

Sexual Alienation in George Moore's "Albert Nobbs"

Philip Roth has said of his study of radical physical transformation, *The Breast*, that Kepesh's predicament "is the most awful case of human aloneness that I've ever depicted." Though situated in a more realistic physical context, George Moore's "Albert Nobbs," from *Celibate Lives* (1927), is as radical a study of transformation and aloneness as *The Breast*. In Moore's neglected novella,² the female protagonist, an isolated, vulnerable illegitimate child, disguises herself, for some twenty years, as a man in order to escape sexual depredation and to achieve some degree of economic autonomy in the male occupation of waiter. Moore's story is an illuminating study of a character who chooses an extreme form of self-alienation so that she can achieve autonomy within a limiting, constraining social context. The price exacted for this partial autonomy is, for Albert Nobbs, a radical denial of the affective needs and desires of her natural self. In order to survive with a modicum of personal dignity, Albert must unsex herself and impersonate a male self that has more economic options in the labor market of mid-Victorian Britain.

We are first introduced to Albert as a waiter in Morrissey's Hotel in Dublin as she is remembered by the unnamed Irish landowner who is the oral narrator of the story.³ In Chapter II, Albert—who has been forced to sleep in the same room with an itinerant housepainter, Hubert Page, and whose real sex is revealed to Hubert after he is awakened by Albert's awkward skirmish with a flea—narrates to Hubert the strange story of her life. In this narrative within a narrative, Albert reconstructs the social and economic conditions that have driven her to male impersonation. A bastard child of "grand folks," Albert is educated at a convent school in England. But when both her parents die, she is left without any means of support. She is removed from the convent school, from which she derived a fear of sexuality, and plunged into the rough world of Temple Lane to live with her old nurse from whom she receives her surname. The convent-educated Albert is revulsed by the disorder and filth of the impoverished lane, by "life without decency": "My old nurse didn't mind the lane; she had been a working woman all her life; but with me it was different, and the change was so great from the convent that I often thought I would sooner die than continue to live amid rough people. There was nothing wrong with them; they were honest enough; but they were very poor, and when you are very poor you live like animals, indecently, and life without decency is hardly bearable."⁴ It is this middle-class ideal of a decent life—or an ordered, independent life—that will drive Albert to male impersonation.

Moreover, it is Albert's knowledge that she is the fruit of undisciplined, spontaneous sexuality, as much as her convent training, that causes her to resist the sexual advances of the rough men in Temple Lane.

I was different then from what I am now, and might have been tempted if one of them had been less rough than the rest, and if I hadn't known I was a bastard; it was that, I think, that kept me straight more than anything else, for I had just begun to feel what a great misfortune it is for a poor girl to find herself in a family way; no greater misfortune can befall anyone in this world, but it would have been worse in my case, for I should have known that I was only bringing another bastard into the world. (p. 52)

Albert, in reaction to the disorder and predatory sexuality around her, falls hopelessly in love with an apparently celibate bachelor barrister, Mr. Congreve, in whose chambers she is employed as a servant. "I had come out

of a convent of nuns where I had been given a good education, where all was good, quiet, refined and gentle, and Mr. Congreve seemed in many ways to remind me of the convent, for he never missed Church; as rare for him to miss a service as for parson"(p. 53).

Until the appearance of Mr. Congreve's French mistress, he is idealized by Albert into an idyllic, sexless alternative to the world of Temple Lane. It is here that we see the beginning of Albert's extreme withdrawal and isolation from the unacceptable real conditions of her life. Albert cannot share or communicate her hopeless infatuation for Mr. Congreve to anyone around her. "It was the hopelessness of it that set the tears streaming down my cheeks over my pillow, and I used to stuff the sheet into my mouth to keep back the sobs lest my old nurse should hear me; it wouldn't do to keep her awake, for she was very ill at that time; and soon afterward she died, and I was left alone, without a friend in the world" (p. 55). The stuffing of her sobbing mouth with a sheet is symbolic of the discipline of suppression that Albert will undertake to mask her inner feelings from others. So rigorous is her discipline that she will even succeed in masking her feelings to herself.

It is significant that the forced confession to Hubert Page is the first undisguised sharing of her life and feelings with another person that Albert has ever known. After completing the story of her life she begins to sob. "Tears trembled on Albert's eyelids; she tried to keep them back, but they overflowed the lids and were soon running quickly down her cheeks. You've heard my story, she said, I thought nobody would ever hear it, and I thought I should never cry again" (p. 59). But, here, instead of suppressing her sobs, she permits herself to be carried along by her emotions and achieves a paroxysm of full self-articulation. "She began to sob again, and in the midst of her grief the word loneliness was uttered" (p. 60). Albert is rewarded for her self-exposure by receiving not only Hubert's sympathy, but also the knowledge that Hubert himself is a male impersonator who has left an unhappy heterosexual marriage and now enjoys a more fulfilling marriage with another woman.

