not decorum, but restraint;
it was the love of doing hard things
that rebuffed and wore them out—a public out of sympathy with
neatness.
Neatness of finish! Neatness of finish!
"Occasioning no little consternation,"
relentless accuracy is the nature of this octopus
with its capacity for fact.
"Creeping slowly as with meditated stealth,
its arms seeming to approach from all directions,"
it receives one under winds that "tear the snow to bits
and hurl it like a sandblast,
shearing off twigs and loose bark from the trees."
Is tree the word for these strange things
"flat on the ground like vines;"
some "bent in a half circle with branches on one side
suggesting dustbrushes, not trees;
some finding strength in union, forming little stunted groves,
their flattened mats of branches shrunk in trying to escape"
from the hard mountain "planed by ice and polished by the
wind"—
the white volcano with no weather side;
the lightning flashing at its base,
rain falling in the valleys, and snow falling on the peak—
the glassy octopus symmetrically pointed,
its claw cut by the avalanche
"with a sound like the crack of a rifle,
in a curtain of powdered snow launched like a waterfall."

1 On the manuscript, Moore ruled out this line and capitalized the first word
of the following line.
The manuscript is published by courtesy of the Rosenbach Museum and
Library.

"Advancing Backward in a Circle":
Marianne Moore as
(Natural) Historian

JOHN M. SLATIN

Critical representations of Marianne Moore are shot through, as
representations of America used to be, with negatives. From the critical
writing which has attached itself to Moore's work, we may abstract a
catalogue of things supposed to be missing from her poetry, a long list
of absences—and a damning one if it should prove valid—comprising
much of what we profess to value, in or out of literature. There are in
her poems virtually no human figures;1 and so of course there is no sex
or love or lust, for blood or power or even money; no real evil, and no
mere brutality, either; no genuine moral complexity, therefore, and no
tragedy or comedy.2 According to one recent critic, in reading Moore
we must even be ready to "relinquish" the "satisfactions" of "consis
tency, symmetry, logic."3

If Moore's poems are often "unpeopled," in Hugh Kenner's
phrase,4 at least there are animals to serve as moral exemplars—
animals described in minute detail, and moving upon landscapes de
picted with equal care and precision. But this choice of subject is also,
in the eyes of many critics, a limitation; as Randall Jarrell puts it, "Miss
Moore sent postcards to only the nicer animals," willfully transforming
"the Animal Kingdom, that amoral realm, into a realm of good," and
sacrificing a great deal in the process.5 R. P. Blackmur makes a related
point: "Compare her animal poems with those of D. H. Lawrence," he
urges. "In Lawrence you feel you have touched the plasm; in Miss
Moore you feel you have escaped and come on the idea. The other life
is there, but it is round the corner, not so much taken for granted as
not allowed to transpire.... In Miss Moore life is remote (life as
good and evil) and everything is done to keep it remote.76 But such
difficulties are as nothing compared to the difficulty of the poems
themselves. For there is so much detail, and such “a very wide spread
of association,” as Eliot writes, that critics often find it extremely “dif-
cult to say what is the ‘subject-matter’” of Moore’s poems.7 Blackmur
attempts to describe the problem with the help of a contrast between a
generic Moore poem and Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” which, he
says, “is about death and love and nostalgia, and about them in ways
which it is enough to mention to understand”; in Moore’s poems,
though, the difficulty arises not “because we do not know [what they
are about] but precisely because we do know, far more perfectly and
far more specifically than we know anything about Keats’ poem.”9

Much of the complicating detail in Moore’s poems is supplied by
quotations; but these are taken from magazines, newspapers, essays,
advertisements, travel brochures, government pamphlets, “business
documents and// school-books,”10 and they are not like other poets’
quotations at all. Kenner tells us that “we are not meant to look up the
sources,” that Moore’s notes “are not part of our education” as Eliot’s
are;11 and Laurence Stapleton explains that “Marianne Moore’s incor-
poration of phrases or sentences from a widely varied list of authors
has an essentially different purpose” from that which motivates similar
practices in Eliot and Pound. These men quote in order “to evoke
memory, to juxtapose past and present, or to maintain what Pound
called the ‘subject-rhyme’” but Moore does none of this: according to
Stapleton, she quotes simply “to avail herself of intersecting perspec-
tives and changing tones of speech,” though “Sometimes . . . the quo-
tations are introduced for a dramatic effect, or a satiric one.”11 Bonnie
Costello makes a similar point. “In any case,” she writes, “Moore’s
quotations and notes are entirely different from Eliot’s. Her borrow-
ings do not extend the meaning of her poem into the worlds they
allude to. While in a sense there is no surface immediacy in The Waste
Land, in Moore’s poetry the surface is everything.”12

We must not make the mistake, then, of treating Moore’s quo-
tations as performing the literary work of allusion, as Pound’s and Eliot’s
borrowings do, for of course there can be no allusion in the work of a
poet who has, as Eliot himself said in 1935, “no immediate poetic
derivations”;13 a poet who, we are told by critic after critic, participates
in no recognizable literary tradition; a poet who stands in relation to
nothing outside of herself, devoid of all historical consciousness; a poet

whose “greatest poetry does not deal directly with the major myths of
our culture.”14

It is not, in the view of these critics, simply a matter of Moore’s
choosing not to “deal directly with the major myths of our culture.”
Indeed, Blackmur contends (and his arguments are representative) that
Moore’s poetic “method” positively disallows her doing so—and since
“method” is an expression of “sensibility,” it follows that it is Moore’s
limited sensibility which ultimately prevents her becoming a major
poet. From what he calls “the astonishing fact that none of Miss
Moore’s poems attempts to be major poetry” Blackmur goes on to argue

she is content with smallness in fact so long as it suggests the
great by implication. Major themes are not susceptible of expres-

sion through a method of which it is the virtue to produce the
idosyncratic in the fine and strict sense of the word. Major
themes, by definition of general and predominant interest, re-
quire for expression a method which produces the general not in
terms of the idiosyncratic but the specific, and require, too, a
form which serves to contain even more than to imply the whole-
ness beneath.15

It is a measure of the state of scholarship and criticism as they
pertain to Marianne Moore that no one, in the nearly half a century
which has passed since Blackmur wrote in response to Moore’s Selected
Poems (and to the prefatory essay by Eliot), has offered a serious
challenge either to his logic or to his conclusions. Instead, his
arguments—together with Eliot’s statement that Moore “has no im-
mediate poetic derivations” and his classification of her work as
primarily “descriptive”16—have become the fundamental tenets, the
unexamined axioms upon which criticism still relies. But criticism based
on such premises cannot hope either to understand Moore’s poems in
any fully satisfying way or to assess her place in the history of modern
American poetry with any accuracy.

The poems I shall be discussing here in an attempt to do both those
things are “Half Deity” (January, 1935); “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myr-
tle” (October, 1935); “Virginia Britannia” (December, 1935); and “Bird
Witted” (January, 1936).17 I shall not be treating them in the order of
publication, however, but in the order Moore gave them in The Pango-
lin and Other Verse (1936), where they appear under the collective
heading, “The Old Dominion,” and are arranged as follows: “Virginia
Britannia,” “Bird Witted,” “Half Deity,” and “Smooth Gnarled Crape
Myrtle.”18 The order is highly significant: “The Old Dominion” is not a
loose grouping of poems, but rather a coherent sequence very much concerned with the "major themes" of which Blackmur speaks, and with what Costello calls "the major myths of our culture." The "myths" Moore evokes are those equating childhood with innocence and adulthood with the fall from innocence into experience, and those identifying America with the earthly Paradise and treating American history as another Fall or series of Falls, of repeated expulsions from the Garden and repeated attempts to regain the happy seat. ("The Pangolin," the only other poem in the collection, lacks this specifically American focus and so does not concern us here.)

"The Old Dominion" represents a critical juncture in Moore's career. Between 1915 and 1935, she is very much a "poet's poet," largely unknown outside the circle of those engaged in the writing and discussion of modernist poetry, and greatly admired within that circle by writers like Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Stevens.19 But with the outbreak of World War II in Europe, Moore becomes an increasingly public poet, and increasingly the public figure of a poet; by the end of her writing life in 1970, she has become—in the words of the English poet Charles Tomlinson, one of her ablest readers—"a kind of national poet."20 This transformation is the result of a major change in Moore's sense of her relationship both to the literary community and its traditions, and to the larger American community and its history. In the early years of her career, Moore stands—not altogether unhappily—apart from both communities; but in "The Old Dominion" sequence, and especially in "Virginia Britannia," she acknowledges for the first time her own anguished complicity in the processes which have given America its peculiar, complex historical shape. For Moore, however, history is a circular process of loss, and loss becomes increasingly intolerable as time goes on; as her sense of history gives way to a deepening nostalgia, her poems come to present a more and more simplified, sentimental account of America and its history, and of the poet's relationship to that history.

The history of Moore's revisions of "Virginia Britannia" itself exemplifies this process of simplification, as I shall demonstrate in comparing the original text with the final revision of 1951; the nostalgia which overpowers the late poems also weakens "Virginia Britannia" in revision, reducing the complex, ironic vision of the original to an impotent and pious hope. I begin with the closing stanza as originally printed in the English magazine Life and Letters Today in December 1935—a stanza which offers a direct challenge to the prevalent critical view of Moore. The stanza presents a highly detailed visual image of a landscape whose central figure, a child, is clearly identified, by an allusion to Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," as a figure for the innocence which cannot survive the advent of temporal and historical—and economic—consciousness:

The live-oak's moss-draped
undulating massiveness, the white
pine, the English hackberry—handsomest vis-
itor of all, the
cedar's etched solidity,
the cypress, lose identity
and are one tree, as
sunset flames increasingly
over the leaf-chis-
elled blackening ridge of green.
Expanding to
earth size, igniting redundantly
wind-widened clouds, it can
not move bothered-with-wages
new savages,
but gives the child an intimation
of what glory is.21

The allusion to Wordsworth is unusually direct for Moore, and it is certainly true, as Bonnie Costello says, that Moore "would never have used allusion . . . in this way" earlier in her career.22 Moore herself acknowledges as much in the following statement, excerpted from a lecture she prepared for delivery at Sarah Lawrence College in May, 1940:

I did not care to use the word "intimation" [she writes,] because it suggested to me Wordsworth's Ode, INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY and one naturally respects first rights, but after rejecting it a number of times, I still came back to it and felt I must, so I finally kept it. This in itself is of no importance, but it suggests to me what does seem to me important—that one must overcome a reluctance to be unoriginal and not be worried too much about possible comparisons and coincidences.23

The allusion is by no means accidental, then; nor is it incidental to the significance of the poem. It serves a number of crucial functions. First, it makes explicit acknowledgment of the influence exerted by Wordsworth's Ode upon the whole of "Virginia Britannia," and not just the final stanza. Second, it gives the final point to the carefully sustained analogy between the poet's deliberate, historically conscious construction of the poem and the equally deliberate and no less historically minded construction (by other hands) of the landscape with
which all the poems of “The Old Dominion” are concerned. For the landscape of Colonial Virginia is not a natural one: it is a human artifact, a carefully constructed, reconstructed, and preserved historical record. Finally, the allusion places “Virginia Britannia” in a complex and ironic relationship to the tradition of the Romantic ode, to which the other poems of the sequence belong as well.

The allusion to Wordsworth is crucial not only to a full reading of “Virginia Britannia” and “The Old Dominion,” but also, in a very real sense, to a reading of Moore’s career. As it develops through 1935–36, that career is best understood as a product of the tension between Moore’s powerful “restraint to be unoriginal”—a restraint which accounts, in large measure, for the apparent lacunae I began by cataloguing—and the desire to “overcome” it. The publishing history of “Virginia Britannia” encapsulates that struggle and its outcome: as the poet’s “restraint to be unoriginal” lessens, so the poem’s strength diminishes—a loss for which Moore attempts to compensate by rhetorical and quite conventional means.

Accordingly, the allusion to Wordsworth occupies a very different place in the final (1951) version of the closing stanza. Changes in grammar and syntax, and in the image itself, show a pronounced tendency toward simplification and abstraction, and the focus shifts away from the natural elements of the scene. The tone deepens, and the language becomes less concretely visual as the center of moral gravity is displaced—first onto the town, which does not figure at all in the original version, and finally onto the child:

The live oak’s darkening filigree
of undulating boughs, the etched
solidity of a cypress indivisible
from the now aged English hackberry,
become with lost identity,
part of the ground, as sunset flames increasingly
against the leaf-chiselled
blackening ridge of green; while clouds, expanding above
the town’s assertiveness, dwarf it, dwarf arrogance
that can misunderstand
importance; and
are to the child an intimation of what glory is.

Here the natural elements of the scene have been redispersed and altered in such a way as to deprive them of their power: what had been, in the original version, a force acting upon consciousness, has now become a fixed image upon which consciousness must work—if it can, that is. Why this should be in question will be clearer if we recall the original version for a moment. What counts there is what we see, and to begin with we see five trees, each firmly planted by the definite article. “The live-oak,” as it were, lends its “moss-draped/. . . massiveness” and its “undulating” motion to “the white/ pine” and “the English hackberry,” as “the cedar” imparts its own “etched solidity” to “the cypress,” so that each tree is a felt, substantial, and active presence. They “are one tree” by the time we raise our eyes to the sunset flaming “over the leaf-chis/ elled blackening ridge of green,” but we carry with us the after-image of each tree as a separate entity which persuades us both that something real is lost when all five “lose identity” before our eyes, and that something real is gained. The image of five trees becoming “one tree” has a dynamic strength which partakes of, and is greater than, that of any of the individual trees forming it.

The trees are brought together by that blazing sunset, the dominant element in the composition of the original stanza, and it is characteristic of Moore at her best that we should be made to feel its power most in a negative assertion:

Expanding to
earth size, igniting redundantly
wind-widened clouds, it can
not move bothered-with-wages
new savages,
but gives the child an intimation
of what glory is.

In the very movement back to earth, the lineation of the stanza discovers, against the pressure of its own expectancy, not what this splendid sunset can do, but what “it can/ not” do. This sudden negation, however, does not cancel the sunset’s power—for what “can/ not move bothered-with-wages/ new savages” nonetheless “gives the child an intimation of what glory is”—but rather marks the adults’ diminished capacity for response, a loss we share to the extent that we are more nearly kin to those “new savages” than we are to “the child.”

Moore’s confidence in our capacity for response has very nearly vanished by 1951, however, for in the revised text to which our attention now returns she exercises it on our behalf. What counts here is not so much what we see as what can be said of what is seen—and what can be seen in any case much less than it was. The number of trees has been reduced from five to three (the white pine and the cedar have been cut away), and the remaining trees have been substantially altered. The live-oak, for instance, has been etherialized: the “moss-draped/ undulating massiveness” has now lost not only its “moss” but all its
“mass” as well, and what we see now is a “darkening filigree/ of undulating boughs,” a delicate tracery of interwoven limbs. The previously unadorned “cypress,” moreover, has now taken to itself what had been “the/ cedar’s etched solidity,” so that we find ourselves considering “the etched/ solidity of a cypress.” Moore effects a further transformation here by transposing the modifying phrase and replacing the definite with the indefinite article, changes which effectively downplay the importance of the tree itself (and so lessen its “solidity”) while at the same time playing up, with the help of the new lineation, its appearance as an “etched” figure—a work of art in two, not three dimensions. Also, the line that names the cypress also moves us quickly past it, leading us to regard the tree not in itself but as part of a larger image consisting of “the etched/ solidity of a cypress indivisible/ from the now aged English hackberry.” And even the hackberry, formerly the “handsomest vis- a-iter of all,” seems less substantial here than it does in the opening stanza of the poem, where a similar construction makes it an image of stately magnificence: “The now tremendous vine-encompassed hackberry/ starred with the ivy flower,/ shades the church tower.”

The trees seem nearly to disappear behind their attributes in this final version: no longer discrete entities that “lose identity” in coming together, they are treated now as subordinate elements of a scene already composed—a scene, moreover, to which their “identity” has already been “lost.” They are central to the scene which is in process of forming itself throughout the original version of the stanza, but they are no longer so: they simply “become with lost identity./ part of the ground” (my italics), and serve as backdrop to a drama which has nothing to do with them. Nor is this the Wordsworthian drama of the sunset which dominates the last ten lines of the original version, fusing the five trees into one, “igniting” the clouds, and working on the spirit of the child. For in the revised text, the sunset has been reduced to little more than a brief, dazzling spectacle. Though it now “flames against” the “blackening ridge of green” instead of simply rising “over” it as before, the dynamic of opposition implied by the changed preposition is evident only in this single moment. The sunset no longer “Expand[s],” it no longer “ignites,” the clouds, and it now “gives” no more to “the child” than it does in the original version to the adult figures whom “it can/ not move.” The significant action—and indeed significance itself—appears to have been removed from the sunset to the clouds: “expanding above/ the town’s assertiveness,” they dwarf it, dwarf arrogance that can misunderstand importance; and are to the child an intimation of what glory is.

But in fact the clouds, no less than the sunset, have been rendered symbolically inert.

We might describe what happens by saying that for all the delicately “etched” pictorial quality of the stanza thus far, Moore’s visual thinking fails her when she needs it most. Because the figures of the trees which she has begun by drawing in have “lost identity” and become “part of the ground,” they are blotted out—as the sunset itself is virtually overshadowed—by the sudden “assertiveness” of a new element in the composition. The town does not figure at all in the original version of the stanza, as I have said; but now it has taken over entirely, occupying the whole field of the poet’s vision and subsuming the “bothered-with-wages/ new savages” into itself so completely that they no longer appear as discernible figures in the landscape. Like the trees, then, the “new savages” have “lost” their “identity,” and the poem suffers for it.

