

‘Sacred spaces’: writing home in  
recent Irish memoirs and  
autobiographies (John McGahern’s  
*Memoir*, Hugo Hamilton’s *The  
Speckled People*, Seamus Deane’s  
*Reading in the Dark* and John Walsh’s  
*The Falling Angels*)

*Stephen Regan*

One of the familiar conventions of autobiography is its revelation of an individual life through a compelling first-person narrative voice. To work upon its readers most effectively, autobiography needs to present the life in question as both unique and typical; it must offer an appealing account of an existence that is special enough and significant enough to warrant attention, but it must also sustain that attention through an insistence on common human dilemmas and a shared sense of endeavour. At the same time as presenting a single life as unfolding and uncertain, shaped by that which can only be dimly discerned, the work of autobiography can, with hindsight, be immensely assured and authoritative about the way things turned out. The reader’s gratification is intimately connected with the process by which the individual life, in all its stumbling unpredictability and waywardness, is given shape and structure. There is a special pleasure, too, in being persuaded that the autobiographical narrative is a truthful record of events, while knowing all along that what we are reading is an elaborate, stylised fiction.

Memoir similarly suggests a recollection of actual events and experiences, with an implicit trust in the faithfulness of memory being shared by author and reader. The term implies historical knowledge, an informed account of one’s own life and times, but the distinctions between autobiography and memoir are not easy to establish and maintain. In a very general sense, autobiography tends to offer a

comprehensive account of a single life in a mode that is personal, if not confessional, while memoir often presents a series of recollections that form only part of the life in question, in a mode that appears more discursive and objective. Memoir, however, often brings with it the personal, emotional intensity of autobiography, and it is just as likely to employ the devices and techniques of fiction.

For many Irish writers, autobiography inevitably takes on the kind of public, historical aura associated with memoir, for the simple reason that the individual life is so frequently and so inseparably entwined with the troubled life of the nation. The awakening of consciousness is also therefore an awakening to the political urgencies of a particular place and time. For late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century memoirists in Ireland, the unfinished business of one's own life is coterminous with an uncertain political future, so that notions of identity, for both self and nation, tend to take on a curiously suspended form. Autobiographical fiction finds its consummate form in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Stephen Dedalus, flying by the nets of language, nationality and religion, becomes the exemplary type of the artist struggling to create anew the conscience of his race. For a later generation of writers, the memory of growing up in Ireland carries with it the powerful imprint of revolution, civil war and partition, and the violent repercussions of that convulsive history extend across the later twentieth century and into the autobiographical writings of the present time. Those writers born in the 1930s and 1940s are, not surprisingly, acutely susceptible to seeing their own coming to maturity as unavoidably implicated in the difficult and traumatic passage of the nascent Irish Free State and its eventual transformation into the Irish Republic in 1949.

Most autobiographies and most memoirs rely very heavily on a vividly realised account of place and time. These are the structural co-ordinates through which the self is most obviously recreated and refashioned. In recent Irish autobiography, however, the intense relationship between the psychology of the self and the politics of nationhood has been rendered through an especially powerful and experimental preoccupation with place and time. One of the unusual and distinctive features of recent autobiographical writing has been its tendency to highlight its own spatial and temporal complexities as a way of denoting the problematic nature of identity. A strong commitment to the co-ordinates of place and time might well be expected in nationalist memoirs and autobiographical writings by Irish authors, but place and time are figured with a new intensity and self-consciousness in recent Irish migrant or second-generation autobiographies, which have increasingly become a special category or sub-genre in the study of modern Irish literature.

John McGahern's starkly titled *Memoir* (2005) opens with a vivid account of the lanes and fields of Co. Leitrim, where he walked as a boy in the 1930s and 1940s, and where he returned to live in the 1970s. Despite its poor soil, that landscape possesses a primal power for McGahern: 'My relationship with these lanes and fields extended back to the very beginning of my life'.<sup>1</sup> It is also as near as he gets to imagining heaven, as he recalls his mother naming the flowers for him as they walk to school. There is a touching candour in McGahern's insistence on his own abundant happiness on these occasions, almost as if he challenges his memory to prove otherwise: 'I must have been extraordinarily happy walking that lane to school' (p. 4). With that one simple sentence we get an immediate sense of the complexity of any autobiographical narrative that seeks to capture both the intensity of childhood feelings and the more circumspect nature of adult recollection. It is not surprising, therefore, that initially McGahern appears to invoke the romantic idealism of Wordsworth, for whom the child is father of the man:

There are many such lanes all around where I live, and in certain rare moments over the years while walking in these lanes I have come into an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace, in which I feel that I can live for ever. I suspect it is no more than the actual lane and the lost lane becoming one for a moment in an intensity of feeling, but without the usual attendants of pain and loss. These moments disappear as suddenly and as inexplicably as they come, and long before they can be recognized and placed. (p. 4)

