

Untimely Development, Ugly History: *A Drama in Muslin* and the Rejection of National-Historical Time

Mary L. Mullen, Texas Tech University

Abstract

This article considers the politics and aesthetics of the colonial *Bildungsroman* by reading George Moore's often-overlooked novel *A Drama in Muslin* (1886). It argues that the colonial *Bildungsroman* does not simply register difference from the metropolitan novel of development or express tension between the core and periphery, as Jed Esty suggests, but rather can imagine a heterogeneous historical time that does not find its end in the nation-state. *A Drama in Muslin* combines naturalist and realist modes, and moves between Ireland and England to construct a form of untimely development that emphasises political processes (dissent, negotiation) rather than political forms (the state, the nation). Ultimately, the messy, discordant history represented in the novel shows the political potential of anachronism as it celebrates the untimeliness of everyday life.

Key words: colonial *Bildungsroman*; naturalism; realism; Ireland; aesthetics; politics

When publicly evaluating *A Drama in Muslin*, George Moore declared, 'The best test whereby to judge a novelist is by his power of accounting for time' ('Defensio' 283). Insisting that time is the 'most corrosive

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of the world's acids', Moore objects to novelists 'who suppress it' by failing to chronicle its destructive force (282). Such a statement reveals Moore's break from the English realists for whom the passage of time brings progressive change and reform. Moore – 'Zola's ricochet in England' – favoured the new French naturalism which was grittier, more scientific, and tended towards a more tragic trajectory of decay and decline (Frazier 95). In these naturalist novels, 'time's ravages are irreparable': they break down bodies and crush naïve illusions ('Defensio' 283).

A Drama in Muslin – the text that ostensibly prompted Moore's reflection on time and the novel – unsettles this easy distinction between old and new, English realism and French naturalism as it grapples with the strange temporality of a colonial nation – Ireland – trying to define itself against the imperial British state.¹ Chronicling the lives of 'the Galway girls' as they leave their English convent, enter society, and venture to Dublin to seek husbands in a ruthless marriage mart, the novel painstakingly portrays time's destructive force (*Drama in Muslin* 15). The passage of time traps many female characters in narrow, meaningless lives – the older they get, the less likely they are to escape by finding a husband or breaking from convention. Time also destroys the Land League's collective 'struggle for nationhood' – by splintering it into groups and reinstating the rhythm of everyday life ('Defensio' 283). As Dr. Reed pessimistically concludes at the end of the novel, 'And when one thinks of the high hopes and noble ambitions that were lavished for the redemption of these base creatures, one is disposed to admit in despair the fatality of all human effort [...] all here is vileness and degradation' (*Drama in Muslin* 324). Most reviewers questioned Moore's taste in part because he so comprehensively described characters' failure to achieve growth. In the words of one critic, it was 'daringly and disgustingly suggestive, and descriptive of what writers of fiction commonly leave undescribed' (Wallace 39–40).

But the novel is not simply the 'tragedy of enforced, stagnant celibacy' that Victorian reviewers made it out to be – it is also a successful *Bildungsroman* ('Review' 5).² In the midst of the decline of the landlord economy, the failure of the tenants to seize power, and the more personal struggles of 'the Galway girls', the protagonist, Alice Barton, achieves an independent and fulfilling life. She matures, takes up writing as a profession, marries the modest Dr. Reed, and moves to a suburb of London. Given the pervasive failure and decline within the novel, her success is surprising. Scholars debate whether it is hopeful or ambivalent, whether it reflects Moore's own rejection of Ireland,

and what enables Alice Barton's growth – her profession and practice as a writer.³ At stake in these discussions is the question of how to connect Moore's critique of both the obsolete landlord system and the tenants who rise against it with the *bildung* narrative of Alice Barton. Or, to put it slightly differently, how to reconcile the novel's disparate aesthetics and politics.⁴

Suggesting that time expresses both aesthetics and politics, I argue that the novel's tension between two temporalities – slow decay and progressive growth – does not resolve or synchronise, but rather invites us to consider the political possibilities of untimeliness and anachronism. To be at odds with the historical moment, to be tied to residual or emergent forms, is to be opposed to the present arrangement of power. Such an embrace of untimeliness makes sense given Moore's own oppositional stance to his contemporary moment. As he told Geraint Goodwin: 'a great artist [...] is either before his time or behind it' (Goodwin 27). But I claim that the novel's recurring trope of anachronism suggests more than an individual stance or authorial position – it is a statement about historical time itself. Discordant, uneven, and messy, historical time is hardly uniform and certainly not linear within the novel – it expresses uneven power relations. As is the case with many postcolonial histories that emerge in the twentieth century, such discordance can open up space for new kinds of historical agency and new forms of power.⁵

In what follows, I read George Moore as a theorist of historical time precisely because he rejects the national-historical time of the *Bildungsroman* to imagine a form of untimely development that resists both the imperial state and the imagined nation. In doing so, the novel expands the political potential of what Jed Esty calls the 'colonial Bildungsroman' (*Unseasonable Youth* 2). Unlike the *Bildungsroman*, which narrates an individual's progress through national-historical time, the colonial *Bildungsroman* registers the distance between imperial narratives of progress and untimely colonial experiences through the trope of 'frozen youth' (2). But *A Drama in Muslin's* colonial narrative does more than measure distance from the imperial centre or reflect differences; it constructs a politics of dissent. In Moore's hands, development accompanies decay because development is always untimely – it results from anachronistic resistance to shared time and space. By representing an asynchronous synchronic time and discordant diachronic development, the novel reveals that the colonial *Bildungsroman* imagines political processes – negotiation, dissent, conflict – rather than solidifying political forms – the nation or the state. Time is a corrosive acid, but its uneven force, which both

underwrites and dissolves social forms, creates spaces for productive political change.

