OBSERVANCE WITHOUT BELIEF

David Staines

BRIAN MOORE has the distinction of being a writer with two nationalities, Canadian and Irish, though he now lives in California.[1] While proud of his Canadian citizenship and his ten-year residence in Canada, where he wrote his first three novels, he acknowledges his primary debt to Ireland: "I'm an Irish writer in this way. I was brought up in Ireland, and Mauriac once said 'the door closes at twenty on a writer and that forms him.' So I am an Irish writer in that I was formed by Ireland, not by Canada." A crucial part of his Irish formation is the world of Irish Catholicism, a religion prominent throughout his fiction. "I'm interested in Catholicism in a non-religious way," he continues, "I'm interested in the traditions that it sets up, and the conflicts."[2]

Born in Belfast of Catholic parents, Moore received a Catholic education of narrow religiosity. Like Stephen Dedalus of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, he attended Catholic schools that perpetuated a rigorous and bigoted training, and this schooling stands behind the indictment of Saint Michan's College in *The Feast of Lupercal* and later novels. Like Dedalus, Moore rejected the indoctrination of his Catholic education, though it did leave a powerful and lasting impression upon him and his fiction:

> I felt, and I still feel, bitterly against the school system I was brought up on. It was a system of beating and teaching by rote, and when I saw other children and how bright they were able to become under American methods, it was around that time that I started to write *Lupercal*. I still feel that it's a wonder I'm not a complete sadist or a masochist after the kind of upbringing we got.[3]

The seemingly blind adherence to religious doctrines, in particular the preoccupation with hell and damnation, represented to Moore outworn and useless values in the contemporary world. Yet his rejection of Catholicism was neither simple nor straightforward. Within its framework he did see a degree of solace for some people, though not for himself. He could sense, for example, religion's positive value for his own parents:

> I've always felt, too, that for most people any faith is better than no faith. It gives them something to live for and with. And while I disliked Catholicism and disliked my parents' religiosity, I think that they were both very honest people, and were people who, if they hadn't had their faith, would have been more dishonest and less admirable. Part of the admirable thing about my mother was that while she was sort of depressive, her faith kept her from being self-centered.[4]

"Something to live for and with" is a dominant theme in Moore's fiction; his characters, trapped in a post-Christian or godless universe, try desperately to create a set of new values both permanent and satisfying.

In all his novels, with the possible exception of *The Great Victorian Collection*, Moore juxtaposes the Catholic faith and the contemporary world where such faith seems no longer valid. Three of his early novels, *Judith Hearne*, *The Feast of Lupercal*, and *The Emperor of Ice Cream*, all set in Belfast, focus relentlessly on the personal damage Irish Catholicism can inflict on its unthinking adherents. Moore's other novels, whether set in Canada, the United States, or France, place Catholicism in the background, but its lasting force is still evident in the mental attitudes of the characters. And his novella, *Catholics*, is the crucial, perhaps definitive confrontation in his fiction between modern man and a godless universe.

Moore's characters represent various dimensions of religious belief or disbelief. The older ones, usually parental authorities, accept the tenets of Catholicism, though their belief may be battered by doubts they try not to acknowledge; such religion often degenerates into blind obedience to outmoded doctrines and practices. The middle-aged struggle valiantly to cling to the remnants of a faith which they often come to know as both invalid and useless, yet they hold to their illusions rather than create any other illusion. The young represent the contemporary world as it attempts to find illusions as sustaining and powerful as religion used to be.

A chronological survey of Moore's fiction reveals the consistency of his obsessive attitude to Catholicism and the development of his possible alternatives to religion. To reject the faith of one's parents and nation is a demanding challenge, but more frightening is the search for a substitute for religion, a search that only a few of Moore's protagonists successfully complete.

Judith Hearne (1955), Moore's first novel, is the incisive exploration of the mental deterioration of a lonely spinster. Trapped by the confining atmosphere of Mrs. Rice's boarding house, thirty-seven-year-old Judith Hearne fantasizes about a growing relationship with James Madden, the landlady's brother. When she realizes that Madden has no marital intentions, she resorts to an evening of alcohol. Because the other boarders object to her drunken singing, Mrs. Rice demands her departure.

Judith Hearne is the victim of a repressive family and a repressive religion. As the novel opens, two objects of importance dominate her room:

> The first thing Miss Judith Hearne unpacked in her new lodgings was the silver-framed photograph of her aunt. The place for her aunt, ever since the sad day of the funeral, was on the mantelpiece of whatever bed-sitting room Miss Hearne happened to be living in . . .
>
> After she had arranged the photograph so that her dear aunt could look at her from the exact centre of the mantelpiece, Miss Hearne unwrapped the white tissue paper which covered the coloured oleograph of the Sacred Heart. His place was at the head of the bed, His fingers raised in benediction, His eyes kindly yet accusing. He was old and the painted halo around His head was beginning to show little cracks. He had looked down on Miss Hearne for a long time, almost half her lifetime.

