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John Broderick: Irish novelist in the European tradition



The author senses a growing appreciation of the work of a writer who, although an 'outsider', was unafraid to challenge hypocrisy in every sphere of Irish life.

EAMON MAHER

Most readers of *The Month* will have never heard of the Athlone novelist, John Broderick (1924-1989), and yet he is the author of some thirteen novels, several critical and travel articles in *The Irish Times* and someone who deserves more critical recognition than he has attracted to date. His first novel, *The Pilgrimage* (1961), elicited the type of praise that Julien Green, the French-born writer of American extraction, normally only lavished on deceased classical writers. Green and Broderick were friends — the former speaks glowingly of a visit to Athlone in the 1950s in his *Journal* — but this fact alone does not explain the genuine enthusiasm Broderick's first novel aroused in him. In the Preface to the French translation of *The Pilgrimage*, Green notes:

It is an extraordinarily captivating book. I acknowledge, however, that it might have the capacity to shock certain readers. In it we see religion and vice interwoven, even though the narrator always maintains an extremely serious tone. We meet an inadequate clergy and lay people whose sole preoccupation is to avoid Hell... If I were a critic, I would write about this book.¹



Photo by P.J. Murray

As I said, such praise was unusual from the first foreigner to be elected to the Académie Française and one of the leading figures in French twentieth century letters. Green's silence about any of Broderick's subsequent works probably demonstrates a decline in the standard of the latter's writings after this promising start. Green's enthusiasm, however, was not shared by the Irish Literary Censorship Board which saw fit to ban *The Pilgrimage* because of its containing 'material with the potential to corrupt'. It is difficult now to see anything unduly offensive to public morality in *The Pilgrimage*, almost four decades later. Irish society has evolved greatly in the intervening period. The Catholic Church is no longer as powerful a force, our entry into Europe and improved communications have broadened our views on morality and there is no longer the same close identification of nationalism and Catholicism. Contraception has been legalised, as has divorce, and homosexuality decriminalised. One is left to wonder how Broderick would have fared in this new ambience.

His homosexuality has been fairly well documented, but it would be wrong to think

that his sexual preferences placed him in the avant-garde category because Broderick was fiercely conservative in religious matters and especially in the reverence he displayed towards the Eucharist. He disliked the changes wrought by Vatican II and, as Patrick Murray points out, he often began his diatribes on the developments in the Catholic Church with the comment: 'Before the Mass was abolished'!² It is clear, then, that there were many paradoxes and much pain in the life of this man. Like his friend, Julien Green, his sexuality and his spirituality were placed in opposition to one another in a classical confrontation of the spirit and the flesh. His devotion to his mother bordered on reverence and he must have suffered greatly at the premature death of his father (when he was only three) and the remarriage of Mrs Broderick to the manager of the family bakery ten years later. The Freudian interpretations of the effects of this perceived abandon by his mother are too obvious to dwell on in any detail in this article. It is sufficient to note that Broderick carried with him throughout his life a tortured aspect that betrayed his inner turmoil.

This explains to some extent the vehemence with which he set about attacking hypocrisy in all its guises. In a television interview on RTE with Patrick Gallagher, shortly before he moved to Bath in the 1980s, Broderick admitted: 'I've been a hypocrite for years'. He explained this by saying that he went to Mass on Sundays mainly in order to please his mother and because he knew that if he didn't go, it could adversely affect the family business. He was hurt by the banning of *The Pilgrimage*, which was a well-constructed and promising first novel. The only slightly *risqué* elements in this book were the subtle hints with regard to the homosexuality of some of the characters and the extramarital affairs in which the main female protagonist, Julia Glynn, engages. These two elements were enough to involve the censor. Julia Glynn is married to a man several years her senior who is crippled with arthritis. During their honeymoon Julia has reason to suspect her husband's homosexuality in the intense relationship he engages in with a German. (She finds correspondence from the latter when tidying away some of her husband's things years later.) Happy with the freedom being married to a rich builder affords her, Julia, as soon as her husband becomes incapacitated, renews her sexual relationship

with her husband's nephew, Jim, a doctor, who comes once a week to tend to his uncle. The departure of Stephen, the manservant who is secretly in love with Julia, to drive Fr Victor, another weekly visitor to the invalid, to the local monastery is the signal for Julia and Jim to make love hurriedly and in a manner that is almost impersonal.

