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CONSANGUINITIES:
T. S. ELIOT AND MARIANNE MOORE

In his introduction to her *Selected Poems* (1935), which he was instrumental in gaining her permission to publish, T. S. Eliot described Marianne Moore's work as among the very few "great" contributions to poetry in his day. He was not used, he said, to handing out such encomiums to his contemporaries, believing that only time could establish their merits. Nevertheless, in her case he made an exception, finding that in her poetry, preeminently, and over many years, "an original sensibility and alert intelligence and deep feeling" had been engaged in "maintaining the life of the English language" in his time (cited in Tomlinson 65). Among other things, Eliot found Moore's technical innovations in rhyme and diction among the major breakthroughs of modernist poetics. He called attention repeatedly in this and other reviews and essays to her superb exploitation of the light or off rhyme, and her daring use of a combination of the sublime and low styles. Lines such as "shallow oppressor, intruder, / insister, you have found a resister" (*Like a Bulwark* 11), with their quickly repeated sound patterns working against the usual emphasis of the verse, drew his praise, as did her fusion of what he called the "ironic conversational" and the "high rhetorical" styles. Nor were these recognitions confined to his critical appreciation of her work. When in "Ash-Wednesday" (1935) Eliot makes use of a repertoire of images distinctively reminiscent of Moore's earlier (1924) poem "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns" (*Selected Poems* 86) to eulogize a woman who walks with white light about her, restoring "with new verse the ancient rhyme," there is a good deal of evidence both internal and external to indicate that Moore was a part of this "compound ghost."

To some extent, Eliot himself had contributed to the achievement which drew these tributes forth. Moore had called an early book of her poems *Observations* (1924),
following, of course, his “Prufrock and Other Observations” (1917) and some of her most important poems were, as John Slatin argues in a very fine and meditative recent book on Moore, clearly written with his work and comments in mind. In a laudatory, yet challenging review for The Dial in 1923 (reprinted in Tomlinson 49-51), Eliot had, after many praises, invited Moore to “shatter” the formal mastery she had achieved in order to attain an even wider range of reference. Her poem “An Octopus,” a tour de force which takes Mt. Rainier through an Ovidian set of metamorphoses, is, Slatin argues, a response to that challenge (174-5). Here and elsewhere, Eliot seems to have had a hand—perhaps, as Celeste Goodridge has discovered, a considerable and ambivalent one—in Moore’s continued growth and self-transformation as a poet.

This direction of influence, however, could be and often was, reversed, for Moore also influenced Eliot, perhaps to a greater degree than has often been perceived. This influence stemmed both from the acute reviews she published in various American journals and small magazines over the period of some twenty years and from the overwhelming strength and craft of her own poetry. (A very fine treatment of Moore’s life and work, the best general introduction to date, though rich also with advanced reading and reflection, is Margaret Holley’s The Poetry of Marianne Moore). On both counts, we must remember, Moore was a figure of no little literary power and prestige. In 1918, when she was twenty-five, and had already written and published several major poems, she and her mother moved from their home in Carlisle, Pennsylvania to New York, where she found herself at the center of a small circle of moderns revolving chiefly around Alfred Kreymbourg and the magazine Others. In the next few years, she continued to publish in significant places, including The Egoist, with Eliot on the editorial board. Poetry, the important journal edited by Harriet Monroe out of Chicago, and later The Dial, often sharing their pages with Eliot, Stevens, H.D., Williams, and Pound.

The response to her work by her peers was immediate and overwhelming. Pound, for instance, was much struck. “These girls,” he said of Moore and Mina Loy, “have written a distinctively national product”—in her terms a compliment indeed. Williams, it seems, was equally smitten; Moore’s poetry was like “a wild animal whose walk corrects that of men... so fleet, hard to capture, so delightful to pursue” (Tomlinson 53). It is interesting how
much to the fore is mention, by most of these contemporaries, of Moore's gender. "Miss Moore's poetry is as 'feminine' as Christina Rossetti's, one never forgets that it is written by a woman; but with both one never thinks of this particularly as anything but a positive virtue," Eliot said in 1923 (Tomlinson 51). Eliot did have the grace to put in quotation marks, and we cannot forget his and Pound's devoted collegial service to Moore in helping to overcome her resistance to large-scale publication of her work. Nevertheless, one may pause here to imagine how Moore would have felt about the comparison with Rossetti, with whom she has little in common except gender, or to wonder how a male poet would feel about having his 'masculinity' adduced as, at least in his case, a surprisingly praiseworthy virtue, consciousness of which never leaves the reader's mind.