Like her aunt, Miss Hearne is the product of a narrow Catholic upbringing. At the Sacred Heart Convent she learned the prejudices that characterize Catholic schools in Moore's fiction. Religion is a comfort and a crutch, a comfort that assures her of her personal holiness and righteousness and a crutch that allows her to avoid any confrontation with reality. Her faith prevents her from living in the present; the world of the past is her home: "Miss Hearne's mind moved in a familiar spiral from present to past, made a journey which had become increasingly frequent since her dear aunt died. It was so much easier to go back now; going forward was so frightening." At the same time, however, Catholicism looks to the future, the realm of the afterlife, which should direct all human actions. Father Quigley admonishes his congregation: "And those young people, standing here in this church, standing there like a bunch of hooligans at the back, waiting their chance to run out at the Last Gospel, what will God say to them on that terrible day? What will He say?"

For Father Quigley and his parishioners, God inspires fear and terror, not love. Life is an obstacle course where God rewards the pains and sufferings of believers: "When she changed her digs and met Mr. Madden, she felt a sense of victory, a partial fulfillment, a blessing of God upon her for her sacrifices." The picture of the Sacred Heart is less a comfort than a warning: "He looked down, wise and stern and kindly, His fingers raised in warning."

The folly of Judith Hearne's fantastical affair with James Madden precipitates her eviction from the boarding house as well as her mental breakdown. Yet her deterioration is the direct consequence of her failure to find any meaning in her faith. Miss Hearne is desperate to find some consolation and understanding in religion, and her ultimate defeat is a commentary on the inadequacy of her Catholicism.

After her drunken evening Miss Hearne flees to her parish church: "The church was empty: cleared of its stock of rituals, invocations, prayers, a deserted spiritual warehouse waiting for new consignments." The rituals that sustained her now seem empty and hollow; she prays naively for some explicit sign of the validity of her faith:

> Surely some great design kept it all moving, some Presence made it meaningful. But what if the godless were right, what if it all started back aeons ago with fish crawling out of the sea to become men and women? What if not Adam and Eve, but apes, great monkeys, were our ancestors? In that world, what place had a God who cared for suffering?
>
> She began to walk. Supposing, just supposing, her heart cried, supposing nobody has listened to me all these years of prayers. Nobody at all up above me, watching over me. Then nothing is sinful. There is no sin. And I have been cheated, the crimson nights in that terrible book from Paris, the sin, permissible then. Nobody above. Nobody to care.

In her verbal exchange with Bernard, Mrs. Rice's son, she sees her own faith totter precariously. "God's ways aren't our ways," she tells him. "This life is a cross we have to bear in order to store up merit in the next. Don't you know your Catechism at all?" Bernard's rejection of his parents' faith makes his response the embodiment of the doubts she tried to suppress:

> You and your Sacred Heart. What the hell good has it done you? It's only an idealized picture of a minor prophet. It won't work miracles. You've got to make your own miracles in this world. Now, listen to me. I can help you, if you'll forget this nonsense and do what I say. You want a man. You can have Uncle James. But don't bore me with this nonsense, with these silly scruples. Your God is only a picture on the wall. He doesn't give a damn about you.[5]

Her subsequent confession to Father Quigley is her first explicit acknowledgement of her loss of faith: "I doubted my faith, Father. I need your advice because I had moments of doubt." His hollow response cannot hide his inability to offer her adequate reassurance: "Now, my child, we all have burdens put upon us in this life, crosses we have to bear, trials and tribulations we should offer up to Our Lord. And prayer is a great thing, my child, a great thing. We should never be lonely because we always have God to talk to." When she uttered these same sentiments to Bernard, he rejected them, and now she cannot accept their relevance.

Father Quigley, the first in a long series of clerical portraits in Moore's novels, cannot comfort Miss Hearne because he too has moments of doubt. His inability to assert that God does dwell in the tabernacle prompts her physical assault on the tabernacle door, an act of desperation symbolic of both her need for faith and her inability to accommodate herself to a world without belief. At Earncliffe Home, the sanatorium that becomes her final lodging, she rejects the opportunity to confess her sins. "In God's house I defied God. And nothing happened," she concludes, and now she no longer believes that the sacraments or the spiritual world itself have any significance.

Judith Hearne is a member of the older generation, the world of rigid and

stern Irish Catholicism, and she cannot forsake the observances and rituals that shaped her. Even though she no longer believes in God, she still attends Mass:

> She was feeling tired. Why, the Mass was very long. If you did not pray, if you did not take part, then it was very, very long. If you did not believe, then how many things would seem different. Everything: lives, hopes, devotions, thoughts. If you do not believe, you are alone. But I was of Ireland, among my people, a member of my faith. Now I have no — and if no faith, then no people. No, no, I have not given up. I cannot. For if I give up this, then I must give up all the rest. There is no right or wrong in this. I do not feel, I do not know. Why should I suffer this?
>
> O Lord, I do not believe, help my unbelief. O You — are You — ?

