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**“The profession of humility”:
Marianne Moore’s Ethical Artifice**

Though Marianne Moore’s status as one of the most important poets of the first half of the twentieth century is no longer subject to dispute, she is still considered as an eccentric or even a misfit whose exact place on the map of modernist poetry remains undetermined. With her old-fashioned religious views, her peculiar appearance including the three-cornered hat almost more famous than her best known poems, and her unswerving immunity to erotic passions, she cuts a unique figure among modernist writers. The only woman poet to have been treated with any degree of seriousness by the patriarchs of early twentieth-century Anglo-American avant-garde, including Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, she has been admired for her meticulously descriptive and yet artful style; however, her insistence on the ethical import of mimesis, dictated by her attitude of humility towards the material reality of the world, complicates her relationships with modernism. Like Laura Riding, another idiosyncratic character of the time, Moore is both important and somehow marginal with regard to what has long been considered as the mainstream of modernist poetry, that is to say—the “high” modernism theorized chiefly by T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.¹ In the words of Harold Bloom: “If we compare her with her major poetic contemporaries—Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Pound, Williams, Aiken, Ransom, Cummings, H.D., Hart Crane—she is clearly the most original American poet of her era though not quite of the eminence of Frost, Stevens, Crane” (11). Bloom’s diagnosis is symptomatic of how Moore’s work has generally been received: as original but not quite “eminent” enough. A judgment essentially almost identical to Bloom’s was expressed, as early as in 1922, by Bryher [Winifred Ellerman] who, reviewing Moore’s debut *Poems*, described the book, sympathetically, as “the study of a Marco Polo detained at home” and urged its author to “leave the fireside and ride forth” pointing out: “your sword is ready and your kingdoms wait” (209–210). Bryher’s piece was published

1 For the discussion of the continuing impact of Hulme’s, Pound’s and Eliot’s theorizing on our understanding of modernism see Beasley.

in *Poetry* as part of “A Symposium on Marianne Moore” put together by Harriet Monroe and presenting the opinions of four critics, in addition to Bryher, also Marion Strobel, Pearl Anderson and Monroe herself. Strobel’s opinion was the most disparaging, as she accused Moore of a lack of grace and described her subject matter as “inevitably dry” (210). Other reviewers expressed qualified praise, including Monroe who, though on the whole approving of the younger poet’s work, nevertheless concluded that Moore was “in terror of her Pegasus” (213).

All of the opinions quoted above suggest that Moore’s writing, though intelligent and inventive, lacks some elusive quality that bona fide poetry should have. What is interesting, Moore herself was hesitant to label her own work as “poetry.” Her ambivalence about the status of her own writing was most famously expressed in her National Book Award Acceptance Speech, where she described poetry as “a peerless proficiency of the imagination” and added: “I prize it, but am myself an observer; I can see no reason for calling my work poetry except that there is no other category in which to put it.”² This hesitance can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it can be understood as an expression of modesty, as if Moore was suggesting that what she does is not good enough to merit the honorable title of “poetry.” But on the other hand, one could read Moore’s statement perversely, and perhaps against the author’s intention, as intimating that in fact her work is too unique, and of too large a scope, to be contained within the category “poetry.” In this second understanding, it is the category of “poetry” that turns out to be too narrow or otherwise insufficient to do justice to the originality of Moore’s artistic endeavor. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that it is the latter understanding of Moore’s disavowal that reflects the essence of her achievement more accurately.

However, that is not how Moore’s work has traditionally been perceived. Bryher and Bloom, though writing at different historical moments, express the same set of reservations about her poetic output. It is very clear that the two critics’ ambivalence towards Moore’s writing stems from their conviction as to the very special status of poetry. Both Bryher and Bloom regard it as the highest form of literary art, a stance which is in keeping with the aesthetics of high modernism. From the perspective of such an elitist understanding of poetry, it is Moore’s work that seems to lack something crucial. What is not stated

2 About a decade later Moore made a similar statement in conversation with Donald Hall. She said: “I disliked the term ‘poetry’ for any but Chaucer’s or Shakespeare’s or Dante’s” (Hall).

explicitly in the quoted comments, but is nevertheless quite obvious from the perspective of twenty-first-century readers, is that the allusive quality missing from Moore’s poetry is related to gender.

