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# Those Various Scalpels: Poetry Made New in Marianne Moore's Observations

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Those Various Scalpels:  
Poetry Made New in Marianne Moore's *Observations*

Claire O. Grossman

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## Introduction

This thesis will be dedicated to an examination of *Observations*, Marianne Moore's first authorized book of poetry. Moore did not have editorial control over her first book, *Poems*, published in London in 1921 by the Egoist press. Though the bulk of the work in *Poems* reappeared in *Observations*, Moore made changes to many of the original drafts before arranging them carefully in the second book, which was published by the Dial press in New York in 1924. By studying the second volume, I hope to draw conclusions about Moore's role in the development of modern poetry.

Moore was born in Kirkwood, Missouri in 1887. She grew up in the home of her grandfather, a Presbyterian pastor, and moved with her mother and brother to Carlisle, Pennsylvania. She attended Bryn Mawr College, where she studied biology after being rejected by the English department. After graduating from Bryn Mawr in 1909, Moore studied typing, worked as a schoolteacher and librarian, and started to submit her poems to various magazines for publication. Several magazines including *Poetry* and the *Egoist* accepted her poems beginning in 1915, allowing Moore to meet and correspond with editors, other writers, and artists. In 1918, Moore and her mother moved to New York City, where the poet continued to build her friendships with poets like Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams.

Moore emerged as an important figure in conversation with other writers, not just from her personal correspondence but in published reviews and, later, as editor of the *Dial*. Her earliest published poems reflected certain Modernist efforts at objectivity and impersonality, but not in any deliberate alliance with a movement's agenda. In a radio broadcast on American poetry, Moore said, "I recall feeling oversolitary occasionally

(say in 1912)—in reflecting no ‘influences’; to not be able to be called an ‘imagist’ – but determined to put the emphasis on what mattered most to me, in a manner natural to me.”<sup>1</sup>

Though often overshadowed by her chief contemporaries – Stevens, Williams, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot– Moore deserves equal attention for her artistic originality and the generative power of her work. She did not just test poetic conventions, but reimagined the form altogether with her peculiar vocabulary, her use of eclectic quotations, and her self-invented verse forms. In *Observations*, she explores topics ranging from marriage to animals to literary personalities, but inevitably the subject of a Moore poem is also poetry itself. Poetry for Moore was a skill of accuracy, a special tool for conceiving both the real and the imaginary. But poetry was also a guide of conduct. And poetry was a model for persistence, a “love of doing hard things”, she said.

I will examine the poems according to several principal categories which, in Moore’s practice, function as metaphors for poetry: virtue, devices, accidents, acquisitions, scalpels, and armor. Moore includes these elements as recurring themes and, I believe, as methods of composition in *Observations*. Gravitating toward poetry’s specialized functions again and again, Moore was able to manipulate the possibilities of language while recognizing its limitations. By looking at *Observations* through these categories, I hope to see how the poems adhere or deviate from poetic conventions, and to ascertain what makes each poem unique in its composition or relationship to language.

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<sup>1</sup> Voice of America broadcast, 1963.

# Virtues

In the *Observations* version of her well-known “Poetry”, Marianne Moore considers how material objects in our world become converted into the stuff of poetry:

...these phenomena are pleasing,  
but when they have been fashioned  
into that which is unknowable,  
we are not entertained.

Moore likes poetry’s specialized way of observing things, except when that process fashions reality beyond comprehension. In the context of 1920s Modernist poetry, we might think of Wallace Stevens’s stylized imaginings or T.S. Eliot’s allusive prophecies as examples of this over-figuring. Moore’s response to over-fashioning is one of clipped disapproval: “we are not entertained,” she says.

Though she shared with her contemporaries the announced ambition of direct presentation (even if that aim played out in practice as something less lucid), Moore seems an unlikely steward of newness in her prim, unamused reaction to “Poetry”. Set against the backdrop of Greenwich Village, the woman behind these lines was a kind of

oddity with her formal speech and uncommonly modest appearance. To those who read *Observations* through the lens of Moore's public image, her scrupulous standards for poetry seem like rules of etiquette. Taffy Martin attributes this phenomenon to the various Modernists' memoirs, which "record Moore's reserve so persuasively that subsequent readers of those memoirs have created a myth out of the person and have begun, unlike her contemporaries, to read the poetry in terms of the myth."<sup>2</sup> In truth, Moore's careful demeanor as it appeared in her verse was not an outgrowth of her everyday decorum, but a method for rethinking poetic language. Her careful evaluation of poetry's tools in *Observations* made her approach closer to the announced aim of precision that was the undertaking of modern poets.

For Moore, precision was a moral act. In her poetry, she is dogged by "the senseless unarrangement of wild things" as any good Presbyterian is by human dishonesty. Moore's moral sense of poetic composition takes us not to her contemporaries, but back to George Herbert's rationale for plainness in 17<sup>th</sup>-century writing. Plainness in poetry was, in Herbert's estimation, equated with moral excellence. Moore in her poems also strives for directness, but (regardless of her specific values) the most significant similarity between *Observations* and 17<sup>th</sup>-century precepts is the overall framework in which the poet's system of individual aesthetics can be mapped onto a moral system. Moore's standards of good and bad expression govern her formal choices. We can see a basic example of this in "Poetry": in reaction to poetry that is vague or twisted in metaphor, Moore's terse and concrete lines offer the alternative of straightforward expression.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin, T. *Marianne Moore, subversive modernist*. University of Texas Press, 1986. 5.

However, the modern poet diverges from her Protestant predecessors in several ways. First, her solution to adornment is not just plainness; it is a complicated set of poetic virtues (restraint, precision, etc.), which are themselves to be defined and exemplified by *Observations*. Second, the underlying poetic principle doubles as subject matter for Moore, materializing as a discernable feature of the cat or the mountain or the novelist being observed. Such is the case when she addresses the insufferable “Steam Roller”, an enforcer of conformity:

The illustration  
is nothing to you without the application.  
You lack half wit. You crush all the particles down  
into close conformity, and then walk back and forth on them.

Sparkling chips of rock  
are crushed down to the level of the parent block.  
Were not 'impersonal judgment in aesthetic  
matters, a metaphysical impossibility,' you

might fairly achieve  
it. As for butterflies, I can hardly conceive  
of one's attending upon you, but to question  
the congruence of the complement is vain, if it exists.

The titular steamroller only functions as a crushing force, flattening “all particles” of a landscape “into close conformity”. This machine devastates with its loudness and imprecision, what Moore calls “a walk[ing] back and forth” on its subjects. To condemn the steamroller, she mocks it in its own terms, adopting its overbearing, redundant mode of expression. She describes the “crush[ing]” action in the first stanza, only to repeat the action unnecessarily in the second: “Sparkling chips of rock / are crushed down to the level of the parent block,” she says. This is the critic who speaks too loudly, so loudly

that he drowns out the significant detailed beauty expressed by the “sparkling” rocks. She shows potential inaccuracy in the sweeping action, disregarding her addressee’s footlessness to describe its movement as “walk”.

Moore also takes “illustration” beyond reason, holding the metaphor in uncomfortable suspense so that we cannot tell if she means to describe the absent human or the human-like steamroller. Stevens might prolong a metaphor in this manner in order to dramatize a problem, but Moore treats such an approach as a vice, one which she turns back against the crushing steamroller by never allowing him out of abstraction. We see again the problem of “Poetry”, veering off into the extended metaphor without any mooring to our sensible reality. Unlike the “imaginary gardens with real toads in them” (from a later, 29-line draft of “Poetry”), Moore’s steamroller errs too much on the side of the imaginary to conceivably host a random, natural element like “butterflies”.

