sexual turmoil she had described", Patrick reveals (*TL* 118). Most disturbing of all is Isobel's account of when she was twelve and her father "came into my bed and masturbated against me" (*TL* 117). The scene

described by Isobel mirrors that of incidents described by McGahern involving his own father (*M* 188) and that of the young boy in *The Dark*.[19] However, if sexual abuse is portrayed as a grim universal phenomenon in *The Leavetaking*, the response to it is not. Isobel, as mentioned, undergoes expensive analysis. By contrast, Patrick's response is decidedly Irish: "'I think I'd prefer to go to confession', I said out of old prejudice. "I'd try and work it out or put up with it'" (*TL* 117).

The point to Patrick's response, it seems, is that while such traumatic incidents can occur anywhere, the responses to them can differ according to the culture and society in which they occur. In other words, the deeply passive and fatalistic aspect to Patrick's response derives in no small measure from the Irish-Catholic culture and society, described at length in the first part of the novel, in which he was brought up. The sins of the fathers are the same, but McGahern uses these varying responses to explore, among other things, the nature of the Irish character, especially where sexuality and morality are concerned. Thus, there are several instances throughout the novel where Patrick's very Irish passivity and fatalism, even diffidence, are highlighted. The first time he enters the Hilton with Isobel he is struck by her confidence and authority: "The assurance with which she said, "Fourteen, please", to the elevator man, I would never have" (*TL* 105). His own lack of assurance betrays a sense of diffidence rooted in a religious culture that nurtured a perpetual childishness. Just before this, Patrick was astonished when Isobel invited him up to the suite, adding: "the directness of what I imagined to be a sexual invitation took my breath away" (*TL* 105). Direct and assured, American Isobel, despite the "sexual turmoil" of her youth and early adulthood, is free from a sexual anxiety that can be mistaken for morality: "Her long thighs stretched against the blue jeans as she climbed, laughing in the pure pleasure of her body and the day in that direct American way I had grown to love" (*TL* 43). In "Doorways", the sense of a mismatch between the Irish and American protagonists is heightened through language reminiscent of *The Leavetaking* and Isobel's "directness" and "assurance" (*TL* 105), qualities McGahern appears to associate with Americans. There, Kate O'Mara speaks of another man in what turns out to be a love triangle, a

scenario not untouched by farce. The other man, Kate reveals, is "fiercely anti-American" and "has this dream of an Irish-Ireland, free of outside influences" (*CS* 161). In relating her sexual history to the narrator, she speaks with "an openness I was unused to" (*CS* 161). Even her smile conveys these qualities, as a draft version of their first meeting suggests: ""Hi," she smiled openly and directly" (P71/466).

In *The Leavetaking*, it is again significant that Isobel's direct Americanness is emphasised, and it is surely no coincidence that Patrick's paean to bodily pleasure above occurs immediately after recollections of his mother, whose wedding night is described in terms more appropriate to Gothic horror than a "love story":

> "Has it happened to me?" was all her mind could frame over the tea and toast and brown bread of the North Star Hotel breakfast the next morning, the mind already trying to change the sheets and blood and sexual suck of the night into a sacrificial marble on which a cross stood in the centre of tulips and white candles. (*TL* 42)

The question "Has it happened to me?" epitomises the complete absence of agency concerning her own marriage. She enters her marriage like a sacrificial victim and responds to her husband's questions about what she would like to do after the breakfast with a simple: "Whatever you think would be nice to do" (*TL* 42). This utter self-effacement produces in turn an equally total fatalism: "Already the feeling was deep within her that there was nothing, nothing on earth, she could do" (*TL* 48). Before her marriage, she had thoughts of becoming a nun, "many times she had come near acting on them, but what had proved stronger was her passivity, to drift on and let life happen to her rather than to force it into any shape" (*TL* 39). Thus life, like her marriage, happens to her. This proves tragic when after being treated for breast cancer and warned not to get pregnant again, she submits to her husband: "starved for sexuality he could not hold back". Knowing another pregnancy would kill her, she "turned into the quiet fatalism of, 'One way or another it will be the will of

God'" (*TL* 65). In serving God's will, it is her own will and body that have been sacrificed on the marble of the altar. The contrast could not be starker between the sacrifice of her body and will to God the Father, and Isobel's "pure pleasure" in her own body and ultimate severance of her ties to her own demanding father.

