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MARIANNE MOORE AND THE SUBLIME

What I offer here is the defense of a topic, not a theory of the sublime to fit Moore’s work. Marianne Moore is not a poet one immediately associates with the sublime. The virtues of modesty, reserve, neatness of finish are, on the surface, incongruent with an aesthetic of the infinite, which calls for grand, rhapsodic gestures. Joanne Diehl, the one critic who has mentioned Moore in connection with the sublime, finds that her poetic strategies block the intense power and emotion as well as the expansion of self characteristic of the mode.

Moore’s emphasis on the power of sight that controls her work, the recurrent separation of self from subject—points toward a deeper separation between her identity as woman and her poetic voice, a repression which may have been essential for her to continue to write. Wit operates to discipline passion in ways that render her poems radically distanced. Energies of sublimation have so taken over as descriptions replace plots, animals, persons and verbal effects the illusion of spontaneous feeling, that the sublime can only be approached in its most attenuated form. (Diehl 54).

Diehl discusses the sublime primarily in psychological terms established by Harold Bloom and Thomas Weiskel. In this model the self (identified as poetic voice, not poetic eye) in struggle with an external power or surplus significance finds its equilibrium in a new ascendency to that power, an identification with a transcendent principle. Since the struggle is defined as Oedipal it is problematic for the woman writer who must separate her poetic vision from her female identity and thus, for Diehl, weaken her vision.

But Moore’s poetry is in many ways a critique of the radical solipsism and egocentrism of the imperial self of American literature, not just an attenuated form of it. Her wit is directed not at passion (Eliot, for one, found plenty of passion in Moore’s descriptions), but at narcissism,
easy anthropomorphism, and other forms of presumptuous language. Her indirection becomes an alternative form of intensification, the restraint that shows deep feeling, rather than a repression or sublimation of feeling. Her seeing is Ruskinian, it fuses poetry, prophecy and religion; it discovers the invisible through the visible. The annihilation of the individual self is basic to the structure of the sublime; if Moore does not replace it with an Emersonian or Whitmanian imperial self, she does establish a Voice ballasted by sight, a sense of invisible power within the visible which she calls the soul, or sometimes creativity. One might even argue that her method of quotation, in poems like "Marriage" or "An Octopus," produces the sense of infinity in discourse.

But while Diehl's critique of Moore can be answered on its own terms, it is perhaps more important to recall that the sublime is a much broader and more varied tradition than the one Diehl describes. If we look at the sublime as an iconographic tradition, as an aesthetic combining pleasure and terror before vast, infinite or powerful objects, as a dramatic challenge to the senses and expansion of mind, Moore becomes a central figure, criticizing but also extending the literature of the sublime.

Longinus described the sublime in terms of style, as the compelling force of an authorial presence. Moore certainly knew Longinus' work (as did her contemporary and friend, William Carlos Williams) and her critical concept of "gusto" owes something to his treatise on the sublime (as well as to the criticism of Hazlitt.) Moore modifies Longinus' sublime by making restraint a prerequisite to (rather than opposite to) power. What engages us is an author's "rapt attention" to a great object, creating a reciprocal structure within the sublime. Moore cites Longinus three times in her major essay "Feeling and Precision," which describes how intense feeling communicates by struggle in language. The restraining structures must be there for the passion to break through them. Moore agrees with Longinus that intentional anticlimax can be powerful, as he says "bearing the stamp of vehement emotion like a ship before a veering wind"(Moore 399). And she agrees that minor flaws are often committed by great writers in the expression of deep feeling: "Longinus asks 'Which is better, in poetry and in prose, . . . grandeur with a few flaws or mediocrity that is impeccable?' Moore also evokes Stevens' notions of poetic power "It can kill a man.' "Yet the lion's leap," she says,
“would be mitigated almost to harmlessness if the lion were clawless, so precision is both impact and exactitude.” The lion’s leap, figure of poetic power, is not attenuated by such pressures, and verbal effects can enhance rather than weaken the illusion of spontaneous feeling.

“Novices” deals directly with authorial power and the force of feeling in a text. Where the self is the center of attention the result is literary apperception; but “the unforced passion of the Hebrew poets” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) is occasion for Moore’s highest praise, as it was for eighteenth century theorists of the sublime—Hugh Blair, Joseph Addison, the Earl of Shaftesbury and others. Though this praise is largely in the form of quotation it does not lose its elevated, impassioned quality. As Moore describes the effect of the Hebrew poets (in contrast to the novices) she reenacts that effect through the rapid succession of phrases (fathomless, incessant, tempestuous). Comparing the literary qualities of Hebrew poets to the force of the sea, Moore fuses rhetorical and natural sublime.