This is exactly the kind of indiscriminate expression that Moore remedies with her signature precision. As the book’s title (changed from *Poems* to *Observations*) suggests, direct observation is, for Moore, a more desirable mode than “unknowable” abstraction. “Words are constructive / when they are true,” she says in “Picking and Choosing”. The poet thus acts a recorder of field notes, rigorously taking inventory of her surroundings. As Hugh Kenner points out, Moore’s precision is like Ruskin’s sense of “the eye [as] a nobler organ” for modern painters.<sup>3</sup> This faculty of sight becomes essential to Moore’s effort at accuracy, allowing her to reproduce the world in precise detail. Her observing

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<sup>3</sup> Kenner, H. *A homemade world: the American modernist writers*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.;

Atwood, S. *Ruskin’s educational ideals*. Ashgate, 2011.

includes a democratic range of subjects, and within that scope “truth” or “volition” merit the same straightforward presentation as “zebras” or a “shaving-brush”. She models this thoroughness by making an index of her subjects:

Christ on Parnassus, 102  
chrysalis, 57, 98  
cigars, 57  
circular traditions, 73, 102  
circus, 107  
clay pots, 28  
coach, gilt, 65; wheel yellow, 35  
cockatrices, 71, 101  
cockroaches, 57  
coffin, 79, 104  
Coliseum, 63  
collision, of knowledge, 88, 107; of orchids, 67

This painstaking and amusing catalogue may seem to reduce Moore’s subjects to curios, but in the poems themselves, the poet does not simply leave these items on the shelf. We see her microscopic vision at work in “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish”. Moore approximates both the physical detail and the imagined human effort behind the object’s making:

Here we have thirst  
and patience, from the first,  
and art, as in a wave held up for us to see  
in its essential perpendicularity;

She begins by evaluating the conditions of the bottle’s making: desire or “thirst”, and the somewhat converse moral capacity of “patience” come together in the completed object. In its physical function as a container, the bottle itself satisfies thirst, but Moore also values the underlying craft or “art” that puts the “thirst / and patience” into relative

arrangement. Thus, we do not admire the bottle's fixed attributes but rather, Moore's idea of its geometric craft: "essential perpendicularity".

In purely visual terms, though, the bottle's power of arrangement seems almost immaterial, bringing the spectrum together "as in a wave" when held up to the light:

...not brittle but  
intense—the spectrum, that  
spectacular and nimble animal the fish,  
whose scales turn aside the sun's sword by their polish.

The physical detail ("not brittle") and property of light ("inten[sity]") factor incongruously into Moore's assessment, similar to the "thirst" and "patience" that motivated the bottle's creation. These oppositions in the "spectrum" are so uncontainable that the fish overrides its bottle-ness and begins to swim, activated by the light's movement. Ultimately, its polished scales deflect the singular presentation of "the sun's sword" but also make the sun sword-like with their transformative power. We may notice that the "essential perpendicularity" of the bottle manifests in Moore's congruent adjacent stanzas. Language is the real craft of the "Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle". Even though the poet uses precise verbal instruments to bring the object to a "polish", the resulting polish fuses abstract and concrete elements in a manner impossible by singular vision. "This is the amazing thing about a good writer," Stevens wrote in a later review of Moore's work. "[She] seems to make the world come toward him to brush against the

spines of his shrub. So that in looking at some apparently small object one feels the swirl of great events.”<sup>4</sup>

Moore’s distaste for poetic abstraction does not mean she is in favor of empirical truths. When Moore does encounter an expressed empirical fact or social truth, she shows it to be inaccurate to reality as poetic abstraction. In “To Be Liked By You Would Be A Calamity”, Moore dismantles her loud opponent and the statement that promotes his belligerence:

“Attack is more piquant than concord,” but when  
    You tell me frankly that you would like to feel  
My flesh beneath your feet,  
    I’m all abroad; I can but put my weapon up, and  
    Bow you out.

The opening quotation from Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes* describes a smug male critic bashing a young female writer’s work. Moore has cleverly aligned her own negative value of loudness with our sense of such an “attack” as improper conduct. She advances on her antagonist with her own definition (“Gesticulation – it is half the language”), then takes self-restraint to the extreme:

Let unsheathed gesticulation be the steel  
    Your courtesy must meet,  
    Since in your hearing words are mute, which to my  
        senses  
    Are a shout.

In the face of verbal incompetence, Moore’s silence becomes more expressive – sharper – than the opposition’s attack. The poet controls the argument by bowing out of it

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<sup>4</sup> Wallace Stevens. “About One of Marianne Moore’s Poems.” *Quarterly Review of Literature* 1948 : n. pag.

completely, making the final “shout” not just rude, but violent. The critic’s authority is made preposterous, his language revealed to be an empty rhetoric.

The poet’s voice in *Observations* often seems to imitate this kind of rhetoric as a way to empty it of meaning. Moore tells us that “Disproportionate satisfaction anywhere / lacks a proportionate air”; “Literature is a phase of life”; “the future of time is determined by the power of volition”; “When one / is frank, one’s very / presence is a compliment.” The list goes on. When she is not inventing moralizing statements, Moore finds other ways to position herself as ultimate authority on truth: in “A Fool, A Foul Thing, A Distressful Lunatic” she tells us that the loon is the “most precocious water bird” as if such a thing could be verified. Another title resembles the language of logic: “Diligence Is to Magic as Progress Is to Flight”. Like the critic who speaks too loudly, these invented expressions of truth call attention to their own questionable authority.

Although she makes light of the critic’s verbal impropriety as though disapproving of bad manners, Moore can also address serious moral dilemmas with her unique sense of justice. In “Reinforcements”, she condemns ancient poetry’s figuring of war:

The vestibule to experience is not to  
be exalted into epic grandeur. These men are going  
to their work with this idea, advancing like a school of fish  
through  
still water—waiting to change the course or dismiss  
the idea of movement, till forced to. The words of the  
Greeks  
ring in our ears, but they are vain in comparison with a sight  
like this.

The poem makes more serious Moore's moral argument against over-abstraction, showing a scenario in which the inadequate "Reinforcements" of epic design have literally fatal consequences. The "words of the Greeks" elevate the experience of war to "epic grandeur", glorifying heroism beyond the reality of men simply "going to / their work" in the present day. The men cannot shrug the "idea of movement" which compels them forward, Moore envisions, "like a school of fish / through / still water". Her simile vastly understates the sight of battle, as if a comparison to such an ordinary scene might counteract the excesses of epic. Her description of Greek words "vain in comparison with a sight / like this" could just as easily apply to the fish simile; both modes of figuring distance the soldiers too far from reality. "I do not mean of course, that things cannot be distorted for the sake of art for they can," Moore wrote to Bryher in July of 1921, remarking on the work of Bryher's husband, Robert McAlmon. "So long as you don't do violence to the essence of a thing."

Like "Reinforcements", the letter to Bryher never proposes a reasonable route to the "essence." If Moore were to eliminate all unwanted effects from her poetry, the result might resemble what Herbert recommends as the best way to "preach [the Lord's] eternal word" in his poem "Church Windows":

Doctrine and life, colors and light, in one  
When they combine and mingle, bring  
A strong regard and awe; but speech alone  
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,  
And in the ear, not conscience, ring.<sup>5</sup>

In this conclusion, the sacrament is to be stripped down to its material aspect. Herbert rejects the ceremony of spoken word (“speech alone/ Doth vanish like a flaring thing”) and proposes the “window” as the best means for G-d’s “light and glory” to reach the worshipper. In modern terms, Herbert’s recommendations might be best compared to the “found” language of Imagism, intentionally pared down to allow the reader direct access to meaning.

Like Herbert in “Church Windows”, Moore’s convictions about the practice of poetry often focus on what should be avoided or minimized. Ancient modes are “not / to be exalted,” she says in “Reinforcements”. In “Poetry”, “we do not admire what we cannot understand,” because “enigmas are not poetry.” These expressions of what “you don’t do” seem on the surface like maxims, ruling out certain kinds of poetry but offering no alternative form. Elsewhere in *Observations*, however, Moore specifies alternatives to her negations with an unmistakable formula: “The deepest feeling always shows itself.../ not in silence, but restraint” she says in “Silence”. A glacier in “An Octopus” is “Like Henry James ‘damned by the public for decorum’; not decorum, but restraint.” Contractility in “To A Snail” is “not the acquisition of any one thing / that is able to adorn”, “but the principle that is hid: / in the absence of feet.” The quality of an “Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle” is “Not brittle but / Intense”. We see Moore’s execution of “restraint” even when “restraint” is not the quality she aims to describe. Her repeated “not...but” construction imitates the process of diction, keeping the imprecise terms (“brittle” or “silence” or “decorum”) in check while arriving at the most apt expression.

However, in *Observations* the most complete description of a thing must also fully disclose the poet's efforts at accuracy. The *attempt* at exact description often fails, and Moore wishes to show that failure in the description itself. Writing to Pound years after *Observations*, Moore considers the feat of such disclosure as framed by an essay on Gerard Manley Hopkins:

I do think she says what she says very well, about the way in which the rhythm in a poem keeps up with itself like an acrobat catching his partner's ankles while affording, in safety, an extra turn and flourish within the fall; and the problem of depicting a mind thinking, so that the idea is not separated from the act of experiencing it; how in writing a poem it seems impossible to get the material into motion in its chaotic state and the poem, unique and perfect, seems to be separate from the conscious mind, avoiding it while the conscious mind takes deliberate steps toward it.<sup>6</sup>

As she elaborates on this "problem" embodied by Hopkins' form, Moore could just as well be describing her own difficulties of poetic insight. "It is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing," she observes the sea-watcher in "A Grave", "but you cannot stand in the middle of this". The young poet who "says what she says very well" about Hopkins is none other than Elizabeth Bishop, then an undergraduate at Vassar. In the younger poet's assessment, the sprung rhythm invokes a "conscious mind" trying to directly access its environment, to stand in the middle of the sea.

