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Volume 24, Number 2, 1999

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl24\\_2art09](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl24_2art09)

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hicks, P. (1999). Waiting for Jeannot:: The (de) Construction of History in Brian Moore's *No Other Life*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 24(2), 151–160.

Article abstract

In Brian Moore's *No Other Life*, Father Jeannot Cantave, after challenging the religious and social history of the fictitious Caribbean island of Ganae, abruptly disappears and leaves those around him waiting for his return, which strongly recalls Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In both texts, the primary concern is absence. In the case of *No Other Life*, the reassessment of history that occurs in the text subsequently allows the previously unexamined to become its focal point. Jeannot's departure (or absence) forces those around him to alter their viewpoints of history.

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## Waiting for Jeannot: The (de)Construction of History in Brian Moore's *No Other Life*

PATRICK HICKS

IN BRIAN MOORE'S *No Other Life* (1993), the fictitious Caribbean island of Ganae is in revolt as Father Jeannot Cantave assumes power and tries to establish democracy in a destitute land. He is hailed as a messiah and seems to provide the political and spiritual leadership that his country has long desired. Yet, after he challenges the religious and social history of his country, he abruptly disappears and leaves those around him waiting for his return, which strongly recalls Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954). If Beckett constructed a narrative based on waiting for a messiah, Moore has focused his attention on the arrival, departure, and subsequent re-waiting of a messiah. In both cases, the primary concern of the texts is absence.

In the case of *No Other Life*, the reassessment of history that occurs in the text subsequently allows the previously unexamined to become its focal point. If history is a construct that helps frame the present, scrutinizing the past becomes dangerous; this is especially true in a dictatorship, which is the political system that opens and closes *No Other Life*. Jeannot therefore challenges the history of his county while, at the same time, many questions are asked of his mentor and friend, Paul Michel. In the first instance, the sociopolitical history that has enslaved Ganae's population is questioned by Jeannot alongside the history (or, to use another word, dogma) of Catholicism. In the second instance, Paul Michel's past is contested not only by Jeannot but also by the female characters of the text. History is therefore reassessed on both a communal and personal level to such an extent that it is radically rewritten. Consequently, I propose an analysis of how history, both social and personal, is re-evaluated in *No Other Life*, as well as how Jeannot's departure (or absence) forces those around him to alter their viewpoints of history. Moreover, in the spirit of re-examining history and absence, I will also register Moore's own representation of Jean-Bertrand Aristide's Haiti, which provided the

historical basis for *No Other Life*. Moore's appropriation of history, in fact, is worthy of examination because in his last two novels, *The Statement* (1996) and *The Magician's Wife* (1997), he likewise borrowed precise historical moments and altered them in order to establish a viable form of art. Historical absence is not only a crucial element for the narrative of *No Other Life*, but it also helps us to understand Moore as a literary craftsman.

The story opens as Paul Michel, the last white priest on Ganae, prepares to retire from his position as a teacher in the Albanesian order. It is a bittersweet farewell because he feels his life has come to an end. From the outset, we are forced to look back into history as Michel reminisces about his personal past:

In the old days they would have given me a gold watch. I never understood why. Was it to remind the one who is being retired that his time is past? Instead of a watch I have been presented with a videotape of the ceremonies. My life has ended. My day is done. (1)

Michel has literally run out of time in Ganae and can now only await death as he symbolically views his past on videotape. What is absent from the ceremony is any mention of his relationship to Jeannot Cantave, whose initials recall that of another saviour, Jesus Christ. The people of Ganae want to overlook Michel's involvement with their saviour and, for that reason, Michel has begun work on his memoirs so that the story might not be forgotten; hence, he is working on an historical account no one wants to read.

