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## Sex and Religion in a Midlands Town

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# Sex and Religion in a Midlands Town

EAMON MAHER

My first encounter with the Irish novelist, John Broderick (1927-1989), occurred, oddly enough, when I was reading Julien Green's *Journal*. In it he refers in animated terms to a trip he made to Ireland in the company of his friend, John Broderick.

It is not surprising that two people of similar outlooks should have become friends, especially as Broderick spent a good deal of time in Paris, where he made the acquaintance of luminaries of the calibre of Ernest Hemingway, Gore Vidal, François Mauriac and, of course, Green. The Irishman, who, as well as writing novels, also dabbled in travel features and was a literary critic at *The Irish Times*, had huge admiration for the French literary tradition. He even went as far as to say in an interview that Mauriac was 'the only [literary] influence of which I am conscious.'<sup>1</sup>

The link to Julien Green would appear to me to be more pronounced, particularly in light of their homosexual similarities and the conflict that can be seen in their works between the spirit and the flesh. Both were religious men who found it painful to come to terms with the impossibility of reconciling their sexual preferences with their Catholic convictions. At least the American-born Green was able to write more freely about sexual matters in his adopted France, whereas Broderick's first novel, *The Pilgrimage* (1961), was banned by the Censorship Board in Ireland, which had also seen fit to ban, among other famous works, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Broderick greatly resented the Irish society that supported and cultivated censorship and he identified it with 'the isolationism and xenophobia of Irish nationalism, the puritanism and authoritarianism of the Irish Catholic Church and the striving for respectability of the Irish middle classes.'<sup>2</sup> There you

1. *The Irish Times*, 1 June, 1989.

2. In Julia Carson, editor, *Banned in Ireland. Censorship and the Irish Writer*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1990, p.17.

have it – Irish nationalism, a controlling Church and emerging middle class all combining to stifle creative thinking.

#### CONSERVATIVE FORCES

The antipathy to the middle class, who grew out of the ancestral Irish peasantry and began to flourish in Ireland after Independence, recurs as a constant theme. Although, like Mauriac, Broderick was himself a member of this group, he never missed an opportunity to castigate the greed and hypocrisy which characterised some of its members. He also saw the Catholic Church as just another element of the bourgeoisie and thus felt justified in criticising her new triumphalism and her constrictive attitude to moral issues. After the establishment of the Free State with the end of British rule in the twenty-six counties, Irish society became more puritanical, as was later illustrated by some aspects of de Valera's 1937 Constitution which, in the opinion of Maurice Harmon, was 'characterised not by bold affirmations of individual liberties, but by cautious qualifications of and restrictions upon just about every freedom it granted. [It] mirrored the new bourgeois mind.'<sup>3</sup>

Living in a state which he saw as dominated by an oppressive clergy and a conservative middle-class, both of whom were pathologically opposed to homosexuality, it is understandable that Broderick chose to spend much time abroad, mainly in England and France. He is in many ways a European writer with a European outlook, though he consistently bases his novels in Ireland just as James Joyce had done. His native Athlone, where the family bakery was located, forms the backdrop for most of the novels, which are mainly set in a midlands garrison town beside a river, on the border between the East and the West. The atmosphere of Brinsley MacNamara's *Valley of the Squinting Windows* (1918) is fermenting in this setting. In Broderick's second novel, *The Fugitives*, his main character, Lily, returns home after a few years spent in London. As soon as she steps off the train, she is struck by the oppressive ambience of the place;

She found it hard to remember what it was like to live in this town. The certainty, the nullity, the watchfulness, the serpentine relationships of people who knew each other too well: the ultimate

3. *The Irish Novel in Our Time*, Patrick Rafroidi and Maurice Harmon, editors, Lille, PUL, 1976, p. 51.

choice between hypocrisy and complete acceptance of the written and unwritten code.<sup>4</sup>

As is true of many writers, Broderick's themes are constant: the Jansenistic attitude to sexuality among Irish people, the snobbery of the new middle class and their manic desire to climb the social ladder, the dominance of the Catholic Church in matters ranging from politics to agriculture, from economics to morality. These are his themes and he is bitter and angry when tackling them.

Here I have decided to confine myself to the author's treatment of sex and religion because, in my opinion, this is where Broderick's major achievement as a novelist lies. His caricature of the middle classes is too often transparent and didactic and the excessive intervention of the omniscient and inartistic narrator only serves to damage the moral integrity of his texts.

