

Skepticism, Illusion and Rigorous Observation:
Marianne Moore's Poetic Pursuit of Hope

by

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B.A., McGill University, 2002

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Marianne Moore's poetic project of creating hope within a modern context. Building on an initial discussion of Moore's skeptical perspective, I go on to argue that Moore's work fosters a desire both to believe in something unknowable and to maintain faith in a goodness that cannot be realized on earth. Moore posits a more demanding hope than one based on the search for truth and namelessness; she gives hope a meaning beyond the feeling that allows people to keep going. Moore's hope requires a guarded vision of the future, a capacity for visualizing both the real and the imaginary, and, especially, careful observation. Actively manipulating the possibilities of language while recognizing their limitations, Moore transforms hope into an action, a pursuit of ethics and a focus on something other than the self.

Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Acknowledgments.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: “A Reason for Living”.....	10
Chapter 2: “Precision and Indirection”.....	29
Chapter 3: “Literalists of the Imagination”.....	52
Conclusion.....	78
Works Cited.....	82

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Introduction

In a 1908 letter to close friend and Bryn Mawr peer, Marcet Haldeman, Marianne Moore wrote: “I do not wonder that you come to ask yourself if dreams good and bad are not the whole stuff hope is made of. I know the feeling...There is nothing fundamental, the matter with aspiration; a man has to have at least one silver hope to hang by, to live” (*Letters* 39). Twenty-seven years later, Moore made hope the central theme of “The Steeple-Jack” (1932), the poem that begins her *Selected Poems* (1935) as well as *Collected Poems* (1951) and *Complete Poems* (1967, 1981). Using a language of hope, Moore creates a quaint seaside town, in which a steeple-jack is repairing the church’s spire: the poem’s opening line invokes “a reason for living” (*Poems* 5), a hope that can overcome despair, while the final image is of a star on a steeple “which...stands for hope” (7). “The Steeple-Jack” first appeared in *Poetry* magazine as part of a triptych entitled “Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play,” but eventually, on the advice of T.S. Eliot, Moore chose it to begin both *Selected Poems* and the two later collections (Engel 23). As a result, Moore highlighted hope as an instrumental component in her complete collection of poetry. Indeed, Moore’s often-cited interests in rigorous observation, in the natural world, in time, and in the imagination function as her poetic system of hope-building (Kriner 42).

Many critics have sought to place Moore in the modernist tradition by focusing on her methods of observing the non-human. Guy Rotella (1991) argues that, since the Puritan landing in Massachusetts, American poetry has involved reading facts of nature as manifestations of larger truths; poets like Moore “shift epistemological questions from the meaning of God toward the meaning of meaning” (37). Rotella adds that American

poets have inherited the Puritan desire to read the physical world metaphysically but, as modernists, they share skepticism of their own impulses to represent nature as an ordered and meaningful design, provisional formulations of truth, and compositional means for exposing the limits and strategies of poetry to humanize nature. Examining the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost and Marianne Moore through the lens of the “other,” Andrew Lakritz (1996) suggests that Moore should be firmly placed within the modernist tradition in part because of the ways in which she clearly critiques the notion of “progress” within modern culture, and in part because of her use of “dense” language. This language does not demand knowledge of foreign tongues, historical referents or myths but it still proves difficult to read; it is easily misunderstood if one reads it with “merely common sense in hand.” It is the perfect vehicle for allowing the “other” to speak or to be heard through silence (41).

This thesis considers Moore’s poetic endeavour to create hope within a modern context. Such hope surpasses idealistic notions of the future that allow humans to persist in daily life; in fact, Moore’s poetry often critically assesses insufficient definitions of hope for being either unrealistic or recklessly idealistic in expecting change to materialize without persistent struggle. My argument concurs with Rotella and Lakritz as I maintain that Moore remains particularly dubious of hope directed both at effortless progress and at obtaining truth, a value Moore sees as unstable and complexly caught up in the very qualities it denounces. However, I diverge from the claim that Moore either seeks or hopes for a “larger truth,” a “meaning of meaning,” or a language that would allow humans to communicate with the “other.” Instead, as Robin Schulze (1995) points out, Moore sees her own poetry as representative of a quest for an ideal presence that clearly

lies outside the self, a quest that can never be fulfilled (*Web* 159). Building on an initial examination of Moore's skeptical perspective in chapter one, I go on to argue that Moore cultivates a desire both to believe in something unknowable and to maintain faith in righteousness that cannot be achieved on earth. Moore presents a more complicated hope than one based on the drive towards Edenic truth and namelessness; Moore's hope relies on a guarded vision of the future, on the ability to visualize both the real and the imaginary, and, especially, on vigilant observation.

Delving into future prospects within the context of modern America, Moore transcends the restrictions of one-feature groupings and reaches towards a shared set of moral values that relies on self-surrender instead of self-centeredness. My second chapter explains how Moore's hope gestures toward the future but insists upon neither an advancement-focused stance nor a wistful yearning for the past. Rather, Moore depends on the foreignness of the future, on a vision that ascribes possibility to moments in the present but that also realizes that the basic strangeness of the future is what allows for the existence of those present possibilities. The uncertain language of probability subsists as the sole way to interpret the reality of the present; hope refuses the authentic circumstances in which things can be said or known, together with the distortion of the present. The intrinsic promise in an observed subject encourages involvement with that subject; therefore, the hopeful observer's actions must connect tightly to the center of his or her gaze.

Anne Raine describes Moore's hope that "close attention to 'still subjects' could foster respect for nonhuman nature, and thereby encourage more harmonious relations among human beings as well as between human beings and the nonhuman world" (179).

But Moore does not naively hope for the formation of this connection; rather, it is the scrupulous effort demanded by “close attention” that creates hope in Moore’s poetry. Observing the intricacies of what exists beyond the self, whether it be the animal world, the natural environment or a foreign culture, Moore’s work attempts to balance a strict description of the material world, a permanent value in her work of the teens and twenties, and the imagination, her eventual answer to an unwillingness to totalize. Therefore, Moore tries to create a poetic interpretation of hope through formal and topical demonstrations of self-restraint, not self-affirmation. Vigorously maneuvering the potential in language while recognizing its limitations, she bestows upon hope a definition beyond either the blind search for truth or the sentiment that allows people to persevere; Moore translates hope into an action, a pursuit of goodness and a reliance on that which lies outside the self.

Moore greatly respected and admired her contemporary, Wallace Stevens, who undoubtedly influenced Moore’s own work. Reviewing Stevens’ volume *Ideas of Order* in 1937, Moore wrote: “The poems rise like a tide. They embody hope that in being frustrated becomes fortitude; and they prove to us that the testament to emotion is not volubility. Refusal to speak results here in an eloquence by which we are convinced that America has in Wallace Stevens at least one artist whom professionalism will never demolish” (*Prose* 349). Like Moore, Stevens describes a nature that communicates without articulate meaning; in “The Motive for Metaphor,” he speaks of “things that would never be quite expressed” (240), suggesting that human language can never communicate the “things” of the world but also that the “things” cannot verbalize themselves. At the end of the poem, the poet’s own motive for metaphor shrinks:

The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
 The weight of primary noon,
 The A B C of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer
 Of red and blue, the hard sound –
 Steel against intimation – the sharp flash,
 The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.

In these lines, the poet shrinks from the alphabet itself, the A B C and X, the imprint of a language that would fix itself in time and space, fix it into something hypostatized. The poet neither creates the world from nothing nor constructs it out of steel with tools and pre-existing images. The poet must become intimate with the material, gaining access to the innermost elements of the natural world and of the non-human.

Moore expresses this same conscious desire to render human language and the non-human indistinguishable, to define each by the solicitation of the other. In her work from the teens and the 1920s, Moore expresses a hope to realign appearance and reality through rigorous observation and precision while refusing to force unification where subjective and objective multiplicities prevent her. Moore's desire to be explicit does not dominate poems such as "A Grave" and "An Octopus," which I discuss in chapter 2; instead, she expresses in these poems the shifting and ambiguous possibilities of the world to which she must respond. Her descriptions involve strings of modifiers and lists of objects, both of which give varied but consistently plausible perspectives on an object. Furthermore, Moore's descriptions extend from nature to culture. In "England," she declines to replace stereotypes of American culture with more accurate description, claiming that "no conclusions may be drawn" (*Poems* 47) through labels alone. Despite

Moore's distress over the limitations of language, her two impulses, toward diversity of meanings and toward a sort of teleology, comprise her hope.

While serving as editor of *The Dial* from 1925-1929, Moore took a seven-year hiatus from publishing her own poetry but wrote many essays and editorials about modern American society. Her prose frequently critiqued America's growing obsession with wealth and competition at the expense of generosity and cooperation. For Moore, the collapse of the stock market in 1929 seemed an inevitable "comeuppance for years of profligacy, irresponsibility, and selfishness" (Schulze, *Web* 65). Moore also saw the avarice of Americans reflected in the arts: "The world of art also is assailed by a spirit of domination, gainfulness, or expediency" (*Prose* 167). My third chapter examines the post-*Dial* decade; reemerging as a poet with the publication of "Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play" in the June 1932 issue of *Poetry* magazine, Moore immediately began to show this "increasingly complex involvement with issues of history, philosophy, and social justice, and the relation of the poet's art to these issues" (White xv). Indeed, Moore's reemergence as a depression-era poet marked a dramatic shift in her career as she turned her attention to the question of how the poet can "balance the pull of worldly obligations with the potentially escapist call to spiritual heights." Ultimately, she asks whether poetry can achieve and embody hope by transcending "detachment – an avoidance of moral obligation to the world on an individual level equivalent to America's tragic isolationism" (Schulze, *Web* 66).

In her poems of the 1930s, Moore prioritizes the act and experience of "gleaning," the central verb in "Camellia Sabina." By amassing and indicating fanciful images that the careless observer may fail to notice, Moore continues to sanction scrupulous

exploration of the natural world but also extends her scrutiny into the realm of the imaginary. In so doing, Moore comes to terms with illusion, continuing to expose it while accepting its necessity. In her poems of the 1930s, Moore achieves hope through her technique of including without reconciling the opposed values of observing and communicating, of nature and art. She does not try to balance or contain the binaries; rather, she observes the intricacies of their coexistence. Denis Donoghue writes that, for Moore, “Poetry is a way of looking, various because vision is irregular, reasonable because, irregular, it is not indiscriminate...The distinction between appearance and reality is not to Miss Moore a cause of persistent distress. To think appearance significant is not a mark of folly; it is a mode of appreciation, or predilection. Things may be deceptive, but a relation between one thing and the other is something achieved” (165).

In a review of Wallace Stevens’ *Harmonium*, Moore wrote: “It is not too much to say that some writers are entirely without imagination – without that associative kind of imagination certainly, of which the final tests are said to be simplicity, harmony, and truth. In Mr. Stevens’ work, however, imagination precludes banality and order prevails” (*Prose* 91). Later in the review, Moore remarks: “Imagination implies energy and imagination of the finest type involves an energy which results in order” (96). Indeed, much of Stevens’ poetry celebrates the imagination’s power to transform the meaningless indifference of nature into significant measures. The opening sections of “The Idea of Order at Key West” define the natural world as an empty force that offers neither comfort nor knowledge; it is “ever-hooded, tragic gestured” and filled with “meaningless plungings” (97). But Stevens also presents an alternative to this naturalistic vision when

the speaker hears the singer's song as an act of solipsistic creativity. The impressive force of the singer's imagination transmutes the "veritable ocean" into a meaningful shape:

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. (98)

This passage apparently celebrates the imagination's ascension over reality yet the speaker soon notes, "there was never a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made." The song has not replaced the world but it does inspire another act of ordering. Thus, the speaker's words of praise for the singer result from both his awareness of incommunicable reality and his rejection of the singer's supposed replacement of such reality, a rejection that nevertheless admires her imaginative strength.

In my third chapter, I introduce Moore's treatment of the imagination through the philosophy of Paul Veyne, a French archaeologist and historian. Though Veyne never commented on Moore's poetry directly, his writings question "moments of truth" and conclude that the foundation of truth lies in the "constitutive imagination," which is a cultural capacity as opposed to an individual one. Thus, Veyne accurately and relevantly reflects Moore's poetic project. For Moore, the imagination's constant freshening is a stay against ever-present doubt, an imaginative fighting back that marks an uneasy hope in a divinity beyond the self that must be remade again and again (Schulze, *Web* 159). Moore does not separate imagination from that which is sensed or factual because it is

precisely the imagined experience of fact and sense that constitutes reality. Moore's work from the 1930s embraces illusion most explicitly through its personification of animals; Moore creates amphibious descriptions of her animals, providing a vision of what an escape from the human world might look like. These poems do not attempt to solve moral problems; rather, they present a hope that exceeds the capacities of reality.

Chapter 1: “A Reason For Living”

Marianne Moore’s dear friend Elizabeth Bishop once referred to Moore as “the world’s greatest observer” (Hotelling 77). Indeed, acute observations and dense layers of description characterize much of Moore’s work, so much so that by the late 1910s, her poetry had become “impressive due to the sheer scale of its incomprehensibility” (Slatin 94). According to Kirsten Hotelling, Moore’s own complexities, including her distinct vocabulary, her incorporation of eclectic quotations, and her careful control over form, are symptomatic of a self-protective distancing, a “shield that [Moore] constantly hides behind” (75). But the perplexing exterior of Moore’s poetry does not shield the poet from the outside world; rather, it fosters the analysis, insight and self-reflection necessary to develop hope. A restrained but restless subject resides in Moore’s poems, a persona who uses the complexities of language to balance her pragmatic vision of the world with her skepticism of truth. Both “In the Days of Prismatic Color” (1919) and “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish” (1924) feature a figure who constantly repositions her gaze; from different angles, Moore examines the concept of truth, or “perpendicularity,” and proves the instability of such an ideal. Ultimately, Moore’s speaker reveals that the modern process of creation displaces edenic ideals and confirms that only complexity, not clarity or originality, can yield a vision of truth that inspires hope.

“In the Days of Prismatic Color” postulates the prior existence of an original truth but, although the poem manifests belief in and nostalgia for such clarity, it does not profess to etch out truth. In fact, the poem enlists the opposing terms of “sophistication” and “complexity” and becomes caught up in the very qualities it initially denounces. The

poem directly tackles the fall of language, contrasting problems with interpretation with the clarity of Adam's language; it recalls a time "when Adam / was alone; when there was no smoke and color was / fine" (41). Before the birth of civilization, "refinement" held no meaning; language and art, products of culture that mask truth with "smoke" and render it murky, did not exist. The desire to find stable, unitary signification in the "first" definition of an object provides the impulse to the opening of the poem as Moore imagines a time when "obliqueness" had only one meaning: an angle larger than ninety degrees, "a varia- / tion of the perpendicular, plain to see and / to account for." Adam, with his universal language, could not have conceived of "indirectness," the alternative sense of obliqueness. The fact that two definitions of "obliqueness" exist when Moore writes her poem illustrates an abandonment of truth and an entrance into post-Lapsarian times. Indeed, "it [obliqueness] is no / longer that [plain]." With the mention of "things into which much that is peculiar can be / read," language and light become interwoven; consequently, a dearth of accuracy in expression becomes "murky" or "dark" and points to a transferal from the "plain to see" to the present in which "nothing is plain."

