CELESTE GOODRIDGE

TOWARDS A POETICS OF DISCLOSURE:
MARIANNE MOORE AND HENRY JAMES

Gordon Craig, Henry James, Blake, the
Minor Prophets and Hardy, are so far as
I know, the direct influences bearing on
my work.1

---Marianne Moore

In his Prefaces [James] hugs secrets,
talking round that overwhelming
question, what the story may be 'for.'
Even in his Notebooks as he ponders his
theme or works out his tale we detect
him flushed with orgies of reticence,
divulging even to himself no more than
he must know to get on with the job.
This is not his perversity, but his
deepest response to the nature of the
craft he practiced. Always, the "story"
has been a hermetic thing. Of the first
hearers of the Parable of the Sower, it
was those closest to the Parabolist who
wanted afterward to know what it meant.

---Hugh Kenner, The Pound Era 23

Although Marianne Moore only wrote one full
length critical essay about Henry James' temperament and
aesthetic--her essay, "Henry James as a Characteristic
American," appeared in the Hound and Horn in 1934--she
clearly had a life-long interest in James.2 As early as 1907,

1. All previously unpublished material by Marianne Moore is printed with the permission of Clive E. Driver, Literary Executor of the Estate of Marianne C. Moore. I would also like to thank The Rosenbach Museum and Library for permission to quote from unpublished material in the Marianne Moore collection. Research for this essay was made possible, in part, by an NEH Travel to Collections Grant, Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia (RML), V:50:06, T.L.C., Marianne Moore to Ezra Pound, January 9, 1919.

we find Moore--20 years old--writing home to her family from Bryn Mawr concerning a lecture she had just heard on James:

As to the lecture, it was so-so--I was wildly excited about it before hand as the pedants talk of nothing but Henry and as I have read since my arrival here this fall 30 Pages of The Sacred Fount (with edification). In chapel this morning the Dean said her say on Henry--she said Henry James was not like those (Browning &/Meredith) who couldn't write clear English for his earlier books were "absolutely crystal-clear." But that in his later style his ideas were the obstacle, that the complicated nature and the vast amount of what he had to communicate made lucidity impossible.

The man who lectured was K. Fullerton's brother, a friend of Peggy's brother, and an intimate friend of Henry's--(Mr. James in fact asked Mr. Fullerton to lecture to Bryn Mawr,) I thought his lecture bad, that is pretentious and "kryptic" [sic] Some things I couldn't begin to understand--and he ran French through it all---... The gist of his talk was that Mr. James synthesizes. He says his early figures are like the rude heavy kings seen etc. on (playing) cards, that his later sketches are romantic realistic everything combined--that he tries to show life in full, that he condenses his thought and that his late books and papers are the result. This is good of course, but was delivered in uffish [sic] style---... After the lecture Miss Fullerton and Peggy both received enough adulation from outsiders to turn the heads of any patriarch....

By announcing at the outset of her letter that she has just read 30 pages of late James--as she puts it "with edification"--Moore joins the company of those at Bryn Mawr who talk of nothing but Henry. As Patricia Willis points out in her essay, "The Owl and the Lantern: MM at Bryn Mawr":

James maintained a kind of presence on campus. He had spoken there twice in 1904, the year before Marianne matriculated. In 1906, Peggy James, William's daughter and Henry's niece, enrolled as a freshman and became a good friend of Marianne's. Her being on campus caused much talk of "Uncle Henry" and discussions about whether his work was "profound." (92-93)

It is not surprising, then, to find Moore commenting, in her letter to her family, so specifically on what the Dean said

See also RML, II:2:22, 57 Pages of Ms. notes for "Henry James as a Characteristic American." These notes reveal that in preparing this essay Moore read or re-read much of James' fiction, his criticism, and his memoirs; in addition, she took notes from Ford Madox Ford's Henry James: A Critical Study and Joseph Conrad's An Appreciation (1906).

3. RML, VI:18b:41, A.L.S., Marianne Moore to Family, October 17, 1907. I am indebted to Jeanne Heving for calling this letter to my attention.

