Yeonmin Kim

The Silence of the Postmemory Generation in John McGahern's Short Stories

In *The Politics of Irish Memory*, Emilie Pine discusses two trends in Irish cultural commemoration: nostalgia and anti-nostalgia. As demonstrated in *Riverdance* and heritage films, Irish cultural nostalgists presuppose that the past is sufficiently stable, when compared to the fast-paced and precarious present, to be evaluated from a restorative perspective. Anti-nostalgists, however, consider the past to be indicative of 'trauma and pain' as illustrated by the national Great Famine memorialization.[1] Both versions of the past are understandable in that the process of remembering is itself a selective one, reflecting the desires of the present. Against the grain of the politics of Irish commemoration, which bifurcates the past as either one replete with glory or trauma, John McGahern has maintained a tension between the two versions of commemoration, deviating from the dichotomy between nostalgia and anti-nostalgia. On the one hand, as many critics have pointed out, McGahern censures the claustrophobic post-independence state with an anti-nostalgic tendency; on the other hand, his search for lost images is inherently nostalgic. With respect to his ambivalent attitude toward the past, I argue that McGahern embodies the tension through the silence of characters of a 'postmemory' generation, a silence which appears not only as a socio-political symptom of the domestic oppression of a patriarchal father, the Church, and the state, but also as an aesthetic use of postmemory, a way to maintain a critical distance from the previous generation and sublimate inherited trauma.

A self-proclaimed member of 'a silent generation',[2] McGahern was born and brought up in a post-independence Ireland where nostalgic narratives of the generation that experienced the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, and the Civil War, dominated the post-revolution society. The Church and the education system that reflected an authoritative and chauvinist ideology worked as punitive state apparatuses for the post-revolution generation, ensuring that their desires

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remained unfulfilled and their resentment accumulated. Collective and cultural silences were imposed on this generation, as they are denied intellectual and personal pleasure. It is a plausible argument that McGahern's generation had no choice but to maintain silence in an age when the trinity of surveillance – the family, the Church, and the state – controlled the knowledge and emotions of individuals. McGahern's silence can thus be interpreted from realist and naturalist approaches as an outcome of social conditions or a national allegory based upon parallelism between the personal and the collective.

Such approaches, however, seem to overlook two dimensions of McGahern's work. First and foremost, the world of silence constructed by his acts of memory is private and aesthetic. Dermot McCarthy claims that a more centripetal criticism of McGahern's use of memory is necessary to complement the previous socio-cultural approaches:

> The passivity of McGahern's various protagonists might be better explored as a symptom of an inner condition, as complex gradations of an acedia whose causes are deep and whose effects are manifest, but whose causes are not primarily social.[3]

From a psychoanalytic perspective, McCarthy finds a Dantean quality in McGahern, 'a life-long quest to re-unite with a "lost beloved"',[4] which refers particularly to his desire to reunite with his mother. In his artistic manifesto, the 1968 version of 'The Image', McGahern asserts that 'art is, out of the failure of love, an attempt to create a world in which we can live'.[5] McGahern indicates that art originates in the loss of love; his aesthetic ground is founded upon this personal nostalgia. It is noteworthy that the phrase 'out of the failure of love' in the opening statement of the 1968 version disappears from the 1991 version. If, as McCarthy suggests, McGahern 'in his art of memory […] was at the very least working through his memories of years of lingering grief, guilt, and anger',[6] then he might have overcome his loss in the twenty-three years between the two versions through his stylistic development, particularly as short story writer. Following a modernist tendency in the Irish short story tradition, rather than an oral folk mode and a mimetic one, McGahern focuses on 'the consciousness of the private, disillusioned, more or less stoical, individual'.[7] With the short story form, he presents the consciousness of his characters and the fragmentation of modern society undergoing radical changes. As critics have discussed, the genre of short story in general is more stylized than the novel form in terms of presenting impressions of individual characters and moments of an event, its style marked by lyricism, brevity, and tension, instead of the causal relationship and cumulative details as appear in novels.[8] The short story form for McGahern becomes a suitable vehicle for portraying

his private momentary insights in the midst of uncertainties of post-liberation society.

The second possibility that the socio-historical perspectives elide is the aesthetic working-through of adversarial social relations and conditions reflected in McGahern. Locating McGahern within the Irish neo-naturalist tradition, Joe Cleary aptly points out that both a naturalist drive to 'expose the hidden traumas' and an existentialist one to 'celebrate the small rituals of the quotidian' coexist uneasily in McGahern from the beginning.[9] However, when Cleary discusses the 'late serenity' that appears in the later works of McGahern, he concludes that the serenity is 'premised on a kind of fatalism and a withdrawal from the social in favour of a coming to terms with life's essential transience'.[10] Thus, Cleary considers the silence in McGahern's works a form of escapism. He characterizes McGahern as 'the detached philosophical existentialist', whose propensity for 'the futility of worldly struggle' and 'the need to discover some inner authority and calm in the face of life's evanescence', do not cohere with the naturalist impulse in McGahern 'to expose, to excoriate and to reform'.[11] The naturalist perspective presupposes that the past is perceived by McGahern as trauma, and the present is still under its irresistible influence. McGahern, however, does not homogeneously reduce the past to a dreary, colourless, and helpless provincialism of post-independence Ireland. Alongside his realist and/or naturalist tendencies, McGahern endeavours to reinvent the past, aesthetically circumventing its deterministic mode, and opening it up to potentialities, although he does not naively aspire to a romantic resolution of conflicts. Glimpsing a way to circumvent a traumatic past, McGahern in the short story form continues to construct an autonomous aesthetic world of silence, where he searches for a possibility of reinventing the traumatic past.