Michel, as we learn, first met Jeannot in the squalid village of Toumalie and brought him to school via muleback as part of a new scholarship scheme. Michel remained his surrogate father until Jeannot studied for his doctorate in France. Although the young man was influenced by liberation theology while overseas, we are not told if he believes it or merely wants to act upon it. Regardless, he brings back his new ideology in order to question the sociopolitical history of Ganae that has enforced poverty. It is when Jeannot establishes his own parish of the Church of the Incarnation that Michel begins to realize the subtext of their relationship; he now feels that Jeannot offers him a new vocation and, because of this, their role as father and son is subverted. In this sense Michel now operates like Joseph did for Christ: he is not Jeannot's biological father but he acts as though he were, albeit aware that his "son" is somehow more holy than himself. Pointedly, Jeannot has become caretaker of his father's spiritual development, thereby transforming their shared past, or history.

Precisely because Jeannot is challenging Ganae's past, an assassination attempt is made on his life while he is delivering mass. After he survives the encounter his standing as a holy man is bolstered, even though he is viewed as subversive by the Albanesian Order, who expel him much to the relief of Ganae's ruling elite (32). Notably, his rise in divine stature correlates to his fall as a priest. In other words, just as the public view him as saintly, Jeannot is stripped of his office *suspensio a divinis* and, without a parish to call his own, his duties as a priest become otiose. The country is now Jeannot's church as he becomes increasingly like Gustav Hartmann, who, in *Catholics* (1972), believed that clerical deviance was justifiable if it helped impoverished countries combat tyranny (25). As a result, Jeannot assumes the messianic role Cardinal Bem rejected in Moore's *The Colour of Blood* (1987). Bem could not challenge the history of his communist country because the Soviet Union would crush an emerging democracy. Conversely, questioning national history in *No Other Life* can be fruitful because, if the domestic plutocracy is overthrown, an outside punitive force will not reverse a successful revolution. It is for this reason that Jeannot's doctrine of rebellion can function whereas Bem was forced to oppose challenges made to national history. Yet in each case the priests are chiefly concerned with the economic and spiritual welfare of their flock. Unlike Bem, however, Jeannot can embrace liberation theology because the questions it asks of national history will not bring further pain if a revolution succeeds.

Assuming a role as a public servant, Jeannot attempts to defuse a protest that arises from a massacre begun by the army. Outside Pierre-Marie Doumergue's presidential palace, which is "a replica of the American White House, but twice as large" (38), Jeannot watches as a young boy is murdered by the army. Doumergue, whose piquant surname recalls the word "demagogue," hits Jeannot with a microphone, thus suggesting that words are a weapon the ailing president cannot use to fight Jeannot. With the child in his arms, Jeannot leaves the protest and others are prompted to do the same. Shortly afterwards President Doumergue dies of AIDS, and, when Jeannot runs for the vacant office, he wins an overwhelming popular vote of seventy-five percent (53). The land that Jeannot must govern is rife with problems: Colonel Alain Lambert is heavily involved in drug smuggling, the Vatican finds liberation theology perfidious, the army may be planning a coup, and there are severe class demarcations that Jeannot wishes to erase.

Jeannot, it seems, has successfully challenged not only the restrictive history that has enslaved his country, but also the dogmatic expectations

of a Catholic priest. Likewise, he has forced Michel to reconsider his own role in the Church. Yet Michel's past is challenged further by the female characters of the text, as represented by the dying wish of his mother. After he arrives at her deathbed in Canada, she urges him to forsake the priesthood because, as she has come to believe, "there is no other life" (73). Ironically, this woman of fervent devotion now wants Michel to reject his office, thereby transforming the bed in which Michel was born into the cradle of his lost faith. Intriguingly, she has lost her faith at the precise moment Moore's own mother did. Commenting on this, Moore said she had "spent her whole life going to mass... it stunned me that people could waver in their faith at that point. I think everyone must have doubts about the hereafter" (Graeber 34). After Michel's mother dies, serious aspersions are cast upon his vocation and he resolves to exile himself from Canada. There are two reasons for this. First, with the death of his mother he no longer feels a sense of history there; second, Canada now represents a loss of faith within himself that he no longer wishes to acknowledge (76). Since Michel's understanding of his personal history and faith is jeopardized in Canada, he returns to Ganée, which is the only place he now feels at home.