This is hardly a surprising conclusion since modernist poetry often defined itself as “masculine” (or even “male”). High modernist aesthetics in fact relied on the exclusion of the feminine, as its basic condition, newness, was linked with male sexual potency. Pound expressed these principles rather succinctly in his afterword to Remy de Gourmont’s *Natural Philosophy of Love*:

one offers woman as the accumulation of hereditary aptitudes, better than man in the ‘useful gestures,’ the perfections; but to man, given what we have of history, the ‘inventions,’ the new gestures, the extravagance, the wild shots, the impractical, merely because in him occurs the new up-jut, the new bathing of their cerebral tissues in the residuum, in *la mousse* of the life sap. (171)³

The masculinist bias of most early-twentieth-century avant-garde movements has been thoroughly examined by now, likewise, Marianne Moore’s strategies of dealing with the anti-feminine predisposition of much experimental poetry

3 As is well known, Pound praised what he considered to be Moore’s „masculine” traits. In the following excerpt from a letter (sent to Moore in February 1919), he also imagines himself to have acquired “femininity” by means of achieving “chaotic fluidity.” Quite predictably, the attention quickly shifts to Moore’s body and Pound’s fantasy about its skin color:

You , my dear correspondent ,
are a stabilized female ,
I am a male who has attained the chaotic fluidities ;

our mutual usefulness
is open to the gravest suspicions of non-existence, but
nevertheless , also , and notwithstanding all this ,
I am glad that you are red-headed and not
wooled , dark , ethiopian .

It would have been a test case :
you dark , nubian ethiopian : could I
have risen to it ; could I m ,
perceiving the intelligence from a distance ,
have got over the Jim Crow law

“Doggerel Section of Letter to Marianne Moore,” 363; punctuation and spelling irregularities are Pound’s.

have been subject to extensive analysis.⁴ However, it is important to note that it is precisely the “feminine” quality of Moore’s work that makes it innovative in its own unique way, not least because of how Moore’s ambivalence towards the ethos of high modernism shapes her responses to the material world, both human and inhuman and, as a consequence, because of how it influences her style.

It is interesting to look closely at the terms of Bryher’s review. In short, this critic believes that Moore’s poetry lacks the spirit of conquest. If Moore is a Marco Polo, that is to say, an explorer and a discoverer, she is one that has not yet set forth on her, or rather, *his*, journeys. Bryher’s reading of Moore revolves around the binary opposition between the feminine realm of the homely and the masculine realm of conquest or seduction. Rather than taking up her sword and triumphing over new kingdoms, Moore decides to stay at home, even though the spirit of her work is, in Bryher’s words again, “that of a man with facts and countries to discover and not that of a woman sewing at tapestries” (209). That “sewing at tapestries” should be the antithesis of art is of course considered by Bryher, as by the majority of modernist poets, as a dogma. Moore’s work is thus characterized as a mixture of the “masculine” spirit of innovation, and the “feminine” sense of obligation towards home.

However, the absence of the impulse to conquer and subdue, which complicates Moore’s relationship with the predominantly masculine mainstream of modernist poetry, is not a flaw but, on the contrary, a particular strength of Moore’s poetics. In a recent book on vibrant materiality, Jane Bennett has proposed to develop a “perceptual style” open to the fact of activity and aliveness of beings and things around us. Bennett defines this perceptual style as an openness to “the appearance of thing power” (5), a development of H.D. Thoreau’s precept that one should always be looking at what is to be seen.⁵ It is possible to argue that eight decades before Bennett’s book Moore was already developing that kind of style, a style which made it possible for her to poetically present the “facts and

4 Even though the artistic society of New York granted women quite a lot of freedom and independence (see, e.g. Cristanne Miller), the relative social equality between the genders did not translate into artistic practices of the majority of poets of the time. Moore’s ways of dealing with femininity in the inhospitable context of avant-garde poetry of her time, which she nevertheless found very compelling, have been discussed for instance by Elizabeth Oliver and Bonnie Costello.