Though Moore's meter often reflects the strict procedure of her mind, she abandons metered feet for her trademark syllabics throughout *Observations*. She also works in free verse, but the syllabics seem most engineered to keep a "chaotic state" at bay. In "The Fish", each stanza's odd-syllabled lines unfold in 1-3-9-6-9 progression. As she enters the scene, the stark elements of the seafloor become increasingly foreboding –

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<sup>6</sup> Moore, M., and B. Costello. *Selected letters*. Penguin Books, 1998. 342.

sharp sunbeams like “split... spun / glass” cut through the water, illuminating “the / turquoise sea / of bodies.” She apprehends the abyss in measured verse:

...The water drives a wedge  
of iron through the iron edge  
of the cliff;

Moore accelerates the physical formation of the sea-chasm into a swift and completed action. In one fell swoop, the water’s figurative “wedge / of iron” cuts into the (less figuratively “iron”-wrought) “edge / of the cliff.” The water forces itself unyieldingly through the edifice. Both entities are of “iron”-like strength, and the cliff is not yet the target of injury it becomes later in the poem. Moore recreates the positioning of these elements in her syntactic arrangement. The “iron through... iron” in a single line shows the water’s cleaving into the cliff, creating a space within the solid entity. Just as the water furrows into the cliff’s edge, Moore carves the word “edge” from the preceding line’s “wedge”, visually inverting the penetrating force with its creviced counterpart. This near-chiastic rendering of the chasm’s formation anticipates the eventual relation of the cliff to “the sea [that] grows old in it.” The cliff protects a bustling, brackish space within the crevice. Though “defiant”, the cliff is still defined by its damaged appearance. Moore introduces the battered hulk of rock first by its scars:

All  
external  
marks of abuse are present on this  
defiant edifice—  
all the physical features of  
  
ac-  
cident—lack  
of cornice, dynamite grooves, burns, and

hatchet strokes, these things stand  
out on it; ....

Though Moore does not specify who is to blame for this abuse, the deliberate marks suggest man-made forms of violence: “dynamite”, fire (“burns”), and a “hatchet” are to blame for the escarpment’s wounds. In the earliest printing of “The Fish”, Moore’s stanzas are more conventionally capitalized and justified to the left margin.<sup>7</sup> She modernizes the shape in *Observations*, hacking into the margin with varied indentations. As Moore’s unique formula coerces words and sentences across line breaks, the poem seems to mimic certain features of traditional poetry. Except here, rhyme and meter have jarring effects: the line break midway through “ac- / cident”, for example, disjoints the word unexpectedly between its hard and soft c’s. The “ac- / cident” is made all the more ironic by its rhyme with “lack / of cornice” and “hatchet strokes”. By calling attention to these mathematics of poem-making, Moore’s invented pattern becomes an extension of her poetic virtue. She cannot penetrate the ocean’s “black jade”, but she does allow us to see back down into her methods of restraint, her “device / of Moorish gorgeousness” as she puns on her own name in another poem.<sup>8</sup>

Rigorous as they were, Moore’s virtues did not transcend her own desire for some kind of upheaval. We can see how emotion is often just as essential to the poet’s measured logic as her tools of restraint. “Literature is a phase of life,” she says in “Picking and Choosing”. “If one is afraid of it, / the situation is irremediable; if one approaches it familiarly, / what one says of it is worthless.” Moore does not reason away

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<sup>7</sup> Shulman

<sup>8</sup> see “Fear is Hope” (*Observations*, 15)

emotion, nor does she ignore the attraction to sublime spectacle. In the final lines of “Is Your Town Nineveh?”, she confesses: “I, myself, have stood / there by the aquarium, looking / At the Statue of Liberty.” The poem concludes with that admission, as if Moore in her system of poetic virtues did not account for how we observe the sublime.

# Acquisitions

Admiring Marianne Moore's work in a 1923 *Dial* review, Eliot criticizes Glenway Wescott's introduction to her poem "Marriage" for its "distinction between proletariat art and aristocratic art".<sup>9</sup> Wescott in his introduction names the difficulty of Moore's poems their "aristocratic art", more rewarding to the reader than "popular art, which yields itself easily and flamboyantly."<sup>10</sup> Pointing out that the aristocracy are not really of different blood than the proletariat, Eliot argues that, correspondingly, high art and popular culture are essentially the same enterprise. This is evidenced by the poetry that emerges from Moore's all-encompassing vocabulary, which includes unpoetic material. "The merit consists in the combination," said Eliot, "in the other point of view which Miss Moore possesses at the same time."<sup>11</sup>

Issues of cultural division are not as central to Moore's work as Eliot suggests; however, he does remind us of the broader context in which nonliterary language entered

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<sup>9</sup> Eliot, T.S. "Marianne Moore (1923)." *Dial* LXXC (1923): 594. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Wescott

<sup>11</sup> Eliot, 594.

the poetic vocabulary. The modernist peers of Eliot and Moore – namely, Pound, Joyce, and Woolf – had also found ways to combine disparate voices into their visions of the modern world. In his epic project *The Cantos*, Pound tested the principles of form by collaging his lines with quotations of ancient lyric and foreign prose. For the earliest part of the poem, Pound brings prose unexpectedly into verse by excerpting the letters of the Italian Renaissance poet Malatesta. Over the years, Pound would find material for his long poem in the letters and other writings of rulers, poets, and scholars across history. Closely in tandem to Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Pound’s practice of quotation provided a model for how poetry could engage in a conscious and deliberate interaction with the past. “The ghost of Homer sings,” Moore wrote in a 1931 review of *Canto XXX*.<sup>12</sup>

Although Eliot also quoted from epoch-making sources in *The Waste Land*, his relation to the literary past was much more unsettled. The past was something to be preserved but also to be mocked; quotation could reduce important works to potsherds or empty them of meaning by repetition. (Moore called Eliot’s epic “macabre” but “a creative achievement” nonetheless.)<sup>13</sup> Most importantly, fragments of great authors could be intermingled with less venerated materials: Eliot also quoted from authors outside the canon, a nursery rhyme, and an Australian ballad.<sup>14</sup> This suggested a dismantling of hierarchies, as the lesser-known voices could become as much a source of poetry as Virgil or Chaucer. This did not eliminate the weight of the literary past in relation to the modern world; for all the ways the tradition had been exploded, its shrapnel remained in Eliot’s poetry as a reminder of old authorities.

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<sup>12</sup> *Collected Prose*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Collected Letters*, 124.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory, E. *Quotation and Modern American Poetry: Imaginary Gardens with Real Toads*. Texas A&M University Press, 1997.

Unlike Pound or Eliot, Moore does not use quotations to evoke the poetic tradition. She was not the first to use quotation in poetry, or the first to borrow from non-literary sources, but her composition in *Observations* is so unlike anything before her that the poems seem like experiments on the existing experiments of modernism. When asked by Donald Hall about her extensive use of quotations, Moore said, “I’ve always felt that if a thing had been said in the *best* way, how can you say it better? If I wanted to say something and somebody had said it ideally, then I’d take it but give the person credit for it. That’s all there is to it.”<sup>15</sup> Her cool logic suggests a catch-and-catch-all approach, but there is undoubtedly more to it. Bonnie Costello calls Moore “a kleptomaniac of the mind”: “She kept file drawers of clippings, photographs, postcards, in which are hidden away the sources of many of her poems. She was once impressed by the remark ‘a good stealer is *ipso facto* a good inventor,’ and made a note of it in her reading diary.”<sup>16</sup>

But Moore in *Observations* does not run off with source material in its entirety; rather, as Randall Jarrell puts it, she is like “a burglar who marks everything that he has stolen with the owner’s name and then exhibits it in his stall in the marketplace.”<sup>17</sup> Jarrell is perhaps alluding to Moore’s approach to art-collecting as she describes it in “When I Buy Pictures”: “Or what is closer to the truth,” she continues from the title, “when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the imaginary possessor...” Her subject is artwork, but the poem is, in effect, a credo for collecting language.

