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“So he who strongly feels, behaves”: Marianne Moore’s ethical detail

David Herd

1. Settings

In a poetic career marked by a relative reluctance to issue general statements, Marianne Moore’s essay “Feeling and Precision” has a particular value within her body of work, being a steadfast, if characteristically un-hyperbolic articulation of certain of her compositional principles.¹ There are other pieces in Moore’s *Complete Prose* that present themselves in general terms; “Idiosyncrasy and Technique” and “Humility, Concentration, and Gusto” are notable examples. “Feeling and Precision” stands out, however, for the deliberateness with which it announces key aspects of her aesthetic, as a balancing of impulse and technique that captures something pivotal to her poetic intentionality. Written in 1943, the essay was of value not least as it provided a guide to her work of the previous two decades: to the radical experimentation of *Observations* and the rigorous crafting of the thirties poems. Significantly, however, the statement also constituted a move in an emerging mid-century conversation, forming as it did her contribution to the 1943 session of the then displaced international symposium *Entretiens de Pontigny*. What Moore arrived at, on the occasion of the symposium, shaped, as it was, by an intense awareness of the gravity of world affairs, was an articulation of her compositional principles that turned aesthetic convictions toward ethical concerns. The real interest of that turn, when regarded historically, lies in the continuity of her expression, in the manner in which she angled her existing idiom to contemporary events. What Moore lays out, in other words, in “Feeling and Precision” is a basis for ethical action underwritten by poetic conduct, where the continuity of the discourse lies precisely in the poetry’s commitment to detail.

Hosted that year at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, and convened by the exiled French philosopher Jean Wahl, the 1943 gathering known as “Pontigny-en-Amerique” was an event of some importance for Moore, being the first time she met Wallace Stevens. As the Mount Holyoke archives record, Stevens and Moore each contributed to a week of talks under the heading

Poesie, Stevens's contribution being his own singular aesthetic statement, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet."² Running from 8 to 13 August, the series concluded on the Saturday with a general discussion featuring all the contributors: Moore and Stevens joined by John Peale Bishop, James Rorty and Wahl himself. Over and above the importance of the meeting with Stevens, however, what Pontigny also represented for Moore, as it did for all the event's contributors, was a significant gauge of her aesthetic position.³

Founded in 1903 by the medievalist Paul Desjardins, and informed, as Christopher Benfey has described, by Desjardins' "vision of the Latin Middle Ages as a time of pan-European humanistic exchange," Pontigny was conceived as "an international community of artists and thinkers" (3). Taking its name from the Cistercian Abbey in Burgundy where the convention first took place, and was hosted every year until 1939, Pontigny allowed in particular for the forging of close relationships between leading German and French intellectuals. Bergson and Benjamin were notable participants, with Blanchot convening the final symposium to take place at the Abbey before it was looted in 1940 following the invasion of France. The three occasions on which Pontigny was hosted at Mount Holyoke (in the summers of 1942 to 1944) were thus interim but highly charged gatherings; symposia in which the relation of intellectual life to global political crisis was explicitly and unavoidably at issue. Drawing on many original Pontigny participants then exiled in New York, notably Jacques Maritain (who would soon help shape the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), Marc Chagall and Roman Jakobson, the intention of the Holyoke gatherings was "to recover a vanished moment of prewar international cultural exchange" (Benfey, 5). Or as Henri Focillon put it: "Pontigny [...] is a spiritual force that the death of Paul Desjardins and the occupation of Pontigny by the enemy must not be allowed to extinguish" (Heurgon and Paulhon, 733). Framed by Wahl, for whom poetic inquiry was vital to a re-calibration of contemporary philosophy, the discussions at Pontigny were of the utmost gravity as regards the relation of intellectual discourse to contemporary events. They were occasions, in other words, on

which a poet's terms had to hold good, not only in relation to their own practice, or the practice of their peers, but relative to the wider intellectual economy.

None of this is to imply that Moore's participation at Pontigny, in and of itself, triggered a shift in view, although it is clear from her correspondence that the impact of the event on her was strong. As she wrote to Elizabeth Bishop, "An unselfish experiment like that of the Pontigny Committee leaves a certain memory of exaltation, and a great desire to be of service to those who suffered" (Benfey, 9). The point, rather, is to register Moore's contribution to the symposium as a form of reckoning; to take the conversation that developed from and through Pontigny as a way of gauging the value of her intervention in the ethical discourse of the mid-century moment. What that intervention turned on, this article argues, is Moore's singular commitment to the force of detail, to appreciate which, it will be suggested, is to read the terms of "Feeling and Precision" in both directions. It is to recognize, in the first place, that her aesthetic experimentation of the 1920s afforded her a register through which to engage critical mid-century ethical debates. It is to appreciate also, however, that her commitment to the necessity of detail endured, that it remained foundational to the more discursive poems characteristic of her writing through and after the war.⁴

The object of the essay is thus to sharpen criticism's understanding of Moore's ethical turn by gauging the specific gravity of the terms that frame the argument of her contribution to Pontigny. To do so is necessarily to revisit the contribution itself, but it is also to consider the discourse with which it intersected. What converged at "Pontigny-en-Amerique," as orchestrated by Wahl, was a set of considerations and intellectual responses that would continue to define ethical inquiry. To read Moore in relation to such considerations is to trace a singular relation between her version of modernism and the new forms of experimental poetry that emerged in America after the war. It is to register also, however, and in ways that criticism should endeavor to make clear, that a poetics of modernist description is once again resonant with our own ethical condition.

