Presenting: Marianne Moore

There was no frenzy about Marianne Moore. She composed not in fits and bursts, but patiently, sometimes over several years. She steadfastly refused to envisage herself as inspired. Her writing doesn’t flirt with gibberish. Her principal mode of production was accumulation. In her various notebooks – of quotations and conversations – she amassed the materials that would sometimes, eventually, constitute the fabric of her poems. One readily available way to view her, therefore, is as a collector, an antiquarian, rooting among the archives for choice additions: as a sub-sub-librarian, extracting and compiling, as a consumptive usher dusting off texts. From which way of reading Moore’s procedure – or rather, from which way of reading off her procedure on to her poems – one can quickly arrive at an image of an enthusiast of sorts: as the kind of enthusiast who, had she known other circumstances, might have founded a museum in an age when private collectors – Isabella Stewart Gardener or Henry Frick, for example – were accruing to American prestige the world’s artistic riches. But such a way of presenting Moore, conflating as it does intellectual curiosity with acquisition, and privileging matters of procedure over questions of form and technique, significantly diminishes her sensibility, and in the process misses the point of her enthusiasm.

To get closer to the point, one might, perhaps, think in terms of the question with which George Oppen opens his sequence ‘Five Poems about Poetry’. ‘The question is,’ Oppen writes, ‘how does one hold an apple / Who likes apples?’ This is a difficult question; not a question it is hard to understand, maybe, but a question to which it is difficult to make an adequate response. Supposing one likes apples, and one has an apple, should one hold it in such a way as to keep it to oneself, or should one hold it in order that others might enjoy it? Should you hold it at all, in fact, or, as the verb allows one to think, ought you rather to behold it? Or should you just eat it? It all depends, of course, on what one means by ‘likes’. This is to take the question literally. Taking the question analogously, understanding it to be in some sense ‘about
poetry’, the same sort of options present themselves, though with further difficulties as regards medium and method. So if one likes apples, and wants to demonstrate that attitude in language, how does one do so? What operations in language are the equivalent to holding close and holding out, to beholding and consuming? And then what further questions arise if one is working in language because one enjoys words; so that not only does one like apples, but one likes ‘apples’ also – the ‘p’s’ and the ‘l’, the way when you say the word you first have to open your mouth wide, before pursing your lips into a sort of pout, the way you breathe through the syllables as you activate your throat, the way the letters line up across the page. How, Oppen asks in his poems about poetry, should one handle language when one’s object in using the language is to present some thing that one likes?

Marianne Moore is a poet of things. Isolated things – jewels, curios, familiar and exotic animals, common and rare species of plant – are often the ostensible subjects of her poems. She is also a poet for whom words have properties not unlike things, not in the sense that she thinks of words as a concrete poet might, but in the sense that when, for instance, she quotes, the value of the quotation is as likely – sometimes more likely – to lie in the discrete properties of the fragment as it is to lie in the text to which the fragment refers, or in its meaning as originally framed. She is fond of groups of words, this is to say, in a sense comparable to the way some people are fond of objects, and the attention she ostensibly gives to things in her poetry is, at one level, an analogy for the way she handles words. It is because of this analogy – this close relation in her poetry between the handling of words and the handling of things – that a reading of Moore as a hoarder can take hold, because when a thing is collected, however regularly it is exhibited, it stays collected, it remains in somebody’s possession. Even where, for instance, a painting is purchased by the state, it will be construed as public property, a vexed description which accords individual members of the public limited rights in relation to the object, but which serves primarily to indicate how difficult it is to construe a thing as standing outside the relationship of ownership, that ‘property’ is a deeply embedded cultural property of things. But this is not true of the published word, even if the procedure that arrived at that word resembles that of the collector, as Moore spelled out in her Paris Review interview with Donald Hall. Answering his question about her predilection for quotation [and in the process answering the question of value raised here through Oppen] Moore tells Hall, as she told numerous interviewers through her career:

I was just trying to be honorable and not to steal things. I’ve always felt that if a thing had been said in the best way, how can you say it better? If I wanted to say something and somebody had said it ideally, then I’d take
it but I’d give the person the credit for it. That’s all there is to it. If you are charmed by an author, I think it’s a very strange and invalid imagination that doesn’t long to share it. Somebody else should read it, don’t you think?³

One task Moore set herself in her poetry, therefore, an obligation – ‘should’ – under which she wrote, was to present things, but more importantly words, she liked in such a way that she should be construed as sharing or passing on their value. In Oppen’s terms, she wanted, in language, to hold an apple in such a way that its value for her is clear, but that built into that sense of value is the commitment that others should enjoy it also. And what this implies in Moore is a double operation, involving the demonstration of the value things and words have for oneself, cherishing them perhaps, while also presenting them clearly enough that they might have a similar value for other people.

This task has to do with enthusiasm. In *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Lewis Hyde draws a partial analogy between religious enthusiasm and the gift, drawing the former into a picture of an economy which circulates without the aid, or intrusion, of money. The point of comparison is the direct communication upon which the idea of enthusiasm is founded. Hence,

> The deist’s attachment to reasonable discourse and his caution before the trembling body placed the spirit of his religion closer to the spirit of trade than to the spirit of the gift. In gift exchange no symbol of worth need be detached from the body of the gift as it is given away. Cash exchange, on the other hand, *depends* upon the abstraction of symbols of value from the substances of value.⁴

‘Cash exchange,’ by this way of thinking, and as Hyde formulates it, ‘is to gift exchange what reason is to enthusiasm.’ Plunging us back into the post-Kantian landscape of Walden Pond, Hyde’s analogy between gift economics and religious enthusiasm has the intention of showing how things can be made more available, how there are social practices which in their methods and modes desist from obscuring things behind symbols and mediations. There is in Hyde’s thinking, it should be noticed, in Marianne Moore’s terms, an ‘element of unreason’ – the phrase is from her poem ‘Black Earth’, subsequently retitled ‘Melanchthon’. ‘Will / depth be depth,’ Moore asks, in relation to the elephant that is the poem’s subject,

> thick skin be thick, to one who can see no beautiful element of unreason under it?⁵

In Moore, as in Hyde, as in Thoreau, there is a sense that things in themselves, in their depth and thickness, are made available by processes
other than, or supplementary to, reason. The prime instance in Hyde of such a process is the relatively unmediated gift economy, though as he indicates here he thinks enthusiasm might also be so conceived. As far as he explores it, however, his analogy is only partial because his sense of enthusiasm deals not with things but exclusively with god. Marianne Moore, I want to argue, can be thought of as tightening Hyde’s analogy. She does so by reorientating enthusiasm towards its Modern sense, so that in her habitual use of the term, enthusiasm shifts from a noun describing a state residing in a person, to a noun describing a relation between a person and a thing: ‘she has enthusiasm for...’, ‘he is an enthusiast of...’. ‘One applauds,’ she says of Stevens, ‘those analogies derived from an enthusiasm for the sea.’

