

Book Reviews

Jo O'Donoghue. *Brian Moore: A Critical Study*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1991. pp. xix, 266. \$39.95.

One of the problems inherent in writing a critical book about a living author is that it can quickly be rendered out of date or incomplete, especially when the subject of that study is such a prolific author as Brian Moore. Three earlier books on him (1969, 1974, 1981) suffered from that risk, but for the moment this present study is safe: it covers all of Moore's sixteen major novels, from *Judith Hearne* (1955) to *Lies of Silence* (1990), but if his past record continues, another novel is almost certain to appear in the next year or so.

Nevertheless, this latest study is a thorough and perceptive one, and O'Donoghue, with her Irish and (I believe) Catholic background, brings insights to her reading of Moore that any new novels by him should not seriously invalidate. It is predicated on a thesis that will not necessarily find support from all readers (that Moore's early hostility to religion and Catholicism has been replaced by his view that spiritual faith is the highest kind there is), and one can accuse her of choosing novels too selectively to support this argument, but on the whole she presents her case convincingly and compels us to consider connections among Moore's novels that we might have missed.

First, however, there are a few matters to get out of the way, especially regarding the book's overall structure. The table of contents indicates that there are twelve chapters, when in fact there are fourteen, and the impression left is that the last two chapters were hurriedly added on, since they do not fit too well with O'Donoghue's main theme. And where each of the first three sections ("The Early Belfast Novels," "Novels of Exile and Escape," and "Belief in a Secular World") is summed up by a strong conclusion, this final section ("Politics as Morality") is left dangling without one, and the fact that there is no concluding chapter to the book as a whole further suggests a rather hurried ending. A few further points: the spelling of

Jamie Mangan's wife is Abbot, not Abbott; Moore occupied a cabin in Canada's Laurentian Mountains, not the Lawrentians (which might have given Lawrentian critics a field day with Moore), and Moore became an Adjunct Professor at UCLA after he moved to Malibu, not before, as O'Donoghue suggests (xiii).

But the three major sections of this book support her point that all of Moore's works have a lot to do with the search for belief, whether religious or secular. Quite correctly, she sees the two early Belfast novels being more concerned with the structures and power of a Catholic society than with belief itself, for the agents of that power (church, school, boarding houses, and private homes) all emphasize outward obedience and conformity rather than an inward search for the meaning of faith. She makes perceptive comments about the techniques Moore uses to construct these novels, his use of free indirect speech, and his establishing of "an equivocal authorial viewpoint" (40) tending to modify the novels' underlying realism. All this causes the reader both to sympathize with Judith and Devine and at the same time to recognize that the world does not see them as they see themselves.

A couple of quibbles: O'Donoghue consistently uses the original 1955 edition of *Judith Hearne*, yet on a number of occasions she makes reference to the "passions" or "lonely passions" as "possible interpretations of the title" (25), without indicating the longer 1956 title, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*. And quoting with approval John Cronin's summation of Moore's attitude towards Ulster as one of "mordant savagery" (4) and suggesting that Moore can be accused of bias in his "one-sided portrayal of Catholicism" (20), she argues that Moore as an unbeliever cannot really be relied on to give a convincing portrait of someone's attempt to understand the nature of faith. Yet she does not find this a problem later on, when Moore portrays characters like Father Laforgue in *Black Robe*, who possesses "a genuine gift of faith" (20).

O'Donoghue sees Moore's novels of the 1960s and 1970s as illustrating in effect two stages of Moore's changing vision. The protagonists here, liberated from home, church, and nation, are free to pursue their personal and secular values, but their subsequent disillusionment with what they attain constitutes the beginning of what O'Donoghue calls Moore's "renewed respect for a higher religious faith" (xvi). The best of these novels of "exile and escape" are, according to her, *An Answer from Limbo* (1962), *I Am Mary Dunne* (1968), and, I am pleased to see, *The Doctor's Wife* (1976), which I think has consistently been underrated by critics. I am a bit surprised that *Fergus* (1970) gets short shrift in this section, for Fergus far more than Mary Dunne has cut himself off from all past influences, and is

very close at the end to total disillusionment. Mary Dunne is certainly obsessed with the process of escape, but to infer, as O'Donoghue does, that her upcoming trip to London is an intensification of her exile is surely to distort the meaning of that word. She and Terence are simply going to London for the summer.