Importing the “black savage” as a slave, killing off those other “savages” who were “subject to the/ deer-fur crown” of the Indian chieftain We-re-wo-co-mo-co—in “colonizing as we say,” the original settlers of Virginia “were not all intel-/ lect and delicacy,” but their heirs are “new savages” in their own right. Their status is doubly ironic because they are not the backwoods louts of Crévecoeur’s “What Is an American?” (1782)—men and women who, in the dangerously “unlimited freedom of the woods,” slough off the restraining and civilizing influence of the agrarian settlements and, “degenerat[ing] altogether into the hunting state,” become “both Europeans and new made Indians,” with “the vices of both” and the virtues of neither. Moore’s “new savages” are the nearest thing America has to an aristocracy: direct descendants of those who made Jamestown a place of elegant refinement, they count among their number the present

mistress of French plum-and-turquoise-
piped chaise-longue; of brass-knobbed slat front door and everywhere open shaded house on Indian named Virginian
streams, in counties named for English lords!
Moore's revision blunts the sharp historical irony of the original version against her monolithic vision of "the town's assertiveness"—a change emblematic of the shift in her thinking over the years since 1935, for increasingly she has come to identify the city as an agent of moral decay. And it is "the town's assertiveness," both visual and verbal, that drives Moore now to the rhetorical "assertiveness" of a repetition that cannot "dwarf" the town as the poem says the clouds do, but in fact does just the opposite. Forcing us to dwell on the twinned "assertiveness" and "arrogance" of the town, the repetition confirms its "importance" even in the attempt to deny it, thus establishing the town's presence all the more firmly.

Marie Borroff argues that the repetition of "dwarf" marks the upward limit of the poem's rhetorical movement; after this point, she says,

the rhetorical intensity of the [stanza] diminishes noticeably.... The ... description of arrogant behavior as capable of "misunderstanding importance" is surely a charitable understatement for [the] centuries of exploitation and prejudice [with which the preceding stanzas are concerned]. Even the allusion to Wordsworth comes wrapped in a prosy syntax.... The sunset continues to flame as the last words of the poem are spoken, but the colors of the language have faded.26

Borroff does not take the earlier version of the stanza into account, however, and what we hear when we measure the final text against the original is not a diminishing of "rhetorical intensity" at all, but rather a deliberate elevation of tone. Combining the two sentences of the original version into one, eliminating many of the more awkward syntactic constructions—and many of the harsher consonants with them—Moore's revisions give more prominence to the quiet vocalic modulations which take us from "oak" to "boughs" to "now," from "now" to "ground" to "town's," and finally to "glory." Even the sibilants are softer, at least until we come to the sudden harshness of "the town's assertiveness" and its "arrogance/ that can misunderstand/ importance."

Not only this deliberate heightening of tone, but also the repetition of "dwarf" which contributes to it and the very slight downward modulation following that repetition, may be explained in part as the result of Moore's effort to "overcome [her] reluctance to be unoriginal." The effect of the revisions I have been describing is to bring the tone of the stanza as a whole more nearly into harmony with that of the final strophe of Wordsworth's Immortality Ode. Here, too, a repetition drives the poem toward closure:

The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet;
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.27

The last two lines are quieter than the pair immediately preceding them, but there is no lessening of intensity; if there were, the poem would have failed. The repetition of "Thanks" quickens our reading; the quietness of the following lines slows it again, making us feel the emotional pressure which has been accumulating throughout the strophe much as stepping on the brake makes us feel the weight of the car. Moore's closing lines work in a similar way: the speed built up by the repeated "dwarf" is checked by the percussives and sibilants—and the brevity—of the following lines. We feel the fury with which Moore excoriates "arrogance/ that can misunderstand/ importance," and then the poem moves on, consonants softening and vowels lengthening, to discover with Wordsworth that the clouds "are to the child an intimation of what glory is."

But the similarity of Moore's tone to Wordsworth's both masks and compensates for what is now an evident dissimilarity of conception, for there is a different, more powerful harmony at work in the original version of "Virginia Britannia." There, the natural world is an active force which gives the child an intimation/ of what glory is," just as, for Wordsworth, "the meanest flower ... can give/ Thoughts that ... lie too deep for tears." Wordsworth has only "relinquished one delight/ to live beneath the more habitual sway" of "Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves" (11. 190–91, 187), but these are precisely the "delights" which Moore has relinquished. Now that the town has imposed itself on the scene, the "sway" of nature can no longer be said to be "habitual." The natural elements of the landscape have lost their power to act, and consciousness must therefore assume the burden of acting on them if they are to retain their significance. But the consciousness upon which that burden falls cannot bear the weight: the Wordsworthian "child" is by definition incapable of the sort of conscious recognition which the stanza now requires of her.

The stubborn assertiveness of the town's presence destroys the visual logic of the stanza and threatens its visionary conclusion as well.
No “intimation” will be vouchsafed if the “clouds” are obscured; but there is nothing left to look at except the town. The only way to avoid being entirely thwarted by its “assertiveness,” therefore, the only way to secure the “intimation” upon which the poem depends, is to avoid looking. Moore accomplishes this by redefining “the town’s assertiveness” in abstract moral terms, as a manifestation of “arrogance.” She thus removes it from the visual plane in which it is now the dominant feature, to the safer plane of thought; but this critical transposition puts the very existence of “the child” in jeopardy.

In the original version, the logic by which Moore arrives at the vision of the child is both visual and syntactic. The gaze travels upward from the trees to the “leaf-chiselled blackening ridge of green,” and on into the sky, where it finds the sunset “Expanding to/earth size” and “igniting redundantly/ wind-widened clouds.” Having widened the scope of vision as far as possible, it is visually and pictorially natural that the poet should now contract it, and the transitive movement of the sentence provides the means of doing so. The sunset itself, in its inability as grammatical agent to “move bothered-with-wages/new savages,” brings the poem back to earth and forces vision to adjust to the human scale. At the same time, the antithetical structure of the sentence makes possible the further narrowing of focus by which the poet finds the child: the sunset “can not move bothered-with-wages/new savages./ but gives the child an intimation.”

In the final version, however, there is no way at all, visually speaking, to the child. The poem must come to a full stop, then resort to the crudest of conjunctions and the weakest of verbs:

- clouds, expanding above
- the town’s assertiveness, dwarf it, dwarf arrogance
- that can misunderstand
- importance; and
- are to the child an intimation of what glory is.

These lines claim for the clouds a mastery over human assertion that the earlier version does not grant to the sunset, the limits of whose revelatory power are reached in and defined by its failure to “move” the adults. Despite that failure, however, the sunset retains sufficient force to bring the child into harmony with nature, “igniting” the clouds and inspiring the child in the same extended movement. The effort in the final version is rhetorically to suggest the same continuity of vision and action, and so to imply a similar consanguinity between the child and the landscape; but the effort is belied by the interruption of the sentence and, more importantly, by the shift from the transitive

“dwarf” which precedes the semicolon to the intransitive “are” which follows it. The poet’s effort to overcome “the town’s assertiveness” by making the “clouds . . . dwarf it” has instead rendered the clouds, and by extension the whole of nature, inert: they do not act upon the child at all, and cannot, of themselves, yield up their significance. The poet must therefore tell us what they “are.” Abandoning the visual in an attempt to save the visionary, Moore has been forced to substitute for the authority of her own vision that of a more nearly Wordsworthian tone of voice; in doing so, however, she denies the intimation upon which the poem is founded and by which it must prove itself.

The original version anticipates and justifies the introduction of the child by focusing first upon the adults who are presumably her parents and their fellows, and to whom, in turn, according to the Wordsworthian conception, “The child is father”—though we should say “mother” here. To be “bothered-with-wages” as these “new savages” are is to be opposed to the process by which the child gains “an intimation of what glory is,” but it is not necessarily to oppose that process knowingly. It is, if anything, to be wholly oblivious to the transaction, as the child herself is ignorant (intellectually, at least) of the operations of nature upon her spirit. The relationship between the enlightened child and the financially embarrassed “new savages” is not antagonistic, then, nor—since both occupy the same stage at the same time—is it mutually exclusive: it is, rather, mutually generative. The child is mother of the woman, and the woman into whom the child has grown, though unable fully to apprehend the “glory” to which the child is privy, engenders in her turn the child to whom such an “intimation” may be given. The one requires the other; the presence of the child is authenticated for us because we know where she has come from and what she must become. Similarly, the “intimation” rings true not only because we know it to be necessarily transitory, but also because the word itself tells us that whatever the immediacy of the child’s experience, it is for the poet who employs it with such knowing precision no more and no less than a memory. In this, too, Moore’s original conception accords with that of Wordsworth’s Ode. The world is beautiful, says Wordsworth, “The sunshine is a glorious birth;/ And yet I know, where’er I go/ That there hath past away a glory from the earth.” (11.16–18).

The final version of Moore’s closing stanza, however, brings the child prematurely into the world, removing her from the generative relations she enjoys in the original text. Without parental figures to justify her presence, there is nothing to engender the child but the
pressure of the poet’s voice, acceding to the need for a vision to counter “the town’s assertiveness” and urged by the memory of Wordsworth. For if in the Immortality Ode we enter the world “Not in entire forgetfulness/. and not in utter nakedness/” But trailing clouds of glory” (11. 62–64), in “Virginia Britannia” both “glory” and “the child” herself are mere cloud-born memories. The poet must tell us what the cloud “are to the child” because the world as it is can “give” nothing (nothing but impetus, that is) to our already-formed memory of the world as it was; but in doing so she breaks the circuit which, in the earlier version, binds the child to nature, and substitutes for it a bond between herself and the child as joint interpreters of the world. Bringing the child into the sphere she inhabits—a sphere in which such experiences as the child’s are impossible—the poet imposes on her the burden of her own conscious antagonism to the world, forces the child to join her in crying out against “arrogance.” Thus pitted against “the town’s assertiveness,” the child is simply dwarfed, rendered as inert as the clouds; the “intimation” of “glory” has been reduced to a pious wish.

Ironically, that reduction is most tellingly revealed by the very fact that the word itself has been removed from its original place at the end of the penultimate line and repositioned at the center of what is now the final line. This might be construed as an indication that Moore’s struggle against her own “reluctance to be unoriginal” is over at last—that her memory of Wordsworth has by now been so comfortably assimilated that the word “intimation” may be accorded the central position it deserves. But in fact the opposite is true. Moore has had to interrupt the movement of the sentence in order to turn it away from the “arrogance” of the town toward the child; and in order to tell us what the clouds “are to the child” she has had to confute the child’s experience with her own memory. What the repositioning of the word “intimation” intimates most clearly, then, is Moore’s failure to maintain the fine, edgy balance—so nicely registered in the way the word had originally been poised—between her own articulate and historical knowledge and what Donald Wesley calls in Wordsworth and the Adequacy of Landscape the child’s “wordless unity with the forms of nature.”

“Our birth,” says Wordsworth, “is a sleep and a forgetting” (1. 58)—though our “forgetfulness” is not “entire”: we are born “trailing clouds of glory” From God, who is our home.” The child does possess a kind of memory; but her memory is not to be confused with the worldly knowledge that allows the poet to recognize “the town’s assertiveness” as a manifestation of “arrogance”—a spiritual debility of which the child is (as yet) innocent. We must bear in mind especially that while the child’s silent receptivity to intimations depends upon her innate, rudimentary memory of “home,” that memory has nothing to do with time. It is rather our assurance that the child is innocent of the historical consciousness that not only determines the poet’s use of the word “intimation” to name an experience of which the child cannot speak, but also informs the whole of “Virginia Britannia” and “The Old Dominion” sequence.

In order to show how the presentation of landscape in “Virginia Britannia” is shaped by Moore’s sense of the historical forces at work in the formation of the landscape itself, I want to begin by setting that landscape against that of an earlier attempt to characterize the American Scene. That attempt occurs in “England,” published in The Dial in April, 1920. I quote the first sentence, which seems endlessly ramifying.

ENGLAND

with its baby rivers and little towns, each with its abbey or its cathedral;
with voices—one voice, perhaps, echoing through the transept—the criterion of suitability and convenience; and Italy with its equal shores—contriving an epicureanism from which the grossness has been

extracted: and Greece with its goats and its gourds, the nest of modified illusions:
and France, the “chrysalis of the nocturnal butterfly” in whose products, mystery of construction diverts one from what was originally one’s object—substance at the core: and the East with its snails, its emotional shorthand and jade cockroaches, its rock crystal and its imper-turbability, all of museum quality: and...

And so, finally, we arrive in America where there
is the little old ramshackle victoria in the south, where cigars are smoked on the street in the north, where there are no proof-readers, no silkworms, no digressions;
the wild man's land; grassless, links-less, language-less country—in which letters are written not in Spanish, not in Greek, not in Latin, not in shorthand but in plain American which cats and dogs can read!" To land in such a place is to land in the middle of a parody of what is already parody. For this place, this America "where there are no proof-readers, no silk-worms, no digressions," this "grassless, links-less, language-less country," is Moore's answer to Henry James's celebrated catalogue of those crucial "items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are missing from the texture of American life." There is, says James in his study of Hawthorne, No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot. In granting to "each" of England's "little towns . . . its abbey or its cathedral," Moore seems to grant James's argument as well—especially as she makes her own contribution to his list of "absent things." By the end of the poem, though, she has managed to turn the Jamesian tables: in effect she accuses him of having "misapprehended the matter" of America's true cultural condition because he has assumed that "high civilization" must exist in America "as it exists in other countries," and has therefore sought only the conventional signs, the visible "flower and fruit of all that . . . superi-ority" which he has "noted" so readily in England and on the Continent. "To have misapprehended the matter," however, "is to have confessed/ that one has not looked far enough"—a sin in Moore's book, as in James's. It may well be that "one" has not, in one's American travels, "stumbled upon" such proofs of "high civilization" as "The sublimated wisdom/ of China, Egyptian discernment, the cataclysmic torrent of emotion compressed/ in the verbs of the Hebrew language"; but, Moore demands, "must one/ therefore imagine/ that it is not there?" Civilization and superiority, she reminds us tartly, have "never been confined to one locality." Moore expects her readers to possess, and to exercise, enough imagination and sufficient wit to recognize in "England" itself the evidence of America's ability to produce its own "items of high civilization"—a recognition requiring both imagination and wit because, as the form of "England" attests, civilization in America does not take the forms by which it is known "in other countries."

"Virginia Britannia," like "England," examines the question of what we bring to the vision of America, but it poses the question in a very different way. Here, too, we approach America from the vantage point of the early settlers and the subsequent travelers whose negative visions James's parody both reinforces and deprecates: we approach from the sea, and from the past. But we arrive at a very different place from the America of "England": we begin where

Pale sand edges England's old dominion. The air is soft, warm, hot, above the cedar-dotted emerald shore known to the redbird, the redecoated musketeer, the trumpet-flower, the cavalier, the parson, and the wild parishioner. A deer-track in a church-floor brick and Sir George Yeardley's coffin-tacks and tomb remain. The now tremendous vine-encompassed hackberry starred with the ivy-flower, shades the church tower. And "a great sinner lyeth here" under the sycamore.

This looks like a conventional landscape—but not like a conventional American landscape. "Virginia Britannia" makes landfall in what should, by long-standing convention, be an empty new world in which the sights offered to the eye are instantly overwhelmed by the traveler's memory of what is not there, of what he has left at home, as in Bradford's account of the Pilgrims' arrival on Cape Cod:

Being thus passed ye vaste ocean . . . they had now no friends to welcome them, nor inns to entertaine or refresh their weather beaten bodys, no houses or much less townes to repaire too, to seeke for succoure. It is recorded in scripture as a mercie to ye apostle & his shipwrecked company, yt the barbarians shewed no smale kindnes in refreshing them, but these savage barbarians . . . were readier to fill their sids full of arrows . . . Besids, what could they see but a hideous & desolate wildernes, full of wild beasts & wille men? . . . which may soever they turnd their eyes (save upward to ye heavens) they could have little solace or content in respecte of any outward objects. For . . . all things
There are those who ... maintain that American scenery possesses little that is interesting or truly beautiful ... that being destitute of those vestiges of antiquity whose associations so strongly affect the mind, it may not be compared with European scenery. ... But I would have it remembered that nature has shed over this land beauty and magnificence, and although the character of the scenery may differ from the old world's, yet inferiority must not therefore be inferred; for though American scenery is destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European, still it has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe.35

Cole's most ambitious series of paintings, The Course of Empire (1836), reveals a double preoccupation with "American scenery" and the missing "vestiges of antiquity" which, like Irving, Cole feels impelled to supply. He superimposes on the "glorious" features of the American landscape a set of bizarre buildings, each of which borrows different elements from different European and classical models, somewhat in the manner of the "composite" architecture of Fenimore Cooper's Templeton;36 successive paintings show these buildings (and the civilization they represent) in progressive stages of decay, until at last there is nothing left but mouldering ruins.37

Cooper himself displays a certain desperate ingenuity in his effort to discover traces of "antiquity" even in the fastnesses of the American wilderness. The Last of the Mohicans—on which Cole based several paintings—was composed in 1826, but it is set in 1757, early in the French and Indian Wars which make up part of the prehistory of the United States. Setting the novel in the comparatively remote American past, Cooper solves part of the problem of furnishing himself with a history whose forces are still at work; but at the same time he creates a further difficulty for himself: the landscape in which the action is staged is even less settled than that of Cooper's own day, and therefore even less likely to afford objects of archaeological interest. Cooper's solution can hardly help seeming ludicrous, but in its way it works: he has Leatherstocking lead a bewildered group of settlement-dwellers past the decaying remains of a wooden hut built by Leatherstocking himself during a previous campaign:

The recollection of the scout did not deceive him. ... he entered an open space ... which was crowned by the decayed blockhouse in question. This rude and neglected building was one of those deserted works, which, having been thrown up in an emergency, had been abandoned with the disappearance of danger, and was now quietly crumbling in the solitude of the forest, neglected, and nearly forgotten, like the circumstances...
which had caused it to be reared. Such memorials of the passage
and struggles of man are yet frequent throughout the broad
barrier of wilderness which once separated the hostile provinces,
and form a species of ruins that are intimately associated
with the recollections of colonial history, and which are in appropriate
keeping with the gloomy character of the surrounding scen-
cery. 38

Moore has no need for such desperate contrivances, no need to
fabricate the "vestiges of antiquity" on which her predecessors de-
manded so heavily and whose absence they felt so keenly. Someone has
already done it for her—someone who, like Bradford and Irving and
Cole and Cooper, had evidently found the landscape of the New World
too starkly "destitute" of historical markers for comfort. The result is
that in the opening stanza of "Virginia Britannia" we find ourselves in a
"known" landscape whose elements are familiar and firmly fixed, a
landscape in which we are comfortable because we know, or think we
know, what to think and how to respond. For this is so much a "typical
ivied-bower-and-ruined-tower churchyard," as Moore later called it, 39
that we half expect to hear how

. . . . from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
  The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as, wand'ring near her secret bower,
  Molest her ancient solitary reign. 40

But the ease with which this setting can be accommodated to such
well-"known" landscapes as that of Gray's Elegy is deceptive. We do not
in fact hear "The moping owl," and though the resemblance is very
close it is not quite perfect:

. . . . The Old Dominion has
  all-green grass-hoppers
  in all-green, box-sculptured grounds;
  an almost English green surrounds
  them. . . .