5 “No method or discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert. What is a course of history, or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen?” (*Walden* 187).

countries” she came into contact with, while respecting their autonomy more than the autonomy of her poems, or even their status as “poetry.” Moore’s work is always looking towards the world external to language, though it is important to add that ultimately there is no sense of rupture in her poetry between language and material reality. Her writing does not focus on itself but, on the contrary, on what is not itself, on what is, and must always remain, other and strange, though not necessarily unspeakable or non-speaking, and certainly not passive. Her work is, to use a currently fashionable phrase, “object oriented” in the most radical way.

Moore’s observation skills are famous and have frequently been praised. Elizabeth Bishop, Moore’s friend and disciple, writing in 1948 referred to Moore as “The World’s Greatest Living Observer” (680). In Bishop’s view Moore’s descriptive style was unmatched and the satisfaction it offered the reader came from Moore’s “being able to give herself up entirely to the object under contemplation” (682). In the words of Josh A. Weinstein, it is thus possible to conclude that Moore’s poetics is “a poetics of humility” (373). She is not a conquistador assuming dominion over new territories but—a hostess. The creatures inhabiting her poetry are not turned into hostages of her imagination, rather, as many critics have already noted, there is a constant interplay of the imagination and the real in her work,⁶ or, as I am going to claim, the literary imagination is not perceived by Moore as discontinuous with reality.

Moore’s poetics of humility is linked with her strong tendency towards self-effacement, even though her style, for instance her complex prosody, is an inevitable mark of the presence of the artist. Yet, the artist that she is is not a romantic egoist but someone genuinely interested in what is external to the ego or, more broadly, to human subjectivity, thus making the poetry hospitable, like Noah’s ark, to all kinds of beings, both human and non-human, as well as to various discourses, for instance that of natural sciences. Moreover, as Weinstein notices, Moore “affords ethical status to all elements of the natural world” (375), or, as Bishop perhaps too narrowly put it, she has an “amazingly uncondescending feeling for animals” (685). These qualities of Moore’s work make Bonnie Costello conclude that even though “Moore’s poetry predates the environmental movement by several decades ... it shares some of its prominent themes.” Those themes are: “a disdain for human rapacity, plunder, and anthropocentrism, a celebration of nature’s variety, economy and ingenuity” (133). Her interest in the natural world along with her refusal to either imaginatively “conquer” or pastoralize it make it possible to see Moore as a forerunner of

6 See, for instance, Blackmur, Costello.

what is today known as ecopoetics, or what Weinstein calls a “confluence of form and content” (373)⁷ in the service of a work of witnessing to the marvelous if somewhat uncanny fact that the world exists and can be experienced. As Bishop put it, Moore expresses in her writing a sense that natural things “exist to be loved and honored” (682) and that it is poetry’s duty to express this knowledge.

Speaking about the duty of the poet is of course problematic, and even Bishop signals a sense of discomfort with Moore’s sense of obligation that “shows through a little plainly” (683). The idea that poetry might have a responsibility outside of itself is certainly incompatible with the elitist understanding of poetry as the highest form of literary art and with the New Critical idea that art is an autonomous realm. On the other hand, however, one does find reflections concerning the obligations of poetry in the writings of other modernist writers as well. For instance, in “The Serious Artist,” Ezra Pound famously claimed that bad art is immoral because it is “inaccurate,” it “makes false reports” (43), thus implicitly equating good art with truthfulness. However, for Pound, art’s truth-telling obligation is restricted to humans. “The arts give us a great percentage of the lasting and unassailable data regarding the nature of man, of immaterial man, of man considered as a thinking and sentient creature. They begin where the science of medicine leaves off or rather they overlap that science” (42). As a continuation of “the science of medicine,” art is concerned with human beings. It could perhaps be assumed that where medicine deals primarily with the body, “the arts” are concerned with the spirit. Truth, in Pound’s understanding, is spiritual and anthropocentric.⁸ In contrast, the sense

7 As Jonathan Skinner and others have noticed the term ecopoetics is more widely used than discussed. Nevertheless, there seem to be two main usages of the term. Sometimes ecopoetics is understood as “the making and study of pastoral poetry, or poetry of wilderness and deep ecology” or “poetry that confronts disasters and environmental injustices, including the difficulties and opportunities of urban environments.” The other usage does not link ecopoetics with the theme but focuses on “how certain poetic methods model ecological processes like complexity, non-linearity, feedback loops, and recycling” or “how poetic experimentation complements scientific methods in extending a more reciprocal relation to alterity—ecopoetics as a ‘poethics’” (Skinner). Even though the themes of Moore’s poems are often linked with non-human nature, it is the second understanding of ecopoetics that can be more meaningfully applied to her world.

