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Writing along the line

JOHN KENNY

Eugene McCabe

Heaven Lies About Us

309pp. Jonathan Cape. £11.99.

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One of the most extravagantly used paradigms in Irish studies, particularly popular in the titles of related academic conferences, involves one conjugation or another of “border”. The paradigm may be a natural adjunct to Irish cultural debate, and is not always loosely interpreted, but its more indiscriminate applications frequently bypass the on-the-ground realities of land and life along the frontier between Northern Ireland and the Republic. One of Ireland’s few thoroughgoing border writers is generally thus bypassed. While Eugene McCabe’s drama and fiction, set variously in counties Leitrim, Fermanagh, Monaghan and Cavan, have dealt on both a practical and visceral level with the combined everyday and extraordinary actualities of the Irish borderlands, he has been granted a scant critical attention that is starkly at odds with his contextual importance.

Though born in Glasgow in 1930, McCabe has lived in Ireland since the 1940s, mainly at his family farm outside Clones in Monaghan; after launching a career as a playwright with the widely respected but controversial *King of the Castle* in 1964, his talent, ultimately better figured in his fiction, has been to allow the events, conversations, people and moods of his locale germinate slowly in his mind until they emerge organically rather than forcedly as completed stories. This process has often been mistaken for reluctant productivity. Even as the saleability of Irish fiction has expanded apace, and more and more Irish writers have become exponentially intent on getting the work out quickly, McCabe has remained laudably aloof of pace and trends. Other than some variable work for stage and screen, it was beginning to seem that his reputation would largely have to depend on his single novel, *Death and Nightingales* (1992), now rightly regarded as one of the terse masterpieces of Irish fiction. *Heaven Lies About Us*, however, in gathering together almost all McCabe’s other equally important but itinerant prose pieces, shows, despite the fallow publication periods of his thirty-year career in fiction, that a steadiness and integrity of vision has produced twelve stories that can now impressively cohere in a retrospective single volume.

The potential ragbag aspect of this new assemblage (prior incarnations include the collections *Heritage and Other Stories* (1978), *Christ in the Fields* (1993) and *Tales from the Poorhouse* (1999) as well as individual publications) is already solved by the end of the first and title story where a ferociously religious widow, mother of a young girl driven to destruction by sexual abuse, is left staring at the ruins of her grotto: “The marble face of the Virgin Mary did not respond to Mary Cantwell’s anguish. It continued to look down, smiling.” This is the corrective reality behind the fulminating religiosity of many of the subsequent stories: as McCabe’s epigraph from Camus suggests, it is a sin against life to so crave heaven that the “implacable grandeur” of the mundane is lost. In “Roma” a perfervid collector of holy pictures is so driven to distraction by thoughts of virginal beauty that he attacks the very girl he idolises; in

“The Orphan” and “The Mother”, two of four interrelated Famine stories, a daughter is chained for licentiousness, a baby and a daughter cruelly die, and, in the closing scenes of the book, a woman is left imploring the Virgin Mary to help her through the pain of memory in the madhouse.

At the centre of the collection is a trilogy of red-raw Troubles stories. Few fictionists, *in situ* or otherwise, have written on this area so relentlessly, compactly, and with such determined balance as McCabe. Worried that “Cancer”, with its central symbol of a British Army helicopter “clapping its way towards Armagh across the sour divide of fields and crooked ditches”, presented the Northern situation from the Republican side, McCabe wrote “Heritage”, about a doomed young member of the Ulster Defence Regiment, in order to present a distinctly Unionist side. Previously published as a novella, “Victims”, about an IRA hostage-taking, simultaneously presents both viewpoints.

Any worry that these stories may have lost topicality in face of a changed situation along the Border can be assuaged by McCabe’s equally resonant treatment, without any obvious political allegorising, of the primitive forces that can explode amidst all private and public lives. Whether due more to a general compositional philosophy or to the necessarily regulative force of their geo-political settings, all these stories are rooted in a comprehensive anti-pastoralism that will moodily impress even those readers unfamiliar with, or uninterested in, Irish border-writing. By the end of the collection, the title has assumed an initially unlikely double meaning: humans are generally vicious, anguished, degraded, and potentially unredeemable; it may be that heaven is lying about us.

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