Modern America, Modernism, and Marianne Moore

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"Do you regard yourself as part of the 'American Tradition,' as an American poet, regional or national?"

"Yes ... an American chameleon on an American leaf."

Hugh Kenner has written that Moore's "heritage was both literary and technological. Her father's given names were John Milton, and he had suffered a nervous breakdown after the failure of his plans to manufacture a smokeless furnace." Kenner has in mind, in particular, how Moore's use of the typewriter and of syllabic grids in her poetry relates her art to modern technology. More generally Kenner has called attention to the modernist taste for what might be called a machine aesthetic, evident in (for example) Pound's admiration of phenomena as diverse as "the functional bareness" of H.D.'s verse and the new New York skyline. Indeed, in 1929, Lewis Mumford suggested that modernist art's fascination with qualities such as precision, clean lines, economy, and accuracy were related to "the more austere forms of science and mechanics." As the title of Mumford's book—American Taste—indicates, there was also a widespread recognition that technological progress (and scientific progress, with which it was conflated) was a distinguishing feature of early twentieth-century America.

Among American poets there was a fascination with this definition of modernity as technological and scientific. When asked about her view of technology as a source of change in this century, Marianne Moore said, "It preoccupies me ... fundamentally and continuously ... and Williams pronounced that the "term 'artist' ... must be reconstituted ... to show a relationship with 'engineer.'\(^{16}\) Moreover, there was a tendency to redescribe nature, the mind, the imagination, even the self, in language borrowed from technology. Examples are numerous, from R. M. Thompson's "Genuflexions to the Engine," where the speaker moves "machine-like, precisely, exactly,"\(^{17}\) to Moore's "machine-like" pangolin (Comp, p. 118)\(^8\) to Williams' statement that "knowledge itself is ... a machine."\(^9\) At times, American poets enthusiastically adopted this vocabulary as well as the aesthetic of modern technology. Thus, Marianne Moore praised a watercolor by Klee for "resembling a specimen of machine design."\(^{10}\) But the fascination with a machine aesthetic and the attempts to clarify the relationship between science, technology and poetry were often muddled or ambivalent. We can take Williams' attitude as an example.

Williams' relatively late definition of a poem as a "machine made of words"\(^{11}\) is part of his desire to claim for poetry the aura of success surrounding technology. The modernist concern with technique (although in part inherited directly or indirectly from Flaubert and the French Symbolists) was claimed as a native American tradition allied with American know-how and practical ingenuity and seen to be underwritten by American prosperity and renown.\(^{12}\) Williams' claim is that technological and scientific modernity—including everything from indexing systems to skyscrapers—can or should provide American writers with a climate in which they might define modernity for the arts internationally.

Williams' claims for America, however, are not consistent. Elsewhere in his writings he echoes the more negative judgments of American technology (and America's priorities). For instance, he denounces "a science doing slavery service upon gas engines."\(^{13}\) Even those writers whose taste was for technological or industrial design reveal a mistrust of technology per se and, more importantly, of the industry and commerce attending and fostering technological growth. The fear most often voiced is that art and technology cannot coexist in American society. Thus Pound, in the New Age, 1919, finds a conflict "between art, literature, intelligence, and card-index and officialdom."\(^{14}\) And in an article for the first issue of Broom, Emily Veronica Sanders regrets "the manifestation of the American Machine—transforming itself ... into American Mind; or the mistaking of analytic acumen for creative mind."\(^{15}\)

By commonplace, modernism both in art and in the world was associated in various ways with technology and science, associated in
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turn with America. Matthew Josephson, for instance, describes the spread of machine culture as the Americanization of the world.16 And yet the arts were not associated with America. Indeed, the small magazines of the period frequently commented on both the lack of creativity and the lack of taste in America, and much was made of, for example, how the United States Customs charged duty on a Brancusi sculpture because they refused to accept it as art.17 Thus many literary modernists had mixed feelings about the values and accomplishments of a country that in practice did not welcome—or offer financial support to—"the new" in literature.

It is in this climate that Marianne Moore began writing. Her notebooks make it clear that she was reading the journalistic writings of Pound, Eliot and others; her poems appeared in magazines such as Broom or Hound and Horn alongside articles that criticized industrial America, and she would certainly have read the exchanges in the Dial, where her own work was appearing by 1920.18 In fact, the first issue of Broom includes a description of Moore's poems as technological: "ingeniously constructed, intricate little piece[s] of machinery ... with cogs and wheels and flashes of iron and steel."19

