2022

Julien Green (1900–1998): Exploring the Intersection of Religion and Literature

Eamon Maher

*Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ittbus](https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ittbus)

Part of the Catholic Studies Commons, French and Francophone Literature Commons, and the Modern Literature Commons

**Recommended Citation**


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Business and Humanities at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie, gerard.connolly@tudublin.ie, vera.kilshaw@tudublin.ie.
Julien Green (1900–1998): Exploring the Intersection of Religion and Literature

Eamon Maher

The extent and quality of Julien Green’s work has earned for him a place in the pantheon of French, and, indeed, world letters. Born in Paris at the very start of the twentieth century to American parents, Green never felt completely at home in France or in the American South, where he went to pursue a university education. His parents were Protestants and when he was young, Julien’s mother, in addition to relating incredible stories about the American Civil War, also used to read the King James Bible aloud to her children, an activity that left an indelible mark on her son. He was greatly taken with the dramatic language and stories from that book. We will see that a number of his characters, nervous about their standing in the eyes of God, seek in the Bible signs that they are saved. Like Flannery O’Connor’s fictional creations, the majority of Green’s characters are Protestants, a fact that does not prevent him from being a distinctly Catholic writer, as we shall see. Indeed, the early engagement with Catholicism culminated in his conversion ceremony in the crypt of the Chapelle des Soeurs Blanches, 26, rue Cortambert in the sixteenth arrondissement of Paris on the 29 April 1916, after undergoing a period of preparation with a family friend, le Père Crété. There were periods during which he became alienated from his adopted religion, and from God, but he nevertheless always remained a staunchly committed Catholic.

A noteworthy incident which occurred during his youth was when one day his sister noticed his hands exploring the forbidden area of his body and reported him to his mother, who entered his bedroom brandishing a knife and shouting: ‘I’ll cut it off!’ Ever afterwards, Green was haunted by the fear of castration, a fear that was exacerbated by his mother’s exclamation, ‘Oh, isn’t it ugly!’, on seeing him as a boy nude in the bath and referring to the same body member that she had previously threatened to remove forcibly.¹

The recent publication of Green’s unexpurgated Journal², covering the years 1919–1940 when his homosexual activities were at their most intense, offers invaluable insights into the complex balancing act that the writer
had to maintain throughout his life between his sexual orientation and his religious convictions. Green had always kept a journal, which he published regularly and in which he shared many anecdotes from his personal life and the political events that were shaping French life and world affairs – the two World Wars being the most significant of these – but, out of a desire to protect his adopted son, Eric, and his lifelong lover, mentor and best friend, Robert de Saint Jean, he also kept a separate journal which recounted in graphic detail many of his sexual adventures. His homosexuality would have been well known in Parisian literary and social circles, but what the *Journal intégral* reveals is the extent to which he acted out on his impulses. On almost every second page, we read about his encounters with strangers in parks, public toilets, baths, homosexual clubs, public transport, streets and alleyways. In an entry on the 17 September 1928, he wrote: ‘I want to put my entire existence into these pages, with total frankness and exactitude. What will this book become? I have no idea, but it will be satisfying for me to know it exists’ (89–90). Not only was it satisfying for Green to know that these hidden facts would one day come into the public domain, but it was also incredibly useful for those of us who are students of his work to learn about his preoccupations and behaviour during this critical stage of his development. Remember that this is the man who remarked on the close links between his fiction and his autobiography in the following manner:

I write out of an urgent need to forget, to plunge myself into a fictional world. And what do I find in this fictional world? My own problems which have been greatly heightened, to the point where they attain terrifying proportions.³

This article will look at some of Green’s fictional work and situate it in relation to episodes recounted in his autobiographical publications, not in a way that seeks to prove the autobiographical dimension of his fiction, but as a means of illustrating how one informs the other. Hence, this article will explore the degree to which literature and religion intersect and complement each other, without the lines between the two becoming blurred. Green appreciated the power of fiction to reveal many of his obsessions in a way that his autobiographical writing could not achieve.
A Catholic and a writer

