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ENCOUNTERING THE UNICORN: WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND MARIANNE MOORE

For readers who try to deal with Marianne Moore's work on the basis of George Steiner's first order of difficulty, what he calls "contingent" difficulty in his essay "On Difficulty" (27), by studying individual words and phrases and looking up the myriad quotations and references that create the surface texture of a Moore poem, its pieces may remain as disparate and scattered at the end as at the beginning of the effort. Even those who give up, in Moore's words, an "obstinate continuous probing [for] a rereading after the interval of a year or years" (Complete Prose 325)--she was offering advice about the best way to approach Pound--may come away dissatisfied.

How to comprehend Moore, to go beyond perception of surface images and references into an awareness of underlying structures and purposes quite different from what most readers are used to? That is a necessary question as we pass her centennial and find ourselves seventy years beyond the crisis of the object in art and the revolutionary environment that gave rise to visual artists such as Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia and Picasso, as well as to the multitude of innovators in music, film and literature who have made art very different at the end from

1. George Steiner defines four orders of difficulty: pragmatic or "contingent" difficulty (On Difficulty and Other Essays 19-27), "modal" difficulty (27-33), "tactical" difficulty (33-40), and "ontological" difficulty (40-47). Toward the end of his essay he makes a brief summary:

Contingent difficulties aim to be looked up; modal difficulties challenge the inevitable parochialism of honest empathy; tactical difficulties endeavour to deepen our apprehension by dislocating and goading to new life the supine energies of word and grammar. Each of these classes of difficulty is a part of the contract of ultimate or preponderant intelligibility between poet and reader, between text and meaning. There is a fourth order of difficulty which occurs where this contract is itself wholly or in part broken. Because this type of difficulty implicates the functions of language and of the poem as a communicative performance, because it puts in question the existential suppositions that lie behind poetry as we have known it, I propose to call it ontological. (40-41)
what it was at the beginning of the century. Perhaps we are realizing that though Moore has not been made easier by time—as some modernist poets undoubtedly have—her deliberate use of her literary raw material in the teens, twenties and thirties produced poems that have remained in the forefront for readers and writers interested in the working out of modernist concerns. Indeed, what is happening in the most innovative poetry of the present seems closer to Moore than to any of her contemporaries.2

A comparison with Williams may provide a key to the problems that discourage some readers after a taste of Moore’s work. On the one hand, the two poets are much alike in the primacy they give to the objects they set against each other in purposely disconnected contexts—made all the more disconnected in many of their poems, as Marjorie Perloff points out, by broken-up visual patterns on the page (101). But on the other, they reveal as great a difference between the essential conceptions of their work as it is possible to see in any two modernist writers. Perhaps the essence of the contrast between them is the way Williams’ “I” constitutes the field upon which his poems evolve, while Moore’s is constantly being hedged about and disguised. In Moore, attempts to make a first person seem to be absent from the events of a poem produce an apparent release of her poems’ artifacts from a first person’s familiar and pressing concerns. The advantage of this release—and disadvantage from the point of view of a reader’s understanding—is, as Bonnie Costello says, to allow the artifacts to “float free in the... realm of her designs” (208).

In Williams’ 1938 poem “These” (Selected Poems 90-91) we find no use of first-person singular per se, but we read in the second stanza after the poet announces that the “year plunges into night” (l. 4):

...the heart plunges
lower than night

to an empty, windswept place
without sun, stars or moon
but a peculiar light as of thought

that spins a dark fire—
whirling upon itself until,

2. I am thinking of John Ashbery, Jorie Graham, and some of the so-called language poets such as Rosmarie Waldrop whose recent The Reproduction of Profiles certainly suggests the shifting ground of Moore’s poems as well as Steiner’s fourth order of difficulty.
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in the cold, it kindles

(11.5-15)

In “the heart” and “a man” we readily perceive allusions to an unnamed “I” whose presence throughout is confirmed in stanza eight when the poet casually uses the first-person-plural pronoun as he refers to “people gone that we loved” (1. 22).