Cleary points out the dilemma of McGahern's incoherence that characterizes his existential and naturalist modes, which his 'admirers have never fully attempted to resolve'.[12] This argument over the tension between the two modes can be re-illuminated through the process of memory, which works at personal and imaginative levels, as well as at collective and historical levels. In particular, the term post-memory, introduced and theorized by Marianne Hirsch, can redirect the argument over McGahern's style. The term refers to the transmission of traumatic memories – including emotions such as anxiety, disappointment, and resentment – from one generation to the next. 'Postmemory's connection to the past', Hirsch maintains, 'is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation'.[13] As Hirsch implies, the postmemory generation perceives the past through the fragmented information, impression, and mood they gain and reconstruct from cultural phenomena; the ways that postmemory is

formed resonate with McGahern's style of short story writing, which is mainly operated by suggestion and implication. Unlike a narrative structure in the novel that seeks to elucidate an event as comprehensible totality, the narratives of postmemory in McGahern's short stories are inherently unstable and incomplete through their imaginative creation of the past. In addition, postmemory retains the tension between naturalist determinism – which asserts the overwhelming power of inheritance and environment – and aesthetic engagement to reinvent the past. When a generation inherits the trauma of the previous generation, they risk losing their own identity, yet remain capable of reconstructing the past imaginatively beyond the limitation of previous narrative power. The core of postmemory lies in the tension between determinism and aestheticism, a tension that McGahern tackles in his stylization of the short story.

Interpreting McGahern via postmemory can re-channel Irish memory studies in certain ways. It can enrich the contemporary discourse on Irish cultural commemoration bifurcated into the realms of nostalgia and anti-nostalgia. David Lloyd argues that the notion of 'survival' or 'living on', rather than 'recovery', does not 'simply preserve belated and dysfunctional practices, but potentialities for producing and reproducing a life that lies athwart modernity'.[14] Thus postmemory addresses both the lingering effects of the traumatic past for the postmemory generation as well as their ongoing struggle to open up unrealized potentialities of that past. In addition, these potentialities are realizable through the notion of reflective nostalgia that Svetlana Boym distinguishes from restorative nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia, with an emphasis on *notos* – 'return home' – pursues a prelapsarian utopia, on which national or religious revivalist ideology is founded, aided by symbolic ritualization and commemoration ceremonies. In contrast, reflective nostalgia, centred on *algia* – the longing itself – leads the past to 'a multitude of potentialities, non-teleological possibilities of historic development'.[15] Reflective nostalgia is directed not solely toward the past but also toward the future, through the use of 'ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary' narratives,[16] as exemplified in McGahern's short stories.

Finally, postmemory can reformulate Irish memory studies with its affiliative propensities. Although Hirsch's theorization of trauma is founded on an event-based model, she does not limit the term to the experiences and effects of the Holocaust. Stef Craps advocates for the expansion of the discourse on trauma from a single isolatable historical event, which presupposes that 'it can be worked through', and obscures the fact that 'it continues to cause damage in the present'.[17] Hirsch, in fact, seeks more affiliative projects beyond the Holocaust, reaching toward various types of suffering wrought by colonialism, the slave

trade, dictatorship, and genocide that have continued through generations. Affiliated with new texts and contexts, Irish memory studies can expand the horizon of expectations via postmemorial aesthetic strategies, which are 'political and emancipatory'.[18]

I argue that, although McGahern neither pushes the limit of his works to the realm of political emancipation, nor pursues therapeutic working-through of trauma, he is an artist whose quest for postmemorial dynamics functions both anti-nostalgically as a traumatic symptom of the authoritative post-independence state, and nostalgically as an aesthetic strategy to reinvent the past. First, he describes silence as generational, representing both the space for a tentative truce between the generations and the means by which the postmemory generation can establish its critical identity. Second, McGahern's silence enables his postmemory-generation characters to reinvent the past. On the one hand, the silence reveals intragenerational memory war among members of the later generation as they form different versions of the past. On the other hand – and less deterministically – the silence serves as a creative space for reflective nostalgia to reimagine, and cope with, the trauma of the past.

SILENCE AS THE SPACE OF CRITICAL DISTANCE FROM THE PREVIOUS GENERATION

The so-called memory war, waged between generations, provides members of the post-independence generation with the space to which the children under authoritative fathers can retreat – a space of internal silence embedded in the individual consciousness. In 'Wheels', the father-son antagonism yields a silent, emotionally disguised space where the two generations can just coexist.[19] After an angry outburst from the father, the conversation turns to the son's schedule, and becomes less severe and tense: 'There was silence but it was easier after he'd spoken. Then he asked, "Are you down for long?"'[20] The silence helps them swerve from their mutual antipathy: as long as they at least temporarily restore their relationship, the son is welcome in the house. Although the sequence of events – the father's anger, the silence, and the welcoming – seems not to be governed by cause and effect, McGahern fills the gap between hostility and hospitality with silence, to serve as an emotional buffer zone. However, the truce characterized by silence is indicative of illusory peace, easily dispelled when the narrator acutely recognizes the presence of 'the lies that give us room' (*CS*, p.9). The silent room between the two is another expression of the temporal truce that fails to lead them to a dramatic and epiphanic resolution. Even if the son recedes into a quiet world of philosophical speculation via the image of wheels that implies a

circular relationship between father and son, his enlightenment changes neither his consciousness nor his circumstance.