It is true that in all of Moore's novels of the 1960s and 1970s with the exception of *Catholics* — which O'Donoghue conveniently dismisses as “not among his better novels” (68) — the protagonists are on a search for secular, as opposed to religious, goals and values. But to argue that these protagonists all suffer an ultimate disillusionment over what they attain is debatable. Brendan Tierney does in *An Answer from Limbo*, as does Fergus, while Anthony Maloney chooses death in *The Great Victorian Collection*. But Ginger Coffey, Gavin Burke, Mary Dunne, Sheila Redden, and Jamie Mangan all attain moral positions and levels of understanding themselves that were denied them as long as they clung to values of the past. In establishing her grounds for analysing the third stage of Moore's vision, O'Donoghue implies that all these protagonists inflict a kind of immorality upon themselves and their victims that can not happen in someone with religious belief, since this kind of belief is “the ultimate unselfishness” (136).

She selects *The Temptation of Eileen Hughes* (1981) as the transitional novel leading to Moore's “renewed respect” for religion, citing Bernard McAuley's obsession for Eileen as “the closest thing possible to spiritual belief” (136). With Marie Davenport in *Cold Heaven* (1983), this spiritual anguish is allied to mysticism, while for Father Laforgue in *Black Robe* (1985), belief takes the form of missionary zeal and a desire for martyrdom. But O'Donoghue warns us that with all three of these novels we can only draw tentative conclusions, because it is not clear whose voice is predominant. “What lies behind the ambiguity of this narratorial voice,” she sums up, “is the profound ambivalence of the author himself on the subject of religion, his most consistent theme, his most troubling and troubled metaphor even when it is not his theme” (147).

O'Donoghue concedes that her yoking together these three novels, whose settings and actions have nothing in common, may seem forced (I would think *Catholics* belongs here rather than *Eileen Hughes*), but justifies her selections on the basis of the protagonists' intense spiritual feelings. This works only if we agree with her that Bernard McAuley, rather than Eileen, is the main protagonist of *Eileen Hughes*, a point that is open to question. And to link them, too, because they are “novels of quest” (144) opens this grouping to many other Moore novels, from *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* to *The Mangan Inheritance*.

Because Moore rarely repeats himself from novel to novel, it is always a bit risky to try any kind of thematic linking of his works, so ultimately any selection to illustrate his changing vision is a subjective act. On the whole, O'Donoghue gives authoritative and convincing readings of Moore's works to justify her choices in the four sections of this study. She does not digress into theories of criticism and approaches that seem almost obligatory in literary discussions these days, and for some that will undoubtedly constitute a major weakness in her book. But it will satisfy those readers who look for sensitive, though at times controversial, readings of the primary texts, and in this respect O'Donoghue's study is a convincing introduction to the works of one of the more significant writers of our day.

HALLVARD DAHLIE

Barbara J. Eckstein. *The Language of Fiction in a World of Pain: Reading Politics as Paradox*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990. pp. ix, 210. \$13.95 pb.

The answer to that often asked or implied, ill-formed, and by now boring question — whether you are for or against deconstruction — puts you on either side of a barricade these days. If you are for deconstruction, you are presumably for, or at least associated with, such unappealing concepts as nihilism, amoralism, and incomprehensibility. If you are against deconstruction, it is assumed that you are either too old to bother with it or a member of the National Association of Scholars. That this polarization and labelling blocks dialogue and community building is obvious enough: Eckstein's book is a rigorous attempt to dismantle the barricade, to talk to and reach those who are not convinced that deconstruction *can* be a politically responsible, ethical theory.

Whereas Robert Boyers's book on political fiction, *Atrocity and Amnesia* (1985), was in part a re-vision of Irving Howe's *Politics and The Novel* (1957), Eckstein's is in part a response to Boyers's (which takes an emphatic stand "against" deconstruction). Just as Boyers refined Howe's definition of political fiction, so Eckstein sharpens Boyers's. She defines "good" contemporary political fiction "as that which exposes paradox inherent in political binary opposition" and describes it by its "effect of complicity" (35). If this definition does not seem sharp, it will once Eckstein turns to her texts.

Before doing so, she does all the right things in an erudite, dense, but clearly-organized introduction: she presents a brief background of the debate on the relationship between politics and literature, defines her terms, locates herself, identifies the historical context, and