Moore's diaries include—in order to take issue with—a whole series of negative judgments on America. In 1922, objecting to the characterization of Americans as ignorant and provincial, Moore writes that "we seem a people of character, we seem to have energy."20 and an unpublished review objects to Harold Stearns's pronouncement on the inferior quality of American arts and letters. Moore concludes that Stearns's scorn for modern American literature: "in as much as Santayana under whose spell Mr. Stearns is—is guilty of similar neglect, one is not surprised."21 Santayana's review of Harold E. Stearns's Civilization in the United States was published in the Dial in 1922, just after Stearns left the country with much public fanfare.22 In Stearns's book, Van Wyck Brooks wrote that "as one surveys the history of our literature during the last half century, [what stands out] is the singular impotence of its creative spirit."23 Santayana's review adds that "the whole world is being Americanized by the telephone, the trolley car, the department store, and the advertising press. Americanism, apart from the genteel tradition, is simply modernism—purger in America than elsewhere."24 In 1938, in a later volume edited by Stearns, John Chamberlain wrote of the Thirties in America that the "great writers' whose absence Van Wyck Brooks had deplored seemed more absent than ever."25 and looking back on that decade, Malcolm Cowley seconded Van Wyck Brooks's view that American writers "turned into machines," adding that the enemy was "efficiency, standardization, mass production, the machine."26

Many of Moore's first editorial "Comments and Announcements" for the Dial implicitly enter this debate on the character and affiliations of the modern American artist and writer.27 Responding to Count Keyserling's Travel Diary, for instance, she approvingly cites his statement that "prosperity is regarded as normal in America," and she notes the commonplace association between America and "speed and sport."28 Moore denies that such an association is unpleasant, distinguishing herself from Stearns, Santayana, and Cowley. Indeed, objecting to Karel Capek's remark that "America's predilection for ... speed and success, is corrupting the world," Moore appeals to the restless energy of Columbus as the trait responsible for the very discovery of America, and again reminds us that women, far from being corrupted by American inventions, benefit from them: "Assisted by the typewriter, the sewing machine, and the telephone, the American white woman... seems as time goes on, more serviceable and less servile."29

Moore's years at Carlisle Commercial School, and her firsthand knowledge that women writers, in particular, "need room to experiment and grow ... and they need pay" is clearly part of her unusual acceptance of the trappings of modernity.30 We find a similarly atypical acceptance of business. Along with denials that Americans are rapacious, we find the following (in a "Comment" on literary neatness): "Pressure of business modifies self-consciousness and genuine matter for exposition seems to aid effectiveness; in fact, Darwin's scientific descriptions."31 Moore obviously accepted just those aspects of American life—of business, technology, science, and advertising—regarded with more ambivalence or downright distaste by some of her contemporaries. Not only does she seem to feel such modern enterprises can coexist with literary concerns but she also celebrates the paraphernalia of the twentieth century (telephones, sewing machines, typewriters) quite matter-of-factly. In the same vein, Moore, unlike Williams, does not turn her machines into obvious metaphors for American poetry, but views them as tools that leave time for writing. In short, she seems on first reading unusually discriminating in separating the practical facts of technological progress from the aesthetic of technology.

On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Moore's acceptance of American industrialization does not involve a celebration of material progress per se. Instead, we are constantly referred to the creative or spiritual energy behind technological and commercial ac-
complishments. For example, the idea of speed or motion, to judge from her reading diaries and Dial editorials, consistently captured Moore’s attention, and was related on the one hand to an ideal of creative energy and on the other hand to grace and non-possessiveness. In “He Digesteth Harde Yron,” the bird’s speed, called heroic, is said to contradict a greed; it does not allow the bird to stand and defend any one place as its own (Comp. p. 100). The imagination, too, in moving from object to object, deflects the urge to possess objects materially. Moore’s poem, “When I Buy Pictures,” talks about not purchasing paintings, but rather regarding one’s “self as the imaginary possessor” of objects (Comp. p. 48). For Moore, possession by the mind or imagination is not greed. Thus, she redefines the character of American business and technology in order to praise the imagination behind such successful American endeavors and to celebrate the “pianist dexterity” of the modern imagination, the very motion of which discourages destructive acquisitiveness by concentrating on (invisible and intangible) creativity itself.32

Similarly, Moore’s often noted praise of science also involves redefinition, and serves the larger purpose of defending America as a country where the value placed on science and technology might nonetheless provide a healthy climate for poets. For example, her attention to verbal detail reclines or redefines the scientific virtues of effectiveness, accuracy and precision. These redefined virtues underlie Moore’s invocations of technology and science. Her comment on literary neatness, for instance, links science and business (the two fields for which America was known), and proposes that Audubon and big business both aid effectiveness. But effectiveness, as Moore continues, is like Darwin’s or Audubon’s “faithfulness to the scene [which, in turn is said to be faithfulness] to the action and aspect of what makes the scene important” (emphasis added). Scientific accuracy is then not the accuracy of machines but of observers; moreover precision and effectiveness include giving value to the world thus viewed: they become forms of imaginative possession, and also activities. As Moore writes: “precision is a thing of the imagination” (P. p. 4) and “we are precisionists/ not . . . arrested in action” (Comp. p. 59).

