

## The “Production” of “Reflection”: Adolescent Choices in John McGahern’s *The Dark*

**Martin Keaveney**  
National University of Ireland, Galway

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**Abstract.** Production, defined here as the application of one’s energies to the production of a good or service and Reflection, meaning the pursuit of a purely contemplative life, with the benefit of sharing the fruits of this reflection with others, are projected in this study to Chapters 4 to 7 of John McGahern’s novel *The Dark* (1965). By overlaying these terms in an Aristotelian sense to McGahern’s work, the dysfunctionalised adolescent’s guideless struggle between Production and Reflection is manifested, but the resultant diminishment of the positive section of self is also depicted, translated as destruction of self-esteem and privileging of negative self-worth via the chapters’ portrayal of corruption of body, mind and spirit.

**Key Words.** John McGahern, *The Dark*, Production, Reflection, Adolescent.

**Resumen.** En este estudio se aplica el concepto de producción, definido aquí como la aplicación de las energías propias a la producción de un bien o servicio; y reflexión, es decir, la búsqueda de una vida puramente contemplativa, con el beneficio de compartir los frutos de esta reflexión con los demás, en los capítulos 4 a 7 de la novela de John McGahern *The Dark* (1965). Al superponer estos términos en un sentido aristotélico al trabajo de McGahern, se manifiesta la lucha del adolescente disfuncionalizado entre producción y reflexión, pero la disminución resultante de la sección positiva del yo también se representa, traducida como destrucción de la autoestima y el privilegio del yo negativo a través de la representación en los mencionados capítulos de la corrupción del cuerpo, la mente y el espíritu.

**Palabras Clave.** John McGahern, *The Dark*, producción, reflexión, adolescente.

In the 2004 documentary, *John McGahern – A Private World*, John McGahern made clear the distinction between his part-time activity in the farm where he had settled in the 1970s and his professional occupation as a writer: “I’m a writer that just happens to have a farm...I was a writer who happened to be a teacher ... It’s actually much more enjoyable working round the land than it is writing...It’s not my main activity...what I do is write.”<sup>1</sup> McGahern insisted in

this documentary that he should be seen primarily as a writer and not a farmer-writer. He later wrote to Stanley van der Ziel: “The myth of Farmer John is not my doing. Over the years many TV crews have been here who wanted me to play the farmer. This I always refused. I was a writer who happened to live on a farm” (van der Ziel 20). These statements raise an important dynamic for every artist, that is, the struggle between artistry and profession. But is being a writer or an artist a profession, or is it rather a vocation? Is it really an economic choice to ignore the need to write and instead focus on more conventional roles of work, such as farming or teaching? What is the difference between writing for money and writing creatively in response to an integral, visceral need? I suggest these questions essentially reduce to a choice between the *art* of *Reflection* and the *act* of *Production* in the Aristotelian sense.<sup>2</sup> J.D. Ackrill quotes Aristotle from “X” in the *Book of Nicomachean Ethics*:

Yet we must not – as some advise – think just of human things because we are human, and of mortal things because we are mortal. Rather we must, as far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and we must do everything possible to live in accordance with the best thing in us (*nous*) ... For men, therefore, the life of reason is the best and pleasantest (since reason more than anything else is man) – and consequently the happiest also. (qtd. in Ackrill 139)

Ackrill teases out the implications of this which can be seen to propel *The Dark* from beginning to end: “One tempting (commonsense) idea would be: first meet the needs of the moral life [*Production*] and thereafter concentrate on *theoria* [*Reflection*]. But are the claims of morality so limited that one *can* meet them to the full and still have time left over?” (Ackrill 140). Young Mahoney’s choices in *The Dark* amount to a life of *Production*, where he would help his father for the rest of his working life on the farm, and later the clerkship of the E.S.B. (Electricity Supply Board) where he will, as he notes, “be earning money straightaway”, versus his first dream of Priesthood which is the choice of *Reflection* (184). Ackrill suggests this section of Aristotelian ethics argues that man identifies himself “with a *divine* element or power, and as far as possible to pursue an activity that is not in fact peculiar to man, but shared with God” (139).<sup>3</sup> Later in the novel, young Mahoney dreams of the University, also part of what is represented in Aristotelian terms as the concentration on a “private, intellectual life” (Ackrill 139). This conundrum of whether to choose one or the other represents the tension which drives *The Dark*. Isolation of how McGahern achieves this enhances critical understanding of his narrative approach to the subject.