Untimely Ireland

In quite different ways, both Mikhail Bakhtin and Franco Moretti contend that the protagonist's successful *bildung* hinges on his ability to integrate into, or in temporal terms, to synchronise with, the nation. Bakhtin suggests that the personal development of the protagonist parallels the historical development of the nation, claiming that the genre portrays 'man growing in national-historical time' (25). In turn, Moretti argues that the future-oriented trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* upholds the value of the nation, arguing that in this genre, 'time must be used to find a homeland' (19). In his conception of the genre, the narrative cannot find closure and the protagonist cannot achieve maturity unless the protagonist finds a national homeland. In both accounts, narrative time implies national time: for Bakhtin, narrative time is 'national-historical time' and, for Moretti, the protagonist's integration into national-historical time is one of the ends of the narrative.

But *A Drama in Muslin* rejects national-historical time as uniform or synchronous, even as it carefully chronicles the contemporary moment. Historical events and historical people populate the narrative – talk of Gladstone, Griffith's valuation, and the possibility of a new Coercion Act pepper the local gossip, and the news of the Phoenix Park murders dramatically interrupts a dinner party at Brookfield.⁶ As Sara Maurer indicates, the novel has a 'journalistic immediacy' – it thrusts readers into the conflicts of the land wars and the dramas of the drawing rooms, repeating the newspaper headlines of the day (181). Moore marketed the novel by celebrating its historical timeliness in advertisements that declared, 'The story will depict with photographic realism the TRUE CONDITION of IRELAND as IT IS NOW' ('The Condition of Ireland' 16). In turn, reviewers noted the novel's clear temporal framework, writing: 'The story is solidly planted, so to speak, both in place and time. The state of Ireland between 1881 and 1884 is sketched so vividly that the book will one day be recognised as a valuable document in socio-political history' ('Review' 5).

But because of the political unrest of the Irish land wars, national-historical time becomes visible not as a uniform progression or as a shared space into which the protagonist integrates, but rather through disparate perspectives that uncover the discordant rates of

historical change. Anachronisms abound: what it means to be contemporary is precisely what is up for debate. From the perspective of the Irish tenants who attempt to establish continuity with Ireland's Celtic past, the Anglo-Irish Big House appears as a 'strange anachronism' (*Drama in Muslin* 40).⁷ By contrast, from the perspective of the imperial state that values stability, routine, and monotony, the Irish peasants are anachronistic remnants of a previous historical era – 'as incapable of thinking as of dressing up to the ideas of the present generation' (68).⁸ Each perspective has a historical narrative – one of cultural continuity that legitimates national independence, the other of modernisation and stability that legitimates the state – but these narratives cannot be reconciled or synchronised. Thus, the 'historical plotting' that Maurer suggests drives the narrative does not simply create a linear sequence of dates – it creates conflict, disagreement, and political posturing about what it means to live in Ireland in 1881–4 (181).

Importantly for Moore, the anachronisms that proliferate are not 'errors' or 'historical mistakes' that need correction or further historical development; they are the result of a form of history that productively resists the dominance of a single time frame. In this way, his portrayal of the Irish Land Wars is far more ambivalent than many found in the newspapers and periodicals of the day. Tending towards partisanship, these accounts used anachronism as a way of solidifying one historical narrative.⁹ Those who opposed the Land League insisted that the Irish people were too anachronistic and too underdeveloped to become agents in their own right. Arguing against peasant proprietary, W. Glenny-Crory declared: 'The United Kingdom has progressed beyond the condition in which a peasant proprietary in land would be for the interests of the State, the good of the tillers of the soil, and the ends of economic progress' (538). Implicitly understanding history as economic development, Glenny-Crory insists that the British state should control time and history. But the Irish Land League argued the very opposite, depicting the system of land tenure and the landowners as anachronistic vestiges of feudalism. They also understood history as progress, but saw themselves rather than the state as the proper agents who would guarantee it. Tellingly, Michael Davitt's history of the Land League, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*, recounts how the actions of the Land League sought to abolish 'anachronism in the control of Irish rural affairs' (687). Moore betrays his own identification with the landlord class throughout the novel, but does not reify its history, choosing instead to emphasise discordance and disagreement.

In a location defined through proliferating anachronisms, there is hardly a stable communal space that allows for social integration. Ireland appears as 'a land of echoes and shadows' – haunted by the untimeliness of historical change (*Drama in Muslin* 159). The traditional acts of the Castle season seem ghostly – holdovers from the past that are out of place in the present. The girls wait in line to kiss the Lord Lieutenant: 'a lingering survival of the terrible Droit de Siegneur – diminished and attenuated, but still circulating through our modern years – this ceremony, a pale ghost of its former self, is performed' (175). The 'muslin martyrs' belatedly repeat the fashions of England: 'How their London fashions sit upon them; how they strive to strut and lisp like those they saw last year in Hyde Park' (159). Irish-Americans, and the threat of emigration to America, haunt the street scene: 'their sinister faces' reveal Ireland's porous boundaries (171). The present is out of joint because the old customs, traditions and economic orders seem out-of-date and ghostly, and the future is unknown: 'the city lay mysteriously dead – immovable and mute beneath the moon, like a starved vagrant in the last act of a melodrama' (203).

