

## “By-play”: The Radical Rhythms of Marianne Moore

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**Abstract:** Marianne Moore was among the foremost innovators of poetic form at the beginning of the 20th century. Influenced in part by visual experimentation like Cubism, Moore developed a poetic stanza based on syllabic verse: that is, the first, second, third, and so on lines of each stanza have the same number of syllables as the corresponding lines in every other stanza of a poem but the number of syllables is not determined by accent, syntax, “breath,” or any other predictable pattern. In some poems, a line is as short as a single syllable. In other poems, or other lines of the same poem, a line may be over thirty syllables long. Consequently, her stanzaic patterns call attention to the artifice of poetic making; they challenge any notion that a poem is “natural” in its construction or form. At the same time, Moore’s syntax eschews all poeticism; it is prosaic, and often colloquial. Her poems, then, foreground two rhythms in exciting and productive tension with each other; the visual pattern of the syllabic stanzas and the aural pattern of her prosaic syntax. Moore’s use of rhyme highlights this play of rhythms; she uses line-end rhyme on unaccented syllables, but because the lines are of unpredictable length and typically end mid-sentence (sometimes even mid-word), the sentences are irregularly punctuated by subtle rhymes. The tension of these competing rhythms comes to powerful, even sensual, release in the concluding stanza of Moore’s poems, where syntax, rhyme, and line-ends all combine in her concluding cadence.

**Key words:** Marianne Moore syllabic verse innovation modernism

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**标题:**“配角戏”:玛丽安·摩尔的激进节奏

**内容提要:**玛丽安·摩尔是20世纪初期最突出的诗歌形式革新者之一。她受到立体主义等视觉艺术实验一定的影响,创造了一种基于“音节诗行”的诗节形式,即一个诗节的第一、二、三等诗行的音节数与相隔一个诗节的诗节中相对应诗行的音节数相等,且音节数量不是

根据重读、句法、“呼吸”或者任何可预见的模式来决定的。在一些诗里，一个诗行短到只有一个音节，而在其它诗里或一首诗的其他诗行中，一个诗行长达 30 多个音节。她的诗节形式将人们的注意力引向了作诗的技巧，对那些认为诗的结构形式是“自然的”之类的观念提出挑战。同时，摩尔避开了毫无新意的诗歌俗套，采用了散文式的、常常是通俗的句法。因此，她的诗歌凸显了两种节奏，即建立在以“音节诗行”为基础的诗节所呈现出的视觉节奏和诗歌的散文式句法所呈现的听觉节奏，两者产生了一种令人兴奋而又具有创造力的张力。另一方面，摩尔诗歌采用行尾韵且押韵的是非重读音节，这种韵律强化了两种节奏的作用；由于她的诗行长度难以预测，常常在一个句子中间换行，有时候甚至是在一个词的中间换行，诗的语句就被微妙的用韵不规则地切断了。这两种竞相表现的节奏在诗歌的最后一节会强烈地、常常是感性地释放出来，诗的句法、音韵、行尾安排等全都融进了诗的终结部分的节律中。

**关键词：**玛丽安·摩尔 音节诗行 创新 现代主义

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Marianne Moore (1887-1972) began writing verse while she was a student at Bryn Mawr College (1905-1909), published several poems in the Bryn Mawr alumni magazine, and began publishing in little magazines in 1915. In 1925, she became editor of *The Dial*—at the time the most prestigious literary and arts magazine published in the United States. By the time of her death, she had won every important poetry prize the U. S. had to offer—including the Pulitzer, the Bollingen, the National Book Award, the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the Poetry Society of America's Gold Medal for Lifetime Achievement, and the U. S. National Medal for Literature. Additionally, she was awarded the Croix de Chevalier des Arts et Lettres following her translation of *The Fables of La Fontaine*. Moore was admired extravagantly by her most prestigious peers, including Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, H. D., and Wallace Stevens. William Carlos Williams wrote frequently about Moore, in essays and a poem—praising her in *Spring and All* as “of all American writers most constantly a poet. . . because the purpose of her work is invariably from the source from which poetry starts”<sup>①</sup>. In a 1967 review of Moore's *Complete Poems*, John Ashbery reconsiders his previous assessment of Moore's significance to American verse: “. . . a year ago, I wrote that ‘Marianne Moore is, with the possible exception of Pound and Auden, the greatest living poet in English.’ After reading her in this magnificent volume, . . . I am tempted simply to call her our greatest modern poet” (Gregory, *The Critical Response* 223).

