Journal of the Short Story in English
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

34 | Spring 2000
Notes on the Irish and Irish-North-American short story

Loss and Failure in *High Ground*

Maguy Pernot-Deschamps

OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/259
ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 March 2000
ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference
Maguy Pernot-Deschamps, « Loss and Failure in *High Ground* », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 34 | Spring 2000, Online since 24 July 2008, connection on 03 December 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/259

This text was automatically generated on 3 December 2020.

© All rights reserved

Loss and Failure in *High Ground*

Maguy Pernot-Deschamps

1 All of the stories in the collection *High Ground* were published in the 1980s but the Ireland they portray is that of the 40s and 50s, two or three decades after the founding of a new country, the Free State. The generation of men that took part in the struggle for independence did not get the republic they had hoped for but a semi-independent state with dominion status. After a bitter civil war between those who accepted the Free State and those who would never agree to anything but an independent republic, the country started to get on with the business of government, something they had little or no practice of.

2 In *High Ground*, the men that lived through the War of Independence and the Civil War are in their fifties and sixties, and their children are a new generation of young men and women who have had a very different life and share very little with their elders, either in their public or private lives. The old ideals of the earlier generation have all but crumbled-- the reality of the new Ireland has fallen far short of the dreams that inspired its creation and the young men and women, who have not experienced them at first hand, often feel adrift in a society that holds little appeal for them. The failure of the dreams of the previous generation has turned into a deep sense of loss for the children of the Free State and, later, the Republic.

3 First, in the public sphere, these young Irish men and women are deeply aware of the gap between the ideals entertained by their fathers in the early part of the century and the reality of the Ireland they know in the 40s and 50s. De Valera's "dream"--mentioned in "A Ballad" (28)--which was that of a happy, Irish-speaking rural Ireland, is belied by the reality of Dublin or the countryside. There are "backyards and dumps around Grafton Street" ("Parachutes," 22) and "plain ugly cottages" built by the government ("Parachutes," 28) in the Meath countryside for instance. Besides, emigration, particularly towards England, has become a scourge--"The countryside emptied towards Luton and London" ("Oldfashioned," 36). The new country has not come up to the expectations of its founders, particularly those who fought and, like the Sergeant in "Oldfashioned," still feel "proud" (45) of the part they played in the history of their country.

4 The general sense of failure is reflected in the institutions of the country, the very strongholds of public life set up by the first Free State government in the early 20s. All the representatives of the major institutions are a very pale reflection of those who set about governing the country a few decades before. The police force is either represented by gentle, harmless people like Guard Casey, whose sole interest in life is gossip--his "insatiable hunger for news" ("Oldfashioned," 40) --or by a Sergeant who wants to appear in control but only succeeds in making a fool of himself--"[The Sergeant] had been drinking after Mass, and had made a nuisance of himself at the practice" ("The Conversion of William Kirkwood," 127).

5 The Church, that other venerable institution, is uninspiring, to say the least, both outwardly and inwardly. As in "The Barracks," the buildings that stand in the countryside to bring the faithful together under the same roof for prayers and devotions are ugly--"The catholic church, hiding its stark ugliness amid the graveyard evergreens" ("Oldfashioned, 35) or "the church in all its huge, astonishing ugliness" ("Oldfashioned," 56). What is more, the priests that serve it too often smell of whiskey --"Canon Glynn... was fond of cards and whiskey" ("The Conversion of William Kirkwood," 129)--and are much more interested in ordinary, earthly pursuits, like "purebred shorthorns" ("The Conversion of William Kirkwood," 130) than in theological matters. Canon Glynn, for instance, is soon "worn out by his pupil's almost insatiable appetite for theological speculation" ("The Conversion of William Kirkwood," 129) when William Kirkwood visits him to receive instruction in the teachings of the Catholic Church.

6 Despite the fact that they seem to have retained little of the true spirit of the Christian Church, the priests are very powerful men who have complete authority over their flock, and in nothing is this better exemplified than in the paramount influence they have over the running of schools in Ireland. In effect, they are the ones who appoint all the teachers. Without their approval, no young recruit to the teaching profession can ever hope to join the staff of the school he/she has applied to, which suggests the failure of the principle of independence that guided the founding fathers. The appointing process itself is made ludicrous in "Crossing the Line," when all that is required from the young teacher is his unrestrained approval of the Archdeacon's porridge--"As long as you take to the stirabout" says the headmaster, "he'll see nothing much wrong with you" ("Crossing the Line," 82).