Perceptible change is precisely what the state seeks to suppress. Following Henri LeFebvre, many theorists of the state argue that it attempts to foster an endless present by converting time into space. Suggesting that the state is 'born in and with a space' (224), LeFebvre articulates the three ways in which the state uses space to perpetuate its power: first, by creating a national territory; second, by governing the creation of social spaces – institutions that 'acquire a quasi-natural self-evidence in everyday life'; and third, by managing representations of space – the way that people conceive themselves in space (225). Set in a historical moment when the national territory is contested, *A Drama in Muslin* highlights how the social spaces that once served the interests of the state, such as 'the colonnades of the Bank of Ireland' and 'the long grey line that is Trinity College', no longer appear as natural and self-evident as they once had (*Drama in Muslin* 218). Despite their seeming permanence, they are merely temporary bastions of power – the Marquis realises that they too 'would perish before the triumphant and avenging peasant' (218).

The Anglo-Irish seem to recognise for the first time that their way of life – like the life of the tenants who oppose them – is subject to historical forces that they cannot control. Seemingly permanent social spaces dissolve as they become subject to time's 'corrosive' force. In Moore's words: 'And now they saw that which they had taken

to be eternal, vanishing from them' (*Drama in Muslin* 95). Tellingly, the Marquis acknowledges his fear of the future after looking at the Daniel O'Connell statue – the first memorial to a Catholic man in Dublin – recognising that this material marker points to 'a new power established' that would eventually render his class and his social position obsolete (218). In other words, the creation of new social spaces forces the Anglo-Irish landowners to confront the fragility of state power and recognise their own untimely presence in the Irish landscape, even as they continue to ask the state to suppress the Land League by passing a Coercion Act.

By contrast, the collective struggle for nationhood transforms the Irish tenants from anachronisms to agents as they create a national time that opposes the state. Talking in Irish amongst themselves, resisting the threat of state intervention, and refusing to be placated by the meagre appeals of the land agent, the Irish tenants appear committed to a nation that restores the continuity between Ireland's past and its future. Unlike the Anglo-Irish landowners who confront the increasing obsolescence of their class as individuals, the tenants are 'united by one thought, organised by one determination to resist the oppressor, marching firmly to nationhood' (*Drama in Muslin* 324). Moore rarely explores events from their perspective, but rather shows their increasing control over time and history by transforming them from 'vague forms' (86) who scramble through the landscape to solid groups and crowds: 'twenty or thirty peasants who, with heads set against the wild gusts, advanced steadily' (124).

Such solidity and solidarity make the landowners confront their foreign origins and attachments. As Catherine Gallagher suggests in her reading of *Castle Rackrent*, this is precisely what the Anglo-Irish did not want to do. Knowing the 'shaky historical grounds of their tenure', they preferred to justify their power within Ireland 'on the basis of their present actions' (289). In Moore's novel, we see just how shaky these historical grounds are. When the landowners attempt to distinguish between those families who were in Ireland before Cromwell and those who acquired land in the land courts in order to assert their ties to Ireland, 'the heavy jaws and flabby cheeks of age and middle-age grew hopelessly dejected, and their vision of poverty had become so intolerably distinct that they saw not the name of the entrée on the menu' (*Drama in Muslin* 44). Such dejection results from the recognition that they will never be able to legitimate their ownership of the land in terms of national-historical time. Instead, they begin to face the possibility of a future outside of Ireland – 'America

rose above the horizon of their vision, and the plunge into its shadowy arms threatened' (95).

By the end of the novel, the Land League has accomplished very little – the landowners return to their daily routines, and the tenants return to their poor, 'animal' existence – and yet, through their brief tenure in power, they have undermined the state control of temporality (*Drama in Muslin* 322). Alice Barton's school friend who marries the Marquis – Violet Sculley – symbolises the precarious plight of the Anglo-Irish even after the state reasserts control. Having gained everything she wanted – a husband with a title, the dissolution of the Land League – her days in power are nevertheless numbered: she knows that 'she will be sold up in a year. But the present is the present, and she enjoys it' (268). No longer believing that the present is eternal, the Anglo-Irish cling to the present because it will soon become past. Moore's far more cynical *Parnell and His Island* – written just after *A Drama in Muslin* – captures this plight well when it ventriloquises an Irish landlord saying:

I am an Irish landlord. I have done this, I do this, and I shall continue to do this, for it is as impossible for me as for the rest of my class to do otherwise; but that doesn't prevent me from recognizing the fact that it is a worn-out system, no longer possible in the nineteenth century, and one whose end is nigh. (3)

In other words, the state resumes control by the close of the novel, but cannot resume its control over time. Neither the Anglo-Irish nor the Irish tenants appear to be the agents of history; they seem instead to be waiting for what comes next.

Such a lack of control suggests that historical time always consists of discordant temporalities, and historical change is always untimely. Deliberately unsettling a history grounded in linear progress or unified time, Moore insists that the novel is a valuable form of history precisely because it can tell the 'hidden' stories neglected by historians:

The history of a nation as often lies hidden in social wrongs and domestic griefs as in a story of revolution, and if it be for the historian to narrate the one, it is for the novelist to dissect and explain the other; and who would say which is of the most vital importance – the thunder of the people against the oppression of the Castle, or the unnatural sterility, the cruel idleness of mind and body of the muslim martyrs who cover with their white skirts the shames of Cork Hill. (*Drama in Muslin* 203–4)

Elevating what he publicly called his 'girl book' to the status of history, Moore undercuts the nation and the state's attempts to control time

by suggesting that sterility and idleness are every bit as important to history as progress ('Defensio' 278). As Maurer contends, the girls' plight has two contradictory allegorical resonances – it both represents the sterility and passiveness of the Anglo-Irish, and the forces, such as the Land League, that hasten the landlords' demise (*Drama in Muslin* 183). I suggest that this dual allegorical significance portrays gender as yet another fissure within national-historical time. Gender both amplifies and undercuts the social conflicts between the Land League and the Anglo-Irish landowners.¹⁰ Like the contemporary moment, the genre of history is a site of conflict told partially by novels that capture the stagnancy of everyday, domestic life – the passive experience of being subject to historical forces – and partially by histories that emphasise action and revolution. Precisely because neither genre more accurately narrates 'the history of a nation', a disjunction between narrative form and political form emerges. His novel does not lead to national unity or consensus – rather it is a partial account in conflict with, but also a supplement to, the historian's work.