It is noteworthy that McGahern reveals the silence-ridden, tense domestic atmosphere using family photographs. In 'Wheels' the narrator is reminded of his past when he looks at the new wedding photograph of his father and imagines that his stepmother has replaced the old wedding picture with this new one. Although the old wedding photograph and the children's photos of the first communion and the confirmation are long gone, he recalls their images vividly, doubly relegated from photographic representation and from the original experiences of the past. The current wedding photo thus reminds him of the irretrievability of the past, just as Hirsch argues that family photographs 'bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability'.[21] Noticeably, there is no room for his mother in the reinvented image of the old wedding photo. His mother is mute and shapeless. She appears unexpressed, inexpressible, and unrecollected as though contained in the deep recess of his unconscious. In the absence of the core of his past, which can only be negatively reconstructed in the photographic images, the narrator quietly confirms his estranged relationship with his father.

In 'Gold Watch', McGahern adopts a plot similar to that of 'Wheels', showing another instance of silence as an emotional truce between father and son. What connects the estranged father and son is the silent, broken gold watch that ostensibly prolongs the father-son relationship. The precarious relationship is manifested in the quiet country landscape, in which their entangled emotions coalesce. After the final uneasy dinner between father and son, the landscape appears so serene that the calm bestowed by the moonlight starkly contrasts with the ticking sound of the new watch resounding only in the son's imagination. The calmer the landscape, the louder the watch resonates in his mind, exacerbated by a scenic premonition.

> The night was so still that the shadows of the beeches did not waver on the moonlit grass, seemed fixed like a leaf in rock. On the white marble the gold watch must now be lying face upwards in this same light, silent or running. The ticking of the watch down in the barrel was so completely muffled by the spray that only by imagination could it be heard. A bird moved in some high branch, but afterwards the silence was so deep it began to hurt, and the longing grew for the bird or anything to stir again (*CS*, p.225).

The quiet landscape does not suggest an epiphanic settlement, however, thus betraying the narrator's expectation of reconciliation with his

father. Neither wind nor a birdsong, typical romantic symbols of inspiration for a final dialectic resolution, bring him a sudden manifestation of truth: 'I stood in that moonlit silence as if waiting for some word or truth, but none came, none ever came; and I grew amused at that part of myself that still expected something, standing like a fool out there in all the moonlit silence' (*CS*, p.225). In de-romanticizing his hidden desire for dramatic reversal, the narrator puts all his disappointment and resentment unresolved into the barrel, along with the watch, against the backdrop of the serene silence. As Richard Robinson argues, 'epiphanies are absent' in McGahern, since his characters never have the chance of overcoming the given circumstance subject to a 'socially determined structure of feeling'.[22]

Nevertheless, it is not that McGahern lacks an epiphanic vision but rather that he reveals an anti-climactic epiphanic moment. The truth always discloses itself belatedly; the narrator proudly describes the new watch as 'dustproof, shockproof, waterproof' but non-acidproof, which he does not realize until the end (*CS*, pp.221–2). The dramatic irony shatters his romantic expectations with no ideal resolution. Both his hope and anger permeate the moonlit landscape deeply: here a melancholic epiphany subsists, familiar in McGahern's work – one which can be understood as a mode of pastoral elegy because he depicts the loss of romantic value through the image of nature. His version of nature, however, never appears personified, unlike the nature in traditional pastoral elegy that empathetically participates in mourning in anthropomorphized forms. Described in a dry, naturalist tone, the natural world lacks an emotional correspondence with the narrator – or, the narrator has lost the capacity to connect with nature – but maintains its aesthetic quality, creating a tension between naturalism and romanticism. McGahern thus concludes the story without consolation.

The non-consolatory closure of McGahern's final twist is indicative of his typical formal elaboration. McGahern creates a vision that 'precludes easy conclusions […] where the action is wrapped up neatly', through which his stories exhibit 'a liberating openness, in that the formal anxieties are never finally mastered or overcome'.[23] McGahern amplifies the closing scene with a melancholic aphorism: 'And when I finally lowered the watch back down into the poison, I did it so carefully that no ripple or splash disturbed the quiet, and time, hardly surprisingly, was still running; time that did not have to run to any conclusion' (*CS*, p.225). Concluding the story with a play on the word 'conclusion', McGahern ironically reveals that the conflict between the father and son is never resolved. The aphorism renders the ending a resounding one, with a permanent silence devoid of any sense of chronological time. Only the sheer passage of time that pervades the moonlit space continues to pass non-teleologically, eliciting the quiet of the pastoral landscape,

indifferent to the human conflict. The generations in conflict thus maintain a tentative truce with the sense of unresolvedness in the silence.

