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IN EARNEST OF MERIT: MOORE’S EARLY FICTION

Marianne Moore’s early fiction consists of eight stories she wrote while in college, all of which appeared in the Bryn Mawr literary magazine, *Tipyn O’Bob*, between February, 1907 and June, 1909. The stories form a remarkably integrated set of fictions, with a consistent genotype story and several recurring themes and moods. All in all, the stories offer valuable insights into Moore’s early understanding of her art and her poetic vocation, as well as proving yet again—as if further evidence were needed—that she was anything but an accidental artist who wandered into poetry and literature without much by way of an adamant will and a clear purpose. Indeed, a great many of the situations and themes of the stories deal directly with artists and the convoluted decisions leading to an artistic vocation, and those that do not treat this material deal instead with situations that can easily be read as allegories of such concerns. From the start of her college career, Moore was an artist of an extremely self-conscious sort, who involved herself with the nexus of forces made up of artistic ambition, moral duty, social decorum, and personal worth. These stories are in places clearly the work of a college student, albeit a very intelligent one, but they are also the work of someone who became, within a decade of graduation from Bryn Mawr, a daring and innovative modernist poet. In many ways remarkably pre-modernist, this body of fiction explores the world of a self-reflective artist faced with either the discomfiting interconnection of the aesthetic and the moral, or the agonized displacement of the one by the other.

Moore was always a consistent artist, working with diligence on a body of writing that was to be much more intensive than extensive. She was also a thoroughly literary poet, for she had absorbed a great many influences and dealt with several “traditional” models even as she
created her distinctively experimental verse. Her early fiction shows her at work on a tightly drawn set of themes and subjects that are at once borrowed from the literary styles of the late 'nineties and yet made over into something very personal. We can see just how integrated are these themes and subjects with a brief "statistical" survey. For example, all eight stories have a main character who is explicitly in the throes of indecision. Four of the eight have artists as characters, while six stories have a moment when the main character takes a long solitary walk. Seven of the stories have, as an important plot device, a visit by a single individual to another, solitary character. Three of the stories have an uncle and a nephew or niece, while another two have a guardian and his or her ward as characters. In no story does any relation drawn from the nuclear family appear: no father, mother, or siblings. In every story there is an emphasis on the environment as an expression of a character's life decision, and many have reference to the "woods" or a romanticized view of nature—the setting, often, for those solitary walks.

The immediate background of the stories, when seen in the light of such a survey, is obviously Bryn Mawr itself. The college meant a great deal to Moore even before she entered it in the fall of 1905, as it was the alma mater of Mary Norcross, a neighbor and close friend of Moore. Mary Norcross was the daughter of the pastor of the Presbyterian church in Carlisle, Pennsylvania attended by the Moore family, and Mary was of an age between that of Moore and her mother. It was Mary Norcross who tutored Moore and helped her gain admittance to Bryn Mawr, and to whom Moore wrote of her early homesickness and something like a traumatic experience in her freshman year. Bryn Mawr, in other words, was clearly the entrance into adult life, but more importantly it was the place where one of the poet's earliest role-models had been formed and educated. It was also the place where family honor was to be exhibited and vindicated, just as surely as Moore's brother Warner was to do at Yale, where he had become a freshman a year earlier, in 1904. Mary Norcross was familiar with and deeply loved by all three Moores, and was nicknamed "Beaver," an apparent reference to her skill and trade as a weaver, but also perhaps to her diligence and artistic discipline. The playful animal nickname shows how Mary had entered into the innermost circle of the Moore family, who often called each other by such nicknames as "Rat," "Mole" and "Badger."
But it was not only the personal example of Mary Norcrossthat Moore had in mind as she wrote her stories. Also present was the atmosphere of the college itself, steeped as it was in Anglophilism and medieval motifs. Several of the stories are set in England, though Moore had not yet visited that country (this was to occur in 1911), and the medieval motifs were present in the mottoes carved on the college passageways and over the mantels in the Pembroke dining hall. Contributing to this atmosphere were the gothic style of architecture and, perhaps most important of all, the generally monastic attitude toward higher education so strongly fostered by M. Carey Thomas, previously the dean and then president of the college. Though only founded in 1885, Bryn Mawr was to be moved sharply away from a school modelled on that of a religious seminary and towards the kind of secular institution that would compare favorably with long established and male-dominated colleges. Thomas, only the college’s second president, assumed a role in this transformation that is impossible to overestimate; she was at once typical of the large change in women’s higher education, and a distinctive spokesperson for its excellence. In the four decades between 1870 and 1910, the percentage of all college students in America who were women virtually doubled, from twenty-one percent to just under forty percent. But despite this tremendous proportional increase, college-educated women still comprised less than four percent of the women Moore’s age in 1909 (Solomon, 62-63). Paradoxically, then, Moore was part of a large social movement in one sense, but still she had to count herself as a member of an elite part of society. This combination of a background of large social change and a foreground occupied with developing a highly special distinction and motivation is reflected in Moore’s fiction. Further adding to the flavor of an elite women’s college was the easy availability of a landscape made for long walks and solitary musings, a feature that Moore often mentioned directly and indirectly in her letters home. It is no surprise, considering her environment as a student, that Moore’s fiction would contain castles, servants, a constant preoccupation with transcendent values, and an otherworldly sense of adolescent self-reflectiveness.