2. “Feeling and Precision”

For any writer who received it, the invitation to contribute to the Mount Holyoke sessions of Pontigny constituted a call for a compelling enunciation of their position. With the fact of the war intensified by the presence of leading writers and artists in exile – Hannah Arendt, for example, recently escaped from Europe, was a significant contributor to the proceedings – the occasions necessitated a sure sense of how any given statement might contribute to larger intellectual concerns. For Moore, where that necessity settled was on the requirement for fastidiousness. As she put it, in “Feeling and Precision”: “When writing with maximum impact, the writer seems under compulsion to set down an unbearable accuracy” (*CPr*, 396). Quite what is meant by an “accuracy” that is “unbearable” becomes clear as the essay moves towards its conclusion. Writing capable of maximum impact, on the other hand, is explained directly and in Poundian terms as “a diction that is virile because galvanized against inertia.” With this in mind, what “Feeling and Precision” quite largely comprises is a series of recommendations for composition: towards certain kinds of word order, against adverbs, and on the preferred function of the connective (*CPr*, 397). The piece is Poundian, also, in its use of example, so that it presents a short history of literary precision, Henryson, for example, exemplifying “the artless art of conveying emotion intact” (*CPr*, 399).

As such, as a series of recommendations and illustrations, “Feeling and Precision” functions as a guide to creative writing, a series of do’s and don’ts for the apprentice poet.⁵ How it differs from such a guide rests on the way exactitude of expression is held to underwrite an ethical relation, how precision is charged with and accountable to an ethical concern. This cuts both ways. In the first place, Moore takes precision to denote what one might term an authentic presentation of self. Socrates is given as the exemplar in this regard, Moore citing his observation that: “I would rather die having spoken in my manner than speak in your manner and live” (*CPr*, 398). What this means poetically, as Moore presents it, is principally an attention to rhythm, since, as she sees it, “You don’t devise a rhythm, the rhythm is the person, and the sentence but a radiograph of personality” (*CPr*, 396).⁶ Rhythm, and the sentence that results, has the objectivity of the scientific reading, a

measure of what in a subsequent piece she would call “idiosyncrasy,” or as she put it in her Pontigny piece, with reference to her own “fondness for unaccented rhyme,” “we must have the courage of our own peculiarities” (*CPr*, 398). What precision underwrites, in other words, is the idiosyncratic, that which (as Moore would later clarify in her Ewing Lecture at the University of California) “is peculiar to the person (the Greek *idioma*),” a cultural regard for which, Arendt was to argue at the same moment, was critical to an ethical condition (*CPr*, 514).⁷

What is at issue, however, in “Feeling and Precision,” is hardly simply the self, crucial as idiosyncratic expression was to Moore. As she put it via the example of Rembrandt, but in the terms of Henry McBride:

It was as though Rembrandt was talking to himself, without any expectation that the point would be seen or understood by others. He saw these things and so testified. (*CPr*, 401)

Rembrandt is exemplary precisely because his fidelity to his way of seeing is matched by his fidelity to the objects that constitute his field of vision. What matters in the context of Moore’s argument, however, is how McBride’s observation modulates the terms, such that Moore’s “compulsion to unbearable accuracy” becomes a form of testimony, the fundamental seriousness of which establishes the ground for her remarkable closing remark. As she puts it by way of conclusion, in a form that the mention of testimony anticipates but does not predict:

Professor Maritain, when lecturing on scholasticism and immortality, spoke of those suffering in concentration camps, “unseen by any star, unheard by any ear,” and the almost terrifying solicitude with which he spoke made one know that belief is stronger even than the struggle to survive. And what he said so unconsciously was poetry. So art is but an expression of our needs; is feeling, modified by the writer’s moral and technical insights. (*CPr*, 402)

As a conclusion, Moore’s closing paragraph presents a characteristic move, arriving at a statement of general significance for which the ground has been carefully but also invisibly laid. Writing in dialogue with the occasion of Pontigny itself, with its clear injunction to address the wider ethical

context, Moore aligns feeling and precision with the contemporary political exclusion represented by the camps, the writer's "technical insights" having as their mandate the fact that suffering goes unseen and unheard. This is not to argue that, in order to address herself to the dialogue taking shape at Pontigny, Moore was compelled to adjust the terms of her aesthetic inquiry. Rather, precisely what she articulates is a disposition that first found expression in *Observations*, a commitment to "fastidiousness," which is to say "unbearable accuracy," that in the context of the war underwrites a substantive ethical position.⁸

It is possible, however, and necessary, to be more specific. To be in dialogue with the occasion, with the shaping purpose of Pontigny, meant among other things to engage with a deepening inquiry into the discourse of feeling. For Wahl himself, Moore's interlocutor on the occasion, such a deepening inquiry required first and foremost a recognition of that "feeling of our kinship with the universe, which poetry has better retained" (Wahl 1948, xii). Wahl's place in the history of poetry, and in particular in its development as a discourse in relation to philosophy, was most notably registered by Stevens, for whom he was the dedicatee of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." What Stevens's dedication also registers, however, is the degree to which, as thinker, translator and intellectual organizer, Wahl captured his contemporary condition; the degree to which, by his various forms of question and intervention, he grasped and helped shaped the ethical temper of the mid-century period.⁹

To understand Wahl's role in the intellectual culture of his moment, it is important not least to appreciate the degree to which his reading of American writing shaped his thought. He was important for Moore herself because she figured in his edition of *Ecrivains et Poètes des Etats-Unis des Amériques*, an important early presentation of American Modernism to French readers. A sharper measure of the degree of his engagement with American writing, however – in which he found a suppleness towards temporality commensurate with Bergson – is the fact that when held in the concentration camp at Drancy after the invasion of Paris, the text by which he oriented himself was *Moby-Dick*.¹⁰ Wahl escaped Drancy in the back of a butcher's truck, hiding amid the carcasses.