When Green was elected to the Académie Française in 1972, he was given the seat formerly occupied by Mauriac, with whom he had a rather fractious relationship. In his acceptance speech, which was a tribute to Mauriac, Green conveyed the discomfort he felt (a discomfort he shared with Mauriac) when people spoke of him as a ‘Catholic’ writer: ‘In my mind, religion is one thing, the novel something else entirely, and there is always the risk when you mix the two of creating something that borders on apologetics.’ During one exchange recounted in the *Journal intégral* (3 May 1929), Mauriac told Green: ‘You are a believer in spite of everything’ (127). Green’s problem was that his sexual needs were sometimes out of sync with his spiritual aspirations. In one of his earliest forays into the world of publishing in 1924, the *Pamphlet contre les catholiques de France*, Green showed his inability as a young convert to allow for any compromise among his fellow Catholics:

All Catholicism is suspect if it doesn’t upturn the life of the person practicing it, if it doesn’t mark him out in the eyes of the world, if it doesn’t overwhelm, if each day it doesn’t make of his life a renewed passion, if it isn’t odious to the flesh, if it isn’t unbearable.

When one considers that these lines were written by someone who at that precise time was actively engaging in acts that were condemned by the Catholic church, a church whose adherents Green accused of not living up to its higher ideals, it would be easy to conclude that Green was being a trifle hypocritical at the very least. But when you consider the virulence with which several of his characters speak of their relationship with God, it becomes clear that for Green religious fanaticism was at one and the same time necessary and dangerous. For him, passion trumped indifference every time. He would subsequently admit that he wrote the *Pamphlet* at a time when he was disillusioned at the realisation that he would never be a saint. In some ways, Green has more in common with Dostoevsky than with French Catholic writers such as Mauriac or Bernanos, because of the prevalence of evil in his fiction, the use of dreams and invisible interventions, and the pitiless destiny that plagues his characters. Malcolm Scott argues that Green was of the view that writing novels was not compatible with being in a state of grace and that literature stemmed from the base instincts of the writer.

After considering briefly these aspects of Green’s interaction with
Catholicism, our focus will turn to two of Green’s better-known novels, *Moïra* (1950) and *Each Man in his Darkness* (1960). Both are set in America and both reveal a more positive view of existence than one finds in much of Green’s earlier fiction, most notably *Mont-Cinère* (*Avarice House*) (1926), *Adrienne Mesurat* (1927) and *Léviathan* (1929), where no hope of deliverance from evil is apparent for the characters.

Green made the journey to America in 1919. He looked on this trip as a way of rediscovering the American South that heretofore he had seen only through his mother Mary’s eyes. His joy at discovering family members and landmarks recounted to him was tempered by the realisation that things had changed a lot since the time of his mother’s childhood. As well as rediscovering his roots, Green also widened his horizons by attending the University of Virginia, where he studied Latin, Greek, English literature, History and German. He also published his first literary work, a short story entitled ‘The Apprentice Psychiatrist’, which appeared in the university magazine. The experience of these years possibly forms the inspiration for *Moïra*, his *chef d’oeuvre*, published many years later.

**Moïra: sex and destiny**

The novel relates the tragic destiny of Joseph Day, a fervent young Protestant from a remote farm nestled among the mountains, who decides to attend university mainly to study Greek so that he might better understand the Bible. *Moïra* represents a new departure in Green’s literary evolution in that it was composed at a time when he had become reconciled to Catholicism. The dream sequences and the irruption of the supernatural that form the basis of the previous stage of his literary evolution (1931–47) in works such as *L’Autre Sommeil*, *Épaves*, *Le Visionnaire* (a title that is revealing in itself), *Minuit*, *Varouna* and *Si j’étais vous*, are replaced by a concentration on the conflict between sin and grace. They also contain fictional representations of his experiences in America and a reassessment of his relationship with Catholicism. In his introduction to the 1988 version of the English version of *Moïra*, Stephen Pickles quotes from a 1942 entry in Green’s *Journal*, where he says: ‘I would like to be able to tell the truth about myself. … I would like to tell my truth one day, one hour, or only for a few minutes. … The only means I can see of managing this is to write a novel’.8