This shift in the history of the word – Thoreau spoke always only of enthusiasm, not enthusiasm for – is contributory to and an index of a significant shift in the history of writing. Thus when, in 1924, Moore published *Observations* – the collection on which this essay will largely concentrate, and in which she emerged quite as fully herself as Stevens did in *Harmonium* – she made fully manifest for the first time a process which had been developing in American writing since Thoreau. More even than *The Waste Land*, *Observations* was a book constituted by other people’s words – words, as she told Hall, that she loved, words for which she had an enthusiasm. What Moore did in *Observations*, by the sheer density of her quotations, and in her demonstration (through her notes to the volume) of the integrity of quotation to her mode of composition, was to reconfigure the source of the poem. Thus, while Pound’s poetry was, or was to become, quite as dependent on quotation as anybody else’s, he held, in many of his prose statements at least, to a view of the poet as a divinely mandated figure. ‘No apter metaphor having been found for certain emotional colours. I assert that the Gods exist.’ For Moore, poetic assembler and arranger that she was, the sources of the poem lay very much less problematically in the world outside the poet: in the things she observed, and, crucially, in the statements people made about them, in the objects and words she found lying about her. Moore, in other words, was a Modern enthusiast, and in the forms of poetry that emerged from her enthusiasm she evolved a way of handling words which, while in its seeming connoisseurship can seem to invite it, in its instinct to pass on in fact denies the analogy of acquisition. One way to begin to understand this is through her prose.

**Enthusing**

Marianne Moore’s prose was not a systematic, nor, in the senses such a body of work might be, a unified enterprise. It does not make the kind of
claim on the reader that did the critical writing of some of her contemporaries. She did not set out, as Eliot did, to reorient the canon according to the virtues of a particular historical moment in an attempt to redirect modern taste; though like him she had arrived at an enduring commitment to the virtues of seventeenth-century prose stylists. She didn’t campaign, as Pound did, on behalf of favoured contemporaries, nor did she exhort readers to particular modes of action. She tended to write reviews rather than essays, money being one of her motives, though she largely restricted herself to work she admired; she cited Leo Stein’s resolve \(\text{as Patricia Willis, the editor of her Complete Prose, points out}\) ‘never to review a book unless essentially in sympathy with it’ (CPMM, 201). In this process she frequently returned to the work of major Modern writers, producing some of the most closely appreciative contemporary appraisals of, in particular, Stevens, Williams, Pound and HD. Pound she valued in part for a facet she termed his ‘master-appreciation’, and her collected prose has the miscellaneous quality it does in part because when reviewing her object was to show her subject not herself; her writing about others showed typical vigilance in the selection of quotation, and consisted in large part of intensely crafted, revelatory phrase-making. In part, also, the miscellaneousness comes from the subject matter: Moore was as happy writing about baseball, and movies, as poetry. There is an aesthetic at work throughout Moore’s prose; her paratactical, digressive syntax is very much her own, if schooled in the sermonizing of Browne and Donne. For the most part, however, her determining ethos emerges only in the manner of her approach and in passing comments, not as statement; with the exception, that is, of the Comment pieces she wrote while editor of The Dial between 1925 and 1929.

Moore wrote no poetry while editor of The Dial. As Willis sees it, the Comment pieces were the poetry’s substitute. There ‘one finds the wit... the delight in quotation, and the unlikely juxtapositions that mark her poems’ (CPMM, vi). For Margaret Holley, Moore’s poetic silence through this period ‘suggests the importance to her of The Dial undertaking as a public forum for the working out of ... issues, trends, and practices’ that had emerged in her poetry up to and until the publication of Observations.\(^7\) These are true statements, and we are lucky to have Moore’s Comment pieces. Intricately constructed, clearly benefiting from her otherwise dormant poetic attention, closely if illustratively argued and committed to a version of truth, this series of short pieces quite quickly developed into the working out of a highly significant twentieth-century aesthetic. Here, as in her poetry, Moore worked largely by observation and quotation rather than by pronouncement, there are no manifestos in Moore, no Poundian dos and don’ts. There is, however, in her Comments, an ongoing and deliberate amplification of the defining aspects of
her poetic practice; a practice which, as her statement of it evolves, comes to turn increasingly on the question of enthusiasm. What I will show in a moment is how, taken as a whole, Moore’s Comment series articulates a relation to things which takes the form of a circulatory aesthetic, which has a close bearing on her handling of language, and which she names enthusiastic. Her sense of enthusiasm, however, was finely calibrated, taking the outward, projective, transitive form that it did in proportion as her suspicion hardened towards conventional images of creativity. And to get the measure of this, to see how she came to formulate her defining attitude to words and things, it is necessary first to consider the prose she wrote prior to taking up the editorship of The Dial.

Determined though she was always to emphasize the laboriousness of her work – ‘I never knew anyone who had a passion for words who had as much difficulty in saying things as I do’ – Moore did not altogether expunge from her writing conventional images of creativity. In her reviewing, in particular, certain divinities persisted, and she was happy, when convinced she had found evidence of it, to acknowledge the work of inspiration. Awe is one of her critical modes, albeit sparingly used, as in, for instance, her commentary on the work of the contemporary Italian artist Alfeo Faggi published in The Dial in December 1922. ‘Remembering,’ as she puts it, ‘C.H. Herford’s comment upon Sir Thomas Browne’s contemporary Alexander Ross,’ an introductory circumlocution which has a bearing on the issue, ‘one hesitates,’ Moore writes of Faggi’s productions in general, ‘to appraise work – even to praise it – the inspiration of which is spiritual.’ Moore’s hesitation in the face of Faggi’s work has to do intimately with its manifestation of enthusiasm. Thus she notes in his Ka,

as in all his work, the controlled emotion, the mental poise which suggests the Absolute – a superiority to fetishism and triviality, a transcendence, an inscrutable dignity – a swordlike mastery in the lips, which suggests the martyr secure in having found the key to mystery. (CPMM, 74)

One can’t read this as anything other than admiration. Moore is unquestionably impressed. But she is also suspicious of the ‘martyr secure in having found the key to mystery’. The suspicion is broadly Kantian; the state of enthusiasm in which Faggi creates diminishes Moore’s capacity for ‘appraisal’. This is significant, ‘appraisal’ being a key intellectual function in Moore, her poetry like her prose being centrally concerned with assessments of value. But it is key also in that in Moore’s scheme ‘appraisal’ is a way of knowing: in ‘Critics and Connoisseurs’ the swan, initially unsure whether to trust the speaker’s offering, cannot resist its ‘proclivity to more fully appraise such bits / of food as the stream // bore counter to it’ (BMM, 77).
The value of Moore’s review of Faggi here is the productive uncertainty in which it finds her. ‘To grasp the nature of the phenomenon which *Dante* represents,’ she observes – *Dante* being a work by Faggi recently reproduced in an issue of *The Dial* – ‘is perhaps impossible to many of us since one cannot discern forces by which one is not oneself unconsciously animated.’ Moore, this is to say, does not think of herself as inspired, either religiously or aesthetically. Equally, Faggi’s work and all that it represents has an allure for her, causes in her a sort of yearning, hence her concluding observation that, ‘In the animating force of this bronze in its setting of physical power, is embodied the spiritual axiom that *Dante* has come to be’ (CPMM, 74–5). What this comes down to, as the history of enthusiasm tells us it should, is differing ways of knowing. Moore admires Faggi’s work not least for its certainty, for its direct acquaintance [martyr-like] with its source, with its ‘animating force’, a phrase which resonates with many a Moore animal poem. But she is also wary of the work, because of the way it disables her own way of knowing, appraisal being central among the ways she gets to know things. Arguably there is a lag here, arguably her poetry of this early period is more articulate on this tension than is her prose. The swan appraises because it cannot resist its proclivity to do so. Its knowledge is the result both of an unconscious animating force and an assessment of value. In her review of Faggi, however, there is a tension in Moore’s structure of judgement, between the inspiration she finds, and admires, in his work, and her inclination to appraise.