In the novel's final paragraph she clings to her picture of the Sacred Heart whereby "a new place becomes home." Convinced that religion is only a personal illusion, she confronts its vacuity, yet cannot abandon its meaningless practices. Her attendance at Mass is the first of many scenes in Moore's fiction that reveal the starkness of a godless universe where observance without belief is the only possible form of religious commitment.

DIARMUID DEVINE, the protagonist of Moore's second novel, *The Feast of Lupercal* (1957), complements Judith Hearne. A thirty-seven-year-old bachelor frightened of marriage or any human relationship, Devine is crippled by his Catholic upbringing. *Judith Hearne* refers frequently to its protagonist's education at the Sacred Heart Convent; *The Feast of Lupercal* offers a vivid and horrifying depiction of Catholic educational institutions. Devine is a schoolmaster at the college he once attended, Saint Michan's, which thrives on rumour, bigotry, fear, and caning. Just as Miss Hearne prides herself in her alma mater, so the faculty of Saint Michan's prides itself in the repression it has created and now sustains:

> Saint Michan's was not an English school, thank God, it was Irish and Catholic. There was therefore no nonsense about putting boys on their word of honour to own up to their own wrongdoings. Boys did wrong. To find out what they had done, you picked a former wrongdoer and threatened him. No boy would be foolish enough to suffer for another's crime. If the boy did not tell, you gave him what for. No boy, in Father McSwiney's experience, was stouter than a good cane.

Like Saint Michan's, Devine's life is confined and constricted: "He was like a flower that had never opened. He felt foolish when he thought of that, but it was true. Like a flower that had never opened. He had been afraid to open, afraid." With unflinching servility he adheres to the doctrines of his school and its religion. A combination of blind faith, personal fears, and unthinking obedience to all

authorities, his life is devoid of vitality, joy, and love. In his boarding-house room there are two pictures: one, *Ecce Homo*, a print of the seventeenth-century portrait of Christ dying for the sins of mankind; the other, a silent reminder of his family:

> the Divine Infant of Prague, His baby body robed in prelate's garb. Twenty years ago, an Irish Sweepstakes winner gave devotion to the Divine Infant of Prague as the cause of a Derby victory. Mrs. Devine, reading the story, sent out at once to purchase this picture and family prayers in the Devine household regularly implored a repetition of that good fortune. But the Infant never completed the double and one member of the household knew why. One member sinned by secret, lustful thoughts. That member, years later, took the picture with him to his new digs out of some vague need for penance.

The difference between the lives of Judith Hearne and Diarmuid Devine is the presence of choice for the latter. Miss Hearne does not find a release from her personal confinement; James Madden's love, a possible escape, is only a figment of her imagination. In Una Clarke, a young Protestant woman, Devine has a fleeting opportunity to love, yet his attachment to Saint Michan's cripples him. He knows that he will lose all chance of advancement if he marries a Protestant. Consequently, while realizing his victimized condition, he refuses to react against it: "It was all a clique, the city was made up of cliques, drama cliques, religious cliques, school cliques, and God knows what else. There was no use in a fellow's trying to fight them: it was a pure waste of time."

When false rumours about his involvement with Una spread, Devine refuses to acknowledge his own complicity; fear makes him unwilling to stand beside her or agree to a small lie to pacify her uncle's excessive wrath. The ultimate, indeed only goal of Devine's existence is continued acceptance at the College. When his questionable behaviour is forgiven by Father Keogh, the President of Saint Michan's,[6] he returns to his uncluttered, loveless life. He is a mental cripple paralyzed and permanently stultified by Catholicism.

Devine finds his personal peace in a life of selfishness where the social world around him has no relevance; the only realm of significance is the authoritarian religion of Saint Michan's, and he never dares to question his blind adherence to that faith. He becomes the personal embodiment of the Catholic system that educated Judith Hearne. In the end Saint Michan's continues to uphold its narrow authoritarianism, and the modern world fails to impinge upon its Catholic territory.

In *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* (1960) Moore abandons his Belfast setting for the new world of America. Belfast's rigid Catholicism disappears, for the new setting is the consequence of the characters' desire to escape their Catholic training. Ginger Coffey brings his wife Veronica and his daughter Paulie to Canada in an attempt to forge a prosperous career, yet "one of his secret reasons for

wanting to get away to the New World was that, in Ireland, church attendance was not a matter of choice. Bloody well go, or else, tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, you were made to suffer in a worldly sense. Here, he was free."