The difficulties of the poem remind us of Steiner's third level of difficulty, the kind the critic calls “tactical” because it results in a “rallentando” effect to slow the reader down in the name of deepening the experience of comprehension (35). But such difficulty is not an impasse and is overcome without too much delay in “These” because of the firm assurance of understanding provided by the sense of a first person controlling the poem’s events. The constant shifting of subjects and of second and third-person pronouns referring to those subjects, as well as the deliberate use of vague pronoun reference, create a good example of the effect Steiner compares to “moiré... the meaningful but unstable and reticulating patterns of shot silk.” Elaborating, Steiner continues: “There is a distinct sense in which we know and do not know, at the same time. This rich undecidability is exactly what the poet aims at. It can be made a hollow trick... Or it can serve as a true tactical difficulty, forcing us to reach out towards more delicate orderings of perception. It is, simultaneously, a subversion and energizing of rhetoric drawing attention... to the inertias in the common routine of discourse” (40). Even in the last four stanzas of “These” where Williams is most ambiguous, shifting as he does to the imperative mood and addressing an unnamed second person, the “you” is an indirect way of saying “I,” for without too much strain we can imagine he is addressing himself.

Hide it away somewhere
out of mind, let it get roots
and grow, unrelated to jealous

ears and eyes--for itself.
In this mine they come to dig--all.
Is this the counterfoil to sweetest

music? The source of poetry that

3. I skip over Steiner’s second order of difficulty, what he calls modal difficulty, because it does not bear on our discussion.
seeing the clock stopped, says,
The clock has stopped

that ticked yesterday so well?
and hears the sound of lakewater
splashing--that is now stone. (ll. 25-36)

In these stanzas we must worry a bit over the referent of "it," "itself" and "this," which always partially eludes us because of the poet's disruptive qualifications set off by dashes and parentheses in stanzas five through eight, just as the source of the "it" is becoming clear. In addition, we must consider the contradictory nature of something that "get[s] roots / and grow[s]" (ll. 26-27) and at the same time can be a "mine" in which all "come to dig" (l. 29). The obscurity of "counterfoil" and of juxtaposing the stopped clock, the "sound of lakewater / splashing" (ll. 35-36) and "stone" (l. 36) at the end, add other layers of contradiction, but the effect is oracular and befits the mystery of psychic despair and renewal that is the poem's theme.

In Williams' 1935 "The Yachts" (Selected Poems 71-72), he uses what can be perceived as another variety of tactical difficulty to create an even more intense confusion for the reader when he breaks his poem into two pieces of visual description that appear at first to be based on two entirely different views of reality. Here his subjects and use of pronouns are steady and unambiguous except on the far side of the break, but the very violence of the break and our inability to put the pieces together based on our experience of seeing in the real world--an experience encouraged by the vivid detail of the first part--force us to seek an explanation in symbolism. But here again, the poet encourages our assumption that a feeling "I" is masterminding our experience, in this case by means of a rather Blakean maneuver. In fact, the speaker refers to that controlling mind, however obliquely, throughout, but especially in the second-to-last stanza. Our problems in seeing a magnificent yacht race described in lavish and pleasurable detail in the first eight stanzas turn into a hideous scene of mass drowning in the last three are finally resolved when the speaker explains:

It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair

until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind,
the whole sea become an entanglement of watery bodies
lost to the world bearing what they cannot hold. (ll. 27-30)
As we observed at the outset, Marianne Moore's poems are obvious candidates for classification on the basis of Steiner's first-level, contingent difficulty, to be dealt with by looking up words, quotations and references—an activity assisted by her cryptic, delightful and sometimes less-than-illuminating notes. Also, and with even greater satisfaction, we see difficulty in Moore as we do in Williams' poems, in terms of tactics she uses to slow us down. However, we must take a step beyond that with many of her most important poems, into the realm of difficulty Steiner calls "ontological." This unlimited kind of difficulty stymies and turns away many potential readers, not only of Moore's poems but of many innovative works, because they question "the contract of ultimate or preponderate intelligibility between poet and reader, between text and meaning." (Steiner 40). The dedicated reader can find ways out of lower level difficulty by methods in use for centuries. But for Steiner, "ontological" difficulty tests the basic assumptions about speech and poetry in the context of a cultural crisis such as occurred at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. In his definition, this kind of difficulty reflects a crisis in language and gives expression to the larger event of which writing a poem is a part. He has only praise for the poet who freely gives himself or herself to language in such a crisis, and I cannot help referring to Marianne Moore's "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns" (Complete Poems 77-79) as well as to many other of her poems, when I read these words paraphrasing Heidegger toward the end of his essay:

The authentic, immensely rare, poem is one in which 'the Being of language' finds unimpeded lodging, in which the poet is not a persona, a subjectivity 'ruling over language,' but an 'openness to,' a supreme listener to, the genius of speech. The result of such openness is not so much a text, but an 'act,' an eventuation of Being and literal 'coming into Being' (46).

Much of the source of ontological difficulty in Moore's poems, as well as of the greatness that accrues to any artist struggling with a new kind of speech, has to do with her denial of subjectivity, a denial that eventuates, paradoxically, in a seeking for a more integral and profound expression of feelings. It is precisely where the "I" of her poems' speaker is most implicated, however, that her obscurity is most dense and most ontological. She eschews the use of the first person as a general rule, and in poems where it appears, limits its function so that we cannot in any way understand it as representing an authority to lean
upon. Even the strange surface effects of her syllabic metrical system and of her collage-like constructions created as Costello says "through a literal scavenging of language from magazines, newspapers, atlases, overheard conversation" (212), are minor compared with the strangeness readers feel in looking for some guide to show the way and discovering there is none to be found. This appears to be a tactical stance, but though it does indeed slow the reading and in the case of "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns" most artfully complement the subject of her poem, it is so determined it often suggests a way of being in Steiner’s sense. Further, when we see her introduce a personal “I” for the purpose of disguising it or to build fences around it as she does so brilliantly in this poem, we know we are dealing with ontological problems of a most provocative sort.

But back to that later. First let us look at the apparent tactics that make the difficulty of “Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns” seem comparable to the difficulty of some Williams poems, though more densely so. Published in her Selected Poems in 1935, it does not at all fit Perloff’s idea of “a poem designed . . . to be seen rather than heard” (95), a description she applies to some of Moore’s poems as well as to Williams’. This long free verse, one-stanza poem builds—or maybe spreads would be a better word—by involving us in a constant movement of images juxtaposed one against the other. In this case the process is so rapid it transcends Steiner’s rallentando. The effect is more of G. M. Hopkins’ “shook foil” (27) than of moiré because it changes in a flash. To switch metaphors, it is as if the images are being laid down the way cards are in a card game, the next card quickly altering the effect of the card before, yet, at the same time, not hiding or superseding the earlier ones. The focus of attention constantly shifting with each new item allows a pleasure of growing complexity and of a remote, residual understanding hard to come by because most of what is presented is mystifying and can only be guessed at.

In the title “Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns” and the first 46 of the poem’s 81 lines, Moore sets the strategy for the whole. In eschewing solidity and thus flying in the face of the conventional wisdom that the more fantastic a figure, the more palpable must be its presentation, Moore creates an effect that mimics the magic of her subject, its ability “to disappear . . . and reappear” (l. 53).
The way she camouflages the unicorn with a confusing multiplication strategy is apparent from the first words. In the title itself we are allowed to know the unicorn only as the second part of a compound subject. The plural “Sea Unicorns” come first and throughout the first part of the poem always obscure “Land Unicorns” with their real life characteristics based on facts about narwhals. As if that complication is not enough, Moore multiplies the two plural subjects by making the originals into couples “with their respective lions” (l. 1). But then she seems to be describing the sea unicorns alone when in a quotation, identified in her note as of Spenserian origin (Complete Poems 274), she calls them “‘mighty monoceroses with immeasured tayles’” (l. 2), and she goes on to give readers a picture of these monoceroses “defiantly revolving” (l. 5) in circular configurations, each creating a “long keel of white” (l. 7) the way a paddle wheel might, that “disperses giant weeds / and those sea snakes whose forms, looped in the foam, ‘disquiet shippers’” (ll. 8-9).

