BONNIE COSTELLO:
Marianne Moore’s Wild Decorum

Marianne Moore at her best is a poet of wild decorum, combining high civility with energy and inclusiveness, propriety with sincerity. This inevitably tense combination suggests that Moore, like other American poets, felt a continuing ambivalence about our European heritage and our native vitality. The old-world values of tradition and culture grow static and superficial in excess; the new, frontier values of freedom and originality are precarious and tend to become crude and rapacious. Moore’s poetry situates itself in the center of this tension, presenting no compromise but a lively struggle toward an ideal fusion. Her ideal “literalists of the imagination” would write a poetry in which art and nature become one, in which refinement and invention, stability and freedom are not at odds. “In the meantime,” she writes, “if you demand on the one hand, the raw material of poetry in all its rawness and that which is on the other hand/genuine, you are interested in poetry” (CP, 267).

Marianne Moore is a difficult poet to place in literary history. She joined other modernists in the revolution of the word, by challenging the conventions of poetic discourse with her inclusive lexicon, her singular choice of subject matter, her imagery, her heightened particularity, her appropriation of fragments from an open range of sources, her conspicuous spatial designating of the page. In no other poet do we find words like “contractile," “expanded," “columns," “ears," “eyes," “that can dilate," “hair that can rise," “wings," “plumes," “feathers." Moore’s poetry is a complex stew of the new and the old, the old-world values of tradition and the scholastic philosophy of the wilderness. It is not the dime-novel exterior, Niagra Falls, the calico horses and the war-canoe; it is not that “if the fur is not finer than such as one sees others wear, one would rather be without it” — that estimated in raw meat and berries, we could feed the universe; it is not the atmosphere of ingenuity, the otter, the beaver, the puma skins without shooting-irons or dogs; it is not the plunder, but “accessibility to experience.”

Our initial reaction to this poem may well resemble the poet’s reaction to New York in an earlier version of the poem: “One must stand outside and laugh since to go in is to be lost.” Standing outside, we observe a dizzying display of images swept along in rapid succession by clause after dense clause and suspended climax. The beginning and ending of the poem appear simple enough, but there are few closures between. As the poem increases its momentum the more arresting phrases tend to pull away from the very long sentences. What can Moore mean by “the scholastic philosophy of the wilderness" and other rich phrases that stretch across wide territories of reference to make its point? The quotation marks around many of these phrases demand further efforts of attention. Yet the poem proceeds without grammatical pause on its path toward the epigrammatic and enigmatic conclusion, emphasizing “not the plunder, but ‘accessibility to experience.’” Armed with a few key oppositions (plunder/accessibility; nature/culture) we trace the path of our attention back through the poem’s descriptive banter to find a place that reaches across city and wilderness through with a “far cry,” where hard pastoral and high urbanity are oddly complicitous. Trapper, tourist and fop—all plunderers and appropriators—face a wilderness that, strangely, surpasses human elegance. Country and city do not divide.
New York" includes the classic images of the American sublime—the Appalachian range, Niagara Falls—only finally to invoke a subject less containable, less material, and less sensational than these clichés, a truer sublime of the imagination. America has long been identified with the sublime; the vastness and variety of its landscape, the austere beauty and challenge of its mountains and deserts, have drawn the praise of artists and writers since the eighteenth century. But the experience of this power requires tremendous restraint as well as imaginative strength; in order to know the infinite, one must put aside the urge to possess or conquer what one sees. Keats's concept of "negative capability," but more locally Emerson's "transparent eyeball" in which "all mean egotism" vanishes, served as a central* closure. She avoids definitive openings as well. In a sense the poem has made of glass that will bend—a much needed invention? metaphors ought to suggest—clear, thorough, resonant, work that builds, with writing. It demonstrates, once again, that intelligence in poetry need not be a cold light nor a clinic for irony. This is work that explicates the emotion without exploiting it, work that builds, with patience, from the interior."—Stanley Plumly February 1987 $15.95 cloth, $7.95 paper

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“Picking perlirnuckles from the cracks”
or killing prey with the concentric crushing rigor of the python, it hovers forward “spider-fashion”on its arms” misleadingly like lace: its “ghastly pallor changing
to the green metallic rime of an ammenos-starred pool.”

Moore's strategy, as in "New York," is to disarm us, to shake our expectations and orientations in order to immerse us in a new reality. The representational subject, the glacier, remains unnamed, so that the initial comparison obstructs rather than enhances the illusion of the scene. No explicit thematic or narrative orientation helps us resist the flux of image and perspective. Our only source of identification is an abrupt, unidentified "you" as hypothetical witness. The poem continues to hurl us through its wounding depths and surfaces, and though we discover where we are: (the glacial Mt. Rainier, which Moore calls Mt. Tacoma), Moore never permits us to settle into the scene or to construct the comfortable dwelling of an idea or a perspective.