"An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish" also explores perpendicularity. Looking at the bottle, the speaker remarks, "Here we have thirst / and patience, from the first, / and art, as in a wave held up for us to see / in all its essential perpendicularity" (*Poems* 83). In these opening lines, the bottle, the wave and art all embody the perpendicular. The bottle stands permanently upright, a functional and concrete representation of the stable, vertical plane. Contrarily, the wave's perpendicularity lasts only momentarily; a wave must have a vertical dimension to exist but only the precise balance of natural forces can create this dimension. For art to emit

the original prismatic colours of “the first,” it must similarly maintain equilibrium between contraries including “thirst” and “patience.” The speaker, then, conveys her own thirst for the perpendicular while admitting that a vision of art of “the first” kind requires great patience; in a modern world, it is only rarely and briefly “held up...to see.” Even then, the smoke from the refinements of civilization obscures any glimpse of originality.

Both the smoke and the mist of “In the Days of Prismatic Color” uniquely affect the perpendicular; the mist is what creates the prism, facilitating the release of colour, whereas smoke damages the “fine” colour by rendering it “no longer [plain]” (*Poems* 41). Moore’s use of “obliqueness” emphasizes this distinction as the word connotes both mist-like and smoke-like qualities: it describes the refracted angle of the light rays coming through the mist but, since the days of Adam, “obliqueness” has come to signify the smoke, taking on new meaning as the contrary of “plain to see.” Thus, in an inhabited world, obliqueness no longer implies colourful variation; obliqueness has become the norm. The speaker seems disheartened by this discovery, mourning the loss of the pure colours and, by implication, of truth: “nor did the blue red yellow band / of incandescence that was color keep its stripe.” Moore asserts that the perpendicularity of the prism has become irreversibly “murky,” portraying nostalgia for pre-linguistic times.

Striving to recapture spiritual and artistic clarity, the speaker initially shows disdain for complexity, clarity’s modern substitute: “carry / [complexity] to the point of murkiness / and nothing is plain” (41). Neither clarity nor originality can deflect complexity, which takes on a life of its own, fills with self-importance, and “commit[s] to darkness.” But, as Hotelling points out, Moore does not only protest “early civilization

art”; she pointedly uses the present tense when she says, “it *is* no / longer that,” and “sophistication *is* as it al- // ways has been” (83, Hotelling’s italics). Moore’s turn to the present shows that, like obliqueness, complexity can be misconstrued: “it also is one of//those things into which much that is peculiar can be / read” (41). After positing clarity as ideal and complexity as monstrous, the poem’s persona moves not only to a justification of complexity but also to a union of complexity with truth itself. Juxtaposed with the apparent evolution from clarity to complexity, “[p]rincipally throat... sophistication” materializes as what has existed all along. Sophistication appears as the result of complexity and clarity turns illusory, the “rest” of the monster that lies in its “lair,” an apt anagram for “liar” in Moore’s poem. Moore ultimately asserts that complexity is “not a crime”; more crucially, complexity produces the “dismal fallacy” that “all / truth must be dark.” This statement implies that complexity may not represent darkness after all; since a singular clarity does not exist in the modern world, the complexities of a fallen world must be welcomed.

Moore also reconsiders her praise of clarity in the second stanza of “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish.” She considers the qualities of a live fish compared to the fish-shaped bottle: “not brittle but / intense – the spectrum, that / spectacular and nimble animal the fish, / whose scales turn aside the sun’s sword by their polish” (83). The fish, not a naturally perpendicular animal, might seem to have lost its essence in the process of freezing into an art form. However, the bottle has not rendered the animal “brittle”; rather, the fish’s colours have intensified because of the glass medium. Angled mirrors compose the bottle’s surface; the polished scales of the fish break up the white light of the sun so that the spectrum becomes visible. From this

perspective, the bottle seems parallel to edenic, pre-linguistic clarity. But the fish also allies with the monster of complexity. Its scales recall the snake-like skin of the “monster...in its lair” and create their own darkness by “turn[ing] aside” the light. This light, the “sun’s sword” would otherwise pierce the “spectacular” animal but the “nimble” fish keeps the “intense” light at bay. Thus, Moore implies that complexity regulates art and language; it allows her own poetry to capture, reflect and refract light and it reconfigures a previously existing “sword,” an appropriate anagram for “words.”

The speaker of “In The Days of Prismatic Color” eventually realizes that a quest for clarity necessitates the artificial construction of “init- / ial great truths,” which oppose “sophistication.” Moore personifies sophistication; it becomes a serpentine monster, so huge and unwieldy that it can only move in segments: “Part of it was crawling, part of it / was about to crawl, the rest / was torpid in its lair” (41). But the monster also assumes human characteristics as it represents artistic language; the “gurgling” and “all the minutiae” of the creature’s exterior results in the discovery that, in its “short legged, fit- / ful advance” the snakeish fiend corresponds to the poem itself (Slatin 95). Moore’s complex creation bewilders with its web of minute details, advances in fitfully enjambed lines, and displays “the classic / multitude of feet,” a pun on poetic feet (*Poems* 41-42). Thus, both the monster and the poem parallel the advance of civilization; with the withdrawal from “the init- / ial great truths” comes language and the “formal” principles of art.

Of both the monster’s and the poem’s advance, Moore writes in her final stanza: “To what purpose! Truth is no Apollo/Belvedere, no formal thing” (42). The Classical statue of Apollo Belvedere, rediscovered during the Renaissance, depicts the god of the

sun and of poetry in an archer's pose after slaying the serpent Python. From the mid-18th through the 19th century, especially, neoclassicists considered it the greatest ancient sculpture and, for centuries, it epitomized ideals of aesthetic perfection for the western world (Slatin 95). But, for the speaker, the statue signifies the smoky conventions of art that prevent spiritual vision. Though he stands victorious over a victim that symbolizes the monster complexity, the formally sculpted and chiseled Apollo does not represent a return to truth. The god and the snake exist together, eternally woven and captured in a permanent art form, enhancing the intransience of complexity.

Moore's speaker, then, has drastically shifted her tone from nostalgia for Adamic originality towards disdain for such a rigid, unrealistic notion of truth. Cristanne Miller suggests that Moore's fascination with physics' then recently popularized quantum theory helps explain Moore's shifting vision, her varied perspective: "According to quantum theory, an object manifests itself differently according to the context of the experiment in which it is seen," so that for Moore redefining "clarity...dovetails with redefining authority, both positive values for Moore but only to the extent that clarity does not entail transparency and authority does not rest on inflexible notions of identity and truth" (Miller 47). Moore ultimately rejects her initial portrayal of clarity precisely because it embodied transparency; everything was "plain." But just as Moore turns to embrace complexity, she warns against its extreme. In the effort to institute authority, complexity can "move[] all a- / bout as if to bewilder us with the dismal fallacy that... / all / truth must be dark" (Moore 41). In the murky darkness to which extreme complexity commits itself, it also hides and cannot see itself for the "pestilence that it is" (Slatin 95).

Thus, the search for clarity necessitates the artificial construction of “init- / ial great truths.” This assertion opposes the “great truths” of Genesis that Moore once lauded but she realizes that, like the Apollo Belvedere, truth must be rediscovered (Slatin 95). Truth is neither any “formal thing” nor any informal or original vision. Moore suggests that truth most closely associates with the linguistic characteristics of negation, contradiction and modification, distinct contrasts to the poem’s initial portrayal of truth. The poem mimics the constructed nature of truth in the shape of Moore’s stanza as she places the first part of the word “initial” at the closure of a line; the word signifies beginning but its end-position highlights the dubiousness of its conventional meaning. Moore then has to force the latter half of the word against its own volition back to the beginning of the following line. This strained and artificial treatment of the great truths shows that, in reality, neither clarity nor the days of “fine” prismatic color ever existed. To claim otherwise is to naively believe truth when it says, “I shall be there when the wave has gone by” (42).

Reviewing the first stanza of the poem in light of the speaker’s changed perspective shows that the “fineness” of the days of prismatic colour cannot be recognizable as such “with nothing to modify”; in fact, the poem constantly modifies its vision of “fineness” through the series of negative qualifications with which it expresses that fineness. Fineness is neither “the days of Adam and Eve,” nor “early civilization art,” nor any alteration to “originality.” Thus, Moore’s method of description contests the possibility of the pure, unrefined “days of prismatic color” just as she writes those days into the poem. Additionally, the “short-legged, fit-/ful advance, the gurgling and all the minutiae” of the poem reflects the halting pace of the first stanza’s numerous adjustments.

Adamic clarity essentially becomes the double of extreme complexity: dark, oblique and illusory. Ironically, what seemed “plain” and up-front becomes the epitome of murkiness.

At the end of “In the Days of Prismatic Color,” Moore remains at the “antipodes from the initial great truths” (Slatin 103). As a poet, she is guilty of introducing a “pestilent” complexity into existence; however, the poem also justifies the complexity of Moore’s work by distinguishing between an undesirable obliqueness that obscures the truth and a necessary obliqueness that threatens familiar misconceptions of ideals such as truth. Through “implication,” Moore shows that, to be “not a crime,” complexity must maintain the same precarious balance that gives perpendicularity to both art and to a wave: it must harbour “much that is peculiar,” including much of Moore’s verse (Hotelling 80), while simultaneously avoiding “murkiness,” “insistence,” and the fallacy that “truth must be dark.”

The wave of complexity, then, ironically embodies the kind of perpendicularity for which the speaker searches; it yields clarity through “patience” and “thirst.” Moore portrays complexity as a challenge, a burden for the poet to confront. Complexity becomes “a crime,” though, when it shuts out comprehensibility, when it attempts to “bewilder” and when it makes unfounded claims about truth, darkness and originality. Though murkiness could not exist in the Adamic days of “prismatic color,” neither could the difference that gives rise to complexity. Moore proves that the risk of complexity outweighs naïve belief in truth but she does not advocate for abandoning truth altogether. Instead, she allows truth the last declaration of the poem: “I shall be there when the

wave has gone by” (42). In so doing, she calls for a trust not in an empirical or conceptual truth but in one that embraces a conscientious, hopeful existence.

In “The Steeple-Jack,” Moore uncovers hope that is based on models of insulation and division and on suppositions of inherent advancement. Instead, by spurning such a grand and self-indulgent hope, the poem gives precedence to vision and observation within a tumultuous environment of concealment, pretext and vagueness; it signposts a hope that develops through careful surveillance. The poem’s first portrayal of the town merges quaint images of seaside life with intimations of the town’s volatility and its hazards:

Dürer would have seen a reason for living
 in a town like this, with eight stranded whales
 to look at; with the sweet sea air coming into your house
 on a fine day, from water etched
 with waves as formal as the scales
 on a fish. (*Poems* 5)

Thus, Moore’s poem opens like a tourist catalogue that depicts a picture-perfect town seeming systematic, well-aspected and aesthetically organized. A visitor’s paradise, the town supplies beautiful scenery: on a “fine day,” one can sniff the “sweet sea air” and watch the pleasing “water/etched with waves.” Standard symbols of societal regulation, including a lighthouse, “the town clock,” “a post-office in a / store,” a church and a school, also play a role in the serene, comforting vista. However, the poem equally opposes such order through its underlying peril and inhospitality. The “stranded whales” indicate forthcoming death and the seagulls that fly “one by one in two’s and three’s” provide a sense of purposelessness and chaos mingled with insinuations of misplaced devotions. As John Slatin adds, the “whirlwind fife-and-drum of the storm” that later

“bends the salt / marsh grass” and “disturbs stars in the sky and the / star on the steeple” suggests war and an associated debilitation of traditional forms of hope (186).

“The Steeple-Jack” resists emblematic tropes that purport language to be an obvious vehicle for bringing a locale into consciousness by use of words. The beginning of the poem does not assert that Dürer would have seen a reason for living in *this* particular town, but merely for living in a town “like this.” Moore conceives of hope as having to overcome despair, her very strong definition of “unhope,” as is implied by the idea that there might not be “a reason for living,” that the idea of death may have enticed Dürer. Moore implies that what can be interpreted as exact and definite is in fact only theoretical. The poem identifies numerical exactitude in the eight whales and the twenty-five pound lobster but contrasts such accuracy with the conditionals of “might,” “could,” “would,” and “as if.” Moore upsets the concept of attained reality, a moment in time and space, with uncertainty about whether the climate is cloudless or tempestuous, whether it is daytime or nighttime: fog quickly masks the “fine” weather and, though Moore describes the scene as if in daylight, the storm “disturbs stars in the sky” (*Poems* 5).

Conscientious vision, which transcends basic sight, is a dominant theme in the poem since Moore presents the town’s necessity for hope as both plainly evident and astonishingly ignored. The poem’s opening line asserts the need for Moore’s kind of faith in hope, a motive to survive, but the enjambment with the second line allows this faith to be overlooked in the apparently reflective appreciation of small-town life. Concurrently, the first lines suggest that observation is a primary theme in and intention of the poem: Dürer may have “seen” a reason for living in a town featuring whales “to look at.” The remainder of the poem maintains this prominence of sight: one can “see a

twenty-five / pound lobster” and “it is a privilege to see so / much confusion” (5). The town’s self-perception, though, continues to be distorted; the town considers itself an idyllic example of American seaside life. Subsequent imagery indicates that the townspeople interpret their surroundings as a model of Eden, an environment cleansed of the serpents, rats, and ambitions that could render it a physically dangerous location. The town’s plentiful, pseudo-tropical flora may conjure up a classical vision of Eden and the statement that “the climate // is not right for... / jack-fruit trees; or for exotic serpents” (6) liberates the town of any worry of temptation followed by a fall. “There is nothing that / ambition can buy or take away” for the townsfolk to be concerned about. However, it is ironically the town’s idea of itself as an edenic paradise, “a fit haven,” that allows it to neglect the peril of both its shortsightedness and its incapability to read and decipher the “Danger” signs (Kriner 44).

Furthermore, the poem describes a variety of hope other than the one inherent to a utopian vision of Eden: hope constructed as a progression with directional advance. Moore’s language describes progress as artificial, contrived and especially deceptive. The poem contains images of chronological and spatial development in the chiming clock and the sailing ships, as well as in the ominous character of C.J. Poole. In every example, the poem doubts the opportunity for either “black and white” (7) knowledge or accomplishment of improvement. The appearance of the clock, with its straight progression, is overshadowed by the confusion of the storm and the meandering flight of the seagulls, moving “one by one in two’s and three’s” (5), which do not even need to move their wings in order to ascend evenly. The tone of the poem bestows exemplary status neither on the clock nor on the lighthouse, a traditional emblem of directionality

and security; both buildings appear within the text as structures branded with usual societal purposes. However, the poem questions their functional status as the reliable and fixed measure of direction and advancement through the addition of the haphazard movement and apparently natural rising of the birds. Evidently, the actual “reason for living / in a town like this” is more dependent on seeing the dynamic signs and numerous suggestions of the imagery they offer than in claiming the harmonious security or the definite direction of the townspeople.