His interventions in contemporary intellectual formations, this is straightforwardly to observe, were shaped both by wide reading but also by acute personal experience. As he would put it in the opening chapter of his most prominent English language volume *The Philosopher's Way*:

The frames have been shattered. In fact, there are no longer any frames, and the very things that were in those frames have themselves disappeared. Thus we are confronted by an intricacy of phenomena of which the classical philosophies gave us no idea. We are in the presence of a no-man's land, even a no-word's land. (1948, 10)

What such zones unarticulated by philosophy called for, as Wahl saw it, was a sharpened sense of the “most subtle relations that constitute the real,” where relations with both things and with persons were equally at issue. Things, according to Wahl (in terms that resonate with Moore) were to be recognized in their defining opacity, as “dense little worlds” having a “kind of inwardness which is closed to us” (1948, 220). As regards persons, on the other hand, what had to be appreciated fundamentally was the status of the other, and not just for the sake of the other – crucial as that consideration was – but for the sake of the self. Thus,

one of the characteristics of contemporary philosophical reflection about the relation between persons is this insistence on the necessity of other persons even for the constitution of my own person (1948, 229).

As Benfey characterizes him, Jean Wahl's principal function in the intellectual economy of his moment was as high-level go-between, a stimulator across disciplines and cultures whose principal intellectual trace, it follows, lies in his significance to other people's work. In philosophy, where one chiefly finds that trace is in his most distinguished commentator, Levinas, who in “Jean Wahl and Feeling” (first published in 1955) acknowledges Wahl's importance while transposing his central category into a structure of analysis recognizably Levinas's own. Registering the urgency of arriving at newly resonant “affective terms,” Levinas subscribes to the view that a renewed attention to “feeling” is necessary in “lead[ing] us toward a “bare, blind contact with the other” (1996, 114). Such a troubled affective sense of contact permits Levinas's own complicated sense of

ethical understanding, that understanding where, as he puts it, “there is both relation and rupture, and thus awakening of the self by the Other, of me by the Stranger, of me by the stateless person, that is, by the neighbor who is only nearby” (1996, 6). Or as he describes it more specifically in *Totality and Infinity* (for which Wahl is again the dedicatee), it is the face of the stranger that both entails obligation but also the awakening that comes of an obligation to act: “the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing goodness” (1969, 200). This is the position that Wahl had arrived at in noting “the necessity of other persons for the constitution of one’s own personality.” It is the position Moore also articulated in her war-time review essay “Who has rescued whom.” Published in October 1944, the year after she had spoken at Pontigny, and in the same month that “Feeling and Precision” appeared in the *Sewanee Review*, Moore’s review of *Behold the Jew* (a book-length poem by Ada Jackson) concluded with one of her characteristically sudden shifts towards abstraction:

Some do not believe that all nations are of one blood, and shrink from the un-fascist minister who says the star of David is not the enemy of the star of Bethlehem [...] And “while you read they die, they died”; they, by way of whom all our moral advantages have come. If we yet rescue them – those who are alive to be rescued – we are still in debt and need to ask ourselves who would have rescued whom (*CPr*, 403).

To situate “Feeling and Precision” as a contribution to the dialogue at Pontigny, a dialogue framed by Wahl, is to understand Moore as participating in a defining mid-century discourse.¹¹ Wahl is present in the articulations of both Stevens and Levinas because he had a compelling sense of contemporary ethics, calling for a new language of affections in ways that crossed both disciplines and cultures. Moore sought to articulate a similar requirement, where the medium of affective renewal was the compulsion to accuracy, a writerly exactitude that presented the idiosyncratic self in its defining relations with persons and things. Technique was critical – the rigour of expression that constituted adequate description – but where the imperative for such description lay was in contemporary acts of political exclusion.

3. “In the Public Garden”

Just as Marianne Moore’s contribution to the dialogues at Pontigny provided a sharpened articulation of aesthetic imperatives she had arrived at in her pre-war work, so equally it gave shape to the ethical disposition that would characterize her poetry through and after the war. ‘Feeling and Precision’, to reiterate, is a transitional text. Thus, just as in Wahl’s writing one finds the seeds of significant postwar ethical discourse, so in Moore’s writing in that war-time moment one finds her developing a stance that bears significantly on our understanding of her relation to postmodern poetics. One way to observe this is through her poem “In the Public Garden,” published in *The Boston Globe* in 1958 and in *O To Be a Dragon* a year later.

The poem matters in this context in two broad and related ways. In the first place, as is described below, it finds Moore abruptly addressing herself to an issue – the crisis of human movement – that was understood by 1958 to be a shaping legacy of the Second World War. It is a poem, in other words, whose principal concern is ethical but in which the ethical focus further tests the disposition “Feeling and Precision” had sought to evolve. The poem matters also, however, because in the way that it presents the public discourse of her moment, Moore’s poem delineates different strategies for poetics in the postwar period. One such strategy, outlined by Al Filreis (in his extended reading of “In the Public Garden”), is to make the poem a space in which public discourse is framed for scrutiny. It is a strategy one can trace through Moore’s work, not least in *Observations*, and which makes it possible to identify her, as Filreis does, with subsequent poetics that emphasise the readymade utterance as a determining device. To read the poem this way, however, while catching Moore’s orientation towards public discourse, is to miss the intertwining concerns of feeling and precision that, as I argue, constitute Moore’s steer for subsequent poetics.