But what, if anything, makes this descriptive poem, which does not plainly objectify landscape or rely on an idea, more than labyrinthine nonsense? What in the poem demands our attention and makes us continually willing to adjust it? Looking closely at the first few sentences, we are unnerved primarily by the drastic eerie shifts the poem makes. We read "an octopus of ice" and look for the resolution of terms, since an octopus is usually associated with fluid movement, ice with rigidity. Instead we are faced with another contrast in the opposite direction: the octopus seems "reserved and flat," stable, but lies "beneath a sea of shifting snow-dunes." This disorientation is not overcome when the images cross purposes, as they do with "dots of cyclamen-red and maroon on its clearly defined pseudo-podia." It is easy enough to cope with the idea that red flowers are a glacial mountain look, from a distance, like red dots on the legs of an octopus, but the ease of that distinction is lost in incongruity: we have red flowers on the feet of an octopus. The fact that the feet are "pseudo-podia" and that this term has a secondary reference to psychic illusion as well as a primary one to a zoological phenomenon heightens the uncertainty.

A certain quantum of Moore's power here comes simply from the verbal disorientation identified with visual disorientation. Our experience as readers is further complicated by the fact that not only our perspective but the glacier shifts. At this point we are provided with a unified image to describe a fluid glass, a "much needed invention." But "glass that will bend" contradicts our ordinary experience of glass. The
focus of the poem splits again: "comprising twenty-eight ice fields from fifty to five hundred feet thick, of unimagined delicacy." The ice-octopus moves on, challenging our comprehension, "picking periwinkles from the cracks" or "killing prey with the concentric crushing rigor of the python." Now the analogy has spread to include not only "an octopus of ice," but pythons, spiders, ghosts, and glitter, and its visual ambiguity has become animistic. The experience of reading the poem becomes analogous to the experience of sublime disorientation in beholding the landscape. The totality cannot be taken in at a glance or from a single point of view, but depends instead on a continually suspended and shifting order, forming and reforming an experience of reality larger than the mind's constructions. As in "New York," Moore contrasts the "uneconomic action of the glacier" and its remarkable "capacity for fact" (for widely various and remarkable particularity) with the complacent generalizations of touristic and mercantile sensibilities that visit it. It might seem odd to ascribe capacity to a phenomenon of inanimate nature, but Moore goes on to make bold comparisons between this landscape and certain mental attitudes: aligning it with those of the Greeks, who "liked smoothness," and contrasting it with that of Henry James, who "damned by the public for decorum": not decorum, but restraint. Such historical or literary digressions in a poem of landscape description find precedent in some eighteenth-century poems—Thomson's "The Seasons," Cowper's "The Task"—that may now seem unfamiliar and strange. But Moore's "digressions" also have affinities with the bold modernist juxtapositions of past and present, concrete and abstract, high and low diction, that one finds in Pound and Eliot. The logic behind the digressions in these poems is that the mountain objectifies the aesthetic ideals Moore herself most admires. Individual lines, while describing the glacier's effects, seem to have peculiarly self-reflective force: "Neatness of finish! Neatness of finish!" by incessantly piling lines of green, white with concussion, its "flushing lanes of perpendicular lightning" with its "great solid stains like long slabs of green marble," incomparably accurate is the nature of this octopus with its capacity for fact." Does nature direct art or imitate it in such lines? Moore's poetry does not attempt to copy nature or to shape it to her mind, but rather to find parallels for mutual expression.
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Lynda Hull

Among Moore's poems, "The Fish" (CP, 32-33) comes closest to inversion. That is, to meeting the criteria Pound laid out in 1913 of visual concentration, undeterred representational presence, nonmetrical rhythms. Moore's conceptual pattern does not compromise or compete with, but rather coincides with the objective presentation of an aquatic world. All the metaphors relate to the visual description and the reader is easily captivated by the graceful movements and fragile textures of the poem.

THE FISH

wade
through black jade.

Of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one keeps
adjusting the ash-heaps;
opening and shutting itself like

an injured fan.
The barnacles which encrust the side of the
water, cannot hide
there for the submerged shafts of the
sun.

split like spars.
glare, more themselves with spotlight softness
into the crevices—
in and out, illuminating
the

irrational sea
of bodies.

(11.17)

While the concepts do not intrude upon the imagined beholding, many of the metaphors introduce qualities extraneous to the objects themselves. The mussel shell is not injured, though it may look like an injured fan. Black jade, ash heaps, and similar images suggest an idea of archolog-

