



Maria Elena Jaime de Pablos and Mary Pierse (eds.), *George Moore and the Quirks of Human Nature*. Volume 51 in *Reimagining Ireland* book series. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014. ix, 273 pp.

I should from the outset acknowledge that I am far from a disinterested party when it comes to assessing this collection of essays, having accepted it for the *Reimagining Ireland* book series of which I am editor. It was not a hard decision to make for a number of reasons. Firstly, George Moore (1852-1933), novelist, short story writer, memoirist, art critic, is someone in whom I have taken a keen interest since reading his 1905 novel *The Lake* a number of years ago. Secondly, given the range and quality of his literary output, there is relatively little critical material available on him, a lack that is being addressed by the annual George Moore conferences out of which this book and a number of others have emerged. Finally, the essays in *George Moore and the Quirks of Human Nature* offer significant new insights into the man and the writer, a quality that is undoubtedly enhanced by the multidisciplinary approach of the contributors.

In the Introduction, the editors justify the title of the collection by noting: “The actual and fictive quirks, whether pertaining to author or fictional character, can be interesting and very revelatory” (1). This is undoubtedly an accurate comment on Moore whose writing was influenced by developments (particularly realism, naturalism and impressionism) which were coming to the fore in French literature and art at the time. Moore was painted by the artists Manet, Degas, Renoir, Orpen, Tonks, Steer and many others, as well as being art critic of *The Spectator* for a number of years. Similarly, he met a large number of writers, most notably, Zola, during his years in Paris and experimented in his fictional writing with the most up-to-date literary devices. This possibly led to the generally hostile reaction to his work among the dominant Victorian school of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in England. The “quirks” of his literary output analysed in this collection cover the Anglo-Irish, Gothic, Big House, feminist, classical, autobiographical and memoir genres. The fact that Moore’s work lacks “uniformity in subject and style from one volume to another” can make it difficult for critics to categorise him. However, the editors note, justifiably in my view, that “the sum total of his writing constitutes a significant literary asset bank where the riches reward the general reader and tantalise and surprise the scholar” (3).

The book is divided into four sections. The first part, “Hidden Links”, is the most captivating, comprising five essays of the highest calibre. I will be concentrating largely on this section in my analysis of the book. Part II, “Terror and the Unconscious”, comprises three chapters, dealing with the Gothic, the unconscious and diseased human natures. Part III, “Paradox, Parody and Linguistic Significance”, has three chapters that examine a number of the literary devices employed by Moore at various stages of his

literary evolution and they demonstrate the importance of drilling into the texts in order to ascertain what the exact purpose of the novelist was. Finally, part IV, “On Women”, comprises three essays on the portrayal of quite liberated female characters who are sensitive to nature, literature and art – Moore’s portrayal of women was ahead of its time in many ways. While pressure of space will only permit me to make reference to a certain number of essays, I would like to stress that the strength of this collection lies in the fact that there is no chapter that could be described as being in any way weak, a rare achievement in a book comprising 14 essays and an Introduction.

Adrian Frazier is undoubtedly one of the leading scholars of Moore’s work. In his essay, he argues compellingly the possible influence of *Confessions of a Young Man* on Joyce’s *Portrait*. Normal practice is to trace the influence of Joyce’s *bildungsroman* on any subsequent Irish novel dealing with the coming of age of a young male protagonist. It is refreshing to think that Joyce also had predecessors who opened new vistas for him, and one of these was undoubtedly George Moore. There is much to admire in both their daring autobiographical accounts of a young man struggling to find his way in a world that is both hostile and exciting. In enumerating the qualities of *Confessions of a Young Man*, Frazier mentions the following:

he stylistic incongruities, the free use of juxtaposition of prose forms without copula, the constant play of artifice and reality, the transportation of styles from one language and culture to another, the exhibition of what today would be called best practice as far as European narrative is concerned, the composition of an international dictionary of decadent tropes, the interlacing of literary criticism with literary production, and the gamesmanship around autobiographical revelations... (18-19).

It is not hard to see how Joyce would have been attracted by these traits or to believe that he learned a few lessons from Moore and applied them to the composition of *Portrait*.

If the relationship between Joyce and Moore was strained at best, Wilde was not someone whom Moore admired, if we are to believe some of the comments that Stoddard Martin unearths in Moore’s correspondence. In one instance, Moore brands Wilde’s work as “thin and casual, without depth, therefore, unoriginal: no man is original in the surface of his mind, to be original we must go deep, right down to the roots” (26). It can be seen that Moore himself did not always match up to his own high standards, which leads Robert Becker to label him a “contrarian.” Becker describes Moore as “a gifted writer who did not read and was not read, an artist who was painted but did not paint, a thought leader who was not followed, a nationalist who spurned his country, a Catholic and then a Protestant who spurned his religion, a Casanova who promoted the dignity and worth of women, a lover who was not loved, a father who did not parent, a landlord with no estate, the head of an historic family who deserted his kin, a storyteller who spurned his audience, an avant-gardist who became archaic” (40). These lines provide

a good summary of Moore's life, but I am not sure I could so far as to share Becker's description of Moore as "Ireland's first punk"!