Because she had no canon-setting agenda, wrote no manifestoes, and generally tended to understate her ideas and their potential significance, Moore was for decades relatively ignored as a poet whose work contributes significantly to national or international conceptions of modernity and modernism—although with the publication of several recent books on modernism, this trend is

changing.<sup>②</sup> Similarly, because the feminism of her era valued a different conception of liberated fulfillment from that of the late twentieth century, Moore was disparaged as apolitical by those critics and poets in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s one might have expected to be most interested in her. Moore grew up and attended college during the first powerful international movement for women's rights. She was born at the end of the generation that campaigned successfully to achieve suffrage and other legal rights for women in the United States, and that challenged many of the customs limiting women's psychological and professional horizons.<sup>③</sup> Moore was encouraged by her family life and her education at Bryn Mawr to think of gender as a neutral factor in judging people's intelligence, abilities, and leadership capacities and to hold the same level of ambition for her development as her brother or other men would assume for their own. Such feminism led to the striking success not only of Moore and other of her peer poets (Gertrude Stein, H. D., Amy Lowell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Mina Loy) but of many women in fostering innovative art in all realms of modernism: poetry, prose, drama, visual arts, sculpture, and music. Women were influential editors, directors of studios, museums, and theaters, and patrons as well as writers and artists. Although the fact has only recently begun to be acknowledged, modernism coincided in the United States, England, and continental Europe with powerful women's movements, and women were influential in shaping modernism—especially in the U. S.<sup>④</sup>

Many aspects of Moore's verse contributed to her significance during the period, and coincided with or influenced similar modes of innovation being developed by her peers. Much has been written, for example, about how Moore's radically mosaic use of quotation, and quotation from popular and private more than from elite literary sources, differs from uses of quotation by Eliot and Pound.<sup>⑤</sup> Moore's interweaving of natural scientific description and ethical positioning similarly corresponds to a general interest among her peers—in this case, the identification of poetry with the discourse of science—while marking her verse as radically her own. Moore's interweaving of what appears to be objective presentation of information with partially occluded uses of the first person singular or highly idiosyncratic and hence personal observation is unique to her verse in the 1910s.<sup>⑥</sup> Other striking features of Moore's verse include her simultaneous extreme concision and lavishly detailed descriptive sequences, her radically innovative use of unaccented rhyme, and her use of complex formal structures in juxtaposition to a prosaic syntax and diction.<sup>⑦</sup> This last is the feature of her verse on which I focus here, and in particular on her use of syllabics.

Marianne Moore developed her syllabic stanzas in an era when all her most radical contemporaries were first experimenting with and then rejecting the formlessness of free verse. Like them, Moore experimented with the line, with rhythm, and with conceptions of naturalness and artifice, but her mode of experimentation foregrounded the visual artifice of poetic making while simultaneously rejecting the poetic conventions of traditionally structured verse. Moore's highly stylized development of syllabic verse form—that is, a form in which lines are organized by numbers of syllables, not by patterned accents or syntax—allowed her to play the rhythms of a prosaic, often conversational, syntax against an ostentatiously arbitrary form. For her, some degree of artifice or imposed restraint signals artistry—whether one understands the constraint as artificiality or as discipline. As Moore writes in her essay “Humility, Concentration, and Gusto,” “it is impossible to be original”—a proposition she then immediately turns to discussion of “feeling that is honest and accordingly rejects anything that might cloud the impression, such as unnecessary commas, modifying clauses, or delayed predicates” (Moore, *Complete Prose* 421). What matters for Moore is “concentration,” “impassioned explicitness”; even the description of a counterfeit \$20 bill may provide an occasion for “gusto” (as it does in her essay) to the extent that it is well crafted: “gusto thrives on freedom, and freedom in art, as in life, is the result of a discipline imposed by

ourselves" (Moore, *Complete Prose* 422, 426). Artifice is what we make; it has to do with will, intention, values, and therefore implicitly with the largest questions one can ask about the ongoing concerns of American history and culture. Moore's syllabics are not a matter of mechanical counting; her use of form embodies the conceptual thrust of her verse as well as giving it its radically distinctive rhythms.

