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'Picking and Choosing': Marianne Moore's Strategic Revision of the Romantic Sublime

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“PICKING AND CHOOSING”: MARIANNE MOORE’S STRATEGIC REVISION OF
THE ROMANTIC SUBLIME

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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Accepted by:
Dr. Catherine Paul, Committee Chair
Dr. Brian McGrath
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ABSTRACT

While many Modernist writers made conscious attempts to position themselves against an existing Romantic literary tradition, careful readings reveal important overlaps and connections in theme, imagery and purpose. While Marianne Moore's work is perhaps farther away from a Romantic aesthetic than that of many of her contemporaries, a close examination of the body of her work reveals an engagement with many themes, motifs, and ideas that can be traced to her Romantic predecessors, a relationship that might best be described as "picking and choosing," to use her words. Many of her poems involve an appropriation and interrogation of the sublime, an aesthetic discourse that permeated Romantic poetry, and this engagement can be traced through three thematic areas: nature, gender and prophecy. However, in contrast to her Romantic predecessors, Moore's treatment of the sublime is marked by a continual undercurrent of skepticism, particularly regarding the ability of the human mind to know for certain what lies beyond it. She repeatedly characterizes the transcendent impulse as an illusion, as in "An Octopus," when her speaker, who attempts to interact with the sublime landscape of Mt. Rainier, insists, "completing a circle, / you have been deceived into thinking that you have pro— / gressed" (*BMM* 83-84:23-24). In addition, her poetry undermines established ideological boundaries that have been inscribed in aesthetic discourse since antiquity, particularly regarding the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, a separation that Moore understood as inextricably linked to gender difference, power, and domination. Taking the notion of the sublime to its logical conclusion in prophecy, the act of uttering the unknowable, her work challenges the idea of the poet as single,

authoritative intermediary between the divine and the community of readers. In all of these thematic areas, Moore's relationship to the authority implicit in the discourse of the sublime is fraught. The very notion of having access to an understanding outside the realm of the human brings forth a host of complications for a poet such as Moore, whose reluctance to state a fixed truth without simultaneously undermining it has been the subject of much critical attention.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Douglas Atkins, for encouraging me to use my gifts, even if he didn't understand them, and to my mother, Susan Newman, for reminding me not to take myself too seriously. Without their unquestioning belief in my ability to succeed, I could never have written this.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Edmund Burke

ESB *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. 1759. New York: Garland, 1971.

Works by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

SW *The Shorter Works and Fragments*. Ed. H.J. Jackson and J.R. Jackson. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995.

Works by Immanuel Kant

OSB *Observations on the Felling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. 1764. Trans. John T. Goldthwait. Berkeley: California UP, 1960.

Works by Cristanne Miller

“WWF” “‘What is War For?’: Moore’s Development of an Ethical Poetry.”
Critic and Poets on Marianne Moore. Ed. Linda Leavell et al. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2005. 56-73.

Works by Marianne Moore

BMM *Becoming Marianne Moore: the Early Poems, 1907-1924*. Ed. Robin Schulze. Berkeley: California UP, 2002.

CPO *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*. New York: Macmillan, 1967.

CPR *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*. Ed. Patricia C. Willis. New York: Penguin, 1987.

SP *Selected Poems*. Introd. T.S. Eliot. London: Faber and Faber, 1935.

Works by William Wordsworth

- “PLB” “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” 1802. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 648-668.
- PR *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts, Context and Reception, Recent Critical Essays*. Ed. Jonathan Wordsworth et al. New York: Norton, 1979.
- “SB” Appendix III [The Sublime and the Beautiful].” *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*. Ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser. Oxford: Clarendon, 1974. 349-360.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Past and present and future are not disjoined but joined. The greatest poets form the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is.”

-Walt Whitman, Preface to *Leaves of Grass*

“The avowed artist...must be an artist in refusing.”

-Marianne Moore, from *Complete Prose*

Many modernist writers made conscious attempts to position themselves against an existing Romantic literary tradition, either through their poetry or through polemical aesthetic manifestos. Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme, and many others argued for a move away from what they considered to be the sloppiness and imprecision of Romantic poetry. However, as Leonard Diepeveen points out in *The Difficulties of Modernism*, “modern writers liked nothing better than a good fight. Literary enemies were useful” (1). While distancing themselves from the art of the past may have been an important rhetorical tool for crafting a movement, there are many connections to be found between the work of Modernist poets and their Romantic predecessors. As T.S. Eliot admits in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “not only the best, but the most individual parts of [a poet’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (38). For many Modernists, the Romantics became an important force in the formation of their attitudes about poetry, contributing not only to

their store of images, rhythms, and ideas, but also to their understanding of how poetry should function (Baker 7). While they certainly departed from their predecessors, traces and echoes of influence are ample, for, as Denis Donoghue pointed out in *The Third Voice*, “to write *against* something is to take one’s bearings from it” (18).

It is with this understanding in mind that I read Marianne Moore, a poet whose work is perhaps farther away from a Romantic aesthetic than that of many of her contemporaries. Her poetry is intellectually difficult, highly rhetorical, calculated, and impersonal, exhibiting a reluctance to rely on an authoritative “I” voice and a refusal to allow her readers the illusion of certainty. In his introduction to her *Selected Poems*, which he edited, T.S. Eliot claimed that Moore “has no immediate poetic derivations” (6). He describes her work as striking in its attention to “minute detail rather than...emotional unity,” with “something like the fascination of a high-powered microscope” (7-8). Focusing on the way that Moore’s eye examines minutiae and makes unexpected associations, he insists that her poetry requires a certain kind of reader, whose intellect is quick and alert enough to follow her mind’s circuitous pathways, for only to such readers will her poems “immediately appear to have emotional value” (8). Such characterizations place Moore’s poetry at the opposite extreme from Wordsworth’s notion of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” marked as it is by calculation, restraint, and detached observation (“PLB” 691).

However, a close examination of the body of her work reveals an engagement with many themes, motifs, and ideas that can be traced to her Romantic predecessors, a relationship that might best be described as “picking and choosing,” to use her words. By

this I am suggesting that her poetry is in part an active attempt to evaluate the artistic traditions of the past by adopting certain modes of representation and subjecting others to a rigorous critique, making judgments that are simultaneously aesthetic and ethical. In each of my chapters I focus on the tension between past and present, to examine which ideas Moore aligns herself with and which against in order to articulate how poetry should function in the modern world. As Lisa Steinman states, “Moore’s relationship to past, especially male, authority was fraught” (99). Moore was highly suspicious of the kind of literary tradition articulated by Wordsworth, which involves a notion of poets connected through time “in a mighty scheme of truth.”¹ Skepticism regarding the relationship between absolute truth and power permeates her poetry, and informs, to a large extent, her evaluation of the tradition that preceded her. As such, this will be a thread that will appear continually in each of my chapters. At the same time, however, Moore’s appropriation of Romantic modes of poetic discourse reveals that she drew inspiration from the art that preceded her. Perhaps her intention was not to set herself up as an antagonist to that tradition, but rather to make legible alternative ways of reading it that were more relevant to a modern sensibility.

There are several areas of Moore’s poetry in which direct thematic connections can be made to Romanticism, particularly in her treatment of nature, gender, and prophecy. Each of these concerns can be examined with particular reference to the sublime, an aesthetic discourse that permeated a great deal of Romantic poetry and that has direct relevance Moore’s work. In essence, the sublime is a discourse of

¹ William Wordsworth. *The Prelude*. 1805. bk. 12, line 305.

transcendence, an attempt to articulate what, if anything, lies beyond what we are able to know and understand as human beings. In his foundational work, *The Romantic Sublime*, Thomas Weiskel insists that the language of the sublime becomes prominent in moments when God recedes from the immediate experiences of a society. He places this dynamic at the center of its importance for the Romantics:

The Romantic sublime was an attempt to revise the meaning of transcendence precisely when the traditional apparatus of sublimation—spiritual, ontological, and (one gathers) psychological and even perceptual—was failing to be exercised or understood. It was the most spectacular response of the literary mind to the dualism which cut across post-Renaissance thinking and made so much authoritative doctrine suddenly in need of interpretation.... In largest perspective, it was a major analogy, a massive transposition of transcendence into a naturalistic key; in short, a stunning metaphor. (4)

The need to revise orthodox routes to transcendence permeated a great deal of Romantic poetry, and with this in mind, I turn to Moore. For, if the Romantic period is characterized by a cultural anxiety about the loss of religious certainty, even more so is the Modern. There are moments in which Moore's poetry invokes a kind of sublime discourse, using similar imagery, ideas, and motifs. However, in contrast to her Romantic predecessors, Moore's treatment of the sublime is marked by a continual undercurrent of skepticism, particularly regarding the ability of the human mind to know for certain what lies beyond it. She repeatedly characterizes the transcendent impulse as an illusion, as in

“An Octopus,” where her speaker insists, “completing a circle, / you have been deceived into thinking that you have pro— / gressed” (*BMM* 83-84:23-24). In addition, her poetry undermines established ideological boundaries that have been inscribed in aesthetic discourse since antiquity, particularly regarding the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, a separation that Moore understood as inextricably linked to gender difference, power, and domination. Taking the notion of the sublime to its logical conclusion in prophecy, the act of uttering the unknowable, her work challenges the idea of the poet as an intermediary between the divine and the community of readers. While refusing to rely on an authoritative lyric “I” voice, Moore nevertheless invokes a prophetic tradition, drawing on her knowledge of the Hebrew prophets in particular, in a way that retains her characteristic wariness of certainty and absolute truth. In all of these ways, Moore’s poetry appropriates and revises the discourse of the sublime, as it has been articulated in the past, for her own purposes.

One of the most important manifestations of the sublime in Romantic poetry concerns the idea of nature as a spiritual guide that provides the poet with a means of accessing the divine on earth. In chapter one, I examine this concept with regard to Wordsworth in particular, for *The Prelude* provides some of the most remarkable examples of a poet’s engagement with a sublime landscape and consequent struggle to achieve transcendence. Moore employs a thematically similar landscape in “An Octopus,” a glacial mountain range reminiscent of Wordsworth’s famous “Simplon Pass” episode, but with a crucial departure. For Wordsworth, the natural world is a sublime spectacle that exists for the benefit and blessing of man. In his “Preface to *Lyrical*

Ballads,” he states, “[the poet] considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature” (657). The poet’s purpose therefore involves “reading” the natural world as a vision for humanity and translating that vision for the common man. Thus, while the sublime is by definition inexpressible, the poet’s imagination allows him a degree of linguistic mastery and control.

While “An Octopus” maintains a similar preoccupation with nature, it nevertheless enacts a reversal of the Romantic lyric tradition, in the sense that Moore’s natural world actively resists human expression. She employs several different strategies that prevent both her speaker and her readers from making meaning out of the scene described, which was inspired by her visit to Mt. Rainier National Park. She inundates her readers with descriptions that cause sensory overload, she conflates physical objects with active subjects, and she does all of this from a curiously disembodied voice that emanates not from a flesh-and-blood speaker, but rather from a detached collection of quotations from outside sources. Strategies such as these resist any human-centered ideas about the natural world and our place in it. “An Octopus” is in many ways a poem about the relationship between language and the desire to possess, which Moore uses as a critique of cultural discourse about nature. The poem challenges any notion of the sublime in nature as an attempt to impose human meaning on nature through linguistic expression.

In order to understand the complexity of Moore’s engagement with the sublime, it is important to remember that aesthetics had been a domain of intellectual experience

reserved primarily to men, despite the growing literacy of women since the early nineteenth century. As such, gendered distinctions between what constitutes the beautiful as opposed to the sublime experience became inscribed in philosophical and literary discourse. In chapter two, I examine Moore's engagement with this gendering of the sublime and the beautiful. In essence, women were automatically relegated to the position of beautiful objects and described as incapable of understanding or participating in the sublime, a realm reserved for men. Such notions were unquestionably adopted by many of the Romantic poets. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, creates a clear divide between the aesthetic minds of the male speaker and his wife in the poem "The Aeolian Harp." The speaker's wife is unable to identify with his sublime meditations, which she misreads as heresy, and he ultimately ends up pacifying her in a way that suggests trying to explain such complexity to a female mind would be futile. This dichotomy involves not only rigid boundaries between gender roles, but also a clear separation between orders of aesthetic experience, both of which Moore directly challenges.

Gender is a complicated issue in Moore's poetry, for she rarely treats it explicitly, choosing animal and plant subjects more often than human. Such an omission should not be considered an avoidance of the topic, but rather a refusal to risk putting the sexed body at the center of her work. At the same time, however, many of her poems interrogate the ideology of power imbedded in how we think about gender roles and difference, whether with an animal subject or a human. For example, in "He Digesteth Harde Yron," a male ostrich takes on feminine and maternal roles, undermining the conceptual boundaries between gender roles. In "Marriage," Moore critically examines the first marriage

between Adam and Eve in a way that blurs the gendered distinctions between intellectual and aesthetic experience and draws attention to the power structures inscribed therein.

Both of these poems are rich and complex, particularly in terms of gender, and they deny the impulse to distinguish male and female, beautiful and sublime, or the conflation of the two. In doing so, they can be set up in direct opposition to the gendered limitations that predominated aesthetic discourse well into the Romantic period and beyond.