The strategies of this “imaginary possessor” offer a starting point to understanding Moore’s complex and innovative use of quotation. To begin, her criterion for what might

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<sup>15</sup> Hall, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Costello, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Jarrell, 173.

be borrowed is rather broad: “I fix upon what would give me pleasure in my average moments,” she says in “When I Buy Pictures”. As evidenced by the *Notes* to her volume, Moore found potential language for poetry just about anywhere she found words. Her works cited in *Observations* include (among many others) excerpts from the Bible, *Literary Digest*, selected letters of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, *Scientific American*, Henry James, Democritus, various reviews, advertisements, and newspaper articles, and the conversational remarks of one Miss A.M. Homans, Professor Emeritus of Hygiene at Wellesley College.

This inventory of sources suggests Moore’s inclusion of many different voices into Moore’s poems but not, as in Eliot’s use of quotations, to evoke the full scope of history and humanity. For Moore, borrowed language has a more immediate function in her poem, and can often be isolated to that particular role. She collects with an eye for idiosyncratic features, parts of each work that can be segmented and reconfigured: “It may be no more than a square of parquetry,” she says regarding pictures of interest, “the literal / biography perhaps, / in letters standing well apart upon a parchment-like expanse; an artichoke in six varieties of blue; the snipe-legged hiero- / glyphic in three parts...” In this strange list of examples, Moore fixates on detail so narrowly that she seems to discount the complete sense of each picture. Her interest in separating the artwork into discrete parts suggests a distance between a phrase's genesis and its new meaning when reappropriated by the poet.

Though in Moore’s poems we can see that words in quotation marks have been taken from elsewhere, each quotation remains anonymous within the poem, most often bearing no clues about its source or meaning within that source. Even if a reader turns to

the index of *Observations* to learn where a quotation originated, the credited source will most likely not clarify what the borrowed phrase means in Moore's usage. The source is not important because Moore does not wish to defer to outside expertise or to find and state a truth in its entirety. She says in "When I Buy Pictures":

Too stern an intellectual emphasis upon this quality or that detracts from one's enjoyment.  
It must not wish to disarm anything; nor may the approved triumph easily be honored—  
that which is great because something else is small.  
It comes to this: of whatever sort it is,  
it must be "lit with piercing glances into the life of things";  
it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it.

The "imaginary possessor" appreciates art for what it perceives at the level of detail, and how it contributes that small piece to her outlook along with pieces from many other works. As such, she rejects art that "wish[es] to disarm" others by elevating its own utterance into the position of truth and authority.

"When I Buy Pictures" is all about denying a single viewpoint in artwork, and yet Moore's voice in this poem is noticeably prescriptive and self-asserting of its truths. By the end of the poem, her personal preferences seem more like rules for art, anaphorically insisting what "it must" do. If we look at the note to "lit with piercing glances...", we see that the "spiritual force" being acknowledged is in fact, a quotation from A.R. Gordon's *The Poets of the Old Testament*.<sup>18</sup> The outside voice interrupts the poet's voice, both exemplifying and describing the power of variable perspectives. However, all of this is within the bounds of Moore's governing perspective. The poet has a unique position of

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<sup>18</sup> Gregory, 161.

authority as collector and curator of language, taking into account all its existing permutations to set forth a truth of her own.

This innovative use of quotation is most apparent in “An Octopus”, a poem really about a glacial mountaintop. The poem was inspired by Moore’s 1922 summer trip to the Pacific Northwest, where she joined her brother Warner for a two-day hike on Mount Rainier, the highest peak in Washington. Upon returning to New York, she jotted down some lines about Adam and Eve that she would eventually split into two poems: “Marriage” and “An Octopus”.<sup>19</sup> The next summer, Moore returned to the Northwest and, though she did not return to Mount Rainier’s glacier-covered slopes, picked up informational booklets about the mountain and its natural surroundings. She used the notes and materials from her two trips to complete “An Octopus”, first publishing the long poem in the December 1924 issue of the *Dial*.<sup>20</sup>

Doubling as the poem’s first line, the title immediately clues us into its own misdirection: “An Octopus” / “Of ice.” We can see that the “Octopus” is only a metaphorical one, but it is still somewhat of a riddle by Moore’s arrangement. Moore has given us a riddle half-answered. The mass is “Deceptively reserved and flat”, she says, seeming to describe the poem’s brisk opening as much as the mountaintop. Slow-moving and massive, “An Octopus” sprawls out in protracted sentences, the longest spanning twenty lines. Moore does not set any regular rhythm or stanza pattern for these sentences, but she takes her time building the succession of images around the mountain. The

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<sup>19</sup> Willis

<sup>20</sup> The version of the poem that appeared in her *Observations* volume varied from its original presentation mostly because of printer’s errors (Schulze, 319).

octopus is a many-sided spectacle of nature that is always the same and always different: “a sea of shifting snow-dunes”, she describes it. Here we have imaginary toads in real gardens, an octopus dwelling in the snowy Washington landscape:

...it lies “in grandeur and in mass”  
beneath a sea of shifting snow-dunes;  
dots of cyclamen-red and maroon on its clearly defined  
pseudopodia [...]

The shifting ice is in this way emblematic of Moore’s process, ““Creeping slowly as with mediated stealth, / its arms seeming to approach from all directions.”” The top of the mountain – octopus-like – appears to have its false feet planted in the “sea” below. As the landscape fills with aquatic images, we may remember the water imagery in earlier poems from *Observations*. The sea recurs in the poems as a site of accumulation and perpetual movement. In “The Fish”, a deep-sea crevice houses “the stars / pink / rice grains, ink / bespattered jelly-fish, crabs like / green / lilies and submarine / toadstools, slid[ing] each on the other.” In “A Grave”, the ocean is “a collector, quick to return a rapacious look” to its human onlooker. “My Apish Cousins” evokes the sea as a profiteer, menacing to those at the surface “when it proffers flattery in exchange for hemp, / rye, flax, horses, timber, and fur.”

Like the sea images in these poems, the landscape of “An Octopus” has an accumulative bulk not easily apprehended by language. Moore imagines the mountain as an octopus when seen from above, the ice extending out from its center like tentacles. Force and frailty, the natural object outsizing human understanding —from the start, poem provokes us to entertain these tensions:

...made of glass that will bend—a much needed invention—  
comprising twenty-eight ice-fields from fifty to five hun-

dred feet thick,  
of unimagined delicacy.  
“Picking periwinkles from the cracks”  
or killing prey with the concentric crushing rigor of the  
python,  
it hovers forward “spider fashion  
on its arms” misleading like lace;  
its “ghostly pallor changing  
to the green metallic tinge of an anemone-starred pool.”

Moore quickly does away with the sense of “unimagined delicacy” in the glacier by informing us of its true strength. We might find it difficult to imagine the ice’s strange, changeable composition – “glass that will bend” – were Moore not so careful to sustain its ongoing movement in her language. She shows the glacier “Picking”, “killing”, “crushing”, “misleading”, and “changing” all at once. There is constant motion and metamorphosis: Moore shifts the possibilities for the glacier’s figure from octopus to python, python to spider. The glacier has the ability to dart forward and feast in the manner of these predators. By showing the glacier’s acquisitiveness as a feeding habit, Moore suggests that the intake of extraneous matter is for survival.

Here, the natural object is an enterprise for the poet’s self-description though – as in all else – not self-revelation. The poet partakes of nature’s survival technique, making her description more robust by hoarding outside matter. Moore’s resemblance to the glacier has a chicken-and-egg dimension: the mountain surely antedates the poet, but we have no mountain without first the poet to describe it. The question of authorship is multiplied by the many other texts brought into the composition. In the opening description there are the kinds of clippings we have seen in other *Observations* poems, news extracts taken from Moore’s favorite sources *Illustrated London News* and the

British weekly *The Graphic*.<sup>21</sup> “The Octopus” also quotes a great deal from guidebooks and field guides: in addition to the *Rules and Regulations* booklet for Mount Rainier, Moore took extracts from the *What to See in America* guide and *The Rockies of Canada*, a mountaineer’s travelogue.<sup>22</sup> She also quotes the Scottish-American forest conservationist John Muir. The poet picks up details we might expect from these interrelated sources: the “thoughtful beavers”; “blue stone forests”; a tree’s “magnitude of...root systems”. However, most of the outdoor experts quoted in the poem are not actually talking about Mount Rainier in their own works, though they may refer an object similar to that which Moore wishes to describe.<sup>23</sup> Their firsthand accounts are more important for *how* they approach nature: a naturalist’s careful and clear identification of flora and fauna; a mountaineer’s navigation of the terrain and record of its intervening distances. Moore adopts these approaches to orchestrate the elements of the mountain.

