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Love, Loss of Faith and Kate O'Brien

EAMON MAHER

Kate O'Brien (1897-1974) was a significant literary figure in the early years of the Irish Free State. Her decision to situate much of her fiction in the last century and outside Ireland, and the fact that she was a woman, give a special flavour to her work. Her treatment of religion is also distinctive, as it is very difficult to detect antagonism to Catholicism in her works, although she made no secret of her agnosticism. She shares with John McGahern, John Broderick and Brian Moore the distinction of having had two of her novels banned in Ireland.

The death of her mother when Kate O'Brien, whose father was a wealthy horse-dealer, was only five necessitated her being sent at a very young age to be educated by the nuns at Laurel Hill Convent, in Limerick. The period she spent under the nuns' care influenced her literary formation, and she admitted that she enjoyed the experience.

We see this in one of her best novels, *The Land of Spices* (1941), where she describes how an English Reverend Mother, Helen Archer, takes a special interest in the youngest inmate of her school, Anna Murphy, whose sad life experience in some ways mirrors her own. Anna's parents are no longer a loving couple and the young girl senses this. She thus turns to the Reverend Mother when she has to endure the trauma of the death of her favourite brother in a freak swimming accident. A strong bond develops between the two. Thus, the nun insists that Anna take up the University Scholarship she has won, in spite of the opposition of her rich aunt, who doesn't see the value of further education for young ladies and who wants to place her niece in a bank. Mère Marie-Hélène issues this warning:

Our Order is world-wide and powerful, Mrs Conlon, and it takes care of its children. That is its *raison d'être*. And Anna is very particularly our child. We shall look after her, and she can rest assured that between us and the Bishop, means will be

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found to prevent her becoming a clerk in the Four Provinces Bank.¹

In addition to being a forceful character, this nun is also politically astute and realises that, by enlisting the support of the bishop, she will bring Mrs Conlon, who has a brother a priest anxious for ecclesiastical advancement, to heel. She thus ensures the academic development of one of her students. *The Land of Spices* is a very sensitive and readable account of convent life from both the students' and the nuns' point of view. It is easy to forget the huge contribution the female religious orders made to educating generations of young Irish women. Kate O'Brien had

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an obvious liking for, and understanding of, nuns, unlike Edna O'Brien, whose experience at their hands was very negative.

Is it not slightly paradoxical that a novelist like Kate O'Brien, whom many commentators like to portray as a lesbian/feminist icon, is very sympathetic in her

treatment of nuns and priests? She doesn't blame the way she was taught religion for her subsequent woes in life. The scandal provoked by the scene where the young Helen Archer returns home early from school one day to find her father and his acolyte, Étienne, 'in the embrace of love' (p. 157) seems very tame indeed by today's standards. And yet this one line ensured the banning of the book in Ireland and the frenzied attack on its author in the Senate by a certain Professor McGuinness.

Kate O'Brien did not set out to shock sensibilities or to debunk myths. She preferred to depict moral dilemmas as she saw them, revolving normally around the choice between following your instinct and facing up to your social or religious duties. I believe that her treatment of love and religion reflect the nostalgia Kate O'Brien felt for her lost faith. When you have been imbued with Catholic dogmas throughout your youth and early adulthood, it is difficult to fully eradicate them from your mind. The influence lingers, the old reflexes remain even when faith has disappeared.

Kate O'Brien was cognisant of the integral role of the Catholic

1. *The Land of Spices*, 1989, London: Virago, p. 262. Many of the novels of Kate O'Brien had been out of print for many years were re-issued in the 1980s by Virago Press.

religion in the lives of the vast majority of the Irish men and women of her time. Not all aspects of the institutional Church appealed to her. She saw the insular, dogmatic attitude of many of the clergy, some of which is encapsulated in the pronouncements of Fr Conroy, the chaplain to the Compagnie de la Sainte Famille, a Belgian Order, who states to Reverend Mother:

Irish national life is bound up with its religion, and it may well be that educational work will become difficult here soon for those Orders who adhere too closely to a foreign tradition. (*The Land of Spices*, p. 15)