The town believes itself to be an ethical model, the type of locale where even the grandiose church columns have whitewash over them so as to be “made / modester” (7), a claim that ironically amounts to a haughty show of false modesty. This gesture defines the act of “not seeing”: it conceals the fact that the proclamation of modesty effaces any modesty that existed in the original assertion. Furthermore, Moore obscures the church’s stance, intimating that the coating on the columns disguises them and turns them partly artificial. But the poem also underlines the extent to which the church’s veneer allows it to become a refuge and a dwelling place for a gamut of half true and half false victims. The church may be pure white in colour but its “pitch” assumes corruption; the steeple rises “not true” in an elemental sense that necessitates “true” sight to observe. Regardless, the church offers a “fit haven” for the warranted: “waifs, children, animals”; it even supplies an asylum to “prisoners” (Kriner 46).

The church also displays a “front,” hiding the intentions of those who employ faithfulness and manners as cunning shields to shirk their responsibilities to society, such as the “presidents” who opportunistically and modestly turn a blind eye to “sin-driven // senators.” The use of the term “haven,” in its imitative correlation to “heaven,” shows

that the town views itself as a safe place of respite. Thus, Moore suggests that successful and valuable hope necessitates a wider scope than a straightforward, ideal-focused hope, the “gilded star” kind of hope, might provide. In “The Steeple-Jack,” Moore does not bestow total knowledge or exemplary status on any construction; even the “pointed star, which on a steeple/stands for hope” becomes biting tentative after the signs of danger that the poem holds, all the while declaring that no danger exists.

Poole could constitute “part of a novel” because he, as do both a spider and a storyteller, spins his yarn. But the character also allies with narrative language via his link both to knowledge, signaled by his name written in “black and white,” and to advancement, personified by his climb up the steeple. Moore enrobes Poole in scarlet fabric and comments on his “gilding the solid- / pointed star”: Poole makes solidity represent hope rather than making uncertainty represent hope. In truth, therefore, the steeple-jack misleads the townspeople both by securing the steeple and by providing marginal, inconsequential warnings about danger in the town, ones which the citizens will interpret as temporary threats, which will only strengthen the steeple. Poole releases his thread as if to knit a tale of the town’s hope for strength and ceaselessness maintaining equilibrium with the ambitions and goals that require the hope of a purged location or a mobile progression. In the context of the poem, however, these goals, like the spire, prove “not true” (6). By depicting the quest both for solidity, signaled by utopia, and for exactitude, signaled by Poole’s false gilding of a star on a “not true” spire, the poem destabilizes those kinds of hope.

According to Charles Berger, Moore’s poetry counters ideologies of hero-worship, not by surrendering the concept of the hero but by subjecting such a concept to

the rigour of poetic skepticism. Moore asserts “the necessity of cautious belief” while demanding that belief does not become exclusive, does not ground itself on obsolete metaphors and does not inhibit critique (151). Indeed, “[t]he college student / named Ambrose” takes on the role of the hero in “The Steeple-Jack” and he does so specifically through “cautious belief.” In the context of both the poem and of Ambrose’s outlook, the real hope of the town becomes the occasion for noticing complexity over idyllic and trivial seaside pictures. When much lurks beyond the language of blind and unrealistic hopes of a people, it becomes “a privilege” to be able to decipher chaos, tempest, peril and murkiness in their confusion. Moore’s fog is multifaceted: it turns into an image of required vagueness as much as it does murkiness. The fog’s transference of the scene into a tropical paradise lets the town see itself as a haven, if only briefly, but the passage’s tone also shows the complexities of the fog’s envelopment:

Disguised by what
might seem the opposite, the sea-
side flowers and

trees are favored by the fog so that you have
the tropics at first hand (5).

The fog itself may benefit the plants in that it makes them appear fruitful and healthy; however, the line break also signals the ambiguity of the sea, which becomes a place of varied signals and complication (Kriner 47). The poem’s opening account of the sea in its many colours, a place where “the purple of the peacock’s neck is / paled to the greenish azure as Dürer changed / the pine green of the Tyrol to peacock blue,” implies that the sea becomes the driving force behind the confusion of the landscape before regressing into the line that withdraws from the sea back to the shore. That same

tumultuous sea, of course, also marooned the whales and left them dying on the beach at the beginning of the poem.

Using the figure of Ambrose, Moore illustrates what Wallace Stevens, in reviewing *Selected Poems*, coined “hybridiz[ing]...by association” (qtd. in Berger 155). Ambrose embodies hybridity; on one hand, Moore separates him from the unreflective town and makes him an alien “with his not-native books and hat” (*Poems* 6). Like the beached mammals and the imported tropical blossoms, Ambrose lies outside his element, gazing at the sea from the limits of the village. But, although a stranger, Ambrose paradoxically feels “at home” and “knows by heart” the intricacies of the town. Ambrose thus personifies an interweaving of the native and the foreign; he reflects “confusion,” a term Moore praises: “it is a privilege to see so / much confusion” (Berger 156).

Indeed, Moore views hybridity as a heroic quality, one which arouses hope by affording a cure for “an elegance of... / bravado” (6). The fact that Ambrose tends towards “elegance” of which “the source is not bravado” proves that *his* aesthetics do not stem from misunderstanding the inconsistent signs: those promoting services and those cautioning of danger. Ambrose possesses the ability for rigorous observation but he furthermore acknowledges illusion and untruth; he observes the boats “white and rigid *as if* in / a groove” (emphasis added). Moore allies Ambrose with the fourth century Bishop of Milan, who served as the saint of hymnology; thus, Ambrose aptly defines the “pitch” of the church spire as “not true” (Slatin 186). Moore suggests both that he can pick out facts among façades and that he is not as removed from the village as positioning him on the hilltop might imply; instead, Ambrose appreciates the twistedness of the spire that diverges from the “white and rigid” boats. Ultimately, he unveils the false fixity of both

the home and the church, two organizations that strive to provide security but that truthfully have unstable foundations.

Ambrose eagerly accepts his position of distinctive distance as it allows him to notice the ironies and the perils that would elude a citizen of the town. Berger explains that “elegance” and “college” come from the same Latin root: *legere*, to choose (155). Ambrose chooses to read “not-native books,” which play a role in his own sentiments of otherness, while simultaneously choosing to stay in and observe this town, in which he feels “at home.” An element of the precarious scene, Ambrose equally acknowledges the difficulties inherent to progress and to lofty goals. His observation of other countries, other territories and other books reflects his own systematic observation and illustrates his facility for breaking down binaries. His scrupulousness adds to his uncovering of the intricate friction between the ships of progress and “sugar-bowl shaped summer-house” of antiquity, seeing the two compulsions.

The final stanza, which confidently claims, “It could not be dangerous to be living / in a town like this” (7), echoes the opening line, which sought a “reason for living” in the harmony of the town. The danger presented by the town manifests as one of not seeing adequately, of not peering beyond the gilding or paint or weather. The town only sees in black and white but it would behoove it to read more thoroughly; the danger, like the sign, can be “red,” a pun on “read.” Therefore, “The Steeple-Jack” distrusts the hope represented by the star on the “not true” steeple, providing scrupulous observation as a limited solution (Kriner 48).

“The Hero,” a companion piece to “The Steeple-Jack,” also discusses the topic of hope, discovering, “hope not being hope / until all ground for hope has / vanished” (8-9).

Motifs and sketches of the “not-native” flourish in this poem as Moore removes the hero from a natural kinship with nation and people. “The Hero” begins with a statement of where “we,” the unheroic ones, like to travel: “Where there is a personal liking we go.” But “liking” does not constitute part of the hero’s framework; he travels instead in the dominion of the invisible, the unknowable. Moore departs from Ambrose’s honoured vantage in “The Steeple-Jack” and travels down into a prohibited but indeterminate wasteland where “love won’t grow,” “where the ground is sour,” and where that which cannot be named or fully seen makes “the skin creep[.]” “[O]ne does not wish / to go” to this place; it does not appeal to heroes like Ambrose since it denies travelers the vision of what lies immediately in front of them. Again, Moore implies that to achieve hope in the form of spiritual vision, the hero must embody complexity; he must both see beyond the self and have a kind of sightlessness to the conventional “sights”:

...He’s not out
 seeing a sight but the rock
 crystal thing to see – the startling El Greco
 brimming with inner light. (9)

The poem explores different forms of blindness: one hero in the poem, Jacob, is literally blind whereas the “fearless sightseeing hobo,” keenly searching for George Washington’s grave, is ignorant of what the Negro guide, “not seeing her,” does see. The hero recognizes fear because of his “reverence for mystery,” because he *can* see beyond the sights. Other kinds of blindness are required: the hero sees hope when ground for it has vanished and looks “upon a fellow creature’s error with the / feelings of a mother – a / woman or a cat.” Even the reader learns to see beyond George Washington, a conventional hero, to the Negro “standing like the shadow / of the willow.”

This twentieth-century man, who serves as a tour guide to the sightseers, answers, without being asked, the “hobo’s” battery of questions to her mute male companion. Costumed, but nonetheless authentic, the Negro does “not see[] her” because he is intent on the “rock crystal.” The contents of the crystal remain a mystery, one reminiscent of Emerson’s declaration that “imagination is a very high form of seeing” (Berger 158). The poem implies that such an imagination involves “let[ting] go” of the political; as Berger puts it, Cincinnatus or Washington leaving the capital to return to the plow does not equal a dressed-up descendant of slaves accepting his role in “an updated minstrel show.” Like Moses, this descendant of former slaves “would not be grandson” to a great patriarch who has enslaved his people; rather the hero finds his “natural meat” beyond the contingencies of his daily situation. As he looks without resentment towards the mansion of a former slave-owning president who he still serves and past woman’s questions, he embodies the El Greco “brimming with inner light.” His clear sight includes recognition of ethical responsibility, an abandonment of the unnecessary and a trace of hope.

Moore’s 1950 statement on “Religion and the Intellectuals” in the *Partisan Review* suggests a complicated relationship between hope and faith:

That belief in God is not easy, is seemingly one of God’s injustices; and self-evidently, imposed piety results in the opposite. Coercion and religious complacency are serious enemies of religion – whereas persecution invariably favors spiritual conviction. But this is certain, any substituting of self for deity is a forlorn hope. (*Prose* 678)

Moore avoids categorizing, confirming or converting; she uses a happy tone to assert that belief in God is not easy. She implies that God is fair because he makes faith in himself challenging, since the intricacies, the ordeal of it, produces greater godliness than would systems that would simply demand or attempt to organize faith. Moore’s quote implies that religion is generated from the same constructions as hope: struggle and liberty, free

from egoism. Moore suggests that true hope would entail something opposite to the replacement of self with God, either a denial to meld the two or a preference to distinguish between self and deity (Kriner 52). “The Steeple-Jack” illustrates the fact that hope requires an attentive sort of seeing, one opposing the lofty, Edenic self-perception of the sleepy town portrayed in the poem. Moore’s hope necessitates discernment, not of flawlessness or growth but of vagueness and impenetrability. Faith, like hope, entails toilsome precision but further augments it with the values of autonomy and diversity.

The hope in Moore’s work thus corresponds to a sort of faith, not the type denoted by the steeple but one that is alive on the town’s slopes, reading and observing both the sailboats and the peril of the town. As Moore shows, faith and belief both necessitate resolve in challenging situations, an achievement that relies on putting the self second to the other. This resolute gaze upon the other, the division between human and God, makes up hope. Moreover, clearly seeing the other permits steady action towards the future. Moore’s poems speak to time with intricacy, attempting to shuffle among opposing and insufficient epistemologies; she grapples with forward movement, boredom and impractical goals to evade time in the present. As well, her desire to eschew self-centeredness and pensiveness directs her far from an exclusive concern with empirically observing the present. Finally, Moore handles the future delicately, linking it to the susceptibility and uncertainty of the other instead of to the “groove” (*Poems* 7) of technological or community advancement. Viewing the other as indefinite capacity for development instead of as existing entity keeps the poetic observations away from objectification of the other. Viewing the other as an entity to which she must react is for Moore a compulsory responsibility, one requiring “gusto” (*Prose* 420).

Chapter 2: “Precision and Indirection”

In July of 1921, Moore began publishing free verse poems, among the first of which included “A Graveyard,” which she later retitled “A Grave” (Slatin 7). The poem provides an initial example of Moore’s attempt to alleviate the strain between perception and reality; it acts out, through its shifting perspective, the scattering of the human resolve and mind caused by musings about both natural occurrences and death. “A Grave” begins with a firm address to a man whose vision of the ocean takes a focal, one-sided stance:

Man looking into the sea,
 taking the view from those who have as much right to 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. (*Poems* 49)

Regardless of the speaker’s initially dogmatic tone, the rest of the poem strives to prove the central declaration that “you cannot stand in the middle of this”; not only does the poet eventually abandon the “you”, but the speaker’s own assertions ironically collapse. Moore speaks to the “you” and to the man’s suggested defiance only once more as the speaker gleans confirmation of the sea’s apathy toward and autonomy from humans:

the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look.
 There are others besides you who have worn that look -
 whose expression is no longer a protest; the fish no longer investigate
them
 for their bones have not lasted:
 men lower nets, unconscious of the fact that they are desecrating a grave,
 and row quickly away – the blades of the oars
 moving together like the feet of water-spiders as if there were no such
thing as death. (49)

The “rapacious look” of the sea soon fades to unresponsiveness as the drowned men fragment, disregarded even by the fish. Yet while Moore portrays the sea as providing

their limitations by the poem's closure, the final tone is not one of hopelessness; rather, Moore ends her poem with sober acquiescence, sustained musing and thoughtful hope.

The persona in "A Grave" does not lose hope over the realization that the sea is a grave and an accumulator; he does not recoil from the fact that bones do not endure and that even the poet's figure of speech can result in nothing. The speaker shows the ability to face that knowledge with a sarcasm that overshadows the initial drive to enlighten and reproach the haughty "[m]an looking into the sea." Outfitted with a sharp eye for the meeting point of language, which sits within human control, and soul, which sits outside of it, Moore employs the methods of appropriate account and shifting perspective to perform, reverentially, the pleasure and indifference that the human mind can realize by "looking into" extremely depersonalizing realities. Therefore, the metaphor that allows the poet to depict fir trees "each with an emerald turkey-foot at the top" can occupy the same place as the hanging third-person point of view that broods over the fate of human "things" released into the ocean. Similarly, the poem's extreme shattering of human subjectivity coexists with the poet's individual presence in the poem's understated internal rhymes, metaphors and reversals. Moore's acknowledgement of man's limitation does not efface but rather relies upon the resolve of personal observation.