In her syllabic verse, Moore highlights the artificiality of formal choice by juxtaposing short and long lines in a shifting left-hand margin of indentation within exactly repeated stanzas. There can be nothing "natural" or organic about these stanza forms—for example, in the repeated juxtaposition of lines of six and twelve syllables in "In This Age of Hard Trying," or in lines as short as one and as long as twenty-six syllables in "The Fish." Similarly, Moore's lines have no regulating accentual meter or correspondence with the phrase that one could imagine as reflecting the rhythms of breath or any other natural pulsation—as, for example, some prosodists describe the rhythms of iambic verse or of the tetrameter line.<sup>8</sup> In fact, one cannot hear Moore's line. Like others of her era, Moore believed that "form followed function" and, like Pound, she advocated what he called a "natural order of words" and what she called "plain American which cats and dogs can read" ("England").<sup>9</sup> Charles Olson writes that the line "comes... from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes"; in contrast, Moore constructs a line of no predictable length or relation to syntax, hence no relation to the sentence, the breath, or any other property of natural being.<sup>10</sup> Neither her diction nor her intricate syntax gives a primary suggestion of speech. Just as physical appearance gives body to the performance of selfhood without determining it, Moore's structures give a poem's language form while forcing a reader to recognize its idiosyncrasy. In the decade which saw the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan (1915) and the increasing popularity of eugenics, Moore's quiet insistence on the arbitrariness of embodiment in relation to speech or statement is unlikely to have been accidental and is entirely consonant with her feminist and progressive social politics.

Moore's "In This Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance Is Good And" (1916) takes as its topic the relations between form, social responsibility, and communication. Here is the poem:

In This Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance is Good And

"Really, it is not the  
business of the gods to bake clay pots." They did not  
do it in this instance. A few  
revolved upon the axes of their worth  
as if excessive popularity might be a pot;

they did not venture the  
profession of humility. The polished wedge  
that might have split the firmament  
was dumb. At last it threw itself away  
and falling down, conferred on some poor fool, a privilege.

"Taller by the length of  
a conversation of five hundred years than all  
the others," there was one, whose tales  
of what could never have been actual—

were better than the haggish, uncompanionable drawl

of certitude; his by-  
play was more terrible in its effectiveness  
than the fiercest frontal attack.

The staff, the bag, the feigned inconsequence  
of manner, best bespeak that weapon, self protectiveness. ⑩

In this poem, Moore condemns all those who set themselves up as “gods” too important to be useful and too lazy or arrogant to take advantage of the tools at their disposal (“the polished wedge”). By implication, they speak with “the haggish uncompanionable drawl / of certitude.” In contrast to such overdetermined self-importance, she places the figure of the “fool” or hobo (with “staff” and “bag”), who tells “tales” and whose “conversation” is worth attending to both because of its “terrible... effectiveness” and because it is “[c]ompanionable.” Those with privileges and power begin with tools “that might have split the firmament,” but they neither “bake clay pots” nor make any other use of what they have. Nor do they participate in conversation, like that implied in the exchange of story-telling. Consequently, it is the conversational nobodies, those who do “profess [...] humility” and “bake clay pots,” who may change the world. The unexpected descriptive particularity of this poem’s last line combined with its highly indirect proposition about self-protectiveness contributes to the general sense of blurred boundaries between fact and belief, or didactic proposition and ethical implication: the trappings of the tramp’s lower-class existence (staff, bag, inconsequent manner) “bespeak” the weapon of self-protectiveness that Moore’s poem attempts to redefine. Manner, style, objective trappings reveal truths, subjective being, real usefulness.

This poem was written during World War I, before the U. S. entered the conflict in 1917. While in principle a pacifist, Moore was distressed at the suffering of the British and French and at apparent U. S. callousness in the face of their need. In this poem, Moore seems to claim for artists and other “fools” professing in communal contexts “what could never have been actual” a greater and longer-lasting power than that of the reigning “gods.” The historical moment of this poem’s publication and the military language of its conclusion (*fiercest frontal attack, terrible, weapon*) suggest that Moore’s “gods” may stand in for political leaders caught up in their own self-importance rather than using their tools to aid countries under attack or promote other communal good. The “weapon” of “by / play” or conversational interaction, in this reading, protects the self from god-like arrogance and inactivity rather than protecting the self against others—aggressively or defensively. Such “self-protectiveness” could not be more different from that based on defensive weaponry, the desire for “excessive popularity” (winning elections?), or maintaining the status quo in an “Age of Hard Trying.”

