Writer and Artist in George Moore's *A Drama in Muslin*

George Hughes
University of Tokyo

Abstract
A Drama in Muslin has been discussed largely in terms of social realism, as George Moore's 'Victorian novel'. This paper argues that such readings distort both the novel and Moore's anti-Victorianism. They ignore the innovation and textual experiment which place this novel within *fin-de-siècle* European naturalism. A focus on artists and writers in the novel throws a clearer light on Moore's dandyesque aesthetic. The paper suggests that, while such an aesthetic may suffer from obvious contradictions, it functions as an important gesture of liberation against the repetitions and constrictions of moralizing Victorian discourse.

At the end of George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man*, the narrative suddenly shifts into the present tense, and the narrator imagines himself back in lodgings in Cecil Street in London, waiting for a visit from a woman and wondering whether to seduce her or not. A short dialogue takes place between the narrator and his conscience. Conscience asks the narrator to devise "a moral ending; one that would conciliate all classes". The narrator replies: "I tell you that nothing really matters to me but art. And, knowing this, you chatter of the unwisdom of my not concluding my novel with some foolish moral ... Nothing matters to me but art". Conscience protests: "Would you seduce the wretched servant girl if by doing so you could pluck out the mystery of her being and set it down on paper!" (1923, 475). It seems he would: and the narrator turns to his audience, addressing us directly, accusing us (echoing Baudelaire) of being "exquisitely hypocritical readers". We pontificate on morality, and then go off to the dinner table, to the animal enjoyment of our stomachs. "Undeceive yourself", he says, "you will leave the world no better than you found it" (1923, 475–76).

This is not, it must be admitted, a socially responsible argument. It is perhaps the typical argument of the *fin de siècle* concerning art and morality. On the one hand there is art—justified as Henry James says in *The Tragic Muse* by singleness of purpose, "the effort to carry it as far as one can" (1978, 17). And on the other hand there is respectable morality, the voice of the British Matron, the familiar garment in which the Anglo-Saxon world has so comfortably clothed its intellectual life.

My paper is concerned with the problematics of reading George Moore, with Moore's individual slant on this argument, and with some of the reasons why I think he is such an interesting novelist; but we might start by

noting this self-portrayal—in which Moore occupies a position profoundly antipathetic both to the British Matron and to the modern academic world.

Problems are undoubtedly raised by Moore's *fin-de-siècle* and dandyesque pose, and I should like to discuss them here in relation to *A Drama in Muslin,* which has been seen as his 'social', humanist and Victorian novel. I would like first to ask some questions about the forms of social realism in *A Drama in Muslin*, then about its relation to the European novel (in particular realism and naturalism); and, finally, I should like to relate these topics to what Moore has to say in the novel about the role of the artist.

First then, social realism: *A Drama in Muslin* is concerned with five young Irish girls from the landowning classes, who leave their convent school in England and return to Ireland in the early 1880s, to enter the marriage market. Published in 1886, it is a novel of contemporary life. Its overt realism is attested on the one hand by frequent reference to political events in Ireland: characters talk about Land Acts and rent problems, the Phoenix Park murders take place off-stage (which makes one Mr. Ryan in the novel extremely pleased, because he thinks it will lead to a new Coercion Act, and "without a proper Coercion Act", he says, "we'd have been murdered in our beds" (Moore 1981, 241)).

Another kind of realism is located in social detail, descriptions of large houses and hotels, parties and dances, the presentation of young women —the "muslin martyrs" (Jeffares in Moore 1981, ix)— to the Lord-Lieutenant at Dublin Castle and their subsequent struggle to catch husbands (Mrs. Barton, the central mother of the novel, announces that "A woman is absolutely nothing without a husband: if she does not wish to pass for a failure she must get a husband: and upon this all her ideas should be set" (137)). Lurking also as an undercurrent, frequently mentioned, but never quite in the foreground, is the life of the poor—faces at the window of a Galway dance hall, crowds at mass, tenants unable to pay rents, a murder fixed up in a potato-field at Mullingar, poor Dublin streets where "plaster, in huge scabs falls from the walls" and shops where "old clothes rot in fetid confusion". The opposition between upper class rituals and the life of the poor is structurally important to the novel. The rich go in their carriages to Dublin castle and the narrator tells us, "Never were poverty and wealth brought into plainer proximity" (171).