The Coffey family is the first portrait in Moore's fiction of Irish Catholics whose presence in the new world helps them to rebel against and reject their religious training. Both Ginger and Veronica are staunch Catholics who have abandoned their faith. In Ireland Father Delaney reprimanded Ginger for practicing birth control: "He [Ginger] said he was damned if any priest would dictate whether or not he'd have another child." But when Veronica later demands a divorce, Ginger takes refuge in his Catholic training that forbids divorce. Her response reflects the degree of religion that remains in these immigrants:

> Don't you preach religion at me, Ginger Coffey, you that haven't darkened a church door since you came out here. Don't you talk about Catholics. What's wrong with you is that you never *were* a Catholic; you were too selfish to give God or anyone else the time of day. Oh, you may think I'm like you now, and I am. I never pray. But once I did. Once I was very holy, do you remember? I cried, Ginger. I cried when Father Delaney said that unless we stopped practicing birth control he'd refuse us the sacraments. Do you remember that? No, you never think of that any more, do you? But I do. You changed me, Ginger. What I am now has a lot to do with what you made me. So don't you talk sin to me, don't you dare! Sins — Oh, let me tell you. Once your soul is dirty, then what difference in the shade of black?

Veronica's attempt to shift the blame to Ginger for her own irreligious behaviour is self-delusion. Like her husband she sets aside the religion of her parents, and at the end of the novel a new religion asserts itself in the form of selfless love. As George Woodcock notes, "Veronica has not changed. She is merely seeking a new set of values in a new world that will replace the old faith."[7] She learns to heed not the teachings of Catholicism but the demands of unselfish love. "You don't know what love is," she asserts. "Just remember this, Ginger. Love is unselfish, it's doing things for other people and not asking them to do things for you." This kind of love becomes the highest standard in the new world. It is not coincidental that Veronica's assertion makes Ginger think of Christ: "Was *that* true love? Would the greatest proof of his love for her be his willingness to sacrifice himself, the way Jesus had sacrificed himself for mankind? Jesus considered that the highest form of love, didn't he? Well, there you are, then." In the courtroom scene Ginger perjures himself by taking a false name so that his wife and daughter will not suffer, and in the novel's final scene Ginger and Veronica reach a new degree of mutual understanding and love.

The Coffeys abandon the ritualistic faith of their homeland. When Ginger

enters the basilica, his reaction parallels Judith Hearne's last visit to her parish church:

> He looked at the tabernacle. His large ruddy face set in a scowl as though someone had struck it. His lips shut tight under his ginger mustache. I never could abide a bully, he said to the tabernacle. Listen to me, now. I came in here to maybe say a prayer and I'll be the first to admit I had a hell of a nerve on me, seeing the way I've ignored you these long years. But now I cannot pray, because to pray to you, if you're punishing me, would be downright cowardly. If it's the cowards you want in heaven, then good luck to you. You're welcome.

Unlike Judith Hearne, however, he does find meaning and security in human relationships, and the novel shows his acceptance of another standard to replace the outworn faith of his homeland.

In *Survival*, her thematic guide to Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood studies *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* as a portrait of the reluctant immigrant and his failure in the new world: "He has learned Canada's lesson well. Endurance, survival, no victory."[8] Yet there is a personal victory since the Coffeys recognize a new set of values. Despite his commercial failure in Montreal Ginger does have luck in the most important area of his life; he does come to know love as the only significant value in a godless universe.

The ritualistic religion of Judith Hearne and Diarmuid Devine has been replaced by a new world where religion is a part of the past. Now man must strive to find values to replace the static Catholicism of Ireland. The new world seems to free man, to liberate him from the paralysis of the old, and to allow him, unimpeded by his Catholic upbringing, to accept new standards. At the same time, however, *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* never directly confronts the religion of the old world; set apart geographically from their ancestors, the Coffeys need not worry about the confining anxieties and pressures of Irish Catholicism.

THE DIRECT CONFRONTATION between the old world's religion and the new world's struggle for other standards is the theme of Moore's next novel, *An Answer from Limbo* (1962). Brendan Tierney, the book's protagonist, is a struggling young journalist in New York City. He invites his sixty-eight-year-old Irish mother to come to America and live with him, his wife Janet, and their two children. The presence of Mrs. Eileen Tierney will allow Jane to seek employment, which will in turn permit Brendan to pursue a full-time writing career.

Brendan's parents belong to the world of Judith Hearne and Diarmuid Devine. His father kept a picture of the Little Flower of Lisieux beside his bed; his mother would have her grandchildren "on their knees, saying rosaries for the souls of the deceased." Like the Coffeys, however, Brendan has abandoned his religion,

though his upbringing still haunts him; an American film director has offered to cast him as a Calvinist divine because of his "noble, guilt-ridden stare." Jane, moreover, represents the new world where she was born; not Irish, she shares none of Brendan's religious feelings or background. Even before his mother's arrival Brendan foresees a family struggle when she learns that her grandchildren have not been baptized.

Limbo, according to Mrs. Tierney, is "the place for children who have never been baptized." Conscious of her duty to insure her grandchildren's baptism, she consults a priest who recalls the authoritarian simplicity of Father Quigley and Saint Michan's:

> The priest she had seen in confession had been no use. He said she must make Brendan bring the children to church and have them baptized. As if Brendan would ever agree to the like of that. The priest had offered to call on Brendan and Jane. What good would that do? Priests live behind presbytery walls. They did not understand.