The landscape has been carefully "boxed" and "sculptured" to look
"almost English"; but we find as the stanza continues that the diligence
with which the resemblance is pursued tends only to the discovery of
difference. Thus

. . . . Care has formed, a-
mong un-English insect sounds,
  the white wall-rose. As
  thick as Daniel Boone's grape-
vine, the stem has
  wide-spaced great blunt alternating os-
trich-skin warts that were thorns. . . .

MOORE AS (NATURAL) HISTORIAN

Set "a/- mong unEnglish insect sounds,/ the white wall-rose" falls a
little too heavily on the ear: the carefully modulated but decidedly
"unEnglish" prosody, spreading an iambic pentameter across three
lines, leads us straight into the "white wall" of a trochee and comes to a
deal halt. The plant strikes the eye awkwardly as well, for "the white
wall-rose" is no delicate English bloom: as if the soil of this "Rare
unscent- ed, provident- ly hot, too sweet, inconsistent flower- bed"
were too rich for it, it has grown unchecked into an American gro-
tesque, with a "stem" as "thick as Daniel Boone's grape- vine" and
covered with ugly "warts."

Whoever the gardener may have been, he was no American Adam
planting his garden in all innocence, and "the white wall-rose" bears the
scars of its troubled origin in its very grotesqueness. The "wide-spaced
great blunt alternating os- trich-skin warts that were thorns" are, in
effect, the heraldic marks of its lineage: they place it in the direct line
of descent from that "able/ sting-ray-hampered pioneer," the
"incessantly/ exciting Captain Smith" who, "with ostrich, Latin motto/
and small gold horseshoe" for his coat of "arms," explored and mapped
and fought—and wrote—not only for England's sake but for his own
glory and profit as well. But the anonymous gardener may have had
other concerns than money and fame: besides building "the white
wall-rose," and the "walls of yew" which have been "formed" as barriers
against what "Jamestown was," we must now begin to penetrate the
text. and to that end we are peremptorily directed to

Observe the terse Virginian,
the mottlesome gray one that drives the
owl from tree to tree and imitates the call
of whippoorwill or
lard or katydid—the lead-
grey lead-legged mocking-bird with head
held half away, and
meditative eye as dead
as sculptured marble
eyes. Alighting noiseless-
yly it muses
in the semi-sun, on tall thin legs,
as if it did not see,
still standing there alone
on the round stone-
topped table with lead cupids grouped to
form the pedestal.

Moore's treatment of the mocking-bird here, and the even more
extensive treatment it receives in "Bird Witted," make it the central
figure of “The Old Dominion” sequence, and its significance is manifold. Driving the “owl from tree to tree” without giving it a chance to “complain,” the mocking-bird evokes the memory of Gray’s Elegy in the very act of dispelling it, and so ambiguously ushers in the new era: “still standing there alone/ on the round stone-/ topped table,” the mocking-bird—not an English import like “the white wall-rose” but a native “Virginian”—persists in sole possession of the field, signaling the end of England’s “ancient solitary reign” over her “old/ dominion.” (Later on the poem will remind us that “The rattlesnake soon/ said from our once dashing/ undiffident first flag, ‘don’t tread on me.’”)

But even as the indigenous figure of the mocking-bird enters the arena to “drive” off the foreign invader, it is apparently possessed by the very forces which have already “formed” the scene with such “Care.” For just as “The Old Dominion has . . . all-green, box-sculptured grounds,” so the mocking-bird has a “meditative eye as dead/ as sculptured marble/ eyes,” and by the end of the stanza it has become—to all appearances, anyway—a leaden statue upon a “stone/- topped table with lead cupids grouped to/ form the pedestal.” Like the trees in the final version of the poem’s closing stanza, the mocking-bird seems to have been subordinated to an image which has already been composed, and whose completion has depended only upon the presence of the bird itself. The bird has succeeded in displacing a specific intruder, but it cannot undo that intruder’s previous work.

Or at least it cannot undo that work entirely; but it may alter, or even perhaps pervert, its effects. For we may “Observe” of the mocking-bird what we “Observe” when, in the Immortality Ode, Wordsworth instructs us to “Behold the Child, among his new-born blisses”—that it seems “As if [its] whole vocation/ Were endless imitation” (I.85, 106–07). As though the bird had no “vocation,” no “call” of its own, it “imitates the call/ of whippoorwill or/ lark or kathidy.” But it is “As if” the “whole vocation” of Jamestown, too, had been “endless imitation,” for we have seen with what painstaking “Care” those “new-born” Americans “formed” the Virginia landscape in the image of the English one they had left behind. There are, then, two quite distinct mimetic projects going on simultaneously in this stanza, projects which proceed from very different and indeed conflicting motives—though as Moore writes in “Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns” (1924), they may “be combined in concert such/ that when they do agree, their unanimity is great.”14 The Jamestown settlers imitate the forms of home in order to reduce what they can only regard as foreign elements (which is to say, native ones) to familiar terms; they are like the Puritans of Williams’ “The American Background” (1934), who saw birds with rusty breasts and called them robins . . . . But at a cost. For they were not robins.”12

By contrast, the mocking-bird “imitates the call” of other creatures not in order to assimilate them more comfortably but rather in order to “drive” its enemies away and to establish its own “dominion.” “Virginia Britannia” thus confronts us, in the figure of the mocking-bird, with the possibility that what is most distinctively “American” in American art—whether it be the art of landscape or of poetry—may be precisely that “endless” capacity for “imitation” which has so often been denounced, by writers from Poe and Emerson to Williams and even Pound, as a foreign habit detrimental to American expression. The figure of the mocking-bird suggests that mimesis is a native—indeed an instinctive—tendency. But its name implies that American mimesis must take a specific form. In order to guard against the deadening effects of mere slavish imitation, of foreign “dominion,” it must turn to parody.

Moore writes in “A Grave” (1921) that “repression is not the most obvious characteristic of the sea.”13 and we may say with equal assurance that imitation “is not the most obvious characteristic” of her work. This is hardly surprising, given the original strength of her “reluctance to be unoriginal”; but just as “repression” is a hidden characteristic of the sea, so a concern with imitation is a latent feature of Moore’s work from the beginning of her career, and, as the following brief survey will indicate, it comes closer and closer to the surface as time goes on.

In her first published essay, “The Accented Syllable” (October, 1916), Moore offers implicit justification for her own increasingly sophisticated use of syllabic verse, arguing that it is virtually impossible to establish or maintain “a distinctive voice of voice” in any other medium. Prose is unacceptable because it has no defense against accidental resemblances: “written tones of voice may resemble one another and . . . a distinctive tone of voice employed by one author may resemble that same tone of voice as employed by another author.”14 Rhymed verse, as Moore calls conventional accentual-syllabic verse, is equally unpromising, because in this “case . . . a distinctive tone of voice is dependent on naturalistic effects, and naturalistic effects are so rare in rhyme as almost not to exist.”15 Worst of all, though, is “free verse,” which not only tends naturally toward mimesis but actually encourages deliberate imitation: “So far as free verse is concerned,” Moore writes, “it is the easiest thing in the world to create one intonation in the image
of another until finally one has assembled a bouquet of vocal exclamation points." 46 Nowhere does she say explicitly that syllabic verse is for her the only satisfactory solution to the problem of distinctiveness, but a careful look at her earlier poems indicates quite clearly that her syllabic patterns give formal expression to what she calls in "Critics and Connoisseurs" (July, 1916) "an attitude of self-defense," 47 enabling her to resist the temptation to do the "easiest thing" by preventing her from creating one intonation in the image of another. 8

The real problem is to prevent herself from becoming the mere reflected image of another poet, as we see in the early poem "Blake," which I give in its entirety:

I wonder if you feel as you look at us,
As if you were seeing yourself in a mirror at the end
of a long corridor—walking frailly.
I am sure that we feel as we look at you,
As if we were ambiguous and all but improbable.
Reflections of the sun—shining palely. 48

Blake, as Moore acknowledges in a letter to Pound four years later, is among "the direct influences bearing on [her] work"; 49 here, though, she sees herself as a pale, attenuated image of him, a distant "mirror" or satellite whose poems shine as "ambiguous and all but improbable/Reflections" of his "sun."

Moore often uses words associated with light or the sun to designate writers to whom she ascribes both literary mastery and the possession of a visionary power; but her response to that light is deeply ambivalent. In a poem called "You Are Like the Realistic Product of an Idealistic Search for Gold at the Foot of the Rainbow" (later re-titled "To a Chameleon"), published in May, 1916, she praises the chameleon for its ability to conceal itself by absorbing light. 50 But it is not always desirable to "snap the spectrum up for food" as the chameleon does: a poem originally drafted in 1915 and published in 1924 presents the sun as a piercing force to be resisted by "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish," and here she celebrates "that/ spectacular and nimble animal the fish/whose scales turn aside the sun’s sword with their polish." 51

Before 1921, it is far more common to find her trying actively to resist penetration by the light than to find her seeing, chameleon-like, to absorb it. In "Black Earth" (April, 1918), the poet "inhabit[s] an elephant skin... fibred over like the shell of/ The coco-nut, [a] piece of black glass through which no light/ Can filter." Her pride in her imperviousness is matched by a somewhat envious scorn for the human

"Tree trunk without/ Roots," whom she images as the "Spiritual/ Brother to the coral/ Plant, absorbed into which, the equable sapphire light/ Becomes a nebulous green." 52 A few months later, in "The Fish" (August, 1918), resistance continues, but "the submerged shafts of the/ Sun, spilt like spun/Glass," have managed to penetrate the "black jade" of the ocean's surface, with devastating results: the light reveals a "turquoise sea/ Of bodies." 53

By the time "Picking and Choosing" appears in April, 1920, Moore has concluded that "the opaque allusion—the simulated flight/ upward—accomplishes nothing," 54 that continued resistance to the "sun’s sword" is both futile and wrong. Thus in "When I Buy Pictures" (July, 1921), she proposes a new set of criteria for the successful work of art:

It comes to this: of whatever sort it is,
it must acknowledge the forces which have made it;
it must be "lit with piercing glances into the life of things;"
then I "take it in hand as a savage would take a looking-glass." 55

Rather than resist penetration by the light, the poem must now "be 'lit with piercing glances into the life of things,'" and this requirement has a twofold bearing on Moore's poetic practice. It means incorporating a larger number of quotations into the poems (as rays of light which also serve to "acknowledge the forces" to which the poem is indebted); and it means abandoning the syllabic patterns on which Moore has previously relied as barriers against the light. This is why the new poems which appear in various periodicals between July, 1921, and January, 1925, are in free verse—the very form Moore had rejected in 1916 on the grounds that she "herself to use it, "it would be the easiest thing in the world to create one intonation in the image of another." 56

And this is precisely what she does in the closing lines of "Novices" (February, 1923), where a group of young writers, suavely ignorant of the true nature of their craft, are

"split like a glass against a wall"
in this "precipitate of dazzling impressions,
the spontaneous unforced passion of the Hebrew language—an abyss of verbs full of reverberation and tempestuous energy,"
in which action perpetuates action and angle is at variance with angle
till submerged by the general action;
obscured by fathomless suggestions of colour,
by incessantly panting lines of green, white with concision,
in this drama of water against rocks—this "ocean of hurrying consonants"
MOORE AS (NATURAL) HISTORIAN

It is no accident that “Bird-Witted” takes its title from the writings of Sir Francis Bacon, whom Moore admired both as a literary stylist and as a scientist credited with a major role in the development of modern scientific methods based on careful, empirical observation of natural phenomenon—a development which coincides with the settling of Virginia in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The poem invites us once more to “Observe the terse Virginian,” the mocking-bird to which we are introduced in the fourth stanza of “Virginia Britannia,” and to do so with an exact and scrupulous eye; we are no longer to “Behold” it as a static image, as we do in “Virginia Britannia” and in the case of Wordsworth’s “child,” that “six months darling of a pigmy size!” The invitation here is implicit: instead of being commanded to “Observe,” we are shown a triad of young mocking-birds awaiting their mother at feeding-time. The careful observation of this family of birds in action gives an ironic twist, however, to Bacon’s concern over what might happen “If a boy be bird-witted.” For Moore is interested not only in the empty-headedness of the young (whose sex is of no concern to the poem) but also in the mother-wit of the adult female who has to feed and protect them.

With innocent wide pigeon eyes, three
grown fledgling mocking-birds below
the pussy-willow tree,
stand in a row,
wings touching, feebly solemn,
till they see
their no longer larger
mother bringing
something which will partially
feed one of them.

The youth of these three birds is crucial: the first thing we learn about them is that their “eyes” are “innocent”—innocent, it will turn out, of that power of observation which would enable them to identify their enemies, and of the capacity for imitation which their mother possesses (though she does not exercise it here), and which depends in turn upon accurate observation.

The young birds are evidently capable of recognizing their mother, but the poet’s powers of observation are considerably sharper. As Hugh Kenner has noted, the cries of the “fledgling mocking-birds” are caught in the reiterated double-or’s of the stanza, though for a moment their cry is muted to the final syllable of ‘partially’ “when they see” their mother coming with food. As the feeding begins, their voices are “raised with a new urgency” in the rhyming “squeak” and “meek”

with its “great livid stains like long slabs of green marble,” its “flashing lances of perpendicular lighting” and “molten fires swallowed up,” “with foam on its barriers,” “crashing itself out in one long hiss of spray.”

What we see here is not only a series of quotations joined together to form a composite image of the sea in motion; it is also an effort to “create one intonation in the image of another.” The quotations have been carefully arranged so as to replicate, as nearly as possible, the rhythmic effects described in George Adam Smith’s analysis of Isaiah 17: 12–13. Smith writes in The Expositor’s Bible:

The phonetics of the passage are wonderful. The general impression is that of a stormy ocean booming in to the shore and then crashing itself out into one long hiss of spray and foam upon its barriers. The details are noteworthy. In ver. 12 we have thirteen heavy M-sounds, besides two heavy B’s, to five N’s, five H’s, and four sibilants. But in ver. 13 the sibilants predominate; and before the sharp rebuke of the Lord the great, booming sound of ver. 12 scatters out into a long yish-sha ‘oon. The occasional use of a prolonged vowel amid so many hurrying consonants produces exactly the effect now of the lift of a storm swell out at sea and now the pause of a great wave before it crashes on the shore.

Returning to this passage two or three years after copying it into her reading notebook, Moore discovers in it the prescription for a rhythmic structure which may be filled out by words other than the original ones and adapted to the resources of a language other than the original Hebrew. And as we shall see, in “Bird-Witted” she adapts the principles discovered here to the resources of the syllabic patterns to which she had returned with the composition of “The Steeple-Jack” in 1932; and she will do so again later on, in translating The Fables of La Fontaine (1954)—the culminating product of her interest in literary mimesis.

After 1932, Moore’s syllabic patterns serve a significantly different function than formerly. They no longer work to secure the distinctiveness of Moore’s voice by inhibiting imitation. Instead, they work to celebrate and preserve, where possible, the innocence of the poems’ subjects—an innocence closely alloyed with the distinctiveness of the subjects themselves. Because the mode of these celebrations is mimetic, however, it has been too readily assumed by Moore’s critics that the poems take their own innocence—and Moore’s—for granted; but this is not the case.
and “beak” of the second stanza—decidedly unmusical sounds attesting to their inability to “imitate the call” of anything but broken machinery:

  Towards the high keyed intermittent squeak
  of broken carriage-springs, made by
  the three similar, meek-coated bird’s-eye
  freckled forms she comes; and when
  from the beak
  of one, the still living
  beetle has dropped
  out, she picks it up and puts
  it in again.

  This goes beyond careful attention to detail: as Kenner says, “there is affectionate mimesis in the awkward ‘dropped/ out’ and the businesslike ‘she picks it up and puts/ it in again.’”66 The poem is similarly mimetic when, at a crucial stage later on, it stumbles slightly, with one of the birds, then regains its footing and proceeds:

  A dangling foot that missed
  its grasp, is raised
  and finds the twig on which it
  planned to perch.

On a casual reading, it may seem that these birds are the objects of a scrupulously neutral (if sympathetic) attention, of the sort empiricism is supposed to demand. But the eye which initially perceives the young birds’ eyes as “innocent” is informed by a moral sense, a knowledge which is by definition not available to innocence itself; and such judgments are specifically disallowed by empirical procedures. The poet’s status as observer is in fact the central issue in “Bird-Witted”—though we have no way of knowing this until the fourth stanza, where Moore turns her whole attention to the mother:

  What delightful note
  with rapid unexpected flute-sounds leaping from the throat
  of the astute
  grown bird comes back to one from
  the remote
  unenergetic sun-lit air before
  the brood was here? Why has the
  bird’s voice become
  harsh?

As Kenner notes, the mother’s song “echoes without effort” in the stanza’s alternating rhymes, and then “drops into harshness” as the poem moves into the new stanza and enters a critical new phase.67 But there is a considerable difference between the mimetic effort we have observed so far and the imitative work being performed here.

