Fables of the Golden Age: the Poetry of Marianne Moore

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One salutes—on reviewing again
this modern mythologia
esopica

"The Web One Weaves of Italy"
(CP, p. 164)

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb,
And the leopard shall lie down with the kid; . . .
And the suckling child shall play on the hole of the asp,
And the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’s den.

Isaiah 11:6,9

The evolutionary barrier of incommunicability among Nature, animals, man, and astral angels is thus overcome by offices of silent love.

Paramahansa Yogananda

There has been almost no significant critical assessment of Marianne Moore’s work in terms of the fable. Only in a 1948 essay by Vivienne Koch is the matter examined at any length. The essay offers an interpretation of Moore’s development of the theme of human conduct and her prolific adoption of animal images, traditionally the two predominant elements of the fable. Koch concludes that Moore resembles the fabulist La Fontaine in her democratic attitude towards animals, in her sympathy for these creatures, and in her conception of

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moral order. Although the criticism of Moore's poems throughout the Twenties and Thirties centered on her explorations of moral themes and her use of animal images, Koch's essay was the first to link these two facets of Moore by viewing her in the fabulist tradition.

The fable is the literary form that most faithfully characterizes most of Moore's verse. Simply put, a traditional fable is a tale in which animals are personified in order to exhibit a moral truth about human behavior. Moore's poetry is filled with animals actively participating in the poems' narratives and the poetry invariably has a moral tone and a proverbial comment. The classic fable, from Aesop to Arnold Lobel, exhibits a two-part structure similar to that of many of Moore's poems. Theologically designated as the body and the soul, or the tale and the moral of the tale, in classic discussions of the form, the fable's structure is evident in the initial narrative and the following proverbial gloss of a characteristic Moore poem. "The Crab and Her Mother," a representative example from Aesop, embodies the usual structure, thematic dimensions, and limitations of the genre.

Said an old Crab to a young one, "Why do you walk so crooked, child? Walk straight!" "Mother," said the young Crab, "show me the way, will you? And when I see you taking a straight course, I will try and follow."

Example is better than precept.

This simple narrative illustrates a common truth about human nature through an imaginary dialogue between two animals. The dialogue is to the point, and there is no verbal, descriptive, or thematic development to offer narrative depth to the fable. The dialogue serves only to introduce a recognizable conflict: youth's rejection of the dogmatic opinions of the aged. The crabs could easily have been replaced by other kinds of animals or by humans, although the evocation of their peculiar walk provides narrative color. The concluding proverb asserts a common truth about human behavior and offers a concise resolution for the conflict introduced in the narrative.

The fable is a didactic instrument that has been traditionally used to instruct the unlettered in the prudential realities of human behavior through a homespun narrative, although later versions of the fable altered both the narrative subject and stylistic possibilities of the form. The fable allows the naive reader to maintain an insulated distance from its often pointed truths because animals or animated natural phenomena rather than humans are depicted in the narratives. Hesiod's fable of the hawk and the nightingale, the earliest Greek fable, is an example. Hesiod's didactic poetry is directed to the Boeotian farmer and concerns the beliefs and morality that sustain the farmer in his difficult day-to-day existence. The later Aesopian narratives exhibit the rustic anecdotal texture and folk humor of many of the classic folktales. Unlike other folktales such as the legend, the fairy tale, the animal tale, the tale of origins and the beast epic, the classic fable usually does not explore creation myths, nor occur in a specific time and place, nor portray the adventures of legendary or real heroic characters, nor exhibit the magical transformations of the fairy-tale world.

The history of the fable reflects an inevitable need to incorporate poetic elements and to expand the dimensions of the form's narrative. The Pancatantra, the early Sanskrit collection of animal fables which exerted a great influence on the medieval European versions of the genre, displays the fable's capacity to incorporate a folktale-like extended narrative. Designed as a manual of instruction for the sons of royalty, the Pancatantra takes the form of a single narrative framework interspersed with prose tales-within-tales and short aphoristic verses. The tale "The Sparrow and the Sparrow-hawk" offers an example of the narrative complexity of the Pancatantra. This tale is preceded by the tale "The Fox and the Hen." At the conclusion of "The Fox and the Hen," Damna the fox alludes to the wit of the sparrow who took revenge upon a hawk. Damna desires his own revenge because of his frustration over a rival at court, the subject of "The Fox and the Hen." At his wife's insistence, the fox relates the tale of the sparrow in which the sparrow enlists the aid of a friendly salamander to destroy a predatory sparrow-hawk. The moral follows: "...whoever has a design to ruin his enemy, may possibly bring it about, let him be never so weak." Immediately the fox's wife warns her spouse of the difficulties of undermining his rival. The fox decides to limit his audience with the lion king to a discussion of the six things that will bring ruin upon a kingdom, one of which is the neglect of men of wit and courage, the fox presumably being one of these. The fox's spouse acknowledges Damna's prudence but again warns him against revenge: "...whoever meditates mischief, commonly brings it at last upon his own head." She however adds, "...he that studies his neighbor's welfare, prospers in everything he undertakes," a questionable truth that she illustrates with another tale, "The Savage Tyrant." This example of the extended beast fable demonstrates that the form may successfully incorporate a series of narrative digressions that are punctuated at various points by compressed moral statements, without dismantling the form's narrative interest, its wit, or the poignancy of its disclosed wisdom.

The Aesopian "The Crab and Her Mother" and "The Sparrow and
the Sparrow-hawk” of the *Panchatantra* represent the two stylistic strands of the fable. The former, admired by Lessing and serving as the paradigm of the fable, offers a spare, compressed narrative and a succinct moral at its end; the latter, from which all animal fables are ultimately derived, offers a meandering narrative and sporadically interjected philosophic and moral assertions. The majority of Moore’s poems stylistically resemble one or the other of these two forms of the fable. A poem like “The Paper Nautilus” (CP, p. 121) is clearly Aesopian. In five seven-line stanzas the construction of the nautilus’ egg case and the hatching of the eggs are described. The moral context of the description is introduced in the first stanza:

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

The folly of misguided civil and aesthetic attitudes is contrasted with the regenerative process in the nautilus. The next three stanzas narrate the egg-shell construction, the incubation period, and the young nautiluses’ births. It is not until the final stanza that the moral is introduced:

laid Ionic chiton-folds
    like the lines in the mane of
    a Parthenon horse,
    round which the arms had
    wound themselves as if they knew love
    is the only fortress
    strong enough to trust to.