John McGahern is very well placed to contribute to an analysis of *Production* versus *Reflection* in the case of the artist. He spent a decade employed as a teacher before being sacked over the publication of *The Dark* in 1965 (Nolan 261-279). Following this, he spent the remainder of his career eking out a living as an occasional lecturer, reviewer, feature writer and farmer, while also earning some money in what he would see as his primary occupation: the publishing of his prose. The struggle between economics and art is not, of course, a new discussion point. McGahern’s oeuvre readily indicates the treatment of this conundrum in his fictional worlds, in particular; *The Leavetaking* (1974, rev. ed. 1984), where a teacher despises his work; *The Pornographer* (1979), where a writer creates sex stories to survive; and the late novel *That They May Face The Rising Sun* (2002), where Kate is tempted to leave her idyllic rural retirement for a well-paid job in London. However, it is *The Dark*, throughout the novel, but primarily in Chapters 4 to 7, that the artistic crisis of economic need versus spiritual need is most treated. Denis Sampson argues the name of the novel is an allusion to a poem by W.B. Yeats titled “The Choice”: “Although the presences of Joyce, Camus, Beckett and other writers may be detected in the novel, McGahern seems to have turned to Yeats for the book’s title and its central image” (*Outstaring* 64). Indeed, Yeats is noted by Frank Shovlin as McGahern’s

“most important and most enduring influence” (10). Richard Robinson’s recent monograph connects the choices facing the boy in the novel to McGahern’s use of first, second and third person, an approach which provides a new reading after many years of critical debate over whether this device of perspective manipulation establishes *The Dark* as a traditional or experimental work. Robinson argues that “McGahern’s gesture towards a splintering of selfhood is actuated by something more than the ludic desire to experiment”, while also suggesting the lack of young Mahoney’s Christian name emphasises “a site of conflictual process” (47). Robinson proceeds to examine the boy’s choices in the context of the novel as a potential *bildungsroman* or a *kunsterroman*.

However, the conclusion to the novel, where the boy abandons university and instead chooses an unstimulating, if secure, clerkship in the E.S.B., is an about-turn which has confused critics who read the book as a coming-of-age novel.<sup>4</sup> By relating Chapters 4-7 to the choice of a perfect “life” *qua Reflection* or a perfect “work” *qua Production*, we can suggest the narrative structure leading to this ending. It is particularly identifiable via the metaphors of school, church and farm. This absence of guidance leads to severe long-ranging consequences for an adolescent living within an already challenging domestic situation. The consequences are developed by McGahern as dysfunctions of the body, mind and spirit. By uncovering the force of this treatment, the traumatised main character’s crisis crystallises the binaries of vocation and economic necessity. In *The Dark*, this ultimately delivers a confused adult self. In Timothy J. Owens’ study of self-esteem as bi-dimensional, he defines the relevant binaries of the adolescent experience as “positive self-esteem” or “negative self-worth” (392). The positive section of the boy’s self is undermined over the course of the book’s 31 chapters, while the negative section is privileged at the end of the novel, which explains the boy’s change of mind in abandoning university for the E.S.B.

The problematisation of *Production* versus *Reflection* is evoked in Chapter 4 by reference to the proximity of truth within the opening scene. In other words, the pursuit of a career of *Production*, simply to survive, rather than because it is one’s passion, is critiqued in *The Dark* as being untrue by the hypocritical behaviour of the characters. It is a performance, essentially a lie to oneself, even if it is an unavoidable one in the need to progress economically. During the visit of Father Gerald at the outset of Chapter 4, honest feelings must be hidden as Mahoney only gives the “appearance of a welcome” (24). This is a reference point for the progressing adolescent. There must be an absence of truth for survival, which accentuates his longing for the simpler times of childhood with his mother. Mahoney’s “appearance” of a welcome to the priest is worse than no welcome at all, in the same way the ghost of the boy’s mother is more torment than comfort to father and son. The underlying hostility is suggested by McGahern’s use of heavily toned passive clauses: “A hen was killed” and “cooked for cold chicken” as “the cloth [is] bleached in the frost white” (24). In this setting, the room remains “lifeless” (24). Early in the chapter, Mahoney appropriately notes the *Productive* value of funerals. He remarks on the hypocrisy of the tradition, “It’s some comfort to know that if you’re not buried for love’s sake, you’ll be buried for the stink’s sake at any rate” (25). Father Gerald assumes his temporary position as a surrogate father in the novel’s wider context by inviting young Mahoney to *reflect*: ““What do you want to be in the world?’ ... as the evening wore” (24). Mahoney suggests: “He’ll wear out his bones on the few acres round this house and be buried at the end of the road” (25). The wearing of both the evening and the bones is a suggestive echo of the false persona that people adopt in society, and a subtle pun on how those cloaks of falsity eventually erode the positive side of self. This is another itemised depiction of the lack of truth, exploited through the stylised language. The boy is passive to the priest’s question, appropriate to his juvenile need for guidance: “I don’t know, Father. Whatever I’m let be, I suppose” (24). Despite what has been revealed about the boy’s inner discomfort in his situation, he presents the same false persona to the world, accepting orders to be whatever he

