THE POLITICS OF MARIANNE MOORE’S POETRY OF IRELAND: 1917-1941

Although when Marianne Moore published “Spenser’s Ireland” in 1941, she had not been to Ireland—calling it “the greenest place I’ve never seen”—she did think of herself as Irish at least some of the time. Here are the facts: her father’s side of the family was English, but Moore never knew her father and had no contact with his relatives until she was almost 60; her mother’s side called themselves Scotch-Irish. The Craig family was among the early seventeen-century Scottish “undertakers” who were granted confiscated land in Ulster in 1610; in 1719, the Craigs emigrated from Ireland to what would become Pennsylvania, where they intermarried for several generations. Moore’s great-grandfather Warner left Dublin in the early nineteenth century, marrying an Irish woman from Monaghan soon after his immigration. In 1917 and 1941, Moore published poems on Ireland, and in 1962 she published a dramatization of Maria Edgeworth’s novel The Absentee. When she was seventy-seven years old, in 1964, Moore traveled to Ireland with two college friends.

Because of the large number of Irish immigrants to the U.S. from the early eighteenth century on, the Irish were a common topic of political journalism and public commentary during Moore’s youth. Writing home from Bryn Mawr College about a visiting lecturer in 1907, Moore reports that in “[speak[ing] of races composite and otherwise,” Dr. Mahaffy “said the Irish were chiefly Norman as seen in the names Fitzgerald Fitzmorris and others, [and] that the Irish melodies were from a different race, low class (as were the Celtic Irishisms people are so fond of calling ‘Irish’).” As Moore’s report of this lecture suggests, even among the group popularly called “Irish,” distinctions were made. “Scotch-Irish” was a designation used by many Protestant Irish immigrant families who sought to differentiate themselves from the more recent wave of relatively poor and Catholic Irish. While the Craig family prided themselves on their Scotch-Irish descent, Moore referred to herself as Irish, refusing the implied hierarchies of the hyphenated “Scotch.” Moore and her family spoke openly of their heritage. In 1914, for example, Marianne reported to her mother from the newspaper “that they were thinking of reestablishing the Jews in Palestine but that the Jews weren’t sure they wanted to go”; “Well,” her mother replied, “how would you feel if you were told you would have to collect your possessions and set sail for Ireland tomorrow?” (22 January 1914; RML VI.20.02). Five years later, when Ezra Pound responded to Moore’s poem about a black elephant by asking if she were “a jet black Ethiopian Othello-hued,” she informed him in the middle of a paragraph of similarly run-on sentences: “I am Irish by descent, possibly Scotch...
also, but purely Celtic, was graduated from Bryn Mawr in 1909 and taught shorthand, typewriting and commercial law at the government Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, from 1911 until 1915. Moore ends this paragraph of “personal data”—after providing extensive information about other aspects of her family and personal life—with the conclusion, “and I am altogether a blond and have red hair.”

By combining without hierarchy, or even the division of separate sentences, information revealing class, religion, national background, education, employment history, personal appearance, family circumstances, and idiosyncratic details (like the fact that she owns a “toy elephant”), Moore veils the importance of any one factor alone. She is not “white” or “American” in response to Pound’s “black” and “Ethiopian,” but “purely Celtic”—a designation that was at different points understood as “white,” “low class” (as Mahaffy puts it), and “black” in the United States, especially during the massive influx of impoverished Irish immigrants during the mid-nineteenth century, known as the black Irish, or simply as black. Her response confounds Pound’s assumption that such distinctions need to be set apart while also affirming a “purely Celtic” background. At the same time, Moore—like her family—was Anglophilic. She read and admired many English authors and in 1911, when she and her mother took their first trip to the continent, they chose to visit only England, Scotland, and France.

