The Return of Agatha McGee: Self-Acceptance in John Hassler's *A Green Journey*

by
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"Things throw light on things"—this phrase from Theodore Roethke has an almost magical significance for Agatha McGee, the protagonist of Jon Hassler's *A Green Journey*. It suggests the possibility of epiphanies, moments of insight which allow individuals to see themselves and their existence in ways they have not before. Although Agatha would probably acknowledge that she has had her share of these moments, she very likely does not perceive the insight still to come to her.

During the course of *A Green Journey*, Agatha reaches the end of her career as a sixth grade teacher at Staggerford's St. Isidore's School. Taking stock of her accomplishments as retirement approaches, Agatha is not at all sure that her priorities have been well placed. (Actually, they have, but Agatha does not herself fully realize this until later.)

Except for her college years, Agatha McGee has lived her entire life in Staggerford, having taught at St. Isidore's for forty-six years. A concerned and demanding teacher, she tries to shape her students' lives so they will reflect the values she cherishes. As the novel opens, for instance, she befriends her former student Janet Raft, now pregnant and unmarried. In fact, her involvement with Janet during the time of the child's birth and the weeks immediately after cause Agatha to wonder if she has missed something in life. Such thoughts also make her think about the direction her life should take in the future. Could this future, she seems to ask herself, include James O'Hannon, a teacher in Ireland—or so he has identified himself—with whom she has corresponded for several years? To grasp the significance of the personal crisis Agatha faces, one must first examine her character, then assess the reasons for her seeming dissatisfaction with her life, note the romantic fantasies she nourishes and finally observe the insight she receives into herself, confirming that she has actually lived her life rightly, guided by what is consistent in her nature.

Agatha's principal traits include her awareness of her slightly elevated social standing in the town of Staggerford, her commitment to conservative doctrines and practices within Catholicism, and her determination to shape events and people so that they

conform to her vision of how things should be. In some ways as an only child—her brother died when she was very young—Agatha is the daughter of an educated and prosperous Staggerford couple. Her father, the town's first lawyer, also served in the state senate, and Agatha still resides in the commodious family home on River Street, Staggerford's prestigious avenue of impressive older homes. Her relatively independent life has not required her to adapt herself to others very frequently, and this gives her a conviction of the correctness of her own views.

It is this conviction that makes Agatha such a formidable opponent for fellow Catholics of a more liberal persuasion. "Her heart," Hassler writes, "had been broken countless times since Vatican II" (28). "In the old days," she muses, "you never judged Catholic ritual—a Mass was a Mass. But nowadays, churchgoing could be a horrifying surprise—guitars on the altar, female acolytes, charismatics babbling in tongues" (6). It is, in fact, her disgust for changes implemented by Vatican II which leads to her correspondence with James O'Hannon. Having subscribed to the conservative international newspaper *The Fortress*, she notes in it a letter from James reflecting views similar to her own and she initiates the correspondence.

Currently, her major course of frustration within the Church is her new bishop, Richard Baker, or "Dick," as he asks his parishioners to call him. He closes church schools, changes worship ritual, and strips churches of adornments. But worse is coming. One Sunday morning Agatha's Father Finn reads a letter from Bishop Baker:

> "Beginning immediately, I intend to stop visiting the parishes of the diocese for Confirmation. All joy and spontaneity have gone out of this wonderful, meaningful sacrament. It has become a rote exercise. From now on I will confirm the souls entrusted to me only when those souls come to me as individuals and ask to be confirmed. They may do this at any time." (69)

Agatha acts on this invitation. After determining the least convenient time to call on him—during his Sunday evening card game—she brings a dozen of Staggerford's youth to ask for Confirmation.

Such persistence, determination, and conviction of the justness of her own views has characterized Agatha throughout her life. Janet Raft's father, for instance, remembers, years after the fact, his discomfort when Agatha pointedly indicated that he had dribbled on her windows and foundation when painting her house. In fact, after bringing the pregnant Janet to Agatha's at the beginning of the novel, Frank Raft still obviously thinks of Agatha as a teacher, for he "paused for further instruction" and then "fled across the porch" (2). Even Agatha's conversation conveys something of the imperious: "answer me this" she often asks as though she were drawing a response out of a slightly recalcitrant student. Agatha's mettle surfaces again when Stephen, Janet's son and the first baby of the year, is not recognized as such because of his illegitimacy. Through Agatha's arm twisting, the town merchants do eventually come across with the appropriate gifts and prizes.