No discussion of the sublime would be complete without an investigation into its ultimate expression through prophecy, and for this reason, chapter three treats Moore's engagement with prophetic tradition. Romanticism abounds with prophetic voices, starting with William Blake, who is situated at the margins of Romanticism but nevertheless set a prophetic tone for the period that would continue from Percy Bysshe Shelley all the way to William Butler Yeats. Blake, a mystical visionary, used his art as a tool to affect political, spiritual, and moral change in times of crisis. In addition, he emphasized the value of the poetic imagination as a transcendental instrument capable of bringing human existence closer to the divine. I examine Blake's *Continental Prophecies* and *Jerusalem* for their representation of an authoritative prophetic voice inspired with privileged information about God's will for the communities they address. In addition, both of these poems unequivocally celebrate violence as a political and spiritual tool necessary to achieve freedom and union with God. This aspect of prophetic poetry is of particular interest when it comes to Moore, who treats the idea of sanctioned violence with ambivalence or outright contempt.

While Moore was not a mystic and her poetry lacks an authoritative visionary voice, she was arguably influenced by her understanding of Hebrew prophets, and, like them, she saw a clear avenue for ethical public discourse in poetry. Unlike Blake, however, Moore's sense of prophecy did not include an emphasis on the inspired speaker or on certainty of moral prescription, as is consistent with her general mistrust for authority and absolute truth. According to Cristanne Miller, this revision can be traced to her knowledge of "[a]ncient Hebrew poet-prophets...[who] provided a respected tradition of personal speech about public issues that did not foreground the self either as privileged speaker or as spouter of opinion" ("WWF" 57). Moore continually conflates aesthetic judgments with religion, politics, and ethics, but with an understanding that living with principle in a complex world demands asking questions rather than stating truths. Her understanding of the Hebrew prophets was consistent with both her insistence on making ethical judgments through art and her refusal to construct an authoritative speaking self. In her notes to theologian George A. Smith's *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, she wrote:

these (Hebrew) men...worshipped God neither out of sheer physical sympathy w. nature...nor out of a selfish passion for their own salvation like so many modern Christian fanatics; but in symp. w. their nation's aspirations for freedom and her whole political life.²

This note not only reveals her admiration for the Hebrew prophets, but suggests that she used them as a model for her own work, much of which is aimed at making ethical

² Reading notebook, 1907-1915, folder VII:01:01, Marianne Moore Collection, Rosenbach Museum Library.

judgments that cross the boundaries of politics and art in a way that does not foreground herself as a privileged speaker.

The link between Moore's prophetic self restraint and her political consciousness can perhaps best be seen in her war poems, many of which condemn the use of violence or at least treat it with uncertainty. "Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel," for example, explicitly argues against war in all forms, while at the same time acknowledging the futility of such admonitions, even from the mouths of prophets. In another poem, "Sojourn in the Whale," however, Moore suggests that armed uprising in the name of freedom against tyranny is not only justified, but also an inevitable response. She does this without the heightened emotion of a traditional call to arms, though, remaining detached and ambivalent about championing violence.

As in so much of her poetry, her prophetic works retain a resistance to the notion of certainty and authority, preferring instead to inhabit the liminal spaces of complexity and doubt while still attempting clear judgment. I draw a contrast between the kind of prophecy articulated by Romantic poets like Blake, which relies on certainty of a privileged vision and voice, and the kind that Moore employs, which refuses such a position of authority. There seems to be a link, for Moore anyway, between the impulse to maintain an absolute truth and violence or danger. Other poems that are not specifically about war or prophecy are nevertheless wary of authority in general. "To a Steam Roller," for example, is an attack on the kind of mental, mechanical might that "crush[es] all the particles down / into close conformity," instead of respecting difference (*BMM* 63:3-4). Likewise, "In the Days of Prismatic Color" celebrates being able to live

in the midst of complexity as the only viable middle ground between two dangerous extremes, simplicity and obscurity.

In each of these examinations of Moore's participation in and revision of the Romantic Sublime, there is a common thread. Whether the issue is nature, gender, or prophecy, Moore's unwillingness to allow the illusion of fixed certainty remains consistent, drawing attention to the operation of power in determining absolute truth. Herein lies a crucial departure from the kind of readings that have come to predominate discussions of Romanticism, as characterized by poets whose insistence on an authoritative lyric voice cannot be denied. And yet, Moore was arguably drawn to these poets and to the notion of the sublime in general. If, as Weiskel argues, the sublime becomes more visible in historical moments that are characterized by a move away from traditional or orthodox modes of transcendence, there is little room for wonder that Moore was interested in adapting such a discourse to her own milieu. The dissolution of faith and certainty that attended the Modernist period was far more pronounced than that of the Romantic, causing a crisis of cultural anxiety that demanded new ways to approach questions regarding what it means to live a fulfilling and ethical life in a fraught world. Moore's poetry, then, can be seen as an attempt to address such a dilemma by renovating the tradition that preceded her.

CHAPTER TWO

“AN OCTOPUS”: MARIANNE MOORE’S LANDSCAPE

AND THE ROMANTIC SUBLIME

“For, as if instinctively, our soul is uplifted by the true sublime; it takes proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard.”

-Longinus, *Peri Hypsous*

Like that of many of her Romantic predecessors, Marianne Moore’s poetry exhibits a ceaseless fascination with the natural world, probing the limits of the human imagination in the face of a vast and unknowable universe. Such inquiries have been central to theories of the sublime since antiquity, and have been continually revised as the relationship between the human and what constitutes the divine has been re-imagined throughout history. In essence, the sublime is an evolving metaphor for that which is beyond what we can know, a figurative way to transcend the human through language. In her poem “An Octopus,” which describes the experience of visiting Mt. Rainier National Park, Moore interrogates the idea of the natural sublime, for she presents an environment that actively resists human expression. The relationship between subjects and objects in language becomes central to Moore’s critique of the sublime, in which the impulse to express the imagination’s response to nature becomes a function of the human desire to possess or control objects that are threatening or incomprehensible. In “An Octopus,” Moore evokes a landscape thematically typical of the Romantic Sublime, a glacial

mountain range, but she enacts specific strategies of resistance that prevent the poem from achieving a transcendent moment. She inundates her readers with observations that cause sensory overload, she blurs the boundaries between active subjects and passive objects, and she refuses to allow her speaker an “I” voice, or even a bodily presence. The poem ultimately creates a reversal of the Romantic lyric tradition, in which a solitary speaker approaches nature with a sense of awe and eventually achieves elevation and higher understanding through meditation and communion with the sublime. Moore appropriates the landscape of the Romantic Sublime, therefore, in order to interrogate the power dynamic implied at its core, crafting instead a natural environment that makes a spectacle out of the speaker’s failed attempts at linguistic mastery.

Because the sublime will be a central concern of this entire inquiry, it is necessary to first define the terms of the discourse and to provide some historical background on some of the important philosophical contributions that have framed the discussion. When I use the term Romantic Sublime, I am referring specifically to what John Keats called, in a letter to Richard Woodhouse dated 27 October 1818, “the Wordsworthian, or egotistical sublime,” which implies a speaker’s move from fear and awe in the face of the unknowable toward self-discovery, growth, and mastery (Keats 448). This particular poetic impulse was by no means the only one that defined the Romantic approach to nature; Keats, in fact, described his own artistic character in direct opposition to it. However, it has received a privileged position in critical discourse, and it is directly related to Moore’s critique of the sublime in “An Octopus.” For this reason, I will be focusing on Wordsworth and on the philosophical developments that preceded him, in an

attempt to place Moore within a historical context regarding the sublime as an evolving metaphor.

Before turning to Wordsworth and his notion of the sublime, it is necessary first to look back to the eighteenth century, in which the discourse was shaped not only by two important philosophical contributions from Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, but also by a shift toward the notion of divinity as Nature. Thomas Weiskel claims that the latter development was “a response to the darker implications of [John] Locke’s psychology,” in which the “‘essence’ of the soul [became] unknowable or even hypothetical...[because] Locke had emptied it out” (14-15). In other words, the idea of the human mind as a *tabula rasa* implies that the only route to transcendence is through the senses, which ultimately created the need for an ideological link between the supernatural and the physical world. This is an important point, because “An Octopus,” with its refusal to allow its speaker a chance to formulate a unified meaning from the natural environment, seems directly to oppose a philosophical development that has deep roots in history. I trace its evolution from Locke to Burke and Kant, before turning to Wordsworth and then to Moore. While Kant and Burke differ in their understanding of how the sublime works, they both center their inquiries on nature (rather than religious experience) and intellectual, psychological, and spiritual responses to it. Threads of both philosophical approaches appear in the Romantic poets, especially in Wordsworth, and Moore’s critique of the natural sublime is therefore linked to their individual contributions.

Locke's understanding of human knowledge as linked to sensory experience rather than to a pre-existing essence points to an important philosophical moment in which the focus on empiricism simultaneously eclipsed orthodox religion as a basis of epistemology and created a need for an alternative means of transcendence. Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, one of the most influential statements on the sublime in eighteenth-century England, is grounded in Lockean materialism and identifies empirical sensory experiences capable of producing sublime emotions in a perceiving subject, namely terror and awe (Stoddard 33). Burke's discussion centers on making distinctions between two orders of aesthetic experience, the sublime and the beautiful, with the assumption that such categories are fixed. He spends most of his energy describing particular qualities that evoke either admiration and respect, which he associates with the beautiful, or fear and awe, which are particular to the sublime.³ Beauty is small, smooth, delicate, and graceful, and we respond to it with love because it is not threatening. The sublime, on the other hand, is too large for comprehension, terrifying, and obscure, and it forces us to realize our own vulnerability.

For Burke, the boundaries between these aesthetic categories are impermeable, and there is no overlap between the two. He claims "the ideas of the sublime and the beautiful stand on foundations so different, that it is hard...to think of reconciling them in the same subject without considerably lessening the effect of the one or the other upon

³ Burke's distinction between the two orders of experience is also gendered, as he places women in the category of the beautiful and men in that of the sublime. This is a point that warrants close examination, particularly in regard to Moore's treatment of gender, and it will be taken up in the following chapter.

the passions” (*ESB* 212). Both orders thus have an objective, material existence in nature and a pre-determined relationship to each other. While Burke doesn’t specifically mention Locke, his ideas fit nicely into a paradigm that insists on empirical, sensory experience for the elevation of a perceiving subject’s mind. This will become an important point when we get to Moore, for “An Octopus” presents a multitude of empirical sensory experiences, ranging from the minute to the grand, all of which culminate in a sense of overwhelming obscurity and confusion, the very passions that Burke links to the experience of the sublime.

In order for such an obscure and terrifying sensory experience to be elevating, however, Burke must elaborate a particular dynamics of power, pleasure, and pain. He insists that “in what light soever we look upon power, we shall all along observe the sublime the concomitant of terror” (*ESB* 115). This power structure is problematic in a discourse of transcendence, for elevation in the face of fear and vulnerability seems contradictory. Burke resolves this partially by insisting on a certain distance from any physical threat, so that the mind does not believe itself to be in real danger (Kelley 131). While this is an important point, it does little to explain why anyone would find delight in the contemplation of something terrible, whether its threat is imminent or abstract. Burke’s solution involves the empirical distinction between positive pleasure and the removal of pain. He claims that positive pleasure, while satisfying, leaves the mind in a state of indifference when it is over. On the other hand, the removal of pain, particularly when involving the near escape of danger, elevates the mind to a transcendent state, “a state of much sobriety, impressed with a sense of awe, in a sort of tranquility shadowed

with horror” (*ESB* 49). Thus, while Burke’s order of the sublime involves the incomprehensible power and might of nature, it ultimately affects a sense of invulnerability and elevation above nature. This is the moment that Moore denies her speaker; if there is any higher meaning to be found in the landscape of “An Octopus,” it lies in the recognition of human frailty and failure in the face of an impenetrable natural environment.

The same power dynamic is present in Immanuel Kant’s account of the sublime, which in fact inherits many elements from Burke, such as the distinction from the beautiful, an emphasis on natural objects that are vast in size, a mixture of pleasure and pain, and the ultimate elevation of the subject over a threatening environment (Zuckert 216). Kant, however, rejects Burke’s empiricism in favor of subjectivity. Where Burke’s sublime is a straightforward emotional response to an external, physical stimulus, Kant’s is the product of the mind’s striving after the unattainable or incomprehensible (Stoddard 34). His account is more about language, and the relationship between subjects and objects imbedded in it. As such, his ideas are essential to my examination of “An Octopus,” which, as we will see, interrogates this linguistic relationship on multiple levels. For Kant, the process of sublimation becomes a meaning-making activity, which is perhaps what made his ideas so attractive to poets, particularly the Romantics. The important moment in this process occurs when the state of normal perception, which is characterized as a subject in determinate and harmonious relation to an object, is suddenly disrupted by some kind of excess. Weiskel describes this phenomenon in semiotic terms:

We are reading along and suddenly occurs a text which exceeds comprehension, which seems to contain a residue of signifier that finds no reflected signified in our mind. Or a natural phenomenon catches us unprepared and unable to grasp its scale. Any excess on the part of the object cancels the representational efficacy of the mind. (24)

Thus, when confronting a natural object that exceeds our comprehension, the root cause of the ensuing anxiety and fear lies not in the object itself, but rather in the indeterminate relationship between subject and object in the mind. It is a failure of the imagination to fully grasp the object and form it into a shape that corresponds to a linguistic concept.