  Uniquely, the stanza just quoted provides no visual data at all; it is wholly devoted to sound. Furthermore, in other stanzas the poem keeps time with the movements of the birds themselves; but the “delightful note...leaping from the throat/ of the astute/ grown bird” is not being sounded now; it only comes back to one from

  the remote
  unenergetic sun-lit air before
  the brood was here.

It is, then, a “note” sounding not in the ear but in what Wallace Stevens later called “the delicatest ear of the mind,”68 reminding us of a moment of apparently innocent ecstasy (but see “Virginia Britannia”) now past, and deliberately recalled—not by the bird, of course, but by the poet. And Moore’s act of recall here is no more innocent than the one which, in the closing lines of “Virginia Britannia,” balances the full burden of the poem on a single, carefully poised word out of memory.

Again Kenner alerts us to a crucial aspect of what is going on here when he suggests that “Bird Witted” may have taken its technical inspiration from Pound’s ABC of Reading, which had been published just over a year before “Bird-Witted” appeared in January, 1936.65 Pound writes that for the troubadour poets the “‘whole art’ of poetry consisted in putting together about six strophes of poetry so that the words and tune should be welded together without joint and without...” the poet whose work best exemplified that art, he says, was “the best smith, as Dante called Arnaut Daniel, [who] made the birds sing IN HIS WORDS.... for six strophes WITH the words making sense.”70 This is exactly what Moore has sought to do in “Bird-Witted,” and she has done it in a way which both confirms and extends Kenner’s hypothesis. For she has used Pound’s discussion of Daniel very much as she had earlier used Smith’s discussion of Isaiah—as a technical prescription which enables her to give formal, mimetic expression to the interest in Provençal poetry which her reading of Pound’s Cantos had engendered five years earlier. (She even follows Pound’s description of the “perfect strophe” in Daniel “where the bird call interrupts the verse.”)71 Reviewing A Draft of XXX Cantos for Poetry in October, 1931, Moore had written:
If poetics allure, the Cantos will show that in Provençal minstrelsy we encounter a fascinating precision; the delicacy and exactness of Arnaut Daniel, whose invention, the sestina form, is “like a thin sheet of flame folding and infolding upon itself.” In this tongue... is to be found pattern [my italics]. And the Cantos show the troubadours not only sang poems but were poems...

Mr. Pound brings to his reading, master-appreciation; and his gratitude takes two forms; he thanks the book and tells where you may see it. “Any man who would read Arnaut and the troubadours owes great thanks to Emil Levy of Freiburg,” he says in Instigations... He sings of this in Canto XX...

And as those who love books know, the place in which one read a book or talked of it partakes of its virtue in recollection; so for Mr. Pound the cedars and new-mown hay and far-off nightingale at Freiburg have the glamour of Provence.

Moore's syllabic reinvention of the sestina in “Bird-Witted” is a “very great feat,” as Kenner says, but it is much more than a technical tour de force. It is a kind of homage to Pound; and as we shall see, it serves a specific function with respect to Moore’s own complex “recollection” in “Bird-Witted” (and in “Smooth Gnarlred Crape Myrtle” as well) of another “far-off nightingale.” We must prepare the ground, however, by first taking up the question of memory in a more general way.

For the art of memory seems to function, in Moore’s poems of the Thirties, as a prelude to, a warning of, and a shield against danger. In “The Steeple-Jack,” for instance, Moore relies on the devastatingly accurate memory of the “college student/named Ambrose” to aim her own perception of dangerous untruth at the heart of a community so firmly convinced of its own innocence that its “simple people” are unable to read even the most blatant “sign” of “Danger.” Ambrose, we are told, “knows” the scene “by heart,” as the poet knows the mockingbird’s “delightful note”; the vision revealed by his memory serves as a standard against which to measure “the pitch of the church/spire” and by which to prove that it is “not true.” In the end, it allows us to supply the properly ironic coloring for the opening words of the final stanza: “It could not be dangerous to be living/ in a town like this,” but it is.

As Moore calls on Ambrose’s memory in “The Steeple-Jack,” so in “Virginia Britannia” she calls upon her own poetic memory for “imitation” as the poem reaches its crisis—when the forces which are to carry out the moral renovation of America have met with resistance. Memory fuels resistance to danger in “Bird-Witted,” too, for here the adult bird’s voice has “become// harsh” because, as the present overtakes the lilting rhymes of memory, “A piebald cat” has been “observing” her young, and it is now climbing toward them. She must act now:

The parent darting down, nerfed by what chills
the blood, and by hope rewarded—
of toil—since nothing fills
squeaking unfed
mouths, wages deadly combat,
and half kills
with bayonet beak and
cruel wings, the
intellectual, cautiously-
ly creeping cat.

The urgency of the situation is underscored by the fact that the creatures in Moore’s poems are rarely so violent, even in self-defense. The jerboa, for example, conceals itself from predators by “assuming [the] colour” of the sand; the plumed basilisk is also hidden by its coloration, that “octave of faulty decorum”—at least until “nightfall, which is for man the basilisk whose look will kill; but is// for lizards men can.kill, the welcome dark.” The frigate-pelican “hides/in the height and
in the majestic display of his art,” while the pangolin, an “armoured animal,” either “draws away from/ danger unpugnaciously,// with no sound but a harmless hiss,” or “rolls himself into a ball that has power to defy all effort to unroll it.” But the mocking-bird cannot do as the frigate-pelican does: “the majestic display” of her mimetic “art” will not hide her now, nor will it protect her young; so she must change her tune and go on the attack in order to defend her home ground—as in “Virginia Britannia”—against an invader more coldly calculating, more “intellectual,” than herself.

For the mother bird, then, to be “Bird-Witted” is to mobilize instinct against a natural antagonist, to hazard her own life in defense of her young. For the poet, however, it is deliberately to mobilize remembered emotion through the formal resources of the past, against an “intellectual... creeping” figure which preys upon “innocent wide penguin eye[ed] children: it is to imitate innocence in order to defend it, and to do so in full awareness that the deliberateness of poetic mimesis belies the apparent innocence of her posture. Of course the poem cannot literally protect these or any other birds against attack by a marauding cat; it can, however, mobilize its resources in a parodic defense of the mocking-bird against the kind of treatment Keats ac-

302

MOORE AS (NATURAL) HISTORIAN

303
Moore writes in “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle”—the fourth and final poem in “The Old Dominion” group—that

“The legendary white-eared black bulbul that sings
only in pure Sanskrit” should
be here—“tame clever
true nightingale.”

The “tame clever/true nightingale” is not “here,” of course, but to a considerable extent Moore behaves as if it were. Keats asks in the second strophe of the “Ode to a Nightingale” for “a draught of Vintage!... Tasting of Flora and the country-green,/ Dance, and Provencal song,”75 and Moore obliges him, in “Bird-Witted,” with a poem about a mocking-bird (syllabically equivalent to the nightingale) which imitates the Provengal “pattern” of Arnaut Daniel. And she goes further: her situation as listener, in the crucial fourth stanza where the bird is invisible, closely parallels the situation in which Keats finds himself in the fifth strophe of his “Ode.” He “cannot see” either his surroundings or the bird; lying in “embalmed darkness,” he can do nothing in the following strophe but listen:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Called him soft names in many a muse’d rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.76

Moore is not listening to “such an ecstasy” as Keats hears, but rather remembering a moment from the past; and her own death is not in question. Unlike Keats’s “immortal Bird,” however, Moore’s mocking-bird and her young have indeed been “born for death,” and though it is not yet their time to die, the “hungry generations” have appeared—in the form of “A piebald cat”—“to tread [them] down” as they never will Keats’s bird. Just as Keats is wrenched back to his “sole self” by the sound of his own voice repeating the word “Forlorn!” as if it were “a bell,” so Moore is called back to the present by the suddenly “harsh” voice of the mother bird, interrupting her memory of “ecstasy” and forcing her to attend to the emergencies of the present. “Bird-Witted” thus justifies its symbolic treatment of the mocking-bird by calling attention to the particular exigencies of its situation in a way that

does not concern Keats at all; what we hear in the mocking-bird’s song is the “note” of its own insistent perception of danger, rather than the personal note Keats strikes in the “Ode.” The implication seems to be that Keats, for all his display of emotion, has transformed the nightingale into a merely “intellectual” symbol of his own desires, and that in doing so he has indulged in a process very similar to that which works upon the mocking-bird itself in “Virginia Britannia.”

The mocking-bird enters “Virginia Britannia” in a blur of motion so fast that for a moment we are unable even to identify the “terse Virginian” as a mocking-bird. But the bird, like the reader, is soon arrested by the command to “Observe,” and it comes to a stand “on the round stone-/topped table with lead cups grouped to/ form the pedestal.” The mocking-bird has begun to slow, to freeze, long before the end of the stanza, however: it is likened to a statue even as it first comes clearly into focus “with head/held half away, and meditative eye as dead/as sculptured marble/eyes.” Now, perched on what is explicitly termed a “pedestal” formed by “lead cupids” in a leaden mockery of loving support, it resembles a statue so closely that it is as if it had been turned to “lead” by the sheer force of the “Care” which “has formed” the scene as if for the express purpose of accommodating and subduing the bird—and by the sheer impetus of nature and our reading. It is in this posture that the mocking-bird enters our memory, so that we are implicated with the poet in the alchemical, “intellectual” transmutation of a living creature into a base material.

“Bird-Witted” brings this faintly ominous leaden figure to life again, transforming it into a momentarily animated figure of sound. But Moore’s effort to undo the effects of her own “intellectual,” Keatsian treatment of the mocking-bird by parody is doomed to fail—for parody is a mimetic mode, and must employ Keatsian tactics. As in “Virginia Britannia,” therefore, the tempo of “Bird-Witted” slows dramatically when the sentence arrives in what seems to be the present, when it comes to the “grown bird” and the predicate that places her “delightful note” in the “remote” Past. The tempo slows because we are not in fact in the present, or rather because we are in a present which is bound by the Keatsian past: what we are hearing is a “ditty[...] of no tune” like those which play throughout the “Ode on a Grecian Urn”—a “note” played “Not to the sensual ear” but to “the spirit.”77 We see the mother bird “darting down” to meet the cat, but the engagement is delayed while we are told what impels her to action ("hope... of toil"), and when finally she “wages deadly combat/and half kills” her antagonist, the object of the verb is deferred until the last possible
moment—deferred not only by syntax, but by typography as well. For in the first three printings of the poem the letters of the final line are more widely spaced than the rest: the mother bird

    wages deadly combat,
and half kills

    with bayonet beak and

    cruel wings, the

    intellectual cautiously

    creeping cat.

The effect is to freeze the scene: the cat is transfixed as it moves toward its prey, and the mother bird is caught as it were in mid-air, just on the point of attack, by the “intellectual,” “unheard” music of the “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Like Keats’s “marble men and maidens,” Moore’s cat and bird will remain so, in the memory of art. When we see them again in “Half Deity,” the third poem in the sequence, they have been slightly transformed, but they are still fixed in the same attitudes.

The almost total critical neglect of “Half Deity” may be explained by Moore’s decision to omit it from both The Collected Poems of 1951 and The Complete Poems of 1967—explained, but not justified. The poem is far too important to be ignored. Only one critic, Laurence Stapleton, considers it “has a rightful place beside the other Virginia poems,” but her own treatment is too cursory to specify that “place” or to suggest the poem’s crucial bearing on the sequence as a whole.

Like “Virginia Britannia” and “Bird-Witted,” “Half Deity” is concerned with the relationship between childhood innocence and adult knowledge, but it explores that relationship more intensively than the others do. “Virginia Britannia” and “Bird-Witted” take the difference between innocence and experience more or less for granted; they can do so, however, only because “Half Deity” offers a rather full account of the passage from one state to the other—an account which is complicated and intensified by Moore’s insistence in “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle” that the distance between innocence and guilty knowledge is almost imperceptible: there is but a step between them.

The passage from innocence to experience occurs when the relationship of observer to observed becomes instead a relation between a pursuer and her prey—when, that is, observation becomes an effort not just to secure visual knowledge of a given object but also to possess that object. Or rather, the passage occurs when the observer becomes consciously aware that she is a pursuer already, and that her pursuit must fail of its object: “Half Deity” implies that observation is never innocent of the desire for possession. The difference between child and adult, therefore, is that the latter has “learned to spare” the object of her desire in a way the child has not—for observation, like imitation, has to be “learned,” though it has its origin in an instinctive “curiosity.” But the adult “spare[s]” the object only from the physical consequences of the possessive urge. Opting for intellectual rather than merely physical possession, the observer makes the object an object of memory instead of immediate sensory experience; she may therefore seem more innocent than the child who attempts to secure the object physically. We have seen that memory may serve as a warning of imminent danger; but it also poses a threat to the integrity of the object, for it transforms and deadens its objects by subordinating them to patterns already formed.

“A subject and an object,” says Emerson in “Experience,” “—it takes so much to make the galvanic circuit complete, but magnitude adds nothing. What imports it whether it is Kepler and the sphere, Columbus and America, a reader and his book, or puss with her tail?” Pursuit inevitably becomes self-pursuit, and then the galvanic circuit can be made “complete” only in a provisional, a metaphorical way, and then only with considerable pain. As Emerson writes earlier in the same essay, “souls never touch their objects.” But when the soul is the object of the soul’s pursuit, as it is in “Half Deity”—when the pursuer deliberately puts on the “aspect” of the innocent observer in an effort to repossess and reanimate her own childhood innocence, which is either a memory or a fiction or both—then the closing of the circle inflicts a sharper pain than the one “puss” must feel when she catches up with “her tail” and bites down. For to capture the memory of one’s former innocence is to discover, simultaneously, that what one has in memory is what one has lost in fact, and so to discover the full burden of one’s guilt. This, I think, is why Moore elected not to include “Half Deity” in late collections of her work: like “Black Earth” (later renamed “Melanchthon”), it is too explicitly self-revealing, and too deeply disturbing, to suit the public image she had come by then to project so successfully.

“Half Deity” begins by carefully establishing the poet in the posture of innocent observer:

    HALF DEITY

    half worm. We all, infant and adult, have

    stopped to watch the butterfly—last of the

    elves—and learned to spare the wingless worm

    that hopefully ascends the tree.
This opening leads us to believe that when the poet stops, a few lines later, "to watch" a "peninsula-tailed" butterfly which "has been/ sleeping upright on an elm," she intends only to look at it in order to confirm for herself what others have reported—for "its yellowness/ that of the autumn poplar-leaf, by day/ has been observed." We assume that she will otherwise "spare" it her attentions, for unlike the sea in "A Grave," she is evidently not "a collector."85 We have not yet been given reason to consider that our having "learned to spare" the caterpillar, "the wingless worm/ that hopefully ascends the tree," says nothing of our eventual response to the butterfly that caterpillar will become; and so we are not distressed when the poet’s apparently matter-of-fact observation gives rise to pursuit, because the poet herself takes no visible part in the chase. So far as we can tell, she is the observer and reporter, not the pursuer.

That role is played by another figure, an "infant/ half deity/ who appears without warning a third of the way into the poem. "Disguised in butterfly/- bush Wedgwood blue, Psyche follows" the butterfly from tree to tree—much as the mocking-bird "drives the/ owl" in "Virginia Britannia"—and the action develops so quickly from this point on that we have no time for surprise at the presence in Moore’s work of a figure so obviously and so conventionally poetic, no time to consider that the landscape of "The Old Dominion" has suddenly become so thoroughly Romantic that Moore, like Keats, can all "thoughtlessly" happen upon Psyche in a wood.86 Perhaps, though, we may explain Psyche’s sudden appearance by recalling the strange, offhand comment made earlier on, that the butterfly’s "yellowness... by day/ has been observed" [my italics]. The phrase implies that the action of the poem takes place at night, and may in fact be a dream—a typically Romantic mode. This might help, too, to account for the specific trees to which Psyche pursues the butterfly. She goes first to a tree whose Latin name, "Micromalus," means "little evil," and whose English name, "the midget/crab," calls to mind not only miniature, inedible versions of forbidden fruit but small, painfully grasping creatures as well; then she goes to "the mimosa," the central symbol of Shelley’s "The Sensitive Plant," where the tree inhabits a beautiful garden, and lives in a mysterious affinity with a beautiful lady—at least for a time. For "When Winter had gone and Spring came back/ The Sensitive Plant was a leafless wreck."84 And so Psyche leaves the wrecked mimosa and goes straight "from that, to the flowering pomegranate," the tree whose fruit was forbidden to Persephone, who ate it nonetheless and brought winter into the world.

Keats’s "Ode to Psyche" begins with the poet’s unexpected discovery, as he wanders "in a forest thoughtlessly," of a sleeping couple whom he recognizes as Cupid and Psyche. But Keats—who feared that "there was nothing original to be written in poetry; that its riches were already exhausted—and all its beauties forestalled"—dismisses the "winged boy" without even troubling to name him, for he has no interest in retelling the ancient legend of Cupid and Psyche’s love. All his attention is on Psyche, and he revels in his discovery of a subject whose "riches" have not been "exhausted," whose "beauties" have not been "forestalled": Psyche, "latest born" of the goddesses as Moore’s butterfly is "last of the elves," was born "too late for antique vows, Too, too late for the fond believing lyre." No poet has sung her praises, nor made his name inseparable from hers; she has had

No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
From chain-swung censer teeming;
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
Of pale-mouth’d prophet dreaming.

(II. 32–35)

The poet begs her to "let" him fill those offices; declaring, "I will be thy priest," he promises in the final strophe to build in Psyche’s honor

... a fane

In some untrdden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster’d trees
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
The moss-lain Dryads shall be lul’d to sleep;
And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath’d trellis of a working brain,
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e’er could feign,
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
And there shall be for thee all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in!

(II. 50–67)

Keats’s "Ode," ostensibly a celebratory gesture occasioned by the poet’s discovery of the goddess sleeping in the wood, is transformed by his ambitious desire for originality into an attempt to displace Cupid
and possess Psyche for himself. (Compare the similar but far more overt displacement in Whitman's Song of Myself: "I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with the bride myself; I tighten her all night to my thighs and lips."