For much of her life, Agatha McGee has been comfortable as guarantor of Staggerford's manners and mores. But presently she is no longer so satisfied with her life. Perhaps because of her involvement with Janet, perhaps because retirement is near, perhaps because she must find some way to occupy her leisure time, she becomes more reflective than usual. After Janet and Stephen leave her home, she must admit that there's something lacking in her routine. Hassler states that "normally she found schoolwork absorbing, but this afternoon it struck her as vaguely tiresome. The first thing she had to correct was a spelling test—how paltry compared to helping a new life into the world" (21). And later, when she sits down with *Economic Geography for Young Readers*, "she wished she had something more interesting to do with her evening" (23). Her disillusionment deepens:

> After all these years of showing the way, she had lost faith in herself as standard-bearer. Just as her teaching career struck her as depressingly plain in retrospect, so her efforts to improve people's lives, or at least to keep these lives from deteriorating, seemed ineffectual. (96)

A conversation with Frank Raft gives her further pause for thought. When Agatha inquires why he calls a chokecherry a tree rather than a bush, he laconically answers:

> "If I'm ever in doubt about how much credit to give a thing, I always give it more, to be on the safe side. . . ."
>
> Yes, (thinks Agatha) that was always your way, wasn't it?
> *Always too easy going, always soft in your judgments*—she left this part unspoken.
>
> "And you, Miss McGee, you always give it less, ain't I right?" (36)

Agatha eventually counters in her "most self-assured tone: 'As for my high standards, it's my nature, Francis. It's much easier to live your life according to your nature than to go against it'" (37). Agatha's comment here is particularly interesting since she is in the process of going against her nature—or rather, not respecting enough as she tries to assess her life.

Reflecting on her teaching, she finds it doesn't give the satisfaction she expected. She had (50) "improved the minds of over twelve hundred twelve year olds, and that was certainly nice to know, but what did she have to show for it but gradebooks?" And when little Stephen finds her forbidding (51) shes wonders, "Why is everyone so formal with me?"

Given her understandable uncertainty about her life's focus — everyone goes through this kind of questioning — it is not strange that Agatha wonders if her friendship with James O'Hannon — thus far only through letters — might not offer her something she

has not yet experienced. Perhaps the possibility of marriage crosses her mind. We learn that "the reason Agatha had never married was that when she was young and had the opportunities she hadn't felt the need, and later, feeling the need, she had no opportunities" (7). When she was twenty-five she had turned down a proposal from Preston Warner, a farmer, because he was not in her social class. Agatha's reflections about this proposal suggest that marriage was never the highest priority for her, regardless of what she might think at the present: "'I was born to teach, not to churn,' she had said, not realizing that he was her last chance, though it's doubtful that realizing it would have changed her mind. She loved classrooms. Barns made her sneeze" (7).

But now she muses about romance with James. His letters "(give) her heart a little kick," and she anticipates them so eagerly that she rips them open at the mailbox (24). Such eagerness, even excluding the possibility of romance, is most understandable. Living in a small town, slightly aloof from others because of her background and education, Agatha obviously needs someone to whom she can pour out her feelings, especially when her correspondent shares her own conservative views.

Thus, when the opportunity to join a tour to Ireland arises, she accepts, even though it is led by Bishop "Dick" Baker and will include her shallow and garrulous neighbor, Lillian Kite. Although she pretends she is going to trace her Irish ancestry, Agatha is really going to see James. So pleased with the prospect is she, that Hassler tells us that "not for anyone's sake would she give up this adventure, never mind if rumors of romance drifted back to the townspeople who had been watching her every action since she was seven years old. . ." (89).

One suspects Agatha may even relish rumors of such a romance. Of course she vigorously denies this when she tells Janet of her correspondence with James:

> "Janet, I have to tell you something. There's a man in Dublin I'm going to be seeing."
>
> "There is?"
>
> "He's a teacher. He lives in a small town not far from the city. We've been corresponding for four years, and tomorrow evening. . . It's a correspondence that. . . You see, Janet . . ." She fell silent . She felt confused. Never in her adult life had she been at a loss for words.
>
> "What's his name?"
>
> "James O'Hannon. You have seen his picture on my desk at home. He's . . ."
>
> Janet looked at her curiously in the amber light. "Yes, I've seen it. I thought it was your cousin or something. What is he, your boyfriend?"

> "Now, Janet."
>
> "He is, isn't he! He's your boyfriend!" Janet squealed. "I can't believe it." Laughing, she took Agatha's arm and hugged it. "James O'Hannon is your boyfriend."
>
> "Stop that and listen to me."
>
> "Oh, Miss McGee, a boyfriend!"
>
> "Not a boyfriend, Janet. He's sixty-six."
>
> "A manfriend, then. How wonderful."
>
> "Will you please be still and listen? It's nothing like that." (126)

Nevertheless, Agatha's initial meeting with James fulfills her expectations. James is intelligent, handsome, though older-looking than he was in the picture he sent her. When she tells James that she can't take the walk he proposes because she's not wearing the proper shoes, they both look down at her shoes and she "(is) thankful for her trim ankles" (140). As they return to her hotel by taxi, James' thoughtfulness leads Agatha to wonder if he is pondering a proposal. But he only asks, "'Is it true that Americans neglect confession these days?'" Yet, when he walks her to the elevator of her hotel, "in plain sight of all, he embraces her" (148). Hassler adds, "ascending, she felt that for a mere seven hundred dollars she had been carried not only from the New World to the Old, but also beyond it, to the realm of her happiest dreams" (148).