In other poems, the quoted materials have far less (if any) bearing on Moore’s style, but here she seems to have absorbed the rhythms of her sources. Perhaps this too is in imitation of the glacier: her words like are the ice tinged by the things it has picked up. She often seems to include outside phrases involuntarily, as in her description of “spotted ponies with “glass eyes””. This appears a fairly straightforward, brief description; but why is “glass eyes” marked off by quotation? Is this a significant detail of the glacial peak’s animal life? The borrowed phrase is small and ordinary as far as metaphors go, and no one would think twice if Moore took credit for it. But the quotation marks are

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<sup>21</sup> Notes to *Observations*, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Wilcox, W. D. *The Rockies of Canada*. G. P. Putnam’s sons, 1900.

<sup>23</sup> Except for the literature on Mount Rainier: “Quoted descriptions of scenery and of animals, of which the source is not given, have been taken from government pamphlets on our national parks.” (Notes to *Observations*, 105)

important; those who bother with the notes to the poem will find that Moore has taken “glass eyes” from *The Rockies of Canada*. Her citation additionally explains the basis for the term, “A colourless condition of the retina, characteristic of the Indian pony or cayenne.” In the original text, the fact appears in an explorer’s account of camping by the Saskatchewan River.<sup>24</sup> When defining the horses’ retinal condition, the explorer himself puts quotation marks around “glass eyes”, consciously designating the non-literal expression in his very literal report. Conversely, Moore quotes the phrase to designate that which seems poetic as something rooted in factual, observed truth. “Relentless accuracy is the nature of this octopus,” she says, “with its capacity for fact.” Her borrowing from guidebooks shows the “capacity for fact” in poetry comes from an affinity between the two in language.

Though the outside matter enhances Moore’s perspective, its unavoidable influence can just as easily hinder her understanding of the mountain. “Completing a circle, / you have been deceived into thinking that you have progressed,” she tells us. Rather than provide a comprehensive view, the attention to microscopic detail (like “polite needles” and “wattled spruce twigs”) hinders our onward movement. We see the poet try to bring order to the landscape by cataloguing rock colors, alpine plants, and animal species. Moore lists the “bears, elk, deer, wolves, goats, and ducks” native to a lake on the mountain, but she cannot actually coax the animal inhabitants into the poem’s immediate scene. To describe animals hiding, she repeatedly uses phrases adopted from other texts, likening “the rat ‘slipping along to its burrow’” to “ ‘thoughtful beavers / making drains which seem the work of careful men with shovels’”. We learn that an

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<sup>24</sup> Wilcox, 130.

antelope on a cliff is “acclimated to ‘grottoes from which issue penetrating draughts / which make you wonder why you came’”. By bringing an outside viewpoint into each of these descriptions, Moore emphasizes that these creatures are subjects of looking. The predicament recalls that of “A Grave”: “Man looking into the sea, taking the view” but unable to advance on it. The poem’s use of borrowed materials multiplies the onlookers so that climber, tourist, naturalist, and poet perceive nature from many directions.<sup>25</sup> These observers overrun the mountain and scare its animals into their concealed habitats. The imported perspectives also suggest direct acts of human intrusion, bringing into the animal habitats “‘careful men with shovels’” and the “you” who “wonders why you came”.

Man’s menacing approach thwarts these smaller interactions but has repercussions for the overall view of the mountaintop, as well. Some bears enter the scene, but “their den is somewhere else,” Moore says, “concealed in the confusion / of ‘blue stone forests thrown together with marble and jasper and agate / as if whole quarries had been dynamited.’” She takes up this suggestion of extreme devastation by quoting the portrayal of Mount Rainier in a national park brochure: “‘a mountain with those graceful lines which prove it a volcano,’ / its top a complete cone like Fujiyama’s / till an explosion blew it off.” Moore’s inclusive approach to composition gives the effect of “Maintaining many minds”, but here the borrowed fragments which finally show us the peak together also threaten its eruption.

The central conceit of the poem is no longer the titular “Octopus”, but rather a volcano. The government-issued park pamphlet that introduced the volcano begins to

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<sup>25</sup> Ladino, 286.

enter the poem and dictate its movement with greater frequency. The volcano's occupants threatened by "treacherous lava and pumice" are not just birds and mountain goats, but also campers who, as Moore quotes from the park regulations, have filed "'names and addresses of persons to notify / in case of disaster.'" Prompted again by the pamphlet's identification of "Calypso, the goat flower", Moore launches into a meditation on the Greeks and their culture. They "liked smoothness," she says, "distrusting what was back / of what could not be clearly seen". The density of quotation in the lines that follow shows that the Greeks' wish for order cannot hold up against influences of the external world.

An excerpt from the park regulations forbids intrusions on the mountain:

... where "guns, nets, seines, traps and explosives,  
hired vehicles, gambling and intoxicants are prohibited;  
disobedient persons being summarily removed  
and not allowed to return without permission in writing."

As with the suggestion of volcanic eruption, these park regulations propose danger in order to restrain it. A climber "must do as one is told" to traverse the mountain successfully and "conquer the main peak." Moore relies on the authority of the pamphlet's information, but also attempts to access the environment on her own terms, the terms in which she originally envisioned the unmapped mountain. She returns to "this octopus" as a symbol of unyielding movement and collection. But the octopus is subject to a harsh atmosphere which Moore describes using several guidebook quotations. The "winds that 'tear the snow to bits'" also obliterate the octopus's living features, reducing it to

...the hard mountain "planned 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.”

As the peak collapses in on itself by force of wind, the poet too must yield to outside forces, bowing out for a quotation to complete the last two lines of the poem. By attempting to coerce the many angles of vision into a “polished”, conclusive meaning Moore’s collected parts overwhelm (and ultimately destroy) the whole.

# Accidents

We can easily discern Moore's trademark scientific precision running throughout her *Observations* poems, but in studying her poetry, the "capacity for fact" foregrounds another vital (and perhaps opposing) talent: her knack for error. The influence of science on the poet's approach, often reflecting her training in biology, shows her commitment to the verified truths of the natural world, or at least a constant effort to perceive the natural world accurately. Moore was aware of the kinship between science and the modernists' seeking of truth. In her diary, she drafted a letter to *Poetry* magazine: "Dear *Poetry*, There is a crying need for a Poet's Handbook of Science. W. R. Benet, for instance should be informed that bats do not land in barns at night, that they fly around at night...Lola Ridge that...jaguars do not inhabit deserts."<sup>26</sup>

Moore's request is not incisive because it offers real facts, but because it imagines strange impossibilities in nature and describes them in detail. Her poetic process integrates error or the staging of error as a principle of composition and a self-conscious mode of metaphor. This is not to say that Moore puts her form in disarray: the line and

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<sup>26</sup> Moore, Reading Diary for 1916-1921, Rosenbach 1250/2, MS, p. 68.

stanza in *Observations* insist on rigor, design, and efficiency. The poems' metaphorical sensibility, however, takes an interest in the irrational. Moore hurries us into "The Fish" with the poem's title as its first line: "The Fish" "Wade / through black jade", she begins. Outside of this poem, we know that fish have no legs with which to wade; we know that it is impossible to wade through stone. But Moore's brisk voice does not allow the mind to consider these realities. We accept – or are compelled to accept – the wading fish as the following line advances to a new image.

The poet was interested in how science and logic could encapsulate truth, but in this instance she is obviously unconcerned with factual content. In fact, she seems to deliberately flout the scientific facts of the fish's anatomies. This opening to "The Fish" exemplifies the characteristic moments of unreality that Moore creates in many of her poems. Such moments are quick and surreal, but can emphasize the poet's hand in converting the natural world to poetry. We might think of their strangeness as highlighting an essential function of metaphor, which is to say one thing when we mean to say another. Moore means to describe the movement of fish precisely, but by deliberately misnaming their action, she calls attention to what she, the poet, has done to make language appear fresh.

Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* describes this effect of figurative language: "Liveliness is specially conveyed by metaphor," he says, "And by the further power of surprising the hearer, because the hearer expected something different. His mind seems to say, 'Yes, to be sure; I never thought of that.'"<sup>27</sup> More precisely, because the two related elements in a metaphor are not *literally* the same, the mind must seize upon some common feature to

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<sup>27</sup> Aristotle. "Rhetoric." *Complete Works of Aristotle*. Book 3, 1412b18-20.

correct the mistake of their equivalence. Having mended the breach in sense, Aristotle tells us, we are left with “a new idea” or “a new fact”. This basic reconstituting of language was an essential concern for Moore and other Modernist poets who sought new possibilities for expression. In *The Pound Era*, Hugh Kenner chronicles the contact between Western languages and the Chinese written character. Comparing the two systems, Kenner describes how Western languages fail to register the flaws that are a reality of human perception. The “ideal language” of Europe, he says, was ordered into “a system of noun and modified nouns, a taxonomy of objects”:

...a metaphor is nota proposition, for to say that my love is a red red rose is merely to publicize an error of classification, no doubt understandable when emotion beclouds perception, but scarcely admissible in discourse meant to detain cooler heads. The man who first called *hippopotamus amphibius* a river horse, ἵππος + ποταμός, made a taxonomic mistake (it is not a horse) and also yielded to a false economy (a new species wants a new name, not an effort to make do with old ones).<sup>28</sup>

Moore celebrates taxonomic mistakes as a way to catch new cadences in poetry. As both Aristotle and Kenner suggest, the arrangement of words must be unexpected in order to make those words seem new.