While this poem alone does not clearly redefine self-protectiveness in relation to national defense, Moore writes throughout her career about the dangers of egotism as an analogue for nationalism—for example, during World War II, she writes that soldiers are “fighting that I / may yet recover from the disease, My / Self”—capitalizing *My* and *Self* and inserting a line-break between them to force recognition of self as disease as well as victim. ⑪ In “In This Age,” Moore implies that those who do see it as their “business” to be useful and have the imagination to see beyond the “actual” are a community’s (or a nation’s) real leaders. Moreover, Moore implies here that ultimately “by- / play” is more powerful than violent warfare. “The fiercest frontal attack” can kill, but it may not be an “effective” way to win, if one wants to change a society, or help a peo-

ple to thrive. This, too, is a belief Moore repeats more openly in 1944 in "In Distrust of Merits." There Moore concludes "There never was a war that was / not inward" (Moore, *Complete Prose* 138). In her tougher, non-didactic poem of 1916, she instead leaves to the reader the question of who is "Trying" so "Hard" and to what effect, while promoting stances of companionable "inconsequence" over those of arrogance and aggression. Unlike the "uncompanionable drawl of certitude," conversation demands partners and therefore the interdependence of give and take. Moreover, the principle of "by- / play" establishes an "authoritative indeterminacy" that destabilizes meaning as well as stances of certitude.<sup>13</sup>

In this, as in all of Moore's syllabic poems, form functions through "by-play." For example, one sees the principle of "nonchalance" in Moore's unaccented and slant rhymes—like her rhyme of "wedge" with "privilege," "all" with "actual," and "the" with "humility"—a rhyme that is doubly unaccented by coming in the middle of a line ("they did not venture the / profession of humility. The polished wedge / . . .").<sup>14</sup> Even more radically, Moore also at times rhymes on an internal syllable of a polysyllabic word; her most famous example of this kind of rhyme alligns the syllable "ac" of "accident" with the word "lack" in "The Fish"—where the line ends mid-word:

All  
external  
marks of abuse are present on  
this  
defiant edifice—  
all the physical features of  
  
ac-  
cident—lack  
of cornice . . . (Moore, *Early Poems* 86; lines 31–9)

Because lines are of uneven lengths, rhyme sounds occur at different intervals, and in complex patterns, arhythmically. Similarly, because all syllables have the "same formal value," nothing promotes a monosyllabic noun as a candidate for rhyme above the least-stressed, dependent syllable.<sup>15</sup> As Linda Leavell points out, this synthesis of the "verbal and the visual, the dramatic and the spatial," is "one of [Moore's] greatest achievements as a modernist."<sup>16</sup>

In playing rhyme patterns and syntax against the patterns of syllabic form, Moore also strikingly syncopates aural and visual rhythms. The arbitrary but strictly patterned visual rhythm of varying line lengths beats, as it were, against the unpatterned aural rhythms created by sentences of various lengths, rhymes occurring at irregular intervals, and cadence. One sees this most clearly when looking at the visual pattern of one of Moore's syllabic poems after blacking out the words, as I show with "X"s below, where "X"s mark the typographic length of a line, not its number of syllables:

XX  
XXXXXXXXX  
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  
XX  
XXXXXXXXXX  
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

X  
XXXXXXX  
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  
XX  
XXXXXXXXXXXX  
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

X  
XXXXXXX  
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  
XX  
XXXXXXXXXX  
XXXXXXXXXXXX

The repetition of stanzas on the page creates a pattern of block-print form—a stamped design, repeated and static. In contrast, Moore's sentences demand dynamic, sequential interpretation, in dependent relation to what precedes and follows them. In them, there is nothing fixed or predictable and little coincidence with the line. You can feel this tension between the independently organized units of stanza and syntax with particular clarity in a rhymed poem with relatively short lines, like "The Fish," which opens:

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 wave, cannot hide  
there for the submerged shafts of the  
  
sun,  
split like spun  
glass, move themselves with spotlight swift-  
ness  
into the crevices—  
in and out, illuminating  
  
the  
turquoise sea  
of bodies. . . . (Moore, *Early Poems* 85, lines 1–21)

Moore's sentences wind through her stanzas, in dynamic counterpoint to their fixed visual structures and patterned rhymes.