Moore’s arguments are in part a response to those of writers such as Capek who linked efficiency and greed as touchstones of a philistine modern America. By her redefinitions, Moore suggests that modern American society fosters—rather than discourages—creative work. For all her often noted praise and use of science, Moore was sensitive to the further link commonly made between American commerce and Ameri-
involve reclassifying, revaluing, and thereby in some sense changing, the world. Thus, Moore's celebrated fondness for naturalists and biologists is still, in part, in the service of her defense of American poetry. That is, she argues that America's engineering or industrial feats rest on the strength of the American imagination. And while the idea that science or technology requires creativity is not original, Moore's close attention to how engineers, businessmen, naturalists, and poets all use imagination in their encounters with the world is unique.

Moore's reading notebooks suggest the sophistication involved in her view of biology or zoology. For instance, she notes a quotation from The Book of a Naturalist on not praising animals for their virtues or "for their profound knowledge of chemistry and ... higher math as shown in their works." The idea that animal behavior cannot count as virtuous or intelligent seems to contradict the claims made in Moore's poems about pangolins, ostriches, and other animals. Yet a closer look reveals that these poems contain a self-consciousness about the status of their humanized creatures. Thus, "He Digesteth Harde Yron" chastises those who maltreat ostriches after having made them into symbols of justice. At the same time, the poem remakes the ostrich into a symbol of heroism. Moreover, after much sarcasm at the expense of those who capture and kill the bird, the poem captures its ostrich in a remarkably strict poetic form. The poem's imaginative possession is contrasted with the more malignant ostrich hunters' forms of possession, but still the poem signals the human need to make something of and thus distort or even limit the freedom of that which we view. "The Monkeys" makes a similar point about how the poet merely redirects, rather than escapes, the need to make the world one's own and in the process to change the world.

Thus Moore proposes that poetry can teach the sciences about their common enterprise, namely, inhabiting the world or (what comes to the same thing) making the world inhabitable. Dewey's Education and Democracy, which Moore read, opens by stating that it will connect "the growth of democracy with the development of the experimental method in the sciences, evolutionary ideas in the biological sciences, and the industrial reorganization." Moore takes a similar position, but also connects American democracy and the mental prowess exhibited in American science and industry with the poetic imagination. Thus she repeats the strategy attributed to D. H. Lawrence in her notes on a review of Lawrence's poems: "Mr. Lawrence does not attack science, he puts science into his pocket and walks off with it—a distinct achievement in the direction of unity."

Moore's poetics, then, are forged in the context of early twentieth-century America. They also help illuminate the reasons for the difficulty of her style. Her poems and essays in effect enact their point as she moves from topic to topic with, to use her terms, "ferocity" and "grace." Her claim is that art "acknowledge[s] the spiritual forces which have made it" (Comp, p. 48) by means of its creative transitions, and that such mental agility demonstrates an attractive example of traits such as rapidity, accuracy, and possessiveness, often denigrated as aspects of the American character when practiced in other spheres. Her approval of Kenneth Burke, whom she cites on how the artist "refines the propensities of his age, formulating their aesthetic equivalent," amounts to a comment on her own relationship to her age.

The playfulness with which Moore examines and reclaims language is also part of a mental dexterity, an "intellectual wastefulness of aesthetic abundance," that one assumes is, in part, Moore's own "aesthetic equivalent" to the prosperity of the age, wherein "imaginary possession" means both possession by the imagination and possession that is not real, or not materialistic.

The 1932 version of "The Student" provides an excellent example of the complexity of Moore's acceptance and redefinition of the characteristics of modern America. Here, Moore's complicated appropriation of modernity lies not only in her redefinition of modern American technology, but also in her use of theoretical science, which further underlines her fascination with motion and process.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Einstein's theories were popularly connected with generalized ideas of flux and motion; indeed, there was a widely shared misconception that "the theory of relativity demand[ed] a Bergsonian philosophy," as Morris Cohen—reviewing eleven books on the new physics in 1921—laments. Moore too seems to appropriate Einsteinian science as a type of poetic process. Her American student asks Einstein: "when will your experiment be finished," and is told that "science is never finished." Williams, who also uses Einstein as a model of how in science as in poetry process is all, tries to nationalize "St. Francis Einstein" by linking him with St. Francis, "the patron saint of the United States," thereby legitimizing—by drawing on the popularity and respect accorded Einstein—one model of poetic creativity. Moore, typically, is more straightforward, yet equally insistent that the processes of science are one indication of American creativity: she replaces Einstein with Audubon, another adoptive American, who "taught us how to dance ... how to turn as the airport wind-sock turns without an error; like Alligator, Downpour,
Dynamite./ and Wotan, gliding round the course in a fast neat/ school,”
Moore’s own turn from Einstein to Audubon to aviation and race tracks
adds to her point about the accuracy of mental turns the implicit
suggestion that the sounds of poetry (error . . . Alligator, Downpour,
Dynamite, and Wotan) can offer a vitality and pleasure in the real,
which turns the greed one might otherwise associate with race tracks
to a celebration of imaginative gain. It is thus we turn from “speed and
success” to women made “more serviceable and less servile,” in the
early “Comment.” In “The Student,” we find America adopting and
learning from—but not exploiting—the world’s men of science, just as
the poem in its final form adopts quotations from a lecture, three
college mottoes, The Arabian Nights, Einstein, Goldsmith, Emerson,
Burke, and Henry McBride (Comp, p. 278). As Moore writes in “New,
York,” what characterizes us “is not the plunder/ but ‘ accessibility
to experience’” (Comp, p. 54).