Further study creates more uncertainty. Moore’s almost innate propensity for supplying contradictory information about the contexts of her images in this poem makes the backgrounds against which she presents the land unicorn and its associates as confusing to imagine as the creatures themselves. When she says “these are those very animals / described by the cartographers of 1539” (ll. 3-4) she uses vague demonstrative pronouns not only to confuse their reference—is she talking about narwhals alone or do the shadows of the four creatures of the title and first line hang over her these and those? But simultaneously she brings the venu of the creatures into doubt. Because of the mention of “cartographers of 1539” we think of an old map. Yet can we be sure the poet is looking at the particular map to which she refers? Could she not be remembering instead of looking at the creatures before her? So what is she looking at when she says “these”? However, the map idea as a whole cannot be dismissed because Moore clearly refers to an old map when she observes that “Britannia’s sea unicorn with its rebellious child” are “indigenous to the new English coast” (ll. 33-34). At first glance, “rebellious child” might be seen as an actual baby narwhal making trouble for its mother, “Britannia’s sea unicorn,” off the coast of New

4. See Costello’s study (143-152) of Moore’s use of camouflage as a technique in “The Phaen’s Basilisk;” in which she notes, “Camouflage is the perfect emblem of a confusion between metonymy and metaphor, for it creates the illusion of contiguity where there is actually separation” (144).
England, but the idea of the “rebellious child” being the rebellious colonies fits a map idea very well and we may even experience a mild sort of triumph when we see in our mind’s eye an old map of the New World that shows both the “rebellious” colonies, and off the coast, “Britannia’s sea unicorn” frolicking in the waves.

But this triumph is short-lived for the unicorn-on-the-map idea disappears when Moore presents what seems to be a recapitulation of the imagined picture in the first part of the poem, but is actually a totally different view of the land unicorn and its lion enemy-partner standing on hind legs facing each other as in heraldry. Because the poet says the pair stands “against [a] screen of woven air/ which is the forest” (ll. 41-43), we realize we are seeing them in a tapestry.5

Then in her rapidly narrowing focus, the lion and the heraldic associations it shares with the unicorn disappear, and the poet allows us a glimpse of the unicorn alone, and, for that moment, possibly even to recognize it as it is seen being hunted in the third and fourth tapestries of the narrative sequence known as The Cloisters unicorn series (Freeman 97-104). Moore could have seen or known about “The Hunt of the Unicorn,” as the series was called (Freeman 226), as early as 1922 when Count Aimery de La Rochefoucauld sent six of the seven tapestries from France to the Anderson Galleries in New York City. While they were on public display John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was so taken with them he began negotiations for their purchase. The story of his acquisition twice made headline news in the New York Times in 1923, and in 1928 they were again exhibited publicly, this time under Rockefeller's auspices at the Metropolitan Museum (Freeman 225-226). Eventually Rockefeller gave them to The Cloisters--then in construction--as its feature exhibition, though The Cloisters did not open and the series of seven, finally including the

5. Certainly the most famous heraldic representation of the lion-unicorn couple in the tapestry medium is the Cluny Museum Lady with the Unicorn series devoted to a celebration of the Le Viste family by way of demonstrating the senses. In the six hangings made in 1500, a beautiful lady sometimes accompanied by a handmaiden is flanked by a lion and unicorn that either support the Le Viste family's banners and shields or assist the lady in showing off a particular sense. In the case of Sight, the unicorn crouches by the lady with his front hooves in her lap as he inspects himself in the mirror she holds, while the lion stands on his hind legs opposite them displaying the La Viste banner. In all six--one tapestry for each sense and one mysteriously titled “A Mon Seul Desir”--the background is indeed a “screen of woven air” depicting the forest with its flowers and creatures (Freeman 63-65). This series, one of the goals of any art-minded tourist in Paris, is not to be confused with The Cloisters' unicorn series The Hunt of the Unicorn, also dated 1500, to be seen at Fort Tryon Park in New York City. Yet confusing them may well have been Moore's very purpose as part of her poem's always shifting effect.
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fragmentary fifth tapestry showing the taming of the unicorn by the maiden in two small pieces, was not available to the public until May, 1938 (Freeman 226-228). This, however, was three years after Moore’s poem was published.

