Struggles with the Fairer Sex : George Moore's Fr. Oliver Gogarty in 'The lake'

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Eamon Maher

George Moore (1852-1933) is a strangely undervalued literary figure in Ireland. He was very close to French writers of the stature of Emile Zola, Théophile Gautier, Edouard Dujardin (the originator of the 'stream of consciousness' technique later adopted by Moore and Joyce), as well as the impressionist painters Renoir, Degas and Manet. In fact, Manet did a number of portraits of Moore and once famously stated to his friend: 'There is no Englishman who occupies the position you do in Paris.' No English-speaking foreigner, not even his contemporary Joyce, inspired the esteem that Moore elicited among artistic circles in Paris which, when he arrived there for the first time in the 1870s, was a veritable hive of cultural creativity.

Perhaps it is because he lived much of his life in France and England that has led to Moore being somewhat neglected in his country of birth. His father George Henry Moore was a Catholic landlord in the West of Ireland and an elected member of Parliament for Mayo. He had the reputation of being extremely fair with his tenants, but even this did not prevent the Moore estate from encountering difficulties in the latter half of the 19th century, when land agitation reached crisis point. The fact that the heir to the estate, George Junior, was usually absent from Ireland did not help to calm things when difficulties inevitably arose in relation to rents and evictions.

Moore's problems with Irish Catholicism can be explained in many ways. He believed that priests in Ireland strove to keep the people in ignorance, all the better to extract vast sums of money from them for building projects and to maintain their lavish lifestyle. The short story collection The Untilled Field, first published in 1903, contains many uncomplimentary portrayals of Irish priests who seem at best powerless, or at worst unwilling to help the impoverished peasants in their parishes to enjoy any sort of normal life. In fact, a huge number of Irish people, particularly in areas west of the Shannon, were forced to leave their homes and their country in order to make some sort of living for themselves and their families abroad. In the story, 'A Letter to Rome', the parish priest Fr MacTurnan, after a lifetime watching his community become more and more destitute, decides to write to Rome suggesting that the rule of celibacy be relaxed for the Irish clergy and that they be advised to wed. He explains his reasons in his letter to Rome thus:

Ireland can be saved by her priesthood! ... The priests live in the best houses, eat the best food, wear the best clothes; they are
indeed the flower of the nation, and would produce magnificent sons and daughters. And who could bring up their children according to the teaching of our holy church as well as priests?²

Unsurprisingly, his suggestion does not meet with a favourable reaction from the Holy See and his Bishop mistakenly believes that MacTur­
nan is having personal difficulties with celibacy, an idea that is hotly disputed by the priest:

‘No, your Grace, no. Celibacy has been no burden for me – far from it. Sometimes I feared that it was celibacy that attracted me to the priesthood. Celibacy was a gratification rather than a sacrifice.’³

I use this short parenthesis to illustrate how George Moore was clearly very interested in the celibate state⁴, particularly as it pertained to priests. Robert Welch ponders on why there was such a fascination with priests in Moore’s work and concludes that there was in him, as in Joyce, ‘a good deal of the priest.’ He continues:

He wrote well of the comforts of the presbytery, the beeswaxed security of the convent, but he also showed, in the writing he did in Ireland (and subsequently), that life’s impulses are con­stantly escaping (going into exile from) the constraints orthodoxy would place upon them. This makes him, as a writer, capable of celebration.⁵

There is a sense in which Moore’s anticlericalism is born out of a sneaking admiration for a way of life that has as its alleged objective a pursuit of the transcendent. His most in-depth probing of the mind of a priest is undoubtedly to be found in his 1905 novel, The Lake, which will form the main focus of this article. The Lake marks a departure in Irish literature in its depiction of a priest, Fr Gogarty, who undergoes a psychological awakening which causes him to lose his faith. This crisis results from his relationship with a teacher, Nora Glynn, whom he denounced from the pulpit and for whom he un­knowingly harboured feelings of love. The form of Catholicism one encounters in The Lake, published in 1905, is one which bears the hallmarks of Moore’s own unbelief at this period in his life. In a letter to his brother Maurice, around the time he was composing The Lake, Moore made the following observation: ‘One writes badly when one is in a passion; no one knows that better than I do.’⁶ Moore was annoyed by his brother’s religiosity, which he associated with ignorance and lack of sophistication. In the same correspondence, brought to light by Conor Montague, Moore belittled Maurice’s religious beliefs in the following manner:
Agnosticism is not so infallible for the production of good literature as Catholicism is for the production of bad. You write like an angel, that I can see; you tell me you have nothing to say—well, Catholics never have, here or elsewhere—they are a silent lot.7 In light of Moore's comments above, Fr Gogarty seems to have a lot to say and to be, in fact, a rather obvious mouthpiece for some of the writer's own views. After Nora has left the parish in disgrace, Gogarty reflects on his true feelings for her and sees that he 'wanted her body as well as her soul.'8 In one of the many letters he writes to her, he reveals how his training in Maynooth seminary taught him 'to despise women' (129), but that he was now determined to follow a different path: 'God gave us our human nature; we may misuse and degrade our nature, but we must never forget that it came originally from God' (129).

