Modification, Idiosyncrasy and The Reader in the Poetry of Marianne Moore

MODIFICATION AND READER RESPONSE THEORIES

It feels particularly apt to subject Marianne Moore's 1919 poem, 'In the Days of Prismatic Color' to

the kind of temporal reading for which Stanley Fish advocates in his reader-oriented criticism:

> not in the days of Adam and Eve, but when Adam
>   was alone; when there was no smoke and color was
> fine, not with the refinement
>   early civilization art but by because
> of its originality; with nothing to modify it but the
>
> mist that went up, (41)[1]

By delaying the verb until the end of the first sentence, which is itself split between the title, first

and second lines, the reader's sense of closure is delayed, their attention prolonged, only to provide

an uneasy image of Adam 'alone'. The poem instantiates a doubleness wherein simplicity is

continually modified as it elaborates upon its own premises, and where its own 'alone[ness]' as an

authored text must be dispelled for it to exist. To read the poem is to destroy Adam's and the text's

aloneness— to replace its original simplicity with complex modification. The reader contorts to

follow the inverted sense of the sentences continually registered in the negative: 'not' 'not' and

'nothing'. While superficially arbitrary, the enjambed jump between the first and second stanzas is

profound in its conditioning of the reader's experience. In my view, the significance of this turning

point in the poem lies in its foregrounding of modification as a central Moorean theme ('nothing to

modify'). In fact, as I shall argue, Moore's obsession with modification, and of reading as itself a

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[1] Quotations are from *Complete Poems* unless otherwise indicated.

kind of modification essential to literary completion, occludes her larger fascination with interpretive difficulty and the place of the self within it.

As Taffy Martin explains, critics have frequently been 'met with frustration' in their attempts to 'fit' Moore into their 'paradigm of high modernism' (*Subversive Modernist*, x). As a result I am inclined to agree with Elizabeth Gregory and Stacy Hubbard's attempts to locate her unique (modernist) difficulty as a means to 'demand acute readerly attention in order to track (and to co-invent) the poem's unfolding logic' (4). She is 'unlike her peer modernist poets', Cristanne Miller suggests, in seeing her poem's 'meaning as unstable, changing with the conditions and culture of its reader' (*Questions,* 32). So doing, she disperses the poem's authority, modifying it, ensuring that Adam is never truly 'alone'. 'Prismatic Color's' manufactured atavism, its imagining of a prelapsarian simplicity prior to the modification of Eve's presence, is symptomatic of Moore's critique of authorial 'alone[ness]'.

Many of her poems represent a sustained meta-poetic and metaphoric engagement with modernist reading practices and their diverse conceptions of poetic meaning. Problematic notions of 'meaning' (or, in the case of 'Prismatic Color', 'truth') are presumed the necessary end result of all hermeneutic acts, conditioning further questions as to the *location* of literary meaning: should it be institutionally determined, in universities and law courts, or can it be allowed to follow one's idiosyncrasies? Must the author stand as the final modifier and creator of the text, or are the reader's modifications necessary for textual completion? Due to the demands her poems make on her readers, it is often difficult to conceptually distinguish between the roles of literary critics and readers of her poetry. These issues position Moore less in the field of poetry, and more-so in that of criticism or literary theory— an institution which formed in her lifetime. Her work problematises some of the key contentions regarding author and reader, particularly those represented by two dominant movements of Anglo-American criticism in the twentieth century: New Criticism, (or,

'Formalism') which consolidated in the 1940s, and Reader Response Theory, which peaked in the late sixties and the 1970s (Davis and Womack).

While I believe that Moore's poetics broadly aligns with the interests of the later, reader oriented focus, I maintain that her works blur conceptual distinctions and challenge theoretical totalisations. Throughout, I will read her against aspects of reader response criticism in the tradition outlined by Jane Thompkins, represented by Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and David Bleich. As Thompkins points out, the reader-response movement arose in 'direct opposition' to the 'New Critical dictum' represented by Wimsatt and Beardsley's 1946 essay, 'The Affective Fallacy', which excluded the idiosyncrasy of readerly affective experiences from criticism (ix). In his foundational essay, 'Affective Stylistics', Stanley Fish argues against the New Critical assumption 'that meaning is a function' of the poetic 'utterance' to claim that 'meaning' is better considered as an 'event' that occurs in the reader (28). This inversion temporalises the reading experience as a series of affective experiences and indeterminacies in time. I want to refocus our attention on how Moore manipulates and encourages different kinds of readerly attention and interpretation, particularly through her use of titles, quotation and her inversions of the expectations of lyric form. My contention is that by making those shifts conscious, her poems defamiliarise and denaturalise the readerly experience, refocusing attention on the difficulties within the assumed relationships between the lyric reader and the modernist text. Doing so, she not only predicts but also problematises some of the central tenets of reader response theory.