If the passage acknowledges Wordsworthian spots of time, it also acquires a more modern, existentialist outlook, reminiscent of Edward Thomas, for whom the lane was a fitting place for meditating on beginnings and endings. The lane, which might otherwise function as a paltry image of Irish pastoralism, takes on a dynamic, cognitive role as memory and imagination begin to interact. It serves as a vital point of entry into and exit out of the buried life of the feelings. Walking down the country lanes provides an intense momentary release, an action beyond words that is reminiscent of the dancing in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). The movement and rhythm of walking constitute a structuring element in the memoir, leading us towards the magnificent final pages in which McGahern imagines a tender reunion with his mother, gently reconciling her unquestioning belief with his own unshakeable disbelief:

If we could walk together through those summer lanes, with their banks of wild flowers that 'cast a spell', we probably would not be able to speak,

though I would want to tell her all the local news . . . I would want no shadow to fall on her joy and deep trust in God. She would face no false reproaches. As we retraced our steps, I would pick for her the wild orchid and the windflower. (p. 272)

If the Irish countryside and a caring mother offer peace and security, what they contend with in McGahern's life is political conflict and a violent father. Outside the reassuring lanes with their wild flowers are the police barracks (Garda Síochána), where the father is stationed as a young sergeant in the new Free State. The life that McGahern recounts so movingly is one in which the Civil War has left a bitter legacy of hatred that erupts irrationally and finds its destructive expression in the violence and cruelty of the father. The barracks are a brutal, stifling and enclosing place, the memories of which are associated with childhood humiliation and abject misery. Against the spirit of freedom that informed The Easter Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916, the State that emerges is 'a theocracy in all but name' (p. 210). By 1950, the Church has come to exercise power over much of civil life, including education and entertainment, and McGahern's sense of enclosure and confinement is once again defined in terms of buildings: 'the hospitals, the orphanages, the juvenile prison systems, the parish halls' (p. 210).

Even for a later generation of writers, the Civil War casts a long shadow. Hugo Hamilton, in *The Speckled People* (2003), recalls his father explaining the events that took place in west Cork in the 1920s:

He tells us about the time when the British soldiers came to their house in Leap, threatening to burn it down because they thought the rebels were shooting from the upstairs window . . . And then the very same thing happened again after the British had gone and the Irish started fighting among themselves, because that's what they had learned from the British. Then one day they had to leave the house a second time when Irish Free State soldiers said they would burn it down, because they were sure they saw IRA snipers in the upstairs window.<sup>2</sup>

Hamilton adopts the kind of *faux naïf* voice and perspective that makes for comedy, but as with Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1998) this wide-eyed credulity is apt to become monotonous and the comic effects can soon wear thin. Where *The Speckled People* excels is in its exploration of 'new' Irish identities: 'My father says we have nothing to worry about because we are the new Irish. Partly from Ireland and partly from somewhere else, half-Irish and half-German. We're the speckled people' (p. 7). What is striking in terms of technique is the representation of this uncertain identity through radical spatial and

temporal shifts which are nevertheless in keeping with a child's view of the world: 'When I was small I woke up in Germany . . . Then I got up and looked out the window and saw Ireland. And after breakfast we all went out the door to Ireland and walked down to Mass' (p. 1). At the end of the book, after their father's death, the children stand with their German mother on the road, unsure of where home might be.

*The Speckled People* presents itself as a memoir rather than an autobiography, and this is how it was generally treated in reviews. Even so, several reviewers paid tribute to its inventiveness and its storytelling vivacity. There was greater uncertainty about whether Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996) was memoir or fiction. Blake Morrison, in a sensitive and discerning review in the *Independent on Sunday*, paid tribute to 'Seamus Deane's marvellous memoir, or novel, about growing up in Derry in the 1950s'.<sup>3</sup> Morrison sees the book modulating between the *Bildungsroman*, a novel of early life and development, and 'a kind of whodunnit', though he nevertheless insists that its strength and control of storytelling make questions about fiction and non-fiction seem irrelevant. For Edna Longley, writing in *Fortnight*, *Reading in the Dark* was autobiographical fiction, 'less a novel than an essay in sensibility of a type more common at the turn of the century', a work full of the epiphanies and self-communings of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus.<sup>4</sup>

*Reading in the Dark* evades any easy categorisation in terms of its narrative style. Its structure seems simple and obvious, with chapters and parts conforming to the written conventions of narrative, but its use of episodic tales and its colloquial, anecdotal technique owe much to the oral tradition of storytelling. The book consists of three parts, each containing two chapters, with each chapter subdivided into numerous short episodes. These episodes are precisely dated, from February 1945 to July 1971, creating the impression of a diary or journal, though in many ways they resemble snapshots that become increasingly fluid and cinematic. The faded photograph on the dust jacket shows Seamus Deane and his brother, arms folded, celebrating their first holy communion. As if simultaneously inviting and denying the suggestion of autobiography, the book cover also reveals a cracked photographic plate.

