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## *"Even Better Than the Real Thing": Brian Moore's The Great Victorian Collection*

By EAMONN WALL

THAT THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA figure prominently in Brian Moore's work is hardly surprising given that he has lived in one or the other of these countries for over forty years. But Moore's novels are not merely set in these North American nations; on the contrary, one finds in *An Answer from Limbo*, *Fergus*, *Black Robe*, *Cold Heaven*, and other works, detailed examinations of many aspects of the New World experience. In fact, one of Moore's most important contributions to Irish fiction has been his ability to forsake Ireland, the traditional stomping ground of modern Irish writers, and report on other worlds with confidence and ease. This aspect of Moore's work has had an enormous influence on a whole generation of younger Irish writers such as Colm Tóibín, Colum McCann, Emer Martin, Sebastian Barry, Glenn Patterson, and others who have followed him. But despite the wide range of his landscapes, the central themes, concerns, and explorations one finds in Moore's fiction are generally part of the traditional domain of Irish fiction. Frequently, protagonists are pushed into crises as a result of unfulfilled sexual longings, of conflicts between religious rules and human desires, or between individuals and their families or societies, and woven deeply into these fabrics one recognizes such diverse and hoary chestnuts as politics, guilt, and miracles. However, since such obsessions are simultaneously Irish and universal, Moore has retained a loyal and diverse audience through nineteen novels.

Unlike his other works, *The Great Victorian Collection*, published in 1975, is, for the most part, as much concerned with place as with theme, and is Moore's attempt to describe where he lives (the United States/California) to his reader. It is a book born out of the experience of absorbing America and written with some of the same hostility which governs his portraits of Belfast in *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* and *The Feast of Lupercal* and of Canada and Canadians in *I Am Mary Dunne*. Here, Moore, who distributed socialist literature on Belfast street corners as a young man, takes particular aim at American business, its mass media, and its university "experts" (O'Donoghue xii). At the same time, *The Great Victorian Collection* is a very postmodern work and something of a landmark in

Moore's career, one in which he puts on display all he has learned from studying the technical innovations Borges and García Márquez have introduced into fiction. The view of America in general, but of Southern California in particular, is born of Moore's belief that the absence of a sense of history has created in many Americans, as Umberto Eco has noted, "the frantic desire for the Almost Real [which has arisen] as a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories" (31). Such creations as The Palace of Living Arts in Los Angeles and the Hearst castle in San Simeon are "Absolute Fakes [and the] offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without depth" (Eco 31). Ironically, Moore's Collection is "real," though it is also the vehicle used to explore the strangeness of contemporary America. When I interviewed Moore in 1990, he stated:

I was very stimulated [by America] when I first came here—by the freedom and the open society. However, the longer I've lived here the more I realize it's like Northern Ireland: it's a complicated situation. I'm not stimulated at all by where I live now [Malibu, California]. (Wall 368)

*The Great Victorian Collection* is an alien's look around his adoptive state and country, albeit one woven through a dense fabric of objects. Both author, protagonist, and objects are removed from their proper domains, and this is why they appear so strange and out-of-touch in California, a capital of the postmodern.

The Great Victorian Collection is the creation of Tony Maloney, a twenty-nine-year-old assistant professor of history at McGill University. Maloney, after attending a conference at Berkeley, drives south in a rented car and checks into the Sea Winds Motel in Carmel-by-the-Sea. That night he dreams that a vast collection of artifacts from the Victorian period has been assembled in the parking lot of the Sea Winds Motel. When he wakes in the morning he discovers what he has been dreaming about has come to be:

It was morning. I was in the hotel room I had dreamed about, that same room in which I had gone to sleep. I got out of bed and barefoot, wearing only my pajama trousers, went to the window, raised the blind, and saw that same pink sunrise. There, below me, just as in the dream, was the large open-air market and the maze of stalls occupying the entire area of the parking lot which had been empty last evening. I opened the window, climbed down onto the main aisle, and began to walk along the aisle, exactly as I had done in my dream, coming to the selfsame crystal fountain which I recognized now as the work of F & C Osler, a marvel of casting, cutting, and polishing of faultless blocks of glass, erected originally in the transept as the centerpiece of the Great Exhibition of 1851. (7-8)