The moral is divorced from the narrative by the speaker's transition of “as if.” What follows in the last two and one-half lines of the poem is a testament to the integrity and innate wisdom of motherhood. The narrative thus becomes an illustration of prudential action, the loving, maternal protection, and of aesthetic mastery, the classical simplicity of the egg shell's design. It accordingly offers a corrective to the uninformed and artists of the first stanza. Poems such as “The Frigate Pelican” (CP, p. 25), “To a Prize Bird” (CP, p. 31), “Peter” (CP, p. 43), “To a Snail” (CP, p. 85), “The Wood-Weasel” (CP, 127), “Apparition of Splendor” (CP, p. 158), “The Arctic Ox” (CP, p. 193), “To a Giraffe” (CP, p. 215), and “Reminiscence of a Wave at the Curl” (CP, p. 244) are also structured on the Aesopian form, and many of Moore’s other short poems have a similar form, except that a concept, object, or state of mind rather than an animal becomes the subject.

Each animal in its particular nature reflects the moral or aesthetic thesis of the given poem, even if often in an oblique manner. The exact rendering of an animal’s shape, color, movement, or behavioral patterns provides metaphors to illustrate the moral theses. So the daily rituals of the housecat in “Peter” (CP, p. 43) offer a fable on naturalness; the relocated Siberian reindeer in “Rigorists” (CP, p. 96) offer a fable on adaptation; the evolutionary adept ostriches in “He Digesteth Harde Yron” (CP, p. 99) offer a fable on perseverance; the breeding habits of the mollusk in “The Paper Nautilus” (CP, p. 121) offer a fable on maternal love; the serene bondage of the elephants in “Elephants” (CP, p. 128) offers a fable on patience; and the *giraff* of the goats in “The Arctic Ox (or Goat)” (CP, p. 193) offers a fable on beneficence.

In animals there is a natural balance between their inner natures and their external existence which produces a kind of tranquillity, a fact celebrated in Moore's portrait of a cat in "Peter." The poem, which lovingly captures typical moods and activities of a pet owned by friends of Moore, illustrates the "virtue of naturalness" that characterizes the cat: "Lifted and handled, he may be dangled like an eel or set up on the forearm like a mouse." Naturalness, for Moore, means more than the spontaneous and unconstrained behavior of animals, although all of her animal subjects demonstrate such approved behavior. More fully, as in her poetry of praise for the plenitude of nature, Moore's "virtue of naturalness" entails a conception of nature as an integrated whole. In the "Forward" to the *Prospect Park Handbook*, Moore states that the "Chinese concept of nature for man to enjoy captivates me." Moore's predilection for natural subjects tests this attitude of awed delight, which presupposes the communication between different ontologies that justifies the fable genre.

The Indian buffalo in "The Buffalo" (CP, p. 24), the Alaskan reindeer in "Rigorists," the elephants in "Elephants," and the oxen in "The Arctic Ox (or Goat)," as well as the figurative encounter of the unicorn and the virgin in "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns" (CP, p. 77), serve as vehicles for portraying the nature of positive accord between man, animal, and nature. Each of these poems dramatizes an exchange of respectful sympathy from man to the domesticated creature. In "Rigorists," the introduction of Siberian reindeer into the Eskimo culture is seen as a miraculous event. In reality these animals, as the poem notes, saved the Eskimos from extinction. The imparted
wisdom contained in “Rigorists” is evidenced in that one dramatic historical fact. Yet, as the final lines of the poem suggest, the exchange here is not merely a material one:

The battle was won
by a quiet man,
Sheldon Jackson, evangel to that race
whose reprieve he read in the reindeer’s face.

The biblical coloring of the language underscores the miraculous nature of the Eskimos’ survival. The introduction of the reindeer was an ecologically sound act that allowed the Eskimos to preserve their indigenous natures as dependents upon animals. What Jackson saw in the reindeer’s gaze was the possibility of insuring the cultural as well as material survival of the Eskimo. And implicit in his description of this animal, “a queen/ of alpine flowers,” is a respectful sympathy for the creature’s beauty and the benevolent service that it could render in its new found home.

“’He Diggesth Harde Yron’” is Moore’s forceful response to the moral dilemma of animal extinction. The poem’s first stanza sets up an opposition between surviving and extinct members of the same species:

Although the aepyornis
or roc that lived in Madagascar, and
the moa are extinct,
the camel-sparrow, linked
with them in size — the large sparrow
Xenophon saw walking by a stream — was and is
a symbol of justice.

The aepyornis, moa, and camel-sparrow are all large, flightless birds of the same species. Like the great auk of the poem’s last stanza, the aepyornis and moa became extinct as a result of man’s uncheckered voracity. The camel-sparrow or common ostrich has survived barbarities similar to the ones that caused others of its species to become extinct. The title of the poem is from Euphues: “The estrich diggesth harde yron to preserve his health” (CP, p. 277). Like the jerboa (CP, p. 10), the ostrich is able to achieve a balanced (indeed miraculous) accord with reality despite the extreme peril of its habitat. Thus the creature embodies justice in its persistent survival, like all of Moore’s animal subjects that elude man’s voraciousness.

That voraciousness is evoked in the poem through references to consumptive, decorative, and sportive excesses of the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia and Rome:

Six hundred ostrich-brains served
at one banquet, the ostrich-plume-tipped tent
and desert spear, jewel-
gorgeous ugly egg-shell
goblets, eight pairs of ostriches
in harness, dramatize a meaning
always missed by the externalist.

The ironic presence of the ostrich plume, the symbol of justice, in this display of opulent excess helps to gloss the last two lines of the stanza. The symbolic plume was invoked in stanza four to sharply counterbalance the description of ostrich hunting in stanza three. Here it serves as an image suggestive of the eventual downfall of corrupt societies. Though the Roman Empire has collapsed, the ostrich, the symbol of justice, continues to exist. The Romans and all cultures based on a materialist ethic are externalists. The ostrich is a symbol of the heroic, almost martyr-like, nature of those who are able to comprehend more than the external nature of experience, and endure. Its existence, like the symbolic plume, serves as an antidote to man’s rapaciousness: “it contradicts a greed that did not wisely spare/ the harmless solitaire.”

