

JOHN BRODERICK AND THE FRENCH CATHOLIC NOVEL

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A number of commentators have remarked on the fact that the Athlone critic and novelist John Broderick (1924-1989) was a Francophile. For example, here is Brian Fallon's observation: "He not only knew and loved French literature, he loved the French language itself and was one of the relatively few of his generation who spoke it well" ("Remembering Broderick" 16). He goes on to remark that Broderick got to know a number of French writers personally during the period he spent in Paris in the 1950s. His friendship with Julien Green was the most notable, although he stated in a few interviews that François Mauriac was the only literary influence of which he was aware. He described to Caroline Walsh in 1976 how he met the Nobel Laureate on one occasion in Paris when Mauriac was recovering from throat cancer, which rendered conversation between them difficult. At one stage, Broderick's ambition was to write about the area around Athlone with the same intensity as Mauriac wrote about his native Landes district of Bordeaux. Similarly, he felt there was great scope for an 'Irish Balzac' with the emergence of a strong middle class from the 1960s onwards in Ireland. All of this indicates his admiration for, and knowledge of, French literature and culture. This was not unusual among Irish intellectuals, as Brian Fallon observes: "France offered, in effect, an alternative to English domination or at least a corrective to it. France was republican while Great Britain was monarchist, and the fact that both had colonial empires was also conveniently overlooked in this Irish exaltation of France as the home of liberty, equality and fraternity" (*Age of Innocence* 124).

Another vital element in this close relationship underlined by Fallon was the fact that France was, or had been, "a Catholic country with a lively, even aggressive Catholic intellectual wing, a long and illustrious succession of Catholic writers from the middle ages" (*Age of Innocence* 124). This is the aspect that will be the main focus of this essay, the extent to which John Broderick actually succeeded in producing an Irish Catholic Novel, one that, while never capable of reaching the lofty heights achieved by François Mauriac, Georges Bernanos, and Julien Green, nevertheless demonstrated great merit.

The situation in relation to Roman Catholicism was very different in France and Ireland. There was a deep-seated enmity between anticlerical republicans and the Catholic Church in France since the time of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, a fact that prompted many Catholic writers to emphasise the mystical and the supernatural in their work. They were conscious of writing for a public that was, for the most part, indifferent to religion. As the 'Catholic Novel' began to assert itself in the opening decades of the twentieth century, however, the notion of writers being

apologists for the Catholic Church began to disturb many of those who were perceived to belong to this 'school.' As Malcolm Scott notes:

The term 'Catholic novelist,' which is the only one I can think of to embrace Barbey d'Aureville, Bloy, the later Huysmans, Mauriac, Bernanos, and Julien Green, has been blighted by unhelpful assumptions that it must refer to a novelist who puts his art to the service of the orthodox views of the Catholic Church and faith. (4)

Jacques Maritain, in *Art and Scholasticism*, states: "A Christian work would have the artist, as artist, free" (qtd. in Whitehouse 14). This is a rule of thumb that all novelists, irrespective of their religious allegiance, would do well to follow. The work of art is not about edification or instruction; it is never implicitly didactic, even though one often finds a moral behind what is being expressed. The French Catholic novelists were explorers rather than expounders of their religious beliefs, a philosophy John Broderick could never fully buy into, determined as he was to allow his opinions free rein in his fiction. As Patrick Murray points out: "The intrusive Broderick *persona* maintains a godlike control over his fictional proceedings, even to the extent of introducing moral reflections, aphorisms, and associated words of wisdom at appropriate – or inappropriate – intervals" ("Athlone's John Broderick" 24). The French Catholic novelists liked to delve into the dilemmas associated with faith, but they tended to do so while maintaining some degree of distance and objectivity in relation to their subject matter.

In Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Under Satan's Sun*, both of which were beautifully adapted for the screen by Bresson, priests are placed at the centre of the narrative. These men experience the pain of God's absence and consider themselves lamentable failures. Yet there is something about them that others find fascinating, this vibrant interiority that attracts those who are experiencing pain in their own lives. The dramas of Catholicism are acted out in a spectacular fashion in Bernanos' novels. God and Satan vie for people's souls, and wrong decisions could lead to eternal damnation. Despite their low self-esteem, despite their apparent inadequacies on many levels, Bernanos' priest-characters have many saintly qualities. The curé d'Ambricourt's last words, "Tout est grâce" ('Grace is everywhere'), offer a summary of his life of self-sacrifice and implacable faith in the face of the many trials that come his way.

With Mauriac, Catholicism is much more subtly interwoven through the text. His main preoccupation is with the psychological probing of his characters. Although a man of deep personal faith, Mauriac's novels were merciless in their exposition of avarice and hypocrisy among the wealthy landowning class and religion to which he belonged, a trait he shares with Broderick. There is a tinge of lasciviousness and evil palpable in some of Mauriac's fictional creations, which caused French Catholics to question how one of their own could write novels that portrayed sin in such an attractive light.

The work of Bernanos and Mauriac demonstrates the extent to which Catholicism has the correct ingredients to produce powerful literature. In admitting the possibility

of the supernatural, of mystery, a writer has at his disposal some of the essential drama of life. Equally, in the wrong hands, it can have disastrous effects. For example, when a Catholic novelist closes his own eyes and tries to see with the eyes of the Church, the result can only be injurious from an artistic point of view. This is one trap that Broderick could be accused of falling into. His pronouncements on the Church were often scathing, especially when it came to the change of the language of the Mass from Latin to the vernacular after Vatican II. This anger makes itself felt on numerous occasions in his fiction, as if the writer could not refrain from venting his spleen through the utterances of his characters. Mauriac once stated in an interview on the television programme *Une heure avec ...* : "I am a novelist and I am a Catholic – and therein lies the conflict. I believe, in fact, that it is fortunate for a novelist to be a Catholic, but I am quite sure that it is very dangerous for a Catholic to be a novelist" (qtd. in Barré 344). Here the problem is presented in terms of a conflict between the role of a novelist who must deal with the miseries of the flesh and that of the Catholic who must not lead his readers into moral danger.

At this stage, I wonder if we are any closer to deciding what exactly the ingredients of the 'Catholic Novel' are. It is undoubtedly far easier to say what it is not than to define what it is. Albert Sonnenfeld, in *Crossroads: Essays on the Catholic Novelists* (1980), provides the most satisfactory definition of the genre that I have encountered: "It is a novel written by a Catholic, using Catholicism as its informing mythopoeic structure or generative symbolic system, and where the principal and decisive issue is the salvation or damnation of the hero or heroine" (vii).

This definition would hold true for many of the novels of Bernanos and Mauriac, to which I have already alluded. I am not sure if the same could be said of John Broderick's fiction. The socio-religious atmosphere in Ireland may have something to do with why a 'Catholic Novel' never really emerged in a country where the majority religion enjoyed a privileged position for well over a century, possibly two. I maintain that Catholicism was too intimately linked with a sense of Irishness for any critical intellectual assessment or objective literary representation of it to take place. Perhaps many of our writers would have been more Catholic if their compatriots had been less so. In an interview with Julia Carlson, John McGahern put it thus:

The amazing thing is that it's a Catholic country and that nearly all the writers are not Catholics. They're lapsed Catholics. I think that the Church in Ireland was peculiarly anti-intellectual, say, compared to the French Church. People like Mauriac or Bloy could have no place here. [...] Nobody actually took any time to understand what to be Irish was. There was this slogan and fanaticism and a lot of emotion, but there wasn't any clear idea except what you were against: you were against sexuality; you were against the English. (qtd. in Carlson 63)

I am in agreement with McGahern's comment about the anti-intellectual aspect of the Church in Ireland, but this was largely as a result of a general lack of knowledge of things theological among both the clergy and the laity. A largely uneducated laity was happy enough to allow the clergy to do their thinking for them. What happened when

writers and intellectuals began to put forward opinions that challenged official Church teaching was a stand-off that usually ended up badly for the writer – witness McGahern losing his job as a primary school teacher after the banning of his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965. Colum Kenny described the situation in the following manner:

Throughout the decades following Independence, the new State had among its citizens vibrant artists and interesting writers. However, a stifling blend of nationalism and conservative Catholicism made it increasingly difficult for many to express themselves freely or to work in ways they believed to be moral and necessary. (229)

Broderick balked on a number of occasions at the ‘pathological’ manner in which Irish people reacted to homosexuality, an attitude that could also be extended to heterosexual relationships that did not enjoy the sanction of marriage. He undoubtedly suffered as a result of his inability to reconcile his homosexual leanings with his deep religious faith. The recent controversial biography of Mauriac by Jean-Luc Barré claims that the Nobel Laureate struggled throughout his life to hide his true sexual longings, which were homosexual in nature. When one reads his novels carefully with their twisted characters, who are never comfortable with their sexuality, and the sun-drenched, erotically-charged landscapes, it is evident that they disclose a lot about their author. As Mauriac once remarked: “Fiction alone does not lie; it shines a light into a writer’s soul that reveals things that he does not even recognise in himself” (qtd. in Barré 359). Broderick equally imbued his work with many of his own obsessions, which involved him in controversy on a number of occasions, as well as bringing down on his head the wrath of the Catholic Establishment. He continued nevertheless to broach a number of taboo subjects in his novels. While disenchanted with certain decisions made by the Catholic Church, he nevertheless acknowledged the possibilities of salvation afforded by prayer and the sacraments. He never definitively left the Church; rather, he remained a dissident voice from within.

Having attempted to outline the difficulties dealing with Catholicism can pose for writers, whether they be French or Irish, I now propose to discuss briefly a couple of Broderick’s novels in order to ascertain the extent to which they could be considered ‘Catholic,’ in the sense that this term is understood by Sonnenfeld in the definition already supplied. At appropriate moments, I will insert some references to works by François Mauriac to illustrate similarities and differences between the two writers.

Broderick’s first novel, *The Pilgrimage* (1961), is his best in my view. It has a labyrinthine plot for such a short book. It recounts how Julia Glynn, the wife of an invalided wealthy builder in a midlands town, engages in sexual adventures with various partners, most notably her husband’s nephew Jim, a doctor, and the pious manservant, Stephen. Julia’s husband Michael, several years her senior, has been crippled with arthritis since shortly after their marriage and is encouraged by a local priest, Fr Victor, to undertake a trip to Lourdes, where he may get a cure. Nobody really believes that the miracle will take place, but they indulge the invalid by having Masses said for his special intention. Julia, largely indifferent towards the pilgrimage, contin-

ues to indulge her sexual desire whenever and wherever an appropriate opportunity presents itself. An easy conscience makes her extra-marital activities even more pleasurable. To her way of thinking, she is not very different from other ostensibly 'religious' people of her acquaintance: "It never struck her as incongruous that the life most of her friends lived was very far removed from the religious sentiments they professed" (19).

In a Mauriac novel, Julia would in all likelihood have been the recipient of grace, as Mauriac had a predilection for lost souls. *The Pilgrimage* is narrated in the main through her eyes. She discovers her husband's homosexual inclinations during their honeymoon when he becomes besotted with a young German man. The infrequent acts of intercourse between the couple reveal his brutality and suppressed homoerotic preferences. In fact, there is something prurient about the way men in this novel regard sex. This is Julia's assessment of Stephen: "There was something odd and perverted about his lovemaking; it was completely anonymous, and try as she might she could never make him kiss her. His lovemaking reminded her very much of Michael's: it had the same brutal off-handedness, and same complete lack of tenderness" (113-114).

