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"Home, A Moscow of the Mind": Notes on Brian Moore's Transition to North America

by DENIS SAMPSON

"I HAVE ESCAPED FROM the provincial mediocrity of my native land and now live, in exile, in the Rome of our day." So reflects Brendan Tierney, aspiring Irish novelist in New York City, early in Brian Moore's *An Answer from Limbo* (1962). The clean and deeply ironic simplicity of the declaration prepares the reader for the complex and ugly narrative of degradation which follows, and for the lifelong investigation which Brian Moore has undertaken into the cost of living as an artist in the global village.

On the first page of the novel, Tierney recalls a letter from his mother, "a letter which carried me back, not to the Ireland she wrote of, but to Home, that Moscow of my mind, forever shut in from the rest of the world; forever shut out" (*AL*, 5). Critics have praised this novel for its acute portrayal of the egocentric artist who abandons wife, mother, children and friends for his work. Having committed himself to art in a would-be Joycean gesture, Tierney has sworn to a friend, "I'll be perfectly willing to sacrifice anybody or anything for the sake of my work" (*AL*, 21). More important for what came later in Brian Moore's career is the answer from limbo. The friend had gone on to say, "I believe you. You'll sacrifice other people, all right. But will you sacrifice yourself?" On the final page of the novel, at his mother's graveside, Tierney realizes the truth that he is a writer, a stranger to himself, who cannot feel, who can only record, and then, "As we turned from the grave, Jane, Finnerty and that other curious watcher, I knew at last the answer to Ted Ormsby's question. I have altered beyond all self-recognition. I have lost and sacrificed myself" (*AL*, 288). The particular sacrifice of Brendan Tierney appears to be the loss of his moral integrity, and with it, perhaps, his creative power. But the "intellectual self-exile" which Moore has spoken of elsewhere as his own first condition as an artist seems to have its psychological equivalent here in the state of being "beyond all self-recognition."

Unlike Chekhov's sisters, neither Brendan Tierney nor Brian Moore appears to look back on their first home with nostalgia or regret. In fact, Moore has embraced the condition of "artist as exile," a term he prefers to "expatriate writer"; and the loss of "self-recognition" has been a central theme of his work from *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* (1960) to *Black Robe* (1985). In an interview in 1967, he comments on that paradox of realistic fiction, that place—setting—should be separable from self, when at the most important level, where the writer's personality and his style fuse, there can be no such separation: "if I have

any style or personality at all as a novelist I will create a world—my world with cities of the mind which are my cities, infused with my own atmosphere. Turgenev's Moscow is not Dostoyevsky's and neither is the real Moscow" (Dahlie, 19). These remarks follow a rebuttal of a reviewer's comment that the Montreal of *Ginger Coffey* is "virtually indistinguishable" from the Belfast of *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1956).

Given his broad experience as a journalist, Moore was probably peeved, for he has prided himself on his ability to capture many places in his fiction, especially the North American cities he began to use from 1960 on. In practice, though, and apart from questions of verisimilitude, Moore has replaced Belfast with a "Moscow of the mind," a city that is both geographically varied in its external circumstances and remarkably stable in essence. His achievement as a novelist is to have invented a fictional world which is undeniably his own. His "Moscow" is the supreme fiction, for the creation of which he has embraced that condition of displacement, that state of being "beyond all self-recognition."¹

* * *

THE LUCK OF GINGER COFFEY was Moore's first novel with a North American setting. But a story also published in 1960 offers a fascinating glimpse of what V.S. Naipaul has called "the enigma of arrival." Set in New York City, "Uncle T" is a first sketch of Moore's extended investigation of the paradoxes of perception and identity in exile. A young man, an aspiring writer, an exile and a rebel from Ireland—and from his own "unforgiving" father—meets for the first time his uncle who, a generation earlier, had become "a rebel, a wanderer and a lover of literature." The meeting, over dinner in Uncle T's apartment, is complicated by the presence of the men's two wives, for, as the heavy-drinking uncle quickly remarks, "you should never give an Irishman the choice between a girl and the bottle" (*UT*, 30-31). This proves to be the choice young Vincent has to make, as "the bottle" dominates the party. Uncle T's life embodied a kind of failure into which he wants to draw Vincent. In fact, both wives are alienated from the men. As a family bond, "the fiction of family unity" is sealed around the craving of Uncle T for the forgiveness he never had from the family he left behind.