All versions of “The Student” open with a comparison between
French and American education, and insist that in America “one de-
gree is not too much.” The later version of the poem suggests: with “us,
a/ school . . . is/ both a tree of knowledge/ and of liberty.” The earlier
version also equates American liberality, knowledge and liberty, but less
explicitly, demanding that readers follow the mental turns of the poem
and so experience a kind of education in the process of reading.

Moreover, the poem invites consideration of the etymology of
words such as education (a leading out, and thus a kind of liberty) and
science (from seire, to know; thus a kind of knowledge). “It is a/ thought-
ful pupil has two thoughts for [a] word,” we are told. The poem thus
raises questions about the relationship between education, liberty, sci-
ence, and knowledge. We are returned to the commonplace association
of democratic America with science and with inferior education.

In “The Student,” these issues are related most clearly to Moore’s
readings about American education. Her reading diaries suggest that
she found debates about whether American education should teach
facts or methods (as we might now put it) to be related to the question
of whether science or art was America’s forte, and thus to the question
of whether America could produce creative work. Again, Moore seems
attracted to the idea that Americans, contrary to popular belief, value
inventiveness over utility. A quote, over which Moore later wrote Ran-
dolph Bourne’s name, suggests that being a student is related to the
creative development of an individual, rather than to mere technical
training: “the whole object of education should be to know what one
truly and wholeheartedly likes and wants.” Moore did not necessarily

read Bourne’s more famous request for “an investigation of what
Americanism may rightly mean,” but she asks the same question,
along with related questions about the place of art and science in
America, in “The Student.”

From the same period, Moore was taking notes on Dewey’s writ-
ings and, from Berenson, on how “we value [education] not for its
direct result but for its direct effects upon . . . the man who is engaged
therein.” On the top of the following page in Moore’s diary she has
written: “Education . . . the term refers to the spiritual.” Her readings
about science yielded passages that echo her notes on American educa-
tion. She quotes a series of statements to the effect that science is an
open-ended process: “It is certain that never, before God is seen face-
to-face, shall a man know anything with final certainty.” We find too
a note on how Duns Scotus answers the question of whether theology is a
science by calling it “more properly . . . a sapientia, since . . . it is rather
a knowledge of principles than a method of conclusions.” As Bonnie
Costello notes, commenting upon Moore’s use of this passage in “To A
Snail,” Moore differs from her source in interpreting science with
sapientia.

Moore characterizes science as ongoing investigation, indicative of
a kind of spiritual energy. Thus, we find “The Student” lists both
theology and biology as sciences. As Moore says later, citing an article
by Bronowski from the Saturday Evening Post, “science is the process of
discovering. In any case it’s not established once and for all: it’s evolv-
ing” (R, p. 273). Science and poetry are unified, both being described
as processes of discovery. For Moore, both also involve discovering a
world in flux. That is, Moore’s interests in Darwin, Burbank, and
etymology are related, in that she equates botanical, zoological, and
semantic facts as evolving rather than static.

“The Student,” then, takes what C. P. Snow has called two cultures
and invites us to see them as related, or twins:

In each school there is a pair of fruit-trees like that twin tree
in every other school: tree-of-knowledge—
tree-of-life—each with a label like that of the other college:
lex, or lux et veritas, Christo et ecclesia, sapient felicit,
and if science
confers immortality,
these apple-trees should be for everyone.

The poem resists the labels that would separate intellectual knowledge
and science from lived experience: “The football huddle in the vacant
lot/ is impersonating calculus and physics and military/ books; and is
gathering the data for genetics.” Science—knowledge—is equated with
vitality and with openness, and is thus not incompatible with poetry: a late essay makes the same point, calling Auden one “whose scientific predictions do not make him less than a poet—who says to himself, I must know” (P, pp. 86–87).

Once again, Moore is resisting the commonplaces that pitted poetry and intellectual learning against the practicality of science and the American character. Her diary for the years 1916–1921 includes, along with her notes about American education, a passage on how odd it is to find “intellectual learning . . . up in a sort of supernormal opposition to practical wisdom and the results of science.”63 In 1920, Dewey wrote, “Surely there is no more significant question before the world than the question of the possibility and method of reconciliation of the attitudes of practical science and contemplative aesthetic appreciation.”64 While Moore may not have read this particular passage by Dewey, she appears to be attempting just the reconciliation for which Dewey calls.