Against the measured, the balanced, the conscious, Moore poses an uncontainable life at the boundary of the natural and the supernatural, of literal and mythic truth. The basilisk, the unicorn, the sea monster form a menagerie of magical realism. The imaginary garden with real tails in it is a prototypical grotesque image, crossing boundaries of beauty and ugliness, truth and fiction, pleasure and fear, to force the mind into a new unity. Like Moore's subjects, her poems inhabit an ambivalent zone where the real and the imaginary intersect and order meets contrary order. Her "capacity for fact" and representational accuracy become surprisingly compatible with conspicuous artifice and imaginative invention. Especially here, in the treatment of nature, Moore is distinguishable from romantic poets and their modern American descendants. The "time of the fish. For the Romantics the grotesque became a locus of synthesis between the mind and the outer world; a spiritual and transcendent nature was awakened by and also awakened the imaginative beholder. Imagists pushed the apostrophes of self in objects even further toward the intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." This poetic stance faltered, however, in its confusion of poetic and representational space, and engendered a crisis in the poetry of objectivism. Moore and others emphasized the importance of clear seeing, of accuracy and economy in presenting things in themselves. They tried to cleanse objects of hackneyed or vague associations. But at the same time they eschewed old ideas of mirroring nature and declared the autonomy of the imagination. Thus the work of this period often seems propelled by opposite forces, one moving toward the observed object, the other toward imaginative construction. Moore integrated these forces inventively, in ways that suggested how one might become a literalist of the imagination. She reinstated rhetoric and artifice (targets of romanticism) not only in form, but in association, so that her images take on, at times, an allegorical character. Yet she preserved the naturalism of speech and imagination by the niceties, allowing it to work more independently of ideas, rather than trying to integrate or fuse these elements.

Among Moore's poems, "The Fish" (CP, 32-33) comes closest to inversion. That is, to meeting the criteria Pound laid out in 1913 of visual concentration, undeterred representational presence, nonmetrical rhythms. Moore's conceptual pattern does not compromise or compete with, but rather coincides with the objective presentation of an aquatic world. All the metaphors relate to the visual description and the reader is easily captivated by the graceful movements and fragile textures of the poem.
Recurrent examples remind us that this poet can write appealing prose on a wide range of subjects.

Moore’s insistent themes—of fortitude in the face of mortality, of defiance in the face of abuse and adversity—emerge as the concerns that have directed the eye across the object. But they do not overwhelm or subvert the object. Particularity of observation itself is thematicized in Moore as a defense against moral complacency, and here objective detail most descriptive, imagistic poems are only about their subjects in a conceptual sense, never fully reducing them to the invisible. Thus equality between image and idea may prove confusing to the reader in search of the "message," but delightful to the reader willing to trace the drama of observation and reflection.

Moore was inspired by the writings of the English critic John Ruskin, who elevated seeing to a moral value. In her notebooks she recorded this passage from Modern Painters: "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion, all in one." (Ruskin stressed as well the moral lessons to be learned from representation of nature is not an end but a means in poetry, the end being pleasure and instruction. The descriptive method, by its very particularity, allows for greater openness of association than the depiction of a central moral or historical moment, which we are more likely to prejudge. But as we’ve seen in "An Octopus," even Moore’s most descriptive, imagistic poems are only about their subjects in a limited sense. Their subjects are always instances of Moore’s aesthetic and moral predilections.

What distinguishes Moore from several other modernists of her period is the balance she achieves between representational and allegorical objectives. William Carlos Williams waged a war on symbols and clung to the particular. Wallace Stevens, on the other hand, took the symbol as the principle that is hid, the contours of the image while developing her symbolic argument. Will Power’s “To a Snail” (CP, 55) demonstrates her treatment of the image as emblem, that is, as object and attitude at once. She cleaves to the contours of the image while developing her symbolic argument.

TO A SNAIL

If "compression is the first grace of style," you have it. Concretion is a virtue as modesty is a virtue. It is not the acquisition of any one thing that is able to adorn, or the incidental quality that occurs as a concomitant of something well said, that we value in style, but the principle that is hid: in the absence of feet, "a method of conclusions"; "a knowledge of principles," in the curious phenomenon of your occipital horn.

Clearly the purpose of this poem is not to describe a snail, but rather to define the moral and aesthetic virtue of "contractility," of which the poem is an example. Yet the snail remains an integral part of the definition. The "absence of feet" puns on the image and the prosody, but the image has the last word here. The je ne sais quoi of poetry is the "occipital horn" of the snail—a suggestive object, connecting the head and shell, form and content perhaps, just as the occipital bone in the human body connects head and torso, mind and body. In searching for the meaning behind the values so eloquently presented, we must return to the vehicle by which they are presented. We observe that the poem does not identify compression with generalizing reduction; the concept finds its simplicity in an image, not in a slogan. Nuance is of the essence.
as the image of the occipital horn suggests. Nor is compression connected with conformity or uniformity. The singular small, intricate yet of a piece, cannot be reproduced.

The language of “To a Snail” is as emblematic as its image: the sentences are long and winding, there are many polysyllabic words, yet the image on the page is a neat block. In revising the poem, Moore listened to the lesson she was teaching, weeding out redundancy and seeking increasing compactness. Moore derived her conceptual forms, as in her poem on the snail, from Renaissance emblems, in which a picture was appended to a moral epigram. The assumption behind this classical form was that the world is a book in which divine instructions could be read. The emblem gave sensuous immediacy to intellectual concepts and dwelled, Moore works with a cleaner lens, juxtaposing what she sees to a human situation rather than blurring the two terms. The poem goes on to develop a brilliant convergence of Classical allusion and biological detail.

