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MARIANNE MOORE AND THE ART OF DELINEATION

What makes Marianne Moore a "modernist"?

This question, which has focussed much Moore criticism, is usually addressed by associating her with Pound and/or Eliot and/or Stevens and/or Williams. Although Grace Schulman omits Williams completely from her discussion, he seems to be the modernist most consistently connected with Moore. In her recent study of American modernism, Lisa Steinman, for example, notes the ways both poets engage twentieth-century science and technology: "like Williams, [Moore] admires not only the creativity of scientists but also the achievements of American technology and even of American business. Also like Williams, Moore sometimes draws parallels between poetry and other more accepted fields to grant authority to poetry" (II). Discussing modernist "long poems," Laurence Stapleton similarly connects Moore with Williams, noting that although Moore does not produce anything like "The Waste Land," "The Cantos," or "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "An Octopus" is more like Paterson at its best...than it is like anything written by [Eliot, Pound, or Stevens]" (45-6).

Moore is particularly connected with Williams in her treatment of objects and images. This connection forms the basis of A. Kingsley Weatherhead's The Edge of the Image. Whatever the merit of these connections, however, I want to suggest that Moore diverges not only from Williams's but also from Pound's and Eliot's treatment of objects in some crucial ways, ways that both differentiate her from other modernists and help delineate her role as a modernist. It is important to note, for example, that she does not follow Williams's dictum: "No ideas but in things."

There are, nevertheless, a lot of things in her poetry--a sea the purple of the peacock's neck (5), planes, dates, / limes and pomegranates (II), candalabrum tree of cockscomb- / tinted buttons, dahlias, / sea-urchins, and
everlastings (19), hawks-head moths and black-
chinned / hummingbirds (23), the Thomas-of / -Leighton
Buzzard Westminster Abby wrought-iron vine (117), and a
twenty-five / pound lobster (5), to name a very few. One
section of “People’s Surroundings” gives us:

the highway hid by fir-trees in rhododendron twenty feet deep,
the peacocks, hand-forged gates, old Persian velvet,
roses outlined in pale black on an ivory ground,
the pierced iron shadows of the cedars,
Chinese carved glass, old Waterford, lettered ladies; (55)

Her poetry is a virtual compendium of things,
aligning Moore with the great catalogers in American
poetry, Whitman before her and Elizabeth Bishop after.
Even her titles could be read as items on the inventory list
of an eclectic curio shop: “The Steeple-Jack,” “The Frigate
Pelican,” “The Plumet Basilisk,” “Bowls,” “An Octopus,” “The
Monkey Puzzle,” “The Wood-Weasel,” “A Carriage from
Sweden,” “The Arctic Ox (or Goat),” “Granite and Steel,”
“Snakes, Mongooses, Snake-Charmers, and the Like,” “Four
Quartz Crystal Clocks,” and “Nine Nectarines,” again to
name a very few.

Her abundance of “ideas” sets her apart. Her
poetry abounds with ideas, presented in the form of direct
statements. “Where there is personal liking we go” (8), she
tells us, and that literature “is a phase of life. If one is
afraid of it, / the situation is irremediable; if one
approaches it familiarly, / what one says of it is worthless”
(45). “Contractility is a virtue,” she states, “as modesty is a
virtue” (85). In “What Are Years,” a poem almost
completely devoid of concrete words, the idea that occupies
the center of the poem is barely connected to a thing in the
world:

... He
sees deep and is glad, who
accedes to mortality
and in his imprisonment rises
upon himself as
the sea in a chasm, struggling to be
free and unable to be,
in its surrendering
finds its continuing. (95)

The residence for her abundance of ideas is not
in things but in “poems,” poems that do not privilege the
image, even though Moore, as Weatherhead pointed out,
shared with Williams a love of the sharply delineated, of
images with edges.¹ No matter how sharp their edges, however, Moore's images do not quite fit Pound's definition either: that which presents an "emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time" (4). In Moore's poetry, the impact of her intellect, or of the intellect in general, remains discrete from the emotional response of recognition through the senses. Her exegetical stance seems almost to force the separation, so that an object or image, sharply delineated, often serves to exemplify a point.

