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In the best work of both Americans, life's terrifying mysteries are only partially contained by structural devices that hold reality at a remove from perception. The ways in which they achieve this constitute their most powerful effects. In Moore's poem, "A Grave," the poet partially conceals the terror of death by her conversational tone and by her presentation of images that challenge perception. The sea is "beautiful under networks of foam," but it is frightening, for it has "nothing to give but a well-excavated grave." And in "Marriage," she contrasts whimsical, witty phrases with language that captures an irrational current of the mind in passages that convey the destruction of reason by passion.

These contrasts of harmony and chaos are found in Kauffer's greatest work. In "Route 160, Reigate," Kauffer presents a row of black gnarled trees backed by straight trees in a brilliant, unearthly red color. The gnarled and the straight, the black and the red, combine to give an effect that is all the more strange for its partial adherence to naturalness. In his book-jacket illustration for Winds, by St.-John Perse, Kauffer employs geometrically neat lettering, but places near the title a jagged line that extends off the page. It is the precision and, conversely, the deceptively unruly view of life, both coexistent in the mind, that the two artists confronted in their greatest achievements. Theirs was a kind of American adventurousness and control that brought curiosity to its furthest reaches and most staggering dangers and risks. It was a quality they shared with their countryman, Henry James, who had, Moore wrote, a "mind 'incapable of the shut door in any direction.'"

The Model Stanza:
The Organic Origin of Moore's Syllabic Verse

MARGARET HOLLEY

In the poems that she published between 1932 and 1936, Marianne Moore revived the syllabically based stanza form that she had developed in many of her earlier "observations." During the early Twenties she had begun experimenting with free verse by rearranging, for example, the long twenty-two and thirty-two syllable lines of 1918's "A Graveyard in the Middle of the Sea" (which became "A Grave") and 1920's "England" into the irregular lines of the free form. The great 1923-24 trio of longer poems—"Marriage," "An Octopus," and "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns"—was also published in free verse. Why then did she return in the early Thirties to the syllable mode?

The five-year foray (1920-25) into free forms made virtually no difference in the sound, the spoken dimension, of Moore's verse, since the natural rhythms of speech and written prose had already been accommodated by her avoidance of regular metrics and her preference for the inaudible syllabic measure. But what free verse did override was one important element of her poetry's textual dimension, the stanza form visibly repeated on the printed page. In the Thirties, when Moore returned from editing The Dial to her own poetry, she turned neither to her early meters nor to free verse but to the syllabically measured stanza. What follows here is an exploration of the nature of that syllabic form, its origin, its role as a textual format, and its implications within the larger context of modernism.

We know that in Moore's process of composing her verse syllabic design was a secondary consideration. The stanza form for any one
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poem originated as an outgrowth of the pattern developed in the early, unplanned stages of writing. Moore explained this procedure to Pound in 1919: “I have occasionally been at pains to make an arrangement of lines and rhymes that I liked, repeat itself, but the form of the original stanza of anything I have written has been a matter of expediency, hit upon as being approximately suitable to the subject.” 4 Forty years later she described her approach again in an interview with Donald Hall: “I never ‘plan’ a stanza. Words cluster like chromosomes, determining the procedure. I may influence an arrangement or thin it, then try to have successive stanzas identical with the first.” 5 We know that the first stanza to be written was not always the opening stanza of the finished poem, for Moore has described how she composed the final two stanzas of “The Jerboa” and then patterned the rest of the poem after it. 6

Moore’s typical poem of the Thirties sometimes opens and usually closes with what I call a model stanza, that is, a stanza composed in the natural grammatical unit of a sentence. In this model “arrangement of lines and rhymes,” syntax and lineation are more or less mutually reinforcing; they seem to fit each other appropriately. Both “The Steeple-Jack” and “The Hero,” for instance, open with complete stanzaic sentence-units. “The Steeple-Jack” begins,

Dürer would have seen a reason for living
in a town like this, with eight stranded whales
to look at; with the sweet air coming into your house
on a fine day, from water etched
with waves as formal as the scales
on a fish.

