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Julien Green – a Life Full of Paradoxes

EAMON MAHER

What is it about the writer Julien Green that makes it so difficult to situate him? Is it the fact that he was born of American parents in Paris in 1900? Or is it because he was an Episcopalian who converted to Catholicism in his early teens? Or could it be the nostalgia he always felt for the American South, which his mother instilled in him from an early age with her stories about the American Civil War? Finally, could it arise from the conflict that has always existed between Green's sexual preferences (he is a homosexual) and his deeply spiritual nature? He spans the entire twentieth century, has lived through two horrendous World Wars, experienced the emergence of existentialist angst and the fear that God had abandoned his people.

When reading the novels of Julien Green (born 1900) one is always conscious of how different they are from those of Bernanos and Mauriac of whom he was a contemporary. This is not due merely to the fact that many of them are set in America but mainly because a strange atmosphere darkens his fictional universe, one similar to that found in Dostoyevsky. His characters are victims of a pitiless destiny, fated to be frustrated in their quest for love and understanding. As so often happens in Dostoyevsky, many of Green's characters can find no escape from their problems except through violence or madness. They are disturbing manifestations of the author's own obsessions. In his *Journal* he once wrote:

I write out of an urgent need to forget, to plunge myself into a fictional world. And what do I find in this fictional world? My own problems which have been greatly heightened, to the point where they attain terrifying proportions.

What is most significant about these lines is the admission that Green's inner thoughts are best encapsulated in his fictional writings. He often makes the point that his real *Journal* is to be found in his novels. In his excellent study of Green's work, Michael

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O'Dwyer makes the point that Green has more in common with Hawthorne and Poe than he does with any French writer.¹ We would add the name of Graham Greene, another convert to Catholicism, to this list. With Graham Greene we sometimes get the impression that sinners become saints – witness Scobie and the famous whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory*. Towards the latter half of Julien Green's work, a similar outlook is adopted.

DICKENSIAN GLOOM

To give the reader an opportunity to sample some of the qualities of Green's work we will briefly deal with his first novel, *Avarice House* (in French, *Mont-Cinère*) which was published by Plon in 1926 and compare it briefly to two of his later novels, *Moïra* (1950) and *Each Man in his Darkness* (*Chaque homme dans sa nuit*, 1960), which is widely considered to be a novel of conversion. A brief analysis will allow us to see the evolution that took place in Green's approach to spiritual matters between 1926 and 1960.

The story of *Avarice House* is situated in America and its theme is miserliness. Mrs Fletcher, on the death of her husband, Stephen, is left with a daughter, Emily, whom she never really wanted and the responsibility to run *Avarice House* on a purse string. However, her preoccupation with spending as little money as possible becomes an obsession. Every means of cutting down on expenses is exploited. She forces her teenage daughter to get rid of the maid and to take over many of her duties. She lights fires only when absolutely necessary. The cold interior of *Avarice House* symbolises the lack of love between the family members. The narrator notes the gulf which separates Mrs Fletcher from her daughter:

She had never wanted the child, and had looked upon her as an intruder who only increased the household expenses; but her early animosity had at length given way to indifference.²

The arrival of Mrs Elliot, Mrs Fletcher's mother, heightens the tension. For this woman is more than a match for her daughter and sees the extent to which she sacrifices everything, even Emily's health and education, to her greed. Mrs Elliot and Emily become

1. Michael O'Dwyer, *Julien Green. A Critical Study*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1997. There is an obvious rich vein to be mined in the similarities between Green and these two American writers but it will not be our preoccupation in this article.

2. *Avarice House*. Translated from the French by Marshall Best, London, Quartet Books, 1991, p. 70.

allies against Mrs. Fletcher until a minor stroke renders the elderly lady an invalid. Emily becomes obsessed in her turn with the possessions of Avarice House and dreams of the day when it will all belong to her. She spies on her mother who, she suspects, is selling off items which would eventually form part of her inheritance. The novel is claustrophobic in its stifling atmosphere. The women are on their guard against each other and are constantly on the look out for signs of weakness.