Written for the occasion of the Boston Arts Festival, “In the Public Garden” is, as Filreis observes, a highly purposeful poem that belies its sense of purpose – in which the moment of purpose, between the sixth and seventh stanzas, seems somehow to be stumbled upon. Until that

point, the poet presents a syllabically elegant tour of Boston. We glimpse Harvard (partly through her conversation with a taxi-driver), the golden dome of Faneuil Hall, and Spring in the public garden (“more than usual / bouquet of what is vernal”). The poem shifts at the beginning of stanza six, the five stanzas that follow capturing the change of direction:

let me enter King’s Chapel
to hear them sing: “My work be praise while
others go and come. No more a stranger
or a guest but like a child
at home.” A chapel or a festival
means giving what is mutual,
even if irrational:
black sturgeon-eggs – a camel
from Hamadan, Iran:
a jewel, or, what is more unusual
silence – after a word-waterfall of the banal –
as unattainable
as freedom. And what is freedom for?
For “self-discipline,” as our
hardest-working citizen has said – a school:
it is for “freedom to toil”
with a fee for the tool.

(*CPO*, 190-91)

To quote at length is to register a series of interruptions. In the first place, the poet interrupts her own itinerary by entering King’s Chapel, established in 1686 as the first Anglican Church in New England, and therefore a significant building in Boston’s colonial history. Prompted to a contemplation of the significance of a chapel and of a festival – that it “means giving what is mutual / even if irrational” – the poet interrupts herself a second time by mentioning a series of phrases on the subject of “freedom.” As Filreis observes, the phrases are Eisenhower’s, being excerpts from a 1958 article, “President Urges Junior Leaguers to Widen Good Work” (525). For Filreis, it is these phrases the poet refers to when she speaks of “the word waterfall of the banal,” though neither the syntax (nor Moore’s own voting record) can be taken as confirmation of this view. Either way, having referred to Eisenhower, the poem then interrupts itself a third time, only now more emphatically, by incorporating a phrase that wrecks its progress:

Those in the trans-shipment camp must have

a skill. With hope of freedom hanging

by a thread – some gather medicinal

herbs which they can sell.

Ineligible if they ail.

Well?

A “trans-shipment camp” is what would now be called, less euphemistically, either a refugee camp or a detention centre. If the former, it might refer, as Filreis observes, to the camps holding Congolese people displaced in the period 1958-60. If the latter, it might refer to Holocaust survivors held by the British on Cyprus as they attempted to reach Israel (525). Either way, it is a densely freighted phrase to introduce into a poem that only a moment before was contemplating downtown Boston – like somebody just built such a camp in the middle of the public garden and called on the poet to make an inspection. How the phrase sits in the poem’s structure is interesting to note.

Moore’s syllabics can, in theory, accommodate any combination of sounds so the line itself is held

intact. That the phrase temporarily disturbs the poem's poise is nonetheless indicated by the breakdown of her otherwise reliable stanza formation. Momentarily the otherwise stable five-line stanza form becomes, conspicuously, a three-line fragment. The real question, however, is not formal but semantic. How, that is, does one gauge the phrase's incorporation into the poem's field of meaning?

For Filreis "In the Public Garden" is a continuation of Moore's "expression of a program for achieving accuracy and currency of political and civic rhetoric" (511).¹² His objective, in part, is thus to re-establish Moore as a poet of enduring political and ethical purpose at a moment – the late 1950s – when her popularity could obscure such continued seriousness. What principally he hopes to establish, however, is a re-assessment of Moore's relation to the New American Poetry, a context he revisits with reference to Burroughs's collaborations with Brion Gysin.¹³ Filreis is right that such a re-assessment is necessary, both to our understanding of Moore and of the New American Poetry; where I differ is in the reading of Moore's aesthetic strategies that results. Thus, as Filreis reads it, the key phrase in Moore's poem is "word-waterfall of the banal," pointing as it does to a linguistic condition that for Burroughs and Gysin, just as (as he sees it) for Moore, the necessary response is the cut-up. The comparison is a stretch, as Filreis knows, his point being to establish a broad literary consensus around the practice of the ready-made, for which interpretation, in Moore's case, there are some grounds. Thus from this point of view, Eisenhower's language is excised in order to expose its deficiency, a practice that in Moore one can clearly trace to the brilliant acts of collage that constituted *Observations*. As Filreis sees it, then, Moore should not be read at a generational remove from the impulses of the New American Poetry, but as coinciding with them, addressing the failings of civic discourse by placing it on display. This is broadly true. However one reads the tone of Moore's references to Eisenhower in "In the Public Garden," and for all that she was reluctant to offer praise when reviewing Allen's anthology, there certainly were continuities between her compositional practice and certain practices of the *New America Poetry*.¹⁴ James Schuyler, for instance, as I have argued elsewhere, writes (and collages) directly out of the Marianne Moore

instruction manual, and to beautiful effect.¹⁵ But what about the “trans-shipment camp”? How does the poem incorporate such a phrase? How does the poet engage the ethical implications of such a point of reference?

