

# A MIRROR OF MOORE

*Jack Ludwig*

**B**RIAN MOORE'S FICTIONAL WORLD is largely a matter of mirrors: a recurrent scene in each of his novels has a character facing his face in the mirror which is *not* magic, and the question asked is: "Mirror, mirror on the wall, have I any right to life at all?" The mirror's plain unmagic answer is the substance of Moore's novels.

So at the beginning of *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* the mirror moment sets the crisis, the let's-face-it scene:

Her angular face smiled softly at its glassy image. Her gaze, deceiving, transforming her to her imaginings, changed the contour of her sallow-skinned face, skilfully re-fashioning her long pointed nose on which a small chilly tear had gathered. Her dark eyes, eyes which skittered constantly in imagined fright, became wide, soft, luminous. Her frame, plain as a cheap clothes-rack, filled now with soft curves, developing a delicate line to bosom.

She watched the glass, a plain woman, changing all to the delightful illusion of beauty. There was still time . . . .

But at the end of the novel Judith Hearne must return to mirrors and *see*, now without hope of time or change:

She sat at the bare white dressing-table and saw her face in the mirror. Old, she thought, if I met myself now, I would say: that is an old woman.

Moore's second novel, *The Feast of Lupercal*, has the mirror "truth" joined by another truth—the eavesdrop. His hero Diarmud Devine is existentially arrested by hearing himself called an "old woman":

He made straight for the washbasin in a hurried ritual of hand washing, hand shaking and hand drying, all the time staring shamefaced at his image in the mirror opposite.

When Devine finds a young girl and a chance at "life" he blunders and blusters, confused and confounded, and, while they are both preparing to make love, takes quick stock of himself in the Moore way:

He . . . looked in the dresser mirror. The face which looked back was weak with fright . . . .

But now, in the dresser mirror, his long pale body was shamefully exposed. His legs seemed knock-kneed and his hair was tousled like an idiot's.

In Judith Hearne and Diarmud Devine the truth paralyzes. Life tests by making love possible. The faint of heart end in fear and loneliness: the young girl with whom Devine could not make it is his accusation of failure at the end of the book: she is his mirror now: "She was right, he couldn't change. For the rest of his life he'd go on telling people what they wanted to hear."

Moore's third and best book, *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*, probably the finest novel Canada has seen, uses mirrors to set up soliloquies, to add a dimension missing in the other two novels, a personal style, a unique voice; Ginger is the suffering ham, the corny sentimentalist, the confused failure, but, as always, *facing it*: Judith Hearne's "There was still time" has been replaced by a *Juno and the Paycock* character's wish, "Maybe today his ship would come in." But the mirror on the wall is relentless:

His image in the dresser mirror looked at him: large, trembling . . . Look at yourself, would you. Take a good look.

He looked at him. A stupid man, dressed up like a Dublin squire. Looked at the frightened, childish face frozen now in a military disguise. He hated that man in the mirror, hated him. Oh, God, there was a useless bloody man, coming up to forty and still full of boy's dreams of ships coming in . . . .

The mirror man looked sad. Yes, he hated that man, that man he had made in the mirror, that mirror man who had unmade him. No one honored that foolish sad impostor, no one loved him. Except him: for only he know that the big idjit had meant no harm, had suffered many's a hurt. Ah, poor fraud, he thought. You're all I have. Yet even I don't like you.

At the end of *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* Moore adds something new to the mirror message: loneliness is not all: failure is not the final judgment: the last page of the book returns to the mirror:

In the dresser mirror, the man began to cry. Detached, he watched the tears run down that sad impostor's face, gather on the edges of that large moustache. Why was that man boohooing? Because he no longer lusted for his wife? Because he wasn't able to leave her? Ah, you idjit, you. Don't you know that love isn't just going to bed? Love isn't an act, it's a whole life . . . .

He had tried: he had not won. But oh! what did it matter? He would die in humble circs: it did not matter. There would be no victory for Ginger Coffey, no victory big or little, for . . . he had learned the truth. Life was the victory . . . . Going on was the victory . . . .

The mirror as teller of truths is, of course, one of Joyce's epiphanic devices in *Dubliners*, and Ginger Coffey is, in a sense, a non-literary Gabriel Conroy, a stylized ham version of the weak nervous Conroy whose glimpse of himself in the glass is the climax of Joyce's "The Dead".