The silence discussed thus far tends to represent an emotional buffer zone for a generational conflict. McGahern also constructs the literary world of silence to reveal the conscious effort of the postmemory generation to maintain a critical distance from their predecessors in the course of constructing their identity. Hirsch argues that the influence of the previous generation is so overwhelming that the postmemory generation faces an identity crisis: 'To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors'.[24] Although memories of the previous generation are influential enough to endanger the self-consciousness of the one that follows, they are not so deterministic that the postmemory generation can assume a critical attitude in its struggle against overwhelming narratives of the past.

In 'Crossing the Line', the narrator is a taciturn listener, exposed to the authoritative voices of the previous generations who continue waging their intragenerational memory war. Entangled in the ongoing strife among the teachers, he is surrounded by a two-fold silence: the silence generated by mutual hostility among the previous generations and that imposed by their nostalgic recollections. The first silence, which rests on the churchyard after a Sunday mass, indicates how the previous generations have long been at odds with each other. The teachers who belong to the union maintain a hostile silence toward the narrator and Principal Kennedy. Their antagonism can be traced back to the 1930s, when the principal, in order to retain his position and support his family, did not join a strike against the Church and the de Valera government that depressed teachers' salaries. The silence between the union members and Principal Kennedy is the result of an enduring mutual animosity. The silence strikes the postmemory generation narrator dumb in the tense climate in which their resentment is never appeased.

The second but primary silence that permeates the story is that which the narrator has to consciously maintain when conversing with members of the previous generations. This silence is enforced by their stories, which dominate almost half of the narrative of 'Crossing the Line', and whose claustrophobic character can be seen as a metaphor for Irish society. The narrator is so overshadowed by the clashing narratives of the previous generation that he has no option but to choose silence, to which he turns inwardly. Their lengthy speeches cause him to ironically lose ground as the teller of his own story. Although Principal Kennedy appears to be kind and generous to the narrator, he is the one who

dominates and closes 'Crossing the Line'. The story ends with Principal Kennedy's suggestion that if the narrator marries Eileen O'Reilly, he will give him an additional surveying job, profitable enough to compensate for his low-paying teaching salary. The narrator's future seems to be already determined by the influence of the previous generation. He must be silent, subject to the voices of others, and unable to conclude his own story in his own words.

The Archdeacon, a man of authority and the second oldest priest in Ireland, is also responsible for the narrator's taciturnity. Responding to his several questions with only short answers, the narrator obediently listens to him; the Archdeacon is still preoccupied with his old memories and customs, including habitual drinking for his health. Although his authoritative narration of his old memories silences the narrator, the silence formed within the narrator now works as a critical space where he can question the reliability of the values of the past. The more confident the Archdeacon is in what he says, the more silently sceptical the narrator becomes, responding to the former's authority by maintaining a secretive distance from him and the old customs. Mr Beirne, the INTO branch secretary likewise renders the narrator mute, by engulfing him in the turbulent relationship between the Principal and INTO in the 1930s. Notably, Mr Beirne takes the initiative in their conversation, as his speech takes up almost an entire page (*CS*, pp.301–2). Ironically, the narrator becomes a subordinate in the first-person narrative of the story, listening to Mr Beirne's lengthy reminiscence about the Emergency. Mr Beirne is also preoccupied with his own reading taste and is indifferent to what the narrator's generation reads. However, the stories and values that he recounts to the narrator sound so selective and biased that the narrator can merely glimpse the fragmented past, which remains permanently incomprehensible to the postmemory-generation narrator. Although the narrator restrains himself from judging Mr Beirne's words, McGahern ensures that the one-sided conversation makes room for the narrator to assume a critical attitude toward the narratives of the previous generation.

The first-person narrator in 'High Ground' is also conditioned in a claustrophobic setting similar to the one in 'Crossing the Line', in which the narrator is rendered silent, suspicious of the previous generation. On a quiet night, the narrator grows frustrated when he secretly overhears a conversation between the Master and townspeople drinking after hours. The final page of the story is devoted to their voices, as they comfort themselves nostalgically with the stories about 1933, the year before the narrator was born. As he reimagines the past based upon the overheard stories, he becomes suspicious of them. Characterized by vociferous voices – the word 'voice' or 'voices' appears thirteen times in the two final pages – the story concludes with the protagonists arguing who

was the best in their school days, justifying the choice they and their ancestors have made not to move to the city but to stay on in the rural community, with little opportunity for advancement. They are proud that the high altitude of the land made their ancestors intellectual, and 'the brains was passed on to the next generation' (*CS*, p.315). In contrast to their self-celebratory memories of the past, McGahern allows their nostalgic reminiscences to reveal how miserable their lives are. The dramatic irony enabled by the narrator's silence calls into question the veracity of the former generation's accounts. As in McGahern's other 'keenly alert and long-suffering fictive children who carry the burdens alike of interiority and historical witness',[25] the narrator can thus critically establish his identity in the calmness of the night.