To understand what those questions mean for Moore, it is necessary to approach her work from a different vantage: not that of conceptual poetry but a vantage made visible by registering her engagement with the discourse framed by Pontigny. To read “In the Public Garden” in relation to that discourse is to register a context by which to assess the poem’s reference to the phenomenon of the “trans-shipment camp,” Arendt being among the most important commentators on such phenomena. As she discussed at length, in the second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “statelessness” was “the newest mass phenomenon in contemporary history” and “stateless persons” “the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics” (1967, 277). Observing displacement to be the war’s enduring legacy, Arendt provided a frame of reference in which the trans-shipment camp is a necessary consideration; it is precisely the site in which the newest mass phenomenon in contemporary history, statelessness, made itself visible. Such camps, in other words, were not aberrations but structurally defining settings.

To note a major assessment of the period in which the “trans-shipment camp” was not an aberration but a structurally determining co-ordinate is already to re-enter the narrative of the poem. The history of Boston, it is immediately to recall, is itself one of movement and displacement; Charles Olson was writing an epic to this effect only 40 miles north. One form of that movement is represented by King’s Chapel, symbolizing the autocracy which gave rise to forced migration, producing subsequent displacement among the indigenous community. There is continuity, in other words, between the Chapel and the Camp, the latter demonstrating the lack of a mutuality that the former apparently proposes. Even allowing for this narrative, however, the incorporation of the camp into a poem about looking at Boston poses an ethical consideration to which the poet, if she is serious, had to understand herself as providing some form of response. And my suggestion here is that if one reads Moore exclusively through a version of modernism that emphasizes the primacy of

the procedures of collage and cut-up, it is difficult to see how a poem such as “In the Public Garden” can address the reference it makes, except perhaps to observe that it is an embarrassment to the writing. If, on the other hand, one reads Moore through and into the ethical discourse with which she was properly and effectively in dialogue at Pontigny, one recovers an aspect of her writing that is capable of meeting the charge of the reference to the camp. What one needs to emphasise, this is to argue, is not the cut-up, but its etymological cognate the detail. It is in Moore’s detailing – her compulsion to unbearable accuracy – that her writing prepares to register that which is excluded from the frame.

4. Marianne Moore’s Prose Detail

To clarify: a detail is a small individual feature, fact, or item, especially a small part of a picture reproduced for close study. As verb it means to describe, item by item, to give the full particulars of, or, in the sense of a commission, to assign to undertake a particular task. The word is from the French, “detailer,” from “de-” (expressing separation) and “tailler” “to cut.” This, in a quite precise sense, is how Marianne Moore worked. She didn’t cut-up exactly, though she did cut out, in the process of importing and exporting phrases to and from her notebooks. One registers this detailing on almost every page of Moore’s *Complete Prose*, which is not just to say that Moore likes, or dwells on, detail, but that detail is the structuring element of her composition. This is a radically paratactical procedure. Moore’s practice is to accumulate aspects of the subject at hand, and her compiling of them amounts to a constantly elaborating description, until such point as, by means of the procedure itself, a judgment is reached. The detail itself, in other words, is all – or almost all – the argument necessary.

To give just one example, in “Idiosyncrasy and Technique” Moore mentions and cites in dense proximity to one another: Auden’s inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Walter Scott, Anthony Trollope, Hesketh Pearson, The King James Version of the Bible, The Revised Standard Version, Dr Alvin E. Magary and Dr Moffat, (both biblical commentators), Henry James,

T. S. Eliot (on Milton, La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère and Michael Hamburger), Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Laurence Binyon on translating Dante, *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius*, and Dr Edmond Sinnott's *The Biology of the Spirit* (CPr, 506-9). One could go on, and Moore does go on, sentence after sentence introducing a new statement of fact, which in one sense renders her prose a further form of collage, statements from the notebook set alongside one another, but which in another constitutes a form of meticulous argument – judgment arrived at by weight of observation. In this case the conclusion regards idiosyncrasy itself: “In saying there is no substitute for content, one is partly saying there is no substitute for individuality – that which is peculiar to the person (the Greek *idioma*)” (CPr, 514). The lecture provides a series of idiosyncrasies, individuals presented through stylistic peculiarity; *idioma*, in other words, rendered as matter of fact.

That such itemizing constitutes a position, that more than mere accumulation, it presents, as Charles Tomlinson put it, “the ethical extension of fact itself,” is established by a supporting structure of general statements and reflections (2). Thus, just as much as the defining procedure of Moore's prose pieces is to detail, so frequently she will take a moment in a piece to reaffirm the underlying logic of the procedure, the statements themselves constituting a lexicon that frames the writing's bearing. With reference to the artist Paul Rosenfeld, for instance, she affirms “the interested mind with the disinterested motive,” while more pointedly, in her consideration of *Carey Thomas of Bryn Mawr*, by Edith Finch, she notes how “Miss Finch is, in her relentless justice, a Vermeer of circumstance and idiosyncrasy” (CPr, 418). The association is strong: justice is a function of a regard for idiosyncrasy, with such regard, as Moore argued at length, being in turn a function of humility. One exemplar of the value of humility as poetic method is the poet Babette Deutsch.¹⁶ As Moore puts it, reviewing Deutsch's *New and Selected Poems*: “Miss Deutsch has a gift for verisimilitude as has been evident from the first, and here epitomizes Goya's *Disasters of War* in the phrase: THIS I SAW” (CPr, 527). Again, one could continue. What these instances suffice to exemplify, however, is the carefully formulated lexicon whereby a procedural accumulation of detail assumes an ethical force. This is said most emphatically in relation to

Deutsch, the reference to the title of one of Goya's series of war paintings serving to establish the writing as an act of witness, a form of testimony which, just as in Rembrandt, underwrites the aesthetic achievement in question.

