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Author
MARIANNE MOORE:

FACETS OF THE CRYSTAL

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BY

Mary Virginia Katzeff

THESIS

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MARIANNE MOORE: FACETS OF THE CRYSTAL ABSTRACT

Marianne Moore's poetry embodies two different types of work. As well as the objective poetry that her contemporaries called modernist or Imagist (labels which she rejected), she also wrote quite personal, subjective poems. Two factors, theme and subject matter, unify her work and give evidence of her distinct poetic voice.

The content and form of Moore's work developed from her personal life and interests. In her childhood, loss of a beloved grandfather and changes of household, as well as a lifelong attachment to her mother, affected the poet deeply, as evidenced by her consistent theme of protection. Exotic animals populate her poems, displaying their natural means of protection. Her early interest in painting also found a place in her poetry, as many objects of art became subjects for her pen. The objectivity and meticulous style found in her work both go back to her love of biology and scientific method which she acquired in her days as a student at Bryn Mawr.

Marianne Moore's style endeared her to the avant garde poets of New York in the early decades of the 20th century. T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and others found her clinical objectivity ideal as they worked to develop poetry along similar lines.

Moore retained her poetic abilities and popularity into her seventh decade, yet she did not even consider herself a
poet, saying that her work could only be called poetry because it fit in no other category.

We can rectify this seeming contradiction by realizing that, as she says in the final revision of "Poetry," (The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore. New York: Macmillan / Viking, 1981, 36) the reader can find in poetry "a place for the genuine." For Marianne Moore, the "genuine" can be objective, the undisputable truth of science or subjective, the emotional honesty of art.
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MARIANNE MOORE: FACETS OF THE CRYSTAL

Marianne Moore wrote two very different kinds of poems. Most of the works upon which her reputation is based are photograph-like examinations of objects, often art pieces, and encyclopedic scrutinizations of unusual animals. These poems answer perfectly to T. S. Eliot's prescription for poetry without the presence of the poet's personality or feelings. But poems of this type constitute roughly one third of her Complete Poems. This final, although far from complete, compilation contains nearly twice as many poems which manifest something of the poet's subjective reactions to life and the world around her.

Although the subject matter is consistent throughout her work, the poet's voice makes itself known in two different ways. In the process of discovering the facets of Moore's poetry, this paper will discuss the content and form of her work within the structure of her personal experiences and predilections. It will define the ways in which the reader can experience this poet's voice, something of her personal feeling that comes into the poem no matter how objective and distant she attempts to remain. Moore reveals her personal voice through theme, subject, and stylistic elements such as diction, syntax, meter, and imagery. She is also known through the literary influences she claims and from events in her life.
No poet can write without incorporating in the work something of self. Modernist poets and contemporary readers find that Moore's poems, at least the ones most anthologized, fulfill that goal of objectivity, yet her presence can be detected in many aspects of her craft and in a majority of her poems. As Paul Goodman explains in Speaking and Language: A Defence of Poetry, it is in the very nature of poetry to express the poet.

A poem, though it may be written in a modern "analytical" language, can be usefully regarded as speaking Jespersen's aboriginal language. The analogy is fairly exact. A poem is one inseparable irregular conglomerate, chanted. The word order is likely to be twisted. The names are particularistic and anomalous. New metaphors are invented. There is use of echoic meaning and expressive natural signs. There is strong use of tone and rhythm and sometimes even meter. The exposition of the sentence follows the speaker's exploration of the subject rather than a uniform rule. All of this is for the purpose of saying a feelingful concrete situation, rather than making discursive remarks about it. (149)

If we hold a quartz crystal, an image of which Moore made use in a number of poems, in a shaft of sunlight and turn it one way, it will cast a bar of white light, plain, bright, and sharp. If we turn the crystal another way, it
will divide the sunlight into the brilliant colors of the rainbow. Likewise, Moore is able to focus her view of the world through herself-as-poet and create poetry, sometimes as clear and plain as a laboratory, sometimes alive and vibrant with feeling.

To some degree, we can discern the poet’s voice, however detached, from theme. Theme involves the choosing of one idea over another; thus, a poet’s themes give evidence of her personal concerns. The theme of protection unifies the whole of Moore’s work, even though most of her poetry deals with objects and animals rather than with people or feelings. Like "The Pangolin" or "The Plumet Basilisk" of her poems, she goes to great lengths to hide or disguise herself, yet something personal often peeks out at the reader. Related to protection, themes of security and danger also appear in Moore’s work.

Whether in poems that appear to be very objective, such as "The Plumet Basilisk" or "The Paper Nautilus," or more subjective, like "The Steeple Jack" or "Tell Me, Tell Me," she speaks of protection of one being by another as well as protection of self (or creature) by intrinsic qualities, such as camouflage, patience, and power.

