Teaching Marianne Moore is a bracing experience, partaking "of the sharpness of brine and sea breeze" (Tomlinson 11). Perhaps even more than other difficult modern poets, Moore can force a teacher to assess just what she or he means by "understanding" a poem and what it means, after all, to "teach" one.

The usual tools work—to an extent.

If, for example, the subject is Moore’s portrait of a hypothetical New England sea side town, “The Steeple-Jack,” the teacher can ask what some of the peculiarities of this kind of composition are, then address them—linking them to Moore’s biography or her relation to literary history, or both. This mix of minute concretion (“the diffident / little newt / with white pindots on black horizontal spaced- / out bands”) and universalizing abstraction (“Danger,” “hope”) is, it might be pointed out, the characteristic diction of a writer who studied biology at Bryn Mawr and whose grandfather and beloved only brother were both Presbyterian ministers. These “little intricate grids of visual symmetry” (Kenner 98), Moore’s stanzas meant for the eye, signal her unique, calculated severance from the thumpingly rhythmical stanzas of late nineteenth-century predecessors such as Swinburne or Kipling. Capacious and syntactically virtuoso, some sentences, with their “grammar that suddenly turns and shines” (Bishop 83), owe much to the seventeenth-century prose writers whom Moore assiduously studied. And so on.

The teacher can offer interesting bits of “background” information. Durer, the fifteenth- to sixteenth-century German artist who shows up as the first word of the first line, is famous for etchings and woodcuts that combine (as do Moore’s poems) a passion for particular and general, physical and spiritual observation; he once went, as Moore elsewhere notes, “to the Dutch coast to look at a stranded whale that was washed to sea before he was able to arrive”
(Moore 203). The list of characters (hero, student, steeple-jack) in the penultimate stanza is a kind of vestigial remnant of Moore’s original tripartite conception, “Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play,” in which each character was protagonist of one part. “C. J. Poole” and the event in which he takes part come, as Moore revealed to a 1961 querist, from “real life.”

C. J. Poole was a Brooklyn steeple-jack who worked on various high buildings and steeples and had his name on the sidewalk danger sign, warning passersby to keep clear of ropes and grappling on the sidewalk. He was repairing the steeple of The Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, the steeple was finally considered infirm and was replaced by 4 Gothic points. (Newsletter 7)

Then, too, there are good comparison and contrast questions. How is this sort of natural description like or unlike the description we find in Moore’s (more centripetally subjective) Romantic forebears? How does this poem look next to Moore’s other poems involving the sea (and see-ing) — “The Fish” or “A Grave”? Next to other Anglo-American sea poems? Such questions can take us pretty far.

Of course, none of this gets at the way this poem sounds like fresh paint looks—a phenomenon partly the result of the poet’s exquisite deployment of sibilance; of the almost too-lyrical long “i” and the brisk, quick short “i”, of the long, sweet “e” and “a”, of the crisp “k” sound (as in “scale”); and the “f” and “sh” sounds which belong to “fish” and make us think of “fresh”:

... with the sweet sea air coming into your house on a fine day, from water etched with waves as formal as the scales of a fish.

And none of this, of course, answers the question (which students will ask) of what Moore is finally saying about this place, a sort of imaginative amalgam, as she said, of “Brooklyn and various New England seacoast towns” (Newsletter 7). With its obvious delight in local fauna (whales, fish, seagulls, “a twenty-five- / pound lobster”), its almost crazily extended flower list, and its earnest attention to local architecture (“The church portico has four fluted / columns, each a single piece of stone, made modester by white-wash”), the poem is clearly a celebration of place. Moore is treasuring for the record—affectionately, sometimes lightly humorously—the qualities of a particular (sea-and-wind-scrubbed, self-consciously historical) American locale:
One by one in two's and three's, the seagulls keep
flying back and forth over the town clock.

(She even makes us hear, with three long “e’s,” the creak or
screech of gulls.)