To achieve newness, Moore habitually names her poetic subject as the thing to which it is *least* related, or with the features of a thing that it is categorically *not*. The usual facts of nature are not just ignored, but flouted, making the metaphors sound like intentional errors. Natural objects are assemblages of disparate parts: a swan is “flamingo colored, [with] maple-/leaflike feet”; a carrot is “a tail-like, wedge-shaped engine”.

Stevens observed the quality of error in Moore’s early work, declaring in his review: “Poetry, rare and never willingly recognized, only its accidental colors make it tolerable

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<sup>28</sup> Kenner, H. *The Pound Era*. University of California Press, 1973. 224.

to most.”<sup>29</sup> Moore adored Stevens, and would admit to Bryher in 1935 that she wished “to bring my product into some sort of compatibility with Wallace Stevens.”<sup>30</sup>

Moore’s judgments of Stevens focus on the aspects of his approach which most resemble her own; specifically, his approach to the natural world. “His great accuracy and refracted images and averted manner indicate to me a certain interior reconcentration of being,” she writes to Bryher. Reviewing Stevens’ *Harmonium* in 1924, Moore praises the release of words from their default vocabulary: “Instinct for words is well determined by the nature of the liberties taken with them,” she says, “some writers giving the effect merely of presumptuous egotism – and unavoided outlandishness; others, not... Shakespeare arresting one continually with nutritious permutations as when he apostrophizes the lion in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – ‘Well moused, lion.’”<sup>31</sup>

Moore makes her own “nutritious permutations” by flouting fact with error. Error does not just mean a deviation from fact, but also misstatement, misidentification, and the statement of logical impossibilities. In the *Observations* poems, Moore juxtaposes these forms of error with her tone of fact: irrational elements do not appear in wild gestures, but rather in crisp, unassuming phrases. When she surveys a shipyard in “Dock Rats”, for example, Moore tells us “There is / the sea, moving the bulkhead with its horse / strength.” Her line breaks emphasize the unforeseen animal quality of “horse / strength” which she applies to the non-animal body of water. We know that she associates horse and sea through idiomatic expression; however, at the same time, the positive statement of “there is” definitively indicates that this “horse / strength” exists and can be perceived

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<sup>29</sup> Wallace Stevens. “About One of Marianne Moore’s Poems.” *Quarterly Review of Literature* 1948. Print.

<sup>30</sup> Moore, M., and B. Costello. *Selected Letters*. Penguin Books, 1998.

<sup>31</sup> Moore, M., and P. C Willis. *The Complete Prose*. Faber, 1986.

in a certain location. The incompatibility between her manner of statement and metaphorical language in her statement is itself a kind of error, or at least an incorrect use of concrete reference for fluid abstractions.

We can see Moore's interest in imperfect statement as a recurring motif in her poems. Somewhat self-amusedly, she undermines human attempts at precision with natural forces that are unstable or unreliable. "There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious / fastidiousness" she says in "Critics and Connoisseurs", taking delight in "a / mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly / ballasted animal stand up". She presents a more serious possibility for error in "England": "Does it follow that because there are poisonous toadstools / which resemble mushrooms, both are dangerous?" the poet asks. "To have misapprehended the matter, is to have confessed / that one has not looked far enough." The toadstools' fatal resemblance to mushrooms suggests that human certainty of some truth – the same certainty which definitively names the "horse / strength" of the sea – does not mean it is an actual truth about our world. To bring out these tensions between reality and unreality, between science and art, Moore pushes against the restrictions of both modes, presenting poetry which traffics in fact and facts that are based purely in the imagination.

We can see Moore's hybrid vision of science and art in her poetry's conspicuous transformation of creatures. Animals are toothsome subjects for reconfiguration because they begin with traits and habits that seem fixed by zoological fact. Moore mismatches and misnames her creatures' parts so that we see a new object; at the same time, she makes visible the poet's work of fusing the abstract and the concrete. In some cases, hybridized creatures are not Moore's own invention, as with the ibis-headed Thoth figure

in “To Statecraft Embalmed”. Though Moore did not create this strange being herself, she capitalizes on the unique anatomy of the ancient Egyptian idol in order to mock its militaristic attitude. She imagines the half-bird “necromancer” as a living creature compelled “with its bill, / [to] Attack its own identity”. The man-made features intended to convey justice and power literally turn on themselves.

Perhaps the poet recognizes in this preposterous figure her own imperfect methods for poeticizing the natural world. When Moore makes a sincere effort to describe a creature in “Like A Bulrush”, we see just how inexact her poetic tools can be. Beginning with its title, “Like a Bulrush” offers a series of similes for an unnamed, amphibious creature:

Or the spike  
of a channel marker, or the  
moon, he superintended the demolition of his image in the  
water by the wind...

In the movement of her poem, Moore is able to convey some of her subject’s features. At first, she stations her frame of view to reflect the static elements of comparison: the bulrush, channel marker post, and the moon. Then, snapping from her initial restraint, an unexpected stanza break evokes the creature’s quick predatorial abilities: “He did not strike // them at the / time as being different from any other inhabitant of the water”. The sudden break suggests this creature’s threat to the other animals and his specialized ability of movement. However, each simile only complicates Moore’s view of the predator and his prey:

it was as if he  
were a seal in the combined livery

of bird plus  
snake; it was as if he knew that  
the penguins were not fish and as if in their bat-blindness, they did not  
realize that he was amphibious.

Both poet and penguins are unable to definitively perceive the predator. The penguins' vision is impeded by "bat-blindness"; Moore impedes her own vision with her simile-making poetic impulses. Preoccupied with showing the strange combination of "bird plus / snake", Moore fails to provide the essential fact of the predator's amphibiousness.

The natural world also seems to go awry in the poem "Peter", a poem in which Moore describes a sleeping cat. The poet invents bewildering details within tightly controlled phrases. Even as the cat lays prone, his body is in constant metaphorical flux:

Strong and slippery, built for the midnight grass-party  
confronted by four cats,  
he sleeps his time away -- the detached first claw on his  
foreleg which corresponds  
to the thumb, retracted to its tip; the small tuft of fronds  
or katydid legs above each eye, still numbering the  
units in each group;  
the shadbones regularly set about his mouth,  
to droop or rise

in unison like the porcupine's quills -- motionless. [...]

The many details promise illustration, but the poem delivers something stranger, as Moore chooses various objects to replace the cat's body parts. The result is a precarious assemblage of anatomy: a disconnected claw, "fronds / or katydid legs" for eyebrows, and "shadbones" for whiskers. Each piece resembles its referent in some way, but the disparate parts seem brought together by mishap. Furthermore, the metaphors describing Peter are all left implicit; Moore does not tell us that the fronds are really eyebrows or

that the shadbones are whiskers. Except for the “claw” which Moore compares to a thumb, the real anatomy never comes into view.

As Ben Rezenstein points out, this opening sentence advances deeper and deeper into a metaphorical sense of the cat. Moore first associates the creature’s claw with a human thumb, connecting Peter to a non-feline feature, but not diverging too far from the reality of his form. Then, we are given an implicit metaphor describing “the small tuft of fronds / or katydid legs above each eye”. The poet has chosen these peculiar elements for the cat’s face, but still invites our participation in making the metaphor: we can choose between the “fronds **or** katydid legs” to stand in place of the unnamed eyebrows. The “shadbones”, on the other hand, have an absolute position on the cat’s face: this is where they are “regularly set”, Moore tells us matter-of-factly. In her certainty about this feature, she does not name the actual whiskers that the shadbones represent. However, the cat does not signal inconsistency or the failure to hold an object together in verse. Her phrasing of all these bewildering details is tightly controlled: the “fronds / or katydid legs” are positioned exactly “above each eye” on the cat’s face. In that location, we can easily infer that they stand for eyebrows. The same goes for the “shadbones” around his mouth. Moore makes convincing replacements for the individual parts, even if they seem wrong when put together.