8 The scope of this essay does not allow for a discussion of Pound’s treatment of non-human nature, ranging from very traditional pastoralism (for instance, in Canto 49), through the reiteration of the image of nature-as-woman or woman-as-nature (for instance in the

of obligation present in Moore’s poetry is not exclusively, or perhaps even not primarily, oriented toward human beings and it does not necessarily focus on the spirit. Her understanding of truth might be anthropomorphic, but it is not anthropocentric: the world depicted in her “observations” is teeming with independent and active non-human presences. The accuracy of her poems is a linguistic accuracy, but it concerns something more than language and the imagination, reaching out towards the real: not the “Lacanian” real of the human psyche, but the pragmatic real of the natural sciences. Moore’s work oversteps the boundaries of poetry or even literature as such,⁹ and perhaps that is the reason why Moore’s poems are, according to some critics, not “eminent” enough to count as poetry. They lack the spirit of conquest or, to refer to Pound again, “perfect control” (49), they are something else than pure art. Pound complained about the traces of emotion found in Moore’s work, even though he famously praised it as *logopoeia*, or “a dance of the intelligence among words.” This is how he wrote about Moore’s (and Mina Loy’s) work in 1918:

These two contributors to the ‘Others’ Anthology write *logopoeia*—poetry that is akin to nothing but language, which is a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas and modification of ideas and characters. It is, in their case, the utterance of clever people in despair, or hovering upon the brink of that precipice. . . . It is a mind cry, more than a heart cry. ‘Take the world if thou wilt but leave me an asylum for my affection’ is not their lamentation, but rather ‘In the midst of this desolation, give me at least one intelligence to converse with.’ (*Literary Essays* 424)

early poem „A Girl”, alluding to the story of Daphne’s transormation into a tree as told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*), to the representations of non-human nature in “Pisan” Cantos where, as I have attempted to demonstrate in a different article, the speaker’s subjectivity is figured as post-pastoral (Fiedorczuk). Suffice it to say that, even though non-human nature appears in some of Pound’s most compelling poems testifying to the poets’ proto-environmental awareness, on the whole it is human history, politics and spirituality which constitute the main preoccupation of his writing.

- 9 In a recent discussion about ecopoetics, Jonathan Skinner emphasized that ecopoetry’s aspiration is to transcend the condition of textuality: “one important aspect of ecopoetics entails what happens *off* the page, in terms of where the work is sited and performed, as well as what methods of composition, or *decomposition*, precede and follow the poem” (Hume 760). In the case of Marianne Moore, her careful study of botanics and zoology is part of the ecopoetical process which happens “*off* the page.”

While all of this is true about Pound's own poetry, it is not really an accurate description of Moore's work. To be sure, "[a] dance of the intelligence among words" is a handy formulation, but it will fit any piece of writing that the critic judges as intelligent. That Moore's poetry is "akin" to many things outside of language is already quite clear even in her very early poems, moreover, that seems to be the very quality responsible for her lack of "eminence," or "modernity." The following lines form the opening of "Critics and connoisseurs":

There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious
fastidiousness. Certain Ming
products, imperial floor coverings of coach—
wheel yellow, are well enough in their way but I have seen
something
that I like better—a
mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly bal-
lasted animal stand up,
similar determination to make a pup
eat his meat from the plate. (*Complete Poems* 38)

The prosody of this fragment has both a musical and a visual effect.¹⁰ The stanza consists of nine syllabic lines of roughly two lengths, where the long lines consist of 11 to 14 syllables and the short ones—of 6 to 7 syllables. Generally the long and the short lines alternate, but there is one exception: the fourth line of the poem is long instead of short, and it consists of as many as 17 syllables, thus standing out against the relatively regular prosody of the whole stanza. The effect of this intervention is an acceleration of the pace of the poem, as if the speaking suddenly became an urgent issue and the speaker wanted to finish one part of a sentence ("but I have seen something") in order to move to the next one. Perhaps it is in places like this one that Pound detects the disagreeable presence of emotion, so strong that it causes the line to spill over and produces an almost impish effect of a playful presence just barely hidden behind the regular surface of the poem and completely disobedient to its rules.