This idea of the novel being a vehicle for revealing the hidden self is one that recurs quite frequently in Green’s work. In the case of *Moïra*, there
can be no doubting the closeness between Joseph Day and his creator in terms of their religious fanaticism. Day is horrified by the licentiousness he detects in his fellow students, who often make fun of this zealot whom they christen the ‘Exterminating Angel’. Given his inability to keep his criticisms to himself, it is not surprising that Day does not make too many friends. He does become close to the soft-spoken David Laird, however, who hopes to become a minister. Day remarks how different the two of them are: ‘Your love of God is peaceful, but I am mad for God. I can only love violently, because I am a passionate man. That is why I am in danger of losing grace and why, in a way, I am nearer hell than you will ever be’ (193).

Joseph’s red hair and fiery temperament reflect his passionate nature, a nature he has difficulty keeping under control. He does not comprehend in any real sense the extent to which he is governed by his sexual impulses. He is attracted to another student, Praileau, an aloof figure with whom he provokes a fight when he feels the latter is making fun of his red hair. Unknowingly, Joseph is attempting to purge the passion that takes hold of him every time he is in Praileau’s presence: ‘A sudden, mad joy filled him at his own strength and he felt some mysterious hunger in him being satisfied’ (27). Praileau makes the prophetic observation after the encounter that there is an assassin lurking in Joseph. Disdainful of the ‘bestial instincts’ of his fellow students, Joseph is gloriously unaware of his true character. Hence, when his landlady Mrs Dare announces that her stepdaughter Moira (in Greek, *moïra* means destiny) is coming home on a visit, the scene for a fateful confrontation is established. When he first arrived in his digs and was given Moira’s room, Joseph decided to sleep on the floor, believing that he risked contamination by lying in a bed that had been occupied by a woman of suspect morals. Mrs Dare’s appearance had already shocked him on his arrival: she was ‘painted like a Jezebel’ (6) and smoked freely in his presence.

Some of the students set a trap for Joseph by getting Moira to visit the young man in his room and lock the door. After some initial agitation, Joseph manages to control himself until Moira, resigned to the fact that her attempted seduction has failed, goes to exit the room. All of a sudden, overcome by passion, Joseph takes her in his arms and commits the act that he abhorred above all others. Moira is shocked by the transformation she sees in him: ‘In the half-light she saw Joseph’s eyes shining like the eyes of no other man she had ever seen, and she was suddenly filled with terror’ (209). The pair fall asleep and the following morning, seeing Moira beside him in the
bed, Joseph smothers her with a pillow, unable to look into the face of the temptress who has shown him his true nature. He moves as if in a trance through the university campus and meets up with David, to whom he declares that he does not want to speak of God anymore. His friend realises what has happened and urges Joseph not to be too harsh on himself: ‘I don’t judge you, I have never judged you. … I’ve always thought that you were better than I am. I still think so. I shall never be anything other than a little clergyman. But you …’ (234). David’s humility is in stark contrast to the certainty that marked Joseph’s behavior and pronouncements prior to the fateful encounter with Moira, his ‘destiny’.