Moving into the second stanza, however, Moore’s sentence does not lead to a cohesive illustration of the cat, or even a clear illustration of cat’s individual features. The poet veers her description of the whiskers even further into unreality by making the figurative shadbones “droop or rise // in unison like the porcupine's quills”. The whiskers

have become shadbones, and the shadbones move like porcupine quills. This outgrowth of a simile from an existing metaphor makes it “so that by the end of the sentence the literal referent is submerged beneath two distinct layers of metaphor,” Reizenstein says.<sup>32</sup> In the attempt to describe of the cat in his natural state, Moore’s unchecked metaphor overwhelms what is there so that we see the poetic effort but not its subject.

It is Moore’s insistence on this misnaming that enables a portrayal of the cat and all his internal contradictions. Moore invites her reader to test her approach of cross-species association. The cat is presented like a sideshow attraction:

[...] Demonstrate  
on him how  
the lady caught the dangerous southern snake, placing a  
forked stick on either  
side of its innocuous neck; one need not try to stir  
him up; his prune shaped head and alligator eyes are  
not a party to the  
joke. Lifted and handled, he may be dangled like  
an eel or set  
up on the forearm like a mouse...

Directed to handle the creature in this manner, we are forced to reckon with his strange composition. In this third stanza, the cat has been domesticated into a curiosity for human viewing, easily “Lifted and handled” to resemble other species’ shapes. As in the first two stanzas, Moore layers her description with increasingly figurative details. First, she abstains from metaphor, explicitly comparing our grabbing of the cat with “how / the lady caught the dangerous southern snake”. Though his body is in flux, the cat miraculously remains asleep. His countenance is not “a party to the / joke” because he

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<sup>32</sup> Reizenstein, Ben. “Perspicuous Opacity: Marianne Moore and Truth in a Fallen World.” *The Cambridge Quarterly* 36.4 (2007): 324.

does not know that features have been converted into extraneous forms: a “prune shaped head and alligator eyes”.

For the first half of the poem, Peter has no say in how he is presented. He is “dangled” about by human hands and shaped by the words of the poet. But once he wakes, we see that the creature who spawned so many metaphors is indeed “Strong and slippery” as Moore said. “Springing about with / froglike ac- // curacy... he is / himself / again”, she tells us. He “emit[s] jerky cries when taken in the hand”, then seems to move beyond the poet’s line of vision.

Then, in the second half of the poem, the titular cat is always a step out of view, out of reach, out of Moore’s verbal comprehension. The cat “insolently” does not speak, as his self-presentation is not verbal, it is physical: he has slipped out of view completely, and so Moore must consider his condition without looking at his body. She does not continue her attempts at visual illustration; instead, she muses about the cat in philosophical terms. Her utterances clue us into the poem’s menagerie of animal references: “To sit caged by the rungs of a domestic chair would / be unprofit-/ able— human,” she says of the cat. By Moore’s assessment, Peter favors wilderness over captivity. “It is clear that he can see / the virtue of naturalness.” Though categorically mistaken, Moore’s cross-species metaphors throughout the poem enact in part the cat’s wish to be undomesticated. Moore gives a sense of wildness in the other animals she conjures in the poem: the katydid, porcupine, snake, alligator, frog, and eel (twice) each contribute their distinct features to the poet’s representation of the cat.

Like Peter, Moore hides in the forms of other creatures. Such is the case in “Black Earth”, a poem spoken from an elephant’s point of view. We cannot assume that the speaker is an elephant at the outset of the poem:

Openly, yes,  
with the naturalness  
of the hippopotamus or the alligator  
when it climbs out on the bank to experience the  
  
sun, [...]

The voice associates her “openly” manner with the “naturalness” of animals sunbathing on a riverbank. The various claims in this opening stanza undermine themselves, running contrary to the ordinary courses of language and nature. To begin, we see that there is nothing natural about her syntax: the first stanza offers a prolonged adverbial description for an action that does not arrive till the second stanza. Furthermore, her comparison to “the hippo **or** the alligator” pulls us in two directions, suggesting two animals for the single action of climbing out of the water. “In visual art [the effect] is called ‘homospaciality’,” Ben Reizenstein explains: “Two images occupy the same space in the visual field, not producing perceptual rivalry, as with the duck/rabbit optical illusion in which only one image is resolvable at a time, but rather allowing both images to exist simultaneously.”<sup>33</sup>

But there is nothing “open” about this speaker: even if we can imagine some indefinite creature sunbathing, Moore does not provide a corresponding action to that “naturalness”. “I do these / things which I do,” she says smugly, “which please / no one but myself.” The voice recalls Moore’s description of Peter at rest: “Sleep is the result of

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<sup>33</sup> Reizenstein

his delusion that one / must do as / one must do as / well as one can for oneself". The boast of independence in "Black Earth" is especially exasperating because it mimics self-disclosure. Moore qualifies "these things" as if to provide further information, but only backtracks with a redundant clause: "I do these / things **which I do**" offers no clarification. The elephant insists on her own candor simply to evade our view, reporting her abrupt obfuscation: "Now I breathe and now I am sub-/merged."

And yet, Moore's poems obscure in their very gestures toward clarity. Most readings of this poem focus on the elephant skin and sediment as an example of Moore's armor. It is also important to understand this speaker as an arbiter of fact. The elephant is an authority on his own anatomy, but does not give us enough information to perceive him in full:

[...] The sediment of the river which  
    Encrusts my joints, makes me very gray but I am used

To it, it may  
Remain there;

The elephant has retreated physically back into the water, but has also retreated in her self-disclosure; the details of her "joints" in the foreground are not enough to substantiate her elephant-ness. The glimpse of "very gray" color hints at her identity, but only after invalidating the association by telling us that it is just a coat of sediment. We will never see below that coating, she explains:

...do away  
With it and I am myself done away with, for the  
Patina of circumstance can but enrich what was

There to begin

With.

The speaker pretends to enlighten us, first by offering a fact of her condition: removing the sediment will obliterate the underlying self. She then reinforces the fact with a piece of wisdom: “the / Patina of circumstance can but enrich what was // There to begin / With.” As with her earlier description of “these / things which I do,” the reporting voice leads us to an “enrich[ing]” feature that is never actually expressed (“what was // There to begin / With.”). However absurd and impossible this may seem, it fulfills the elephant’s claim, “do[ing] away with” her inner essence by trying to uncover it. Isolated in her self-image, the elephant creates her own poetry, a system of new facts that do not depend on what we already know about elephants. With her abstract logic indifferent to its context, the elephant is like Moore, creating her own autonomous world that wagers between truth and her own striking irrationality.

## Armor & Scalpels

After Moore's friends printed her *Poems* in London without her consent, the poet wrote to Bryher in response to the volume. Moore illustrates the feeling of her forced debut with an example from Darwin: "[I]n *Variations of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, Darwin speaks of a variety of pigeon that is born naked without any down whatever. I feel like a Darwinian gosling," she says. Referring to an earlier exchange in which Bryher had described Moore's poetry as "of a world before the fish age where shell clung to a rock", the poet writes: "I am a pterodactyl with no rock in which to hide." She signs the letter "Your now naked Dactyl".<sup>34</sup>

Moore's sense that she was missing a protective layer would not surprise readers of her early poems, including Bryher and H.D., who had published the works without the poet's knowledge. Moore was known for her interest in animals' natural armor and her use of motifs relating to self-defense. Perhaps to reflect that interest, H.D. had described the modernist effort using wartime jargon when commenting on Moore's poems in 1916. Moore was "fighting in her country a battle against squalor and commercialism," said

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<sup>34</sup> *Collected Letters*, 164.

H.D. “We are all fighting the same battle.”<sup>35</sup> Though Moore often used “half-playful ironies”, in her poems, H.D. remarked, that playfulness was “a laughter, that holds, fascinates and half-paralyzes us, as light flashed from a very fine steel blade, wielded playfully, ironically, with all the fine shades of thrust and counter- thrust, with absolute surety and with absolute disdain.” H.D.’s image of Moore is of a mocking adversary to her readers: “‘see, you cannot know what I mean – exactly what I mean,’ she seems to say, half pitying that the adversary is so dull – that we are so dull – ‘and I do not intend that you shall know – my sword is very much keener than your sword, my hand surer than your hand – but you shall not know that I know that you are beaten’”.<sup>36</sup> The analogy suggests that Moore’s defensive disposition is actually a tactic for engaging her reader’s interest. In describing the playful challenge that Moore poses to her reader, H.D. reveals the paradoxical nature of the poet’s armor.