The unnamed narrator of *Reading in the Dark*, about five years old in 1945, is the third of seven Catholic children growing up in the city of Derry. Despite its seemingly chronological trajectory, the book repeatedly and obsessively turns back on itself, both starting and ending at the foot of the stairs in a house overlooking the cathedral. There is no single linear narrative, but instead a proliferation of narrative

possibilities that have to do with the absence of any secure knowledge. The mental and emotional torment that fuses these different narrative strands arises when a boy so loves his parents that he wants to know everything about them, and in seeking to acquire that knowledge he uncovers a secret that bitterly divides him from them and ends up destroying the love he cherished. The most prominent and poignant verb in the book is the verb *to know*, and while in some ways a universal, archetypal infinitive, it cannot in this instance be abstracted from the cultural and political pressures under which the boy's psychology is so tragically thwarted.

As Edna Longley's review makes clear, *Reading in the Dark* shares with *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* an interest in memoir and autobiography as significant narratives of Ireland. In his introduction to a section of the *Anthology* titled 'Autobiography and Memoirs 1890–1988', Deane declares his interest in 'what gives the self definition'. Autobiography, he suggests, is never simply about the self, but also about 'the hostile or liberating energy' which 'made the self come into consciousness and thereby gave to existence a pattern or the beginnings of a pattern of explanation'.<sup>5</sup> *Reading in the Dark* has its origins in precisely this kind of speculation about selfhood and identity. In a colonial or neo-colonial context, Deane continues, the oppressive agencies with which the self contends are 'multiple and blatant', and so the writing of an autobiography or memoir produces an unusually intense enquiry into the nature of identity, personal or national. The growth of consciousness in such writing is not likely to be registered as a smooth and uninterrupted process but one of profound unease and disturbance. This, Deane asserts, is 'one of the obsessive marks of cultures that have been compelled to inquire into the legitimacy of their own existence by the presence of another culture that is forever foreign and forever intimate'.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of political repression, the autobiographer or writer of memoirs is likely to ask if identity can be more securely established or otherwise simply abandoned and forgotten. What is articulated in the process of self-examination is a familiar relationship between 'Edenic' and 'utopian' responses, one pushing back to a condition of primal innocence, and the other looking forward to some ideal resolution. What most often prevails, however, is 'a radical privation . . . the sense of a missing feature or energy'. *Reading in the Dark* is a meditation on that missing agency, an anguished search for some alternative to what Deane terms 'the obduracy of existing conditions'.<sup>7</sup> The boy's act of reading in the dark is one of both existential necessity and political expediency, a matter of 're-imagining all I had read, the various

ways the plot might unravel, the novel opening into endless possibilities in the dark'.<sup>8</sup>

A further explanation of the generic indeterminacy of *Reading in the Dark* is evident in Deane's searching and appreciative review of Terry Eagleton's *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (1995). Here, Deane reflects on the cultural forms appropriate to a society in which the conflict between modernity and tradition has been unusually fraught. In literary terms, there is the imaginative world of the realist novel, with its temporal, everyday rhythms, but there is also 'that other world, variously described as the legendary, the mythical, the timeless'. One of the distinctive features of Irish literary culture, according to Deane, is its simultaneous perception of these different dimensions or cultural chronologies. Irish fiction is endowed with a facility for incorporating 'canonical realist forms . . . and other forms subversive of or merely different from them'.<sup>9</sup> *Reading in the Dark* possesses this facility for sliding subtly and uncannily between different imaginative discourses or dimensions. If it embraces the everyday rhythms of realist fiction, it is also powerfully imbued with the rhythms of Gothic supernaturalism. Ostensibly a novel about growing up in a particular place at a particular time, it is also an excursion into the realm of the fantastic, a harrowing story of hauntings, possessions and exorcisms.

The opening episode of *Reading in the Dark* establishes a strange and uneasy conjunction between exactness and ineffability, between that which can be physically measured or registered by the senses and that which lies beyond recovery or comprehension:

On the stairs, there was a clear, plain silence.

It was a short staircase, fourteen steps in all, covered in lino from which the original pattern had been polished away to the point where it had the look of a faint memory. Eleven steps took you to the turn of the stairs where the cathedral and the sky always hung in the window frame. Three more steps took you on to the landing, about six feet long. (p. 5)

The look of the lino and the loss of its original pattern exert a powerful metonymic and characteristically realist effect at the outset of a narrative obsessively concerned with the processes of memory. At the same time, the unsettling description of silence as being clearly and plainly there 'on the stairs' prepares us for the appearance of a shadow that the boy and his mother can feel but not see. The strict denotation of realist narrative subsides into the ghostly imprecision of the Gothic: 'The house was all cobweb tremors' (p. 6). Accompanying the immediacy of the child's enthrallment is the adult narrator's retrospective assessment of the mother-child relationship: 'I loved her then', a plain and

sorrowful declaration of the breakdown that follows. Similarly, the dialogue presents the shadow as 'something there between us', obdurately and tragically anticipating their separation (p. 5).