We can trace this preoccupation to childhood events. Born in Kirkwood, Missouri, on November 15, 1887, Marianne Moore experienced tragedy early in life. Her father, a failed inventor, suffered a nervous breakdown a few months
before her birth and vanished forever from his family's lives. When she was seven years old, Moore's beloved grandfather, a Presbyterian minister in whose home she had been living, died. Following his death, her mother moved with Marianne and her brother to Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Such loss and upheaval in early life obviously affected Moore deeply. The detachment and disaffection, the reticence and restraint that mark her poetry, as well as her theme of protection, probably result from to an insecurity and a fear of loss that go back to childhood.

Moore's personal life was marked by familial devotion and attachment not inconsistent with her independent, even feminist ideas. Moore considered her mother her best friend and critic, depending on the older woman for reactions to her work constantly. When Marianne attended Bryn Mawr, the first year of separation from home and mother proved extremely difficult for the young student. She and her mother lived with her brother until he joined the Navy, and Marianne and her mother continued to live together until the latter's death when the poet was sixty years old.

Three poems in particular exemplify Moore's concern with mother and family, our first protectors. "To a Steam Roller" illustrates the ambiguous feelings that arise in families; the traditional motherly role is one quality of "The Hero"; "The Paper Nautilus" depicts the archetype of motherhood. The first two exhibit subjective emotion; the
third portrays the crustacean with reportorial objectivity.

John M. Slatin proposes that "To a Steam Roller," which on the surface presents a powerful machine, is Moore's response to her mother's suggestion that the budding poet change her style. Mrs. Moore called her daughter's writing "ephemeral." Slatin calls "To a Steam Roller" "a poem whose title reveals how intensely Moore felt the pressure of those 'Pleas for conformity,' and whose opening lines reveal how intensely furious they made her" (34):

The illustration
is nothing to you without the application.

You lack half-wit. You crush all the particles
down
into close conformity, and then walk back and
forth on them.

Sparkling chips of rock are crushed down to the level
of the parent block. (Complete Poems 84)¹

The poetic voice is in full evidence through the critical
tone created by such words as "nothing," "lack," and
"crush." She seems to be scolding, wagging a finger as she repeats, "You."

Moore grants one quality of the complex character of "The Hero" maternal origins: "lenient, looking / upon a fellow creature's error with the / feelings of a mother" (CP 9). And even as exotic a creature as "The Paper Nautilus" has the maternal virtue, Moore's theme of protectiveness:
... the watchful maker of it guards it day and night; she scarcely eats until the eggs are hatched. Buried eight-fold in her eight arms ... . . . her glass ram'shorn-cradled freight is hid but is not crushed (CP 121)
The eight-armed creature sacrifices her own needs to protect her offspring.

In addition to theme, the poet's choice of subject matter also reflects personal tastes, interests, and concerns, and Moore's choices of subject matter also come from early experience. She writes almost exclusively about non-human subjects; her enduring poetic interests focus on art objects and unusual animals. These two subjects reflect her lifelong personal concerns of art and biology, but, whether subjective or objective, they are treated with scientific precision and clinical distance. As Donald Hall says, "One has the impression of words having been selected and placed by tweezers in their context (Marianne Moore: The Cage and the Animal 38). Even the living animals she describes are those she encounters in the pages of books and magazines, stuffed and mounted in the American Museum of Natural History, or safe in zoo cages.

Moore was heavily influenced by visual art; in fact, in youth she wanted to be a painter. It is no wonder, therefore, that her poetry looks intently at things. In her
first days in New York, in 1916, she went almost immediately to Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery, which she had heard about from a teacher at Bryn Mawr. At 291 she became acquainted with the works of Georgia O'Keefe, Pablo Picasso, and Gordon Craig, among other artists whose work American poets found inspiring. Although Moore is associated with many Imagist poets, she differs from them in that the significance of her subjects, which include a multitude of animals and a wealth of art, involves more than that of the object itself. In this way, Hall says of her poems, "They comment at the same time they describe" (37). For example, she describes in the beginning of "Nine Nectarines" when she looks at a Chinese porcelain plate:

    Arranged by two's as peaches are,
    at intervals that all may live --
    eight and a single one, on twigs that
    grew the year before -- they look like
    a derivative;
    although not uncommonly
    the opposite is seen --
    nine peaches on a nectarine.
    Fuzzless through slender crescent leaves
    of green or blue or
    both, in the Chinese style . . . . (CP 29)
Only at the end of the poem does she become personal with the comment, "A Chinese 'understands / the spirit of the wilderness' " (CP 30).

The first stanza of "Nine Nectarines" is mirrored by the second, third, and fifth. This repetition of line length and arrangement gives visual pleasure; this was the stylistic challenge she set for herself in many of her poems. In the interview with Donald Hall, she explains,

I never plan a stanza. Words cluster like chromosomes, determining the procedure. I may influence an arrangement or thin it, then try to have successive stanzas identical with the first. Spontaneous initial originality -- say impetus -- seems difficult to reproduce consciously later. (Tomlinson 47)

Furthermore, the poet presents the arrangement of the nectarines on the branch in lines that grow in segments like those of the branch.