7 No wonder then that the educational system is uninspiring too, especially in the person of its teachers, all middle-aged and lacking the qualities that one normally expects from the men who are supposed to shine like beacons to the new generations of children. A number of their pupils have indeed done very well and gone to university thanks to new educational opportunities, but the old teachers are no examples at all. They are seen as uncultured--William Kirkwood is "struck" by "the absence of books in a schoolmaster's house" ("The Conversion of William Kirkwood," 134)--materialistic, like Master Kennedy, constantly after money, for whom "Teaching is a lousy, tiring old job" ("CL," 87), and given to drinking, like the old master in "*High Ground*" who tells his pupils to "Beware of the high stool" (100) but has regular drinking sessions at the local pub after hours.

8 To this already dismal picture of failure is added the lack of principles shown by the elected representatives of the nation. The politicians who run the country are neither particularly bright nor generous. Rather they are opportunists who have made their

way up the social ladder in a variety of clever, even unscrupulous ways, like Senator Reegan in *High Ground*, who "had come poor to the place" and whom no one had ever seen "work with shovel or with spade"(94), or like the Minister in "Bank Holiday," who got elected after he put " parallel bars on the back of a lorry [and] did handstands and somersaults before and after speeches" (151).

9 For the new generation therefore, the dream of the fathers has failed to materialize. They have inherited a country that is singularly lacking in stimulating, uplifting examples for the future. The very nature of the dream of the early days has been distorted by all those who were supposed to do all within their power to turn it into a reality. The failure of the dream is symbolized in a very poignant way by the remark made by the young teacher in "Crossing the Line" about Master Kennedy's plan to spend a holiday 'staying in the best hotels," drinking wine and dining on "prawns or smoked salmon, sole or lobster or sirloin or lamb" (92). What he says shows that he is keenly aware that the old dream has been lost--"It was a very different dream to the young priest's, cycling round Ireland with a copy of the "Rambles" all those years ago" (92).

10 Against this background of a modern, uninspiring young country, the few remaining members of the Protestant Ascendancy serve only to provide added gloom to the picture because of their general loss of status. The Sinclairs may still impress the local people with their genteel way of life and their Jaguar. They are nonetheless never to be completely accepted, remaining on the margins of the local community and likely to be violently opposed when they try to interfere, even from generous motives, in the village life, as when they suggest helping the Sergeant's son to get into a good school in England.

11 The Kirkwoods provide an even more striking illustration of the deterioration of the famous Big House in the decades following independence. The house is cold, damp and badly in need of repair and the estate has run wild. The owners, the last descendants of the proud Ascendancy families, are isolated creatures who are no longer well off and spend their time enjoying leisure activities, like watching the stars or beekeeping. Old Kirkwood, standing for hours 'staring directly into the flight path" of his dear bees (77) aptly conveys an image of decline for someone of his class. Like his son with the stars, all he has left of his family's former glory is purely personal and no longer connected to public life in the country. And even when William's isolation has come to an end, when he becomes a Roman Catholic and is planning to marry a local girl, the final impression is one of failure. His happiness is marred by the image of these two women, his servant and her daughter, having to leave the big house because of the arrival of the new wife--"two people who had been a great part of his life, who had done nothing themselves to deserve being driven out into a world they were hardly prepared for" ("The Conversion of William Kirkwood," 139).

12 Both the old order and the new order have therefore failed and the young generation, who have indeed had more opportunities in the field of education than their fathers, do not have the enthusiasm that might be expected from young people who are about to enter, or have just entered, the world of work and responsibilities. They naturally have their own longings--the narrator in *High Ground* feels that "a world of love and beauty, of vague gardens and dresses and laughter... seemed to be almost within reach. We would enter this world. We would make it true" (93)--but they are soon confronted with the disillusionment of the day-to-day reality of a job. Asked about teaching, the

narrator of *High Ground* replies, "I didn't dislike it. It was a job" (95), a sentiment echoed by the young teacher in the schoolyard in "Crossing the Line"--and also by the protagonist in The Leavetaking--when he says "sometimes I shivered at the premonition that days like this might be a great part of the rest of my life" (86).

