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The Secret of Mary Gordon's Success

Carol Iannone

Mary Gordon's first novel, *Final Payments* (1978), about the embattled coming of age of an Irish Catholic woman, was both a best-seller and the object of an astonishingly enthusiastic critical response, in which Miss Gordon was compared to Jane Austen and her novel was called a contemporary version of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*. Her second novel, *The Company of Women* (1981), also a best-seller, met with a slightly less rapturous but still highly respectful critical reception; Francine du Plessix Gray was typical in hailing Miss Gordon as her generation's "preeminent novelist of Roman Catholic mores and manners." After this novel Miss Gordon announced that she intended to expand her concerns, and indeed her third novel, *Men and Angels*,* is ostensibly not about Catholicism. Except, of course, that it is; only the names have been changed to protect the guilty.

Mary Gordon's background has supplied her with some unique qualifications to write about present-day Catholicism. Her mother, whom she has described simply as "an Irish Catholic working-class girl," was the daughter of Irish and Italian immigrants. Her father, David, a Harvard-educated Jew, had belonged in the 20's to the colony of American expatriates in Paris, where he gradually grew disaffected with modern culture. His sympathy with what his daughter calls "the embarrassing side" in the Spanish Civil War led to his conversion to Catholicism, and a tendency to romanticize the Catholic working class led to his marrying Mary Gordon's mother. While his

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wife worked as a legal secretary, he made several attempts to found a right-wing Catholic periodical while staying at home to care for their only child (no doubt preparing the ground for Mary's later ardent feminism—she has remarked that for her, feminism comes nearest to Catholicism as an informing framework of values). He died when Mary was only seven, but had by then already begun to teach her Greek, philosophy, and French.

Perhaps partially because of the mixed colors of her personal history, Mary Gordon gradually came to resent her confinement in the Catholic "ghettoes" of Queens and Valley Stream, Long Island, where she attended parochial school through the 12th grade. A docile child—she wrote devout tracts entitled "What Is Prayer?"—she became a rebellious adolescent who once organized a bubble-gum-blowing demonstration to harass the "ignorant" nuns she had come to despise. Her bitter provincial exile ended with a scholarship to Barnard. There Miss Gordon began her advance beyond the pale into the mainstream of American life—which for her, it seems, is entirely, eternally, lyrically Protestant. (Her perception of the ethos formed by the two religions sometimes seems a caricature-in-reverse. For her, Catholics are morbid and intensely self-scrutinizing while Protestants are confident, masterful, disciplined, capable of "a deep unstated sympathy.") It being the turbulent 60's at Columbia, Miss Gordon found more effective ways to protest authority than by blowing bubble gum. She participated in student strikes and sit-ins, and thereby, presumably, gained the social consciousness that filters into some of her work as a liberating

alternative to the burdensome demands of Catholic charity.

But Catholicism is not entirely a negative force for Miss Gordon. She has remarked on its profound idealism, and in her novels she depicts a species of Catholic manhood that is fiercely compelling. To her heroines, moreover, she accords a driving passion and qualities of clarity, insight, and penetration that at times can make the Protestants around them seem warty and complacent. Miss Gordon still calls herself a Catholic, or, as she puts it, "I have a real religious life in a framework which I think of as Catholic." But she doubts the Pope would be pleased with her views on birth control, abortion, and the ordination of women are unorthodox, and she has observed that "sexy people" leave the Church. On the other hand, her writing evinces a decided scorn for much of the updated Church of post-Vatican II and a certain nostalgia for the consuming seriousness of traditional Catholicism.

In some ways, Mary Gordon's own story, as well as the story she tells in her novels, is one of upward ethnic mobility. But it is a story with a twist: Catholicism, with its insistent ethic of self-renunciation, can make the achievement of worldly success seem not just difficult or forbidding, but positively evil. This tension between the mutually exclusive demands of the sacred and the profane gives Mary Gordon's writing its all-absorbing, almost obsessive intensity, and may well account for the excitement her work has provoked. In a generation of casually pervasive materialism, her protagonists' struggles to break free of the peremptory, otherworldly claims of the Church and to carve out a share of "ordinary human happiness" must seem both deliciously exotic and monumentally heroic. Without the defining element of religion, the resemblance of her novels to the genre known as "women's fiction"

* Random House, 241 pp., \$16.95.