It appears that she did not "plan" the spaces between the lines of "When I Buy Pictures." Instead, she uses her restraint as framework to speak openly about her taste in art. She hides herself in the prepositional phrases "when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the imaginary possessor" (CP 48), then she reveals the variety in her artistic tastes:

I fix upon what would give me pleasure in my average moments:
the satire upon curiosity in which no more is discernable than the intensity of the mood; or quite the opposite -- the old thing, the medieval decorated hat-box, in which there are hounds with waists diminishing like the waist of the hour-glass, and deer and birds and seated people; it may be no more than a square of parquetry; the literal biography perhaps, in letters standing well apart upon parchment-like expanse; an artichoke in six varieties of blue; the snipe-legged heiroglyphic in three parts. (CP 48)

She remains detached by imagining owning these pictures rather than involving herself by actually buying them.

The clinically objective Marianne Moore exposes her personal tastes in the paintings and objects she selects to write about. Works of Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Durer, and El Greco, appear in her poems. Three dimensional creations also fascinated her so much that she put them into her verse. "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish," the Roman fountain shaped like a pine cone and the Egyptian "toilet-boxes . . . the pivoting / lid incised with a duck-wing" (CP 11) in "The Jerboa," "A Carriage from Sweeden," a mechanical tiger owned by an eighteenth century
sultan in "Tippoo's Tiger," and the Louis XV candelabrum in "No Swan So Fine" are taken from magazine pictures and museum displays to decorate her poems.

Science and art might seem very different fields, yet Moore found inspiration and pleasure in both. While art expresses the artist's perception of and emotional reaction to the world, science discovers the world, its natural laws and unemotional facts. Perhaps the two are reconciled in the precision and control necessary for success in each. Perhaps Moore found beauty in both. Certainly, both areas concern themselves with objects.

Moore's interest in biology and scientific method apparently began at Bryn Mawr, where she was denied a major in English because of poor marks. Ironically, thirteen of her poems were printed in Bryn Mawr publications during her studies there, and she was active on the board of the undergraduate magazine. She majored, however, in economics and history and minored in biology. The scientist's objective attitude of detachment and exactitude is one of her hallmarks. Asked by Donald Hall if this training affected her poetry, she replied:

Precision, economy of statement, logic employed to ends that are disinterested, drawing and identifying, liberate -- at least have some bearing on -- the imagination, it seems to me. (Tomlinson 23)
To Marianne Moore, the severity of scientific discipline resulted in a freeing of the imagination.

An example of this analytical, clinical poetry is "The Plumet Basilisk." Here Moore presents what appear to be encyclopedia entries about various lizards, describing them colorfully, particularly their protective, frightening appearances and their quick retreats to safety.

In Costa Rica the true Chinese lizard face is found, of the amphibious falling dragon, the living fire-work.

He leaps and meets his likeness in the stream and, king with king, helped by his three-part plume along the back, runs on two legs tail dragging; faints upon the air; then with a spring dives to the stream-bed, hiding as the chieftain with gold body hid in Guatavita Lake.

He runs, he flies, he swims, to get to his basilica . . . (CP 20).

Here we see her admiration for the creature’s ability to escape to its hiding place.

Perhaps as an outgrowth of her admiration for precision, Moore was also fascinated with the technological achievements of the 20th century. Just as she wrote of her
concern for the preserving of things of the past ("The Camperdown Elm," "A Carriage from Sweden," "No Swan So Fine"), she likewise wrote about the products of modern technology. "Four Quartz Crystal Clocks" present a fitting subject for her objective treatment. Free of personal feelings or opinions except in the last line, where she interjects, "punctuality / is not a crime" (CP 116), the poem features line-end rhymes and a rhythm that moves with accented syllables. In spite of these traditional techniques, it also follows a syllabic pattern:

There are four vibrators, the world's exactest clocks;
and these quartz time-pieces that tell
time intervals to other clocks,
these workless clocks work well;
independently the same, kept in
the 41 [degree] Bell
Laboratory time vault. (CP 115)

"The Icosasphere" appealed to Moore as another achievement of human reason. In a poem where she is present in her reserved use of "we" and in her questions, she describes the ingenuous way birds "weave little bits of string and moths and feathers and thistledown, / in parabolic curves" (CP 143), then talks about human weakness in recounting the fates of several fortune-hunters. Finally she introduces the icosasphere and asks,

Would the engineers making one,
or Mr. J.O. Jackson tell us

how the Egyptians could have set up seventy-eight-foot solid granite vertically?