The dramatic situation is brilliantly evoked, with layers of acute psychological observation, so that these characters who are ostensibly little more than caricatures reveal a raw and sad truth. The young man comes face to face with "his spitting image," and he is torn between family loyalty and his new wife, between his first home and the uncertain present. The story freezes the characters in that moment of irresolution, yet it is an emblem of Moore's lasting concern with the pain and fear associated with the erosion of received versions of identity

1. Derek Mahon's review essay, "Webs of Artifice," on *The Doctor's Wife* and other novels by Moore, begins: "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction ... might stand as a general title for Brian Moore's work as a whole; for the creating of fictions is his central theme." Among many shrewd and perceptive insights into Moore's work, this essay includes the following remark which is pertinent to my topic here: "America itself is presented as a colossal fiction, a creation of the human will without roots in any spiritual reality."

and identification.

The confident steps which Moore took out of his first city, the Belfast of the thirties and forties, and then through the Montreal of the fifties and New York of the sixties, gave him much material for fiction. But in the process, the experience of change, or recurring displacement, became more real than the certainty or stability associated with the geography or history of the first home. After *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* (1965), place as the home of the self loses its sense of primary reality. Moore came to the end of realism as a method, and the investigation of how he had been shaped by his first home ceased to be the focus of autobiographical inquiry.

If Belfast made Judith Hearne and Diarmuid Devine (of *The Feast of Lupercal*) and Gavin Burke (of *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*), and they know it, the North American Mary Dunne cannot say who she is, other than to recall the succession of persons she has been in different places. The self she attempts to recognize is the set of memories she summons up and evaluates on that day. But, in fact, she also accepts that the self is a maze, a hall of mirrors, and memory a less than perfect instrument of definitive enquiry. If she is the product of her past, it is a past which consisted of change, a sequence of separate events, many of which now take on the character of mistakes and misinterpretations, rather than a past which can be known with certainty. The fear that she is a "changeling," without a stable self or identity that can be articulated, drives her close to suicide. Yet the truth is that she *is* a changeling; she cannot go back in time or in space; she cannot go home again.

In the interior monologue which, significantly, Moore chose for this novel, place, the past, and character are refracted through Mary Dunne's consciousness. What she knows best are her own tentative reflections and the biological reality of her own body, in pain and in ecstasy and in all its vulnerability. *I Am Mary Dunne* initiated a different kind of enquiry in Moore's fiction, central to which are his new definitions of fiction and the self. The precarious space between self-recognition defined as the experiences and beliefs of the first home, the "grammar of the emotions,"² and the unknowable processes of living suggested by the epigraph, "how can we know the dancer from the dance," became the anxious site of "Moscow" in Moore's later work.

* * *

MIRROR IMAGES ARE prominent in Moore—not the celebrated "mirror in the roadway" of nineteenth-century realism but the mirror of Narcissus. Looking in a mirror is a pervasive metaphor of the search for self-recognition—of the avoidance of truth as well as the discovery of it—and counterpart of another favourite technique of using minor characters as reflectors who prefigure what the central character may become. The dramatic confrontation of self and image

2. The phrase comes from *Fergus* and has been used by Kerry McSweeney as his guiding insight for an extended essay, "Brian Moore's Grammar of the Emotions," in *Four Contemporary Novelists*, Kingston: McGill-Queens Univ. Press, 1983.

is, of course, replete with ambiguity, and here the narcissism of “self-deceit . . . an Irish weakness,” announces a major and complex theme in many of Moore’s novels, achieving its fullest expression, perhaps, in *The Mangan Inheritance* (1979).