In the Kantian sublime, this moment is followed by a power shift in which the mind of the perceiving subject recovers its equilibrium by conceiving the infinite as a unified whole rationally (Zuckert 18). In other words, indeterminacy itself becomes a signifier for reason's power of transcendence. The initial failure of perception forces the mind back on itself, and instead of being defeated, it is actually exalted in the discovery that the infinite can only be understood as a function of reason, which is independent of sensory knowledge (Stoddard 34). As Kant explains in *The Critique of Judgment*, while we encounter our own limitations in encountering a sublime object,

at the same time in our rational faculty we find a different, nonsensuous standard, which has that infinity itself as a unity, in comparison with which everything in nature is small, and thus in our mind we find superiority to nature even in its immensity. (101)

The important point here is that Kant's sublime involves the elevation of the self over nature. The moment of transcendence entails a metaphorical domination of an object or experience that can't be represented (Freeman 3). This focus on the symbolic order as means of achieving power is central to the egotistical sublime, and it highlights a particular relationship to language characterized by the desire to possess or supercede that which is threatening.

Both Kant and Burke became central to Romantic aesthetics, which was grounded in the relationship between the human mind and nature. While Wordsworth claimed ignorance of eighteenth-century philosophical writings, he nevertheless exhibits similar concerns, particularly in *The Prelude*, a poem that moves from the speaker's awe of and submission to nature through an intellectual journey that brings about independence and momentary flashes of the divine (Stoddard 32). This movement can be described as a transition from Burke's model of the sublime to Kant's, for the poem's philosophical inquiry mirrors the dialogue between the two and relies on similar imagery. Theresa M. Kelley argues, however, that Wordsworth moves beyond Kant, taking issue with and finally rejecting the role of fear and reason (as Kant describes them) in favor of unity and imagination. She claims that Wordsworth "suggests instead that reason, which he glosses as 'the comparing power,' is a counter-agent to the sublime, not that which allows the mind to recognize [it]" (135). This is an important point, because it shows Wordsworth's engagement with and revision of an intellectual tradition that preceded him, and his emphasis on the power of the imagination over reason points to the shift from Neoclassical to Romantic aesthetics. In the same way, Moore's appropriation of the

language of the sublime in “An Octopus,” along with her interrogation of its power structures, will shed light on the move from Romanticism to Modernism.

While Wordsworth may have enacted a new vision of the sublime, he nevertheless built on the conceptual categories created by Burke and Kant to achieve it, and his model maintains the eventual elevation of the self over nature that is imbedded in both. In Book I of *The Prelude*,⁴ the poet’s relationship to nature is introduced with contradictory imagery, creating a tension between love and fear and between the imagination’s elevation and frustration. He opens with a celebratory response to a natural environment that is both benign and gentle, proclaiming, “the earth is all before me. With a heart / joyous, nor scared at its own liberty, / I look about” (I:14-16). This immediately follows a brief catalogue of surroundings that include a “vale,” “grove,” and “stream,” all images that evoke Burke’s description of beauty as that which is small, pleasant and non-threatening (*ESB* 212). But the poet’s pleasure is quickly undermined by a mounting anxiety that is coupled with a move from the beautiful to the sublime. He indicates this transition with a storm, an image commonly associated with the sublime: “for I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven / was blowing on my body, felt within / a correspondent [sic] breeze, that gently moved / with quickening virtue, but is now become / a tempest, a redundant energy, / vexing its own creation” (*PR* I:34-38). In *The Correspondent Breeze*, M.H. Abrams investigates the recurrence of the metaphor of air in motion in Romantic poetry, and argues that it is often “not only a property of the landscape, but a vehicle for radical change in the poet’s mind” (26).

⁴ I will be citing from the 1850 text unless otherwise noted.

At this point in the poem, a mounting sense of fear and frustration threaten the speaker's incipient joy. His anxiety continues to increase in direct relation to the danger in his surroundings. Later, when he describes his exploration of "the slippery rock," "the naked crag," and "the perilous ridge," he moves to a state of awe in which he is unable to recognize or understand the natural world. He wonders, "with what strange utterance did the loud dry wind / blow through my ear! The sky seemed not a sky / of earth—and with what motion moved the clouds" (*PR* I:332-339). This movement between love and fear involves an emotional response to a physical environment that is distinctly Burkean in its empirical division between the beautiful and the sublime. The tension between the two comes to symbolize his early development, for he states, "fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up / fostered alike by beauty and fear" (*PR* I:301-302).

While Wordsworth may adopt Burke's conceptual categories initially, he ultimately rejects their materialist underpinnings (Stoddard 33). In Book II the poet begins to seek nature with an understanding that the emotional response to different orders of experience is in the mind of the perceiver, rather than being intrinsic to any external physical quality. He asks, "who...shall point as with a wand and say / 'this portion of the river of my mind / came from yon fountain'" (*PR* II:209-211). He begins to approach transcendence in the aspirations of his mind toward the infinite, a move that reflects Kant's model of sublimity as the symbolic elevation of the mind over the might of nature. The speaker clearly indicates this shift in the following passage:

I would stand,
if the night blackened with a coming storm,

beneath some rock, listening to notes that are
the ghostly language of the ancient earth....
Thence did I drink the visionary power;
and deem not profitless those fleeting moods
of shadowy exultation: not for this,
that they are kindred to our purer mind
and intellectual life; but that the soul....
retains an obscure sense
of possible sublimity. (*PR* II:306-318)

By the end of the poem, the speaker has achieved a state of transcendence remarkably akin to Kant's vision, in which the mind is capable of conceiving the infinite as a conceptual unity. In Book XIII of the 1805 version, Wordsworth indicates that within Nature lies "the soul, the imagination of the whole," a realization that elevates him to "the perfect image of a mighty mind, / of one that feeds upon infinity" (*PR* XIII:65-70). This last image is striking, for it presents not only a powerful mind capable of understanding the sublime, but one that is large enough to dominate, even consume, the vastness of nature. It is important to understand that, for both Wordsworth and Kant, the transcendent moment is achieved by reading the sublime landscape as a function of the mind's activity. This will become an important point of departure in "An Octopus," for Moore's descriptions of the landscape prevent the speaker from reading it as anything but a sign of linguistic frustration and expressive lack.

While there are important overlaps between Wordsworth and Kant, there are equally important differences that signal a move from Neoclassical aesthetics to Romantic. Theresa M. Kelley outlines several points of contention between the two in her essay “Wordsworth, Kant, and the Romantic Sublime,” namely Kant’s insistence on fear and reason as integral to the mind’s experience of sublimity (131). In his fragmentary essay “The Sublime and the Beautiful,” Wordsworth implies that both fear and reason inhibit any real approximation of transcendence, which he describes as a feeling of “intense unity” (354). For Kant, the progress toward the sublime requires the imagination to step aside so that reason can intuitively recognize what the imagination is unable to (Kelley 133). Wordsworth, on the other hand, maintains that sublimity “exists in the extinction of the comparing power of the mind [reason]” and in a sense of “unity that exists in security or absolute triumph” (“SB” 356). This difference does not invalidate the many points of connection between Wordsworth and Kant, but rather illustrates Wordsworth’s ability to sift through the aesthetic tradition that preceded him and alter it in ways that suited his particular understanding of the sublime.

Many scholars have read Book VI of *The Prelude* as positive evidence of Wordsworth’s reliance on Kant, and while this approach is certainly valid, there are several points where his insistence on the absolute power of the imagination over reason is evident. Critics often cite the famous “Simplon’s Pass” passage as evidence of Kant’s influence; however, this argument overlooks the poet’s ultimate rejection of reason as the transcendent faculty. Climbing the Alps through “dumb cataracts and streams of ice / a motionless array of mighty waves” (*PR* VI:530-531), the poet and his friends approach

the sublime landscape as a text in which they “could not choose but read...the plain / and universal reason of mankind” (*PR* VI:544-546). Yet, this realization leaves the poet unsatisfied, for he laments that “still in me with those soft luxuries / mixed something of stern mood, an under-thirst / of vigor seldom utterly allayed” (*PR* VI:558-560). It is interesting that in this section of the poem, the speaker and his companions, who are so intent on seeking the summit of the Alps, actually pass it without notice, as a peasant soon informs them. Their attempt to reach the highest point of the sublime landscape in order to read in it the highest function of their own minds is ultimately thwarted, a fact that points to Wordsworth’s skepticism regarding the power of reason and empirical experience to produce sublimity.

When the poet actually achieves transcendence and quenches this thirst, if only momentarily, it is because of the sudden and inexplicable power of imagination:

Imagination—here the Power so called
through sad incompetence of human speech,
that awful Power rose from the mind’s abyss
like an unfathered vapor that enwraps,
at once, some lonely traveler. I was lost;
halted without an effort to break through;
but to my conscious soul I now can say—
‘I recognize thy glory’: in such strength
of usurpation, when the light of sense
goes out, but with a flash that has revealed

the invisible world, doth greatness make abode. (*PR* VI:593-604)

This passage is pivotal not only because it follows a moment in which reason fails to yield satisfaction, but also because of the imagery that associates the imagination immediately and powerfully with the sublime. The imagination is an “awful power” rising from the mind’s “abyss,” an image often used to indicate the sublime. He indicates that, while he had previously been lost, his imagination, by usurping his sense, provided a flash that revealed the invisible world and the glory of his own soul.

It is important to note that the imagination’s ability to transcend is linked both to power and usurpation. Paradoxically, this power is invoked following a recognition of the subject’s own impotence and vulnerability in a landscape that is threatening or incomprehensible. A metaphorical substitution of power is therefore necessary for the subject to regain its dominance over nature. Weiskel links this transference of power to “the grand confidence of a heady imperialism, now superannuated as ethic or state of mind—a kind of spiritual capitalism, enjoining a pursuit of the infinitude of the private self” (6). And yet, this grand assertion of power is problematic, because it does not fully overshadow the initial lack inherent in the subject and carries with it an air of compensation. What results is an oscillation between the subject’s inability to express a particular relationship to nature and the contradictory assertion that the imagination’s power is infinitely greater than that of the physical world, one that is never fully resolved. In both sides of this paradox, language takes a central role in establishing either the subject’s lack or presence of power, and the subject’s ability to transcend depends ultimately on his capacity to create a metaphorical possession of the natural world.

In many ways “An Octopus” is an attempt to explore this particular power dynamic, for although the speaker continually tries to approach the natural environment through language, each attempt is frustrated or complicated by a natural world that seems to resist expression. Moore wrote the poem, one of her longest and most complex, after visiting Mt. Rainier National Park with her mother and brother in 1922. Published in her 1924 edition of *Observations*, the poem describes the glacial mountain range and its inhabitants in a succession of metaphors and observations that confound rather than elucidate a clear picture of the scene. The octopus of the title is in fact the glacier, descending Mt. Rainier with its eight arms. Moore’s landscape has clear thematic connections to Wordsworth’s in *The Prelude*, particularly in the “Simplon’s Pass” episode already discussed. The choice to describe a snow-covered mountain in a lyric poem immediately evokes echoes of the egotistical sublime, for it fits well within the tradition. However, because Moore’s descriptive strategies do not lead the reader to a grand scheme of meaning, there is a gap in the poem between the speaker’s efforts to express the natural spectacle and the environment’s refusal to be expressed.

This dichotomy is apparent from the beginning of the poem, through Moore’s choice of such modifiers as “deceptively,” “shifting,” “unimaginable,” and “misleadingly” in the opening lines (*BMM* 125:1-11). The attentive reader is automatically aware of a disparity between what the human speaker perceives and the reality of the natural environment. The opening lines also shift back and forth several times between imagery of the glacial octopus “of ice” and that of a real octopus, with a disorienting effect. The tentacles of the octopus are simultaneously dotted with

“cyclamen-red and maroon,” “made of glass that will bend,” “comprising twenty-eight ice-fields from fifty to five hundred feet thick,” and capable of “picking periwinkles” or “hover[ing] forward ‘spider fashion” (*BMM* 125:4-10). This juxtaposition of contradictory imagery is baffling and prevents the reader from pinning down any clear idea regarding the nature of the octopus. It is simultaneously a physical object and an active subject, an effect that blurs the distinction between the two (Cull 6). While Moore’s landscape, a glacial mountain range, fits thematically within the tradition of the Romantic sublime, her environment subverts any attempt the speaker might make to possess or dominate it through language and metaphor.

Along with this destabilization of conceptual categories, Moore also inundates her readers with a barrage of imagery that ironically makes the mountain scene even harder to picture. Although each image is recognizable when taken individually, she combines them in ways that are bewildering. She pushes the limits of syntax to the point where it is impossible to tell what is being described. For example, in the section where she lists the multitude of animals that “own” the lake, she follows the catalogue with the following description:

Composed of calcium gems and alabaster pillars,
topaz, tourmaline crystals and amethyst quartz,
their den is somewhere else, concealed in the confusion
of “blue forests thrown together with marble and jasper and
agate
as if whole quarries had been dynamited.” (*BMM* 126-127:49-53)

While the sentence contains precise imagery of scientifically identifiable rocks and minerals, its composition prevents this accuracy from forming a clear picture. What exactly is composed of these various gems, the den or the animals? Given the poem's earlier conflation of animal and physical object, it is difficult to tell. Indeed, the answer seems "concealed in the confusion." Ryan Cull argues that this technique further conflates the object of description with the subject making meaning. He says that passages like this one result in an experience of "sensory overload, revealing Nature making a spectacle out of the speaker's broken strategies for linguistic representation" (5). Moore's fascination with scientific observation has been well noted, and her use of it in this poem brings up an interesting connection to Burke, who not only focused his attention on the primacy of empiricism in the sublime spectacle, but who also cites sensory overload as one of the characteristics particular to the experience of sublimity. Passages such as this one, which confound the reader with a barrage of imagery, evoke the initial phase of the sublime experience, yet the speaker never actually achieves any kind of linguistic mastery.

