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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; Françoise 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 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 "ghettos" 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 records a driving passion and qualities of clarity, insight, and penetration that at times can make the Protestants around them seem wan 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; 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 perennial middleworldly claims of the Church and to carve out a share of "ordinary human happiness" must seem both deliciously exotic and momentarily heroic. Without the defining element of religion, the resemblance of her novels to the genre known as "women's fiction"

which omniscient heroines
pick through impossible odds to
achieve an inevitable triumph) would no
longer have been more readily dis-
trusted. It is not to suggest that Miss
Gordon lacks technical skill; quite
contrary, she is fabulously capable
of her tightly packed sentences
burst with metaphor. Her characters
may be large, but the situations
affecting them are small. Reviewers
praised her for all of this—
have as well cited her flaws,
which include overwriting, a ten-
ancy to fall back on stereotypes,
and to sustain an overall narra-
tive—that it is clear that they are
largely impressed with some-
much greater than technical
subtlety. With Miss Gordon's novels,
they enter the presence of
nothing almost, well, holy. A
powerful, transforming power
at work. which she does not
mention.

Mary Gordon once expressed sur-
prise that a novel of "sacrifice and old age"
should have been so warmly
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, cure loose
people's lives, 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 pining 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
love; they are tired or defeated
whenever "their bodies . . . had
not given them sufficient plea-
sure." These losers not only lack
the courage to risk human love but
never had much to recommend
them to begin with—no beauty,
concrete, intelligence, humor, or sen-
suality, especially no sensuality.
(Other models of loser-spirituality
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 poor. 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 it up; I did not have to give it 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 1 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 diluted, 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 expose 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 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, breaks in on a well-to-do group of Columbia students who get herself pregnant, and returns to the group to have her baby. This point the women build themselves houses near the now-reinaugurated Cyprian. Felicitas eventually agrees to marry (another man), and 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 cast—Mary Gordon has warned us about her feminism—broke from his obsession with spirituality, and made and 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 mudding 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 Brontes 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-
and the only Feli... capricious and lus- ed score of Rochester's religious and spiritualism—hates her baby and learns to be cut loose from the old Church herself, which needs to be humanized, feminized, and brought down to earth by the company of women. If it is not at first surprising that Miss Gorham puts it—humanized, feminized and brought down to earth, it is an object lesson in the death of orthodoxy—feminism evident in The Company of Women. It is the female people that will save Catholicism, though how the replacement of the death of orthodoxy—a much narrower one constitutes an improvement, she does not believe in Final Penance. The ways of the fathers accept the religious life for comfort, and on the high ground, the other self-admitted to the ash heap of history. The Company of Women, in her first novel, The Company of Angels, the end of an ascendant religious sensibility is no longer embodied in a compelling man like Cyprian, but a quintessential loser, Laura, a pathetic wraith, bruisingly rejected by her family, seizes upon an idea of God's love to assuage her miserable loneliness of her existence. She becomes a mother's confidante,廣告 as a bud turns away when she cannot bear it for their graphic description of a mangled abortion, as there is a section telling how Felicia must hate her baby and becomes pregnant with abusive motherhood—constitutes part of this novel's dedication to feminist susuasion. The... nature of the... it is an object lesson in the death of orthodoxy—feminism evident in The Company of Women goes far beyond the promotion of various items on the agenda to become the very moral imperative. The... she does not believe in Final Penance. The ways of the fathers accept the religious life for comfort, and on the high ground, the other self-admitted to the ash heap of history. The Company of Women, in her first novel, The Company of Angels, the end of an ascendant religious sensibility is no longer embodied in a compelling man like Cyprian, but a quintessential loser, Laura, a pathetic wraith, bruisingly rejected by her family, seizes upon an idea of God's love to assuage her miserable loneliness of her existence. She becomes a mother's confidante, and used by men and her husband, a professor of French literature at a small northeastern college, when she is offered (at thirty-eight) a remarkable opportunity to prepare the catalogue for an exhibit of the works of Caroline Watson, an early 20th-century painter (a fictional composite of Cecilia Beaux, Mary Cassatt, and Suzanne Valadon), neglected in her own time but now being rediscovered thanks to the current interest in women. Taking the job requires that Anne stay home with her children while her husband 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...
cide by slitting her wrists in the family bathtub. Later Anne, learning of Laura's unhappy life, mourns her inability to 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 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.