James, however, is different the following day. He's nervous, tense, even irritable, although there still are tranquil moments. As they sit resting from their tour of Dublin, Agatha feels she "wouldn't mind if she never moved from this bench. She felt whole and complete and exhausted. . ." (157). But then, at the end of the day, James announces that he must spend the next several days dealing with a crisis that has suddenly come up. He will get in touch with Agatha before she leaves and hopes they will continue to correspond. Agatha is stunned.

But not for long. By morning her practical, determined nature has reasserted itself and she realizes James needs her, regardless of the particular nature of the trial that he is going through. Since it is now Sunday, she takes the bus out to St. Brigid's, his parish church at Ballybegs knowing she will find him there. She enters the church:

> The pews were filling fast. She knew where James would be sitting; he liked the front pew near that Virgin's altar. He wasn't there; she walked partway down the aisle to make sure. She returned to the back and stood waiting. The bell stopped ringing. Half a dozen men came in quickly at the last minute, unceremoniously,

dipping in a perfunctory genuflection and slipping into pews. Still no James. She saw a place for herself near the back and went there and knelt. . . .

There was a long wait. Eleven thirty-five. Coughing. Two or three babies whimpering. Then a small bell tinkled over the sacristy door, and six altar boys stepped out into the sanctuary, two abreast, carrying candles. They were followed by the priest wearing white for Corpus Christi. He was a tall, white-haired man. He was pale, with ruddy spots high on his cheekbones. He was James. (163)

Agatha flees the church with a bitter laugh. However, as one may well expect, this shock, intense though it is, does not stop her life. Although James has hurt her greatly she does find it possible to see him when he calls at the Dublin boarding house in which she is now staying. Later, as they sit in Stephen's Green, James asks Agatha if they will still write. "I'm sorry," she says. I can't be sure (274). Attending noon mass at a nearby church her feeling toward James softens further:

She (asks) God if the pleasure of knowing James would someday heal the injury of discovering the truth about him, and she was amazed to find that it was already so. The pain of his deception, though lingering, was no longer a chaotic sort of pain, nor was it, she suspected, as strong as the emptiness she would certainly feel if she had never known him. She assured God that her forgiveness of James was complete. However, she didn't go so far as to tell God that she'd resume the correspondence. (276)

So the correspondence with James will begin again and it will serve for Agatha the function for which it was intended: she will share with James her views, her frustrations and delights—all of the things that gave meaning to the correspondence before she allowed it to be distorted by romantic fantasies, comforting fantasies created when she doubted the value and accomplishments of her past decades.

Recovered from her trauma, Agatha now begins to seriously consider accepting Bishop Baker's request that she become principal of St. Isidore's School in its final years before closing. After weighing positive and negative factors, Agatha notes that

the horizon was blue and clear. What lay beyond it was the principalship. She would take it. To be fair, however, she must warn the bishop, next time she had a moment alone with him, that he'd have an easier time closing St. Isidore's with someone else in charge, that as principal she'd be in a strong position to fight for its life. She was amazed that her course should be so clear, when for weeks it had been veiled in haze. Things throw light on things. (285)

Agatha had not seen her course before because she momentarily lost confidence in the qualities and achievements that had always defined her life—her involvement in the

church, her dedication to teaching, her interest in students—and believed she must look elsewhere for significance and meaning—that elsewhere being an imagined romance with James. But she would hardly have been able to adapt herself to marriage with James, let alone live in Ireland. Significantly, her fantasies never progressed beyond the possibility of a proposal, suggesting that something within her recognized the tenuous nature of her dreams. Now, as she flies home, Agatha contemplates the changes she will make as principal. Her life is back on course.

Thus, although most readers of *A Green Journey* probably assume that Agatha's "romance by letter" with James signals a new and beneficial change in her life, it does not. Her vicarious, imagined romance with James simply reveals that approaching changes in her life frightened her into considering options which were consistent with neither her personality nor her interests. Although Agatha is seriously hurt and angered when she discovers James' identity, the shock of this discovery allows her to once again see her life and herself realistically, to accept herself and to devote herself to her major concerns of the past decades. Thus, Agatha's return from Ireland also marks her return to the kind of life which she finds most comfortable and meaningful.

Bibliography

Jon Hassler. *A Green Journey.* New York: Ballantine, 1986.