The landscape continually deceives the speaker, who is curiously disembodied, the composition of the poem being a collage of quotations from various outside sources. The poem lacks any definite "I" voice, which, coupled with the active nature of the landscape, further enhances the reversal of the power structure imbedded in the discourse of the sublime. Carol Cantrell calls this method a "strategy of restraint and [a] tacit erasure of human subjectivity in the face of larger-than-human forces" (163). Thus, while the poem enacts an experience similar to the subject's attempt to come to terms

with a sublime landscape, it is almost impossible to tell exactly who the subject is. The glacier has much more of a presence than any human speaker. The poem therefore undermines a human-centered epistemology and points toward a nature-centered one instead(Cull 9). The domination of nature that is inherent in both Neoclassical and Romantic approaches to the sublime, both of which depend on a subject's metaphorical possession of a natural landscape, is ultimately reversed in the poem. This perhaps points to Moore's own anxiety about the consequences of such an ideology of domination of the natural world, as wilderness areas began to be transformed into tourist parks in the Modernist period.

Moore's understanding of the complex relationship between language and possession is implicit in the tension she creates between perception and reality, words and things, subject and object. But there are also moments in the poem where this understanding is explicit:

The Greeks liked smoothness, distrusting what was back
of what could not be clearly seen,
resolving with benevolent conclusiveness,
“complexities which still will be complexities
as long as the world lasts”;
ascribing what we clumsily call happiness,
to “an accident of a quality,
a spiritual substance or the soul itself,
an act, a disposition, or a habit,

or a habit infused, to which the soul has been persuaded,
or something distinct from a habit, a power—”

such power as Adam had and we are still devoid of. (*BMM* 130:174-185)

I quote this section at length because it is one of the clearest examples of Moore’s direct cultural critique in the poem, and because it exhibits an understanding that the urge to possess, like the desire for power, is part of the human condition.⁵ The Greeks are guilty of oversimplification, which is a kind of possession in the sense that it involves imposing a false simplicity on something that is infinitely complicated to satisfy a desire. The speaker goes on to make a direct, yet convoluted, connection between what humans “*clumsily* call” happiness and power. The fact that it takes six lines to refine the object of happiness to its final state emphasizes the awkwardness of language and its lack of expressive ability. Furthermore, the sentence ends by invoking the power of Adam, which was that of naming the plants and animals in the Garden of Eden. The act of naming is the perfect synthesis of language and power because it imposes a meaning on the named object. It is significant to note that the speaker undermines the very idea of linguistic power by saying that it is something we have lacked since the fall. Without the power to approach the natural world through language, transcendence, as it has been articulated in the past, cannot be possible. Neither reason nor the imagination is able to give the speaker anything other than the illusion of power. In relation to the sublime, then, Moore’s strategies here suggest that the metaphorical domination of nature inscribed in the discourse of transcendence is illusory.

⁵ This is a concern that arises in many of Moore’s poems, including “Marriage,” “In the Days of Prismatic Color,” “The Jerboa,” and “When I Buy Pictures,” among others.

An examination of Moore's sources for the poem's collage technique reveals another way in which she undermines the idea that the human mind can dominate the natural world. It also provides a cultural motive for her interrogation of the sublime. She composed the poem after two visits to Mt. Rainier National Park, and she wrote her original notes on the National Park Service's *Rules and Regulations* brochure from which she took the majority of her quotations. Jennifer Ladino explores the brochure's rhetoric, which she says "represents the kind of utilitarian approach to nature that Moore challenges" (288). She discusses the historic events and ideological shifts that led to the development of nature tourism in America, arguing that rapid industrialization and the official closing of the frontier in 1890 created a sense of national nostalgia regarding the natural environment. The idea of nature tourism, which had previously been nonexistent, became an expression of patriotism. The National Park Service was created in the midst of such a shift, and the language of its brochure is imbedded with an ideology that views nature as a marketable commodity, an aesthetic spectacle, and a national resource to be exploited (295). The fact that Moore not only took excerpts from this brochure, but also inscribed her notes on top of it reveals the extent to which the poem's meaning lies in the relationship between the texts. While the rhetoric of this pamphlet is only incidentally related to any previous writings on the sublime, both Kant and Wordsworth describe the natural world (in a state of transcendence) as part of the human destiny (Stoddard 36). If our intellectual domination of nature is inherent in our (manifest) destiny, then any use of our natural environment is appropriate, from the spectacular to the utilitarian. Considering the extent to which environmental degradation has occurred in the name of

profit and convenience in the decades since Moore's writing, it is easy to see the dangers of such a discourse of mastery.

While the phrases and quotations Moore took from this brochure are rooted in the ideological assumption that nature exists *for* humans, Moore transplants them into the poem in subversive ways. She uses irony and juxtaposition to call attention to their original meanings and inscribe new meanings alongside them in reply. She treats the pamphlet's language the same way that she treats all human expression, as inherently unstable. Jeanne Heuving argues that Moore's arrangement of quotes has a "destabilizing and relativizing [effect on] the meanings of these phrases" (111). Although each of the quotes has its own explicit meaning, her arrangement of them produces shifting meanings, in the same way that her use of specific, concrete imagery results not in defining a clear picture, but in making such a thing impossible. The quotations do not impose their meanings on the poem. Rather, Moore's use of them points to the space between the texts as the site wherein meaning must be negotiated (Ladino 299). The point of drawing attention to the intertextuality of the poem is that it challenges Moore's experience with Mt. Rainier as a potentially sublime landscape by distancing the speaker from the spectacle. In contrast to the speaker's experience in *The Prelude*, for example, Moore's speaker is disembodied because of her composition method. In addition, "An Octopus" is also not simply about the interaction between one person's mind and nature. There is another text in between, and the reader's negotiation between them halts the momentum toward ecstasy that is typical of transcendent poetry.

The section of the poem that criticizes the Greeks for their need to establish fixed meanings, which corresponds directly to the control and exploitation of the natural world, is a perfect example of the strategic relationship between the two texts. The calculated arrangement of NPS discourse within this passage suggests a common cultural critique. The Greeks, who are “‘so noble and so fair’,” (*BMM* 130:164) are contrasted with nature tourists who are “‘alive to the advantage of invigorating pleasures’” (*BMM* 130:168). These quotations are taken directly from the NPS brochure, and although they embody the ideology that Moore is criticizing, their arrangement in the poem plays with their original meanings in an ironic way to create a mocking tone. The poem has already undermined the idea of fixed meaning in regard to the natural world, and this context frames the quotations in a way that reveals the illusory nature of their imbedded ideology.

This idea of illusion is encapsulated in the statement, “augmenting the assertion that, essentially humane, / ‘the forest affords wood for dwellings and by its beauty stimulates / the moral vigor of its citizens’” (*BMM* 130:171-173). The assumption that nature exists for the benefit of human civilization is implied in this quotation, and yet its use in the poem draws attention to its fictional nature. It is immediately followed by the passage quoted earlier that criticizes the Greeks for oversimplification, a juxtaposition that reveals Moore’s attitude toward the discourse invoked. Ladino asserts that her use of the NPS brochure cannot be taken as an indication of serious regard for it, “since the quotes are bracketed by discussions of the Greeks, whose... ‘benevolent conclusiveness’ Moore laments, as we see from the determined *inconclusiveness* of her poem” (302). Her construction of the poem therefore invokes the very ideology that she wishes to critique

in order to subvert it using its own language. She is able to accomplish this because she treats all language, hers and the sources of her collage, as unstable and productive of shifting meanings. In terms of the dominant discussions of the sublime, an indeterminate linguistic relationship to nature is an important part of the transcendent moment, particularly for Kant, but the subject eventually overcomes it. Moore's speaker, however, inhabits that moment of uncertainty without being able to dominate the landscape through language.

Yet the poem does not simply undermine the notion of human mastery of nature; it points toward an alternative way of making meaning that resists the urge to encapsulate. It moves beyond deconstruction to suggest a way to create new kinds of meaning. Cull articulates one of the central questions that drives the poem: "how does one get back outdoors after entering the prison house of language?" (10). Knowing that agency and subjectivity are illusions, particularly in the face of a natural world that exceeds our comprehension, how can we ever find meaning? The poem presents these questions to the reader and suggests a way to envision what forms such truth might take. The key to understanding her suggestions lies in the fact that she ultimately approaches her subject with a sense of plurality and imagination, and in doing so implies a strategy for her readers to understand truth as something that is continually evolving rather than fixed. In this sense, Moore's poetry could arguably be aligned with what might be called "the feminine sublime."⁶ Barbara Freeman, whose foundational work provided one of the

⁶ By "feminine," I am suggesting a particular relationship to language rather than a determinate gender, with the understanding that Moore's treatment of gender is incredibly complicated. I will discuss these complications in detail in my second chapter.

first comprehensive feminist critiques of sublime theory, defines the term as “a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into relation with an otherness...that is excessive and unrepresentable” (2). This relation is particular in its ability to exist in a state of liminality, in which boundaries overlap and differences collide, without the struggle for mastery that is explicit in previous discussions of sublimity.

Moore’s ability to inhabit such intellectual borderlands is evident in “An Octopus,” particularly the connections she makes between objects and ideas that are contradictory. The poem moves from one fragmented, elusive perspective to another by making boldly imaginative leaps between differences. The effect of such associations is often disorienting, and yet it urges the reader to understand things in new ways. A perfect example is the description of the antelope as “the ermine body on the crystal peak; / the sun kindling its shoulders to maximum heat like acetylene, dying them white” (*BMM* 127:65-66). She pairs a living animal with a flammable gas, a parallel that is at first obscure, then enlightening. The two have nothing in common, and yet the combination evokes the sensation of looking at something illuminated from behind, which creates the illusion of flames at the point where the figure and the background meet. In another example, the mountain is described as a “fossil flower concise without a shiver” (*BMM* 131:199). The petrified hardness of a fossil is combined with the delicate blossoming of a flower. This paradox is ultimately unresolved, but it creates a certain geologic

For the purpose of this discussion, I am merely linking Moore’s interrogation of the sublime to an alternate tradition that approaches the natural world in a way that resists the urge to encapsulate, dominate, or possess.

understanding nevertheless. The rock strata that make up a mountain unfold in intricate layers in the same way that petals do. And despite our perception of them, mountains do grow, just at a rate too slow for us to notice. These imaginative connections between contradictory elements suggest a new way of seeing that involves questioning our assumptions and repositioning ourselves in relation to the object being described.

This kind of vision can be contrasted with the idea of human transcendence that has pervaded Romantic discourse about nature. The very concept of a human subject achieving sublimity by interacting with a landscape implies a kind of universal knowledge (whether from our reason or our imagination) that is both larger than the physical world and absolute. In contrast, the kind of truth that Moore proposes in “An Octopus” can perhaps be understood through the lens of Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledge.”⁷ She defines this as a “practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing” (Haraway 184). Situated knowledge emphasizes partial understanding over universal, and points to the openings between these partial truths as the space where discovery becomes possible.

It is important to understand that Moore’s concept of imaginative discovery in nature is quite different than Wordsworth’s idea of the unified, absolute power that feeds on the infinite. It involves seeking out the difficult, the unexpected, the unfamiliar, and finding a way to appreciate it for what it is. And even when she approaches discovery, she does not allow it to crystallize in the poem, but immediately shifts perspective.

⁷ I credit the connection between Moore and Haraway to Kirstin Hotelling, who used it to describe Moore’s feminist poetics in her essay “The I of Each.”

Following the passage with the antelope, with its own difficult discovery, the poem immediately moves to the violent, explosive nature of the mountain that inspires reverence, and on to a catalogue of the “diversity of creatures” that includes campers and trappers as well as chipmunks and water ouzels. It never allows the reader the opportunity to rest on a single observation or discovery, but keeps moving, indicating an awareness of the danger that is inherent in any fixed expression.

This points to her understanding that it is impossible to fully separate language from the possessive urge. Cantrell argues that “by the time Moore wrote ‘An Octopus,’ the confidence that a nonpossessive alternative language was there for the taking had disappeared” (170). Yet the poem does resist possession, and it does so by drawing attention to the very power structures it attempts to subvert and rigorously interrogating them. Symbolic power can only truly exist when veiled or obscured. “An Octopus” is an unveiling of the mechanisms by which power is inscribed in language, and consequently on the natural world. By juxtaposing the speaker’s clumsy efforts at linguistic expression with an active natural world that makes its own meanings, Moore shows her readers how our desire to control nature is really a function of our lack of control. Seen in this light, the move from vulnerability and awe toward elevation and transcendence that is inherent in the egotistical sublime can be thought of as similarly flawed. The subject’s need to be elevated above the landscape that threatens him is ultimately rooted in his lack of power and control.

Ultimately the only way to approach the natural world without the urge to capture it is to be what Moore calls “an artist in refusing” (*CPR* 161). Throughout the poem she

exhibits an awareness of the dangers and pitfalls of language, and instead of overcompensating for them, she imposes limits on the act of expression. She refuses her speaker the illusion of subjectivity, and she refuses to allow her shifting perspectives the rest required for meaning to solidify. A great deal of the poem's meaning is found in what is left unsaid, in the gaps between the disjointed ideas that are carefully strung together. As Heuving argues, the poem makes use of "articulate silences" to recognize "how an important part of the meanings she can make are unrepresentable" (21). And herein lies another layer of complexity that challenges any notion of meaning as fixed: every reading is necessarily an act of creation. Each person brings different assumptions and experiences to her own reading of the poem and will therefore find unique discoveries in the poem's blank spaces.