In view of the poet’s propensity for collecting articles about subjects that interested her (Costello 212-213), it is possible she followed this story and used it here. In any case, whether she was referring to it specifically or to the rich unicorn lore available to anyone drawn to the subject, the most solid fact about the unicorn of her poem, as well as its most essential magic, is its ability “to disappear” for long periods, then “to reappear.” She says about it:

So wary as to disappear for centuries and reappear,
yet never to be caught,
the unicorn has been preserved
by an unmatched device
wrought like the work of expert blacksmiths— (ll. 53-57)

On the one hand, she may be identifying the creature in general with tapestries that depicted it but were hidden by the nobility of France to keep them from being destroyed during the Revolution then brought to light years later (Rorimer 6). Or, more specifically, she could be referring to the fascinating story of the disappearance and reappearance of the Rockefeller-Cloisters series that involved their almost unbelievable rediscovery in the 1850s and their return to the château of Verteuil from which they had vanished during the Revolution (Freeman 220-223). Yet, at the same time, and with her own variety of magic, she is saying the creature has no phenomenal reality whatever.

But the solidity of this allusion to tapestry history—if indeed it be so—is short-lived and we are not surprised to find our attention rapidly being directed to other unicorn lore, stories of its throwing itself on its horn “head foremost from a cliff” and “walking away unharmed” (ll. 59-60), and of its being “impossible to take alive” except by a lady “as curiously wild and gentle” (ll. 65-67) as itself. In the final shifting impressions of the poem the only thing known for sure is that the unicorn is “etched” (ll. 74) and we are tempted to read the last lines as referring to an old map of the heavens upon which the constellations are filled out to look like the Greek mythological figures for which they were named. There is, after all, the constellation called Monoceros or Unicorn (a piece of information that enhances the reference of the Spenser line early in the poem), and maps of this sort are beautiful and
fantastic. But though the poet wants us to have that beautiful and fantastic picture in mind, she has said that the unicorn is "etched like an equine monster" (l. 74) (my italics), and true to her tactical purposes throughout, no more here than elsewhere does she allow a settled mind about the medium to which she refers. Indeed, she never wants her readers to see her visual sources as having any autonomy in her poem at all. She makes her own picture out of words and the words are primary.

But by now we have given up hope for a set visual location of the poem that can be known. Adding that loss to our growing awareness that an accessible guide in reading a poem, a first person such as we find in Williams' poems, is not to be found here, we take another big step away from the old manner of interpreting poetic experience and relinquish even the hope of a set sequence of events. To put it another way, in the ostensible absence of a guiding "I," Moore's inconsistency has the opportunity to become so consistent it cannot be seen to fit the limited purposes of mere tactical maneuvering. Instead, we must now begin to see her use of language as expressing a transcendent purpose--"an evantuation of Being and...coming into Being" (Steiner 46). Indeed, we see a new kind of subjectivity that creates a totally new form based on freedom from old limitations of space and time. It's all happening again and again, or as many times as the poem is read, and it does not much matter where we start or end a particular reading. Each part is equal to every other part. I am reminded of something Milton Babbitt said about Bartok's quartets:

There is...no avoiding on the one hand a highly attenuated functionality, or on the other a constant mutation, rather than more easily perceived reiterations of thematic elements. In this resides the difficulty and apparent complexity of Bartok's music.

