

“Sounding Brass:”

Artists, Writers, and Mothers in Mary Gordon’s *Men and Angels*

Brian Abel Ragen

For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love,
But to be loved alone.
—W.H. Auden

Near the end of *Men and Angels*, Anne Foster’s art books are almost ruined. They are in danger of being soaked with blood and water, which is dripping down from the bathroom where Laura Post, the religious fanatic who has been caring for Anne’s children, has cut her wrists in the bath. Laura has killed herself thinking that her death will save Anne and soften her hard heart. (Earlier in the day Anne showed how hard her heart was by firing Laura for endangering the children.) Anne’s books, at least, are saved, thanks to her friends Barbara, Jane, and Adrian, who stop the flow of bloody water before it can reach more than one bookcase, and salvage the volumes the flood has already touched:

‘How many of them have been ruined?’ [Anne asks.]
‘Not many,’ said Barbara. ‘But they’ll probably always smell queer.’
Memento mori, Anne thought. Not the clean, well-formed skull, but
the smell of mold, the feel of pages crumbling. (369)

The art books that smell of mortality—stained by a fanatic love and saved by generous friendship—capture the theme Gordon explores in *Men and Angels*. Gordon shows love destroying people almost as often as it sustains them, and destroying art almost as often as it inspires it.

Men and Angels is told alternately from the points of view of Laura and Anne. One of them is single-minded in her desire—she wants the love of God, and the love of a human being who will find God through her. The other wants to include many things in her life, to love many things in many different ways. Essentially, Gordon explores

whether different commitments can be balanced, and how far devotion—to art, to family, to those one loves—is possible, or even desirable.

Throughout *Men and Angels*, Anne Foster struggles, essentially, with the idea of commitment—or devotion or dedication—and sacrifice. “Committed,” “devoted,” and “dedicated” are terms of praise. The idealist committed to his cause, the mother devoted to her children, the scholar dedicated to his profession are all held up for admiration. But all these terms also suggest imprisonment or destruction: While we commit ourselves to causes or to other people, we also commit the insane to the asylum and the body to the ground. To “devote” or “dedicate” something is in the root meaning of each term, to bring an offering for sacrifice, or, at the very least, to set something apart from human life for the service of God. All three terms suggest restriction, exclusion, the loss of the individual self in the other thing that is the object of devotion. When we talk about a “committed relationship,” for instance, we mean a romantic relationship that excludes others—and that sort of commitment most of us do try to manage, though even that is clearly difficult. The real problem comes when the threat to commitment is not a human rival, but one of those other things to which people want to dedicate themselves—their work, their art. All people harbor the child’s desire to be loved to the exclusion of all else, to make the personalities of those we love become perfect complements of our own. Fortunately, we do not achieve our desire; we are loved by people who love other things as well—their friends, their work, their children. In Anne Foster, Gordon presents a woman who struggles to balance her various loves and duties—and to understand how other women have made the same negotiation. In Laura Post, she presents a woman who, madly, tries to live a life of devotion to Anne. She sees herself as the chosen of God; He calls her to save Anne. In pursuing her mission, she destroys herself.

Anne hires a baby-sitter because she has chosen to remain in America while her husband spends a year teaching in France. What keeps her from going to Europe is the chance to write the catalogue for an exhibition of the work of Caroline Watson, an early

twentieth-century American painter, modeled on artists such as Mary Cassatt and Cecilia Beaux. Caroline Watson was a woman who left her family to pursue her art, and Anne is constantly confronted with the perplexing question of how this woman did so easily what she herself can barely do at all. To Anne's surprise, the object of her scholarly study ends up being how Caroline Watson balanced—or failed to balance—her devotion to her art and her responsibility toward her child. Anne is confronted with the fact that the artist she admires has clearly slighted her son, Stephen, while devoting her life to art. Her lack of love for him ruined his life. Caroline Watson worked hard at her painting, and those who loved that art loved her. Even Jane, Stephen's widow, clearly felt more for her mother-in-law, the artist, than she did for her husband. Other authors might portray Caroline as the callous, unnatural mother. (And even in this novel there is one such character—Laura Post's mother, who is presented as a monster who drives her daughter to madness through lack of love.) But Gordon suggests that the price Caroline paid for the slighting of the child was, if not worth it, at least justifiable. The paintings—and the friendships—seem somehow to make up for the slighted son.