The body of the poem then repeats the formal design of this model, maintaining the syllabic count of its line-scheme through grammatical sequences that are independent of the design, often startlingly so. Thus the naturally phrased closing line “on a fish” is later echoed in an odd line unit such as “to dry. The.” The syntax of the poem seems to move obliviously through the repeated syllabic pattern, or perhaps it is the line scheme that blithely and mechanically divides the statement unfolding within its parameters. The syntax (dynamic in its continual unfolding) and the syllabic design (static in its self-repetition) proceed through the poem in tension with one another, until, as in a musical piece, the variations end, the tension is resolved, and the poem closes on another model stanza. In this closure, syntax and syllabic schema are harmoniously united in a stanzaic whole.

While “Camellia Sabina” (published in 1933) and “Virginia Brit-
tania” (1935) are also enclosed by model stanzas, the more common pattern of this period is that of, say, “Smooth Gnarlage Grape Myrtle” of 1935. This poem opens right onto a disjunction between syntax and syllabic design: there is no opening model of which the subsequent stanzas appear as formal ghosts. Hence the syllabic pattern appears quite arbitrary, until one reaches the grammatically whole stanza at the poem’s close. What may look like a willfully senseless ending to stanza one—

between the two, bended the
peculiar
bouquet down; and there are
—is revealed in retrospect to be a formal replica of the end of the poem—

our clasped hands that swear, “By Peace
Plenty; as
by Wisdom Peace.” Alas!

—complete with inaudible rhyme in the final couplets.

The arbitrary appearance of the syllabic plan is heightened considerably in poems in which Moore’s revisions have altered or omitted the closing model stanza. In these cases, a syllabic design informs the entire poem without ever suggesting its original congruence with the statement out of which the poem grew. The first version of “The Student,” the one that appeared in Poetry in June 1932, ends with a model stanza whose language and line scheme have largely disappeared from the 1941 version that Moore preserved from What Are Years on. Likewise, 1934’s “The Frigate Pelican” was reduced by half for Collected Poems and deprived of a closing model stanza that bears a virtually imitative relation of form to content. The stanzaic pattern, decreasing from a longer 15–12–11–9–9 to a quicker 7–9–7–6 syllables per line, enacts the shift from large heaviness to nearly disembodied lightness and from distant rhyme or none at all to an immediate chime. This is the original closing stanza that appeared in Criterion in July 1934:

The reticent lugubrious ragged immense minuet
descending to leeward, ascending to windward
again without flapping, in what seems to be
a way of resting, are now nearer,
but as seemingly bodiless yet
as they were. Theirs are sombre
quills for so wide and lightboned a bird
as the frigate pelican
of the Caribbean.
It is a form "uniting levity with strength" just as the bird does. The reader of the late version, however, will not find any such trace of the joint evolution of form and content, and thus the syllabic form may seem to be simply a matter of mathematics, a detached if playful way of chopping up sentences into a semblance of the traditional English stanza.

Critics often delight in demonstrating the oddities created by Moore's apparent disregard for the line as a unit of sense or even rhythm. Excerpts from 1934's "The Buffalo" like "have significance: The" or like "foot horn-spread—decreased" or like "hump; to red-
seem good evidence of what Hugh Kenner calls the "implacable arbitrariness" with which the "grid of numerical rules" has been imposed. Kenner adds that "since a mosaic has no point of beginning, the poem is generated from somewhere just outside its own rigidly plotted field." Kenner's example, "The Fish" of 1918, is one of those verses whose model lines have been left far behind in earlier, unpublished drafts.

But for fifteen of the eighteen poems that appeared during the Thirties, we do have a model stanza available in one of the published versions. (Interestingly, the three lengthy poems of this decade that Moore dropped from her later collections—"Half Deity," "Pigeons," and "Walking-Sticks and Paper-Weights and Water Marks"—are all lacking extant model stanzas.) In most cases we can still see how the syllabic schema originates as the pattern of the model stanza's words "cluster[ing] like chromosomes" into an "arrangement of lines and rhymes."

In the model stanza of "The Buffalo," for instance, we can see how the peculiar-looking excerpt "hump; to red-
shape, with white plush dewlap and warm-blooded
hump; to red-
skin-
nerd Hereford...