History and social history are then undoubtedly present. And yet if we consider *A Drama in Muslin* purely as a social novel we can soon point to weaknesses—as Terry Eagleton, for example, does. Eagleton says that Moore shows the gentry as drones, their tenants as 'animals'. *A Drama in Muslin* is, he says, largely non-committal about the exploitative relations of landlordism (because Moore was a landlord), and only seriously critical of the "glittering trumpery of social rituals, which costs [Moore] rather less to satirize" (Eagleton 1995, 219–21). I am far from accepting Eagleton's

reading here, since I think it betrays a misunderstanding of the way literary texts work. But if we insist on the primacy of the social history in the novel, I must agree that we shall find the limitations Eagleton indicates.

A Drama in Muslin is not, after all, *Middlemarch*. The dandyesque irony of the text is unstable, experimental—something that becomes clearer as we ask how it stands in relation to the European novel. I move now to my second question, of the relation to European realism and naturalism, and would suggest that, rather than social history, *A Drama in Muslin* is a palimpsest—in the sense that Gérard Genette (1982, 12–19) uses the term—a text whose intertextual relations are everywhere apparent. It is not a straightforward *Bildungsroman* of the marriage market: its words do not, in Blanchot's phrase, "disappear into their meaning" (1995, 66). It breaks up narrative with experiments in description, or with extraordinary delays and excursions, like Cecilia's monologue of lesbian passion and religiosity that intrudes into the final chapters. It plays with the role of the narrator in new ways. And if it is not, as Eagleton portrays it, a second-rate document in social history, it is not either, as Judith Mitchell (1982) has insisted, George Moore's Victorian novel.

Mitchell says that *A Drama in Muslin* is nothing like the "typically bleak" European Naturalist novel (1982, 211). Certainly, it is not bleak. But who says nowadays that French naturalist novels are bleak? Endings of naturalist novels may be bleak, and a summary of naturalist plots may sound bleak—but all the richly detailed descriptions of Paris, the fights and feasts of *L'Assommoir* (so much admired by Moore), the excitements of *Nana*, the department stores of *Au bonheur des dames*—these can hardly be called bleak. David Baguley, in his recent book on *Naturalist Fiction*, has pointed out the major importance of "comic strains" in naturalism, as well as "ironic modes" in naturalist satire. The comic strains he identifies with indecisive, repetitive, unresolved organization of plots (1990, 120). Ironic modes he identifies with "disconcerting effects at all levels of the novelistic structure, admitting shocking *subjects*, likely to shake its bourgeois readers into a reaction of indignation and disgust" (1990, 158).

Such comic strains of unresolved plots are obvious in *A Drama in Muslin*—out of the five young women we follow, only one makes the hoped for kind of marriage. Cecilia, since she is lesbian, and disappointed in her love for Alice, decides to enter a convent. May becomes pregnant, manages to go into hiding to have her baby (which she dislikes, and which conveniently dies). Olive, the prettiest of the girls, does not get the young man her mother hopes for, and is condemned to repeat the Dublin season endlessly—or perhaps escapes to live with her sister (without a husband).

As for the ironic mode, Moore quite obviously sets out to offend contemporary readers. When Alice and May prepare for their first dance, a scene which mid-Victorians would surely wish to represent the sweet anticipations of innocent girlhood, May says:

> 'Oh! dear, there's my garter coming down!' and, dropping on to the sofa, the girl hitched up the treacherous article of dress. 'And tell me what you think of my legs', she said, advancing a pair of stately calves. 'Violet says they are too large.'
>
> 'They seem to me to be all right; but, May dear, you haven't got a petticoat on.'
>
> 'You can't wear petticoats with these tight dresses; one can't move one's legs as it is.'
>
> 'But don't you think you'll feel cold—catch cold?'
>
> 'Not a bit of it; no danger of cold when you have shammy leather drawers.'
>
> Then, overcome by her exuberant feelings, May began to sing ... (1981, 85–6)

The Victorian novel, that "Literature at Nurse" (Moore 1885) Moore so despised, suckled by the circulating libraries, did not allow women to mention their "shammy leather drawers".