Maloney has dreamed up the largest collection of Victorian artifacts in the world—many of the pieces are not just similar to, but they are the same as, similar pieces in English museums, while others are pieces which had been lost. That the collection is there is confirmed by a man out walking who asks Maloney, "Hi there. What the heck is this, some kind of exhibition? How in God's name did they get it up so fast?" (10). That the collection is large is

revealed by the irate hotel and parking lot owner who berates Maloney, "What's all this junk? How in hell did this stuff get in here? I don't believe it. A fountain! I've got to be dreaming.... How did you get all those structures up? You must have used fifty trucks" (12-13).

Although Moore is often considered a traditional writer, it is clear from *The Great Victorian Collection*, and some other more recent novels, that he has been influenced by innovative novelists, and by Borges in particular. Borges' fictions often resemble books of legal evidence in which the individual's whole life, or some part of it, is examined dispassionately. Borges refers to his fictions as essays: instead of providing a story, Borges provides a gloss on the margins of a story as a substitute for a story itself. He's a scholar of nonexistent texts. Therefore, Borges' stories approximate Maloney's collection.

A good example of a typical Borges fiction is "An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain," a short story, appropriately enough, with an Irish setting:

Herbert Quain has just died at Roscommon. I was not astonished to find that *The Times Literary Supplement* allots him scarcely half a column of necrological piety and not a single laudatory epithet but is corrected (or seriously qualified) by an adverb. *The Spectator*, in its pertinent issue, is unquestionably less laconic and perhaps even more cordial, but compares Quain's first book, *The God and the Labyrinth*, with a work by Mrs. Agatha Christie, and others with books by Gertrude Stein: evocations which no one would consider inevitable and which would not have gratified the deceased. Quain, for that matter, was not a man who ever considered himself a genius; not even on those extravagant nights of literary conversation on which a man who has already worn out the printing presses inevitably plays at being Monsieur Teste or Doctor Sam Johnson.... He was very clear-headed about the experimental nature of his books: he thought them admirable, perhaps, for their novelty and for a certain laconic probity, but not for their passion. (*Fictions* 66)

The tone of this paragraph (cool, ironic, speculative) and the diction (specialized, to distance narrator from subject) is closer to what one might find in a dull scholarly journal than in a work of fiction. Borges makes no attempt to convince his reader he is telling a story; no significant events are foreshadowed, and the imaginary Irish writer Herbert Quain is not made at all interesting. Borges reminds us, as does Beckett, that traditional, plot-driven, story-telling is highly artificial and must be discarded. What makes the preceding paragraph, and Borges' fiction in general, so captivating is its irony and cleverness. "Necrological piety" is a beautiful sendup of the kind, but insincere, words composed by obituary writers, while the coupling of Quain with Agatha Christie and Gertrude Stein is both funny, and confusing. Of course, Borges makes no effort to determine which of these authors Quain is closest to. Borges and Quain may be the same person: the title of Quain's first book, *The God of the Labyrinth*, is close to the title of Borges' second, *Labyrinths*. In addition, Quain's observation, summarized by Borges' narrator, that his

work is known for its “novelty and for a certain laconic probity” could also be applied to Borges’ own fiction (*Fictions* 66).

*The Great Victorian Collection* is also written in the form of an investigative report. Moore, like Borges, or a scholar, or a police officer, keeps his distance. Without intruding, the narrator, like a camera, provides the process with an area to unfold itself. The merit of Quain’s work is debated by the experts who review it in journals, and, in like manner, experts are brought in to decide whether or not Maloney’s collection is authentic. Of course, because the motives of such experts are suspect, their integrity is undermined. Unlike Borges, Moore does not abandon the traditional ways of writing novels. Instead, he retains plot, foreshadowing, etc., and adds elements which appeal to him, which he has found in his readings of the works of Borges, the Magic Realists, and such “Superfiction” writers as John Barth and Robert Coover.