The Panchatantra tradition of the extended beast fable which builds up many layers of meaning through its interrelated series of tales and verse can be illustrated by “An Octopus” (CP, p. 71). In the two hundred odd lines of the poem a digressive strategy is established through metaphors within metaphors, dramatic shifts of narrative description and perspective, frequent interjections of philosophic commentary, and a plethora of diverse quoted materials. The poem is a narrative description of a glacier, the titular octopus, and the environment in which it exists. The digressions are framed by the simple metaphor established in the title and the first line: “‘An Octopus’ of ice.” The first fifteen lines and the last twenty-two lines of the poem concentrate on the actual description of the octopus, and a reference to the “ungoistic action of the glaciers” occurs near the poem’s middle. The remaining lines are devoted to descriptions of the area’s weather, topographical features, animal and plant life, local lore, and vacationing tourists, as well as a long discussion of Greek metaphysical attitudes and a short comment on Henry James’s sensibility. The various descriptions of the glacier and mountain are all rendered with a deft precision of naturalistic detail, and thus underscore the major theme of the poem which is declaimed at the poem’s end:

Neatness of finish! Neatness of finish!
Relentless accuracy is the nature of this octopus
with its capacity for fact.
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The description of the metaphoric octopus and its environment illustrates the aesthetic conviction and metaphysical imperative to observe the world and to express one's response to it, always through an attention to details. This conviction is developed at length in the discussion of the ancient Greeks who "liked smoothness, trusting what was back/ of what could not be seen." The digressive nature of the poem is highlighted by the mention of the small ponies that just precedes the discussion of the Greeks. Preceding the account of the ponies is a short description of eleven eagles that listen to the roar of the melting ice off, as well as a quoted conversation on the sound of the marmot. The narrator then attributes the marmot's frightened response to either a loosened stone, another marmot, or the ponies. An eighteen-line description of the ponies follows. This meandering style occurs with more or less complexity in many of Moore's longer poems. It allows the poet to develop reverberant moral implications within the visual context of the landscape, cityscape, seascape, or garden. "The Plumet Basilisk" (CP, p. 20), "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns" (CP, p. 77), "The Pangolin" (CP, p. 117), "Elephants" (CP, p. 128), "Tom Fool at Jamaica" (CP, p. 162), and "Blue Bug" (CP, p. 218) are examples, and most of Moore's long landscape poems and historical and philosophic narratives maintain the same digressive texture. These poems are not narratives, poetic essays, epics, dramatic monologues, pastorals, or extended meditations, although they share some of the poetic strategies of these forms. They resemble fables because they have a controlling metaphor whose subject is an animal.

It has been theorized that the fable had its origins in primitive allegories in which plants and animals spoke like men. This anthropomorphism of nature is a predominant element of the fable tradition. In only a few of Moore's poems do animals or animated forces literally speak or act as if they were men. But her creatures nevertheless convey truths applicable to human nature. The narratives of the Aesopian and eastern fable traditions are essentially revelations of principles of conduct. The poetic narrative was the simplest means for conveying an imaginative work of literature's moral purpose without becoming either rhetorically sermonic or gnomic. Fables are, however, imaginative entertainments as well as allegories. The history of the fable tradition reflects an irrepressible movement towards expanding the dimensions of the genre's basic formula. The *Panchatantra* tradition exhibits the anecdotal and cumulative possibilities of the fable's narrative. The Aesopian fable presents a single moral or satiric action through a classic succinctness of form and content. During the Roman Empire, Phaedrus expanded the metrical possibilities of the form in his versified collection of the Aesopian tales. He also introduced topical and political satire, a direction that leads to the religious fables of the Reformation and a work such as Dryden's *The Hind and the Panther* and later Gay's *Fables* and Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Animal characters persisted as central components of these narratives, even if the stylistic treatment of the animals reflected a commonplace symbolic inheritance from Aesop, the *Panchatantra*, and the Bible.

Although the moral of a tale could be acted out by any arrangement of animals, a body of stock associations with certain animals provided narrative depth and color. So, a lion is lordly, a wolf treacherous, and so forth. These stock associations were indispensable to the medieval beast epic, an episodic animal tale in the *Panchatantra* tradition. Thus the hero of *Roman de Renart* is the fox, a stock symbol for cunning. The creatures' distinctive physical characteristics could also help enliven the narrative as in Aesop's "The Crow and the Pitcher" where the bird's beak adds an element of actuality to the moral of necessity and invention, and in the description of the crab's sidling walk in "The Crab and Her Mother." Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale," a beast fable related to the *Roman de Renart*, and derived, ultimately, from the *Panchatantra*, extends the descriptive possibilities of animal nature through its fidelity to the rustic scenes of barnyard life. Almost none of the animals depicted in the fable traditions possessed fantastic natures such as the aspidochelon of the *Physiologus* tradition or fantastic characteristics like Aesop's "The Goose with the Golden Eggs." The animals of the fable tradition, then, are interchangeable symbols that illustrate a moral. Truncated depictions of the animals' characteristics that are taken from animal lore provide the only naturalistic density for these symbols. This is the case through the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, for example, the monkey who thought eyeglasses were worthless because it did not understand their function could have been replaced by any other animal in Krylov's fable on ignorance, "The Monkey and the Spectacles." With the rise of children's writers such as Carroll, Kipling, Grahame, and Potter and adult fabulists like Tolkien and our contemporary Richard Adams, animal images that maintain highly detailed naturalistic fidelity and depict fantastic beings have become common features of the modern fable tradition. Through these innovations the nature and character of the animal in its own right dominates the form. The imaginative depiction of these creatures becomes more fundamental to the value of the fable than the moral itself. Attention is drawn principally to the realities of Squirrel
Nutkin, the White Rabbit, or the hobbit Frodo. The great moral themes in which these beings participate are set in the background. Like these most recent exponents of the fable Moore is interested in the imaginative development of her animal subjects. The body of her poetry exhibits the major structural and thematic concerns of the fable tradition and extends the moral and aesthetic dimensions of this tradition, but her most distinctive work in the fabulist mode involves her treatment of the animal image.