In spite of its title, many commentators argue that the sexual attraction between Joseph and Praileau is the real focus of the novel. During the period he spent in Virginia, Green was besotted with a male student whom he referred to as ‘Mark’ (not his real name). He never summoned up the courage to declare his love, even when Mark came to visit him in Paris. Green himself admitted in an interview why the motivation for Joseph’s crime is left in doubt: ‘I didn’t attempt to explain what Joseph did not understand himself. Instead, I merely presented the drama is such a way that the reader might guess without too much difficulty what it was that I could not allow myself to say.’ Scott remarks that Joseph is ‘a bigotedly pious young man who is forced by circumstance to face his repressed sexuality’ and I would add that this revelation of his fallen nature results in a moment of grace. The last lines of Moïra are significant in this regard:

The light wavered between the trees, each branch showing white against the pale blue sky, now turning grey. The library clock rang out in the distance and in the dusk was heard the hard, fresh voice of a small boy calling an evening newspaper. With beating heart Joseph went on his way.

At the corner of the street a man came towards him. (235)

The rays of light filtering through the trees, the pure sky, the peaceful scene into which Joseph emerges does not indicate that his fate will necessarily be tragic. The man coming towards him could be an agent of grace, someone who will get Joseph to face up to what he has done. It is not the role of the novelist to pronounce on these matters, and Green wisely leaves it up to his readers to decide what will become of his character. No one can judge
whether someone is worthy of God’s love apart from God. Sin can often be a path to salvation and so the ‘righteous’ should be more circumspect when it comes to judging sinners.

A sinner saved

*Each Man in his Darkness* introduces us to the charismatic Wilfred Ingram, a devout Catholic who is also a womaniser. Unlike Joseph Day, Wilfred is all too aware of his weaknesses and it may be this trait that might explain his evangelical quality. People who come in contact with him sense a strong spiritual quality and they find themselves unburdening their problems to him, as they would do to a priest. However, the hero is acutely conscious of his sinful nature, and especially of the numerous sexual encounters he has had with women. There is a powerful scene at the beginning of the novel when Wilfred goes to visit his dying uncle, Horace, another Catholic who has committed many sins of the flesh. Wilfred is frightened when he sees this replica of himself on the threshold of death, seeking the reassurance of religion at this crucial moment. Wilfred feels inadequate to the task and declares: ‘I cannot cure you. … It would take a saint to do that and I’m not a saint.’

His uncle rejects this abnegation: ‘Yes you are! … Right now you’re like a saint. We are all at one moment or another of our lives.’ (64)

The idea of whether or not Wilfred is a saint raises some interesting questions. One is reminded of Graham Greene’s whiskey-priest in *The Power and the Glory*, or the corrupt adulterer Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter*, both fatally flawed individuals who nevertheless appear to be vehicles of grace, and perhaps even achieve sainthood. Wilfred certainly attains something akin to sanctity through his impact on others and the suffering he endures. His conscience gnaws at him constantly: ‘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’ (44). This innocent device does not hide his depravity from God or from himself and he continues to make love to several women, after which he confesses his sins and then resumes his philandering. The crisis arises when he falls in love with his distant cousin, Phoebé, who is not only married, but also extremely devout. As the attraction between them increases, Wilfred feels the weight of responsibility on his shoulders. He knows that should they consummate their passion it will endanger both their souls. Phoebé’s husband James Knight points out to Wilfred his wife’s purity: ‘There’s something untouched in her. She is undefiled. Sin would make her
lose it, but sin is unknown to her. She is not like us. If there’s someone in the world I believe in, it’s she’ (288).