Yet while “The Student” insists upon the mental agility of American scientists and students (as well as poets and readers), it also insists upon facts, including the sociological or cultural fact that in America science was seen as offering hard facts. Thus, although she argues that science (unlike the common conception of it) is primarily creative, Moore at the same time suggests that poetry is practical. In the same vein, a 1935 speech given at Bryn Mawr (in which Moore read “The Hero,” originally part of the same poem as “The Student”) compares poetry, music, and math as being of little practical use. Yet the speech, which recommends students read Whitehead’s Introduction to Mathematics, continues: “but we have no use of applied mathematics that is not based on theoretical mathematics,” and concludes that physics—by virtue of improvements to the phonograph—has trained poets’ ears.65

One is tempted to accuse Moore of obscurity here. But a look at the context of her speech helps reveal the point, which is that poetry—like math—only appears impractical. We know that mathematics informs life; the implication is that poetry is equally implicated in the real world.

In keeping with this claim that poetry and practicality are not opposed, “The Student” maintains the common definition of fact, as indicated in the list of zoological tidbits—“horned owls have one ear that opens up and one/ that opens down”—and linguistic niceties—“Swordfish are different from gars, if one may speak of gars when the big/gamemakers are using the fastidious singular.” As the poem says, after celebrating mental and aural “going[s] round,” “there is more to

learn.” So Moore’s student is called upon to know facts as well as to be creative. The syllabics in which the poem is written add to the sense that the poem involves an almost mathematical precision. Indeed, the precision with which words are used in the poem is, for Moore, related to science: a review of Roget’s Thesaurus pronounces the investigation of words to be “analogous to the laboratory scientist’s classification of species in botany or zoology.”66 And, later, she describes the form of her poetry in scientific language that almost overturns her usual insistence upon the part played by the human imagination: “I never ‘plan’ a stanza. Words cluster like chromosomes, determining the procedure” (R, p. 263).

Finally, Moore’s attitude towards facts, in the commonly understood sense of the word, is complex. Her diary cites W. H. Wright on The Creative Will: the “artist sacrifices minor scientific truths to his creative inventiveness because he is ever after a profounder truth than that of accuracy of detail.”67 We also find, from W. H. Hudson’s The Study of English Literature: “the poet does not give what they call facts” and poetry “is an interpretation of life from the point of view and through the medium of feelings.”68

On the one hand, Moore’s emphasis upon the creativity of science and the mind’s ability to give value to the world it observes seems to ally her with Hudson and Wright. Indeed, she uses the quotation from Hudson in “Picking and Choosing,” where she says that Hardy—as poet and as novelist—is “one man/ interpreting life through the medium of the/ emotions.” If he must give an opinion, it is permissible/ that the/ critic should know what he likes” (Coll, p. 52). This suggests that opinions are related to emotion and interpretation; they are a matter of feeling rather than of scientific verification.

Yet on the other hand “Picking and Choosing” goes on to mock (albeit affectionately) the mistranslation of summa diligentia as meaning Caesar crossed the Alps “‘on the top of a/ diligence.’ We are not daft about the meaning, but this/ familiarity/ with wrong meanings puzzles one” (Coll, p. 52). And “The Student” reiterates that no fact of science “might/ not as well be known; one does not care to hold opinions that fright/ could dislocate.” Indeed, Moore’s diary includes a quotation on how poetry that ignores facts “in the long run . . . must have a weakening effect on the mind.”69 Moreover, two pages after her citation of Hudson on how poetry need not be factual, Moore’s diary contains the draft of a letter to Poetry magazine: “Dear Poetry, There is a crying need for a Poet’s Handbook of Science. W. R. Benét, for
instance should be informed that bats do not hang in barns at night, that they fly around at night... Lola Ridge that... jaguars do not inhabit deserts.\textsuperscript{70}

Science may be viewed as creative, but poetry takes on the practical commitment to hard facts that Moore's redefinition no longer identifies with science or education. "The Student" remains an attempt to unify two cultures in the process of producing a defense of American creativity. But, as usual for Moore, there is a refusal to settle for easy answers. In fact, the early version of the poem is best characterized by its continual refusal to rest with any particular redefinition of science or poetry, although it insists upon the ongoing process of redefinition. The poem keeps open the distinctions between knowledge and life, fact and creativity, poetry and science, even while insisting that they cannot be neatly separated.

Absolute knowledge, presumably, precludes the necessity of continued investigation. Thus "The Student" maintains its valorization of process and imagination in refusing to settle the questions it raises. On various levels, the poem courts the uncertainty that sparks the imagination and intellect. It suggests we can neither separate nor wholly merge the terms of Moore's dialect; we can neither give up trying to get things right, nor—it is suggested—will we ever finally get things right. The language itself repeats this suspension: the student interested in a stranger's résumé is pleased to be told that "science is never finished..." but the poem has just insisted upon the etymology and context of words (specifically French words—valet, bachelor, damsel) reminding a thoughtful reader that résumé means a summary of experience, or conclusion, yet also comes from the French, résumer, meaning to continue.

The dialectic or suspension set up in "The Student" is characteristic. We find that science is not inert fact; poetry, science, and education in America are all concerned with creative energy and ongoing process: but facts are still facts and not to be ignored. Similarly, as a passage in Moore's diary puts it: "Education... the term refers to the spiritual or bodily effect of a course of experience be its nature what it may... [In viewing art, it] means that the mind rests in its object... beholding it without deserting it..."\textsuperscript{71} The mind's relationship to the object of its attention is dynamic and creative, but does not entail "deserting" the object.