Various voices, whether they appear as noise or silence, surround McGahern's protagonists as they struggle with the past. Eamon Grennan analyzes how voices are structured in McGahern's works:

> The 'voice' of talk, of speech, of dialogue, is the noise of the world as it surrounds the silent inner voice of the consciousness and is in turn surrounded by the speechless voice of the natural environment and the enduring quiet of inanimate objects.[26]

The silent narrators are surrounded by multiple voices and the noise of talkers; the narrators and talkers are also surrounded by the silent landscape that always serves as a backdrop, as in the aforementioned stories. The scenic, speechless natural world works as the autonomous space in which McGahern's narrators can build their critical consciousness. In the inner world of silence, which is amplified by the quietness of the natural environment, the narrators can contemplate the meaning of the past by questioning it. 'Korea' is an example of how McGahern's postmemory-generation narrator is surrounded both by voices and silence in which he can develop his critical consciousness. McGahern opens 'Korea' with the first-person narrator's question through which he retraces his father's past when he fought during the War of Independence and was traumatized by the execution of his comrades:

> 'You saw an execution then too, didn't you?' I asked my father, and he started to tell as he rowed. He'd been captured in an ambush in late 1919, and they were shooting prisoners in Mountjoy as reprisals at that time (*CS*, p.54).

The narrator seems to take the initiative in a conversation with his father by questioning. He is, however, immediately engulfed by his father's story, which is the narrator's imaginative reconstruction of his

father's testimony. Even the father's recollection of his honeymoon, which appears right after the narrator reconstructs the execution story, so abruptly intervenes that there seems to be no boundary between the narrator's postmemory and his father's testimony in the embedded narrative structure. The imaginary world of the narrator's postmemory reverberates with agonized voices of the previous generations, as in the case of the execution officer, the helpless prisoners, and the father, while the narrator himself – a silent listener – rearranges their haunting voices.

The louder his postmemory narrative, the more silent the narrator becomes, and the more critical of the past as silence dominates the scenic landscape of the rural town. Pressured by his father's suggestion that he go to America, and believing that his father would sell him to the Americans to serve as a soldier in the Korean War, he puzzles over his father's convoluted past. Although the silence imposed on the narrator is attributed to the authoritative father, the silence of the narrator also serves as a space from which to question the conviction that his father's generation has thus far espoused. The critical consciousness of the son is dramatized in the final scene of the story when he rejects his father's suggestion: '"It'll be my own funeral", I answered, and asked after a long silence, "As you grow older, do you find your own days in the war and jails coming much back to you?"' (*CS*, p.58). Unlike a Joycean Dedalus who heroically declares himself an exile in search of his artistic vision, the narrator chooses to remain in the country. Once he declares his existential independence, he maintains a 'long' silence, in which his antipathy toward his father expands to a broader political context. The son's denial of his father is redirected toward his critical inquiry into the legitimacy of the post-independence state to which his father dedicated himself. By questioning, the son can take the first step toward forming his identity, autonomous from the traumatic past of the previous generation. When the father avoids answering the son, only disclosing his irrevocable past and the sense of betrayal by the state, another silence falls between them:

> I knew this silence was fixed for ever as I rowed in silence till he asked, 'Do you think, will it be much good tonight?'
> 'It's too calm', I answered.
> 'Unless the night wind gets up', he said anxiously.
> 'Unless the night wind', I repeated (*CS*, p.58).

The silence contains multiple layers of meaning. It signifies not only the father's irremediable trauma and the son's curiosity about and frustration over the past, but also the son's resolution to live a different life from his father's. In the calmness of the lake, the father and son

momentarily reach an agreement on the subjunctive of the weather, a precarious accord that they work toward different ideas: the father toward his concerns about the fish farming and the son toward his envisioning of an uncertain future. Although the son concurs with his father in a seemingly submissive but indifferent tone, the poetic tension created by his repetition generates subtle discord between the father and the son against the backdrop of the calm lake. They tentatively safeguard against the generational conflict in that silence, though it is never reconciliatory. Yet, the silence obviously works for the narrator as a critical rupture through the dominant voice of the past.

SILENCE AS THE SPACE FOR REINVENTION OF THE PAST

As McGahern's postmemory-generation characters establish their critical identity, they begin to invent their own versions of the past in their imaginary worlds of silence. They share ideas of what the past means to them, but also disagree on this significance. The three sons in 'The Country Funeral' use silence in their intragenerational memory war in which their divergent memories clash. McGahern dramatically portrays their conflicted memories as the three brothers attend the funeral of their uncle, Peter, near Gloria Bog, where they spent summers in their youth. Their arguments are significant because each of their positions can represent an ideological dispute in modern Irish history: Philly, Fonsie, and John represent nationalist romanticism, revisionist realism, and nonpartisan individualism respectively. Graham Price elucidates these three perspectives on the Irish past thus: 'This story intends for us to view all three of these versions of rural Ireland with suspicion since they all derive from individual, subjective, and potentially unreliable accounts'.[27] There is no single voice in the story that can claim legitimacy in the memory war, which is reinforced by McGahern's choice of a third-person narrator who does not take a side. As Robinson indicates, the antagonistic counterforces of memories are 'mutually subversive and constitutive' in the three brothers.[28]