Moore uses elements from every type of folktale in her poetry, but chooses the fable as her vehicle because it is the only type of animal tale that explicitly points to a moral. She chose the fables of La Fontaine as her major work of translation and incorporated lines from these fables into several of her own poems, although she has also translated Adalbert Stifter's wonder tale “Rock Crystal” and retold Charles Perrault's versions of “Puss in Boots,” “Cinderella,” and “Sleeping Beauty.” The association of Moore with La Fontaine and with the fable became a standard assumption with the 1954 publication of her translations of The Fables of La Fontaine. In a Festschrift for Moore, Harry Levin presents a casual but discerning catalogue of the similarities between Moore and various French writers and sources. In his comments on the La Fontaine translations he noted how “the human bestiary has been so thoroughly assimilated that the esprit gaulois is refined into a quintessence of Yankee wit.” Moore’s success with her idiomatic translations of La Fontaine’s Fables is evident. An example from “The Lion in Love” will illustrate her accomplishment. The tale begins with an allusion to a fabulous period in which animals could converse with human beings. The French reads:

Du temps que les bêtes parlaient
Les lions entre autres voulaient
Entre admis dans notre alliance.

Moore translates the lines as follows:

Before their speech was obstructed,
Lions or such as were attracted
To young girls, sought an alliance.

Why not?

In this translation as in her poetry Moore attempts to concretize experience through the use of colloquial locutions, a compulsive wit, and clinically precise images and acts. La Fontaine’s tone here is similar to the anecdotal “Once upon a time” of a fairy tale. He is amusingly patronizing in his account of the fabulous Golden Age when animals could talk; hence, Moore’s droll interrogative at the beasts’ supposed desire to converse with men. Since the classical tradition of the Golden Age is not well known to an American readership, Moore transforms La Fontaine’s reverie, albeit a witty one, into a contemporary narrative about love. The colloquialism of Moore’s “alliance” turns the tale immediately into a modern romance. And her interjection carries the same droll wit in relation to her romance as La Fontaine’s did in relation to his legendary Golden Age.

Most of the later full-length studies of Moore recognize her mastery in putting La Fontaine into an American idiom. In their analyses the inevitable comparison between the Fables and Moore’s other poems is explored, although never to any length. The obvious similarities are noted: the witty tone, the light rhyme, the precision of language, the interest in animals, and the moral viewpoint. None, however, calls her a fabulist or her poems fables. The majority of the initial reviews of Moore’s translations were positive and reiterated Levin’s assessment of Moore’s successful transference of idiom. Howard Nemerov, in an introductory paragraph to his negative review of the translations, suggests that Moore is not a fabulist:

But there is, I find, a great distance between a Moore jerboa and a La Fontaine rat . . . My fine critical hindsight tells me now, what it didn’t warn me beforehand, that Miss Moore has never been a fabulist at all, that her animals never acted out her moralities; that their function was ever to provide a minutely detailed, finely perceived symbolic knot to be a center for the pattern of her recondite meditations; that what she shares with La Fontaine is a shrewdness and delicacy of getting there — their fables, in fact — are so different as to be opposed.

For Nemerov, Moore is not a fabulist, like, for example, La Fontaine, because her animals are incidental to her poetic meditations. Her poems are not moral tales acted out by her animal subjects but abstruse flights of fancy that are somehow provoked by and centered on these animals. Though Nemerov is accurate in linking Moore’s style with that of La Fontaine, his disassociation of her animal and her morality is questionable. All Moore’s creatures reflect her moralities by example. Her poems are the narratives of the creatures’ natures, and these natures become the controlling metaphors that express her moral points. Thus we have a collection of poems that includes fables on the paper nautilus’ maternal love, the metaphoric octopus’ neatness, the housecat’s naturalness, the Siberian reindeer’s adaptation, the ostriches’ perseverance, the elephants’ patience, the Arctic ox’s beneficence, and so forth. In each of Moore’s fables the relationship between the aes-
thetis quality of the animal subject and the moral lesson to be drawn from that subject is evident. Despite its density of syntax, language, tone, and meaning, a Moore poem bears the implicit form of the fable. This density makes the poems appear to be abstruse. But an explication of Moore's moral concerns makes apparent the resemblance of her poems not only to the structure and but also to the aims of the fable. Her animal subjects are reminders of the moral nature of the universe and of the universal myth of the Golden Age. This last association is suggested in the shared attitude toward animals and the shared conception of moral order that Koch discovered in Moore and La Fontaine.

In a review of Wallace Stevens' *Auroras of Autumn*, Moore compares Stevens' art to that of La Fontaine because of his "spectacularly quiet verbal harmonies," his "modest authoritativeness," and his reserved evocation of the "durable, the classic, the incontestable." Both Stevens and La Fontaine are deft verbal stylists whose poems express, respectively, aesthetic and proverbial truths. These truths are intuited and constructed solely within the imagination: "Sensibility imposes silence which the imagination transmutes into eloquence." The quality of the eloquently stated truth that Moore ascribes to both Stevens and La Fontaine is applicable to Moore herself. Her poetry also offers the expressive but unstressed assonance, internal rhymes, and end off rhymes that she detects in Stevens and La Fontaine. She quotes two lines from La Fontaine as an illustration:

   Ne craignez point, d'entrer au prison de la belle.
   Ce n'est qu'à nous qu'elle cruelle.\(^2^2\)

The assonance of the "p," "cr," "n," and "qu" sounds reflects one of Moore's own favored poetic techniques as do the more recognizable internal and slant end rhymes such as those of the "ez" ("er") and "elle" sounds. But the presiding stylistic trait which Moore and La Fontaine share is the "surgical courtesy" that first attracted her to La Fontaine, rather than their common interest in animals, social satire, and the fable form. For Moore, the quality of "surgical courtesy" exhibited in her own poetry is often manifested in a rhetorical density similar to that of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English prose moralists, a subtle transference of idiom.