In writing “The Paper Nautilus” (CP, 121–122) Moore was probably aware of a famous earlier American poem, Oliver Wendell Holmes’s “The Chambered Nautilus.” Both poems employ the image in order to recommend an analogous human stance—the idea of progress in Holmes, the idea of nurturing creativity in Moore. Yet Moore’s conceptualization clings far more than Holmes’s to the contours of the object. Where Holmes sees “the lowest pearl,” in which “dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,” Moore works with a cleaner lens, juxtaposing what she sees to a human situation rather than blurring the two terms. The poem goes on to develop a brilliant convergence of Classical allusion and biological detail.

For authorities whose hopes are shaped by mercenary? Writers entwined by teatime fame and by commuters’ comforts? Not for these the paper nautilus constructs her thin glass shell.

With her touchstone of the genuine, Moore inspects household truths and revises their meanings by renewing their connection to images. Choosing the delicate Paper Nautilus, which grows temporary arms to protect its eggs, over the more spectacular Chambered Nautilus, which leaves a series of empty chambers in its pursuit of “stateliers mansions,” Moore comments upon Holmes’s wasteful vision of mankind’s destiny. In her poetry, the spineless jellyfish embodies all elusive charms, and the mighty and massive elephant is a pattern of reverence and restraint. The objective of an image-centered aesthetic is not simply to bring ideas into connection with reality, but in the process to reexamine and renew those ideas. Moore is particularly fond of “inn” with the reminder that “inns are not residences.” The values of reserve and restraint need defending in a culture dominated by a superficial openness and demonstrativeness. In the midst of talkative America the virtue of silence is little understood, but “the deepest feeling always shows itself in silence,/not in sound, but in silence, but restraint.” To an audience so recently embracing Whitmanian self-expansion, Moore may seem archaic, a Ben Franklin of American poetry. But she is unique in offering traditional Protestant values and provided a meditative center, but it was essentially an allegorical rather than a descriptive mode. Moore does not, however, simply revert to classical means in her attempt to make a connection between ideas and things. Responding to the call of modernism for new rigor in the nexus of image and idea, Moore stretches the emblem convention far beyond its original uses. She expands the detail within the illustration, and draws conclusions which surprise and alter our expectations. The snail, usually a symbol of withdrawal, is now a symbol of active power and compression, and “hiding in a shell” takes on new potency.