Moore was admirably armed--even armored, to use one of her favorite metaphors--against the heady delights and subtle dangers of this positive reception of her person and her work. First of all, she and her mother were long-time members of the suffragette movement, in which they had been active since at least 1915 (Stapleton 4). Secondly, she had a Calvinist "distrust of merits" and a Calvinist sense of the private dignity of the person, to whom public acclaim was irrelevant. Furthermore, she had already been through the fire. In 1918, she was a veteran of isolation, having passed through the worst of her years of self doubt, the period around 1912 when she realized she could not accept the label imagiste which had both made and unmade H.D. (Stapleton 10-11). A bit later, she remembered, she had had one poem turned down by no fewer than--the count is her own--twenty-six literary magazines (Holley 18).

From almost the beginning of her public career, then, Moore seemed to have absorbed the wisdom of a Confucian proverb she probably learned from Pound, and much liked citing. "If there be a knife of resentment in the heart, the mind will not attain precision" (Prose 568, 649). As she also liked to say, "it is determination with resistance, not determination with resentment, which results in poise" (Prose 177). Precision and poise were qualities of which she had need, for once her career was launched, both because and in spite of the tributes it inspired, Moore found herself in a position of considerable direct and indirect literary influence. This influence was particularly in evidence during the period from 1925 to 1929 when she was editor of The Dial, though it extended as well to the
subsequent period in which she reviewed regularly for such magazines as *The Nation*, *The Criterion*, and *The New Republic*. From this position she was able to exercise, in an extended way, that decided and incorruptible judgment of aesthetic value which was her special gift to the modernist movement. Here, I think, we find the secret of her relationship with Eliot, a relationship mediated almost entirely by print (they did not meet in person until Eliot's trip to America in the thirties), as they read one another's reviews and recent work from an ocean's distance away and corresponded across the barrier of that scrupulous and formal American upper middle class decorum and politesse they both so cultivated and enjoyed.

Wherever possible in her criticism, Moore preferred to praise rather than to condemn. "Well Moused, Lion," she congratulated Stevens on the publication of *Harmonium* in 1924, and in 1926 she hailed Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* with a perspicacity it took years for others to match. Her praise, however, was never mere rhetoric. I doubt if there is a better short introduction to Pound than her two reviews of "A Draft of XXX Cantos," one for *Poetry* magazine and the other for Eliot's *Criterion*. Moore did not, however, for all this warmth of response, lack bite. She was quick to take Williams to task for petulance (*Prose* 59) and to identify both the strain of sexism in George Moore (*Prose* 75-79) and the far more vicious anti-feminism in Maxwell Bodenheim (*Prose* 103-107). She was able to provide a very subtle estimation of the weakness as well as the strengths of that much admired lesser lion of the times, e.e. cummings.

For Eliot her respect was undeviating, but her praise tempered by qualifications he would have been the last person to overlook or dismiss. In 1918, when she first came to New York, Moore wrote a review of Eliot's early work for *Poetry* magazine. "It might be advisable for Mr. Eliot to publish a fangless edition of *Prufrock and Other Observations*," she began, "for the gentle reader who likes his literature, like breakfast coffee or grapefruit, sweetened" (*Prose* 35). Her review went on to praise Eliot for looking with the naked eye at scenes Whistler would have painted impressionistically and with the haze of distance to cushion their shock. If there was room for sweetness in art, there was also room for accuracy, and Eliot was--here we see the seeds of what for Moore was a modernist credo--"the faithful friend" of the "objects" he portrayed. Nevertheless, she went on to identify, as she would continue to identify in much of
the work of Eliot's she subsequently reviewed, a certain stylistic violence in his apparent directness of approach, a violence which sometimes ran counter to his own stated aims. This fault was exemplified for her by the touch of unconscious cruelty in the last lines of "Portrait of a Lady."
"It wrenches," she said, "a piece of life up at the roots" (Prose 35). She certainly did not want her objections to be mistaken for those of the genteel breakfast reader. But she did wish to make the point implied in her metaphor: to "wrench up by the roots" is not to observe but to destroy, and it thus fails of the mandate implied in Eliot's own title.