Such a sense of ‘animation’, of the ‘animating force’, recurs on occasion in Moore’s prose. With reference to Pound she later remarked, ‘Most of us have not the tongues of the spirit, but those who have, tell us that, by comparison, knowledge of the spirit of tongues is as insignificant as are the clothes worn by one in infancy’ (CPMM, 272). She is pleased, also, to quote George Saintsbury: ‘“The religion of literature is a sort of Pantheism. You never know when the presence of the Divine may show itself, though you should know where it has shown. And you must never forbid it to show itself, anyhow or anywhere”’ (CPMM, 189). And then, of course, such a sense of ‘animating forces’ as she finds in Faggi is frequently present, as is discussed later, in her poetry. In ‘When I Buy Pictures’, she requires of any picture she might buy, that

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\begin{align*}
\text{it must be “lit with piercing glances into the life of things”}; \\
\text{it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it.}
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[BMM, 101]

One has to register Moore’s acknowledgement of such ‘spiritual forces’ to appreciate that, as she reconfigured the idea of the poem – as she reorientated her own and her reader’s sense of poetry’s sources – there lingered in her thinking another idea of art’s animating impulse; that even as she displaced it
she understood the sway of old-time enthusiasm, that its trace retained a grip on her imagination.

Still, for the most part, when Moore toyed with the idea of inspiration it was with a qualification firmly in mind, as in, for instance, her reviews of her friend and fellow member of the Others group, HD. In these pieces, conspicuously, she was both drawn to and drew back from the old enthusiasm. She wrote beautifully about HD, emulating Pound’s ‘master-appreciation’, and nowhere more so than when considering *Hymen*:

One recognizes here, the artist – the mind which creates what it needs for its own subsistence and propitiates nothing, willing – indeed wishing to seem to find its only counterpart in the elements; yet in this case as in the case of any true artist, reserve is a concomitant of intense feeling, not the cause of it. (CPMM, 80)

Again, as in the discussion of Faggi, there is a deep concern here for creativity and its impulses, for what drives, and compels, and sustains the artist. But here again, only this time more centrally to the image, there is reserve, the idea of which Moore amplifies when she notices also in HD’s work, as ‘suggested by the absence of subterfuge, cowardice and the ambition to dominate by brute force’, a ‘heroics which do not confuse transcendence with domination and which in their indestructibleness, are the core of tranquility and of intellectual equilibrium’ (CPMM, 82). That description, of ‘heroics which do not confuse transcendence with domination’, is important for Moore, articulating as it does an aesthetic and political position which ran through the heart of her writing. So just as in ‘When I Buy Pictures’, she requires that art ‘must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it’, so she also demands that ‘it must not wish to disarm anything: nor may the approved triumph easily be honored – / that which is great because something else is small’ (BMM, 101). Transcendence must not be confused with domination. In a very early Comment piece, Moore takes as her subject for discussion a list of the world’s greatest educators as issued by Charles W Eliot, President Emeritus of Harvard. She is at pains to point out that the ‘domination of these ... sages [has] been implicit’ in the work of ‘lesser sages’, and also to advocate those lesser sages on the grounds that, ‘unmenaced as is the greatness of Dr. Eliot’s decemvirs, the unbookish are intimidated by greatness so inclusive’ (CPMM, 155). What this amounts to is a defence of miscellaneous reading. One of the ‘Labors of Hercules’, as her poem of that title puts it, is to persuade artists

that one must not borrow a long white beard and tie it on

and threaten with the scythe of time, the casually curious

(BMM, 105)
Transcendence, this is to say, must not be confused with domination in any area of life, and the terms of her politics are apparent in her criticism of Dr Eliot, her politically motivated poems responding precisely to situations of domination by inclusion. ‘Sojourn in the Whale’, ‘He Digesteth Harde Iron’ and ‘Spenser’s Ireland’ each coordinates its response to imperialism through a play of incorporation, the poetry absorbing the words of the dominant regime in the name of resistance, and incorporating alongside them hermeneutically stubborn elements. And then it was in the spirit, surely, of ‘heroics which do not confuse transcendence with domination’ that Moore arrived at her best-known self-presentation as an artist, repudiating poetry, and all that it might stand for in the public mind, and substituting for that image a sort of poetic administrator. ‘I have,’ she was pleased to recall from her early career, in answer to a question from Donald Hall, ‘a little wee book about two inches by three inches, or two and half by three inches, in which I systematically entered everything sent out, when I got it back, if they took it, and how much I got for it’. Here, as Moore recalls herself at the beginning of her career, filling in and ticking off, recording and amassing, is the poet as bureaucrat. It was a pose, but by no means entirely a disingenuous one. She was quite ready to admire the ‘animating force’ as and where she found it in another artist. Like HD, however, or at least as she presented her, it was Moore’s practice, in the content and the processes of writing, to resist domination. Enthusiasm, as she scratched around it in the reviews she wrote alongside her early poems, was a vexed and largely unresolved subject.

In her earliest prose, then, in the reviews she wrote while composing Observations, there are, if you ask questions of them, significant uncertainties, albeit around issues Moore was fixing on as her own. In the later prose (and at times in the poetry) there is a tendency, as she began to formulate questions of poetics in essays and lectures for particular occasions, towards an over-awareness of the audience – an awareness which became a sort of defensiveness, a tendency to hide her practice behind a too readily formulated paradox. In the series of Comment pieces, however, undistracted by the pressure to produce poetry, she was able to draw out the principles and elaborate on the innovations which had informed and defined her work to date. As she did so she set out to establish a place for her sensibility within the mainstream of American literature. She coordinated herself with the major themes and figures of American writing, and what that coordination turns on, centrally, is ‘things’.

Emerson is an early point of departure. Taking as her pretext, in March 1926, a study entitled The Religion of Undergraduates, and having prefaced her Comment with an epigraph from Sir Thomas Browne – ‘I am sure there is a common spirit that plays within us, yet makes no part of us’ – Moore quotes...
from ‘The American Scholar’: “‘We, it seems, are critical ... We cannot enjoy anything for hankering to know whereof the pleasure consists; we are lined with eyes, we see with our feet; the time is infected with Hamlet’s unhappiness’” (CPMM, 160-1). This is familiar territory. Emerson’s argument is for a different relation with things, a less critical, less alienated, more direct relation. It was such a relation Thoreau settled at Walden to establish. It was towards such directness that Pound invented Imagism. Where Moore wants to be seen to differ from her fellow Americans is in her particular sense of how writing might acquaint itself with things. Thus, picking up what was clearly a salient feature of her own poetry in a Comment of three months later, she observed that ‘Perfect diction is not particularly an attribute of America’. She finds it in Henry James, in his ‘geometrically snow-flake forms’, but identifies it more readily in European prose:

We attribute to let us say Machiavelli, Sir Francis Bacon, John Donne, Sir Thomas Browne, Doctor Samuel Johnson, a particular kind of verbal effectiveness – a nicety and point, a pride and pith of utterance, which is in a special way different from the admirableness of Wordsworth or Hawthorne. Suggesting conversation and strengthened by etymology there is a kind of effortless compactness which precludes ornateness. (CPMM, 165)

The aim of ‘perfect diction’ is not, as one might half-suspect given the examples she presents, ‘ornateness’, but ‘effectiveness’, where the desired effect is a clearer relation with things. ‘Perfect diction’, in other words, is elemental to Moore’s handling of that which she values, as for instance in her account of an exhibition of typography at the Grolier Club, where the excitement is held to lie chiefly in the way, for instance,