Untimely Development

Given the pervasive decay and the ongoing conflicts that resist historical consensus and unsettle the expectation for a shared future, Alice Barton's successful development is surprising. Should not she, like her class, be doomed to destruction? If time is a 'corrosive' force, how does she find a way to mature? 'A girl who silently but firmly declined to acquiesce', Alice does not integrate into a shared national space or grow in 'national-historical time' but rather achieves maturity precisely because she remains at odds with the expectations of her class, her community, her gender, and her religion ('Defensio' 278). Moore declared Alice Barton 'the best thing in the book', because she was 'representative of the modern idea' (280). I suggest that she does not just represent 'the modern idea', but a form of modernity that accounts for and celebrates discordant rates of change. Her untimely development imagines a heterogeneous historical time that opens up spaces for political agency at odds with the nation and the state.

Esty's account of the 'colonial Bildungsroman' is helpful here. Reading a variety of texts – including *The Last September*, *The Story of an African Farm*, *Lord Jim*, *The Voyage Out*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Kim* – Esty contends that this colonial genre distinguishes itself through its uneven and unstable narrative time. The untimely realities of a colonial setting lay bare the vexed relationship between

the colony and the imperial state within the narrative by replacing the genre's traditional emphasis on progressive plotting with a focus on arrested development, decline, and even death. In Esty's account, the space of the colony makes visible the contradictory temporalities of development: the 'unbounded forms of temporality associated with supranational forces' – namely capitalism and empire – and the bounded clock time of the nation (*Unseasonable Youth* 259). Visualising these contradictions through competing chronotopes, the colonial novel of development registers difference rather than representing developmental change.

It is surprising that Esty does not include *A Drama in Muslin* in his study of the colonial *Bildungsroman*, both because of what the novel shares with the colonial novels that he does include, and because of the ways that *A Drama in Muslin*'s Irish setting shapes the novel's narrative form. Moore wrote this novel partly to respond to Olive Schreiner; his influence on James Joyce is well documented, and, like Elizabeth Bowen, he represents the Anglo-Irish as an 'anachronistic and futureless class' ('Virgins of Empire' 259).¹¹ As is the case with these novels, the colonial setting shapes *A Drama in Muslin* in important ways. Moore conceived of it while in the west of Ireland, and, as he says in his assessment of the novel, Dublin Castle was its 'central point' and the Land League was an important dramatic force ('Defensio' 278). Reading *A Drama in Muslin* in relation to these texts reminds us that this novel does not only represent Moore's personal relationship to Ireland, as some critics contend, but rather attempts to grapple with the way that a colonial setting transforms dominant narrative forms.

But *A Drama in Muslin* is ultimately more radical than the novels that Esty examines. While these novels contain the trope of 'frozen youth' – or prolonged adolescence punctuated by death – to suggest that social integration into the nation is impossible in a colonial setting, Moore shows how the very discordance between the nation and the state can enable new forms of untimely development. For example, Esty's interpretation of *The Last September* helpfully reveals how the ambivalence of Bowen's novel is not necessarily nostalgia for an old way of life, but rather a way of accounting for the uneven and untimely realities of colonial existence. Understanding the protagonist, Lois Farquar, as a 'living figure of a cultural death', Esty reveals how she resists maturity and adulthood because she represents the anachronistic position of her class ('Virgins of Empire' 271). In the process, he suggests that tension between the narrative's desire to reproduce the narratives of the imperial centre demonstrates

how development will always fail in a colonial setting. For Esty, the colonial *Bildungsroman* reveals the unbounded temporalities of global capitalism without imagining new forms of untimely development or modes of resistance.

By contrast, *A Drama in Muslin* forges new narratives of development that, as the novel's English ending suggests, can circulate in both Ireland and England. Like Bowen, Moore conveys ambivalence towards the decline of the Anglo-Irish culture, but in this novel, prolonged adolescence is a threat that Alice fears but ultimately avoids. Recognising how unfair social constraints limit the scope of women's lives, Alice worries that she will never be able to achieve maturity and live an active life. In her worst moments, she imagines a protracted 'girlhood' replaced by ignorant old age:

And from this awful mummery in muslin there was no escape. It would continue until the comedy became tragedy; until, with aching hearts and worn faces, they would be forced aside by the crush of the younger generation; and, looking aghast in the face of their five and thirty years, read there their sentence to die, as they had lived, ignorant of life and its meaning. (*Drama in Muslin* 99)

In many ways, Alice's fears are justified, for the Irish landscape is populated with figures of frozen youth. Her sister, Olive, remains stuck in 'the perpetual trying to make up matches' (328), as do most of the women on the marriage market. These women 'remain' and 'wither' rather than develop and progress. But, despite this fear, Alice achieves maturity. Rejecting her mother's advice, she speaks in 'her own individual right', decides to marry the modest Dr. Reed, and moves to England where she continues to pursue her writing (314). In the process, she achieves adulthood, recognising that 'the last few sands of girl-life were [...] disappearing into the obscure void of the past' (316).