In "In This Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance Is Good And" Moore's title also calls attention to her rejection of the "certitude" implied by predictable coincidence of statement and form; the title is not self-contained, and provides no summary of a topic or theme. Concluding the title with "And" highlights its nature as inconclusive fragment, especially because there is no clear logical connection between the title's relatively formal proposition about "Nonchalance" and the first line's quoted colloquialism ("Really, it is not the / business. . ."). Like her irregular rhymes on unaccented syllables and destabilizing interweaving of subjectively personal and scientific or descriptive discourse, the use of titles as a first line of verse is a technique Moore developed earlier than her peers.

This minimalization of the author's role in performing interpretive work for the reader characterizes several aspects of Moore's style and is key to her conviction that poems should galvanize readers to think rather than dispensing truths, sentiment, or accounts of personal experience. As "In This Age" suggests, poets should not think of themselves as "gods," and their relationship with the reader is ideally one of "conversation," albeit a conversation structured to illuminate its essential artificiality so that no reader could imagine that a poem's lines stand simply for what the poet herself might say. It is up to the reader to hear irony, multiple voices, or other modes of potential distance between the words of any given sentence and the poet's perspective.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is perhaps difficult to hear how radical such by-play would have sounded in the early twentieth century. Unlike either traditionally metered verse or the phrasally-based line of early free verse, one cannot hear Moore's lines because they are so heavily enjambed. A poem's radical structure is revealed only when one sees as well as hears its lines. At the same time, Moore's syllabic patterns function more to structure a pulsation of rhythm than to call attention to the visual as such. Moore's poetry moves the reader, but sometimes viscerally through these rhythms rather than emotionally. Moore publishes "In This Age" in 1916; nothing like it had been published up to this time. In *Tender Buttons* in 1914, Stein rejected the poetic line altogether, instead writing prose poems that foregrounded grammatical innovation. In Pound's multiple books published before 1916, he wrote almost exclusively in phrasally determined lines—occasionally placing single words or minor phrases on inset lines, but not breaking minor phrase boundaries. T. S. Eliot never left the phrasal line behind, and favored end-rhyme ("Let us go then you and I / When the evening has spread out against the sky"). e. e. cummings had not published by 1916 in a venue Moore might have read. Only Mina Loy played radically with visual space on the page in publications like her 1915 first installment of "Love Songs"—where she uses blocks of white space between words on a single line. Moore pursues a non-interpretive, non-syntactic use of the visual in playing her prosaic syntax against the contrasting rhythms of stylized visual form.

In her later decades, Moore wrote a number of brief articles in fashion magazines. In one, she stated that "Fashion can make you ridiculous; style, which is yours to control individually, can make you attractive—a near siren" (Moore, *Complete Prose* 503). In addition to its visual impact, the style of Moore's poems can also be seen as that of a siren—seductive and at a distance, hence difficult to grasp. Her poem's form provides a visual sheath, a kind of clothing, that moves in disconcerting rhythms over and against the rhythms of the body or language for which it provides a visible cover. Its fascination lies first in the ongoing disjunction between static visual shapes and sinuous syntax, and then in those powerful moments of simultaneous formal and syntactic closure



so unexpected and yet so skillfully built toward as to take your breath away. Moore makes us newly conscious of the body of form. She makes us take intense pleasure in elements of verse that are utterly predictable in traditional forms, where—for example—rhymes recur with clockwork regularity. The allure, the charge, of Moore's poems lies in their patterns of delayed expectation and syncopated reward, created through the reader's mounting desire for their two rhythms to join as one: the syntax drives forward, punctuated by irregular and therefore always surprisingly pleasurable jolts of aural consonance, leading to a conclusion—or perhaps one should say climax—where syntax and form finally perfectly coincide. As Gertrude Stein writes, “creative literature... unconnected with sex is inconceivable but not literary sex, because sex is a part of something of which the other parts are not sex at all.”<sup>⑩</sup>

