



HAL
open science

Niamh Campbell, Sacred Weather. Atmospheric Essentialism in the Work of John McGahern

Sylvie Mikowski

► **To cite this version:**

Sylvie Mikowski. Niamh Campbell, Sacred Weather. Atmospheric Essentialism in the Work of John McGahern. *Etudes Irlandaises*, 2021, pp.175 - 178. 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.10980 . hal-04100276

HAL Id: hal-04100276

<https://hal.univ-reims.fr/hal-04100276>

Submitted on 22 May 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - ShareAlike| 4.0 International License



Études irlandaises

46-1 | 2021

Passer au crible les traces du passé : modèles, cadres
et métaphores

Niamh Campbell, *Sacred Weather. Atmospheric Essentialism in the Work of John McGahern*

Sylvie Mikowski



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/10980>

DOI: [10.4000/etudesirlandaises.10980](https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.10980)

ISSN: 2259-8863

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Caen

Printed version

Date of publication: 8 July 2021

Number of pages: 175-178

ISBN: 978-2-38185-030-6

ISSN: 0183-973X

Brought to you by Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne



Electronic reference

Sylvie Mikowski, "Niamh Campbell, *Sacred Weather. Atmospheric Essentialism in the Work of John McGahern*", *Études irlandaises* [Online], 46-1 | 2021, Online since 08 July 2021, connection on 17 May 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/10980> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.10980>



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

culture. This further highlights the need to accept the emergence of new cultural forms and the interweaving of “high” and “low” cultures – not so much as a way of “dumbing down” (p. 10) but as a need to accept their strong connection. Simpson’s final stance summarises what needs to be taken into account: “[Henry] Jenkins warns: ‘No one group can set the terms. No one group can control access and participation’ [Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York – London, New York University Press, 2006, p. 23]. As this timely volume engages in a closer interrogation of the interrelationship between Beckett’s work and pop culture, we as scholars and academics might do well to heed his words” (p. 242).

Megane MAZÉ

Niamh Campbell, *Sacred Weather. Atmospheric Essentialism in the Work of John McGahern*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2019, 224 p.

The number of books of criticism on the work of John McGahern could now approximate twenty, notwithstanding the numerous Master theses and PhD dissertations presented in universities around the world, which tells a lot about the canonical status reached by the novelist in his own country where he started out being considered “parochial”, then somehow outrageous, at the time when his second novel *The Dark* was censored and he lost his job as a primary school teacher. More recently, the trend in McGahern studies has been to unravel the numerous intertextual references which could be disclosed through his writings, or to retrace the influence of either Irish, English, French or Russian authors on the Leitrim novelist. Proust, Camus, Flaubert, Beckett, Tolstoy or even Jane Austen and Wordsworth have been thus called forth to recreate his imaginary library. Such is not at all what Niamh Campbell set out doing in this thought-provoking, ambitious, challenging, extremely sophisticated essay. Indeed one of her aims in adding up to the voluminous literature seems to have been to distinguish herself from the already well-established “traditions” of McGahern criticism, of which she offers throughout the essay a sort of meta-critical survey, listing the main authors of monographs written on McGahern over the last twenty years, and distributing good and bad points in the process, depending whether these authors do or do not cling to what she calls “the conservative interpretation” (p. 50) of McGahern’s writing, which she also links with a notion defined by Leo Bersani as “the culture of redemption” (p. 51). While engaging in a straightforward, yet honest, dialogue with previous McGahern critics, Campbell means to address, if not to redress, what she sees as a refusal by the state or the academic institutions, to acknowledge McGahern as an “immensely skilled and subtle writer of Irish realism” (p. 44), while taking stand with those who have limited the interpretations of his works to “kitsch”, or to ideology. Her critique of the body of McGahern criticism extends to the whole of Irish studies, in response to Conor Carville’s essay