Because of the Puritanism that was bred into their bones, Irishmen, in Julia's estimation, "would [n]ever be able to dissociate lovemaking from the furtive, the sordid, the unclean" (171). The last sentence of *The Pilgrimage* caused a major controversy: "In this way they set off on their pilgrimage, from which a week later Michael returned completely cured" (191). It may well have been this line more than the daring descriptions of Julia's sexual escapades that caused the banning of the novel in Ireland. It was considered blasphemous that a sinner like Michael should be miraculously cured. In his introduction to the French version of the novel, reproduced in the Lilliput edition, Julien Green expressed his admiration for an "extraordinarily gripping book" (1) and asked why anyone should see blasphemy in the miraculous cure of a sinner. "Since when has healing been exclusively available to the just?" (2), he asks. Broderick's introduction of a concept like grace in the form of a miracle shows him to be close to some of the preoccupations of the French Catholic novelists. But what is different in this instance is that the beneficiary, Michael, remains a rather peripheral figure throughout.

The approach adopted by Broderick in *The Pilgrimage* differs from that employed by Mauriac in one of his most famous works, *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927). Both have what could be termed flawed females as their main characters. Whereas Julia married Michael solely for his money and social position, Thérèse had genuine respect for her husband, Bernard, before they got married. It is true that one of the main attractions he held in her eyes was the fact that the properties of the two families seemed destined to be joined. In addition, there was also the pleasing thought that by marrying Bernard she would become even closer to his sister and her best friend, Anne de la Trave. The relationship between these two women reveals a strong physi-

cal attraction, a fact that possibly leads to Thérèse viewing the relationship with her husband as less than wholesome: “Everything before my marriage now seems to have taken on an aura of purity – by way of contrast, of course, with the ineradicable dirtying of the marriage” (37). Rarely, if ever, are human sexual relations perceived in a positive light by Mauriac. There always seems to be some guilt associated with physical desire, a feeling that the flesh is a source of sinfulness. Mauriac explores the huge transformation in Thérèse that eventually leads to her systematically attempting to poison Bernard, whom she comes to view as hypocritical in his religious observance and totally subservient to social conventions. Mauriac’s decision in the Preface to place himself squarely on the side of a woman who is a potential murderess caused a few ripples among Catholic opinion. The novelist claimed, however, that he had no interest in depicting virtuous characters, people who wear their “hearts on their sleeves.” In his view, such people have no story to tell, whereas “those hearts that are buried, the ones deeply intermingled with the mud of the flesh – those hearts are the ones I know” (25).

What makes Mauriac’s position as a Catholic novelist even more precarious is the manner in which, at a crucial stage in the novel, he suggests that Thérèse may be the beneficiary of grace. As she contemplates taking a lethal dose of arsenic, a maid rushes into her room to announce that her Aunt Clara, possibly the only person ever to love her unconditionally, has died. Could this be an example of a substitution of souls? Clara dies so that Thérèse may live? Some time after this episode, when Bernard decides the time is right, the heroine is released from what had become a prison in Argelouse to go to live in Paris. On the terrace of a sidewalk café in the company of her husband, she imagines “a whole life of meditation, of perfecting herself in the Argelouse silence, an interior journey in search of God” (119). The moment passes, but the very fact that she had such a thought is indicative of Mauriac’s belief in the possibility of redemption, even for what may seem to be the most wretched of sinners. Had Julia Glynn experienced some spiritual revelation in *The Pilgrimage*, had she suddenly become open to the possibility of divine love, we might be able to speak of it as a ‘Catholic Novel.’ As it stands, however, she remains unchanged, and the novel, while undoubtedly a promising literary debut by Broderick, is not really what we could term a ‘Catholic Novel’ in a strict sense of the term.

