

MOORE & LESS

Of that great American poetry generation born in the 1880's, a generation that includes William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore is an anomaly: at eye- and ground-level she is no less an influential practitioner of the art of the modernist poem than any of her male contemporaries. It could be argued, in fact, that as a master of specific metaphor and analogue, as an originator of the use of found and exotic material integral to the texture of a poem, as a player with language for its own sake, and as a metaphysician of what unifies yet puzzles a poem, Moore stands out.

There was a time when Moore's contemporary critics wished to ghettoize her surprising style as too often playful and experimental entertainments, as too often elaborations of data and instruction, as too often poetry structures yoked into arbitrary, self-conscious forms, with a penchant for inventive rhymes in which a "Chameleon" sorts with "laid upon," Nineveh" with "Jonah," and, in "The Fish," the hard, hyphenated "ac" sound at the beginning of "accident" is perfect with "lack." Showy stuff. And then there was the issue of syllabics versus metrics, syllable count versus accents, so much so that Moore's so-called "music" called attention to itself—if not as an aural language then as a written word, suggesting, in Robert Lowell's

formulation, that Moore “is an inventor of a new kind of English poem, one that is able to fix the splendor and variety of prose in very compressed spaces.” A poetry, in other words, that is really compressed prose, with all the knowledgeable range available to prose. Moore herself had once said that “I realized that the spoken word is different from the one on the page.”

Otherwise, Moore, in the old days, was being praised for her colorfulness—that is, for her arresting imagery, her love of objet d’art, her habit of bric-a-brac, her odd animals treated as familiars and her familiar animals treated as oddments. And then there are the lists, as if researched from the public library; and then a poem like “The Octopus,” sustained for more than 200 lines by speculation and quotation and outré reference. Plus a personal poetry biography that invites the Brooklyn Dodgers, Life Magazine, the Ford Motor Company into the sacred temple of the area of the poem; and then the funny hat, the cape, and life at home still with your mother. In sum: Moore is to be characterized as the poet as eccentric yet popular, as different but finally chummy.

Even if all of this, in total, is only half-true—which it is--it is all beside the point of Moore’s greatness, her contribution, and her influence, one essential quality of which is her best poetry’s paying attention to what I think of as the art of silence, the art of the means to achieve an abiding ars poetica of the modest self: Moore’s silences being but one vital aspect of her writing that may seem miles away from her apparent and abundant method, interest, and obsession. For instance, big poems

such as "The Octopus," "The Pangolin," and "In Distrust of Merits"—all anthology pieces—would seem to argue, demonstratively, against what is implied by silence. These poems are filled with complicating rhetoric and logic, wide-eyed lines and off-balance line-breaks, a massive sense of space occupied, and a "rough music" of insistence underscored by the angularity of syllabics (syllabics being a concept Moore refused, early on, to talk about). Yet even in these samples there are silences, absences, separations that cause or imply connection; and there is the commitment of a mind that believes that what is left out will, by the reader, be filled in.

"The Octopus" is one long seminal progression that seems to want to smother the reader with information, evocation, and as many tentacles as possible, but there is one willy-nilly stanza break, that acts like a breather, near the end of the poem, and several other silent breaks within the developing text. It is a greedy poem, gathering in as much imaginative and associative possibilities as seems possible--very like an octopus. Yet for all its acquisitional and collective power the poem stops and restarts constantly; it moves here, then there; it quotes as if to interrupt as much as reinforce its speaker. It distracts and deflects its potential straight-line narrative. All of which is to say: it gives pause as often as it can and turns away from transition. It fills itself, so to speak, with separations and absences.

"In Distrust of Merits," like "The Pangolin," builds itself with even-handed but consistently enjambling stanzas; rather than a recitation, it is, however, a meditation in a time of war, published first in *The Nation* in 1943. It analogizes both the Old

and New Testaments to construct its plea for tolerance and humanity as an antidote opposed to the isolation of self-destruction that war represents, in which the “world’s an orphan’s home.” Ultimately, this poem is a Keatsian assertion of the fact that “Beauty is everlasting/and dust”—and the poet here means for us to rhyme a silent “us” with “dust”—“Beauty is everlasting/and dust is for a time.” The poem’s stanza breaks, regardless of its pushy enjambments, are, of course, visual as well as vocal silences, but it is the movement of the “enchanted” mind—in and out, over and across spaces of reference—that creates Moore’s necessary and intensifying suspensions and arrivals over the course of 80 lines. And at the close of her poem, it is her moral acceptance of another kind of silence that elevates Moore’s argument for art to the terms of beauty—“Inwardly,” she says, “I...did nothing” against the war but write a poem.

When Moore was asked why she reduced one of her most famous poems, “Poetry,” to just 3 lines from its original 30 full lines of 5 stanzas, her answer was that she felt, on reflection, that after the first two sentences the poem was over—or, more precisely, that the rest was “padding.” She might well have said that the rest of the poem—that is, the remaining 27 lines--required silence, since silence is another way to look at what was there and now should not be there. Silence, in this case, being an absent presence. The good thing, in hindsight, is that we have both versions of the poem and can test what Moore thinks silence is: i.e., a subtraction; or an anti-addition. Without the missing or silent lines we lose not only her argument but her discovery and juxtaposition of quotations from a sagacious Yeats and a

didactic Tolstoy regarding what Moore pretends poetry is and is not: is it imagination versus business documents; or, is it a combination and inevitable connection of things, apparently disparate things, within a compatible world?—even in terms of different levels of reality, such as imaginary gardens with real toads in them. How compatible ~~must the~~ ^{should these} connection be? ^{How far apart, how surreal?} Wallace Stevens' complaint against surrealism is that it is too much like clams playing the accordion, yet, when you ^{as you might in a Moore poem,} picture it, this undersea image makes a certain visual sense.