How does Alice Barton escape the fate of her class and her friends? I suggest that she succeeds precisely because she is a figure of the untimely. Most of the characters in the novel imagine a future that ensures historical continuity and synchronicity: the Anglo-Irish desire the state to re-establish 'order' so that they can return to the timeless rhythms of everyday life, the Irish tenants desire the nation to re-establish continuity with the past, and the 'muslin martyrs' desire a husband so that they can fulfil their mothers' dreams of social mobility. But Alice Barton does not allow the state, the emerging nation, or even her gender to determine her understanding of the future. Instead, she embraces her anachronistic and anachronistic

position – the ways she is at odds with her historical moment and her cultural location – as that which allow her to develop as a person and an artist. In a novel where there are stark contrasts between landlords and tenants, men and women, and Catholics and Protestants, Alice does not easily fit in any of these social categories: she questions the landlord economic structure, does not believe in a Catholic or Protestant god, and resists the social constraints on women by pursuing a writing career. She seems to have no future – ‘there was no end for her to attain, no height for her to climb; and now looking into the future she could see no issue for the love and energy which throbbed within her’ (*Drama in Muslin* 98). Yet, precisely because she understands that such lack is a problem of the social forms that govern her life – they imagine futurity too narrowly – she succeeds.

Moore quantifies Alice’s untimeliness. In a confusing reference to Eduard von Hartmann, Moore claims that Alice adopts Hartmann’s ideas in 1882 Ireland. Since an English translation of Hartmann’s *Philosophy of the Unconscious* did not appear until 1884 – in 1882 he was almost completely unknown in Ireland – this brief scene appears to engage with the novel’s moment of production rather than the moment it attempts to represent.¹² But the narrator insists that Alice Barton expresses ‘ideas not yet in existence, but which are quickening in the womb of the world’ (*Drama in Muslin* 228). He then goes further, claiming that William Wordsworth anticipated Schopenhauer, concluding with the question: ‘Is it therefore unnatural or even extraordinary that Alice Barton, who is if anything a representative woman of 1885, should have, in an obscure and formless way, divined the doctrines of Eduard van Hartman’ (228–9)? Seeming to represent a category of her own, Alice is associated with artists from the past – Wordsworth – and thinkers who will affect Ireland in the future – Hartmann.

The question that remains, however, is why does Moore quantify Alice’s alienation by explicitly telling the reader that she is a woman of 1885 in 1882 Ireland? For Elizabeth Grubgeld, such a reference might function as an instance of the ‘ahistorical’ emergence of the individual artist (4). But, as Grubgeld herself admits, Moore hardly recognises Alice as an artist. His narrator repeatedly undermines her writing, representing it as too sentimental, too provincial and too businesslike to have any lasting value. In fact, Moore suggests that Alice’s anticipation of Hartmann’s philosophy actually undermines the apparent agency of the individual artist by revealing ‘ideas which we believe to have been the invention of individuals, are but the intellectual atmosphere of that epoch breathed in greater or less

quantities by all' (*Drama in Muslin* 228). Shifting the locus of agency away from the artist and towards the 'intellectual atmosphere', Moore emphasises how history moves at different rates for different people.

By explicitly noting Alice's untimeliness, Moore disrupts a politics grounded in origins and continuity. Unlike the state and nation which both desire continuity, Alice is a figure of discontinuity. She anticipates ideas and exemplifies the non-linear nature of inheritance. As Maurer argues, the novel reveals how inheritance – both inherited traits and inherited property – is not traceable within the novel (186). Alice inherits 'her love of books' from her grandfather, her 'clear logical intelligence' from her mother but 'of her father's brain she had nothing' (*Drama in Muslin* 38). Heredity matters as much for the ruptures it engenders as for the continuities it assures.

Accessing ideas that do not easily fit into a narrative of national development or contribute to the perpetuation of state power, Alice repeatedly resists the nation and the state's control. Alice's marriage – the very thing that allows her to achieve maturity – does not serve either the nation or the state. In order to marry the modest Dr. Reed, who 'was educated at the National School, and [...] used to run there without shoes', Alice must disobey her mother, accept a more economical way of life, and move to the London suburb, Ashbourne Crescent (*Drama in Muslin* 314). Even within England, her supposed 'connatural' home, Alice is slightly out of place: the character of her house 'is therefore essentially provincial, and shows that its occupants have not always lived amid the complex influences of London life, viz., is not even suburban. Nevertheless here and there traces of new artistic impulses are seen' (327). Combining the provincial with 'new artistic impulses', Alice Barton embodies the multiple temporalities necessary for historical change even after she has achieved maturity.

The ending requires more attention because although it confirms the radical understanding of historical time that underlies the novel, it also receives the most criticism from scholars. For many critics, this English ending undermines Moore's nuanced portrait of Ireland. Some scholars read the ending biographically, claiming that Alice's decision to leave Ireland reflects Moore's own renunciation of the land of his birth.¹³ For them, the novel juxtaposes Ireland's discordant temporalities with stable, civilised England in order to suggest that England productively reinstates homogeneous, empty time. Even Grubgeld, who questions whether the ending is as positive a portrayal of England as most scholars suggest, claims that the ending

'seems to exist outside of time' (15). For these scholars, the ending closes down the narrative's radical potential because it replaces the untimely realities of colonial experience with the stable, 'civilised' life in the imperial centre.¹⁴

