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Review: George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man*, ed. by Matthew Creasy  
(Modern Humanities Research Association, 2025)

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George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man*, ed. by Matthew Creasy (Modern Humanities Research Association, 2025), xiii + 172 pp.  
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The publication of this new edition of George Moore's *kunstlerroman* *Confessions of a Young Man* (French edition first published in 1886 and English edition in 1888) is a welcome chance for readers to become acquainted with a largely forgotten text of one of Ireland's most influential Irish revival and pre-revival writers. The book is a partly fictionalized account of Moore's experience of fin de siècle Paris and London. It fascinatingly blends the genres of autobiography, memoir, and novel writing in a manner that makes it an archetypal example of decadent literature and also a proto-Modernist text. The similarities with James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) – which shall be examined shortly – extend far beyond the titles of both works.

The plot of *Confessions of a Young Man* spans fifteen years and follows the young narrator, Dayne, as he prowls the boulevards of Paris in a manner akin to a Parisian flâneur. He muses on art and philosophy and has a series of encounters with individuals. As a result of these encounters, Dayne is transformed as an individual and as an artist. The work concludes in London after Dayne decides that he will not pursue a career as a painter and instead resolves to write a novel. This story is a reflection of the years Moore spent in France during the 1870s.

This is the first critical edition of *Confessions of a Young Man* in fifty years and Matthew Creasy has produced an extremely detailed introduction and explanatory notes, demonstrating his professional editorial skills. There are also appendices that contain Moore's prefaces to reprints of the book, excerpts from different versions of the book, and selections from Moore's literary journalism, much of which had not been published since the nineteenth century. The result is an outstanding scholarly version of Moore's intergeneric text.

The history of Irish literature is filled with examples of writers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who chose to sojourn in France, particularly Paris, because they regarded that country and its capital city to be the bastion of cosmopolitan modernity. Notable examples of Irish writers who chose to immerse themselves in French literature and culture include Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, Brendan Behan, and Samuel Beckett. *Confessions of a Young Man* reminds its readers that Moore should be regarded as another member of this group of Irish Francophiles.

By the work's conclusion, Dayne admits that he has grown tired of the English language and wishes to immerse himself in French. This mirrors Moore's writing of *Confessions of a Young Man* in French before bringing out the English version two years later. In this respect, Moore anticipated Wilde's decision to write his decadent play *Salomé* (1893) in French and Beckett's use of French as the language for the original versions of his prose trilogy and plays such as *Waiting for Godot* (1952). The preference that certain Irish authors had for French over English is attributable to the alienation that many Irish people felt from the English language of colonization. The immersion in the French language is presented as the catalyst that leads Dayne to abandon the art of painting for that of writing.

Although Moore is best known for his portrayal of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland, *Confessions of a Young Man* reveals his immersion in the decadent writings of Walter Pater and Joris-Karl Huysmans. In this respect, Moore is similar to Wilde whose devotion to the works of both Pater and Huysmans is well known. *Confessions of a Young Man* contains many passages that are similar to Wilde's essays on art and also to his famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). It also marks a departure for Moore from his trademark style of realism and move towards a more experimental and less fixed mode of writing.

*Confessions of a Young Man* is a perfect example of *kunstlerroman* in that it contains many passages concerning the influence that past artists and their works have had on the narrator's development as a writer. As Creasy notes in his introduction:

In the opening pages, [the narrator] evokes the concept of ‘echo-augury’ [...] to describe an epiphanic revelation of self-identity precipitated by a literary or artistic encounter. This term is employed three times in Moore’s *Confessions* [...]. The way that the narrator’s examples of ‘echo-augury’ connect to literary and artistic encounters suggests that the work is specifically a *kunstlerroman* – a work which recounts the formation or development of an artist. (p. 11)

Through *Confessions of a Young Man*, Moore gave Irish literature an archetypal example of *kunstlerroman* thirty years before Joyce published *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The narrator of *Confessions of a Young Man*, a fictionalized version of Moore, is comparable to the character of Stephen Dedalus who has a similar relationship with the life of his creator, Joyce.

*Confessions of a Young Man* begins with the narrator asserting his artistic and personal identity as being a very complex and multiform entity:

My soul, so far as I understand it, has very kindly taken colour and form from the many various modes of life that self-will and an impetuous temperament have forced me to indulge in. Therefore I may say that I am free from original qualities, defects, tastes, etc. What I have I acquire, or, to speak more exactly, chance bestowed, and still bestows, upon me. I came into the world apparently with a nature like a smooth sheet of wax, bearing no impress, but capable of receiving any; of being moulded into all shapes. Nor am I exaggerating when I say that I think I might equally have been a Pharaoh, an ostler, a pimp, an archbishop. (p. 37)

For this narrator, his soul is akin to Georg Wilhelm Hegel’s conceptualization of ‘the spirit’: an entity that is comprised of internal control and external influence, impacted upon by both choice and chance.