When dealing with sex and religion, however, Broderick can be perceptive and it is interesting to observe how his characters, who nearly all choose at least an external observance of Catholic practices, attempt to reconcile the urgings of the flesh with their religious beliefs – without much success, I hasten to add.

#### WHAT WOMEN WANT

In *The Pilgrimage*, we see in Julia Glynn a prototype of many of the author's future female protagonists. Married to Michael, a retired building contractor who is crippled, Julia seeks sexual gratification wherever she can find it. After her husband becomes an invalid, she resumes her pre-marital affair with Jim, her spouse's nephew. The sexual encounters between these two are feverish and sometimes even brutal. Little genuine affection is apparent in their couplings. Julia seems to possess an insatiable sexual urge and in this regard she closely resembles Marie Fogarty, the heroine of what is undoubtedly Broderick's best-known (if not his most accomplished) novel, *An Apology for Roses*. Marie enters into an affair with the local curate, Fr Tom Moran, whom, in spite of his sexual ineptitude, she continues to use (or abuse) '... because his large well-endowed body excited her; a body perfectly fashioned for the intimacies which stirred her imagination, filling her senses with a primitive phallic longing.'<sup>5</sup>

4. *The Fugitives*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, p. 6.

5. *An Apology for Roses*, London: Calder and Boyars, 1973, p. 20.

Broderick's description of sex-starved women is not balanced. Irish men were renowned in the 50s and 60s for repressing their sexual desires. It was unheard of to speak so openly of women actively encouraging sexual advances from men, and to refer to affairs with priests was especially dangerous from the point of view of the Censorship Board of the time.

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Perhaps Julien Green's portrayal of Moira, his most famous female character, who, we are told, 'is what the Romans called lupa, a beast perpetually famished', influenced Broderick in his portrayal of women. (We can't say for sure.) Green could never see male-female relations with anything other than a jaundiced eye, because of his difficulty in accepting his own sexuality. Broderick is certainly very explicit in his descriptions of sex and depicts many women who seek their sexual pleasure from any sort of male, as long as his body is suitable. I take it that women of this type actually existed in Ireland in the 60s but I wonder were they as commonplace as Broderick seems to believe. In artistic terms, his approach has to be questioned in this regard. As a homosexual, female sexuality as an area of everyday life was possibly foreign to his experience.

Let's return to the case of Julia Glynn. When she is abandoned by Jim, on his engagement to the daughter of a wealthy businessman, she becomes involved with her husband's manservant, Stephen, whom the reader suspects of having bisexual tendencies and whose relationship with his master is, at best, ambivalent. Julia is aware of her new partner's incapacity to have any type of normal sexual relationship with her:

She doubted if Stephen, who, she had no doubt, loved her in his own fashion, would ever be able to dissociate lovemaking from the furtive, the sordid and the unclean. The puritanism which was bred in their bones, and encouraged in their youth by every possible outside pleasure, was never entirely eradicated.<sup>6</sup>

This is the type of social commentary that is the stuff of Balzac and

6. *The Pilgrimage*, p. 171.

it has the flavour of a writer with a keen sense of what he's attempting to say. Some Irishmen today still retain a strong puritanical streak because they have been conditioned to view sex as sordid, dirty and sinful. This is far less pronounced in young Irish people but it exists nonetheless. Broderick's younger female characters don't suffer from this repressed attitude but their unbridled promiscuity leads them to the conclusion that the only ultimate fate that awaits them is aloneness.

There are other types of women portrayed by Broderick also. For example, Agnes Fogarty, Marie's mother, shrinks at the thought of sexual contact with her husband. She is at the other end of the sexual spectrum from her daughter:

She closed her eyes again, shutting out the Sacred Heart, as her memory recalled the first terrible years of marriage when, a frigid woman, she had discovered with horror the insatiable appetite of her husband. He was little better than an animal, worse in fact since animals did not have souls, and could not be held responsible for their filth.<sup>7</sup>

Note the way that, for Agnes, sex and religion are set in opposition to one another. When forced to even contemplate the sex act, she has to shut out the image of the Sacred Heart. Intercourse is reduced to an animalistic ritual to which she is obliged to submit but from which she remains detached. Here I am struck by the similarity between Agnes' reaction and that of François Mauriac's heroine, Thérèse Desqueyroux, who gives this graphic description of the sexual act:

Nothing is so severing as the frenzy that seizes upon our partner in the act. I always saw Bernard [her husband] as a man who charged head-down at pleasure, while I lay like a corpse, motionless, as though fearing that, at the slightest gesture on my part, this madman, this epileptic, might strangle me.<sup>8</sup>

The distaste of both women towards their husbands' sexual advances is apparent. Broderick's admiration for Mauriac could be due, in part, to the opinion they both hold that the flesh is essentially sinful and that it constantly endangers eternal salvation. There are very few, if any, happy couples in Broderick's novels, and

7. *An Apology for Roses*, p. 52.