The reason for providing these two kinds of documentation – of Moore's propensity to detail, and of her specifications of what such detailing means – is to bring to the fore a balance in her procedure that a contemporary reading of the poetry of document, along the lines provided by Filreis, has the potential to obscure. Thus it is important, on the one hand, to register that in the combination of procedural compulsion and abstract commentary, what one has in Moore's prose – as in many of her poems – is a method that corresponds to a form of conceptualism.¹⁷ It is by detailing, this is to suggest, rather than by detail, that the argument of Moore's writing is established. To read her prose this way is to echo Filreis's commentary on "In The Public Garden": that the poem shares an implicit sympathy with the logic of the ready-made that underpins the cut-up. This, however, is only part of the story. What this means (and where I differ from Filreis), is that to detail is not exactly to cut-up. Rather, it is to cut-out in order to form an observation, with the observing itself carrying its portion of the argumentative force. This is where Moore ended up in "Feeling and Precision," with reference to Maritain:

Professor Maritain [...] spoke of those suffering in concentration camps, "unseen by any star, unheard by any ear," [...] And what he said so unconsciously was poetry. So art is but an expression of our needs; is feeling, modified by the writer's moral and technical insights.
(*CPr*, 402)

What matters here is the modification, poetry as feeling modified by technical insight. Moore's prose argues, in other words, for a form of procedure governed and informed by the act of witness.

5. "So he who strongly feels"

In her major poetic statement of 1940, "What Are Years?" Moore opens by posing the ethical question that in its unavoidability is an aspect of the condition of war: "What is our innocence, /

what is our guilt?" (*AG*, 15).¹⁸ It was a refrain across her prose (repeated in interview) that, as she put it in "Feeling and Precision," "We must be as clear as our natural reticence allows" (*CPr*, 396). "What Are Years?" is impressive for its clarity, for the directness with which the poem's statement of position is allowed to unfold. The achievement is technical in the sense that the argument hinges precisely on the shape of the stanza, on the line break generated by the counting of syllables: "All are / naked, none is safe." Since the poem's ethical position is necessarily complex, so the thought must be elaborated and it is at the level of rhythm that such elaboration is made possible, the syllabics entailing the listening that makes it possible for the argument to be heard.

Such required hearing is most clearly achieved at the beginning of the final stanza:

So he who strongly feels,
behaves. The very bird,
grown taller as he sings, steels
his form straight up.

It is a moment that requires some consideration. For a start, the link between feeling and conduct could not be more clearly stated; it is imperative, as the poem understands it, that we "strongly feel." What matters for the poem, however – as it did for Jean Wahl – is how the link is constructed, a consideration which, in two senses, takes into account the detail of the poem. The first detail is rhythmic, resting on the entirely assured distribution of sound across the caesura. "Behaves," the consequence of feeling, falls with what Moore would have liked to call compelling "naturalness" at the beginning of the line. In one sense, this is a trick of the accomplished poet, the holding back of meaning across the line-break. On the other hand, in being so emphatically rhythmic, the argument from feeling is doubly underlined, catching the reader at the level of physicality just as it registers at the level of sense. The second detail is visual. What follows, in other words, from a meditation on the relation between feeling and behavior is an itemizing of a bird's posture as he sings, "his form straight up." This is by no means Moore's most detailed presentation of an animal. Rather, what the poem provides here is something like a representative detail. The particularity of the detail

definitely counts – it matters that the bird “steals” – but what really matters is that there is a detail to contemplate, because it is in observational detail, as Moore wants us to appreciate, that affect is formed.

Principally what matters in “What Are Years?” is that the value of detail is established. It is strong feeling informed by detail, not simply strong feeling, that is conducive to the ethical conduct the poem imagines. About this, for Moore, there is no question; it is tantamount to an article of faith. Elsewhere, however, it is the particular kind of detail that matters. Quite frequently, Moore settles on the specificity of the face. One such example is “Rigorists,” and the face in question, in this instance, is that of the reindeer with which the poem concludes:

And
this candelabrum-headed ornament
for a place where ornaments are scarce, sent

to Alaska,
was a gift preventing the extinction
of the Eskimo. The battle was won

by a quiet man,
Sheldon Jackson, evangel to that race
whose reprieve he read in the reindeer’s face.
(AG, 16-17)

The question the poem concludes with, in other words, is how do you read a face, and more precisely, how did Sheldon Jackson read a face.

Also published in 1940, and echoing “What Are Years?” in its insistence on the ethical force of detail, “Rigorists” should likewise be understood as a poem in relation to war. It follows that Jackson’s role in the poem, as a figure who intervened in the history of colonisation, must be

carefully estimated. To tease that judgment out, it is the face one has to attend to. The reprieve of the reindeer's face proposed by the final line refers to the fact that Jackson arranged for the importation of reindeer to Alaska to replace dwindling supplies of other food stocks. It was a 'gift' intended, as the poem records, to prevent "the extinction/ of the Eskimo." The complication in this case is that in the history of Alaska, as Richard Dauenhauer has observed, Jackson is a profoundly controversial figure precisely because he practically effected extinction by other means. As Dauenhauer summarizes:

Jackson [...] believed that only through massive conversion to Christianity and acculturation could Alaskan Natives be spared the military defeat and tragic poverty and exploitation of the reservation system befalling native Americans. (81)

What "acculturation" principally meant was the "insistence on English only interaction," an educational policy that, as Dauenhauer describes "led to suppression of Native Cultural development" and which was "disastrous to native self-image and language survival" (1996, 83, 85).¹⁹

What matters in the context of the poem – to the balance of its judgment – is how Moore frames Jackson's intervention in the conflict between white settlers and indigenous people. Thus, the counter to his reading of the reindeer's face is provided by the earlier part of the poem, which in its intricacy and detail is worth quoting at length:

"We saw reindeer
browsing," a friend who'd been in Lapland, said:
"finding their own food; they are adapted

to scant *reino*
or pasture, yet they can run eleven
miles in fifty minutes; the feet spread when

the snow is soft,
and act as snow-shoes. They are rigorists,
however handsomely cutwork artists

of Lapland and
Siberia elaborate the trace
or saddle-girth with saw-tooth leather lace.