in which omniscient heroines
triumph through impossible odds to
inevitable triumph) would no
have been more readily dis-

is not to suggest that Miss
lacks technical skill; quite
contrary. She can be fabulously
descriptive; her tightly packed sen-
ences burst with metaphoric en-
ergy. Her characters can be large,
complex situations affecting. Reviewers
praised her for all of this—
I have as well cited her flaws,
which include overwriting, a ten-
dency to fall back on stereotypes,
and an inability to sustain an overall narra-

But it is clear that they are
completely impressed with some-
thing far greater than technical
skill. With Miss Gordon's novels,
characters seem to enter the presence of
something almost, well, holy. A
fantastic, powerful transforming
force. "the monster we have all been
looking for," said the *Christian*
Science Monitor of *Final Payments*,
and the *New York Times* found
in *The Company of Women* to be a
woman of "integrity," "chastity,"
"purity," "ambition, and grandeur."
Miss Gordon's concerns, asserted
critics, are nothing less than
"theological"; according to *Sat-*
urday Review, she writes about "in-

tellect and reason, submission and
authority, the holiness of the flesh,
and the awesome power of love to
purify, enrich, and immortalize."
And when they are not agreeably
impressed in this manner, Mary Gor-
don's critics praise her for freeing
women from "the false lessons of the
Church" for dethroning "the mythical
ability of suffering," and for ex-
alting the charity that is really
disguised masochism, the morality
that is only a cover for hypocrisy.

This, then, with a few emenda-
tions and detours, and the deter-
mined imposition of feminist ideol-
ogy, is the substance of the Gordon
oeuvre: a muscular prohibitive or-
thodoxy crusades against a sunny
mainline permissiveness, while the
heroine, who embodies the best of
both worlds, is torn between the
piousness of being Catholic and
the freedom of being Protestant.

This struggle appears in Miss
Gordon's first novel, *Final Pay-*
ments, in the form of a revisionist

treatise on love and charity. Isabel
Moore, Irish-Catholic born and
bred, has made a sacrifice unusual
for the self-seeking generation to
which she belongs but (Miss Gor-
don implies) typical of the Catho-
lic female with dreams of self-
denial. When she was nineteen, her
adored father, a widower, an ultra-
conservative Catholic, and a pro-
fessor of medieval literature at a
small Catholic college in Queens,
had discovered her in bed with his
favorite student, and shortly there-
after suffered a stroke. Isabel has
cared for him through eleven years
of wretched invalidism, both hat-
ing and loving her self-imposed
martyrdom. The novel opens at his
funeral, when she realizes that she
must "invent an existence for her-
self."

Once freed of her burden, Isabel
eagerly plunges into the in-
dulgence of the flesh. She sells
her house and acquires an I.U.D.,
then takes on a new job, a new
apartment (outside of Catholic
Queens), and a couple of lovers
(both married, one to a best
friend); thirty years of Irish Catho-
lic repression have obviously failed
to dim her capacity for the sensual
and the sexual. But Isabel soon
finds living for the pleasures of this
world more than she can bear.
The repellent, self-pitying wife of
one of her lovers humiliates her
and triggers off a terrible episode
of guilt and self-condemnation.
Isabel determines to return to a
life of self-sacrifice. With the willed
perversity of the saints who drank
the water in which they washed the
lepers' feet, she undertakes the care
of the aged and impoverished Mar-
garet Casey, a onetime housekeep-
er for her father and herself.

Margaret is a selfish and sancti-
monious woman whom Isabel has
always despised but toward whom
she still feels an intense obligation.
She sets herself the task of learning
to love this woman she hates in
order to attain the pure, imper-
sonal state of Christian charity. It
is a mistake, concludes Isabel, to
want to love uniquely and be loved
uniquely; better to love "as God
loved His creatures, impartially,
impervious to their individual
natures and thus incapable of be-
ing really hurt by them." But soon

it becomes obvious to her that such
forced sacrifice is itself illegitimate.
At novel's end Isabel dispatches
her debt to Margaret and resolves
to seek a "reasonable life" of or-
dinary satisfactions.