86 What Keats ends by building, therefore, is less "a fane" than what Moore calls in "Half Deity" a "flowering, shrewsdented tropical device" whose function is to secure the poet's dominion over Psyche by imprisoning her "in some untrdden region of [his] mind."

Similarly, although Psyche's pursuit of the butterfly in "Half Deity" seems to spring from a relatively uncomplicated desire "to watch" it, she soon finds herself wholly committed to trapping the elusive creature. She follows it until,

Baffled not by the quick-clouding serene gray moon, but forced by the hot hot sun to pant, she stands on rug-soft grass; though "it is not permitted to gaze informally on majesty, in such a manner as might well happen here." The blind all-seeing butterfly, fearing the slight finger, wanders—as though it were ignorant—a step further and lights on Zephyr's palm.

Psyche, Zephyr, and the butterfly now form a tableau in which all our attention is directed to the confrontation of observer and observed, pursuer and pursued:

Small unglazed china eyes of butterflies—pale tobacco crown—with the large eyes of the Nymph on them; gray eyes that now are black, for she, with controlled agitated glance observes the insect's face and all's a-quer with significance as in the scene with cats' eyes on the magpie's eyes by Goya.

Psyche only "observes the insect's face" here—but the butterfly, rightly "vexed because curiosity has been pursuing it," is unable to remain "calm." For if in "Bird-Witted" the "delightful note" of a "remote" and untroubled past is recalled as a prelude to danger, "Half Deity" recalls the "deadly combat" of "Bird-Witted" in the midst of an apparently innocent confrontation. 87 Psyche's "curiosity" begins to look less innocent, moreover, when we recall that her marriage to Cupid was annulled when she disobeyed the divine injunction against looking upon his face. And "though it is not permitted to gaze informally on majesty, in such a manner as might well happen" again "here," Psyche "might well" find a certain sanction for her curiosity in the reflection that—as Alice says elsewhere—"A cat may look at a king." 88 For that is precisely what does "happen here." The analogy to Goya's "scene with cats' eyes on the magpie's eyes" likens Psyche not to the bird (which would be dubious enough, since the magpie is a thievish bird) but rather to the "intellectual cautious/ly e e p i ng cat" of "Bird-Witted." And the cat is most itself in preying upon innocence, as readers of earlier poems like "Silence" (where the cat "takes its prey to privacy—/ the mouse's limp tail dangling like a shoelace from its mouth") and "Peter" (where the cat is naturally inclined "to purloin, to pursue" the "hen") will recall. 89

All this may seem to set "Half Deity" at odds with the celebration, in "Bird-Witted," of the effort to repel the predator. But we know by now what "Smooth Grained Grape Myrtle" will confirm that "An aspect may deceive." We must consider, too, the poet's lament in the same poem that "Art is unfortunate./ One may be a blanleness/bachelor and it is but a step to Congreve"; for there is "but a step" between "Bird-Witted" and "Half Deity." We have seen that "Bird-Witted" inherits from "Virginia Britannia" the memory, in stanzary form, of a living creature—a memory which it reanimates by imitating the intricate aural patterns of Arnaud Daniel's verse. But at the very moment when those aural patterns are most conspicuously displayed, the fourth stanza where the poet must carry the tune alone, the imitation of Daniel coincides with the silent memory of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn"; and from then on convergent imitations sustain the formal movement of the verse while gradually returning the bird (and the cat with her) to the initial state of immobility. This is not an innocent stratagem (if there is such a thing) but a desperately conscious one. "Bird-Witted" concentrates upon presenting to the reader the more innocent "aspect" of Moore's poetic enterprise, but it is the peculiar misfortune of an art so wholly mimetic that it must imitate whatever comes into its ken. It is, therefore, only by resorting in desperation to Keats, only by forcing both the mocking-bird and the cat into conformity with the frozen statuary of the Grecian Urn, that Moore prevents herself from taking a mimetic "step further" with the "intellectual cautious/ly e e p i ng cat" whose movements the typography has already begun to imitate—prevents herself, that is, from giving the poem an "aspect" as predatory as Psyche's has now become. For, like the poet and the reader in
“Virginia Britannia,” and like Psyche here, the cat begins by “observing” the “fledgling mocking-birds.”

Like the cat, moreover, Psyche is immobilized just when her barely “controlled agitated glance” reveals the true character of her interest in the butterfly. As her “large ... gray eyes” darken to “black” with excitement, they become so opaque as to recall the “meditative eye” of the “lead-grey mocking-bird” of “Virginia Britannia”—an eye seemingly “as dead/ as sculptured marble/ eyes,” but there is a crucial difference between Psyche’s eyes and the bird’s. The “eyes of the Nymph,” apparently so intensely alive, are in fact “sculptured marble,” and so are Zephyr’s “mirror eyes” and the “Small unglazed china eyes” of the butterfly itself. The action has been brought to a halt by the sudden assertion—apparently against the Keatsian movement of Psyche’s pursuit but actually, as the conclusion of “Bird-Witted” attests, in logical confirmation of the end to which that pursuit must lead—of the poet’s memory of a “Carved Marble Group by Jean Baptiste Boyer,” representing “Psyche trying to capture the butterfly held out on Zephyr’s palm.”

That memory cannot contain the action for long, however. Reanimated as suddenly as it had been frozen, the butterfly now “springs away. [a] zebra half-deified,” and in the next instant the poet takes the irrevocable “step” she had denied herself in “Bird-Witted.” She thereby reveals the extent to which her own imitation of Keats, parodic though it may be, has entangled her with Psyche. Until now, the poet has preserved her status as observer of the entire episode; but now she suddenly insults the butterfly, calling it: “Twig-veined, irascible/ fastidious, stubborn undisembled zebra! Sometimes one is grateful to/ a stranger for looking very nice.” So intolerable is it that the butterfly should escape that the poet’s voice turns markedly childlike, as though by acting the petulant child for a moment (and she is very like Alice just now) she could disguise a deeper, more adult sense of loss and lure the butterfly back.

But “An aspect may deceive;” and “looking very nice” is not enough to satisfy the “blind/ all-seeing butterfly,” which has only wandered on to Zephyr’s hand in the first place “as though it were ignorant” [my italics]. It sees, therefore, that it is “free/ to leave the breeze’s hand” as it would not be “free/ to leave” the “half-shut” hand Psyche has extended toward it. And so, like Emily Dickinson’s “Little Tippler” (Dickinson had “For Poets ... Keats—and Mr and Mrs Browning”),

“it flies, drunken with trivality or guided by visions of strength, away till diminished like wreckage on the sea, rising and falling easily; mounting the swell and keeping its true course with what swift majesty, indifferent to us, it’s gone.

“It’s gone,” and the poet can only wonder: “Deaf to my/ voice, or magnet-nice? as it flutters through/ airs now slack, now fresh. It has strict ears,” she adds ruefully, “when the/ West Wind speaks.” The lineation here emphasizes the possessive pronoun (“my/ voice”), and the question brings the poet fully into the open. Psyche has served only as a mask—and not a very effective one at that. The poet’s interest in the butterfly is as “intellectual,” and therefore as predatory, as Psyche’s has become—and she too is immobilized by the weight of her own desire.

But if the butterfly is finally “indifferent/ to” anyone who might take an active interest in it, it has yet been drawn as if by a “magnet” to Zephyr, the Shelleyan “West Wind,” for whose words it has such “strict ears,” and whose “hand spread out was enough/ to tempt the fiery tiger-horse to stand.” Moore’s memory of the “Ode to the West Wind” has served to rescue the poem (and the butterfly) from the impasse to which her imitation of Keats has brought it. As we have seen, what Keats attempts in the “Ode to Psycho” is the attainment of mastery, an ambition which his professed desire to serve the goddess and worship as “priest” at her “fane” cannot conceal; by contrast, in the “Ode to the West Wind” Shelley acknowledges the wind as his master. He seeks not to possess its power for himself but rather to be possessed by it as a prophet is possessed by the divine afflatus. His concern, unlike Keats’s, is less for himself than for the “unawakened earth”: he wants to borrow the wind’s “power” and make it speak his “words,” but he wants it not to glorify himself but rather to “quicken a new birth,” to arouse the world from its “Winter” sleep to a revolutionary “Spring.”

Moore is not, I think, especially concerned with the particular features of the revolution Shelley had in mind, and in fact must have found his doctrines thoroughly incompatible with her own conservative views; but his doctrines are not the issue here. The nature of Moore’s interest in Shelley is most clearly indicated by the words of her friend Scofield Thayer, former editor of The Dial and a great admirer of Moore and her work, who wrote of Shelley in 1913 that while “many of the poet’s ideals now appear scarcely comprehensible, the integrity of
his purpose is not the less patent." Thayer's remarks (which Moore transcribed into her reading notebook in November, 1928) have a clear bearing on Zephyr's success in attracting the butterfly though he makes no apparent effort to do so. His "hand" is "spread out," giving assurance of "the integrity of his purpose"—an assurance which the "blind/ all-seeing butterfly" recognizes, and by which it distinguishes between the Shelleyan Zephyr and the Keatsian Psyche: Zephyr has "no net," and makes no such attempt as Psyche's to "capture the butterfly" in a "half-shut/ hand." Nor is Zephyr more "comprehensible" than Shelley: "many of the poet's ideals now appear scarcely comprehensible," says Thayer—and so, Moore writes, Zephyr's "talk was as strange as my grandmother's muff."

Moore's "talk" is "strange," too; but her struggle to "overcome [her] reluctance to be unoriginal"—which has led her actively to pursue "possible comparisons and coincidences" with other writers—has betrayed her into what she perceives as a loss of "integrity." Significantly, Moore does not imitate Shelley in "Half Deity"; rather, she captures the erratic, fluttering movement of the butterfly by parodying the loosely Pindaric form of Keats's "Ode to Psyche." But parody is only another form of imitation, and even in parody Moore is possessed by the Keatsian obsession with originality which she is struggling to "overcome." Inevitably, then, she becomes Psyche, straining after the butterfly which is the emblem of her own soul, and seeing in her inability to capture it the extent to which, unlike the butterfly, she has departed from her own "true course"—seeing, that is, a loss of self, a loss of innocence and "integrity of purpose." "They that have wings must not have weights," she says early in the poem—but she has no wings. On the contrary, she is so weighted down by memory and desire that, like Psyche, she is immobilized, turned to stone. Even the self whose emblem she strains after is only a memory. The closing line, delivered as an artlessly inconsequent throwaway, lodges the entire poem in the past, reminding us that the poet, for all that she "look[s] very nice" "Disguised in butterfly/ bush Wedgewood blue," is not a child but an adult remembering a dream of a childhood long since past: "His talk was as strange as my grandmother's muff."

"Such a life as [Shelley's,]" writes Scofield Thayer, "resembles the sepulchral slab in the pavement of an ancient church; the imperfections of name and insignia are worn away by the feet of time, but the crossed arms remain." The grave thus becomes the image of an inscrutable and anonymous integrity, for Thayer immediately goes on to insist that the incomprehensibility of Shelley's ideals leaves "the integrity of his purpose . . . not the less patent." And so we circle back to "Virginia Britannia," where in the "typical ivied-bower-and-ruined-tower churchyard" of the opening stanza we find that

A deer-track in a church-floor
brick and Sir George Yeardley's
coffin tacks and
tomb remain.

This image is so specific that it bears no obvious relation to Thayer's discussion of Shelley: in the final version, however, the resemblance is much closer. For the identity of the "great sinner" who "lyeth here under the sycamore" is no longer "known": the "impertinences" of Yeardley's "name and insignia" have been "worn away" by revision, leaving only the "deer/- track" and "a fine pavement tomb with engraved top."

But the original image is more fully informed by Thayer's odd analogy than it seems. Yeardley was the only knighted member of the Jamestown colony, and he received his title in recognition of his work in aiding the community to establish itself. Apparently, then, his "tomb" functions in an ironic capacity as an image of justly rewarded integrity, and thus strikes the keynote not only for "Virginia Britannia" but for "The Old Dominion" as a whole. It is "integrity of purpose" that concerns Moore most deeply as she explores what Thayer calls, in the subtitle of his essay on Shelley, "The Poetic Value of Revolutionary Principles." Like Emerson's nature, the landscape of colonial Virginia "offers all her creatures [the poet] as a picture-language" which, under Moore's scrutiny, reveals the principles inherent in the original "colonizing" of the New World and the subsequent history of America as a nation which owes its existence to the practical application of revolutionary ideals.

We must bear in mind, however, that "An aspect may deceive." For we shall find as the poem proceeds that the "picture-language" of "Virginia Britannia" spells out not a linear history of simple integrity but rather a history of principles perverted in the application and from the start. The history of America as this poem tells us is (to borrow a phrase from "Marriage," but which is originally from Sir Francis Bacon) a history "of circular traditions and impostures./ committing many spoils." "Virginia Britannia" is an attempt to rectify that history, to set America back on the "true course" of integrity; as we shall see, how-
ever, it works by the apparently paradoxical method of "advancing backward in a circle"—a revolutionary method in the strictest etymological sense of the word "revolution," a method which requires that Moore accept the very perversions she is trying to correct and that she accept them not only in principle but in practice as well. Like Whitman, then—a poet for whom she felt a profound distaste—Moore identifies the form of the poem with the form of America itself, which is the form of its history. For those perversions, those "circular traditions and impostures" and their "many spoils," are inseparable from the principles to which they give visible expression: they are the history of America. Nowhere is the paradoxical intertwining of principle and perversion, the backward-circling movement of advance, more powerfully evident than in the deliberate use of the word "intimation" to mark the boundary separating the mature poet from the figure of the innocent child and to confess the poet's participation in the circular logic of American history.

The "picture-language" of the Virginia landscape is all the more revealing because it is not entirely the language of nature. As we have seen, the landscape which the poem purports to describe has been "formed" by the "Care" of an anonymous gardener or gardeners, in painstaking and nostalgic imitation of the landscape the colonists had left behind. What remains for us, however, is a monumental and wholly inadvertent parody, "an almost English" landscape dominated not by the "tame clever/true nightingale" which "should be here" to suit the tastes of "one who dresses// in New York but dreams of / London" (as "Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle" puts it), but rather by the hostile, mimetic, statuesque mocking-bird.

The gardeners' efforts to turn Virginia into an earthly Paradise have gone awry, have ended by producing a "Rare unscent-/ed, provident-/ly hot, too sweet, inconsistent flower-/bed" in which "serpentine shadows star-/tie strangers" while the inhabitants remain curiously oblivious. The grotesquely thickened "stem" of "the white wall-/rose," however, is itself a sign of danger: for the "wide-spaced great blunt alternating os-/trich-skin warts that were thorns" signify the "many spoils" which have been committed by "the predatory hand" against which, in "Roses Only" (1917), the rose's thorns provide the only measure of "proof."98 Nothing is safe here: the "poor unpoison-/ous terrapin likes to//idle near the sea-top" where it makes easy prey; soon "Terrapin/ meat and crested spoon//feed the mistress" of that "everywhere open/shaded house on Indian/named Virginian//streams in counties named for English lords!"

The history of "Virginia Britannia," then, is the history not of integrity stoutly maintained but of "tobacco-crop/gains" memorialized on "church tablets," of mixed motives and cross purposes working "on/ The Chickahominy"—one of those "Indian/-named Virginian//streams"—to establish "the Negro (opportunistly brought) to//strengthen protest against tyranny." It is a history founded on appropriation:

Strangler fig, pale fiercely
unpretentious North American, and Dutch
trader, and noble
Roman, in taking what they
pleased—colonizing as we say—
were not all intel-
lect and delicacy.

The Virginia landscape is more than a natural historical record: it is a work of art predicated upon the colonists' (and their descendants') having combined the strength to "tak[e] what they/pleased" with an intense longing "to be unoriginal," to use what they took as the material from which to construct a simulacrum of the English landscape as a permanent monument to England and the past—an enormous mortuary sculpture, as it were. So powerful is that combination of strength and longing that it can assimilate to its grand design even those native elements which, in breaking the silence of the grave, threaten to overwhelm the memory of home with their mockery. Thus the mocking-bird, though as it enters the scene it "drives the/owletree to tree and imitates the call/ of whippoorwill or/ lark or katydid," falls silent and turns to "lead" under the spell of the gardeners' "Care": it is left frozen in its place, "still standing there alone//on the round stone/-topped table with lead cupids grouped to//form the pedestal."

Nor may we omit Moore's name from the roster of those who have made "Virginia Britannia" what it is by "taking what they/pleased—
colonizing as we say." For the poem which discovers in the landscape the long history of appropriation is itself not only the most recent product of that history, but a "colonizing" power in its own right.

The slowmoving glossy
saddle-cavalcade

of buckeye brown surprising
jumpers; the contrasting work-mule and
show-mule and witch-cross door and "strong sweet prison"
are a part of what
has come about, in the black idiom, from advancing backward in a circle; from taking the Potomac cowbirdlike; and on The Chickahominy establishing the Negro (opportunistically brought) to strengthen protest against tyranny.

Here Moore registers her own “protest against” the “tyranny” to which Blacks in America have been and are subject, but in “strengthen[ing]” that “protest” with a phrase “opportunistically brought” into the poem from “the Black/ idiom” she knowingly implicates herself in the very “tyranny” she condemns. The availability of that “idiom” depends, of course, on the institution of slavery, under which “the Negro” was brought to America to sustain the outmoded economy of the South and its “tyrant taste.” But Moore uses “the Negro” in a similar way, deliberately appropriating his language to define and sustain the economy of “Virginia Britannia” itself—to enact and “strengthen” the circular logic of its opportunistic history.