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Silence, for Moore, seems to be less about imaginative leaps of faith or the rawness of the raw materials than about not staying beyond your welcome. As such it is a distancing device, promoting, what Keats after Hazlitt, calls disinterestedness, which is yet another way to disappear, with reticence, behind the text. Moore's work, therefore, is ^{rough} ~~more~~ about definition, ^{as it is} ~~not~~ delineation, which in itself demands the work of poetic economy. Her under/statement is a form of denial in favor of an alternative richness. Her poet's job is to take away expectation, reverse the scale of the expected, let the air out of the large and give a touch of the grand to the small—glaciers become octopi, snails make modesty a virtue. For example, unlike her contemporary D. H. Lawrence, she does not treat her animal encounters as passionate subjects but as inspiring objects to be viewed outside the outlines of elevated narrative and instead inside the circle of a configuration, an approximation, a comparison, as if she were a kind of cubist seeing the animal in the round and thereby transforming it.

INSERT (Moore)

But playful is one thing, serious another. Moore's powerful one-page poem "A Grave"---originally titled "A Graveyard"---invites an absence right off the bat. It begins with a dearticled "Man looking into the sea" rather than "a man" or "the man" or "some man." "Man" alone and large has the feel of mankind, yet I think Moore is interested less in a universal than in an archetypal representative whose specific role seems to be that of a great meditative presence so present as to block the view.

Man looking into the sea,
taking the view from those who have as much right to see it
as you have to it yourself,
it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing,
but you cannot stand in the middle of this;
the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave.

The elided leap from the shoreline into the sea itself is itself a silence in that the step from the one to the other is not only subtracted necessary. The referent for "this" is in both places-- the shore and the sea--at once, and serves to rescue the difference between standing by and standing in this most massive of all graves. Man, therefore, long is looking into the Grave. The seventeen lines that follow these first five separate into semi-colons, dashes, colons, and periods that may help organize the space of the poem: they also, however, release it, free it, in effect, into a logic of juxtapositions in which Moore can keep us at the edge while exploring the sea-life of death--as if death finally means to go under, down, sunk in a drift "in which all dropped things are bound

to sink--/in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition
nor consciousness."

The ongoing back-and-forth between our position in life on land
and death among the fishes, seaweed, "tortoise-shell scourges," etcetera,
evokes the tension that is what the source of imagination is about.

Men may row above, cast their nets into, build their lighthouses near
this grave that is the sea, but to no avail. The tension in the silence
between--or within--land and sea, surface and the deep is the content here.
"Man" is all of us, genderless, fishers of men, fishermen all. And this
grave, this all-depth of water is as beautiful as it is dark:

The wrinkles progress among themselves in a phalanx--beautiful under
networks of foam,
and fade breathlessly while the sea rustles in and out of the seaweed;
the birds swim through the air at top speed, emitting cat-calls as
heretofore--

Wonderful that pun on "swim"; remarkable the power in "top speed,
emitting cat-calls as heretofore"--no speed, no cat-calls hereafter.

When I read a really fine and moving poem by Moore, a poem such as "A Grave" or "In Distrust of Merits," I feel I am in a very intimate, almost private place—a space, if you will, of profound solitude: this, too, is a silence. The paradox is, it seems to me, that such a singular, separate place is not isolating but comforting, connecting, as personal to the reader as it is to the writer—one silence, as Rilke puts it, speaking to another silence. Moore's poem entitled "Silence" sets the case pretty well. It is set itself in an older, conservative, perhaps more silent Cambridge, Mass.

My father used to say,
"Superior people never make long visits,
have to be shown Longfellow's grave
or the glass flowers at Harvard.
Self-reliant like the cat—
that takes its prey to privacy,
the mouse's limp tail hanging like a shoelace from its mouth—
they sometimes enjoy solitude,
and can be robbed of speech
by speech which has delighted them.
The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;
not in silence, but restraint."
Nor was he insincere in saying, "Make my house your inn."
Inns are not residences.

It is generally best when the thing speaks for itself. "Silence" here speaks for itself—or, rather, Moore allows the father figure to ^{literally} speak for her about silence, about privacy and solitude and not overstaying your welcome; and especially about how authentic feeling "shows itself" in the tension of holding back, of listening, of creating spaces within the space. Moore's "silence" in the presence of the father puts her in the position of the listener, the learner, the daughter superior. Her active role is to hear, and—in the words of St. Mark—to understand. Silence builds the structure of an insight, whose artful construction is exactly what the overall forms of Moore's poems are about: constructs of subtraction in tension with assertion. Silences, that is, controlled by the larger silent white space of the page. Silence, in fact, Moore seems to be saying, is about listening to that space, is about letting it speak for itself.