The collusion of realist narrative and elements that subtly undermine it produces a highly distinctive and striking prose style. A clean, spare diction and simple, uncluttered syntax reminiscent of journal narratives suddenly opens into a richly embellished and heavily adjectival prose. The opening of the episode, dated 'November 1947', is characteristic:

It was a fierce winter, that year. The snow covered the air-raid shelters. At night, from the stair window, the field was a white paradise of loneliness, and a starlit wind made the glass shake like loose, black water and the ice snore on the sill, while we slept, and the shadow watched. (p. 9)

Here, a passage that specifies the season, the year and the post-war environment modulates into a world of strange and supernatural occurrences.

*Reading in the Dark* takes its epigraph from a popular song, 'She Moved Through the Fair': 'The people were saying no two were e'er wed / But one had a sorrow that never was said'.<sup>10</sup> The disjunction between what is said in public and what is not said in private is just one point of contact between the book and the song. The quotation acquires significance as the marriage between the narrator's parents begins to founder on his mother's agonising and obstinate silence. The reluctance or inability to speak about disturbing events is a common affliction in the book, and the narrator himself frequently confides, with shame and frustration, that 'I said nothing'. In a more general way, the epigraph points to the persistence of popular cultural forms, including folklore, songs and legends.

The early episode titled 'Disappearances' establishes the significance of myth, superstition and illusion in the narrator's developing consciousness: 'people with green eyes were close to the fairies, we were told; they were just here for a little while, looking for a human child they could take away'. Catholic doctrine asserts a different, though no less compelling, mythological notion of destination and disappearance, prefiguring hell as 'a great whirlpool of flames' where 'you disappeared forever' (p. 7). In the same episode, we encounter Bamboozel, a magician with Duffy's Circus, who performs a celebrated disappearing act. The child at the circus hesitates between the power of magic and the rational explanation that Bamboozel has slipped through a trapdoor: 'Everyone was laughing and clapping but I felt uneasy. How could they all be so sure?' (p. 8).

So often, in the narrator's perceptions, mythical or magical incidents have their counterparts in actuality, though the diverse episodes in the



book are so neatly imbricated that no easy distinction between the imagined and the real can be drawn. It is typical of Deane's skilful intercutting of scenes that the 'Disappearances' episode should be followed immediately with the story of 'the big shoot-out at the distillery between the IRA and the police, when Uncle Eddie disappeared'. The story of Uncle Eddie's disappearance is one among many, but its exact dating – April, 1922 – firmly links it to the founding of the Irish Free State and the subsequent events of Irish political history. The repercussions of Eddie's involvement in the Republican movement produce the secrecy and silence that dominate the family life of a later generation: 'Certainly he had never returned, although my father would not speak of it at all' (p. 9).

A powerful instance of realist chronology intersecting with the mythic can be found in the episode titled 'Field of the Disappeared, August 1950'. The narrator and his brother, Liam, are taken by their father to see a 'stretch of green' close to the sea. The father explains that the souls of all those from the area who had disappeared, including lost fishermen, would gather on certain feast days like St Brigid's Day or Christmas Day, 'to cry like birds and look down on the fields where they had been born' (p. 53). The narrator suspects that there is 'something more to be told', but his father says nothing. Then the boy intuitively makes the connection with his father's lost brother: 'Is this, I wondered, where Eddie's soul comes to cry for his lost fields?' (p. 54).

'Field of the Disappeared' is a startling instance of Deane's simultaneous apprehension of different cultural chronologies. What it suggests, however, is that the hybrid realism of *Reading in the Dark* is founded not just on intersecting temporal dimensions but on intersecting spatial dimensions as well. One of the most impressive aspects of the book is its sense of place, its meticulous way of mapping cultural and political anxieties on to the city of Derry and its rural environs, at the same time dissolving the boundaries between the real and the legendary. All of the principal places in the book, including the stairs on which it opens and closes, appear to cast a shadow. The Field of the Disappeared, the ruined distillery, the lost farmhouse and the old fort of Grianan are all exactly realised and all imaginatively elevated as legend.

'We begin to think where we live', as Raymond Williams was fond of remarking, and that observation has a special acuity if the place happens to be Derry.<sup>11</sup> The contradictory impulses which Derry provokes in the mind of the young boy growing up there are hauntingly and beautifully evoked by Deane in an episode titled 'Fire'. 'It was a city of bonfires', the narrator tells us, and he goes on to recall how 'Fire was what I loved to hear of and to see. It transformed the grey

air and streets, excited and exciting' (p. 33). Of course, the bonfires also inflame the deep sectarian divisions within Derry ('The Protestants had more than we had'), keeping alive a bitter history of triumph and defeat: the 'liberation' of Derry from besieging Catholics in 1689 or the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Fire also plays a significant role in the events of 1922 and the burning down of Watt's distillery. The occupation of the distillery by IRA gunmen was 'a last-minute protest at the founding of the new state' (p. 35). What remains is 'a burnt space in the heart of the neighbourhood' (p. 36). Place, then, is not a neutral entity or simply a convenient setting for the narrative in *Reading in the Dark*. It is where the long, protracted struggle for meaning and definition goes on.