Why have both Borges and Moore resorted to the fantastic so much in their work? Borges explains it best in his preface to *Doctor Brodie’s Report*: “I have set my stories some distance off in time and space. The imagination, in this way, can operate with greater freedom” (12). However, Borges still considers himself a realist. In order for the fantastic to be convincing in writing, it must be treated as if it were real so the reader will think it real. Before writing *The Great Victorian Collection*, Moore’s work fit in to a traditional Irish groove: he wrote of variations on a theme of poverty—spiritual, sexual, economic, artistic. What made this early work so compelling was the quality of the writing, its honesty, and its variety of settings. Furthermore, these novels were urgent and earnest. However, in three novels—*Catholics* (1972), *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975), and *Cold Heaven* (1983)—he produced, for him, a new, more speculative, dispassionate, and more imaginative kind of fiction. Of course, because he was raised a Catholic in Ireland, the country with Europe’s greatest treasure trove of folklore where myth and religion, past and present, fact and fiction are often inseparable, it seemed a natural turn for Moore to bring together what he had inherited from Ireland with what other literatures and life in America had presented him with. Furthermore, one can speculate that perhaps *The Great Victorian Collection* is, perhaps, at least to a degree, a kind of ironic stocktaking of Moore’s own career to date and that the artifacts strewn about the California parking lot, being examined by onlookers and experts, are figures representing both Moore’s novels, and their readers and critics. One unavoidable conclusion, considering Maloney’s fate, is that Moore believes that the creators of novels or Victorian collections play second fiddle to the image-makers, spin-doctors, and moneybags who seek to profit from the creativity of others.

Why, one might ask, does Maloney have his dream in Carmel, and not in

his hometown of Montreal, or in England? An obvious answer is that Carmel is close to where Moore lives; a fuller answer, however, is more complex. In an ingenious essay on the novel, Seamus Deane suggests why this novel had to be set in California:

Brian Moore's *The Great Victorian Collection* and Umberto Eco's essay "Travels in Hyperreality" were both published in 1975. The reason for Eco's "journey into hyperreality," from the Hearst castle in San Simeon, to Lyndon Johnson's mausoleum in Texas, the now-defunct Palace of Living Arts in Los Angeles, to the California Disneyland, the Florida Disneyworld and so on, is to discover "instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake...." One point, repeatedly and ingeniously made by Eco, leads directly to Moore's novel, and it is appropriate that the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, close to where Moore lives, should offer the most telling illustration of it. The Getty museum is one of the greatest of its kind. It displays works of "unquestionable authenticity." But it also contains an edifice called the Villa of the Papyruses of Herculaneum which is a reconstruction of a building which no longer exists in its entirety and is, in its totality, a supposition. It has been (re)created by experts.... (*Irish University Review* 74)

Ironically, Maloney's collection, since it is just like the real thing, is not a fake. The fake in this novel is "The Great Victorian Village," constructed by Management Incorporated a few miles distant from Maloney's collection, which is a mixture of Las Vegas, Disneyland, and the Crystal Palace. It is, in Eco's words, a "hyperreal" place (43). The village had to be constructed because road access, parking, and space for development were lacking at the original site. Also, it was felt that a simpler collection would attract a wider audience, and because the flagellation chambers and other kinky areas, which attracted large audiences, had been closed off by the State of California, in the interests of decency. The Village is a parody of the Collection. In Mrs. Beauchamp's Parlour, which tries to imitate the decor of the most scandalous part of the Collection, "young California girls wearing black lisle stockings and white cotton knickers with panels which opened to expose their behinds moved among the patrons, serving drinks and flaunting their breasts in provocative deshabelle" (198). A men's wear boutique is called Oscar Wilde Way Out, and the warehouse selling imitation Victorian knick-knacks is misleadingly named The Great Victorian Collection. The Village is the "ultimate fake." However, the gullible public is eventually convinced that the warehouse is The Great Victorian Collection (198).