We should like to know how that was done. (CP 143)

The lines of the three stanzas are arranged in a pattern of four lines increasingly indented, the fifth line beginning on the same space as the second, and the sixth the same as the third. The visual effect, which must have been effective when she typed it, does not succeed, however, because several lines exceed the margins of the published page. When the ending words appear on the next line, right-justified, the pattern breaks down. Like J.O. Jackson’s predecessors, who attempted to design a steel globe "without wrinkling or waste," Moore tries to wrap the poem around the pattern but has words left over.

The exacting qualities that Moore developed early in her poetry were also sought by Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and others. Moore’s individuality cast her among the modernists, yet she transcends any movement. Nevertheless, we can examine the place of Marianne Moore in the modernist movement and in other times of her life as a way of appreciating her innovative, independent poetic voice. William Carlos Williams explains the situation of New York’s avant garde in the early decades of the 20th century and Moore’s place in it:
These were the years just before the great catastrophe to our letters -- the appearance of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. There was heat in us, a core and a drive that was gathering headway upon the theme of a rediscovery of a primary impetus, the elementary principle of all art, in the local conditions. Our work staggered to a halt for a moment under the blast of Eliot's genius which gave the poem back to the academics. We did not know how to answer him.

Marianne Moore, like a rafter holding up the superstructure of our uncompleted building, a caryatid, her red hair plaited and wound twice about the fine skull, though she was surely one of the main supports of the new order, was no luckier than the rest of us. . . Marianne was our saint -- if we had one -- in whom we all instinctively felt our purpose come together to form a stream. Everyone loved her. (*Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* 146)

Although she was beloved and respected by eminent fellow poets, she was not struggling to develop her poetry as many of them were at the time. As Hall says,

At a time when American writers were casting about uncertainly for a distinctly new mode of expression, Miss Moore, by virtue of her independent spirit, was pointing the way. (31)
By the time Moore arrived on the New York avant garde scene, she had already developed her poetic in virtual isolation. As Laurence Stapleton points out,

Moore was restless after returning from Bryn Mawr to a small provincial city with her mother, and having to learn stenography and typewriting in order to teach . . . at the . . . school maintained by the government for the education of American Indians. (Marianne Moore: The Poet’s Advance 4)

During the six years before she went to New York, Moore wrote and submitted poetry to the only vehicles she could find locally, Atlantic Monthly, Harper’s, the New Republic, Smart Set, and the Yale Review, all of which sent rejection slips. She understood that what she was not writing what editors were looking for, and she eagerly sought more receptive magazines. Finally she discovered Others, Egoist, and Poetry, all of which published poems of hers in 1915.

Moore’s distinctive voice reveals itself in her choice of words, which is dictated by her personal feelings. As Winifred Nowottny relates:

It is inevitable from the very nature of language that choice of words implies choice of attitude, the choice of a certain kind of mental structure within which the object is to be seen, or to which it is assimilated, or by reference to which it is explained. The nature of language is such that there can be no
such thing as a neutral transcription of an object into words. (45)

The first two poems in the Complete Poems, "The Steeple-Jack" and "The Hero," and their companion piece, "The Student," make up a triptych which she called "Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play," first published in 1932. Examined together, these three poems show the two kinds of poetry which Moore wrote and the ways in which she reconciled the dichotomy between objective and subjective, one of which is evident from her diction.

"The Steeple-Jack" offers a panoramic view of a small East-coast town which Moore envisioned, combining qualities of three or more towns she had visited and featuring scenes of Brooklyn, New York, her home for many years. Moore chooses words that create such a conversational tone that the reader can sense her presence, almost see the sweep of her arm and hear her speak as she points out the local sights. She imbles the poem with a personal presence by using such phrases as "a town like this," "sweet sea air coming into your house," "You can see . . . ," " . . . you have the tropics at first hand," " . . . if you see fit; / but here they've cats . . . " (CP 5-6). The use of the second person and of "this" involve the reader intimately in the experience of the poem.

Moore had other reasons and methods for developing this conversational tone, which Eliot called "the curious jargon
produced in America by universal university education" (Tomlinson 49). Moore's tone reflects her personal concerns. In "Feeling and Precision," she tells how and why she accomplishes the conversational tone, which is produced not only by diction, but also by syntax:

... you don't devise a rhythm, the rhythm is the person, and the sentence but a radiograph of personality. The following principles, however, are aids to composition by which I try, myself, to be guided: if a long sentence with dependent clauses seems obscure, one can break it into shorter units by imagining into what phrases it would fall as conversation; in the second place, expanded explanation tends to spoil the lion's leap -- an awkwardness which is surely brought home to one in conversation; and in the third place, we must be as clear as our natural reticence allows us to be. (Predilections 3)

The speaker of "The Hero" becomes more distant than that of "The Steeple Jack" because of both the subject matter and the use of "we." This poem deals in what "we" like and what "we" do not like. The tone is cautious; as Donald Hall says, "Words are used in such a way that they must be pronounced precisely and singly . . . . The effect is a staccato pattern within the straining line" (48):

Where there is personal liking we go.