Religion is almost totally absent – the Fletchers rarely go to Church. Like many of Green's characters, they are Protestants, but Protestants without faith. When the Methodist minister of Glencoe, Mr Sedgwick, comes to visit Avarice House Mrs Fletcher is greatly upset. The request that she make a contribution towards the upkeep of her church is strongly resisted. Emily is delighted to witness her mother's discomfiture and is fascinated at the same time with the middle-aged minister. She seeks to get close to him, writes him love letters that she subsequently tears up and slips into her Bible. Frustrated at every turn, deprived of love, Emily takes the drastic decision to marry Frank Stephens, a poor neighbour who has the merit, she believes, of being strong enough to impose his will on her mother. The plan falls asunder when she enters a room to hear Frank telling Laura, his daughter from his first marriage:

– All this belongs to us ... You and I are going to live here together all our lives, here in this house with all these fine things. (*Avarice House*, p. 354)

This is the final straw for the young heroine: she throws herself at her husband's young baby and grips it by the throat. Frank has to forcibly prevent her from strangling the child. Seeing all her hopes of love and understanding in ruins and realising that she will never be in full control of Avarice House, she sets it on fire and dies amidst the flames.

This first novel received a positive response from the French critics. It is a very dark account of hopeless desperation. Emily has no outlet for her positive desires. Abandoned at every turn by her mother, rejected by the minister, weakened by the death of her grandmother, she felt that she had no option but to turn to avarice and hate in order to attain some sort of revenge for a most unhappy existence.

Roger Bichelberger makes the pertinent point that the greed

which dominates the characters' lives in this novel is a reflection of the frustrated carnal desire that Green was experiencing at the time.³ There is no outlet for love, all is trapped in a cold egoism. The fire which ravages the house at the end of the novel is the expression of a repressed passion. Emily seeks out God but sees around her numerous signs of his absence; she believes him to be indifferent to her plight. Her mother only prays when she feels threatened, like when there is a likelihood that she will have to pay out money for a doctor or for firewood.

The gloomy atmosphere never lifts in this first period of Green's writings. In the other novels which appear in the 1920s (*Adrienne Mesurat*, *Léviathan*), this despair is heightened. Green had not yet succeeded in reconciling his homosexuality and his religious convictions. With *Moïra*, we see the beginnings of some sort of resolution of the conflict between the spirit and the flesh.

FLESH AND SPIRIT

Moïra is undoubtedly Green's finest novel. In it we have the superb description of how a young Protestant, Joseph Day, leaves his home in a remote mountain area to study in a university. The autobiographical elements are clear in this novel. Joseph's voyage of self-discovery is very similar to that of the young Green who went to study in the university of Virginia as a young man. Day is a religious fanatic who has very little in common with the activities or interests of the other students. He wishes to study Greek in order to read the Bible in the original, sees sin at every turn and is particularly puritanical when it comes to sexual morality. Small wonder then that he is christened the 'Exterminating Angel' by another student, Killigrew. He is attracted to Praileau, an aloof figure with whom he quarrels when he feels the latter is poking fun at him about his red hair. The fight becomes very violent as Joseph is unknowingly trying to purge the passion which fills his whole being: 'A sudden, mad joy filled him at his own strength and he felt some mysterious hunger in him being satisfied.'⁴

Afterwards, Praileau makes the prophetic comment that there is a murderer lurking in Joseph. Indeed, anyone who is as unaware of the passionate side of his nature as Joseph is, anyone as fanatical in

3. Roger Bichelberger, *Julien Green ou le combat avec Dieu*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Metz, 1978, p. 99.

4. *Moïra*, translated from the French by Denise Folliot, Quartet Books, 1985, p. 27.

his religious convictions, has to find an outlet for his tensions. He is attracted to Praileau but will not admit it to himself. When Moïra (in Greek, 'destiny'), the stepdaughter of his landlady, Mrs Dare, comes home on a visit, Joseph is forced to face up to his true character.