The intensively stiff Lorenzo de Medici-like augustness of the Breydenbach fifteenth-century Perigrinatio detains one as does the perpendicular esprit and fencing-foil erectness of the lines on the page at which the 1491 Schatzbehalta is open, and there is a 1499 Aldus edition – open at pairs of elephants, flutes, harps, banners and other constituents of a triumph. (CPMM, 173–4)

By picking out the ‘intensively stiff Lorenzo de Medici-like augustness of the Breydenbach fifteenth-century Perigrinatio’ Moore situates herself in the mainstream of American literature, where that mainstream, starting with Walden, is post-Kantian in its resolve to renew people’s acquaintance with things. Where Moore differs is in her sense of how this might be achieved. Exactness of diction is not as foreign to America as Moore would have us think – Thoreau’s project, in all its erudition, was towards a perfected lexicon
of the lake, and the scholarship of *Moby-Dick* was an essential, albeit not exhaustive component of Melville’s presentation of the whale. But in both of these writers as in Pound there lurked the enthusiast’s suspicion of the text, as if finally the purpose of writing was somehow to open itself up, so that the world and its items might rush directly through. Moore, by contrast, though quite as committed to things – as committed to ostriches and pelicans as Melville was to the whale – presents an epistemology which esteems, above all attributes, fineness of diction, hence her keenness for the nomenclature of the connoisseur. This, it would seem, is her response to the inspiration of the likes of Alfeo Faggi, her fastidious appraisal substituting for his direct acquaintance with his source. And so again, what would seem to emerge is a picture of Moore as poetic collector, acquainting with things through the fineness of her discriminations. What disrupts this image, however, or should disrupt it, is the fact that at every level of her expression Moore is concerned to circulate stuff. It might be as a connoisseur that she would seem to approach the world; her object, however, is not to amass things, but to pass them on.

Thus it is crucial to Moore, as she articulates her aesthetic in her Comments, that she should develop a language for transmission. Excitement is one means, as in the account of literary inheritance she gives in her Comment of April 1926:

> we may admire, and the shock of admiration may serve as an incentive to writing, quite as may that which has been experienced by us; but like the impelling emotion of actual experience, literary excitement must be assimilated before it can be reproduced ... Apperception is, however, quite different from a speedy exchange of one’s individuality for that of another. [CPMM, 162]

This is a standard enough account, though it is worth noting in passing how Moore qualifies her remarks, and how her qualifications here – the assimilation preceding reproduction – check the easy flow of inspiration from one author to another that Melville wanted to assert by his allusion to *Ion*. A less standard, more far-reaching sense of transmission and its possibilities is offered in her Comment of June 1926, where the issue is not literary indebtedness, but charity. Addressing the present age’s tendency towards conspicuous consumption – ‘our present economically irresponsible detailed ornateness’ – Moore considers the argument whether charity is selflessness or show. Focusing attention on cultural and artistic charitable gestures, she considers a litany of recent donations and endowments – for instance Mr. Rockefeller’s funding of a museum of antiquities in Egypt – and wonders also ‘what species of self-exultation is evinced by the recent anonymous gift to one
of our universities of a million dollars for the establishing of an art school?’
Moore’s gently polemical, and by no means water-tight conclusion, is that, ‘It
does seem to us that there is active today, an altruism which is disinterested’
(CPMM, 169). This is a hunch, and tells us little about what might actually be
at work, psychologically and economically, in the donations and endowments
of American capitalists. What the piece does clearly point to, however, is
Moore’s highly self-conscious pursuit of a sustainable, non-profit-accruing
mode of transmission. The desire for such a way of passing things on goes
deep with her, running, I will argue, freely from her prose into her poetry. ‘To
part with a valuable thing without losing it,’ she asserts in her Comment,
‘bespeaks for this thing, a very special kind of value.’ It is in that statement,
one could argue, that Moore speaks to George Oppen’s question; that what
one does with an apple who likes apples is somehow to part with it without
losing it. One has a sense, perhaps, of what she means to say, though that does
not remove the difficulty of the operation. But then, as elsewhere she quotes
Chesterfield as saying, ‘“The manner of giving shows the genius of the giver
more than the gift itself”’ (CPMM, 194).
So here’s the argument: in the Comment pieces she wrote while editor of
The Dial Marianne Moore strives to articulate a principle which goes to the
core of her poetry. The principle has to do with the way writing handles that
which it most values, where the objects of value are both things and words,
and where the aim is somehow to be able to part with a thing without losing
it. It is a thing of special value, she suggests, that permits such an operation,
but the operation itself would also be special. It would be a special kind of
giving, and Moore’s genius, one might argue, following Chesterfield, is
precisely to be found in the manner of her giving. But giving is only one
language of transmission Moore turns to as she tries to articulate the principle
at stake in her writing. Literary inspiration is another nomenclature, and
charity is another. And another, as she gets into her stride as editor and as
Comment writer, and as her conceptualising of her own aesthetic impulses
develops, is what she wants to call enthusiasm.

Moore admires enthusiasm. Writing in the Comment of November 1926, she
was pleased to welcome Children’s Book Week, which ‘bespeaks as annually,
the irrelevantly necessary enthusiasm of grown people. ... If it is possible to be
both hidebound and hospitable, children’s books presented collectively can
perhaps more than others, make one so’ (CPMM, 175). The approval is
qualified. The enthusiasm grown people show for children’s books is
irrelevant, but it is also necessary – it demonstrates something vital in them.
A similar claim is made in her Comment of March 1927, where in this case
the argument centres on happiness, and on how modern existence seems to
militate against it. The pre-texts for the discussion are books presenting old New York: Mark Sullivan’s *In Our Times* and Henry Collins Brown’s *The Elegant Eighties*. It is with obvious relish – she sounds like the Whitman of *Specimen Days* – that Moore catalogues the things and places, the ‘prides, misfortunes, and whims of one-time New York’. And ‘as Greek architecture rendered domestic by Thomas Jefferson, seems colonial; New York seems as one reads of it... national; and although an occasional rococo facetiousness scarcely augments vividness, one’s rhetorical ear pardons to enthusiasm, incidental offenses’ (CPMM, 180). The argument in this piece is more looping, digressive and artful than ever, but what it comes down to is a thesis about loss, about the way Modernity homogenizes culture. This is the argument, in part, of ‘To a Steamroller’ also, where the forces in question ‘crush all the particles down / into close conformity’. In her Comment piece what Moore considers has been lost, for all its rococo facetiousness, is ‘enthusiasm’.

This is not Thoreau’s enthusiasm, and it is not Melville’s: the term doesn’t have here its mid-nineteenth-century charge. But it does have a charge, a charge which, as she developed her argument, was all Moore’s own. Witness her discussion of a recent book about Caxton featuring his prologues and epilogues, where, as she sees it, ‘The antique strengths and refinements of speech and thought in these originals kindle by their substance and manner, enthusiasm for exactness of production and depth of learning’ (CPMM, 181). Enthusiasm here is, as it were, transitive rather than revelatory. It is for, and fixes on, things and artefacts, rather than being of the spirit. But precisely as she resists an aesthetic which, as she sees it, implies domination – precisely as, apparently, she prefers not to construe her work as an opening up to other forces – so she recognizes enthusiasm to constitute a different kind of circulation. In her clearest statement of the importance of art’s circulatory role, the Comment she wrote for *The Dial* in February 1929 [shortly before the closure of the magazine], she opens with a statement of the privileges and values of the marginalized artist: ‘When an artist is willing that the expressiveness of his work be overlooked by any but those who are interested enough to find it, he has the freedom in which to realize without interference, conceptions which he personally values’ (CPMM, 214). Such private valuing, connoisseurship if you like, is not to be discounted; but nor, she wants to argue, is its apparent opposite, advertising. Here again she qualifies: it is not that she wants to put her name to such advertising as places a ‘strain upon credulity’, but