But play is a serious thing, as proved by poetic things the speaker "likes better" than the otherwise very admirable "Ming / products," for instance: "a / mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly bal- / lasted animal stand up."

¹⁰ Moore's poems sometimes exist in multiple versions. In this analysis I am referring to the poem as printed in *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, 1967).

The image conveys a mixture of playfulness and gravity and a sense of continuity between biological necessity (the “imperfectly bal- / lasted animal” has to stand up) and artistry (it requires effort, it is poetry). The unexpected line-break in the middle of the word “ballasted” in this version of the poem¹¹ is justified by the count of the syllables (14 and 7 respectively in the two lines under discussion) but also, the interrupted word aptly illustrates the “imperfect ballast” in which natural poetry is found. The part of the word which ends line 6—“bal-”—is shorter and, because of the association with a “ball,” it is also *rounder*, one might have the impression that it is moving and about to roll down the dash which follows it. The part of the word moved (as if it was pushed over) to the beginning of line 7—“lasted”—is longer and, because of the association with “lasting” it is also more stable. The way in which these lines are arranged enacts the act of balancing: it is a combination of movement and stability, of lawlessness and order which has to reassert itself over and over again. It is important to add that the same terms describe Moore’s prosody. Her style is not a *representation* but a *presentation*, an enactment of the interplay of chaos and design found in nature.

It is even more difficult to understand why Pound should consider Moore’s work as a “mind cry.” None of the poems printed in *Others* convey anything even remotely related to “despair” simply because the speaker in Moore’s poems is hardly ever narcissistically experiencing her own psychological states. In an attitude of hospitality, the consciousness of the speaker is turned outwards, allowing life to reaffirm itself in it and through it. If there is a “victory” in Moore’s poems, it is not of the kind Bryher encouraged her to pursue. It is not the victory of a Marco Polo, or of art over its material but of a living co-existence of phenomena usually considered as antithetical, for instance—of nature and art.

The most explicit expression of the conviction that the task of poetry is not to achieve autonomy but, to the contrary, to give expression to the continuity between natural *poiesis* and human artifice is formulated in “Poetry,” one of Moore’s best known and most frequently discussed works. First published in 1919, the 38-line-long poem subsequently underwent significant revisions, to be reduced, in the version published in 1935 to the following three lines:

11 From *Collected Poems* (1967). It is important to note that other versions of the poem exist also. Lines 6–7 are sometimes printed as a single line (which then becomes the longest and the most emotionally ‘excessive’ line of the poem), other versions introduce the line-break in a different place. However, the eccentricity of this particular prosodic arrangement allows one to conclude that it was in keeping with the poets’ intention.

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine. (*Complete Poems* 36)

However, the original version of the poem was included in the notes of the book and it is the version as printed in the notes to the *Selected Poems* (1935) and, subsequently, in *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (1967), that I will refer to in my analysis. The beginning of the original version reads as follows:

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine. (*Complete Poems* 266)

The opening refers to the fragment in *The Notebooks of Samuel Butler* where Butler records a conversation with a boy who claims to dislike poetry (Bloom 71), but of course it also serves to acknowledge the fact that there exists a large community of readers whose disposition is likewise antipathetic towards this literary form. As a response from a poet one might expect some kind of “a defense of poetry,” but if “Poetry” is a defense, it is paradoxical to say the least. It begins with the confession: “I, too, dislike it.” Moore admits that poetry can be unattractive or even worthy of contempt as “all this fiddle,” that is to say, playing around with sounds and meanings. However, the seemingly trifling activity of verse-making becomes not only important but even urgent once “a place for the genuine” is discovered in it. The “genuine” is left unexplained in the shortened version of the poem but the longer text gives us a catalog of very palpable examples:

Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful. (266–267)