Moore's defense of Williams in a 1921 Dial piece states that the "oppositions of science are not oppositions to poetry but oppositions to falseness."\textsuperscript{72} But both science and poetry, variously defined, claim truth as an uneasy marriage of continued endeavor and fidelity to the world, allowing us neither to ignore facts nor to ignore the effects of human observation and evaluation. This double focus on object and observer is repeated in "When I Buy Pictures," where we are told that art must both reveal "the spiritual forces which have made it" and give "piercing glances into the life of things" (Comp, p. 48).

Such a commitment to both mind and world, process and fact, is problematic,\textsuperscript{73} but nonetheless Moore apparently felt an ethical commitment to both sides of this dialectic. The poems and essays are not easily accessible, which has less to do with the lack of relevance of which Moore is sometimes accused than with this dual commitment to mind and matter, with her tactic of redefinition, and—one might add—with a lack of condescension. Moore tells us, again in "The Student," that "we are as a nation perhaps, undergraduates." Her poems exemplify rather than preach certain modes of understanding, and thus they show us. In her later version of "The Student," we are told of a student who is a "variety of hero": he "renders service when there is no reward." So too with Moore: her own ideals, like her heroines, are various, but she does consistently argue for one service she would have poetry render, namely, the encouraging of respect for what is—for concrete particularity—without relinquishing the need morally and imaginatively to redefine values, in an ongoing engagement with the world that is the true moral center of her work.

Thus, Moore's difficult vision of science's and poetry's roles in America returns us to the larger question with which "The Student" is concerned. If Moore's defense of poetry is in terms of science and fact, I have argued that this is in part because criticism of American society had raised the problem of how to launch a defense of American poetry without ignoring the commercial and industrial values for which America was famous. To cite Lewis Mumford's essay on the city in Stearns's 1922 Civilization in the United States: the "highest achievements of our material civilization... count as so many symptoms of its spiritual failure."\textsuperscript{74} To counteract such views, Moore points out the spiritual in the material and the complex interrelations of higher learning and life, fact and imagination, poetry and science.

Yet Moore does not pretend that American society's potential—great as she claims it to be—is all necessarily for the good. Despite my argument to the contrary, there is a grain of truth to Bernard Engel's judgment that "The Student" is about American immaturity and to Randall Jarrell's remark about Moore's relationship to modern America: "she accepts her own society scarcely more than Cato accepted his."\textsuperscript{75} The poem ends:
... in this country we've no cause to boast; we are as a nation perhaps, undergraduates not students. But anyone who studies will advance. Are we to grow up or not? They are not all college boys in France.

The modulation of tone in these final lines is complicated. Not boasting—having humility—is a trait Moore admires, but having no cause to boast can mean either that Americans are not bound to some single cause, that is, they are open-minded, or it can mean that a celebration of America is premature. In the same vein, the French clearly are not all college boys because some have grown up and are (perhaps in contrast to us) students in the best sense of the word. Yet the comment cuts two ways: we are referred back to the beginning of the poem, and reminded that the French system of education is not democratic and so disenfranchises many. Thus, by contrast, American education may be better.

The poem itself is open-ended in that it refuses to settle such issues. American democratic education may be (like the poem) open-minded, broad-based, even humble. Not to be a graduate is not necessarily to be uneducated; it could indicate that education is ongoing—a matter of degrees in the sense of increments rather than of sheepskins. Yet it is also true that to be undergraduates may indicate immaturity and a lack of self-consciousness, neither of which would count as a virtue. Indeed, some of the virtues of Americans presented in the poem are highly qualified. "Impersonating calculus," as the poem's football players do, may be to give life or body to abstract disciplines, but it may also qualify the genuineness of such a calculus. The poem continues: "If scholarship would profit by it, sixteen-foot men should be grown; it's for the football men to say." While Burbank's genetic experiments intrigued her, Moore's comment on football men is surely tongue-in-cheek, especially in light of her self-consciousness about the relatively inhuman (and unvaluable) status of the unobserved world. Some observers might be able to see scientific theories at work in a football game, but like the animals who cannot be praised for their knowledge of chemistry, the football men are certainly not best qualified to say what scholarly profit is.

Moore was aware that many of her readers would understand advancement in material terms, rather than the intellectual and spiritual advancements obliquely proposed in the poem. Yet, by forcing us, as readers, to observe the science put into practice by football men, the poem tries to educate its audience. If the poem's football players are not the American students for whom the poem calls, those who have read Moore's poetry are being prepared to fulfill the potential that "The Student" outlines as distinctly American.