The semi-confidential impartial enthusiasm of the pre-auction descriptive catalogue suggests a desirable mechanics of eulogy and the same kind of honor without exaggeration is seen occasionally in guide-books and travel bureau advertisements. (CPMM, 215)
Here, surely, is a portrait of Moore: ‘semi-confidential’, ‘impartial’, ‘descriptive’, hunting among the catalogues, the travel bureau publications and the guide books. These are the media she likes, those by which she holds out against art which ‘confuses transcendence with domination’, against art which construes enthusiasm as an act of self-surrender. And here it is that she articulates another version of enthusiasm, ‘enthusiasm’ as ‘a desirable mechanics of eulogy’. The question here, as in Thoreau, Melville and Pound, is how to pass things on. The secret, as she observes, is to do so in such a way that one parts with a thing without losing it. Enthusiasm, as she construes it, is a way of conceiving of this. To enthuse about a thing is to enjoy it and to make it available to another person. Enthusiasm is a ‘desirable mechanics of eulogy’. It is a way of liking one’s apple and passing it on.

This double operation – valuing and transmitting – is central to Moore’s poetry, to its key devices and techniques. It is as an enthusiast, I want to argue, that Moore gives such thought to the way she displays her materials; and it is as a Modern enthusiast, I would suggest, that she gives her poetry over so frequently to other people’s words. To put this another way, Moore’s defining innovations as a poet flow from the new construction she came to place on enthusiasm in her series of Comments, the accumulated arguments of which amplify, and so better enable one to appreciate, the principles she had been bumping up against in her poetry.

**Displaying**

So as to resist the analogy of collection, the image of Moore as poetic hoarder, the question was asked, following Oppen, ‘How does one hold an apple / Who likes apples?’ Moore’s response to this question, the question of how one handles what one values, was to try, as she put it in her prose, to determine a way of parting with a thing without losing it, a way, in language, of holding (where holding means, in part, cherishing) and at the same passing on. This is a matter, in the fullest sense of the term, of presentation, of how one presents a thing, or, as it surfaced in Moore’s poetry, a question of display. How, she wanted always to establish, should she best display the elements of her writing such that the poem might be understood not to be possessing them but to be passing them on. Or to put this another way, what operations in language best accommodated and articulated her kind of enthusiasm?

The question of how the elements of her writing might best be displayed informed all aspects of Moore’s thinking about her work from the beginning. She deliberated much longer than most poets, for instance, on the question of publication, telling Pound, in the first letter she wrote to him, ‘I do not
appear’, ‘I grow less and less desirous of being published, produce less and have a strong feeling for letting alone what little I do produce. My work jerks and rears and I cannot get up my enthusiasm for embalming what I myself, accept conditionally.’ The far-reaching thought here is that poetry does not display itself well, that publication is not, as Emily Dickinson thought, an auction, but an embalming. The more pressing question was when, or whether, to publish a book. Robin Schulze tells this story best. In the course of charting the ‘Becoming’ of Marianne Moore, she documents how to Moore’s great dismay HD and Bryher took the matter into their own hands and produced a pamphlet of poems under the imprint of The Egoist Press. Moore’s response to Bryher was categorical: ‘I had considered the matter from every point of view and was sure of my decision – that to publish anything now would not be to my literary advantage’ (BMM, 24). Only, in fact, when the call had become irresistible, when Eliot and Pound had both written urging her to publish, and when The Dial had offered its annual award (worth $2000) should she take her book to them, did Moore consent to ‘appear’. And when she did appear she was more than particular about how: Observations came, complete with an index and a set of supporting annotations, and the poems themselves came carefully revised, differing in numerous cases from their appearance in magazines.

One further index of its importance in her earliest work is the fact of display as content, the fact of the number of earlier poems which have as their central purpose an exhibition. Take for instance ‘To a Chameleon’, the third poem in Observations:

HID by the august foliage and fruit of the grape vine,
Twine
Your anatomy
    Round the pruned and polished stem,
    Chameleon.
Fire laid upon
    An emerald as long as
    The Dark King’s massy
One,
Could not snap the spectrum up for food as you have done.

(BMM, 53)

This is a poem all about display. The chameleon is a display animal, deploying display to accommodate the elements of its environment, showing those elements to its own best advantage. Then there is the matter of the poem’s entwining form; few poets, probably, since George Herbert have given as much care as Moore evidently wanted her reader to know she had, to the
question of how to present a poem. It is the formal aspect of Moore’s sense of display that I want to concentrate on here, though not chiefly as that implies Herbert-like mimesis. ‘To a Chameleon’ is in every sense, as commentators have pointed out, an emblematic poem, where part of its value is to give emblematic expression to Moore’s concern for presentation. It is not, however, typical; Moore was rarely aiming for that kind of copy. What she sought, rather, were formal principles which might best accommodate her desire to part with a thing without losing it; formal principles of interest here not least as they point towards the enthusiasms of the New York School. Take the miscellany, which perhaps Moore developed a fondness for through her reading in the seventeenth century, and the case for which she made in her Dial Comment of May 1927. ‘Academic feeling,’ she notes,

or prejudice possibly, in favor of continuity and completeness is opposed to miscellany – to music programs, composite picture exhibitions, newspapers, magazines, and anthologies. Any zoo, aquarium, library, garden, or volume of letters, however, is an anthology. ... The science of assorting and the art of investing an assortment with dignity are obviously not being neglected. (CPMM, 182)

The question the miscellany goes to answer is how best to present things; how to present things in such a way that they are most clearly themselves. Its response is difference. An apple, say, is perhaps best presented in its appleness by placing it alongside an orange, or for that matter a sardine; or a newspaper cutting, or a flag. Perhaps the best setting for an apple, in fact, would be a painting by Robert Rauschenberg. The miscellanist judges that the art of presenting lies in large part in juxtaposition. Moore understood editing like this. When asked about the value of The Dial, she told Donald Hall:

It was a matter of taking a liking to things. Things that weren’t in accordance with your taste ... And we didn’t care how unhomogenous they might seem. Didn’t Aristotle say that it is the mark of a poet to see resemblances between apparently incongruous things.12

Moore is right about The Dial, and she is right in general about the literary magazine, that it serves its elements best by not caring for homogeneity, though this, of course, is to make a demand on the reader, to require the same discernment of him and her as Aristotle called for in the poet. But Moore’s discussion of miscellany points towards her own writing also. Thus, ‘However expressive the content of an anthology, one notes that a yet more distinct unity is afforded in the unintentional portrait given, of the mind which brought the assembled integers together’ (CPMM, 183). ‘Integer’ is ‘perfect diction’: a thing whole in itself, it is the root of integral and integrity, where
the element is considered in relation to the whole. Moore thus asks us, here, to imagine a mode of presentation in which each item is whole in and unto itself, but also of the whole, and where both, unintentionally perhaps, present a portrait of the assembling mind. Assembling integers, by this way of thinking, is an act of enthusiasm, a way of displaying things in order that their singular value might best be appreciated.