"A Grave" represents an early instance of Moore's efforts to reconcile perception and reality while maintaining an idiosyncratic presence (Tramontana 121). As Costello's reading of the poem implies, "Moore uses an image to explore...a subject...The experience of the poem is constant revision and ambiguity, suggesting that human observation is never definitive" (56-57). More persuasively, Taffy Martin observes: "Moore has placed humans in the uncomfortable position of facing not only the

insufficiency and the error of their perceptions, but their inability – because of the scene’s very attraction – to abandon hope in it” (90). These readings both propose a latent ambiguity upon which Moore expands in her poems published in close proximity to “A Grave” and foreshadow Moore’s subsequent delight in chaos, danger and multiplicity. Other poems from *Observations* (1924) go further in decentering the first-person speaker to illustrate the tension between subjective and objective values. These poems, characterized by a greater use of accurate description, lengthy lists, multiple voices and conflicting perspectives, move even more radically away from a speaking self as syntactically or meditatively central.

Many critics have noted that Moore had a naturalist’s eye for her environment but she also displayed a keen interest in “show[ing] nature’s sight of us” (New 108). For Moore, a scrupulous vision of the non-human reveals itself formally in poetry. The friction between careful vision on one hand and unspeakable otherness on the other hand leads to the discord among precision and indirection in Moore’s employment of quotations, her many modifiers and her inventive stanza forms. “An Octopus” (1924), which chooses Mount Rainier as its focus, tests the human gaze; the poem debases human knowledge and readjusts the poet’s interaction with the world. The citations and textual fragments in this work both summon authority to develop a feeling of exact expression and obscure the speech of her persona by casting uncertainty onto such an imposing perspective. As Elizabeth Gregory has noted, the use of the quotation is Moore’s “reevaluating secondariness,” which challenges the value of originality by using borrowed materials, all the while making the poem new in the very practice of using quotations over more traditional allusions (*Quotation* 130). The heightened potential

provided by the pre-written text, particularly in “An Octopus,” which strives for “Neatness of finish,” results in a mood of paralyzing sublimity that rivals unease.

“An Octopus” chases an ethics of thorough gathering of observations and controlled, cautious recitation as a vehicle for conveying the complexity and overawing transcendence of the mountain. The lengthy poem, which likens Mount Rainier to both an octopus and to the practice of writing, employs a vast array of quotations: those from the 1922 *National Parks Portfolio*, dialogue overheard at the circus, an article about an octopus, a reference book on the Canadian Rockies, and books on philosophy written from a religious angle. The volume of quoted material from scientific sources has inspired Laurence Stapleton to label the poem a “documentary in verse” (qtd. in Kriner 55). However, the utter scope of Moore’s sources also implies that there are a number of subjects at play and a variety of gazes that create reflections on the mountain. The quotations are shards of text that weigh on the mountain, angles that repeatedly redirect the reader’s concentration and which disrupt and redirect the pattern of the sentences that structure the poem’s conversational advancement. The poem uses strings of modifiers that continually transfer meanings to develop a feeling of fragile exactitude as potential, and to create a sense of movement toward an objective always implicitly future or far off, possibly even sublime.

“An Octopus” opens with an extensive and painstaking account of the mountain’s glacier, its guests, and its various residents. The initial lines of the poem quickly point out both the feeling of instability and the driven progress that the entire poem stresses as growing out of a detailed assembly of observations.

An Octopus

of ice. Deceptively reserved and flat,
 it lies “in grandeur and in mass”
 beneath a sea of shifting snow-dunes;
 dots of cyclamen-red and maroon in its clearly defined pseudo-podia
 made of glass that will bend – a much needed invention –
 comprising twenty-eight ice-fields from fifty to five hundred feet thick,
 of unimagined delicacy. (*Poems* 71)

By doubling the title as the opening line of the poem, Moore creates bewilderment as the title establishes beliefs about the poem’s subject only to have those beliefs splintered by the following portrayal of the mountain. Additionally, the opening vision of Mount Rainier collapses the gap between binaries and reveals the linguistic friction that underscores the whole poem; the mountain looks “deceptive[,]” “unimaginable,” “misleading,” yet also “clear[.]” The “octopus” conveys both reluctance and “grandeur” and possesses “unimagined delicacy” despite “pseudo-podia” “from fifty to five hundred / feet thick” which can destroy prey with “crushing rigor.” Moore portrays Mount Rainier as both alive and inert, at once a physical object and an independent, thinking subject.

Contrary to the distant, single peak, which may symbolize a kind of divine truth, Moore creates her peak from “twenty-eight ice fields” that stay “intact when...cut.” Moreover, the paramount inner “peak” is not present: “an explosion blew it off.” As in “In the Days of Prismatic Color,” Moore’s divine truth is decentered because it consists of “the classic / multitude of feet” (Leavell 181). The poem’s second line, “it lies,” enhances the “deceptive” nature of the octopus. The quotation marks that ensue do not elucidate the subject; rather, they create irony and point to secondary sources. The “grandeur” and “mass” of the octopus of ice, still indefinable as a mountain glacier, is

really “flat,” “hidden,” and always shifting. The following claim that the pseudo-podia are “clearly defined” then becomes totally unbelievable when Moore paradoxically portrays them as “glass that will bend.” The octopus of ice, present as a shifting glacier in nature, has sublime status bestowed upon it as it is rendered both unidentifiable and “unimagined.” Moore describes the glacier precisely and yet, from the boundaries of the picture, it appears that the reproduction of explanatory angles discredits each unique fact that strives to capture the mountain completely. When Moore provides a fact, the ensuing text changes the primary material so dramatically that the truthfulness of the original claim becomes questionable as she changes her own angle. The poem’s focus on the mountain glacier therefore starts to exude a tone of nervousness of definition, a sort of conscientious panic over a natural object that is constantly shifting and changing.

Moore makes no attempt at realism, which causes Vicki Graham to criticize the poet for partly failing to meet “our need for accuracy [that] demands...[the poem] be written as though it *could* take the place of the mountain” (Graham’s italics). Graham insists that “the most important goal of the poetry of nature...[is] to teach us to attend to what we perceive and to trust the words we use to articulate our perceptions” (182). But Moore disagrees with this view of poetry; she does not disdain realism because of its inattentiveness to nature but rather because of the anthropocentrism that realism promotes. For Moore, the attempt to portray nature “realistically” through language equals the attempt both to usurp and assimilate nature. Moore’s skepticism towards language neither prevents her from appreciating nature’s beauty nor signals a belief that there can be no bridge between language and the natural world. Moore interrogates realist aesthetics of nature that “validate the epistemic centrality and sufficiency of the

poetic subject” (Cull 7) and, though bound by her own subjectivity, she strives to overcome such aesthetics.

The glacier challenges the drives of both the climber and the reader toward total comprehension and advancement. Actually, the poem considers its reader as the mountain considers its climber who “completing a circle...ha[s] been deceived into thinking [she has] progressed” (71). The larches’ needles, which the guidebook claims are “hung to filter, not to intercept the sunlight,” emerge as “tightly wattled spruce-twigs” clustered together to keep warm. The secure fastening of the twigs parallels the restraint of lodes of gold and silver that encircle the lake. The text’s indirectness misleads the reader into thinking that she has advanced in the poem; however, the narrative constricts her, effecting detail, but providing a heightened sense of both the vagueness of the mountain itself and the unachievability of clarity for the reader (Kriner 57).

Moore opens the human characters in her poem up to critique as a result of their sightlessness toward the otherness of the glacier and its residents. The poem’s exploration of the mountain’s fauna mixes reverence for the grandeur and exactitude of their bodies and movements with a mood of skepticism about the harm of the human eye directed toward the animals. The poem switches between amassing varied descriptions of animals and offering an unreliable, one-sided, knowing gaze on them. Moore conveys the goat as “farther up, in stag-at-bay position / as a scintillating fragment of these terrible stalagmites,” looking at a waterfall frozen in time (72). The halting accuracy of the portrayal of his exterior in white on white provides confidence in the description but the goat’s eye remains “fixed” and his horns are “engraved,” facts which undermine the goat’s definiteness by displaying him as if inside a painting; his form invokes the wild

captured on canvas (Costello 84). Like the mountain itself, the goat dissolves the boundaries between binaries. Transfigured by the sun and snow, the goat both attracts the human eye with its visionary brightness and defies it with its blinding impenetrability. Additionally, the creature highlights the collapse of difference through its fusion of all four elemental phases, earth, air, fire and water: it appears consecutively as a “stalagmite,” “petrified water vapor,” and an “acetylene” torch (Cull 9).

Human perspective is disrupted by the assertion that the goat is a “special antelope / acclimated to ‘grottoes from which issue penetrating draughts / which make you wonder why you came’” (72). As Costello has pointed out, the tourist’s gaze on the “Goat’s Mirror” turns her attention back onto herself, a strategy that the poem repeatedly employs (85). The gusts of wind “make you wonder why you came”; the bejeweled forest materializes as if “whole quarries” that “had been dynamited” brought it into being. The prose here implies that a vision of the wild requires contemplation from the perspective of the human and for the use of the human. The wind and forces of nature must either defend or query humans’ inherent gravitation towards natural scenes. Regardless of whether nature serves the “business men who require for recreation / three hundred and sixty-five holidays in the year,” or the wood for “bows, arrows, oars, and paddles” (*Poems* 74-75), “An Octopus” describes a natural vista with human perspective and expenditure coursing through it. But nature also resists by vanishing from human gaze: the goat, while morphing into the stalagmites, fades into the whiteness of the backdrop and is rendered invisible through the very act of being depicted for the reader. Similarly, the antelope, whose shoulders are bleached by the sun, melts into “cliffs the color of clouds, of petrified white vapor” (72).

As the speaker grows ever more dubious of abstract margins that promote humanity into a superior rank over other species, “An Octopus” becomes “an attempt to theorize a new, less imperialistic model of interaction amongst all species” (Cull 12). With the knowledge that it is not “well enough to treat things as indifferent” or to “work them over,” Moore launches an evaluation of human objectives, blatantly expressing the need to reassess human knowledge, language and subjectivity (Kriner 59). The linguistics of progress, alluded to by the “mountain guide evolving from the trapper,” delicately permeates the prose of advertisement and develops into a separate critique of evolution akin to that in “The Steeple-Jack.” The notion of large-scale tourism within the natural world is subject to biting appraisal through the description of the eagles: “‘They make a nice appearance, don’t they’ / happy seeing nothing?” (*Poems* 73). The tourists come up with ways to use nature to their own devices and to recognize its happy appearances but in fact, they observe little, only “alive to the advantage of invigorating pleasures” (75). The tourists realize that they can neither approach the mountain nor portray it and, ultimately, they damn the place “for its sacrosanct remoteness,” for its sober, defensive and prohibitive face “planed by ice and polished by the wind” (76).

Remarking on parallels between “An Octopus” and Shelley’s “Mont Blanc,” Robin Schulze argues that Moore adheres to Shelley’s praise of the human imagination. Schulze claims: “the mountain without the imagination is ‘nothing’ since only the mind can assign value and transform the mountain into something more than an indifferent and destructive waste of confusion” (*Web* 60). But Moore does not judge the mountain so severely; she reveres the natural power of the mountain and recognizes in it the magnificence she cannot express. Thus, metaphor extends beyond mere naming; it also

ritualizes the ways in which humans translate the world and draws attention to that process. Moore wishes for attentiveness, a state of being attentive to but not domineering over the environment, as opposed to the Romantics, who project their own aspirations onto nature. To be inspired, the Romantic poet needs to be spoken *to* so that experience translates flawlessly into language. Moore roots her poetic attention in discernment and in esteeming the wilderness as “other,” as separate from the sphere of human knowledge. She distorts human categories, extends language and questions the human compulsion to order the world. Furthermore, the persona in “An Octopus” has shunned the Romantic goal of placing nature at the center of the imagination in favour of the quest to humble human knowledge. To some extent, the poem mirrors this goal by disdaining pride; the speaker scorns Western tourists for the “toys” they have modified by their “intelligence,” or lack thereof. While the forest is “essentially humane” (75), the tourists manipulate the woods by use of their “eagle-traps” and “snow-shoes” (74), which are included in the overtly banned “guns, nets, seines, traps and explosives.”

Mount Rainier is also remote from Homer’s Olympus, which is never “swept by the winds nor touched by snow...white clarity envelops it and the gods there taste of a happiness which lasts as long as their eternal lives” (qtd in Leavell 182). By contrast, Moore’s mountain features “winds that ‘tear the snow to bits / and hurl it like a sandblast’” as well as lightning storms, torrential rain and violent avalanches. The poem’s abrupt redirection towards an address of Greek culture and characteristics, including an attention to finish, evenness, precision and insistence, thus presents an alternative method of describing the mountain’s otherness as well as of connecting the mountain to writing via Henry James. When up against the “complexity” of the

mountain, the Greeks do not attempt to colonize nature physically; they do not take “advantage of invigorating pleasure” (75). Rather, they withdraw into the allegedly safe borders of the mind: “The Greeks liked smoothness, distrusting what was back / of what could not clearly be seen, / resolving with benevolent conclusiveness, / ‘complexities which still will be complexities / as long as the world lasts.’”

Moore may appreciate the Greeks’ “benevolence” and their “emotional sensitiv[ity]” but she also displays her uncertainty about their dependence upon logic and human knowledge. Trusting the mind to be “so noble” and “so fair,” the Greeks naively parade their “happiness” about their detachment from “complexity.” However, Moore reveals this happiness to be “clumsy,” a fantasy and an meaningless concept: “an accident or a quality / ...an act, a disposition or a habit, / or a habit infused... / or something distinct from a habit, a power.” This roundabout effort to categorize “happiness” proves that the term is yet another “complexity” of language, one over which humans cannot wield power. Referring to Genesis, Moore asserts that only Adam ever possessed the power to name notions like “happiness.” On an inhabited and civilized Earth, humans “are still devoid of” such power; to think that humans might reassert influence over language is to live “[l]ike happy souls in Hell, enjoying mental difficulties.” Thus, the Greeks and the Western visitors share more than the stanza break implies: both search for happiness within control, a hope that the poem scorns.