That Patrick has to an extent inherited his mother's passivity and fatalism is evident both in his joining the "second priesthood" (*TL* 85) and in the manner events seem to happen *to him* much as his mother's wedding happened to her.[20] Before their move to Dublin, Patrick explains to Isobel how all education in Ireland is denominational, which meant that while "the State paid teachers, it was the Church who hired and fired". Isobel's astonished response is typical of her "direct American way" and sanely defiant: "That's ridiculous". Patrick's, on the other hand, is entirely fatalistic: "It's the way it is" (*TL* 142). He seems here to confirm his "old prejudice" of before in his willingness to either go to confession or "put up with it" (*TL* 117). Indeed, it is such moments that lead the reader to suspect that McGahern is presenting Patrick in much the same ironic fashion that Joyce presents Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait,* a major intertextual presence in McGahern's earlier novel, *The Dark,* in particular. Later in *The Leavetaking,* for instance, Patrick appears to "master" himself after briefly succumbing to the need for prayer, but his self-addressed call for rationality comes close to ironic contradiction: "use your head for Christ's sake" (*TL* 169). This might also lead us to suspect that in so far as *The Leavetaking* replicates certain patterns of the Bildungsroman (in particular the modernist Bildungsroman of which *A Portrait* is most salient here), the Ireland Patrick must eventually be exiled from is still in many ways typical of how the nation is identified in such fiction of development as a "belated, flawed, and often debilitating basis" for, as Jed Esty puts it, the protagonist's "soulmaking project".[21] A belatedness in *Bildung* seems particularly apt here in light of McGahern's repeated accusations of Church and State authority colluding to infantilise those under their control. Looking back on his childhood, Patrick asks himself: "Was my life beaten into its shape in this schoolroom day by those forces or would it have grown similar even

if the forces were otherwise …?" (*TL* 48, ellipses in original). Those "forces" are as much the domestic struggles he has been directly describing as they are the wider national forces of historical belatedness and inheritance that shape the lives of characters in a wide range of Irish novels contemporary to *The Leavetaking*. As Clair Wills argues, the "circular plots characteristic of Irish post-war realism emphasised characters' entrapment within an anachronistic historical moment. The pull of a deterministic past … signalled the inability of Irish society to develop or progress into modernity in ways which might be seen as typical of the western European nation-state".[22] Patrick does indeed acknowledge the "pull of a deterministic past" when he recalls in shame a moment of obsequiousness while still a young schoolmaster in conversation with the school inspector: "I blush still as I hear the slavish caution of my whole forever overmastered race in my voice" (*TL* 150). He is, at this point, emphatically not "*a mhaistir*", or *master* as the teachers address each other in Irish, but a young servant, in the same way the headmaster is an "old servant" (*TL* 16).[23]

That allusions to America in *The Leavetaking* are being used quite consistently by McGahern to highlight these Irish traits is clear from the two stories, "Doorways" and "Bank Holiday", that offer alternative perspectives on the "love story" that occupies the second half of that novel. In the former in particular, Kate O'Mara's American directness creates a self-conscious awareness in the narrator of how he appears in her presence. Talking with their mutual friend, Nora Moran, the narrator tries to compensate: "'Do you miss not being married, Nora?', I asked *so as not to appear too passive*" (*CS* 162, my emphasis). But the effort of doing so exhausts him: "I was numbed by the day. I was probably numbed anyhow. I hadn't even resentment of my own passivity" (*CS* 163). This numbed passivity appears to point us back to Joyce again and the "hemiplegia or paralysis" afflicting the characters in *Dubliners*.[24] But for our purposes here, it is noteworthy that this sense of paralysed or numbed passivity is brought to the fore by means of a contrast with American characters. Later in the story, Kate tells an anecdote about Nora Moran and

the workers at her large country estate that seems again to suggest certain inherent differences in the Irish and the American character:

> "The workmen were so servile with her", Kate complained.
> "They don't mind that. It's their way", I said.
> "But American workmen would never be like that".
> "Listen, won't we miss the bus?" An edge had crept into the talk. (*CS* 168)