In 1917, however, Moore published a poem called “Sojourn in the Whale” in which she associates herself closely with Ireland. When writing the poem, Moore and her mother had just moved in with her brother in New Jersey. For the first time in her life, she was now within easy commuting distance of Manhattan, and spent a great deal of her time with the artists and poets she was beginning to know well there. Because of the time she spent on trains, she jokingly called this her “Middle Pullman period.” She had been publishing poems for about two years, many of them strongly anti-war or feminist or both, and many containing a strong note of anger or rebellion. For example, the brief “To Be Liked By You Would Be A Calamity” is a gem of polite abuse, and “To A Steamroller” is wittily devastating in its portrayal of a figure incapable of budging from its position and wanting to “crush” all other perspectives down to the level of its own “block.” In the poem “Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel” she asks, “What is war / For; / Is it not a sore / On this life’s body?” and she addresses “Military Progress” like an individual, accusingly: “You use your mind / like a millstone to grind / chaff. You polish it / and with your warped wit / laugh // at your torso.” The military industrial complex is as dumb as a fairytale giant, capable only of “warped” self-involved humor and terrible destruction.
Moore's pacifism, however, received a jolt sometime in 1917, when her brother Warner joined the U.S. Navy as a chaplain, and then set sail early in 1918, after the U.S. had entered the war. No correspondence is available between the fall of 1916 and the summer of 1918 that reveals Moore's thoughts on this subject. Later poems suggest that she came to accept the necessity of U.S. engagement in World War I, as she did in subsequent wars. My sense, however, is that during this period as a whole Moore was feeling the distance between her views, interests, and desires and those of her brother and mother, although in the context of deep affection. This was the setting for her composition of "Sojourn in the Whale," a poem in which the speaker addresses a "you" that is both "Woman" and Ireland, defending her from men and England, the composite "whale" that has tried to imprison her in an essentializing ideology that would declare her unfit for anything but service:

"Sojourn in the Whale"

Trying to open locked doors with a sword, threading
The points of needles, planting shade trees
Upside down; swallowed by the opaqueness of one whom the seas
Love better than they love you, Ireland—

You have lived and lived on every kind of shortage.
You have been compelled by hags to spin
Gold threads from straw and have heard men say: "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 happened to bar
The path, rise automatically.

(Early Poems 223; first published Others 1917)

The poem responds to the Easter Rebellion of 1916, and to the chaos of the following year, leading up to the establishment of the Irish Free State. Moore identifies herself with Ireland and against the colonizing British. This identification is marked through allusion to fairy tales—among Moore's favorite reading materials throughout her childhood. Ireland is like the Miller's
daughter of “Rumpelstiltskin”: she is forced to do the impossible. She is the ignored or oppressed youngest child who succeeds through luck and wit; she is “loved” not by the great or formal powers of the world (the “seas”) but by fairies, animals, creatures of inhuman but also sometimes superhuman power. Like these stepchildren or younger siblings, Ireland has “lived and lived” on conditions of shortage. In the repetition, Moore implies gusto, the kind of living that does not bewail its state but pluckily makes the best of what it has—and indeed, improbably, thrives.

Near the mid-point of the poem, the fairy-tale plots elide into the more contemporary plots of colonialism and misogyny. “Men say” that Ireland is both genetically and culturally incapable of moving beyond her current subservient level. “Temperament” and “[h]eritage” will force her to “give / in”—a line break marvelously illustrating the arrogant assumption of superiority belonging to the colonial attitude. The poem sets up its antagonists with a bold clarity that leaves one eager for the moment of response, and the fact that this is one of Moore’s very few poems that she republishes without revising word choice suggests that Moore was satisfied with her conclusion. The response she attributes to women and Ireland, however, seems tame. A “smile” and confidence in a future of “ris[ing] automatically” does suggest eventual liberation, but it would seem to have little to do with the violent rebellion of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army on April 24, 1916 or the ongoing clashes of the Irish with the British government in 1917, and equally little to do with the ongoing attempts of the women’s movement in the United States to obtain equality for women. These struggles require deliberate, wide-scale action. The smile of superiority suggests strength and confidence, but if a people rises “automatically” it requires no leaders, strategy, or weapons.

As I suggest in an earlier reading of this poem, the passivity implied in the obvious reading of this poem seems implausible in the context of the actual situations to which it alludes. Irish Republicans and women are capable of intelligence, aggression, and weaponry far beyond what is attributed to them by those too prejudiced to see anything but “native incompetence,” and their response is not automatic or natural. Moreover, no figure in any of Moore’s poems is ever strictly limited by nature; as in fairy tales, her heroic people and animals succeed by determination and wit. The “rise” predicted in the poem, then, may be “automatic” in the sense that one inevitably responds to changed conditions—like the British government’s deferred operation of the Irish Home Rule Act in 1914. The New Woman, like a colony or any downtrodden people, will respond when imposed “obstacles” make her continued “level” of existence unbearable.
In 2003, the idea of inevitably successful rebellion seems naïve. This poem was written, however, at a time of great hopefulness—in Moore’s life, nationally in the U.S. in regard to women’s suffrage, and internationally, to the extent that, at least in the United States and England, the dominant rhetoric of the war in 1917 continued to represent it as the “war to end all wars.” Already thirty and still living with her mother and brother, Moore could almost taste what might be the freedom of her life in the city she visited several times a week, out from under familial rule. As an active participant in Women’s Rights campaigning, she would certainly have noted the increased strength of this movement’s position. From across the Atlantic Ocean, the Easter Rising may have had the combined romance for her of fairy tale, epic of political justice, and heroic ancestry. In the early twentieth century, most Irish Americans enthusiastically supported Irish nationalism as analogous to America’s own earlier revolt from England, making the link between the two nations one of democratic principle and freedom from oppression as well as ancestry: as Fiona Green cites, even in the eighteenth century, George Washington told Irish patriots that “your cause is identical with ours” (176). Now the Irish cause seemed not just “identical” with that of American patriotism but imminently realizable.

