

**Mary Gordon, *There the Heart Lies*, New York, Anchor Books, 2017, 320 pp.**

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Mary Gordon has been called the chronicler of contemporary American Catholic life. For decades she has dissected the complexities and contradictions inherent in a Catholic way of life in eleven acclaimed novels and multiple works of non-fiction. Her new novel, *There the Heart Lies*, is no exception. Once again, Gordon courageously probes into tough personal questions raised against and made the more relevant by the backdrop of fraught international conflict—this time, the Spanish Civil War—with the Roman Catholic Church dead center. Once again, Gordon turns her attention to the religious cultural heritage of Ireland, as she did in *Pearl* (2005), when she told the story of Maria Meyers, an Irish-American mother who witnesses the slow death of her daughter Pearl during a hunger strike in Ireland.

*There the Heart Lies* explores in part the trans-Atlantic connections forged over more than a decade by Marian Taylor, the estranged nineteen-year-old daughter of a well-heeled Irish-American family of New York, and the small group of left-leaning Spaniards who fiercely sided with the

Republic against Francisco Franco's rise. Marian joins their cause—a cause that defies the social values of her sheltered, privileged upbringing in mostly Catholic schools and the deep-seated religious values of her Irish-American family. By “fighting for the enemies of the church” (17), as her father bluntly puts it shortly before she sails to Spain in 1937, Marian volunteers to aid the cause of the Republic against the nascent Fascist-oriented *Falange*.

While striving to maintain a sense of balance of contrasting conditions, a trait of good writing that Gordon explicitly cultivates, the novel also develops the precious relationship between the now nonagenarian Marian—the year is 2009—and her granddaughter Amelia. The two have a lot in common. Both are Hispanophiles; they devoted years to becoming proficient in Spanish; and they lived abroad. Both have a Catholic background—Marian's much more devout than Amelia's—but now they both consider themselves non-believers. Marian never regained the faith of her parents, and Amelia is the product of an upbringing without faith. The novel spans decades and centers on the compelling revelations of the older woman, who in her youth willingly participated in collective suffering, to the younger one who, raised in safety and prosperity, lacks any sense of momentous events beyond those in her own private sphere. In the back-and-forth between Marian's account of her concealed day in history and Amelia's often overawed but scattered reaction to it, Gordon ably explores the difficulties of intergenerational communication. Often Marian must “translate” her out-of-date experiences for her granddaughter, for Amelia's “beliefs have led to nothing” (200). Amelia, a product of the twenty-first century, needs help relating to the central role played by committed political engagement and the shattering of faith of her grandmother's generation.

Gordon's writing ability, her trenchant prose, is most dashing as she methodically unravels the historical thread while keeping a resonant story moving forward. The central chapters of the novel describe young Marian's encounters with the devastation of war. They echo Virginia Woolf's analysis of the rise of militaristic fascism in *Three Guineas* (1938). This is a particularly pertinent connection, not only because Woolf is an enduring influence on Gordon's work, but because of the two writers' shared views on the Spanish Civil War. Let us recall: Woolf was personally motivated to write *Three Guineas* by the loss of her beloved nephew Julian Bell in the Spanish Civil War in 1938, where he perished in a bomb explosion while volunteering as an ambulance driver. Woolf condemns the "abomination", the "barbarity" (11) of all war and describes it always in corrosive terms. Memorably, she refers to the inner turmoil caused by the photos of dead bodies and ruined houses that the besieged pre-Franco Spanish government sent twice a week from Madrid for publication in a London newspaper intended to energize the cause of pacifism. Woolf writes, "This morning's collection contains the photograph of what might be a man's body, a woman's; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a bird-cage hanging in what was presumably the sitting room. . ." (10-11).

In heartrending first-person narrative and from the epicenter of devastation, Gordon describes Marian's odyssey and her inner dislocation as she traverses the city of Valencia, Spain, where she volunteers as a driver from 1937-38. She observes, "Events pile up on top of one another like the stones from the destroyed buildings . . . you forget what came first, whether you saw the boy with the green eyes screaming for his mother on Tuesday or Wednesday". Also, "On some streets, you can see into houses whose roofs have been blown off, whose windows have been shattered. She sees a woman watering a plant; she sees a canary in a blue painted cage" (70). Both writers proffer similar windows into the suffering produced by the same war.

Marian's family drama and the display of the historical forces contributing to the rise of Spanish fascism are central strands of the novel. But *There the Heart Lies* is a novel written by Mary Gordon, so religion must play a hefty part in its mix. To that effect, Gordon plumbs the depths of the almost inconceivable linkage of the Roman Catholic Church and the Spanish government. Marian refers to "a two-headed monster: One head the Church; the other El Caudillo" (Franco) (147). In Spain, as in Italy and in Germany, the church allied itself squarely with fascism.

However, Gordon balances the sharp condemnation of clerics who "adopted fascist salutes" (232), and who were engaged in a shameful neglect of the faithful, with the actions of the most heroic of Gordon's minor characters. Tomas is a Catholic priest, a Spaniard of Irish ancestry trained in Maynooth, County Kildare, Ireland, at the height of the fascist repression. He is the mouthpiece of a profound insight into the novel: the observation that both sides of the conflict were equally responsible for unthinkable abuses of power, that the brutality of war was present on both sides. It is almost as if Gordon were endowing Ireland and Tomas's mixed Irish ancestry with the capacity to inspire the right type of political engagement, that which has a strong sense of place and history. For Tomas seems to experience something similar to what Pearl experienced in Ireland, where she "felt for the first time that she was a part of history" (27). Tomas returns to Spain in time to adjust his role as a Catholic priest in the thick of the war. Complicit as he feels for serving a church that is shamefully compromised, he finds a way to don the mantle of compassion. So he dispenses restorative justice by meeting the spiritual needs of both the wrongdoer and the wronged through his tireless work from the confessional.

*There the Heart Lies* is a great read, well researched and overall rewarding. Its only shortcoming is its failure to resolve a major theme: the balance between large public sorrow and individual, private grief. Compared to the stunning canvas Gordon paints of Marian's years in Spain—the sacrifices she made given her posh background, the faith she lost, the horrors she witnessed—the last section devoted to Amelia seems smallish and too quickly paced. It is not that Amelia is by nature incapable of experiencing the cathartic effect of her grandmother's story. She is not insensitive to the world around her. Like many other sympathetic characters in Gordon's fiction, Amelia has enough of a social conscience to endorse causes of considerable social import like racial, gender, religious, and sexual equality as well as the ecological concern for the protection of the earth. But Amelia has never questioned those values, and she has certainly not staked her life on making any of those a reality. Furthermore, she has not experienced the crushing failure of the causes she believes in nor has she ever been the victim of another human being's emotional harm. If, as the novel asserts, public suffering and private sorrow "shed a garish light on one another, bathing each other in a lurid glow" (106), Marian's experience of both dwarfs Amelia's. In the last analysis, Marian's visceral experience, her half-Irish background embedded in Ireland's tragic history, and her loss of faith cannot compare to Amelia's unexamined dismissal of faith and her relatively untested American background.