The poem's rigid syllable count of 6–10–3–10–6–5–5 represents more than a numerical plan; it has its own rhythmic plan of long and short lines with audible and inaudible rhymes. The three layers of indentation from the left mark the quick light rhyme ("ox's" with "Yes"), a delayed heavier rhyme ("beast" with "decreased"), and the unrhymed lines. This pattern evolved in the closing model stanza and is maintained here in the body of the poem where "hump; to red-
occurs:

The modern
ox does not look like the Augsburg ox's
portrait. Yes,
the great extinct wild Aurochs was a beast
to paint, with stripe and six-foot horn-spread—decreased
to Siamese cat-

Brown Swiss size or zebu-
shape, with white plush dewlap and warm-blooded
hump; to red-
skin-
nerd Hereford or to piebald Holstein. Yet
some would say the sparse-haired
buffalo has met
human notions best.

The reader's eye and ear together can sense the pattern of the whole in which the odd isolated lines make formal sense.

My title phrase, "the organic origin of Moore's syllabic verse," means to suggest that her "numbers," the mathematical designs of her poetry, have their source in an "arrangement of lines and rhymes" in which shape, sound, and syntax converge in a "suitable" and vital way. Her syllabic line scheme for any one poem "develops itself from within," to use Coleridge's description of organic form. The pattern originates in the dance and play of the organically whole model stanza.

The context of Coleridge's remarks on organic form is appropriate to these thoughts on Moore's syllabic verse, because it raises a binary opposition that still characterizes much of our discourse on poetic form. Coleridge adopted from Schlegel the distinction between mechanical and organic form, a polarity itself grounded in other oppositions such as without versus within, before versus during or after, and living versus nonliving. In art, as Coleridge puts it, the mechanical occurs "when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material," while "organic form on the other hand is innate, it shapes as it develops itself from within." This distinction coincides in general with his contrasting pair of faculties, fancy and imagination. And his privileging of imagination as vital and creative over fancy's "fixed and dead" objects, is part of his larger allegiance to the organic as the natural, as the power of production and creation, the ultimate self-affirming spiritual value expressed as God.

While Moore shares Coleridge's preference for affirmation, nature
plays a qualified role in her work, and her verse offers us a unique 
chance to observe the dissolution, or relative status, of some of the 
binary oppositions he has helped to bequeath to us. The privileging 
of organic over nonorganic form is a romantic bias, one that has added 
impetus to the increasing predominance of free verse forms over the 
last one hundred years. And although there are certain romantic 
strains in Moore's work, the syllabically measured patterns to which she 
returned in a majority of her poems of the Twenties, Thirties, and 
Forties require fairly equal appreciation of the organic and nonorganic 
elements of form. 

A case in point is "The Jerboa," a publication of 1932, which 
Moore cited as an example of her procedure. The model stanzas' 
rhymed, then unrhymed, then rhymed couplets indented in pairs ap- 
pear to have evolved felicitously with the syntax, for they fit rather 
neatly with the sense of movement as hopping along on two legs:

By fifths and sevenths, 
in leaps of two lengths, 
like the uneven notes 
of the Bedouin flute, it stops its gleaning 
on little wheel castors, and makes fern-seed 
foot-prints with kangaroo speed.

Its leaps should be set 
to the flageolet; 
pillar body erect 
on a three-cornered smooth-working Chippendale 
claw—proped on hind legs, and tail as third toe, between 
leaps to its burrow.

"Having written the last stanza first," Moore said, "I had to duplicate 
it, progressing backward." This process of duplication transforms a 
unique, relatively organic pattern into a replicated, relatively mechan- 
ical pattern, so that one and the same syllabic configuration appears 
natural to one syntax and artificial to another.

Of all the virtuoso pieces opening Selected Poems, "The Jerboa" has 
probably the simplest and closest fit of line scheme with syntax, and 
this may be why Moore and others have favored it. However, a stanza 
(the seventh from the end) that was deleted after the 1932 version in 
Hound and Horn is perhaps unfamiliar enough to bring back afresh the 
sense of expression traversing a "predetermined" schema that is not 
tailored to it: the jerboa moves 

with great 
speed, followed by as a weight,

a double length, thin 
tail furred like the skin; 
that curls round it when it 
sleeps "round"—the nose nested in fur, a hind leg 
at each side of the head—or lies lengthwise, 
in view, when the body lies 

flat.