Moore’s title gives yet another twist to the poem’s conclusion, insofar as there was nothing “automatic” about Jonah’s escape from the whale. By implying that the Miller’s daughter, Ireland, and she herself are like the prophet Jonah, Moore suggests that each is being tested and—if faithful—will become “free.” Because the poem makes no mention of spiritual faith and because of its introductory ramble through the impossibilities of folklore, the faith prescribed seems to be not in religion but in the self, in knowledge and confidence that others’ representation of one’s own limitations reflects only their interests or desires. Whatever the emergency—a crisis of faith like Jonah’s, a task of fairytale impossibility like threading the point of a needle, or achieving a centuries-old political goal—a response can eventually be found that meets it. Emerson’s assertions that “If there is omnipotence in the stroke, there is omnipotence in the recoil” and “the one serious and formidable thing in nature is a will” might give propositional form to Moore’s conclusion that blocked water will “rise.” In 1917, Ireland represented, and seemed to be enacting, Moore’s hopes for herself and the world. To identify herself with Ireland was to ally female poets and women generally with the justified, heroic, and apparently finally successful rebellion of a colony against colonizers.

By 1941, Moore’s personal circumstances had changed. Four individual volumes of her poems had appeared, one had won a major poetry prize, and her Selected Poems had included an introduction by the already prestigious T.S. Eliot. She had also served for five years as the editor of one of the United
States’s most prestigious journals of innovative art and literature, and she was publishing a fifth volume, *What are Years*, in which “Spenser’s Ireland” would appear. Moore was taken seriously as a poet of originality and merit. The world had also changed. Far from ending all wars, World War I had laid the stage for further conflict, and Moore watched the spreading war in Europe with close attention. She was horrified by the growth of fascism, Germany’s imperialistic designs, and European anti-Semitic violence (Moore was well-informed about this activity through Bryher, a close personal friend who sent her information on German and other European atrocities with the request that Moore publish it in the U.S.). Moore was absorbed, then, not by her own marginality or feelings of personal rebellion, but by anxiety at the state of the world—at what she (like many of her peers) saw as a world gone awry: mindlessly materialistic, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and with unthinkable military might.

Additionally, during the late 1930s, Moore’s mother descended into the sequence of increasingly severe illnesses that would culminate in her death in 1947. The woman who had been not just her mother but her life companion, her most exacting and helpful reader and editor, and a cross between personal research assistant and domestic partner, was dying. Although the Moores eventually hired a nurse and housekeeper to help with the necessary duties, Moore remained her mother’s primary nurse throughout this decade. While Moore and her mother must have had the conflicts of any couple or parent and child, and Moore indicates some explicit impatience with her mother in the late 1910s, theirs was a close relationship and nursing her ailing mother must have been painful as well as exhausting for her. Finally, at the time of Moore’s second reflection on Ireland, the country was not on the verge of achieving liberation through public rebellion but was an independent state, recently renamed Éire or Ireland (albeit partitioned), that had ended British occupation, and was choosing to remain neutral in the second World War, a war Moore found justifiable, given events in Eastern Europe and Germany.

Like “Sojourn in the Whale,” “Spenser’s Ireland” does not describe a political or geographical entity. Instead it interrogates the semiotics of Ireland for an outsider both attracted to and uncomfortable with characteristics called “Irish.” Unlike “Sojourn,” “Spenser’s Ireland” presents no simple antagonists; Moore does not satirize a tyrannical force which demands that a potential rebel “give / in.” Instead, repeating these same key words, she berates an apparently Irish figure for not understanding that in order to be “free” one must at times “give in,” rather than “again and again” asserting independence. As she says, “Spenser’s Ireland”:

- has not altered;—
- a place as kind as it is green,
- the greenest place I’ve never seen.