This section of the poem conveys an ironic distance between Moore’s description of the Greeks as generous settlers of complexities and her quotation about their interpretation of happiness, which is anything but settled. When Moore explores the Greek culture, with its drive toward smoothness and its multi-faceted definition of

happiness, she achieves the kind of writing that, though it will never regain Adam's initial power to name, will be unyielding in precision even though it will never result in any perfect knowledge. It appears that the munificent resolution of complexities, that is, the Greek focus on mental attention and on thought, is what actually reveals the hopelessness of resolution. Yet the attempt at resolution and what Moore calls "Neatness of finish" is vital to understanding the "otherness" of the other; it is necessary in order to eschew the "cool official sarcasm / upon this game preserve" (75). And yet neatness does not equal ordered simplicity; according to Cull, Moore harkens back to the word's Latin root, *nitere*, meaning "to gleam or shine," an appropriate quality for the "glassy" mountain (21). Thus, Moore by no means extols the "neatness" of her own poetic eye; instead, she establishes the "relentless accuracy [that] is the nature of this octopus" (*Poems* 76) by encouraging an appreciation of its otherness while also realizing that the mountain will forever rest outside of her own comprehension. The neatness of finish, which Henry James labels "restraint," is a deceitful shroud over the interplay of exteriors against each other and the perpetual motion they create (Kriner 61). Moore, like James, places a great deal of clout on the complex idea or object, rendering it exactly and thus rendering its complication.

The allusion to Adam flashes back to a lost and everlasting mythic paradise while the allusion to Dante, in which Moore links the Greeks to the "happy souls in Hell" who will one day reach heaven, implies the possibility of reattaining paradise (Willis 258). But Moore neither naively hopes for a return to pre-linguistic Eden nor does she look for happiness by dominating language; instead, she hopes for salvation of the Greek methodology of neatness and accuracy. This hope rests on the "neatness of finish," based

on exactitude, extending so that the fear of “hav[ing] everything afraid of one” will be dissolved and so that the observer may discover a way to face the wilderness without asking, “Is ‘tree’ the word for these things?” (76). Neatness of finish and relentless accuracy, which are revealed in the shifting and frustratingly exact deceitfulness of the octopus of ice, provide an ability to detect motion and to query the quaint consumerist images of the wilderness. The politeness and restraint present in Henry James’ writing offers a further instance of such relentlessness that draws the culmination of the poem back towards its beginning. Though distinct from the public language of advertisements and guidebooks that Moore read, the rhetorical methods of exactness, neatness and scrupulous precision strive to convey an accurate picture of multiplicity. At once, they clarify the means of observation used in public and promotional discourse and also call them into question.

The main question the poem asks, then, is: how does one portray Mount Ranier accurately without harming its otherness by turning it into a version of a tourist trap for human consumption, “afford[ing] wood for dwellings and by its beauty/stimulat[ing] the moral vigor of its citizens” (75)? The poem ties the artful values of the Greeks and its own rigorous observation of the mountain with the writing process of writing, with “relentless accuracy” and “capacity for fact.” Its conclusion, which does not entirely answer the question, is that precision, or the guarded use of language, and indirection, or the disruption of efforts to shut down the meanings in careful uses of language, can be employed to ensure the “otherness” of the other in artistic representation. The instrumentality of “hard things” as they tackle the subject is their total need for rigour and relentlessness, even considering the current lack of Adam’s naming power (Kriner 65).

According to Willis, the Greeks, the writer and the mountain itself all await salvation in the poem. But this redemption cannot stem from the tourists, who, searching to advance, find that they have come full-circle. The poem's postulation of the animals as wild, which prevents them from both meeting humans and being fearful, upholds their "otherness" as well as the mountain glacier's sublimity. The portrayal of the glacier focuses on its mobility as well as its duplicity, which, like Henry James, works as self-control, a virtue rather than a vice. Moore's use of the term "pointed" in the final description of the octopus is significant:

the white volcano with no weather side;
 the lightning flashing at its base,
 rain falling in 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." (76)

Figuratively, the octopus is a mountain's glacier that appears to be shaped symmetrically and directed toward the apocalypse of the avalanche that will both disturb progress and finish in a truly transcendent event. Encountering the abundance of nature in "An Octopus," Moore comes to recognize "the fiction of epistemic sovereignty" (Cull 23). Remaining self-critical, the speaker can always attest to the beauty of nature, though she must continue the fight against her possessive drives. Moore holds on to her hope to restructure, if not objectify, the human relationship with the other but the final avalanche hinders progress: the goal of mutuality with the other survives but, in the indescribability of the future hoped for, knowledge of such a state remains indeterminate.

"An Octopus" involves humans' responsibility to nature and reveals the shortcomings of both language and perception. But the poem's questions about the

human link to nature also complicate the ideas of society and collective community. Moore portrays a markedly American mountain, one kept in order by eagles and adorned with a “cavalcade of calico” (74) of “cyclamen-red” dots, “white vapor” and “blue forests thrown together.” Its fir trees are “austere specimens of our American royal families,” sources of the diverse deer, elk, wolves and goats that symbolize American ancestry. According to Linda Leavell, this rusticity and diversity constitutes a familiar American myth of the wilderness, one that Moore queries through her reference to Henry James (182). Upon claiming that the Greeks’ “wisdom was remote,” Moore indicates that both the mountain and Henry James are “damned for sacrosanct remoteness.” Americans, who “adapt[] their intelligence / to eagle traps and snowshoes,” are “out of sympathy with neatness.” James has in common with his countrymen “the love of doing hard things” but, like the Greeks, he also relishes in “mental difficulties” and “[n]eatness of finish.” Like Henry James’ “decorum,” which closer scrutiny reveals to be equivalent to “restraint,” the discovery of “[n]eatness of finish” demands a new definition of America (Leavell 183). Indeed, Moore provides such a definition: “Relentless accuracy” will discover both Henry James and “the mountain guide evolving from the trapper.” Only by permitting multiplicity through “relentless accuracy” and continuous redefinition can one find the solidarity for which America stands.

Several critics have noted that “England” (1920) conveys Moore’s hope for a national poetry or a national voice. Erickson asserts that Moore seeks an American dominance in poetry (22) and Helen Vendler contends that the poem provides a dissatisfied patriotism, one that yearns for a general literature and a countrywide fabric. Bonnie Costello’s discussion of “England” takes the poem as an example of Moore’s

tending to public issues, specifically American cultural independence in light of the emigrant tradition in American writing after World War I. Costello argues that, with both its light-hearted overstatement of American characteristics and its portrayal of other nations, “England” upholds both an appreciation of other cultures and a definite approval of America and the American experience (156). Yet Moore does not try to adopt an American voice in this poem; or, if she does desire one, she proves incapable of providing a characterization of such a voice. Refusing to accept stereotypes of American culture, the poem opposes replacing such labels with more exact classification. Instead, Moore’s text claims that “no conclusions may be drawn,” asserting that those who boil the national character down to its shortcomings “ha[ve] not looked far enough” (*Poems* 47). The poem concludes with its most evasive statements; it inquires, “the flower and fruit of all that noted superiority - / if not stumbled upon in America, / must one imagine that it is not there?” The response to the question can solely be the claim, albeit tainted with playful ridicule, that the superiority described at the opening of the poem “has never been confined to one locality.” America may possess the traits that Moore sees in the world in general, but, as in “An Octopus,” the present task is to “look” rather than to draw conclusions.

In “England,” declarations about the ways in which cultures surpass the linguistic limitation of description invoke both an awareness of the foreign and a drive toward hope for America as a country. “England” leans on a national aggregation in order to achieve hope; it looks for merit in American literature and ponders the grounds for American letters to survive among a sizeable expatriate literature of the early twentieth century. As Elizabeth Gregory argues, the poem makes an explicit case for America as a place that

indeed manifests a valuable culture and an aesthetic sophistication despite exteriors (*Mixed Brow* 212). Thus, Moore's desire to endorse American writing mirrors an attempt to offer the hope that a veritable American literature could wield propulsive force.

"England" begins with a sequence of terse qualifications of world countries, including England, France, Italy, and Greece. After cataloguing locations and characteristics about each, the poem enters into a relatively lengthy section about America, which uses specific indexes of generalized opinions on the country. The poem ultimately implies that an observer of the nation "misapprehend[s]" the sense of America if he/she presupposes that Americans are all "misapprehend[ing]" or dangerous (*Poems* 46). Moore's poem shows that rash conclusions or beliefs about America's inferiority are unfounded: the "wisdom of China, Egyptian discernment," "compressed" emotion and books free of resentment may, in fact, all be in America, for those elements of "noted superiority" have "never been confined to one locality" (47). Moore not only disdains a fanatical Americanism that would create emotions scorned by "The Steeple-Jack," but she also advocates for a literary individuality for America beyond the stereotypes it produces. The poem's quest for the potential in American writing directs itself forward in time; even in a poem portraying the mother country, which could be deemed a part of the self, its disruption of meanings and qualities results in the indefinite and denies the condition of identity, choosing instead a mission of inquiry.

The poem both opposes the status quo and operates for change. Its portrayal of America discreetly teases the country by allowing some overgeneralizations of American culture to speak while also barring those stereotypes from having the final word.

...and America where there
is the little old ramshackle victoria in the south,

the accent in which its people speak, and their judgment, mentioning that simply because something sounds or looks unsophisticated doesn't mean that it is so. The poem illuminates the opposition between exterior and interior, suggesting: "no conclusions may be drawn" about qualities that seem to indicate frivolity or hurriedness. As Moore asserts in an essay in *The Dial* in 1926, the shortcomings of American elocution and accent need not signpost literary shortcomings. She acknowledges that "[p]erfect diction is not particularly an attribute of America...It is true that in America, we sometimes lack altitude and as masters of slang, we do, as we are often told, excel" (*Prose* 165). Later in the essay, however, she claims that difficulties with articulation and expression do not designate a dearth of enthusiasm in seeking out the differences within the realms of speech and dialogue: "...the curiosity of the unprofound, with regard to the acoustics of speech, may seem like that of Esquimaux listening for the first time to a phonograph. Our completely fascinated interest in these matters is, however, not to be disguised and our desire to know what topics may occupy the attention of the fastidious, is genuine" (167). In "England," Moore adopts a comparable stance on the language and letters of America, claiming that the complete vision required for stereotypical characterizations of the country's abilities has "misapprehended the matter."

The social ambiance following World War I may have inspired Moore's disdain for superiority. The joke regarding "plain American which cats and dogs can read" brings up the matter of context of "100 per cent Americanism" at the height of post-war immigration. In the end, the war fostered comprehensive American freedom, encouraging the broadening of American liberties as was achieved in part by the granting of the vote to women in 1920, a cause for which Moore herself campaigned. Yet

“England” manages the means by which the war-influenced xenophobia of the time resulted in the more rigorous expectations of American immigrants to show their “Americanness.” The joke about “American” language becomes more serious when bearing in mind that, by 1919, most of states had passed laws limiting foreign language teaching (Foner 187). The poem’s opposition to declaring that apparent flaws in American culture are actually strengths is mindful of a historical truth: there were considerably fewer vehicles for most American youth to learn Spanish, Greek or Latin in public schools throughout a period of marked xenophobia. Therefore, while claiming the possibility for American culture to approximate “the flower and fruit of all that noted superiority” of other countries, Moore blatantly refuses to grant precedence to American interpretations of such superiority. If it is found, it is “stumbled upon” (*Poems* 47). Any sagacity, discernment, sentiment or self-assurance does not fall under sole ownership of the nation; America is not portrayed as wise but as a place where “the sublimated wisdom of China” may be “stumbled upon” if one delves deep enough (Kriner 88).

Apart from defying usual depictions of the American nation, “England” presents other countries as well. Through their exactness and questioning obliqueness, the illustrations of foreign nations specify the link between art and locale. Moore’s descriptions of Greece’s “nest of modified illusions” and France’s “chrysalis of the nocturnal butterfly” fail to embody the nations as much as they scorn them, ushering them into a place that Moore respected for its fostering of persistent observation: the “museum” (46). Both old world and new have their own satisfactions; a substanceless sophistication can offer only limited gratification, and likewise with unsophisticated substance (Gregory, *Mixed Brow* 212). But Moore’s poem stresses and embraces a third

alternative: one in which cultures weave together to form a denser picture of reality than either can garner by itself, one that gives in to the complexity of pleasure in daily life. In this manner, the poem's hopes for a unique national character rest upon exploration and broadening of the outside, an inspection specific to a hope formed by looking beyond the self.

In the first part of Moore's career, her work of hope equated the work of precision in observation. Her metaphorical venture built a series of observations that upheld the multiplicities of both nature and foreign culture rather than insisting upon a knowledge stemming from what Moore would label "substituting of self for deity" (*Prose* 678). In "England," this translates into obtaining as thorough an impression of what is "not" as what is. Moore implies that America owns cultural reserves, however overshadowed they might be by mediocre diction, yet she declines to elucidate them. Instead, she implies that one can discover "sublimated" and "compressed" characteristics shrouded within the global community that include that which warrants a further look into America. In works like "An Octopus," the variety of points of view, images and borrowed texts indicate both the requisite determination in the writing project and the hope within such a project marked by precision and indirection.

A decade after the publication of "An Octopus," Moore returned to Henry James as an agent to define America. In "Henry James as a Characteristic American" (*Prose* 316-22), Moore amasses various qualities conventionally believed to be American but not necessarily Jamesian, including "an air of rurality," "idealism," an indebtedness to Emerson, "a good conscience," and "affection for family and country," and shows that these characteristics do, in fact, apply to James. Moore ends the essay by fixing onto

James his own interpretation of the American citizen: “‘intrinsically and actively ample...reaching westward, southward, anywhere, everywhere.’” Moore constantly relies on precision as a virtue prevalently but not solely American. The variety of America requires both a “mind ‘incapable of the shut door in any direction’” in order to find what is present and “[r]elentless accuracy” in order to label and define it. Therefore, the compulsion toward thoroughness provides apocalyptic and sublime hopes, urging the visitor or reader away from the self and in the direction of the outside. Furthermore, the poems that make use of American promotional prose inherently support a gaze outward even farther than the national context for hope, beyond American frontiers or cultural resources.

In appreciating the boundaries imposed by linguistic and subjective authority, Moore’s early work reveals and questions perceptual, notional and artistic inaccuracies. Throughout the teens and twenties, Moore continues to be wary of “truths” that stem from superiority or from grandiose visions of clarity, favouring “something which transcends the literal” (*Prose* 170): knowledge that roots in concentration, research and willing disbelief. Displaying how truth subtly moves through costume and presentation, these poems enhance the need to appreciate illusion along with realistic fact. Thus, they anticipate an attitude towards truth, belief and hope that is grounded in literary imagination.

Chapter 3: “Literalists of the Imagination”

In his essay, *Did The Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*, Paul Veyne claims that “[m]en do not find the truth; they create it, as they create their history” (xii). Veyne describes various “moments of truth” from antiquity, dissecting their structure and deciphering how they came to be established as truth. He discovers that the key to the foundation of truth lies in the “constitutive imagination,” which is a cultural as opposed to an individual capacity: “the words [constitutive imagination] do not designate a faculty of individual psychology but refer to the fact that each epoch thinks and acts within arbitrary and inert frameworks” (118). Imagination not only encompasses a whole gamut of cultural beliefs and assumptions including values and truths; it also bears a specific and definable relation to belief and truth. According to Veyne, belief objectifies truth and the imagination constitutes truth itself. No realm of reality or truth exists separately from what the imagination has brought into being because the imagination contains the conditions that, at any one moment in time, define the limits of what it is possible to think. Thus, nothing exists outside these “palaces of the imagination,” which both come into being and succeed each other in unpredictable order. The imagination defines the ultimate creative faculty.