Though it is clear that Moore's poetry exhibits moral themes, filled with animal subjects, and so resembles the fable, it is also clear that her poems are not highly crafted static reworkings of classic parables but idiosyncratic meditations focused upon animal images. This procedure is illustrated by "The Web One Weaves of Italy" (CP, p. 164):
aesthetic ordering is illustrated by the narrator's placing a jar upon a hill and his describing the effect this new design has upon the surrounding landscape. His poetry reflects his cardinal requisite for the supreme fiction; it is abstract, albeit, as he would have it, blooded with reality.

For Williams, poetry represents the immediate, visceral engagement with the texture of reality that is unmediated by any philosophic ordering, aesthetic predilection, received structure, or academic tone—what he termed, in his insistent colloquial idiom, "contact": "man with nothing but the thing and the feeling of that thing." The subject of a Williams poem determines the form and the meaning of that poem. The poet does not impose his intellect, will, or imagination upon his subject. As he declares in Paterson: "No ideas but in things." The poet's imagination and the meaning of a poem are generated by the poetic subject itself. And for Williams, the subject of poetry is what Stevens termed anti-poetic; that is, subjects are taken from the palpable world and serve as unique individual complexes in their own right. Thus in "The Red Wheelbarrow" the significance of the ordinary texture of actuality is asserted in the simple image of an observed red wheelbarrow and white chickens. These ontologically vibrant subjects are together an instance of the poetic nexus that, according to Williams, infuse and enrich reality. This is what Williams means when he notes that "so much depends/upon" these elementary images. The ordinary is the focal point of poetry and the engenderer of imagination.

Moore stands somewhere between the extremes of Stevens' aestheticism and Williams' thoroughgoing revelatory realism. She declared in a 1936 lecture at Brooklyn College that "imagination is a quality if not the quality on which poetry rests." Stevens viewed imagination as an aesthetic order imposed upon things. His poems were about reality but not of it. Williams viewed the imagination as a mechanism that was activated by its encounter with reality itself. For Stevens the imagination presides over poetry and reality. For Williams reality presides over poetry and the imagination. In Moore we find an aesthetic ordering like that of Stevens connected with a fidelity to actuality like that of Williams.

Much Moore criticism examines the cumulative process by which she created her poems. "The Sycamore" (CP, p. 167), for example, explores the assumption that unblemished appearance and physical magnitude are not necessarily the only criteria of beauty or grace. The poem is a fable that combines a descriptive fidelity to concrete images with the imaginative transformation of these images through metaphor. It offers a complex metaphor of a faithfully described albino giraffe that looks like the sycamore. A sycamore when it has lost its bark and an albino giraffe are totally white except for the few shards of unpeeled bark on the tree and the muted impressions of ovals on the animal. The stately beauty and uniform color of this towering, composite creature are juxtaposed to the diminutive size and variegated color of the objects and creatures in the poem: steppingstones, the Hampshire pig, the white butterfly, and the tiny insect upon a stalk. The fidelity of Moore's description of natural phenomena has been documented with reference to the giraffe, the pig, and the stones. The imaginative union of these three and the tree and butterfly through a motif of white and piebald color is achieved by the compressed associative and metaphorical construction of the poem itself. The characteristic moral is asserted: "there's more than just one kind of grace." And the fable structure is suggested in the insect's fairy tale-like comment upon the giraffe's stature: "And there was I like a fieldmouse at Versailles." To use Blake's famous terms Moore is declaring that one could see beauty and grace in a grain of sand, here the unassuming insect, as well as in the butterfly, the steppingstones, and the miniatures of Imami. The controlling images of the poem are faithful to actuality but transformed by the aesthetic and moral ordering of the poem.

In contrast is a poem like Stevens' "The Snow Man." Although the ostensible subject of the poem is the snow man, this object is not described. Rather, an imaginative projection of that object's synesthetic response to winter is evoked, a supreme fiction about a season. Also in contrast is Williams' "Iris" which presumably describes an actual experience. The personal "we" of the Williams' poem contrasts with Stevens' rhetorical "one" and Moore's anecdotal, almost narratively conventional "I." The figurative language provoked by the experience of the flower's scent in "Iris" is conventionally descriptive: "blue as/ of the sea," "trumpeting/petals." Stevens' evocation of a winter atmosphere of the senses and Moore's metaphor-within-metaphor, her fairy-tale ending, and her color motif are more complex and imaginatively worked than the images in the Williams' poem. But Moore's giraffe, like Williams' iris, is willfully constrained by and in precise accord with the texture of visible reality, unlike Stevens' hypothetical snow man. In a review of Kora in Hell, accordingly, Moore notes that Williams belonged to "no school but experience." She has also praised him elsewhere for his accuracy of description while significantly observing that he was often too specific. In her review of Stevens'
Auroras of Autumn Moore notes that Stevens’ poetics offer an aesthetic pleasure in which “the intangible is more real than the visible,”43 thus recognizing the abstract nature of his craft. Moore’s own poetry, commonly thought of as poetic literalism, is a deft blending of Stevens’ aestheticism and Williams’ realism.

In the Aesopian fable the narrative exists almost solely to illustrate a single piece of proverbial wisdom. Even in the tale-within-a-tale structure of the Panchatantra tradition, the narrative progress of each individual tale is straightforward and economically bound to the tale’s given moral. Moore’s meditations are geometric rather than linear narratives, and her penchant for diverse quotations and the absence of lexical connectives further stresses her insistence on the cumulative, self-referential, and spatial nature of her meditations. Her poems may be fables, but they are structurally closer to dreams than to storyteller’s anecdotes. Even when the fable form is stylistically embroidered, as in the case of La Fontaine’s reworkings of Aesop, the inevitable logic of a transparently simple narrative and a naive allegory is present.