When she baptizes her grandchildren without their parents' knowledge, she finds herself estranged from her son and daughter-in-law. For Jane, the baptism represents the final imposition of her mother-in-law's foolish faith. For Brendan, the baptism is a vivid reminder of his past:

> In that moment I hated her. She was my past, with all its stubborn superstitions, its blind emotional faith. The rage we feel as children when Mummy knows best, the rage we know as adolescents when our parents deny us the conduct of our affairs, the frustration of all intercourse with the older generation.

Because of the baptism Mrs. Tierney is evicted by her son and forced to live alone until her return to Ireland; during this isolation she breaks her hip and dies. "If there is, as she believed, a heaven above us, will her God recompense her for our coldness and indifference?" Brendan wonders. Yet her death only increases his inner struggle with religion:

> The temporal life was, for her, a secondary thing. For me, it is all there is. Because of this difference in belief, a gate shut between us. Because of that gate, she died alone, trying to reach me. And yet, as I sat in that coffee shop, denying and despising my wife's tears, I asked myself if my beliefs are sounder than my mother's.

Brendan makes his projected novel his god and the art of writing his religion. At the end of *An Answer from Limbo*, however, he is a writer who "can't feel, he can only record." He is unable to answer his own depressing question: "Is my belief in my talent any less an act of superstitious faith than my mother's belief in the power of indulgences?"

An Answer from Limbo does not provide the comparatively easy solution of *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*, where unselfish love replaces religious faith. Brendan

makes a religion out of writing, but the novel closes with an ominous admission: "I have altered beyond all self-recognition. I have lost and sacrificed myself." The confrontation between the old world and the new world does not lead to simple resolutions. Despite the seemingly superstitious nature of Mrs. Tierney's faith, she does find that her belief sustains her, even as she lies dying on the floor of a vacant apartment. Catholicism comforts her, but it does not speak to the modern world of Brendan and Jane. Consequently, like Mrs. Tierney herself, religion seems destined to die alone and wasted in the new world.

The Emperor of Ice Cream (1965), Moore's fifth novel and the final member of the Belfast trio of novels, is his *bildungsroman*, the novel that reflects his own personal growth and maturing.[9] Gavin Burke, the seventeen-year-old protagonist, is a member of the Air Raid Precautions, a British World War II first-aid organization. A product of Saint Michan's College, he is struggling to assert himself amidst the bigotry and narrowness of 1939 Belfast. The *bildungsroman* is a morality debate between what Gavin names his White Guardian Angel and his Black Guardian Angel. Their frequent intrusions into the narrative reflect the interior moral crises confronting Gavin as he breaks away from the Catholicism of his family and his schooling.

The Emperor of Ice Cream opens with a description of the most significant object in Gavin's bedroom:

> The Divine Infant of Prague was only eleven inches tall yet heavy enough to break someone's toes if it fell off the dresser. Although he wore the coronation robes of a monarch, he was, in reality, a desperate little preacher whose aim in life was to catch Gavin Burke's eye.

As Gavin explores the Belfast beyond Saint Michan's, he encounters "a grown-up world, undreamed of in the Saint Michan's school philosophy." Each new experience makes him increasingly scornful of his family, their religion, and especially his girl friend Sally Shannon, "a repressed Child of Mary." Sally's religiosity confirms his understanding of the inadequacy of Catholicism in the modern world:

> Nothing would change. The care of this room would continue, as would the diurnal dirge of Masses all over the land, the endless litanies of evening devotions, the annual pilgrimage to holy shrines, the frozen ritual of Irish Catholicism perpetuating itself in *secula, seculorum.*

Gavin escapes this confining paralysis by a complete rejection of religion: "he vowed to deliver himself from the sham of church attendance, of pretending belief for his parents' sake, of the pretenses and compromises which had helped keep him becalmed in indecision between adolescence and adult life." The validity of his rejection of Catholicism is emphasized in the novel's final episode, Gavin's

reunion and reconciliation with his father. Gavin has outgrown his family and his religion, but his maturity allows him to confront his father as a human being for the first time:

> In the candlelight, he saw that his father was crying. He had never seen his father cry before. Did his father know that the house was condemned, did his father know that everything had changed, that things would never be the same again? A new voice, a cold grown-up voice within him said: "No." His father was the child now; his father's world was dead. He looked over at the wireless set, remembering his father, ear cocked for England's troubles, pleased at news of other, faraway disasters. Forget that, the grownup voice said. He heeded that voice, heeded it as he had never heeded the childish voices of his angels. Black Angel, White Angel: they had gone forever. His father was crying. The voice would tell him what to do. From now on, he would know these things.

Sally Shannon accosts Gavin with the taunt: "Don't be silly, you can't give it up, you were born a Catholic and you'll die one." Gavin, however, does escape his Catholic background, and *The Emperor of Ice Cream* is a young man's rejection of an outworn faith and acceptance of the modern world. It is also the novelist's catharsis, his most direct assault to date on the Catholic religion and his farewell to the stifling world of Belfast.