The priest becomes increasingly fascinated by nature and associates Nora with the sun and the spring-tide. His quest, he discovers, is not so much Nora Glynn as the inner life he has discovered through the feelings she has aroused in him. He comes to view the Mass as 'a mere Latin formula' and sees his quest as 'that intimate exaltation that comes to him that has striven to be himself, and nothing but himself.' (175)

In many ways, Oliver Gogarty's awakening to the love he feels for Nora Glynn appears contrived. Their numerous letters to one another skirt their real feelings and delve into complex areas of literature, theology and philosophy that would appear to be very high-brow and not altogether realistic. Gogarty is manifestly not so concerned with the dangers posed to Nora's faith and spiritual wellbeing by her taking up with the successful writer, Walter Poole, a self-proclaimed atheist, as he is at the thought of her sharing this man's bed. Similarly, his claim in a letter he writes to her that the dilemma he is undergoing because of his harsh treatment of her, will serve him well in his subsequent life as a priest, just does not have the ring of authenticity:

The conflict going on within me goes on within every man, but without this conflict life would be superficial; we shouldn't know the deeper life. Duty has its rewards as well as its pain, and the knowledge that I am passing through a period of probationship sustains me. I know I shall come out of it all a stronger man (100)

Unlike MacTurnan, Gogarty is aware of the sexual attraction Nora Glynn represents for him and he also knows that celibacy precludes all types of intimacy that he would like to share with her. Whereas I do not find the relationship between priest and female parishioner satisfactory on many levels, I do believe that Moore achieves more success in his depiction of how Gogarty relates to another priest working in England, Michael O'Grady, whom he contacts to find out what has
Moore's view of the Catholic Church was at an all-time low at the time he was composing *The Lake*. O'Grady sees his brother priest's dilemma long before the younger man accepts what is bothering him. He advises Gogarty to put Nora utterly out of his mind, something the young man is incapable of doing. Then he pays him a surprise visit in his parish and hears his Confession. Afterwards O'Grady says, 'We should not fall into the sin of despair' (81) and tries to convince Gogarty that Nora's employment with Poole need not necessarily involve a threat to her faith. In the course of a general conversation surrounding relationships that follows, Fr Gogarty explains how he was ordained at 22 and was 'singularly free from all temptations of the sensual life, especially those represented by womankind' (83). He continues: '... as soon as I began to hear confessions, the things that surprised me most were the stories relating to those passionate attachments that men experience for women, and women for men—attachments which sometimes so intense that if the sufferer cannot obtain relief by the acquiescence of the object of their affections, he, if it be he, she, if it be she, cannot refrain from suicide' (83). The look in Fr O'Grady's eyes on hearing this pronouncement shows that Gogarty 'had revealed himself' (83). The older priest sees the pain that Oliver Gogarty is undergoing and it is likely that his concern for what was happening to him is what prompted O'Grady to visit Gogarty during his stay in Ireland.

When they are not discussing matters of the heart, there is an obvious empathy between the two men. The time they spend at the table, their references to the current state of the Irish Church, politics and the clerical life, are all conveyed in a way that shows a deep understanding by Moore of how priests at this time (and perhaps still) enjoy friendships that sustain them during the difficult times that inevitably occur during their solitary lives.