[no stanza break]
Every name is a tune. Denunciations do not affect
   the culprit; nor blows, but it
is torture to him to not be spoken to. They're natural,—
   the coat, like Venus'
mantle lined with stars,
buttoned close at the neck,—the sleeves new from disuse.

If in Ireland
   they play the harp backward at need,
   and gather at midday the seed
of the fern, eluding
their “giants all covered with iron,” might
   there be fern seed for unlearning obduracy and for reinstating
the enchantment?
Hindered characters
seldom have mothers
in Irish stories, but they all have grandmothers.

It was Irish;
   a match not a marriage was made
   when my great great grandmother’d said
with native genius for
disunion, “Although your suitor be
   perfection, one objection
is enough; he is not
Irish.” Outwitting
   the fairies, befriending the furies,
whoever again
and again says, “I’ll never give in,” never sees

that you’re not free
   until you’ve been made captive by
   supreme belief,—credulity
you say? When large dainty
fingers tremulously divide the wings
   of the fly for mid-July
with a needle and wrap it with peacock-tail,
or tie wool and
   [no stanza break]
buzzard’s wing, their pride,
like the enchanter’s
is in care, not madness. Concurring hands divide

flax for damask
that when bleached by Irish weather
has the silvered chamois-leather
water-tightness of a

skin. Twisted torcs and gold new-moon-shaped

lunulae aren’t jewelry

like the purple-coral fuchsia-tree’s. Eire—

the guillemot

so neat and the hen

of the heath and the

linnet spinet-sweet—bespeak relentlessness? Then

they are to me

like enchanted Earl Gerald who

changed himself into a stag, to

a great green-eyed cat of
the mountain. Discommodity makes

them invisible; they’ve dis-
appeared. The Irish say your trouble is their

trouble and your

joy their joy? I wish

I could believe it;

I am troubled, I’m dissatisfied, I’m Irish.13

In this poem, not changing is not a virtue. In fact, it is the mark of a certain
kind of death. This poem acknowledges the problems of colonization, but its
primary enemy is internal: a domineering stance within the family, one’s own
inability to bend, or believe, or any form of “relentlessness.”

Amidst detailed research into Moore’s sources for this poem, Laura B.
O’Connor argues that “Spenser’s Ireland” deals profoundly with the politics of
Irish history as manifested in the politics of language—both the suppression
and the nationalist recovery of Gaelic and the more subtle linguistic
colonizations involved in the transformation of political acts (like those of Earl
Gerald, mentioned at the end) into folklore. In O’Connor’s reading, Moore
identifies closely with anti-colonialist, Gaelic Ireland. While persuasive on its
own terms, her reading does not sufficiently acknowledge Moore’s
dissatisfaction with Ireland—voiced in the poem but more powerfully
expressed in the poem’s draft stages.14 One draft begins with the lines:
In this draft, Moore begins with the implied questions of why she likes Ireland “less and less” and what it means for “blood” to be “thicker than water.” The poem in part asks what it means for an American to claim to “be” Irish.

In the process of writing out her poem, Moore seems to come to terms with these questions to the extent that she can conclude, “I’m Irish.” While drafting the poem, however, she puns: “I’m Ire-ish”—as if to be Irish is to be angry. In the finished poem, Moore condemns stances that foster anger. She hopes for “fern seed for unlearn-/ing obduracy and for reinstating /the enchantment.” Enchantment, she implies, is at the opposite pole from obduracy, and Moore hints that in Ireland “the enchantment” has been lost—despite advertising that associates the country with fairies, greenness, and garrulously hospitable people. The beginning lines of the poem also suggest that the loss of enchantment is the result of colonialism, even though it is outsiders like colonists who stereotype the Irish as both primitive and enchanted. In “Spenser’s Ireland,” names are tunes because the English or Anglicized Irish don’t understand the Welsh words any longer and hear only music in their sounds.15 After centuries of Anglicanization, what remains of Irish tradition are town names, myths marketable for encouraging tourism, and a “native genius for / disunion” which seeks to befriend “the furies” rather than the fairies—which, in other words, seeks conflict that is not liberating. Unlike the rebellion of 1916, the “disunion” of Ireland in 1941 seems to Moore to indicate a country “troubled” (as she puts it) by stagnation and bulheadedness. In a world transformed by (among other things) world wars, not to “alter” is a problem. The challenge of reading Moore’s poem, then, is to understand how she gets from her implied opening critique of Ireland to her concluding identification with it.