AFTER *The Emperor of Ice Cream* Moore's novels focus less explicitly on the hollowness of religion; perhaps his *bildungsroman* freed him from the constant explorations of faith that characterized his early novels. In subsequent works his characters usually accept the fragmentation of modern life and attempt to accommodate themselves. Both *I am Mary Dunne* (1968) and *Fergus* (1970) appear initially to ignore the problems of observance without belief, yet upon closer examination these novels become further extensions of the theme. Set in the United States, both focus relentlessly on their title figures. *I am Mary Dunne*, written entirely in the first person, explores the mind of a disturbed, thrice-married woman; *Fergus*, though not written in the first person, is a vivid portrait of the title character's mind and its hallucinations. *I am Mary Dunne* evokes the world of literary Manhattan, *Fergus* the literary colony of Malibu. Most importantly, for our purposes, both novels depict modern characters who have rejected their Catholic upbringing and are trying to forge their own place in society. Mary Dunne and Fergus Fadden join the younger generation of Ginger Coffey, Brendan Tierney, and Gavin Burke, who have abandoned their faith in order to establish a new set of personally satisfying values.

Mary Dunne is cut off, both figuratively and literally, from her Catholic mother. She lives in Manhattan, her mother lives in Nova Scotia; she is a more

intellectual Veronica Coffey, her mother is another version of Eileen Tierney. Mary Dunne's rejection of Catholicism creates a barrier in her relationship with her mother; whenever the name of Christ "comes up in our conversations, my mother and I become strangers in a darkness, far away from contact with each other, strangers on a long-distance wire." In moments of desperate need she finds herself calling upon God and invoking his name in prayers she learned as a child. When she fears that her mother may have cancer, she tries to pray, though she admits: "Prayers are charms, they are knocking on wood."

For Mary Dunne the substitute for religion is love. Her need for human relationships has led her into three marriages; her current husband, Terence Lavery, offers her the comfort she craves. The role of God in the lives of Mary's parents and their generation is now filled for Mary by her husband: "Terence is my saviour, I shall not want, he maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he restoreth my soul. Yes, that's right. He's my new religion. He's my life after death."

Thirty-nine-year-old Fergus Fadden, a moderately successful Belfast writer, now lives in Malibu with a twenty-two-year-old woman. With two novels and one wife behind him, he wakes up one morning to a series of hallucinations in which his family and other figures from his Irish upbringing appear; the plight of the young Catholic rejecting his parents' religion plays a dominant role. Fergus' father, who attended Saint Michan's, reminds his son that "nothing's more important that a person's religious duties." Fergus' sister Maeve scolds him:

> As a Catholic, you were brought up to believe in a life after death. But you can't believe in it. So you invent a substitute. You start worrying about your reputation outliving you. Your work becomes your chance to cheat the grave. That's a very attractive thought, particularly for ex-Catholics. That's why you care so much about your literary status.

Like Brendan Tierney Fergus substitutes literary reputation for religion. And Maeve is accurate in her assessment: "You have no laws, no rules, no spiritual life at all. You have to make up your own rules of conduct. You have to become your own wee ruler, and found your own wee religion. You are your own god."

The clerical figures who populate Fergus' hallucinations emphasize the importance of the afterlife, the necessity of regulating your earthly existence in order to obtain heavenly glory: "The Irish people know that it is not this world that counts. This life is but a preparation for eternity." But it is Fergus' family, especially his father, whom he must confront and reject. In the final episode of the hallucinations and of the novel, he presents the hollowness of religion to his father:

> All the things you taught me, the things you believed in, your prayers, going to Mass and Confession and Holy Communion, your devotion to Our Lady, the whole thing! Your obedience to the rules of the church, the ten commandments, mortal

> sins, plenary indulgences, the lot! Just think of it! A sham, a fraud, a complete waste of time!

Fergus raises his arm and dismisses the hallucinatory presence; not seeking the reconciliation with his father that Gavin Burke achieved with his father, Fergus turns his back on the old world in order to create his own standards in modern California.

In *Catholics* (1972) Moore turned to the bastion of Catholicism, an abbey of pious monks, to make his definitive statement on the validity of religious faith in the modern world. The novella depicts the final days of Muck Abbey, Kerry, Ireland in the closing decade of the twentieth century. The Abbey has achieved international fame as the only remaining stronghold of traditional religious practices; the Mass is still offered in Latin, Confession is still a private sacrament. At this period in human history the Church of Rome is concerned with social action, not prayer and religious observances; for the modern Catholic priest, the Church "exists today as the quintessential structure through which social revolution can be brought to certain areas of the globe." The embodiment of this new outlook is Father James Kinsella, a young priest sent from Rome by his Provincial General to the recalcitrant Abbot of Muck, sixty-nine-year-old Thomas o'Malley; the purpose of his mission is the termination of Muck Abbey's outdated religious practices.