is allowed to be, while he struggles with finding what it is he really wants, or as Sampson puts it: “[McGahern’s] characters, much like Hamlet, ask themselves ‘To be or not to be’ and the fiction represents the struggle to find answers to that conundrum” (*Young* 11).

Father Gerald offers the boy the hope of “openings and opportunities” (25). This remark is interpreted by the boy as an invitation to pursue the priesthood. The chapter divides the paths open to the boy as being the *Productive* value of the farm or industry versus the *Reflective* qualities of a vocation to the church. The stylisation of the setting illuminates the choices: the fire suggests the warmth of “openings and opportunities” while the chicken sets off the cold prophecy of young Mahoney “wear[ing] out his bones” on the farm (25). Despite the boy’s passiveness in open conversation, he thinks he would “not be like his father”, he would “be a priest if he got the chance”, he would “go free in God’s name” (25). With this passage, “free[dom]” is linked to *Reflection*. Sampson analyses the formative philosophy of McGahern in this light:

While this image [McGahern reading as a boy in a neighbour’s large private library] of a boy in his own world may convey a sense of how he escaped from his father’s aggression or began to develop a confident sense of self in adolescence, his capacity for concentration and pleasure is key to the formation of a distinctive self. (*Young* 5)

The qualities of concentration and pleasure are commingled, and it is in this devotion that McGahern will navigate adolescence. Young Mahoney instead achieves success in education. While McGahern escaped to the nearby private library, young Mahoney escapes the *Productive* farm by applying himself to *Reflective* schoolwork (*Memoir* 171-178). Although the boy is intrigued by the vocation toward the close of the priest’s visit, it is unsatisfying in its open-endedness: “‘Work at your books and we’ll see what happens,’ the priest said as he shook hands at the gate” (25). Young Mahoney is left to ponder on the religious dream, reflecting on a life of *Reflection* in the absence of any concrete guarantees. Mahoney has already assumed the boy will follow his path: “He’ll be like me I suppose” (25).

Although Mahoney would propagate the farm’s *Productive* qualities, it is a vocation of sorts for the father, one which offers its periodic qualities of *Reflection*: “This is the way to live,” he says at one point during a fishing expedition in Chapter 2, an outing which is absent of the same joy for the children who become increasingly tense as they warily assess Mahoney’s unpredictable moods (14). After Father Gerald has left, Mahoney, who will later demonstrate respect for the church, jeers the advice given to the boy: “‘Work at your books,’ the father mimicked as his car left. “They’re free with plans for other people’s money, not their own. There he goes. Christmas comes but once a year”” (25). Mahoney is undermined by the priest’s special words of advice to the boy and attempts to destabilise Father Gerald by identifying the priest’s lack of economic awareness. This suggests the productive agenda favoured by Mahoney on the farm and also the “once a year” token gesture of Christmas, which suggests the holiday season is coloured by the falseness of annual visits and gift-giving, followed and preceded by a year of absence.