This understanding rests, I think, on the figures of Edmund Spenser and Earl Gerald, which begin and end the poem. Spenser’s associations with Ireland were complex. He wrote several poems expressing his attachment to this country, and much of his Faerie Queene as well as the late epithalamia were
written there. On the other hand, his attachment stemmed in part from the fact that he became a wealthy landowner in Ireland, as part of the English process of “repopulating” provinces depleted by English policies of war and starvation. Spenser loved the land as a colonizer; he abhorred Irish “lawlessness” and resistance to English rule. In the 1598 uprising, his estate in Munster was burned. Ireland was not “kind” from Spenser’s perspective, and Spenser was not “kind” from the perspective of the Irish. The poem’s first stanza, referring to “Spenser’s” Ireland, seems to repeat primitivist myths appealing to a colonizer or tourist: Ireland is green, and the people are kind, servile, “natural,” and irrational—buttoning a coat like a cloak, for example. The knowledge that sixteenth-century English administrators like Spenser outlawed the wearing of cloaks in Ireland, under the argument that the Irish hid too much under their expansiveness, adds only another colonial stereotype: the Irish are also subversive, tricky, not to be trusted. Although Moore later wrote to a student that “I had in mind the appearance of Ireland, and the Irish idiosyncrasies as seen in Maria Edgeworth’s Ireland—Thady Quirk, for example . . . ‘his coat worn as a mantle’” (Willis 9), the opening reference to Spenser and later passages of the poem suggest that she had a more serious purpose in mind in this World War II poem.

The next stanza moves from the unchangingness of stereotypes to the preservation of values in folklore. Again echoing “Sojourn in the Whale,” Moore reintroduces “hindered characters.” In another poem, Moore writes of both Hercules and the mollusk’s young as “hindered to succeed” (“The Paper Nautilus,” Complete Poems 121). In “Spenser’s Ireland,” “hindered characters” are similarly those, like Snow White or other fairytale heroes, whose lack of a mother determines the conditions that eventually lead to the character’s often magically enabled success. If Cinderella, or the Miller’s daughter, had had a mother, she would not have been “hindered” and would also not have entered the realms of danger and magic, or enchantment. To be “hindered,” then—here as in “Sojourn”—is not necessarily a disadvantage. If the Irish can indeed “play the harp backward at need,” then they may also bring a return of the kind of “enchantment” that transforms “hindered” or humble lives and defeats military “giants.” In contrast, to insist dogmatically on tribal Irishness, as the great great grandmother does, is to abandon such possibility. Irishness, then, is less a matter of blood lines than of the capacity for certain kinds of enchantment, credulity, and determination.

This implied distinction leads to the primary ethical statement of the poem. Typically for Moore, this statement has no obvious link to what has preceded it, couches itself in a conditional, contains a triple negative, and ends with a question that undercuts the speaker’s stance. Nonetheless, its placement
marks a protest against the "native genius for disunion" represented by the
great great grandmother:

... Outwitting
    the fairies, befriending the furies,
    whoever again
    and again says, "I'll never give in," never sees

    that you're not free
    until you've been made captive by
    supreme belief,—credulity
you say?

While convoluted in syntax, these lines are striking in the density of their
alliteration, assonance, and internal rhyme. They are also strikingly negative. In
her own language in this poem, Moore seems to manifest the "native genius for
disunion" even while she protests against its nationalist or xenophobic
elements. "Never...never...not free," she writes in this passage, and she
uses emphatic negation in other stanzas as well: "not seen...not affect...or
blows...unlearn- ing...not a marriage...disunion...not Irish...not
madness...Discommodity" and the concluding "dissatisfied." Through her
tripled negative, Moore asserts that freedom issues from "supreme belief." In a
draft, she uses a more aggressive formulation: "What is liberty? To succeed in
being captive to the right thing." Yet particularly for a previous colony still
rebelling against imperial injustice, what is "the right thing" to be captive to?
Although Moore greatly admired Spenser's poetry, Spenser's colonialism is not
the answer that leads to stasis and self-alienation. It is, after all, Spenser's
Ireland that does not change. Moore's brother, naval chaplain Warner Moore
(like the Protestant Spenser), might assert that Presbyterianism is the "supreme
belief" enabling freedom. Moore herself was an active churchgoer, but
Christianity is also not the answer. In many poems, Moore asserts an equality,
not hierarchy, of faiths. In this poem, as in "Sojourn in the Whale," she skirts
all questions of religious sectarianism by alluding to folklore and defining
Irishness as independent of Catholic and Protestant belief.