All of this suggests that, through careful discipline, humility, and imagination, we can find a way to experience the natural world as a part of it, without allowing ourselves the ability to colonize it. Moore does not deny her speaker the urge to encapsulate nature, but rather exhibits continual attempts that are frustrated and unsatisfied. She recognizes that such an urge is somehow rooted in the human condition, but suggests that such a desire can, and should, be denied. Her poetic approach can be seen as one of practiced and determined self-denial, and yet, paradoxically, "An Octopus" abounds with expression. There is so much expression that the reader cannot keep track of it. Because she is able to remove herself so successfully from the poem, she creates the illusion that the natural world is the subject making meaning. And while this may still impose a

human fiction onto nature, it is nevertheless one that reverses the privileging of culture over nature that has been implicit in the rhetoric of sublimity since antiquity.

CHAPTER THREE
GENDERING THE BEAUTIFUL AND SUBLIME:
MARIANNE MOORE'S POETIC SUBVERSION

“The extravagant scene stages the sublime as entailing a certain tension, if not conflict,
between women and men, or models of them.”

-Ian Balfour, “(The) Sublime Sex”

Any examination of Marianne Moore's poetry as an engagement with notions of the sublime is necessarily fraught with complications specific to gender. Not only has aesthetic discourse been a field traditionally dominated by men, but so many of its formative texts also insist on a gendered distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. For Burke and Kant alike, women are naturally both beautiful objects and incapable of participating in the sublime, an order of experience specific to men. This division of aesthetic discourse along gender lines shaped Romantic poetry in significant ways, for when women are present in the many meditations on the sublime, they are more often than not excluded from the action. Moore's poetry enacts an interrogation of such gender boundaries on multiple levels, blurring the lines between both beauty and sublimity and masculine and feminine. And yet, what has frustrated and complicated feminist criticism of Moore's poetry is her refusal to treat issues of gender explicitly. With a few notable exceptions, her poetics is largely devoid of sex. Considering the fact that she prefaced *The Complete Poems* with the epigraph, “omissions are not accidents,” it is important to situate such an absence in relation to her position as a woman writing

within a male-dominated aesthetic discourse. Despite the fact that gender is not at the center of her poetry, it nevertheless structures her work in important ways. In fact, her reluctance to place issues of sex at the forefront of her work prevents the personification or reduction of all members of one sex necessary to maintain the rhetoric imbedded in the gendered distinctions between the beautiful and the sublime.

For Burke, the divisions between orders of aesthetic experience are naturally gendered, relegating women to the position of beautiful objects capable of exciting love in a male subject. What is interesting about Burke is his Lockean, empirical treatment of categories as subjective as gender, beauty, and love. For example, his description of how the mind and body respond to love, while non-gendered, is replete with pseudo-scientific language that reduces all experiences to one caricature. He claims that when faced with objects of beauty that excite love,

The head reclines something on one side; the eyelids are more closed than usual, and the eyes roll gently with an inclination to the object, the mouth is a little opened, and the breath drawn slowly, with now and then a low sigh: the whole body is composed, and the hands fall idly by the sides.

(ESB 287)

After making such pronouncements, Burke simply rests his case as if his descriptions admit no room for exception, adding only the qualifier that the appearance of these effects is always in direct proportion to the beauty of the object (*ESB 287*). The appearance of empirical discourse here is important because Burke also links women specifically with beautiful objects, therefore locking them into the position of exciting

such an experience in a subject. When describing the two sexes, he claims, “there are two sorts of societies. The first is, the society of sex. The passion belonging to it is called love, and it contains a mixture of lust; its object is the beauty of women” (*ESB* 85). His use of empiricism constitutes women in strictly literal terms as sex objects and personifies the entire sex as necessarily beautiful, passive, and existing for the aesthetic pleasure of men.

Not only are such gendered distinctions ideologically problematic, but they also deconstruct at the rhetorical level. In his essay, “(The) Sublime Sex,” Ian Balfour argues that Burke’s separation of the beautiful and sublime, as well as their respective alignment with opposite sexes, ultimately falls apart in spite of his insistence on them (330). He points to a particularly charged passage in which Burke provides a kind of blazon of a woman’s body in order to elucidate the characteristics that evoke an experience of the beautiful. Burke writes:

Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried.
(ESB 216)

This passage occurs in the section on “gradual variation,” one of the many qualities that Burke associates empirically with beauty. However, upon close examination, his language actually ends up evoking a scene eerily similar to his descriptions of sublimity.

He continually associates beauty with objects that are not only feminine, but also smooth, soft, small, non-threatening, and most importantly, unified. On the other hand, he describes the experience of the sublime as one in which “the mind is hurried out of itself, by a croud [sic] of great and confused images; which affect because they are crouded [sic] and confused” (*ESB* 106). While Burke intends the blazon passage to provide another empirical description of how (men) experience beauty, his description of a woman’s body parts fails to coalesce into a unified whole. There is a distinct tension between the desired effect of totality and the scattering of images that, instead, form a “deceitful maze” (Balfour 330). In addition to the disjointed and disorienting effect of Burke’s word choice, the passage is further complicated by the fact that the observing subject gets carried away in the process of description, becoming both “unsteady” and “giddy.” Balfour claims, “it is a scene of *transport* more characteristic of the sublime than the beautiful” (331). Because Burke has aligned the female with the beautiful and the male with the sublime, when the distinction between beauty and sublimity blurs, the validity of his entire rhetoric falls apart, leaving room for both uncertainty and play between the binaries of male and female, sublime and beautiful.

While much of Moore’s poetry does not directly address the gender divisions implicit in the aesthetics of the sublime, it nevertheless enacts a similar deconstruction. Oddly, however, it does so for the most part without putting sex in a central role. In her essay, “Injudicious Gardening,” Robin Schulze points to Moore’s “submersion” of gender issues into her poetry about plants and animals, arguing that such a strategy allowed her to engage in a critique of her “distinctly biodeterministic age...in which

Darwinian discourses about nature inevitably intersected with those about human nature, or the biological constitution of maleness and femaleness” (74). Moore was deeply interested in science, and yet her poetry resists the kind of strict categorization endemic to both Lockean materialism and biological determinism, particularly when it comes to notions of gender roles. In doing so, she implicitly divorces the desire for knowledge from its gendered context.

In “He Digesteth Harde Yron,” for example, Moore depicts an ostrich involved in a maternal act; however, her use of gendered pronouns and diction complicates a straightforward understanding of a phenomenon that has traditionally been considered feminine. The ostrich “watches his chicks with / a maternal concentration,” “mothering the eggs” (*CPO* 99: 8-10). Male ostriches naturally defend their young in the wild; however, the choice of such modifiers as “maternal” and “mothering” associates a conventionally masculine act (defense) with something distinctly feminine. At the same time, the ostrich is associated with stereotypical masculine qualities such as swiftness, hardness, suspicion, and courage (*CPO* 99: 13-15). Such descriptions are immediately followed by an investigation of the ostrich’s value as an object of desire for men, “prized for plumes and eggs and young” (*CPO* 99: 16) and “preening” (*CPO* 99: 28). It is important to note that the word “preening” can mean both to clean, as in feathers with a bill, or to dress elaborately so as to draw attention to one’s beauty. Here, with careful word choice, Moore has conflated a scientific detail with a gender-specific action particular to the aesthetic order of the beautiful. In terms of the aesthetics of beauty, object status is a necessary condition that is linked empirically, at least for Burke, to

females. But Moore blurs the distinctions between actions and qualities that are specific to how we construct gender differences, conflating the two in one animal and drawing attention to the borderland with subtle dissonance.

Jeanne Hueving argues repeatedly that Moore's later poems such as this one, originally published in 1940 in *What Are Years*, "disregard, rather than deconstruct, differences between men and women as they are culturally engendered and representationally inscribed" (164). She points to the fact that "He Digesteth Harde Yron" simply affirms the link between feminine identity and mothering (150). While it may be true that this poem valorizes maternity, Hueving's argument seems to ignore the ways in which Moore's careful wordplay prevents fixed categorization of gender. The poem toggles continually between masculine and feminine, harsh and beautiful, mothering and fathering, without resting on a stable identity. It is also full of violent imagery, particularly when Moore describes the results of man's objectification of this magnificent bird. For example, an emperor, who admires strange animals, has "six hundred ostrich-brains served / at one banquet, the ostrich-plume-tipped tent / and desert spear, jewel- / gorgeous ugly egg-shell / goblets, eight pairs of ostriches / in harness" (*CPO* 100: 39-44). The ostrich that Moore focuses on, however, manages to avoid such violent ends for himself and his chicks by being alert and swift. This is important, not only because the maternal takes on a harsh and even heroic quality, but also because the poem suggests that the way to resist objectification is to remain in constant motion. If we think about these ideas in terms of the gendered divisions in aesthetic discourse, the

ostrich becomes emblematic of movement and play, preventing the crystallization of meaning necessary to sustain such boundaries.

The poem also interrogates the division between the beautiful and sublime, or what Moore calls the visible and the invisible. In his investigation into the passions that evoke the sublime, Burke argues that ideas that are clear and simple might produce love, but obscurity inevitably results in the excitement of a higher passion. He writes, “it is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration...knowledge and acquaintance make the most striking causes affect but little” (*ESB* 105). The sublime, in other words, is always associated with what cannot be seen or easily grasped, while the beautiful exists on the surface of what is knowable. Moore, on the other hand, undermines this distinction in one simple sentence: “the power of the visible / is the invisible” (*CPO* 100: 46-47). These lines immediately follow the passage quoted above, in which Moore describes man’s violent uses of the ostrich-as-object, and suggests the immanence of an ultimate meaning that persists despite those that are superimposed or on the surface. In her essay “Marianne Moore and the Seventeenth Century,” Patricia C. Willis argues that Moore’s sensitivity to the penetration of the visible by the invisible is evident in many of her poems, and that “Moore’s genius was to seize on the device of hidden, emblematic meanings and apply it to lizards, mountains, rodents and birds” (47). Moore insists that the invisible is always present in all things, “as even where / no tree of freedom grows, / so-called brute courage knows” (*CPO* 100: 47-49). We don’t need the power to see the invisible in order to know it exists everywhere, even in the mundane; in fact, such

capability should be beyond our reach. All we need is perhaps the courage to refuse our human greed for categories that can be easily defined and possessed.

Another aspect of aesthetic ideology that Moore directly challenges is the notion that women should not attempt to understand or participate in the kind of thought necessary to achieve transcendence. In order to show how this idea has been inscribed in the language of the sublime and in Romanticism, I will turn briefly away from Moore to explore its development in Kant and Samuel Taylor Coleridge before returning to Moore's response. Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Sublime and Beautiful* echoes Burke's insistence that women belong to the order of the beautiful and men to the sublime, but Kant goes on to suggest that if such lines were crossed, the result would be both unnatural and grotesque. He writes,

Deep meditation and a long-sustained reflection are noble but difficult, and do not well befit a person in whom unconstrained charms should show nothing else than a beautiful nature. Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex, and because of their rarity they can make of her an object of cold admiration; but at the same time they will weaken the charms with which she exercises her great power over the other sex. A woman who has a head full of Greek...or carries on fundamental controversies about mechanics...might as well have a beard; for perhaps that would express more obviously the mien of profundity for which she strives. (*OSB* 78)

A woman's great power over the other sex, or her "secret magic," is her ability to rouse the passions in a way that reflects favorably on her own beauty. Yet this "power" actually restricts women's sphere of influence to that which does not require deep or abstract thought. Balfour points out that Kant's descriptions of women "can be violent even when appearing to be complimentary or respectful" (326). Despite its overt intention, however, this passage betrays itself and opens a space for interrogation, for it implies that women might, in fact, be capable of achieving a higher order of aesthetic experience than that of beauty. While Burke simply takes the gendered divisions of aesthetics as an empirical given, in other words, the fact that Kant hypothesizes about women's entry into the sphere of the sublime admits the possibility. However, Kant insists that if women attempted to cross the gendered aesthetic divide they would inevitably cease to be women, becoming instead a grotesque caricature of a man. A woman's mental foray into a man's aesthetic territory has physical consequences for her body: her beauty loses its power to affect men as she becomes more like a man, sprouting a metaphorical beard.

Ultimately Kant's gender roles are as irreversible as Burke's, and the predominance of such ideas has shaped, to a large extent, literary thought in the century to come. Balfour points out that despite the proliferation of women's writing at the close of the eighteenth century, aesthetic philosophy remained "largely a matter of men telling women how such...distinctions were to be made" (324). He points to a telling anecdote related on numerous occasions by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in which the poet describes

the act of witnessing a sublime spectacle in the presence of a woman.⁸ The scene described is typical of the sublime, with “a cataract of great height, breadth, and impetuosity, the summit of which appeared to blend with the sky and clouds, while the lower part was hidden by rocks and trees” (*SW* 362). The poet is with a party of travelers, and one of the men remarks “that it was, in the strictest sense of the word, a sublime object.” The woman present replies, “Yes! And it is not only sublime, but beautiful and absolutely pretty.” The anecdote is obviously condescending toward the woman who cannot distinguish between the beautiful and the sublime, and it points to the fact that not only were aesthetic distinctions still inextricably linked to gender difference, but also that women remained subordinate to men in terms of the ability to participate in such discourse in the first place.