The imagination constructs the very conditions of human existence; hence, Veyne’s discussion of “the fishbowl in which we live” (xii). This metaphor draws attention to both the confining quality of what the imagination has created and the constraints that limit human attempts to get outside it. The very world does not even exist except insofar as imagination has brought it into being but human access to this truth is occluded by fictions of reality. A particular “program of truth” dominates each

“fishbowl”; that is, a specific discourse forms the truth either at any one point in time or within the limits of any single domain. Centaurs exemplify a historical vagary of truth, a notion which is currently regarded as fictitious but one in which the Ancient Greeks wholeheartedly believed. At the same time, for a Greek to believe in the laws of gravity, a feature of the present program of truth, would have constituted a sociocultural error.

Humans ordinarily distinguish between the worlds of fiction and reality and relegate novels and poetry to the former category. At the same time, analogy with the real world actually allows for comprehension of the unreal world of fiction. Thus, Veyne ultimately calls for an abandonment of confidence in human possession of the truth: "Truth itself egocentrically remains our own" (124). However, he recognizes the inescapable constraint that the boundaries of ideology afford, boundaries that offer only the limited choice between culture and belief. Veyne explains this contrast: "As long as we speak of the truth, we will understand nothing of culture and will never manage to attain the same perspective on our culture as we have on past centuries, when people spoke of gods and myths" (113).

For Moore, the meaning of truth also reaches above fact and observable stimuli, into the sphere of the imagination. Moore counters realism, which discounts the inventions of the mind because they have no physical authenticity. Rather, she sees a more direct reality in both thought and the stimulation of the senses; the definition and makeup of a thing are not realities but rather catalysts for the active imagination, which creates reality. Thus, the imagined seems to Moore to be the very core of reality because it is more exclusive and more private than other phenomena. In the 1921 version of "Poetry," Moore writes: "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. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand, / the raw material of poetry in / all its rawness and / that which is on the other hand / genuine, you are interested in poetry" (*Poems* 267). Moore does not think it necessary for the poet to distinguish imagination from that which is sensed or factual; the imagined experience of fact and sense is what constitutes reality. Imagination melds the experienced, the observed and the studied into a heightened experience, which enhances the singularity of the idea of a thing while discarding much that has held to it through constant usage and casual observance.

What primarily interests Veyne is how fictions become divided into the true and the false based on human institutions and power relationships. Moore also grapples with this question as indicated by her resistance to solidified forms of knowledge that stem from inattentive belief. Unlike Veyne, Moore defends the imagination as a medium for mindful perception; she has said that, "the artist biased by imagination is a poet" (*Prose* 405). Indeed, by accepting imagination as poetry's mechanism for ideation, Moore establishes that the rational uses only principles, which it has studied and accepted; the imagination has no such predetermined ideas. Appreciating the imaginative connections between the various matters of Moore's poems, it becomes perfectly reasonable that Moore compare her ideas with objects, to other ideas, to animals and to the human world.

Moore would certainly support Veyne's claim that the imaginary has consistently existed whereas the factual always changes thanks to emerging concepts and ideas. Indeed, Moore distrusts facts because they rarely correspond to their appearance. When she states, "What is more precise than precision? Illusion" (*Poems* 151), she argues that

precision has no place in a world of ever-changing facts. Instead, it must work within the field of the imagination, where the notion of the thing is more important than the physical reality of the thing. Moore does not totally disregard fact and the senses; she subordinates them to imagination and makes them stimuli for the imaginative process. The factual and the sensed gain importance only as catalysts for the imagination; reality becomes that which is insubstantial and which can never be proved. Moore certainly “admits the allusiveness of truth, connecting the genuine with the acknowledgement of limits” (Costello 18); she consciously points to the dangers of believing in fantasy while, at the same time, affirming the viability of fictional truth. At the end of “In the Days of Prismatic Color,” truth confidently asserts, “I shall be there when the wave has gone by” (*Poems* 42) but Moore does not implore her audience to trust truth naively; rather, she insists upon belief in a truth parallel to Veyne’s philosophy of myth and poetry, a truth which transcends the notion that the existence of something depends on its translatability into a mental concept.

Moore’s poems of the 1930s acknowledge and welcome illusion but they also reconcile with nature; although it can never be contained in poetry, nature provides animals as models not in order to overcome the challenges of political domination, economic exploitation and aesthetic artificiality but rather to imagine the possibility of escaping and even transcending such challenges. Moore’s “animalies” present moral standpoints in which fact and fantasy simultaneously disguise and substantiate morality. Moore’s ethical vision, distinct from didacticism and fairy tales, manifests as a humourously presented but serious view, responding to use value without obliterating fantasy. Moore’s attraction to fairy tales and to the fantastic does not make her animals

entirely otherworldly; rather, the poems imply that the fantastic lies within the quotidian. Her poetry is based on her material experience in the world, which enables her to look beyond the literal. She edits facts to create amphibious description, which bears on both the everyday and the marvelous, and she inverts proportion and perspective to reassess the conventional values and moral systems by which humans live. Rather than positing her animals as desired ideals, Moore shows that their characteristics exceed human capabilities and thus mark humans' moral and aesthetic limitations.

"The Plumet Basilisk" (1932) provides a fitting example of Moore's dialogue with the imaginary, her acknowledgement of illusion and her reverence for the animal world. The poem lauds the basilisk lizard of Central America, using both zoological fact and mythological wisdom to offer not only a description of the animal itself, but also diverse examples of the interpretations humans have bestowed upon it. Similarly to the natural world of Moore's earlier poems, the basilisk continually shifts form and location, obstinately rejecting palpable symbolism and blatant declaration. Moore cannot convey the basilisk in the poem; rather, the poem sparks the imagination and tries to create an opportunity for the lizard to emerge. Foregrounding the basilisk's amphibious quality and his knack for stimulating both the visual and the auditory, Moore proves that the creature's intricacy transcends "true" linguistic representation. Only a carefully wrought melding of the literal and the imagined can create a sensitive encounter with the animal.

The persona quickly describes how the basilisk opposes a steady gaze; after labeling the animal with the title of the poem, Moore goes on to dissociate him from human taxonomy. The first subtitle, "In Costa Rica," replaces the basilisk's name with a place and the opening line of the poem, "In blazing driftwood," substitutes that place with

another. This shows that the basilisk is impossible to track: it resides “In Costa Rica” but possesses a “Chinese lizard face” (20) while posing as “our Tower-of-London/jewel” (23). The basilisk has equivalents in the East, in New Zealand and in Copenhagen and he resides both on land and in the water, amphibiously “portray[ing] / mythology’s wish / to be interchangeably man and fish” (23).

Moore’s basilisk eternally metamorphoses and resists a final description. The speaker depicts the animal as “the fire-opal,” “the living fire-work” and the “falling dragon” (20) before paralleling it to “the true divinity / of Malay” and the tolerant “tuatera” (sic). The persona never truly observes the basilisk, who is only categorized linguistically based on its similarities and differences from others. However, Moore proves that the basilisk inelegantly introduces himself through language: when captured, he becomes “stiff / and somewhat heavy, like fresh putty on the hand -- he is no longer // the slight lizard that / can stand in a receding flattened / S – small, long and vertically serpentine or, sagging, / span the bushes in a fox’s bridge” (22). Here, the basilisk “withdraws behind the shadow of language as the S recedes in alliterative clusters” (Costello 143) and therefore, right after Moore portrays the arrest of the basilisk, the lizard starts his rebirth within the language but also withdraws behind it. Additionally, the “wide water-bug strokes” made by the wading basilisk mirror the strokes of “a Chinese [paint]brush” that fashion written language while only expressing “a regal and excellent awkwardness” (*Poems* 23).

The series of images produces the general tone of volatility: a fire, which symbolizes decomposition and irretrievable loss, paradoxically offers an enduring image of “the green [that] keeps showing at the same place”; the opal “intermittently” displays

the constant colours of “blue and green”; and the lizard, with its “true...face” seems totally cagey and imaginary. In fact, the notion of “truth” comes back in “The Malay Dragon,” which describes one of the basilisk’s counterparts in the East: “the true divinity / of Malay” (21). This reptile can spread its skin from its ribs and glide from branch to branch in the fragrant nutmeg trees with his “minute legs / trailing half akimbo.” He is a “harmless god” but turns divine through his relationship to the air plant. As Lakritz explains, “what makes this creature interesting to Moore...is its connection to what botany calls ‘epiphytes’ after the Greek *epi* + *phytos* or above + plant. In other words, the Malay dragon is like a plant that grows on another plant yet is not a parasite” (144). Indeed, the Malay dragon “confers wings on what it grasps, as the air-plant does” (*Poems* 21) and thus by merely touching another surface it transfers its majesty and produces a powerful change upon that surface: what was once stationary gains the ability to fly, at least metaphorically. The air plant stands above the ground that fixes it yet takes nourishment from the paradoxically unfixed air. Similarly, the terrestrial Malay dragon has a “boat-like body” and can also fly, placing it in multiple categories and further emphasizing its fluidity. Its “true divinity,” then, lies in its ability to inhabit multiple realms: earth and air, real and imaginary, natural and supernatural (Lakritz 145).

The third and final instance of the word “true” in the poem describes the tuatera, “‘a true dragon [who] has nine sons’” (21). The “truth” of the tuatera, apparently measured by the number of its offspring, seems a matter of pure, irrelevant chance. Indeed, the poem does not concern itself with such empirical statements; it is more interested in the tuatera’s tolerance of life with birds. The lizard lays its tail “alligator-style, among / birds toddling in and out” and will “tolerate a / petrel in its den,”

supporting Moore's assertion that "[b]ird-reptile social life is pleasing." The tuatera, "[i]n appearance a lizard – with characteristics of the tortoise; on the ribs, uncinat process like a bird's; and crocodilian features" (265), becomes another figure that crosses boundaries and evades classification. In each case, then, the "truth" of the creatures is that they refuse to submit to human categories of placement: the tuatera is a genre to itself, "the only living representative of the order Rhynchocephalia"; the Malay dragon moves between land and air; and the plumet basilisk comes to occupy the remainder of the poem as a figure that can run on the surface of the water and remain invisible to the eye in daylight.

In human presence, "the frilled lizard" will "take to flight" (21); "As you look," the basilisk turns into a "nervous naked sword on little feet" (24), obviously opposed to misuse or even brief observation. However, in spite of the evasiveness of the basilisk and his equivalents, Moore neither becomes discouraged nor does she aim to convey the basilisk in her poem, even self-consciously. The lizard always eludes the speaker's clutch yet he is also viscerally "alive there" (24), omnipresent in a work that weaves his being into comparative symbolism. The fieriness of the basilisk in the first stanza mirrors the image of the lizard "nested in the phosphorescent alligator...in his basilisk cocoon beneath / the one of living green" (24). The "living fire-work" that conveys the basilisk comes back in the creature's "three part plume" and his "three fold separate flame above the hilt." Finally, the lizard's "gold body hid in / Guatavita Lake" mirrors the colour of the fire while the movement of the firework supports to the speaker's description of the basilisk as "one of the quickest lizards in the world" (22). The basilisk's constant

conversions do not reflect reality; they act as stimuli for the imagination and provide not a physical reality of the animal but an idea of him that exists only in the mind.

The speaker describes the basilisk musically as well as visually: “as from black opal emerald opal emerald - /scale which Swinburne called in prose, / the noiseless music that hangs about/the serpent when it stirs or springs” (23). The “green” that “keeps showing at the same place” (20) effectively portrays the permanence of the basilisk, the harmony among the images he occupies. Furthermore, the reiteration of the words “opal” and “emerald” mirrors the conversion of the lizard from both one visual image to another and from one sound image to another. Just as “piano keys are barred” (22), the speaker is barred from an occurrence of the basilisk. Yet, among the bars, between the “avenues of steel to veil,” she can nevertheless hear the “minute noises” of the basilisk “swell and change” as she notices his formal conversions. Indeed, Moore proves that illusion is “more precise than precision”; she acknowledges the basilisk’s imprecision and regards fact and the senses inferior to the imagination. Although the speaker’s glances of the basilisk are fleeting and transitory, the lizard’s performance of “mythology’s wish / to be interchangeably man and fish” both embodies the persona’s encounter with the basilisk and drives the poem forward.

Contact with the basilisk is possible only for an understanding superior to that which humans can grasp. In particular, Moore employs the character of the basilisk to depict how familiarity comes not only out of the imaginary but also from seconds of heightened perception and connection between humans and their environments. But the speaker does not symbolize the basilisk romantically; “No anonymous / nightingale sings in a swamp” (23). “This,” a lizard and what he signifies, is the “jewel that the Spaniards

failed to see.” He seems understated, “merely / breathing and recoiling,” but he dwells in accord with “hawks-head moths and black-chinned/humming-birds.” He builds as comfortable a home on land, where he “feeds on leaves and berries” and “lies basking on a // horizontal branch” (22), as he does in the “stream-bed” into which he dives to become “the ruler of Rivers, Lakes, and Seas” (20). Contrary to the traditionally precious “jade ax-heads, / silver jaguars...amethysts and / polished iron, gold...and pearls” (24), the basilisk is “alive” despite his “temporary loss” to the speaker.

To the cavalier onlooker, this “gold-defending dragon” seems both “nervous” and vulnerably “naked”; his “little feet” suggest a powerlessness to resist an army of Spanish soldiers. But together, illusion and imagination will permit this “naked sword” to morph into a flame that “eat[s] into air and that ultimately disappears with a “shattering sudden splash” (24). An envoy of a spirit in nature and time, the basilisk continues to provide a hopeful possibility in a realm where treasure hunting rather than comprehension has dictated the human relationship with nature. The Costa Rican lizard denotes an animal that, in resisting the permanence of individuality, demonstrates the influence, allure and usefulness of disobeying firm limits of thought and action. The basilisk eventually symbolizes a substitute for lack and want: he possesses hidden authority, hidden riches, liberty and clarity through complexity. He does not strive for representation in the poem; he *is* the poem.

