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Brief Encounters between Fictioonal Universes:
John McGahern and Ernest Hemingway

Please allow me to make two remarks before I get to my paper proper.

First, I know that it is not common procedure to dedicate conference papers but in this particular instance, since the two most influential figures behind this paper both died earlier this year, I would like to make an exception and dedicate it to the late John McGahern, whose writings inspired this presentation, and to the late Max Nanny, Professor emeritus of English and American Literature at the University of Zurich, who taught me to read Hemingway.

Second, the original perception behind this paper, namely that John McGahern’s “Korea” and Ernest Hemingway’s “Indian Camp” are thematically and structurally related, I owe to my wife Barbara; it was she who first pointed out to me some of the parallels that made me investigate further, leading to today’s presentation.

John McGahern is often perceived as an original creator of a microcosmic Irish universe that revolves around a limited number of recurrent themes. This fictional world with its intense focus on the Irish locale nevertheless succeeds in transmitting universal experiences. A lot of research, in particular since the publication of his Memoir in 2005, is directed towards tracing the sources of these themes in the author’s biography. McGahern habitually denied links between his life and his texts, maintaining that “[u]tobiographical stuff isn’t much use for writing because it’s never according to shape” (cited in Kampen, 2002: 336) and that his narratives “create worlds, which people inhabit,” and thus “grow out of the words, not the other way round” (McGahern, 1998). In his most vehement denial the author even stated: “I think that all autobiographical writing is by definition bad writing unless it’s strictly autobiography” (Gonzales, 1995: 20). Nevertheless, several critics have discovered connections between the author’s biography and certain recurrent themes in his fiction. These links are confirmed when one reads Memoir and instantly notices the resurfacing of specific incidents in McGahern’s carefully crafted autobiographical narrative that one has already encountered in fictional form in his novels and short stories. However, this paper is not about writing and re-writing one’s life – a topic that might also be suitable for this conference – but about a further aspect of McGahern’s fiction. In his review of Memoir, the critic Stanley van der Zel accurately notes how carefully McGahern “has almost completely written the role of art and literature out of the story of his life” and emphasises that literary and textual influences are of at least equal significance for the author’s fiction (van der Zel, 2005: 465). Although literary influences are hardly mentioned in Memoir, the author’s debt to reading is acknowledged both within its pages and in “The Solitary Reader,” a short account of McGahern’s initiation into the world of books, where he admits that reading proved to be a seminal influence and explains that it actually was at the root of his writing: “I had great good luck when I was ten or eleven. I was given the run of a library. I believe it changed my life and without it I would never have become a writer” (McGahern, 1991: 19). There is a broad range of writers that have regularly been cited as having influenced McGahern: Beckett, Joyce, O’Casey, Yeats and Kavanagh are some of the obvious Irish models; among the writers from outside his home country Flaubert, Proust, Camus and Chekhov have been singled out as sources of inspiration. The stimuli provided by the Russian writer even resulted in McGahern being referred to as “the Irish Chekhov.” The main purpose of this paper is to assert van der Zel’s contention, namely that McGahern is also a very literary writer, by establishing this literariness for one specific short story, namely “Korea”. I would like to proceed in the following manner: first of all I intend to point out, briefly, a number of possible links between the fictions of McGahern and Hemingway. Next I want to remind you of the elaborate construction of the first hypotext, Hemingway’s “Indian Camp.”


will then point out the numerous instances that link the hypotext to the hypertext, John McGahern’s short story “Korea” and, in the course of this, also introduce the second hypotext, one of the short prose vignettes inserted between the stories of In Our Time. Once the circumstantial evidence of McGahern’s extensive reliance on Hemingway’s texts has been established, I would like to delve, for a short moment, into the question of how to read McGahern’s rewriting, which transformed one of Hemingway’s best-known prose narratives, a classic of American literature, into a very Irish story, typical of McGahern’s subdued style.

A discerning reader will discover quite a few brief encounters between the fictional universes of Ernest Hemingway and John McGahern. I do not want to give a detailed catalogue of these moments here but simply provide you with a few examples. The first instance is the title of McGahern’s novel Amongst Women, which might well be read not only as a quote from the “Hail Mary” but also as a somewhat ironic echo of Hemingway’s Men Without Women. One of McGahern’s “Spanish” short stories, “Peaches,” alludes a number of times to The Old Man and the Sea, in particular by means of the stinking carcass of a shark that is rotting on the beach in the background of the narrative. “Peaches” also contains identifiable references to other short stories by Hemingway, in particular to “Hills Like White Elephants” and “Cat in the Rain.” In his monograph on McGahern, Denis Sampson also characterises “Peaches” as “reminiscent of Hemingway”, focusing in particular on the theme of estrangement that he perceives on various levels of the story (1993: 165). Last but not least, the callous and enforced sexual intercourse the female narrator suffers in McGahern’s “The Beginning of an Idea”, a story that is much indebted to Chekhov, recalls Jim’s equally heartless lovemaking to Liz in Hemingway’s “Up in Michigan.”

