

2011

## Tracing the Imprint: Catholicism in Some Twentieth Century Irish Fiction

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### Recommended Citation

Maher, E. : Tracing the Imprint: Catholicism in Some Twentieth Century Irish Fiction, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 100, No. 400, A Century of Studies (Winter 2011), pp. 489-500

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Source: *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 100, No. 400, A Century of Studies (Winter 2011), pp. 489-500

Published by: [Irish Province of the Society of Jesus](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23209769>

Accessed: 03/09/2014 06:54

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# Tracing the Imprint: Catholicism in Some Twentieth Century Irish Fiction <sup>1</sup>

**Eamon Maher**

In a seminal article published in *Studies* in 1965, Augustine Martin noted how Irish writers were characterised by what he termed 'inherited dissent', a tendency that led them to replace their original religious faith with blends of the mystical and aesthetic:

*They seem to have been needled into apostasy by a Christianity which at that time ...appeared to be extremely philistine, anti-intellectual, disciplinarian and, above all, anti-mystical. It was Christianity smug in the dry complacency of nineteenth century apologetics, suspicious of everything outside devotionism and observance.* <sup>2</sup>

The writers he describes may well have had good grounds for their negative assessment of Christianity. Certainly, in the course of the twentieth century, it is hard to find too many Irish novels which grapple in a searching manner with questions of Catholic faith as such – we never came close to producing, for example, a François Mauriac or a Graham Greene. More typically, there are denunciations of superstitious religiosity and unflattering portraits of priests who are for the most part concerned with power and prestige rather than any real spiritual quest.

It has become something of a cliché to refer in this connection to James Joyce's rejection of Catholicism in order to espouse a religion of art. Writing to Nora Barnacle on 29 August 1904, he outlined his reasons for turning his back on

organised religion: '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'.<sup>3</sup> Joyce does not cite here any difficulty with dogma as such in his decision to abandon Catholicism. Like Stephen Dedalus, his protagonist in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), his struggle is with the desires of the flesh. But, like Stephen too, he struggled with the power claimed by the Church, not only over his personal life but over the country's politics and public behaviour. This had been dramatically demonstrated in the treatment of Parnell. In the novel, Stephen witnessed a bitter argument on this subject between his father and his governess, Mrs 'Dante' Riordan, at the Christmas dinner-table. For 'Dante', Parnell was 'A traitor, an adulterer!', whereas Mr Dedalus sees him as a victim of religious intolerance and abusive clerical power. 'We are an unfortunate priestridden race', he snorts in contempt, indignant that the Irish people never made decisions independent of their clergy.<sup>4</sup> Clerical involvement in Parnell's downfall left many middle-class Catholics disillusioned with the Church and the idea would in time take root that the country would have to be secularised before it could truly prosper. For Joyce, 'Rome Rule' was in many ways more oppressive than British rule.

Because of the influence it continued to exert on Irish society for so long, Catholicism inevitably features prominently in twentieth century Irish fiction after Joyce. Given the close collusion between the Church and the newly-formed independent Irish state, particularly in regard to moral legislation, later writers struggled to assert their artistic independence in the face of what they experienced as an excessively puritanical public culture. Many of them highlighted the more repressive aspects of Irish Catholicism and the warped view of sexuality to which these led. John McGahern would say, looking back over his own career, that if there was one thing injurious about the Church, it would be its attitude to sexuality. 'I see sexuality as just a part of life. Either all of life is sacred or none of it is sacred. I'm inclined to think that all of life is sacred and that sexuality is a very important part of that sacredness'.<sup>5</sup>

He himself suffered at the hands of the Censorship Board for such an attitude. In his second novel, *The Dark* (1965), he dared to describe an adolescent boy's problems with masturbation, tackled the issue of physical and sexual abuse in the home, and even hinted strongly at the existence of clerical sexual abuse. Such a

cocktail was too much for 1960s Ireland and the book was banned. Louise Fuller has described the religious culture of the time as one in which people ‘had such an exaggerated idea of their own unworthiness and fear of committing mortal sin, that they felt that they had to “get” confession always before receiving Holy Communion – just to be on the safe side’.<sup>6</sup> Novelists were able to exploit the dramatic possibilities afforded by such a conflicted culture.