Silence envelopes the three brothers during their dispute over their disparate memories of their uncle and the rural land. Whereas Philly romanticizes his uncle and country life, Fonsie demystifies all the memories. He recollects that '[t]he whole thing was barbaric, uncivilized, obscene' (*CS*, p.385). In his criticism, his silence expresses his anger and disillusionment with the past, which can be expanded to post-independence Ireland, where Fonsie is socially marginalized for his physical disabilities, considered unfit for the newly independent, triumphant state. Fonsie's silence becomes highly dramatic at his uncle's burial site. Unable to climb the hill for the funeral, Fonsie remains in the car and observes the procession of mourners carrying the coffin up the hill. In coldly refusing the old custom, his consistent indictment of

the rural tradition undergoes a sudden transition when a priest hurriedly joins the procession, which urges Fonsie to laugh harshly and turn on the car radio. Following the burial, the priest is the first to descend the hill. Watching this, Fonsie becomes agitated; he 'reached over to turn off the rock and roll playing on the radio as they drew close, but, in a sudden reversal, he turned it up louder still' (*CS*, p.401). It is an epiphanic moment for Fonsie, disillusioned with the romantic values and religious hypocrisy behind the ritual. The louder the rock and roll music, disturbing the calm and solemn atmosphere of the funeral, the heavier the silence falls in the brothers' minds. Stunned into silence by the awkward music, the postmemory-generation brothers are trapped in the unresolved memory war.

Another character marked by silence is John. He cannot be McGahern's hero, but is probably his double, judging from his biographical background: the family's eldest child and a schoolteacher by profession. If Fonsie uses silence as his weapon to express resentment, John takes refuge in silence as his shelter from the clash. He does not behave as an active arbitrator but as someone concerned only about his duty, burying himself deep in his silence, denying reconciliation. What causes John's scepticism is unclear, yet McGahern does not portray him as offering an alternative to the ongoing tensions. Instead, the author foresees in the image of John a ceaseless intragenerational conflict. John listens silently to the argument between the two brothers, left unnoticed throughout the story. Whether he is a pessimist or a sheer individualist, the trope of the silent listener also contributes to the memory war that shapes contemporary Irish postmemorial cartography. His shadowy presence disappears into the aphorism uttered by the third-person narrator: 'An old argument started up, an argument they had had many times before without resolving anything, the strength of their difference betraying the hidden closeness' (*CS*, p.405). John cannot offer any meaningful settlement to the fierce conflict, from which he barely protects himself, and escapes instead into silence.

If the silence lingering around the brothers implies a symptom of the perpetual memory war occurring in the postmemory generation, McGahern also conceives silence as an aesthetically charged state, within which contentious subjects of history momentarily envisage an alternative space. As visitors gather in the house, they share their stories about the dead. The house is full of the narratives of the previous generations who retain various memories of the deceased, memories that now surround the three brothers: 'Almost all the talk was of the dead man. Much of it was in the form of stories' (*CS*, p.391). Unlike the other stories where the first-person narrators are intimidated by the previous narratives to the point of losing their own stories, McGahern in 'The Country Funeral' shows a qualitatively different space of silence,

where he reveals the possibility of transcending the current strife induced by the memory war. After listing anecdotes about the dead in the visitors' voices, McGahern begins a new paragraph about a pastime of the late Peter:

> From the top of the dresser a horse made from matchsticks and mounted on a rough board was taken down. The thin lines of the matchsticks were cunningly spliced and glued together to suggest the shape of a straining horse in the motion of ploughing or mowing. A pig was found among the plates, several sheep that were subtly different from one another, as well as what looked like a tired old collie, all made from the same curved and spliced matchsticks (*CS*, p.392).

Unlike the fierce dispute over the past, another silence sits among the visitors, highlighted by the composed description of the matchstick animals made by the deceased. The aesthetic world of silence brings momentary peace into their intense memory war. When a neighbour recollects that Uncle Peter had genuine skills in making these animal figures, he is briefly transformed into an artist maintaining serenity in the face of modernization.

With this revelation, the postmemory generation pause their judgment, and open themselves to new possibilities. Following the matchstick animal scene, McGahern momentarily glimpses a world of reconciliation, describing the people gathered around the dead, reciting the Rosary. It is a time when silence fills the house and catalyzes a momentary reunion of people of all ages:

> In the upper room there was silence, the people there keeping vigil by the body where it lay in the stillness and awe of the last change; while in the lower room that life was being resurrected with more vividness than it could ever have had in the long days and years it had been given. Though all the clocks in the house had now been silenced everybody seemed to know at once when it was midnight and all the mourners knelt except Fonsie and two very old women. The two rooms were joined as the Rosary was recited but as soon as the prayers ended each room took on again its separate entity (*CS*, p.392).

The house is divided into the upper and the lower room, occupied by the silence of the dead pointing towards divine transcendence and secular affairs, respectively. The unbridgeable gap between death and life temporarily dissolves at midnight when only the Rosary is heard. Then the previous arguments cease, and silence cascades between

individuals. It is interesting to note that the Rosary is a kind of post-memory shared by all the mourners. Passed on from generation to generation, orally and through memory, the Rosary recited in silence unites all, eventually forming an undivided collective consciousness. It is a special time for peace among the contentious members of the postmemory generation, although the silent truce lasts for just a few minutes. The collective memory of the Rosary has brought all the living in union. Before the mourners return to their homes, the silence that death brings momentarily reveals a glimpse of a romantic reconciliation that always arrives belatedly.