A Moore poem, however, is a complex fabric that must be taken whole in order to be comprehended. Moore shares with William Carlos Williams the view that a poem is a whole with a single meaning, a view she cites in a 1941 lecture at Vassar College.44 This notion of a poetic whole takes the form in Moore’s poetry of the controlling metaphor that is usually manifest as an animal image. But with Moore one should remember Goethe’s dictum that if one would seek comfort in the whole, one must learn to discover the whole in the smallest part.45 Moore’s view of reality is part of a consistent moral sensibility that finds precepts and aesthetic pleasure in the texture of actuality. The subject of this sensibility is always a finely observed object, animal, experience, episode in cultural history, landscape, abstraction, emotion, and often, a collection of these. Each precisely rendered observation and figurative expression must be attended to through the insistent focus of Moore’s creative sensibility, manifest as the poem’s controlling metaphor. When Elizabeth Bishop notes in “Invitation to Miss Moore,” that “Manhattan is awash with morals,”46 she is pointing to Moore’s controlling sensibility. The adjective “awash” is exact. Moore’s sense of the world is not a preconditioned and inevitable one. She has a predominant attitude, what she would call a predilection, that is receptive to the variable and manifold quality of human experience and its subject, the world. That world’s province is not, in its embodying forth in poetry, a firmly codified one, like the fable. It is a complex fabric that is flooded with innumerable instances of specific subjects suitable for examination by the poet’s sensibility, a sensibility in Moore’s case always infused by love.

In the particularly dense poem “Efforts of Affection” (CP, p. 147) Moore examines the proper function of love; one must maintain a prideful internal strength through efforts of love in order to achieve a sense of wholeness and humanity. The inevitable moral succinctly notes: “love can make one/ bestial or make a beast a man.” The poem alludes to La Fontaine in its assertion of each person’s obligation to overcome brutal or unprudent inclinations through the inner strength of love: “love’s extraordinary-ordinary stubbornness/ like La Fontaine’s.” In simple terms, the poem expresses the maxim that it is prudent to have moral strength. This maxim declares the central affirmation of the fable tradition, an affirmation which sustains all of La Fontaine’s and Moore’s fables. For Moore love is that province out of which the classic truths are discerned and explored. Moral strength comes from love and seems equated with it. Her vision is essentially a passive one: humility, patience, and love are protective coverings of the soul. These virtues inspire revelation and divine grace.47 Like a prism in light, a recurring image in Moore, love has a peculiar sensitivity to the world that reveals its hidden truths.

Thus, love functions like the imagination but is essentially higher in nature because of its mastery over experience and the concerns of the imagination itself. In effect, Moore values La Fontaine’s ability to offer a classic anatomy of love and hence prudence. The poetic fable is an ideal vehicle to express prudential wisdom, although Moore expands the dimensions of the form to include explorations of traditional ethical and spiritual values. In an early uncollected poem that was published in The Lantern of Bryn Mawr College, the strategies of the simple allegory that dominate the later mature fable-like poems are introduced. The Latin title “Tunica Pallio Propria” is translated in the poem’s first line:48

My coat is nearer than my cloak;
Inside
My coat is an integument of pride.

The poem presents the concise self-realization of the narrator’s moral nature. The poem alludes to the classic symbol of hypocrisy, the wolf in sheep’s clothing. In Moore’s elemental allegory, the coat and the cloak serve as metaphors for the superficiality of the external aspect of human nature. The coat and the cloak conceal the narrator’s defective internal nature, pride. But in this early poem Moore’s interest in presenting abstract moral conflicts in physically concrete images is
already apparent. The coat and the cloak are traditional poetic symbols for the body or covering of the soul and thus additional tangible descriptive details are unnecessary to express the poem's significance. The word “integument,” however, is precise and refers to the external layer of an organism, thus associating the abstract moral quality of pride with a concrete biologic phenomena.

Although most of Moore's animal fables are developed through a metaphor adopted from one of an animal's characteristics, in other poems, such as "The Monkeys" (CP, p. 40), the animals do not provide a controlling metaphor for the poems' moral, although their renderings are as rich as those in which one creature embodies the thesis. "The Monkeys," a satire on philistine misapprehensions of art, is presented in the form of a highly rhetorical lecture. Any creature could have served as the lecturer and any scene could have provided the setting if Moore were writing entirely in the classic fable tradition. But the choice of scene, the African veldt, and the opulent description of the creatures and of the other images attests to Moore's enlargement of the fable form. The moral of the poem is a subtle inversion of the adage that beauty is only skin deep. The poem suggests that the literal surface of reality is beautiful if comprehended in the correct manner. The philistine literalists alluded to in the lecture cannot perceive the beauty of the world because they are blinded by the cultural rubric of art. For them art is an impenetrable otherness, not an accessible facet and expression of experience. The descriptions of the elephant's "fog-colored skin," the feline narrator's "wedge-shaped, slate-grey marks on its forelegs and the resolute tail," and the awesome power of art, transformed by the literalists into a mercantile sea that "proffers flattery in exchange for hemp, flax, horses, platinum, timber, and fur," comprise an account of the seemingly enigmatic nature of beauty. The poem thus suggests that the world itself defines aesthetic value. True familiarity with the commonplace transforms it and provides the experience of beauty. Animals were chosen to illustrate this discourse on beauty because, being deeply of the world, they embody beauty. Moore accordingly notes of her interest in animals: "They are subjects for art and exemplars of it, are they not?"46

Moore's animals are depicted with a naturalist's precision. Moore has documented the naturalist prose and cinematic sources of her animal descriptions in the notes appended to several of her animal poems such as "The Plumet Basilisk" (CP, p. 20), "The Frigate Pelican" (CP, p. 25), "The Pangolin" (CP, p. 117), and "Elephants" (CP, p. 128). This zoological fidelity is characteristic. The depiction of the jerboa's use of its tail to keep its balance in "The Jerboa" (CP, p. 10), for example, occurs in a passage from Smaller Mammals of North America that is recorded in Moore's diary.56 The flat, scientific tone of these prose sources is, however, lyrically transformed when the animals become subjects for Moore's fables, as the animated conclusion to "The Jerboa" illustrates:

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

The majority of Moore's animal subjects have never appeared before in imaginative literature. Thus exotic creatures such as jerboas, plumet basilisks, pangolins, and arctic oxen enter the fable genre for the first time. Moore's descriptive accuracy evokes vividly both her more familiar subjects, like the elephant, cat, or jelly-fish, and the entirely fabulous creatures, like the unicorn and the kylin.