8. François Mauriac, *Thérèse*, Penguin Modern Classics, Methuen, 1972, p. 35.

very little love. (At the end of *An Apology for Roses*, there is the possibility of a fulfilled life awaiting Marie and her husband-to-be, Brian Langley, but this is far from certain.)

#### PRIESTS

The priests we encounter are either stereotypes – like Fr Victor in *The Pilgrimage*, whose weekly visits to the Glynn household are characterised by over-indulgence in food and drink – or manipulative – like Fr Mannix (*The Waking of Willie Ryan*), who is a major mover in the plan to have Willie committed to a mental asylum although there is obviously nothing wrong with him apart from the fact that he has fallen in love with another man. Faith and spirituality have only a small role to play in the lives of these priests. Fr Victor indulges Michael's desire to be cured in Lourdes but he doesn't appear to believe that such a miracle will occur. He is also blind to events in the Glynn household and he frequently remarks to Michael what a fervent Catholic Stephen is. Everything is judged on externals. The old heretic, Aunt Kate, says in *The Fugitives*:

– Only the really religious people turn against religion in this country. The ones that are at the top and bottom of every religious organization are the ones who have no religion at all.<sup>9</sup>

Fr Tom Moran entered the seminary in Maynooth straight from secondary school and received a very inadequate preparation there for the struggles that lay ahead of him in a parish. He didn't entertain intellectual or philosophical doubts with regard to the priesthood, but rather saw it as a means of social and economic advancement. Some trace of such an attitude would not have been unknown among the Irish diocesan clergy of the time. When Brian Langley confronts Fr Moran on the issue of the affair between the priest and Marie, he is struck by the aura of authority that surrounds this man: '... he represented in his cloth a terrible antique power, mute and mysterious; the long, lingering shadow of Rome.'<sup>10</sup> In the Ireland of the 1950s and 60s, this 'shadow of Rome' was a very long shadow indeed. Pitting yourself against the Catholic Church often led to being ostracised and isolated. It was not something to be undertaken lightly.

When one happened to be an artist, as Broderick was, committed

9. *The Fugitives*, p. 151.

10. *An Apology for Roses*, p. 79.

to giving a realistic representation of the human condition, the likelihood of conflict with the Church was even more pronounced. Taboo subjects like extra-marital sex, affairs between women and priests, and homosexuality were unlikely to escape a Censorship Board that was strongly influenced by the same Church. Broderick was fortunate to enjoy financial security, which allowed him to travel and not to worry about how his books sold. He was a self-assured character which meant that he cared very little about what people said about his books. It also helped him to be outspoken on his special antipathies – a luxury few could afford.

#### A LOVE DARING TO SPEAK ITS NAME

I will conclude with a short analysis of *The Waking of Willie Ryan*, which brings together his twin themes of sex and religion. The novel deals with the reaction of a rural middle-class family to the scandal that one of their number has been engaged in a homosexual relationship with a widower. Willie is interned in a mental asylum in order to hide this affront to the family honour. He escapes from the asylum after twenty-five years and returns home with the intention of gaining revenge. His sister-in-law and the local priest, Fr Mannix, were the main agents in his committal to the madhouse. His nephew, Chris, had never been told the full truth about what happened all those years ago and he quickly realises, as does the doctor who examines him, that Willie is far from being mentally ill. Mrs Ryan chastises her son for his innocence:

– Willie seems to have made quite an impression on you. He was always good at getting round people. His sort usually are.<sup>11</sup>

The inference is clear: Willie is a disreputable 'sort', an undesirable. Seeing that she has not convinced her son, Mrs Ryan mentions Willie's neglect of his religious duties, as if his agnosticism somehow justified his treatment by the family. In the end, the Ryans agree that they will accept the return of the prodigal son as long as he agrees to admit his sinfulness. With this in mind, Fr Mannix, the confessor of Roger, Willie's former lover, is asked to say a Mass in Chris' bungalow. Willie is expected to go to confession and to receive Communion to prove his rehabilitation.