McGahern adopts the space of silence in which the aesthetic generates new possibilities through past imagery. In that sense, McGahern's nostalgic reconstruction of the past resonates with Boym's notion of reflective nostalgia, set with a non-teleological drive but including aesthetic and inconclusive potentialities. In 'Oldfashioned' McGahern's nostalgia for the Anglo-Irish tradition negates both anti-intellectual and anti-aesthetic tendencies in the post-independence state. Instead, McGahern establishes his literary bastion in the private and aesthetic realm, formed by his reading experience in the library of his Protestant neighbours, the Moroneys. His longing for the nostalgic past, reconstructed in the world of silence, is not to restore the Ascendancy but to aspire to an alternative sought in the aesthetic. McGahern constructs his aesthetic world of nostalgia in the silence of the ruins. The opening passages of 'Oldfashioned' dramatically contrast the world of silence and that of noise. Contrary to the Georgian parsonage left with an orchard and a garden run wild, the Catholic Church appears to be a marketplace, crowded with people clamouring for stories and news reflecting their avaricious desires. The atmosphere of the Protestant Big House is best represented by silence, as in other Protestant stories like 'Eddie Mac' and 'The Conversion of William Kirkwood', where values of intellectual aspiration and aesthetic sensibility are fermented. Although in 'Oldfashioned' Protestant architecture has turned into ruins or already disappeared as the Protestants declined in post-independence Ireland, McGahern seeks the lost values in either the hushed wilderness or the absence of the Big House that is now replaced with a modernized construction, from which he can envisage their traces negatively.

McGahern's aesthetic longing appears as an epiphany when an image of art foregrounds a scene against the backdrop of silence. In 'Oldfashioned' young Johnny experiences two epiphanic moments that allow him to transcend claustrophobic circumstance. The aesthetic experiences form the basis of his career as a documentary director. The first artistic epiphany comes with a basket of apples that Mrs Sinclair sends his father as a reward: 'Big yellow apples in a bed of green leaves

and twigs ringed the rim of the basket, and in the centre red Honeycombs and Beauty of Bath were arranged in a striking pattern' (*CS*, p.255). Unlike his Catholic communities preoccupied with gossip and commotion, the basket of apples keeps its calmness and order. In admiring the arrangement of the apples, Johnny encounters an entirely new aesthetic taste. At that critical moment, however, McGahern describes Johnny's epiphany in dry, objective style. From the third-person omniscient narrator's perspective, McGahern restrains himself from expressing his emotion at the moment of epiphany. McGahern illustrates epiphanies, but not with the aim of establishing an aesthetics of totality in which contradictions and conflicts are reconciled harmoniously. Instead, his aesthetics of silent epiphany is set anti-climatically, limited to situations, 'in which consciousness is alert but incapable of action' and 'the subject has no control' over the conditions.[29] McGahern presents his epiphanic moments as wet, unexploded fireworks or the Benjaminite constellation still hidden in the cloudy sky.[30]

Another epiphanic moment for Johnny occurs when he burns leaves in the Sinclairs' garden. After mentioning that Johnny's father is most proud of his devotion during the War of Independence, McGahern contrasts the nationalist ideal with aesthetic aspiration for which the postmemory generation longs:

> The leaves they were burning were catching light, and he went to get the baskets of leaves Mrs Sinclair had left waiting. It was one of the tasks he liked best. When he piled on the leaves he stood back to watch the thick white smoke lift slowly above the beech trees and, as there was no wind, hang like clouds in the dead air (*CS*, p.258).

As in the depiction of the apple basket, the image of burning leaves and that of the thick white smoke rising slowly appears as an epiphany in serenity for Johnny. This silent moment in the pastoral landscape opens new possibilities for him, beyond the contemporary strife between him and his father, and between the Irish nationalist ideology and the individual desire for success in post-independence society. Johnny is still capable of perceiving transcendental value through this silent observation. The epiphanic description of the smoke, however, indicates that Johnny cannot transcend obstacles that he faces. With no wind of inspiration, the smoke appears just to 'hang' and stagnate. His wish becomes suffocated and unrealized in the dead air of the claustrophobic social atmosphere. Contrary to the rising smoke, McGahern's epiphany again goes downward or, at least, is in limbo between transcendental awareness and inescapable reality.

Although young Johnny experienced two epiphanic moments, it is evident that adult Johnny does not seem to overcome the social constraints, in that his documentary films are mainly concerned with 'the darker aspects of Irish life' (*CS*, p.268). The post-epiphanic conditions still appear naturalistic. Nevertheless, Johnny's aesthetic capacity to reinvent the past prevents him from collapsing into either naturalism or sceptical determinism. Johnny returns as a documentary film director to the parsonage where the Sinclairs once lived. The previous generations are all gone. Amid the dead silence of the decaying house, Johnny reconstructs the life of the Sinclairs as he records the narrative about them. His narration is in itself postmemory, in that he reinvents the family history of the Sinclairs, based on the stories that he has heard from the previous generations. In projecting his desire for the Sinclairs, he unfolds his narration about them: 'They restored it [the parsonage], house and garden and orchard and paddocks and lawn. I think they were very happy here, but now all is wilderness again' (*CS*, p.271). It is interesting to note that he nostalgically reinvents the life of the Sinclairs as happy and content although contemporary Protestants were socially and culturally marginalized under the Catholic hegemony of the post-independence state. Yet, the purpose of his nostalgia is not to restore that glorious past of the Ascendancy; the Big House is gone; the parsonage now remains deserted. Instead, McGahern's nostalgia is that of the melancholic who faces a history that collapses. McGahern's melancholic nostalgia, however, does not simply lapse into pessimism. In his reinvention of the past, by making a documentary film about the past of the Sinclairs who lived in the parsonage, Johnny aesthetically constructs the world of postmemorial nostalgia.