Deane shows the complex interaction between spatial relations and social relations in a brilliantly evocative and highly animated way. The passage that follows conveys the sights, smells and sounds of the city, but also that complicated experience in which intimate belonging and sullen disenchantment seem inseparable:

The dismembered streets lay strewn all around the ruined distillery where Uncle Eddie had fought, aching with a long, dolorous absence. With the distillery had gone the smell of vaporised whiskey and heated red brick, the sullen glow that must have loomed over the crouching houses like an amber sunset. Now, instead, we had the high Gothic cathedral and the parochial house, standing above the area in a permanent greystone winter overlooking the abandoned site that seemed to me a faithless and desolate patch, rinsed of its colour, pale and bald in the midst of the tumble of small houses, unpaved streets and the giant moraine of debris that had slid from the foot of the city walls down a sloping embankment to where our territory began. In the early winter evenings, people angled past like shadows under the weak street lights, voices would say goodnight and be gone. (p. 34)

Deane's recreation of the city is both majestic and desolate. The scattered streets and the 'tumble' of houses suggest a casual, unplanned filling of space, and yet the lines of territorial possession are clearly demarcated. Even as a child, the narrator is in no doubt about 'where our territory began'. The contradictory response that Derry elicits is evident, too, in the relentless personification with which it is invested. Its 'heart' is a burnt space, its streets are 'dismembered', and yet its will to live is irrepressible: 'The town lay entranced, embraced by the great sleeping light of the river and the green beyond of the border. It woke now and then, like someone startled and shouting from a dream, in clamour at its abandonment' (p. 36). This romantic evocation, reminiscent of Wordsworth's London in his sonnet 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge', is brutally

undercut with the recollection of a St Patrick's Day riot, when 'the police had baton-charged a march and pursued us into our territory'. The episode ends with another fire – a burning police car – and a sudden spatial distortion: 'The whole street seemed to be bent sideways, tilted by the blazing hoardings in to the old Gaelic football ground' (p. 36).

The Derry of *Reading in the Dark* is possessed of those equal tugs of attachment and disavowal that Deane describes so well in *The Field Day Anthology*: 'To the extent that the world, especially the world of childhood and youth, is restored in writing to its full presence, there is a corresponding sense of its inadequacy. It is always something to escape from'. The search for an alternative, Deane suggests, is 'one of the symptoms of a culture that believes itself always to be provincial, always to be in need of a metropolitan world elsewhere'.<sup>12</sup> Like Gar in Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, the narrator of *Reading in the Dark* dreams of American cities: 'Chicago was a place I longed to see' (p. 37). As the boy reaches adolescence and prepares for university, the crisis Deane describes seems imminent. The provincial city must be left, and yet there is no other place that can be as fully realised.

Along with the ruined distillery, there are two other places of deep significance in the geography of the child's imagination. He dreams of a lost farmhouse and longs to go there, but his dream is disrupted by the repercussions of a family feud and by the revelation that Uncle Eddie was interrogated there before he 'disappeared'. The other place is the ancient fort of Grianan (the Fort of Light), where the sleeping warriors of the legendary Fianna are thought to rest. According to the prophecies of St Columcille, the sleeping Fianna will awake to a trumpet call and fight the last battle somewhere between Derry and Strabane, 'after which the one remaining English ship would sail out of Lough Foyle and away from Ireland forever' (p. 57). The old stone ring of Grianan is one of those symbolic places that Deane describes as 'romantic' ruins, signifying 'not only loss but also the native endurance that will prevail even over and through the destruction of the buildings it once created'.<sup>13</sup> Once again, however, these places of dream and legend and imagination are found to be implicated in the harsh political actualities of the present. The narrator discovers that Grianan is where his Uncle Eddie was shot by fellow Republicans on suspicion of being an informer.

So much of *Reading in the Dark* exemplifies what Fredric Jameson calls 'cognitive mapping', an exploration of socio-spatial relations and their political causes and consequences.<sup>14</sup> The landscape where the narrator grows up is 'border country', physically marked by bridges and streams, but also indelibly scored in the mind. A stream, crossed by a

hump-backed bridge, marks 'part of the red line that wriggled around the city on the map and hemmed it in to the waters of Lough Foyle'. At one end of the bridge 'the Free State began – a grassy road that ran straight for thirty yards' (p. 49). The physical and mental contours of the narrator's territory are compactly described in a single sentence: 'So there it was, our territory, with the old fort of Grianan on one hill overlooking Lough Foyle, the feud farmhouse on another hill, gazing on Lough Swilly, the thick neck of the Inishowen peninsula between, Derry gauzed in smoke at the end of Lough Foyle, the border writhing behind it' (p. 59).

