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Irish Writers and the Eucharist

Eamon Maher

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I was honoured to be asked by the editor of *Spirituality* to do a piece for the 100th issue of this magazine. However, my enthusiasm waned a little when I discovered that the special theme was Eucharist. What would a non-theologian like myself have to say about a topic like this, I wondered? But then I started thinking about the way in which various Irish writers have made explicit references to the Eucharist and had many enlightening things to say on the topic. So I have decided to discuss four authors' treatment of the theme and to assess the ways in which they deal with it in all its complexity.

JAMES JOYCE

James Joyce's apparent estrangement from Roman Catholicism to espouse the religion of Art has become something of a cliché over the years. In a letter to Nora Barnacle on the 29 August 1904, he made the following announcement: 'Six years ago, I left the Catholic Church, hating it most fervently. I found it impossible for me to remain in it on account of the impulses of my nature.'¹ His objection to the Church of Rome was inspired, according to Douglas Kanter, by the type of spiritual torpor 'caused by what he perceived to be the oppressive religiosity of Catholic culture in Ireland.'² He felt that Roman tyranny was even worse than its English equivalent. But for all his misgivings about the Church's negative influence in the social and political spheres, Joyce nevertheless remained steeped in the vocabulary and rituals of Catholicism. In *A Portrait*, for example, we have the image of a girl coming out of Jacob's biscuit factory who makes Stephen Dedalus ponder on the nature of women and beauty:

To him she would unveil his soul's shy nakedness, to one who was but schooled in the discharging of a formal rite rather than to him, a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life.

The radiant image of the eucharist united again in an instant his bitter and despairing thoughts...³

For all that he abandoned the Catholic world-view and vowed not to serve it, Stephen's own signifiers deliberately borrow from his knowledge of the religion in which he was reared and educated. In the passage above, Joyce equates the aesthetic in terms of the transubstantiation of the Eucharist, with the artist now a priest of a

1. Cited by Douglas Kanter, 'Joyce, Irish Paralysis, and Cultural Irish Anticlericalism', in *James Joyce Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Spring, 2004), pp.381-396, p.381

2. Kanter, p.382

3. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p.252

more secular movement towards transcendence. His displeasure with the clerical caste is prompted in part by the undue influence a priest exercises on the object of his desire: 'He had done well to leave her to flirt with her priest, to toy with a church which was the scullery maid of Christendom' (*Portrait*, 250-1). Stephen's bitterness is clear at what he views as the girl's attentiveness to the priest's words, which to him ring hollow. Doubtless, his own decision to give up on his religious vocation after discovering the joys of the flesh only serve to augment his agitation. Joyce's lingering fascination with Catholicism is brought to the fore in an exchange Stephen has with an acquaintance later in the novel: 'It is a curious thing, do you know', Cranley said dispassionately, 'how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve' (*Portrait*, 273). This is an insightful comment and one that has relevance for several Irish writers who find in Catholicism a religion that is inimical to their artistic imagination without being able to avoid being 'supersaturated' with its vestiges.

KATE O'BRIEN

Kate O'Brien (1897-1974) was a writer with a keen understanding of Catholic doctrine. Educated by the nuns in Laurel Hill, Limerick, she always wrote insightfully and sensitively about religion. Eibhear Walshe sums up her attitude very well: 'There was a melancholy within Kate O'Brien's literary sensibility, the melancholy of the lapsed Catholic, at odds with the sexual codes of her religious education, yet still enraptured with the beauty of its ceremonies and its liturgy.'⁴ The Eucharist plays an important role in O'Brien's most accomplished novel, *The Ante-Room* (1934), which traces the dilemma of a young woman, Agnes Mulqueen, who is desperately in love with her sister Rose's husband, Vincent de Courcy O'Regan. The situation becomes intolerable when the heroine discovers that there is to be a Triduum of Masses for her dying mother in Roseholm, the family home. In order to participate fully in the Triduum, Agnes will have to receive Holy Communion and to do that, she knows she must first of all go to confession. She is under no illusions as to what she has done wrong: 'The common sin against the ninth commandment, enhanced by all the pitiful complications of sister love.'⁵ The Jesuit priest who hears her confession is impressed with her lucid exposition of her sins and gives Agnes what he considers sound advice: earthly love is transient, 'whereas in the idea of God, there is matter for eternity' (*Ante-Room*, 89).⁵ She experiences momentary solace after receiving absolution, but when she meets Vincent soon afterwards, she finds herself once more in the maelstrom: 'Yes, holy Jesuit, that's all very fine. But we aren't made in the most convenient

4. Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p.2

5. Kate O'Brien, *The Ante-Room* (London: Virago, 1996), p.80

form in which to pursue ideas, and we have no notion at all of how to front eternity' (*Ante-Room*, 200).