In "The Hero" (8-9), for example, sites which contain "snakes' hypodermic teeth" illustrate ground "where love won't grow." "The startling El Greco / brimming with inner light" exemplifies a "rock crystal thing to see... that covets nothing that it has let go." And preference for seeing such a "rock crystal thing" identifies the "hero." The poem presents the image, then, only to illustrate an abstract concept which in turn is useful only to explain how to recognize an intangible quality. In other poems the separation results from making the object a focus of discussion, a source of contemplative wisdom. Considering the elaborately described bowls, in "Bowls," Moore learns "that we are precisionists, / not citizens of Pompeii arrested in action / as a cross-section of one's correspondence would seem to imply" (59).

These examples suggest that Moore does not rely on "objective correlatives," if we infer that Eliot meant objects which focus emotion by representing it, by becoming its manifestation instead of complementing a direct assertion.² If for Eliot emotion recollected in tranquility is an inexact formula,³ it is not nearly so inexact for Moore nor so formulaic. Perhaps this is so because the tranquility of Moore's poetry provides the site not so much of re-collection as of delineation.

Or at least that is the line I want to pursue in this essay, the tenets of which I will outline here, starting first with my goal, which is to outline Moore's profile as a modernist poet. How else can we think of it but as an outline, a connection of strokes at the outer margins of the

1. See Weatherhead, 4.
2. Weatherhead notes: "In Eliot's characteristic practice, the image is not developed as if it were of interest in itself; it is not presented but used. The term Eliot made famous, the objective correlative, describes the role of his imagery, which functions in the poem as the formula for his particular emotions. The way in which Miss Moore uses imagery, however, is otherwise: although strong emotion is unquestionably presented in the poems, curbed or controlled or, in a sense, being avoided, the imagery is not a correlative for it—not in the manner of Eliot's "ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots..."[19].
modernist lineage, which has proven after all to be a patrilineage? Evidence continues to amass that suggests the exodus of Pound et al. was not the quest for expatriation but for patronage, something the Old World understood better, and hence rendered with more alacrity, than the New World—which was a place "in which," Henry James noted, "to play a social part, you must either earn your income or make believe that you earn it" (3).

Were we to pursue this line, we might develop a storyline with many subplots and subordinate narratives—for example: the quest of Robert Frost, who went to England to meet Pound as a rite of initiation so that he could be published in America; or the romance of Hilda Doolittle, who followed Pound to England to change her name to his and instead found it merely pounded down to initials in another rite of "initiation," so to speak. If we were to construct such a narrative in the name of the patron, we might call it something like "The Pound Era," linking his name with that of Time, itself, that other patron whose lineage had been rent, whose linearity had been challenged in the modern age. But such a narrative is outside our line of inquiry, and it should only be noted, therefore, that in the outline of such an inquiry again we would find Moore, confirming the role of Pound's patronage by remaining in America, an American product of ex-patronage, not quite following the line promoted by her contemporaries.

That line was of course a poetic line, and that of course is where the line of this argument must go—to the poetic lines, those things which move—or move the reader—across the page, or fail to, rupturing the form, the syntax, the prosody. Pound after all wanted to change the old poetic line. About "form" he said: "I think there is a 'fluid' as well as a 'solid' content, that some poems have form as a tree has form, some as water poured into a vase" (9). Because his goal was mimesis, he felt that "a vast number of subjects cannot be precisely, and therefore not properly rendered in symmetrical forms" (9), and he believed in an "'absolute rhythm', a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed" (9). This belief in form or meter that corresponded precisely or exactly to a given sentiment or action suggests a model of the real and a level of adequation, a level not being met by traditional poetry. Traditional English

4. For two recent works which discuss at length the relationship of modernism to the concept of "time," see Kern and Quinones.
language poetics—according to the line of Pound’s argument—dominated by iambics (usually by pentameters) and often by regular rhyme schemes was inadequate to delineate the connection between poetry and its subject matter. Only by breaking with tradition and employing the full array of poetic devices available could poetry achieve the necessary precision and exactitude.

This concern, shared by Moore also, as Bonnie Costello notes, set her apart from other modernists: “While [they] made the major claim of achieving the genuine in form, closing the gap between human constructions and the order of nature, Moore admits the allusiveness of truth, connecting the genuine with the acknowledgment of limits” (18). “For Moore,” Costello explains, “accuracy is always an ideal” (90). From this perspective, we can see Moore as articulating the problems with Pound’s suggestion of the adequacy of poetry—a suggestion of adequation that marks the story of its own failure, a story that follows this line: Once upon a time we could presume that a direct line connected art to what it signified in nature—an emotion, vision, or idea, that could be re-collected and retold. The mode of representation was believed to function independently of the object of representation, but now the nature of nature has been shown to be more complex than we thought, and simple signification no longer delineates it adequately. Now we must marshall more to the endeavor, employ all the devices once used merely as decor. What we once took as the surplus, the supplement, now we recognize as crucial, necessary, that without which poetry is merely a bunch of inadequate lines.