The French poet Charles Baudelaire once claimed that only those who believe in spirituality are capable of sacrilege. Joyce, despite his anticlerical outbursts, retained a pronounced attraction to Catholic ceremonial and his writings are shot through with references to the religion in which he had grown up and in which his artistic imagination had been nurtured. Cranley’s charge to Stephen in *A Portrait* about his fascination with Catholicism applied to Stephen’s creator too: ‘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’.<sup>7</sup> It was no less true of a number of Irish novelists of the past hundred years who may have found Catholicism inimical to their artistic quest but could not avoid being ‘supersaturated’ with it, imprinted with its traces. While, in many cases, following Joyce’s path to apostasy, they nevertheless found themselves depicting characters with a deep-felt devotion to the Catholic faith. The ‘inherited dissent’ of which Augustine Martin wrote may still be at work, but it no longer assumes the same prominence.

Kate O’Brien (1897) was someone who understood Catholicism intimately. Educated by nuns in Limerick, she always wrote with insight and sensitivity about religion. Eibhear Walshe speaks of ‘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’.<sup>8</sup> *The Land of Spices* (1941) is a sympathetic portrayal of the vital contribution played by the female religious orders in the formation of generations of intelligent, questioning, ambitious young Irish women during the last century. But it is *The Ante-Room* (1934) which is the closest an Irish writer has come to being a truly ‘Catholic’ novel, not in the sense of indulging in apologetics or promulgating dogma but of being a narrative that could only be understood by readers with a certain knowledge of Catholicism and the obligations it imposes.

*The Ante-Room* traces the dilemma of Agnes Mulqueen, a young woman desperately in love with her sister Rose's husband, Vincent de Courcy O'Regan. When she discovers that there is to be a triduum of Masses for her dying mother in Roseholm, the family home, she finds herself facing an acute spiritual dilemma. She wants to be able to participate fully in the triduum but she knows that, for this to happen, she must first of all go to confession. She is under no illusion about what she has done wrong: 'The common sin against the ninth commandment, enhanced by all the pitiful complications of sister love'.<sup>9</sup> The Jesuit priest who hears her confession is impressed with her lucid exposition of her sins and gives her what he considers sound advice: earthly love is transient, 'whereas in the idea of God, there is matter for eternity' (89). O'Brien's heroine has a keen intellect and is not given to self-deception. She knows that her feelings for Vincent are wrong and that she must put a stop to them at all costs: 'Faith, a cold thing, a fact – that was what she must use to destroy fantasy' (84). The resolve is quickly put to the test when she meets Vincent in Roseholm and realises that her feelings for him are stronger than ever. She muses remorsefully: 'Yes, holy Jesuit, that's all very fine. But we aren't made in the most convenient form in which to pursue ideas, and we have no notion at all of how to front eternity' (200).

Throughout *The Ante-Room* one can detect the tension that exists between religious duty, family, and human passion. Agnes is acutely aware that for her to follow her natural inclination and give in to her deep feelings for Vincent would require that she abandon her dearly-held faith and her equally cherished family. Religion is omnipresent in the novel: it plays a significant role in the decision she makes to give up Vincent and it brings together the small community of Roseholm. The dying Mrs Mulqueen's brother, Canon Considine, is no saint and not much of a mystic, but when he says Mass he seems to be transformed by the awesome power bestowed on him by the priesthood:

*Silence relaxed into quietude. God was present; the room and the morning was full of peace. The Latin murmuring of the priest, the holy sighs of old Bessie ... softly relaxing tension, brought back its human reality to each consciousness, through keeping it mercifully illumined by the miracle in which it was participant* (175).