Her comfortable existence gets upset when she begins receiving anonymous letters which describe in lurid detail her relationship with Jim. The novel takes on the heightened drama and tension of a detective yarn as we begin to wonder who is responsible for these letters. In the end, Julia discovers that it is Stephen, almost mad with jealousy, who is her tormentor. At this stage she has already entered into a sexual relationship with the manservant. Julia is aware of Stephen's incapacity to have any type of normal healthy 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.³

Broderick admitted that François Mauriac was the only literary influence of which he was aware⁴ and certainly there are similarities in the way the two depict the hypocritical materialistic characteristics of the middle class to which they both belonged. There is also a Jansenistic distrust of the flesh evident in their novels. The quote above is very insightful into a certain race of Irishmen who had a strongly puritanical streak, seeing sex as sordid and sinful. This is an attitude that is not nearly as prevalent among the young Irish people of today who have probably gone as far in the other direction, in that they see very little connection between sexual concourse and sin. In fact, the whole idea of sin has become very blurred in Ireland and it is very rarely indeed that you hear priests or lay people making explicit reference to it. It is not for me to say whether this is a positive or negative development. What I can say, however, is that the majority of people living in the Ireland of the 1960s knew about, and had a genuine fear of, sin and eternal damnation. In this context I think it is appropriate to



refer to the experiences of an Irish Redemptorist priest, Fr Tony Flannery, who noted in a recent publication that people of his generation were encouraged to see the body as bad, the source of all the troublesome passions:

We were taught to think badly of ourselves. Instead of focusing on the goodness of God, which is where all Christian teaching should begin, we were first told of our own sinfulness. And the emphasis on sexual sin (...) led us to be ill at ease with our own bodies.⁵

Broderick frequently evokes the strong reservations and residue of guilt of his characters with regard to sex. They find it well nigh impossible to reconcile the two. The problem, from a literary standpoint, however, is that Broderick makes his feelings all too apparent to his readers and so ruins all pretence of objectivity. In general he fails to adequately disguise his hurt and alienation. Too often he feels compelled to spell things out for his reader. As Michael Paul Gallagher, one of the few critics to write on Broderick, points out:

The tendency to become not simply an unJamesian intrusive narrator but a downright domineering narrator is a major pitfall in Broderick's approach to fiction.⁶

Writers 'suspect'

This approach can be explained to a certain extent by Broderick's painful experience of Irish provincial life and of the narrow-minded and vindictive nature of its inhabitants. Many Irish writers before him had chosen exile as a means of escaping from a cultural milieu which attempted to stifle all artistic endeavour and creativity — Joyce is the main figure that comes to mind in this respect. He chose exile as a means of nourishing his art and he revelled in writing about Ireland from his self-imposed banishment. Many others followed his example. More than in any other country, perhaps, the writer in Ireland was suspect, especially when living in a Church-dominated society which liked to do its thinking for the people and which did not tolerate opposition to its authority. The tension became all the more intolerable when the artist chose to delve into aspects of the human condition that were seen to be the domain of the Church — particularly the whole area of sexuality. In Broderick's case, the suspicion of his writings was magnified by his homosexuality, a subject which he dealt with openly in his fiction but which he declined to dwell on publicly in real life. Like his friend Julien Green, he was a very spiritual man who found it impossible to reconcile his religious convictions with the urgings of the flesh. He remarked once in an interview:

I think the Irish are pathological about homo-sexuality. That was one of the reasons why I chose it as the theme for my books because it had never been done before.⁷

Having been born into a wealthy Athlone family who owned the local bakery, Broderick was afforded the luxury of travelling abroad, where he encountered a far more enlightened attitude to sex and religion. He particularly liked the freedom of Paris, where he made the acquaintance of such literary luminaries as Samuel Beckett, Gore Vidal, Ernest Hemingway, as well as Mauriac and Green. Paris attracted artists from all over the world and Broderick marvelled at how different this cosmopolitan world was from Brinsley MacNamara's *Valley of the Squinting Windows* (1918), which captured in a succinct manner rural Ireland at the turn of the century. Broderick greatly resented that Irish society he associated 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'.⁸ There you have it — Irish nationalism, a controlling Church and emerging middle class all combining to stifle creative thinking.