Across the border, Donegal exerts its own distinctive cultural rhythms, while in Derry the pace of modernity is quickening. By the end of 1958 a firm called 'Birmingham Sound Reproducers' has opened a factory for making record-players. Whereas previously it was the women who occupied the jobs in the local shirt factory, it is now the men who take the available work. As the narrator observes, 'It changed the whole pattern of movement in the neighbourhood' (p. 219). On a crucial day when the narrator's father is about to reveal what he knows of Uncle Eddie's death, he takes the boy and his brother to one of his favourite childhood haunts. Across the river from Culmore Point the British Oxygen plant is being built, and his father explains that the whole embankment is going to 'disappear' in a short time. The ironies here are multiple. It is not just that the Birmingham record-player company and British Oxygen are perceived to be modernising agents that have come from 'outside' and are therefore indicative of a continuing cultural and economic incursion into the area, it is also that one hints at the replaying of a familiar historical record, while the other manufactures oxygen in a place of continuing suffocation.

Given the narrator's sensitivity to the politics of place, it is hardly surprising that his own family's tragic break-up and dispersal should be construed in terms of spatial relations. Dwelling on the broken links of the family and his father's agonised suppression of speech, the narrator reflects: 'I felt we lived in an empty space with a long cry from him ramifying through it. At other times, it appeared to be as cunning and articulate as a labyrinth, closely designed, with someone sobbing at the heart of it' (p. 43). At the end of the book, the narrator leaves Derry for a university education in Belfast, sensing acutely that there is already an unbridgeable gap between himself and his family: 'I had created a distance between my parents and myself that had become my only way of loving them' (p. 225). The boy realises, too, that there is wisdom in Crazy Joe's conundrum: 'There's a place where a man died but lived on as a ghost, and where another man lived as a ghost but

died as a man, and where another man would have died as a man but ran away to live as a ghost. Where would that place be?' (p. 221). The melting of solid forms into shadows finally afflicts the boy and his mother. 'She was nearly gone from me now', he remarks towards the end of the book, 'Now the haunting meant something new to me – now I had become the shadow' (p. 217). If the image of the shadow suggests an encroaching darkness and an unremitting sense of guilt and complicity, it also recalls the uncanny resemblances between the missing Uncle Eddie and other family members, as if they are all in some way implicated in his fate.

It is entirely in keeping with the complicity of private and public grief in *Reading in the Dark* that the narrator's mother should suffer a stroke and lose the power of speech at the onset of the Troubles in October 1968. The closing episode, simply titled 'After', shows a community reeling under gunfire, explosions and the smashing of batons on riot shields. On the day the narrator's father dies, a curfew is called and armoured personnel carriers move through the streets. The narrator stays awake until dawn and is roused by the noise of horse-hooves. He watches 'a young gypsy boy jog sedately through the scurf of debris astride a grey-mottled horse'. Although the curfew is still going on, the boy rides through the streets, holding on to the horse's mane. The narrator recalls how 'The clip-clop of hooves echoed in the still streets after he had disappeared' (p. 233). That striking image of the boy on horseback functions on a number of levels. It carries with it the stirring energy of Jack B. Yeats's equestrian paintings, challenging and resisting authority and conformity, but like the painter's fabulous horsemen and their horses it seems to be conjured up out of the imaginative remnants of an older Ireland. Like so much in *Reading in the Dark*, there is a powerful sense of presence in the very acknowledgement of absence and disappearance.

In its moving depiction of a community caught between modernity and tradition, *Reading in the Dark* sedulously avoids both sentimentality and dogmatism. It is all too well aware of that naively utopian plenitude of selfhood and nationhood that seems to beckon in such desperate circumstances. The book does not allow a simple-minded politics of identity to offer itself as cause and explanation, but nor does it cynically or despairingly relinquish the processes of self-definition and interpretation. If reading in the dark is a way of making sense of history, of infusing interpretation with imagination, so too is the writing of fiction. The boy who reads in the dark is effectively inventing fictions of his own and quietly learning the subtle distinction between telling it as it is and telling it as it might be.

A self-reflexive concern with reading and writing, and with the nature of artistic vocation, provides the strongest point of contact with Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Like Stephen Dedalus, the narrator of *Reading in the Dark* comes to consciousness amidst a competing and bewildering array of aesthetic, religious and political imperatives, and there are moments when he has to announce, 'I will not serve'. An education with the Christian Brothers provides Deane's narrator with some magnificent opportunities for ribald comedy and satirical deflation. Like Joyce's novel, *Reading in the Dark* makes its difficult way between the politics of affiliation and attachment and the politics of disavowal and denial. In the process, language, nationality and religion are exposed to those destabilising ironies so characteristic of Joyce. In the Cold War episode titled 'Political Education, November 1956', a priest in British Army Uniform tells a group of school-boys that in comparison with the great threat of Communism, 'Our internal disputes are no more than family quarrels'. The boys wonder if it's the Germans, the Russians or the IRA who are causing all the problems. 'Global vision', the narrator muses, 'I needed that' (p. 197).