Broderick's most severe criticism is reserved for Fr Mannix who is just a pawn in the intrigues of Mrs Ryan and who places social

11. *The Waking of Willie Ryan*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965, p. 37.

respectability ahead of spiritual authenticity. He visits Willie on different occasions before the Mass-day to try and ascertain the full extent of his loss of faith. 'Are you still a complete pagan, or are you just sunk in apathy?' he asks Willie.<sup>12</sup> Willie knows that the priest is trying to prove something to himself, but he is resolved not to make his task any easier. He receives Communion at the family Mass and is left alone subsequently by the Ryans. But he feels it to be imperative for himself that Fr Mannix should know the full truth about what occurred between himself and Roger. The critical encounter takes place shortly before Willie's death. The priest sees that there is going to be no conversion *in extremis*, that Willie had merely been putting on a show to get the family off his back. He realises, however, that the old man has no fear of death, and that intrigues and worries him at the same time. Willie reveals the full extent of his error to the priest:

– Roger never gave up what you like to call 'vice'. If it's of any interest to you I never wanted it, not with him anyway. It was he who – how would you put it? – seduced me. Yes, that's how you'd put it. I hated it; but I did it because I loved him.<sup>13</sup>

Such a portrayal of homosexual love was very daring for the Ireland of the 1960s. The family, in this once more similar to many of bourgeois families depicted in Mauriac's novels, are concerned primarily with appearances. Marginals like Willie disturb their equilibrium and make them feel uncomfortable. But the complicity of the Church in the unjust claustration of a man who has done nothing worse than to fall in love, is, in many ways, even more reprehensible. Fr Mannix, driving around in his Mercedes, lacks any of the spiritual attributes of Graham Greene's whiskey priest (*The Power and the Glory*, 1940) who, in spite of all his shortcomings and sinfulness, knows what it is to be humble and to love others. He returns to the country from which he has escaped, knowing that he faces almost certain death, because he has been told that a hardened criminal is in need of his priestly ministry. No such sacrifices are made by Fr Mannix. As portrayed by Broderick, Mannix is part of a social hierarchy which is opposed to any breaches of a narrow moral code. He cannot see the man behind the mask of the sinner. He is lacking in both discernment and integrity

12. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159.

I have dwelt briefly on the treatment of religion and sex in Broderick's novels. I don't wish to put this man forward as an accomplished novelist because, as many critics have already pointed out,<sup>14</sup> his writing does not possess anything like the poetry of John McGahern or the ruthless detachment of Brian Moore even when the latter is describing the awful solitude and suffering that are the main ingredients of *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1955).

And yet there is something in his writings that appeals to me, a certain image of the Ireland of my youth perhaps (I too was brought up in a midlands town), or his courage in addressing homosexuality in such a bold manner, his rejection of masks and social conformity, his laying bare of certain abuses within the Irish Church, then, unlike now, a powerful force in everyday life. He probably owes more to the French tradition of protest than to any Irish influence and that may be an added attraction for me.

Whatever his merits or weaknesses, I do not think he should be ignored and I believe him to possess some good insights into the problems that have long haunted us in this country when it comes to the conflict between sex and religion. That his vision was blurred by his experience of repressive attitudes to homosexuality when he developed his views on the Church and Irish society in pre-Vatican II Ireland, cannot be doubted. Thus it is that his Ireland is an exaggerated and simplistically puritanical island. But his blurred vision did not blind him to some of the foibles inherent in the Ireland of his time: hypocritical priests, mendacious men, sex-starved women and frigid wives. What he saw he coloured with his own special sheen of Irish authenticity. Therein lie the validity and extravagance of what is best in his novels.

14. Michael Paul Gallagher notes: 'Broderick is not a subtle or delicate psychologist. Starkness and shrillness are his elements.' And he adds later: 'The quality of this writing ... is self-concerned, didactic, manipulative. The excessive presence of an interpreting voice does not only mistrust the tale but also the reader.' ('The Novels of John Broderick', in *The Irish Novel in Our Time*, *op. cit.*, p. 237, p. 241 )

Very few critical articles have been published on Broderick. And whatever articles do exist are rarely complimentary.