Again, typically, rather than answer her questions about liberty and
credulity directly, Moore gives examples and counter-examples that the reader
must interpret. In the lines following her assertion about "supreme belief,"
Moore states that "When" fingers both large and dainty tie flies for fishing,
"their pride / like the enchanter's / is in care, not madness." This example
allies belief with care, and with the enchanter, a version of fairy.17 The rejected
"madness," by implication, alludes to the furies and closed-minded obduracy.18
In Moore's next example, "concurring hands divide" flax that will become skin-
like silvery damask, "when bleached by Irish weather." The conjunction of
“concurring” and “divide” appears immediately before the stanza break and echoes through sound play the key words of the stanza: captive, credulity, care, enchanter, and dainty, divide, pride (in addition to several long-i rhymes). The agreement or coming together of separate hands to divide the material they jointly work on enables the production of a native craft. This example, like that of fly-tying, shows “native genius” for “concurring” rather than for disunion. Clearly the model is one of working with and through difference, not allowing difference to divide. In the third example, traditional Celtic jewelry is appropriately not “jewelry / like the . . . fuchsia-tree’s”: art is not nature; the tied fly is not a fly; the damask “has the silvered chamois-leather / water tightness of a / skin” but it is not leather. Art belongs to the world of artifice and, Moore implies, it is art, artisanship, artifice not the “nature” of ignorance or primitivist stereotyping that can enchant. Here to be Irish is to be an enchanter, to be capable of producing an art of enchantment through knowledgeable skill and care—including the verbal skills of storytelling or, presumably, making poetry.

The next three sentences complicate the apparent simplicity of Moore’s admiration for traditional arts. If, as her question implies, the guillemot, hen, and linnet bespeak “relentlessness,” Moore reasons, “then” they are like “the enchanted Earl Gerald” and have indeed “disappeared.” The nearly doggerel rhythm and rhyme of the lines referring to “Eire” suggest some level of satire on Moore’s part, which the allusions bear out. According to O’Connor’s research (to which I am indebted), Earl Gerald lived in the fourteenth century and was the third Earl of Desmond. He was of Norman descent but a proponent of Irish culture and a poet who wrote some verses in Gaelic. Later Irish lore mythologized him as a magician who could change shapes and—in one version—disappeared underground when his wife (who was under taboo against showing surprise at anything her husband did) screamed at his shape-changing. Legend has it that Gerald will return at the hour of Ireland’s need. In the version of this story Moore heard told by Padraic Colum in New York, Gerald had also attempted unsuccessfully to gather fern seed that would enable him to disappear at will.29 This enchanter is also “enchanted.” In her poem, he—like the “sweet” birds that represent a “neat,” domestic, tourist-brochure “Eire”—disappear against their will. “Discommodity”—that is, trouble, or inconvenience—makes them invisible. Unlike the native arts Moore admires, these elements of Irish legend have not survived. Moore’s borrowing of the guillemot and linnet reference from a hyperbolic and nostalgic pamphlet of poems, Happy Memories of Glen-Gariff, supports the idea that this is not the Ireland she most admires.

It is at this point that the politics of language, naming, storytelling, and poetry becomes most complex. Moore’s sentence is syntactically inconsistent:
in “Eire . . . bespeak relentlessness?” the verb “bespeak” does not match its initial subject, “Eire,” although it is appropriate for the embedded plural subject, the “guillemot / so neat and the hen / and the linnett.” This syntactic disconnection causes a kind of cognitive dissonance in linking the country with these stereotypically sweet birds. More significantly, the verb “bespeaks” means not just “signifies” but also “foretells,” “requests,” “engages,” or “addresses.” Does “Ireland” in its new nationalist state as Éire (a very different place from Spenser’s “Ireland”) signify, or request, or foretell, or address “relentlessness”? In whose view? Its own relentlessness, or whose? Is relentlessness different from never giving in—just as (relentlessly) repeated bird’s song differs from human repetition, “again and again”? The ambiguous syntax and tone of these lines make it hard to tell whether this Earl is meant to be a model of flexibility or a model of loyalty to a bygone, mythic Ireland, or neither. The question is particularly difficult to determine because Moore herself wrote many poems associating people with animals and was called by animal names throughout her life by her mother and brother; her own experience suggests that self-transformation into animals is both wonderful and the kind of thing ordinary people may do to reveal aspects of themselves or their desires. Hence she would seem to admire the “enchanted Earl Gerald,” despite his disappearance.