Wilfred’s dilemma is that by embarking on an affair with Phoebé, he would defile her innocence by exposing her to sin. And yet he cannot give her up. It is at this point that Max enters into the equation. This strange, sinister character follows Wilfred home from church one day and insists on talking to him about religion. Max is attracted to Wilfred and frustrated by how his attempts at seduction are rebuffed. The crux of the matter is explained thus: ‘Between the two, and for weeks, since the moment they met, their tacit dialogue was each time resumed, no matter what their lips said. Max was willing and Wilfred was not. Max wanted to kill Wilfred for that reason’ (335). In a moment of desperation, and being unaware of Max’s true feelings for him, Wilfred goes to visit his friend and is shot. Before dying, Wilfred’s final gesture is to forgive Max, the ultimate Christian act. This peaceful ending is most untypical of Green’s writing up to this point. For example, James Knight is convinced that Wilfred’s countenance in death shows that he entered a type of mystical peace. He notes that never has he seen such ‘an expression of happiness on any face as that which lit up Wilfred’s’. And he adds: ‘… he was watching us from afar, from a region of light’ (346). Just like at the end of Moïra, the light is emphasised here, a light that points to a transcendent knowledge of God’s mercy and, ultimately, salvation. Wilfred, a sinner, is saved. Malcolm Scott that this optimism must be mitigated in that Wilfred does not actually ‘defeat the tyranny of sexual desire’. In his Journal entries in his later life, Green did suggest that his ideal love, which was not dependent on sexual expression, was achievable, but he did not ‘impose such a solution on his young, tormented and divided characters.’

Telling the truth through art
This brief sketch of some of Green’s literary concerns underlines the intersection between religion and literature in his work. He was highly regarded by the literary establishment in France, his works appearing in the Pléiade edition while the author was still alive, and several being translated into numerous languages. And yet he remains something of a marginal figure in literary terms. This marginality has to do with the nature of his themes and the atmosphere that dominates his fiction. At times, his work is a denunciation of the world and of existence – it announced the theme of ‘nausea’ so prevalent in Sartre. Exile, solitude, suffocation, suffering are all
to be seen in the novels of this American who was brought up in France, in this convert to Catholicism who was plagued by his unworthiness in the face of God. Jean Sémolué argues that Green’s morality bears the hallmarks of Manichaeism, the dualistic notion of human nature revolving around darkness and light. His notion of art being a means of telling the ‘truth’ is a recurrent theme, as is his fascination with the fallen nature of Man. Throughout his life, he struggled with the knowledge that he was inescapably attracted to men (and sometimes to boys, as the Journal intégral reveals), and to God. The difficulties that this posed to him were addressed in 1955, when he included a section called ‘Jean’s Confession’ that he had originally excised from the original 1948 version of the novel Le Mafaiteur. It makes a moving case for a more understanding attitude towards homosexuality:

The most wrenching punishment that can befall an individual whose sexual orientation causes his banishment from society is that he be reduced to pretence or to making a big scene. And if he doesn’t have the heart to declare himself, he is unjustly obliged to live like a hypocrite.

The essence of Green’s problems can be found in these lines. Should he openly declare his preferences and risk the possible incomprehension of the reading public? Or else hide behind the cloak of fiction and live like a hypocrite? For him, religion and literature both demanded the truth, no matter how shocking or unpalatable. Beauty need not be ornate or complicated: it can also be plain and simple once it contains the mark of authenticity. In Green’s case, the dichotomy between the pure and the impure formed the basis of a life and work that still have the capacity to speak to a contemporary audience, because of their universal and timeless quality. If readers of Studies have not done so already, perhaps it would be a good idea to seek out some of Green’s work and see if this assessment is justified. I do not think you will be disappointed.

Eamon Maher is Director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies in TU Dublin and General Editor of two academic book series with Peter Lang Oxford, Reimagining Ireland and Studies in Franco–Irish Relations. He is currently working on a monograph dealing with the twentieth-century Catholic novel.
Notes
1 Both these quotes are taken from Partir avant le jour, in Jeunes années autobiographiques I (Paris: Seuil/Points, 1984), 28 and 21. My translation.
2 Julien Green, Journal intégral 1919–1940 (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2019). In-text citations from this publication will have the page number in brackets and the translations will be mine.
9 Figaro littéraire, 10 June 1950
10 Scott, The Struggle for the Soul of the French Novel, 222.
11 Julien Green, Each Man in His Darkness, translated by Anne Green (London/New York: Quartet Books, 1990), 63. All subsequent references will cite the page numbers in brackets.
14 Julien Green, Le malfaiteur (Paris: Fayard/Livre de Poche, 1955), 141.