T. S. Eliot's characterization is apt: "Moore's relation to the soil is not a simple one." We may add to Eliot, taking the soil to indicate the things of the world—facts, animals, and so on—or the specifically American climate in which Moore wrote. "The Student" helps to reveal the ways in which Moore's poetics draw on her detailed awareness of how American modernity was commonly defined. In her redefinition of science, fact, accuracy, speed, and the vocabulary of profit, she revalues the common characterization of technological and industrial America, making this revised portrait of the country the foundation of her vision of modern American poetry. Thus, Moore both claims and resists the traits she and others found in modern America. To set imaginative agility and possession against more destructive manifestations of the same impulses—or, rather, to redefine the field in which such impulses should operate—is an attractive political stance. Moreover, Moore's clarity about her poetic project allows her to avoid the confusion that Williams, for example, often exhibits in his simultaneous attraction to and mistrust of his age.

Yet this strategy does not solve the dilemma presented to the American poet in the early twentieth century, as witnessed by Moore's self-consciousness about how to reconcile American practicality with creativity, or accuracy with imagination. Indeed, the effectiveness of Moore's strategy is open to question. That is, her insistence on the primacy of the individual mind's confrontations with its world may prevent her from going on to offer analyses of such questions as why women as a class might be served by technological advances or why certain character traits are fostered by post-industrial societies. In short, to concentrate on morally redefining American traits—rapidity, possessiveness, the attraction to competitive sports—might distract attention from the need for more active social (rather than individual) change. Further, it is not clear that Moore convinced even herself that there was a place for modernist poetry in America. Indeed, Moore's view of Williams' and Stevens' poetry as proof that "poetry in America has not died" (P. 139) suggests that she felt the proposition needed proof.

Such complaints, however, might be lodged against the modernist project as a whole; Moore's critique of modernity, especially her clear-sighted, and subversive, redefinition of American modernity, still stands
as one of the most intelligent poetic responses of her time. Her early poems may not have changed or even reached the American public, as she hoped; poetry's place in a pragmatic society remains problematic. However, Moore's confrontation with the dilemmas of twentieth-century American culture clearly inspired much of her poetry, resulting not only in an astute critique of modern America, but also in poems, the quality of which may be the best defense of Moore's claim that American modernity could foster American poetry.

All previously unpublished material by Marianne Moore is used with the permission of Clive E. Driver, Literary Executor of the Estate of Marianne C. Moore.

1 Twentieth-Century Verse, Numbers 12–13, American Number (October, 1938), 107, 114.
3 Kenner, p. 8.
6 Notes for a speech, Yale TS. (Copyright @ 1983 by William Eric Williams and Paul H. Williams.) Thanks to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, and to New Directions and the Williams Estate for permission to use this material.
8 Quotations from Marianne Moore's work will be cited in my text as follows:
12 Williams discusses the "inventive intelligence" of Americans, and proclaims that "American plumbing . . . indexing systems, locomotives, printing presses, city buildings, [and] farm implements . . . have become notable in the world," Selected Essays, p. 35.
15 "America Invades Europe," Broom, 1, 1 (November, 1921), 89.
17 See, for instance, Hound and Horn, 1, 2 (December, 1927), 157.
18 See, for instance, her quotation of Eliot's remark on James, which appeared in the August, 1918 issue of the Little Review, edited by Pound, where Eliot says James waved aside "all this show commercialism which Americans like to present to the foreign eye" (Reading Diary for 1924-1930, Rosenbach 1250/5, MS, p. 68). Moore's work appeared in Others, the Egoist, and Poetry in 1915; in Broom by 1922; and in Hound and Horn by 1932.
20 Reading Diary for 1921-1922, Rosenbach 1250/3, MS, p. 61.
21 "America and the Young Intellectual," unpublished review, circa 1919-1920, Rosenbach TS.
24 "Marginal Notes on Civilization in The United States," Dial, 72 (June, 1922), 555.
26 Exile's Return, pp. 76 and 94.
27 Moore was an active contributor to the Dial well before the official announcement of her editorial status in June, 1926. Nicholas Joost and Alvin Sullivan, The 'Dial,' Two Author Indexes: Anonymous and Pseudonymous Contributors; Contributors in Chipsheets (Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University, 1971), make clear which editorial pieces were written by Moore.
29 "Comment," Dial, 81 (October, 1926), 357-58. A note on Capek's article from The New York Times (16 May 1926) appears in Moore's Reading Diary for 1924-1930, Rosenbach 1250/5, MS, p. 125, although the public comment on Capek does not appear until October.
31 Dial, 82 (March, 1927), 267.
32 In "Briefier Mention," Dial, 78 (January, 1925), 75. Moore identifies pliant dexterity as characteristic of a modern style.
33 "Wallace Stevens was really very much annoyed at being . . . compelled
to be scientific about what he was doing,” in “Interview with Donald Hall” (R., p. 273).

All quotations are from the 1932 version of the poem as it first appeared in Poetry magazine, unless otherwise noted. “The Student” was first published as the middle section of “Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play” (Poetry, 49 [June, 1932], 122–26). It was reprinted in Fugitive, 1, 4 (Summer, 1941), 92–93, and reappeared on its own in the 1941 volume, What Are Years, with some revisions.


“Comment,” Dial, 79 (August, 1925), 177.