O'Brien was well-attuned to the symbolic power of the Mass and clearly appreciated the beauty of the ritual. Similarly, in presenting Agnes' spiritual crisis, her rigorous examination of conscience before entering the confessional, her constant awareness of her religious duty, O'Brien shows herself adept at depicting her characters' struggle with their faith. In the case of Agnes and some other female figures in O'Brien's fiction, Catholicism appeals to the intellect as much as to the heart.

In this respect, the Catholicism represented in the novels of Brian Moore (1921-1999) and a number of the writers of the next generation is quite different. When Moore's first novel, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1955), appeared, it drew the attention of many influential people, the most notable being Graham Greene who said that Moore was his 'favourite living novelist'. He was born in Belfast into a very Catholic, nationalist family. His father was a doctor and, when he was young, the family moved to Clifton Street, a Protestant area of the city, to be close to the university hospital where his father worked. The house directly faced the local Orange hall and a statue of 'King Billy' on his white horse, symbol of the religious conflict which had ravaged Ulster for centuries. From an early age, as he admitted in a BBC interview in 1997, Moore himself had 'lacked the religious sense'. His problems – as with others - had begun with confession. He found it hard, he said, to regard his normal sexual urges as sinful and began to invent sins, without experiencing any fear of divine retribution afterwards. Although agnostic, however, he remained fascinated by people who possessed religious faith and their quest for belief in something other than the material world. As he told another interviewer:

Belief is an obsession of mine. I think that everyone wants to believe in something – politics, religion, something that makes life worthwhile for them. And with most people there's a point in their lives... when these beliefs are shattered. And it's that point I seize on as a writer.<sup>10</sup>

We see this process particularly at work in the two first Belfast-based novels, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* and *The Feast of Lupercal* (1957), in both of which we encounter characters who are prevented from attaining any autonomy in their lives because of the oppressive religious ghetto in which they are ensconced.

The novella *Catholics* (1972), set in a remote island monastery called Muck Abbey located off the southwest coast of Ireland in the era of post-Vatican IV, offers a notably interesting vision of Catholicism, in which the clash between the traditional and the modern is finely drawn. Some monks in the abbey, resistant to the changes wrought in the liturgy by the Council and in direct contravention of its provisions, have begun to say Mass in Latin again. A progressive American priest called James Kinsella is sent to Ireland to bring them into line. The abbot, Tomás O'Malley, cares deeply for his community and understands how attached the monks are to the Latin Mass. But he is also pragmatic enough to realise that Fr Kinsella has been sent to quell the commotion which is being caused by the large crowd of pilgrims who flock to Cahirciveen for the outlawed liturgy at the foot of Mount Croom:

*Most could see the Mass rock and the priest only from a distance, but all heard the Latin, thundering from loudspeakers rigged up by townsfolk. Latin. The Communion bell. Monks as altar boys saying the Latin responses. Incense. The old way.*<sup>11</sup>

The incense-laden ritual, the priest with his back to the congregation dressed in striking vestments, the sense of mystery and reverence, would all have been part of Brian Moore's own early experience of religion. Sadly for the monks of Muck Abbey, however, for whom the same would have been true, 'the old way' is not Rome's way, as Kinsella makes unambiguously clear.

One of the old monks bemoans that fact that 'this new Mass isn't a mystery it's a singsong' (43), but the visiting priest does not flinch – orthodoxy and conformity must be preserved: 'We are trying to create a uniform posture within the Church. If everyone decides to worship in his own way well it's obvious it would create a disunity' (55). The abbot feels sympathy for the monks, knowing that they will be forced to conform to the dictates of Rome. The loss of his own faith years previously during a visit to Lourdes does not prevent him from successfully carrying out his duties. After Kinsella's departure and faced with possible rebellion by the community, he manages to assuage their anger by assuring them that it does not matter what means we employ to worship God: 'Prayer is the only miracle. We pray. If our words become prayer, God will come' (91). As he murmurs the 'Our Father', the reader has the impression that the abbot may well have recovered his faith.



