

# Brian Moore's *Judith Hearne*: Celebrating the Commonplace

ROBERT GREEN, *Chancellor College, Malawi*

*The Lonely Passion of Miss Judith Hearne* (1955) is a first novel remarkable for the successful distancing of its author's own experiences. Brian Moore could scarcely have created a character less like himself than its heroine, the fortyish untalented spinster. In later novels he will allow his own experiences as an immigrant and reporter in Montreal or as an adolescent in the Belfast A.R.P. to impinge more directly on his fiction. His career began, though, with a Flaubertian exercise in self-effacement and Moore has acknowledged that *Madame Bovary* was indeed his model for *Judith Hearne*.<sup>1</sup> In 1857 Flaubert wrote that his was "a *totally fictitious* story; it contains none of my feelings and no details from my own life. The illusion of truth comes, on the contrary, from the book's impersonality."<sup>2</sup> *Judith Hearne*, similarly, was an exercise in authorial displacement, an attempt to render with cool detachment the Belfast which Moore had left in 1948.

The novelist was later to remark upon his determination to avoid the autobiographical in his first novel and in this respect the French text offered him an example of objectivity and authorial control.<sup>3</sup> His choice of an unattractive heroine and the adoption of a narrative form that discourages the reader from any crude identification with Judith are the technical consequences of Moore's decision to avoid any personal statement. Both Judith's character and the manner in which she is presented ensure that the reader remains constantly aware of the fictiveness, the artificiality of the text. Moore himself has no "spokesman" in *Judith Hearne* and it is significant that Bernard Rice, who may embody some of the novelist's own anticlericalism, is presented as such an extraordinarily unlikeable character. Instead, Moore's own feelings about his past are communicated through the narrative techniques employed in the novel. In particular, the tension between the first-person voice adopted for Judith's thoughts and the third-person narration that carries the views of the other characters, corresponds to the mixture in Moore himself of sympathy and distaste, understanding and revulsion. Moore avoids what he has called the "onanistic" danger of first-person narration by placing Judith's obsessions within a third-person point of view.<sup>4</sup> The latter provides him with the desired safeness and distance, while the evocation of Judith's thoughts within that controlling framework enables the reader to share the heroine's deepening isolation.

---

<sup>1</sup>Robert B. Sale, "An Interview in London with Brian Moore," *Studies in the Novel*, 1, No. 1 (Spring 1969), 71.

<sup>2</sup>Letter to Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie [1857], *Selected Letters*, tr. F. Steegmuller (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1954), pp. 195-96. The letter is included in *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature*, ed. R. Ellmann and C. Feidelson, Jr. (New York: O.U.P., 1965), pp. 132-33. Italics are Flaubert's.

<sup>3</sup>Sale, p. 71.

<sup>4</sup>Sale, p. 71.

This narrative technique can be illustrated from the first chapter. *Judith Hearne* opens as if it were a traditional realist novel, with the author standing apart from his heroine, omniscient and detached:

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. And as she put her up now, the photograph eyes were stern and questioning, sharing Miss Hearne's own misgivings about the condition of the bed-springs, the shabbiness of the furniture, and the run-down part of Belfast in which the room was situated.<sup>5</sup>

The opening paragraph is low-keyed, ordinary, unexciting, detached, with the phrase "whatever bed-sitting-room Miss Hearne happened to be living in" the sole anticipation of her later homelessness.

The chapter continues with the novelist describing Judith unpacking and becoming accustomed to her new environment. Needing a hammer to fix a hook, she goes downstairs to her landlady's rooms and is invited to share a pot of tea. Judith accepts apologetically and enters Mrs Rice's sitting-room:

But as she said this she advanced across the threshold. It was always interesting to see how other people lived and, goodness knows, a person had to have someone to talk to. Of course, some landladies could be friendly for their own ends. Like Mrs Harper when I was on Cromwell Road and she thought I was going to help her in that tobacconist business. Still, Mrs Henry Rice doesn't look that type. Such a big jolly person, and very nicely spoken.