Thus Moore is not simply describing a landscape, as she seems to be. Rather, she is extending the method we have seen her use in “Novices” and “Bird-Witted,” finding in the construction of the landscape itself the technical principles of composition by which she now composes her own imitative reconstruction of a landscape which is already, in her words, “one of America’s most undeniable poems.” She is not so much writing “Virginia Britannia,” then, as rewriting it, and correcting as she goes (much as she does in revising her own poems, including this one); and she is working along the lines laid down almost a century earlier by Emerson, who writes in “The Poet” (1844) that

poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word or a verse and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem.

The original settlers of Virginia, forced to “substitute something of [their] own” for the missing “words” of the English original, have “miswritten the poem” of Jamestown—and as Emerson tells us a few pages later, “herein is the legitimation of criticism, in the mind’s faith that the [poem is] a corrupt version of some text in nature with which [it] ought to be made to tally.”

Moore’s initial response to the colonists’ inadvertently parodic miswriting is to counter with a deliberately parodic reconstruction of that parody which both reveals and corrects it. From the outset she intertwines various elements—natural and artificial, domestic and foreign—so thoroughly that all seem equally out of place in the end, and equally at home as well. In the first stanza, for instance, the alternating pattern formed by “the redbird/ the red-coated musketeer/ the trumpet-flower, the cavalier,” seems to accommodate “the parson, and the/ wild parishioner” without strain; but here Moore has already extended the poem well beyond the temporal and chronological limits of what we call Colonial Virginia. In the early seventeenth century “New England was called Northern Virginia,” as she points out, and the presence in this closely patterned landscape of “the parson, and the/ wild parishioner” points not only to the “deer- track in a church-floor/ brick” but also, and more problematically, to a permanent reminder of just how “unEnglish” this “almost English” scene really is. The pairing is a reminder, too, of just how far America has strayed from its “true course,” for it recalls the most celebrated adulterous union in nineteenth-century American fiction—the forest meeting between “The Pastor and His Parishioner” in which Hester Prynne persuades Arthur Dimmesdale to join her in fleeing the oppressive stricures of Puritan Boston.

Following Hawthorne’s ironic design (for of course Hester and Dimmesdale are foiled by her devilish, cuckolded husband), Moore binds these figures permanently into the American landscape. And she does so with the same “Care” with which she “has formed, a/ mong” the “unEnglish insect sounds” of stanzas which “should sound like a kind of inexhaustible bumble-bee” (as she put it later), “the white wall-rose” with the grotesquely thickened American “stem” whose missing “thorns” are no longer “proof” against “the predatory hand” that governs the landscape. In “Virginia Britannia,” however, the “observing” eye does the work of the hand—and “observing” is a very “predatory” activity, as we have had ample occasion to discover.

We cannot gauge the full extent of the eye’s rapacity until we consider that it is the poet’s simultaneous observance of the forms of the past and of the present which impels her to cast “Virginia Britannia” as a syllabic imitation of the Immortality Ode and, at crucial moments, so complicate that willingness “to be unoriginal” by combining with it the strength to take what she pleases. In doing so—in “colonizing as we say”—Moore reveals the full extent of her unoriginality, of her willingness to let herself be influenced by other writers.
For her definition of "colonizing" ("taking what they/ pleased") is very nearly identical in phrasing to the definition of influence which Eliot had advanced in his essay "In Memory" of Henry James (1918)—an essay on which Moore relies in "Picking and Choosing," which redefines the complementary relationship between criticism and poetry along the lines of Eliot's discussion: "To be influenced by a writer," says Eliot, "is to have a chance inspiration from him; or to take what one wants." It is Eliot himself who, at a crucial moment in "Virginia Britannia," provides Moore with "a chance inspiration," and it is from his most recent work that she takes "what [she] wants." The mockingbird to which we have already devoted so much may be indigenous to Virginia, but like virtually everything in "Virginia Britannia" it has been imported, "opportunistically brought" in from elsewhere. It comes from Eliot's short poem "Virginia," one of several small landscapes published under the heading "Words for Music" in the Virginia Quarterly Review in April, 1934:

Red river, red river,  
Slow flow heat is silence  
No will is still as a river  
Still. Will heat move  
Only through the mocking-bird  
Heard once?  

The mocking-bird belongs to the immediate present; but though it "drives the owl from tree to tree," it cannot overcome the full burden of the English past. Having been forcefully appropriated by a poet ever-observer of her contemporaries' work, it is introduced into a scene so rigidly determined by the past that the bird is struck dumb and cast in lead. For the scene owes its form to Moore's parodic effort to "Observe" the form of the Immortality Ode—an effort which perpetuates, in turn, the awkward attempts of the original colonists to "Observe" the cherished forms of their own history.

As Moore's corrective measures take effect, as the present begins apparently to free itself from the bonds of the past, there is a corresponding change in the character of Moore's parody. By the penultimate stanza, parody has become anticipatory as well as reminiscent:

The song-bird wakes too soon, to enjoy  
Excellent idleness, destroy-.  
Legitimate  
Laziness, the unbought toy  
Even in the dark  
Risking loud whee whee whee 

of joy, the car-  
away-seed-spotted sparrow perched on  
the dew-drenched juniper  
beside the window-ledge;  
the little hedge-sparrow that wakes up seven minutes  
sooner than the lark  
they say.

But there is no escape from the past. In the final stanza, the delighted, gently mocking anticipation of Shelley's Skylark shades into a much more straightforwardly honorific imitation of the Immortality Ode, and though the anticipatory note remains it has been muted. For "The clouds that gather round the setting sun/ Do take a sober colouring from an eye/ That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality," and when the poem encounters a group of stationary figures whom even the flaming sunset "can/ not move," Moore resorts directly to Wordsworth. This time, in a final, desperate acknowledgment of her own complicity in and responsibility for the American historical process, she takes liberties not only with Wordsworth's formal patterns, but with his language and, most importantly, with his central symbol as well.

Like the "solid-/ pointed star" which "stands for hope" at the end of "The Steeple-Jack," like Zephyr in "Half Deity," the child, receiving "an intimation" which she does not seek, seems to hold out the "hope" of escape from the long history of "colonizing" which the poem has developed. But as Moore writes in "The Hero"—one of two companion pieces to "The Steeple-Jack"—hope is not hope "until all ground for hope has/ vanished." The child is mother to the woman, an "historic metamorphoser" [my italics] like the butterfly in "Half Deity"—and so she is doomed to undergo a process of growth which will invert precisely the transformation of "the wingless worm/ that hopefully ascends the tree" into a "weightless" butterfly. The child is already "historic," as Psyche is—a figure caught by poetic memory in the attitude from which, like the butterfly from its cocoon, the predatory, "intellectual" adult emerges into history to stand rooted and grasping in "endless imitation" of an innocence which has already receded into the "remote" past and which she knows from the outset to be permanently lost. "Art is unfortunate."

All previously unpublished material by Marianne Moore is printed with the permission of Clive E. Driver, Literary Executor of the Estate of Marianne C. Moore.
TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

Except where otherwise indicated, in quoting Moore I have followed the first published text of each poem; in quoting possible sources for those poems, I have tried to use editions she could have seen.

3 Costello, op. cit., p. 1.
4 Kenner, op. cit., p. 117.
5 Jarrell, op. cit., p. 119.
6 Blackmur, op. cit., p. 85.
8 Blackmur, op. cit., p. 82.
10 Kenner, op. cit., p. 102.
12 Costello, op. cit., p. 185.
13 Eliot, op. cit., pp. viii-x.
15 Blackmur, op. cit., p. 84.
16 Eliot, op. cit., p. x.
18 Moore, The Pangolino and Other Verse (London: Brendon, 1936), pp. 3-16.

MOORE AS (NATURAL) HISTORIAN

22 Costello, op. cit., p. 105.
23 Moore, untitled lecture. Typescript headed "Sarah Lawrence College, May 1, 1940," in the Rosenbach archives. Referred to hereafter as "Sarah Lawrence lecture."
31 Ibid., p. 43.
36 James Fenimore Cooper, The Pioneers; or, Sources of the Susquehanna (Works of James Fenimore Cooper (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1897), IV, p. 31: "The composite order... was an order composed of many others, and was intended to be the most useful of all, for it admitted into its construction such alterations as convenience or circumstances might require."
37 For discussion of The Course of Empire, see McCoubrey, American Tradition in Painting (New York: George Braziller, 1963), p. xx.
38 Cooper, The Last of the Mohicans; or, A Narrative of 1757; Works, II, p. 144.
39 Moore, Sarah Lawrence lecture, p. 1.
41 Moore, "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns," The Dial 76 (November, 1924), 411.
43 Moore, "A Graveyard," The Dial 71 (July, 1921), 34.
44 Moore, "The Accented Syllable," The Egoist 3 (October, 1916), 152.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.


Moore, “You Are Like the Realistic Product of an Idealistic Search for Gold at the Foot of the Rainbow,” The Egoist 3 (May, 1916), 71. The title was changed in 1924.


Moore, “The Fish,” The Egoist 5 (August, 1918), 95.

Moore, “Picking and Choosing,” The Dial 68 (April, 1920), 421.


Except for “Picking and Choosing” and “England” (both April, 1920), all the poems Moore published in magazines between July, 1921, and January, 1925, are in free verse. Most appeared in The Dial, but also see “Snakes, Mongooses, Snake-Charmers, and the Like,” Broom 1 (January, 1922), 193; and “Bowls,” Sesson no. 5 (July, 1923), 12. The only other exceptions to this practice of publishing in free verse are “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle…” and “Peter,” both first printed in Observations. In The Complete Poems (New York: 1967), “Peter,” “Picking and Choosing,” and “England” have all been recast as free verse, so the poems of the Twenties stand as a formally consistent group.

Moore, “Novices,” The Dial 74 (February, 1923), 184.

George Adam Smith, The Book of Isaiah (The Expositor’s Bible) (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1900), 1, 282.

Moore copied this and other passages from Smith into her reading notebook in 1920 or ‘21; see her Reading Diary 1916-21 p. 128, in the Moore Collection, Rosenbach Museum.

Moore never returned to free verse, though in late years her syllables became much less strict. In her Preface to The Fables of La Fontaine (New York: Viking, 1954), Moore says she has tried “to approximate the original rhythms of the Fables” (p. x).

61 See “The Jerboa, where the syllabic pattern matches the “fifths and sevenths,” the “two lengths” of the jerboa’s “leaps,” which “should be set to the flaglets,” Hound & Horn 6 (October-December, 1932), 113.

62 The Advancement of Learning (1605) appeared two years before Jamestown was settled; The New Organon appeared in 1620, the year the Mayflower reached The New World. See Moore, “Sir Francis Bacon,” The Dial 76 (April, 1924), 84-91.


64 Kenner, “Meditation and Enactment,” Tomlinson, p. 162.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.


69 Kenner, “Meditation and Enactment,” op. cit., p. 163.
Fables of the Golden Age: the Poetry of Marianne Moore

Bruce Ross

One salutes—on reviewing again
this modern mythologia
esopica

"The Web One Weaves of Italy"
(CG, p. 164)

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb,
And the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
And the suckling child shall play on the hole of the asp,
And the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice's den.

Isaiah 11:6,9

The evolutionary barrier of incommunicability among Nature, animals, man, and astral angels is thus overcome by offices of silent love.

Paramahansa Yogananda

There has been almost no significant critical assessment of Marianne Moore's work in terms of the fable. Only in a 1948 essay by Vivienne Koch is the matter examined at any length. The essay offers an interpretation of Moore's development of the theme of human conduct and her prolific adoption of animal images, traditionally the two predominant elements of the fable. Koch concludes that Moore resembles the fabulist La Fontaine in her democratic attitude towards animals, in her sympathy for these creatures, and in her conception of
moral order. Although the criticism of Moore's poems throughout the Twenties and Thirties centered on her explorations of moral themes and her use of animal images, Koch's essay was the first to link these two facets of Moore by viewing her in the fabulist tradition.

The fable is the literary form that most faithfully characterizes most of Moore's verse. Simply put, a traditional fable is a tale in which animals are personified in order to exhibit a moral truth about human behavior. Moore's poetry is filled with animals actively participating in the poems' narratives and the poetry invariably has a moral tone and a proverbial comment. The classic fable, from Aesop to Arnold Lobel, exhibits a two-part structure similar to that of many of Moore's poems. Theoretically designated as the body and the soul, or the tale and the moral of the tale, in classic discussions of the form, the fable's structure is evident in the initial narrative and the following proverbial gloss of a characteristic Moore poem. "The Crab and Her Mother," a representative example from Aesop, embodies the usual structure, thematic dimensions, and limitations of the genre.

Said an old Crab to a young one, "Why do you walk so crooked, child? Walk straight!" "Mother," said the young Crab, "show me the way, will you? And when I see you taking a straight course, I will try and follow."

Example is better than precept.

This simple narrative illustrates a common truth about human nature through an imaginary dialogue between two animals. The dialogue is to the point, and there is no verbal, descriptive, or thematic development to offer narrative depth to the fable. The dialogue serves only to introduce a recognizable conflict: youth's rejection of the dogmatic opinions of the aged. The crabs could easily have been replaced by other kinds of animals or by humans, although the evocation of their peculiar walk provides narrative color. The concluding proverb asserts a common truth about human behavior and offers a concise resolution for the conflict introduced in the narrative.

The fable is a didactic instrument that has been traditionally used to instruct the unlettered in the prudential realities of human behavior through a homespun narrative, although later versions of the fable altered both the narrative subject and stylistic possibilities of the form. The fable allows the naive reader to maintain an insulated distance from its often pointed truths because animals or animated natural phenomena rather than humans are depicted in the narratives. Hesiod's fable of the hawk and the nightingale, the earliest Greek fable, is an example. Hesiod's didactic poetry is directed to the Boeotian farmer and concerns the beliefs and morality that sustain the farmer in his difficult day-to-day existence. The later Aesopian narratives exhibit the rustic anecdotal texture and folk humor of many of the classic fables. Unlike other folktales such as the legend, the fairy tale, the animal tale, the tale of origins and the beast epic, the classic fable usually does not explore creation myths, nor occur in a specific time and place, nor portray the adventures of legendary or real heroic characters, nor exhibit the magical transformations of the fairy-tale world.

The history of the fable reflects an inevitable need to incorporate poetic elements and to expand the dimensions of the form's narrative. The Pancatantra, the early Sanskrit collection of animal fables which exerted a great influence on the medieval European versions of the genre, displays the fable's capacity to incorporate a folktale-like extended narrative. Designed as a manual of instruction for the sons of royalty, the Pancatantra takes the form of a single narrative framework interspersed with prose tales-within-tales and short aphoristic verses. The tale "The Sparrow and the Sparrow-hawk" offers an example of the narrative complexity of the Pancatantra. This tale is preceded by the tale "The Fox and the Hen." At the conclusion of "The Fox and the Hen," Damna the fox alludes to the wit of the sparrow who took revenge upon a hawk. Damna desires his own revenge because of his frustration over a rival at court, the subject of "The Fox and the Hen." At his wife's insistence, the fox relates the tale of the sparrow in which the sparrow enlists the aid of a friendly salamander to destroy a predatory sparrow-hawk. The moral follows: "...whoever has a design to ruin his enemy, may possibly bring it about, let him be never so weak." Immediately the fox's wife warns her spouse of the difficulties of undermining his rival. The fox decides to limit his audience with the lion king to a discussion of the six things that will bring ruin upon a kingdom, one of which is the neglect of men of wit and courage, the fox presumably being one of these. The fox's spouse acknowledges Damna's prudence but again warns him against revenge: "...whoever meditates mischief, commonly brings it at last upon his own head." She however adds, "...he that studies his neighbor's welfare, prospers in everything he undertakes," a questionable truth that she illustrates with another tale, "The Savage Tyrant." This example of the extended beast fable demonstrates that the form may successfully incorporate a series of narrative digressions that are punctuated at various points by compressed moral statements, without dismantling the form's narrative interest, its wit, or the poignancy of its disclosed wisdom.

The Aesopian "The Crab and Her Mother" and "The Sparrow and
the Sparrow-hawk" of the *Panchatantra* represent the two stylistic strands of the fable. The former, admired by Lessing and serving as the paradigm of the form, offers a spare, compressed narrative and a succinct moral at its end; the latter, from which all animal fables are ultimately derived, offers a meandering narrative and sporadically interjected philosophic and moral assertions. The majority of Moore's poems stylistically resemble one or the other of these two forms of the fable. A poem like "The Paper Nautilus" (CP, p. 121) is clearly AESopian. In five seven-line stanzas the construction of the nautilus' egg case and the hatching of the eggs are described. The moral context of the description is introduced in the first stanza:

> For authorities whose hopes<br>are shaped by mercenaries?<br>Writers entrapped by<br>teatime fame and by<br>commuters' comforts? Not for these<br>the paper nautilus<br>constructs her thin glass shell.

The folly of misguided civil and aesthetic attitudes is contrasted with the regenerative process in the nautilus. The next three stanzas narrate the egg-shell construction, the incubation period, and the young nautiluses' births. It is not until the final stanza that the moral is introduced:

> laid Ionic chiton-folds<br>like the lines in the mane of<br>a Parthenon horse,<br>round which the arms had<br>wound themselves as if they knew love<br>is the only fortress<br>strong enough to trust to.

The moral is divorced from the narrative by the speaker's transition of "as if." What follows in the last two and one-half lines of the poem is a testament to the integrity and innate wisdom of motherhood. The narrative thus becomes an illustration of prudential action, the loving, maternal protection, and of aesthetic mastery, the classical simplicity of the egg shell's design. It accordingly offers a corrective to the unwise officials and artists of the first stanza. Poems such as "The Frigate Pelican" (CP, p. 25), "To a Prize Bird" (CP, p. 31), "Peter" (CP, p. 43), "To a Snail" (CP, p. 85), "The Wood-Weasel" (CP, 127), "Apparition of Splendor" (CP, p. 158), "The Arctic Ox" (CP, p. 193), "To a Giraffe" (CP, p. 215), and "Reminiscent of a Wave at the Curl" (CP, p. 244) are also structured on the AESopian form, and many of Moore's other short poems have a similar form, except that a concept, object, or state of mind rather than an animal becomes the subject.