What is more, Caroline's choice of art over human relationships is mirrored to some extent in the choices of every other character—except for Laura. Anne is, in a sense, choosing her work over her children when she hires a baby-sitter so that she can write the catalogue for Caroline's exhibition. Her choice is just the choice most people must make—but in making it she chooses, for a few hours a day, to be the dedicated scholar rather than the devoted mother. Her writing does not take absolute priority over her children—as Caroline's art did over her son—but it is an independent consideration, one that has to be balanced with the children's interests and desires. The idea of “devotion” suggests the enclosure of a person in a single role—*just* the mother, *just* the scholar, *just* the artist. All the sane characters in this novel feel they must play several roles.

Every child desires a parent who plays *only* that role, who will never be distracted

from it by other interests or commitments. None of the characters in *Men and Angels* grew up with even a semblance of that parental devotion. Ben, the art critic who invites Anne to write the catalogue and introduces her to Jane Watson, even claims, with more than a trace of cynicism, that having distant parents is an advantage. When Jane asks about his English childhood, when he was cared for by servants and sent away to boarding school, he admits,

‘I minded awfully at the time. But in retrospect, I think it was good. It taught one early not to expect too much from human attachments.’ (43.)

Anne is struck by the sadness of Ben’s revelation, and troubled by its implications. She immediately fears she is teaching her children not to rely too much on human attachments, and then hopes to spare them that lesson by finding the right sitter. But in many ways the novel provides grounds for thinking Ben is right. He turns his lack of parental love into a devotion to art—and art remains, while every other sort of love, particularly the intense romantic variety, is tenuous. Those involved in art and scholarship make a decision to balance love of other human beings with the appreciation of something else, some human creation. And the value of mere artifacts is always open to question. Do they become the sounding brass, the tinkling cymbals, the tongues of men and angels that are nothing without love? Or *are* they love—a real though not interpersonal kind—that is truly passed between the artist and the audience, the scholar and the subject?

At times in the novel, it even seems that lack of adequate parental love makes some of the characters in the novel especially loving in their adult lives. Anne and her husband Michael both found the maternal love they were given in childhood inadequate. Neither’s mother was exactly unloving, but neither felt comfortable in the role of mother. Michael’s mother supported a child after her husband abandoned her and gave her son “a steamy rich affection, redolent of the cave” (30), but she also cast him in the role of responsible homemaker while she dealt with disappointment by becoming a tipsy slattern.

Anne's mother, although not much interested in domestic life, tried to play the 50's housewife. The role so depressed her that she, too, cast her daughter in the role of parent. As adults, Anne and Michael seek each other in part because of the lack they felt in childhood: They seem to value domestic life because they have been starved for it. Clearly, Ben has become the gallant, generous friend in part because of his distant parents. In fact, no adult in the novel has had a parent who loved him or her adequately. Only Laura is permanently damaged by her unhappy childhood. But she, unlike the others, has felt not simply a lack of love. While the other adult characters felt neglected in favor of other things, Laura felt her mother despised her for what she was.

If Caroline loved too little, and Anne balances her real love for her children with her desire to have some role in the world beyond that of mother, Laura Post loves with a pure intensity. Once she has fixed on Anne as the object of her love, she does not let her go. She has searched for a love not built on compromise, one as pure as her mother's hatred for her. Before she comes to Anne, she has sought that love first in a charismatic Catholic healing ministry and then in a cult that she finally discovers is a fraud. What she seeks in both places is not just God's love, but the undiluted love of other human beings. She has found real human love so unlikely a prospect, however, that she no longer even feels the desire for it. Instead, she wishes only to save people, to make them know they need her. The mad self-sufficiency born of the most intense need is what makes Laura so unlovable—and so unlikely to help anyone.

In her assurance that she is the "chosen of the Lord," Laura makes God the substitute for all the affection she has been denied. Her belief that God loves her does not assuage her pain; in fact, it only makes her harder to the world. She can console herself with the knowledge that the world that has so often rejected her will be punished for that rejection by God.