Where the ground is sour; where there are
weeds of beanstalk height,
snakes' hypodermic teeth, or
the wind brings the "scarebabe voice"
from the neglected yew set with
the semiprecious cat's eyes of the owl --
awake, asleep, "raised ears extended to fine points,"
and so

on -- love won't grow. (CP 8)

Neither a personalized nor editorial "we," this "we"
includes all of humanity in general while it enumerates the
qualities of a hero. The speaker does not appear, but
rather merges with the reader. "Where there is personal
liking we go. . . . We do not like some things, and the
hero / doesn't . . . " (8). We all have some things in
common with the hero; there is hero potential in all of us:

like Pilgrim having to go slow
to find his roll; tired but hopeful --

hope not being hope
until all ground for hope has
vanished; and lenient, looking
upon a fellow creature's error with the

feelings of a mother -- a
woman or a cat. . . .

. . . with a

sense of human dignity and reverence for mystery . . .

(8-9)
In her catalog, a hero is patient, optimistic, and forgiving. She keeps the hero’s humanity at the forefront of all heroic qualities.

However human the hero, however hidden the speaker, Moore openly espouses a philosophy, a world view, in this poem. The final stanza further details characteristics of the hero:

It is not what I eat that is
my natural meat,
the hero says. He’s not out
seeing a sight but the rock
crystal thing to see -- the startling El Greco
brimming with inner light -- that
covets nothing that it has let go. This then you may know

as the hero. (CP 9)

This quality of what Joseph Campbell later calls "self-achieved submission" (The Man with a Thousand Faces 16) obviously mattered a great deal to Moore; it is the result of great self-restraint. She repeats her view of the hero in her review, "Mr. Eliot: ‘It Is Not Forbidden to Think’.

Those who have power to renounce life are those who have it; one who attains equilibrium in spite of opposition to himself from within, is stronger than if
there had been no opposition to overcome . . . .

(Predilections 50)

The third poem in the triptych, "The Student," gives a third point of view. "We" are spoken of again, but not with the familiarity of "The Steeple Jack" nor the universality of "The Hero." In this poem, the circumstance of "we" and "here" seems to be we here in America. She selects a national spirit for her subject, and she makes it clear with the opening words, "'In America'."

"The Steeple Jack" is concerned with a safe environment, as when C.J. Poole, the steeple jack, places a "Danger" sign on the sidewalk below where he works; "The Hero" goes about without outward protection; but "The Student" deals with self-protection. Two qualities which keep the student safe are patience and reclusiveness. She quotes Emerson saying that the student is

a variety

of hero, "patient

of neglect and of reproach," -- who can "hold by

himself . . .

. . . the student studies

voluntarily, refusing to be less

than individual . . . ." (CP 102)
This "he" student is the concealed poet defending herself. She could be speaking of herself when she speaks of the student who

... is too reclusive for
some things to seem to touch
him; not because he

has no feeling but because he has so much. (CP 102)

Marianne Moore does not use just the conversational tone in her poetry. For example, "Camellia Sabina" is somewhat disjointed, moving from image to image in an almost dreamlike way. With the title as the first line of the poem, she plunges immediately into a description of what she is looking at, but the description lacks the clinical view of other poems. The reader does not immediately know what is being viewed, partly because of the hypnotic sound of the words as they are combined, partly because of the order in which the images are presented:

CAMELLIA SABINA

and the Bordeaux plum
from Marmande (France) in parenthesis
with A.G. on the base of the jar -- Alexix Godillot -- unevenly blown beside a bubble that

is green when held up to the light . . . . (CP 16)

The first stanza presents a still life of a camellia and a jar of plums. The imagery is strong despite the relative
obscurity of the subject, and she brings in a touch of the mundane:

... the screw-top
for this graft-grown briar-black bloom
on black thorn pigeon's blood,
is, like Certosa, sealed with foil. Appropriate custom. (CP 16)

These lines exemplify one of Moore's most endearing techniques, the juxtaposition of Latinate and Anglo-Saxon words. This putting together of unlikely pairs of words brings surprise and often delight to the reader. In this particular passage, "screw," "briar," "pigeon," and "foil" can be traced to Latin roots; "grow," "black," "bloom," "thorn," "blood," and "sealed" are Anglo-Saxon. Spoken together, they delight the ear with their sound. She also utilizes the Old English verse technique of alliteration, both of consonants and of vowels, throughout her works. For example, "Tippoo's Tiger" has repeating sounds in "The tiger was the prototype. / The forefeet of his throne were tiger's feet. / He mounted by a four-square pyramid of silver stairs converging as they rose" (CP 241). "Like a Bulwark" also uses alliteration: "Affirmed. Pent by power that holds it fast -- / a paradox. Pent. Hard pressed" (CP 157).