As young Mahoney commences serious study a year after the priest’s visit, the second scene of Chapter 4 presents a clash of vocation with practicalities. He has won a scholarship, but Mahoney is curiously devoid of specific guidance: “Take it if you want and don’t take it if you don’t want. It’s your decision” (26). This is a remarkable conversion to passivity from the earlier chapters of absolute control, but it is motivated by Mahoney’s desire to shift the burden of choice onto the boy. Mahoney does not want this *Reflective* role and forces it on the boy. Yet young Mahoney has the perceptiveness to interpret this as a psychological ploy: “He knew Mahoney wanted him to stay from school and work in the fields” (26). It is the boy’s persistence with the school, his choosing of *Reflection*, which will ignite the furore of his father

in the potato fields. Mahoney warns the boy his prolonged absence from farm duties will be his “own funeral”, which links to the focalisation of Mahoney on being “buried” in the earlier scene in the chapter and this choice of phrase is also relevant to the theme of growing existential crisis (26). Initially, the boy succeeds in balancing the responsibility of his schoolwork and the farm, but eventually conflict arrives. Due to the boy’s late arrival from school one evening, the potatoes are not gathered before rainfall. Mahoney loses his temper and abandons the field. McGahern’s sequencing establishes further rhythmic mirroring: as Mahoney mimicked the priest to undermine his power, the children echo this response, this time with their father as the subject. This is the sole point in the novel where young Mahoney engages in outward animation, which he finds through *Reflection*. The gush of emotion brought on by the fellowship he enjoys with his sisters eases the boy: “There’s no need to be afraid” he reassures Mona (28). When he adds “[T]hey’re only bloody spuds when all is said”, McGahern, through the boy, aligns the concept and practicalities of *Production* to parity with *Reflection* (28). This position will be further stabilised very near the end of the novel when the boy reflects:

One day, one day, you’d come perhaps to more real authority than all this, an authority that had need of neither vast buildings nor professorial chairs or robes nor solemn organ tones, an authority that was simply a state of mind, a calmness even in face of the turmoil of your own passing. (188)

At this point of the novel, even the *Reflective* values of the church’s “organ tones” and the university’s “professorial chairs” are exposed as not being the “real authority”, inferring something even higher, a ‘calmness’ far from the scene in Chapter 4.

In the potato field, even as the boy counsels his sister, he cannot neutralise his adolescent sense of unease, dysfunctioned by his father’s actions. He reflects: “But why had things to happen as they did, why could there not be some happiness, it’d be as easy” (28). The second scene of Chapter 4 meditates on the clash of practicalities with vocation. It is emphasised through McGahern’s choice of narrative setting: a potato field with bad conditions and pressure to save the crop. *Production* in the field is halted by the weather and leaves space for *Reflection*, as demonstrated by the children’s lampoonery of their father after he has left in a rage (28). McGahern’s narrative strategy in Chapter 4 conveys social falsity, and measures integrity in making career choices of desire versus practicality, these latter elements ultimately translating to a crisis of *Production* versus *Reflection*.

In the scenes following Chapter 4, the adolescent experience is further traumatised by the stark choices of *Production* and *Reflection* in the absence of parental guidance. This crisis is driven through dysfunctions of body: repeated escapes to sexual fantasy; mind: the lack of mature reason in a parent; and spirit: the recalibration of the *Reflective* figure of a priest to a *Productive* secretary.

At the outset of Chapter 5, the boy is in his bedroom, where his indulgences are carefully recorded: “Five sins already today, filthiness spilling five times, but did it matter, the first sin was as damning as a hundred and one, but five sins a day made thirty-five in a week, they’d not be easy to confess” (31). The boy has no empathy for his physical longings; there is total lack of compassion for the self as the scene is narrated. The guilt felt is visceral: it is as real as the one-dimensional image he masturbates to is false. The artificiality of the photo is suggested: “An ad. torn from the *Independent*” (30).<sup>5</sup> The image is “torn”, emphasising the absence of any actual human presence.

The masturbating self is dislocated from its host:

The eyes devour the tattered piece of newspaper as hotness grows. Touch the black hair with the lips, salt of sweat same as my own, let them rove along the rises of the

breast. Press the mouth on the black bursting lips, slip the tongue through her teeth.  
(30)

The host is presented as operating organs of eyes, fingers and mouth as though they are external tools, suggesting the adolescent body's desire to escape its mind, only the expelled sweat is attached to the personal pronoun. The self-defilement quantifies animal *Production sans* the human *Reflective* capacities of love, meaningful interaction and emotional pain. Essentially, the boy in the bedroom tries to control his fantasy via a *Productive* use of his sexual organ, as in Chapter 3 his father uses him as a surrogate wife. The boy is dysfunctionalised by the abuse of Chapter 3, but also by the passive treatment of father and priest in Chapter 4 when career choices were being discussed. The lack of any guidance leads the boy to compulsively resort to excessive fantasy.