Having been denied a mother's love in childhood, Laura will not accept any sort of substitute. The various families with whom she works try to make her a part of their

lives, but the effort is fruitless. She is not willing to take the little joys, the small gifts and kindnesses, as a form of love. Having been cheated of the shared, qualified, ordinary sorts of love she might have had, she wants only the most intense and most extreme form—and that form is the absolute devotion of another person. Simple affection or friendship—much less the love conveyed through the medium of art or ideas—will not do.

The plot in which a seeming innocent enters the ordered life of a mother and comes close to destroying it has become quite popular recently: *Men and Angels* shares much with such recent gothic films as *The Baby-Sitter* or *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*. But while in other versions of this story the mad baby-sitter wishes to supplant the mother and is motivated by an obsession born of envy, Gordon's version does not quite follow that pattern. Laura does want to separate Anne from her friends, her husband, even, in a sense, from her children, but she does not want to take her place. She projects on Anne her own feelings of isolation and lovelessness, and seeks to save her, by making her feel that the other human attachments in her life are meaningless:

Why couldn't she hear the words of Laura's heart to her heart: I, only I, can lead you into safety. . . . Because she looked out at the white sun in the clouds. The white sun in the clouds was not her safety. Or the strength of her husband's arms. Or the sweetness of her children's bodies. That was the error that Anne lived by that the Lord would teach her in the proper time. That day was coming when Anne would know herself alone, unsheltered, and would turn to Laura, who would lead her to the Lord.
(253-4)

The domestic affections, the aesthetic appreciation of nature—none matter to Laura. Love mingled with those cannot, in her mind, be real. She wishes to be loved by someone who is as desperate for love as she is. And in trying to make Anne into that creature, she becomes the gothic terror.

In her monstrous single-heartedness, Laura rejects many things. She rejects the aesthetic in any form. She feels only contempt for the many characters who are interested in food and proud of their cooking, as all that ends up in the drain. She subsists

on white bread and margarine. She has no interest in any art—when the intellectual characters in the story talk about museums, she goes blank. She will not even take an interest in the clothes she herself wears. In this asceticism, she is not just denying herself pleasure; she is also rejecting a kind of love. While most other characters find pleasure in the things of the world, none of them can fairly be called materialistic. Rather, the things they enjoy are the medium through which they express love or concern. A picture, a meal, draws the other characters together, but Laura denies herself that kind of communion. The results of Anne’s efforts to buy Laura new clothes are especially revealing. Anne does not like Laura, but is trying to be kind to her. She takes her shopping, and tries to find out what sort of boots Laura would like best. Laura, giving no more thought to what she wears than would a lily of the field, is equally pleased with everything Anne suggests. And Anne, finding Laura takes no interest in the kindness she offers, feels increasing anger toward her, rather than the love the girl craves.

Indeed, Laura rejects all the less-than-absolute forms of love. She avoids friendship—or uses it. Throughout the novel, she either avoids meeting people, or uses them to serve her purpose. (She despises Héléne, but accepts her help because she feels it will lead her to where the Lord wants her.) The same is true of her sexual relationship with Adrian. Its only purpose is to detach Anne from another friend. She deceptively accepts faulty, human love only to further her quest for absolute love.

The love that seems to help all the other characters—though often only for a moment—is built through compromise and a recognition that no love is in truth all-consuming. Anne’s marriage seems happy—but it includes months of separation, temptations to adultery, and an emotional distance on some topics. Anne’s several friendships are strong—but they are all built on the recognition of other commitments. And the real parental love that most of the parents in this novel feel for their children is also qualified and balanced. Anne will offer anything—her life, Michael—when she thinks Laura has endangered the children, but she will not spend every moment with

them.

Love, in this novel, does not speak in the tongues of men or angels. There are few of either here. (Gordon chooses an angel's name—Michael—for Anne's husband, and it is significant that he is an ocean away for much of the book.) Rather, in Anne and her friends, it speaks a more domestic language, in the tongues of women. It is less the grand declaration than the small, significant act.