“The Student” may also respond to the review in The New Statesman, 7, 173 (29 July 1916), 403, that proclaimed commercialism above all was responsible for the deplorable faults, including lack of restraint, of American students.


“Comment,” Dial, 79 (August, 1925), 177.

See, for instance, Bertrand Russell, “Is Nationalism Moribund?,” Seven Arts, 2 (August, 1917), 682.

Reading Diary for 1916–1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, p. 91.

Moore rewrote the poem from one with eight lines per stanza (in rhymed sylabics) to one with seven lines per stanza (still in rhymed sylabics) — no mean technical feat — indicating that she found the rigors of the form to be an important feature of the poem.


Reading Diary for 1916–1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, p. 40, mentions Education and Democracy.


Reading Diary for 1921–1922, Rosenbach 1250/3, MS, p. 43.

In the announcement of the presentation of the Dial Award to Burke in Dial, 86 (January, 1929), 90 (emphasis added).

“Comment,” Dial, 83 (October, 1927), 358.

See Bonnie Costello, Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), on Moore as a poet of process, and in particular on how many of Moore’s apparent descriptions of “real objects” borrow from verbal accounts of art objects. I should add that I am indebted to Costello’s reading of Moore throughout this essay. Costello discusses “The Student” on pages 248–49.


“St. Francis Einstein” first appeared in Contact, 1, 4 (Summer, 1921), 2–4, after Einstein’s much publicized visit to the United States. The issue also includes Moore’s review of Kora in Hell, just following Williams’ poem and just before a complaint by Williams that “America . . . knows nothing of its debt to the artist” (“Sample Proof Piece / The Artist,” Contact, 1, 4 (Summer, 1921), 10–11). The identification of St. Francis as American—not an unusual claim for the period, as Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), pp. 151–53, points out—is found in Selected Essays, p. 27; it first appeared in Contact, 1, 1 (January, 1921).


Bourne’s question is found in his Atlantic Monthly article, on the failure of the American melting-pot (p. 86).

Reading Diary for 1916–1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, pp. 39–40. In the 1916 Education and Democracy mentioned by Moore, Dewey’s argument was that the purpose of education was primarily “to keep alive a creative and constructive attitude” and to liberate “human intelligence and human sympathy” (cited by Charles Morris, p. 162). The passage Moore cites, however, seems more to suggest Dewey’s attempt to reconcile his emphasis upon developing character with his respect for facts.

Reading Diary for 1916–1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, p. 121.

Reading Diary for 1916–1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, p. 122.

Reading Diary for 1930–1943, Rosenbach 1250/6, MS, pp. 162–72, for instance, mentions such titles as The World of Science, Pathways in Science, Scientific Monthly, and Francis and Roger Bacon and Modern Science from the Science Press.

Reading Diary for 1930–1943, Rosenbach 1250/6, MS, p. 172, from Dr. Fernando Sanford’s Francis and Roger Bacon and Modern Science.


The Marianne Moore Newsletter, 3, 2 (Fall, 1979), 14.

Moore’s journals include notes on Burbank (Reading Diary for 1921–1922, Rosenbach 1250/3, MS, p. 84 and Reading Diary for 1924–1930, Rosenbach 1250/5, MS, p. 88) and on Darwin (Reading Diary for 1916–1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, p. 127).

Reading Diary for 1916–1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, p. 127.

Cited in Morris, p. 97.

Rosenbach notes. In “Aids to Precision,” Rosenbach TS, p. 10, a piece related to “Feeling and Precision” (P., pp. 3–11), Moore recommends reading as an aid to writing, saying, “In my own case I am inclined to put first, scientific works such as Darwin’s.”

“Briefe Mention,” Dial, 80 (May, 1926), 431.

Reading Diary for 1916–1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, p. 36.

Reading Diary for 1916–1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, p. 66.

Reading Diary for 1916–1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, p. 66.

Reading Diary for 1916–1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, p. 68.

Reading Diary for 1916–1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, p. 122.

“Announcement,” Dial, 82 (January, 1927), 89.

See Morris, pp. 59–71, for an account of the American Pragmatists’ problems with similar issues.
The Reality of Imagination in the Poetry of Marianne Moore

RALPH REES

Reality means different things to different people. To most, fact and the stimuli of the senses define reality; to some, the products of the intellect may be added to the above; to a few, the offspring of the imagination must also be considered. Marianne Moore belongs to the last group, for she finds imagination as much a part of reality as fact. Many realists ignore the figures of the mind because they do not feel that such things have actuality; they deal only with the apparent, the sensed. Moore finds a more immediate reality in thoughts than in facts and the things that arouse the senses. The imagined, because it is more individual and more personal than the other phenomena, seems to her the very essence of reality. The way a thing seems is truth; its definition and its composition are not realities but stimuli to the imagination, which creates actuality. The experience of the fact and the sensed is reality.

In speaking of poetry, Moore says, nor till the poets among us can be "literalists of the imagination"—above insolence and triviality and can present for inspection, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," shall we have it. In the meantime, 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.