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## The Struggle to be Christian : Julian Green's "Each Man in His Darkness"

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## Writers on Catholicism 5

In this series, Eamon Maher looks at one book by an author who was marked by Catholicism

# The struggle to be Christian

Sin and grace in  
Julien Green's *Each Man in his Darkness*



*Julien Green's Each Man in his Darkness is a most optimistic portrayal of the many benefits Catholicism can bring to bear on the lives of people, often without their fully realising the forces that are governing their actions, writes Eamon Maher*

The position of Julien Green in relation to European, and more specifically, French Catholicism is slightly skewed by the fact that he was born of American parents in Paris at the beginning of the last century. His parents were Protestant (the father Presbyterian and the mother Episcopalian) from the American South, and it was the father Edward Green's business interests that brought about the move to Paris.

Although most of his life was spent in France, Green retained his American nationality, and it was thus that he was to become the first non-French national to be elected to the Académie Française in 1971. His mother, Mary, read to her son every day from the King James Bible and this practice was continued by Green long after her death in 1914. Another legacy she imparted to her son was a negative view of sexuality, due largely to the death of one of her brothers from syphilis. On one fateful occasion, when she caught young Julien examining his body under the bedclothes, she threatened to castrate him. This traumatic episode led to a distrust of the body in Green, a feeling that was accentuated in later life when he discovered his homosexuality.

After converting to Catholicism in his teens (1916), Green would spend the rest of his life attempting to reconcile his sexual orientation with his deeply held faith.

Many of his novels are set in the American South (including *Each Man in his Darkness*), to which the writer was deeply attached emotionally, and have Protestants as their main

protagonists. His most celebrated work is undoubtedly *Moïra* (1950), which relates the arrival of Joseph Day, a red-haired, fervent Protestant to an American university, whose main ambition is to become proficient in Greek and Hebrew so that he could read the Bible in the original.

There are elements in Day's itinerary that closely resemble some of Green's own experiences when he went to study at the University of Virginia in 1919. Of particular relevance are the attraction felt by Day for a classmate, Praileau, and his disgust at the behaviour of the other students with whom he shares lodgings. Sexual naivety and religious piety are the main characteristics of Joseph Day, and it is likely that these too reflect the character of the young writer who had lived a rather sheltered life before he arrived in Virginia after the First World War.

### Collision of values

*Moïra* is a classic portrayal of the fatal consequences that can arise when traditional and modern values collide, and it is a finely sculpted psychological novel.

However, *Each Man in His Darkness* (1960) is the closest Green came to producing a Catholic novel. Set in America, and written in French, you can see how incongruous Green's position is in relation to the French Catholic Novel, as envisioned by Georges Bernanos and François Mauriac. Published at a time when Green had reached maturity in terms of both his art and his faith, this is undoubtedly the most optimistic portrayal of the

many benefits Catholicism can bring to bear on the lives of people, often without their fully realising the forces that are governing their actions.

The novel opens with a visit by Wilfred to the bedside of his dying uncle, Horace, with whom he shares a disturbing number of resemblances. Both men are sexual philanderers and have enjoyed the favours of many women. With death approaching, Horace is anxious to set things right with God and, as he senses that his nephew enjoys a strong inner life, he wants to question him about his faith. (His cousin Angus, who feels a deep attraction for Wilfred, also notes this trait and asks: 'Are you still as much of – a believer?', to which Wilfred is forced to reply in the affirmative.)