As well as the Catholic Church, Broderick resented the insular attitudes that prevailed in parts of the midlands, and in rural Ireland in general. In *The Fugitives* (1962), the heroine returns to Ireland after spending many years abroad and is immediately 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 choice between hypocrisy and complete acceptance of the written and unwritten code.⁹

This is a fine description of the enclosed and watchful atmosphere of many Irish provincial towns in the middle of the twentieth century. Being from this background himself, Broderick was writing about the familiar — this is what makes some of his satire all the more biting. His 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 sexual morality. When he tackles these themes, his anger and bitterness show through. His caricature of the middle classes is too often transparent and didactic and the excessive intervention of the omniscient and inartistic narrator serves to damage the moral integrity of his texts — Mauriac would never fall into that particular trap. In

Don Juaneen, we meet this moralising about the wealthy O'Connor couple:

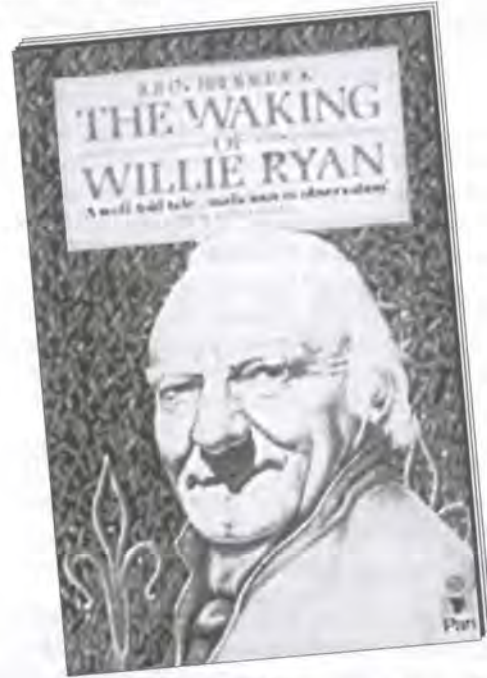
Their whole life was permeated with a profound and largely unconscious hypocrisy. Money was the only God they worshipped; *although, pious and bigoted Catholics as they were, they would have been horrified if anyone had told them so.*¹⁰

The last few comments betray a negativity not only to the characters he is describing but also to the literary process itself. It is as if he cannot trust his readers to make a correct evaluation of what is presented to them. This is undoubtedly the main weakness in Broderick as a novelist. On the plus side, however, there is his ability to tackle problems associated with sexuality. We have seen how Julia Glynn is largely devoid of guilt when it comes to sex outside marriage. In her liberated attitude, she resembles closely Marie Fogarty, the heroine of what is undoubtedly Broderick's best known (if not his most accomplished) novel, *An Apology for Roses* (1973). Marie enters into an affair with the local curate, Fr Tom Moran, whom she continues to use (or abuse), in spite of his sexual ineptitude: '... 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'.¹¹

Insatiable appetite

It was not at all commonplace, even at the beginning of the 1970s revolution, to speak in such forthright terms about sexuality, and to refer to affairs with priests (whose sexual prowess is clearly outlined) was especially daring. Many of Broderick's female characters have an insatiable sexual appetite. I believe that Julien Green's portrayal of Moïra, his most famous character, who, we are told, 'is what the Romans called *lupa*, a beast perpetually famished',¹² influenced Broderick in his portrayal of women. Broderick freely admitted his predilection for this particular novel by Green. Broderick is very explicit in some of 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. As a homosexual, female sexuality may have been foreign to his experience. (That said, I know several homosexual male writers who write very well about female sexuality.) And yet this does not prevent him from coming up with some almost comical scenes that are hard to resist. In *The Pride of Summer* (1976), we encounter the insatiable and pious Kitty O'Reilly whose lowly-sexed husband, Frank, is forced to satisfy his wife's longings:

This litany went on as Frank allowed his clothes to be clawed off him by the eager, predatory fingers of his 'lonely' little wife, who fell back upon the bed murmuring a prayer to the Holy Ghost as her husband thrust himself into her quivering body with an ardour she had not experienced for years. (...) Twice she writhed in 'agony', the word she always used when in the throes of an orgasm.¹³