For Moore, originality was not an aim but the inevitable byproduct of sincerity and individuality of vision. Moore’s revisions of cliché are local and reactive—she is no system builder or dogmatist. Yet seen together, her poems express coherent values, based on principles of restraint, economy, humility, privacy, values that oppose what she may have seen as a tide of American rapacity, waste and audacity. But within her values she preserves a paradoxical place for particularity, energy, individuality, and passion, traits she identified as characteristically American. Indeed, in her very insistence on going against the tide, in her repeated “nevertheless,” she is most American. Moore’s imagination seeks the occasion when a lapse has occurred, where some coarse or incomplete thinking requires her correction. She is fond of retort, of contrary vision, of refinements of interpretation that alter old sayings. Her goal is not one-upmanship (she often takes herself to task) but imaginative vitality. Among modernists she is perhaps the most vigorous exponent of the classical value of wit in all its connotations: ingenuity, inventiveness, irony, linguistic virtuosity. In “Silence” (CP, 91), for instance, she examines the cliché of American hospitality, “make my house your home,” reversing it to “inn” with the reminder that “inns are not residences.” The values of reserve and restraint need defending in a culture dominated by a superficial openness and demonstrativeness. In the midst of talkative America the virtue of silence in little understood, but “the deepest feeling always shows itself in silence, not in silence, but restraint.” To an audience so recently embracing Whitmanian self-expansion, Moore may seem archaic, a Ben Franklin of American poetry. But she is unique in offering traditional Protestant views.
values in a radical style. The values are affected by the style as much as by the style of the values, and we should not glance too quickly over what may seem like an archaic sense of propriety. Moore's poetry is radical as well in the sense of getting to the roots of ideas, to uncover their essential modernism is thus the opposite of nihilism. Other poets, especially American poets, were beginning to incorporate values in a radical style. The values are affected by the style as much as mortality, in particular, cannot be treated in easy generalities and vague values are strained and invigorated. Thus she is a paradox of radical and original meanings. As she expresses and exercises them, these producing obstacles to an easy acceptance of her judgment she persuades us of its daring and protects it from false assimilation. (She also indicates her own ambivalence.) As one who is so often quoting others, she may be "robbed of speech," but she has also preyed upon the speech of others. Other poets, especially American poets, were beginning to incorporate into art the qualities of violence and vulgarity they found in themselves and others, and in the American scene. Moore stood out as a defender of her own ambivalence. As one who is so often quoting others, she may be "robbed of speech," but she has also preyed upon the speech of others. Other poets, especially American poets, were beginning to incorporate into art the qualities of violence and vulgarity they found in themselves and others, and in the American scene. Moore stood out as a defender of the gentleman, to the qualities of restraint, deference, humility. Moore's modernism is thus the opposite of nihilism. Though the articulation of values is, for Moore, one of the essential tasks of poetry, she is by no means a dogmatic poet. She sets the compressed, directive rhetoric of wisdom (aphorism, epigram, maxim) against the comprehensive, digressive rhetoric of observation; extended metaphor becomes a vehicle to extended understanding. The true vitality of Moore's work is best experienced in whole poems, where the dramatic interplay of image and concept can be seen. The theme of mortality, in particular, cannot be treated in easy generalities and vague symbols. In "A Grave" Moore enters a tradition of poets associating the sea with death—Milton, Tennyson, Whitman, Poe and others. But she reequips herself with this association rather than simply inheriting it. The sea she depicts is not personified. Rather, it is indifference and difference from human concerns makes it a grave. Put phrases, conventional symbolism, all forms of mental complacency are grist for Moore's mill. But that keen resistance to cliché and unexamined statement makes her a hard poet to understand; the problem at times of Moore's tone and statement is exacerbated by her keen interest in how people talk and write. Quotation was one of her trademarks, but behind that conspicuous stylistic trait lies aesthetic conviction. No poet listened more carefully to the variables of speech and the forms of humility or pride. Her ear was as remarkable as her eye. The self of these poems is not explicit but known in acts of attention, selection and arrangement. The Moore archives represent a testament to her voracious imagination, which drew from such sources as cocktail party talk, reviews, fashion columns, moral essays, and zoological features. But these texts undergo considerable alteration in meaning and even in phrasing as they are integrated into Moore's imaginative constructions. In "Poetry," for instance, Moore's paradoxical remark that the ideal poet will be "literalist of the imagination" has a significantly different meaning from Yeats's antithetical remark that Blake was too literal a realist of the imagination. In "An Octopus," Moore draws on the bureaucratic language of a National Park Rules and Regulations manual and the flaccid language of a feature article on octopi in the Illustrated London News, but she fuses these into one dazzling image of the mountain, of art, of subtlety. The poem offers natural description, aesthetic reflection, and witty parody, in widening, Jamesian sentences. Over two-thirds of it is acknowledged quotation. Moore's approach to her materials is inclusive and expansive. Rather, its expansive poet continually challenges us to weigh for ourselves the authority of each remark, though her arrangement may guide us. Her method is very different from Eliot's mythical centering of esoteric allusion, and from Williams' alternation in Paterson of the poet's lyric voice and the prosaic materials around him. Moore's quotations are an integral part of her lyric stance; mundane materials are processed to become part of the final art.

Moore's distinct being reveals itself in choiciness and in what it chooses rather than in self-dramatization. While she will not discriminate against "business documents or schoolbooks," she will decide what excerpts from these might be suitable material for poetry.
While she rebels against conventional hierarchies of class, she remains, as she proudly admits, fastidious on moral and aesthetic grounds too. In an era when avant-garde poetry prided itself on poetic license as a new sort of realism, she knew hers was a lonely endeavor.

Moore's option of the remarks that she quotes varies considerably and is not always obvious. The alternative to cliché and narrow-mindedness is an open, relativistic discussion that resists paradigms in twists and turns of response to the discourse around it. The speaking self may be present as manner but is seldom present as content or referent. But Moore's reclusion should not be mistaken for imperspicacity. Though she might agree with Eliot that there is a difference between the man who suffers and the poet who creates, a distinct "personality" does emerge in this poetry, and even, more specifically, a "style." We do not require the first person to know that Moore's life was full of struggle, that she developed a means of vigorous survival, that she was driven by a relentless search for the genuine, a commitment to propriety and humility maintained under much strain and ambivalence, a form of curiosity displaced from the realm of experience into the realm of observation. By clinging to the particular, and standing more as observer than as narcissistic agent in the world, she may not let us in on the secrets of the private life, but she does make clear for us the shape, form and rhythm of the inner life.