At first glance, Ashbourne Crescent's monotonous life certainly seems to offer a stable alternative to the discordant temporalities at work in Ireland. In his depiction of Ashbourne Crescent, Moore maps the endless present that the state promises onto the nation, insisting that this place where 'life flows monotonously' is 'typical England' (*Drama in Muslin* 326). Here, routine reigns without any apparent fear for the future: 'there is neither Dissent nor Radicalism, but general aversion to all considerations which might disturb belief in all the routine of existence' (325). Yet Moore suggests that even Ashbourne Crescent contains the seeds of revolution:

And that Ashbourne Crescent, with its bright brass knockers, its white-capped maidservant, and spotless oilcloths, will in the dim future pass away before some great tide of revolution that is now gathering strength far away, deep down and out of sight in the heart of the nation, is probable enough. (325-6)

In England then, where the nation and the state seem to merge into one continuous present, there are still discordant rates of change: the monotony of the present, and the slow, gathering strength of a revolution 'in the heart of the nation'.

By concluding the novel in the imperial centre, at a site where the nation and state cohere rather than antagonise one another, Moore offers a critique of the nation-state and its control of temporality. For Moore, the possibility of revolution is not threatening; it 'renews the tired life of man' (*Drama in Muslin* 326). Tellingly, Moore returns to the notion of the 'atmospheric', describing political revolution as 'those sempiternal storms which, like atmospheric convulsions, by destroying, renew the tired life of man' (325). In this account, revolution does not serve the nation, as the Irish Land League desires, because as a 'sempiternal storm', revolution does not necessarily lead to stability or a new control over temporality. But that does not mean that Moore encourages 'the failed nationalist to embrace the virtues and values of the centre', as Patrick Ward claims (195). Rather the novel seems to celebrate the failure of the nation, the landlord economy, and Ashbourne Crescent's 'fund of materialism' celebrating the discordance but also renewal that revolution brings (325). Ensuring the continued proliferation of anachronism and discordant rates of change, these failures create the possibility of untimely development.

This critique of the nation-state suggests that if *A Drama in Muslin* shares some of *A Parnell and His Island's* harsh criticism towards Ireland and Irish nationalism, it also contains echoes of Moore's later anti-imperialist embrace of the Irish language. Returning to Ireland after a period of writing in England, in 1900 Moore began advocating on behalf of the Irish language 'with an intensity that bordered on absurdity' (Kiberd 92). For many of Moore's contemporaries, his participation in the Gaelic Revival was one of his many ploys for publicity. *The Daily Express* treated Moore's declaration that he would ensure that his nephews learned Irish as a joke, and not surprisingly, he soon lost interest in the movement (Frazier 289). Yet his writing in support of Irish language revival provides glimpses of the same discordant temporalities that fill *A Drama in Muslin*. In 'A Plea For the Soul of the Irish People', Moore boldly declares that '[t]he teaching of history is that the danger of empire is uniformity' before suggesting that maintenance of local language is a way to avoid the encroaching 'monotony of empire' (293). As is the case in his earlier novel, Moore questions the value of the nation-state by suggesting that it leads to monotony and uniformity rather than new, experimental forms of art. In this instance, however, Moore does not merely chronicle the Irish nation's opposition to the state; he also advocates for continued opposition.

A Drama in Muslin thus participates in David Lloyd's project of rethinking national-historical time. Formally, *A Drama in Muslin* encourages what Lloyd calls 'subaltern history' – or a form of history that does not find its end in the state. He suggests that dominant narratives foster unity – unity between the individual and the state, and unity within the narrative – by subsuming the story of an individual's growth and development into the 'larger narrative of the civilizing process' (134). In the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist's successful development produces national subjects, while in Esty's version of the colonial *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist's failure to develop troubles the nation-state only to point towards class or the uneven modernisation process as what produces historical subjects. By contrast, Lloyd contends that subaltern history is fragmentary and discontinuous, resisting narrative unity because it resists assimilation into the state and into a universalising form of history. In these subaltern narratives, an individual's story resists becoming normative because it refuses to govern the production of either national or historical subjects.

As a figure of discontinuity, Alice Barton certainly disrupts the 'larger narrative of the civilizing process'. Moore celebrates Alice's

untimely development without necessarily wanting to generalise it – he does not teach readers how to anticipate ideas not yet in existence, or make Ashbourne Crescent represent a national community. Instead, Moore seems to highlight how Alice resists the narratives of the nation, the state, her class, and even her gender – in order to celebrate her successful development as a form of radical dissent. Moore’s contemporaries often noticed the novel’s violation of dominant narratives, praising the novel as one of the ‘most original novels of the year’ only to complain about its disruptive narrative form. One reviewer was so disappointed with Moore’s ‘melancholy’ characters that he found consolation in the fact that *A Drama in Muslin*’s characters are not ‘complete pictures of typical personages’ (‘Courting of Mary Smith’ 110). Another reviewer complained that *A Drama in Muslin* failed to celebrate ‘virtuous’ characters, writing, ‘It would be refreshing to feel at the close of the chapter that virtue, whether in life or death, is its own reward’ (‘The New Realism’ 3). I suggest that these complaints express unease about a novel that traces an individual’s successful development but consistently refuses the dominant narrative of ‘the civilizing process’.

Returning to the question of the colonial *Bildungsroman*, then, the Irish setting shapes the peculiar model of development that Alice follows. In Ireland, a site of contested time, integration or synchronisation is not the mark of maturity or the goal of development. Integration into a uniform temporality would merely obscure continued oppositions within the nation, between genders, religions, and classes, and against the state. Alice’s untimely development reveals the limits of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, not just to register distance, or express difference, but to show how exploiting oppositions rather than reconciling them creates change. In order to develop, grow, and mature in a land of echoes and shadows, one must embrace untimeliness.