There is obvious tension between religious duty, family, and human passion in *The Ante-Room*. Catholicism is a strong presence throughout, with Agnes never once failing to realise that for her to follow her natural inclination would require abandoning her dearly-held faith and her equally cherished family. The descriptions of the sacrifice of the Eucharist reveal a genuine attachment to the ritual by O'Brien. For example, as they recite the 'Holy, Holy, Holy' in anticipation of receiving Holy Communion, 'they reached the quietest moment of their faith, a moment so still that bells must ring and sometimes guns must sound to make it humanly bearable' (*Ante-Room*, 173). The priest, Canon Considine, seems to be transformed by the awesome power bestowed on him by his priesthood to hold God in his hands. As for the congregation, receiving the Eucharist gives them an insight into the point of view of God: 'Then He became in Communion the mystic visitant of each one in the room, save only one' (*Ante-Room*, 175). Vincent had not received, too consumed by his love of Agnes and the suicide he was planning because of her choosing God over him.

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BRIAN MOORE

O'Brien's description of Mass and the meaning of the Eucharist is a far cry from Joyce's more secular representation. With Brian Moore's *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1955) we encounter the spiritual turmoil of a middle-aged spinster whose world is turned upside down when she is disappointed in love and can find no comfort in religion. Plagued by a serious drinking problem and aware of her unattractiveness and financial difficulties, Judith Hearne turns to God as her one hope of succour. She regards the tabernacle as the place where she can find Him and cannot understand how the priest and sacristan perform a perfunctory bow as they pass God's temple: 'As though they both knew there was no need to bow, as though the tabernacle were empty.'⁶ At a certain stage, Judith herself begins to wonder if her religious beliefs are without foundation. After years of self-denial and strict observance of her duties, she now confronts the terrifying prospect: 'What if there was no God? These doubts occur when her relationship with the returned emigrant, James Madden, comes to a sad end due to his discovery of her impoverishment. Distraught, Judith returns drunk to the church and starts challenging God in the tabernacle: 'Why do You torture me, alone and silent behind Your little door? Why?'⁷ The red sanctuary lamp continues to burn as Judith makes her way up to the altar, thinking

6. Brian Moore, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (London: Flammingo, 1994), p.199

7. *Ibid.*, p.240

as she goes there is 'only bread' in the sacred place. A few shocked women observe her ascent of the steps to the altar, where she pulls across the little curtain in front of the tabernacle:

Now! Now! She tore at the door. Now the thunderbolt. But the door would not open. Small, golden, Holy of Holies, it remained shut against her trembling, weeping onslaught. 'Open. Let me in', she screamed (*Judith Hearne*, 241).

God makes no sign in Judith's hour of need. Her disillusionment with the Eucharist is fuelled by the thought that it may not really be the Body and Blood of Christ, that God may not be permanently present in the tabernacle, that it is all a myth. Judith is representative of the views of a number of Irish people who regularly visited (and continue to visit) churches for silent adoration of the Eucharist. The essential motivation for such visits, however, is faith and that is what fails Judith at the crucial juncture in her life.

AIDAN MATTHEWS

A more contemporary view of the Eucharist is provided by Aidan Matthew's short story, 'Lipstick on the Host.' It depicts a few days in the life of a secondary school teacher called Meggie who is having difficulties coming to terms with life after forty. She finds a lifeline in Antony - her lover, a gynaecologist - only to have him taken from her in a tragic car accident. Matthews conveys the confused feelings of his main character, her post-coital feeling of closeness to Antony, whose body odour she can still detect in her bed. The title of the story comes from Meggie's reluctance to receive Communion when wearing lipstick. On one occasion, aware that she is actually wearing lipstick when approaching the altar, she decides to receive in the hand and puts the host in her handbag. Later, she has a chance to look at it more closely:

I had never really looked at a host before. They are very delicate. They break at the wrong touch; they break at a touch, even. If you dropped them, they would not fall; they would flutter, like flakes of snow.⁸

The corporeality of the host is strongly emphasised throughout the story. Meggie places it on a clean napkin and receives in a way she has never done before. After doing so, she notices that she forgot to remove the lipstick. It is not clear if there is any connection between this irregular act and the death of Antony (who happens to be a Protestant). Meggie has difficulties accepting he has gone and seems to seek in Communion a type of replacement lover: 'At the weekends, I met God; always at his place, never at mine.' Her mental

8. Aidan Matthews, *Lipstick on the Host* (London: Minerva, 1993), p.288

'At the weekends, I met God; always at his place, never at mine.'

stability is becoming suspect, as is clear from the following lines:

Now he's broken the rules. Now he wants more. He wants more than my lips and tongue. He wants me. He has started writing letters. He has begun to ring the school. He has broken into my home, to search for me... (*Lipstick*, 301).

Matthews, who is producer of *A Living Word* on RTÉ radio, provides a daring portrayal of a distraught woman's compensatory obsession with the Body of Christ. The other writers we have discussed stop short of associating the host with the human body in the explicit way he does. It is important to remember, however, that the incarnation is at the heart of all the sacraments of the Church, especially the Eucharist. In his study of the role of the body in contemporary American literature, John Waldmeir notes how in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* the strong message comes through how, 'when reason explores the mysteries of faith - especially the liturgical mystery of the Eucharist - it should begin its inquiry with the physical experiences associated with the Eucharist.'⁹ One of these experiences involves coming to terms with how God Incarnate is present in Holy Communion. The brief survey we have done of some literary representations of the Eucharist illustrates, I would argue, that the writers have a grasp of this mystery, in spite of the fact that the majority of them are non-believers.

9. John Waldmeir, *Cathedrals of Bone: the Role of the Body in Contemporary Catholic Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), pp.7-8