Like Patrick's memory of a moment of shameful obsequiousness towards authority in *The Leavetaking*, the workers' servility seems demonstrative of a "forever overmastered race" (*TL* 150). Like Patrick, they appear to be happy to "put up with it" (*TL* 117): "They don't mind that. It's their way". American workers, in Kate's eyes, would never stoop to such servility or sycophancy. Whatever the truth of Kate's response, it is precisely the perceived Americanness of Americans that is being deployed to explore themes of paralysis, passivity, and servility in the Irish character and, indeed, in Irish self-perception itself. We see this again in a later scene by the sea, a key setting in these stories and *The Leavetaking*:

> "This country depresses me so much it makes me mad", she said suddenly.
> "Why?" I looked up slowly.
> "Everybody comes to the beach and just sits around. In America they'd be doing handstands, playing volleyball, riding the surf. Forgive me, but I had to say something".
> "I don't mind at all".
> "That's part of the trouble. You should mind".
> "I don't mind". (*CS* 171)

The scene recalls and repeats the narrator's defence of Nora's workmen in the face of Kate's exasperated complaint about their servility: "They don't mind that".[25] Shortly after, he makes

explicit the connection between them: "I thought bitterly of what she said – like Nora's workmen I had been brought up a different way, that was all" (*CS* 171). The stress on *Bildung* or development here ("brought up a different way") should act as a further reminder that, for all his insistence on the local and individual in his non-fiction, McGahern's fiction does on occasions such as these gesture towards something broader like the Irish character and an inheritance shaped by shared social, cultural, and political forces.

"Bank Holiday" follows a similar pattern to *The Leavetaking* and "Doorways". A middle-aged Irishman in a middle-class profession that McGahern himself either took up or considered doing so (the civil service in this case) meets an American woman in a city neither are originally from (Dublin in this case). Certain motifs recur: there is an "unreal" feeling to the morning (*CS* 353); the couple go to the seaside (*CS* 354–55); there are rich American relatives (*CS* 355). In contrast to "Doorways" however, the relationship in "Bank Holiday" between the Irish civil servant, Patrick McDonough, and the American, Mary Kelleher, is much less fraught with tension and misunderstanding. Most significant of all, perhaps, is the manner in which Patrick avoids the "very Irish malaise" of paralysing passivity and fatalism seen in the narrator of "Doorways".[26] We see this clearly in one key scene, where Patrick takes Mary to a pub to meet a poet almost certainly modelled on Patrick Kavanagh on one of his bad days.[27] The poet has been kicked out of his regular pub and enters the one Mary and Patrick are in. He demands "hoarsely" that Patrick go across the street to buy him a brand of cigarettes available in that pub but not the one they're in. Patrick resolves the situation by asking the potboy Jimmy to run across the road and buy them for him, adding: "I'd cross myself but I'm with company" (*CS* 358). His politeness and tact are met with nothing but abuse from the poet, who leaves in a temper. Mary asks Patrick why he didn't just go across the road and buy the cigarettes:

> [Patrick] "It wasn't the cigarettes he wanted".

> [Mary] "Well, what did he want".
> "Reassurance, maybe, that he still had power … He must have done something outrageous to have been barred. He's a tin god there. Maybe I should have gone over after all".
> "Why didn't you?"
> "Vanity. I didn't want to be his messenger boy". (*CS* 359)

Patrick self-effacingly deflates his small moment of triumph in standing up to the overbearing poet, but his refusal to act as a "messenger boy" to the "tin god" nevertheless contrasts sharply with the I-don't-mind passivity of the narrator of "Doorways". Clearly Patrick does mind. In this sense, he escapes that "very Irish malaise" by refusing the servile, sycophantic role of messenger boy to a figure with authority or "power", although this is somewhat undercut by his continuing allegiance to the clownish Minister he works for: "We're stuck with one another" (*CS* 361), Patrick fatalistically concedes under questioning from Mary. Questions of mastery and servility are undoubtedly critical here. McGahern has written of the "demand for subservience" in Ireland driven by the Catholic Church (*LW* 128). In *The Leavetaking*, Patrick struggles against the strictures and legacies of an authoritarian Catholicism that dominated his youth. While he achieves an ambiguous liberation, the servility and passivity of McGahern's Irish male protagonists are observed and remarked upon by American female characters to whom, the stories suggest, such characteristics are anathema and peculiarly Irish.