Therefore, while it is undoubtedly a most interesting novel on many levels, especially in its daring experiments with narrative technique, the main problem with *The Lake* is precisely the fault that Moore tried to warn his brother Maurice about, namely writing when in a passion. As already mentioned, Moore's view of the Catholic Church was at an all-time low at the time he was composing *The Lake*. Fr Gogarty's fascination with Nora Glynn stems from his belief that she is benefiting from the type of intellectual liberation that is only available outside of Ireland. On the Continent, she is free to develop her own ideas and discuss them with like-minded people, without looking over her shoulder to ensure that her actions are not reported to the moral policemen that were the Irish priests of the time. Peter Connolly, a priest and former Professor of English in Maynooth College, is correct in his assessment that Moore and Joyce 'rejected the dogmatic and moral system of the Church in the name of the artist's search for
freedom, but to a surprising extent they were obsessed with the priest as a personification of it all.' Art and religion were synonymous for two of Ireland's most cosmopolitan writers, who saw themselves as secular priests of the written word. Undoubtedly, time spent abroad influenced both writers and imbued in them a respect for truth and accuracy of expression, a desire to say and do what they believed to be correct. That freedom was not available in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Hence Fr Gogarty, in the stream-of-consciousness technique pioneered by Dujardin and adopted by Moore, can reflect on what exactly he seeks to achieve from leaving Ireland: 'He was not following her, but an idea, an abstraction, an opinion; he was separating himself, and for ever, from his native land, and his past life, and his quest was, alas! not her, but – He was following what? Life? Yes, but what is life? Do we find life in adventure or by our own fireside?' (174)

For George Moore, 'life' was more easily found in the new and the exciting, as distinct from at his own fireside. Thus Gogarty thinks with envy about the discoveries that Nora Glynn is making far from the shores of Ireland. One wonders, however, the extent to which a priest, even one with the intellectual capacities of Oliver Gogarty, working in a rural parish in Co. Mayo and insulated from the secular influences of the Continent, would have had the self-awareness and the humility to make the following admission:

Again I thank you for what you have done for me, for the liberation you have brought me of body and mind. I need not have added 'body and mind' for these are not two things, but one thing. And that is the lesson I have learned. Good-bye. (147)

This parting comment does not sit comfortably with the rather conservative and repressed priest who felt it necessary to denounce Nora from the altar. The bringing together of body and mind, the notion that the two things are in essence one, indicates a rather radical break with his seminary training, his background and his life experience. He did not follow through on the attraction he felt for Nora, had not absconded with her and experienced the consummation of his desire. How then can one say that this is a logical evolution? His decision at the end of the novel to fake a drowning by leaving his clothes on the shore of the lake (he had left a fresh pair at the other side) and to live out his new-found freedom away from Ireland, is not consistent with the mind of the man we encounter at the beginning of the narrative. The following declaration is also somewhat out of kilter with the priest's character:

It seemed to him that we begin to love when we cease to judge.
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If she were different she wouldn’t be herself, and it was herself he loved – the mystery of her sunny, singing nature. There is no judgement where there is perfect sympathy, and he understood that it would be as vain for him to lament that her eyebrows were fair as to lament or reprove her conduct. (177)

Whose views are being expressed here? Oliver Fogarty’s? Or George Moore’s? Much inclines one to see the latter as being in the ascendancy towards the end of The Lake. Rather than being two separate people, therefore, Moore and his character become one, sharing insights and feelings that have been nurtured by the pain of an impossible love and the compelling desire to find meaning in the midst of all the madness of the world. It is hard to believe that Moore could have written a novel like The Lake without having spent such long periods outside of Ireland. It was the accumulation of adventures and experiences which he sampled in places like Paris and London that made him into the cosmopolitan writer and astute art critic that he would become. Saying that is not to play down in any way his Irish heritage either, because one must always have something to react against as well as to espouse. In his Confessions of a Young Man, we read the following lines:

Two dominant notes in my character – an original hatred of my native country, and a brutal loathing of the religion I was brought up in. All the aspects of my native country are violently disagreeable to me, and I cannot think of the place I was born in without a sensation akin to nausea. These feelings are inherent and inveterate in me. I am instinctively averse from my own countrymen; they are at once remote and repulsive; but with Frenchmen I am conscious of a sense of nearness; I am one with them in their ideas and aspirations, and when I am with them, I am alive with a keen and penetrating sense of intimacy.10

This ‘loathing’ of Catholicism at certain times caused Moore to be somewhat emotive in his portrayal of the religion of his youth, but strangely enough it did not blind him to some of the virtues of the priestly life and function, which are conveyed convincingly, and with quite a deal of insight, in a novel such as The Lake.