At the end of the chapter, the need for a female connection is linked with another inanimate image, a falling memoriam card, literally recalling both his parents' wedding and his mother's death:

A Memoriam card slipped out of the first book. A black tassel hung from its centre, miniature of her wedding photo glued to the cardboard. Her small face was beautiful, the mass of chestnut hair. The white wedding dress drooped away from her throat. She was smiling. (33)

The *Productive* value of the wedding photo used for the memoriam card is noticeably flawed as it is missing Mahoney's figure. As mother is absent in the reality of the Mahoney household, father is absent in the unreality of the photograph. The boy *reflects* on his *Productive* promise to his mother that, "[O]ne day [he'd] say mass for her" and then notes, "[A]ll I did for her now was listen to Mahoney's nagging and carry on private orgies of abuse" (33). Even the boy's *Reflective* experience here is negative, consisting of self-abuse: criticising himself for not delivering on his promise to his mother, masturbating and even listening to his dysfunctional father.

By Chapter 6, Mahoney has lost control of his house. His mind is not mature or of reason. It does not *Reflect* nor even *Produce*. His children are growing, becoming stronger and more wilful. His shortcomings are exposed in his handling of an episode of adolescent menstruation involving Joan: "There had only been one heavy beating in the year, a time over a shocking absurdity with cotton wool and a corset far too tight for Joan when her first flow of blood came to her" (34). Nature is treated with absurdity in the dysfunction of the Mahoney home. In retaliation for this, Mahoney is "frozen out" and left alone at the card table, a strategy which echoes Chapter 2, when the children wouldn't play with him (34). Mahoney feels "his power go in the house" and takes into "fits of brute assertion, carried away by rage and suspicions" (34). Mahoney dysfunctionalises his *Reflection*, finding in his mind only anger and distrust. The second-person narrator chosen to relay the scene in the chapter notes Mahoney coming in "crazy to do someone after tripping over a bucket he'd left carelessly behind him in the darkness" (34), which recalls the bucket at the centre of Mahoney's fury in Chapter 4 (27). Mahoney accuses the children of "throwing buckets out of [their] hand[s] for people to kill themselves across" (35). The only adult in the house is presented as being unstable: "crazy to do someone", "crazy with frustration" (34-35). The bucket, notably an item which connotes *Production*, drives Mahoney mad in his *Reflection* that it had been left as an obstacle. Indeed, the obstacle is, as Mahoney sees it, positioned there by his children, who are ironically the subject of his *Re-productive* actions.

In Chapter 7, the *Reflection* which might have been expected in the confessional box is replaced by something much more clerical and *Productive* as the boy confesses his sins to a priest:

‘I had impure thoughts and did impure actions.’  
 ‘Were these impure actions with yourself or someone else?’  
 ‘With myself, father.’  
 ‘You deliberately excited yourself?’  
 ‘Yes, father.’  
 ‘Did you cause seed to come?’  
 ‘Yes, father.’  
 ‘How many times?’  
 ‘Sometimes seven or eight times a day and other times not at all, father.’  
 ‘Could you put a number on them?’  
 ‘More than two hundred times.’  
 ‘And the thoughts?’  
 ‘More times than the actions, father,’ it was all out now, one pouring river of relief.  
 (41-42)

The methods of hearing and absolving sins are reminiscent of a *Production* line, rather than emphasising *Reflection* on the transgressions. However, the boy does find the reporting “one pouring river of relief” (42). The priest tells the boy he must do better, fight the habit, attend confessions every week, and make up his mind “to break that sin once and for all now, tonight. Confession is worthless if you're not firmly decided on that” (42).

McGahern’s choice of the adjective “worthless” is significant. As the boy will later fail to desist from masturbation, even when he stays with Father Gerald, his feelings of low self-worth will be reinforced, and this contributes to the ultimate abandonment of the boy’s university career. In the confessional, the priest does not offer the boy sufficient compassion. There is no “sense of the priest’s understanding,” as McGahern describes the ideal of confession in the early *X* version of the scene (158).<sup>6</sup> The priest is also relevant in his particularly mechanical performance. He carries out his role without compassion: *Producing* penance and absolutions, rather than encouraging *Reflection*. He encourages firm, finite decisions, rather than, for example, mature consideration of any potential blocks to self-development excessive masturbation might cause. Neither priest figure in this sequence of the novel is found to be compassionate. Father Gerald is passive and the priest in the confessional coldly formal. It is perhaps bizarre that young Mahoney will later move to Father Gerald’s parochial house for an extended period to consider becoming a priest. However, this is another indication of the boy’s developing dysfunctional thinking as a result of the elements around him, demonstrated via body, mind and in Chapter 7, through a scene depicting the absence of spiritual nourishment. Despite the priest’s distant absolution, it is true that the boy does feel a sense of forgiveness as he leaves the confessional and briefly glows in joy: “O God, how beautiful the world was” (42).