One of the poem's rigorists is, of course, Jackson himself – rigorous in his Presbyterian zeal. The other rigorists are the reindeer, but also the poet's friend, who is meticulous in her account of the animal's conduct. What the friend observes – and this is why Moore quotes her – is the specificity of the reindeer's relation to its environment, captured in the detail of the operations of the feet against the snow but also in the name, "adapted" as they are "to scant *reino*."²⁰ The really compelling moment, however, is the moment of encounter:

One looked at us
with its firm face part brown, part white,—a queen
of alpine flowers. Santa Claus' reindeer, seen

at last, had gray-
brown fur, with a neck like edelweiss or
lion's foot,— *leontopodium* more

exactly."

Actually "seen / at last," the reindeer's face is presented in exquisite detail, its neck "like edelweiss or / lion's foot, — *leontopodium* more // exactly." It is the detail that underwrites the moment of relation; that shows clearly that the speaker was affected. To observe a creature in its environment, the poem asserts, is to understand both that and also how it belongs, which makes the argument one

of indigeneity, of the necessity to understanding of situational detail. To observe the deer's face, the poem proposes, in the reality of its circumstance, is to gain a deep regard for the manner in which it exists.

Whatever else one might say of him, and whatever he might have intended, one can observe categorically of Jackson that he did not demonstrate a deep regard for the manner of indigenous existence. He did not, this is to point out, read the indigenous people's culture and relation to their environment with the degree of care that Moore's friend reads the way the reindeer has adapted. The poem's first reading of the situation, in other words, provided by the poet's friend, is a check and balance on the implications of the second reading of the situation, given by Jackson, where what the second reading tended towards historically was extinction, which is to say genocide. That Moore argued in this manner in her war-time poems, that she refracted politics by a process of substitution, is evident elsewhere in her work of the period. Observing that "Moore's political positioning takes the form of metonymy or analogical example," Cristanne Miller notes in Moore's reference to Herod in "The Mind is an Enchanted Thing" a "chain of logic [that] indirectly condemns the politics of Hitler" (2008, 365, 367). The "logic" in that case is that the poem articulates a fineness of observation ("in the dove-neck's // iridescence," for example) that the figure with whom it concludes, Herod, catastrophically lacks. Against the impoverished qualities of feeling and precision that permit Herod to effect the massacre of the innocents, Moore's poem presents the mind's ability to apprehend detail, a capacity to discern that "tears off the veil" where the veil is prejudice. The suggestion here is that "Rigorists" follows the same pattern: intricate articulation of a quality of mind conducive to respect, followed by reference to an historical personage whose actions were motivated by zeal. Exactly how the balance of judgment falls in the case of "Rigorists" is inevitably a little harder to finalise simply because Sheldon Jackson's moral standing has not been so categorically settled by history as has Herod's. The pattern of argument is entirely comparable, however, and at very least what 'Rigorists' articulates is an intricate relation between detail and affect. It is a matter of profound importance in other words, for Moore, as she

variously proposed in her prose of the period, that there is a complex cultivation in her writing of the practice of witness.²¹

One further face in Moore's mid-century poetry establishes the theme. First published in *The New Yorker* in 1961, the ethical consideration represented by "Rescue with Yul Brynner" is framed by its epigraph, Brynner having been appointed special consultant to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1959-60. Written three years after "In The Public Garden," the poem returns to the situation of the "trans-shipment camp," reference to which had such an altering effect on the bearing of the earlier poem. In this case, the manner of the reference is not juxtapositional, since the poem is concerned explicitly with Brynner's role with the UNHCR. What distinguishes the poem, rather, is the plainness with which it communicates the circumstantiality of such camps. As it observes:

There were thirty million; there are thirteen still –
healthy to begin with, kept waiting till they're ill.

(*CPo*, 227)

Brynner, on the other hand,

flew among
the damned, found each camp
where hope had slowly died

As with the earlier reference to the trans-shipment camp, the question is how the poem can incorporate its subject matter, how it can meet the demands of its ethical engagement. In part it does so by being factually correct, by registering the scale of the statelessness (between thirteen and thirty million) that, as Arendt reported, defined the period. As elsewhere, however, its consideration settles, in the final stanza, in the detail of exchange:

"Have a home?" a boy asks. "Shall we live in a tent?"

"In a house," Yul answers. His neat cloth hat
has nothing like the glitter reflected on the face

of milkweed-witch seed-brown dominating a palace
that was nothing like the place
where he is now.