Where Seamus Deane's autobiographical novel explores the consciousness of a Catholic, Republican community in a border town in Northern Ireland, John Walsh's memoir *The Falling Angels* is much more obviously concerned with the fate of migrant or diasporic Irish communities, and in particular the uncertain identities of the émigré Irish middle class. In stark contrast to Deane's emphasis on working-class Derry, Walsh (the son of an Irish doctor) gives us what at first appears to be a picture of comfortable affluence in Battersea, South London. But if Walsh finds space for comedy in his anatomy of Irish migrant identity, he is also alert to the painfulness of division and separation. Like *Reading in the Dark*, *The Falling Angels* is about family disintegration and it, too, records the loss of the narrator's mother and father and the bleakness of trying to reinvent and redefine oneself in the emptiness that is left behind. Walsh's memoir is subtitled 'An Irish Romance', but that love of romantic Ireland is severely undercut by the narrator's persistent sense of displacement. In many ways, Walsh's writing exhibits those distinguishing characteristics identified by Deane in his account of Irish memoir and autobiography in the Field Day anthology. If at one level, there is an urge towards consolidation of a secure identity, there is at another level a counter-urge towards complete abandonment of any such notion. *The Falling Angels* is suspended between those backward-looking Edenic impulses and those forward-looking utopian impulses that Deane registers so acutely, but it brings with it a special sense of spatial and temporal complexity that derives

from its status as a second-generation memoir essentially conceived outside of Ireland.

*The Falling Angels* gives us an opportunity for examining diasporic Irish identity, especially that of second-generation Irish children growing up in England. Aidan Arrowsmith's analysis of displaced Irishness is helpful here, though as Liam Harte points out, it needs to be modified with reference to the peculiarly indeterminate or suspended identity that second-generation children acquire.<sup>15</sup> Arrowsmith's model is based on a tripartite pattern of development. The uncertainty of identity associated with second-generation affiliation to a lost homeland leads initially to a rejection of parental heritage, involving a desire to conform to English cultural norms. This is followed by a reassessment of cultural origins and by nostalgia for some authentic ideal of Irishness. This nostalgia then mutates into a more mature and enquiring third position, in which the displaced subject begins to question whether there can ever be an authentic state of being and comes to accept the provisionality and hybridity of identity.

What is unusual about *The Falling Angels*, according to Liam Harte, is that it seems to bypass this linear, progressive model of identity and instead shows us different notions of identity co-existing in a much more problematic and unresolved way.<sup>16</sup> Walsh, who studied English Literature at Oxford and then Irish Literature at University College Dublin, and who now writes for the *Independent* newspaper, has a powerfully engaging rhetorical style in which he is able to expose and ridicule the obvious stereotypes of romantic attachment to Ireland while simultaneously suggesting just how strong and seductive those ideals of Irishness actually are. At the same time as revealing that second-generation Irishness entails a whole range of possible identities that might be performed or improvised, the memoir also continues to yearn for some fixed point of security in the old ancestral homeland.

It is towards the west of Ireland, the place of myth and folklore and Irish language, that the memoir is drawn. The title recalls another literary work of indeterminate genre, John Millington Synge's book *The Aran Islands*, in which the Irish playwright in the guise of anthropologist encounters the denizens of those far-flung islands. In his account of his visits to Inishmore, the largest of the islands, Synge recalls how he met an old blind fisherman called Mairtin Conneely, who told him the story of how Satan and his angels were thrown out of heaven, and how one of the archangels pleaded with God to spare some of Satan's followers. The old man explains to Synge: 'those that were falling are in the air still, and have power to wreck ships and to work evil in the world'.<sup>17</sup> Walsh finds a compelling parallel with those exiled Irish, like himself, who seem cursed to spend their lives in a state of suspense,

caught between Ireland and England. He seizes on the image of falling angels to explain the predicament of those who are 'eternally in transit between one place and another, deprived of a sanctuary, denied a final refuge, never finding a real home' (p. 30).

What complicates Walsh's already confused sense of identity is the powerful attraction of 1960s popular culture in London in his teen years, with the Beatles and the Rolling Stones now competing with the traditional Irish music enjoyed by his parents and their Irish friends. For much of the memoir, the narrator oscillates between the need for assimilation in middle-class English culture and the powerful attraction of Irish otherness, seeking an identity that will somehow embrace both nationalities. After the death of his mother, Anne, the narrator takes a long journey through Ireland, a rite of passage in which he hopes to find a secure sense of origin and belonging, but to no avail. At the funeral of his mother's sister, his Aunt Dolly, he talks to a nun about his search for home:

I fell into conversation with Sister Brid, from the Presentation Convent in Athenry. We talked about Dolly's in-between status – how neither she nor Anne could quite stay, or grow, or become 'really themselves' in England; but neither could they go back to what they'd known and rejected in Ireland. I told the nun about my own wonderings about where my home was.

'It's very simple,' she said. 'Wherever your parents may be buried, your true home is with the next generation. So with you it's London, where your children are growing up. But the human heart allows itself to have *sacred spaces*, where you feel most alive, even if they're not your home.'

That sounded about right. But I still hadn't found the home I sought, somewhere between London and Galway, sharing the essences of Englishness and Irishness, somewhere beyond both. (pp. 279–80)

Although Sister Brid's distinction between one's 'true home' and the 'sacred spaces' of the human heart provides a flexible model of attachment and identification, it still invokes the binary categories of England and Ireland, of 'here' and 'there'. It insists too strongly on generational divides as the final arbiters of what constitutes home.