Moore's non-sexual personal life has led many to read her poems as utterly eschewing the pleasure of the senses. I am not the only one, however, to find intense sensual pleasure in Moore's poetry. In “Marianne Moore and the Arcadian Pleasures of Shopping,” Victoria Bazin argues that Moore's richly elaborated descriptions express her desirously appreciative seeing and feeling.<sup>⑪</sup> John Emil Vincent describes Moore's frequent but unforegrounded use of the pronoun “I” and detailed descriptions as constituting a queer “erotics” or “orgasmics” in her verse. Vincent points out that in 1935, T. S. Eliot introduced Moore's *Selected Poems* by writing that each of us chooses the “subject-matter” that allows us “the most powerful and most secret release.” According to Vincent, Moore's finely detailed observations presented in obtuse relation to a speaking self provide exactly such “secret release” (Vincent 99, 119). Kathryn R. Kent makes a similar argument about the “autoerotics of incorporation” in Moore's “simultaneously dispersed and decentered, form of identification,” asserting a “self-legitimizing vision of poetic and queer power” (Kent 209). Moore also constructs such “release” and erotic sensuality, I would argue, in the rhythms of her poems.

The poem “Radical”—first published in *Others* in 1919 and not republished after *Observations*—thematizes this vibrant, suggestively erotic energy as well as embodying it. The poem reads:

Tapering  
to a point, conserving everything,  
this carrot is predestined to be thick.  
The world is  
but a circumstance, a mis-  
erable corn-patch for its feet. With ambition,  
imagination, outgrowth  
nutriment,  
with everything crammed belligerent-  
ly inside itself, its fibres breed mon-  
opoly—  
a tail-like, wedge shaped engine with the  
secret of expansion, fused with intensive heat  
to the color of the set-  
ting sun and  
stiff. For the man in the straw hat, stand-  
ing still and turning to look back at it—  
as much as

to say my happiest moment has  
 been funereal in comparison with this, the con-  
 ditions of life pre-  
*determined*  
 slavery to be easy—defined  
 by contradiction—and freedom hard. For  
 it? Dismiss  
 agrarian lore; it tells him this:  
 that which it is impossible to force, it is im-  
 possible to hinder. (Moore, *Early Poems* 240)<sup>19</sup>

In this poem, a carrot grows and a farmer “look[s] back at it.” What could be more simple? Yet as many critics have remarked, the force of this carrot, “stiff,” belligerent in its engine-like “secret of expansion,” “impossible to hinder” suggests the ambition of its poet, who was famous for her red hair.

The implications of this phallic self-portrait and the striking indirection of its mode are highlighted through comparison with poems by two other American poets who use a natural scene as the occasion for self- (or human) portraiture. In William Carlos Williams’s “The Farmer,” published four years later, a farmer “is pacing through the rain / among his blank fields” while “On all sides / the world rolls coldly away”; at the poem’s end, however, what “looms” in this landscape is “the artist figure of / the farmer—composing / —antagonist” (Williams 98 – 99). Similarly, Moore’s mention of “the set- / ting sun” recalls a section of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” Moore’s carrot expands with an energy suggesting both colors of the sunset and the “stiff”-ness of erection. Whitman’s speaker exclaims: “Behold the day break! . . . Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs, / Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven,” and then he responds: “Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me, / If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me” (Whitman 212 – 213)—matching the sun’s daily ejaculations with his own. Where Williams’s poem concludes unambiguously with its looming artist/farmer and Whitman’s focuses on the poet’s explicitly ejaculatory powers of creation, Moore’s provides no obvious focus beyond the root vegetable, the “Radical” of the title. The “man in the straw hat” is an observer, not a competing ejaculator or controlling composer; his “happiest moment,” he seems to say, “has / been funereal in comparison with” the joyous energy of the carrot’s “expansion.” If this description of the carrot also acts as a portrait of the artist, then the poem would seem to say that the most dynamic expression takes place in submerged, inconspicuous form. The poet/carrot’s belligerence is directed against that which would inhibit its growth, and its “secret of expansion” inheres in its own imaginative and physical intensity. Perhaps Moore here combines a feminine erotics with phallic stiffness—or perhaps Moore models a feminist aesthetic through the byplay of analogy and multiply suggestive registers of language, none of which display Williams’ or Whitman’s open assumptions of mastery. As a woman, Moore may claim an erotic energy of phallic proportions for any being that can “conserv[e]” resources for intensive deployment in the direction of its combined nature and will, even if that deployment long remains underground. For a woman, the poem may imply, the “world” is both a mere “circumstance,” the “mis- / erable corn-patch” in which she happens to be planted, and a manifestation of “the con- / ditions of life” that “pre- / determine[ . . . ]” at least some part of her growth. A carrot cannot choose to be a grape. A red-haired American woman does not choose her gender, nationality, race, or family, but she can determine the vitality with which she expands in the directions available to her.