Such a disjunction of line and syntax is the norm in most of Moore's 
poems, and their conjunction is the hyper-expressive exception. So 
while her syllabic designs originate organically in the model stanzas, 
the mechanical application of that design dominates the body of the poems 
and the reader's impression.

At this point we need to suspend a romantic reading of Moore in 
which art imitates nature, where, as at the beginning of "The Jerboa," 
"A Roman hired an / artist, a freedman, / to make a cone—pine-cone" 
and recognize at the other end of that poem the way in which nature 
imitates art in the jerboa's "pillar body erect / on a three-cornered 
smooth-working Chippendale / claw." The classicist's devotion to pre- 
scribed forms, to symmetry and deliberate duplication, is strongly at 
work in these syllabic measures. Any such duplication—whether of 
iambic pentameter or of rhyme royal or of "little epiphany poems in 
free verse"—adopts and thus affirms a "predetermined form." Even 
a poet like Moore who evolved a more or less unique form for each 
incipient poem is then faced with the choice of sustaining certain 
formal units or abandoning them and working continually ab aon.

Moreover, to sustain a formal unit is not only to make it mechanical 
in application but also to transform it from the spontaneous and 
natural into art and culture, to couple the coming spontaneity with 
tension, the unconscious with the conscious. The recognition that art is 
artful does not hinder it from honoring and imitating nature. 
Moore's poem imitates and honors the jerboa alongside a detailed 
account of the many Egyptian artifacts that, like the poem itself, dupli- 
cate nature in miniature. "Its leaps should be set / to the flageolet," she 
suggested, because as she saw them, art and nature complement and 
highlight one another. Their separation is merely a feat of the analytic 
intellect.

The alternately organic and mechanical modes of the same syllabic 
measure in one poem demonstrate the relative nature of these modes 
in her work. Moore harnessed their complementarity as one more way 
of enacting her equal homage to nature and culture alike. In the two
syllabically neat stanzas of “No Swan So Fine” she affirms the superior fineness of the “chintz china one,” the ornate Louis Fifteenth candelabrum, over the natural swan. Likewise the poem’s final statement, “The king is dead,” is a closure that opens silently onto the second half of the maxim, “Long live the king,” implying that the love of artifice embodied in his kind of candelabrum may also live longer than one work or age. In Moore’s work in general, appreciation of the artful, the cultivated, is an anti-romantic theme that supports, or gives rise to, the large role she assigns to duplicated forms.

Nevertheless, Moore’s syllabic patterns bear a wholly different relation to convention than, say, the Japanese haiku or the English sonnet. Forms that are passed from poem to poem become conventional entities in their own right, publicly available vessels whose shapes are recognizable from Basho to Richard Wilbur and Shakespeare to Cummings. These forms bring to each of their instances a weight of convention and tradition that becomes part of the overt or covert sense of the poem. Virtually none of Moore’s patterns are transferrable from poem to poem. Each design is unique to its poem and enacts a replication that is grounded within the poem itself. The countervailing effects of her organic and mechanical modes imbue each of her poems with a formal tension which a wholly organic or wholly mechanical arrangement could not raise. Coleridge saw imagination revealed “in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities”; Nietzsche called it the marriage of Apollonian and Dionysian; we might call it a preference for “both/and” over “either/or,” the inclusive spirit.

In general, poetic form is an image in its own right at least as vivid as any other verbal image. The medium as message is part of our culture’s overall assumption of significant form, our traditional or constitutional tendency to translate facts into values. We try to find meaning wherever we can, since the discovery of meaning is one source of power in its broadest sense. Meaning is a bond between mind and matter, a connection that electrifies and empowers both poles.

Poetic form is one way in which Moore and other modernists answered the poetic tradition that surrounded and impeded them. Modernism constitutes a radical break with pre-twentieth century poetic forms and assumptions, even while modernist works use and rely on some elements of that tradition. This kind of rich, positive duplicity, by which the poet can both use and discard the parent tradition, is particularly evident in Moore’s skillful opposition of the written and spoken aspects of poetry. By balancing equally the textual with the vocal elements of verse in general, she allows us to watch their counterpoint with particular clarity in her work.