The young priest, fresh out of the Maynooth, irritates Mère Marie-Hélène who makes no apology for her efforts to promote 'La Politesse' in her girls, that is, the ability to mix comfortably in international as well as national circles, to have well-informed opinions and good social skills. She steers them clear of insular and parochial prejudice where at all possible. Her personal conflicts are hidden from the students but shared with the reader: her tendency to be too severe in her judgements of others and her constant wrestling with the vow of obedience. The greatest obstacle she encounters in her spiritual life is that posed by human love:

And, free in her meditations on God's will, and His hopes for humanity, she admitted that human love – such love, for instance, as she would have protested she felt for her father when she was young – must almost always offend the heavenly lover by its fatuous egotism. (*Land of Spices*, p. 20)

Her treatment of human love provides a very clear insight into Kate O'Brien's world-view. Human love is imperfect for her because it is wrapped up in egotism and tainted with sin. It compares very unfavourably with the love of God, which is eternal. Very seldom do we come across a portrayal of love between a man and a woman which is in any way a microcosm of divine love in O'Brien's novels. We will now see how this area is dealt with in a subtly different way in two well-known novels, *The Ante-Room* (1934) and *Mary Lavelle* (1936), the latter of which was banned by the Irish Censorship Board.

The Ante-Room is Kate O'Brien's second novel and follows the highly successful *Without My Cloak*, a sort of Irish version of the *Forsythe Saga*, and which won both the Hawthornden Prize and the James Tait Memorial Prize. The fortunes of the Considines,

a rich merchant family from Mellick, the name O'Brien gives Limerick, form the basis of the first novel. In *The Ante-Room*, Teresa Considine, married to Danny Mulqueen, is dying of an incurable cancer. Her suffering is all the more acute for the realisation that she will be abandoning her son, Reggie, savaged by syphilis, to a cruel and uncaring world:

Reggie was 36, wasted, unhappy, dangerous – dependent for his own decency and for his whole interest in life, on his devotion to her – and she was leaving him – and God had not answered her yet or told her where he was to turn then, so that he would do no harm in his weakness, and yet might be a little happy, a little less than desolate.²

The novel traces the many conflicts which arise as the characters struggle with the twists and turns that life throws at them. Teresa's major concern is a very unselfish and natural one – to ensure that her son is cared for after her death. The importance of property, family relationships and responsibilities, the fine psychological probing of the motivations that prompt people to act in a certain manner, remind me of the work of François Mauriac who, in novels like *Thérèse Desqueyroux* and *Le Noeud de Vipères*, revelled in depicting the labyrinth that is family.

Like Mauriac, O'Brien is also adept at analysing the problems which inclinations of the flesh bring to bear on her protagonists. The main character of *The Ante-Room*, Agnes Mulqueen, is in love with her sister's husband, Vincent de Courcy O'Regan. He becomes irritated at his wife, Marie-Rose's tendency to flee to Roseholm, the Mulqueens' residence, every time they have a serious quarrel. Marie-Rose, thanks to Agnes' love and attention, is then able to return, 'her petals dewy and refreshed, to subjugate again the perverse and irritable stranger who was her husband.' (p. 30) Vincent begins to ache for similar comfort, and from the same source. At the beginning of the novel, we discover that Agnes is desperately trying to exorcise the love she feels for Vincent, which she knows to be wrong. John Cronin provides a perceptive assessment of her predicament:

Agnes has to choose between her guilty desire for Vincent, her loyalty to her faith and her long-standing love for her sister.³

2. *The Ante-Room*, 1989, London, Virago, p. 17.

3. John Cronin, *The Anglo-Irish Novel*, Vol. 2, 1900-1940, 1990, Belfast, Appletree Press, p. 145.

Her situation is made even more difficult when her mother's brother, Canon Considine, announces that he is to say a triduum of Masses at Roseholm. Agnes knows that the thoughts she has been harbouring for her brother-in-law are sinful and will thus prevent her from receiving Communion, unless she goes to Confession. She owes it to her mother to participate fully in the triduum. She also knows that Vincent will be accompanying Marie-Rose to Roseholm and that she will need all the sanctifying power of grace to be able to deal with his presence. After Benediction, she waits in the church to cleanse herself of her sin: 'Be clean and free of it, and filled with prayer, before she see his dreaded face again' (*The Ante-Room*, p. 51). This is what she hopes to achieve through the sacrament. The confessor, a Jesuit, on hearing her admission of illicit lust, explains how human love is finite 'whereas in the idea of God there is matter for eternity'. Agnes receives momentary respite from this thought but will remark ruefully to herself later:

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. (*Ante-Room*, p. 200)

Spirit and flesh, human life and eternity, good and evil – all these pairings occur throughout the novel. We have Teresa dying upstairs with her family gathered round her, the canon saying his Masses in the house, Dr Curran and Vincent vying for Agnes' love, Marie-Rose suffering abandonment by her husband, Reggie's increasing infatuation with his mother's nurse, Miss Cunningham, the palpable religiosity of the household – there is much indeed to hold the reader's attention. There is much to admire also in O'Brien's capacity to present what is unique in all her characters – their hopes and fears, strengths and weaknesses. Religion is omni-present as a kind of sub-plot or *motif*. O'Brien knows the power of the sacrifice of the Mass has on believers. Canon Considine has an enraptured audience:

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

This powerful writing brings into focus how love in its earthly form can never bring this quality of peace. Nurse Cunningham's calculated decision to accept Reggie's marriage proposal, 'warts and all', is perceived as sordid by Agnes, but at least it is honest and hurts nobody. In fact, it brings peace to Teresa, who 'was purely happy, entirely and childishly grateful to God, ... because her ruined son would have a custodian when she was gone'. (p. 288) For Vincent and Agnes there can be no such happy resolution; only a flaming passion that can neither be consummated nor quenched. Agnes' senses are disturbed by the touch of Vincent's hand and she knows that she could realise her most exotic dreams with him as her partner. But at what price?

She stood up and paced her room. Here were Christian and social duty combining with sisterly love to make one foolish craving of hers impossible. And she with brains and blood and training found them justified and her desire insane. It followed it must die – but how quickly? (*The Ante-Room*, p. 240)

A possible alternative to Vincent is Dr Curran, but Agnes doesn't love him, cannot bring herself to love him. Vincent provides an unexpected solution by committing suicide in such way as to make it appear an accident. However, Agnes knows the truth and her suffering is even more intense after this tragedy. She had admitted to Curran shortly before Vincent's suicide: 'I feel as if I had some kind of poison – as if I were dying here this minute – half dead.' (p. 299) Now her desolation is even greater. In fact, it is not love itself which is of the greatest importance for Agnes, but the sense of sin attendant on such love and the way it gnaws on her conscience. There is no liberation here, only pain and suffering.

Whereas Agnes stops short of following her natural inclinations and desires, Mary Lavelle steps outside conventional rules and restrictions in search of the *grand amour*. The daughter of a widowed doctor, who is petty, self-pitying and tyrannical, the heroine escapes the stifling ambience of provincial Ireland and a fiancé whom she doesn't really love, to spend a year as a Miss to a noble Spanish family. Her journey becomes an initiation to a new culture with its naked violence exemplified by the ritual of the bullfight ring, as well as the flowering of a sensuousness which had been kept well under wraps in Catholic Ireland. It is clear from Mary's motivation for going abroad that she fears being tied to a restrictive mode of existence:

To cease being a daughter without immediately becoming a wife. To be a free lance, to belong to no one place or family or person – to achieve that silly longing of childhood, only for one year, before she flung it with all the other childish things upon the scrap-heap.⁴

Had Agnes Mulqueen realised her ambition to travel, who knows what her fate might have been. She may well have experienced the liberation and exhilaration that come to Mary Lavelle. They are both faced with a similar moral choice. In Mary's case, the object of her desire is not her sister's husband, but rather the happily married son of the family for which she is acting as Miss. Her loyalty to John, her fiancé, rapidly evaporates as she falls madly in love with Juanito, an idealistic, moral young man, destined to be 'one of Spain's great men'. Possessing as he does lofty principles and a strong sense of honour, this is not the sort of man to give in easily to a passing fancy. Mary Lavelle's arrival in Spain will not only disturb the equilibrium of Juanito, but also that of his father, Don Pablo, who sees in the young Irishwoman the 'eternal poetic myth of girlhood' and who is immediately smitten with her.