On a literal level, the novel's premise isn't as far-fetched as it appears to be. Take photocopying, for example. Technology has become so advanced that it can often be impossible to tell the difference between an original page of manuscript and a copy, unless we are informed by the author that one was printed from a disk, and is the original, while the other is a copy, and not the original. Of course, one might then inquire as to the status of that same page on the disk in relation to the document saved on the hard drive. Which is the original? In the future, it seems possible that copying and software will

improve to the extent that it will be possible to recreate, for example, the "Mona Lisa." This new work will not be a reproduction: it will be another "original." Of course, this will mean that there will be many "originals," that great works of fine art will be as common as televisions (one in every home), and that art will finally yield to democracy. On the flip side, the art market will collapse, great fortunes will be lost, nobody will be bothered going near art museums, and all of Sotheby's employees will be made redundant. Of course, such a scenario can never be allowed to unfold: experts will make determinations and what is real will be separated from what is a fake. Eco notes, in relation to books, that "the triumph of photocopying is creating a crisis in the publishing industry. Each of us if he can obtain, at less expense, a photocopy of a very expensive book avoids buying that book" (178).

With regard to postmodern fiction, Moore's removal of the Victoriana to a parking lot in California is similar to techniques used by both Cortázar and Nabokov in their fictions. Commenting on these writers, Brian McHale has noted:

Similar effects are achieved by Julio Cortázar in his story "The Other Heaven" (from *All Fires the Fire and Other Stories*, 1966), where Buenos Aires of the 1940s is superimposed on Paris of the 1860s; and on a much larger scale in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (1970). The alternate world, or Antiterra, of *Invitation to a Beheading* has been constructed by superimposing Russia on the space occupied in our world by Canada and the United States, Britain on our France, Central Asia on European Russia, and so on. (47)

All three writers—Moore, Cortázar, and Nabokov—have lived, or live, much of their lives outside of their own countries. Imaginatively, they travel back and forth between where they were born and where they live till eventually locations travel too. Multiple locations are grafted together to make a single place which allows imaginative release, and which becomes a substitute homeland.

The issue of authenticity is a central concern in *The Great Victorian Collection*, and the vehicle Moore uses to involve business, the mass media, and academe. A major contention is that the three are closely related, interdependent and self-serving. Business is represented by Management Incorporated, the creator of The Great Victorian Village. Management Incorporated, through its manipulation of the popular media, is remarkably successful in peddling its collection to the public. However, the more serious media, represented by the *New York Times*, and the nation's most incorruptible arbiters of veracity and taste, university experts, are not much concerned with unearthing the truth. The *New York Times* brings in H.F. Clews from Yale and Sir Alfred Mannings, the Director General of the British Imperial Collections, whose efforts not only cast doubt on the whole process of authenticating, but also on the presence of ethical standards, or the lack of such, in academe. This part of the novel is also extremely funny. Professor

Clews is a man "with a port-wine nose and protuberant eyes arrested in a glaucous stare" (52). He believes that Maloney shouldn't be taken seriously as a scholar because his doctorate was received from a Canadian university, and he is "insane" (53-54). Sir Alfred Mannings, a proud Briton with a low estimation of America, is horrified and "moved to indignation ... to see these wonderful treasures laid out in flea-market fashion in an American car-park" (57). His reaction is comparable to Umberto Eco's who, when confronted by the objects present in the Hearst castle in San Simeon, notes that "what offends is the voracity of the selection, and what distresses is the fear of being caught up by this jungle of venerable beauties ... redolent of contamination, blasphemy, [and] the Black Mass" (23). Mannings, although he is impressed by the Collection, closes ranks with Clews and roundly condemns it as a fake to the *New York Times*.