4. In his discussion of major modernist poets who just missed hearing James lecture, Kenner maintains: "Marianne Moore did not hear him lecture at Bryn Mawr on 'The Lesson of Balzac' in January 1905; she was not to arrive on campus till that fall." (19).
in Chapel and on Mr. Fullerton's performance. As she labels the lecture "pretentious" and "kryptic" she becomes the critic criticizing the critic. Moore, who later in "An Octopus" would defend James' right to be difficult and remote, here seems particularly interested in "the obstacle" or "complicated nature" of James' later style and the Dean's assertion that what James 'had to communicate [in his later works] made lucidity impossible."

It would be 27 years before Moore offered her own prose assessment of James; it is clear, however, from her notebooks, her books and her 57 pages of manuscript notes for her essay--"Henry James as a Characteristic American"--that she had been admiring him for many years. In her 1934 essay, Moore constructs a strikingly comprehensive analysis of James' temperament--one that evolves from her arrangement of a mosaic of quotations from his memoirs, criticism, and fiction. Moore's orchestration of quotations from James' The American, A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brother, The American Scene, Hawthorne, The Lesson of Balzac, "Madame de Maupes," "The Middle Years," "Eugene Pickering," and "The Madonna of the Future" also serves to reveal her own aesthetic and temperamental affinities with James.5

Grace Schulman has recently pointed out that Moore confided to Dorothea Gray in 1935 that her essay on James was "descriptive of her [own] outlook on life" (13). A still larger connection needs to be made between Moore's aesthetic, as it takes shape between 1907 and 1934, and James'. Drawing first on her reading of James in 1934, which clearly represents many years of thinking about James, and then back-tracking to a consideration of her 1924 poem, "An Octopus," a poem which is almost as much about James as it is about Mt. Ranier, I argue that Moore's epistemology, as well as her belief that aesthetic disclosure is most possible in those moments that the "self" is concealed and protected, was not only influenced by James, but actually legitimated by the "self" he fashioned in his memoir, A Small Boy and Others (1913). Moore's 1934 essay about James, then, may be seen as a tribute to the mythology of self James created in this memoir.

5. See RML, II.02.22, Typed Carbon Copy Manuscript, "Henry James as a Characteristic American." Moore copied out a list of the James works she quoted from in her essay. She often made such a list when an essay represented a comprehensive assessment of a writer's career.
In her Reading Notebook for 1914-1921, Moore made the following notation under the Letter "J":

James, Henry. *A Small Boy + Others* (Scrib.) adventures of one who even as an infant was an incorrigible observer. Nation.

Not surprisingly in her own essay in 1934, Moore turned to James' penchant for observation:

...to say that Henry James as a child was "a-throb" with the instinct for meanings barely suggests the formidable paraphernalia which he was even then gathering. It is in "the waste of time, of passion, of curiosity, of contact—that true initiation resides," he said later; and no scene, strange accent, no adventure—experienced or vicarious—was irrelevant. *(Complete Prose 319)*

Moore depicts James, in terms that might apply to herself, as someone who gathered, treasured, and hoarded his impressions. She also maintains that James was particularly attracted to the "glimpse" or partial disclosure of something:

Things for Henry James glow, flush, glimmer, vibrate, shine, hum, bristle, reverberate. Joy, bliss, ecstasies, intoxication, a sense of trembling in every limb, a shattering first glimpse, a hanging on the prolonged silence of an editor; and as a child at Mr. Burton's small theater in Chambers Street, his wondering, not if the curtain would rise, but "if one could exist till then"... *(317)*

James, Moore implies, prefers the shadows of "things"—the possibility of an event over the event itself. Positioning himself at a distance from an occasion, James seems to revel in the gap between the moment of anticipation and the thing itself. Preferring the unattainable, James becomes, as Kenner maintains, "the connoisseur of absences" *(511).*

James even, Moore suggests, protects the inevitable distance between the past and the present:

He would not risk disturbing his recollections of *The Wonder-Book* and *Tanglewood Tales* by rereading them, and Dickens "always remained better than the taste of overhauling him." The aura is more than the thing. *(317)*

James' cultivated distance between the past and the present allows him to safely hoard his "recollections" until the proper time to spend them.