Mary Lavelle is not as finely sculpted a novel as *The Ante-Room*. Too many incidents in the narrative stretch the credulity of the reader. We are expected to believe that a shy, largely inexperienced and uncultivated young woman has the power to woo what are essentially two highly sophisticated men. I am not claiming that love at first sight is a myth, but I do have reservations about the instantaneous attraction that is ignited in the look that Mary and Juanito exchange as she climbs the stairs to her room on the first night she meets him:

These two were to know each other hereafter, and to arrive at their knowledge in reluctance, grief and protestation. Long pain lay ahead of the unwitting sympathy with which the eyes of each unprompted sought the aspect of the other, but for this once, if never again, they were innocent. (*Mary Lavelle*, p. 145)

O'Brien does not usually give such licence to her omniscient narrator. Most of the plot is revealed to us in the lines above. Juanito falls in love with Mary, seeks out ways to meet her alone, whisks her off in his car on a day she is meant to be visiting

4. *Mary Lavelle*, 1984, London, Virago, p. 34.

Toledo. Instead, they spend the time luxuriating in each other's company, in the strength of their shared passion. They acknowledge that there is no future for their love, and yet they keep on imagining how happy they might have been in different circumstances. Mary says to her lover:

If you were an American, say, and your wife had a little lost her interest in you, and divorce was part of the code and religion you were brought up in, and would not displace your ambitions and ideals, and make you into a kind of exile without occupation – then you and I might have a kind of clumsy future to discuss. (*Mary Lavelle*, p. 254)

The emphasis has shifted sharply from that seen in *The Anteroom*. Mary would be quite prepared to sin against Catholic teaching and enter into a sexual relationship with Juanito. What holds her back is the danger that in so doing she could 'for ever maim a handsome and self-confident man of twenty-nine' (p. 257). She has no fear whatever in relation to herself, but cannot bear the thought of injuring the peace of mind and self-respect of Juanito. Religious constraints do not enter in a serious manner into Mary's moral framework, unlike in the case of Agnes Mulqueen. In fact, she does eventually have sex with Juanito, on the eve of her proposed departure date for Ireland, and she does not suffer remorse afterwards. In her liberated stance, she resembles the novelist who is being quite daring in her description of the love-making, which takes up several pages, even though everything is couched in very tasteful and poetic language. It is easy to imagine how, in 1936, Mary Lavelle's 'fall from grace' may have provoked something of a scandal. More shocking again, however, was the confession of her lesbian love by another Miss, Agatha Conlon, to the heroine:

– Are you shocked? I like you the way a man would, you see. I never see you without wanting to touch you ... It's a sin to feel like that.

To which Mary replies:

– Oh, everything's a sin! (*Mary Lavelle*, p. 285)

This type of exchange explains to some extent what makes *Mary Lavelle* an exciting departure: deals with taboo subjects like lesbianism without the slightest hint of condemnation on the part of the novelist. What Agatha Conlon feels for Mary Lavelle

is seen as no better or worse than what passes between Mary and Juanito, or Agnes and Vincent: 'Everything is a sin', after all. Love is mainly a source of unhappiness for Kate O'Brien's characters, many of whom break free of their Catholic upbringing to do things that could imperil their eternal salvation. Were they wrong? That is not what interests me in this piece. I merely point out that the raising of these issues was a bold step at a time when a Jansenistic distrust of the flesh was prevalent in Ireland and when the Censorship Board was particularly active.

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Where did this leave Kate O'Brien in relation to the Catholic Church? In his excellent analysis of Irish culture in the years 1930-1960, Brian Fallon notes his belief that Kate O'Brien seems to have kept her religious faith, which had been mellowed by her experience of Continental Catholicism, and adds:

Her novels remain especially valuable because they depict the impact of the Church on thinking, educated middle class women, through the medium of nuns as well as the male clergy. She spoke to and for people who, while they might be critical of many of the Church's sayings and doings, still counted themselves believing Catholics in spiritual communion with millions around the world.⁵

Mr Fallon might be stretching things a bit in this assessment, but he is correct in pointing to the positive influence of the nuns and male clergy on Irish women like Kate O'Brien. He rightly points to her experience of living abroad as having moulded a different, more Continental form of Catholicism in her. She was a feminist, if by that term one means someone who saw the value in education for women as well as their right to independence and self-determination. Characters like Mary Lavelle choose their own destiny and accept the consequences of their actions. They are no blushing virgins, no innocents in the ways of the world, that is to say, once they are initiated into such rituals. Yet, for all their independence there lurks within them a close identification with the Catholic religion, albeit in a sanitised