Upon his return, Michel goes to the prison of Fort Noël and meets another woman who unknowingly interrogates his sense of personal history. Caroline Lambert, wife of the local cocaine magnate, begs Michel for security from alleged assassination attempts in prison. During this exchange Michel discovers that he is falling in love with her, and this shrewdly dispels Michel's feelings for Jeannot as homosexual:

She was beautiful. As I looked at her I was filled with a strange resentment, an anger I had often felt in my youth when I realized that to young women I was a priest, something other than a male. I was ashamed of this prideful vanity and surprised that it had come back to me now, in the forty-seventh year of my life. (118)

For him she is a desirable woman, but for her he is merely a priest, a non-male, a desexualized being. Michel soon realizes that "he was suffused by a sense of loss for a path not taken, an unlived other life" (130). The phrase his mother uttered on her deathbed takes on a new resonance here: "no other life" certainly suggests doubt about the hereafter, but in relation to Caroline Lambert it can also signify the acknowledgement of the rejected path towards sexual fulfilment. In both cases women have undermined Michel's understanding of the spiritual and secular world. Jeannot,

on the other hand, is the only bulwark Michel now has in order to frame both the social and personal past he finds himself questioning.

Returning to Jeannot, Michel finds that the Lambert's estate of Shalimar is burnt by a mob in much the same way as the Big Houses in Moore's homeland of Ireland were torched by nationalists during the Irish Civil War. Riots ensue and Jeannot is overthrown by a seemingly successful coup by General Macandal. In an effort to retain his office, Jeannot and Michel flee in order to find Willi Narodny, a HAM Radio enthusiast who will broadcast a message by Jeannot. After Jeannot records the message, they are forced to hide from soldiers who are looking for the fugitive pair and, on a motorcycle, Michel again recalls how he brought Jeannot down from the mountain as a young child. He recalls, in a new way, the personal history they both share:

I looked down at Jeannot's hands clasped around my waist and felt his frail body press against mine. Back through the years, a woman sat on a ramshackle porch watching, as I went down a hilly road on muleback, a little boy hanging on behind me, a boy she had given into my care. (169)

Michel again feels parental affinity towards Jeannot and, just as he did before, he is once again bringing Jeannot to the world's attention in order that his protégé might challenge the political history of Ganae. Hiding from the army, they stumble upon a wake where Jeannot appears as "God's messenger" to the mourning villagers (173). As the army arrives at the wake Jeannot symbolically rises from the dead as he once again assumes a public role, albeit one that is controlled by army supervision. Back in Fort Noël, he agrees to become a puppet for the new regime in order to avoid bloodshed. Hours later, he makes a speech on Radio Libre where he asks the populace to meet him for a recitation of the rosary at the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Secours (192). After the sacrament is performed the *aperçu* of the novel manifests itself in Jeannot's speech, which is presented as a poem, if not a prayer:

But, you ask me  
Who will be our leaders?  
The dead are our leaders.  
You and only you  
With the help of God  
And the memory of the dead  
Can bring about our freedom...

It will happen when you  
 No longer ask  
 For a Messiah.  
 As for me  
 I am nothing  
 I came from nothing.  
 Today I go back  
 To those from whom I came,  
 The poor, the silent, the unknown. (201-02)

There are two ideas at work in Jeannot's speech: the dead leading the living, and the notion of messianic leadership coming from within rather than from without. If history gives purpose to nationalism, Jeannot is tacitly endorsing its birth when he requests that the masses listen to "the memory of the dead." Although this may sound noble, it is elevating the dead to the status of martyrs, and the outcome may, if unchecked, lead Ganae into armed conflict. Jeannot is correct in assuming that the dead can fuel insurrection, but he (and Moore) fail to offer cautionary words about how a glorified past can lead to bigotry. Given that Moore attacked Irish nationalism in *Lies of Silence* (1990), it is surprising that he allows Jeannot to support the very seeds of hatred that hold Northern Ireland captive, be that by Republican or Loyalist violence. The dead should not be forgotten, but Jeannot seems to agree with Irish revolutionary Patrick Pearse's famous dictum: "the ghosts of a nation sometimes ask very big things and they must be appeased, whatever the cost." Moreover, his words eerily recall the Easter 1916 Proclamation: "In the name of God and the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom." Although these words helped Ireland gain independence, they continue to plague the North of Ireland because Catholics view them from one perspective and Protestants from another. Hence, both sides of the Irish divide narrate history in such a manner that violence is justified.