A good deal of Moore's sense of what observation required came from her Calvinist heritage, a heritage she took seriously and one which was very different both from the somewhat attenuated Unitarianism of Eliot's youth and the Anglo-Catholicism of his maturity. Moore was firmly enough persuaded of the divine origin of both poetry and grace to accept that the energy that would lift verse into art would come, if it came, from outside the self, as the wind comes from outside the rigging. But she had an acute eye, as did Calvin himself, for the point of intersection between craft, which is within human control, and spirit, which is beyond it. "To start a large turbine," she warned Conrad Aiken, "you cannot throw steam into the drum; the inertia is too great; you run it by means of a small engine until it has been stepped up to the point at which steam can be added. If you desire a certain result, you must put a train of circumstances in motion that will bring it about; in this way, and in this way only, will you be able to defy Satan or the Devourer or the Fissured Mind when it puts its hand on your throat and tells you you were meant to die and not to live" (Prose 285). Put with less of a gothic shudder, this is the old 'God helps those who help themselves' in another guise.

Because of this rigorous sense of both the strengths and the limitations of human will, Moore never indulged either in the supplication or the propitiation of the muse, and she certainly never sacrificed to the demands of poetic inspiration either her sexual integrity, her family values or her sense of public decorum. Indeed, such sacrifices seemed to her not only futile, but beneath human dignity, and human dignity, the ability to remain upright under the pressure of a rigged game, was one of her fundamental concerns. She liked it when Emily Dickinson said "though I think I bend, something straightens me"
(Prose 293) and liked it too, when she found herself writing in "What Are Years?" of someone who:

sees deep and is glad, who
accedes to mortality
and in his imprisonment rises
upon himself as the sea in a chasm.

(Selected Poems 99)

Both Moore and Eliot were debarred by principle and temperament from recourse to a number of means of priming the pump for poetry, from Pound's open courtship of the pagan gods through Lawrence's exploitation of sexual energy to Yeats' deep insufflations of the occult. But where Moore waited with composure for the sea to rise, Eliot found himself often involved in a labor of works, soliciting the muse with an uneasy mixture of impatience, asceticism and self-abasement which was only occasionally productive. For every happy found object in Moore's poetry, Eliot had to substitute an uneasy, sometimes ambiguous, sometimes obsessively disturbing image which lacked her clear objective contours. As he said in "Ash-Wednesday," he could not "find" but must "construct" something upon which to "rejoice" (Collected Poems: 1909-1962 95).

Moore's self-respecting Calvinism extended both to her conservative politics and her conservative views on sexual conduct, and here her positions entailed a certain solidarity with Eliot which made her occasional criticism of his work and stance all the more telling. Both of them were well aware that the rest of the poetry world regarded their personal views, in particular their commitment to restraint in matters sexual, with an attitude compounded of fascination and disbelief. Moore was quite willing to tackle this issue directly. "It is correct and unnotorious for the race to perpetuate itself," she wrote in a review of "Sweeney Agonistes" in 1933; “committing adultery and disclaiming obligation is the suicide of personality, and the free spirit wearsies of clarity in such matters" (Prose 298). But, she went on, "I gotta use words when I talk to you," and she was much struck by the words Eliot used, by his acid-etched but painfully observant exploration of the consequences of sexual confusion, and by the complexities, which she never denied, of maintaining one's balance in the midst of them. She was extremely aware too--perhaps more so than Eliot, though she gave him credit for the insight--of the implicit sexism in superficial theories of free love. The effects of this doctrine, whether held by would-be Bohemian revolutionaries or what she described, with Sweeney's Doris
in mind, as "baulky card-cutting girls" were, in her opinion, simple: "work annihilated, personality negativated, and conscience suppressed; a monkey to milk the goat and pass the cocktails--woman in the cannibal pot or at hand to serve" (Prose 298).

Here as with "Portrait of a Lady," however, Moore took pains to register an uneasy question as to whether Eliot was describing this confusion with genuine poetic detachment or reacting against it with a violent distaste born of unresolved conflict. In her list of the bad consequences of sexual confusion, her very choice of words indicates her concern. To speak, as she does, of self annihilation, of "personality negativated," as evils, runs directly counter to Eliot's frequent praise of these qualities as positive virtues in such essays as "Tradition and the Individual Talent." "Any writer of strong personality is a stylist," Moore wrote, (Prose 52-5), and, quoting George Moore, "the impersonality of the artist is the vainest of delusions" (Prose 77). For Moore, the detachment and equilibrium necessary to the work of art was not the result of impersonality in Eliot's sense but of complete self-acceptance. The annihilation of personality for which Eliot was ready to take up the knife looked to Moore at times no more than a desperate quest for a false control, the parody, not the paradigm, of grace. As she went on to say in her "Sweeney Agonistes" review, "one is dead in being born unless one's debts are forgiven; and equipoise [under these conditions] makes an idiot of one" (Prose 298).