Moore would also seem to admire this shape-changing Earl’s descendent, the fourteenth Earl Gerald—who was Spenser’s contemporary and nemesis. He was, in O’Connor’s words, “the symbolic quarry of the 1580-82 campaign of terror that Spenser helped Lord Grey execute in Munster” against the Irish. As O’Connor puts it, Spenser’s View of the State of Ireland “is an apologia for military repression and an argument for repeating and intensifying a campaign of terror” while the legend of Earl Gerald “is a military rescue fantasy” (336). According to O’Connor’s reading, Moore comes down firmly on the side of Gerald.

Yet Moore’s juxtapositions, syntax, and tonal complexity imply, I believe, that the Irish “troubles” require a more flexible response than “relentless” rebellion. “Discommodity” should not make a hero disappear: as Moore writes in the poem “The Hero,” heroes do not like uncertainty or “suffering and not / saying so” but even when beaten down they are “hopeful”: “Hope not being hope / until all ground for hope has / vanished.” And they are, she continues, “lenient, looking / upon a fellow creature’s error with the / feelings of a mother—a / woman or a cat” (Complete Poems 8-9). Moore is herself “troubled” by Irish nationalist mythologizing of disunion and relentlessness, and she opposes the romanticization stemming from both nationalist and colonialist views. If “your trouble is their / trouble and your / joy their joy,” then the Irish show extraordinary generosity—far from the prejudice of the matriarch who rejects the non-Irish suitor. Could a nation with
such values remain neutral in a World War fought against another imperial power, engaged in a form of oppression even more terrible than that Spenser and his fellow imperialists practiced against the Irish? Moore writes in a draft that “untrustfulness is suicide / Distrust is sure defeat”: while belief can always be criticized as “credulity,” without it, and without trust, one defeats one’s self. Moore’s Ireland is closer in values to the popular resistance and folklore suggested by Earl Gerald than to than of Spenser’s colonizing. Yet the Ireland she describes is one that must repeatedly be reconstructed by each generation of its inhabitants, one of care, pride, art, and belief that faces “discommodity” without recourse to “relentlessness”—whether colonial, sentimental, or nationalist.

To be Irish, at the conclusion of Moore’s poem, is to be “troubled” and “dissatisfied”—not necessarily with Ireland, but in the sense that one who is alive, who can change, who is “hindered” (as who is not) must in some sense be dissatisfied. “The Irish say your trouble is their / trouble and your / joy their joy?”—Moore states in the form of a question, and then responds: “I wish I could believe it.” But is she wishing to believe the sentiment expressed or that “the Irish” say it? Her “wish,” I think, balances uneasily between re-mythologizing Ireland in her own preferred form and acknowledging that there is no single answer. One might say that the argument for balance takes place at the levels of grammar and word choice, not in the poem’s narrative. The poem attempts to demonstrate how one can both have a “native genius for disunion” (the multiple negatives) or deep skepticism and “concur” or be susceptible to the allied concepts of credulity, belief, and enchantment. She articulates both characteristics as “Irish,” in a way that implicitly acknowledges but attempts to circumvene or rise above Irish partition and continuing internal violence. Rather than taking a position in relation to Irish politics in the 1940s, as she does in “Sojourn in the Whale” in 1917, she constructs an Irishness that is anti-colonial, without reference to contemporary political alternatives. To move from the draft to her conclusion, one could paraphrase the poem as stating, “Ireland never took my fancy less than now” but because I am trying to believe or trust that what is apparently lost may be reinstated or may, like Earl Gerald, reappear: indeed, “I’m Irish.”
NOTES

1 Moore's mother's cousin Mary Craig Shoemaker published a book of genealogical history called *Five Typical Scotch-Irish Families of the Cumberland Valley* in 1922, including detailed information about the Craig family. Laura B. O'Connor summarizes primary information about the Craig and Warner families, 288-90.

2 Moore to her family, January 13, 1909, Rosenbach Museum and Library correspondence file VI:15a:02. All reference to unpublished papers from the Rosenbach Museum and Library Moore archive will be designated by the abbreviation RML, with box, file, and folder numbers. Unpublished material from Moore's letters and notebooks is quoted with the permission of Marianne Craig Moore, the Literary Executor of the Moore estate, and the Rosenbach Museum and Library. Sir John Pentland Mahaffy (1839-1919) was an Irish classical scholar who published, among many other works, *An Epoch in Irish History* in 1904.