The word “useful” placed prominently at the beginning of the line comes as a surprise. One does not tend to think about the effects of poetry in terms of their usefulness, as usefulness is at odds with the notion of the sublime, the “natural,” it would seem, territory of poetry. Moore’s evocation of the usefulness

of poetry is clearly a way of responding to the accusation that verse-making is mere “fiddle.” It is worth noticing, however, that the usefulness of the genuine things listed in the preceding lines has more in common with, referring to Bryher again, the spirit of “a woman sewing at tapestries” than with that of “a man with facts and countries to discover.” Nevertheless, “the genuine” is at the same time not unrelated to Pound’s “accuracy” and Riding’s “truth,” even though the reverberations of Moore’s term are different because of her emphasis on usefulness. Still, “eyes that can dilate” are eyes presented so accurately and truthfully in a poem that they are not different from real eyes. “The genuine” comes into being when the barrier between reality and poetry dissolves, which is to say, when we begin to understand that it has never been absolute. There is no sudden rupture between the material reality of the world and the linguistic creativity of the poet. Language, too, is material, and it can also be “useful.” “Hands,” “hair” and “eyes” are “useful” both outside of the text and within it, if the text, in all its artfulness, knows how to evoke “the genuine.” This involves both the preservation of what already exists and the creation of something new. In Moore’s ecopoetics, preservation and innovation are not opposed to each other, which complicates its relationship with modernism even further. As noted by John M. Slatin, Moore often refuses to take sides and sometimes “apparently irreconcilable positions are brought into combination” in her work (Bloom 83), for instance—modernism and conservatism. But if modernism is related to innovation and conservatism to preservation, it is important to note that they are “irreconcilable” only within the conceptual framework which equates innovation with destruction as avant-garde poetry often, in fact, does.

In the subsequent parts of the poem, the truthfulness of good poetry is contrasted, rather authoritatively, with the activity of “half-poets,” one more testimony to the fact that Moore, like most of her contemporaries, believed in the elitist character of poetry, in spite of her own writings’ radically anti-elitist import:

One must
make a distinction
however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the
result is not poetry,
nor till the poets among us can be
‘literalists of
the imagination’—above
insolence and triviality and can present
for inspection, ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them,’
shall we have

it. (267)

The above fragment has received a lot of critical attention, with many commentators wondering what it means for poets to be “literalists of the imagination” and usually concluding that the phrase is, at least ostensibly, oxymoronic. It is important to point out that the formulation is borrowed from W. B. Yeats’ critique of Blake, where Yeats expressed dissatisfaction with Blake’s excessive adherence to his visions at the cost of style (Bloom 74). Moore obviously disagrees with Yeats and demands that poets be not less but more “literal”: only then will they be able to present “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.”

Going against the majority of critical responses to “Poetry,” I would like to propose that there is no contradiction in demanding both literalness and imagination at the same time, in fact, to demand both of them is less strange than Moore herself might have thought. If a literal rendering of an imaginary vision produces “real toads,” it simply means that imagination and reality are not opposed but continuous, in stark negation of T. S. Eliot’s famous claim, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” that “the difference between art and event is always absolute” (27). In fact, it is a verdict such as Eliot’s that should be considered strange. Such an opinion as his could only be formulated in the context of the philosophical tradition equating language’s primary function with representation, where *re*-presentation must always aspire to, but never reach, the condition of presence. But such a dualistic understanding of language has now become obsolete. As intuited by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and demonstrated by cognitivism, the essence of language might as well be understood as expression, and not as representation. Language creates presence, causes things to happen, signals the experiential parameters of a given speaking body. As Graham Harman¹² and other object oriented philosophers have argued, human creativity, including linguistic creativity, is not exceptional and not qualitatively different from the natural creativity of other material things. One might point out that human language has a tendency to anthropomorphize experience and of course this fact is impossible to negate. But, again, the inclination to anthropomorphism does not make humans or human activities exceptional. As Timoty Morton put it, “[j]ust as I fail to avoid anthropomorphizing everything, so all entities whatsoever constantly translate other objects into their own terms” (207). In other words, toads do not become less real for being seen by human eyes, or by those of a dog or a fly, nor is there any reason to suppose that one of those perspectives or some other perspective should be able to produce an exhaustive experience of those strange amphibians. The intuition expressed in Moore’s poem is that the task of the imagination is to reconnect words with

12 See, for instance, Harman’s *Guerilla Metaphysics*.

life and thus to prevent the narcissistic proliferation of poetic “fiddle” which experiences nothing but itself.