On the other hand, we are teased into more
thought. As many critics (and some of my students) have
noted, there is something unsettling, provoking, about the
statement that begins the last stanza: “It could not be
dangerous to be living / in a town like this.” Could it be
dangerous? What could be dangerous? Isn’t it always
dangerous (Moore’s line break prompts the question) “to be
living”?

So we look back together and see the suggestion
of a double nature in Moore’s American portrait. This town
of astonishing light and sweetness (“sweet air,”
“antique / sugar-bowl shaped summer-house”) may be--as
certain deft touches hint (the boats progress here in “white
and rigid” fashion; the student’s books are necessarily “not-
native”)--just a bit unpleasantly calcified, claustrophobic.
The small coastal town with its surprising riot of flora,
pointedly lacking “exotic serpent life” but possessing its own
“diffident little” domestic newt, may then come to seem
somewhat more complexly Edenic than at first glance: both
pristine and ever-so-slightly sinister.

Again and again in our discussions of Moore’s
poems we repeat this confounding, complexifying process:
when we confront the yet-more-equivocal celebration
of (imperialist-established, democratically-diversified)
“Virginia Britannia”; or the quotation-encrusted, richly
ambivalent critique of “Marriage”; or the perfectly poised
ambiguities of “No Swan So Fine.” Of the latter poem--
which simultaneously cherishes and challenges the value of
artifice--one of my students had this to say about the
cryptic, ringing conclusion (“The king is dead.”): “It is
utterly unexpected, utterly simple, utterly confusing, and
typically Marianne Moore” (Luke 4).

If it sometimes seems that Moore “perches”
everlasting like her Louis Fifteenth “chintz-china” swan,
her habit of equivocation is neither coyly nor nigglingly
noncommittal. Rather, it results from fierce commitment to
a sort of rigorous modernist or objectivist version of the old
idea of copia. This is a poetry which takes up a subject (a
place, an institution, an animal or object) in order then to
consider it from all possible physical and moral angles.
More consistently and carefully than any modern poet I can
think of, Moore asks, "Just what is this thing that I am looking at?"

So her acts of scrupulous observation undermine complacency. Even when we have, after much scrutiny, satisfied ourselves that we are at least no longer "all at sea" about the nature of what one might call a poem's global double action, there generally remain more local paradoxes, more complacency-ruffling puzzles. I am thinking, for example, of my students pointing to such oxymorons or "conscientious inconsistencies" as "successively at random" or "imperious humility." Or of the way mysteries of meaning and tone created by Moore's quotation-laden constructions remain stubbornly insoluble by means of footnotes or source-hunts--quotations as a rule gaining "nothing for Moore's own text by being restored to their own contexts" (Bloom 5). Or of a session on Moore's early satiric jab at self-important obtuseness, "To a Steam Roller," in which we explained to one another and forgot and explained again--as if staring at the words under some kind of intellectual strobe light--the sense of the precise but somehow dreamily alliterative and Latinate concluding clause: "but to question / the congruence of the complement is vain, if it exists."

There were so many difficulties in reading Marianne Moore that sometimes, like Moore's Hercules, we felt "hindered to succeed." Yet how, as I asked my students, can such unbudgeable difficulty be dismissed as mere sloppiness or common ineptitude when we are in the presence of such an unmistakably fastidious mind? How dismiss as stuffy or snobbish the humorously sympathetic poet who wished to write "in plain American which cats and dogs can read?" and who anticipated impatience by acknowledging in "Poetry" that "there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle"?

As one student good-naturedly assented after we had opened our Complete Poems to the first page and talked for an hour about "The Steeple-Jack," "it is a privilege to see so / much confusion." If we occasionally--baffled teacher and frustrated students alike--felt like pleading with Moore as did her Bryn Mawr professor, Miss Fullerton, "Please, a little lucidity! Your obscurity is greater and greater" (Willis 91), we were nevertheless invigorated by the atmosphere that Moore created of "Humility, Concentration, and Gusto." Some of us relished it. If we more often than not left the classroom with fresh uncertainties, so much the better. As Moore said, "A few
unexplained difficult things—they seem to be the life-blood of variety” (qtd. in Garrigue 32).

WORKS CITED