“It’s an old story,” as Uncle T’s wife bitterly retorts, “making yourself out to be something you never were” (*UT*, 51). That seems to be the germ of the character of Ginger Coffey, who is repeatedly given this message by his tough-minded boss, McGregor, as well as by his wife, Vera. Yes, “an old story,” but not only an Irish one, for as *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975) and *The Mangan Inheritance* show, Moore’s protagonists come to resemble more and more the North American society of which he had become a part. And that society, in turn, comes to be a global village. While Jamie Mangan’s mother is involved with art therapy in California (whether as patient or healer is unsure), the abused Kathleen Mangan in her caravan in Cork dreams of being a Hollywood actress. Since the forties or fifties, when Judith Hearne accompanied a returned Yank to the movies for a simple evening of vicarious romance, the world has changed. The distance between province and metropolis has lessened, and, following the loss of self-recognition, fictions of the self have become the reality of personal life.

In the “Peepers” passage of *Mary Dunne*, Mary remembers her earlier careers as actress and as writer, both roles, she says, in a lifetime of role-playing at the behest of others, especially of men. She recalls a particular incident:

Surreal as an early Buñuel film, I saw myself, Tom Brooks, and Hat, the three of us walking in bright morning sunshine across a grassy dune. . . . It was Sunday brunch at Nancy’s place, a pseudo-event ostensibly in aid of some charity, but actually a ruse to promote our season of summer plays, or perhaps, come to think of it, to promote Nancy herself. In any case, it was like most of the social events you read of nowadays. No one can be sure of anything. Were the photographers there because of our elaborate breakfast by the sea, or were we there because of the photographers? (*MD*, 26-27)

Such moments hover between social criticism and a perennial epistemological conundrum, for when Mary remembers her many roles she asks, “And me, how do I see me, who is that me I create in mirrors, the dressing-table me, the self I cannot put a name to in the Golden Door Beauty Salon” (*MD*, 32). The question Mary tries to answer, then, is not one which arises only from personal trauma but from the culture of which she is a part. The fictions of self and the fictions of society mirror each other: fear, doubt, and the craving for certainty are the ingredients of the new “commonplace” which Moore explores in North America—and not only in that geographical location, for this has become, in his view, the modern condition.

The prominence which Moore gives to the power of the media suggests that he believes that what is most real in North America is the images and gesture which are validated by the visual media. From the television which flickers endlessly as Mrs. Tierney dies to the television dream which contributes to Maloney’s suicide in *The Great Victorian Collection*; from the satirical analysis of the management of the daily newspaper in *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* to an even more satirical treatment of the collusion of publicists and media in the manufac-

ture of "stars" in *The Mangan Inheritance*; and the political role of the media recurs in *The Revolution Script* (1971), *The Color of Blood* (1987), *Lies of Silence* (1990) and *No Other Life* (1993). Moore's insider perspective on the power of the media—of television and film especially—to shape contemporary reality reflects a profound alienation from contemporary discourses.

As *Catholics* (1973) makes clear, even the traditional repositories of metaphysical reality, religious faith and communal worship, have been subverted by the mass media. This satirical treatment of the world in which Moore found himself working in the fifties and sixties accompanies the change in his fiction from the concreteness of one place and the solidity of its historical and cultural textures to landscapes, houses and hotels which are essentially like movie sets. Realism is overshadowed by subjective states of desire and dream, of fantasy and invention, of images and stories which situate ordinary actions in personal and social conditions, the parameters of which have yielded to the indeterminate and the paranormal.