The room was not in the best of taste, Miss Hearne saw at once. But cosy. Lots of little lace doilies on the table and lamps with pretty pastel shades. (*JH*, pp. 8-9)

In this extract the first paragraph exemplifies the technique adopted by Moore throughout the novel, of sliding from authorial detachment into Judith's private observations. The opening sentence consists of authorial narration. The next two sentences appear on first reading to be, likewise, Moore's own reflections: on curiosity, the need for conversation, and the opportunism of landladies. But from the two uses of the first-person pronoun in the fourth sentence the reader realizes that all the material from "It was always interesting" consists of Judith's attitudes. It is Judith, not the novelist, who at this stage sees the landlady as a "big jolly person, and very nicely spoken:" the judgment and the cadences are both Miss Hearne's. However, lest the reader forget the point of view through which the room and its occupants are being shown, Moore reminds him in the second sentence of the next paragraph—"The room was not in the best of taste, Miss Hearne saw at once"—that everything is being mediated through Judith. The cosy vulgarity of Mrs Rice's sitting-room is only her judgment; Moore doesn't necessarily endorse this view. The effect of this technique is to create a narrative that is both stiffly detached ("she advanced across the threshold") and simultaneously easy, intimate, and revelatory. Miss Judith Hearne is both a character in an environment and a way of viewing and judging that same environment.

---

<sup>5</sup>*The Lonely Passion of Miss Judith Hearne* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), p. 7. All later references will be to this edition and will be inserted in the text.

*Judith Hearne* is so designed that the reader can never become totally absorbed in the story. Thus the first five chapters, describing Judith's early days in the lodgings and her friendship with James Madden, are abruptly interrupted in the sixth chapter, which presents James and Judith as they appear to the five other members of the Rice household. Consisting of five interior monologues, divided and subtitled only with the names of the five characters, this chapter effectively destroys any 'realistic' illusions and underlines the novel's fictiveness. *Judith Hearne* is made from a series of perspectives, Judith's own idiosyncratic, subjective consciousness being juxtaposed against the way she appears to five unsympathetic spectators. Similarly Chapter XV is composed of a mosaic, the impressions Miss Hearne makes on the minor characters she encounters when she moves from her lodgings into an expensive hotel: the bank cashier, the assistant in the off-licence, the hotel clerk, the two bellboys Moore uses this same technique again in Chapter XIX, where Judith's mental breakdown and admission to hospital are presented through a taxi driver, a night nurse, a Sister, Father Quigley, Dr Bowe, and her friend Moira. The consequence of this technique is that *Judith Hearne* is read, as it were, "bi-focally," with the heroine apprehended through her own fantasies and memories as well as through the impact she has on those around her. Thus the objective and the subjective, the public image and the private reality, are continually counterpointed, the individual's wracking loneliness balanced against society's disaffection for a drunken, deluded spinster.

As the title suggest, *Judith Hearne* is a text concerned with isolation, in which the reader's overpowering impression of the terrors of loneliness is generated by the narrative disjunction between *external* views of Miss Hearne and her own *internal* emotions. The narrative form allows us to sympathize with Judith's complaint that Moira and her daughter "don't understand, they never will, they've never been me." Some human emotions—joy or bereavement, perhaps—are communicable, but loneliness is shown to be intensely private in this novel. It frequently generates gaps between the desperate energy of its heroine's fantasies and the conventional dismissals and misunderstandings by those who surround her. The fantasies Judith invents become increasingly dynamic and imaginative so that, like Emma Bovary's, their richness is contrasted with the drab provinciality of Belfast or Normandy. Each concerns an invented relationship between Judith and Madden; in each Judith possesses an importance lacking in her reality. In the first (p. 29) she soothes her husband, "tired after a day at work in his hotel." The second, inspired by the Hollywood film they have seen—incidentally, this was one of Miss Sontag's "Camp" movies—has Judith playing "Delilah" to Madden's "Samson."<sup>6</sup> Judith's third, more adventurous and original fantasy envisions her terminal illness, "sick with something tragic: cancer or heart," "wasting away slowly, everyone sorry;" her death and funeral "in the rain at Nun's Bush" with Madden "lovelorn," grieving year after year and failing to recover, forget, or forgive himself. Only in her invented sickness and death can Judith command the sympathetic attention of those who in reality have failed to understand her. Thus, finally, during her mental dissolution at the end of the novel, she imagines herself as a *grande dame*, presiding over a musicale in her exclusive *salon*. In this, the boldest of her imaginings, she is at home to the Bishop, to soldiers, diplomats, and Maud Gonne MacBride, and to Madden and Moira O'Neill, now awed by Judith's aristocratic poise (pp. 187-88).