To return briefly to the critical context: Declan Kiberd has written of McGahern that he is "an artist of the self-enclosed world".[28] In *The Leavetaking* and the two stories discussed here, McGahern opens that self-enclosed world to comparison with what is not itself, just as he opens the self to comparison with the non-self, the other. Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh argues that in McGahern's works scenes of the return of the migrant to rural homes from Dublin or Dagenham "constitute set pieces that allow McGahern to offer his view on the cultural distance between those who left and those who stayed".[29] Encounters with Americans too seem to present a similar kind of set piece that

allows McGahern to offer his views on cultural differences that appear to advance the means to a potential liberation from paralysing conservatism, even if that liberation is only ambiguously achieved, if at all. In both cases, the differences are striking not least because of Yeats' notion that "no two nations are bound more closely together".[30] Beckett once said he considered his writing "quite unamerican in rhythm and atmosphere" and it would appear that McGahern shares the view that there is something in the Irish character that is indeed "quite unamerican".[31] In one highly symbolic moment in "Bank Holiday", Patrick explains to Mary that palm trees by the Bull Wall are wired down so "that they will not be blown away in storms. They are not natural to this climate" (*CS* 362). Isobel's "direct American way", Kate O'Mara's frankness and forcefulness, Mary Kelleher's "glowing" (*CS* 354) exoticism and self-confidence; these are not, it seems, natural to the climate of early 1970s to early 1980s Ireland. In planting such exotic specimens to weather the storms of the unfavourable Irish climate, McGahern is measuring like an anthropologist their influence on the native male of the species. In this way, he achieves his localism precisely through its exposure to the non-local, the non-native. The self-enclosed world is achieved through its self-exposure.

The first constant was water

One final point regarding McGahern's localism that needs emphasiding here is the extent to which, in constructing the fictional worlds of these three narratives involving transatlantic relationships, he deploys a vocabulary of circulation and movement dominated by images of water and sea that marks the narratives' Irish localities and individuals as deeply interconnected with the Atlantic world that surrounds them, despite the suggestions of cultural difference. In "Doorways", Kate O'Mara's absurd and "fiercely anti-American" lover dreams of an Irish-Ireland that is "free of outside influences" (*CS* 161), a stance also grossly at odds with the actual culture and economic policies in Ireland when this story was published in the late seventies. Moreover, it is evidently at odds with how

McGahern portrays the influence of the outside, which tends on the contrary to be reviving. In *Amongst Women*, for instance, the return visits of Moran's daughters from Dublin and London "were to flow like relief through the house … Above all, they brought the bracing breath of the outside" (*AW* 93). It is Moran's own fierce resistance to "outside influences" that is most damaging in this instance and not the tidal "flow" of homecomings and leavetakings that carry his children.

This essay will thus conclude on the repeated emphasis by McGahern on these metaphors of water ("flow like relief") and the sea, of circulation and movement. "[T]he first constant was water" (*TL* 9) is how *The Leavetaking*'s opening sentence enigmatically concludes.[32] Patrick is standing in the schoolyard, watching the shadows on the concrete of the gulls circling above, "crossing and recrossing" (*TL* 9) as the narrative itself will do throughout.[33] Isobel is waiting for him in Howth, where she and Patrick, after crossing the Irish Sea from a city to which they must return, have walked the same path by the cliffs his parents walked after their horrific wedding (*TL* 43, 144). McGahern evokes a sense of lives "crossing and recrossing" in an open Atlantic world in which Ireland, Britain, and North America are closely triangulated. Discussing Alistair MacLeod's *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, set in Nova Scotia, he writes: "The same sea that washes the Hebrides beats against these granite cliffs" (*LW* 174). Writing about his native Leitrim, he notes simply: "The whole region is dominated by water" (*LW* 23). While localism dominates nationalism in much of McGahern's thinking, the dominance of this "first constant" in the language of the works under consideration here suggests that that localism itself is already profoundly marked by a fluid openness to the outside world, the non-local.