13 These young people are not unreflective. They ask themselves questions about the meaning of their existence, like the protagonist in "Bank Holiday," "mulling over that old, useless chestnut, What is life?" (150) and waiting in vain for an answer, like the men and women in "Parachutes" who, in a very Beckettian way, are waiting for Halloran and wondering what on earth may be in the case he has lumbered them with. But they do not have ideals or models to look up to. They have lost the sense of purpose that drove their fathers. They drift from bar to bar but, more importantly, they drift like the "parachutes" across the doorway in the first story. The old ideals represented by the *High Ground* and the source of the Shannon in the title story (103) have escaped them and they are left with a dull sense of loss.

14 In the realm of private relationships, the young people of the Ireland of the 40s and 50s hardly fare any better, and often worse in certain circumstances. The two main sets of relationships presented in McGahern's collection are between fathers and sons, on the one hand, and between men and women on the other. For readers already familiar with the characterisation of the novel *The Dark*, the violent intensity of feeling between the Sergeant and his son in "Oldfashioned" and, even more strikingly, between the old farmer and his son in "Gold Watch" comes as no surprise and serves to reinforce the basic failure of understanding between the two generations of men in John McGahern's fiction. The relationship is fraught with resentment, misunderstanding and hatred.

15 The father in both stories is cast as a strict patriarchal figure, fossilized into a role he had taken on for himself on entering manhood at the time of the struggle for independence. Although he is aware of the limitations of the new country, he remains so full of himself and of his own importance as head of a family unit he is bent on dominating that he slowly becomes estranged from his own son, who feels powerless before his father's bouts of uncontrollable anger. The son tries to make some form of contact only to be fiercely rejected and even humiliated by his father who resents his intellectual abilities and years of studying, what the Sergeant in "Oldfashioned" calls "a woeful waste of fire and light" (42).

16 The father's violence and hatred can be explained by his basic failure to adapt to the new life in the very country he helped to create. He constantly sticks to the old models and adheres strictly to the rigid family division of the old days, when the patriarch and head of the family was God on earth to his dependents and demanded respect based on fear rather than filial love. With such a vision, he occasionally becomes a tyrant who cannot control himself when his authority is threatened. When the Sergeant in "Oldfashioned" hears about Colonel Sinclair's offer of help in the boy's studies, he is 'speechless with rage" (46) and later does not know "what to do with his rage" (47). In "Gold Watch," the narrator tells his girlfriend that his father had bouts of "fury" (108) directed at his children for no apparent reason.

17 The story "Gold Watch" conveys still more deeply the notion of authority, even authoritarianism, involved in the father-son relationship, since the watch, inherited by the father from his own father, comes to symbolize power and the inviolable strength of the traditions that are passed on from one generation to the next. When the gold watch falls and gets broken, the son reflects, "The watch had come to him from his

father. Through all the long years of childhood I had assumed that one day he would pass it on to me. Then all weakness would be gone. I would possess its power" (112). The breaking of the patriarchal watch becomes a sort of sacrilege threatening the integrity of the person who owned it and abused the power he had acquired with it. And so, when the son offers the father a new, modern watch, all the destructive forces hidden within the latter's breast are unleashed and a kind of almost tribal war ensues, culminating in the barrel of poison in which he dips the new watch. Since all the violence the father exerted with a hammer and a sledge was of no use--"he threw the sledge aside... the watch was still running" (117)--nothing will do but the "barrel of pure poison" (118), that is of pure hatred against the challenge to his authority.

18 In relation to his father's attitude, the son in "Oldfashioned" can be quite wary. When Colonel Sinclair offers to help him get into an English school, the boy is "careful not to dampen his father's enthusiasm by showing any of his own" (42) but he ends up disappointed and bitter--"A world had opened that evening; it was closing now like curtains being silently drawn" (50). In "Gold Watch," he still shows a form of respect for the age-old tradition and authority represented by his father but he is clearly aware that his regular visits home are a form of surrender, saying "it seemed less violent to come than to stay away" (115). But to the gold of power, symbolized by the watch, he presents the iron of resistance, of endurance, saying "And that phrase from the Bible is true that after enough suffering a kind of iron enters the soul" (108-9).