“Camellia Sabina” also employs the animal world to communicate an ethic among rich facts and fantastic deviation. Drawing on humorous observation, Moore redirects her morality away from a somber sermon yet, though her witticisms amuse, they also provide ground for thoughtful reflection. Moore proves that comedy, fact and

imaginative connection both conceal and authorize morality. At the height of the poem, the imaginary Tom Thumb comes into view riding on the back of an “Italian upland / meadow-mouse” (17). Moore conveys Tom Thumb as a brave and daring “glean[er]” who threatens to overturn the hierarchy between harvesting and gleaning and, through parallel, between aristocracy and peasantry and between lucidity and impulse. The mouse, both a creature of the imagination and an actual photographed animal, shows that “the gleaning is more than the vintage” (18) by “dashing round,” amassing a line of imaginative relationships that finally provide a more significant experience than the epicure’s prized wine, which, Moore notes, “accomplishes nothing and makes the/soul heavy.” Perhaps the hope and fantasy that an advantaged culture neglects and that a gleaner accumulates cannot be explained using language of rationalism and utility. However, as Moore discloses, that which a society may see and depend upon as “rational,” “objective” and “useful” is never quite separate from what it strives to oppose: the useful becomes the fanciful, the rational the irrational and the factual the illusionary (Sekiguchi 55).

Therefore, Moore shows less interest in weakening chains of command than in obscuring and connecting their components: the fantastic domain of Tom Thumb upon “the Prince of Tails” (17) seems trifling fancy but Moore includes a note to the poem that authenticates the “mouse with a / grape” and renders it impossible to separate the fantasy world from reality. The note says: “*Mouse with a grape*. Photograph by Spencer R. Atkinson, *National Geographic Magazine*, February, 1932. ‘Carrying a baby in her mouth and a grape in her right forepaw, a round-tailed wood rat took this picture.’” (264). The heading of the photograph straddles the limits of fantasy and fact; by explaining the

manner in which the rat's tail literally activated a camera shot with a strap so that the "rat took this picture," the speaker gives the animal the human capacity for photography. Furthermore, the persona sees in the mouse an intermingling of animal and human characteristics: the "Prince" might "*stroll*" and the mother mouse possesses a grape in "its *hand*" (emphasis added). Utilizing the exactness of the camera lens and the inherent objectivity of the scientific publication, *National Geographic*, Moore questions empiricism but also awards approval and accuracy to her fairy-tale (Sekiguchi 55). Her note augments the discrepancy between reality and fantasy, obscuring the border between them.

At the beginning of the poem, the "Bordeaux plum" connects to a monastery in Certosa, the farming of camellias, gastronomy and Persian finery, all of which contest the wild mouse. Fussiness, repression, unoriginality and indolent contentment oppose the competence, liberty, sensibility, nimbleness and romance of the Italian mouse. The moral face of the work implies that associative imagination based on "gleaning" becomes "more than" the development of pleasure; it fosters the growth of the imagination. Moore would never preach that the gleaning is "better" than the vintage but she does insist that it is "more" useful for the inspired mind than patrician traditions. Glints of relationship, like gleaned grapes, will educate and please more than anachronistic customs.

The ethical side of Moore's poetry lessens neither her direct notions nor her direct allusions. Unlike parables, Moore's work does not render observations inferior to morals; specific items and notions may suggest things above or apart from themselves. Moore bestows fair attention upon details, thoughts and lessons and therefore prevents herself from writing a fable in which tangible entities reflecting ideas are global and

conceptual instead of detailed and objective and in which they exist solely as the vehicles to highlight the lesson. Moore eschews inconspicuous morals through resisting the temptation to render her objects abstractions and dig a message out of them. To this end, she observes exactly and scrupulously, amassing numerous innocuous and apparently differing items instead of conveying a basic, easily noticed few. Moore's descriptive system and juxtaposition of distinct objects are the instruments with which she avoids the simple concept of turning the physical and the mental into the moral. Moralism is a notion that is always present in Moore's poetry but it can only be achieved by sensually and conceptually relating to the poet's arduous and pleasing observations, aided by the poem's web of optic, intellectual and fantastic relationships.

The development of the poet's imagination acquires force through binary images of captivity. Opposing the spry motions of the gleaning mouse scurrying about the vineyard, everything that Moore scorns at the beginning of her poem appears domesticated and confined. The Bordeaux have been rigidly shaped, "graft[ed]" by vintners. The plums "keep under / glass," "sealed" by the "foil" just as Certosa sits "sealed" within its gold exterior (16). Botanists have unnaturally cultivated the camellias and kept them in hothouses, creating flaccid "pale pinwheels, and pale / stripe." The orderings and taxonomic enumeration of "Bordeaux merchants / and lawyers" (17) have also imprisoned the flowers and the plums within the clutches of tradition; both demand effortful, rigorous care. Moore reprints *The Epicure's Guide* in her "Notes," noting that the French have different practices for "a food-grape" and for a wine-grape, thus making grape-cultivation both an "art," with its own aesthetic, and a horticultural procedure. Furthermore, the French have methods both for "gild[ing] the grapes without scorching

them” and for obliterating imperfect ones using “special scissors” (263). Moore augments her dubiousness of the epicure’s traditions with her metaphor of grape cultivation as another confined area: the locked “wire cage.” The epicure’s “food grape” adorns the table of the hedonist; the grapes have a showcase value instead of a use value just like the fussy “undemure” coats in Persia that remain worthlessly “unruined / by the rain.” In providing a substitute, sensible use of a grape with the image of a mother mouse nourishing her young, Moore suggests a lesson that doubts the importance of profligacy simply for gratification.

Moore’s gleaner maternal mouse exemplifies not only intuitive survival, through seizing a grape for her child, but also a “generous” use of substance. Distinct from an epicure’s particular food or wine, which succeeds by contrast rather than by a relationship with something else, Moore’s gleaner is an amasser who chooses and collects materials from numerous sources: the natural environment, the vineyard of “the Bolzano / grape of Italy” and the “well-piled // larder” (17). Moore herself often gleans from her reading and links correlations from a horticultural treatise, a zoological article, fairy tales and scientific photographs. The opposition between the gleaner and the vintner extends to that between eclecticism and genuineness, between one who conscientiously recycles and one who praises the worth of originals.

Moore sees the mouse’s consciousness as a possible state to which humans *may* aspire but she does not turn her poem into to an allegory that would pigeon hole and confine the animal within a stereotype. Purposefully, she reproduces images of her mouse using far-reaching connections. The mouse exists as freely as one in the wild, as realistically as one in a photograph, and as accurately as one in a textbook yet the

creature also occupies a space in the imaginary. Moore creates the parallel between the mouse with “a child in its mouth” and the sign of the Golden Fleece. Interestingly, Moore links the mouse to the mythical Jason through larceny: Jason steals the Golden Fleece, protected by a serpent, just as the mouse “pluck[s]” a grape for her child (Sekiguchi 70). The idea of theft, when motivated by need and artistry, becomes intriguingly heroic. Tom Thumb also possesses a record of stealing yet he becomes “the cavalry cadet” as the small knight in King Arthur’s court climbs atop the meadow mouse. Like Jason, who staves off the giants during his mission for the Golden Fleece, Tom Thumb suffers the dangers of a pudding batter, a cow’s insides, a raven’s clutch and the mouth of a fish before coming to the table of King Arthur. Amused, Arthur grants Tom Thumb a knighthood as well as a mouse for him to ride (Kenner 101). Thus, the figure of Tom Thumb denotes complex associations among the adventures of Jason, the chivalrous King Arthur, and the fantastic “upland / meadow-mouse.” Furthermore, Moore positions Tom Thumb as a compound figure by describing the character’s unpredictable movements: he appears “dashing round the *concours hippique* / of the tent, in a flurry / of eels, scallops, serpents, / and other shadows from the blue of the green canopy” (*Poems* 17-18).

The legend of Jason, the fantasy of Tom Thumb and Moore’s fanciful depiction of the meadow-mouse may all appear ridiculous but, as Veyne makes clear, it is precisely because the mythical world is definitively other, inaccessible, different, and remarkable that the problem of authenticity is suspended (20). In her own essay, “Is the Real the Actual?”, Moore compliments the sculptor Alfeo Faggi for his “spiritual imagination” and shows her appreciation for the inexplicable: “The realm of the spirit is the only realm

in which experience is able to corroborate the fact that the real can also be the actual” (*Prose* 74). The poet provides a reproduction of the exterior, impression and spirit of an object; this artistic rendering must stem from imaginative principles since the empirical and the observed would both provide more limited experiences. Moore processes data using her imagination, without which the information itself would have of little or no meaning for the individual. Ultimately, imagination is the only framework in which reality and the sensual can be gauged. By complicating the traditional definition of truth, Moore finds in both animal nature and the self the facility to charm and guard a supernatural vision; she imagines the possibility of modifying the language, symbols and notions that depend on scientific truth.

The fanciful appearance of Tom Thumb also permits Moore to manipulate proportion and logic. Moore speaks directly to the mouse: “In that well-piled // larder above your / head, the picture of what you will eat is / looked at from at the end of the avenue” (17). For the human onlookers, this creates the illusion of looking up at the grapevines from the mouse’s vantage point (Costello 102-103). But suddenly the point of view grows so that “bending down and studying the / roof” of the larder becomes feasible. By changing from a small scale to an enormous one, from interior to exterior and from short to tall, perspective becomes chaotic. Moore continually makes divisions and polarizes opposites but her amphibious style of writing also both coheres contraries and upsets divisions. In the poem, Moore combines formal and precise description with the casual and the common: the precise “sixty-four million red wines / and twenty million white” opposes the lawyers who have imprecisely expended “a great deal / of trouble” distinguishing “what was / and what was not Bordeaux.” Stripping the poem of

a constant angle, Moore challenges conventional hierarchies that customary binaries create and foster.

Additionally, Moore's complication of scale reveals an ethical suggestion. Moore makes the mouse bigger and permits humans to intrude on its miniature world while the French cultivation of grapes, the object of scorn, is diminished to the "wire cage" of a measurement that permits observers to bend over and examine it from above. Persian ideation, represented by the sultans' elite and ornate decorations, is a rigid structure with firm rules and culture, permitting no penetration but only distant observation. Similarly, Moore portrays the French production of grapes as an isolated culture: self-contained, "sealed" and "locked." Therefore, significance does not dwell in the actual size of the object but in its readiness to embrace others' involvement in it (Sekiguchi 66). The mouse permits and invites the participation of the observer whereas both the French aristocratic practices of cultivating flowers and grapes and the designed Persian treasures seem diminutive because they cut themselves off from outside connection. By magnifying the mouse and by using the French term *concours hippique*, "a hurdle race," for the mouse's excursion, Moore alludes to the tradition of the mock-heroic (Costello 103). But the poem does not actually mock the mouse; it reads humourously but seriously bestows upon the mouse the dignity it warrants without regressing into spoof. The alteration of scale results in a new perspective, which doubts the organizations that create values and definitions.

Throughout the poem, Moore contrasts inflexibility of thought with an adaptable imagination. She infers that "[a]ppropriate custom" does not allow for irrational yet facilitating fancy. The French vintners discard imperfect grapes "delicately," leaving

none on the ground for the gleaning. They stay apathetic to the imaginative escapades that grape vines proffer. Contrarily, in the Bolzano vineyard, where “the Prince of Tails / might stroll,” there is definitely room for fantasy to mature. Moore proves that both functional knowledge and science feed off of the fantasy and imagination that steep into culture, regardless of the fact that language knows its own shortcomings. Moore’s modifications of an environmental language elucidate the narrow boarder between fanciful imagination and that which is known as objectivity. But even considering the possibility for imagination, the French adhere to their own rules without straying from tradition. Unlike the mouse of the “generous Bolzano,” they do not appear prepared to disobey rules and regulations.

Moore questions the traditionally opposed, artificial and conformist values by which we exist and form our points of view. She complicates point of view through her amphibious style of writing, occupying both aspects of pairs of opposites. The methods by which Moore dispenses her ideas rely neither on a logical narrative nor on an authoritative voice. She often deviates and capriciously amasses a variety of distinct cultural interpretations into an interdisciplinary montage, showing that it is not a poet’s natural aptitude but his or her rigorous dialogue with the surrounding society that molds a modern consciousness. Moore’s poetry converses with the larger world by recreating, editing and altering what the world fabricates. Her fancy and her modernist techniques serve as a mask for ethical morals; observers learn while engaging imagination. But Moore’s moral teaching stays separate from edification and concerns with virtue and vice.

“The Jerboa” admires and respects the “small desert rat[’s]” independence while neither attempting to own nature nor concealing the illusory nature of art. Moore separates her poem into two unequal sections that highlight the distinct contrast between plundering, inharmonious art and accepting, balanced nature. However, the two segments intersect as Moore considers both the human and the natural worlds. Without unease, she fashions a location in which the realms of art and nature intersect and divide and where opposing assertions cannot reconcile but can coexist. Moore’s poem is not totally free from “unease”; rather, Moore abates it by imagining the possibility of a society not characterized by bureaucracy, economic manipulation, and artistic disingenuousness. These elements ultimately prove inescapable but the jerboa’s fortitude and adaptability provide a vision of what an escape from them might look like.

“Too Much” recalls the building of the Castle St. Angelo on the Tiber River (Lakritz 135). The section lists a collection of objects that “passed for art” (*Poems* 10) in ancient Rome and Egypt. These artifacts held material value for the privileged few; the engraved “bone boxes” and the “fine linens” (11) denote opulence and illustrate their owners’ prosperity. The narrator covertly scorns this assortment of luxury, condemning the ancients with her choice of verbs: “a Roman *had* an artist, / ...*contrive* a cone,” which “*looks* like a work of art” (10, italics added). The speaker labels the artist as a “freedman” though he is ironically anything but free; the economy presses aesthetic choices onto him, not permitting the statue to grow out of authentic inspiration. The oversized pine-cone displays financial power, underscored by the statue’s history of ownership: the freedman built it as a fountain to appease an unnamed member of Roman royalty but it ended up as an adornment on a Papal prison. Both artist’s primary desire

for money and the church's desire for extravagance imply the debasing influence of falsity, power, and riches.

The speaker asserts that the ancient Egyptians knew "how to use slaves" (10) for their own benefit. The Egyptians also exploited the animal world; they "kept crocodiles...put / baboons on the necks of giraffes to pick / fruit" and "had their men tie / hippopotami / and bring out dappled dog- / cats to course antelopes, dikdik, and ibex." The Egyptians saw these exotic animals as "theirs," embracing an attitude of possession. Here, the speaker defines the section title, "Too Much," enhancing her disapproval at the animals being "kept," "used," and "tied." She notes that "[t]hese people liked small things" (11) before elaborating: "Lords and ladies put goose-grease / paint in round bone boxes—the pivoting / lid incised with a duck-wing // ...kept in a buck / or rhinoceros horn, / the ground horn; and locust oil in stone locusts." Pretense links to violence through association with slavery and prison but the link becomes more obvious as the Egyptian artifacts serve as immovable, decorative symbols of the once-living things they contain. Humans have destroyed animals for by-products such as paints and powders that they use only to produce more artifice. Thus, the poem describes an innovative but inhumane culture, made more apparent as Moore adds that this wealth was seen as a "right to those with, everywhere, // power over the poor" (10).