But it is not simply that the stories reflect her environment that make Moore’s early efforts intriguing. What a careful reading of the stories also reveals is how patterned and even compulsive are Moore’s concerns as well as her artistic habits. For example, each of the first four
stories seems to be rewritten in another, later story so as to provide a different resolution. "The Discouraged Poet" is rewritten as "A Pilgrim," as the young wandering poet first leaves his guardian and then in the second version he chooses to remain with the paternal figure. In "Pym" the artist in his Bohemian situation appears to return to the support of his uncle, whereas in "Wisdom and Virtue" the female artist decides to continue in her independent course. In "A Bit of Tapestry" the man clearly accepts the woman he wants to marry but only after she appears to reject him, and then in "Philip the Sober" the prince at first rejects the countess, but accepts her once she has revealed to him the nature of his own indecisiveness. And in "Yorrock" the irritation that exists between the two characters results in a separation, while in "The Boy and the Churl" the abrasiveness is resolved. It is this clear patterning of conflicts and resolutions that contributes to the feeling of the remarkable consistency of the "world" of Moore's stories. When we add to this set of four pairings the further realization that the stories have overlapping themes, such as the question of artistic or marital commitment and the indecisiveness attendant upon both, we can see that all the stories are virtually versions of one another.

Granted this integration of theme, motif, and atmosphere, we can say that the actions of the stories present something like a genotype, a story behind the stories, that contains a number of clues to the inner recesses of Moore's preoccupations and anxieties. This genotype can be laid out, I think, fairly clearly, and then in turn reapplied to particular stories--I will choose two as illustrations--and thus demonstrate some of these hidden concerns.

The genotype might be expressed in this way: an isolated artistic character is visited by (or visits) someone who represents a challenge to the artist's vocation; but this challenge only objectifies the artist's own misgivings, and the visit prompts the artist to reconsider the nature of his or her commitment. The artist decides to create or leave behind or display some token of that commitment as an "earnest" of the meritorious achievement that he or she eventually hopes to produce. (I use "earnest" in the legal sense of something given to bind a bargain and to serve as a sign of that which will eventually be produced or delivered.) The misgivings of the artist are expressed through a series of personal irritations, irritations that center on small points of personal contact, misunderstanding, and sensitivity. The genotype is thus entwined with the question
of the relationship between art and life, and more specifically the problem as it was posed by late 'nineties aestheticism: one must choose perfection of the life or of the work.

Such a formulation obviously recalls the early Yeats, and he, along with Whistler, that other great aesthete, stands behind these stories. Moore directly refers to “the land of heart’s desire” in “A Pilgrim,” and to the “gentle art of making enemies” in “Yorrocks.” What Yeats and Whistler represented to Moore in the first decade of the new century was not only the severity of artistic discipline and the rejection of all that is merely conventional in art, but also the challenge of replacing traditional moral and social ethos with aesthetic values. Surely Moore is drawn to such a replacement, but just as surely she is wary of its consequences, and we can see here a conflict taking shape that was to stay with her for the next half-century or more. For in Moore what we have is a distinctive struggle between traditional moral and spiritual values on the one hand and the replacement of those means of cultural continuity with a self-justifying, self-conscious, and yet skeptical, attitude towards the claims of art to be autonomous.

Another point about what I have called the genotype of Moore’s fiction: though she never announces it directly as such, the theme of all the stories that deal with artists or vocational choices is that the full and unfettered recognition of the desires of the individual is a necessary but not a sufficient part of becoming modern. The aestheticism of the 'nineties had always cultivated a very strong strain of individualism, even when it was most involved in passivity and etiolation, as witness the work of Oscar Wilde. In “Pym” Moore presents the point most explicitly and in tones that are both arch and potentially self-mocking. The narrator, named Alexander (alluding perhaps to the youthful conqueror of worlds), says, “It’s all in the copy-books that a man lay down his life for his individualism. I begin to be convinced” (Complete Prose, 108-110). Moore deliberately undertakes a passage of time in her life, with the early poems and the March 1925 issue of the Dial, to show the transformation of an able writer into a more modernist figure. The transformation is not as linear as many versions would have it.
13). The fact that Moore ironically points out that such a claim for individual autonomy is recorded universally and in un-extraordinary contexts suggests the sort of wry questioning with which the poet was to test so many received opinions. We must also ask how aware the character is of the Christ-like echoes of the formulation, and if he is being deliberately blasphemous. Likewise, the archness of the second line may very well recall the famous Yeatsian opening line, “I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,” though Moore may be undercutting the self-assurance and imperiousness in the Irish poet’s formulation. In any case, the content of her character’s claim about copy-books and individualism combines in its content and its tonal qualification the core of her ambivalence about this very modern concern.