The narrator's search for somewhere beyond both London and Galway takes him further west and back out to the Aran Islands, following the footsteps of John Millington Synge. He discovers in his reading about the islands that there was an English military presence there in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that the people of the islands are not the pure-bred Irish that Synge and Yeats believed them to be. The Aran Islands as a place once thought to be the repository of authentic Irishness turns out to be a more heterogeneous, hybridised place than Ireland's writers imagined. It provides a space in which English



and Irish identities might be joined and transcended. In a moment of reconciliation strongly reminiscent of Wordsworth turning to his sister at the end of 'Tintern Abbey', the narrator addresses his sister, Madelyn, both suggesting a recovered sense of unity and allowing the memoir to end with a question:

I looked to the right, where the Cliffs of Moher bulked in the sunlight, showing a more friendly, piebald aspect than ever before. I looked left and saw the edge of Connemara, the great lunar landscape of Galway rock, from where the airplane would soon land to take us back to civilisation. The Cliffs and the stone desert, my favourite sights in Ireland, seemed suddenly drawn together, forming a mystic triangle, somewhere beyond England and Ireland. Here, where Synge's fishermen believed that angels were always falling through the air and wreaking havoc in the world, here was the place where they might fall to earth at last.

'Madelyn,' I said. 'How'd you like to build a house here?' (pp. 281–2)

Looking to the right and then looking to the left are gestures of caution, but the west of Ireland landscape, for all that it retains suggestions of being beyond 'civilisation', even 'lunar' in its remoteness, is friendly and inviting. The question remains, however, whether this is the real home that the narrator has repeatedly sought. We are asked, perhaps, to consider the difference between a house and a home, and to reflect upon the possibility that a house is only a temporary structure. Liam Harte's reflections on the nature of the house are instructive here: 'this implied preference for fixity over flux is counterbalanced by the sense that this will be no ordinary or earthly house, but rather one which embodies an idea of "home" as site specific yet free floating, earthed yet deterritorialised, concretely bounded yet transcendently open'.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most remarkable features of Irish autobiographical writing since the 1990s has been its readiness to depart from the usual and familiar conventions through which the self is represented in literature. Often this has involved a flagrant mixing of generic codes, or a self-conscious literariness and allusiveness, so that the fictional component of memoir or autobiography is made more than usually explicit. This unsettling of traditional autobiographical modes has tended to bring with it a strong sense of identity held in abeyance, painfully thwarted, strangely suspended. More striking still has been the extraordinary preoccupation in Irish autobiography and memoir with the spatial and temporal structures through which the self is habitually known and understood. There is no easy rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, even in those works that call upon comedy to relieve the troubling question of what it is to be Irish. John McGahern's country lanes in some ways hold secure the memory of a child happy in the presence of his

mother, and they guarantee, as well, an enduring image of Ireland. His *Memoir* seems to move, finally, towards reconciliation and fulfilment by returning us to those lanes in Co. Leitrim. From the outset, though, those leafy lanes are 'a maze . . . a green tunnel pierced by vivid pin-points of light' (p. 2), and what they seem to signify in the end is only a momentary security, a momentary magic. What Irish memoir brings home to us with more than usual intensity is the urgent need to converse with the dead and the impossibility of ever doing so: 'If we could walk together through those summer lanes, with their banks of wild flowers that "cast a spell", we probably would not be able to speak' (p. 272).

### Notes

- 1 John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber, 2005), p. 3. All further references will be given as page numbers in the text.
- 2 Hugo Hamilton, *The Speckled People* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), pp. 35–6. All further references will be given as page numbers in the text.
- 3 Blake Morrison, *Independent on Sunday*, 1 September 1996.
- 4 Edna Longley, *Fortnight*, November 1996.
- 5 Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, 3 vols (Cork: Field Day, 1991), vol. 3, pp. 383, 380.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 383, 380.
- 8 Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), p. 20. All further references will be given as page numbers in the text.
- 9 Seamus Deane, Review of Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, *London Review of Books*, 19 October 1995.
- 10 The words are by Padraic Colum. See Stephen Regan (ed.), *Irish Writing: An Anthology of Irish Writing in English 1798–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 395.
- 11 Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 32.
- 12 Deane, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. 3, p. 383.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 381.
- 14 Fredric Jameson, *Modernism and Imperialism* (Cork: Field Day, 1988), p. 18.
- 15 See Aidan Arrowsmith, 'Plastic Paddy: Negotiating Identity in Second-generation "Irish-English" Writing', *Irish Studies Review*, 8/1 (2000), pp. 35–43 and Liam Harte, '"Somewhere beyond England and Ireland": Narratives of "Home" in Second-generation Irish Autobiography', *Irish Studies Review*, 11/3 (2003), pp. 293–305.
- 16 Harte, p. 297.
- 17 John Walsh, *The Falling Angels* (London: Harper, 1999), p. 29. All further references will be given as page numbers in the text.
- 18 Harte, pp. 303–4.