We cannot, of course, deny that there are echoes of Jane Austen (whom Moore admired) in the novel, and of Thackeray (whom Moore did not). But critics who want *A Drama in Muslin* to conform to patterns of the Victorian social novel have been forced to distort its narrative into one structured on an ethical basis, sealed off with ethical closure. To read it in this way is to ignore not only the significant connections with Balzac and Flaubert, but also the textual disruptions of classic realist plot—the self-consciously elaborate descriptions which delay the narrative—descriptions of the girls, their clothes, their parties. It must be admitted that a common response to such sections of the novel has been boredom and rejection: "Too indulgent, too conscious of producing an artistic effect", says Richard Allen Cave (1978, 66–67). Jean Noël, suggesting that Moore draws on Zola, Huysmans and Mallarmé (plus Baudelaire and Rimbaud), says "Le résultat fut désastreux" (1966, 131).

But, though Moore's experiments may be boring to readers who wish simply to focus on the plot, I would maintain that they are not without interest. They stand at that moment of crisis in naturalism when, perhaps as a result of Huysmans's work, the transparency of writing begins to seem fake, when plot disappears into writing that has become its own subject. Thus, the representation of thought in *A Drama in Muslin* not only drifts in and out of the minds of characters through free indirect discourse (as it usually does in the classic novel) but foregrounds its own textuality—as when Alice thinks of a life without marriage, looking at "the plain of virginal snow, flecked with the cold blue shadows of the trees ... a white path extending before her—a sterile way that she would have to tread—a desolate way, with no songs in its sullen air, but only sad sighs, and only stainless tears, falling, falling, ever falling—falling silently" (98). The comparison

with the end of Joyce's "The Dead" is obvious; textual experiment has led to what Riffaterre calls the metamorphosis of the sign (1978, 4), a transfer from one level of discourse to another: description shifts towards the prose poem.

More extraordinary perhaps are the scenes with the women's clothes, what Susan Mitchell called Moore's "tiresome preoccupation with ... millinery and confectionery" (quoted in Cave 1978, 67). We have first the outrageous descriptions of cloth in the dressmakers shop: "Lengths of white silk clear as the notes of violins playing in a minor key; white poplin falling into folds statuesque as the bass of a fugue by Bach; yards of ruby velvet, rich as an air from Verdi played on the piano ... ". The synaesthetic effects, mixing music and colour, drift off into references to Watteau, then return to flowers and children's voices and finally to comparison of flounces, plumes and veils with "the strains of a German waltz played on Liddell's band" (Moore 1981, 162). The passage is grossly excessive, inordinate in its demands upon the reader, but nonetheless a textual representation of the fascinating excess of these dresses. They are largely white, and some forms of realism would no doubt have told us how much they cost: this text prefers to take us into the complexity of the discursive possibilities that surround them.

Equally difficult but interesting is the extended and narrativized description of the party at Dublin Castle. Conventional views of the scene are discarded, and Moore's picture focuses on the absurdities and contradictions of Victorian modesty—that women who could not usually show an ankle in public could, in evening dress, crushed in a huge crowd, outrageously bare most of the top half of their bodies: "The beautiful silks were", he says, "hidden by the crowd; only the shoulders remained, and, to appease their terrible ennui, the men gazed down the back of the women's dresses stupidly". He goes on to list what is revealed: shoulders that are adolescent; abundant and free; chlorotic; pert; dainty little shoulders, shoulders filled with warm pink shadows; large heavy shoulders; clustering white shoulders. They are compared to long lists of roses. Then suddenly the narrative frame changes; the first-person pronoun, usually avoided by the narrator of this novel, brings him into the scene himself. The tense shifts into the present, and he is there, it seems, hypocritically enjoying it all, also stupidly staring down the backs of women's dresses, and noting "just in front of me, under my eyes, the flowery, the voluptuous, the statuesque shoulders of a tall blonde woman of thirty, whose flesh is full of the exquisite peach-like tone of a Mademoiselle Eugene Verdier" (173). (The woman of thirty, borrowed from Balzac is, of course, one of Moore's obsessions.)