To undo the damage done by the report in the *Times*, Management Incorporated brings in its own duo of experts:

There arrived that same afternoon Henry Prouse, Regius Professor of History at the University of Saskatchewan, and Charles Hendron, Keeper of the Dulwich Memorial Trust. Both were eminent Victorian scholars who had collaborated on a two volume work entitled *The Lodging Houses of Victorian London*.... Management Incorporated possessed an excellent research department. Some years before, *The Lodging Houses of Victorian London* had been reviewed unfavorably in the *Times Literary Supplement*. The unsigned review was written by Professor H.F. Clews of Yale. (86)

Naturally enough, given the animosity both scholars share for Clews, they are wild in their praise for the Carmel Collection. Hendron says that the "Carmel Collection is, without doubt, the greatest single collection of Victoriana to have been uncovered this century," while Prouse, in a flourish of hyperbole, proclaims that he has come into the presence of "perhaps the first wholly secular miracle in the history of mankind" (87). Neither duo of experts is much concerned with authenticity per se: the first is concerned with undermining Maloney, while the second seeks to settle an old score with the unfortunately named Clews. Of course, if one believes in the notion of universities as centers of disinterested learning where highly educated individuals seek the truth above all else, with little interest in money or fame, these passages of *The Great Victorian Collection* will disturb one greatly and lead one to grow as cynical about the motives of these people as one has grown of politicians'.

Equally disturbing, but also delightfully funny, is how, by means of the introduction of a third expert, the evidence is weighted towards authenticity. Lord Rennishawe is an eighty-one-year-old dwarf and the owner of Creechmore Castle in Wales who is able to verify the authenticity of many of the "lost" items (objects which once existed but were lost through time, or fires, etc.). He tells a remarkable story of stumbling upon a room in an old



summer house where his grandfather housed his Sadean equipment and paraphernalia. To this house, the grandfather lured young servant girls. Because of Rennishawe's titillating subject matter, he makes many appearances on television talk shows. Such appearances, in view of both the media's power and America's love of aristocracy—Lord Rennishawe is, after all, the real thing—render the Collection real in the eyes of the public. Until Rennishawe has made his round of the talk shows, Maloney's colleagues and superiors at McGill University are skeptical of his collection, angered by his absence from work and, in fact, remove him from his position; however, after Rennishawe has told his story, Maloney is reinstated.

Rennishawe's narrative is also remarkable for another reason. Not only is his story captivating, but it also is a good example of how well Moore uses the Collection as material. Indeed it exists to indict experts, but it also takes on a life of its own. Each piece and part of the Collection reflects some aspect of Victorian England and is fascinating in its own right.

Another process traced in the novel is how the creatorship and curatorship changes Maloney's life and eventually destroys him. In return for being granted the powers which enabled him to bring the Collection into being, Maloney must forgo most of the elements which are part of a normal life—a job, a home, sexual relationships, the ability to enjoy food, and sleep. He must remain close to the Collection, at the Sea Winds Motel. When he drives away from the Collection with his secretary, Mary Ann McKelvey, to test whether or not items will be damaged by his absence, it rains, and damage is done. In another test, he tries to use his new powers to make the child's wooden fire engine move from the Collection to his hotel bed. It does not move, but when he checks to see if it is still in the Collection, Maloney notices that it is no longer an original: it has become a cheap imitation bearing the inscription "Made in Japan." Of course, today such an inscription is a sign of quality.