Muck Abbey is the world of Judith Hearne and Diarmuid Devine without the masochistic brutality of Saint Michan's. The Abbey adheres to the rules of the traditional Church, the sacraments, and the prayers that Fergus Fadden and his generation have rejected. The fame of the Abbey reflects modern man's desperate need for some kind of certitude, some kind of faith: "People don't want truth or social justice, they don't want this ecumenical tolerance. They want certainties. The old parish priest promised that."

In the confrontation between Abbot o'Malley and Father Kinsella is the battle between the old world and the new world. When the young priest's helicopter lands on the island where the Abbey is located, the Abbot remarks: "Do you know, Father, that's the first flying machine of any description that has ever landed on Muck. You've brought us the symbol of the century. Just when I thought we'd be able to close the hundred years out, and say we missed our time." Cut off and isolated from the modern world, the inhabitants of the Abbey show no need or desire for the world beyond their island.

For Abbot o'Malley Rome's attitude to religion is strange; seeing his duty as the care of his people's faith, he cannot accept the new Catholicism: "I think I was born before my time. A man doesn't have to have such a big dose of faith any more, does he?" As Father Kinsella's short stay reaches its end, however, the Abbot begins to reveal his own loss of faith. He is unable to believe in the old

faith but willing to cling to its hollow observances. His life is a private hell: "the hell of those deprived of God. When it came upon him, he could not pray, prayers seemed false or without any meaning at all. Then his trembling began, that fear and trembling which was a sort of purgatory presaging the true hell to come, the hell of no feeling, that null, that void." Years ago the Abbot felt a certainty about his beliefs, but now he does not genuflect when he leaves the church, he does not say the Divine Office, he does not pray. While other monks cling to old beliefs, their superior is the clerical equivalent of Judith Hearne. Even the men of religion, the guardians of the faith, can no longer acknowledge or accept the tenets of Catholicism. For the younger priests, social revolution serves the same function that literary creation offers Brendan Tierney and Fergus Fadden; for the older priests, social revolution is not faith, yet there is no substitute. As the Abbot leads his monks in prayer at the end of the novella, he "entered null. He would never come back. In null."

Catholics is the climax of the treatment of religious belief in Moore's fiction. The tabernacle that Judith Hearne tried to open, the tabernacle that received Ginger Coffey's scoffing, this tabernacle is now empty. Only a miracle can make God present on the altar, and the new Catholicism of Rome, concerned only with man's social betterment, disregards the realm of the miraculous. The twentieth century has reached Muck Abbey, and mankind, including the monks, must find a substitute for religion.

Shortly before the publication of *Catholics*, Moore remarked: "When I wrote most of my novels I was interested — I'm not sure that I'm much interested now — in presenting the moment in a person's life, the crucial few weeks or months, when one suddenly confronts the reality or unreality of one's illusions, because that, to me, is what the drama of the novel is."[10] Moore's next novel, *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975), exemplifies this statement. During a stay in Carmel, California, Arthur Maloney, a young History professor at McGill University, dreams of a great Victorian collection. When he awakens he finds that his dream has become a reality. The novel follows the world's disbelief in the reality and the progressive mental deterioration of Maloney as he becomes a celebrity. Religious belief has no place in the novel, since belief now centres on the collection. Arthur Maloney does not believe in God: "God was, like Santa Claus, a word his mother used." And Christianity finds its only expression in the placard of the madman picketing the collection: "God Alone Can Create — Do Not Believe This Lie."

In his most recent novel, *The Doctor's Wife* (1976), Moore explores again "the crucial few weeks or months, when one suddenly confronts the reality or unreality of one's illusions." Sheila Redden has led a quiet life in Belfast; now, however, on a brief holiday in France she questions her way of life and rejects the dull security of her marriage to a Belfast physician; when we meet Sheila at the beginning of

the novel, she is in Paris, and we never see her in Ireland since she never returns to her old world.

Like earlier Moore heroines Sheila Redden was raised in the Catholic faith, but she no longer finds religious belief valid or feasible. In earlier years she was a devout Catholic: "Once, she had asked God's help in everything . . . It seemed like another life, that long-ago time of rules and rewards, when prayer and sin were real." When she visits Notre-Dame Cathedral, she finds a museum as hollow spiritually as Muck Abbey:

> Notre-Dame is a museum, its pieties are in the past. Once these aisles were filled with the power of faith, with prayer and pilgrimage, all heads bowed in reverence at the elevation of the Host. Once people knelt here, in God's house, offering the future conduct of their lives against a promise of heaven. But we no longer believe in promises.

Her love affair with Tom Lowry is her religion. This romantic attachment possesses her in the same way that her religion used to dominate her life: "These few days with Tom were her state of grace. She turned, went back to the bed, and lay down beside him, holding him in her arms, pressing against his warm body. She closed her eyes. I am in grace. In my state of grace."