Moore was keenly aware that historical narration can divide a society. This was true not only of his homeland, but also for his adopted home of Canada. When the Front de Libération du Québec kidnapped James Cross — and later murdered Pierre Laporte — Moore feared that Canada would have its own version of Belfast. He addressed these concerns of sectarian violence and nationalism in *The Revolution Script* (1971), an ill-conceived narrative he regarded as a failure shortly before his death. Consequently, since Moore was openly acerbic about nation-

alism in any form, I think he would disagree with Jeannot's controversial use of history. Nevertheless, Jeannot's speech reinforces a slippery stance on violence, which is never adequately explained by the end of the novel.

Additionally, Jeannot states that there are no messiahs. In effect, he claims that the masses are the messiah and that if they want freedom they have to look to themselves for leadership. In essence, Jeannot is repudiating a crucial element of Christianity — that of the second coming — by suggesting that society can be its own messiah if it looks to the past for answers. This egalitarian mantra seems positive, but unfortunately the masses ignore his plea. Although Jeannot rejects the role of saviour, his own status as a historical presence is quickly enshrined after he willingly vanishes from the public. Jeannot is subsumed so totally into the mythos of the imagined community that ten years after his disappearance,

candles are lit daily to Jeannot's memory. Small, homemade shrines may be seen at country crossroads and on the barren hillsides of Cap Gauche, Papanos and Pondicher. The shrines are religious, with a crucifix at their head, as though to ward off the vampires of the regime. Most contain crude images of Jeannot, but there is also an oleograph or statue of the Virgin Mary. (209)

Jeannot's disappearance has effectively brought about his informal canonization. In fact, even though it is easy to view Jeannot as a *figura* of Christ, it should also be remembered that, due to the slave trade, Ganae would have been heavily influenced by African mythology. Since the recent history of Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide's Haiti was the inspiration for Moore's Ganae, we must consider the possibility that voodoo would be present on the island, and this means asking questions of Moore's own representation of religious history in a Caribbean society.

Since Moore has often been compared to Graham Greene, his desire to write a novel that resembles *The Comedians* (1966) may initially suggest that Moore was shadowing the literary oeuvre of a writer he admired. Yet this is not the first time Moore used Haiti in his work. Indeed, one of his earlier short stories, "Off the Track" (1961), has the Coles visiting Haiti and taking pictures in a small village that is, quite literally, off the track. Not surprisingly, it is based on Moore's own experiences, and he depicts the country with compassionate generosity. Thirty years later when Aristide assumed power Moore's imagination was again stirred by Haiti, except this time he would borrow its recent history in order to craft a narrative. This does not mean that *No Other Life* is a mere simulacrum



of recent events. If anything, the narrative exists in a historical vacuum because the Pope is mulatto and Cuba is no longer at loggerheads with the Vatican. Moore, it seems, borrowed recent political history but changed it for his own purposes<sup>1</sup>. Yet, if Moore owes a debt to Haitian history, it is telling that he neglected to mention the historical presence of its religious systems. Why did Moore omit the presence of voodoo? This is somewhat surprising when we consider Moore's skilful attention to non-Christian religions in such works as *Black Robe* (1985) and *The Magician's Wife* (1997).