Before proceeding to the textual parallels between “Indian Camp” and “Korea”, I would like to draw your attention to the elaborate construction of Hemingway’s story. The fact that Hemingway’s prose is the result of a meticulous process of writing and revising is widely known. What was discovered rather late, namely by Max Nanny, is the fact that the author’s texts are ingeniously crafted by means of chaotic structures, very much in the manner of an architect who searches for the perfect balance in the design of a building. In an article that he published in the North Dakota Quarterly in 1997, Nanny first outlined his discovery that… in a large number of crucial passages in both his short stories and his novels Hemingway’s multiple repetitions, lexical as well as semantic, do not just follow any random order. On a closer scrutiny, these repetitions surprisingly reveal themselves to fall into a symmetrical pattern, a pattern in which the sequence of words or phrases is repeated in an inverted order. To use the appropriate rhetorical term, the textual organization of his prose often follows a chaotic arrangement, it is ordered by a lexical and/or semantic chiasmus of verbal or narrative elements (Nanny, 1997: 157).

“Indian Camp” is one of those stories that provide a supreme example of this mode of writing. From the point of view of setting the narrative could be summarised in the following fashion:


This particular sequence of events, if presented in space, results in a framing of the central part, the events in the shanty, where a baby is delivered, and where the child’s father commits suicide. This chaotic setting is sustained by further chaotic structures or circles in the story: the circle of life, the circular change of day and night, even a bass jumping and making a circle in the water. As Nanny observes, Hemingway uses chaotic arrangements, among other purposes, “to frame a whole story or a scene” (Nanny, 1997: 165). Such chaotic structures also recur in specific paragraphs, for instance in the third paragraph of the story:

The two boats started off in the dark. Nick heard the oarlocks of the other boat quite a way ahead of them in the mist. The Indians rowed with quick choppy strokes. Nick lay back with his father’s arm around him. It was cold on the water.

The Indian who was rowing them was working very hard, but the other boat moved further ahead in the mist all the time. (Ernest Hemingway: “Indian Camp”, p. 67, italics mine)

On the transparency I have italicized the repetitions in the passage and represented the chaotic arrangement in space. It is certainly noteworthy that the chaotic structures in this paragraph actually perform what is described in the framed sentence at the centre – the words embrace just the sentence, which describes Nick’s father holding him in his arm – an extremely adept construction indeed.
Let us now consider McGahern’s story, published in his first volume of short stories, *Nightlines*, in 1970. The title of “Korea” is a reference to the Korean War. The narrator is helping his father, a veteran of the IRA, with the fishing while waiting for his exam results, whose outcome will determine his future. This will most probably lead him away from his home on the Shannon and deprive his father of his help. Surprisingly, the father suggests that he emigrate to America but the narrator soon discovers the motive: the financial compensation the US Army pays to the families of immigrants that are immediately drafted and sent to Korea.

McGahern’s style has been the subject of extended discussions: Eamon Maher mentions that readers can easily be “fooled by the down-to-earth, non-showy prose” and elaborates that this style “is the result of painstaking effort and an ability to communicate deep human experiences in a beautifully measured manner” (2005: 69). Eileen Kennedy, commenting on McGahern’s stories in general, notes that every detail is significant and that the dialogue, “clipped, even elliptical,” serves as an instrument to advance the plot (1989: 65). According to Nicholas Wroe, McGahern “vastly overwrites” his narratives “before paring them down for publication. The result is an extraordinarily exact prose stunning in its visual accuracy” (2002). In his study of McGahern, Sampson writes that “Korea” has been singled out as one of the best stories in *Nightlines*. The critic perceives the narrative as stringently structured and admires the “compressed set of images,” which result in what he calls “a prose poem” (Sampson, 1993: 94). These remarks suggest that there is a kindred spirit to Hemingway at work, namely a writer who is sensitive towards the architecture of his prose and who deeply cares about the balance in his stories. A number of critics, for instance Bertrand Cardin, have also commented on the recurrence of circles in McGahern’s fiction – and this symbol, mentioned in the discussion of “Indian Camp” above, provides a further link to Hemingway.