In addition to mixing Latin- and Anglo-Saxon-based words, Marianne Moore uses a variety of other syntactical strategies in her poems. Many of her poems begin with the
title as first line (as in "Camellia Sabina"), with a quote (as "The Icosasphere"), with a question, or with some modifying phrase. She begins "Charity Overcoming Envy" with the question, "Have you time for a story / (depicted in tapestry)?" (CP 216); "Apparition of Splendor" begins, "Partaking of the miraculous / since never known literally," (CP 214).

Moore’s syntax produces the momentarily puzzling effect of the beginning of "Camellia Sabina." The words are put together in such an order that the reader’s first view of the two objects is through French place names, then the view is immediately narrowed to the jar with names on its label. Readers are often unaware of the workings of syntax; Nowottny points out the importance and subtlety of syntax in poetry:

Of all the elements necessary to make an utterance meaningful, the most powerful is syntax, controlling as it does the order in which impressions are received and conveying the mental relations ‘behind’ sequences of words. And since we naturally tend -- except when checked by a difficulty -- to take in without effort the relations conveyed by syntax, its operation as a cause of poetical pleasure is often the last cause we recognize, if indeed we recognize it at all. The result is that syntax is important to the poet and to the critic because it produces strong effects by stealth;
these remain 'inexplicable' so long as the power of the syntax goes undetected. (9)

Moore’s recurring theme appears in this poem; the protection of the camellia in the third stanza is later compared to the care given to wine grapes:

. . . "Dry the windows with a cloth fastened to a staff. In the camellia-house there must be no smoke from the stove, or dew on the windows, lest the plants ail," the amateur is told;

"mistakes are irreparable and nothing will avail."

(CP 16)

The quote from the camillia keeper shows Moore’s lifelong fear of loss. A person so mindful of the cost of mistakes does everything with great care.

Another way to look at the poet’s presence in her work is through the techniques she uses and the resulting style. Moore relies on some traditional elements occasionally, such as rhyme and metric strategies, but the consequences are pure Marianne Moore, whether personal or objective. As Bonnie Costello says,

While Moore’s poetry is in a way "impersonal," in that the self is not the focus or dominant presence, we feel the movement of a distinct personality throughout . . .
The "minor defects" of form, as she called unassimilated elements, are marks of style. (234)

Style also includes imagery, one of the poet's tools for which Marianne Moore had a gift. Rather than the unadorned practicality of the laboratory, Moore's poems, whether subjective or objective, are decorated here and there with imagery rich in history or natural science. Hall calls her work "a delight of particulars" (36). The "Late-fifteenth-century . . . Flemish or French" tapestry in "Charity Overcoming Envy" leaps to life:

Charity, riding on an elephant,
. . . faces Envy
. . . Envy, on a dog, is worn down by obsession . . .

. . . Crouching uneasily
in the flowered filigree, among wide weeds
indented by scallops that swirl,
little flattened-out sunflowers,
thin arched coral stems, and -- ribbed horizontally --
slivers of green, Envy, on his dog,
looks up at the elephant . . . (CP 216)

Another image, from "Camellia Sabina," enchants readers with its personification: "... the Prince of Tails / . . . yonder mouse with a / grape in in its hand and its child / in its mouth (CP 17). In "The Mind is an Enchanting Thing," Moore's eye for biology makes the simile that the mind "is an enchanted thing / like the glaze on a /
katydid-wing" (CP 134). She sees that the reflection of light flashing on an insect's wing resembles the brilliance and changeability of the human mind. Even such an unnatural object as the Brooklyn Bridge, in "Granite and Steel," becomes "Enfranchising cable, silvered by the sea, / of woven wire, greyed by the mist" (CP 205). Precise and unemotional as she can sometimes be, Marianne Moore always finds memorable images to put in her poems.

Moore often quotes from her reading in her poetry. She skillfully weaves these borrowings into her verse in a way that makes them look like her own. This use of other sources is evidence of her busy mind and her widely varying interests. It becomes, for her, another way of hiding, disguising herself. By quoting others, she can say what she wants to say without being responsible for the statement. Regarding this practice, Hall says:

Miss Moore has said, when questioned about the extensive use of quotations in her poems, that if a thing has been said in the best way, it cannot be said better. "If I wanted to say something and somebody had said it ideally, then I'd take it but give the person credit for it. That's all there is to it." (34)

Besides using direct quotes, Moore utilizes snatches of conversation or refers to classical characters and historical figures in her poems. In contrast to Eliot, who became known for enriching his poems with obscure, scholarly
references that the general reader cannot decipher, Moore made herself much more accessible. Most of her allusions are familiar to readers who have undergone the American "universal university education." Furthermore, Moore happily amends her poetry books with notes crediting her sources, which come from in such mundane origins as popular magazines, travel folders, and television. A large portion of "An Octopus" comes directly from a Department of the Interior publication. "No Swan So Fine" opens with a quote from the New York Times Magazine. "Logic and 'The Magic Flute'" refers to magazines and a television performance. "Nevertheless" begins from a comment her mother made. Many of her quotes originated in the New York Times and the London Daily News, and she quotes from sources varying from the Greek classics to The Compleat Angler.