As Moore has said, he believes in a "strong framework of narrative, a strong framework of dream" (Meyer, 173). Unease in the face of God's mysterious will, as in *Judith Hearne*, has been translated into visceral fears, anxiety, and suspense, which are commonplace and real but which are heightened by being located in a narrative genre which is at once "popular" and poetic. If the faiths that bond people into a community so that individuals can feel real and rooted in place have long gone, nothing has replaced them except pervasive and fast-changing life-styles and roles which reflect a consensus of media images and commercial pressures.

The hunger for security and reality is deeply rooted in all Moore's characters, and the reader engages with them as terror increases in their private and public worlds. It is not surprising that the private terror which gripped Judith Hearne or Mary Dunne should reappear as the different terror created by the power of publicity in *The Great Victorian Collection* and *The Mangan Inheritance*, or in the sexual and supernatural phantasmagoria of *The Temptation of Eileen Hughes* (1981) and *Cold Heaven* (1983), or indeed, in the terror in the face of terrorism portrayed in *The Color of Blood* and *Lies of Silence*. Moore's fiction is a testament to his effort to dramatize the extent of fear as a pervasive and labyrinthine human reality, an ordinary and banal reality as well as the ground of psychological and metaphysical enquiry into the self and the threat of its dissolution.

* * *

MOORE IS AWARE that self-recognition may not be regained by Mary Dunne, in spite of the title-providing assertion at the end of the novel, because she realizes that her own experience is reflected in much of Romantic and Modern literature. Mary Dunne herself expresses it: "Dostoyevsky, Proust, Tolstoy, Yeats. They knew who they were and, because they did, we, posterity, will always know. They wrote, therefore they were, whereas I, sitting glum on that sofa was nameless, lost, filled with a shameful panic" (*MD*, 134-35). Yet it is not as clear

cut as Mary says. Those authors' belief in themselves as writers is coupled with their doubts about themselves as people: the issue is stated with typical succinctness by Beckett: "Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had a voice, who says this, saying it's me?" (*Beckett*, 91). Negative capability reappears in its modernist and self-conscious form in the autobiographical drama of Joyce/Stephen, Proust/Marcel, and in the drama of self-conscious voices in Yeats and Beckett. And Moore's sense of self and selflessness, his cultivation, even, of the role of "artist-in-exile," may be viewed in the same light.

After the early phase of his work, Moore began to think of himself in this role, so that no actual place or society held his allegiance, not Ireland, not Canada, not the United States. He felt free to invent setting which would capture the reader's belief in their reality as place and yet would also be invented, placed conforming to the rules of a poetic reality. Moore has spoken of his appreciation during this period of Borges' "sharp tales about metaphysical subjects" and praises in particular a one-page fable called "Borges and I" about "the difference between one's public *persona* and one's private *persona*" (Graham, 71). Elsewhere, Moore praises Borges' "idea of time, of dreaming oneself," clearly a reference to the essay "A New Refutation of Time," and I believe that in the matter of home and tradition Moore has paid close attention to Borges' "The Argentine Writer and Tradition." In short, as Moore realized that he was an international writer who might explore European or American settings and themes at will, he found in a speculative metaphysical artist like Borges a touchstone for his own self as artist. This identification with Borges' imaginative vision allowed him to expand in fascinating directions the borders of his "Moscow."

Moore has always relied on quotations from poetry to alert the reader to a controlling vision in his novels, notably from Wallace Stevens and Yeats. Yeats is especially relevant here, the Yeats who chose for an epigraph, "in dreams begin responsibilities" and the Yeats who invented cities like Byzantium. While Mary Dunne may not be capable of trusting wholeheartedly either herself or her new husband, Moore's epigraph tells us that behind Mary Dunne's panic in the face of indeterminacy is the artist's belief, founded on Yeats's line, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" In this paradoxical notion of the creation of a life in the act of living it, the artist can collapse the distinction between life and work, and in spite of Mary Dunne's assertion that she is unlike those great artists who "wrote, therefore they are," Moore's extraordinarily compelling dramatization of the inner life of this woman on this day makes her feel like the author of her own life. She may not know the truth but she does embody it.