Moore then presents the mongoose, the equivalent of the artist in the animal world. The king did indeed "tame[] // Pharaoh's rat" (12) but, unlike other creatures in the poem, the mongoose evades human domination. Whereas the Egyptians reduced other animals to art objects, "[n]o bust / ...was made" of the mongoose. The mongoose's worth and usefulness lie not in its physical structure but in its fierceness and

“restlessness,” characteristics that enable it to kill the snakes feared by the king. The mongoose feels not subservient to but allied with the artist; it obliterates other animals to benefit itself and to gain the king’s favour while is also “praised for its wit,” a poetic virtue to which Moore relates. Thus, the mongoose becomes a living representation of the art already described in the poem: clever, destructive, and in the service of power.

Before the close of the first segment of “The Jerboa,” Moore leaves the Romans and the Egyptians to focus on the “small desert rat” that “lives without water,” discovering “abundance” within apparent emptiness. Contrary to humans, who are constantly overwhelmed by excess or by lack, the jerboa makes his home in an unfriendly world “without water,” at ease in a “boundless,” “stupendous” void. Unlike the mongoose, the jerboa is “not famous” (13) but he “has happiness” in his “shining silver house / of sand.” These lines position the jerboa in an artistically advantageous world where nature, not materials or artificiality, determines beauty. Elisa New asserts that the mongoose’s “pleasure” only becomes disreputable when Moore weighs it against the jerboa’s “happiness” (258). New compares Moore’s use of “pleasure” and “happiness” to the distinction between “the carnal and saintly temperament” but the opposition within the terms also reflects the difference between “Too Much” and “Abundance.” Both terms refer to copiousness but “too much” connotes a greed alien to the securities and rewards of “abundance.” Additionally, those loyal to artistry still search for “happiness” while “pleasure” implies the injurious gratification that drove both the freedman to fashion a colossal pine-cone and the artisan to carve ornate duck-heads. Moore’s juxtaposed terms and animal figures therefore mirror both the poem’s cogitation on the ethics of the human relationship with the natural and its discovery of how humans amass the heavenly gift of

abundance and distort it into overindulgence.

Though Moore presents the well-adapted jerboa as a curative for the rapacious usurpations of culture, she remains aware that the animal embodies an ideal that fallen human beings can never achieve. But, although reaching “abundance” remains impossible, humans can still aspire to estimate the ideal. The desert may have misled the Biblical character, Jacob, but his “translucent mistake” implies that the human will to ally with the “terrestrial” and “celestial” can take more principled, if still illusory, forms than indulgent, colonial ones. Moore brings Jacob into her poem so as to prove the inimitability of the jerboa. In Genesis, Jacob travels from Canaan and one night has a vision of a ladder climbing to heaven and teeming with angels. In the vision, God avows that Jacob’s progeny “shalt spread abroad” throughout the entire world (qtd. in Johnson 77). Moore positions Jacob as a “part terrestrial” (*Poems* 13) mortal whose divine vision renders him “part celestial.” Jacob dwells in the liminal space between humans and nature, even as he undergoes a moment of spiritual vision that transcends both worlds. Jacob’s tale has neither an ethical principle nor a moral; rather, the poem turns his vision into a theoretical and theological case used to imagine the unattainable circumstance in which a human could see truth in its unbroken uniqueness. Through its association with Jacob, Moore shows that the jerboa, too, rises above the moral and artistic capacities of humans. Jacob’s “claw hand” implies that this version of Jacob is part-animal, perhaps even part-jerboa. Finally, the jerboa builds his home in the sand just as Jacob adjusts to nature when he makes peace with “his friends” the stones.

Jacob is not entirely consistent with the jerboa as the animal does not require Jacob's godly vision to be contented: "The translucent mistake / of the desert does not

make / hardship for one who / can rest and then do / the opposite" (13-14). Moore acknowledges Jacob's dream as an illusion, a "mistake" that turns, to the human, into a troublesome "hardship." An meeting with a divine, comforting presence does not seem a traditional "hardship" but Jacob does bear the burden of building a temple and creating a nation; he confronts an existence in which he will wrestle with the divine (Johnson 78). Grace, then, does not negate a life of spiritual hardship. The jerboa, however, is a joyful "simplified creature" who needs not concern himself with the immaterial. Instead, he can "do the opposite," "launching" himself across the desert. The "desert rat" becomes vastly distinct from both from Jacob, with his many-sided dream, and from the violent reproductions of the first section of the poem. Moore looks to the jerboa not to institute a moral standard, but to contrast the epitome of simplicity that of artifice. The jerboa is incomparable to humans; it is not a model.

"Abundance," therefore, employs the jerboa to point out human shortcomings and to offer hope for amelioration. Contrary to the Romans, the jerboa does not vanquish foreign territory; it finds it home where vitality, camouflage and rapidity guard it from subjugation by others. Moore also highlights the jerboa's separation from humanity when she writes, "It / honors the sand by assuming its color" (14). The jerboa epitomizes artistry by personally connecting to its natural environment and by paying tribute to it through the colouring of its fur. Whereas "have," "use," and "kept" dominate the opening of the poem, the jerboa "honors" the land. Not only does the jerboa live symbiotically with its environment, the single creature actually embodies the whole of nature. Moore qualifies various characteristics of the jerboa in terms of their likenesses to other creatures and, as Moore zooms in on a specific part of the animal, she moves away from

it at the same time. The jerboa has “chipmunk contours” and a “bird head”; the tip of its tail looks “fish-shaped” and it moves with “kangaroo speed” (15). The naturalist poet observes in the jerboa reflections of many other types of natural adaptation. Therefore, Moore’s jerboa shifts slowly from a “real,” taxonomically definable animal to an amalgamated creature.

The jerboa displays reverence through replication; it imitates the sand, its natural environment, as well as the poem, its artistic environment. While the jerboa adapts to nature, the artists of Rome and Egypt manipulate nature into self-serving manifestations. The freedman artist seeks to honour his client but the monetary worth of his services and the huge dimensions of his creation serve to mangle and shroud nature. The Egyptians make trinkets out of animal parts but the artists only mimic and destroy nature in the drive to possess it. Instead, the jerboa mirrors the world without hostility. Just as the jerboa honours its surroundings, Moore’s poem strives to honour the jerboa. Like the Romans and the Egyptians, Moore imitates nature through art: the jerboa moves “By fifths and sevenths, / in leaps of two lengths” (14), mirroring the stanzas of the poem that begin with two lines of five syllables and end with a line of seven syllables. John Slatin argues that the poem “honors the jerboa not only by assuming its name but also by tuning its own movements to those of the animal” (206), and, indeed, Moore’s poetic device “honours” rather than captures or tames the jerboa. Her technique is artificial but she appreciates this characteristic as necessary: humans can be *like* the jerboa but cannot *be* the jerboa.

The jerboa does not solve the ethical dilemma of artifice. The poem, with its exact syllable counts, truly shares more traits with the delicate trinkets of the Egyptians

than with the innate grace of the jerboa. To comprehend this creature, Moore concludes the poem by revisiting the language of well-wrought artifice that defines the work's opening. Moore stations the jerboa as firm as a pillar and then morphs it into a three-cornered wooden claw, both images that render the jerboa statuesque as it pauses for final examination. No bust of the mongoose exists but Moore makes sure to shape the jerboa. This move may seem hypocritical of the poet after Moore criticized the Egyptians and Romans for their desire to manipulate nature by carving it into inanimate objects. However, Moore also tries to separate her work from the damage of "Too Much." Though the jerboa poses statically, the animal only ceases "between leaps to its burrow" (15). It has halted long enough to be celebrated, but it will continue on. Slatin asserts that Moore's decision to freeze the jerboa in a careful pose illustrates an excessive politeness that causes the poem to fail as an attempt to imagine "poetic freedom" (207). But the poem does not contain a moral so much as a string of unresolved speculations on the moral problems and potentials of artistry. Indeed, the poem both condemns and commemorates artifice, never settling on the superior attitude. The "simplified creature" thus becomes highly complicated; it embodies qualities of both the natural and the supernatural worlds, it presents itself as both a zoological sample and as a figment of the human mind, and it links both to the natural world and to artistic production.

Moore tries to solidify the fact that, while language is fallen and artificial, the tools of poetry can be employed to acknowledge the straightforwardness and honesty that they cannot themselves attain. The jerboa's grace does not present a goal; it indicates a wonder and an unachievable aspiration. "The Jerboa" implies that, in a society of excess, moral and artistic ideals can only be discovered by imaginatively leaving the world for a

desert of cogitation, disclosure, and grace. The poem cannot escape fallibility, as it proves when it ultimately turns to metaphors resembling the artifice it had once belied, but it can, in the spirit of the jerboa, find a grace that transcends poetry.

Conclusion

In her poems of the teens and twenties, Marianne Moore trusted empiricism to create hope, relying on rigorous observation of the non-human and maintaining a skeptical perspective. In the thirties, she discovered and learned to accommodate the notion that art, culture and knowledge are necessarily illusions, fictive impositions on the world to be interpreted through the imagination. By the forties, however, the outbreak of World War II combined with Moore's increasing age, her intensifying fame, and the death of her mother late in the decade produced in Moore "an expanding need to have something useful to say on public matters" (Rotella 186). Thus, the poems of Moore's later career position her interest in epistemological and aesthetic matters as secondary to the ethical requirement that artists create and preserve the cultural illusions that lend order and significance to life.

Critics debate the merits of Moore's late work; Costello and Slatin see it as drastic poetic decline but Margaret Holley argues that it signals a new orientation, "a shared sense of social and historical urgency" and an "advocacy of value" (x). Indeed, Moore remains interested in perceptual, conceptual and aesthetic delusions but she ends her career with an emphasis on virtues that neither possess nor harm the world: preservation, humility, restraint and quiet joy. She breaks away from attachment to a specific "thing," alluding instead to a variety of objects that serve a purpose at the moment and thus grounding cautionary generalizations in sensory reality. The very titles of Moore's collections reflect such a change: *Observations* (1924) indicated poetry based on a perceived thing, *What are Years?* (1941) raises an abstract question and *Nevertheless* (1944) seems to suggest continuation of a meditation (Engel 66). Moore maintained her

skeptical gaze throughout her career, operating, as one title puts it, “in distrust of merits.” However, she became less directly corrective, more understanding of people’s moral limitations and thus of their moral possibilities. By the late 1930s, Moore was pondering the place of war in human culture; an entry in her notebook from March 1937 reads: “from the beginning life has been a struggle against death...It is a struggle against death and against self – or should I say selfishness.” Later that year, she wrote, “War – should be man fighting against that in himself which is not of god” (qtd. in Engel 88). Moore insists that war is an inward struggle, a moral conflict unique to humans who are, according to “What are Years?”, “naked,” “innocent,” and open to error (*Poems* 95). But humans also endure hardship through hope, that is, the “courage” to remain “glad” in “resolute doubt” and even in defeat. Such courage, more spiritual than physical, arises from the will; it is a choice, the vision of one who “accedes to mortality” by recognizing the inescapability of the human condition. Continuous struggle ensures survival.

In *What Are Years?*, hope stems from courage, self-discipline based on belief, craftsmanship and grace. But what secures and fortifies these qualities is a value rarely mentioned hitherto in Moore’s work: love. Moore adds the value of love to her poetry, a quality that demonstrates greater confidence in the power of poetic expression and greater assurance in both hope and belief. Love produces a steeling from within, a taking up of armour not to enable withdrawal but to fortify endeavour. “The Paper Nautilus,” the closing poem of the collection, asserts in its final lines that love “is the only fortress / strong enough to trust to” (*Poems* 122). The female paper nautilus raises her young carefully in a thin, glasslike shell, not to please artists and curious observers but to ensure her family’s survival. The “perishable” shell becomes her “souvenir of hope,” the house

for her eggs that she protectively guards “day and night” by cradling it in her eight arms. The poem remarks that Hercules, in his struggle with the hydra, found that his strength was renewed when bitten by Cancer (Engel 81). In a similar paradox, the nautilus and her shell become free when the new-hatched young no longer need supervision. The hatchling owes its success to the guarding arms of the nautilus, to the “fortress” of love. The nautilus may be a creature of instinct but her behaviour provides a model for humans.

The opening of *Nevertheless* reads as a continuation of the assertion that love is the only trustworthy fortress. The title poem of this collection, however, returns to the value of courage, presenting a series of examples of courageous behaviour in the face of difficulty: the apple seeds that are neatly patterned though locked in place, the roots of the dandelion that survive in frozen ground, and the prickly pear leaf that sends a shoot down to earth despite being caught on a barbed wire fence. These examples from the plant world display the possibility of survival despite, even because of, captivity. They demonstrate the need for resolute action; the speaker asserts, “Victory won’t come // to me unless I go / to it” (*Poems* 125). The poem ends with a final example of “fortitude”: the cherry stem that, despite its fragility, has provided the fruit with necessary sap. Thus, the love cited in “The Paper Nautilus” as an ultimate value is an ideal but, to prevail, it must be accompanied by hope grounded in courage and determination.

Moore further exemplifies such hope in “Elephants” (1943), which opens with the image of two interlocked elephant trunks. The two animals are united in a playful “pastime” as are the human mahout and his charge. The elephant’s body “cradles” the man, “unconscious” of his weight while the man seems elephant-like himself: “incised

with hard wrinkles, embossed with wide ears, / invincibly tusked, made safe by magic hairs!" (*Poems* 128). But Moore knows that animal and man are not one despite the appearance "as if" they were. The magical attainment of "serenity" is a "masterpiece" achieved only by the elephant who is "too wise / to mourn" (129) his own way of life. Like the plant life in "Nevertheless," the elephant represents "a life prisoner but reconciled," a captive with the wisdom to accept what he cannot prevent. He has straightened his trunk, has learned "reason" and has "revived," determined to live with dignity in a non-ideal world.

"These knowers" (130) inspire the idea that they are "allied to man" and indeed that they could "change roles with" him. "Hardship makes the soldier" whereas "teachableness" makes a philosopher, one who knows that he cannot be "sure that he knows." By depicting knowledge as so tenuous, Moore emphasizes the need for strong belief; only the person possessed by hope can sustain the discipline necessary for heroic behaviour. One necessity for serenity, for a willingness to live with uncertainty, is thinking in "as ifs": "As if, as if, it is all ifs; we are at / much unease" (*Poems* 128). Moore ultimately came to see the truth in this; there can be no cure for hopelessness save what the artist might purvey, what man might glean from the natural world. Moore seems at last to have felt that she could "perceive and champion determinate values" even though she remained a "vessel of indeterminacy" herself (Holley 121). Her exhortations to save the Camperdown Elm in Brooklyn's Prospect Park (1967) include necessity, hope and hopelessness: "It is still leafing; / still there. *Mortal* though. We must save it" (*Poems* 242).

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