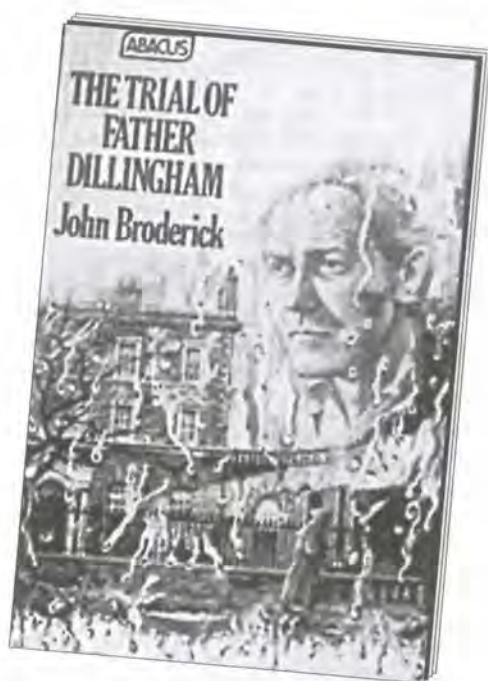
This account, though amusing, borders on the pornographic. Note the vocabulary used to build up the impression of the beast-like woman: she has 'claws' and fingers that are 'eager' and 'predatory'. While such descriptions could be considered comical caricatures, they do betray nonetheless an ambivalent attitude to women and to sexuality in general. Many of Broderick's female characters seek solace in a type of brutal sex, but their unbridled promiscuity leads them to the conclusion that the only ultimate fate that awaits them is aloneness. They are alone even when they are having sex because it is sexual activity devoid of love. Love and sex do not intermingle in Broderick's novels.

There are other extremes 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.¹⁴

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 forced to submit but from which she remains detached. As is true of Mauriac and Julien Green, there are very few, if any, happy couples in Broderick's novels, and even less love. What love does exist occurs between male couples, and these are subjected to the censorious and intolerant so-called 'normal' people who see fit to sit in judgement of them. Homosexual love is of the unnatural, unmentionable kind for heterosexuals who are involved in many cases in far more depraved relationships.



Appearance, rather than truth

In *The Trial of Father Dillingham* (1982), Maurice and Eddie look on their love for one another as: 'a recompense which they owed to one another as outcasts and aliens in a hostile world.'¹⁵ *The Waking of Willie Ryan* (1965) sees the main character committed to a mental asylum by his family, with the connivance of the local priest, Fr Mannix, because he has been engaged in a homosexual relationship with a widower. He returns home from the mental hospital after twenty-five years with the intention of gaining

revenge. His family, in this once more similar to many bourgeois families depicted by Mauriac, is concerned more with appearances than with truth. Marginals like Willie, with their tendency to fly in the face of order, disturb social equilibrium and make his family uncomfortable. But the complicity of the Church in the unjust committal of a man who has done nothing worse than to fall in love, is, in many ways even more reprehensible.

That said, I should point out that Broderick's own experience of priests was not all negative. He was very friendly with the former Professor of English at Maynooth College, Fr Peter Connolly, who was vehemently opposed to the banning of his books in Ireland and who campaigned against their censorship.

Willie reaches some kind of accommodation with his family before the end of the novel by agreeing to attend Mass in his nephew's house. He receives Holy Communion and his family is satisfied with this external sign of piety. They are happy to believe that Willie has seen the error of his ways. However, Fr Mannix is not so sure. He knows that Willie did not go to Confession before the Mass and that, as such, he has committed a mortal sin. The struggle between them continues long after the family has accepted Willie's return to the fold. They discuss Willie's former lover, Roger, and his apparent reconciliation with the Church. For Willie, the worst sin of all is hypocrisy. He knows that had he been able to conform more his life would have been much easier. But he wants Fr Mannix to know the truth about what happened all those years ago. Roger had not given up seeing Willie who could not endure his friend going to Mass and Communion on Sundays and making love to him in the dark. In what is one of the high points of the novel, Willie says to Fr Mannix:

... Roger never gave up what you like to call 'vice'. If it's of any interest to you now 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.¹⁶

Whatever criticisms can be levelled at Broderick's writings, it cannot be said that he shied away from addressing issues of a contentious nature. *The Waking of Willie Ryan* is Broderick's best novel in my opinion, as it has a good story-line and is well narrated. He does not interfere too much either with his characters' organic growth. At his worst, Broderick can be awful but the good novels, like *The Pilgrimage* and *The Waking of Willie Ryan*, are very good indeed. The highest compliment I can pay him is to say that he is an Irish novelist in the European tradition: that alone should give him some significance. He also knows how to spin a

good yarn and is able to capture the atmosphere of ennui and social frustration.