“split like a glass against a wall”
in this “precipitate of dazzling impressions,
the spontaneous unforced passion of the Hebrew language—
an abyss of verbs full of reverberations and tempestuous energy”
in which action perpetuates action and angle is at variance with
angle
till submerged by the general action;
obscured by “fathomless suggestions of color,”
by incessantly panting lines of green, white with concussion,
in this drama of water against rocks—this “ocean of hurrying
consoments”
with its “great livid stains like long slabs of green marble,”
its “flashing lances of perpendicular lightning” and “molten
fires swallowed up,”
“with foam on its barriers,”
“crashing itself out in one long hiss of spray.” (61)

The rhetoric of the sublime here is traditional (abyssal, fathomless, incessant, tempestuous, all stock adjectives of the sublime.) But its place in the poem prohibits an ironic reading. Such privileged moments occur in many Moore poems where the primary force of the text is critical or satiric: the truth which survives the wave in “In the Days of Prismatic Color,” the “strange experience of beauty below the incandescent stars” which in “Marriage” tears one to pieces” (the sublime vision of Eve) are examples in which Moore’s characteristic distancing is suspended and a moment of direct, sympathetic vision enters the poem, quotation or no quotation.
Where Longinus emphasized the sublimity of style, Edmund Burke first associated the sublime with the experience of nature. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the American wilderness and its monumental features became synonymous with the sublime. As Elizabeth McKinsey has pointed out in *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime*, these wonders became symbols of America itself, its landscape and its heroes, its political and natural power. Moore’s “An Octopus” addresses this tradition directly, joining in the celebration of the American wilderness (its remoteness, its rugged beauty, its infinite variety, its majesty), but also criticizing the culture's efforts to commodify that wilderness (materially and conceptually). As Patricia Willis has shown, the poem makes an analogy between Milton’s paradise and Paradise Park at Mt. Ranier, to demonstrate our inherent failure to preserve a paradise on earth. Moore thus repeats the tendency in American sublime painting to make the wilderness an image of New Eden, but at the same time reinforces the fallenness of the beholder. The natural sublime as plenitude in this poem is matched by another sublime described in American literature: the abyss of language, Emerson’s “perpetual allegories”, Stevens’ dump of images, behind which lies the absolute whiteness of unarticulated reality: the white whale, the winter, the “curtain of snow” of Moore’s glacier, Bishop’s imaginary iceberg. (This second aspect of the sublime has been detailed in several of the essays in Mary Arensberg’s recent collection *The American Sublime*).

In many ways Moore’s “An Octopus” fits Edmund Burke’s prescription for the sublime in “A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.” She associates greatness with physical reality, describes an ambivalent response of terror and rapture, and contrasts the sublimity of the mountain to “smooth” (Greek) beauty, as Burke contrasted the sublime and the beautiful. As Marjorie Hope Nicholson early pointed out in *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, Burke’s aesthetic of the sublime could only arise when nature ceased to be a constant threat, when culture has achieved some ascendancy over nature. But this also meant that power and infinity became properties of mind.

But Moore’s poem does not invest the sublime wholly in nature. It becomes a mental as much as a physical phenomenon. The sublime is not so much a passive response to a threat or a defeat of the senses by an infinite object, as Burke described it. The poem lifts the mind into
the sublimity of the natural force it describes. Repeatedly identified in self-reflexive language, the trope of the octopus of ice is complete as the curtain of snow, the avalanche, coincides with the white page. The failure of discrete statements to accommodate this majesty ("of which the visitor dare never fully speak at home for fear of being stoned as an imposter") is a topos of sublimity, as Elizabeth McKinsey has shown.