“Bad art is art that makes false reports,” said Ezra Pound. For Moore, bad, self-preoccupied poetry makes things “become so derivative as to become / unintelligible.” No one could like *that*, because “we / do not admire what / we cannot understand” (*Complete Poems* 267). However, it is not complexity that makes poetry unintelligible but lack of truthfulness. It is quite possible to write in an ostensibly lucid way, but if “the genuine” is missing the writing will ultimately be incomprehensible simply because it will not communicate, it will be perfectly solipsistic.

Moore’s list of possibly genuine things is famously inclusive:

the bat
holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf
under
a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that
feels a flea, the base-
ball fan, the statistician—
nor is it valid
to discriminate against ‘business documents and

school books’; all these phenomena are important. (267)

Both human and inhuman phenomena are equally crucial. Moore does not introduce any hierarchy among the elements of the world and, once again, makes the boundaries of poetry permeable by defending “business documents and / school books” against Tolstoy’s disparaging treatment of these things as the antithesis of poetry, however broadly understood.¹³ Poetry is found everywhere imagination is found, that is to say, whenever words preserve their connections with life.

Moore’s ecopoetics is thus a way of knowing. She is not very much interested in inventing a new reality, rather, she uses creativity in service of the reality which already exists. Unlike Pound, she does not think the knowledge available

13 Moore refers to Tolstoy’s diary, where he writes: “Where the boundary between prose and poetry lies, I shall never be able to understand. The question is raised in manuals of style, yet the answer to it lies beyond me. Poetry is verse: prose is not verse. Or else poetry is everything with the exception of business documents and school books” (73).

through poetry is limited to human affairs. Her interest in the non-human world, fueled by her extensive reading in scientific literature, is coupled with humility. In sharp contrast with the instrumental rationality of much western science, Moore does not turn its objects into laboratory specimens. Her poems do not kill or destroy, they seek connection with that which escapes analytical examination, that is to say, with the living “flesh of the world,” to use Merleau-Ponty’s formulation. And even though Moore shared the modernist poets’ faith in the elitist character of poetry, her own writing does not aspire to uniqueness or superiority over other things or discourses. Her poems are also part and parcel of the flesh of experience, they belong to the same ontological plane as the objects she presents. In some of her poems about animals, for instance in “The Pangolin,” the equality of the speaking subject and the observed animal is expressed through the poet’s use of humor. In the words of Rachel Trousdale, “Moore’s humor is not ridicule, even if it borrows some of ridicule’s techniques; instead, she treats laughter as a starting point for respect and serious mutual understanding” (123). Like the imagination, humor, too, is a matter of collaboration, not of competence, it is a laughing *with* someone whose otherness cannot ever be exhausted, not a laughing *at* someone who is thus reduced to an object of ridicule.

Moore’s attitude towards the non-human protagonists of her poems is persuasively expressed in “Jellyfish,” brief enough to be quoted in its entirety:

Visible, invisible,
 a fluctuating charm
 an amber-tinctured amethyst
 inhabits it, your arm
 approaches and it opens
 and it closes; you had meant
 to catch it and it quivers;
 you abandon your intent. (180)

Perhaps it is the poet who “approaches” the jellyfish through her attempts to describe it as “a fluctuating charm” inhabited by “an amber-tinctured amethyst.” The description, though surely anthropomorphic, is accurate but, as every description, it is incomplete. As the poet approaches, the jellyfish “opens” and “closes,” and the two actions can be understood as either sequential or simultaneous. The line “and it closes; you had meant” aligns the withdrawal of the jellyfish into the uncanny independence of its unique existence with the human intent which can be understood as an inclination towards mastery. The next staccato line, built almost exclusively out of monosyllabic words, aligns “catch it” with “quivers.”

The line is difficult to read without stuttering, which makes it almost possible to experience the jellyfish’s quivering in one’s own body. As a result of this emphatic undoing of subjective boundaries, it is no longer possible for the human observer to maintain the position of mastery: Marco Polo must abandon his journeys and, why not, take up embroidery. With its patterns of distant landscapes and exotic animals rendered with the clumsiness necessitated by nature of this art, his tapestries will perhaps be just as good as poems.

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