The Waking of Willie Ryan (1965) comes a bit closer. This is an excellent exploration of the intricate machinations of a well-to-do provincial Irish community. When faced with a potential scandal concerning a homosexual relationship between a family member, Willie, and an older man, Roger Dillon, whose family are well-connected, the Ryans, in collusion with the local priest, Fr Mannix, decide to have Willie committed to a mental asylum. After twenty-five years in this institution, he returns to the community in the hope of living out his last days in peace. Roger has passed away in the intervening period, but the other main actors of the drama are still in place: Willie’s sister-in-law Mary, who claimed that he had behaved threateningly towards her, his older brother Michael, who had sexually abused him as a child, and, finally,

the local priest, Fr Mannix. The use of religion as a means of social control is a strong motif in the novel. Mary Ryan tells her son Chris, who cannot understand why his uncle was committed, that Willie was no better than a heathen, something that justifies his incarceration in her view: "He has never been to Mass or confession since he was a young man, and he didn't change his ways in the asylum" (47). This same woman abhors the Church's new-found interest in the working classes and points out the incongruity of a priest like Fr Mannix driving around in a Mercedes, when a Morris Minor would be more in his line.

In order to avoid a scandal, it is decided that a Mass will be organised in Chris's bungalow where Willie has installed himself since his return. Before the Mass, the prodigal son is to go to confession so as to be in a position to receive Communion, which will provide concrete evidence of his religious rehabilitation. Willie is prepared to play along with the charade, but his friend Halloran, an employee of the asylum, is infuriated at the antics of the family: "They can't bear to have anybody around who doesn't toe the line, publicly at any rate. If you had died in the asylum without a priest, it would have been put down to madness, and everybody's conscience would have been clear. But that won't work any more" (136-137).

The best scenes in *The Waking of Willie Ryan* are undoubtedly the exchanges between Willie and Fr Mannix. The priest is aware that Willie only agrees to receive Holy Communion as a fob to the family. The two discuss his affair with Roger, and it transpires that the priest was oblivious of the fact that the two continued to meet in secret even after Roger had ostensibly returned to the Catholic fold. In fairness to Broderick, he resists the temptation to demonise the priest, who is shown to have a more sincere approach to matters of faith than the majority of his parishioners. For all that he lives at a remove from the official Church, it is clear that Willie is sensitive to the rhythms of his Catholic upbringing. It is the superficial observance of their religion by the rest of the family, their parody of the Christian life, that prevents him from opening up to the possibility of faith. In this regard, his comment to Fr Mannix is revealing: "Perhaps you only recognise what you call 'infernal grace' when you're told about it. After all, it's easy to preach to the converted, even if they only pretend to be converted" (199). Later on in their exchanges, the priest is horrified at the thought of Willie committing sacrilege by receiving Holy Communion while in a state of mortal sin: "It's God you have insulted," he says. "You may mock me – maybe I deserve it – but you won't mock Him" (198).

At the end of the novel, Fr Mannix is left feeling uncertain about Roger's apparent conversion and upset at his inability to lead Willie to some sort of accommodation with God. Mary's friend, Kathleen Carroll, remarks how strangely the priest behaves at Willie's grave, like someone who is drunk. His agitation is in stark contrast to the relief of Willie's family, who happily resume their lives of comfort after the funeral. Equilibrium has been restored, the spectre cast on them by Willie's reappearance now having been dissipated.

The situation of Willie is left in some doubt. Did he reach some sort of resolution at the close of the novel? The visit from Roger's sister, Mrs Whittaker, the day before his death, does bring him some respite. She tells him that Roger worried hugely about whether Willie could ever forgive him for what happened between them. Then, in a revealing comment, she says: "Sometimes good can come out of evil" (234). These words bring comfort to Willie. The chapter ends with the following lines: "When she was gone the room was very silent. The fire had settled down; the sick man seemed hardly to breathe; outside the falling snow muffled the earth. And the old weep quietly" (236).

Willie's final thoughts are couched in mystery, but we do get the impression from the silence and the falling snow that a cleansing of sorts has taken place. As with Mauriac, the target of Broderick's bile was not the sinner but the conformists who make a mockery of religion. Patrick Murray noted: "Those who knew him merely by repute were probably surprised at his strong emphasis on the importance to him of his Catholic faith and of Catholic moral teaching" ("Athlone's John Broderick" 38) This may have come to him from his knowledge of French Catholic literature that demonstrates how 'âmes égarées' or the lost souls are the ones most cherished by God. In a review of Mauriac's *Mémoires intérieures*, Broderick took issue with the French writer for his decision to stop writing fiction (qtd. in Kingston, *Stimulus of Sin* 9-11). Mauriac wanted to save his soul and figured that writing novels was not the way to do it. We read in *Le roman* (1928), which was in a sense his literary manifesto:

A Catholic writer advances along a narrow crest between two chasms: he cannot be a cause of scandal and yet he cannot lie either; he must not excite the desires of the flesh and yet he must also beware of the danger of giving a false picture of life. Which is the greater danger: making young people dream in an aberrant manner or inspiring disgust in them for Christ and his Church? (80)

At a certain stage, therefore, Mauriac decided that novel-writing was endangering his salvation. He replied to Julien Green when the latter asked him why he omitted so much from his work: "I am not just responsible for myself. I have a family" (qtd. in Barré 13), a family he risked hurting by revealing the dark side of his nature. Broderick rightly detected that Mauriac's imagination was stimulated more by sin than by virtue.

Throughout his long and not always illustrious career, Broderick showed a great interest in the Catholic faith. He contemplated becoming a priest after his mother's death in 1974 and he always remained attracted to the smells and bells of his early religious experience, the beauty of the Tridentine Mass, the power of church music when properly performed, the theatrical side of it all. Madeline Kingston remarks that it is somewhat clichéd to associate Broderick with the French Catholic novelists as a result of his admiration for Mauriac and his friendship with Green. She points out how Mauriac, Green, and Bernanos "were preoccupied with the portrayal of individual struggles with faith, individual concern with the state of the soul, consciousness of guilt, failure and unworthiness" (*Something in the Head* 121). I agree with this assessment, which complies with Sonnenfeld's statement that the Catholic novel's main

focus is “the salvation or damnation of the hero or heroine.” I detect places in Broderick’s writing where this preoccupation is prominent also. That said, I think his concerns as a novelist were focused more on the social than they were on the individual. He preferred satire to inner probing – it is here that the Balzacian influence can be seen. Then there were the obvious differences between the social fabric in France and Ireland at the time when the writers produced their best work. Kingston captures this aspect well:

The Catholic Church in republican, secular France was very different from the Catholic Church of Holy Ireland: its novelists were originally defending the Church against the overt onslaughts of the state and later against the tide of scepticism and scientific advance. But if, as has been suggested, Broderick in writing this work was attempting to reinvent himself as a French-style catholic novelist, he came close to success. (*Something in the Head* 122)

I can accept this thesis also. The French Catholic novelists of the early twentieth century were acutely aware that they were writing for a public that was at best indifferent to spiritual concerns, lukewarm about religious matters. The writers therefore sought to depict characters whose overarching concern is to ensure eternal salvation. The Irish, on the other hand, rather than emphasising the metaphysical, tended to concentrate on the hypocrisy and intolerance of those who used religion for their own purposes. As Fintan O’Toole points out in *The Ex-Isle of Erin*: “Catholicism in Ireland has been a matter of public identity more than of private faith. For most of its history, the Republic of Ireland was essentially a Catholic State, one in which the limits of law and behaviour were set by Catholic orthodoxy and the beliefs of the Catholic bishops” (15). This sort of deference is in short supply in contemporary Ireland, where in fact the pronouncements of bishops are now often met with derision and disdain.

The French have long tended to rely more on individual conscience and questioning when it comes to pronouncements from the hierarchy. The two countries therefore have distinctively different histories in relation to the Catholic Church. So, while one can say with a fair degree of certainty that Broderick was influenced by the likes of Mauriac and Green, it should be stated that many factors contributed to him stopping short of producing an Irish equivalent of the French Catholic novel. The former nun, Aunt Kate, in *The Fugitives* (1962), sums up the Irish situation very well when she says: “Only the really religious people turn against religion in this country. The ones that are at the top and bottom of every religious organisation are the ones that have no religion at all” (151).

The Athlone writer did turn against religion for a while, but in the end it was one of the few comforts left to him as, exiled in Bath, he faced into the uncertain terrain of eternity.

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