The Ends of Ireland, questioning after him Irish subjectivity beyond the limits of identity politics (p. 7). If the readings of McGahern as a realist, social chronicler of de Valera's Ireland which characterised the earlier reception of the novels have in fact long been superseded by more sophisticated interpretations of the Irish writer as a modernist, sometimes putting his writings through the grinds of lacanian psychoanalysis, Campbell has deployed an even more up-to-date, far-reaching and far-reached theoretical arsenal, composed of Antonio Negri, Leo Bersani, Slavoj Žižek, Timothy Morton, among others, introducing new concepts to the range applied by her predecessors, such as *sinthome*, *jouissance*, *presence-in-absence*, *crise pléthorique*, *non-address*, notwithstanding the notion which gives its title to the book, "atmospheric essentialism", taken up later as "place-hood", "ambient poetics", or "poetics of peatsmoke", in imitation of Timothy Morton's book *The Poetics of Spice*. Atmospheric essentialism is declared to be a *sinthome* of Irish identity (p. 28), that is to say, if the present reviewer understands correctly, as what is not analysable, contrary to the symptom, which is a signifier demanding interpretation. But even though atmosphere, environment and landscape are said here to be interchangeable, the rest of the essay is very remote from any sort of ecocritical reading of McGahern, and the title may partly be thought to be deceptive.

Indeed, despite of, or alongside, the definition of McGahern's kind of writing as "ambient poetics", Campbell actually lays much emphasis on the image, stressed upon right from the introduction with a reference to Thomas Aquinas, and prolonged all through the essay by ruminations – to use one of Campbell's terms – on the image of Susan McGahern, or that of Francis McGahern. Mother and father are here taken for "figures for a strand of conflicted psychic and artistic symbolism" (p. 46), while other figures in McGahern's work – Elizabeth Reegan, Michael Moran – are described as "present-in-absence" (p. 87). The prospect of an ecocritical reception of McGahern is further postponed by the transformation in chapter 2 of the notion of "ambient poetics" into that of "the ambient text" even though the subchapter announcing this change avoids casting light on the difference, while embracing successively the presence of ekphrasis in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, the meaning of *Memoir's* original title *All Shall Be Well*, associated with Saint Teresa of Avila, or the role of voice and sounds in the same book, so that in the end Campbell feels the need to admit that "the theme of absorption [...] has not been made completely clear" (p. 75). Things become even tighter for the reader in the next subchapter which, leaving once more aside the notion of "ambient poetics", ventures to examine "otherness-as-such" – a phrase borrowed from Bersani – in *Rising Sun*, "throwtness" and the traces of Thomist aesthetic thought in McGahern, as well as the conceit of "beholder-denial" in the scene depicting Elizabeth Reegan bending her head over her sewing in *The Barracks*, or in the figure of Susan McGahern. Campbell's efforts to turn the evanescence of these images and the mystery that surrounds them into concepts is commendable, but to a certain extent one is left with the feeling that the words she uses only add one more layer of opacity to the subject she is attempting to reveal. The "ambient poetics" morph again to "ambient art" in chapter 3, in which the aim is to apply Campbell's "visual sensibility" to the opening scene of *The Dark*;

however, here Campbell deviates again from her main topic in order to take a stand against what she calls the “politics of aftermath”, or “journey of atonement”, namely the process by which critics, and more largely, public authorities, have distorted McGahern’s writings so as to find in them a source of redemption and atonement for the atrocious crimes of sexual abuse. Chapter 3 aligns old Mahoney in *The Dark* with other ogre-like father figures, based on McGahern’s own father Francis, an interpretation which I had already put forward in my own 1995 PhD dissertation when I discussed characters and their avatars. Chapter 4, entitled “Fascinating Francis: A Preposterous History”, is as good as what the title promises, as Campbell preposterously accumulates remarks on Pearse, Yeats, Stephen Dedalus, Lord Byron, Dracula as the backdrop of what she calls the “revised eikon” of Francis McGahern (p. 133). Her atmospheric creativity is given free rein in this collage, or precipitate of concepts and words thrown at the reader’s face as an injunction to be up to the standards of the epic defenderess:

[...] both the metaphysically dispersed or ambient matter of, variously, national spirit, sacred weather, miasma, bat sails, spectres, indigenous sublimity, symbolic traces and meteorological eroticism enjoin a collective metaphorical charge which underwrites national affinity with an apparent ontological autonomy, a degree of tactility, or of pleasure, only to leave us with quasi-substances afterwards. (p. 137)

So much for the *crise pléthorique*... There are also some dashing but perhaps perilous rapprochements, such as the one between “Francis the fascist” and Sylvia Plath’s use of “Daddy” as an emblem of National Socialism (p. 122), or between McGahern and Francis Bacon, particularly on account of the raw violence depicted in *The Dark*.