This brings us to the first of two stories that we can consider in the light of the genotype. Many readers would, I suspect, consider “Pym” the most interesting and accomplished of Moore’s early stories. Written in the form of five diary entries covering a three-week period, the story tells of Alexander Pym’s attempts to prove himself as a writer. The other two characters are Alexander’s uncle and a friend named Cob. The uncle clearly represents social propriety, whereas Cob stands for the artistic audience and approval that Alexander desperately seeks. Uncle Stanford wants the narrator to return to respectability and take up law; at the story’s end, the young man takes up a pen and begins to write to “Dear Uncle--.” Whether this signals acceptance or rejection of the uncle’s propriety remains deeply ambiguous.

In the final diary entry Alexander complains, rather too melodramatically, that “Life is a fairly simple matter, for me to have made such a mess of it” (16). But Moore’s portrait of the artist as a young man will strike many as rather tame and unmessy, since the only dramatic incident occurs when Alexander visits Cob, and, quite without provocation, destroys the manuscript he has brought along to show his friend. Immediately after this act of self-destructiveness, Alexander complains that he can’t stand loneliness and the strain of analytic work. He goes on to further reflection and says that he was too bull-headed at the start of his writing career and will now “consecrate” himself to toil. What Alexander seems to have resolved upon, assuming he has not decided to study law, is, at the very least, to give over his writing “experiment” for the time being in favor of more worldly experience. “Nothing
done for effect, is worth the cost,” he says in the closing lines of the story, and we can hear in this axiom Moore’s mistrust of the elevation of style over content.

Of course Pym’s melodramatic destruction of his manuscript during the visit to Cob might well be what is referred to as something done “for effect.” We can also see this destruction as the withdrawal of the token that Pym offers the world as his sign of merit. But it is a very equivocal token, for as he himself says, “Manuscript and hesitations seek the flames together” (14). This episode has an eerie echo with the story of a despondent James Joyce casting a draft of his early novel, *Stephen Hero*, into a furnace. Moore could not have known of this real life episode, of course, nor did she know of Joyce’s use of diary entries at the conclusion of his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. But her use of the attitudes of aestheticism, as well as her ironic reflections on them, does recall Joyce’s indebtedness to the same artistic manner.

When Pym later decides to abandon his current lodgings, all he plans to take with him are a rug with a snail-shell design (symbolizing his self-sufficiency) and a portrait, “of the unknown lady in the green dress.” These two possessions are his tokens of independence and transcendent commitment, and since he argues that his “love of the material” interferes with his new-found dedication, they in fact become tokens of his disdain for the material world of things. Of course, Moore could easily be employing irony here, just as Joyce did when he had his rebellious and self-sufficient artist, Stephen, end his book with his mother packing his clothes for him. Moore shows us that Pym is still divided in his attitude towards life and his own commitments; he uses physical objects as tokens to convey his non-attachment to the physical, and says of his physical surroundings, “they are not an everlasting test of one’s bigness” (16). As a measure of Pym’s character, both the tokens of the manuscript as well as the rug and portrait equivocate about what he is willing to give, and to give up, in his quest for life’s meaning.

What “Pym” does show us, however, besides Moore’s equivocating mistrust of artistic poses and stylistic display, is a glance at Moore’s developing poetic. She has Alexander formulate his sense of writing, its purposes and methods, and to do so against the pressure of both Uncle Stanford and Cob. He tells his uncle that “there are times when I should give anything on earth to have writing a matter of indifference to me” (14). But he quickly recovers
his sense of purpose and continues, with a "modestly
askance" (14) look, saying that "it is undeniably convenient,
in time of expressionary need, to be able to say things to
the point" (14). And, "irrelevantly"—to him, perhaps, but not
to us—he adds that he likes "the thing for the element of
personal adventure in it" (14). Of course, many of Moore's
later formulations about her poetic, from the early essay,
"The Accented Syllable" (1916) to the later formulations of
"Idiosyncrasy and Technique" (1956), can be read as
expanded versions of this double sense of expressionary need
and personal adventure.