Bartok's concern for the total composition, and the resultant evolution of the maximum structure from a minimum assumption, makes it irrelevant whether one initiates a consideration of his music with the detail or the entirety. (Babbitt "The String Quartets of Bartok")

It's a bit like a mobile set in motion by the mind of the reader. One part set going, activates the others, but it does not matter which, and each one can be seen as moving by itself just as well as with the rest.

In the center of the mobile's moving parts and moving with them, however, is an allusion to the poet's
private life that lets us see the whole poem as an elaborately fashioned statement about a self. About a quarter of the way through the speaker uses the association between land unicorns and their enemy lions in Sir John Hawkins' Florida as an excuse for a bit of wisdom about human relations. "Thus," she says, "personalities by nature much opposed, / can be combined in such a way / that when they do agree, their unanimity is great" (ll. 22-24). Next, as if to forestall any temptation we might have to suspect a reference of a personal sort, Moore presents us with a quotation that like the mismatched piece of a jigsaw puzzle makes what preceded it look absurd. "Personalities by nature much opposed" may indeed find "unanimity" "when they do agree" but the list of subjects they agree on linking "politics" and "trade" and "law" (l. 25) with "china-collecting" and "church going" (l. 26) makes us think not about individuals getting along with each other, but a whole nation of people such as the British living in peaceful association. This idea is supported in her note that identifies the quotation as belonging to Henry James' English Hours (Complete Poems 274).

But we do not forget the poet's lifelong relationship with her mother, and when we recall that her "closeness with her mother" set her apart from her friends and contemporaries even as a young woman in the teens and early twenties (Martin 11), we feel we are not far from what she had in mind. In the context of the whole poem about unicorns, could not such a suggestion be a quick vision of that other partly invisible unicorn-like creature Marianne Moore herself? She and her mother are likely to have agreed on their politics, china-collecting and church going, also on sport and tennis, and to see the pair absurdly blown up into a nation by the poet, as indeed they must have appeared to some who observed them, not least of all to Moore herself, makes for the effect of wry self-satire.

Then, adding another surprise, Moore addresses somebody as "you" in the line immediately following. To whom is she speaking? The reader? Herself? Her reader-mother? The last seems most likely. Her brother John Warner Moore, the third person with whom the poet and her mother shared their imaginative associations, had been absent from their lives except for brief reunions after he became a Navy chaplain and married in 1917 and 1918 (Willis 244). In addition, the subject matter to which she turns our attention as she has repeatedly throughout, embroideries and old maps, are interests one might share
with someone also interested in china-collecting. Addressing this unidentified presence, she says:

You have remarked this fourfold combination of strange animals, upon embroideries enwrought with “polished garlands” of agreeing difference—thorns, “myrtle rods, and shafts of bay,” “cobwebs, and knotts, and mulberries” of lapis-lazuli and pomegranate and malachite—(ll. 27-32)

Difficulties protect these words from curious eyes as effectively as “thorns, ‘myrtle rods, and shafts of bay’” might serve to protect the embroideries from prying fingers. For one thing they are not the kind of embroideries in which land unicorns appear at all. Quite the opposite. The poet describes designs of “‘garlands,’” (l. 29) “‘myrtle’” and “‘bay,’” (l. 30) as well as “‘cobwebs, and knotts, and mulberries’” (ll. 31) from what, in a note, she identifies as Queen Elizabeth’s dresses (Complete Poems 127). In addition this is a strange and difficult, not to say repellent, texture for embroidery. Though the “‘garlands’” are “of agreeing difference” (l. 29), they are “‘polished,’” and there are “thorns,” and the “‘myrtle’” is in “‘rods,’” the “‘bay’” in “‘shafts.’” There is also “lapis-lazuli and pomegranate and malachite” (l. 32). No doubt she includes these last for their blue, red and green colors, but two of the three are stones and contribute their hardness to the painful effect she is building.

Indeed, the contradictory nature of these details difficult to the point of challenging belief in their existence—create the sense of a barrier around the central feelings of the poem and perhaps of the poet’s life—not to be taken lightly in a work about unicorns and the conditions under which they may be seen. The speaker’s feelings may very well have to do with the conflicts and rewards of the chaste, disciplined life “unfearful of deceit” (l. 73) she chose for herself with her mother.