Terence Brown has noted how 'in Moore's fiction the Catholic faith is as undeniable as the weather, with its prevailing winds of depressed feeling and moral demand affecting the psychological temperature of all his protagonists'.<sup>12</sup> The same religious climate of repression and depression is to be found in two other important novelists writing in the same period, John Broderick (1927-1989) and John McGahern (1934-2006). Broderick hailed from the midlands town of Athlone, where his family owned the local bakery. A deeply religious man, he had difficulty reconciling his homosexual inclinations with his fervent Catholicism. He had huge admiration for Kate O'Brien and was on friendly terms with the French American writer, Julien Green, whom he invited to visit Ireland in the 1970s. But he said that François Mauriac was the only literary influence of which he was aware. When he wrote well, he was adept at probing the inner recesses of his characters' souls and shared Mauriac's classical, economical style. At his worst, he was prone to vituperation and exaggeration and his growing alcoholism in the last decades of his life can have done nothing for his objectivity. Paradoxically, he managed to combine a serious aversion to the 'progressive' tendencies of Vatican II with a desire to open up Ireland to what he saw as more enlightened European influences. After his mother's death in 1974, he discussed the possibility of studying for the priesthood with his friend Fr. Peter Connolly, then Professor of English in Maynooth and someone who had always supported his literary endeavours. The idea came to nothing, which may have been for the best, as Broderick would have had difficulty conforming to the somewhat rigid role demanded of Irish priests in the Church of his time.

He had great interest in provincial Irish Catholicism. Many of his novels are based on people and events he knew well, both barely fictionalized. In *The Pilgrimage* (1961), which, along with *The Waking of Willie Ryan* (1965), was by far the best book he ever wrote, he details the life of Julia Glynn and her crippled, gay husband Michael. Provincial Ireland seems to have had a lot of gay men if we are to believe the evidence of this narrative. As well as Michael, his manservant Stephen and Tommy Baggot, with whom Stephen is platonically infatuated, also display gay tendencies. On the other hand, Julia has numerous heterosexual affairs. Her lovers include, most notably, Jim Glynn, her husband's nephew as well as his doctor, and the manservant Stephen. About Stephen's sexuality, however, she remains uneasy:

*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. Few Irishmen, she knew, ever were. The Puritanism which was bred in their bones, and encouraged in their youth by every possible outside pressure, was never entirely eradicated.*<sup>13</sup>

This passage all too faithfully reflects something of the prevailing Irish Catholic culture in which the novel is set.

Because of its theme, *The Pilgrimage* inevitably attracted the attention of the Censorship Board and was duly banned. Surprisingly, perhaps, it was not so much the sexual content of the novel itself that caused the most furore as its wonderfully ambiguous closing line: 'In this way they set off on their pilgrimage, from which a week later Michael returned completely cured' (191). For many Irish readers at the time, the suggestion that an obvious sinner like Michael should have been the graced recipient of a miraculous cure may well have seemed blasphemous. But, in his preface to the French version of the novel (reproduced in the Lilliput edition), Julien Green not only expressed his admiration for an 'extraordinarily gripping book' but also insisted that no one should take offence at the cure. 'Since when has healing been exclusively available to the just?', he asked (2), pointing to Broderick's essential faithfulness to Gospel teaching. Judgment of God's actions, Green insisted in the same spirit, is not for mere mortals.