In the *Observations* volume of Moore’s poems, she makes a virtue of self-defense with recurring images of animal armor. Though H.D. borrows from WWI rhetoric in her review, Moore’s images of armor were not in sympathy with the war; in fact, some of her early poems criticize the senseless deployment of troops. Moore imagines the fish in “Reinforcements” as expendable soldiers, “advancing like a school of fish through / still water.” In “To Military Progress”, the casualties of battle are to be blamed on those who decided “to revive again, / war / at little cost”. In “To Statecraft Embalmed”, she addresses an Egyptian statesman in an ibis-headed sarcophagus: “Guard / Your secret,” she coaches him disdainfully, “Conceal it under your hardy / Plumage, necromancer”.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> H.D., ‘Marianne Moore’, *Egoist*, 3:8 (August 1916), 118–19.

The statesman's distance from the living world cannot hide his war-mongering: "As if a death mask ever could replace / Life's faulty excellence!"<sup>37</sup>

Moore admires defensive abilities as they appear in individuals, as with the "colossal" addressee of "To A Prize Bird". "[N]one dare bid you stop" the poet tells the bird, "Your brazen claws are staunch against defeat". In Moore's vision of the natural world, an animal's strong physical construction most often corresponds with its resilience of mind and character. Such is the case in "Diligence Is to Magic as Progress Is to Flight" when Moore connects the toughness of elephant skin to the creatures' ability to guard themselves against external influence. In the poem, an unnamed woman must choose to be transported by either flying carpet or by elephant. Flying carpets can serve the imagination – "the semblance of speed" – but the elephants function more practically as a means of travel:

So far as magic carpets are concerned, she knows  
that although the semblance of speed may attach to scarecrows  
of aesthetic procedure, the substance of it is embodied in such of those  
tough-grained animals as have outstripped man's whim to suppose  
them ephemera, and have earned that fruit of their ability to endure blows  
which dubs them prosaic necessities—not curios.

The poet is represented in the poem not by the female traveler, but rather by the "tough grained" elephant species that resists the diminishing "blows" of man. Moore structures "Diligence" so that the elephants' speed corresponds with her abilities as a poet, rushing onward through enjambed lines until she concludes with flourish. The described attacks on the elephants seem to anticipate the critical reception of *Observations* that would

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<sup>37</sup> McCabe, S. *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry And Film*. Cambridge University Press, 2005. 220.

characterize Moore as a decorative oddity.<sup>38</sup> She joins the elephants in their emphatic self-designation: they are “prosaic necessities – not curios.” Her “stiff and sharp” subject in “Roses Only” is in similar danger of being dismissed as a knickknack. “You would,” she addresses the rose, “minus thorns, / look like a what-is-this, a mere // peculiarity.” But both rose and elephant prove that they have a talent beyond their strange beauty: the ability to guard against the misperceptions of others.

The elephant remains an emblem of toughness when acting as speaker of the poem “Black Earth”. “My soul shall never // Be cut into / By a wooden spear,” she says self-assuredly. “That on which darts cannot strike decisively the first // Time, a substance / Needful as an instance / Of the indestructibility of matter”. The elephant is poised in spite of her wounds; in fact, Moore’s frequent stanza breaks suggest a form which has grown accustomed to repeated blows:

[...] This elephant skin  
Which I inhabit, fibered over like the shell of  
The coco-nut, this piece of black glass through which no light  
  
Can filter—cut  
Into checkers by rut  
Upon rut of unpreventable experience...

On the one hand, the elephant’s impenetrable quality keeps her safe from harm, and she is not subject to the penetrating “light” which might expose or modify her inner self. On the other, her furrowed skin is so effective as a form of armor that she seems entirely inaccessible. The thwarted intrusion of light corresponds with our failed access to the elephant’s inner essence. As discussed in Chapter II, we are not even privy to the

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<sup>38</sup> Martin, T. *Marianne Moore, Subversive Modernist*. University of Texas Press, 1986. 193.

creature's identity as an elephant until many stanzas into the poem. The creature hides behind a composed exterior, and the poet hides behind the creature, leaving the reader (as in "Like A Bulrush") without very much information about the poetic subject.

Often, when Moore looks favorably at a natural object that does not have an inherent means of protection, she hews at its surface as if to simulate the "unpreventable experience" which causes injury to the elephant skin (but in doing so, also makes it tough). The poet describes two distinct methods for surface-shaping in the poem "Those Various Scalpels". The first is symbolized in by one "raised hand" which inflicts a generic wound: "an ambiguous signature: your cheeks, those rosettes / of blood on the stone floors of French châteaux..." The slapped may suggest a precise striking motion, but with the line break Moore shows that the marked "rosettes" are made of blood, in which case they have a more free-flowing, indefinite composition. Meanwhile, "your other hand // a bundle of lances all alike," makes an incisive cut between stanzas and between the distinct gems which it encounters. This hand has an effect similar to the unknown force which cuts the elephant skin "Into checkers" in "Black Earth", bringing out smaller nuances of detail:

...the fractional magnificence of Florentine  
goldwork—a collection of little objects—  
sapphires set with emeralds, and pearls with a moonstone, made fine  
with enamel in gray, yellow, and dragonfly blue;  
a lemon, a pear...

Moore sees that the potential for creating such detail from these "rich instruments" may not be justify the harm which can just as easily arise. "Are they weapons or scalpels?" she asks of the hands.

Whether her hands are weapons or scalpels, they have a knack for bringing out nature's strong and beautiful shapes that might otherwise pass unnoticed. Take "Radical," which imagines a carrot as an analogy for a political activist:

Tapering  
to a point, conserving everything,  
this carrot is predestined to be thick.  
    The world is  
    but a circumstance, a mis-  
    erable corn patch for its feet...

Rather than presenting the vegetable in its static form, Moore shows it “Tapering” and “conserving” its body in an active process of shape. The carrot spurns the “circumstance” of its hostile environment like the elephant in “Black Earth”; however, Moore’s hand acts as a scalpel and not a weapon, shaping the carrot’s composition with her signature incongruities:

...With ambition, im-  
    agination, outgrowth,  
  
    nutriment,  
    with everything crammed belligerent-  
    ly inside itself, its fibres breed mon-  
    opoly –  
    a tail-like, wedge-shaped engine with the  
    secret of expansion, fused with intensive heat to  
    the color of the set-  
  
    ting sun and  
    stiff.

Breaking her lines purposefully to maintain a regular syllable count, Moore shares the defiant vegetable’s struggle to take root as it burrows its tapered form into the ground. We might not think of the poet as a radical herself, but there is something quite radical about her self-concept in this carrot, its “ambition, im-/ agination, [and] outgrowth”. By comparing the carrot’s color – improbably – to “the set-/ ting sun”, she fulfills its ambition to transcend its “corn patch” existence without violating its careful form.

Moore's poise is meant to serve as kind of armor even when the composition is a matter of style rather than physical form. In "An Octopus", we see Mt. Rainier protected by a thick layer of ice; however, Moore also relates the mountain's durability to the Greeks' ideal of smoothness. In their effort toward "neatness of finish", she says, the Greeks tried to gloss over any blemishes that would confuse or complicate an orderly surface. But we see that this "sacrosanct remoteness" of surfaces ignores the depths and complexities of true human experience, that which "we clumsily call happiness", Moore says. Orderliness and stringency may be desirable in aesthetic terms, but if the poet wants to accurately show experience, "neatness of finish" is merely a superficial covering. Neatness, which Henry James labels "restraint", ignores the movement and interaction of different surfaces, the complications that are inevitable parts of the natural world. The mountain peak crumbles in an avalanche at the poem's conclusion, unable to achieve any real protection by putting forth a flat, regular surface.

Moore also describes the shortcomings of poise as a protective armor in the poem "People's Surroundings". When the poet considers the role of selfhood in relation to her environment, the inevitable effects of her surroundings are much less catastrophic than the forces which cause her "Octopus" to self-destruct. In "People's Surroundings", we see an "acacia-like lady shivering at the touch of a hand", her form "let fall / to disappear like an obedient chameleon in fifty shades of mauve and amethyst". Unlike the elephant's skin, which literally does not allow light to pass through it, the "acacia-like lady" cannot compose herself to be impervious against the coloration of her surroundings. Moore draws a lesson from this: "the physiognomy of conduct must not reveal the skeleton," she

says. One's exterior appearance does not successfully serve its purpose, she seems to say, if the surface reveals its underlying armature, the "fundamental structure" below. The statement is Moore's way of self-affirming her unique "conduct", shielding the features of her poetry that give it life.

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