Both Burke and Kant emphasize natural spectacles (though for Kant they become tropes) producing the effects of terrified rapture and of mental expansion, what Moore refers to as "eyes that can dilate... hair that can rise if it must." The opening of "An Octopus" is designed precisely to produce these effects:

An Octopus

of ice. Deceptively reserved and flat,
it lies "in grandeur and in mass"
beneath a sea of shifting snow dunes;
dots of cyclamen-red and maroon on its clearly defined pseudopodia

made of glass that will bend--a much needed invention--comprising twenty-eight ice fields from fifty to five hundred feet thick,
of unimagined delicacy.
"Picking periwinkles from the cracks"
or killing prey with the concentric crushing rigor of the python,
it hovers forward "spider fashion
on its armed" misleadingly like lace;
its "ghostly pallor changing
to the green metallic tinge of an anemone-starred pool." (71)

As Emily Mitchell Wallace has shown, the octopus itself has been associated with sublimity since pre-Homeric times, considered god or monster depending on the attitude toward the sea. Pound and H.D. join Moore in using the octopus as an image of the mind. But Moore makes the most extensive and the most affirmative use of the image.

The sublime is a drama of consciousness thrown off balance by an object which exceeds its mastery. Moore's strategies of paradox (glass that will bend, 28 ice fields from 50 to 500 feet thick of unimagined delicacy) force the boundaries of sense and sensation. Moore stresses physical force in the "crushing rigor of the python" (71). The association of monarchical power (first like American royal families) reinforces this impression. Added to these images of force and power are gothic images of instability, ephemerality, transience. All objects are fugitive. There is
a "ghostly pallor" in the pool; she notes the eerie movement ("spider fashion") of the glacier's arms. Obscurity (the larches filter the light, the gusts of a storm obliterate the shadows of the fir trees) which to Burke was a major feature of the sublime, persists on this mountain despite the poem's passionate display of its plenitude. Indeed, detail often contributes to obscurity: the horses are "hard to discern" among the birch trees, ferns, lily pads and other flora. The details themselves set up a momentum of infinity. In this, Moore joins the transcendentalists for whom, as Lawrence Buell argues in *Literary Transcendentalism*, such catalogue rhetoric provides "the closest verbal approximation they were able to achieve to the boundless vitality of nature; it creates a literary analogue for the speaker's initial bafflement when faced with the rich mysteriousness of nature" (Buell 221). Moore, like Thoreau rather than Emerson, hones to the particular, resisting the logic of totality, of the universal. Moments of mastery are repeatedly undermined, rhetorically and imagistically. The goat who "stands its ground" is confronted with erupting Fujiyama. Moore offers no simple transcendence to restore the sense of power to the perceiver. This is not the egotistical sublime of Wordsworth, in which nature disappoints until the infinite expectations of the beholder are matched by a transcendent signifier. The beholder in Moore's sublime remains overwhelmed by the disorienting prospect of the mountain and the sacrosanct remoteness of its details. Scope eludes her, except as it is established in the poem itself.

Moore's problem, already faced by Hawthorne, Poe, Thomas Cole and others in the nineteenth century, was how to reconstruct the sublime of the American landscape once the naive phase of exaltation in nature's physical immensity dwindled within a commodity culture. All of these artists turned to a moral symbolization of nature. Barbara Novak has pointed out in *Nature and Culture* that the first artists of the American wilderness saw it as a new Genesis; but this was not so much a moral as a phenomenological identification. Here, they thought, they could escape the veils of culture and their own belatedness and experience a primal vision, an untainted original nature. Emerson participates in this ideal of unmediated nature with his notion of the "transparent eyeball." Moore makes no such claims to restore innocent vision. Instead, as Patricia Willis and John Slatin have so brilliantly pointed out, Mt. Ranier (especially Paradise Park) becomes a place
in which we are reminded of the fall, reminded of our moral and perceptual decline from grace. The American landscape may still be Eden, but we have forfeited a clear vision of it through our abuses. We are devoid of Adam’s power to see, enjoy and name paradise.

Can the aesthetic of the sublime tolerate a notion of man’s fallen vision and language? Certainly much of Moore’s poem is devoted to an ironic display of this fallenness, especially those sections dealing with the human presence on Mt. Ranier. But this is not a pastiche of the janitors’ poems of everyday; majestic Mt. Ranier is a far cry from Stevens’ dump. The vastness, power, “unimagined delicacy” of the glacier survives its reductive articulations. Moore hurls language against the recalcitrant reality (“is tree the word for these things . . . ?” echoing Ruskin again) not to punish the reader with defeat but to press the “smoothness” of conventional expression against the ruggedness of its object. That pressure (“neatness of finish,” which urges the poet on beyond each finite articulation) itself has the force of sublimity. Thus the end of the poem is sublime in image and rhetoric:

the white volcano with no weather side;
the lightning flashing at its base,
rain falling in the valleys, and snow falling on the peak--
the glassy octopus symmetrically pointed,
its claw cut by the avalanche
“with a sound like the crack of a rifle,
in a curtain of powdered snow launched like a waterfall.” (76)

Verbal effects do not replace their illusion of spontaneous feeling.