Whereas Broderick concentrated mainly on the small midlands community around Athlone, his distant cousin John McGahern concerned himself more with rural Leitrim-Roscommon, further to the west, where he had spent most of his life. His first, still unpublished novel, 'The End or the Beginning of Love', shows remarkable maturity for a writer still in his early twenties and reveals much of interest about his emerging artistic preoccupations.<sup>14</sup> The narrative begins with what was a key moment in McGahern's own life, a conversation between mother and son in which the boy, Hugh, is asked whom he loves most in the world. The reply, 'You, Mammy', is not accepted and he is obliged to repeat the usual formula about loving God most of all, then his mother and father equally. The devout mother, who is dying of breast cancer, hopes fervently that her son will one day become a priest, a scenario that is familiar to readers of McGahern's later works,

*The Leavetaking* (1974, revised in 1984) and *Memoir* (2005). Throughout his life, the writer remained haunted by the broken promise he had made to his own mother that he would one day say Mass for the repose of her soul. He also had difficulty forgiving himself for leaving her bedside just before the other children and himself were transported to their father's barracks in Cootchall, where they were to live after their mother had died. Time and time again, McGahern returned in his writing to the conversations he had with his mother, his anguish at the thought of life without her, his appreciation of her kindness, and her deep faith. When Hugh in 'The End of the Beginning of Love' pleads with his mother that she must not die and leave him, she replies:

*But I'll be up in heaven praying for you. When you grow up, you'll say Mass for me and I'll still watch over you so that you can come to no harm. One day we'll meet in Paradise and we will be with one another for all eternity.*<sup>15</sup>

These words offer no comfort to the disconsolate youth, who clings desperately to the hope that his mother will not die. Apart from these moving exchanges between son and dying mother, the unpublished novel also covers much of the material contained in subsequent works. The father (named Mahoney, like the father in *The Dark*) derives sexual excitement from beating his children: 'Even in the dim light he saw by his father's trousers that he was sexually roused. Mahoney's face was horrible with passion' (P71/8, 143). Hugh visits his cousin, Fr Gerald, to discuss his vocation. Like the similarly named priest in *The Dark*, Fr Gerald shows him his scars during a visit to his bedroom in the middle of the night. This makes Hugh very uncomfortable and, although nothing untoward is depicted as occurring, one has the sense that the cleric may have been grooming the young boy.

The romantic relationship which develops between Hugh and Kathleen in 'The End or the Beginning of Love' has no parallel in the later works. Whenever they allow sexual passion to take hold of them, they end up loathing each other afterwards. Kathleen is particularly puritanical: 'You shouldn't kiss me like that... It's wrong, it's sinful, it's passionate kissing' (P7/8, 242). On another occasion she declares; 'I wish I had the strength to enter a convent... to leave all this passion and sin and enter a convent' (P7/8, 292). Even within marriage, she considers sex

sinful: “...there’s something dirty and disgusting about sex, something”, she shuddered with repulsion, “unclean” (P7/8, 293). Hugh and Kathleen are seen as victims of the unhealthy approach to sex of which McGahern was so outspokenly critical: ‘They all seem to have inherited the idea of the horrible ugliness and sewer filth of sex’ (P7/8, 293). Derek Hand, commenting on the exaggerated importance accorded sex in so many Irish novels, has pointed to the irony that ‘The influence of the Catholic Church is witnessed in how an emerging sexuality becomes central to these novels of development in the twentieth century especially, as if the sexual act were the only indicator of authentic maturity’.<sup>16</sup> At regular intervals in McGahern’s fiction, we encounter characters who are anxious about the possible consequences of following their sexual inclinations. The unpublished novel serves to underline how McGahern was exploring from the beginning themes that would remain constant throughout his career as a writer. Catholicism is a negative force in the lives of his characters, yet seemingly as necessary to them as it was to his dying mother. Hugh Mahoney reflects on the conditioning he endured:

*When I was a child, I was harnessed (sic) into the church by the stick of hell and the sweetmeat of heaven. If I did what I was told I was promised sweets, if I didn’t I was showed (sic) the stick. I’m a well-trained donkey by this* (P7/8, 295).