As he passed in the way of the cheval-glass he caught sight of himself in full length, his broad, well-filled shirt-front, the face whose expression always puzzled him when he saw it in a mirror, and his glimmering gilt-rim eyeglasses . . . . A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror.

I HAVE DWELT so long on the mirror of Moore and Joyce because I think Moore is probably, at this time, Joyce's heir in fiction. Not his sole heir—for Joyce has many children: and not being sole heir, Moore has inherited—so far—only a small part of Joyce's legacy. Moore has Joyce's compassion, that essential openness and anticipation which never disqualifies any man from the possibility of fictional—i.e. *human*, significance. Moore's heroes are all unheroic, lead lives *below* history—as indeed, Leopold Bloom does. No civilization depends on Judith Hearne or Diarmud Devine or Ginger Coffey: their death would leave the world unchanged except that Brian Moore, like James Joyce, believes there is limitless fiction in the fall of a sparrow.

Moore's Belfast and Montreal are similar to Joyce's Dublin. Details of a city are used to build a world: Belfast is dreary, Montreal is alien, but the human condition of Moore's heroes, like that of Joyce's, is only partly dependent upon cities and surroundings. Life is tough. Men are judged daily, weighed and found wanting. But the judgment must not paralyze. The significant difference between Moore's Ginger Coffey and his Judith Hearne and Diarmud Devine is that Ginger knows defeat must not defeat him, that the miracle which is life flares forth from the unworthy as from the worthy. Moore has taken Ginger Coffey not merely beyond *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* and *The Feast of Lupercal*

but he has, in a way, passed beyond the limits of Joyce's *Dubliners* and has entered the greater world of Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*.

Ginger Coffey is out of Leopold Bloom and *Ulysses*; Moore has pared away the literary devices and touched the core of that novel, the lonely passion of the uninvited-to-the-feast unlucky man, Leopold Bloom turned into a celebration of the human spirit doing what it does in moments of magnificence—liberate itself from the *facts* of life. To write the saga of Ginger Coffey Moore obviously had to see Bloom's facts—suicide father, dead infant son, alien daughter, cuckolding wife, hostile city, despising, hating him for his Jewishness, his advertising job, his sobriety, his doctrine of love: and he had to see, too, that Leopold Bloom is *not* the sum of these facts nor their categories. Bloom's *being* is a success, *and* heroic. This, I submit, is what Moore is after in *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*. The portrait of a hero as failure: the celebration of life by those who don't define themselves by defeat and "humble circs".

As I've already indicated, though, Moore's being Joyce's heir is so far only a limited accomplishment. Anyone reading Moore's three novels knows, of course, that they are really one novel being rewritten (if the second was not an advance over the first, the third is certainly a wonderful culmination of the earlier two). Which brings me to the question of what Joyce might yet will Brian Moore—or what Moore might do all on his own. Moore has opened a tiny window on a fully-developed world. He has done what he has done so well that it must now be considered *done*. Another novel about an imposter, a nervous man, a fearful lady would be, in my opinion, unworthy of his talents. The window must be shut: other windows must be opened.

So far in Moore's fiction there is almost no sense of a larger world of space and time, of history, of ideas, of complex feelings, situations. His fiction expands the "moments seized" theme of Browning's poetry: in the first two books the characters don't make it, in the third it's a tie. His heroes see their faces in the mirror but the effect tends to turn the world over to Narcissus. What's showing *around* the hero's face? What's on the other side of the mirror? In short, to return to Joyce, Moore has not yet found the Joyce way of using the sensibility of a simple, uncomplicated, concrete, specific man like Bloom to reach unsimple cosmic questions like the ones that recur in Bloom's interior monologues during the course of his Ulysses wandering. I won't, of course, be put off by that old bit about "such was not his intention". *Ginger Coffey* is a sufficient departure *stylistically* to indicate the possibility of new intentions.