Faced with a replica of how he himself could easily end up if he fails to mend his ways, Wilfred experiences a moment of revulsion at the dissolute life he is leading: 'But when all was said and done, things invariably ended on a bed of pain, with a priest bending over you. All the beds on which sensual pleasures had been enjoyed were no more than the prefiguration of this last and terrifying place of rest.' (p.27)

### Saints

Wilfred is not blind to the paradoxical nature of his uncle's appeal to him for reassurance. After all, he is nothing more than a sinner: '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.' (p.44) Why is it then that his uncle persists in asking him to pray for the restoration of his lost faith? Wilfred at first feels ashamed, but then a peace suddenly takes hold of his soul and he says gently to Horace: 'I can't cure you [...]. It would take a saint to do that and I'm not a saint.' (p.63) To which Horace retorts: 'Yes, you are! [...] Right now you're like a saint. We all are at one moment or another of our lives.' (p.64)

In an earlier article in this series we saw how Graham Greene's whisky priest, unworthy sinner though he be, nevertheless possesses saintly qualities. Wilfred fulfils a similar role by bringing peace to a dying man – Horace receives the Sacraments shortly after his interview with his nephew – and opening up the possibility of his eternal salvation

He, on the other hand, must continue his struggle with his demons.

### More perilous

Wilfred's spiritual destiny becomes more perilous after he meets and falls in love with Phoebe, the wife of his distant Presbyterian cousin, James Knight. It is her purity that particularly attracts him, a purity he knows will be lost forever if their mutual attraction is ever consummated. She is totally different from the other women with whom he has had affairs. First of all, she is married, and then there's the added problem that by making love to her he would endanger the salvation of both of them. He also doubts that he could ever give her up if

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he experienced the joy of possession.

James Knight, guessing the growing intimacy between his wife and Wilfred, warns the latter: 'There's something untouched in her (Phoebe). She is undefiled. Sin would make her lose it, but sin is unknown to her. She is not like us.' (p.288)

Wilfred is in uncharted waters with such a woman. Normally after a night of debauchery, he felt the usual self-revulsion: 'Between sin and repentance came an interval of disgust, a disgust of the flesh and still more horrible disgust of religion.' Then the realisation that it was Sunday would add to his nausea: 'What he was about to do would be done in spite of himself: leave his bed, deluge his body with cold water that would only purify the skin, dress like an automaton and pick up a Mass book with hands that still remembered the flesh they had caressed.' (p.98) At least in circumstances like these there could be genuine repentance and a resolve not to sin again: with Phoebe, it would not be so simple.

### Moral abyss

As he totters on the edge of a moral abyss, knowing that Phoebe reciprocates his passion and would be prepared

to risk all to be with him, Wilfred is saved by the intervention of Max who, like Angus, is in love with the hero. This strange young man follows Wilfred home from church one day under the pretext of wishing to discuss religion with him. Frustrated by the indifference of Wilfred to his sexual advances and by the knowledge that he loves Phoebe, Max ends up shooting him when Wilfred ill-advisedly visits him late one night. He has come to the inescapable conclusion that he cannot give up Phoebe, who is as important to him as life itself, and so in a strange way Max, by killing Wilfred, is an agent in the hero's salvation.

The tension between the two men had been simmering for some time: 'Max was willing and Wilfred was not. Max wanted to kill Wilfred for that reason.' (p.335) One wonders if the hero deliberately visited Max with a view to ending problems to which there were no satisfactory solutions. James Knight notes the peace that marked

Wilfred's last moments on this earth: 'Never have I seen such an expression of happiness on any human face as that which lit up Wilfred's.' It seemed as though 'he was watching us from afar, from a region of light.' (p.346)

### Grapple with faith

Up until his death on August 13, 1998, Julien Green continued to grapple with the Catholic faith he had chosen in 1916. *Each Man in His Darkness* is an excellent exposé of his more positive view of the power of grace to change the course of a man's life. Michèle Raclot, an eminent Green scholar, wrote shortly after his death:

Julien Green's faith underwent numerous fluctuations at certain periods during his life, but it was so deeply ingrained in him that he couldn't, any more than his hero, Wilfred, cheapen it in order to avoid spiritual obstacles.

*Each Man in His Darkness* is a challenging novel about Catholicism and the obstacles it places in the path of those who take it seriously and live their lives by its tenets. ✚

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