In Moore's moral world, the self that declares itself too readily is not only vulnerable but also false and shallow, a "tree trunk without roots sunk into its own rights to itself like a shell." In "Black Earth." While Moore's poetry is constantly celebrating, as means of self-protection, the value of indirectness and its related values of modesty and restraint, she asks us to understand these in a special way. Moore's armor protects this from her own capriciousness as much as from the aggressions of the outer world. Her poem "His Shield" (CP, 144) - about Presbyter John who reigned over an abundant kingdom without fear of siege-celebrates humility, not repression or abdication. Poems present themselves as vulnerable and unsusceptible, which make one vulnerable and unsusceptible. "His shield was his humility," she says of Presbyter John, but it did not dare others to challenge him. He was able to preserve his great wealth because he did not fear the loss of it. The warning "be dull, don't be envied or armed with a measuring rod," is not directed at the powerless or undistinguished, but precisely at those who would maintain boundless power, excellence and freedom. Here is an "unconquerable country of unpunished gusto." That is so often the theme of Moore's poetry as to become its major value, but it is a highly ambiguous one. At its limit, such an ethos denies selfhood. It is a value associated with Protestantism, and also traditionally with the feminine. Moore elevates this virtue above the traditionally masculine secular virtues of originality, authority, dominance. Whether Moore has changed the nature of humility with her change of its status is uncertain, except in the important respect that she makes the virtuous active rather than passive. Humility no longer signifies inferiority, nor does rectitude signify the absence of thought or intention. Moore sets up a dramatic tension between inner and outer expression, the "dullness" of an exterior almost requisite to a sublime interior. Power and freedom within this ratio are defined as private attributes first, but as public ones in consequence.

Moore's reticence about her personal experience, her emphasis on discretion, restraint and humility, and her elusive stance, make her an ideal poet for feminist analysis. Some critics have insisted on the expression of personal material in her work as a sign of submission to male literary standards. But this view in turn privileges a confessional standard inappropriate to Moore's work. If we look at the poems within their own aesthetic standard, based on response to the assertions of others rather than on self-assertion, we find a feminism that is the natural extension of a larger search for the genuine.

Moore's commitment to women's rights was fervent from the beginning. In Carlisle she belonged to the Woman's Suffrage Party of Pennsylvania, and her scrapbooks include numerous flyers and pamphlets obtained at suffrage rallies. She was by no means a dogmatic advocate of women's right to vote, however. Her poetry contains numerous satires and critiques of female as well as male vanity. "To Roses Only," "These Various Scapels," and other early poems call upon women to understand the self-defeating nature of their vanity and obsession with glamorous surfaces. But if she exhorts women to look into their own resources, and to beware the trap of beauty, she also corrects false public assumptions about women's nature. Typically, Moore begins with certain popular biases or assumptions and turns them upside down. "Sojourn in the Whale" (CP, 90), ostensibly about Ireland, challenges dismissive concepts of feminine temperament:

"There is a feminine temperament in direct contrast to ours, which makes her do these things. Circumscribed by a heritage of blindness and native incompetence, she will become wise and will be forced to give in. Compelled by experience, she will turn back;

water seeks its own level,
and you have smiled. "Water in motion is far from level." You have seen it, when obstacles happen to bar the path, rise automatically.

Moore's armor protects the self from its own rapaciousness as much as from the obsessions of others. Power and freedom within this ratio are defined as private attributes first, but as public ones in consequence.
“The Paper Nautilus,” about the feminine activity of hatching eggs but also about the creative process, contrasts the nurturing with the mercantile sensibility. Here, Moore breaks down the easy conventional may have occasioned these reflections (her friend H.D.’s marriage to Richard Aldington, Scofield Thayer’s proposal of marriage to Moore herself) are conspicuously omitted. The poem appears to be a commonplace book organized around the topic of marriage, but it is both more universal and more particular than this. Many of the quotations have originally little or nothing to do with marriage (so that we are given the sense of a larger world brought to bear on this topic). A review of Santayana’s poems becomes the source of a description of Adam as “something feline, something colubrine.” An article in Scientific American on “Multiple Consciousness or Reflex Action of Unaccustomed Range,” becomes the source of a portrait of Eve as “able to write simultaneously in three languages.” As Moore herself remarks in her notes to the poem, these are “statements that took my fancy which I tried to arrange plausibly.” But within that apparent casualness a deliberate argument, parodying the conventional mystique of each sex, but finally celebrating the mystery of their attachment, emerges. Moore never agrees difference in “Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns,” like the chasm in “What Are Years” that “in its surrendering finds its continuing.” Not only is the “strange experience of beauty” something that Moore, like Adam and Eve, has known, but the captivity that results from it may have its own transcendental claims, despite its absurdity. Marriage is a paradoxical state indeed, but Moore’s imagination thrives on paradox.

Marriage, like every other subject in Moore’s work, is but an instance of a larger one. It is the marriage of the couples, the marriage between our state, commencing in romance and persisting in warfare. Much of the work in apparent autonomy from the poem’s statements, they spring more apparent than in the formal design of Moore’s poems and its wide concept of dynamic unity. Nowhere is this idea of dynamic unity more apparent than in the formal design of Moore’s poems and its relation to the rhetorical design. The short line of “Marriage,” running without break down nine pages, streamlines the poem, in contrast to its expansive language, its lexical and contextual density, its syntactic spirals. The reader rides this “rapid transit” (as Williams called it), through the mind’s changing terrain, taking in the poem’s thoughts and images at a pace faster than he can take in sentences. Thus the form of the poem not only offers an area of clarity and continuity, but also opens the mind to new units of thought, the line, the clause, the phrase, which invigorate meaning and redistribute emphasis in the sentence.