In this and subsequent reviews of Eliot's work, Moore also shows a Calvinist distrust of asceticism and a more balanced attitude than his toward the material of the poems, whether another person, the self, or an inanimate object. After all, once you fully and completely accept, with Calvin, that knowledge is always knowledge of limitation, and that all railings against this limitation are merely further forms of self-aggrandizement, you achieve freedom to meet the world and its creatures with a certain irony which can be productive of great delight as well as great detachment. Furthermore, if the universe is capable, with justification, of reducing anyone and anything to dust, then neither man nor nature nor science need intimidate, nor need you fear, as Eliot so often feared, possession by the spirits or influences of others. The result, in Moore's case as in the case of many, is a release of the quality she called gusto, and which she realized in even the most satiric of her portraits.
Gusto is evident in the relaxed insouciance of her satires, in her wry titles: “To Statecraft Embalmed,” “The Pedantic Literalist,” “To Be Liked By You would be a Calamity.” It animates, too, throughout, her eye for the antics and poses of the too fastidious man of taste in “Critics and Connoisseurs,” in which a certain swan is pressed into service to indicate the silliness of a critical poseur:

I remember a swan under the willows in Oxford,
    with flamingo-coloured, maple-
    leaflike feet. It reconnoitred like a battle-
    ship. Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were the
    staple
    ingredients in its
    disinclination to move...

... it made away with what I gave it
to eat. I have seen this swan and
I have seen you; I have seen ambition without
understanding in a variety of forms...

Part of the comedy here lies in the way the prey of this ambitious swan, the poet/speaker herself, turns and observes her would-be consumer, the biter bitten by the very object of his greed. And yet Moore does not exempt herself or her readers from the ironic reversals such turn-aboutss indicate. To her cool eye, the swan is comic because he is a contingent being pretending to be absolute. On the other hand, so are we all, men and women, bound and free, critic and poet. Furthermore, in spite of our discriminating judgments, we must bear in mind that we are always likely to be unexpectedly trumped. The tally of the saved is not known, and the eye of the universe, to which our perspectives only approximate, may always take another point of view. That preening swan/critic whom we love to mock may also turn out, in heaven’s eye, to have his own claim as an object of contemplation, whatever the inadequacies of his conscience de soi, visualized as Moore has placed him, with his “flamingo coloured, maple-/ leaflike feet.”

Eliot’s sketches and satires—“Burbank with a Baedeker,” or “Cousin Nancy,” for instance, show by comparison that the objects of his observation are far more threatening to the balance of his work than Moore’s. When fully accomplished, as in “Prufrock,” Eliot’s ironic poems can be at once darker and more profound, for Moore is at her best when celebrating, rather than dissecting, her material. Nevertheless, Eliot had much to learn from Moore
about generosity to himself and to his objects, the kind of generosity that informs her luxuriant “Melanchthon,” with its open celebration of “these / things which I do, which please / no one but myself” (Selected Poems 45). Moore was aware of their difference and worried about Eliot’s apparent approbation of the old Augustinian line that to be a saint one must divest oneself of the love of created beings. Is the choice then, she asked with asperity, to be a saint or go mad? If so, she preferred the latter (Prose 298).

When he wrote his first laudatory public review of Moore in 1923, Eliot was beginning that transformation of his own style which led from the metaphysics of The Waste Land through the increasing accessibility and simplicity of the middle poems to the fusion of high and low styles in Four Quartets. There is a great deal of evidence, hitherto unremarked, I believe, that this transformation was undertaken quite deliberately under Moore’s aegis. Consider, for instance, the following lines:

I recall their magnificence, now not more magnificent than it is dim. It is difficult to recall the ornament, speech, and precise manner of what one might call the minor acquaintances twenty years back...
strict with tension, malignant
in its power over us and deeper,
than the sea when it proffers flattery in exchange
for hemp
rye, flax, horses, platinum, timber and fur.

Eliot quoted these lines from Moore in a review of her work (Tomlinson 63), and it would not be surprising, at least on the grounds of style, to find them translated wholesale into, say, “The Dry Salvages.” In that quartet, Eliot, too, fuses the conversational and the sublime, the ironic and the ruminative, with the same running patterns of light rhyme and the same undertow of sinister power. He, too, uses the sea as a metaphor for dangerous exchanges, the granite into which it “reaches, the beaches” where it offers its hints of “earlier and other creation,” and the incantatory lists, “the starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale’s backbone” (Collected Poems: 1909-1962 205).