If we now consider the two narratives next to each other, the thematic and structural parallels ought to become immediately apparent. In the following I would like to comment on a few of these. The two narratives share similar settings: while Hemingway’s narrative begins and ends in a canoe on a lake, McGahern’s story begins and ends in a boat on a river. Mist is initially present in both stories. A crucial moment in each story takes place in a confined space – inside the shanty in “Indian Camp” and inside the lavatory or outhouse in “Korea.” Both stories focus on a so-called initiation rite, more typical of societies closer to nature than Western society in general. In each case a son experiences the “rite of passage” when closely observ- ing a father in his profession: the doctor in “Indian Camp” and the fisherman in “Korea.” The initiation of Nick Adams into adulthood by means of a rather brutal confrontation with some of the facts of adult life, involving birth, pain and death, is mirrored in “Korea,” where the narrator becomes painfully aware of the economic law of the jungle that dominates the decision-making of both himself and his father: eat or be eaten. According to Sampson, the imagery of the fishing and the various fish choking on each other while hooked on the bait fores- shadow the narrator’s awareness of “a savage world” and the ruthless laws of economy (1993: 95).

Last but not least, both stories end in an ambiguous last sentence that has caused controversy among critics as to how to read it. Paul Smith, summing up the critical discussion of “Indian Camp” until 1989, notes that the last sentence of the story “returns our attention to the central issue of any male initiation story, the relationship between the figures of the father and the son” (1989: 39). It appears that both Hemingway and McGahern reveal in their stories (and not just in the two under discussion here) an intense interest in the archetypal relationship between fathers and their male offspring. In his *Memoir*, McGahern, when writing about his own father, actually refers to what he calls a “certain primal pattern of the father and the son” (2005: 9). This left traces in his fiction, as Kennedy, after reading *Nightlines and Getting Through*, illustrates with the fact that out of fifteen stories, “ten center on the son-father relationship” (1989: 65). Sampson reads the last sentence in “Korea” as an “ironic remark” (1993: 97) while Kennedy offers a Freudian interpretation, namely

… that the son, to establish his own self, must psychologically murder his father, just as his father to survive would risk his own death. The insight into his father’s motive – and the realization of his own potential deed – brings some sense of understanding of the father by the son (1989: 68).3

Garffit argues that the “final and most subtle paradox is that the son’s sympathy for his father increases in proportion to the wariness he must feel” (1975: 222).

3 Also quoted in Sampson, 1993: 97n.
Figure 1 (below) illustrates the most significant parallels concerning structure and content of “Indian Camp” and “Korea.”

The turquoise areas on the transparency and the arrows between them illustrate these corresponding aspects of the two stories. Moreover, “Korea”, which is a longer story than “Indian Camp”, is set within an additional framework that begins with an execution the father witnessed during his days in the IRA and is coupled with that disturbing contemplation of murder in the last sentence. This frame is also the link to the second hypotext, which can be identified as “Chapter V”, one of the prose vignettes inserted into Hemingway’s In Our Time.

The execution scenes are thematic mirrors but there are also noticeable differences so that the mere analogy might be dismissed as coincidence. However, pursuing the matter a bit further, Hemingway’s vignette is based on a historic incident that he read about in two versions in the Paris edition of the New York Tribune (cf. Baker, 1969: 108; Reynolds 1972: 82). The newspaper reported the execution of six Greek cabinet ministers, among them the ex-Prime Minister, in Athens in 1922 as a result of the failure of the Greek campaign against Turkey. The articles contain certain details that are missing in Hemingway’s version but which resurface in “Korea”. The first report stresses the fact that all the politicians about to be executed refused the blindfold and one of them “stood with his hands in his pockets.” The man that is shot in “Korea” also refuses to be blindfolded and keeps his hands in his pockets. The second newspaper article gives an account of the ultimate dispatching of the victims: “The moment the prisoners fell the firing party rushed forward and emptied their revolvers into the corpses” (quoted in Reynolds, 1972: 82). In “Korea” it is the officer who makes sure that the boy is dead by firing “one shot from the revolver as he lay face downward, but he pumped five bullets in rapid succession into the man, as if to pay him back for not coming to attention” (1994: 54). These textual parallels might still be the result of chance, but in combination with the connections to “Indian Camp” there seems to be sufficient circumstantial evidence that “Korea” was inspired by two narrative texts by Hemingway.