While Moore joined other modernists in breaking with traditional English forms, she by no means moved toward formlessness. Rather, she designed poems in which visual, aural, and linguistic designs operate in independent, even contrapuntally. Finding the iambic, endstopped line too insistent, too predictable, she preferred an aurally unobstrusive emptiness that in other poems is a source of paradoxical strength. This content downloaded from 128.197.26.12 on Mon, 13 Nov 2017 21:16:52 UTC All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms
from them. Moore would often write down a first stanza in free verse, as naturally as "drapery might fall," (that is, already with the sense of staging a portrait); she would then look for rhymes within the stanza, and reshape it to draw out these rhymes. The syllabic pattern of this first stanza would then serve as a kind of "chromosome" for subsequent stanzas.

The rhymes in such poems tend to accent minor words, even syllables, and follow no rigid scheme, providing writer and reader with more discovery than confirmation. We saw in "The Fish" how Moore’s descriptive language pulls free of the poem’s moral reflections. Similarly, the sharp visual design and the rhyme patterns of this poem counteract the movement of the sentences and paragraphs. Moore breaks whole stanzas in the middle of words and rhymes where the emphasis of the spoken word least falls. The patterns working asymmetrically in the poem sustain its energy and keep the reader’s responses open. "In the Days of Prismatic Color" (CP, 41–2), for instance, uses a five line syllabic stanza that rhymes on such minor words as "wax" and "because," or "it" and "fit"; it breaks lines and even whole stanzas on small or hyphenated words, never at the end of a sentence or even of a clause. Thus the formal patterning of the poem yields to forces other than the statement. This makes the poem impress us as more than statement, and causes us to re-examine the images into new semantic units. This is of course the perfect poem for such innovations in form, as it tells us that truth cannot be shaped into baroque symmetries. The poem explicitly attacks conventional metrics:

In the short-legged, fitful advance, the gorging and all the minute—**we have the classic multitude of feet. To what purpose? Truth is no Apollo**

Bacchic, no formal thing. The wave may go over it if it likes.

Know that it will be there when it says, "I shall be there when the wave has gone by."

(B II 4–29)

Moore will not enslave herself to her own inventions any more than to adopted ones. As though to demonstrate truth’s recalcitrance, she breaks with the stanza pattern of five lines she has employed throughout the poem, and concludes with only four.

While Moore rejectedmetrical verse form, her poems are, especially in later books, highly musical. Her timing was as inventive as her spacing. She was attracted in music, as in all things, to contrapuntal effects. Indeed, the music of "The Jerboa" (CP, 10–15) seems designed to accompany the subject’s uneven yet rhythmic movement:

By fifths and sevenths, in leaps of two lengths, like the uneven notes

of the Bedouin flute, it stops its gleaning

on little wheel castors, and makes fern-seed foot-prints with kangaroo speed.

(B II 147–152)

"Bird-Witted" (CP, 105–111) uses a sprightly but tugging beat that resists the more obvious musical shape of iambics but nonetheless uses long and short stresses to move it forward:

With innocent wide penguin eyes, three

large fiddling mocking-birds below

the grey-yellow tree,

stand in a row,

wings touching, feebly solemn,

all they are

their no longer larger

mother bringing

something which will partially feed one of them.

(B II 1–10)

Laurence Stapleton has observed the contrast between the squeak of baby birds and the more melodious sounds of the grown bird, a contrast which becomes "an expert dissonance" at the end in response to the "intelectually cautiously cackling cat" whose pace is itself paralleled in sound. Moore’s music is by no means mimetic. Sound parallels themes, but does not strictly accompany it. The music, whatever resonance it may have with images or concepts, is not enslaved to or enlivened by any other structural system in the poem. The poet prefers a pattern of dissonance and coincidence to a redundant harmony.

Moore shaped syntax and rhetoric just as consciously as she worked the more external materials of sound and visual pattern. Her language is impeccable, but uncooperative; it stretches to the breaking point without violating its rules, so that we become diverted from the referential world of the poem and drawn into the formal shapes the language is constructing. Main clauses lose their authority in the counterweight of subordinate clause, so that the false security of immediate comprehension gives way to the greater pleasure of adventure in meaning. Moore ensures that the tools of language are no longer transparent vehicles of meaning, but become part of the surface, just as modern visual artists made the two dimensional canvas, the paint, and the shaping of pictorial space part of their activity. Again Moore heightens the tension between unitifying and diversifying elements in the poem.
setting lexical variety, lists, variations on a theme, and most often, classifications against the rhetorical repetitions.