Along the same line, we can construct the story of many modernist arts. In painting too the adequacy of the line to render reality had come under scrutiny.5 The sense of a subject not stable and timeless but fragmented and time-bound shook the foundation upon which pictorial representation relied. The line itself—that basic unit of the pictorial—was recontextualized in a fourth dimension, in a time-frame that was, after Einstein, relative and spatial, not constant and linear. The same storyline, as well, could be adapted to narrate the fate of prose narrative, in which the privileged position of the chronological, the model of historical linearity, was flooded by a stream of consciousness on whose currents rode the model of the psychological present. In that model, time lines dissolved

and the lines which connected perceptions with one another or with external experiences became muddled, crossed, hard to identify and/or to disentangle.

To put it most simply, the idea of linear reality—*that* old story—had lost its authority. Hence followed strategies of containment which tried to salvage thought and emotion by locating them within the image, object, thing. But this move toward self-containment simultaneously required contextualization, required the extratextual explanations necessary, paradoxically, to assert the self-sufficiency of the artistic work. The footnotes to *The Waste Land*, Pound’s literary essays, *The Necessary Angel*, etc., can be viewed—alongside their critical codifications in the name of “New Criticism”—as ways of defending the mimetic quality of modernist art.

This modernist line of defense delineates the point, as I have suggested, at which Moore departs from the picture, but in the way that she reconstitutes that point of departure, that place where the line itself is in question, she marks her quintessential modernism. In any case, that is the line I am—more or less—arguing.

And it begins appropriately with the line of argumentation, for that is the line Moore’s compositions make new. Whereas Pound, Williams, Eliot, H.D., even Frost, and often Stevens, relied on juxtaposition—just as Picasso and Duchamp did—to substitute for commentary, Moore foregrounded commentary itself. The resulting observations—as she called her works—find their structure best described not in the vocabulary of poetics but in the vocabulary of rhetoric. “When I Buy Pictures,” for example, is a verse essay delineating the qualities in visual art that Moore values. It fits clearly into the genre of the personal essay, purporting not to identify universal principles but principles of personal taste, those things, she tells us, that “would give me pleasure in my average moments.” Like the ideal student of, let’s say, *The Harbrace Handbook*, she has begun the perfect “topic/restriction” paragraph. Fixing on the topic of acquiring art, she has used the word “when” to delineate the scope of her composition; it will tell us *under what conditions* Moore finds paintings desirable. Not when they soar to the sublime, her argument indicates, but when they replicate what gives her pleasure in her “average moments.” This means works of two sorts: “the satire upon curiosity in which no more is discernible / than the intensity of the mood; / or quite the opposite. . . .” A list of examples follows, and then the next point, which is that
these effects cannot be achieved through disproportion, overemphasis. She concludes by appealing to an authority (A.R. Gordon, her endnotes indicate) and then heightening the appeal by reiterating in her own words the common quality her two sorts of pleasure-giving paintings have:

it comes to this: of whatever sort it is,
it must be “lit with piercing glances into the life of things”;
it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it. (48)

The rhetorical structure of this work is clear—a classification achieved by topic/restriction/example, developed by further modification and resolved by moving from the differences to the similarities; similarly the argument moves from the personal (“when I”) to the universal (“it must”) and from the subjective qualities of the poet (“what would give me pleasure”) to the objective (in the sense of being authoritative and shared) of A. R. Gordon. If these rhetorical qualities are somewhat obvious, that is all the more reason to say that this is a fairly good “composition” (i.e., short piece of expository prose).

But it is also a composition in the sense that the pictures it discusses are compositions, works of art arranged by an intelligence in such a way that the whole effect is greater than the sum of its parts. The pictures are assemblies of lines that do not allow their being viewed simply as lines nor even as lines of reference, but rather as references that effect commentary. If these lines, then, are no longer transparent—no longer merely referential—they act as a method of classification, a way of delineating. When the voice in The Waste Land can connect nothing with nothing, it voices another aspect of the dilemma Moore investigates here and elsewhere when she shows the line of connection between something and something.