MARY GORDON once expressed sur-
prise that a novel of "sacrifice and
old age" should have been so warm-
ly received as was *Final Payments*
—as if the esoteric ethic of self-
renunciation were not this author's
chief appeal. But "sacrifice and old
age" are in any event only half the
message of *Final Payments*. The
other half is a treatise on how to
overcome guilt, cut loose from
life's losers, and buckle down to
enjoying "the cares of this world"
as soon as possible. Thus, much of
the book is devoted to Miss Gor-
don's improvements on traditional
morality. When Isabel commits
adultery she suffers a sharp back-
lash of guilt, but the book reminds
us that this "sin" breaks up a stag-
nant marriage and frees one of life's
winners from one of its congenital
losers. ("I was never any match
for her, with all her deprivations,"
the defecting husband declares of
his whining martyr of a wife.) In
Isabel's job as a social worker (in-
vestigating home care for the
aged), she comes across an old
woman ready to commit suicide
because of her need for particular
love rather than the "generalized
charity" she receives; Isabel does
not hesitate to help her end her
life, once again with the novel's
quietly defiant endorsement.

It is here, in the dichotomy be-
tween the need for personal affec-
tion and the Catholic exhortation
to universal love, that Miss Gordon
repeatedly focuses her moral atten-
tion. But she has stacked the deck.
Universal, unconditional love is
for her largely the love of and for
losers. People love God and seek
to be loved in Him mostly be-
cause they are tired or defeated
or because "their bodies . . . had
not given them sufficient pleas-
ure." These losers not only lack
the courage to risk human love but
never had much to recommend
them to begin with—no beauty,
grace, intelligence, humor, or sen-
suality, especially no sensuality.
(Other models of loser-spirituality

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include Isabel's father, fanatical and often hateful, and Father Mulcahy, her pastor, loving and loyal but somewhat beside the point. The men of Isabel's choice love "conditionally.")

Personal human love is for the winners—for those with all the assets plus the guts to ask to be loved for themselves alone and "not for what we share with the rest of the human race." But once you admit your need for such love, you are vulnerable; "there was nothing worth living for once you lost it." Hence Isabel's sympathy for the old woman's desire to commit suicide. Life is "monstrous" in its "randomness" as to who gets the good stuff, and in its precariousness as to who gets to keep it, but there you have it; the winners accept the terms.

The problem is that Catholicism asks the contenders to care for the rejects. How to quiet this nagging demand with minimal energy and still stay on the fast track—that is the question that haunts Isabel, who recognizes, correctly, that the charity and sacrifice being demanded cannot be accomplished through a simple act of the will (she does not surmise that it can be achieved through grace). And so she rejects her parochial-school lessons—"Love is measured by sacrifice," and "Charity suffereth long and is kind"—in favor of something much simpler:

Margaret's life would be more bearable if she did not have to worry about money. And I had money, money from the sale of the house. It occurred to me, simply, that I could give up my money; I did not have to give up my life.

By signing over her entire bank account to Margaret, making her "final payment," Isabel is freed from pointless self-sacrifice and can begin her own life anew: "It was all the money I had in the world. But I was free of Margaret now, and I felt weightless. . . . There was nothing left between us. Margaret could not touch me now."

It seems awkward to have to remind such a self-reflective writer as Mary Gordon that in the very same chapter of I Corinthians from which she draws the title of her

third book, *Men and Angels*, Paul gives a clear warning against precisely this kind of giving: "though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor . . . and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing." But Miss Gordon, who so arranges her moral landscape as to make *any* impulse toward transcendent love seem deluded, aims of course precisely to dismantle charity in its Christian sense. Indeed, even private philanthropy is not her idea of a model system for the necessary redistribution from winners to losers. Isabel's first lover, a pointedly crude, callous, and selfish man, nevertheless "really does a lot of good" in his position as overseer of county welfare programs: more good, it is implied, than can ever be done by trivial acts of self-sacrifice. "Governments gave money and did not ask for love. Money was beautiful . . . you could change lives without giving up your own life." Government is a "dealer in charity without the weights of love."

In her exposé of Christian charity, Mary Gordon thus inadvertently gives us a sudden compact insight into the much vaunted "compassion" of the Left. We may be seeing here just what is impelling so many Catholics to equate their religion with the welfare state: not so much compassion as guilt, and the desire to enjoy life's banquet disencumbered of Lazarus at the gate.

ONE reason *Final Payments* needs to be examined in detail is that it fixes the pattern of which Miss Gordon's later novels are progressive variants. *The Company of Women*, set partly in the pre-Vatican II period, draws the same sort of (loaded) dichotomy between universal and particular love. A group of unattached women, living separately, are linked by the guidance of a powerful conservative priest, Father Cyprian, who has in one way or another helped them, given meaning to their lives, and made them into "something." This little company places all its hopes for the future on a girl named Felicitas (after "the one virgin martyr whose name contained some hope for ordinary human happiness"), the daughter of one of their

widowed members and the ^{only} child among them. But Felicitas gradually rejects the all-pervasive spirituality that Father Cyprian would impose upon her. She leaves her mother's Brooklyn apartment for Columbia University, briefly undertakes a radical style of life, gets herself pregnant, and returns to the group to have her baby. At this point the women build themselves houses near the now-retired Cyprian. Felicitas eventually agrees to marry (another man), and little by little begins "to have an ordinary life."