4 Quoted in Leavell 28.

5 These poems are reprinted in *The Early Poems of Marianne Moore* 415, 161, and were first published respectively in 1916 and 1915; I refer to this edition hereafter in the text as *Early Poems*.

6 This apparently continued to be her political stance for a good while after 1917 as well. George Bornstein points out that while editor at the *Dia* (1925-29), Moore printed the work of several Irish writers, "strengthening the Irish component of the magazine" (91); Bornstein lists Yeats, Padraic Colum, Daniel Corkery, John Eglinton (William Magee), Thomas McGreery, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain, and Liam O'Flaherty—all writers who had sympathized to some extent with the rebellion in the Easter Rising and the establishment of an Irish Free State.

7 Moore also later translated fairy tales into English—a German tale in 1945 (with Elizabeth Mayer) and three French fairy tales in 1963.

8 In "Your trouble is their trouble": Marianne Moore, Maria Edgeworth and Ireland," Fiona Green gives a more affirmative reading to the conclusion of the poem, seeing the concluding metaphor as suggesting the whale's dyspepsia: the whale vomits up what it has ingested: England has gorged on Ireland, and then cannot "stomach its resistant movements. Its regurgitation is the inevitable consequence" (175).

9 Miller 112.

10 Moore was a vocal feminist from her college years on. In letters from Bryn Mawr she describes herself as making feminist arguments to friends, and while living in Carlisle after college she campaigned actively with the Pennsylvania Suffrage Committee. For information on these activities, see Miller, Chapter Four. For letters showing Moore's interests in feminism see *Selected Letters* 30, 60, 99, and 100.

11 "Fate," in Emerson 341, 343.

12 For examples of Moore's responses to such correspondence from Bryher (Winifred Ellerman), see *Selected Letters* 262-64, 305-06, 325-29, 368-70, 391-93.

I do, however, agree that even in her dissatisfaction Moore supports the idea of an independent Ireland in this poem. Evidence for this political position is provided by the work Patricia C. Willis has done on the poem's notes. According to Willis, all the sources of notes for “Spenser’s Ireland” that Moore lists are Irish, and most of the poem’s lines are quoted from one of the four mentioned authors. Including the title, Moore quotes 40 out of 67 lines from Donn Byrne, Maria Edgeworth, Padraic Colum, or a boatman-poet, Denis O’Sullivan.

Willis points out that in his 1927 National Geographic essay “Ireland: The Rock Whence I Was Hewn,” Byrne claims that in Ireland old names “are still alive in Irish speech,” that is, their meaning has not been lost for the Gaelic speaking population—in contrast to other places where names are only “like a bar of music,” without meaning. In her poem, Moore may suggest that to colonizers and colonized (non-Gaelic speaking Irish), Irish names have become only tunes, whereas to Gaelic speakers the names have both meaning and melody. Although Byrne does not, she may also refer to the traditional Irish tunes named for local towns or people, like the “Maids of Mitchelstown.”

In his 1596 View of the State of Ireland, Spenser writes, for example, that the traditional mantle is “a fit house for an outlaw, a meet bed for a rebel, and an apt cloak for a thief” (Willis 6). Willis point out that Moore would have read this passage in a footnote of Edgeworth’s 1892 Stories of Ireland: Castle Rackrent and the Absentee.

In many Irish legends, fairies are indifferent to human will and desire and merely make mischief in human lives. Byrne represents fairies as child robbers—on the lookout for little boys, who are dressed as girls to “outwit” fairy thieves. In the contrast of “fairies” and “furies,” however, it is clear that Moore prefers the former to the latter. Here, as in other places in the poem, I would say she uses material from her sources in a manner contrary to that of the original author.

My reading, here, differs from Green’s. Green notes that the quoted passage about fly tying, from Edgeworth’s The Absentee, contains reference to a “moorish fly”; reading Moore’s omission of this possible self-reference from the lines in the poem, Green suggests that Moore here rejects the argument for Irish self-containment and allies herself with Edgeworth’s desire for reconciliation between Britain and Ireland (180).

Moore refers to having heard this story in her 1949 essay “Humility, Concentration, and Gusto” (Complete Prose of Marianne Moore 420-26). O’Connor writes about Gerald, 333-36.

See Miller 94-97, 105, and 142 on the naming practices of the Moores, and family letters throughout the Selected Letters.
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