The principles of the miscellany flow freely into other of Moore's characteristic formal and procedural choices. As, for instance, in her fondness for the catalogue, indicated early by A Fool, a Foul Thing, a Distressful Lunatic', with its amplified list of conventionally misapprehended birds: the gander, the Egyptian vulture and the loon, between them gesturing towards 'folly's catalogue'. Barely distinguishable from the act of cataloguing is the act, characteristic of early Moore in particular, of amassing, as in the amassed countries [and conventional prejudices] in 'England', and the amassed animals of 'My Apish Cousins', and the amassed illustrations of 'When I Buy Pictures'. Here again, of course, in the mention of amassing, one would seem to be recasting Moore as a poetic collector, as if, to repeat, her intention was an imaginary private hoard. And it is precisely from such easy readings of her procedural innovations that the image of Moore as an acquirer emerges. The problem is to do with the reading – no poet’s procedure is their whole story; but the problem is also to do partly with the language available to poets, critics, readers and citizens alike, for the description of people’s relations to things. Amassing and accumulating are among the best words we have for describing how Moore proceeds in her poems, and neither, given their financial connotations, is an instance of perfect diction. Actually, probably, the word Moore wants for the way she handles things doesn't quite exist; I hope, of course, I am getting close to it by speaking of her enthusiasm. In practice, though, it is a motivating fact in Moore’s career that there is no simple way of describing the relation – somehow parting with but not losing – she wants to have with words and things. It is out of this linguistic deficit, in other words, that the poems are written.

Take ‘When I Buy Pictures’, which is at every stage an argument with the implications of amassing, but which is also its freely acknowledged procedure. An argument is stated clearly at the beginning. She doesn’t buy pictures; she imagines herself their possessor. But this isn’t the whole argument because she hasn’t sufficiently rewritten the relation – the image is still of possession. Closer to the nub of the argument is the suggestion, patiently articulated, that

Too stern an intellectual emphasis upon this quality or that, detracts from one’s enjoyment;
it must not wish to disarm anything; nor may the approved triumph easily be honored -
that which is great because something else is small.

It comes to this: of whatever sort it is,

it must be “lit with piercing glances into the light of things”;

it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it.

I want to say two things in response to this. The first has to do with emphasis. What is being called – what Moore herself called – the practice of amassing has an implication for emphasis. The implication, as the assorted things are placed beside one another, is that none carries too stern an emphasis, that none is emphasized more than any other, that the poem is free, in its even-handedness and evenness of tone, from domination. ‘When I Buy Pictures’ is thus a poem about not dominating, a poem about having relations with things which do not depend – as buying does – on domination. The second thing I want to say, or at least hazard, is that right at the end there, with the requirement that any picture in question ‘acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it’, Moore, in her poem about possession, falls back on enthusiasm. Enthusiasm, I want to say, can be about possession – the religious enthusiast can very well be thought of as possessed – but it can also be about transmission, about the desire to pass things on, freely to acknowledge that which has ‘made’ it. There isn’t a single word, perhaps, for the way Moore handles things in her poems, but one of her words was enthusiasm, that good mechanics of eulogy, and not without reason.

In shifting, here, to the question of emphasis, as qualification of the implications of amassing, the discussion moves from questions of procedure to questions of form, a poem’s formal properties being the province of its emphasis, or refusal to emphasize – the chief means it has of displaying and presenting. Beneath the mechanics of her procedure, then, are the articulations of Moore’s formal innovations, all of which are dedicated to an equality of display. Take light rhyme, her keenness for which Moore described clearly to Donald Hall, and which Margaret Holley writes about expertly in *Marianne Moore: Voice and Value.*

‘I like light rhymes,’ Moore told Hall, ‘inconspicuous rhymes and unpompous conspicuous rhymes.’ A shimmering instance of this is her poem ‘The Fish’, which one has to read more than once to appreciate that the machinery holding the poem together consists in part of a rhyme featuring the first word of each stanza. This word – the only word of the line – rhymes with the third and final word of the second line. Another isolated word, the fourth line, rhymes with the last word of the fifth. Sometimes the words are feature words, ‘wade’ and ‘jade’; sometimes they are incidental, ‘an’ and ‘fan’. They are conspicuous only as far as everything in the poem is conspicuous, the point of this poem about water being that nothing can ‘hide / there for the submerged shafts of the // sun’ (BMM, 85). That such a contrived rhyme scheme can manage not to insist upon itself has to do with
emphasis, is a consequence of Moore’s predilection for prose rhythms rather than metre. Nothing is emphasized, and so everything is emphasized; parts come variously into view. Or to put it another way, the poem doesn’t dominate its integers: rather they are assembled, and held out, for the reader’s pleasure.

One might, with justice, say a similar thing of Moore’s collage poems, ‘An Octopus’ being her most striking instance of this, where the achievement of the work is precisely in the assembling of the integers. One might cite, for instance, the line

comprising twenty-eight ice fields from fifty to five hundred feet thick of unimagined delicacy

(BMM, 125)

where a part of speech taken, very likely, from a ‘government pamphlet’, or a natural history, sits uncompromisingly, and uncompromised, next to a seemingly lyric utterance. Or one might observe such listed elements as:

the birch trees, ferns, and lily pads,
avanche lilies, Indian paint-brushes
bears’ ears and kittentails.

(BMM, 128-9)

Here we are somewhere between Walden and James Schuyler’s Freely Espousing, where what is being placed before us are instances in the natural word, but more so the words that are picking them out. Moore relishes the words, that’s why she uses them, and so she hands them on as unmediated (by cadence, emphasis or formal intervention) as she is able. She takes the words into her poem – where she holds them out.

One might say a similar thing again for the shift, in Moore, from the mainly free verse of Observations to the syllabics of her poems of the 1930s, where artfully designed stanzaic forms advertise the poet’s desire to display, and where the forms are derived from rigorous syllable counts; so rigorous that one can become obsessed by them, and can start thinking again of Moore as no more than a proceduralist, as a bureaucrat of poetry, dogging content with questions of inappropriate form. Except that so supple are Moore’s unmetred rhythms, and so light her rhymed emphasis, that the effect of the forms is not to dominate language but to show it anew. Charles Tomlinson picks out an early example in ‘Melanchthon’ (titled ‘Black Earth’ in Observations’), observing that, ‘We are, among other details, made by her syllabic lay-out to take cognisance of the humbler components of language, the “to it” and the “with it”’. To put this another way, in her miscellaneousness, her assorting, her amassing, her cataloguing and her beautiful handling of emphasis; in her
syllabics and her stanza formation, her unmetred rhythms and her light rhymes, Moore composed poems thoroughly dedicated to the act of presentation, intricate machines, one might think, purpose built for the display of their own bits and pieces. In her determination not to dominate the assembled integers of her poems, to hold them forth for the reader’s equal and maximum enjoyment, she arrived at a medium capable of parting with but not losing that which she valued. In other words, she perfected an expression of her enthusiasm.

Quoting

In the event, Moore was right to have worried about the question of publication. When her *Poems* as presented by HD and Bryher appeared, it was to largely unsympathetic, not to say hostile reviews. Writing in the *TLS*, Harold Child went to the heart of the issue, accusing her, as Schulze reports, of ‘writing pointless, contrived poems’ in order to conceal her lack of inspiration. Harriet Monroe compiled a ‘symposium’ of responses to her work, affording most space to commentators who concurred with Child’s line. Marion Strobel complained: ‘she makes us so conscious of her knowledge! And because we are conscious that she has brains, that she is exceedingly well-informed, we are the more irritated that she has not learned to write with simplicity’ (BMM, 26). While Bryher, ‘the woman who,’ as Schulze observes, ‘had funded her volume’, wrote that ‘The temperament behind the words is not a passive one.... The spirit is robust, that of a man with facts and countries to discover and not that of a woman sewing at tapestries. But something has come between the free spirit and its desire’ (BBM, 26). Moore was dismayed, but, to her credit, not discouraged by this reception, such that when she published *Observations*, she accentuated the aspects of her writing to which reviewers had taken exception. The book appeared with a more elaborate apparatus than even sophisticated readers of Modern poetry might have expected, extensive notes on the poems’ sources being supplemented by a comprehensive index (to the poems and the notes) of titles, phrases, key words and names. Not that Moore’s early reviewers should be dismissed. In their antagonism to her work, in their complaints about its lack of inspiration and its mediating knowledge, and in Moore’s subsequent response to these complaints, a significant question was being raised: where, Moore and her critics were asking, should Modern poetry come from?