Moore is in many ways a Keatsian poet, a chameleon (as she practically announces in “To a Chameleon”) who “has no self” (as Keats described him) and “lives in gusto.” Gusto, as a form of the sublime, is quite different from the “egotistical sublime” which has dominated recent criticism. It is the sublime of “negative capability,” of being in mysteries and uncertainties without an irritable reaching after fact and reason. How can the cerebral, intensely empirical Moore be aligned with such an aesthetic? The crucial term, though rarely emphasized, in Keats’ theory is “irritable.” Moore’s reach into what is unfamiliar retains a “reverence for mystery” and always yields, in gusto, to uncertainty and the indeterminacy of life, yields the visible to the invisible.

Negative capability in Moore is often translated into a via negativa, a discovery of the infinite in the
cumulative failure of the finite. In “New York,” that
tiradeable reaching (and its material counterpart, plunder)
gives way to uncertainty, “accessibility to experience,” the
openness of mental as well as experiential horizons. The
tawdry “dime novel exterior” of New York and the
hackneyed sublime of Niagara Falls gives way to a subject
less frameable, less material, and less sensational than these
cliches, a truer sublime of the imagination. The tortuous
paths of the via negativa of “scholastic philosophy” becomes
“the scholastic philosophy of the American wilderness” for
Moore, but also suggests a mental wilderness through which
the poem moves, rejecting old accommodations in order to
get access to reality.

If “An Octopus” and “New York” deal with the
sublimity of the North American landscape and its
inhabitants, “The Plumet Basilisk” is her Latin American
example, owing much to the earlier sublime excursions of
Stevens’ Crispin in “The Comedian as the letter C.” In her
poem Moore accomplishes a deft transition from a natural
(Burkean) to a mental (Kantean) basis for sublimity as the
basilisk becomes less and less identified with nature and
more with art until finally his living form is but a cocoon
or sheaf of spirit (creativity, soul, imagination). The
basilisk, cousin to the chameleon, is an instance of Moore’s
sublime of negative capability.

Like the unicorn in “Sea Unicorns and Land
Unicorns,” the basilisk produces an effect of agreeable
terror. Also like the unicorn, he is known for miraculous
elusiveness despite the abundance of fact Moore hurls at us.
Alongside these facts are the conventions of the sublime
challenged but also appropriated. The monster basilisk
whose “look can kill” is a symbol of night itself, the
darkness Burke calls a major object of sublimity. His stripes
suggest Blake’s Tyger, “fearful symmetry” transformed to
“regal awkwardness.” The poem recalls as well the sublime
accounts of Spanish conquest, the legends of infinite wealth
(“gold in a 10 ton chain”) in a virginal setting. Moore
transforms these conventions by making the icon of the
Americas, their meta figure, a small unconquerable lizard.
Unlike the Keatsian nightingale which the poem invokes,
the basilisk does not become pure trope, leaving us
alienated from the natural world. The invisible is known
within the visible.

“The Hero,” too, addresses and alters the
conventions of the sublime. Moore dismisses gothic imagery
of “weeds of beanstalk height, / snakes’ hypodermic teeth,
Marianne Moore and the Sublime

or the wind's "scarebabe voice." But she replaces these superficial "sights" with another, truer sublime where the power of the visible is the invisible: "the rock crystal thing to see--the startling El Greco / brimming with inner light," the emblem of sublimity.

Much of Moore's poetry is a criticism of what Roy Harvey Pearce called the "primary egocentrism" of the American sublime. She sets her sublime in a post-Adamic world where the self has lost its primal continuities with nature, or has converted nature's wonders into commodities. But this is not a poetry only of loss, disillusionment, reprimand or mere belatedness. It is also a poetry of the reconstructed sublime. Like Stevens' man on the dump, Moore "rejects the trash" and "feels the purifying change." I have really only pointed to the evidence of Moore's participation in the tradition of the sublime. The specific terms and structure of her participation are the real challenge to criticism.

WORKS CITED


Willis, Patricia C. "The Road to Paradise: First Notes on 'An Octopus.'" Twentieth Century Literature 30 (Summer/Fall 1984): 242-266.