The novel makes conscious allusion to *Jane Eyre*, an allusion which Miss Gordon has underscored in interviews. Like Mr. Rochester, Cyprian must be symbolically castrated—Mary Gordon has warned us about her feminism—broken from his obsession with spirituality and made to accept his own need for human love. At the end of his life he is forced to admit that "the love of God, untouched by accident and preference and failure," still eludes him. As for the particular love of the women who surround him, this is the only real love he has felt—a fact he admits somewhat grudgingly: "They have dragged me down to the middling terrain of their conception of the world, half blood instinct, half the impulse of the womb." (Such ideas are among the elements that bring Miss Gordon closer to D.H. Lawrence than to the "female tradition" of Jane Austen and the Brontës she seems to believe she belongs to.) So much for putting your eggs in the basket of spirituality.

As for Felicitas, she continues the line, set by Isabel in *Final Payments*, of criticizing the ways of God to man: "I will not accept the blandishments of the religious life. I will not look to God for comfort, or for succor, or for sweetness. God will have to meet me on the high ground of reason, and there He's a poor contender." While the older women need a strict Catholicism to fill and order their otherwise diffuse and empty lives, Felicitas manages on what is revealed as a budding feminism. She turns away from sexual "liberation" when she sees how men exploit it for their own selfish pleasure. A graphic de-

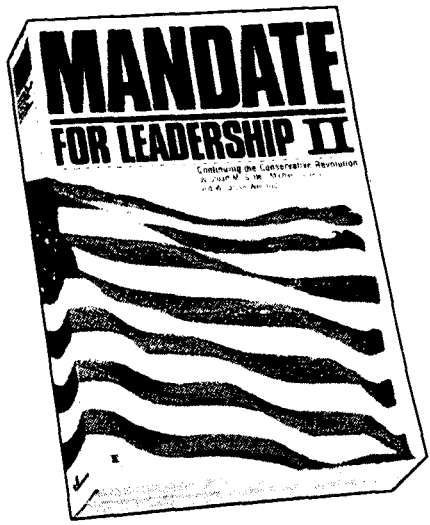
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ception of a mangled abortion, as
 is a section telling how Felicitas
 at first hates her baby and learns
 to sympathize with abusive mother
 constitutes part of this novel's
 contribution to feminist suasion.
 In *Final Payments* it was a defense
 of feminism and a glorification of
 the friendship; in *Men and Angels*,
 it is an object lesson in
 how to combine family and career.)
 But the feminism in *The Com-
 pany of Women* goes far beyond
 the promotion of various items on
 the liberationist agenda to become
 a new moral imperative. The
 named, savagely devout priest is
 obviously meant in a way to stand
 for the old Church itself, which
 allegedly needs to be cut loose
 from male spiritual chauvinism—
 "ortho clericalism," as Miss Gor-
 don has put it—humanized, femin-
 ized and brought down to earth
 (in the company of) women. If it
 is at first surprising that Miss
 Gordon is no supporter of the post-
 Vatican II changes in the Church,
 she indeed mocks many of their
 manifestations—priests in chinos,
 new rites of penance, daisy-
 decorated prayer cards, etc.—this is
 because her real hope for renewal
 comes from the mystical and sal-
 utary feminism evident in *The Com-
 pany of Women*. It is the female
 principle that will save Catholic-
 ism from the death of orthodoxy—
 though how the replacement of
 the expansive orthodoxy by a sec-
 ular, much narrower one consti-
 tutes an improvement, she does not
 say.
 In any rate, traditional Catholic-
 ism having been effectively con-
 demned to the ash heap of history
 in *The Company of Women*, in her
 next novel, *Men and Angels*, the
 ideal of an ascendant religious sen-
 sibility is no longer embodied in a
 compelling man like Cyprian, but
 in a quintessential loser. Laura,
 a pathetic waif, bruisingly re-
 spected by her family, seizes upon
 the idea of God's love to assuage
 her miserable loneliness of her ex-
 istence. She becomes a mother's
 helper to Anne Foster, a Harvard
 Ph.D. in Art History and a winner
 who is not yet wholly secure about
 the fact. Anne has been happily
 making a home for her two chil-