Then, and only then, Maloney realized the laws of this creation. Already the toy engine reproached him, a small cancerous blemish on the perfect bloom of the whole. It had been given to him to envisage the Collection here, in a parking lot in California. Any further attempts to remove these items to some other location would result, not in the greatest collection of Victoriana the world had ever seen, but in an astonishing conglomeration of Japanese fakes. (17)

Maloney is tied to Carmel by a Faustian pact. If he leaves, or tries to take the Collection with him, it will become a greater fake than the Hearst castle at San Simeon where, at least, some of the elements are real. Of course, Maloney travels to Los Angeles and Montreal because he wants to resist the vise of the powers which are imprisoning him, but is disconsolate on his return to discover the damage his absence has caused to the Collection. He is torn between his desire to live a normal life and his duty, as a scholar, to pro-

tect his collection. Does Moore suggest that the two are incompatible? In an effort to sleep without dreaming, since the Collection also controls his dreams, Maloney takes to drinking hard and taking drugs in a vain attempt to induce forgetfulness and stupor. In addition, he cannot make satisfactory love to his secretary, Mary Ann McKelvey, in a hotel room in Montreal because he is not able to disassociate her from the Collection, which is hundreds of miles away in Carmel.

One of the central themes explored by Moore throughout his career has been faith. In his world, it is difficult for the believer to have faith unless she/he is provided with some elements of the happy life. If none of these are provided, the individual will become unhappy and knotted with bitterness and rage. In *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, Judith Hearne calls on God in the tabernacle to reveal himself to her so she can confirm his presence, and her faith. She wants to be certain that there will be a bright future ahead for her when she leaves Belfast and this life, where she has been miserable. "'Show me a sign,' she [says]" (175). Even if the individual does not believe in a God or follow a religion, she/he is still possessed by a drive, what Jung refers to in *Psychology and Religion* as "numinosum," which propels this person to find a substitute for a God, a person towards whom desire and the need for transcendence can be channelled (O'Donoghue 154-55). Of course, in *Cold Heaven* this process occurs in reverse: Marie Davenport is shown all the signs which are never revealed to Judith Hearne. Marie possesses beauty, wealth, and a husband—the elements of a happy life in Judith's view—but is unhappy and indifferent to the world and to religion. Yet, an apparition of Our Lady appears to her near Carmel, where *The Great Victorian Collection* is set. Therefore, in two novels, two miracles take place within a few miles of each other, one secular, the other religious. Seamus Deane believes that in Moore's view "it is a radical dissatisfaction with the actual that leads in the end to either the acceptance of or the recognized possibility of a miracle" (*A Short History of Irish Literature* 221). Clearly, for Brian Moore, all modern America offers is shallowness, and it is the recognition of this by his protagonists which drives them to search for meaning, depth, and transcendence in either ultimate fakes, such as Disneyland and San Simeon, or in more traditional, but equally problematic, Catholic miracles. Also, both author and individual are forced by circumstances to consider the possibility that a God exists. Implicit in this turning towards the miraculous is the knowledge that attempts to find salvation through love affairs, marriages, and money have failed. In Moore's early Belfast novels, God and religion are oppressive and both Judith Hearne and Diarmuid Devine (*The Feast of Lupercal*) seek liberation through the primal energies of this world—sex and love. In his American novels of the 1970s, Moore entertains

the possibility that the opposite view is feasible: people are unable to make one another happy because, instead of cooperating, they compete against and exploit one another. Salvation, therefore, must come from outside, just as the preachers have been intoning for centuries. As a young man, Moore moved away from religious belief and embraced socialism because it appeared to lend itself toward improving the lot of humankind, and it seemed more practical. However, as an older man, he is no longer able to accept that manipulation of the material world will lead to happiness, though he still does not seem to believe in a God or an afterlife. However, as he grows older, Moore begins to distance himself from materialist philosophy and to move in the direction of the spiritual. As a writer, Moore is interested in exploring the grey areas which frequently define the lives of believers and unbelievers. The former are forced into crises when doubt undermines faith. For the latter, love of a man or woman is a substitute for love of God: when this love is undermined or broken, the individual is plunged into crisis. It is interesting to note that in *The Great Victorian Collection*, and other novels such as *I Am Mary Dunne*, *The Doctor's Wife*, *The Temptation of Eileen Hughes*, *Cold Heaven*, and *Lies of Silence*, it is the absence of satisfactory sexual relationships which leads to the collapse of marriages and relationships.