The animal image served the fable because, in its origins, these creatures were representations of an animistic and mythic comprehension of the world. When the fable was conventionalized as a simple allegory of proverbial wisdom, the animals became symbols of that wisdom as anthropomorphic spokesmen for human nature. But throughout the history of the genre, the original enchantment with these animals in their own right came to assert itself. Thus in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries as much theoretical discussion of the genre was concerned with the nature of man's interest in animals as it was with the form's pedagogical intentions.51 Far from being opaque symbols, these creatures were viewed as bearing in kind the same moral participation in the world as man. They displayed the moral nature of the universe. And with the romantics animals were no longer Cartesian machines or living moral ciphers but reminders of what Herder calls the "Golden Age," a primitive time in which man and beast were joined in a common unity. This notion was conveyed in a highly civilized way in La Fontaine's "The Lion in Love" and other fables, through what Hugh Kenner calls "pastoral urbanity."52 It is also embodied in the epigraph from Isaiah at the head of this essay. Those verses inform Moore's concern with animals, addressing the moral problem of how men should relate to the natural world and to each other. Moore's fables are, like the offices of silent love of the epigraph from Yogananda, attempts to perceive and celebrate intimations of the Golden Age.
Through the virtues of steadfastness, strength, humility, love, patience and resistance, the concord of the Golden Age is achieved. And even out of concord the individual creature can thrive, realize its authentic nature, and manifest beauty. Some of Moore’s poems present visions of the desired concord through what could be termed landscapes of the character of nature. Here the pastoral vision of the Golden Age in which man and beast live in harmony is manifested in actuality, despite the imprudent and discordant nature of the contemporary world. The poems in which the almost sentimental scenes with house pets occur, such as “Peter” (CP, p. 43), “Reminiscent of a Wave at the Curl” (CP, p. 244), and “Prevalent at One Time” (CP, p. 247), are staid versions of this accord. While the mirroring of the geometric precision of the birds’ nests by the architectural structure in “The Icosahedron” (CP, p. 143) suggests the ultimate similarity between nature and technological society, the pacific interchange with the otherness of nature is best represented in poems where animals and man live and work together. The Indian buffalo being led by the herd-boys in “The Buffalo” (CP, p. 28), the reindeer staring back at its observers in “Rigorists” (CP, p. 96), and the man asleep on the reclining elephant in “Elephants” (CP, p. 128) are notable examples. But in a stanza from “The Arctic Ox (or Goat)” (CP, p. 194) that evokes the prophetic imagery of Isaiah, man and beast are brought into consummate harmony:

They join you as you work;
love jumping in and out of holes,
play in water with the children,
learn fast, know their names,
will open gates and invent games.

Animals, unlike man, are able to maintain acts of love, accord, service, and the like in a pure state, without psychological ambiguity or willed complexity, and thus serve as potent exemplars of moral virtue. Moore’s animal subjects do not, however, betray conventional emblematic associations. Thus the virtue of patience is exemplified in the poem “Elephants” by the elephant, a creature that is equated with strength in the Western literary tradition and clumsiness in the modern secular imagination. The Indian elephants of “Elephants” maintain the same practicality and patience in their domesticated service as the buffalo in “The Buffalo.” Like the elephant nature portrayed in “Diligence Is to Magic as Progress Is to Flight,” the Indian elephant embodies a substantial aesthetic and moral principle that contradicts the nature of its human masters:

His held-up fore-leg for use
as a stair, to be climbed or descended with
the aid of his ear, expounds the brotherhood
of creatures to man the encroacher, by the
small word with the dot, meaning know—the verb bůd.

These knowers “arouse feelings that they are
allied to man” and can change roles with their trustees.

The elephant’s dominating characteristic is patience, variously described in the poem as “serenity,” “a pilgrim’s pattern of reverence,” and equanimity. Here as in “Diligence Is to Magic as Progress Is to Flight,” the elephant’s slow movements are seen as a representation of a substantial knowledge that is opposed to an ephemeral, but highly charged, worldly experience that passes for knowledge. This dichotomy is presented in the concluding lines: “Who rides on a tiger can never dismount / asleep on an elephant, that is repose.” In the Indian culture the elephant is a symbol of divine wisdom and an avatar of Buddha. Although it maintains a practical demeanor in captivity, the creature is charged with the serenity of its symbolic nature. Thus the Sanskrit word for knowing, bůd, is reflective of the elephant’s spiritual wisdom and prudent behavior. Its patient service to its masters is an extension of these qualities, and as such provides man with an example for understanding his own moral nature, the desired “repose” of the poem’s last line.

In “The Arctic Ox (or Goat)” a portrait of accord close to the idealized notion of the Golden Age is represented in a fable on beneficence. The poem humorously evokes the creature’s frolicsome and companionable nature. The ox’s wool, which is used in the clothing industry, becomes a metaphor for the beast’s harmlessness, and, by extension, an ecologically sound example of animal husbandry:

To wear the arctic fox
you have to kill it. Wear
qītut—the underwool of the arctic ox—
pulled off it like a sweater;
your coat is warm; your conscience, better.

Here is an antidote to the fur industry’s exploitation in “New York” (CP, p. 54) and a more humane ecological system than the one of the Eskimo in “Rigorists.” The ox’s dual nature is whimsically presented in stanza six:

these ponderosos could dominate
the rare-hairs market in Kashan and yet
you could not have a choicer pet.
The union of economic sufficiency and friendliness makes the arctic ox's existence with man almost an idealized one. The images of the beast's play with children and the song-birds' use of its wool for their nests emphasize the integrated accord of the human and animal worlds. A moral imperative underlies Moore's regard for this vision of concordance.

If we can't be cordial
to these creatures' fleece,
I think that we deserve to freeze.

We are advised to cultivate the peaceable vision embodied in "The Arctic Ox (or Goat)." Moore does not say that we will perish if we do not, she says only that we would "deserve to." Frozen oblivion would be just regard for cold indifference.