5. *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960*, 1998, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, p. 192.

form. In *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938), written partly as a response to the banning of *Mary Lavelle*, we meet Nell, a devout Catholic, whose virginity is dependent less on piety than on the conviction that the Church's teaching is appropriate in many ethical situations. Without the moral framework provided by organised religion, she feels, the slip towards an unswerving liberalism is a great danger:

Adultery and homosexuality were entirely respectable so long as their practitioners had the *savoir-faire* to keep them so. Any joke whatever was acceptable, so long as it was a good joke. Any word was permissible almost anywhere, by either sex. But tolerance and discretion were the passwords in regard to actual life. Go as you please and make no scenes.⁶

These views have more than a little relevance in contemporary Ireland where political correctness is *de rigueur*. Nobody any more wants to criticise, denounce, and to declare some action is sinful will only be greeted with scorn. That type of vocabulary has

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all but disappeared in this country. Kate O'Brien saw a liberal strain developing in the Irish Catholic merchant class to which she belonged in the 1930s. Her self-imposed exile clearly assisted her in making an objective appraisal of the country she had

left. Her writings transport the reader to a universe that is both foreign and familiar. Her characters encounter the sort of difficulties that still beset us today: the universal, inevitable struggle between the spirit and the flesh, the quest to find a spiritual meaning in a world that is hostile to spirituality, preoccupied as it is with materialistic advancement at all costs. Matt, the writer-hero of *Pray for the Wanderer*, lives in London but returns home to Ireland when his relationship with a married actress concludes (another failed couple in Kate O'Brien). He hopes he might find some certainty in the country of his birth. He is in many ways the mouth-piece of O'Brien because of his ambivalent attitude to this country:

Could he live in de Valera's Ireland, where the artistic conscience is ignored—merely because, artist or not, he loved that

6. *Pray for the Wanderer*, 1969, Bath: Cedric Chivers, pp. 108-109.

Ireland, its lovely face, its trailing voice, its ribaldry and piety and dignified sense of wide spaciousness of time? (*Pray for the Wanderer*, p. 248)

Matt's answer to this rhetorical question, like that of the novelist who gave him life, was an emphatic, if nostalgic, 'No'. Kate O'Brien died in England in 1974, largely impoverished and in poor health. I am glad to have met her through her novels, as she has keen insights into many basic human issues and writes with a classical style. I was delighted to discover recently that *The Land of Spices* is to feature on the Leaving Certificate English syllabus because it will reveal to students a hidden Ireland that doesn't appear in most of the Irish fiction of this century. It is also significant that as a novelist she refrains from allowing her own loss of faith (or at least her serious doubting of many aspects of it) to appear in any obvious manner in what she writes. Irish literary history will judge her kindly.

Created for joy God does not coerce into joy, but there is always more on offer than we can take. There are as many ways into Christian joy as there are people, and the variety of testimonies is endless. Some begin in a burst of joy; others are far more hesitant, and only very slowly wake up to the intense joy at the core of faith. There are also different qualities of joy through life, culminating in the matured peacefulness of those who have been through great suffering and have had their capacity for joy expanded and deepened in the process. But whatever our experience, if the background for the ups and downs of our lives includes the Psalms, the hymns of many Christian traditions, and the New Testament, then we can never forget that joy is the accompanying and ultimate note of faith in the God of creation and resurrection. We are created for joy, and salvation is inseparable from it. The First Epistle of Peter sums it up powerfully (1 Pet 1:3.8-9) ...

We are constantly stretched to accommodate more joy, and this affects not only the tone of our lives but their very shape. Celebration and praise of the God of joy become a *cantus firmus*, with accompanying counterpoints of rejoicing in other people, rejoicing in truth and goodness, rejoicing in creation, and in all sorts of creativity, play and work. It is a constant, gentle, and sometimes vigorous testing, inviting us to be more appreciatively open to God, people and the world, expanding our capacity to cope with the infinite joy that God desires to share with us.

David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living*, 1998, London, Fount