John McGahern, echoing Joyce, wrote in *Memoir* of his decision to replace religion with art: ‘Instead of being a priest of god, I would be the god of a small, vivid world’.<sup>17</sup> He maintained a reverence for Catholic ritual long after he stopped practising his religion. As such, he is representative of many Irish writers who demonstrated antipathy towards an authoritarian Catholic Church that tolerated no challenge to its control and was relentless in its pursuit of temporal power. Its overarching presence can be felt in the writing of this period, so much of which reflects negative and damaging experiences of religion and the Church. In many instances, they found themselves reacting against the fawning deference to the Church of society around them. It might be argued that Irish novelists would have been more ‘Catholic’ if their compatriots had been rather less so. Be that as it may, as Fintan O’Toole has written, ‘the world in which Catholic beliefs and institutions played so central a part is too imaginatively rich to be dispensed with without deep regret’.<sup>18</sup> In the face of a Church greatly weakened by scandal, the moment

may be ripe for a re-evaluation of its role in society and culture alike. Perhaps the last word may be given to Aunt Kate, a defrocked nun in John Broderick's second novel, *The Fugitives* (1962): 'Only the really religious people turn against religion in this country. The ones that are at the top and bottom of every religious institution are the ones that have no religion at all'.<sup>19</sup> Some of the anger and 'inherited dissent' may not, after all, have been because the Catholic Church in Ireland was too religious but because it was, as Augustine Martin was suggesting, not truly religious enough.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges a Fellowship received from the Moore Institute in NUI Galway, which greatly facilitated the research for this article.
- <sup>2</sup> Augustine Martin, 'Inherited Dissent: The Dilemma of the Irish Writer', *Studies*, vol.55 (Spring 1965), pp.1-20; here p.6.
- <sup>3</sup> *Letters of James Joyce*, vol.2 (ed. Richard Ellmann; New York: Viking Press, 1966), p.48.
- <sup>4</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1996), pp.43, 42.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Catholicism and National Identity in the Works of John McGahern', Interview between Eamon Maher and John McGahern, *Studies*, vol.90 (Spring 2001), pp.72-83; here pp.73-74. On McGahern's relationship with Catholicism, see Eamon Maher, *The Church and the Spire: John McGahern and the Catholic Question* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2011).
- <sup>6</sup> Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism Since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2002), p.119.

- <sup>7</sup> James Joyce, op. cit., p.273.
- <sup>8</sup> Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p.2.
- <sup>9</sup> Kate O'Brien, *The Ante-Room* (London: Virago, 1996), p.80. Subsequent references are to this edition, with page numbers in brackets.
- <sup>10</sup> Joe O'Connor, 'An Interview with Brian Moore', *Sunday Tribune*, 1 October, 1995, p.8.
- <sup>11</sup> Brian Moore, *Catholics* (London: Triad/Panther, 1983), p.10. Subsequent references are to this edition, with page numbers in brackets.
- <sup>12</sup> Terence Brown, 'Show Me a Sign: The Religious Imagination of Brian Moore', *Irish University Review*, 18.1 (1988), pp.37-49; here p.37.
- <sup>13</sup> John Broderick, *The Pilgrimage* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2004), p.171. Subsequent references are to this edition, with page numbers in brackets.
- <sup>14</sup> He submitted a manuscript to the publishers in the summer of 1959 and extracts were published in "X" (April 1961) and reprinted in "X" *Anthology*, ed. David Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). These were later incorporated into *The Dark*, chapters 3, 4 and 8. See Denis Sampson, 'John McGahern: A Preliminary Checklist', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol.17 (July 1991), p.95.
- <sup>15</sup> The various versions of 'The End or the Beginning of Love' are available in the McGahern Archive in the Hardiman Library in NUI Galway. The most complete version is catalogued at P71/8 and the quotations in the text are from this version, with page numbers in brackets; here p.15.
- <sup>16</sup> Derek Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.7.
- <sup>17</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p.205.
- <sup>18</sup> Fintan O'Toole, 'Why Artists Can't Quite Give Up on Catholicism', *Irish Times*, 5 December, 2009, p.5.
- <sup>19</sup> John Broderick, *The Fugitives* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), p.151.