While the boy attends to the penance given him by the priest after his confession, Mahoney assumes it will be short: “You can’t be long more” (43). Mahoney reignites the presence of *Production* while the boy is in the process of *Reflection*, a neat hybrid scene over all the events of Chapter 4 to 7. This interruption infuriates the boy, immediately obliterating his post-confessional joy: “What did he know whether you’d be long or short, you might pray all night yet”, ironically also putting a specific *Productive* timescale on his *Reflective* practice (43). However, he quickly notes his thoughts are “without reason” and remembers he is

“supposed to love everyone” (43). In another move back toward a *Productive* rather than *Reflective* tone, the chapter ends as the boy “mechanically” rises (43).

Throughout these chapters, the binaries of sex without a partner, parenting without maturity and confession without compassion develop the mid-teen crisis and the dysfunctionalised conflict of *Productive* and *Reflective* activity. The boy is now beyond the father’s shadow, which was the desire early in the novel, but he has found by Chapter 8 that the result of succeeding in this ambition does not either provide release from the additional pressures in his adolescent experience. When the world is laid out for the boy, the choices are stark and too much for him in the dysfunctional home and surrounds, demonstrated through Chapters 5 to 7 by body, mind and spirit. He is without a guide in any of the episodes and makes the decision to stay with Father Gerald in the centre chapters of the novel, where he is treated in a similarly distant way.

Young Mahoney is significantly damaged by the experiences of Chapters 4-7, which relate to attitudes toward one’s destiny. Sampson writes: “Young Mahoney’s traumatizing efforts to make specific decisions about matters of major import – what to do about his violently abusive father, his vocation to the priesthood, his school examinations, and his choice of career – are the subject of a continuing reflection on the nature of choice itself” (*Outstaring* 63-64). Sampson suggests this period of decision-making and the book as a whole are a meditation on choice, but these particular chapters especially underpin the trauma of the adolescent and the failure of Mahoney to provide adequate guidance.

Mahoney is absent in his presence in the home, no more than a manifestation of childish bickering during this period, in the same way as the boy’s mother is a ghostly presence in her absence. While Mahoney *produces* the anguish of his son, the appearances of the boy’s mother in his dreams force the boy into *reflective* turmoil. The consequences of this ignite a matured sarcasm in the boy as demonstrated in Chapter 4’s closing confrontation where the boy argues that the unpicked crop will survive the night by noting the rarity of simultaneous “frost and rain” (29). In that exchange he is not unlike the juvenile version of his father, and it could well be imagined that the son will become the father on the track the novel leaves him, eventually bitter and frustrated by unstimulating years of working as an E.S.B. clerk, in the same way as Mahoney is “crazy with frustration” in his situation (35). The mother’s present/absence is also demonstrated through the boy’s need for female company, sexualised at the outset of Chapter 5 and then romanticised at the conclusion of the same chapter. The process of *Reflection* is noted by Sampson as being “explicit in the consciousness of young Mahoney and implicit in the dramatic conflicts that are basic to the structure of the narrative”, but he notes that “it is through the symbolism and style of the narrative ... that the reflection on choice is definitively pursued” (*Outstaring* 64). This process then is narrated by these basic “dramatic conflicts”, but specifically it is the absence of adult direction through this section which conveys the erosion of positive self in young Mahoney in a way which evokes the binaries defined by Owens. Robinson also notes the reduction of positive self: “The violence of *The Dark* is not just in its represented scenes of beating or psychological bullying, but also connected to this annulment and mortification of individuated selfhood in narrative” (48). All that remains is a traumatised shadow self, which Owens describes as “negative self-worth”, which ironically blocks the boy from progressing at the novel’s conclusion (392).