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3 Yvor Winters calls Moore "an exacting moralist" in "Holiday and Day of Wrath," Poetry, 26 (1925), 39–44; Edith Sitwell notes that the elephant subject of "Black Earth" is a product of life rather than art in "Reviews," The Sackbut, 2 (1921), 38; and Morton Zabel suggests that Moore's animal images represent a coincidence of appearance and meaning in "A Literalist of the Imagination." Poetry, 47 (1936), 326–36.
4 Koch distinguishes between La Fontaine's fables, which were principally created for moral instruction, and Moore's poems, which are intended to illuminate her subjects and bring a certain plastic extension of the sensibility into imaginative universes. Koch, p. 169.
5 Koch distinguishes between La Fontaine's fables, which were principally created for moral instruction, and Moore's poems, which are intended to illuminate her subjects and bring a certain plastic extension of the sensibility into imaginative universes. Koch, p. 169.

6 For a concise study of the genre see Erwin Lebfried, Fabel (Stuttgart: Sammung Metzler, 1967).
7 In Moore's poems accurate descriptions of nature and animals play an increasing role as metaphors for moral themes. The treatment of these descriptions suggests that she is writing poetic fables. A definite break, however, seems to occur with the volume O To Be a Dragon (1959). Formerly, a fable-like tale is developed through an observation, a description, a meditation, or a combination of these. The tale presents a dominating or subsidiary animal image that exhibits the wisdom of the usually concluding moral adage. These poems also reflect the distinctively dense verbal and imagistic texture associated with a Moore poem. With O To Be a Dragon and the following volumes and uncollected verse, the poems become less stylized and less dense. They are usually short, sentimental imagistic impressions or direct and sentimental moral statements. They lack, on the whole, the earlier poems' incisive elements of threat and conflict that help generate the narrative tension associated with the fable.
10 Aesop's Fables, pp. 145–147.
11 Ibid., p. 146.
12 Ibid., p. 147.
14 Moore's strategy in her longer poems is similar to the narrative, allusive, and aphoristic texture of T. S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and The Waste Land and Ezra Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberly and the Cantos. Moore, however, excises a recognizable dramatic persona from her poems. Her logopoeia is less consciously philosophic than Eliot's or Pound's and more concerned with the cinematic development of her metaphors and tales.
15 A. Lytton Sell, "Fable," p. 269.
16 The term "fable," however, can refer to a legendary story of supernatural happenings. Thus Moore's depiction of the "living fable," the legendary stone-eating pangolin of "The Pangolin" (CP, pp. 118, 49).
17 Aesop's Fables, p. 227.
18 Moore used the names of animal characters from Graham's The Wind in the Willows to refer to herself and members of her family throughout her private correspondence.
19 See Moore's depictions of and references to Tom Thumb in "Cammellia Sabina" (CP, p. 16), Hansel and Gretel in "The Frigate Pelican" (CP, p. 25), unicorn legends in "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns" (CP, p. 77), the legendary Sanskrit singing bulbul in "Smooth Gnarled Grape Myrtle" (CP, p. 103), Earl Gerald's transformation into a stag in "Spenser's Ireland" (CP, p. 112), Presbyter John in "His Shield" (CP, p. 114), the fairy's train in "Apparition of Splendor" (CP, p. 158), Virgin Mary's legendary blue cloak in "Rosemary" (CP, p. 168), the dragon transformations in "O To Be a Dragon" (CP, p. 177), the legends of Santa Claus and St. Hubert in "Saint Nicholas" (CP, p. 196), Saint Jerome and his tame lion in "Leonardo Da Vinci's" (CP, p. 201), the mermaid of Zennor in "The Mind, Intractable Thing" (CP, p. 208), and Beatrix Potter's tailor of Gloucester in "Tell Me, Tell Me" (CP, p. 231).
20 See Marriage (CP, pp. 62, 256–58), "Efforts of Affection" (CP, pp. 147, 6), "Apparition of Splendor" (CP, pp. 158, 21), "The Web One Weaves of Italy" (CP, pp. 164, 12), and "Blessed is the Man" (CP, pp. 173, 16).
23 Ibid., p. 40.
24 The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore, p. 252.
26 The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore, p. 252.
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31 Ibid., 9.

32 Ibid., 8.

33 The term is Moore's. See “An Interview with Donald Hall” in Tomlinson, pp. 29.


37 A copy of the lecture is located in the Marianne Moore Collection at the Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia.


40 The Imagist Poem, p. 84.

41 Contact, 4 (1921), 5.

42 Poetry, 44 (1934), 103–06.


44 Moore Collection, Rosenbach Museum.


48 The Lantern, 18 (1910), 102.


50 Moore Collection, Rosenbach, 1250/6/53.


52 “Supreme in Her Abnormality” in Tomlinson, p. 139.


After The Fables:
The Translator as Poet

Rosalie Sprout

There is a touch of La Fontaine, for better or worse, in everything Marianne Moore wrote after the Fables. Her later critical essays such as “Subject, Predicate, Object” and “Idiosyncrasy and Technique” use examples from the translations to illustrate poetic principles like “straight writing” and “concentration.” Her later poems with their elements of fantasy and their concern for the preservation of American cultural artifacts in rhyme recall La Fontaine’s fanciful fables, composed for specific occasions and personalities in seventeenth-century France. The end-rhymes of later poems and their appeal in general to the ear can be traced to the weeks, months, and years spent with La Fontaine’s fables and cannot be fully apprehended nor appreciated outside the context of her intense work from 1945 to 1954 on these translations.

Most readers of Moore’s poetry either skip the Fables altogether, or are familiar only with the ones included in the incomplete Complete Poems or the Marianne Moore Reader. Some critics have complained that since Marianne Moore admitted she could not speak French nor understand spoken French very well, she had no business tackling the project in the first place. John Ciardi sighed with regret that the poet had attempted translation at all rather than reworking the old fables herself, much as La Fontaine had done.1 Helen Vendler cautions that “Not a great deal should be claimed for them.”2 Even Moore’s friend and advocate, Laurence Stapleton, sees the Fables as a “detour,” although Stapleton believes “that some of her finest work is in the book, and that the nature of the task invested her with skills different from those of her earlier poetry.”3 Stapleton advances the idea of forward progress in her study of the poet’s career, and says that after the fables Moore “came back from the detour to her own road forward.”4

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