Each animal in its particular nature reflects the moral or aesthetic thesis of the given poem, even if often in an oblique manner. The exact rendering of an animal's shape, color, movement, or behavioral patterns provides metaphors to illustrate the moral theses. So the daily rituals of the housecat in "Peter" (CP, p. 43) offer a fable on naturalness; the relocated Siberian reindeer in "Rigorists" (CP, p. 96) offer a fable on adaptation; the evolutionary adept ostriches in "He Digesteth Harde Yron" (CP, p. 99) offer a fable on perseverance; the breeding habits of the mollusk in "The Paper Nautilus" (CP, p. 121) offer a fable on maternal love; the serene bondage of the elephants in "Elephants" (CP, p. 128) offers a fable on patience; and the *giraff* of the goats in "The Arctic Ox (or Goat)" (CP, p. 193) offers a fable on beneficence.

In animals there is a natural balance between their inner natures and their external existence which produces a kind of tranquillity, a fact celebrated in Moore's portrait of a cat in "Peter." The poem, which lovingly captures typical moods and activities of a pet owned by friends of Moore, illustrates the "virtue of naturalness" that characterizes the cat: "Lifted and handled, he may be dangled like an eel or set up on the forearm like a mouse." Naturalness, for Moore, means more than the spontaneous and unconstrained behavior of animals, although all of her animal subjects demonstrate such approved behavior. More fully, as in her poetry of praise for the plenitude of nature, Moore's "virtue of naturalness" entails a conception of nature as an integrated whole. In the "Forward" to the *Prospect Park Handbook* Moore states that the "Chinese concept of nature for man to enjoy captivates me." Moore's predilection for natural subjects tests this attitude of awed delight, which presupposes the communication between different ontologies that justifies the fable genre.

The Indian buffalo in "The Buffalo" (CP, p. 24), the Alaskan reindeer in "Rigorists," the elephants in "Elephants," and the oxen in "The Arctic Ox (or Goat)," as well as the figurative encounter of the unicorn and the virgin in "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns" (CP, p. 77), serve as vehicles for portraying the nature of positive accord between man, animal, and nature. Each of these poems dramatizes an exchange of respectful sympathy from man to the domesticated creature. In "Rigorists," the introduction of Siberian reindeer into the Eskimo culture is seen as a miraculous event. In reality these animals, as the poem notes, saved the Eskimos from extinction. The imparted
Six hundred ostrich-brains served
at one banquet, the ostrich-plume-tipped tent
and desert spear, jewel-
gorgeous ugly egg-shell
goblets, eight pairs of ostriches
in harness, dramatize a meaning
always missed by the externalist.

The ironic presence of the ostrich plume, the symbol of justice, in this display of opulent excess helps to gloss the last two lines of the stanza. The symbolic plume was invoked in stanza four to sharply counterbalance the description of ostrich hunting in stanza three. Here it serves as an image suggestive of the eventual downfall of corrupt societies. Though the Roman Empire has collapsed, the ostrich, the symbol of justice, continues to exist. The Romans and all cultures based on a materialist ethic are externalists. The ostrich is a symbol of the heroic, almost martyr-like, nature of those who are able to comprehend more than the external nature of experience, and endure. Its existence, like the symbolic plume, serves as an antidote to man's rapaciousness: "it contradicts a greed that did not wisely spare the harmless solitaire."

The Pancatantra tradition of the extended beast fable which builds up many layers of meaning through its interrelated series of tales and verse can be illustrated by "An Octopus" (CP, p. 71). In the two hundred odd lines of the poem a digressive strategy is established through metaphors within metaphors, dramatic shifts of narrative description and perspective, frequent interjections of philosophic commentary, and a plethora of diverse quoted materials. The poem is a narrative description of a glacier, the titular octopus, and the environment in which it exists. The digressions are framed by the simple metaphor established in the title and the first line: "An Octopus/ of ice." The first fifteen lines and the last twenty-two lines of the poem concentrate on the actual description of the octopus, and a reference to the "uneconomic action of the glaciers" occurs near the poem's middle. The remaining lines are devoted to descriptions of the area's weather, tophographical features, animal and plant life, local lore, and vacationing tourists, as well as a long discussion of Greek metaphysical attitudes and a short comment on Henry James's sensibility. The various descriptions of the glacier and mountain are all rendered with a deft precision of naturalistic detail, and thus underscore the major theme of the poem which is declaimed at the poem's end:

Neatness of finish! Neatness of finish!
Relentless accuracy is the nature of this octopus
with its capacity for fact.
The description of the metaphoric octopus and its environment illustrates the aesthetic conviction and metaphysical imperative to observe the world and to express one's response to it, always through an attention to details. This conviction is developed at length in the discussion of the ancient Greeks who "liked smoothness, distrusting what was back/ of what could not be seen." The digressive nature of the poem is highlighted by the mention of the small ponies that just precedes the discussion of the Greeks. Preceding the account of the ponies is a short description of eleven eagles that listen to the roar of the melting ice flow, as well as a quoted comment on the sound of a marmot. The narrator then attributes the marmot's frightened response to either a loosened stone, another marmot, or the ponies. An eighteen-line description of the ponies follows. This meandering style occurs with more or less complexity in many of Moore's longer poems. It allows the poet to develop reverberant moral implications within the visual context of the landscape, cityscape, seascape, or gardenscape. "The Plumet Basilisk" (CP, p. 20), "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns" (CP, p. 77), "The Pangolin" (CP, p. 117), "Elephants" (CP, p. 128), "Tom Fool at Jamaica" (CP, p. 162), and "Blue Bug" (CP, p. 218) are examples, and most of Moore's long landscape poems and historical and philosophic narratives maintain the same digressive texture. These poems are not narratives, poetic essays, epics, dramatic monologues, pastoral, or extended meditations, although they share some of the poetic strategies of these forms. They resemble fables because they have a controlling metaphor whose subject is an animal.

It has been theorized that the fable had its origins in primitive allegories in which plants and animals spoke like men. This anthropomorphism of nature is a predominant element of the fable tradition. In only a few of Moore's poems do animals or animated forces literally speak or act as if they were men. But her creatures nevertheless convey truths applicable to human nature. The narratives of the Aesopian and eastern fable traditions are essentially revelations of principles of conduct. The poetic narrative was the simplest means for conveying an imaginative work of literature's moral purpose without becoming either rhetorically sermonic or gnomic. Fables are, however, imaginative entertainments as well as allegories. The history of the fable tradition reflects an irrepressible movement towards expanding the dimensions of the genre's basic formula. The Panchatantra tradition exhibits the anecdotal and cumulative possibilities of the fable's narrative. The Aesopian fable presents a single moral or satiric action through a classic succinctness of form and content. During the Roman Empire, Phaedrus expanded the metrical possibilities of the form in his versified collection of the Aesopian tales. He also introduced topical and political satire, a direction that leads to the religious fables of the Reformation and a work such as Dryden's The Hind and the Panther and later Gay's Fables and Orwell's Animal Farm. Animal characters persisted as central components of these narratives, even if the stylistic treatment of the animals reflected a commonplace symbolic inheritance from Aesop, the Panchatantra, and the Bible.

Although the moral of a tale could be acted out by any arrangement of animals, a body of stock associations with certain animals provided narrative depth and color. So, a lion is lordly, a wolf treacherous, and so forth. These stock associations were indispensable to the medieval beast epic, an episodic animal tale in the Panchatantra tradition. Thus the hero of Roman de Renart is the fox, a stock symbol for cunning. The creatures' distinctive physical characteristics could also help enliven the narrative as in Aesop's "The Crow and the Pitcher" where the bird's beak adds an element of actuality to the moral of necessity and invention, and in the description of the crab's sidling walk in "The Crab and Her Mother." Chaucer's "Nuns Priest's Tale," a beast fable related to the Roman de Renart, and derived, ultimately, from the Panchatantra, extends the descriptive possibilities of animal nature through its fidelity to the rustic scenes of barnyard life. Almost none of the animals depicted in the fable traditions possessed fantastic natures such as the aspidochelone of the Physiologus tradition or fantastic characteristics like Aesop's "The Goose with the Golden Eggs.

The animals of the fable tradition, then, are interchangeable symbols that illustrate a moral. Truncated depictions of the animals' characteristics that are taken from animal lore provide the only naturalistic density for these symbols. This is the case through the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, for example, the monkey who thought eyeglasses were worthless because it did not understand their function could have been replaced by any other animal in Krylov's fable on ignorance, "The Monkey and the Spectacles." With the rise of children's writers such as Carroll, Kipling, Grahame, and Potter and adult fabulists like Tolkien and our contemporary Richard Adams, animal images that maintain highly detailed naturalistic fidelity and depict fantastic beings have become common features of the modern fable tradition. Through these innovations the nature and character of the animal in its own right dominates the form. The imaginative depiction of these creatures becomes more fundamental to the value of the fable than the moral itself. Attention is drawn principally to the realities of Squirrel
Nutkin, the White Rabbit, or the hobbit Frodo. The great moral themes in which these beings participate are set in the background. Like these most recent exponents of the fable Moore is interested in the imaginative development of her animal subjects. The body of her poetry exhibits the major structural and thematic concerns of the fable tradition and extends the moral and aesthetic dimensions of this tradition, but her most distinctive work in the fabulist mode involves her treatment of the animal image.

Moore uses elements from every type of folktale in her poetry, but chooses the fable as her vehicle because it is the only type of animal tale that explicitly points to a moral. She chose the fables of La Fontaine as her major work of translation and incorporated lines from these fables into several of her own poems, although she has also translated Adalbert Stifter’s wonder tale “Rock Crystal” and retold Charles Perrault’s versions of “Puss in Boots,” “Cinderella,” and “Sleeping Beauty.” The association of Moore with La Fontaine and the fable became a standard assumption with the 1954 publication of her translations of The Fables of La Fontaine. In a Festschrift for Moore, Harry Levin presents a casual but discerning catalogue of the similarities between Moore and various French writers and sources. In his comments on the La Fontaine translations he noted how “the human bestiary has been so thoroughly assimilated that the esprit gaulois is refined into a quintessence of Yankee wit.” Moore's success with her idiomatic translations of La Fontaine's Fables is evident. An example from “The Lion in Love” will illustrate her accomplishment. The tale begins with an allusion to a fabulous period in which animals could converse with human beings. The French reads:

Du temps que les bêtes parlaient
Les lions entre autres voulaient
Entre admis dans notre alliance.

Moore translates the lines as follows:

Before their speech was obstructed,
Lions or such as were attracted
To young girls, sought an alliance.

But there is, I find, a great distance between a Moore jerboa and a La Fontaine rat . . . My fine critical hindsight tells me now, what it didn’t warn me beforehand, that Miss Moore has never been a fabulist at all, that her animals never acted out her moralities; that their function was ever to provide a minutely detailed, finely perceived symbolic knot to be a center for the pattern of her recondite meditations; that what she shares with La Fontaine is a shrewdness and delicacy of getting there—their fables, in fact — are so different as to be opposed.

For Nemerov, Moore is not a fabulist, like, for example, La Fontaine, because her animals are incidental to her poetic meditations. Her poems are not moral tales acted out by her animal subjects but abstruse flights of fancy that are somehow provoked by and centered on these animals. Though Nemerov is accurate in linking Moore’s style with that of La Fontaine, his disassociation of her animal and her morality is questionable. All Moore's creatures reflect her moralities by example. Her poems are the narratives of the creatures' natures, and these natures become the controlling metaphors that express her moral points. Thus we have a collection of poems that includes fables on the nautilus' maternal love, the metaphoric octopus' neatness, the housecat's naturalness, the Siberian reindeer's adaptation, the ostriches' perseverance, the elephants' patience, the Arctic ox's beneficence, and so forth. In each of Moore's fables the relationship between the aes-
thetic quality of the animal subject and the moral lesson to be drawn from that subject is evident. Despite its density of syntax, language, tone, and meaning, a Moore poem bears the implicit form of the fable. This density makes the poems appear to be abstruse. But an explication of Moore's moral concerns makes apparent the resemblance of her poems not only to the structure and but also to the aims of the fable. Her animal subjects are reminders of the moral nature of the universe and of the universal myth of the Golden Age. This last association is suggested in the shared attitude toward animals and the shared conception of moral order that Koch discovered in Moore and La Fontaine.

In a review of Wallace Stevens' *Auroras of Autumn*, Moore compares Stevens' art to that of La Fontaine because of his "spectacularly quiet verbal harmonies," his "modest authoritiveness," and his reserved evocation of the "'durable, the classic, the incontestable.'" Both Stevens and La Fontaine are deft verbal stylists whose poems express, respectively, aesthetic and proverbial truths. These truths are intuited and constructed solely within the imagination: "Sensibility imposes silence which the imagination transmutes into eloquence." The quality of the eloquently stated truth that Moore ascribes to both Stevens and La Fontaine is applicable to Moore herself. Her poetry also offers the impressive but unstressed assonance, internal rhymes, and end off rhymes that she detects in Stevens and La Fontaine. She quotes two lines from La Fontaine as an illustration:

Ne craignez point, d'entrer au prison de la belle.
Ce n'est qu'à nous qu'elle cruelle.

The assonance of the "p," "cr," "n," and "qu" sounds reflects one of Moore's own favored poetic techniques as do the more recognizable internal and slant end rhymes such as those of the "ez" ("er") and "elle" sounds. But the presiding stylistic trait which Moore and La Fontaine share is the "surgical courtesy" that first attracted her to La Fontaine, rather than their common interest in animals, social satire, and the fable form. For Moore, the quality of "surgical courtesy" exhibited in her own poetry is often manifested in a rhetorical density similar to that of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English prose moralists, a subtle transference of idiom.

Though it is clear that Moore's poetry exhibits moral themes, is filled with animal subjects, and so resembles the fable, it is also clear that her poems are not highly crafted static reworkings of classic parables but idiosyncratic meditations focused upon animal images. This procedure is illustrated by "The Web One Weaves of Italy" (CP, p. 164):

---

One salutes—on reviewing again

this modern mythologia
esopica—its nonchalance of the mind,
that "fount by which enchanting gems are split."
Are we not charmed by the result?

The poem's first two stanzas are based on descriptions Moore found in an article on Italian festivals and fairs, but the poem as a whole takes its moral inspiration from La Fontaine's "The Monkey and the Leopard," from which the quoted line in stanza three cited above is drawn. This tale exemplifies the thesis that heartfelt actions are superior to ones that are merely ostentatious. This moral forms the fourth and last stanza of the poem:

since flowering

is more than mere talent for spectacle,
Because the heart is in it as well.

Although the ostensive moral of the poem is based on the La Fontaine tale, it is a "mythologia/esopica," but a modern one. That is, this characteristic moral meditation is the same thing in spirit as an Aesopian narrative. Moore expresses her debt to the Aesopian fable: the moralizing impulse of that form is transferred to the dynamic meditative process which informs Moore's poetry. Her poems, like Aesop's fables, subject reality to a moralizing order.

An understanding of Moore's conception of the respective roles of imagination and reality in poetry would be helpful here, and is conveniently achieved by comparing her with two of her contemporaries who shared similar subject matter. Both Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, like Moore, returned again and again to the confrontation of the poetic consciousness with the structure of actuality. All three wrote landscape poems, poems inspired by art, and studies of individual natural phenomena. For Stevens, poetry was an exercise in which the interaction between a highly sensitive imagination and the surface of reality creates a supreme fiction. Stevens' poetry is philosophic in that he is consciously exploring the problems of ordering reality and the emotions, delineating the metaphorical structure of impressions, and portraying the aesthetic consequences of art. In "Anecdote of the Jar," for example, the phenomenological problem of an
metaphoric figures. It offers a complex metaphor of a faithfully described albino giraffe that looks like the sycamore. A sycamore when it has lost its bark and an albino giraffe are totally white except for the few shards of unpeeled bark on the tree and the muted impressions of ovals on the animal. The stately beauty and uniform color of this towering, composite creature are juxtaposed to the diminutive size and variegated color of the objects and creatures in the poem: steppingstones, the Hampshire pig, the white butterfly, and the tiny insect upon a stalk. The fidelity of Moore’s description of natural phenomena has been documented with reference to the giraffe, the pig, and the stones. The imaginative union of these three and the tree and butterfly through a motif of white and piebald color is achieved by the compressed associative and metaphorical construction of the poem itself. The characteristic moral is asserted: “there’s more than just one kind of grace.” And the fable structure is suggested in the insect’s fairy tale-like comment upon the giraffe’s stature: “And there was I like a fieldmouse at Versailles.” To use Blake’s famous terms Moore is declaring that one could see beauty and grace in a grain of sand, here the unassuming insect, as well as in the butterfly, the steppingstones, and the miniatures of Imami. The controlling images of the poem are faithful to actuality but transformed by the aesthetic and moral ordering of the poem.

In contrast is a poem like Stevens’ “The Snow Man.” Although the ostensible subject of the poem is the snow man, this object is not described. Rather, an imaginative projection of that object’s aesthetic response to winter is evoked, a supreme fiction about a season. Also in contrast is Williams’ “Iris” which presumably describes an actual experience. The personal “we” of the Williams’ poem contrasts with Stevens’ rhetorical “one” and Moore’s anecdotal, almost narratively conventional “I.” The figurative language provoked by the experience of the flower’s scent in “Iris” is conventionally descriptive: “blue as of the sea,” “trumpeting/petals.” Stevens’ evocation of a winter atmosphere of the senses and Moore’s metaphor-within-metaphor, her fairy-tale ending, and her color motif are more complex and imaginatively worked than the images in the Williams’ poem. But Moore’s giraffe, like Williams’ iris, is willfully constrained by and in precise accord with the texture of visible reality, unlike Stevens’ hypothetical snow man. In a review of Kora in Hell, accordingly, Moore notes that Williams belonged to “no school but experience.” She has also praised him elsewhere for his accuracy of description while significantly observing that he was often too specific. In her review of Stevens’
Auroras of Autumn Moore notes that Stevens' poetics offer an aesthetic pleasure in which "the intangible is more real than the visible," thus recognizing the abstract nature of his craft. Moore's own poetry, commonly thought of as poetic literalism, is a deft blending of Stevens' aestheticism and Williams' realism.

