Catholic Guilt: Longing and Belonging in the Fiction of François Mauriac and John McGahern

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EAMON MAHER

IT SHOULD be stated from the outset that the French Nobel laureate François Mauriac (1885-1970) is not usually cited as one of the influences on the Irish fiction writer John McGahern (1934-2006). Literary critics tend to point to Camus, Flaubert and Proust as the writers who had the greatest impact on McGahern’s literary evolution. Other international figures mentioned include Tolstoy and Thomas Hardy.

As a comparatist, always on the look-out for subtle and not so subtle connections between writers, I was delighted to discover that McGahern was reading Mauriac during the 1960s and that he even recommended one or two titles by the French author to his sister around this time. It always seemed likely to me that McGahern would have read and appreciated the work of Mauriac, whose harsh portrayal of a repressive form of Catholicism, a strong cult of family, and guilt-ridden characters who have huge difficulty reconciling the urges of the flesh with their religious beliefs, would have had an undoubted resonance with the Leitrim writer’s own preoccupations. ‘Belonging’ for both writers meant conforming to the narrow cult of family and local community, placing personal needs on a lower level than the demands of the ‘clan’. The result is often very damaging for the individual, who finds him or herself unable to break out of the moral confines of their particular milieu, with all the frustration that this can entail.

This article will point to some shared concerns between Mauriac and McGahern without attempting to suggest in any way that the Irish writer can compete with his French counterpart in terms of literary

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notoriety or accomplishment. Also, the cultural milieu depicted by the two writers is significantly different, with Mauriac’s characters being drawn from the educated land-owning bourgeoisie around Bordeaux whereas McGahern’s are, generally speaking, composed of small farmers from the northwest midlands of Ireland. In both instances, these are the backgrounds of the writers themselves and it is clear that they mined exhaustively their knowledge of these areas and communities as a source of inspiration for their work.

Catholicism is an important component for the writers and it is noticeable that neither attributes many positives to how it shaped their characters’ lives. In an interview with me in 2000, McGahern made the following observation:

I would think that if there was one thing injurious about the Church, it would be its attitude to sexuality. I see sexuality as just part of life. Either all of life is sacred or none of it is sacred. […] And I think it [the Church] made a difficult enough relationship – which is between people, between men and women – even more difficult by imparting an unhealthy attitude to sexuality.¹

It is worth noting here that McGahern only makes reference to heterosexual relationships: homosexuality would have been far more problematic in relation to Church teaching, especially in the 1930s and 40s when he was growing up in post-Independence Ireland.

As was revealed by Jean-Luc Barré’s somewhat controversial biography of Mauriac,² the Bordelais writer suffered hugely as a result of his homosexual longings, which came to light in a heightened manner during the 1920s when the strong attraction he felt for the handsome Swiss Cultural Attaché to France, Bernard Barbey, put severe pressure on Mauriac’s marriage. Barré argues that Barbey was just one in a line of young men for whom Mauriac had strong feelings: Jean Cocteau and Daniel Guérin are two other names cited in this context. It cannot

². Jean-Luc Barré, François Mauriac : biographie intime (1885-1940) (Paris : Fayard, 2009). This first tome is the one in which Mauriac’s alleged homosexuality is dealt with explicitly.
have been easy for a husband and father, a man of deep faith such as Mauriac clearly was, to harbour desires for which there was no satisfactory outlet. Because, to live out his homosexual passion fully would have meant leaving his wife and children and turning his back on a strict Catholic upbringing, something which in the end he could not countenance.

When reading his novels, one finds several instances where characters have a rather depressing view of sexuality, something which I associate with the difficulties Mauriac himself experienced in that particular area of his life. In one autobiographical account of his upbringing, Mauriac mentions how his pious mother (widowed from a young age) imbued in her children an excessive scrupulosity in relation to their bodies:

Our nightgowns were so long that I couldn’t even get to scratch my foot. We knew that the Lord above demanded from His children that they sleep with their arms crossed over their chests. We went to sleep with our palms almost nailed against our bodies, grasping the holy medals and the scapular of Mount Carmel that we couldn’t remove, even in the bath. The five children thus hugged against their bodies, in an embrace that was already passionate, the invisible love of God.3

Such rituals were not likely to instil a wholesome attitude to sexuality in Mauriac or his siblings. The body was the temple of the devil and it was important at all costs to keep it under control, to avoid ‘occasions of sin’, to remain pure and chaste. It is interesting to observe how McGahern, in Memoir, describes the conditioning he received as a child in a way that reminds one of Mauriac’s recounting of his mother’s instructions to her children at night. Once more, a negative image of the body is foregrounded:

Authority’s writ ran from God the father down and could not be questioned. Violence reigned as often as not in the homes as well. One of the compounds at its base was sexual sickness and frustration, as sex was seen, officially, as unclean and sinful, allowable only

when it too was licensed. Doctrine separated body and soul.⁴

Such a dichotomy between body and soul led to a situation which could, and often did, result in violence born out of frustration. Sex and sin were often perceived as synonymous, which created many problems for generations of Irish people forced to live with the consequences of such a legacy, which was promulgated by the Catholic Church and reinforced in the majority of Irish homes. In our subsequent discussion of McGahern's work, we will see how the dissatisfaction arising out of this situation manifested itself within the confines of family.