(*CPo*, 227)

The reference to the palace is to the set of *The King and I*, the setting with which the face of Brynner was most readily associated. But this is not that place, is nothing like that place, and the question, in this altogether other setting, is what does Brynner's face reflect? The answer, one is called on to imagine, is the face of the boy who asks the question. As the poem positions them, in other words, the faces are in a tense and mutually informing relation. This raises the question Moore previously articulated in relation to the issue of rescue: who in this circumstance, has rescued whom? How the ethical charge is incorporated, in other words, is in the registration of mutual constitution, in the "awakening," as Levinas put it, "of the self by the Other, of me by the Stranger, of me by the stateless person" (1996, 6).

6. "secrets objects share"

To read Marianne Moore's argument for "Feeling and Precision" in relation to the mid-century inquiry in which she was participating at Pontigny is to register a significant continuity in twentieth-century poetics. It is to understand how the brilliant fastidiousness of her early experiments enabled her to contribute to an ethical discourse that, as we can now appreciate again from our own fraught ethical moment, was foundational to postmodern poetics. One way to express this is in relation to Olson, on whose work Moore commented in her review of *The New American Poetry* and for whose critical idiom she had little instinctive sympathy. Between Moore and Olson, even so, there was a structural convergence, though neither could easily have noticed it, to be found in the second part of Olson's 1950 manifesto "Projective Verse." As Olson put it:

For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he

achieves an humilitas ... [I]f he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share.

(247)

Writing in the late 1940s, out of his own understanding of the war, Olson arrived at a poetics of humility the purpose of which was to underwrite a newly chiasmic relation to objects – things and persons – which was itself grounded in a practice of witness, a necessary closeness of listening.

To hear that position articulated in relation to Moore is to register the ethical force of her ongoing project of observation. What she wrote out of, when she contributed to *Pontigny*, and what she continued periodically to reframe, was a profound sense of the way systematic political exclusion altered the poetic act. Faced with absolute precarity, she argued for a new language of feeling, a language rooted in the registration of affective detail. From which it follows that, as we read her in the present moment, we need to register the whole of her utterance, not just the cutting up but also the unbearable accuracy, the intensely exacting acts of description. What she framed, as the mid-century made its catastrophic demands, was a procedure of witness, a form of expression through which ethics might be renewed through detail.

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² Both Stevens’s talk and Moore’s, along with an introduction by John Peale Bishop, were subsequently published in the *Sewanee Review* (52.4, Autumn 1944). Archived copies of the original programme for the event can be viewed at:

<http://mtholyoke.cdmhost.com/cdm/ref/collection/p1030coll8/id/845>

³ For an account of Moore’s long-awaited meeting with Stevens, see Schulze 1996, 157-160.

⁴ To position Moore's statement at "Pontigny" in this way is to address what Moore criticism tends to regard as a break. For an account of the criticism's articulation of the break, see Miller 2008, 353, 375.

⁵ Schulze reads "Feeling and Precision" as consisting "primarily of technical comments about poetic form and diction" (1996, 159). This degree of emphasis, I argue, is to misjudge the discursive context to which the piece was a contribution, and therefore to underestimate the force of the ethical register that underwrites it, as felt, in particular, in Moore's conclusion.

⁶ Moore again echoes Pound here. See her 1931 review of a *Draft of XXX Cantos*, where "a man's rhythm 'will be, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable'" (*CPr*, 276).

⁷ "Idiosyncrasy" is central to Arendt's account of the polis in *The Human Condition*, it being the function of the polis to enable the quality of communication that an emphasis on idiosyncrasy entails. For a full consideration of postwar American poetry's emphasis on the "idiosyncratic," see Carbery 2015.

⁸ "Feeling and Precision" has been widely considered, with Miller's 2008 article among the most carefully calibrated discussions of Moore's position in the piece. Where I differ from Miller is in the way the discourse of "feeling" hinges on the compositional practice of detail. It is in the exact balancing of the terms of the title, in other words, that Moore's essay focuses her existing practice toward ethical concerns.

⁹ For a discussion of Wahl's dialogue with Stevens, see Luyat-Moore 1998.

¹⁰ For an account of this episode, see Benfey 2006, 6.

¹¹ For further considerations of the way Moore articulates the ethical value of a language of "feeling," see Leader 2005, and Schaller 2012.

¹² In articulating this view, Filreis draws on Muriel Rukeyser's 1960 review of *O To Be A Dragon*, which praises Moore's "skilful and flexible use of the document as part of her poetry" (18).

¹³ Burroughs's collaborative experiments with Gysin were collected in *The Third Mind*.

¹⁴ Moore's review of *The New American Poetry* was published in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* on 26 June 1960.

¹⁵ See Herd 2007, 109-135.

¹⁶ Moore articulated the value of "humility" most concertedly in "Humility, Concentration, and Gusto," for a careful discussion of which see Leader 2005.

¹⁷ One could say that the procedure of detailing gains an abstract dimension that Vanessa Place would term allegorical. Place conducts an extensive discussion of the function of allegory in conceptual writing in "The Allegory and the Archive."

¹⁸ For particularly strong considerations of the place of "What Are Years?" in Moore's body of work see Green 2000, 202-3, and Leader 2005, 322-6.

¹⁹ For a counter-reading of Sheldon Jackson, see Haycox 1984.

²⁰ The detail of such adaptation, and the subtle relationality it implies, was, as Jennifer Leader has observed, of considerable interest to Moore (2005, 330).

²¹ This is to address an important consideration raised by Fiona Green. As Green observes, with reference to Moore's Second World War poems, "the effect of remoteness on a poetic much prized for its close and accurate observations was also potentially disabling" (2000, 214). The argument here is that for Moore the ethical function of the poet was to cultivate the complex practice of witness, it being of such a capacity that language at this moment was most manifestly in need.