Eliot’s line and Moore’s share a recognition of limitation, a willingness to forego the other possibility—that of connecting something (or nothing) with everything. Both recognize—as all modernists did—the ways in which the modern sensibility had rent the connection between the temporal and the eternal. Moore responds, I am arguing, by drawing smaller lines, making connections not authorized by a cosmology but by the rules of argumentation, the science of rhetoric. It is worth noting in this light that virtually all the critics who discuss Moore’s poems on some or many occasions refer to them as arguments. Again and again one finds such phrases as “the argument of the poem is . . .” or

6. Schulman devotes a full chapter to the nature of Moore’s “argumentation” (43-75).
“Moore is arguing here . . . .” In that regard, then, my argument is not particularly new; it merely foregrounds what many critics have taken for granted—that one must talk about Moore's poetry in the same way that one talks about Williams's essays, but not his poems. More than delineating this implicit line which runs through Moore criticism, I am arguing that Moore in her poems is drawing out the lines which connect not only her critics to one another, but also connect her contemporaries—the modernists—to their own work. Each of their works can be viewed as part of an argument about the nature of connections, about the kinds of lines that can be drawn between life and art, art and art, tradition and the individual talent.

But they are arguments made enthememically, i.e., with a term missing. For the major premises, one must go outside the self-contained art to the conventions of modernism (fragmentation, imagism, free verse, etc.) on the one hand, and/or its storyline (informing mythologies, traditions, allusions, etc.) on the other. It is at the point, then, where it meets its own glosses that modernist art exists, the point at which the fragmented, tenuous line meets its referent through the delineation of its own conventions. This delineation gives modernism its sharp-edged quality, its gloss, and forms the subject matter of Moore's unglossable compositions.

But she does more. In foregrounding the unarticulated process of argumentation upon which modernist art depends, Moore also exposes the problematic nature of arguments. This is an implicit premise of Costello's argument and an explicit one in Taffy Martin's: that Moore's arguments often collapse, conflate, shift focus. The ostensive argument of "When I Buy Pictures," as I glossed it earlier for the purposes of my argument, strains under Costello's observance that the poem's argument about acquiring possessions merges ideas of possession with those of self-possession, so that "observer and object are reversed" (32). Moore's integration of assertion and examples, moreover, fails to establish a sound argument, because the examples don't apply. "The pictures she buys," as Costello notes,

are already bought, and indeed all of her examples are already once removed from "the life of things" though they may be "lit with piercing glances" into it. On the other hand to buy a picture is inevitably to make it, to infuse it with personal significance. The energy in the phrase "lit with piercing
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glances into the life of things" flows two ways, drawing light from inside and outside at once. That Moore has borrowed the phrase from A. R. Gordon's *The Poets of the Old Testament* only extends this doubleness. (34-5)

Costello's commentary does not undermine my earlier schematizing of Moore's argument in this poem. Rather it shows that the schematic argument exists in the same space as its own undermining so as to add another dimension to the poem's doubleness. That doubled and re-doubled space, existing on the tenuous bridge between modernist art and the real arguments which support it, is the place she creates for the genuine--the complex, usually fragile, often unsound, necessarily defensive arguments, fraught with paradox, which permit modernist art its claims on reality.

"Complexity," "fragility," "soundness," "defensiveness"--these words not only qualify her arguments but also name themes which run through them. Others have discussed aspects of these themes in her work, and space does not permit even an adequate outline of their arguments. But it is worth noting that these themes again help identify some margins of modernism. The "soundness" of poetic argument, for example, suggests not only Pound's and Eliot's insistence on a poetics based on the paradigm of musical composition but also connects their arguments with those of the French symbolists. If for Pope the sound must seem a sequel to the sense, for Moore (like her contemporaries) sound helps create sense. She shows as well that poetry makes sense sound--a double pun or perhaps a triple suggested by the phrase "sound sense" in the last line of "To a Strategist." Poetry gives us the sensation of sound and as well replicates sensate sounds, the sounds of the senses. It also contextualizes sounds so as to make them sensible. Sensibility, in turn, renders the sensate experience of poetry stable, firm, sound. Poetry thus sounds an argument made sound through that argument.

Or through nothing. The pun "sound sense" thus delineates as well the margins of the modernist/symbolist argument that makes sound and sense a self-contained unit.  