In the other story I would like to consider,
"Philip the Sober," Moore uses the question of marriage
rather than that of artistic vocation to set out her thoughts
and concerns. More than any of the other stories, this one
deals with indecision and shows us Moore thinking aloud
about the problems of personal worth and commitment. The
central situation in this story seems rather contrived, insofar
as it concerns Philip's reluctance to marry the countess,
Isabella, because he is expected to follow the social rule
that he should marry only a princess. Nevertheless, his
inclinations are all in favor of Isabella, and he approaches
her with an offer. However, she senses his indecision, and
refuses him. It is, she claims, because she cares for him that
she won't "acquiesce." Philip then leaves, taking with him a
copy of one his poems, from which Isabella has read aloud a
quatrain to show him his own mind. As he rides away he
reads the poem, and discovering his true desires, returns to
offer again to marry her, and she accepts. The reversal is
somewhat obscure in motivation, but it apparently turns on
a line from the poem, "What fools are those who pray to
crowns." Philip has discovered the unimportance of outward
and material measures of worth and character, and so he
resembles not only Pym, who vows to give up his material
wealth, but also several other characters from the stories.
This theme of anti-materialism becomes very important in
Moore's life and in her work after the 1930's, when she
identified the materialism of American society as the
greatest threat to national morality. Her anti-materialism
derived in part from her reaction to the Depression and the
New Deal, when she favored Hoover over Roosevelt, and this
attitude was greatly strengthened by her brother Warner's
similar views. But here we can read the concern as part of
the late adolescent concern with the truth of interior
experience and moods over that of social standing and
objective skill.
The token plays an especially key part in this story. When Philip first arrives at Isabella's he offers her a "sprig shoot" (*Complete Prose*, 22) but he does so "mock-ceremoniously" (22), after she has teased him about the "indirect" expression of his affection. Philip means the sprig to express more directly his feeling, yet Isabella "twirl[s] it absent-mindedly for a moment" before she "let[s] it fall to the ground unnoticed" (22). But then after their conversation begins to circle pointlessly around Philip's indecision, we read the following:

Nothing was being said. Isabella reached for a scrap of paper which lay on the table, lined with words in Philip's handwriting.

"May I read?" Her hand, lying across her knee, rose in protest as the author of the words stirred forward unconsciously solicitous.

"Philip!" The outburst had nothing to do with the words. "I am disappointed in you. You have no--" The girl gazed up at the ceiling. "You lack something." (23)

This passage is obviously cryptic, and a few lines later Moore even writes that Isabella "cut[s] off all possible speculation as to the probability of her speculation" (23). But what we can see through the story's resolution is that Philip can't acknowledge his true feelings until he can read his own poem and complete its meaning by his actions. The rejected sprig is replaced by the poem, which Isabella partially accepts, but it is only when Philip himself completes the earnestness of the poem with an unequivocating proposal that we have a full reading of the prince's poem and its meaning. There is a lovely and affecting irony in a college writer's ability to have a story that reveals that an author can know herself only after she can fully read what she has written.

In 1943 Moore published what is perhaps her most directly moral poem, "In Distrust of Merits," in *The Nation*. The theme of the poem is that one's merits are only as good as one's deeds, and any promise or verbal commitment to virtue must be redeemed by what she calls "action or beauty." We can take two phrases from this poem to summarize the fictional experiment of Moore's *Bryn Mawr* years. First, she says "the blessed deeds bless / the halo" (*Complete Poems*, 136). Reading such a line in a thoroughly modernist fashion we could paraphrase it as a version of the clarion call of existentialism, namely, existence precedes essence; no sign or token of value automatically bestows value. Second, she says "We are / not competent to
/ make our vows" (137). Here Moore’s irony comes fully into play, because she has, only one sentence earlier in the poem, just made a promise. And, furthermore, if we aren’t competent to make our vows, surely no one can make them for us. No one can speak for us in our most important commitments, nor can we speak “competently” for ourselves. I take this to be the chief moral and aesthetic lesson of the early stories, that we offer tokens of our selves, essentially in earnest of the merits we would attain, because in part, as Kierkegaard said, we are not able to measure our own moral worth. Only others can do that for us. Of course, in the early stories the experience of this moral and psychological paradox was not built on the same amount and depth of experience as was the poem written in the midst of World War II, when Moore was past her fifty-fifth year. But even in the voice of the twenty-year-old college student, keen to please her superiors and yet vindicate her own individual worth, we can hear something like a self-reflexive irony. We hear such an irony if we read these early stories as themselves tokens given in earnest of the artistic and personal commitment Moore could hardly have failed to realize she would give in due time. But “hardly have failed to realize” is of course written in the future anterior. What makes the stories both instructive and moving is their very presentness, despite their manifold traditional encumbrances. For they are stories written by someone who is living what she knows others have already lived, even as the life she makes will be none other than her own. This double awareness is, perhaps more than anything else, what gives them their modernist resonance and makes them tokens that are fully redeemable.

WORKS CITED