McGahern’s motives for ultimately choosing *Reflection* as a writer, rather than *Production* as a teacher can be detected in his comment on the writer Michael McLaverty, with whom McGahern kept up a regular correspondence early in his career:

In [McLaverty’s] novels in particular, there is sometimes a sense of a turning away from any disturbing grain in the material into safe/unsafe paths of convention. I think this is true of his most interesting novel *The Three Brothers*; but there are at least two

paths in every wood, and if he had taken any other he would not have recorded society as he did. (*Love of The World* 76)

McGahern could not either have written the way he did in the years following *The Dark* had he persisted as a teacher. His attitude to teaching may be suggested in the short story “The Recruiting Officer” where the schoolteacher reflects on his profession: “I was a clockwatcher. The day hung mostly like lead, each morning a dislocation of your life in order to entice or bend the children’s opposing will to yours, and the day a concentration on this hollow grapple” (*Creatures of the Earth* 76).

Chapters 4-7 of *The Dark* are an intricately linked series communicating the helplessness of the dysfunctionalised adolescent. The world, as the boy enters adolescence, is devoid of advice. Fr Gerald is vague when he leaves after the visit, Mahoney is out of control in the potato field, and the boy is given little support to attend school. Young Mahoney resorts to excessive sessions of self-defilement, becomes drawn into confrontation and ultimately finds even the priest secretarial rather than spiritual.

When McGahern said that his work was writing and his hobby was farming, he was differentiating between the visions of publishers and TV producers and his internal private world. As his letter to van der Ziel indicates, the image of McGahern as a farmer was helpful for his public persona, however, his primary occupation was writing. He identified the *Production* of the farmer and the *Reflection* of the writer, humorously calling his artistic practice a trade in the documentary.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle argues that “we are endowed with a range of practical and productive capacities as well as powers of growth, motion, perception and scientific understanding, all as essential to us as contemplation”, which means, as Amelie Oksenberg Rorty argues “the well-lived practical life is, according to Aristotle, perfected by being contemplated” (343-344). For contentment, *Production* and *Reflection* are not separate entities, but according to Aristotle and Rorty should be merged.

One of the major criticisms of *The Dark* is the about-turn at the end of the novel.<sup>8</sup> The boy ultimately abandons university and takes on an unstimulating clerkship with the E.S.B. But this change of direction is symptomatic of the crisis which unfolds in Chapters 4-7. These chapters, then, are critical in their treatment of a major theme in the novel and in McGahern’s life: the perennial struggle of *Production* and *Reflection*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See 3.00-3.30.

<sup>2</sup> In W.D. Ross’ translation, Aristotle uses the term “Contemplation”.

<sup>3</sup> In this section of Ackrill’s book, he is identifying what he calls a “striking tension” between Aristotle’s position of “identifying ourselves with a divine element or power that we have” and his ergon argument which “invites us to discover a man’s excellence and hence his good by noting what is characteristic and peculiar to man; and that is in fact practical reason” [sic] (139).

<sup>4</sup> For example in *Outstaring Nature’s Eye – The Fiction of John McGahern* by Denis Sampson (62).

<sup>5</sup> James M. Cahalan notes that McGahern indicated the choice of the *Independent* was due to its conservatism at the time, evidenced by its popularity in convents (63).

<sup>6</sup> *X* magazine was a London based art and literature magazine that circulated from 1958 to 1962. It included Samuel Beckett and Patrick Kavanagh amongst its contributors. It was edited by Patrick Swift and David Wright. Versions of Chapter 3, 4, 8 and 9 of *The Dark* were published in the magazine in April, 1961.

<sup>7</sup> See 1.00-2.00.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in “Disintegration and Despair in the Early Fiction of John McGahern” by Eamon Maher (90).

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**Martin Keaveney's** scholarship was recently published in the peer-reviewed *New Hibernia Review* and *Journal of Franco-Irish Studies*. His debut collection of stories, *The Rainy Day*, was published by Penniless Press in 2018. Short fiction has been published in many literary journals in Ireland, UK and US. He has also written for the screen and his writing has been produced and exhibited at many international film festivals and on broadcast television. He has a B.A. in English and Italian, an M.A in English (Writing) and a Ph.D. from NUIG (Creative Writing and Textual Studies). He was awarded the *Sparanacht Ui Eithir* for his research in 2016 and the NUIG Write-Up Bursary in 2018. See more at [www.martinkeaveney.com](http://www.martinkeaveney.com)

[mcwkeaveney@gmail.com](mailto:mcwkeaveney@gmail.com)