Moore also acknowledges James' aesthetic preference for "the shattering first glimpse" of something or

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someone when she quotes from his description of his meeting with Dickens:

He [James] speaks of "the extremely handsome face... which met my dumb homage with a straight inscrutability... It hadn't been the least important that we should have shaken hands or exchanged platitudes.... It was as if I had carried off my strange treasure just exactly from under the merciless military eye--placed there on guard of the secret." (320)

In this account, James privileges Dickens' inaccessibility--his "straight inscrutability"--rather than the possibility of an "exchange." Having just a glimpse of Dickens' genius, James becomes the transgressor/artist who both pillages and hoards his "strange treasure" or impressions. James practices here what he described in his "Preface" to The Spoils of Poynton as the "sublime economy of art" (120). This economy, "which rescues, which saves, and hoards and banks," investing and reinvesting these fruits of toil in wonderous useful 'works'...." (120), necessarily privileges the non-exchange. And though he casts Dickens in the role of guard who, with a "merciless military eye," stands ready to protect "the secret," it is clear that James is the real guard here. What he is guarding, and endorsing as an aesthetic, is a lack of exchange, or the space between himself and Dickens.7

This valorization of the domain between "self" and "other" leads to an epistemology in which things are known from afar--"The aura is more than the thing"--and in the moments that they "glow, flush, [and] glimmer...." In her manuscript notes for her 1934 essay, Moore cites a passage from James' 1913 memoir--A Small Boy and Others--in which James describes one of his early needs to inhabit a world of his own:

118 One of the elder cousins fr Albany had begun to read aloud to my mother the new, wh must have been the first installment of D. Copperfield. I had feigned to withdraw, but had only retreated to cover close at hand, the friendly shade of some screen or drooping table-cloth. I listened long and drank deep while the wonderous picture grew, but...I broke into sobs of sympathy that disclosed my subterfuge.8

7. This is not unlike Lambert Strether's confrontation with the sculptor, Gloriani, in The Ambassadors. This meeting, which is also defined by Strether's lack of direct engagement with Gloriani, acquires value in the moment that Strether can deposit it in some repository we might call the self: "He was in fact quite to cherish his vision of it, to play with it in idle hours; only speaking of it to no one and quite aware he couldn't have spoken without appearing to talk nonsense" (197).
Although Moore does not incorporate this quotation into her essay, as she does so many of the quotations we find in her manuscript notes for this essay, she does provide an interesting, albeit cryptic, comment after it: "[J. always part of a drama of romance]." She may be referring to James' claim that Dickens "constituted for [them] in itself romance" (A Small Boy and Others 118). It is more likely, however, that she is commenting on James' particular method of creating "a drama of romance"—that is, by listening to the reading from afar; it is almost as if James' consciously transgressive concealment of self legitimates his "sobs of sympathy." Only under "the friendly shade of some screen or drooping cloth" could James listen and drink deep "while the wonderous picture grew."9 Highlighting James' deep reserves of feeling by citing this passage in her notes, Moore implicitly defends his need to withdraw from the life around him.

In her Reading Notebook for 1938 we find a reference to T. S. Eliot's "Four Elizabethan Dramatists" (1924) in which Eliot argues that "an artist should consciously or unconsciously draw a circle beyond which he does not trespass . . . ." Beside the entry, Moore has written "cf. H. James":

Four Elizabethan Dramatists

III It is essential that a work of art (should) be
self-consistent that an artist should consciously
or unconsciously draw a circle beyond which he
cf.H.James does not trespass; actual life is the
material+... an abstraction from actual life is a
necessary condition to the creation of a work of art.10

Moore’s comparison between James and Eliot’s artist is apt for James repeatedly presented himself in his autobiography as someone who needed to absent himself from the life around him in order to nurture his own artistic enterprise.

Some of the other passages Moore cites from James’ A Small Boy and Others that appear in her manuscript notes, though not in the 1934 essay itself, also concern James’ early predilection for withdrawing “from [the] actual life” around him. I cite these references because they complement the passages Moore does include in the review and because they allow us to chart Moore’s private

9. This description might apply to Moore’s own method of making James up from afar, of responding to his aesthetic with her elaborate mosaic of quotations from his work.
10. RML, VII.02.03, Reading Notebook 1938-1942.
response to the "self" James offered the public in his 1913 memoir:

15 Homesickness was a luxury I remember craving fr the tenderest age

120 it was my habit,... to attribute to orphans circumstantial charm

194 what happened all the while, I conceive, was that I imagined things--... wholly other