We learn from Albert's confessional narrative that upon the death of her nurse, Albert was faced with two conventional options: a life of underpaid female domestic service or a life of prostitution. Albert contemplates suicide rather than the sexual degradation—implicit in the former and explicit in the latter—that her options promise. Because Albert's breasts and hips are not overly developed, Bessie Lawrence, a domestic servant at Temple Gardens, suggests that she disguise herself and apply for a position as waiter at the Freemason's Tavern. Albert does and her life of self-exile begins. Because her society provides women of her class and situation few viable economic options, she is compelled to choose a life of permanent isolation and deception. Rather than sell herself through prostitution, she chooses to sell an impersonated role. But Albert's choice is even more alienating than prostitution, for, because of it, she is denied the possibility of ever experiencing intimacy and a full, undisguised articulation of emotion.

Albert's only contact with others, prior to her meeting with Hubert Page, is through her function as waiter. She has no private life, no authentic personal life; her only life is that of her economic role. "But I've jostled along somehow, she added, always merry and bright, with never anyone to speak to, not really to speak to, only to ask for plates and dishes, for knives and forks and such like, tablecloths and napkins, cursing betimes the life you've been through" (p. 59).

Inspired by Hubert Page, her chance confidant, Albert pathetically seeks out a "wife" and the possibility of a private life. She now comes to desire more than autonomy and unviolated survival; she desires authentic human sharing and intimacy. Though she never achieves her domestic dream-idyll of a tobacco "shop with a door leading to her wife's parlour" (p. 67), her very desire for it gives her "a new life," a life that exists beyond and apart from her economic role: "a new life was springing up—a life strangely personal and associated with the life without only in this much, that the life without was now a vassal state paying tribute to the life within. She wasn't as good a servant as heretofore. She knew it. Certain absences of mind, that was all; and the servants as they went by with their dusters began to wonder whatever Albert could be dreaming of" (pp. 66-67).

The narration of Albert's fumbling courtship of Helen Dawes and her exploitation by both Helen and Helen's friend, Joe Mackins, is presented in comic detail by the dramatized Irish landowner-narrator. But into this comedy of cross-purposes, Moore includes a scene of great expressive power. Albert, unable to persuade Helen, through her description of her anticipated tobacco shop, to marry her, walks, still disguised as a man, the streets of Dublin and encounters two prostitutes. For a moment, Albert realizes this alternative of her adolescence would have been more bearable, finally more fully human, more consoling than the dessicating, self-denying alternative she has chosen. "At the corner of Clare Street she met two women strolling after a fare—ten shillings or a sovereign, which? she asked herself—and terrified by the shipwreck of all her hopes, she wished she were one of them. For they at least are women, whereas I am but a perhapser—in the midst of her grief a wish to speak to them took hold of her" (p. 83).

Moore's "Albert Nobbs" is a penetrating socio-psychological study of an urban grotesque, who is presented not externally, but, primarily, through the device of her own confessional narrative in Chapter II, internally, with great sympathy and understanding. Albert Nobbs, like Miss Wade in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, chooses self-alienation, desexualization, and isolation rather than humiliation and degradation. But unlike Dickens's Miss Wade, Albert becomes, in Moore's novella, a sympathetic heroine, who chooses a difficult, unnatural autonomy rather than a natural, servile fulfillment. Though she attempts at the end of her life to reverse her choice and make an accommodation with her suppressed natural self, Albert's heroism lies in her perverse resistance to the social and economic forces that have oppressed her.

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NOTES

¹'On The Breast: An Interview' *New York Review of Books*, 19 (Oct. 19, 1972), 26.

²The volume of tales, *Celibate Lives*, in which "Albert Nobbs" appears is admired by Ernest Baker because in it we see "realism applied to the least romantic things." *History of the English Novel* (London: Barnes & Noble, 1936), IX, p. 200. And Charles Burkhardt notes that "Albert Nobbs" is "a story that borders on sexual pathology, but escapes prurience." "The Short Stories of George Moore," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6 (1968), 172. Christopher Isherwood reprints the story in his anthology of *Great English Stories* (New York: Dell, 1957), pp. 93-115. He observes that Albert "dressed as a man for economic, not sexual reasons" (p. 94). My essay is an attempt to probe the complex of social and economic reasons that brought Albert to male impersonation and the psychological consequences of impersonation.

³The landowner is telling the story to his manservant Alec. There is no explanation given for his complete knowledge of Albert's personal life.

⁴George Moore, *Celibate Lives* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), p. 52. Hereafter cited in the text.