In the Aesopian fable the narrative exists almost solely to illustrate a single piece of proverbial wisdom. Even in the tale-within-a-tale structure of the Pancatantra tradition, the narrative progress of each individual tale is straightforward and economically bound to the tale's given moral. Moore's meditations are geometric rather than linear narratives, and her penchant for diverse quotations and the absence of lexical connectives further stresses her insistence on the cumulative, self-referential, and spatial nature of her meditations. Her poems may be fables, but they are structurally closer to dreams than to storyteller's anecdotes. Even when the fable form is stylistically embroidered, as in the case of La Fontaine's reworkings of Aesop, the inevitable logic of a transparently simple narrative and a naive allegory is present.

A Moore poem, however, is a complex fabric that must be taken whole in order to be comprehended. Moore shares with William Carlos Williams the view that a poem is a whole with a single meaning, a view she cites in a 1941 lecture at Vassar College. This notion of a poetic whole that takes the form in Moore's poetry of the controlling metaphor that is usually manifest as an animal image. But with Moore one should remember Goethe's dictum that if one would seek comfort in the whole, one must learn to discover the whole in the smallest part. Moore's view of reality is part of a consistent moral sensibility that finds precepts and aesthetic pleasure in the texture of actuality. The subject of this sensibility is always a finely observed object, animal, experience, episode in cultural history, landscape, abstraction, emotion, and often, a collection of these. Each precisely rendered observation and figurative expression must be attended to through the insistent focus of Moore's creative sensibility, manifest as the poem's controlling metaphor. When Elizabeth Bishop notes in "Invitation to Miss Moore," that "Manhattan is awash with morals," she is pointing to Moore's controlling sensibility. The adjective "awash" is exact. Moore's sense of the world is not a preconditioned and inevitable one. She has a predominant attitude, what she would call a predilection, that is receptive to the variable and manifold quality of human experience and its subject, the world. That world's province is not, in its embodying forth in poetry, a firmly codified one, like the fable. It is a complex fabric that is flooded with innumerable instances of specific subjects suitable for examination by the poet's sensibility, a sensibility in Moore's case always infused by love.

In the particularly dense poem "Efforts of Affection" (CP, p. 147) Moore examines the proper function of love; one must maintain a praiseworthy internal strength through efforts of love in order to achieve a sense of wholeness and humanity. The inevitable moral succinctly notes: "love can make one/ bestial or make a beast a man." The poem alludes to La Fontaine in its assertion of each person's obligation to overcome brutal or unprudential inclinations through the inner strength of love: "love's extraordinary-ordinary stubbornness/ like La Fontaine's." In simple terms, the poem expresses the maxim that it is prudent to have moral strength. This maxim declares the central affirmation of the fable tradition, an affirmation which sustains all of La Fontaine's and Moore's fables. For Moore love is that province out of which the classic truths are discerned and explored. Moral strength comes from love and seems equated with it. Her vision is essentially a passive one: humility, patience, and love are protective coverings of the soul. These virtues inspire revelation and divine grace. Like a prism in light, a recurring image in Moore, love has a peculiar sensitivity to the world that reveals its hidden truths.

Thus, love functions like the imagination but is essentially higher in nature because of its mastery over experience and the concerns of the imagination itself. In effect, Moore values La Fontaine's ability to offer a classic anatomy of love and hence prudence. The poetic fable is an ideal vehicle to express prudential wisdom, although Moore expands the dimensions of the form to include explorations of traditional ethical and spiritual values. In an early uncollected poem that was published in The Lantern of Bryn Mawr College, the strategies of the simple allegory that dominate the later mature fable-like poems are introduced. The Latin title "Tunica Pallio Proprio" is translated in the poem's first line:

My coat is nearer than my cloak;
Inside
My coat is an integument of pride.

The poem presents the concise self-realization of the narrator's moral nature. The poem alludes to the classic symbol of hypocrisy, the wolf in sheep's clothing. In Moore's elemental allegory, the coat and the cloak serve as metaphors for the superficiality of the external aspect of human nature. The coat and the cloak conceal the narrator's defective internal nature, pride. But in this early poem Moore's interest in presenting abstract moral conflicts in physically concrete images is
already apparent. The coat and the cloak are traditional poetic symbols for the body or covering of the soul and thus additional tangible descriptive details are unnecessary to express the poem's significance.

The word "integument," however, is precise and refers to the external layer of an organism, thus associating the abstract moral quality of pride with a concrete biologic phenomena.

Although most of Moore's animal fables are developed through a metaphor adopted from one of an animal's characteristics, in other poems, such as "The Monkeys" (CP, p. 40), the animals do not provide a controlling metaphor for the poems' moral, although their renderings are as rich as those in which one creature embodies the thesis. "The Monkeys," a satire on philistine misapprehensions of art, is presented in the form of a highly rhetorical lecture. Any creature could have served as the lecturer and any scene could have provided the setting if Moore were writing entirely in the classic fable tradition. But the choice of scene, the African veldt, and the opulent description of the creatures and of the other images attests to Moore's enlargement of the fable form. The moral of the poem is a subtle inversion of the adage that beauty is only skin deep. The poem suggests that the literal surface of reality is beautiful if comprehended in the correct manner. The philistine literalists alluded to in the lecture cannot perceive the beauty of the world because they are blinded by the cultural rubric of art. For them art is an impenetrable otherness, not an accessible facet and expression of experience. The descriptions of the elephant's "tawny-colored skin," the feline narrator's "wedge-shaped, slate-grey marks on its forelegs and the resolute tail," and the awesome power of art transformed by the literalists into a mercantile sea that "proffers flattery in exchange for hemp, rye, flax, horses, platinum, timber, and fur," comprise an account of the seemingly enigmatic nature of beauty. The poem thus suggests that the world itself defines aesthetic value. True familiarity with the commonplace transforms it and provides the experience of beauty. Animals were chosen to illustrate this discourse on beauty because, being deeply of the world, they embody beauty. Moore accordingly notes of her interest in animals: "They are subjects for art and exemplars of it, are they not?"46

Moore's animals are depicted with a naturalist's precision. Moore has documented the naturalist prose and cinematic sources of her animal descriptions in the notes appended to several of her animal poems such as "The Plumed Basilisk" (CP, p. 20), "The Frigate Pelican" (CP, p. 25), "The Pangolin" (CP, p. 117), and "Elephants" (CP, p. 128). This zoological fidelity is characteristic. The depiction of the jerboa's use of its tail to keep its balance in "The Jerboa" (CP, p. 10), for example, occurs in a passage from Smaller Mammals of North America that is recorded in Moore's diary.50 The flat, scientific tone of these prose sources is, however, lyrically transformed when the animals become subjects for Moore's fables, as the animated conclusion to "The Jerboa" illustrates:

Its leaps should be set
to the flageolet;
pillar body erect
on a three-cornered smooth-working Chippendale claw—propped on hind legs, and tail as third toe,
between leaps to its burrow.

The majority of Moore's animal subjects have never appeared before in imaginative literature. Thus exotic creatures such as jerboas, plumet basilisks, pangolins, and arctic oxen enter the fable genre for the first time. Moore's descriptive accuracy evokes vividly both her more familiar subjects, like the elephant, cat, or jelly-fish, and the entirely fabulous creatures, like the unicorn and the kylin.

The animal image served the fable because, in its origins, these creatures were representations of an animistic and mythic comprehension of the world. When the fable was conventionalized as a simple allegory of proverbial wisdom, the animals became symbols of that wisdom as anthropomorphic spokesmen for human nature. But throughout the history of the genre, the original enchantment with these animals in their own right came to assert itself. Thus in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries as much theoretical discussion of the genre was concerned with the nature of man's interest in animals as it was with the form's pedagogical intentions.51 Far from being opaque symbols, these creatures were viewed as bearing in kind the same moral participation in the world as man. They displayed the moral nature of the universe. And with the romantics animals were no longer Cartesian machines or living moral ciphers but reminders of what Herder calls the "Golden Age," a primitive time in which man and beast were joined in a common unity. This notion was conveyed in a highly civilized way in La Fontaine's "The Lion in Love" and other fables, through what Hugh Kenner calls "pastoral urbanity."52 It is also embodied in the epigraph from Isaiah at the head of this essay. Those verses inform Moore's concern with animals, addressing the moral problem of how men should relate to the natural world and to each other. Moore's fables are, like the offices of silent love of the epigraph from Yogananda, attempts to perceive and celebrate intimations of the Golden Age.
Through the virtues of steadfastness, strength, humility, love, patience and resistance, the concord of the Golden Age is achieved. And even out of discord the individual creature can thrive, realize its authentic nature, and manifest beauty. Some of Moore's poems present visions of the desired concord through what could be termed landscapes of the character of nature. Here the pastoral vision of the Golden Age in which man and beast live in harmony is manifested in actuality, despite the imprudent and discordant nature of the contemporary world. The poems in which the almost sentimental scenes with house pets occur, such as "Peter" (CP, p. 43), "Reminiscent of a Wave at the Curl" (CP, p. 244), and "Prevalent at One Time" (CP, p. 247), are staid versions of this accord. While the mirroring of the geometric precision of the birds' nests by the architectural structure in "The Icosahedron" (CP, p. 143) suggests the ultimate similarity between nature and technological society, the pacific interchange with the otherness of nature is best represented in poems where animals and man live and work together. The Indian buffalo being led by the herd-boys in "The Buffalo" (CP, p. 28), the reindeer staring back at its observers in "Rigorists" (CP, p. 96), and the man asleep on the reclining elephant in "Elephants" (CP, p. 128) are notable examples. But in a stanza from "The Arctic Ox (or Goat)" (CP, p. 194) that evokes the prophetic imagery of Isaiah, man and beast are brought into consummate harmony:

They join you as you work:  
love jumping in and out of holes,  
play in water with the children,  
learn fast, know their names,  
will open gates and invent games.

Animals, unlike man, are able to maintain acts of love, accord, service, and the like in a pure state, without psychological ambiguity or willed complexity, and thus serve as potent exemplars of moral virtue. Moore's animal subjects do not, however, betray conventional emblematic associations. Thus the virtue of patience is exemplified in the poem "Elephants" by the elephant, a creature that is equated with strength in the Western literary tradition and clumsiness in the modern secular imagination. The Indian elephants of "Elephants" maintain the same practicality and patience in their domesticated service as the buffalo in "The Buffalo." Like the elephant nature portrayed in "Diligence Is to Magic as Progress Is to Flight," the Indian elephant embodies a substantial aesthetic and moral principle that contradicts the nature of its human masters:

His held-up fore-leg for use  
as a stair, to be climbed or descended with  
the aid of his ear, expounds the brotherhood  
of creatures to man the encroacher, by the  
small word with the dot, meaning know—the verb bûd.  

These knowers "arouse feelings that they are allied to man" and can change roles with their trustees.

The elephant's dominating characteristic is patience, variously described in the poem as "serenity," "a pilgrim's pattern of revery," and equanimity. Here as in "Diligence Is to Magic as Progress Is to Flight," the elephant's slow movements are seen as a representation of a substantial knowledge that is opposed to an ephemeral, but highly charged, worldly experience that passes for knowledge. This dichotomy is presented in the concluding lines: "Who rides on a tiger can never dismount/ asleep on an elephant, that is repose." In the Indian culture the elephant is a symbol of divine wisdom and an avatar of Buddha. Although it maintains a practical demeanor in captivity, the creature is charged with the serenity of its symbolic nature. Thus the Sanskrit word for knowing, bûd, is reflective of the elephant's spiritual wisdom and prudential behavior. Its patient service to its masters is an extension of these qualities, and as such provides man with an example for understanding his own moral nature, the desired "repose" of the poem's last line.

In "The Arctic Ox (or Goat)" a portrait of accord close to the idealized notion of the Golden Age is represented in a fable on beneficence. The poem humorously evokes the creature's frolicsome and companionable nature. The ox's wool, which is used in the clothing industry, becomes a metaphor for the beast's harmlessness, and, by extension, an ecologically sound example of animal husbandry:

To wear the arctic fox  
you have to kill it. Wear  
giotut—the underwool of the arctic ox—  
pulled off it like a sweater;  
your coat is warm; your conscience, better.

Here is an antidote to the fur industry's exploitation in "New York" (CP, p. 54) and a more humane ecological system than the one of the Eskimo in "Rigorists." The ox's dual nature is whimsically presented in stanza six:

these ponderosos could dominate  
the rare-hairs market in Kashan and yet  
you could not have a choicer pet.
TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

The union of economic sufficiency and friendliness makes the arctic ox's existence with man almost an idealized one. The images of the beast's play with children and the song-birds' use of its wool for their nests emphasize the integrated accord of the human and animal worlds. A moral imperative underlies Moore's regard for this vision of concordance.

If we can't be cordial
to these creatures' fleece,
I think that we deserve to freeze.

We are advised to cultivate the peaceable vision embodied in "The Arctic Ox (or Goat)." Moore does not say that we will perish if we do not, she says only that we would "deserve to." Frozen oblivion would be just regard for cold indifference.

All previously unpublished material by Marianne Moore is used with the permission of Clive E. Driver, Literary Executor of the Estate of Marianne C. Moore.


4 Yvor Winters calls Moore an "exacting moralist" in "Holiday and Day of Wrath," Poetry, 26 (1925), 39-44; Edith Sitwell notes that the elephant subject of "Black Earth" is a product of life rather than art in "Reviews," The Sackbut, 2 (1921), 35; and Morton Zabel suggests that Moore's animal images represent a coincidence of appearance and meaning in "A Literalist of the Imagination." Poetry, 47 (1936), 326-36.

5 Koch distinguishes between La Fontaine's fables, which were principally created for moral instruction, and Moore's poems, which are intended to illuminate her subjects and bring a "certain plastic extension of the sensibility into imaginative universes." Koch, p. 169.

6 For a concise study of the genre see Erwin Lehfried, Fabel (Stuttgart: Sammuing Metzler, 1967).

7 In Moore's poems accurate descriptions of nature and animals play an increasing role as metaphors for moral themes. The treatment of these descriptions suggests that she is writing poetic fables. A definite break, however, seems to occur with the volume O To Be a Dragon (1959). Formerly, a fable-like tale is developed through an observation, a description, a meditation, or a combination of these. The tale presents a dominating or subsidiary animal image that exhibits the wisdom of the usually concluding moral adage. These poems also reflect the distinctively dense verbal and imagistic texture associated with a Moore poem. With O To Be a Dragon and the following volumes and uncollected verse, the poems become less stylized and less dense. They are usually short, sentimental imagistic impressions or direct and sentimental moral statements. They lack, on the whole, the earlier poems' incisive elements of threat and conflict that help generate the narrative tension associated with the fable.


10 Aesop's Fables, pp. 145-147.

11 Ibid., p. 146.

12 Ibid., p. 147.


14 Moore's strategy in her longer poems is similar to the narrative, allusive, and aphoristic texture of T. S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and The Waste Land and Ezra Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberly and the Cantos. Moore, however, excises a recognizable dramatic persona from her poems. Her logopoeia is less consciously philosophic than Eliot's or Pound's and more concerned with the cinematic development of her metaphors and tales.

15 A. Lytton Sell, "Fable," p. 269.

16 The term "fable," however, can refer to a legendary story of supernatural happenings. Thus Moore's depiction of the "living fable," the legendary stone-eating pangolin of "The Pangolin" (CP, pp. 118, 49).

17 Aesop's Fables, p. 227.

18 Moore used the names of animal characters from Grahame's The Wind in the Willows to refer to herself and members of her family throughout her private correspondence.

19 See Moore's depictions of and references to Tom Thumb in "Camellia Sabina" (CP, p. 16), Hansel and Gretel in "The Frigate Pelican" (CP, p. 25), unicorn legends in "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns" (CP, p. 77), the legendary Sanskrit singing bulbul in "Smooth Gnarled Grape Myrtle" (CP, p. 103), Earl Gerald's transformation into a stag in "Sparrow's Ireland" (CP, p. 112), Presbyter John in "His Shield" (CP, p. 14), the fairy's train in "Apparition of Splendor" (CP, p. 158), Virgin Mary's legendary blue cloak in "Rosemary" (CP, p. 168), the dragon transformations in "O To Be a Dragon" (CP, p. 177), the legends of Santa Claus and St. Hubert in "Saint Nicholas" (CP, p. 196), Saint Jerome and his tame lion in "Leonardo Da Vinci's" (CP, p. 201), the mermaid of Zennor in "The Mind, Intractable Thing" (CP, p. 208), and Beatrix Potter's tailor of Gloucester in "Tell Me, Tell Me" (CP, p. 231).

20 See Marriage (CP, pp. 62, 256-58), "Efforts of Affection" (CP, pp. 147, 16), "Apparition of Splendor" (CP, pp. 158, 21), "The Web One Weaves of Italy" (CP, pp. 164, 12), and "Blessed is the Man" (CP, pp. 173, 16).


23 Ibid., p. 40.

24 The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore, p. 252.


26 The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore, p. 252.
TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE


31 Ibid., 9.

32 Ibid., 8.

33 The term is Moore's. See "An Interview with Donald Hall" in Tomlinson, p. 29.


37 A copy of the lecture is located in the Marianne Moore Collection at the Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia.


40 The Imagist Poem, p. 84.

41 Contact, 4 (1921), 5.

42 Poetry, 44 (1934), 103–06.


44 Moore Collection, Rosenbach Museum.

45 Goethes Werke (Weimar: H. Böhlaun, 1887–1919), 1, 2, p. 216.


48 The Lantern, 18 (1910), 102.

49 "Forward" to A Marianne Moore Reader (New York: Viking 1961), xvi.

50 Moore Collection, Rosenbach, 1250/0/53.


52 "Supreme in Her Abnormality" in Tomlinson, p. 139.