Killigrew told Joseph that the difference between him and the other students was that they gave in to their instincts. Joseph was quick to add: 'Their bestial instincts.' (*Moïra*, p. 81) What Joseph fails to realise is that there is a beast lurking within each of us which no amount of religious asceticism or denial will ever eradicate. He comes from a violent heredity; his father was blinded in a quarrel about his mother. He is also a very sensual person who feels so uncomfortable at sleeping in what had been Moïra's bed that he opts for the safety of the floor in order to avoid bad thoughts. David Laird, a quiet-spoken man who is studying to become a minister, is the one person to whom Joseph can speak freely. In an outburst which occurs shortly before his violent crime he declares to David:

– Your love for God is peaceful, but I am mad for God. I can only love violently, because I am a passionate man. That is why I am more in danger of losing grace and why, in a way, I am nearer hell than you will ever be. (*Moïra*, p. 193)

He has attained some degree of self-knowledge at this point but he has yet to fully understand to what dangers his passionate nature exposes him. 'We shall burn, David, we shall burn in an eternity of joy' (*Moïra*, p. 194), he exclaims hours before Moïra enters his room as part of a prank organised by Killigrew and MacAllister who wish to see Joseph exposed to 'what the Romans called *lupa*, a beast perpetually famished.' (*Moïra*, p. 163) Joseph resists the advances of the she-wolf initially and it is only when, resigned to defeat, she is about to leave the room that he takes her in his arms: 'In the half-light she saw Joseph's eyes shining like the eyes of no other man she had ever seen, and she was suddenly filled with terror.' (*Moïra*, p. 209)

After they make love, Joseph falls asleep. When he awakens to find the evidence of his sin beside him, he smothers Moïra. He cannot bear to look on this woman who has revealed the bestial side of his nature, and now becomes a murderer. Extremes are what best characterise him.

The dramatic treatment of the age-old struggle between the flesh and the spirit gives this novel a powerful force. There is much of

Green in the character of Joseph. He too was the religious fanatic who wrote in the *Pamphlet contre les catholiques de France* in 1924:

All Catholicism is suspect if it doesn't upturn the life of anyone practising it, if it doesn't mark him out in the eyes of the world, if it doesn't overwhelm him, if each day it doesn't make his life a renewed passion, if it isn't odious to the flesh, if it isn't unbearable.⁵

The *Pamphlet*, Green had subsequently admitted, was written by someone who was dejected at the thought that he would never be a saint. It contains all the ardour and fervour of the convert, the exigency of the zealot. In Praileau, also, we have the fictional representation of the great love of Green's life, Mark, whom he met while studying in Virginia. This love was never openly declared or physically consummated, just as Joseph will leave unsaid his true feelings towards Praileau. The optimistic note of the novel is found towards the end when Praileau offers to help Joseph to escape. The latter agrees to this proposal initially but later decides to return to face his punishment. He has been humbled by his experience and is in many ways a more attractive figure at the end of the novel than he was at the beginning. There is much optimism in the last lines that describe Joseph moving to meet a stranger in the half-light. There are doubts with regard to the hero's destiny just as there are shadows on the street as he prepares to meet his fate.

HUMBLE GRACE

Each Man in his Darkness (1960) introduces us to the charismatic figure of Wilfred Ingram, a devout Catholic who is also a womaniser. The novel is set in America once more but it is a more modern setting than either *Avarice House*, which is Dickensian in its atmosphere, or *Moïra*. Wilfred, while being a sinner, is more evangelical than Joseph Day. People who come in contact with him sense a spiritual dimension that they envy. The hero knows how far removed he is from the image people have created of him and he would feel far freer were he not so aware of the sinfulness of his nature. There is a powerful scene at the beginning of the novel when he goes to see his dissolute uncle, Horace, who, like Wilfred, is a Catholic who has sinned a lot. Wilfred observes with fear this replica of himself who is preparing to die. The old man needs

5. *Pamphlet contre les catholiques de France*, Plon, 1924, p. 68.

reassurance but his nephew feels inadequate to the task: 'I cannot cure you,' Wilfred exclaims, 'It would take a saint to do that and I'm not a saint.'⁶ Despite his protestations his uncle retorts: 'Yes, you are! ... Right now you're like a saint. We all are at one moment or another of our lives.' (*Each Man in his Darkness*, p. 64)