That the choice was not easy may be born witness to by the repetition of the idea of rebellion from beginning to end of the poem. In the early lines when she says about sea unicorns, “these are those very animals / described by the cartographers of 1539, / defiantly revolving” (ll. 3-5), the “defiantly” might at first be taken as a quaint detail, but it is followed by other words and effects suggesting enmity even more strongly. The idea that the partners of the land unicorn-lion couple are enemies is a well-known bit of unicorn lore that appears in Sir John Hawkins’ remark about the abundance of
both creatures in Florida. The partners of the other, watery couple are also seen to have problems, and a narwhal called “Britannia’s sea unicorn” accompanied by its “rebellious” infant sounds like another instance of the poet’s blowing up a pair of “personalities by nature much opposed” into their largest, most absurd form. In that context, the vision of the unicorn at the end of the poem can easily be understood as the spiritual reward for the enormous patience always associated with seeing it. Yet, even the invisible being inside the “Virgin-Mary blue” dress is called the unicorn’s enemy, until the unicorn “approach[ing] eagerly” becomes “engrossed” (ll. 78-79), and “‘upon her lap,’ / its ‘mild wild head doth lie’ ” (ll. 80-81). In truth, as Mary Queen of Scots is said to have said—not to mention T. S. Eliot—, in [our] end is [our] beginning, for looking back over the poem, we see that the idea of ambiguously matched couples is everywhere, as in life.

Williams writes about The Cloisters unicorn in Book Five of Paterson (205), symbolically associating the wounded unicorn of the seventh tapestry—not alluded to in Moore’s poem—with the artist facing death. At the same time, he uses it as the reincarnated Christ—its ancient symbolic role in the story of the hunt linking it with the imagination and art, man’s only hope of escaping death. But for all Williams’ force as a modernist struggling toward a new language and toward Steiner’s “‘Being of language’ “, his use of a self, to a greater or lesser degree, operating as an interpreter, gets in the way of the power of indirection achieved by Moore. Indeed, for Moore, the unicorn can be seen to represent the way a self in a poem can be made to disappear and reappear at the will of the maker.

It was no accident she wrote as she did, for though she kept the first person out of her work, her creative I was much occupied behind the scenes arranging things to bring about the effects she wanted. Indeed, control of her material to achieve those effects may have given her the opportunity to express a new range of experience and feeling, including personal feeling, that Williams put beyond his reach when he placed the exposure and definition of a feeling self at the center of his poems’ experience. Taffy Martin remarks on the unwavering nature of Moore’s control:

It...becomes clear that control is, indeed, the subject of [her] poetry. Many critics automatically see this quality as hermetic and unfortunate. In fact, the control is the product of Moore’s limitless ambition, as controlled and controlling as the
“spruce cone regularity” that she admired in the armored scales of “The Pangolin.” But by filtering daily experience and personal circumstance through the enabling straightjacket of her control, Moore created a poetry as personal and emotional as it sometimes seems distant. (7)

Perhaps because of the difference in the way she saw a self, Moore viewed what Suzanne Langer calls the “virtual image” of artistic expression (5-8) with greater clarity than Williams did and thus freed herself for a deeper and purer allegiance to its making. Though she and Williams were lifelong friends (Martin 69-76), she had many hesitations about his work and he knew it. Costello quotes a letter from Williams to Moore, 23 March 1921, in the Rosenbach collection of manuscripts and letters, that shows how aware of his creative limitations with regard to his friend's work he was:

... each must free himself from the bonds of banality as best he can; you or another may turn into a lively field of intelligent activity quite easily but I, being perhaps more timid and unstable at heart, must free myself by more violent methods. (161)

WORKS CITED


6. See also Celeste Goodridge's “Private Exchanges and Public Reviews: Marianne Moore's Criticism of William Carlos Williams."
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