Untimely History

Alice Barton’s refusal to accept a political form and integrate into a uniform community transforms the political questions of the day. At a moment when Home Rule was gathering momentum, many political discussions sought to create a political form that balanced the desires of the Irish nation with the needs of the British state: how to give Ireland national independence without undermining the British empire; how to balance the populist desire for peasant proprietorship with the economic interests of the Anglo-Irish landowners; how to

restore law and order while also acknowledging the legitimacy of some of Ireland's grievances. These conflicts were not new; as historian D. George Boyce suggests, the failure to establish 'a settled form of government based upon shared political perceptions' is characteristic of the long history of nineteenth-century Ireland (4). But in the 1880s, these conflicts were certainly gathering intensity.

A Drama in Muslin engages with these conflicts not to resolve them or reconcile them through a 'settled' political form, but to question the desire for formal resolution. The novel insists that maturation and development do not accompany form, but rather map out a process of continued negotiation. Such a politics is messy, even ugly, and, yet, it depends upon an untimely history where time expresses differences rather than seeking unity and uniformity. The term 'ugly' is significant here because it is the very term that Moore uses to describe history within the novel. History appears as an 'ugly dream' and 'a nightmare' because of its uncertainty, its visible conflicts, and its unknown future (*Drama in Muslin* 265). But if for Joyce, history 'is a nightmare from which I am trying to wake', Moore suggests that history is a nightmare from which it is all too easy to wake (28). At the end of the novel he writes:

Peasants and landlords rubbed their eyes, stared aghast, and then, laughing like people awakening from a nightmare, they resumed their ordinary occupations. The change was as marvellous as any transformation-scene [. . .] The stoning of the hounds, the poisoning of the covers, were only remembered as an ugly dream; in a trice the gentry disbanded their black-coated bodyguards, and resumed their own red coats. (*Drama in Muslin* 265)

The characters easily resume their routines, actively forgetting the conflicts and oppositions that continue, albeit less visibly, to shape history. Tellingly, Moore reminds the reader that the conflict over land has not been resolved, and shared time has not been reinstated despite the return to the 'ordinary'. For instance, Dr. Reed tells Alice that the Land League 'has' and 'hasn't' 'lost all power', asserting:

It is hard to come to a conclusion, for when in one district you hear of rents being paid and boycotted farms letting freely, in another, only a few miles away, the landlords are giving reductions, and there are farms lying waste, that no one dare look at. In my opinion the fire is only smouldering, and when the Coercion Act expires the old organization will rise up as strong and as triumphant as before. (293)

To awake from the nightmare, then, is to be out of touch with historical developments and to forget that history continues to act in ugly, discordant ways.

Such an understanding of history is a significant break from Lukács's conception of history in his famous essay on naturalism, 'Narrate or Describe?'. Juxtaposing realism and naturalism, Lukács favours realism precisely because it represents history as a totality. Realism centres history and upholds the 'laws of historical development' (122) by representing history's 'major opposing forces', according to Lukács (142). By contrast, he claims that naturalism suppresses action because its flat contemporaneity creates 'monotony and tedium' (125). Instead of centring and ordering history, naturalism's descriptions get lost in peripheral objects, marginal stories, and meaningless accidents. Lukács ultimately objects to naturalism's representation of history on political grounds.¹⁵ He argues that naturalism's emphasis on the synchronic rather than the diachronic – its depiction of historical contingencies rather than historical developments – forestalls action by failing to represent the 'capacity to change' (129). Characters seem to be destined to either fail or succeed, but their actions hardly represent the possibility of growth or development.

A Drama in Muslim puts pressure on Lukács's argument because, despite the novel's naturalism, it does not encourage resignation or forestall action. Instead, it shows that the capacity to act may not lie in the diachronic, as Lukács suggests, but rather by reconceptualising the synchronic. Alice Barton's development highlights marginal and peripheral historical forces to imagine new ways of apprehending the present as a site of heterogeneity. In a discordant, messy present moment the 'capacity to change' depends upon negotiating between differences rather than choosing a political form – in this instance, the state, the nation, or some form that reconciles the tensions between them – to ground one's history.

Dana Nelson's concept of 'ugly democracy' is one version of such a political model. She suggests that ugly democracy 'affirms not wholeness and symbolic consensus but the inevitable incompleteness of always dissensual community' (220). Ugly democracy does not seek to establish synchronous shared national time, but rather intersubjective relations that emphasise differences. It shifts our understanding of democracy as a form – one that often creates unity through unifying representatives – to an ongoing process. To contextualise this in nineteenth-century terms, ugly democracy is a version of politics that rejects wholeness, harmony, and unity – the merger of culture and character, state and nation that Matthew Arnold

so fervently argues for in 'Democracy'.¹⁶ To the extent that *A Drama in Muslin* seeks to make difference and disagreement visible through anachronism and untimely development, the novel helps imagine a version of ugly democracy where discordance can encourage change without representing history as a totality or politics as a unified form.

Of course, by suggesting that *A Drama in Muslin* is both a colonial *Bildungsroman* and a representation of ugly democracy, I am also shifting from political forms (the colony) to political processes (democracy as process). Such a shift highlights the contradictions of nineteenth-century Ireland – the ways it is 'misplaced' both within Western political discourses and colonial discourses.¹⁷ Nineteenth-century Ireland both was and was not a colony, it both was and was not a democracy.¹⁸ Yet, precisely because of Ireland's strange history – its complicity in British imperialism but subordination to the British imperial state – Ireland is important. Arguing for the centrality of the Irish Question in 1868, John Morley asserts, 'The functions of the State, the duties of the property, the rights of labour, the question whether the many are born for the few, the question of a centralised imperial power, the question of the pre-eminence of morals in politics – all these things lie in Irish affairs' (quoted in O'Day 3). Moore's novel helps think through the Irish Question by refusing to imagine a form that resolves the tensions and conflict over the role of the state, property, morals and empire. In other words, it ensures that the Irish Question creates more questions, perhaps even better questions, for Britain, rather than offering solutions.