Another of Moore’s techniques involves the conscious shaping of stanzas, mentioned above. As she wrote to Ezra Pound in 1919,

Any verse that I have written, has been an arrangement of stanzas, each stanza being an exact duplicate of every other stanza. I have occasionally been at pains to make an arrangement of lines and rhythms that I likes, repeat itself, but the form of the original stanza of anything I have written has been a matter of expediency, hit upon as being approximately suitable to the subject.  (Tomlinson 17)
Often the stanzas of Marianne Moore poems are shaped in such a way as to suggest some quality of the subject. Fulfilling the visual demands and getting the message across require precise choice of words. For example, in "The Fish," she manages to build stanzas that are made of lines of one, three, nine, six, and eight syllables. The shape of the stanzas suggests the movement of little fish while the words delight the reader with their sound and imagery:

THE FISH
wade
through black jade.
Of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one keeps
adjusting the ash-heaps;
opening and shutting itself like
an
injured fan.
The barnacles which encrust the side
of the wave, cannot hide
there for the submerged shafts . . . (CP 32)

The visual appeal of Moore’s poems is often the product of syllabic verse, wherein the number of syllables dictates the line. "What is the rationale behind syllabic verse?" Hall asks Moore. She replies unselfconsciously, "It never occurred to me that what I wrote was something to define. I am governed by the pull of the sentence as the pull of a fabric is pulled by gravity" (Tomlinson 33).
Within the syllabic form, Moore's poems do have a rhythm, as Williams explains:

Her own rhythm is particularly revealing. It does not interfere with her progress; it is the movement of the animal, it does not put itself first and ask the other to follow. (Tomlinson 55)

Syllabic verse presents a problem when read aloud, raising the question of meter. In accentual verse, important words and phrases stand out because of their placement, as in "A Grave": "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," (CP 49). End-stopped lines contain relatively complete ideas; pauses come naturally; the poem moves through imagery and meter. If the reader emphasizes line ends in syllabic verse, however, with lines treated as units, meaning can become obscured. As Hall says:

There is an odd sort of cadence to poetry written in syllabics. The reader knows that some control of rhythm is being used, but the effect is much subtler than a usual metric line. If these poems are read with a slight pause at the line end, the effect is eccentric indeed, odd words take on emphasis and one has a sense of being jerked along. Sometimes this jerky progression is pleasant, sometimes funny and, occasionally, irritating . . . Miss Moore is, in
general, a poet of the eye. She tells you how things look . . . . (81)

Accentual verse emphasizes particular syllables and words and requires the poet to arrange words in order to serve this emphasis. The arrangement of ideas for their oral stress enables the poet to express emotion openly. Syllabic verse, on the other hand, requires word-choice based on number of syllables, a rather mechanical process which results in emphasis on verbal imagery and visual effect; it expresses little emotion. Thus, the visual effect of syllabic verse provides another way for the poet to hide in her work, presenting a surface image which distracts the reader from the submerged and potentially vulnerable statement.

Contrary to the visual pattern she has created, in reading her own poems aloud, Moore reads with normal, conversational emphasis, stressing line ends only when they are end stopped, as in "The Fish," which Moore reads on a recording as:

The fish wade through black jade. Of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one keeps adjusting the ash-heaps; opening and shutting itself like an injured fan. The barnacles which encrust the side of the wave cannot hide there for the submerged shafts . . . ." (Caedmon)

The poem works on two levels with which Moore was concerned, that of outward appearance and that of inner
expression. Thus, we can see that she wrote with both the look and the sound of the poem in mind. Marianne Moore reveals her personal poetic philosophy as she sums up her technique of composition:

A felicitous phrase springs to mind -- or a word or two, say -- simultaneous usually with some thought or object of equal attraction . . . . I like light rhymes, inconspicuous rhymes and unpompous rhymes . . . . I have a passion for rhythm and accent, and so blundered into versifying. I consider the stanza the unit . . . . I like the unaccented syllable and nearly accented near-rhyme . . . . (Tomlinson 28-29)

This philosophy of composition did not grow directly from Moore's influences. Understanding a poet's influences can be a key in understanding the individual poetic voice. When Hall asks Marianne Moore, "Did any prose stylists help you in finding your poetic style?" she replies with the names of Doctor Johnson, Edmund Burke, Sir Thomas Browne, Sir Francis Bacon, Cellini, Cesare, Zenophon, Henry James, and Ezra Pound (Tomlinson 30). Other influences are credited in a letter to Ezra Pound: "Gordon Craig, Henry James, Blake, the minor prophets and Hardy, are, so far as I know, the direct influences bearing on my work" (Tomlinson 17).