In *The Doctor's Wife* as in much of Moore's fiction love becomes the substitute for religious faith in the modern world. The spiritual imagery that surrounds the love scenes indicates the new power and role of love. During his one evening with Una Clarke Diarmuid Devine "knelt once more, as though in genuflection before that altar of her body"; Una herself wants him to repeat his professions of love "over and over, as though, like prayer, repetition would buy grace for the thought." When Brendan and Jane Tierney quarrel, love becomes "the litany of atonement. They made their ejaculations and responses as devoutly as monk and nun, knowing all the extravagant declarations by heart, confident that they could pray back into their marriage its act of faith, its bond of submission, its vows of obedience and trust"; Brendan foresees a new version of hell where he may endlessly make love to his unresponsive wife. For Mary Dunne her husband Terence is the new Christ and hell is reserved for selfishness. And Sheila Redden finds her state of grace in the arms of her lover. In a godless universe love inherits from religion such spiritual imagery.

Educated in the most rigid form of Irish Catholicism, Brian Moore rejected its doctrines and practices. Yet his schooling helped to form him, both as a man and as a novelist, and his indoctrination has led to his continuing explorations of modern man's godless universe.

For Moore, as for his fictional characters, religion is a manmade illusion. Yet Moore admits that man needs illusions:

> A friend of mine once said that a depression is when the world is not at fault, but

> you're at fault. In a peculiar way, if you think about that, it sums up the reason why we all have illusions. We *have* to have illusions, because if you finally lose your illusions about yourself you lose the motive force or whatever it is that keeps us going.[11]

Like Fergus Fadden and Brendan Tierney, Moore regards writing as his illusion: "I know that writing *is* my illusion, and that it's as nonsensical as any other religion."[12] Another illusion, more common and more important, is love. So much of Moore's fiction is a celebration of this beautiful but precarious substitute for religion. Only *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* has an ending that suggests any degree of sustained happiness, and Moore's fiction is sceptical about the permanence of this illusion.

The characters of Moore's novels are confronted with a fragmented world where there is no possibility of religious certainty. In Belfast they are given the answers to life's problems by their religion, but these answers no longer satisfy; even Muck Abbey must move into the modern world. The old world of Irish Catholicism gives way to a new world where a personal substitute for faith must be found. From the clearly defined but outdated world of the Sacred Heart Convent and Saint Michan's College Moore leads us into a godless universe where men and women struggle to find some illusion that will give meaning to human existence.

NOTES

[1] The only two full-length studies of Brian Moore reflect his dual nationality. Hallvard Dahlie, *Brian Moore* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969) appears in the series, "Studies in Canadian Literature." Jeanne Flood, *Brian Moore* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1974) appears in "The Irish Writers Series."

[2] "Robert Fulford Interviews Brian Moore," *The Tamarack Review*, 23 (Spring 1962), 13-14.

[3] "Brian Moore — An Interview Conducted by Hallvard Dahlie," *The Tamarack Review*, 46 (Winter 1968), 17-18.

[4] *Ibid.*, 20-21.

[5] Moore points out the parallel between Bernard's outlook and his own: "When I devised the character of Bernard Rice, I gave him some of my own opinions. The ideas about God's omniscience and omnipotence, for instance" (*ibid.*, 15).

[6] Father Keogh assumes the role of God as he metes out charity and forgiveness to his staff. "The headmaster, who many critics mistakenly took for a kind old man," Moore notes, "is to my mind the very spirit of authoritarianism and Catholicism at its worst. He is *Realpolitik* all the way. He doesn't give a damn for anything but the good of the school. He is the person I think one should be most frightened of" (*ibid.*, 18).

[7] George Woodcock, "Rounding Giotto's Circle: Brian Moore's Poor Bitches," *Odysseus Ever Returning: Essays on Canadian Writers and Writing* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970), p. 46.

[8] Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 158.

[9] Moore describes the novel: "Every first novel I'd read, by an Irish writer — well, Sean O'Faolain once said they're all about young men and the novel ends when the young hero gets on a boat and goes to England. I felt that was terribly true, and to write a better book than that you'd have to compete with *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I felt that had been done. I did write the autobiographical *bildungsroman* type of novel, but I wrote it twenty-five years later, at a fair remove from my own young life. That was *The Emperor of Ice Cream*" (Donald Cameron, *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973, II, pp. 69-70).

[10] *Ibid.*, II, p. 66.

[11] *Ibid.*, II, p. 79.

[12] *Ibid.*, II, p. 80.

DIALECT

Pier Giorgio di Cicco

There are wounds we will never touch
swimming through the bright lake of the body.
We near them, and our dreams stand up and
cry.
There are needs we shall never fill,
swimming through the bright lake of the body.
Like a fish, we imagine all sorts of fingers
reaching the light, when what we want is what we held
yesterday, however beautiful it was, we are ready to
forgive it,
and say we are coming, we have bare feet, we are afraid
of nothing; open your arms, son of man,
all five senses shut, and waiting for the screaming to begin.