The conflicted and contradictory nature of Moore’s identity has been noted by Virginia Woolf in this appraisal of his character and status as a writer:

George Moore is the best living novelist – and the worst; writes the most beautiful prose of his time – and the feeblest; has a passion for literature which none of those dismal pundits, his contemporaries, shares; but how whimsical his judgements are, how ill-balanced, childish and egotistical into the bargain! (p. 22).

The multiform nature of Moore and his alter ego Dayne mark them out as quite similar to the central figure of Huysmans’s *À rebours*, which is written about with admiration in *Confessions of a Young Man*. The fact that Dayne is clearly a narrator who cannot be entirely trusted to be sincere

and to give totally objective and unbiased accounts of events and encounters makes the title of the book quite ironic.

The back cover of this edition of *Confessions of a Young Man* quotes one of the most striking sentences from the book: 'I am feminine, morbid, perverse. But above all perverse, almost everything perverse interests, fascinates me.' This statement from the narrator amounts to a declaration of his decadent identity and an assertion of his right to live in what was then the capital of European decadence: fin de siècle Paris. Chapter Seven begins with the narrator declaring himself to be in open revolt against everything that was meant to have shaped his identity:

Two dominant notes in my character – an original hatred of my native country, and a brutal loathing of the religion I was brought up in. All the aspects of my native country are violently disagreeable to me, and I cannot think of the place I was born in without a sensation akin to nausea. (p. 109)

This expression of hatred for his home, fatherland, and church is another example of how this character is an earlier version of the anti-Irish, anti-Catholic Stephen Dedalus. *Confessions of a Young Man* provides another piece of incontrovertible evidence of Joyce's great admiration for the work of Moore.

The depiction of barely concealed same-sex desire in *Confessions of a Young Man* is just one of the examples of the book's decadent quality. This is most evident in the narrator's fixation with the character of fellow artist, Marshall. The moment that Dayne first sets eyes on Marshall is charged with erotic energy:

One day I raised my eyes, and saw there was a new-comer in the studio; and, to my surprise, for he was fashionably dressed, and my experience had not led me to the marriage of genius and well-cut cloth, he was painting very well indeed. His shoulders were beautiful and broad; a long neck, a tiny head, a narrow, thin face, and large eyes, full of intelligence and fascination. (p. 51)

This scene of objectification of Marshall by Dayne is very similar to the description of the intoxicating first sight that Basil Hallward has of Dorian Gray. The outrage that greeted Wilde's novelistic depiction of same-sex desire was not meted out to Moore's less overt representation of similar attractions.

Wilde's diagnosis of England as 'the native land of the hypocrite' is an opinion that the narrator of *Confessions of a Young Man* seems to share. This is evidenced by the final chapter which is set in London and most paragraphs are addressed to the book's 'hypocritical' readers. Dayne believes that he embodies all the dangerous transgressions that his readers do not have the courage to commit themselves to, anticipating Lord Henry Wotton's assertion to Dorian that he represents all the sins that Dorian himself does not have the courage to commit. The difference between Dayne and Wotton is that the former has actually transgressed against various social norms whereas Wotton merely theorizes about being immoral while never committing an actual 'sin'. Dayne's celebrations of the rebelliousness and freedom of youth and the young was also something he had in common with Wilde.

In his analysis of the style in *Confessions of a Young Man*, Creasy suggests that the work is a profound meditation on the nature and form of decadent literature:

Moore's narrator [...] may indeed offer an exaggerated satire of the transgressive sexual ethics and aesthetic values associated with Decadence as a contemporary literary movement. But, on this reading, it is precisely the slippery nature of his narrator and the elusive and evasive nature of *Confessions of a Young Man* that also make it most Decadent. (p. 16)

This evaluation of decadent literature and the position of *Confessions of a Young Man* within that genre also draws attention to the similarities between decadence and literary modernism as both are committed to stylistic experimentation and the subversion of the conventions of the realist novel. As Creasy goes on to argue: 'Moore's experiments with style and form, and the shifting subjectivities of his narrator in *Confessions*, anticipate similar developments in the writings of Woolf, Joyce, and other modernists by a couple of decades' (pp. 22-23). The concluding lines of *Confessions of a Young Man* emphasize the fluidity of the text as the final note that its readers are left with is one of continuity rather than finality: 'I shivered; the cold air of morning blew in my face, I closed the window, and sitting at the table, haggard and overworn, I continued my novel' (p. 206). The symbolic grammatical tool that closes *Confessions of a Young Man* can be said to be less of a full stop and more of a semi-colon.

The publication of this invaluable and painstaking scholarly edition of *Confessions of a Young Man* is a timely reminder of one of the often-neglected examples of Irish and European decadent and modernist literature. With its focus on the artistic development of an evolving consciousness, *Confessions of a Young Man* looks back to Wordsworth's Romantic representation of the growth of an artist in *The Prelude* (1850) and anticipates Joyce's modernist depiction of the same subject in *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*. *Confessions of a Young Man* serves as a reminder that the fin de siècle represented a bridge between the Realism of the nineteenth century novel and the modernism of twentieth-century literature. For this reason, *Confessions of a Young Man* should be read as a text that is both of its time and anticipatory of later literary revolutions and experimentation.