The undercurrents of this aesthetic condescension can be seen in one of Coleridge’s most famous poems, “The Aeolian Harp,” in which the speaker engages in a dialogue about the sublime with his new wife, Sara. Coleridge introduces her in apostrophe as “pensive,” but also “soft,” “soothing,” and “sweet,” modifiers that automatically associate her with Burke’s notion of beauty and love, regardless of whatever thoughts might occupy her mind (1-2). The speaker quickly moves from a surface description of their visible surroundings into a meditation on the invisible, with the controlling metaphor of what M.H. Abrams called “the correspondent breeze” as the force of the unseen that manifests itself through the music of the Aeolian harp (Abrams 26). The speaker identifies himself as the harp, a passive mind through which the sublime

⁸ This story has been recounted many times in different versions, by Coleridge and by Dorothy Wordsworth. Interestingly, in her version, there is no lady present.

wind blows to make “such a soft floating witchery of sound / as twilight Elfin make, when they at eve / voyage on gentle gales from Faery-Land” (20-22). Not only does the speaker identify the breeze as “at once the soul of each, and God of all” (48), but he also depicts himself as naturally capable of recognizing this invisible spectacle. The breeze automatically lights on him through no effort of his own, and he already possesses the equipment necessary to turn that visitation into transcendent expression.

The end of the poem shifts in tone abruptly, as the speaker becomes aware of his wife’s disapproving glance and changes his rhetoric to pacify her. While we never actually hear Sara’s voice in the poem, the speaker relates her reproach of his “dim and unhallowed” thoughts, “bubbles that glitter as they rise and break / on vain Philosophy’s aye-babbling spring” (51-57). It is possible to read Sara’s rebuke as an insistence on orthodox Christianity in the face of her husband’s waxing pantheism, for the speaker calls her a “meek daughter in the family of Christ,” because she bids him to “walk humbly with [his] God” (53). At the same time, however, if we consider the fact that the invisible world the speaker taps into is as much an aesthetic and intellectual spectacle as a spiritual one, it is also possible that Sara is simply incapable of participating in the speaker’s transcendence, being relegated to the domain of beauty, and therefore misreads his sublime meditation as heresy. In the last lines of the poem he suddenly becomes penitent and humble, a shift that creates tension with the rest of the poem. Considering the poem’s mounting ecstasy, if the ending is read as a simple acquiescence to Sara’s religious demands, it becomes anti-climactic. It is far more likely that the ending is ironic, with the speaker’s retraction serving as a veiled means of pacifying a woman who, although

beautiful, cannot possibly understand the depth of his meditations. Read this way, the structures of gender and power become visible, and the poem reinforces the separation of women from the spectacle of the sublime.

While many of Moore's poems interrogate cultural constructions of gender and power, few are as explicit in their critique as "Marriage," first published in her 1924 *Observations*. "Marriage" is one of the few poems that directly addresses the ideology imbedded in our notions of gender difference through human subjects. It also engages with ideas of beauty and sublimity on multiple levels, which are complicated by the fact that Moore sets the poem in the Garden of Eden, in a state before humanity was separated from direct contact with God. Moore draws heavily on Milton for the imagery that she uses to describe Adam and Eve, a fact that is important for the purposes of this analysis because *Paradise Lost* goes much further than Genesis does to place the quest for the unknowable and the loss of union with God in a gendered context. Patricia C. Willis notes that Moore "quotes directly from Book IV in her description of Adam, and she paraphrases Book IX where Eve suggests that she and Adam work apart in the garden" (44). Moore admired Milton greatly for his "ardor for religion and art considered as one" (*CPR* 233), and she uses his imagery in ways that evoke the richness and complexity of gendered knowledge present in the text for her own purposes.

Moore introduces Eve first, and she does so in a way that immediately disturbs the boundaries between beauty and knowledge of the sublime. Here, Eve is associated with beauty, as she is in *Paradise Lost*, but Moore challenges the notion that this makes her incapable of higher thought. The speaker says, "I have seen her / when she was so

handsome / she gave me a start, / able to write simultaneously / in three languages— / English, German and French— / and talk in the meantime” (*CPO* 62:22-28). Moore’s syntax in these lines actually links Eve’s beauty to her ability to think on multiple levels, completely redefining the predominant terms of aesthetic discourse. And rather than submitting to a man’s superior understanding of God, or the invisible, Eve quietly pronounces, “*I should like to be alone,*” and separates herself from Adam in order to experience her own sublime spectacle (*CPO* 62:31). Her experience of the sublime is further complicated by Moore’s decision to describe it as “the strange experience of beauty; / its existence is too much; / it tears one to pieces” (*CPO* 63:37-39). This moment in the poem is simultaneously one of beauty and transport, which points to Eve’s *strange* ability to recognize the simultaneous presence of both aesthetic categories.

When Adam finally appears in the poem, Moore associates him with beauty as well, but she does so in a way that draws attention to how the will to power shapes his understanding of reality. His introduction makes a direct connection between his particular beauty and domination, for Moore writes that “he has beauty also; / it’s distressing—the O thou / to whom from whom, / without whom nothing”⁹ (*CPO* 63:61-64). The power structure here, which Moore appropriates in order to emphasize that it is “distressing,” actually prevents Adam from understanding the truth of Eve’s mind, a fact that ultimately contributes both to the fall and to the breakdown of their union in the poem. “Forgetting that there is in woman / a quality of mind / which as an instinctive

⁹ The last part of these lines is a direct reference to Eve’s address to Adam in Book IV of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as “O though for whom / and from whom I was formed flesh of thy flesh / and without whom am to no end (440-442).

manifestation / is unsafe” (*CPO* 64:85-88), Adam becomes embroiled in his own discourse of “everything convenient / to promote one’s joy” (*CPO* 64:96-97) and “experiences a solemn joy / in seeing that he has become an idol” (*CPO* 64:101-102). Although he experiences spectacles that have traditionally been thematically linked to the sublime, such as violent waterfalls, powerful wind, and chasms, his understanding of it and his discourse about it are undermined by his will to power, and Moore is quick to point out that this is neither wise nor ethical. She writes, “in him a state of mind / perceives what it was not / intended that he should” (*CPO* 64:98-100). It is interesting to note here that traditionally, Eve has been given the blame for the fall, precisely because she tried to know things that God didn’t intend for her to know, and yet here Adam’s understanding is the one that goes against God’s plan. The fact that Eve yielded to her temptation for the sake of ultimate knowledge is only “that invaluable accident / exonerating Adam” (*CPO* 63:59-60).

Adam is ultimately unable to act in the presence of the sublime, perhaps because his will to dominate makes him uncomfortable with the idea of not knowing, and this lack prevents him from having a fulfilling marriage with Eve. When confronted by the nightingale, a conventional Romantic motif that symbolizes the immortal or ineffable, Adam is “plagued” (*CPO* 64:103) and “unnerved” (*CPO* 65:114) by “its silence— / not its silence but its silences” (*CPO* 64:105-106) and is incapable of acting in response. He can’t decide whether to clap, cry out, or stay silent, and the presence of the invisible or unknowable, instead of moving him to transcendence, only makes him frustrated. It is at this point in the poem that “he stumbles over marriage, / ‘a very trivial object indeed’ / to

have destroyed the attitude / in which he stood— / the ease of the philosopher / unfathered by a woman” (*CPO* 65:124-129). The fact that Moore links Adam’s inability to achieve transcendence to Eve’s arrival in the garden introduces a multilayered interrogation of power in gender construction. On the surface, it is an obvious reversal of conventional aesthetic discourse, in which women are restricted from the realm of sublime experience because of men’s presence in that domain. Underneath, however, is a tacit understanding that the reason Eve’s presence disrupted his mastery of higher thought is that her difference, coupled with his will to dominate and possess it, separates him irrevocably from the ultimate other that can never be contained.

What ensues from this “stumbling over marriage” in the poem is a lengthy exchange of insults and criticism, all of which draw attention in some way to a distinctly “fallen” understanding of gender difference, beauty, power, and art. Adam begins the exchange by insisting that women must be beautiful, for “what monarch would not blush / to have a wife / with hair like a shaving brush?” (*CPO* 67:194-196). Eve retorts with a sharp criticism of men’s desire to dominate aesthetic discourse, which is ironically trivialized. She says, “men are monopolists / of ‘stars, garters, buttons / and other shining baubles”” and she cites this will to power as the reason they are “unfit to be the guardians / of another person’s happiness” (*CPO* 67:200-204). He ends up proving her right on this count when he proposes that wives must be treated carefully, but in the process ends up grotesquely dividing the woman’s body into meaningless parts, “a couple of shins and the bit of an ear,” and associating it with imagery of death (*CPO* 67:205-21). Eve accuses Adam of associating with “artists who are fools,” while Adam insists that Eve knows too

many “fools who are not artists,” an exchange in which Moore draws attention to the separation of aesthetic discourse along gender lines (*CPO* 68:228-230). In the end neither Adam nor Eve is able to love the other because each is too self-involved. However, Moore makes a clear distinction between Adam, who “loves himself so much, / he can permit himself / no rival in that love,” and Eve, who “loves herself so much, / she cannot see herself enough” (*CPO* 68:234-238). Adam’s self love is an egotism that causes him to dominate Eve by restricting her access to certain realms of experience, and Eve’s is arguably the result of being shut out. In the end the marriage falls apart despite the fact that it is legitimized by the state and by ritual, and it does so precisely because Adam’s desire to be dominant, even god-like, prevents either of them from being able to understand the true nature of a reality in which male and female, beautiful and sublime, love and art are equally important and inextricably connected.

As a whole, the body of Moore’s poetry treats strict categorization as something fundamentally rooted in a legitimized desire for power, domination, and possession, and this is particularly the case when she deals with issues of gender and art. Her reluctance to allow herself and her readers the comfort of resting on any particular, crystallized meaning is an intentional refusal to participate in such legitimizing. Considering the terms that have defined and dominated aesthetic discourse for centuries, many of which rely on forced and arbitrary divisions between categories of experience, Moore’s poetry can be seen as a counter-discourse. One aspect of her work that has continually fascinated and frustrated her readers is its insistence on continual movement and play between the various dichotomies around which we have structured our reality as a culture. It’s

difficult to pin down a Moore poem, precisely because she is consistently wary of fixed meaning. She pays careful attention to the kinds of truths that have historically been privileged and investigates the power structures at work in that process. At the same time, she considers the ethical and artistic consequences of continuing to legitimize knowledge that is based in the urge to construct hierarchies of experience. When this general approach is applied specifically to gender difference in the aesthetic philosophy of the sublime, her poetry suggests that holding on to such divisions is not only irrational and unrealistic, but also insidious for everyone involved. As an alternative, she stresses maintaining a healthy level of comfort with paradox, movement, and play in order to understand the interpenetration of all things, beautiful and sublime, in life and art.

CHAPTER FOUR

LOSING VOICE: MARIANNE MOORE AND THE PROPHETIC TRADITION

“There is no ‘poetics of prophecy’; there is simply a voice breaking forth.”

-Geoffrey Hartman, “The Poetics of Prophecy”

If the sublime entails a discourse about the unknowable, then its logical extension in poetry is prophecy, divinely inspired public utterance. For the purpose of this analysis, prophecy is not to be understood as prediction, but rather as the act of making ethical, moral, and spiritual judgments concerning the current and future state of a community based on privileged knowledge of God’s will. Prophetic poetry frames the Romantic period in important ways, starting with William Blake, who drew on archaic religious and mystical traditions to construct visionary social commentary in the midst of war, instability, and political turmoil. For Blake, the presence of an authoritative voice, whose emanation is the intermediary between the divine and the community, becomes a central concern. While Marianne Moore has rarely been included among the ranks of prophetic poets, her body of work nevertheless engages in a similar kind of public discourse, drawing on her knowledge of and admiration for the Hebrew prophets to craft sharp social commentary in a time of looming war and cultural anxiety. What is most interesting about Moore’s appropriation of the prophetic tradition, however, is the fact that she resists the use of an authoritative lyric voice in general. Many of the biblical prophets to whom she makes frequent and direct reference were uneasy with the burden

of divine vision and with their position of authority in the community. Moore's use of intertextuality as a method of composition becomes important here, because it allows her to revise the idea of prophecy by drawing on multiple sources instead of a single authoritative self to make judgments through negotiating and dialogue. In this way, Moore strategically constructs her own selfhood (or lack of selfhood) in order to create a kind of impersonal, or voiceless, prophecy.

William Blake was a self-proclaimed prophet, and he constructed his own elaborate system of mythology and iconography, both visually and verbally, in response to what he considered to be the most pressing concerns of his time, namely the French Revolution and increasing secularization. It is not my intention to explicate Blake's mystical allegories—such a task is beyond the scope of this analysis¹⁰—but rather to draw attention to the overlaps in his work between the idea of the sublime, the act of prophecy, and the function of both in an unstable world. Many scholars have pointed to the immense social and political turmoil that accompanied the French Revolution as the impetus for Blake's turn toward mysticism and prophecy. In his introduction to the illuminated manuscripts of Blake's *The Continental Prophecies*, for example, D.W. Dorrbecker argues that “Blake's ideas about the functioning of word and image underwent significant changes during the years immediately following the Revolution in France,” moving beyond direct historical representation to a “new and ‘prophetic’ mode of historical...interpretation” (13). It is important to note that, in reviving a religious tradition that had fallen out of common use in British literature for centuries, Blake set

¹⁰ For further reading on Blake's vision and the prophetic tradition, see Kathleen Raine, *William Blake*, New York: Praeger, 1971.

the tone for Romantic poetry, from Percy Bysshe Shelley all the way to William Butler Yeats.