What I want particularly to call attention to here is Moore's assertion of the extraordinary pleasure in this ordinary vegetable's growth; to follow one's natural direction with ambition and imagination gives an orgasmic joy making everything else "funereal in comparison." At the same time, the poem's turn from "secret... expansion" to deliberation on slavery may mark the particular "con- / ditions of life" suffered by women or other relatively unempowered populations. "Slavery" may be easier than freedom to the extent that freedom demands choice and particularly one's own choice of constraints or limits. On the other hand, it is "the man in the straw hat," not the author or the carrot, who comes to this contradictory conclusion. It is far easier for the free to claim that "slavery [is] easy" than for the slave; only the privileged can imagine that their lives are the most difficult. And we have only this man's metaphor as grounds for perceiving the dynamic carrot as enslaved. Moore gives the carrot the last word. It effectively "tells" the man that freedom may take the lines of "predetermined" or "predestined" constraints. The carrot does not have a choice but to become "thick," but it gives such intensive imagination, ambition, and vitality to fulfilling this design that it puts lesser effort to shame, and its vitality is "im- / possible to hinder."

In this poem, every stanza ends mid-sentence and two end mid-word until the final closure of the last stanza's last line. The drive of the syntax across line and stanza endings gives a suggestion of this erotic, unstoppable expansion and energy while divorcing that power from a particular subject position. The poem's largely unaccented rhymes and increasing alliteration punctuate this forward drive in an uneven, oscillating rhythm. Characteristically, Moore ends this poem on an unaccented syllable, without a rhyme—traditionally, a recipe for a weak effect. Just as Moore says "Dismiss agrarian lore," however, she may be implying that poets should "Dismiss prosodic lore": it is the "intensive heat," the "secret of expansion" in one's preferred or given directions, the imaginative gusto with which one proceeds that determines "force." The eroticism of Moore's poems is submerged, and it is not identified with sexuality. It decenters gendered and sexual norms by constructing rhythms of hesitation, expansion, and congruence that are embodied in visually syncopated syntax rather than in human bodies.

Like other modernists, Moore engages in experiments concerning the relation of art's uses to its forms. In particular, she challenges the naturalized assumptions of her culture about biological sciences and pseudosciences like eugenics; about conceptions of sexuality (as in the newly circulating conceptions of homo- and hetero-sexuality); and about relationships of power—racial, gendered, historical, and colonial or imperial. Her extraordinary ear for by-play leads her to the construction of complex rhythms that entice, siren-like, through their tensions while leading repeatedly to the pleasures that are "impossible to force" and "im- / possible to hinder."

### [ Notes ]

① Williams 145. Elizabeth Gregory's edition of *The Critical Response to Marianne Moore* reprints Williams' 1925 essay "Marianne Moore" and an excerpt from his *Autobiography* where he discusses Moore.

② See, for example, *Critics and Poets Read Marianne Moore*: "A right good salvo of barks," ed. Linda Leavell, Cristanne Miller, Robin Schulze; the recent *Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex David and Lee M. Jenkins, which devotes a chapter to Moore and Stevens; and several recent volumes on modernism that include a chapter on Moore—including David Kadlec's *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatism, Culture*, Catherine Paul's *Poetry in the Museums of Modernism: Yeats, Pound, Moore, Stein*, Zhaoming Qian's *The Modernist Response to Chinese Art: Pound, Moore, Stevens*, Jeffrey M. Westover's *The Colonial Moment: Discoveries and Settlements in Modern American Poetry*, and Susan McCabe's *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film*.

③ As historians of women's movements know, the early decades of the twentieth century were a more progressive

period for women's rights in the U. S. than any time until the 1970s. See Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century*, and my essays "Marianne Moore and the Women Modernizing New York" [*Modern Philology* 98. 2 (2000): 339 - 62] and "Gender and Sexuality in Modernist Poetry" (Davis and Jenkins 68 - 84).

④ This is the subject of my study of gender and literary community in New York and Berlin, *Cultures of Modernism: Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, Else Lasker-Schüler* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005).