Fergus, the novel which followed *I Am Mary Dunne*, marks a return to the situation explored in *An Answer from Limbo*. New York has been replaced by California, and the Irish novelist, now a success, is again faced with a crisis of conscience about his work. His crisis of a day resembles that of Mary Dunne, and the novel is again an investigation of the loss of self-recognition and the Yeatsian idea of the artist as dancer. Fergus Fadden, one foot in the California world of circumstances, the other in an Irish world of myth and dream, reflects Moore's

own ambivalence about much of modern life, just as Yeats's career did. The accusations made against Fergus during his first trial by the ghosts who haunt him on this day are a challenge to Moore himself:

'The problem here,' said Mandel's voice, 'is that this man is not living in history. His work, such as it is, ignores the great issues of the age. His life is narcissistic: he is completely ensnared by the system. True, he has rejected his ethnic background and has denounced the class, race and religion into which he was born. But to reject is not enough. Lacking a true foundation, he has fallen back on cliché: the romantic sacerdotal ethic of art for art's sake, which was already dead and buried forty years ago. And so, ultimately, made reckless by his rootlessness, he has been led, sheeplike, to the final solution. Hollywood.'

'Well put! Well said, Chaim!'

'A creative criticism!'

'Mandel's exegesis has elucidated the essence of the problem!'

'Ah, get away out of that! Sure your man Fadden isn't worth the argument. He's a flaming bloody fraud.' (F, 72)

Earlier, the thought of William Faulkner had "steadied" Fergus, for Faulkner has "endured and prevailed" during his years in Hollywood. But the presence which seems to steady Fergus even more is that comforting sea with which the novel opens and closes. In the opening lines, the sea is "monotonous as a banging door," reminding Fergus of his girlfriend's departure, which appears to have precipitated his hallucinations and made him doubt his mental stability and artistic purpose.

Throughout the novel, he looks out from his surreal, rented beach-house to the waves crashing on the shore. "Thalassa, the loud resounding sea, our great mother": Fergus's recollection of this quotation from Xenophon, together with other details reminiscent of the opening chapter of *Ulysses*, suggests that Moore is consciously evoking Joyce. The waves crash "monotonous as a heartbeat." The rhythm is a reassuring one for, on this day, not only Fergus' mental stability is called into question, so is his biological one. He suffers a minor heart-attack and is comforted by the man he has never known in his professional capacity, his father.

There are ample hints that the symbolic landscape resonates with literary and mythological associations, so that the troubled, alienated, consciousness of Fergus is steadied by that context. His sister Maeve has mentioned Yeats to Fergus when she tells him that his writing is "a substitute for belief," and a conversation ensues between him and this "apparition" on the nature of belief and reality. When Maeve leaves him, she walks on the beach and meets a fisherman. Fergus wonders about the reality of Maeve, "figment of [his] imagination," and about the reality of the lone fisherman. In the next section when Boweri the film producer visits, Fergus doubts the reality of Boweri and seems to steady himself by reference once again to the fisherman.

The fisherman is there, touchstone of reality and of the ordinary in this bewildering metaphysical nightmare. But the reality of the fisherman is also a symbolic reality with obvious Yeatsian resonances:

Maybe a twelve month since
 Suddenly I began,
 In scorn of this audience,
 Imagining a man. . . .
 A man who does not exist,
 A man who is but a dream. (Yeats, 167)

The imagination is capable of knowing a kind of truth; the body also has a kind of knowledge; in a world in which the nature of belief itself is in question, Moore allies himself with the Yeatsian "vision of reality." It is a truth which is difficult to use in the ordinary world—a difficulty broached in *Cold Heaven* and on a wider and more convincing scale in *Black Robe*. But there should be little doubt of Moore's own belief in "Moscow," in the supreme fiction of his art in the contemporary "wasteland."

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