**THÉRÈSE DESQUEYROUX**

Having discussed briefly the backgrounds and religious conditioning of the writers, we will now move to a brief discussion of Catholic guilt in one novel by each, Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux* and McGahern's *The Dark*. Although almost four decades separate the publication of these books, they nevertheless contain enough areas of mutual interest to justify the comparison I am proposing.

*Thérèse* is undoubtedly Mauriac's *chef d'oeuvre*. The depiction of his heroine's attempted murder of her husband and the empathy she inspired in her creator did not appeal to the respectable Catholic lobby in France. How could a Catholic writer like Mauriac side with such a flawed individual, they asked? Mauriac anticipated this reaction in the Foreword:

> Many will feel surprise that I should give imagined life to a creature more odious than any characters in my other books. Why, they will ask, have I never anything to say of those who ooze with virtue and wear their hearts upon their sleeves? People who 'wear their hearts upon their sleeves' have no story for me to tell, but I know the secrets of the hearts that are deep buried in, and mingled with, the filth of flesh.⁵

The point made here is a valid one. For the novelist, evil characters

offer much more dramatic scope than saintly depictions – Bernanos is one of the few novelists to have delved successfully into the realms of sanctity. Mauriac excelled in the psychological probing of people like Thérèse who become consumed with evil and who at the same time retain certain spiritual needs that cannot be satisfied through conventional religious practice.

Seeing how Bernard and his family use religion as a means of bolstering their social status fills Thérèse with disgust and is a contributory factor in her decision to poison her husband. Her disenchantment came to a head during a Corpus Christi procession when Thérèse observed the priest reverentially carrying the monstrance containing the Eucharist while Bernard followed behind ‘doing his duty’ (p. 73). Religion, for Thérèse, was not a matter of being seen in church and providing all the outward signs of piety. For her, it had to involve more than that: it demanded a genuinely spiritual dimension. The Desqueyroux and La Trave families view Thérèse as something of a rebel because of her unwillingness to play the role of good Catholic and dutiful wife. Appearances are all-important to them and they place family above everything else. What they fail to realise is that Thérèse is actually someone with deep spiritual cravings: ‘She longed to have knowledge of some God. She wanted to pray that this unknown life which was still an undistinguishable part of herself might never see the light of day’ (p. 30).

For all the faults that Mauriac points out in Bernard’s character (and they are manifold), Thérèse admits that she was not indifferent to him or, more pertinently, to his pines, before they got married. The respective land of the two families seemed made for ‘fusion’ and as someone with property in her blood, this played a key role in Thérèse’s decision to marry Bernard.

Another factor was undoubtedly her infatuation with Anne de la Trave, Bernard’s half-sister, to whom Thérèse hoped to become even closer after the wedding. The descriptions of the sweltering hot summer days that Anne and Thérèse spent together are tinged with definite traces of lesbian desire. When looking back on her youth after her acquittal for attempted murder, the heroine notes: ‘Everything which dates from before my marriage I see now as bathed in a
light of purity – doubtless because that time stands out in such vivid contrast to the indelible filth of my wedded life’ (p. 22). Describing her wedded life as being associated with ‘indelible filth’ underscores a tendency to link the sexual act to sinfulness and guilt. Alone with Bernard after their wedding Thérèse anticipates ‘that irremediable outrage to which her body would have to submit’ (p. 33), another strong indication that the heroine has anything but a positive view of the upcoming consummation.

It is not traditional Catholic guilt that makes Thérèse so disparaging towards sexual concourse. She is portrayed as being cold towards her husband’s advances, which she finds distasteful, but equally she demonstrates no desire for other men, which brings us back to the attraction she felt for Anne. It is not too outlandish to argue that Mauriac was revealing something of his own turmoil at this period in his life when the fascination with Barbey was at its height. Family is a ‘cage’ for Thérèse, as perhaps it was equally for Mauriac during the time he was composing his classic novel. It is difficult to read the following description of Bernard’s lovemaking without thinking that marital sex was viewed in a negative light by both the heroine and Mauriac:

I always saw Bernard 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. As often as not, balanced on the very edge of the ultimate excruciation, he would discover suddenly he was alone. The gloomy battle would be broken off, and Bernard, retracing his steps, would, as it were, stand back and see me there, like a dead body thrown up on the shore, my teeth clenched, my body cold to his touch (p. 35).