It is quite mistaken, I think, to describe this narrator, as Judith Mitchell (1982) does, as typically Victorian and intrusive. Stanzel's theory of narrative (1984) reminds us that the Victorian narrator is in a different text-world from that of the characters, one from which readers may be

addressed, as in George Eliot, by an inclusive 'we'. Moore's narrator breaks the rules, breaks the frame, challenges one of the underlying conventions of fiction, and enters the world of his characters (*hypocrite actant*, perhaps). The text here is, in David Baguley's terms, "entropic": characterized by "disjunctions, dissolutions and dissociations" (1990, 202). And it is interesting to note that when Moore revised the novel in 1915, cutting out large chunks and re-publishing it as *Muslin*, he changed these passages only slightly. He dropped a few Darwinist comments on the struggle for existence, but the shoulders and dresses are still there, and the men continue to stare down the backs of the women's dresses, though in 1915, no longer "stupidly".

The suggestion that Moore is to be read as experimental within this European paradigm does, however, face one major problem in the character of Alice—the plain girl who is good, who gets her man and ends up married to a doctor in London. Richard Allen Cave admires the "sound commonsense" of Alice, identifies her with Moore, and calls her "the prototype of Moore's humanism" (1978, 65, 67). We see her at the end, a respectable housekeeper, conveniently relieved of her motherly duties by a nurse as she sits down at her desk to write a novel.

In considering Alice we move to my final question. Alice is portrayed as a writer—what then does Moore want to say about the writer as artist through her? In his preface to *Muslin*, he explains that halfway through writing *A Drama in Muslin* he was shown a translation of Ibsen's *Doll's House*, and that his heroine has something in common with Ibsen's. But Moore makes two distinctions between Alice and Nora. One is that he thinks women should not give up their sexuality (he does not like the idea of Nora going off to a life with no sex). Second, he says that his work is a comedy, that what Alice finds is a fulfillment of the beginning of the novel. Though she has quiet dignity, and commands our sympathy and respect—he makes it plain that she is still at the end a creature of conventions and prejudices. Alice's life represents, Moore says "a sort of small *comédie humaine*" (1936, x).

Thus, we may emphasize, as Cave and Mitchell do, the goodness and happiness of Alice—but she now lives in a house, which as the narrator says "arises before the reader in all its yellow paint and homely vulgarity". Her suburb of London has an "air of dull well-to-do-ness", which may seem "intolerable" and "obscene". Her walls are decorated with Frith's 'Railway Station' and Guido's 'Fortune', not quite the taste of the man who introduced Monet, Degas and Renoir to the English public, and closer to what Moore called "the Alderman in Art". Alice is not totally lost—she has some good books (Pater's *Renaissance* and "Many volumes in yellow covers, evidently French novels")—but her social life is in smug little tea meetings with fellow lady novelists and, supremely revealing for Moore, when she sits down to write, she writes quickly "without a perceptible pause" (1981, 328). "*Au*

fond", Moore says, "the artistic question troubled her little" (233). This is a very small *comédie humaine*.

The world of *A Drama in Muslin* in fact contains several kinds of artist: the wicked female social artists, the old connoisseur and roué Lord Dungory, the silly Mr. Barton (who consoles himself with outdated history paintings), and the cool, detached writer, Harding—who has been identified with Moore. Harding is a calculating reporter—prepared to encourage Alice to write, and happy to seduce her if possible. He is not, however, prepared to marry her. (As Moore says of himself in *Communication:* "I too would like a mate, but a mate and the writing of books are incompatible, Balzac has said so" (51).) By the side of Harding's work, Alice's is not taken seriously. Harding says to her, "I suppose the right and proper thing for a young lady to write is a novel. Did you ever try to write a story?" She duly writes "Notes and Sensations of a Plain Girl at Dublin Castle" for the *Lady's Paper* (1981, 180, 255).