Religion and its symbols are almost the sole contact with a greater world in

Moore's novels. The questions of life and death are subjected to the prevailing religious answers by three heroes uncertain of God, their church, their faith. This uncertainty is very significant, I think because as one passes from the first books to the third one finds that the difference between Ginger Coffey and the earlier characters is that Ginger is *married*, that he has a *daughter*, that he has made some commitment to life *literally*, and that he has near him the *human* answer to man's age-old questions. Moore's "religion" is what Arnold gets close to as possibility in "Dover Beach": "Come, love, let us be true to one another," because, if we are *not*, then the rest is despair and ruin and darkness. If God and the Church (or church) are solace is not *the* question: human loneliness can only have a human comforter. Judith Hearne and Diarmud Devine are existentially dead without another human's warmth: Ginger Coffey has a wife—not triumphantly. His realization is the human answer:

Love [is] . . . knowing you and she will care about each other when sex and daydreams, fights and futures—when all that's on the shelf and done with . . .

Moore has a great comic sense in his books: each of the novels has a great scene in it, usually a sad attempt at making love or a wild confrontation scene such as the one between Ginger and his wife's lover. Moore never loses sight of the absurdity of his Devine or Coffey, and in the midst of a scrap is always reminding you of how ludicrous a figure his hero cuts. Like Joyce, Moore uses humor to point up the serious. Ginger Coffey's silly appearance, like Bloom's poached egg eyes, doesn't cancel out the tension in his quest.

THE COMIC, rather than the satiric eye is the eye of compassion, and Moore's greatest accomplishment so far is his delicate combining of love and the absurd, compassion and the ludicrous. Even a clown, a fool, a fop may have significant destinies. This is what makes Brian Moore truly the heir of James Joyce. He has picked up where Joyce left off—with the commonplace, the unheralded: Maria in *Dubliners*' "Clay", Little Chandler in "A Little Cloud", Mr. Duffy in "A Painful Case". Disregarding the literary innovation of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, its concern for the artist, for literature, Moore has renewed our awareness of the complexity of the clerical character as well as any other contemporary writer, including J. F. Powers. The "retreat" section of the *Portrait* means most to Moore. Finally, as I've already indicated, his *Ulysses* is a novel without Stephen Dedalus in it: his *Ulysses*—*The Luck of Ginger Coffey*—is a novel told solely from the point of view of a Leopold Bloom.

I've made much of the Joyce connection because I want to suggest that I think Brian Moore a highly significant writer. His significance is far greater than the fact that he has come to reside in Canada and set his fiction in Canadian cities. In *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*, if not earlier, Moore shows a first-rate talent for the creation of characters with *style*—in fact I wish Brian Moore had greater confidence in his gift to do this: he would dispense with tags and exclamations and repetitious devices to coerce us into *hearing* the voice of Ginger Coffey. Ginger Coffey *is*. His style is not the superficial tricks of literary art but a way of looking at the world, a way of thinking, a way of feeling. And out of Ginger's style grows the unique style of Moore's entire novel—a searching, relentless analysis of self which here, for the first time in Moore's fiction, is entirely successful. Ginger's style is everywhere and adds flair to every part of Montreal he sees and touches. This is the new dimension in *Ginger Coffey*—the affirmation of the world which comes, as it does in Bloom's *Ulysses*, from an insignificant man seeing the world significantly.

This is what Ginger Coffey, proofreader, *sees*:

Mr. MacGregor [his boss] was coming through. Bony old arms hanging naked from shirt sleeves, blue vein pumping in his pale forehead, fanatic eye starved for trouble. As he swept out on his nightly visitation, office boys, delinquent deskmen, guilty reporters, all avoided his eye, practiced the immobility of small animals as a hawk moves over a forest . . . . The composing room foreman waited his nightly sortie with the amused contempt of a Roman general dealing with the chieftain of a small hill tribe. Here, each night, MacGregor relived his defeat.

Ginger's style—Moore's style—has brought colour and joy into a world which, from the point of view of the character observing it, may be essentially colourless and joyless. Ginger may be a failure, but the world can never be a flop—as the world lonely despised Bloom moves through is not; the life-force and human magnificence are as vividly dramatized in the vicious as in the saintly; Moore's Mr. MacGregor and Joyce's Citizen or Buck Mulligan, no matter what harm they may cause a Ginger or a Bloom, celebrate possibility, go beyond the categories of success and failure, high or low, good or evil.

We had no significant football in Canada before we took to imports. Perhaps Brian Moore will have a professional import's effect on the quality of our writing. *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* marks him as a man of great talent who still works within a relatively narrow world. Signs of change are in this book. And in *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* and *The Feast of Lupercal* signs of other possibilities abound. Brian Moore is a writer in Canada who has just begun to write.

As result and as omen his effect on Canada cannot be anything but good.