Mary Pierse supplies a stimulating and elegant comparison between Moore's *Evelyn Innes* (1898) and *Sister Teresa* (1901) and Antonio Fogazzaro's *The Saint* (1905). These three books were found in the libraries of Joyce and Theodore Dreiser, which is what initially prompted Pierse to undertake an examination of the themes covered in the three novels: "The Moore and Fogazzaro texts feature illicit love, urges of the flesh, tussles with conscience, mystical experience, and aspects of belief, especially of Catholicism, in the period; they also engage with the contentious matter of female agency" (51). In relation to "female agency", Pierse argues that Evelyn Innes voices many of Moore's own beliefs, something which is particularly noticeable in her following quote from the novel:

The restriction of sexual intercourse is the moral ideal of Western Europe [...] So inherent is the idea of sexual continence in the Western hemisphere that even those whose practice does not coincide with their theory rarely impugn the wisdom of the law which they break; they prefer to plead the weakness of the flesh as their excuse, and it is with reluctance that they admit that without an appeal to conscience it would be impossible to prove that it is wrong for two unmarried people to live together. (*Evelyn Innes* 326 *apud* Pierse 59)

Small wonder that Moore did not endear himself to the Victorians, as Melanie Grundmann illustrates to good effect: "Literature (for Victorians) was expected to serve the moral education and the improvement of society but French writing was regarded as corrosive to those Victorian values and morals. What was feared in Britain was any detailed depiction of reality, or even a suggestion of it" (125). Moore could not buy into such a restrictive credo and was very much in the French camp, even to the extent of being a self-confessed admirer of the *poète maudit* Charles Baudelaire.

Conor Montague's chapter is the one I find most fascinating, as it combines authoritative comments about Moore's work and the forces that shaped it. Not having been aware of the "volatile" relationship between Moore and his brother Maurice, Montague's dissection of their correspondence shows the extent to which Maurice may well have been the inspiration for Father Oliver Gogarty, the main character in *The Lake*. What is refreshing about Montague is his lack of hesitation when it comes to putting forward an opinion in a forthright manner, as the following lines demonstrate:

The Lake is not just a novel concerning the psychological awakening of a prodigal priest. It is a stream of consciousness bildungsroman, epistolary novel, treatise of naturalist philosophy, Big House novel, a parable, a love story and a beautifully crafted critique of Catholic Ireland (69).

In analysing how the dialogue between two brothers whose views diverged quite a lot when it came to issues like Catholicism, the Irish language, nationalism (the fact that Maurice fought on the English side in the Boer War was incomprehensible to his

brother), property and parenting and that they exchanged letters on these subjects, was in a strange way good preparation for when Moore would imaginatively configure the correspondence between Fr. Gogarty and his former parishioner, Nora Glynn. Maurice's decision to stay within the fold of Catholicism struck his brother as being fantastical. Montague notes: "In his articulation of the perceived psyche of his brother, GM framed the dilemma that faced Fr Oliver Gogarty: to be an agnostic is courageous and noble, to remain a Catholic is cowardly and decadent" (77). Earlier, Montague quoted a comment by Moore which I find most telling: "One writes very badly when one is in a passion: no one knows that better than I do." If there is one weakness in *The Lake*, it stems from Moore's lack of objectivity when it comes to religion. There is a "preachy" tone in many of the passages and particularly in Gogarty's letters to the woman for whom he harboured lustful thoughts. One more gem that Montague unearths in Moore's letters to Maurice is the following: "it requires much more will to break from prejudice than to acquiesce" (83). If Moore saw his brother as representing an Ireland full of prejudice and blind adherence to the dictates of the Catholic Church, the writer himself was certainly not without his own prejudices, many of which he found it well nigh impossible to break away from.

I regret not being able to refer in any detail to the essays by Elizabeth Grubgeld, Jayne Thomas, Fabienne Gaspari, Kathi R. Griffin, José Antonio Hoyas Solís, María Elena Jaime de Pablos, Kathryn Laing and Catherine Smith. They all contain excellent analysis of certain "quirks" of human nature as portrayed by Moore. I compliment the editors on putting together such a fine collection, which does justice to its subject, and I look forward to more of the same in the years ahead: George Moore deserves no less.

Eamon Maher