I would now like to take a closer look at an excerpt from “Korea” and demonstrate that McGahern went to great lengths in his attempt to imitate Hemingway’s style. As we have seen, “Indian Camp” adheres to a strict, chiastic architecture and the verbal repetitions are crafted into a symmetrical shape. In The Art of Fiction David Lodge provides a suitable comment on this phenomenon when he expresses his belief that “[s]ymmetry … matters more to writers of fiction than readers consciously perceive” (1992: 168). McGahern’s text also strives towards a similar symmetrical structure and, on the level of setting it is almost equivalent to the one of “Indian Camp”. However, when the micro-level of a few paragraphs is considered, it becomes apparent that McGahern, while working with a similar pattern of repetitions and also devising symmetrical prose architecture, is not as strict as Hemingway in adhering to chiastic patterns on the lexical level, quite probably because he was not aware of this particular aspect of Hemingway’s narrative which, to my knowledge, was only discovered in the nineties. Consider the following excerpt from “Korea”:  

I saw him stretch across the wall in conversation with the cattle-dealer Farrell as I came round to put the worms where we stored them in clay in the darkness of the lavatory. Farrell leaned on the bar of his bicycle on the road. I passed into the lavatory thinking they were talking about the price of cattle, but as I emptied the worms into the box, the word Moran came, and I carefully opened the door to listen. It was my father’s voice. He was excited.
‘I know. I heard the exact sum. They got ten thousand dollars when Luke was killed. Every American soldier’s life is insured to the tune of ten thousand dollars.’

‘I heard they get two hundred and fifty dollars a month each for Michael and Sam while they’re serving,’ he went on.

‘They’re buying cattle left and right,’ Farrell’s voice came as I closed the door and stood in the darkness, in the smell of shit and piss and the warm, fleshy smell of worms crawling in too little clay (“Korea”, p. 55).

The passage I just read proves that McGahern also resorts to frequent verbal repetition and, when arranged in space (cf. figure 2, below), it is evident that these come very close to Hemingway’s technique of framing certain aspects of a text by means of chiastic arrangements. The elements that can be found at the core of McGahern’s verbal arrangement highlight certain uncomfortable truths at the heart of “Korea,” namely that life, death, and money are closely interwoven.

1  worms … clay in the darkness (word order 1-2-3)
2  Farrell …
3  cattle
4  1 … opened the door …
5  my father’s voice
6  ten thousand dollars

… when Luke was killed. Every American soldier’s life is insured to the tune of …

6  ten thousand dollars.
3  cattle
5 (2)  Farrell’s voice
4  I closed the door
1  in the darkness … worms … clay (word order 3-1-2)

McGahern must have studied Hemingway’s text in close detail and afterwards manufactured his own version. It is surprising how close, at least in the one example that I show you here, McGahern comes to Hemingway’s shaping of prose, most likely without actually being aware of the highly complex chiastic constructions that the American author relied upon.

The parallels between “Indian Camp” and “Korea” seem to have escaped notice so far. It is evident that both stories are works of art that can be read independently in their own cultural context. McGahern does not merely imitate Hemingway but uses his text as a “springboard” (to use a term by Mary Orr) to adapt it for a new audience. By adapting Hemingway’s short story and transferring it into an Irish context, McGahern implicitly acknowledges the archetypal “authority” of “Indian Camp”: it works as well in an Irish context and might probably be transferred to further settings. Making it his own story is very significant since the author does not believe in imitating somebody else to a large extent: “And that’s why a writer who is totally influenced by other writers is never any good because his imagination is drowned out by influences” (Kampen, 2002: 339). The author clearly does not suffer from Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” and knows where the borderline between imitation and adaptation lies. Regarding the motives I would argue that although McGahern pillages Hemingway and fuses two hypotexts into his hypertext, the underlying intention is homage to a classic that appealed to his creative instincts.

According to Julie Sanders, a rewriting such as “Korea” also reflects back on the source text, setting it even more firmly in the canon and providing it with new meaning in the context of the Irish version. However, this concept is somewhat questionable since the links between these two texts appear to have been only just discovered. Sanders writes:

If readers are to be alert to the comparative and contrastive relationships that Eliot regarded as crucial to the aesthetic process, it goes almost without saying that the texts cited or reworked need to be well known. They need to serve as part of a shared community of knowledge, both for the interrelationships and interplay to be identifiable and for these in turn to have required impact on their readership. This is why … adaptation and appropriation tend on the whole to operate within the parameters of an established canon, serving indeed at times to reinforce that canon by ensuring a continued interest in the original or source text, albeit in revised circumstances of understanding (Sanders, 2006: 97-98).
The reinforcing of the canon, in this particular case, would then be the task of the critics who discover such parallels.

Singling out the influence of Ernest Hemingway is not an attempt to determine the range of “Korea” to the two specific hypotexts presented but to draw attention to this particular relationship. McGahern’s short story is, most certainly, not just a pastiche of “Indian Camp” but host to what Pamela Cooper, in a comment on Graham Swift’s Last Orders, called a “symphony of intertexts” (2002: 37). Thus, it also alludes to both the author’s biography as well as to a number of further narrative texts. Executions and the brutality of the Irish Civil War evoke, for instance, a number of texts by Liam O’Flaherty while the narrator’s flash of recognition in the outhouse is very much in the form of a Joycean epiphany. This opens plenty of scope for further analyses of “Korea”.

References