It would be difficult if not impossible to trace more than a flash of any of these influences at work in any particular poem (except for humanism, which is discussed below).
Rather, they have been assimilated in her general outlook. Perhaps this is why she claims no influences when Hall asks:

Interviewer: What in your reading of your background led you to write the way you do write? Was imagism a help to you?

Moore: No. I wondered why anyone would adopt the term.

Interviewer: The descriptiveness of your poems has nothing to do with them, you think?

Moore: No; I really don’t. I was rather sorry to be a pariah, or at least that I had no connection with anything. . . .

Interviewer: Where do you think your style of writing came from? Was it gradual accumulation, out of your character? Or does it have literary antecedents?

Moore: Not so far as I know. . . . (Tomlinson 29-30)

An important aspect of her life not detectable in Moore’s poetry is her religion. Although she attended Presbyterian church every Sunday and was the granddaughter and sister of ministers, she cannot be considered a religious or devotional poet. No church dogma appears in her work, yet a philosophy pervades many of her poems. Faith is an aspect of her theme of protection not written into her poetry: in church doctrine, the faithful are protected from life’s tribulations by their faith. But
Moore's subjects are protected by their own devices. As Hall notes,

Man seems advised to practice the Christian virtues but to rely on himself for help and protection . . . . I think, we must assume that Miss Moore is talking about a belief in life, an affirmation of life that includes an acceptance, not avoidance, of its perils. (100)

Thus, it is evident that Moore had a personal philosophy of humanism, trusting to reason and the human intellect for aid and protection rather than to God. Two of Marianne Moore's influences, Sir Francis Bacon and Sir Thomas Browne, contributed significantly to the spread of the humanistic movement and the development of Protestantism. At a point where modernism, humanism, and Presbyterianism intersect, reason is a virtue. As Andrew J. Kappel explains:

The intellectualism of her verse is a modern feature serving a Protestant, and even more specifically a Presbyterian purpose. It is a point of Presbyterian faith that human reason is a foremost manifestation of God's grace. (Willis 48)

Perhaps this is the reason Moore keeps her faith to herself, pointing out creatures of God and creations of humans but leaving out references to the ultimate source of both. Marianne Moore is the kind of poet Molly Mahood describes when speaking of seventeenth century devotional poets:
When a religious poet is completely faithful to his experience, and when the experience itself is so powerful that he is not tempted to overstate its force, he wins the admiration of believers and non-believers alike. (Poetry and Humanism 9)

Marianne Moore published her last book of verse, the Complete Poems, when she was eighty years old. She actively revised its contents, putting the poems she wanted in the form in which she finally wanted them. The collection is far from complete; she eliminated many well-received poems that had appeared in earlier volumes. She had no qualms about revision, sometimes altering a poem radically each time it was published. The prime example of her penchant for revision, "Poetry," saw many revisions and four basic printed versions. The final, Complete Poems version is only four lines long:

I, too, dislike it.

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

This terse verse seems an odd statement for one so involved with the world of poems and poets. Moore’s reticence extended even to herself in her reluctance to call herself a poet. Again and again in the interview with Donald Hall, she denigrates her work. She refers to her poems as "things"; she says that she never intended to
become a poet and that she dislikes the term "poetry" for her work. "What I write . . . could only be called poetry because there is no other category in which to put it" (Tomlinson 27).

Marianne Moore’s reticence leaves us with an enigma: a poet who achieved literary and popular success, who says she dislikes the products of her craft. What are we to make of this? "Reading it . . . with . . . contempt" would be a method of self-protection, i.e. detachment, yet the true value of poetry, "a place for the genuine," remains at the core of the poem and of poetry itself. Perhaps the word "genuine" unlocks the mystery of the poet; "genuine" can be the indisputable truth of science or the emotional honesty of great art; it may be the objectivity of bare facts or the subjectivity of bared feelings. Moore’s poems delight readers with their genuine descriptions, vivid yet detached, as well as her honesty, her true presence. She leaves us her crystal clear view of the world and its creatures.
This thesis uses the poems of Marianne Moore's *Complete Poems* for discussion because this volume is her last published collection, containing late revisions, representing the culmination of her poetic career. As the "Author's Note" so succinctly states: "Omissions are not accidents," (*CP* vii). Clive Driver's "A Note on the Text" points out,

The text conforms as closely as is now possible to the author's final intentions . . . . Late authorized corrections, and earlier corrections authorized but not made, have been incorporated. Punctuation, hyphens, and line arrangements silently changed by editor, proofreader, or typesetter have been restored . . . . (*CP* vii)
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