⑤ Elizabeth Gregory's *Quotation and Modern American Poetry*, for example, uses a line from Moore's poem "Poetry" as its subtitle: "Imaginary Gardens with Real Toads." An early important essay on the same topic is Lynn Keller's "'For inferior who is free?': Liberating the Woman Writer in Marianne Moore's 'Marriage'." I also write about this feature at length in *Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority*, especially 175 - 203.

⑥ See my chapter "An 'Unintelligible Vernacular': Questions of Voice" in *Marianne Moore* on this subject.

⑦ The best general studies of Moore are Bonnie Costello's *Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions*, Linda Leavell's *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts*, Taffy Martin's *Marianne Moore: Subversive Modernist*, and Margaret Holley's *The Poetry of Marianne Moore*. Particular aspects of Moore's style are well developed in Cynthia Hogue's *Scheming Women: Poetry, Privilege, and the Politics of Subjectivity*, Jeanne Heuving's *Omissions Are Not Accidents: Gender in the Art of Marianne Moore*, John Slatin's *The Savage's Romance: The Poetry of Marianne Moore*, and Lisa Steinman's *Made in America: Science, Technology and American Modernist Poetry*—as well as in the volumes previously mentioned by Gregory, Kadlec, McCabe, Qian, and Westover.

⑧ The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* summarizes a number of speculative theories about why meter is so popular, including that the beat in accentual poetries resembles the heart-beat; iambic rhythm was thought nearest to ordinary speech in antiquity, and has also been considered closest to speech in English (497).

⑨ Pound espouses the "natural order" of words in his translation of Ernest Fenollosa's "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry." All of Moore's poetry published before 1925 is quoted from Robin Schulze's superb edition, *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907 - 1924* (hereafter Moore, *Early Poems*). Grace Schulman's recent edition *The Poems of Marianne Moore* also contains early published and previously unpublished poetry, but its many inaccuracies make it unreliable as a source text.

⑩ Olson, "Projective Verse" 242. Moore is no closer to Bishop's claim that "Writing poetry is an unnatural act. It takes great skill to make it seem natural"; Moore does not want to give the impression of naturalness in the poetic act or form (Bishop 207). In fact, John Slatin writes that Moore's syllabics are designed to prevent mimesis (Slatin 6)—although he sees this intentional "opacity" as aesthetically inadequate, a weakness of the early poems.

⑪ First published in *Chimaera* in 1916; quoted from *Observations* 1924, Moore, *Early Poems* 70. The source of Moore's quotations is Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*, in which a manipulative character tries to persuade another to join him by representing the two of them as "gods" above the "louts."

⑫ Quoted from Moore's *Complete Poems*, 136.

⑬ J. Ladin makes this argument in "Marianne Moore and the Politesse of Protest," *American Literature Association* paper, May 2007.

⑭ See Moore's essay "The Accented Syllable," *Complete Prose* 31 - 34, on this aspect of her verse.

⑮ Slatin's phrase, 86. Slatin is not here talking about rhyme but about the meter of syllabics.

⑯ Leavell, *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts* 57. Leavell further notes that Moore developed her syllabic stanza as early as 1915, when her peers were "looking to the painters—or, more accurately, looking *with* the painters—for new forms. The adulation Moore received from other poets in the late teens indicates that her stanza did represent what they were all in various ways seeking. Though other poets no doubt learned from Moore, her stanza seemed so uniquely hers that they could not altogether adopt it..." (80).

⑰ Quoted from Carolyn Burke's "Getting Spliced; Modernism and Sexual Difference" 101. Burke quotes from John Hyde Preston, "A Conversation," *Atlantic Monthly* 156 (1935) 191. Stein made this comment to an interviewer during her 1934 - 35 trip to the U. S..

⑱ Bazin, "Marianne Moore and the Arcadian Pleasures of Shopping" 218. As Bazin states, Moore was fetishized as exemplifying modernist resistance to capital and ideological immunity, "hermetically sealed off from its historical moment" (227).

⑲ I quote here from the 1919 Others version of "Radical," as it was first published, rather than the later version

in *Observations* (1924) because she radically revised her verse stanza for this later printing, combining lines and changing line breaks, so that the poem consists of four stanzas of six rather than seven lines each. See Moore, *Early Poems* 241 for information on variations between her first and her 1924 printing of this poem.

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