This subsequently raises an interesting question: can Jeannot be something other than Christ? Since Ganae is modelled upon Haiti, how might Jeannot be represented in Haitian mythology? Henry Louis Gates mentions that one of the "signifying monkeys" of Haitian mythology is a god called Èsù, who is originally derived from Yoruba mythology:

The versions of Èsù are all messengers of the gods: he interprets the will of the gods to human beings; he carries the desires of the human beings to the gods. He is known as the divine linguistic, the keeper of *àse* ('logos') with which Olódùmarè created the universe. Èsù is guardian of the crossroads, master of the style and the stylus, phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of the mystical barrier that separates the divine from the profane world. In Yoruba mythology, Èsù always limps, because his legs are of different lengths; one is anchored in the realm of the gods, the other rests in the human world... As Hermes is to hermeneutics, Èsù is to *Èsù-tífunàlò*. (Gates 286-87)

Èsù, then, is of both the physical and metaphysical world as well as being the courier of human desire to the gods. Just as Christ resembles a bridge to future greatness, so too does Èsù. These degrees of conflation are further heightened by their linguistic resemblance: Èsù and Jesus sound remarkably similar if the latter is pronounced in French, which was the colonizing language of both Haiti and Ganae (8). In fact, they fulfil congruent roles, and I propose that Jeannot would be viewed as both deities in Ganae. Even though the absence of voodoo does not necessarily weaken the novel, one wonders why Moore, who was sensitive to non-Christian beliefs, neglected to mention a religion that has been a part of Haitian and Caribbean history for many centuries. If *No Other Life* is about the (de)construction of history in order to view what has been absent, Moore's own construction of history also registers forces of absence.

Regardless of the religious implications attached to Jeannot, his disappearance is the novel's "spiritual center, its allegorical terrain" and many

of the motifs that opened the narrative also close it (Sullivan 3). Thus our attention is drawn back to the beginning, back to the past, back to a sense of history within the text itself. For instance, towards the end of the narrative a woman arrives at Collège St Jean and returns the watch Michel gave to Jeannot when he was younger; ingeniously, the retirement gift denied Michel at the beginning of the novel has been offered at the end. Likewise, the motif of bringing Jeannot down from the mountainside again occurs when Michel returns to Toumalie and discovers that Jeannot – now Frédéric – died of fever the previous winter. Michel weeps with the knowledge that there is no other life in which they may be reunited, and, in turning to leave the village, he plays with Frédéric's son, who shares his father's name: "When I went to lift him off, he cried. 'More! More! Take me down the hill.' 'No, *Petit*. Stay here'" (216). Rather than bring another messiah to the people, Michel chooses to keep young Frédéric in Toumalie. Michel has not only lost his faith in the afterlife due to the difficult questions asked of his personal history, but the story has also come full circle: just as Michel unknowingly brought Ganae a messiah in the past, he now refuses to repeat his actions. What remains unvoiced is his conviction that there should be no messiah, thereby establishing Michel's role to history as one of absence and non-fulfillment. Although his role as a priest demands that he bring the masses to the messiah, Michel has opted to ignore his role and distance himself from a society that no longer wants him. His priestly role is effaced not only due to the history Ganae has constructed around Jeannot's image, but also due to his personal doubt about the afterlife. Pointedly, Jeannot's place within society is magnified in opposition to Michel's growing lack of faith; or, in other words, as Jeannot is co-opted into the history of Ganae, Michel must be forgotten, as exemplified by his forced retirement to Cuba.

Jeannot's disappearance is not just a part of social history; rather, he has been elevated to the same level as Christ and the Virgin Mary (if not Èsù). Since Jeannot is now a part of Ganae's religious history, its people are waiting for his return much like Vladimir and Estragon were waiting for Godot. Michel, on the other hand, has rejected Ganae's history of Jeannot by refusing to bring the potentially new saviour of young Frédéric to the people. For him there is no other life. For him, the history of the country, along with his own personal history, have both been a sham that cannot be reconciled by simply waiting for Jeannot.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Some critics, however, have made too much of the connection between Haiti and Ganæ. For instance, see Wilentz and Elie. Curiously, the latter critic assumes the dedication of the novel, "To Jean," is in reference to Aristide rather than Moore's wife.

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