I am conscious that my focus remains at odds with much of the recent critical currents on Moore. The publication of Linda Leavell's biography on Moore, '*Holding on Upside Down*' in 2013 prompted some productive engagement with her as an author, a phenomenon that Hubbard and Gregory call a 'critical renaissance' (1). Jennifer Leader traces Moore's version of 'modernist hermeneutics' to a 1914 bible class she attended (114). Leader's term allows us to pluralise 'modernism' as itself a readerly practice and to draw distinctions between her relationship with her

reader and Eliot and Pound's with theirs. In other cases, Grace Schulman's assumption that readers mimic the author's phenomenological engagement with the world around her, fails to account for our inability to accurately recreate the 'inner dialectic' 'of the poet's mind' nor for Moore status as herself a reader (43). Arguments like Schulman's reinstall a Romantic view of the author that ignores a century of critical developments. They assume that other forms of presumably heretic or idiosyncratic readerly modification are necessarily distancing from an original moment of 'meaningful' authorial inspiration— from Adam's aloneness.

Yet, as I think we find in Moore, modification is always palimpsestic, which is to say temporally instantiated. Take her images of physical modifications in 'The Monkeys', (they have imposed on us with their pale/ half-fledged protestations,' 40), and 'The Fish' ('All/ external/ marks of abuse are present on this/ defiant edifice', 32) and 'Black Earth' ('the/ patina of circumstance', 46, *Selected Poems*). In keeping with these Moorean images, a focus on the reader's perspective does not necessitate an a-historicism. My study maintains that reading and critical practices are historically contingent by reading her poetry through its historical positioning between two critical discourses.

For reasons of brevity and clarity, I will focus on the more well-known poems of her *Selected Poems*— a choice which, I hope, will leave more space to push the implications of her interests in some of the foundational assumptions of literary interpretation.

'Those Various Scalpels' could easily be placed in the self-critical tradition of Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (Pope, 144). It plays on lyric expectations to explore and test hermeneutic apparatus, which it recasts in a biological, surgical analogy:

> Those
> various sounds, consistently indistinct, like intermingled echoes
>   struck from thin glasses successively at random— (51)

Her verse engages us from an auditory standpoint, an apt opening considering that her poems are most obviously formally distinguished from her modernist peers by their reliance on seemingly arbitrary syllabic patterns. The simile of 'glasses' 'struck' 'successively at random' can then be read as a depiction of the real-time sonic reading experience. Words, hopefully transparent, are illuminated in sequence, always carrying the looming threat of 'random[ness]' or arbitrariness. But they are 'consistently indistinct', a curious phrase, that seems to imply a kind of textual anarchy, and an upturning of the 'relentless accuracy' and 'precision' that is a commonplace of Moore criticism (Holley, 73). Like Fish, Moore offers a temporal analogy for reading. The poem represents a defiant challenge to Eliot's refashioning of the lyric poem as what Thompkins calls 'a place of order and equilibrium' (220). However, in other instances Moore endorses views of the poem as object: her mise en page creates a contradictory visual analogy for the poem in which the sharp thinness of the lines resemble textual scalpels. To her more astute readers, 'Various Scalpels' comes to represent a kind of self-dissecting blason; the confused deixis of the poem begins to flood with lyric body parts, problematising the usual dualism of subject-object, writer and reader. The traditional imagery of the blason ('your eyes,/ flowers of ice and snow') is upturned and ironicised. In the next line we find the most obvious symbol of authorial presence: 'your raised hand, an

ambiguous signature:' which encourages us to ask in what way is Moore's authorial role is ambiguous (51). In six words Moore intertwines the presumed reader-recipient of the lyric utterance ('you') and the authorial imprint of identity ('signature'). Our doubleness as co-inventors is made explicit. The auditory, and thus temporalised analogy of 'those various sounds', has, by this point in the poem, transformed into a different critical paradigm in which the poem views itself in a spatial or more characteristically New Critical sense ('— a collection of little objects—', 51). For the reader enmeshed in the sense of her verse, perhaps this visual analogy's most apparent effect is its emphasis on words as discrete objects, as constitutive of their own etymologies and fields of reference. Typical for Moore, the poem's final lines, enact a faux finality that frustrates interpretive closure:

> Are they weapons or scalpels?
>   Whetted
>
> to
> brilliance by the hard majesty (…)
>   But
> why dissect destiny with instruments which
>   are more highly specialized than the tissues of destiny itself? (61, *Selected Poems*)

While ostensibly critiquing the over-complex specialisation of critical instruments, the stanza is overshadowed by the irony of its own interpretive complexity. Indeed, hermeneutic verdicts are particularly hard to come by when we know that the text itself is not stable. In *Selected Poems*, for example, the 'Are' is capitalised, whereas in the *Complete Poems* it is not. Likewise, in the latter, the final statement alternately reads:

> more highly specialized than components of destiny itself (51)

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The definite article is has been excised, cut out— modification in a highly literal sense. As Robin Schulze argues, Moore 'contributed to a modernist aesthetic of textual instability and historical contingency' (138) through the major revisions she made to her poetry and through her textually problematic *Complete Poems*. Moore's tendency to modify her own texts, and thus maintain their interpretive instability, attacks the critical fetishisation of literary commodities stabilised by their authors .

As a result, Moore's texts, like the reading experience, become experimental and provisional. As Schluze claims in another essay on 'Textual Darwinism', Moore expected 'her "serious" readers' to '"look up" the other incarnations of her poems' and 'consider them side by side' (280). So doing, the text distinguishes between different kinds of readers and modifiers. Moore sets the critical demand for semantic completion against the literary demand for textual completion.

In its constant omissions, 'The Monkeys' uses animals as a representative Other to critique demands for lyric completion:

> winked too much and were afraid of snakes. (40)

The poem begins having already made many assumptions about its reader. Moore's run-on line from the title, indicated by the lower case 'winked', imposes a particular kind of reading. Upturning lyric titling convention, reminds us that we should have been concentrating on the title all along, and were expected to have maintained a sustained and homologous attention to both title and text. She centres her adverbial phrase 'too much' around a presumed mutually agreed centre… *how frequently does a monkey normally wink?* Doing so, she creates an epistemological rift between herself and her readers: clearly, the lyric speaker is more knowledgeable on animal behaviour than we will ever be. Our expectations are frustrated again, or perhaps calmed, by the imposition of a speaker's voice, who begins a continued reminiscence on the animals described in the first stanza:

> I recall their magnificence, now not more magnificent
> than it is dim. (…)
>
>   but I shall not forget him — that Gilgamesh among
> the hairy carnivora — that cat with the (40)

The titular monkeys are now almost entirely sidelined, replaced by a male cat. Allusions to 'Gilgamesh', and the unexpected formulation 'hairy carnivora', a defamiliarising modification of 'carnivores', assumes a mythological and biological frame of reference in its prospective reader. The speech that follows and concludes the poem is comic in its strange specificity and erudite vocabulary. The cat, thus far positioned as the lyric object of the speaker's subjectivity, then inverts this relationship by critiquing the hierarchical and exclusive nature of speaker's lyric interpretation of the natural world. He describes how he himself has been erroneously modified by the interpretive acts of human speech:

> "They have imposed on us with their pale
> half-fledged protestations, trembling about
>   in articulate frenzy, saying
>   it is not for us to understand art; finding it
> all so difficult (Ibid)

It is particularly interesting that Wolfgang Iser, who views the reader's position as that of forming interpretive wholes, characterises modernist texts as unique in 'frustrating our' ability to 'impose' the '"gestalt" of the text' (284). That both writers (even in translation from Iser's German) should use forms of the verb, 'impose' is particularly noteworthy, and characterises their shared understandings of interpretation as a *modificatory activity*. Yet Moore's poem upturns Iser's dichotomy: difficulty is 'imposed' upon the non-human object, rather than found within it, and is subsequently framed as problematically hierarchical. Modification and interpretation work interdependently, dispersed between subject and object.