> The camera panned slowly away from the narrator to the house, and continued along the railings that had long lost their second whiteness, whirring steadily in the silence as it took in only what was in front of it, despite the cunning hand of the cameraman: lingering on the bright rain of cherries on the tramped grass beneath the trees, the flaked white paint of the paddock railing, the Iron Mountains smoky and blue as they stretched into the North against the rim of the sky (*CS*, p.271).

When Johnny adopts a desolate landscape, in which melancholic social emotions are embedded, he does not lose sight of the aesthetic sensibility in depicting the parsonage in decline, surrounded by silence. In other words, his processing of postmemorial reconstruction of the past is made possible by his reflective nostalgia that maintains the tension between his awareness of history as collapse – instead of

progress – and as beauty.[31] In a sense, McGahern can be interpreted as a naturalist, as positioned by Cleary, in that the narrator and Johnny are the individuals who helplessly observe the fall of history, unable to gain full agency. Nevertheless, as Heather Ingman contends, the description of the landscape quoted above is full of 'the sacramental, lost to modern Irish society', pointing 'towards the future and the necessity of healing the current ecological crisis',[32] his stories preserve the author's longing for the aesthetic that is open to the future with multiple potentialities. It is that longing which decisively distinguishes him from a naturalist writer.

TOWARD THE STYLIZATION OF AESTHETIC SILENCE

Although the postmemorial reconstruction of the past that McGahern's characters show is open to potentialities for the future, their deeds demand closer scrutiny. It is not indicated that they are ethically superior to the previous generations. Critical about the previous generation's authoritative attitudes, they are engaged in history as implicated subjects, who enjoy the benefits of their predecessors. Undeniably, as he grows old, the narrator in 'Korea' cannot be free of the benefits of both national independence and the ensuing modernization projects, financially supported by the sacrifice of those who participated in the Korean War.[33] In 'The Country Funeral', the three brothers on the trip to the Gloria Bog rent a Mercedes, the company which supported Nazi Germany during the Second World War. Convoluted in the intricacies of relationships, the Irish past cannot be defined as either nostalgia or anti-nostalgia. The past comprises both, as McGahern indicates in *Memoir* by identifying two movements in the history of Irish Catholicism: on the one hand, he illustrates 'the fortress churches with their edicts, threats and punishments'; and on the other hand, he highlights 'the churches of the spires and brilliant windows that go towards love and light'.[34]

In describing the existential struggles of his postmemory-generation characters, McGahern does not lose the tension between nostalgia and anti-nostalgia, as delineated in the closing of 'The Key', where the young protagonist throws the key, the symbol of his father's legacy and his psychological burden, toward the river. The movement of the key flying along a curve over the serene landscape is at the core of McGahern's aesthetic yearning for lost potentialities in the past, neither simply reactionary nor pessimistic, and not succumbing to dire social conditions. In a sense, McGahern's strategy of silence may seem apolitical and evasive since historical responsibilities for the adversity and failure in post-independence Ireland can be neutralized in the pastoral description. Sampson, however, notices McGahern's public role as 'the writer of silence and exile' who invents a new voice in refraining

from public engagement.[35] McGahern creates his realm of aesthetics, denying particular ideological preferences:

> If a writer only sets out to reflect a particular society he will only be of interest to a historian or sociologist. What is permanent is the spirit or the personality in language, the style, and that's what lasts.[36]

He believes that his style takes priority over a political stance. When he develops the style of aesthetic silence, his artistic sensibility never yields to the political, maintaining its autonomy in which his postmemory-generation characters distance themselves from overwhelming narratives and establish their own identity in reflective nostalgia. Although a grim legacy of the traumatic past is transmitted to the next generation, what enables them to overcome its deterministic fatalism is his belief in the aesthetic, the created world of imagination, the 'Medusa's mirror, allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable'.[37]

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NOTES

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31. Kim, 'The Aesthetics of Nostalgia', p.20.
32. Ingman, p.264
33. Adapting from McGahern's 'Korea,' Cathal Black in his film *Korea* (1995) implies that Irish modernization is ironically achieved by sacrificing Irish sons in war. It is best exemplified in the scene of rural electrification, which appears after the funeral of Luke, who died in the Korean War and brought his family a great sum of compensation, with which his family can afford to use electricity in the rural town. That Eamon, the protagonist, romantically looks at the warm, yellow electric light emanating from the window of Luke's home signifies that the postmemory generation can be an implicated subject that benefits from historical atrocities. See Yeonmin Kim's 'A Poetic Reconstruction of the Postliberation Irish Family in Cathal Black's Film *Korea*', *Studies in English Language & Literature* 45.3 (2019), p.10.
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