I hope that this brief assessment of Broderick's works will show him to be a writer who, in spite of his many weaknesses, still displays power and courage in addressing issues that were taboo in his time. In my view he owes more to a European, and more specifically French, tradition of challenge and protest than he does to any Irish influence. He did not hesitate to expose the foibles inherent in the Ireland of his time. 1999 marked the tenth anniversary of his death and already I sense a change of feeling to him in Ireland. It is almost as if people are finally beginning to realise that behind the bitter façade was to be found a sad alcoholic man who could never fully gain acceptance for himself in this country and who died an exile in the English town of Bath. He deserves a posthumous acceptance as a writer of merit. Julien Green, writing about *The Pilgrimage*, made the following telling statement:

In England, as well as in Ireland, the book provoked a scandal. But then again, Ireland has always had her rebellious children. Rebels are almost her speciality and, as is the case in all countries, these are the ones to which she remains most attached, when it is too late. One only has to consider the fate of Joyce, Wilde, Synge and all the others...¹⁷

I would not like to be accused of overstepping the mark by putting Broderick on a par with the three major Irish writers mentioned above. I agree with Julien Green that he was a rebel, but his rebelliousness had as much to do with his own complex psyche as with any specific Irish trait. As I pointed out at the beginning of the article, he was as attached to traditional Catholicism as Evelyn Waugh was. He is very close to the description of the religious man given by Aunt Kate 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 organisation are the ones that have no religion at all.¹⁸

Broderick's rebellion stemmed from how far-removed the Catholic Church of his time was from the glorious image he harboured of it. He loved and hated his native country in equal measure but his decision to end his days in England was an unhappy one because the uprooting left a yawning vacuum in his life. To

conclude, one final quotation from *The Fugitives* which provides a good summary of Broderick's disillusionment and sense of displacement before his death:

Those who have pulled up their roots have nothing but bleeding stumps with which to explore the no-man's land they inhabit.¹⁹

Notes

1. Preface to *Le Pèlerinage*, Editions La Découverte, 1991. The translation is my own. Most of Broderick's novels are available in French translation, which contrasts starkly with the unavailability of the vast majority of his books in Ireland.
2. Patrick Murray's excellent article, 'Athlone's John Broderick' in *Eire-Ireland*, Winter 1992, is essential reading for anyone wishing to get to know the writer's oeuvre more intimately. The quote about the Mass is on p.27.
3. *The Pilgrimage*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961, p.171.
4. *The Irish Times*, June 1, 1989.
5. Tony Flannery, *From the Inside. A Priest's View of the Catholic Church*, Cork: Mercier Press, 1999, pp.43-44. Fr Flannery deals at some length also with the hurt and pain caused by *Humanae Vitae* and says that some of the virulent reaction to the recent sexual scandals involving priests in Ireland is a residue of the feelings aroused by the authoritarian Church of the past.
6. 'The Novels of John Broderick', in *The Irish Novel in our Time*, eds. Patrick Raffroidi and Maurice Harmon, Lille: PUL, 1976, p.240.
7. In Julia Carson, editor, *Banned in Ireland. Censorship and the Irish Writer*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1990, p.46.
8. *Ibid.*, p.17.
9. *The Fugitives*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, p.6.
10. *Don Juaneen*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963, p.43. The emphasis is my own.
11. *An Apology for Roses*, London: Calder and Boyars, 1973, p.20.
12. *Moira*, translated from the French by Denise Folliot, London: Quartet Books, 1985, p.163.
13. *The Pride of Summer*, London: Harrap, 1976, pp.33-34.
14. *An Apology for Roses*, op. cit., p.52.
15. *The Trial of Fr Dillingham*, London: Abacus, 1982, p.65.
16. *The Waking of Willie Ryan*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965, pp.158-159.
17. Preface to the French edition of *The Pilgrimage*, op.cit.
18. *The Fugitives*, op.cit., p.151.
19. *Ibid.*, p.135.

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