209 my share... comes back to me as merely contemplative

James covets homesickness, he explains, because it would suspend him between two worlds: "... my first assured conception of true richness was that we should be sent separately off among cold or even cruel aliens in order to be there thrillingly homesick" (A Small Boy and Others 15). To be homesick as he defines it is to have a "glimpse" or intimation of the unattainable. It is an exquisite privation to be "among cold or even cruel aliens." To be an orphan in James' scheme affords even greater "circumstantial charm," for orphans are cut off from family ties and they live in a world of "constant improvisation":

Parentally bereft cousins were somehow more thrilling than parentally provided ones...I think my first childish conception of the enviable lot, formed amid these associations, was to be so little fathered or mothered, so little sunk in the short range, that the romance of life seemed to lie in some constant improvisation, by vague overhearing authorities, of new situations and horizons. (14-15)

Increasingly, James sought to create a world in which he could make things up from afar; Moore alludes to this when she cites the place in James' memoir where he describes his life as a haven from this world:

What happened all the while, I conceive, was that I imagined things--and as if quite on system--wholly other than as they were, and so carried on in the midst of the actual ones an existence that somehow floated and saved me from any degree of direct performance, in fact from any degree of direct participation, at all. (194)

Transgressing between two worlds (the world as he found it and the world as he imagined it), James endorses an aesthetic of improvisation that is possible in the moment he conceals himself. A measure of his success is that he

achieves "an existence that somehow floated and saved [him] from any degree of direct performance . . . ." Enjoying and cultivating his subterfuge, James' self-presentation becomes inseparable from his concealment of self. Again, as with his non-exchange with Dickens, James endorses an economy of space in which he is spared "any degree of direct participation." Moreover, this romance of isolation ensures that he will be "other"; under the guise of making "all fellow-occupants of benches and desks, all elbowing and kicking presences within touch or view, so many monsters and horrors, so many wonders and splendours and mysteries" (194), James succeeds in fashioning himself as "other" and avoids "the mere reality of relation" (195). 12

William James gives us a different view of James' "world elsewhere" and his need for protection. In 1889, he wrote to his wife, describing his brother's need to be both armored and hidden:

Harry is as nice and simple and amiable as he can be. He has covered himself, like some marine crustacean, with all sorts of material growths, rich sea-weeds and rigid barnacles and things, and lives hidden in the midst of his strange heavy alien manners and customs... (Letters of William James 288)

Moore, who was fascinated by sea creatures, admired this description enough to include it in her list of Prose Similes, dated approximately 1918-1929. 13 Earlier in the same letter, William James had described another inhabitant of the sea in terms that would not have been wasted on Moore. 14 After visiting the aquarium in Brighton, James wrote home:

The best thing by far which I saw in Brighton, and a thing the impression of which will perhaps outlast everything else on this trip, was four cuttle-fish (octopus) in the Aquarium. I wish we had one of them for a child--such flexible intensity of life in a form so inaccessible to our sympathy. (287)

Although we cannot be certain Moore read the whole letter, we can speculate that she did since she privately recorded the description of "Harry" as being "like some marine crustacean." We also do not know exactly when Moore read this letter; it is possible, however, that since the letters were published in 1920 she may have seen them in the early 20's

12 See also where James notes in A Small Boy and Others that "to 'be' other, other almost anyhow, seemed as good as the probable taste of the bright compound wistfully watched in the confectioner's window; attainable, impossible, of course . . . ." (176).
13 RML, VII:00-05, Miscellaneous Notes, 1918-1929.
14 I am indebted to Mark Murphy Scott for calling this part of the letter to my attention.
--perhaps around the time she composed "An Octopus." In any case, William James' description of the octopus--"such flexible intensity of life in a form so inaccessible to our sympathy"--complements Moore's own "octopus of ice" whose "Neatness of finish" is finally unfathomable. What I am suggesting is that Moore may have found a natural analogue for Henry James' temperament and aesthetic in the image of the octopus.

William James' description of the cuttle-fish is also reminiscent of the accounts of octopuses Moore read about in the *London Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News* in August of 1923--the summer she began composing "An Octopus." The article she read in the *London Graphic* nicely captures the gentle otherness of these "timid" yet all-reaching, destructive animals:

*Graphic August 15, 1923*

*The Octopus in the Channel Islands*

...No little consternation has been caused from time to time when it is reported that there is an influx of octopuses in these warm channel waters, and letters to the papers ensue....