As was the case in *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, his first novel, and in many that followed it, faith must be tested. In *The Great Victorian Collection*, this is achieved with great dexterity by Moore, again by bringing the Collection into play. Vaterman, like St. Thomas, does not quite believe in Maloney's abilities as a clairvoyant and seeks proof. One night, both he and Mary Ann hide in the Collection and are discovered by Maloney who, "sensing that something was wrong," leaves his room and makes his way to a shed which contains the bedroom exhibit (89). In addition, Maloney is able to tell Vaterman exactly what items from the Collection he has concealed in his pockets. Vaterman tells Maloney that he is a "genius," the modern equivalent of a God or saint.

Maloney's collapse is recorded by Dr. I.S. Spector of Vanderbilt University who interviews him on a number of occasions and who, after his death, publishes his findings in a long article in the *Journal of Parapsychology* entitled "Psychokinetic Elements in the Manifestation of Dreams: The Carmel Experiments." As Maloney disintegrates so does the Collection, and in this respect Moore's novel begins to resemble Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and some techniques used by Alfred Hitchcock—for whom Brian Moore worked briefly—in his films and television dramas (Wall 367-68). Eventually, Maloney's condition has deteriorated to such a degree that "the tour guides, if they saw him approach, would turn their groups into another aisle" (201). He tries to break an exhibit with a ham-

mer, attempts to set another on fire, and in the end kills himself.

What are we to make of all this? In her excellent book on Brian Moore, Jo O'Donoghue concludes that *The Great Victorian Collection* is a "fable that is never fully elucidated, an obscure parable about the nature of art and the possibility of miracles" (75). On one level, this is certainly true; however, it also misses the point because it tries to make of the novel what it is not. It is not fully elucidated because it is not fully a realist novel but, rather, one written in the shadow of Borges, García Márquez, Barthelme, and Coover and, as a consequence of the dominance of this mode of influence, must be obscure, and must be more concerned with its parts than with the whole. Such an approach seems ideal for a work whose subject is the fragmented and failed America which Moore finds outside his front door, as it were, in California—an America of fake objects and fake people bent on exploiting one another. Like Moore's other novels, it does not offer us much to take away with us in the form of conclusions, but rather a lot to ponder. Ultimately, I believe, *The Great Victorian Collection* is best read as a brilliantly constructed and ingeniously written book about the search for transcendence and faith in an America where both are on sale. To be sure, Moore is concerned with writers and their books and reviewers, but this is a secondary theme. Both Moore and Eco are writers who are simultaneously fascinated and repelled by America and whose visions are complex and confused, but irresistible.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Irish writers of fiction frequently spent much of their time outside of Ireland, but wrote almost exclusively of Ireland. This is no longer the case and no writer has blazed this trail more than Brian Moore. In this regard, and in many others as well, Brian Moore has operated way ahead of his time and, despite his popularity and all the prizes and awards he's garnered for his fiction, has remained underestimated by critics. There are reasons for this. One is that he has written too many books, and there are some real "clunkers" among them, and another is that his most popular and highly regarded novels are his most traditionally conceived. His most innovative and daring novels, among which must be counted *The Great Victorian Collection* and *Cold Heaven*, are groundbreaking works in Irish writing but not, as yet, accepted as such. Perhaps, Moore's multiple identities—Irish born and raised, Canadian passport-holder, and California resident—have hindered his ability to be tidily packaged for consumers. Ironically, these same multiple identities are central to Moore's artistic consciousness, and a consistent source of strength. In recent years, many Irish novelists have followed Moore's example and written about America—Sebastian Barry in *The Engine of Owl-Light* and Colum McCann in *Songdogs*, to name but two excellent examples. It is certain that the trend will continue, for Irish writers will always be drawn towards America, since

America is an extension of Ireland, and will follow Brian Moore by writing about it. But, even though they will continue to find America strange, they will find it a great challenge to describe it as well as Brian Moore does in *The Great Victorian Collection*.

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