The dominance of water is felt in the short stories under discussion in their settings in particular. In both "Doorways" and "Bank Holiday", key scenes occur by the sea (Strandhill and the Atlantic in Sligo in the former, and the Bull Wall and the Irish Sea in Dublin in the latter), which in "Doorways" becomes almost a character in its own right: "'We can have all this and more,' the waves whispered" to the narrator in section VIII (*CS* 169). Even time itself seems to fall under the

influence of the whispering waves, as the narrator describes a dream-vision of all the living and the dead in which "all seemed to be equally *awash* in time and indistinguishable" (*CS* 174, my emphasis). By contrast, when facing the Atlantic and observing the difference between Irish beachgoers and their American counterparts, Kate O'Mara's comments initially suggest the considerable geographical distance separating the two countries is matched only by the concomitant cultural distance separating the couple sitting next to each other. The Atlantic here seems to figure as a metaphor of almost irretrievable distance between very different worlds. When he parts ways with Kate for the last time, the narrator thinks: "She would be almost back in her own world before her train left, as I was almost back in mine" (*CS* 177). As this suggests, the metaphor also potentially extends to other forms of separation, such as when Jimmy invites the narrator to Strandhill for a clam-digging party on the shore, and he notes to himself, "Already it was a world I could no longer join" (*CS* 174). This sense of separation from one's roots is echoed in "Bank Holiday", in which Patrick, also looking out to sea, reflects on "being cut off from the people he had come from" (*CS* 354). But as the drafts of this story make clear in the following image of the couple, separation is not incompatible with connection in this relationship: "their *roots* were already so securely *intertwined* that they could sketch wildly two *separate* trees against the sky" (P71/578, my emphasis). Moreover, the patterns of "crossing and recrossing" in both stories – physical crossings (Kate O'Mara, Michael Henry, Mary Kelleher, among others) and literary crossings (Melville's Bartleby most notably) – suggest a simultaneous openness towards and deep-rooted connections between the countries that are contingent on the very sea that separates them. Images of the sea emphasise both distance and its dissolution. Discussing the "archipelagic dependence" of Joyce's Dublin on the sea, John Brannigan argues that the characters in Joyce's works exhibit "the portal consciousness of Dublin" and "their openness to a global imagination" is a "condition of portal life".[34] In McGahern's case, the critical preponderance on rural localism has arguably

obscured the extent to which a similar "openness to a global imagination" is conditional of his landscapes, east and west, and the dominance of water therein.

In *The Leavetaking*, the all-encompassing nature of that "first constant" water is perhaps best illustrated by one particular series of textual mirrors. It begins with an image reeking of Joyce's "ashpits and old weeds and offal".[35] Patrick is standing in the schoolyard, watching the gulls circling above: "A smell of urine seeps from the lavatories, their small windows half open under the concrete eave" (*TL* 10). It is at first tempting to read in this image of another kind of water merely an expression of uncompromising naturalism. As it is shortly after, when we read:

> Grey gullshit falls close to me on the concrete as I walk by the side of my class towards the door by the lavatory. *Cle, deas, cle … cle*. The shadows float and hang still on the concrete but they are thinning, drifting over the trees in the direction of Dollymount strand and the Bull, from where the autumnal smell of dying seaweed reaches me through the fresh urine …When they leave for the sea the concrete will be empty of shadow … (*TL* 24–5)

A reader might easily dismiss this as merely substituting a harsh, realist cloacal colour for local colour, as it were. But as the gullshit piles up, these exceptionally raw materials accrue significant symbolic resonances through their associations with images of circulation and flow. As McGahern notes about Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach*, the basic rhythm of life on the small island on which the work is set is that of a "continual setting out and a returning" (*LW* 265). Such are the patterns evoked in *The Leavetaking* where the "crossing and recrossing" gulls "whirl" and "wheel" before heading back out to sea (*TL* 9, 20); the boys in turn "stream in a continuous line" into class, lines "flowing towards the rooms" (*TL* 21). Patrick soon abandons the "arid" discipline of his normal lessons to lose himself on a "tide of memory" (*TL* 25). In particular, he remembers his mother, also a teacher, reflecting: "but this last day in the classroom will one day be nothing but a memory before its total obliteration, the completed circle" (*TL* 35).[36] The "continual setting out and

… returning" of separate lives is immediately reiterated in the sentence he writes on the blackboard for the children to copy: Wordsworth's "The child is father of the man" (*TL* 35). He then returns to memories of his mother and a poem she wrote on the blackboard for her own class many years ago: Hopkins' "Heaven-Haven", which figures life's tumult and uncertainty as "the swing of the sea" (*TL* 37).[37] This leads to his memories of her grim wedding and the "crossing and recrossing" of the path in Howth Patrick walked with Isobel years after his parents had done the same. Moreover, Patrick began the day by setting out for the school from his rooms in Howth, and the day and the novel will end with his returning. It is during his recollection of that walk in Howth that the gulls return:

> We walked singly on the beaten cliff path between heather until we came to the sewage outflow. White puffs of the gulls rode delicately far below us on the brown stain in the pewter and blue light of water. A workman, awkward in his Sunday blue, with his wife and three boys had stopped too to look down on the cluster of gulls above the outflow.
> "Think of it all piling up out there under the gulls", he was remarking in wonderment. (*TL* 44)

Thus, on a tide of memories and effluence the narrative joins the school lavatory to the sea via the gulls, the present to the past. "I'm getting hungry", Isobel wryly informs Patrick. They go to a nearby pub and order stout, brown bread, and prawns. Raising their glasses, they make a toast to sanitation in the seventies and the "completed circle" in dear, dirty Dublin: "Here's to it all piling up out there under the gulls" (*TL* 44). There is, however, nothing superfluous in these images of waste; images of water and waste, flow and outflow, circulation and movement in boats or bowels have been piling up from the very first page. This essential pattern of recirculation dominates the novel, emphasising the principle outlined in the opening paragraph that "the first constant was water".

As we have seen, McGahern considered Irish national identity to be vague, fragmented, time-serving, and dominated by a "rampant individualism and localism" (*LW* 200). Yet, however vague and fragmented, it also appears in some sense integrally different to American national identity. Contrary to his reputation as a writer concerned only with the local and the individual, McGahern uses American characters in the narratives in question to highlight particularly Irish national traits. In this way, McGahern's writing gestures towards something like an Irish national identity while at the same time challenging the anachronistic Irish-Ireland notion favoured by Kate's lover in "Doorways" by opening up the Irish self and consciousness to the "bracing breath of the outside". Although there are suggestions of cultural incompatibility between Ireland and America (in "Doorways" especially), McGahern also highlights extensive connections between these "two worlds" (*TL* 35) and those connections are suggested in particular through a vocabulary of sea symbolism and recirculation that dominates in these three narratives and their open, interconnected landscapes and seascapes shaped by transatlantic patterns of "crossing and recrossing".

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Notes

[1] McGahern, *Memoir*, 2–3, hereafter abbreviated as *M* and cited parenthetically with page number. Conboy was also cashing in on a "showband craze" that reached Ireland in the 1960s and became an industry employing some 10,000 people; see Ferriter, *Transformation*, 603.

[2] McGahern, 'Dubliners', in *Love of the World: Essays*, 200; hereafter abbreviated as *LW* and cited parenthetically with page number.

[3] For examples of the state's abrogation of responsibility, see Ferriter, *Transformation,* 492, 501, 511, 520, 523, 586–7, 666.

[4] Wills, *The Best Are Leaving*, 4.

[5] See for instance, 'Wheels' (*CS* 8), 'Christmas' (*CS* 24), 'Korea' (*CS* 56), 'Doorways' (*CS* 165), 'Oldfashioned' (*CS* 269), 'Bank Holiday' (*CS* 352), and 'The Country Funeral' (*CS* 379, 399, 408). All quotations are from *The Collected Stories*, hereafter abbreviated *CS* and cited parenthetically by page number. Allusions to specifically American emigration in the novels can be seen in, for instance, *The Barracks*, 109, or *Amongst Women*, 102–5.

[6] There is, of course, a biographical angle here too: McGahern's second wife Madeline Green was American. For the purposes of this essay and its necessary limitations, however, I will follow McGahern's own advice against what he called the "autobiography stunt", a warning put in more literary terms in *The Pornographer* (hereafter abbreviated as *TP* and cited parenthetically with page number): 'He warned against the confusion between art and life. Art was art because it was not nature. Life was a serious of accidents. Art was a vision of the law' (*TP* 27). For persuasive critical arguments against the biographical approach to McGahern's work, see Shovlin, *Touchstones*, 3–4; van der Ziel, *Imagination of Tradition*, 13–4, 55–7.

[7] McGahern, *That They*, p.45.

[8] O'Brien, 'Contemporary Prose in English:1940–2000', 427. See also Malcolm and Malcolm, 'The British and Irish Short Story: 1945–Present', 253; Potts, 'The Irish Novel After Joyce', 462; Harte, *Reading*, 51; Kiberd, *After Ireland*, 336, 431; Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, 164–5.