Marianne Moore introduced a new way of thinking about language, borrowing qualities from each of the subgroups that surround them. "England" (CP, 46-47) sees nations as surpassing classification. The poem is organized by national identity, but the range of material within each identity, abstract and concrete, objective and subjective, physical and spiritual, places tension at the boundaries of the description. The characterization of "The East with its snails, its emotional shorthand and jade cockroaches, its rock crystal and its imperturbability/all of museum quality" requires considerable pause, though the confident syntax pulls us on and forces us to accept the grouping. The line-named entities are America, which seems to have so composite an identity that anything can be found there. America has a right to excellence, Moore argues, since superiority "has never been confined to one locality." Not even titles rule too heavily over the poems—England is simply the first word of a poem that turns out to be about the delights of diversity and the right of America to be considered the equal of any other nation.

Throughout her career, Moore experimented with long and short forms, and this alternation is itself an example of a general vacillation between compressed insight and expansion. Her tendency to observe and describe particularity plays against her tendency to pitiful epigram and witty retort. The distinction became a contest in "Poetry" when she reduced the sixty-line poem to its four opening lines, but published the original version, at her editor's request, in her notes. In most poems, however, the two tendencies create dynamic energy in the structure: the closing line resisted by the momentum of description. In Moore, the relationship between data and conclusion, between enumeration and summary, finish and neatness, is a matter of internal rhythm, a continuing alternation rather than pattern of governance in this alteration her art of wild decorum emerges. It is a decorum that manages to articulate order without stifling change, that directs the mind without disenchanting it. For the mind, it tells us, "conscientious inconsistency." All Moore's models of order are dynamic and relative, not authoritarian or programmatic ones, and her own work proves true to her aesthetic project, as every "unconfusion submits its confusion to proof."

Moore's intention in designing these poems of classification is to break down the boundaries of each group. Moore's most attractive animals, like the plumet basilisk or the pangolin, seem to surpass nomenclature, to name the territories between the subgroups that surround them. England and America, for example, are beyond the reach of classification. The poem is organized by national identity, but the range of material within each identity, abstract and concrete, objective and subjective, physical and spiritual, places tension at the boundaries of the description. The characterization of "The East with its snails, its emotional shorthand and jade cockroaches, its rock crystal and its imperturbability/all of museum quality" requires considerable pause, though the confident syntax pulls us on and forces us to accept the grouping. The line-named entities are America, which seems to have so composite an identity that anything can be found there. America has a right to excellence, Moore argues, since superiority "has never been confined to one locality." Not even titles rule too heavily over the poems—England is simply the first word of a poem that turns out to be about the delights of diversity and the right of America to be considered the equal of any other nation.

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Marianne Moore introduced a new way of thinking about language and its responsibilities and possibilities. Her identification of moral and aesthetic values is not merely a return to neo-classical notions of correctness, but a new consciousness of the weight of style in culture and the importance of art to the perception of values. Moore's willingness to make every matter of form a matter of ethics, to wrench the art of poetry back into the world of consequences. This return to poetic responsibility about the nature and function of poetry, informed by a modernist self-consciousness about language and decorum, is typical of Moore's bidirectional stance in literary history. While her technique proves true to her aesthetic project, as every "unconfusion submits its confusion to proof."

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comprehension of the reader, that teaches in paradoxes and reacts to other stances rather than confining its own? Perhaps it is best described as a poetry of imagination in a dance with fact, imagination both aesthetic and moral, aware of its difference from the world, but also its harmonies with it. It is a poetry of enchantment and vigorous evaluation, oddly both formalist and didactic, making these interchangeable. The poem “Poetry” tells us something about what is at stake: judgment and discrimination, but also a feeling for diversity, for value, for the genuine.

Notes
1. Marianne Moore, Complete Poems (New York: Viking, 1981), 267. Subsequent citations are given in the text, abbreviated CP.
3. Cited in Moore (CP, 267): “ ‘Literalists of the imagination/ Yeats, Ideas of Good and Evil (A.H. Bullen, 1903), p. 182. ‘The limitation of his view was from the very intensity of his vision; he was a too literal realist of imagination, as others are of nature; and because he believed that the figures seen by the mind’s eye, when exalted by inspiration, were “eternal existences,” symbols of divine essences, he hated every grace of style that might obscure their lineaments.””

MARIANNE MOORE—Vision into verse
The Rosenbach Museum & Library in Philadelphia is celebrating the centennial of Marianne Moore’s birth with a traveling exhibition, Vision into verse, drawn from their Moore Collection. The exhibition will be at the Museum at 2010 Delancey Street until April 24. From May 7 to August 2 it can be seen at the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago. It then moves to the Grolier Club in New York from September 15 to December 1, followed by the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. from December 15 to February 15, 1988.

C.K. Williams’s essay “Poetry and Consciousness,” which appeared in the January/February 1987 issue of APR (Vol. 16/No. 1), was first given as a talk at “Creativity and Adolescence,” the Eastern Seaboard Conference of the American Society for Adolescent Psychiatry, September 27, 1986.

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