Bernard is in all likelihood conscious of his wife’s indifference, but after she becomes pregnant during their honeymoon, his focus switches to the new life growing within Thérèse and he does not force himself too regularly on his unenthusiastic partner. Indeed, Mauriac leaves the reader in no doubt as to his heroine’s attitude to sex: ‘Much as when looking at a landscape shrouded in mist we fancy what it must look like in sunshine, so did Thérèse contemplate the delights of the
flesh’ (p. 34). Lines like these would not have endeared Mauriac to many of his fellow Catholics in France.

As the novel progresses, we see Thérèse being consumed by her crime, entering almost like a sleepwalker into the role of would-be assassin. In the end, Bernard is saved by the intervention of a medical expert from outside the area who detects unusually high levels of arsenic in the patient’s system. During his convalescence and Thérèse’s appearance in court, Bernard’s sole preoccupation is with preserving the reputation of the family. He suspects that his wife’s actions were motivated by a desire to secure all their wealth for herself and he fails to see the much more complex web that led to Thérèse’s crime. There is a real communication deficit between the couple. They are as far apart psychologically as they are incompatible sexually and therein can be found the root of their problems.

THE DARK

McGahern’s first novel, The Barracks, received much acclaim on its publication in 1963. It won a number of awards and the critics predicted that a new Irish literary talent had arrived on the scene.

Therefore, the announcement that his second novel, The Dark, was to appear in 1965 was greeted with much anticipation. However, it did not meet with anything like the same level of approval and its portrayal of a troubled adolescent’s struggle with masturbation and an abusive father led to its banning and the subsequent dismissal of McGahern as a primary school teacher. The novel opens with a middle-aged widower, Mahoney, administering a simulated beating to his son, whom he has commanded to undress and go to his sisters’ bedroom. As the boy bends naked over a chair, Mahoney senior brings the strap down on the leather seat parallel to the boy’s head. The sexual overtones are obvious: ‘He didn’t lift a hand, as if the stripping compelled by his will alone gave him pleasure.’ 6 He issues orders in an imperious manner: ‘Move and I’ll cut the arse off you. I’m only giving you a taste of what you’re going to get’ (p. 9). When it’s all over, the leather strap resembles a limp penis after ejaculation and Mahoney’s excitement is

obvious: ‘[H]is face still red and heated, the leather hanging dead in his hand’ (p. 10). The boy’s humiliation is complete when his sisters witness him losing control and urinating on the chair.

Throughout the early part of The Dark young Mahoney’s orgies of self-abuse are described in detail. One particular instance, where the boy uses a newspaper picture of a woman revealing the hair in her armpits as his stimulus, caused something of a stir, as the advertisement for hair removal had appeared in The Irish Independent, considered a highly conservative newspaper at the time. After climax, Mahoney feels intense guilt:

The pulsing dies away, a last gentle fluttering, and I can lie quiet. The day of the room returns, red shelves with the books and the black wooden crucifix, the torn piece of newspaper on the pillow. Everything is as dead as dirt. I’d committed five sins since morning (p. 31).

The only way to dispense with the guilt is to go and confess his sins to a priest. Mahoney regards confession as a type of mechanical means of clearing the slate and starting afresh. The church pews are full of people who have come with the same intention: ‘All waited for forgiveness, in the listless performance of habit and duty or torturing and turning over their sins and lives, time now to judge themselves and beg, on the final day there would be neither time nor choice’ (p. 39). The fear of Hell hangs over all these wretched souls in search of forgiveness. In Mahoney’s case, masturbation is top of the list of sins he must confess. The priest questions him about the ‘impure actions’ and the number of times he gave in to temptation. The response, ‘More than two hundred times’ (p. 41), is not commented on other than for the priest to say that the penitent must fight the sin and pray for grace. Then Mahoney is given absolution and feels momentarily elated: ‘such relief had come to you, fear and darkness gone, never would you sin again’ (p. 42).

It is significant that Mahoney fails to mention in confession the abuse he (literally) suffers at his father’s hands. The rhythmic massaging of his stomach and genitalia by Mahoney Senior, bringing both to orgasm, seems unworthy of mention, even though it clearly leaves its
mark on the young protagonist. Somehow, abuse within the home, what is referred to as ‘the dirty rags of intimacy’ (p. 19), the ‘loathing’ (p. 21) they inspire in the son, are placed outside the list of peccadilloes that must be related to the priest in the confessional. It is as though such acts were sanctioned by the dominant position of the father in the Ireland of the time.