What is visually outstanding in Moore’s poems of the Thirties, as text on a printed page, is the repeated unit of the indented stanza. These units are constructed on the same principles as the indented stanzas of Donne, Herbert, Keats, and Tennyson: they are a mixture of long and short, end-stopped and enjambed lines, with indentations determined sometimes by rhyme and sometimes by line length, weight, and balance. The symmetry of the repeatable unit has been a characteristic of our poetry for centuries from rhymed couplets to romantic odes. The repeated, indented stanza is a staple of the English tradition which some modernists discarded but which Moore chose to preserve and to imprint on most of her pages of text.

The textual or visual impression of the indented stanza carries with it a certain freight of other expectations, however, mainly having to do with the sound of poetry, and these expectations are where Moore makes her implicit departure from how we have traditionally conceived of poetry. We have traditionally thought of verse as language bearing more or less regular or musical rhythms, a recurrent lilt that became especially predominant in verse like Swinburne’s in the latter half of the last century.

Metrical regularity demands that language be composed by the poet in one of the audible systems of stresses which produce that recognizably “poetic” rhythm. Even though English is a naturally accentual language, people do not normally think or speak or write in iambic pentameter or in Alexandrines. As Paul Fussell points out, to present them speaking metrically is to transform them from creatures of nature into creatures of art. And when it is the poet’s voice that we hear speaking metrically, the meter announces or implies his vatic role, just as meter tends to invest with a mysterious air of authority and permanence the words that assume its patterns.

Hence we may come to feel with Hugh Kenner that “metric is a system of emphases, centered in human comfort, human hope.” The music and authority of the sustained iambic voice seem to assure us, as Matthew Arnold did, that poetry’s elevation and beauty will continue to meet our spiritual needs and aspirations, even when religious doctrines fail to do that for us. Modern poets like Yeats and Eliot have at times richly exploited the auras of traditional meters and rhyme by approaching a spiritual vacuum with the sense of a prophetic voice.
vatic or prophetic voice is not absent from Moore's work, but it is released extremely sparingly, and one will not find it in her usual rhythms.

While a metrical pattern will make itself more or less felt to the ear of the general reader, a syllabic pattern will not. Moore apparently could tell how many syllables a line contained without counting them,

and her handwritten drafts and revisions show no evidence of numerical calculation. For many readers, however, determining the exact number of syllables in each line of a series of stanzas often involves a counting procedure that gradually becomes antagonistic to even the simplest reading for sense. While metrical verse organizes its language into audible patterns, syllabic verse (like free verse) accommodates the natural rhythms of spoken and written language. This rhythmic similarity of syllabic and free verse is confirmed by the fact that Moore's rearrangement of several of her poems of the early Twenties from one form to the other involved negligible alteration in their wording.

What the syllabic measure does that free verse does not do is to cross the rhythms of the natural voice or nonpoetic passage over the traditional textual appearance of the repeated stanza form. Moore's syllabic poems are shaped like traditional verses, but they do not sound like them. The written and seen dimension of her work reinforces a premodern expectation that the spoken and heard dimension radically undermines. The nonmetrical measure of her poetry releases an anti-"poetic" rhythm that constitutes a critique of our habitual association of the sound of poetry with metrical music.

The effect of this dissociation and yet interpenetration of text and voice in Moore's work is to demystologize the traditional notion of poetry, that is, to show that the metrical rhythms we have customarily assumed to be a necessary, definitive essence of poetry are, in fact, a contingent, conventional attribute of it. Modernism as a revolutionary aesthetic may be understood as a process of demystologizing the past, of transforming it not "from history to nature," as Barthes says myth does, but rather from eternal, unchangeable nature back into history. The grand past with its option on the future becomes the mere past intertwining with a present that is different from it. And Moore's syllabic poems are as vivid an image as we could desire of that intertwining.

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2 Moore, "Interview with Donald Hall," in Tomlinson, p. 34.
5 Typescript of an unpublished, non-stanzic version of "The Fish" in the Marianne Moore Collection, The Rosenbach Museum and Library.
7 Ibid.
8 Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, I, 304.
9 See note 3 above.
11 Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, II, 16.