Eliot also owes Moore the idea of making the technical resources it takes to write poetry the subject matter for the poem itself. For both, a number of the ethical values required to write well—courage, resolution, humility, gusto, precision—became material for their work, especially with regard to the writing of poems in wartime.
Here in particular, celebrations of strength, valour, self-defense, intelligence and commitment, and excoriations of pedantry, fear, self-indulgence, luxury and rigidity become martial as well as writerly values, extending private virtue into the public sphere. Eliot drew as well on Moore’s determination to make distinctions, to counter the prevailing jingoistic rhetoric of self-congratulation and to question, tacitly and explicitly, the styles and stances of the poems of the First World War.

This exploration of the agon of writing poetry as subject matter for art goes back in Moore’s work to such poems of the teens and twenties as “Those Various Scalpels,” “Novices” and “The Labours of Hercules.” The first of these offers a commentary both on a particular woman’s sharp style and on the general problem of brilliance in art. It ends with a question which is not merely rhetorical: “Why dissect destiny with instruments which / are more highly specialized than the tissues of destiny / itself?” (Selected Poems 58). In a crystalline short prose piece for The Dial in 1926, Moore drew an extended analogy between warfare and the writing of poetry which is at once a meditation on the psychology of art, a defense of the martial stance in relation to others, and a refutation avant la lettre of theories of poetic relations as Freudian rivalry or internecine strife. “It is seldom that the professed grounds correspond with the real motives of a war,” she begins, and goes on to argue that whatever the surface turbulences of influence, counter-influence and resistance among writers, in so far as a work of art is genuine it conforms to other works of art. “Wherever there is art, there is equilibrium,” she insists, even though the artist is often unable to recognize in himself that “summer in December” of which enduring and peaceable achievement consists. “In making works of art,” she concludes, “the only legitimate warfare is the inevitable warfare between imagination and medium,” and victory and reconciliation are both established when imagination has subdued its material (Prose 177). Eliot captures her thought exactly in those passages of Four Quartets where he later writes of his struggles with language and poetic precedent and his own quest for the “unimaginable zero summer” of artistic inspiration. He, too, argues that poetry is always “a raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment always deteriorating.” Yet, with Moore he affirms that “what there is to conquer / By strength and submission, has already been discovered / Once or twice . . . by men whom one cannot hope / To emulate” (Collected Poems: 1909-1962 203). In
most of Eliot's mature work there is an attempt, as Moore constantly urged, to let understatement cut beneath the violence of internal and external warfare, with the strong effect of a deliberately lowered voice in a noisy room.

There are as well between the two poets certain more subtle confluences of subject matter and stance. Consider, for instance, the meditative, ambulatory pace of Moore's longish poem "Virginia Britannia," published in England in 1936, where among carefully planted yews on "an almost English green:"

A deer-track in a church-floor
brick, and a fine pavement tomb with engraved
top,
remain.

(Selected Poems 108-9)

This meditation has much in common, in theme, setting and technique, with the opening of "Little Gidding" (1943) where Eliot evokes England's yew hedged churchyards, and with them another tombstone, which is an ocean away from Moore's and yet shares the same linguistic element. When Moore writes that in that lost corner of Virginia called the Old Dominion, "not one of us, in taking what we / pleased---in colonizing as the / saying is--has been a synonym for mercy," and yet still that the American cypress and the English hackberry have, with the Indian's live oak, "become with lost identity, / part of the ground, as sunset flames increasingly," (113) we are surely not far from that moment of oneness in "Little Gidding" where "with frost and fire, / The brief sun flames the ice" and where many opposed races, parties and poets lie down together "united in the strife which divided them" (Collected Poems: 1909-1962 214).

Returning to the poems of Eliot's early middle years, we find equally pervasive evidence of Moore's influence, as well as many poems which may be read as covert homage to her precedents. Everywhere are the light or unstressed rhyme, the conversational diction, rising at times to a very understated sublime, and the scrupulous observation without violence or distortion, of the poem's intended object. Here Eliot moves beyond technical emulation to celebrate as well the grace of Moore's poetic stance, her mandate to praise rather than condemn, her friendship for the observed phenomenon, and her confident rootedness in self and place. It is not surprising, given these poetic consanguinities, that we owe to Moore, as well,
perhaps one of the best estimates of Eliot's mature achievement on record, her final, hard-won tribute to his Collected Poems. In her earlier "Sweeney Agonistes" review she had implied, politely enough, that Eliot's appearance of ironic detachment was, alas, something of an illusion. Now at last she was able to affirm without qualification the greatness of his victory over his own temperament and the materials of his art. "Those who have power to renounce life," she wrote, "are those who have it," and "one who attains equilibrium in spite of opposition to himself from within, is stronger than if there had been no opposition to overcome; and in art, freedom evolving from a liberated constraint is more significant than if it had not by nature been cramped" (Prose 335).

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