Men and Angels leaves the reader wondering about God's love. Since human love is so fragile, so based on circumstance and compromise, only divine love might truly satisfy the longing all the characters feel. Only Laura, who has had the least human love, thinks much of going to God to fill her emptiness, but her death raises the issue of God for the others. Where is God the loving parent who might have saved her? The first paragraph shows Laura meditating on one of the feminine images of God that the Bible presents: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." Has He forgotten, too? Is he another mother who abandons her child. Laura's love for God brings her no happiness—and her attempts to give that love to other people result only in misery. God's love for Laura seems not to be active at all. Her belief that she is the chosen of the Lord appears to be only a delusion, or an illustration of the biblical hard sayings, for it brings, not peace, but division. She evidently believes God loves her only so that she can damn all those who will not love her. God's love seems never to have comforted or protected her. And, like Anne at the funeral, we are left wondering why he has not preserved her.

Yet Anne is touched by the psalm the priest reads at Laura's funeral:

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help?
My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.

.....
It was so beautiful, and it was such a lie. From what had Laura been preserved? Yet she was glad the priest had read those words. Perhaps it was true for Laura now. Perhaps now Laura was protected. Perhaps now someone preserved her going out, her coming in. Or perhaps

not.

As if obeying the psalm's first line, Anne looked at the mountains. The morning sun shone clear and shadowless. From whence cometh my help? She had never noticed it before, but the way the priest read it made it clear the words were a question. (392)

As in the rest of her life, where Laura had a mad certainty, Anne is left with a question.

If *Men and Angels* leaves us wondering where God is, it also questions the value of art. What value can Anne's writing, or even Caroline's paintings, have in a world where people like Laura Post and Stephen Watson live their unhappy lives and die their lonely deaths? Even Caroline herself asked that question in an entry she wrote in her journal when she knew she was dying, and which Jane reads to Anne hours before Laura's death:

I left my son to wither. I knew what he needed: warmth and care, and moist rich soil. And I left him in a stony place, a leafless place. He died still a boy. Rootless, unrooted. . . . I have loved beauty. I have loved above all the light on the water, a yellow pear in a blue bowl, a winter sky shot through with silver. Yet perhaps to earn an eternity of beauty one has had to live a life of goodness. Perhaps I will sit, weeping and shuddering, in eternal darkness. I am right to fear. (333-334)

Caroline becomes more sympathetic to both Anne and the reader in her self-knowledge. But her question still remains, What value does beauty have, when those who seek it allow the people in their lives to suffer? The question is not made any easier by being paired with the one Laura's life raises, what value does godliness have if it allows others to suffer?

In the end, *Men and Angels* implies that while St. Paul may be right that all is nothing without love, love alone is not worth much either. Laura has love—love as desire, love as compassion—for Anne. It gives her nothing—it does not even make her lovable. The characters who are loved and loving are those who can love through things—whether art, or meals, or sexual attraction. They are also able to recognize that all human love must be based on balance and compromise. And that act of balance is

what Anne is left with at the end. Laura has wished to make her see that there is but one thing needful, the love of God, which Laura herself will bring to Anne after stripping her of all other loves. Caroline devoted herself to art and lived to regret the choice. Anne finds that art is not enough, motherhood is not enough, friendship is not enough, the pleasures of the world are not enough. But taken together, they *are* enough for a life of decent happiness.

In the last scene of the novel, Anne sits near the window of her bedroom. Her son is sleeping in her bed; he has been having nightmares since he discovered Laura lying dead in the tub, and Anne has brought him into her room to comfort him. As he sleeps, she thinks of the work she will soon resume:

[S]he would take the facts that she had learned, the words that were there for them. Join them together. She would make decisions on the dates of paintings. She would write, "It should be noted," and "The style demands." Hard words, formed words, white stones that she could hold and separate. And then, refreshed, she could dive back down to the dense underworld, to her children. . . (400)

As the child stirs, ready to return to his own room, she moves closer to the window and looks out at the clouds that are lit by the first hint of dawn. The many things of the world are still there for her. And she, unlike the unhappy young woman who would have separated her from children, husband, and the white sun in the sky, will have them all. She may even have the help that seemed to be promised when she looked up at the hills and saw the morning sun. Help will come not from single-minded devotion, but from careful balancing.

Works Cited

Gordon, Mary. *Men and Angels*. New York: Ballantine , 1986.

Brian Abel Ragen, Professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, can be contacted at inquiries@brianableragen.net. He retains copyright to this essay.