dren and her husband, a professor
 of French literature at a small
 northeastern college, when she is of-
 fered (at thirty-eight) a remarkable
 opportunity to prepare the cata-
 logue for an exhibit of the works
 of Caroline Watson, an early 20th-
 century painter (a fictional com-
 posite of Cecilia Beaux, Mary Cas-
 satt, and Suzanne Valadon), neg-
 lected in her own time but now be-
 ing rediscovered thanks to the cur-
 rent interest in women. Taking the

job requires that Anne stay home
 with her children while her hus-
 band goes off on a sabbatical to
 France.
 Anne makes several attempts to
 be nice to Laura but really comes
 to despise her—for Laura, pathetic
 as she is, is also carefully presented
 as difficult and self-righteous. But
 Laura, falsely cheered by Anne's
 outward signs of affection, is so
 devastated when Anne fires her for
 negligence that she commits sui-

“...One of the people it's been most useful to and used by is me.”
Ronald Reagan
 on *Mandate for Leadership I*



The election is over but not the revolution

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The Heritage Foundation

cide by slitting her wrists in the family bathtub. Later Anne, learning of Laura's unhappy life, mourns her inability to have overcome her hatred of the girl and extend the love that might have saved her. But everyone assures her that such love is virtually impossible (they must have read Mary Gordon's previous novels); no matter how much she suffered, Laura was inherently unlovable.

Anne, like Isabel before her, finally accepts the "monstrous" precariousness of human life—illustrated in various ways throughout the novel—without the consolations of transcendent love. As Laura may or may not be winging her way to the God who let her down, Anne walks bravely away from the gravesite into the beatitude of husband, children, home, and career.

She wept and wept. People were so weak, and life would raise its whip and bring it down again and again on the bare tender flesh of the most vulnerable. Love was what they needed, and most often it was not there. It was abundant, love, but it could not be called. It was won by chance; it was a monstrous game of luck.

Although Anne is presented as having no "religious life," her tendency to self-scrutiny, her insecurity about her place in the world of achievement, and her fear that she might someday be punished for the "great good fortune" life

has handed her put her fairly in the line of Miss Gordon's Catholic heroines. In this novel the fanatical and anti-sensual religiosity has been filtered off into Laura, while the sunny Protestant version of "religious life" is represented by Jane, Caroline Watson's beloved daughter-in-law, a beautiful, intelligent, and proud old woman who lives comfortably by the "senses" rather than by "morals."

Actually, it turns out that Jane, in an access of guilt over the way she had treated her husband before his miserable, untimely death, had once sought and found forgiveness in God. But her faith is of that highly qualified variety of which Miss Gordon approves: God's love (such as it is to begin with) will ever be "insufficient for the human heart," it "means nothing to the heart that is starved of human love." Thus the revisionist charity Miss Gordon advances as a gloss on the famous idealism from Paul that gives the book its title: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal."

IN HER novels Mary Gordon goes over the same ground again and again—the precariousness and random unfairness of human existence, its value nonetheless, the right to enjoy it if one is a winner, the nagging problem of what to do with the losers. Miss Gordon's work in some ways resembles those books and articles on "having it all" that

are written for women, with their advice on cramming in as much as possible, keeping track of one's needs, making sure they're satisfied, the whole informed by a lurking fear that nothing will really suffice.

Thus in the end the real question is not whether human love will serve in the absence of the divine, for Miss Gordon's books are not really about love at all; they are about the monumental self-centeredness released by the collapse of orthodoxy, the agitated emptiness that finds an expression in movements like feminism. It is a historical irony, no doubt inevitable, that this same agitation should be the presiding difficulty of the contemporary Church as well, with its restless movements and demands and its cries over the "monstrous" unfairness of being poor, of being female, of being deprived. Where there was once some ability to accept the simple grace of God's love even in the face of inequalities, and to work in one's own quiet way for His kingdom, now this entire dimension seems to have been lost, or perhaps destroyed. Yet it is hard to see how all the aimless revisionism, of the variety produced by the Church itself or proposed to it by the likes of Mary Gordon, is going to lead the way back to salvation. For Miss Gordon's novels are at once the symptom and the artistic exemplification of the empty self-centeredness which happens to have become her subject.