Moore’s notes on her sources can seem a sufficient response to this question. The poems, Moore wants us to understand, have their origin very largely in her reading, whether as tributes to other writers, or more
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straightforwardly, in that her writing is made up of other people’s words. The notes underline what the quotation marks in the poems already indicate. They also add to the whole enterprise a scholarly or antiquarian air, as if, again, Moore was principally a collector of texts. Her early reflections on the act of composition would seem to confirm the point. Thus, in ‘The Accented Syllable’, a short essay she wrote for The Egoist, which opens, delightedly, with a series of quotations – presenting the pleasures of other people’s words – she quotes Butler on quotation: “‘As I have said over and over again, if I think something that I know and greatly like [in music] no matter whose it is, is appropriate, I appropriate it.’” (CPMM, 31). Poets often speak boldly of theft. Just as in ‘When I Buy Pictures’, however, where the issue was precisely that the speaker didn’t buy pictures – that there was a linguistic deficit when accounting for the relation between people and things – so ‘appropriation’ is not a satisfactory metaphor for Moore’s art of quotation, and not least as it underestimates the force the practice has in her work.

In part the underestimation has to do with the sheer density of quotation in Moore. Thus, as we have considered the enthusiasms of Thoreau, Melville and Pound, citation has naturally surfaced as a significant element in their practice. Each writer opened writing to others’ words, with, in the order given, growing self-consciousness. In none of these cases, however, was quotation quite as integral to their compositional practice as it was to Moore. Moore’s notebooks of quotation run to thirteen volumes, this in addition to the numerous conversation notebooks (a variation on the theme). What the metaphor of appropriation doesn’t answer to in this practice, what her own remark about ideal phrasing doesn’t reveal, is its programmatic quality. It wasn’t only, in other words, that she would defer or resort to a preferable way of saying a thing when that saying occurred to her; it was that absorbing other people’s words was a foundational element of the compositional process. Moore, this is to say, didn’t simply clutch at previous ways of saying as they happened to suit, but, as will be observed, in her systematic use of quotation she reconfigured the source of the poem.

There is a further sense, however, in which appropriation is not an adequate metaphor for Moore’s citational practice, taking us back to the notes which, as Margaret Holley has observed, are neither complete – Moore mentions some sources but not others – nor provide a full account of all the phrases they reference, for the reason that often Moore will have altered for the purposes of the poem the words that appear in the note. Sometimes, also, the note will contain other words, which promise and sometimes deliver context – the notes on the fur trade in relation to ‘New York’, for instance, carry the poem beyond itself and towards the ‘experience’ it means to catch – though not infrequently the additional annotation will serve only as a
digression. As Holley puts it, therefore, what looks like ‘transcription’ in Moore is quite often ‘transformation’. The idea of appropriation, with all the connotations and analogies attendant on it, is deficient as an account of the value of quotation to Moore, of the way it figures in the origins of the poem, of the way it alters her writing. Rather, as it stirs the compositional process it functions as the poetry’s enthusiasm.

One way to think of this would be as citation standing in for inspiration, for the force and impulse Moore’s early critics found her poetry to lack. And Observations does act out this substitution. Thus, a number of poems comment on their own emptiness or hollowness. In ‘Pedantic Literalist’, for instance, it is charged – Moore anticipating her reviewers – that

> What stood
> Erect in you has withered. A
> Little “palm tree of turned wood”
> Informs your once spontaneous core in its
> Immutable production.

(BMM, 75)

Ironically, teasingly, the ‘excerpt’ is from Richard Baxter’s ‘The Saint’s Everlasting Rest’. Thus, a text which deals with the presence of the divine is made to make up for the lack of that presence in Moore’s poem. What stands in for inspiration, in other words, is quotation, and quite often what seems to be at issue in Observations is this kind of incorporation, others’ words being used in proportion as the poems want (or repudiate) inspiration. This is one version of Moore’s practice. An Octopus’ and ‘Marriage’ are the prime instances of it, where in both cases the real subject matter – the sublime and love respectively – would conventionally, in poetry, imply an animating spirit. In both collage pieces, however, the sources of the poem are, to all intents and purpose, other agencies’ remarks, citation thus standing in for inspiration.

But true as this sometimes seems, it is not the whole truth, the metaphor of substitution, like the metaphor of appropriation, underestimating the degree to which citation informs the making of the poem, the degree to which, in her reconfiguring of the act of composition, Moore allowed the practice of citation to operate on her imagination. To state this as a claim: a Moore poem, I would suggest, is often – much of her most substantial work is like this – a seeking after another voice, where the mind (and language) in which that voice might be articulated is achieved through the act of quotation, through opening the poem up to the words of other agencies, where agency might mean poets, or friends, or passers-by, or (more literally) government departments, or park authorities. To trace this from the point of inception,
when asked how a poem starts for her, she said: ‘A felicitous phrase springs to mind – a word or two’. From the beginning, the poem is understood as being open to other sources, ‘words’ as ‘springs’, ‘springs’ as ‘words’. And frequently, and throughout, as the poem develops, those sources are in the manner of quotations. There is, she observed, in an essay on ‘Sir Francis Bacon’ and by way of a commentary on sources – on what sustains a poem – ‘a renovating quality in the work of early writers, as also in so-called “broken” speech in which we have the idiom of one language in the words of another’ (CPMM, 98). This is integral to the process of a Moore poem: invariably others’ words renew her work; invariably her work consists, one way or another, in broken speech. Often, however, the object of a poem seems to be to avail itself of some other source still, which is not the poet, and which is not simply a borrowed phrase.

‘My Apish Cousins’ is a good example of this, as of various aspects of Moore’s procedure. The poem consists of more or less uniform stanzas – subject to the limitation of page size in Observations – with the stanzas having as a key formal principle the unemphasized rhyme. The poem sustains itself by the procedure called here, for want of a better word, ‘amassing’ (in this case various animals and their characteristics), breaking part way through into a transformed quotation, the note to the poem recalling that, ‘An old gentleman during a game of chess’ remarked: ‘“It is difficult to recall the appearance of what one might call the minor acquaintances twenty years back”’ (BMM, 139). The poem only makes part use of this remark, and it fragments what it uses, interspersing the old chess players’ words with words we take to be the poem’s own. All of this is by way of preparation for – as setting or prelude to – a speech which comes as if from nowhere:

“They have imposed on us with
their pale
half fledged protestations, trembling about
in inarticulate frenzy, saying
it is not for us to understand art; finding it
all so difficult, examining the thing

as if it were inconceivably arcanic, as symmetrically
frigid as if it had been carved out of chrysoprase
or marble – strict with tension, malignant
in its power over us and deeper
than the sea when it proffers flattery in exchange
for hemp,
rye, flax, horses, platinum, timber, and fur.”