QUOTATION AND AUTHORITY

Perhaps the most interesting poem with regard to Moore's quotation conditioning her reader's experience is another animal poem, 'The Octopus'. Quotation, along with carrying a baggage of considerations specific to canonical modernism, has the impression of being 'partial, divisible, portable and dependent' on external epistemologies (Martin, *Raw Material*, 198). Margaret Holley similarly notes how Moore 'refuses to naturalise' the 'everyday discourse' she 'appropriates' (68). This denaturalisation, a chief effect of the quotation impulsion demonstrated by some of her most difficult poems, in fact imposes a different kind of reading. As Jonathan Culler demonstrates in *Structuralist Poetics*, to read a newspaper article formatted as a lyric poem is bring 'into play a new set of expectations' and 'conventions determining how the sequence is to be read and what kind of interpretations may be derived from it' (189). When read as lyric, 'banal journalistic prose' acquires a new significance. Culler views literary meaning as what Thompkins calls an 'institutional matter' (xviii), reminiscent of Fish's notion of 'interpretive communities' (collectivities of readers) as the arbiters of literary meaning (Fish, 171). Moore's quotation marks make us conscious that we approach these quotations with the sensitivity we preserve for lyric; simultaneously they frustrate analogies which frame lyric utterances around a speaker and listener dichotomy: if we are the recipient of a single speaker, we cannot hear the quotation marks.

'An Octopus' is multi-limbed in the sense that it is textually an octopus, extending its reach into the history of writing and the history of the reader. In the version collected in the *Complete Poems* its first page has 30 lines, 16 of which include quotation. Miller, who centres her book length study of Moore on *Questions of Authority* writes that 'to undermine these expected relationships of power, one constructs a complex intertextuality' characterised by a Kristevean 'transposition of one (or several) sign systems into another' (5). Viewed in this way, the notes pages, in condensing the full contents of the *Complete Poems* into 40 pages of directory, encourage intertextual reading. She

casts her viewer in an editorial role, attributing origins, determining and distinguishing between voices and (literary and non-literary) registers. While her animals tend to remain in their discrete verse formations, the 'Adam' of 'Prismatic colour' appears in 'An Octopus': 'such power as Adam had and we are still devoid of' (75). Noticing this, we are quick to read the poem alternately as an engagement with the themes of 'Prismatic Color', those being truth's relationship to complexity and sophistication.

In radically dispersing the authorial and textual centre, 'An Octopus' encourages multiple readings, modelling itself as an event constitutive of reiterative readings. In some readings one line seems to explain the whole poem by providing a heuristic with which to explain its complexity. In others, those lines vanish and become mere contingencies of the poem's syllabic structure. Many scholarly interpretations of 'The Octopus', for example, rely on its 'Neatness of finish' line towards the end of the poem with which to stabilise the poem (76) (See Schulze, *Frigate Pelican*, 137).

Some of the most impactful lines in 'An Octopus' are, problematically, not written by Moore herself. Does this diminish her status as a poet, at least in our post-Romantic sense of one? Her fir trees are propped on Ruskin:

> "each like the shadow of the one beside it.
> The rock seems frail compared with their dark energy of life" (71)

When we learn she is quoting Ruskin, Moore's status as original, unitary authorial presence is transposed into a merely interpretative, modificatory role, as opposed to the fountain of inspiration lyric model. The 'notes' are particularly fascinating in this regard. Lines such as the first note: 'Quoted lines of which the source is not given are from Department of the Interior Rules and Regulations' (273) encourage an active engagement with textual attribution. Must readers follow these up, making sure she has cited them correctly, not modified her quotations? To encourage reference to the 'notes' at the back of the book is to encourage a trans-bibliographic reading that

stresses the dependence of the literary object upon other forms of institutionally determined knowledge, centring readerly modification and decentring authorship.

These considerations are further complicated by the fact that not all quotations, as we discover in the 'notes', are denoted by quotation marks. Take for example, the phrase '—a much needed invention—' from 'An Octopus' (71). While the hyphens have a similar effect in their fragmenting of the quotation from the rest of the poem's texture, it is undoubtedly a different one. By implication, all the hyphens that litter her poems could indicate artistic borrowing. With 15 notes attached, 'A Octopus' is more dense in its quotation per line than Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a poem famed for its 'modernist' allusiveness. Rachel Blau DuPlessis distinguishes between the allusive practices of Moore and Eliot according to gender, claiming that Moore achieves a 'shared authorial authority', allowing her to 'undercut the sole or superior authority' of high modernist poetics (16). 'In her citations,' DuPlessis contends, Moore 'disperses cultural authority, while Eliot, in contrast, accumulates it' (Ibid). Her readers become authors, the final modifiers of the text.