All along the book Campbell asserts her claim to innovation and singularity, flaunting her ambition to correct the wrongs she sees in Irish studies at large: “I have aimed at deconstructive contemplation, marshalling a number of new figures for rethinking Irish identity” (p. 44), “I propose a radical revision of the socio-historical meaning of *The Dark*” (p. 91), “I disagree with Garfitt’s suggestion” (p. 121). One of her claims is to propose a study which is not a rational, well-ordered, book-to-book analysis, and Campbell throws in numerous analyses which may seem to fall far from base: a digression on Sean Hillis’ *Irelantis*, a long one on Yeats, the Rising and the figure of Pádraig Pearse, on Alistair McLeod’s novel *No Great Mischief*, on Kevin Barry’s novel *Beatlebone* in the conclusion. As regards McLeod’s book, a novel which Campbell notes McGahern did not comment on, she invokes a kaleidoscopic range of references, tending to blur once again the reader’s clarity of vision, in the hope of moving towards “an engagement with what Terence Brown has posited as a ‘critically enabling’, and explicitly Irish, ‘interrogation of the self’ via a ‘Keatsian and Borgesian’ vision of Shakespeare” (p. 147). To sum up, we are supposed to grasp what Campbell means about McGahern through a reading of McLeod which reminds her of Terence Brown advocating the notion of identity such as Keats and Borgès saw it in Shakespeare.

The basis of the book being a PhD dissertation, it sometimes brings academic jargon to the limits of unreadability, a style which Campbell defines herself as

“associative and cumulative” (p. 46), and which is both dazzling and unnerving. Even though the author quotes Roland Barthes, the pleasure of the text is often elusive here, as the reader constantly stumbles upon neologisms and convoluted phrases. For example, speaking about the number of unwanted pregnancies Irish women had to bear with, Campbell contends that this culture “effectively subtended a derogatorily ethnicised association with overproduction first registered in Malthusianism” (p. 97). Such phrases as “sacred laterality” (p. 21), “extra-proscriptive” (p. 44), “a quantal mode of approach” (p. 51), “effetness” (p. 121), “objectal surfaces” (p. 140), “detrital staticity” (p. 154), “to alchemise” (p. 163) may be read as further evidence of the author’s desire to distinguish herself from the mainstream of Irish studies by an elitism which contradicts the proposed “radicality” of her readings and her anti-humanist stance. This somewhat exclusionary pose belies the affective power she rightfully attributes to McGahern’s writing, characterised by its deceitful and disarming simplicity. True, the ideas that Campbell proposes to discuss are extremely abstract and even evanescent, as misty and gaseous as ambient poetics themselves: there is a mystery in McGahern’s writing, and especially in the effect or affect that his writing calls upon in the reader’s mind – or unconscious – that all critics have tried to unveil and resorb, but so far have failed to capture, whatever the theories, concepts or neologisms they have recourse to, and which may in the end amount to what Campbell describes in her typical style as no more than “the residual materiality of post-ideological quasi-substances” (p. 163). Book upon book of criticism is written and published, leaving whole and non-resorbed the beauty, mystery and integrity of the work of art.

Sylvie MIKOWSKI

Gerald Dawe, *The Sound of the Shuttle: Essays on Cultural Belonging and Protestantism in Northern Ireland*, Newbridge, Irish Academic Press, 2020, xi-170 p.

The constitutional challenges brought about by the Brexit referendum and the subsequent focus on Northern Ireland and the Irish border have generated a renewal of interest in this corner of the United Kingdom. In this context, the publication of a collection of essays spanning a period from 1983 to 2019 by poet and Trinity College Dublin professor Gerald Dawe appears particularly timely. Several essays take the reader back to the days when, at the turn of the 1990s, Irish studies emerged as a critical field informed by post-colonial theory but also the revisionist reaction to it. These were the days when Edna Longley (who edited with Gerald Dawe in 1985 a collection of essays on “the Protestant imagination” entitled *Across a Roaring Hill*) was picking with the likes of Seamus Deane a historical and theoretical bone which, for all the illuminating points that were made at the time, has probably been picked dry by now. This should not be taken to deny Dawe’s