The question of whether or not Wilfred is a saint is a delicate one. Is Graham Greene's whisky-priest a saint? He too has sinned a great deal but possesses enough humility to accept his faults and deeply regret them. Julien Green gives us a glimpse in the character of Wilfred of a man who attains a degree of conversion through his suffering. He is plagued with guilt:

He kept a rosary in his pocket, but when he went to town to misbehave he always left it at home in a drawer, so that the little crucifix saw nothing. (*Each Man in his Darkness*, p. 44)

But his awareness of sin does not prevent him from engaging in illicit sexual activity. He makes love to women, confesses his sins and then resumes his philandering. His real predicament occurs when he meets a distant cousin, Phoebé, with whom he falls in love. Many obstacles are placed in his path. The first one is the fact that she is married and so he risks not only his own soul, but also hers, if they consummate their passion. And then there is her purity, which James Knight, her husband, points out to Wilfred:

– There's something untouched in her. She is undefiled. Sin would make her lose it, but sin is unknown to her. She is not like us. If there's someone in the world I believe in, it's she. (*Each Man in his Darkness*, p. 288)

Wilfred realises that he is gambling his own and her salvation because Phoebé's love for him is deep and unconditional. To abuse this would be to sin grievously in his eyes. And yet he cannot give her up. Enter Max, a strange character who follows Wilfred home from church one day and speaks to him about religion. Max is attracted to Wilfred and frustrated by the latter's insensibility to his sexual advances. In a moment of desperation, Wilfred goes to visit his disturbed friend and is shot by him. The hero's final gesture is to forgive Max – the ultimate Christian gesture. His drama thus seems to reach a peaceful resolution, which is highly unusual in Green. James Knight is convinced that Wilfred has entered a type of

6. *Each Man in his Darkness*, translated by Anne Green, Quartet Books, 1990, p. 63.

mystical peace. He notes that never has he previously seen such 'an expression of happiness on any face as that which lit up Wilfred's'. And he adds: '... he was watching us from afar, from a region of light' (*Each Man in his Darkness*, p. 346)

Clearly there is an optimistic attitude to sin, salvation and death that is new in Green. Wilfred, a sinner, is saved. The pessimism of his first novel, the violence of *Moïra*, have given way to a hopeful climax. Wilfred ends up by experiencing first hand the peace he was unconsciously instrumental in securing for his uncle Horace. His goodness finally overcomes his lustfulness.

So what has this brief sketch of Green's writings revealed? Obviously the evolution from the first novel to *Each Man in his Darkness* has been significant. Gone are the despair and the doubts, the inability to escape from an implacable destiny. The God we encounter in the latter novel is a much more forgiving and proactive force than in *Avarice House*. He is also far more present to his creatures, more caring about their destiny. *Moïra* has the force and passion of a Shakespearian tragedy with its hero, Joseph Day, setting in motion the train of events which will lead to his downfall. It has positive moments but the conclusion is shrouded in the darkness as he walks towards his unknown destiny. *Each Man in his Darkness* has an obvious optimism in its very title.⁷

Green's work is at times a denunciation of the world and of existence – it announces the theme of 'nausea' so prevalent in Sartre. Exile, solitude, suffocation, suffering, there are all to be seen in the novels of this American who was brought up in France, in this convert to Catholicism who was plagued by his unworthiness in the face of God. For anyone with an interest in the links between literature and spirituality Julien Green is an indispensable reference. His life and his works are studies of the perennial struggle between good and evil, between grace and free will, which preoccupies the mind of every thinking individual. In addition, Green had to try to come to terms with his genetic homosexuality which was at war with his innate yearning for purity. Through his writings he explores the depths of his sinfulness and eventually he seems to find acceptance of his duality. Maybe that is his major achievement as a man and a writer.

7. Critics like Michael O'Dwyer note the importance of the unfinished title of the novel: 'Each man in his darkness goes towards his light.' This conveys a positive message to the reader.