(BMM, 82)
Even within the grammar of the poem it is not clear who or what this speech is spoken by – by the cat likened to Gilgamesh, or by its resolute tail. Actually, of course, it is spoken by neither, and in being spoken by neither is, in effect, spoken by nothing, or by something else altogether. What we approach here, in fact, is oracular speech. A speech, that is, which does not properly belong to any of the poem’s available speakers, but which nonetheless speaks through the poem. It is a speech, as we are to understand, of ‘inarticulate frenzy’, a speech, as the poem implies, spoken from a point of view of seeming intellectual disadvantage; a speech which ends, Thoreau-like, by giving voice to things.

Numerous Moore poems arrive at this kind of outcome, seem to have it as their intention. Invariably, in other words, what the poem is aiming to do is give articulate form to an otherwise voiceless, or unconscious, agency or force, to give voice to a force informing the subject of the poem, or the poem itself – which prior to writing the poem wasn’t available. ‘Black Earth’ is like this, with its beautiful expression of the ‘element of unreason’. ‘Critics and Connoisseurs’, likewise, identifies forms of, and gives voice to, ‘unconscious / fastidiousness’. ‘Virginia Britannia’ documents and quotes, and in its supreme moment, ‘unable to suppress’ the brown hedge-sparrow’s ‘reckless / ardor’, ‘flutes his ecstatic burst of joy’ (PMM, 215). A Moore poem, in other words, characteristically sets out to voice something which would otherwise, but for the writing of the poem, be unavailable, opening itself to quotation in a compositional process which has as its object, as Henry James’ phrase in ‘New York’ has it, ‘“accessibility to experience”’; to, as Moore’s own magnificent phrase puts it, ‘articulate unconscious force’.

This is not to mystify Moore. Rather it is to suggest how deep her practice of quotation goes. Quotation, to recapitulate, the availability of the poem to others’ words, was an integral part of Moore’s compositional process. It is the poem’s source, stirring and making it possible. The poem is available to other voices. Such voices open it up. They are its openings, to use George Fox’s suggestive phrase, and once open, the poem can construe itself as voicing that which otherwise it doesn’t know. There is an analogy here with Thoreau, where the uttering of others’ words, and of the language as others’ words, permitted – as Thoreau hoped – the voicing of that which was prior to language. The difference is that, more even than in Thoreau, the focus of activity in Moore is not the writer but the writing, not the poet but the poem. It is the poem which is quite deliberately opened up to other voices, and the poem which through that process hopes for an ‘“accessibility to experience”’. Because, this is to say, not in spite of, its practice of citation, a Moore poem is understandable as an enthusiastic text.
Knowing

Marianne Moore was famously suspicious of poetry. Writing for the *Christian Science Monitor* under the heading ‘Subject, Predicate, Object’, she invoked her most memorable riposte against the medium – ‘Of poetry, I once said, “I, too, dislike it”’ – in order to set up the version of the poet she could not subscribe to: ‘Dazzled, speechless – an alchemist, without implements – one thinks of poetry as a divine fire, a perquisite of the gods.... As said previously, if what I write is called poetry it is because there is no other category in which to put it’ (CPMM, 504). Against this picture of the poet as enthusiast, ‘dazzled, speechless ... under the spell of admiration or gratitude’, she took every opportunity to document her fastidiousness, remarking frequently on the labour and perseverance necessary for her to produce a poem. The work itself makes this labour manifest, her poems being among the most carefully achieved, closely wrought of the twentieth century. Following her prose commentaries, however, the argument has been that in her fastidiousness Moore reconfigured, or redirected, rather than eliminated the enthusiasm of the poem. Her abiding formal innovations – her remodelling of the poem as miscellany, and her calculation of the line in terms of syllables rather than feet – were designed, as was observed, to perfect a medium (in the sense, perhaps, of ‘perfect diction’) in which the elements of her writing might be presented as immediately as possible, that she might pass on that which she valued with minimum interference. When she suspected interference in her work, she eliminated it: ‘Considering the stanza the unit, I came to hazard hyphens at the end of the line, but found that readers are distracted from the content, so I try not to use them.’15 Ornate as they are, Moore’s poems have as their utmost object direct communication. Her intricate mechanics are in the service of her enthusiasm, have as their ambition a medium capable of parting with a thing without losing it. Likewise, in the same breath as Moore extinguished the divine fire as a source of poetry, she incorporated quotation more wholeheartedly than any other poet, thus continuing to open her expression to other voices and so preserving (in her miscellanies, collages and assemblies) the image of an utterance shaped and sounded by another’s words. More than this, though, quotation in Moore has been presented as kind of conduit, not back, retrogressively, to an inspirational voice, but to a voice, or voicing, which cannot properly belong either to the poet, or to her subjects: voices which are sometimes allocated to animals but which are in fact the poem’s best expression of what she terms, in various ways, an unconscious force.

This brings us to an important disjunction in Moore, which can be figured in terms of consciousness and unconsciousness: a disjunction whereby the
unconscious force is figured as speaking through highly conscious poetic form. There is a sense, in other words, in which Moore’s poetry endeavours to speak what it doesn’t know, to give expression to the ‘element of unreason’. And it is here, importantly, that for all her erudition, Moore will often identify the basis of knowledge. Thus as with ‘When I Buy Pictures’, the point of her great poem ‘Critics and Connoisseurs’ seems to be to depart from, or to advance on, the language advertised by the poem’s title. What the title describes are epistemologies to which the poem does not fully subscribe. It does not endorse either the critic’s or the connoisseur’s way of handling things. Instead it likes the childish attempt to make an ‘imperfectly / ballasted animal stand up’, and the swan’s ‘proclivity to more fully appraise such bits / of food as the stream // bore counter to it’, and the ‘ant carrying a stick, north, / south, east, west’, only to go through ‘the same course of pro- / cede’ with a ‘particle of whitewash’. There is fastidiousness here, but an ‘unconscious / fastidiousness’, in which, as she states in the poem’s beautifully ungainly opening, ‘There is a great amount of poetry’. The poetry is in the ‘ambition without / understanding’, in the direct acquaintance each agent gains with their object, in an unalienated relation with, or handling of, things held to be of value.

Or to hear this from the horse’s, which is to say the poet’s, mouth: reviewing Mabel Loomis Todd’s edition of the Letters of Emily Dickinson for Poetry in January 1933, Moore suggested that,

The chief importance of the letters for us, however, is in their establishing the wholesomeness of the life. They are full of enthusiasm.

(CPMM, 290)

Dickinson’s abiding enthusiasm is, Moore concedes, a cause of dissatisfaction in some readers: ‘To some, her Japanesely fantastic reverence for tree, insect, and toadstool is not interesting; many who are “helped” by a brave note, do not admire the plucked string’ (CPMM, 292). For Moore, however, such reverence for things is integral to Dickinson’s work:

A certain buoyancy that creates an effect of inconsequent bravado – a sense of drama with which we may not be quite at home – was for her a part of that expansion of breath necessary to existence. (CPMM, 292)

What Moore wanted of her own writing, and what she admires in Dickinson, in the sense of the ‘expansion of breath necessary to existence’, is a poet’s enthusiastic relation with things. With trees and insects, with imperfectly ballasted animals: with yellow helmets and papaya juice, as Frank O’Hara might have thought.
Notes

9. Ibid., p. 84.
11. An essay on Moore’s enthusiasm might be the place for a discussion of what Schulman calls Moore’s ‘passion for revision’, were the revisions not so numerous as to warrant separate rather than passing comment. Suffice to say here that what clearly mattered deeply to Moore was how, at any given moment, a poem should be displayed. To revise published poems was to keep them alive, to prevent ‘embalming’.