Mahoney had promised his dying mother that he would become a priest and offer Masses for the repose of her soul, but because of his problems with masturbation, he believes himself unworthy of the calling. One of his fantasies is to hear the confession of some woman who has had illicit sex:

A whimper of grief in her voice, her dress would rustle, her face and young body close as inches to yours in the night. The same young thighs that had opened submissively wide to the man’s rise the summer night by the river might open wide as that for you. She’d give you the fulfilment you craved…. Or would you burst out of the box and take her in madness? … Would she cry out too when the priest tore her clothes off and took her on the stone floor of the church? (p. 55)

Such a scenario was always likely to elicit a negative response in the Ireland of the 1960s, with its vivid sadomasochistic descriptions of a disturbed young mind. However, even more daring was the suggestion later on in the novel, when Mahoney visits his cousin, Fr Gerald, that the latter may have been trying to groom the boy. The priest enters Mahoney’s room in the middle of the night, gets into bed alongside him and proceeds to question him in an intrusive manner about his sexual desires: ‘[Y]ou stiffened when his arm went around your shoulder, was this to be another of the midnight horrors with your father’ (p. 70). The way that this scene mirrors the nights when Mahoney has to endure his father’s improper sexual advances, and the fact that in this instance the perpetrator is a priest, leads to bitter disillusionment. But it also pretty well guaranteed that McGahern’s novel would attract the attention of the Censorship Board and be banned.

Fifty years later, in the wake of the clerical abuse scandals and revelations of the horrific treatment meted out to largely innocent children
and young adults in Church-run institutions such as Industrial Schools and Magdalene Laundries, the courage of McGahern in touching on such issues was truly remarkable. Fintan O’Toole captured it well shortly after McGahern’s death in 2006: ‘When it [child sex abuse] hit the headlines in the 1990s, it was spoken of as a stunning and awful revelation, a secret that hardly anyone knew. Yet it is there in black and white in The Dark, thirty years before’.7

It is easy in the Ireland of today to look back in horror at some of the atrocities that were committed, often in the name of religion, but very few were prepared to bring them to light in the way that McGahern did. What is particularly forceful about his depictions is the controlled, non-judgemental way in which they are written. He does not see his role as performing the work of judge and jury and he leaves a lot of the horror in the subtext. Young Mahoney is a damaged man by the time he arrives at university in Galway and promptly opts to leave when offered a job with the Electricity Supply Board. The reconciliation between father and son at the end of the novel is more apparent than real, as is well captured by Michael Cronin:

Young Mahoney may move from his father’s house to Father Gerald’s house to Galway; he may circulate between different emotional and social environments, and between apparently different ranges of possibility. But wherever he goes there is always a bedroom, and the appearance of choice and of diverse possibilities is inevitably reduced to the same singular fate.8

That fate is not an enviable one and the sad fact of the matter is the way in which the guilt endured in the bedroom is generally felt by the victim far more than by the perpetrator.

WHERE OTHERS FEARED TO GO

François Mauriac and John McGahern were writers who dared to tread where others feared to go. They exposed hypocrisy in all its guises.

and shone a light into areas of life that were known but never spoken about. Catholic guilt is a central part of their fictional universe and they write about it convincingly because of their own private struggles with it. Mauriac captured the dilemma of his art succinctly:

A Catholic writer advances along a narrow crest between two chasms: he cannot be a cause of scandal and yet he cannot lie either; he must not excite the desires of the flesh, and yet he must also beware of not giving a false picture of life. Which is the greater danger: making young people dream in an aberrant manner or inspiring disgust in them for Christ and His Church? 9

Mauriac eventually discovered a solution to his dilemma: he would attempt to write with a pure heart in order to attenuate the dangers to which his writings might potentially expose his readers. McGahern always believed that his role was to write as well as he could and, in so doing, he would express whatever it was that he needed to say. Both writers demonstrate great skill when it comes to getting across the trials and tribulations of people who are conditioned to think in a certain way about religion and sexuality and for whom Catholic guilt is a perennial problem.


‘Who do you say that I am?’ – From ‘Miracles’ in my first collection to ‘Intercession’ and ‘The Call’ in my most recent book, I have been preoccupied with the issue of Christ in the world – live issue for me.

*Dennis O’Driscoll (writing in November 2011), quoted by John F. Deane in Give Dust a Tongue*