7. Martin notes that Moore's conclusion in this poem "rejects idle speculation and pretends to offer a straightforward evaluation. Instead, as in so many other instances of Moore's epigrammatic closure, the poem opens rather than constrains experience." (105) The poem's double focus is also noted by Steinman, who regards it as reflecting Moore's recognition that "both science and poetry, variously defined, claim truth as an uneasy marriage of continued endeavor and fidelity to the world, allowing us neither to ignore facts nor to ignore the effects of human observation and evaluation" (128).

8. Kenner notes the importance in Moore's work of puns ("Moore's poems deal in many separate acts of attention, all close-up, optical puns, seen by snapshots, in a poetic normally governed by the eye, sometimes by the ears and fingers, ultimately by the
Beyond the soundness of that argument resides only silence, which is equally sensible and sensate in its restraint, Moore’s poetry argues, as sound is in its indulgence. Against the anonymity of the author, Moore outlines the idea of privacy which is a form of silence created by self-possession and presence, not anonymity and absence. As silence supplements sound, presence supplements anonymity, a connection delineated most clearly in the second stanza of “Injudicious Gardening”:

However, your particular possession,
the sense of privacy,
      indeed might deprecate
offended ears, and need not tolerate
effrontery. (81)

The sense (of privacy), which is a form of silence, deprecates access to sound, the offended (and off ended) ear channels through which sounds pass on their way to becoming sensible. Or sense might do that, indeed. The kind of deed that might indeed allow such deprecation remains unsaid, as does the nature of the offense. The first stanza suggests that the offense is liking yellow flowers—a “symbol” of infidelity—but indeed this is more a visual than an aural offense. In the poem’s contentious reversibilities, Moore takes us inside the sounds of words that make them (in)sensible. In this imaginary garden, in judiciousness, in fidelity, she finds again possibly, in action (in deed), in possession (in deed), a place for the genuine (indeed).

Indeed the pun is the line of aural association that takes us into that garden as it does into the words of which the garden is composed. In such judicious gardening one finds the best arguments for modernism, just as Moore found in the Armory Show its best defense. I am suggesting, in other words, that “Armor’s Undermining Modesty” glosses the Armory Show that Moore found so inspirational. The poem—which is about words and etymologies, surfaces and self-possession, gloss and tarnish—connects visual with linguistic by highlighting the power of understatement as well as its vulnerability. This is what the Armory Show

moral sense” [92], but his discussion emphasizes the “optical puns,” without attending closely enough to the aural puns, which often function to much the same effect.

9. Costello notes: “The relative awkwardness of the second stanza can be read as a sign of self-restraint against the automatic response of the first stanza, or as a sign of sarcasm. Whose gardening is injudicious here? Like “infidelity,” the word “injudicious” is assigned double objects which reverse double (negative and positive) meanings” (44).

10. See Costello, 188.
delineated for Moore, and the pun on armor creates another outline of modernism in her work.

The observance of that outline takes us to a final observation on Moore’s observations: they merge not only the seen with the scene, the sense with the said, the argument with the example; they also merge in some ways the temporal with the eternal. For the making of her poetry outlines the argument that contextualizes observed phenomena and thus turns the observation into a form of observance. By constructing the argument in judiciousness and in fidelity that connects thought and phenomena, one must not only observe the phenomena in the sense of seeing it but also observe it in the sense of paying homage to it. The act of temporal observance thus becomes a form of religious observance, and the poem itself becomes a rite of passage and a passage of rites. In this way Moore aligns with Eliot by completing the line of his argument that leads us out of the Waste Land and back to the Garden. 11

Or at least she takes us to its boundary, to the place where the arguments of modernism surface as a form of gloss, the shimmering armor containing the modernist quester poets. Moore, as she confessed, “should like to have a talk with one of them about excess.” “A mirror-of-steel uninsistence” becomes not the surface but the middle term between “the tarnish” and “the imperishable wish” (152). The gloss was not the surface at all but a reflection of the apparent image that always (already) required more.

WORKS CITED


11. Slatin provides a detailed reading of Moore’s “Novices” in terms of The Waste Land in his chapter titled: “Moore, Eliot, and the Search for Community” (121-155). He notes: “The process of conforming the present to the past demands that writers like Eliot and Pound stand in the final lines of ‘Novices’ as both silent presences and active collaborators. This may sound ridiculous: remember, though, that Moore’s own presence in these lines is largely a silent one--silent, that is, in the special sense given to that word in ‘Silence’ a year and a half later....” (139).