A Drama in Muslin's depiction of Alice Barton's success against the backdrop of decay transforms the colonial *Bildungsroman* from a narrative that seeks formal unity through integration to one that validates the discordance of everyday life. Differences do not find resolution, the protagonist does not integrate into a stable, uniform community, and individual maturation does not represent national becoming. Yet, within this depiction of untimely, ugly history, the novel questions the impulse to find closure in form, showing instead the possibilities of an open, heterogeneous history.

Notes

1. Taking up Frederick Cooper, who warns against the simplistic opposition between nation and state because often nations and nationalism helped states '[think] like an empire', it is important to point out the ways that this opposition between the imagined Irish nation and the British imperial state is far more complex than a simply binary (154). Importantly, many strands of Irish nationalism hoped to achieve their objectives through the state. For instance, many Home Rule supporters argued for a federalist solution and many supporters of the Land

- League were motivated by economic rather than nationalist concerns (see O'Day 7–15). But *A Drama in Muslin* is very much a narrative about state power and, to the extent that opposition to the state coheres as a political form within the novel, it coheres as a nationalist enterprise grounded in creating a nativist nation independent of Britain.
2. Alice Barton's development is perhaps one reason why Judith Mitchell calls the novel 'Victorian' rather than naturalist.
 3. Judith Mitchell is hopeful about the ending, Alexander Gonzalez claims that Alice offers a way out of paralysis (152); Paul Goetsch argues that the ending shows Alice's resignation (91); M^a Elena Jaime De Pablos suggests that Alice Barton achieves liberty but only because she renounces the confining environment of Ireland (193).
 4. Paul Goetsch is a notable exception. Goetsch claims that Moore's 'position is far from being consistent' – it both justifies the protests of the peasants and laments the passing of an old way of life (80).
 5. Simon Gikandi argues that this is what postcolonial studies contributes to globalisation: an understanding of historical time and historical agency that disrupts the temporality of modernisation (636).
 6. This particular scene is important because it contrasts the feelings that the murders inspire, shock, terror, a sense of crisis, with the consequences of the murders, the Coercion Act that the landlords desire (*Drama in Muslin* 240–1).
 7. Of course, the land wars originated from far more complex causes than nationalist desire for a 'nativist' nation. An 1878 agricultural crisis intensified demands for land reform by mobilising diverse populations. But one of the effects of the land war – an effect that Moore treats as a cause – was the solidification of 'a collectively held notion of the land for the people, as opposed to the "alien" landowners, an idea imbued with the sense of "native" dispossession' (O'Day 17).
 8. Historically, these divisions were not so stark. As Paul A. Townsend argues, the land league's nationalism was not necessarily anti-empire and not always opposed to the British state. What is telling, though, is that in the novel Moore represents a relatively simple opposition between peasant nationalists and Anglo-Irish landlords associated with the state, even as he represents the diversity of each group (144).
 9. D. George Boyce suggests that one of the dominant questions of nineteenth-century Ireland was, 'If Ireland were to have self-government, which of the major groups in Ireland was to inherit the future?' Moore shows that one of the ways that this question played itself out was debates over who was part of the present (8).
 10. For more on how gender affects the Land Wars, see Valente 47–51.
 11. Patrick Ward reads Moore alongside Joyce, as does John Wilson Foster. Following Richard Ellman's claim that Moore's *Vain Fortune* influenced Joyce's *Dubliners*, there are several articles that consider Moore's influence on Joyce's short fiction. See, for instance, Parkes 265–82. Elizabeth Grubgeld is one of the few scholars who reads *A Drama in Muslin* in relation to Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (8–11).
 12. See Patrick Bridgewater, who claims that Moore probably read this 1884 translation, although Bridgewater does not think that Moore engaged seriously with Hartmann's ideas (34).
 13. While Patrick Ward claims that this resolution to the novel juxtaposes the barbarous Ireland with the civilised England (195), John Wilson Foster suggests that Moore's heroes discover their 'Protestant' selves (124).

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14. Patrick Ward suggests this (see above). In a slightly different but related vein, John Cronin writes, 'The move is from overblown Anglo-Irish decadence to British materialism and there is a curious sense of loss and diminution at the work's end which is hardly altogether appropriate to the central satirical purpose of Moore's novel' (132).
15. Rachel Bowlby argues that Lukács's criticism has taken root in more contemporary approaches to naturalist novels that emphasise naturalism's excessive contemporaneity. She suggests that these studies tend to treat naturalist novels as historical rather than aesthetic objects (16).
16. George Moore frequently cited Matthew Arnold – especially 'The Function of Criticism in the Present Time'. For more on Moore's thoughts on Arnold, see Frazier 350–1.
17. Joe Cleary writes, 'Although Ireland belonged to the same geocultural locale and the same orbit of capital as the major European imperial powers, it was structurally integrated into that orbit of culture and capital in a very different way to its main European neighbors' ('Misplaced Ideas?' 106).
18. Joe Cleary's 'Misplaced Ideas?' is one of many essays considering these questions. Terrence McDonough and Eoin Flannery also take up these questions in their respective work.

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