The octopus is really a timid creature and makes his home in the rock pools in quite an innocent fashion. Off the Breton coast he is undoubtedly very destructive to all kinds of shellfish, actually sucking lobsters and crabs empty in the pots...The big arms double rowed with 140 suckers each are of amazing strength + unimaginable delicacy combined w extreme delicacy of touch...It can pick a periwinkle out of a crack, or crush large prey w the grip of a small python....

In this description--one that Moore drew on for certain phrases in her poem--the octopus is often concealed in its rock pools; yet it can appear unexpectedly, wreaking destruction. Moore seemed particularly drawn to animals, particularly those of the sea, who appeared to be both accessible and inaccessible--who enjoyed the ability to advance and then to retreat. In October of 1923, while visiting her brother, Warner, in Bremerton, Washington, she wrote to Glenway Wescott and Monroe Wheeler about "an enormous barnacle" she and Warner had discovered:

One day after the hull of the Mississippi had been scraped, Warner and I explored the bottom of the dry dock and picked up an enormous barnacle which advanced and withdrew like a

15. According to Patricia Willis, Moore composed "An Octopus" between the summer of 1923 and that of 1924.
disappearing gun, the edges of its mouth turquoise blue with an
inner border of light scarlet and a set of curling fern-like feelers
which it folded and unfolded in a kaleidoscopic manner which
reminded me of the marine marvels in the Illustrated News and

The Natural History Journal.\textsuperscript{17}

Moore's enormous phallic barnacle "which advanced and
withdrew like a disappearing gun" is not unlike the
octopuses ("the marine marvels" she alludes to) who could
appear unexpectedly ready to consume, with their far-
reaching all powerful arms, everything in their paths.

Like Moore's barnacle who "advanced and
withdrew" and the octopuses she read about, James, by his
own account in \textit{A Small Boy and Others}, enjoyed the same
economy of advancing only to withdraw, or of concealing
himself only to disclose his "subterfuge." In her 1934 essay,
Moore acknowledges James' predilection for this sort of
self-presentation when she cites his "meeting" with Dickens
or his hiding under the "drooping table-cloth" while one of
his cousins read \textit{David Copperfield} to his family.

In "An Octopus," Moore also endorses James'
aesthetic of disclosure and concealment. David Kalstone
once said "the whole poem is about Henry James."\textsuperscript{18} Before
looking at the direct allusion to James at the end of the
poem, let me suggest some of the ways Moore prepares us to
see that James' "Neatness of finish" like Mt. Ranier's is
finally to be celebrated because, to quote William James, it
is "in a form so inaccessible to our sympathy."

Moore's "reading" of this landscape's conflicting
energies prepares us for her conflation of the glacier--"An
Octopus / of ice"--with James. The appearance of James'
"Neatness of finish" is present in the first "glimpse" we are
given of the glacier:

\begin{quote}
\textit{An Octopus}

of ice. Deceptively reserved and flat,
it lies "in grandeur and in mass"
beneath a sea of shifting snow-dunes; (71)
\end{quote}

Moore shows us how deceptive this glacier's "neatness" is;
the glacier appears to be stationary--"it lies in grandeur and
in mass" --and yet it is surrounded by the motion of "a sea
of shifting snow-dunes"--an image of unpredictability. Far
from being stationary and predictable, this glacier of
"unimagined delicacy" (71) can kill "with the concentric

\textsuperscript{17} RML, V.76:32, A.L.S., Marianne Moore to Glenway Wescott and Monroe Wheeler,
October 16, 1923.

\textsuperscript{18} In conversation at Rutgers University in 1983.
crushing rigor of the python” (71). “Its arms” (71) which are “misleadingly like lace” (71) are always moving--always forcing the poet to shift her own perspective.