Another chief effect of the sudden imposition of a quoted clause is that it breaks the sense of the verse, defamiliarising it, creating further gaps for idiosyncratic modification. 'Idiosyncrasy' has followed Moore criticism since her 1956 lecture, 'Idiosyncrasy and Technique' (*Moore Reader,* 169). Her poetry arguably embraces readerly idiosyncrasy far more than Eliot's, exemplified perhaps most obviously in her insistent distaste for connective words and phrases. Take, for example, the first stanza of 'The Hero', which opens her canon-forming *Selected Poems*, and itself upholds the precedence of subjective intuition:

Where there is personal liking we go. (8)

Moore's opening declarative statement, with its strange inversion of syntax, placing the subject ('we') and the verb ('go') at the end of the sentence, demonstrates its own semantics. '[P]ersonal liking', and its suggestion of subjectivity, is conflated with the abstract universality of the collective pronoun: 'we'. The 'reader', is tensely both singular and plural, idiosyncratic and communitarian: the sentence's applicability to collective human experience clashes with the subjective implications of 'personal liking'.

The fear of interpretive solipsism, or the loss of all claims to objectivity, has dogged literary criticism for decades. If the author is no longer, to use Derrida's term, the 'transcendental signified' (50) of the work, nor the work self-explanatory on its own terms, then literary criticism exposes itself to interpretive anarchy (See Bar-Yaacov, Barthes, Foucault). While, to Fish, Wimsatt and Beardsley's writings 'demand[ed] the suppressing of what is subjective and idiosyncratic' (5), even Fish's own early formulation of a reader oriented criticism claimed that good reader oriented critics should 'recognise and discount what is idiosyncratic' in their responses (67). Moore takes a

more pragmatic angle her later poems. Similar to 'Prismatic Color', 'The Student' centres on a semi-atavistic return to origins, though it is this time more concrete and less fanciful. The poem, which appeared in her 1941 collection *What Are Years* recalls a classroom environment, framing itself as a dialogue, presumably between the 'lecturer' with whose speech it begins and the unnamed student whose voice blurs with the author's. What follows is an exploration of how meaning is socially produced in an institutional pedagogical setting. The poem embraces idiosyncratic modification under the condition that it is tempered by pluralisation. Again Moore opts for the collective pronoun:

> With us, a
> school— like the singing tree of which
> (…)
>   is both a tree of knowledge
> and of liberty— (101)

Moore's exploration of the institutional determination of meaning, similar to that which Fish, Culler and Bleich describe, is caught between the authority of declaration and tentative possibilities: 'It may be that we/ have not knowledge, just opinions' (101). As in her earlier poems, quotation decentres Moore's authorial role: '"Science/ is never finished"' (101). Perhaps the most peculiar moment in the poem occurs when Moore forgoes her quotation marks:

>   But someone in New
> England has known enough to say
> the student is patience personified,
>   is a variety
> of hero, "patient
>   of neglect and of reproach" (102)

The poem rests neither in the ether of self referentiality, nor solely in the mind of the reader. We read it intertextually: the 'tree of knowledge' undoubtedly sends us to Milton, while 'hero' recalls

the opening of her *Selected Poems*. Moore's pedagogical angle towards modification predicts David Bleich's view of reading. Bleich argues that reading(s) must be predicated on 'mutual responsibility' (the antidote to 'solipsism'), because 'intersubjective negotiation is the source of knowledge' through which idiosyncratic modifications can be tempered but not excised (295).

Yet, beyond emphasising our collective responsibility for literary meaning, Moore's denaturalisation of lyric reading conventions challenges some of the most foundational assumptions of authorial selfhood and reading practices. So doing, her work complicates the work of the reader-response theorists, notably in its textual instability and use of quotation— a feature which Fish and Bleich remain largely silent upon. As her dates of publication imply, Moore is in some ways caught between two critical notions of the text and of the reader: there is more work to be done in considering her within a meta-critical context. I conclude with 'The Fish', a poem which situates the literary text as not only provisional but productive of different readerly 'impositions':

> All
> external
>   marks of abuse are present on this
>   defiant edifice—
> all the physical features of
>
> ac-
> cident (32)

'The Fish', simultaneously plural and non-plural, are a model for the palimpsestic interpenetration between reader and writer and for diversity as inherent in modernist hermeneutic practice. The poem exposes interpretation's status as an 'accident[al]' modificatory experience whose interdependence disrupts some of the foundational principles of lyric selfhood. Viewed in this way, her poems become continuous affective textual events in which our readerly idiosyncrasies age and coalesce: 'The sea grows old in it.' (33) And Adam can grow old too, though he cannot escape modification.

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