Blake makes the link between the sublime, the act of prophecy, and the experience of turmoil explicit in many of his works. For example, in the opening plate of *Jerusalem*, which is addressed “To the Public,” he uses vocabulary specific to the aesthetics of the sublime to describe his prophetic project. He describes his forms as “giant,” and he exhorts his audience to behold his visions “with trembling and amazement” (1:3)¹¹. He depicts the voice of God as something terrible, charging him with a burden of prophetic responsibility that is specific to the act of writing:

And of that God from whom
Who in mysterious Sinais awful cave
To Man the wond'rous art of writing gave,
Again he speaks in thunder and in fire!
Thunder of Thought, & flames of fierce desire:
Even from the depths of Hell his voice I hear,
Within the unfathomed caverns of my Ear.
Therefore I print; nor vain my types shall be. (3:1-10)

This passage is important for many reasons, and I quote it at length because it echoes Burke’s notion that the experience of the sublime is both terrible and beautiful. In addition, the speaker explicitly identifies himself as the intermediary between God and the public, establishing his authority as a prophet. The imagery that he uses to describe

¹¹ This work, like *The Continental Prophecies*, is a series of illuminated plates. My citations for these works include plate number followed by line numbers.

the source of his vision is frightening, coming as it does from an “awful cave,” and even “the depths of hell” to his own “unfathomed caverns.” At the same time, the vision’s charge is “wond’rous” and full of “fierce desire,” words that arouse passions specific to the sublime. Blake’s emphasis on sound is a key point here, for he repeatedly points to the loudness of God’s speech and the depths of his own hearing. Such repetition places voice in a central role, a position that Moore directly challenges in her revision of the prophetic tradition.

The fact that Blake associates the divine with terror is compounded by his frequent representations of social discontent, war, and revolution in tones that echo the biblical prophets. In “America,” one section of *The Continental Prophecies*, for example, he situates the role of prophecy within the context of civic strife, crying out to the image of God in a supplicant voice, saying, “On my American plains I feel the struggling afflictions / Endur’d by roots that writhe their arms into the nether deep” (4:10-11). Again, in “Europe,” he writes, “the youth of England hid in gloom curse the pained heavens; compell’d / into the deadly night to see the form of Albions Angel / their parents brought them forth & aged ignorance preaches canting. / On a vast rock, perciev’d by those senses that are clos’d from thought” (14:5-8). The Hebrew prophets were called upon to speak to the Israelites particularly in times of political crisis and exile (Blenkinsopp 126). Blake’s purpose seems to be the same, likening himself to what Jeremiah described as “prophets that have been before me...[and who have] prophesied both against many countries, and against great kingdoms, or war, and of evil, and of

pestilence” (28:7-8). Thus, for Blake, the function of prophecy and art is rooted in the need for social, moral and spiritual change.

While his prophetic voice is an answer to the suffering of a community, it also valorizes violent revolution. In Plate 11 of “America,” for example, he repeats the phrase “Sound! Sound! My loud war trumpets & alarm my thirteen Angels” four times (11:1, 13, 20, 25). “Europe” ends, after numerous descriptions of tyranny and suffering, with Los (the prophet) arising, “and with a cry that shook all nature to the utmost pole, / call’d all his sons to the strife of blood” (17:10-11). Blake’s emphasis on the necessity of violence needs to be understood in the context of the French Revolution, which symbolized humankind’s ability to throw off the yoke of tyranny in a way that no other historic event had at the time. Katey Castellano argues that the kind of violence Blake champions is inextricably linked to hope for the future. She claims that “when Blake represents revolution positively, those spectacular events are described in terms of expenditure, or sacrifice, that would restore religious and social meaning to an increasingly secular and scientific world” (12). Blake’s poetic momentum, then, moves from a state of spiritual and social turmoil toward the promise of rebirth and restoration, much the same as many of the Hebrew prophets. For example, Joseph Blenkinsopp points specifically to Ezekiel, whose teachings are “set up to move thematically between the poles of exile and return, divine absence and presence, spiritual death and new life” (170). The promise of renewal does not come without a price, however, and Blake’s prophecies impel the reader toward the moment of violent uprising that must come first.

My main interest in examining Blake, particularly in relation to Marianne Moore, lies in the authority of his prophetic voice. His development of a unique and obscure system of mythology, coupled with his aim to create a form of poetry that would bring the human community closer to the divine, sets him apart as an artist with privileged knowledge of God's will. It is here that I draw a contrast between his mode of prophecy and Moore's. While she also creates a body of poetry that speaks to a community in crisis, her prophetic voice is distinctly different, marked by a refusal to rely on certainty or authority. Unlike Blake, she is ambivalent toward violence and resistant to what she calls "hard and fast definitions."¹² On the surface, such characteristics might seem contradictory to a prophetic tradition; however, Moore pulls directly from Hebrew prophets and even invokes them by name, modeling her own vision after a tradition that she understood as both antithetical to divine-sanctioned warfare and engaging in ethical dialogue rather than providing easy answers. Her lack of an authoritative voice is compounded by her unique method of collage composition, which allows her to appropriate other ideas and materials and use them in new ways, resulting in poems that insist on dialogue because their meaning lies in the negotiation between texts. In a body of work that, as Cristanne Miller argues in "What is War For," attempts to make ethical judgments and "address questions of what it means to live in a principled way in a complex world," such strategic self-positioning warrants examination for the ways it challenges privileged modes of prophecy in poetry.

¹² Marianne Moore to John Warner, 24 September 1914. Folder VI:20:10, Rosenbach Museum Library.

Miller has done extensive critical work linking Moore's poetry to an ancient Hebrew tradition, pointing to Moore's own notes from a Bible class with her family's minister to argue that she used biblical prophecy as a model for ethical speech to a national and international community (57). Miller insists that Moore understood the Hebrew prophets as providing "a respected tradition of personal speech about public issues that did not foreground the self either as a privileged speaker or as a spouter of opinion" (57). Moore's emphasis on the Hebrew prophets' self-positioning is essential to her own poetry, and she may have looked to them as a means of legitimizing her own position as a woman writing within and challenging a masculine tradition. I draw heavily on Miller's work to show how Moore's poetry enacts an ancient form of prophecy; however, I do so in order to point out the ways in which her work challenges a particularly Romantic tradition that privileges authoritative voice and insists on violence as a political and spiritual tool.

Many of Moore's most explicitly prophetic poems grapple with issues of warfare and community. Unlike Blake, however, she tends to approach the idea of sanctioned violence with ambivalence at best, and more often contempt. In doing so, she pulls directly from the Hebrew prophets, particularly ones that take clear stances against war in the name of God. The poem "Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel" is one of her most obvious invocations of Hebrew prophecy, and its epigraph insists, "bloodshed and strife are not of God." Each of the prophets mentioned in the title spoke out against war, Isaiah commanding the Israelites to "beat their swords into plowshares," (Isa 2:4) Jeremiah pointing out the cost of violence to "the stranger, the fatherless...the widow...[and the]

innocent” (Jer 22:3), Ezekiel insisting that a just man “hath spoiled none by violence” (Ezek 18:7), and Daniel instructing rulers to show “mercy to the oppressed” (Dan 4:27). Consequently, Moore’s poem describes war as “a sore / on this life’s body,” calling on the prophets of the title to confirm and legitimize her claim (*BMM* 360:3-4). At this moment the speaker appears to take on an authoritative voice, speaking out to an international community with a clear prescription for action.

Such a stance is unusual for Moore and surprising; however, she does not let this pronouncement rest without troubling. The poem immediately moves into a commentary on the powerlessness of the prophetic voice to combat the sounds of warfare, reminding readers that “so / long as men will go / to battle fighting / with gun-shot, / what / argument will not / fail of a hearing!” (*BMM* 360:6-12). As in Blake’s poetry, sound imagery takes a central role, but for Moore the booming of gunshots overshadows any attempt to speak out against war in a public forum. Such a statement immediately undermines the sense of authority established at the beginning of the poem, and presents a speaker/prophet who is both determined to speak and incapable of being heard. The poem ends without any indication that the situation facing the speaker will change, and yet she is not absolved of the moral responsibility to speak out against inevitable war, for the poem exists. This seeming paradox is in fact an important dynamic for Moore’s work in general, much of which celebrates difficulty as an impetus for continual re-imagining. In an early, unpublished poem, “Man’s Feet are a Sensational Device,”¹³ Moore insists

¹³ Marianne Moore, unpublished poem, “Man’s Feet are a Sensational Device,” Folder I:03:02, Rosenbach Museum Library. Miller tellingly points to the early drafts of this poem, some of which were entitled, “To Pacifists in War Time,” “To a Public Servant in

that “the clear field of moral choice affords men’s / feet, crackling ice,” an image that points to the unstable and difficult nature of ethical judgment. Yet she follows this with a reminder that “feet are / a sensational device,” capable of managing complexity with continual movement and sensitivity. Thus, for Moore, difficulty does not relinquish the poet/prophet from her responsibilities to the community, but rather impels her toward a creative revision that can make clear judgments without ignoring complexities.

Concerning the issue of war, Moore’s poetry is not unequivocally against violence, particularly where struggles for freedom against tyranny are at stake. Like Blake, Moore occasionally invokes a prophetic tradition in support of armed uprising; however, she does so with a distinctly detached voice and in an indirect way. In the 1917 poem “Sojourn in the Whale,” for example, which was originally entitled “Ireland,” she intimates support for the Easter Uprising without issuing any clarion call to arms. The speaker addresses Ireland directly, describing her as “swallowed by the opaqueness of one whom / the seas / love better than you,” a metaphor that compares Ireland to Jonah and England to the colonial whale (*BMM* 81:3-5). The “opaqueness” of the British is linked to their inability and perhaps refusal to understand the Irish as anything other than “circumscribed by a / heritage of blindness and native incompetence,” a phrase that appears as part of a quotation from a source that Moore does not name (*BMM* 81:11-13). The quote is obviously part of colonial discourse, for it insists that Ireland will naturally submit to England’s superior power because “water seeks its own level” (*BMM* 81:16). Moore’s placement of this outside source in the poem plays with its meaning in ironic

War Time,” “To the Faithfully Weary,” and “Patriotic Sentiment and the Maker” (“What is War For” 61).

ways, however, for she immediately follows it with a reminder to Ireland that “you have seen it when obstacles happened / to bar / the path—rise automatically” (*BMM* 81:18-20). She appropriates the quotation’s metaphor of water in motion for her own purposes, to suggest that a battle fought for the freedom of the oppressed is not only justified, but also a natural response (Miller, “WWF” 67).

While the “Sojourn in the Whale” clearly legitimizes the Irish Revolution, it does so without the heightened rhetoric of a typical call to arms. Unlike Blake’s, Moore’s prophetic voice here is detached and distinctly impersonal, commenting on events from a position outside, yet still imminently invested in, the community. Instead of relying on imagery immediately evocative of the brutality endured by the Irish at the hands of the English, she uses metaphors to describe the unnatural state of colonized Ireland. Rather than directly depicting bloodshed and strife, in other words, she describes Ireland as “trying to open locked doors with a sword, threading / the points of needles, [and] planting shade trees / upside down” (*BMM* 81:1-3). Such analogies suggest the nation’s frustrated destiny without direct emotional appeal. Miller argues that “the poet-prophets [Moore] most admired attempted to guide through metonymy and analogy—tools of language associated with her own verse” (“WWF” 68). The result of such indirect and metaphorical depictions of violent insurrection is distance, not only from the sights and sounds of battle, but also from certainty, for there is room for questioning and play in her choice of descriptive language. Do her metaphors signify Ireland’s state before revolution, in unnatural subjugation to the English, or are they a commentary on the

frustrated measures that have been taken to rise against tyranny? Either seems plausible, and thus the reader is left to sift through the possible choices and decide for herself.

This lack of certainty is typical of the majority of Moore's poems, and ostensibly runs counter to a prophetic tradition, considering the fact that prophecy implies privileged knowledge and divine inspiration. However, many of the prophets that Moore invokes by name operated in a similar manner despite their direct communication with God, and their visions were often accompanied by a sense of anxiety regarding the burden of prophecy. Miller acknowledges this, and she points to the poem "The Past is the Present,"¹⁴ in which the speaker insists, "I shall revert to you, / Habakkuk" (*BMM* 74:3-4). According to Joseph Blenkinsopp, Habakkuk's visions were not only specifically concerned with political crisis and international affairs, but also marked by questioning and doubt (126). In chapter three, following a passage in which he prepares himself to receive God's answer to his complaint about an anonymous tyrant, Habakkuk receives his vision with uncertainty, for he says, "my footsteps tremble beneath me" (Hab 3:16). This image of unsure footing, which appears, as already discussed, in "Man's Feet are a Sensational Device," describes not only Habakkuk's psychological state of mind while receiving his visions, but also his questioning of God's message. Blenkinsopp argues that, while Habakkuk's vision promises victory for the Israelites, it was "a prediction of well-being the truth of which many, the prophet among them, had reason to doubt" (127).

¹⁴ An earlier draft of this poem, which appeared in *Others* 1.6 (December 1915): 106, is entitled, *So Far as the Future is Concerned*, "Shall Not One Say, with the Russian Philosopher, 'How is one to Know What one Doesn't Know?'" *So Far as the Present is Concerned*. (I am following Robin Schulze's solution for citing this title, which has two sets of quotations imbedded in it). The version of the poem I am citing appears in *Observations* (1924).

In a time of political crisis, with the imminent rise of Babylonian and Assyrian power, Habakkuk's prophecies depict a crisis of faith in the face of difficulty (Blenkinsopp 128). This is important to recognize, because Moore was writing in a time of similar international political crisis, calling on a prophetic voice that could legitimize her own poetic struggle to make clear ethical judgments without relying on certitude, a dangerous illusion in a complex world.