[9] Shovlin, *Touchstones*, 3. Shovlin's work has been exemplary in illustrating the extent to which this "local" writer was deeply enmeshed in the non-local, "universal" world of canonical European literature. As McGahern himself wrote (quoting the Portuguese writer Miguel Torga), "The universal is the local, but with the walls taken away" (*LW* 11). Although beyond the scope of this essay, a fuller consideration of the influence of transatlantic (specifically North American) literary currents on McGahern's work is surely merited, given McGahern's praise for (*inter alia*) Melville, John Williams, and the "extraordinary richness" of the American short story tradition (*LW* 13; 213–24; 369).

[10] McGahern, *That They*, 3.

[11] Joyce, *Ulysses*, 215. See also: 'he was intensely aware of every other presence, exercising his imagination on their behalf as well as on his own, seeing himself as he might be seen and as he saw others', McGahern, *That They*, 42.

[12] McGahern, *The Leavetaking*, hereafter abbreviated *TL* and cited parenthetically by page number.

[13] This question was actually put to McGahern by the General Secretary of the Irish Teachers' Union in 1965 after the publication and banning in Ireland of *The Dark* and after news got out that McGahern had married the Finnish theatre director Annikki Laaksi in a London registry office, leading to his own dismissal from a teaching post in a Dublin school; see *Memoir*, 249–51.

[14] Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is a major intertextual presence here; see Robinson, *McGahern and Modernism*, 103–5; Shovlin, *Touchstones*, 3, 4–6, 10–11, 69; van der Ziel, *Imagination of Tradition*, 163–4.

[15] Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, 75–6.

[16] In *The Pornographer*, Josephine's obsession with American movies (and America in general) seems to be both gently mocked and a further sign of the irretrievable distance between her and a narrator-protagonist who exhibits many of the same traits as Patrick in *The Leavetaking*.

[17] "People grow up pretty fast in the States", is how Mary Kelleher reflects on this particular disparity in an abandoned line from a draft of 'Bank Holiday'; see John McGahern Archive, James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway (P71/582), hereafter cited parenthetically according to archival file number and page number if paginated.

[18] Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*, 467.

[19] McGahern, *The Dark*, 20.

[20] Teaching was often described as the "second priesthood"; see for instance *LW* 115.

[21] Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, pp.145–6.

[22] Wills, *The Best Are Leaving*, 132.

[23] The Irish *fada* or acute accent on the 'a' in '*a mháistir*' is missing in the original.

[24] James Joyce to Constantine Curran, Dublin, n.d., in *Letters*, 55.

[25] The narrator's defence here forms part of an intertextual network of allusions to Melville's "Bartleby", signalled most obviously in the names of a pair of characters who reappear throughout: Barnaby and Bartleby. The same phrase also appears in a draft version of "Bank Holiday": "He didn't mind. It was a phrase he found himself continually using" (P71/587). Another reference to Melville's tale can be found in a draft version of McGahern's short story "Christmas" (P71/319). McGahern also made notes for a lecture on Melville (P71/1294); see also Bargroff, "The Case of Bartleby in Ireland", 97–112.

[26] Discussing his protagonist in *The Pornographer*, McGahern noted: "He falls into that disease, which is *a very Irish malaise*, that since all things are meaningless it makes no difference what you do, and best of all is to do nothing"; see Maher, *John McGahern*, 149, emphasis added.

[27] The poet is briefly named as "Mr Kavanagh" in an early draft (P71/573).

[28] Kiberd, *After Ireland*, 332.

[29] Ó Tuathaigh, "McGahern's Irelands," 22.

[30] Yeats, "Emmet the Apostle of Irish Liberty," 101.

[31] Cronin, *Samuel Beckett*, 435.

[32] A concept attributable to Thales of Miletus; see Robinson, *McGahern and Modernism*, 103.

[33] *The Pornographer* also opens with a strikingly similar image: "I watched the sun cross and recross the carriages as the train came in between the pillars" (*TP* 9).

[34] Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, 69–72.

[35] James Joyce to Grant Richards, June 1906, in *Letters*, 63–4.

[36] The "completed circle" is itself a phrase recycled near-verbatim in *The Pornographer*'s "the circle completed" (*TP* 57).

[37] Hopkins also wrote a short poem based on the same Wordsworth lyric.

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