Moore's representation of art and its place in the world is anathema to the moral tradition of the English novel and its admirers. He rejects respectability and socially responsible attitudes as the defining characteristics of the important artist. And a defence of Moore (like a defence of Huysmans) cannot clean up his act for him: that is how he is. From a more open-minded position, however, we can well see that, in a world where moralism tries to dictate to art, a world where the tastes of the British Matron control the circulating libraries and publishing houses, Moore's standpoint represents an important gesture of freedom and individuality. He is not a traditional moralist, he aims at a European style; he is dandyesque, and the dandy, as Baudelaire says, is the "hero of modern life" (1968, 259–60).

Of course the dandyesque faces an impasse; a dandy criticizes the fashionable world from inside, attacks within the web of his own narcissism, offers no positive except stylish satire. As Camus says, "Sa vocation est dans la singularité, son perfectionnement dans la surenchère" (1951, 73).[1] But the impasse of the dandy may also be the site of experimentalism, creativity and liberty. At the moment of the *fin de siècle* it is from such a position that artists can claim autonomy from a constricting and moralizing social discourse. And it is in this area that modernist artists will first gain a foothold in European art. To accept the dandyesque is to accept the artist's right to break rules—to accept the liberating possibilities of disjunctive experiments in art—and in such a context the morally reprehensible Moore may still, I think, seem a novelist well worth our immediate attention, and *A Drama in Muslin* an innovative, experimental novel.

NOTES

[1] "His vocation is singularity, his improvement is excess" (my translation).

WORKS CITED

Baguley, David. 1990. *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Baudelaire, Charles. 1968. "De l'héroïsme de la vie moderne". *Œuvres Complètes: Salon de 1846.* Paris: Seuil. 259–260.

Blanchot, Maurice. 1995. "The Novel is a Work of Bad Faith". *The Blanchot Reader.* Ed. Michael Holland. Oxford: Blackwell. 61–73.

Camus, Albert. 1951. *L'Homme révolté.* Paris: Gallimard.

Cave, Richard Allen. 1978. *A Study of the Novels of George Moore.* Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe.

Eagleton, Terry. 1995. *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture.* London: Verso.

Genette, Gérard. 1982. *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré.* Paris: Seuil.

James, Henry. 1978 (1890). *The Tragic Muse.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Mitchell, Judith. 1982. "*A Drama in Muslin*: George Moore's Victorian Novel". *English Literature in Transition* 25: 211–24.

——. 1985. "Huysmans and George Moore's *A Drama in Muslin*". *Dalhousie Review* 65: 88–98.

Moore, George. 1885. *Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morals.* London: Vizetelly.

——. 1896 (1893). *Modern Painting.* London: Walter Scott.

——. 1923 (1917). *Confessions of a Young Man.* New York: Boni and Liveright.

——. 1933. *A Communication to My Friends.* N.p.: Nonesuch P.

——. 1936 (1915). *Muslin* . London: Heinemann.

——. 1981 (1886). *A Drama in Muslin: a Realistic Novel.* Gerrards Cross: Colin Symthe.

Noël, Jean C. 1966. *George Moore: L'homme et l'œuvre (1852–1933).* Paris: Marcel Didier.

Riffaterre, Michael. 1978. *Semiotics of Poetry.* London: Methuen.

Stanzel, Franz K. 1984. *A Theory of Narrative.* Trans. Charlotte Goedsche. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Zola, Émile. 1978 (1887). *L'Assommoir.* Paris: Folio.

——. 1980 (1883) *Au bonheur des dames.* Paris: Folio.

——. 1971 (1880). *Nana.* Paris: Folio.