---

<sup>6</sup>Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1969), p. 286.

These four fantasies, increasingly bizarre and unreal, are so narrated that the reader comes to understand what is not fully appreciated by the characters around Judith. Moira and Una do not understand Judith, because "they've never been" her: the reader has "been" her, has shared her dreams of significance and of human contact. And yet, concurrently, he can also place those dreams within reality and see the disjunctions that loneliness impels Judith to elide. The ephemeral glory of the fantasies is circumscribed by the mundanity of Judith's real life. The reader participates in Judith's illusion of herself as a *grande dame*, but he also sees that she is depressed and alcoholic. Loneliness is the product of the gap between a person's desire for attention and sympathy, and the world's neglect. The lonely person is the centre of his own world, but is marginal to the perception of others. Both these conditions, self-absorption and marginality, are mimed by the narrative of *Judith Hearne*, as it alternates between the heroine's subjectivity and the objectivity of third-person narration.

Brian Moore has remarked that writing *Judith Hearne* enabled him to understand why he could never consider returning to Ulster, with its bitterness, bigotry, and narrowness.<sup>7</sup> The novel's "external" views of Judith, the criticism of her voiced by Madden, Bernard Rice and the O'Neill family, show how, though a victim of her environment, she has contributed to her plight. Belfast destroyed Judith; but people like her have also destroyed the city. *Judith Hearne* ratifies and endorses, then, the novelist's own expatriation. It illuminates the forces that drove Moore to Canada. The "third-person" element in the novel, Moore's ability to stand outside Miss Hearne and present her as she appears to others, confirms the correctness of his decision to leave Belfast.

And yet at the same time Judith is also presented "internally," with sympathy and affection. Moore has remarked in an interview that although he wanted Judith's character to make her a failure he was anxious that his readers should not feel superior to her. His work, he said, like Joyce's, is "the celebration of the commonplace." He admires the resilience of mundane unheroic people like Judith: "It's their endurance I admire, the guts that ordinary people have, the guts that the least likely people have."<sup>8</sup> Brian Moore's belief in hidden heroism, his view that, as Jack Ludwig put it, "there is limitless fiction in the fall of a sparrow," created a heroine for whom the reader can sympathize.<sup>9</sup> Moore's humanity, then, enables him to imagine a Judith Hearne, but there is, in addition, another affiliation between author and fictional character, one revealed most clearly in a passage at the end of the novel in which Judith, attending Mass at the Home, thinks of how she is cut off from those around her: "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 did not believe, you are alone. *But I was of Ireland, among my people, a member of my faith. Now I have no faith—and if no faith, then no people*" (*JH*, p. 221; italics mine).

Here, between these lines, it is possible to catch the voice of the exile, writing *Judith Hearne* in a shack in Canada's Laurentian Mountains, and counting the cost of his deracination. Judith's loss of faith, in her acquaintances and in her

---

<sup>7</sup>Robert Sullivan, "Brian Moore: A Clinging Climate," *London Magazine*, 16 (December 1976-January 1977), 65.

<sup>8</sup>Sale, pp. 74-76.

<sup>9</sup>Jack Ludwig, "A Mirror of Moore," *Canadian Literature*, 7 (Winter 1961), 18-23.

nominal religion, has turned her into an exile in her own land in much the same way as the novelist's decision to leave his native Belfast led him into isolation and loneliness. The creation of *Judith Hearne*, Moore's first novel, proves the correctness of the move across the Atlantic, for expatriation provides a new wholeness of vision and authorial independence. At the same time the terrors of his heroine's isolation expose the author's sense of the price that must be paid by those who renounce their birthright. The narrative's frequent shifts from subjective to objective, from compassionate absorption in the fears of the isolated to detached criticism of a mediocrity that is both personal and social, expresses the complex dynamics of exile and expatriation. Expatriation confirms, in an act of retrospection, the rightness of a past decision: exile feels the current and consequential dismemberment. Moore's Flaubertian form offered the means of avoiding both the smugness of the former and the self-pity of the latter.