19 The determination to resist holds him in good stead until the iron of his soul is, in its turn, seriously undermined by an attack on his own past, the childhood years that made up the various threads of his identity, when he finds all the work in the hayfield done before his return to the farm. He had gone there every year in the haymaking season to try to hold on to his deep identity, buried in the fields, an atmosphere conveyed in a very sensual way with "the smell of diesel in the meadow, the blades of grass shivering as they fell, the long teeth of the raker kicking the the hay into rows..." (117). The "keen outrage" (115) he feels the last time on finding all the work done without him shows the weakness of his shield of iron. He finds himself rejected in something he held very dear and his fond memories of the haymaking season are now irreparably damaged. Not only has he failed with his father, he has also lost a cherished part of himself forever.

20 Not quite so destructive, and yet part of the same pattern of loss and failure, is the relationship between young men and women. The eternal quest for love is omnipresent but love itself is no longer automatically linked with the serious business of a respectable marriage within the community into which the young people were born. Most of them are educated, more mobile and more likely to go through a number of diverse experiences before they finally settle down, if indeed they ever do. McGahern presents love as an extremely complex reality, as in "Bank Holiday" where an affair has to be ended because of an impending marriage.

21 The quest is well and truly present, for instance in "Parachutes," where the narrator says of a love affair that he was "only too anxious to believe that it augured well" (20); or in "Gold Watch," where the narrator cautiously admits that he "had even waited for love" (106). But the young protagonists have lost the old certainties provided by their community; they are deeply aware of, and also inwardly disturbed by, the notion of love as both multi-faceted and illusory. Love for them takes many forms, ranging from the early days of a new passion--"for it was happiness such as I had never known"

("Gold Watch," 106)--to the apparently irrelevant talk between an old husband and wife--"had he not seen love in the person of his old mother reduced to noticing things about a farmyard?," says the narrator in "Bank Holiday" (152).

22 The loss of certainties about love goes hand in hand with the loss of traditional values, particularly with regard to marriage. The young male protagonists reject the idea of marriage, that ends up being nothing more than the constant repetition of a daily routine, what is called "bungalow bliss" (56) in "Oldfashioned." Married life, symbolized by the traditional wedding ring, holds very little appeal, for it is associated with a form of life that seems to have no direction or that goes round in circles. And yet, as soon as love seems to enter their lives, all the protagonists can think of is a proposal of marriage--as in "Like All Other men," "Perhaps we could be married?" he pressed blindly" (66) or in "Bank Holiday," where Patrick asks his newly-found girlfriend "if she would consider marrying him" (155). "Gold Watch" even contains a scene reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's Ernest, when the two protagonists go through a proper proposal, although they had agreed at the start to live together without thinking of marriage. When the young man says he hopes she'll marry him and not someone else, she replies "You haven't asked me" (109).

23 To all outward appearances, the love stories in "Gold Watch" or in "Bank Holiday" are a success and yet the words used by the narrator in "Bank Holiday" hardly augur well. Attracted to a new girl he has just met, Patrick wants to see her again, "not wanting to see this flow that was between them checked, though he knew to follow it was hardly wise" (144). Later, thinking of his new-found happiness, Patrick is poised between an irresistible urge to love and the almost equally irresistible awareness of the elusiveness of his feeling—"It was as if blank doors had slid back and he was being allowed again into the mystery of a perpetual morning, a morning without blemish. He knew it by now to be an old con trick of nature, and that it never failed..." (152). Amid the "extraordinary peace and loveliness in those first weeks together" ("Gold Watch," 105), is the germ of impending failure.

24 The readers who come to the end of the collection are therefore left with a bitter rather than bittersweet taste in their mouths. The universe inhabited by McGahern's protagonists in the various stories is openly mocked by the title of the book. In the Ireland of the 40s and 50s, both in the public and private spheres, ideals remain forever out of reach. The *High Ground* of the title story is both the unattainable ideal of a rejuvenated country and the impossible union of the minds in the very human emotion called love.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

McGahern, John. *High Ground*. London: Faber, 1985.

AUTHORS

MAGUY PERNOT-DESCHAMPS

Université de Bourgogne