For Moore and for Habakkuk, questioning and doubt are necessary tools in the search for greater clarity. According to George Adam Smith, whose *Book of the Twelve Prophets* Moore owned and studied, Habakkuk was the first prophet to introduce questioning into the prophetic tradition, with the acknowledgment that "revelation is baffled by experience, [and] that the facts of life bewilder a man who believes in the God whom the prophets have declared (Smith II:131)¹⁵. And yet, as Miller points out, Habakkuk relies on his confusion, doubt, and mode of questioning as an impetus for his prophecy, rather than using it as an excuse to avoid the responsibility of speaking God's word to his community (69). Likewise, Moore celebrates and utilizes uncertainty as a strategy of resistance to what she considered an outmoded form of ethical prescription that privileges authoritative voice.

Many of her poems that do not deal explicitly with war or with prophecy nevertheless make clear her insistence on continual movement and doubt as the only appropriate response to a complicated world. "To a Steamroller," for example, criticizes the kind of mindset necessary to achieve authority, simplicity, and certainty by saying,

¹⁵ This work contains two volumes.

“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” (*BMM* 63:3-7). The metaphor of the steamroller implicitly connects such utilitarian judgments with power and violence, which crush subtlety and difference in an attempt to maintain absolute boundaries. Moore follows this criticism with a generous statement that causes the poem to enact the kind of mindset she wishes to have in its place, one that relies on self-doubt, humility, and acceptance of limitless possibilities (“WWF” 67). The speaker muses, “As for butterflies, I can hardly conceive / of one’s attending on you, but to question / the congruence of the complement is vain, if it exists” (*BMM* 63:11-13). She recognizes that, while similarities between a steamroller and a butterfly are difficult to imagine, to ignore the possibility of their existence would be “vain,” a word that connotes both vanity and futility. Such simplistic dichotomies must always be interrogated and undermined, the poem suggests. Moore does not absolve herself from having the impulse to categorize and simplify, but her moment of recognition and self-doubt in the closing lines underscores her refusal to allow that impulse to crystallize into ideology.

Another poem that embodies Moore’s celebration of difficulty and uncertainty as the only way to find truth is “In the Days of Prismatic Color,” which describes the introduction of complexity into Adam’s prelapsarian world in a distinctly prophetic tone. Moore links complexity to Eve’s birth, for she begins the poem discussing simplicity, “Not in the days of Adam and Eve but when Adam / was alone; when there was no smoke and color was / fine” (*BMM* 91:1-2). Before Eve, then, Adam lived in a world where everything was clear and certain, “with nothing to modify it but the / mist that

went up...plain to see and account for” (*BMM* 91:5-8). After Eve’s introduction to the scene, however, such innocent simplicity disappeared, “nor did the blue red yellow band / of incandescence that was color keep its stripe: it also is one of / those things into which much that is peculiar can be / read” (*BMM* 91:9-12). The colors of the spectrum are a controlling metaphor in the poem; as the distinct boundaries between them move toward gradation, Moore suggests an opportunity for finding alternative, if peculiar, truths. She follows this with an insistence that “complexity is not a crime,” (*BMM* 91:12) indicating perhaps that the move toward complexity is not necessarily a move away from clarity.

Yet, she follows this realization with a discussion that simultaneously warns against taking difficulty to a dangerous extreme, to a point where it eclipses truth. She insists that if we take complexity to the point of “murkiness,” we commit ourselves to “darkness,” and “bewilder” ourselves with thinking that “truth must be dark” (*BMM* 91:13-21). Instead, we should allow complexity to “be the pestilence that it is,” Moore suggests (*BMM* 91:16). The choice of the word *pestilence* here is interesting, considering the recurrence of plagues in the biblical tradition as hardships to be endured by command of God for the sake of communal cleansing or rebirth. It also connotes something that can be overcome with work and faith. Moore’s mediation of two potentially dangerous extremes, simplicity and obscurity, ultimately suggests an alternative that celebrates complexity coupled with belief in the existence of truth that can only be obtained with diligence. As Kirstin Hotelling argues in “The I of Each,” “though the Adamic days of ‘prismatic color’ were free from murkiness, they were also void of the difference that engenders complexity--both kinds. And as Moore’s poetics repeatedly suggest, the risk of

‘murkiness’ is better than no risk at all” (82). The poem ends with “Truth” speaking in a clearly prophetic cadence, insisting, “I shall be there when the wave has gone by” (*BMM* 92:31). This poem is an attempt to prescribe a way to navigate life’s difficulties and find truth by working through complexities rather than reverting to the illusion of simplicity or darkness.

Moore’s resistance to certainty in her prophetic works also needs to be examined in conjunction with her reluctance to rely on an authoritative voice in her poetry as a whole. As we have already seen with Blake, the Romantic tradition of prophecy privileges the poet’s voice and the poem as inspired utterance. This is particularly interesting with regard to Moore, a poet whose refusal to place herself at the center of her poetry complicates any notion of voice. Many scholars have commented on the lack of a stable lyric “I” in Moore’s work, much of which is crafted through a collage of disembodied observations and quotations from outside sources. In her book *The Feminist Poetics of Self-Restraint*, Kirstin Hotelling specifically links this “strategic selfhood” to a conscious subversive attempt to “displace the Romantic lyric “I” (16). She argues that Moore and her other Modernist contemporaries were “reacting to what seemed a Romantic excess, as well as to the threatened guarantee of transcendental promise,” and “attempted in a variety of ways to strike a balance between the individualistic thrust to ‘make it new’ and a growing wariness of universal truths” (15). In her book *Questions of Authority*, Cristanne Miller claims that Moore’s lack of a speaking self is one of several tactics she employs “for restructuring the lyric poem so that it directly engages an audience in a mode reminiscent of conversation without invoking an authority of personal

presence, natural voice or iconic elevation” (62). In terms of prophecy, then, Moore’s poetic restraint can be seen as a strategic revision of the notion that the poet’s inspired voice is the sole intermediary between the divine and the community of readers.

The very idea of a voiceless or impersonal prophet seems counterintuitive, and it is perhaps for this reason that Moore has largely been left out of critical discourse on the prophetic tradition, with the exception of a few notable scholars. When examined alongside some of the most prominent prophetic voices in Romantic poetry, however, we can begin to see how her work both overlaps and departs from the kind of discourse that has dominated art that attempts inspired ethical and spiritual pronouncements. Like Blake, Moore wrote poems that were directed toward a community of people in the midst of political crisis, with the understanding that art can create real and lasting change. And, like her male predecessor, she invoked an ancient religious tradition in order to legitimize her particular vision for how that change should take shape. Such parallels place her work neatly within the boundaries of prophecy in the modern world. Yet, her ambivalence toward violence and authority challenge those boundaries at the same time. For Moore, the only way to create art that spoke to the reality of the particular crisis facing her community was to eschew rigid boundaries, celebrate complexity, and instill a healthy sense of humility tempered with imagination. These poetic strategies should not be read as a means of avoiding clear judgment, but rather as ways to seek it out relentlessly, with the understanding that absolute certainty is illusory at best, and more often dangerous.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

My attempt to place Marianne Moore within the context of the Romantic Sublime began as an investigation into the aspects of her poetry that seemed the most un-Romantic to me. Among other things, I was particularly drawn to what I saw as the impersonal, detached, and ostensibly unemotional nature of her voice, something that created an immediate contrast with my understanding of the major Romantic poets. Yet, the more I tried to separate her from the tradition that preceded her, the more I began to notice thematic areas of overlap, which, when explored, brought a much richer and more complex reading to both Moore and the Romantics that I was examining. My process has given me a deeper understanding of what T.S. Eliot describes, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” as the historical sense, which “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (38). Being able to see traces of the Romantics in Moore’s work, and simultaneously recognizing the ways in which she revises the ideas that influenced her, sheds light on the larger implications of the poetic shift from Romanticism to Modernism, and on Moore’s place within it.

In all of the thematic areas that I have examined, Moore’s relationship to the authority implicit in the discourse of the sublime has been fraught. The very notion of having access to an understanding outside the realm of the human brings forth a host of complications for a poet such as Moore, whose reluctance to state a fixed truth without simultaneously undermining it has been the subject of much critical attention. Yet, the

fact that her poetry does evoke the language and metaphors of sublimity points to a telling paradox that exists in the Modernist historical moment. In a period characterized by increasing cultural anxiety regarding the dissolution of absolute truth, fragmentation, and political and spiritual crises, the impulse to appeal to a grand scheme of meaning was perhaps even more poignant, charged as it was with a sense of futility. Moore's poetry, then, can be thought of as an attempt to inhabit and even celebrate such a paradox, in a way that continually strives for truth while recognizing its ultimate instability. Her appropriation of the sublime, as a discourse that provides a means of accessing the divine, coupled with her refusal to allow her speakers or readers the illusion of certainty or authority, is an important part of that attempt.

While Moore's poetry resists an authoritative voice and the reliance on certainty, this does not mean that it enacts a denial of self or of the existence of truth. Moore is every bit as present in her poetry as other writers, and she continually insists that the struggle for clarity of judgment, though difficult, is worthwhile. Her poems would not exist otherwise. In *Cultures of Modernism*, Miller describes Moore as "determined to establish in her writing a communally focused authority that avoided egocentric and essentialist assertions of a subjective self while also avoiding the self-erasure which is their opposite and double" (4). Thus, instead of reading her reluctance to use an "I" voice as a way to avoid the vulnerability of placing herself at the center of her poetry, we should instead see it as an insistence on dialogue rather than proclamation. Likewise, her refusal to allow simplistic notions of truth to rest without troubling should be read as a way to involve her readers in the process of interrogation and discovery instead of

providing easy answers. In the context of the sublime, such strategies do not suggest a denial of transcendence, but rather a new way to imagine it, one that demands the participation of the community that her art seeks to reach.

In terms of our human relationship with nature, “An Octopus” interrogates the idea that we can, or even should, attempt mastery over the environment, but does not suggest that there is no way to have a meaningful experience of nature. Moore’s appropriation of a sublime landscape results in a poem that undermines the speaker’s attempts to master or contain the scene through language, halting the momentum toward transcendence as it has been characterized by writers like Wordsworth. The poem privileges the supremacy of the landscape, not because it exists as a text in which to read the limits of the human mind, but simply because it exists. The irresolvable complexity of the mountain range contains meanings that are only meant for itself, or for its inhabitants. But at the same time, the impulse to approach nature through language is not futile, otherwise there would be no poem. Instead, Moore guides her readers through a series of difficult metaphors that require abstract and complicated logic to resolve and through negotiations between various texts that require stepping outside the poem’s immediate moment. All of this takes a great deal of work on the part of the reader, but with persistence, humility, and imagination one is able to achieve “neatness of finish.” The poem therefore implies that it is possible to exist in harmony with nature by refusing to allow ourselves the impulse to impose simplistic or self-serving meanings on it and focusing our attention instead on relentless interrogation of our own assumptions.

Moore's examination of the role of gender difference in theories of the sublime is less accommodating, however. Both "He Digesteth Harde Yron" and "Marriage" deny the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, connected as they have been to empirical distinctions between men and women. Moore's ostrich is both masculine and feminine, a fact to which she draws attention while simultaneously reversing the qualities traditionally associated with those categories. Eve is complex, capable of multiple levels of abstract thought and stepping out of her traditional role as a beautiful object, while Adam's simplicity is inextricably linked to his will to dominate her. Moore's interrogation of the gender boundaries inscribed in the discourse of the sublime ultimately appeals to a vision in which both sexes and both orders of experience can exist simultaneously, without being ordered by a hierarchy. Her insistence on blurring the boundaries between these ideas unmask the power structure that keeps them in place, and in doing so points to a new way to imagine ourselves as participants in a world where aesthetic judgments are based on an ethics of equality.

Arriving finally at Moore's revision of the prophetic tradition, the question of the function of poetry in the modern world takes center stage. By participating in a prophetic tradition, Moore's poetry suggests the need for a renewed call to faith and principled living, placing art at the center of such a revival. Moore insists, like her Romantic predecessors, that art can create lasting and important change in a culture. Her reliance on ambivalence and doubt as prophetic tools should not be taken as a denial that truth and meaning can be found, in art or in prophecy. Rather, it should be read as a way of speaking to a community that involves their participation in the difficult job of sifting

through the complexities of the modern world in order to arrive at a clear ethical judgment. In a period marked by wariness toward the notion of absolute truth, Moore's poetry points to a way for herself and her readers to struggle together through the wasteland of modernity in the search for meaning.

Each of my inquiries into Moore's revision of the Romantic sublime has produced a common thread: an insistence on privileging complexity over certainty and community over self. This is a dynamic that is central to Moore's poetry in general, regardless of its engagement with the tradition that preceded her. It is a vital part of her approach to the world, and it is seamlessly incorporated into most everything she writes. Such a mindset seems to point to a clear departure from the kind of voices that dominated the Romantic period, abounding as it was with solitary voices and mighty schemes of truth. Moore's recurring poetic strategies can therefore be thought of as her unique way of situating herself as a poet in a world in which such forms of representation were no longer relevant to a shared cultural experience.

On a final note, I realize that to suggest this contrast automatically simplifies a period that was in reality much more varied and complex, consisting of many different kinds of voices. Just as there were many different Modernisms, so were there multiple versions of Romanticism. My decision to focus on this one depiction of Romanticism lies in the fact that it seems to be privileged in critical discourse. Its dominance in the canon has, and should, be challenged, just as Moore has challenged its core ideological assumptions, to make alternative readings legible.

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