Moore fixes her eye on the objects in this landscape which disclose and conceal contrary energies. The fir trees on this mountain conceal as much as they reveal:

The fir-trees in “the magnitude of their root systems,”
rise aloof from these maneuvers “creepy to behold,”
austere specimens of our American royal families,
“each like the shadow of the one beside it.
The rock seems frail compared with their dark energy of life,” (71)

Even the perfect balance of the line--“the ermine body on the crystal peak” (73)--is undermined by the destructive energy inherent in the images which follow:

the sun kindling its shoulders to maximum heat like acetylene dyeing them white--
upon this antique pedestal,
“a mountain with those graceful lines which prove it a volcano,”
its top a complete cone like Fujiyama’s
till an explosion blew it off. (73)

The ermine body, whose shoulders have been dyed white, becomes an image of living death as it is transformed into an ash of while heat. The unbridled energy of the sun, which might be celebrated in another context, is associated with the ominous and powerful hydrocarbon, acetylene. The mountain’s seemingly accessible facade--“those graceful lines” of the mountain with “its top a complete cone”--becomes inseparable from the momentarily concealed forces “which prove it a volcano.”

Another part of the poem which seems to anticipate James’ and Mt. Ranier’s “neatness of finish” is Moore’s description of the Greeks:

The Greeks liked smoothness, distrusting what was lack
of what could not be clearly seen,
resolving with benevolent conclusiveness,
“complexities which still will be complexities
as long as the world lasts”; (75)

In one of the most extensive readings of the poem to date, Patricia Willis perceptively maintains that “the behavior of the Greeks is oddly juxtaposed to that of Henry James” (“The Road to Paradise: First Notes on ‘An Octopus’ “ 259). John Slatin argues, on the other hand, that “Neatness of finish” “is like the ‘smoothness’ of which the Greeks were so fond; indeed, it is like Greek itself, ‘that pride-producing
language” whose speakers are “Like happy souls in Hell” --persuaded that they can resolve the unresolvable” (163). Moore, it seems to me, praises James’ “finish” not because it gives the appearance of being accessible, but because it is unfathomable--because it conceals beneath its surface forces that defy neatness.19

Moore fully fuses her aesthetic with James' when she actually compares the mountain’s “remoteness” and “Neatness of finish” to his:

if one would “conquer the main peak of Mount Tacoma, this fossil flower concise without a shiver, intact when it is cut. damned for its sacrosanct remoteness -- like Henry James “dammed by the public for decorum”; not decorum, but restraint; it is the love of doing hard things that rebuffed and wore them out--a public out of sympathy with neatness.

Neatness of finish! Neatness of finish!
Relentless accuracy is the nature of this octopus with its capacity for fact. (75-76)

Moore defends James’ necessary distance from his readers--his “sacrosanct remoteness.” She wants us to see that James’ finish (like the “finished business” Strether confronts in the figure of Chad in The Ambassadors) can only be partially known or tentatively approached; it is finally, like the “self” Chad offers Lambert Strether, both accessible and inaccessible.

“Neatness of finish” is then of a piece with “this octopus” who

“Creeping slowly as with meditated stealth, its arms seeming to approach from all directions,” it receives one under winds that “tear the snow to bits and hurl it like a sandblast sheering off twigs and loose bark from the trees.” (76)

19. Laurence Stapleton points out that Moore may have taken her phrase--“neatness of finish”--from Williams' Kora in Hell (16). See also Section XXI, 2 of Williams' Kora in Hell.

Neatness and finish; the dust out of every corner! You swish from room to room and find all perfect. The house may now be carefully wrapped in brown paper and sent to a publisher. It is a work of art. You look rather askance at me. Do not believe I cannot guess your mind, yet I have my studies. You see, when the wheel’s just at the up turn it glimpses horizon, zenith, all in a burst, the pull of the earth shaken off, a scatter of fragments, significance in a burst of water striking up from the base of a fountain. Then at the sickening turn toward death the pieces are joined into a pretty thing, a bouquet frozen in an iced cake. This is art, mon cher, a thing to carry up with you on the next turn; a very small thing, inconceivably feathery. (71)
We come full circle to the initial image of the glacier as “deceptively reserved.” If the glacier is reserved, it is also (like James) reserving and conserving energy. In “An Octopus” Moore pays homage to James by taking us through a landscape in which “things” “glow, flush, glimmer, vibrate, [and] shine.” Giving us only “a shattering first glimpse” of this octopus of ice, Moore endorses a Jamesian epistemology in which things are known through partial disclosures.

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