

Introduction

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The impetus for this special issue on Marianne Moore was the March, 2015 “21st Century Moore” conference at the University of Houston. The theme of that conference, at which forty-one scholars and poets from across Europe and America presented, was the future of Marianne Moore studies in the new century. Two of the conference organizers, Elizabeth Gregory and Stacy Hubbard, have edited a forthcoming book of essays by a selection of the presenters, *Twenty-First Century Marianne Moore: Essays from a Critical Renaissance*. We, Heather White and Fiona Green, were the other two organizers, and wanted to use the momentum from the conference to pay tribute to *Twentieth-Century Literature*’s particular role in supporting the scholarship that brought new energy and rigor to Moore studies just over thirty years ago, and became our own first encounter with the world of Moore criticism. That world has changed significantly in the intervening decades, as new critical methodologies have come into play, the canon of Moore’s work has itself expanded significantly, and the advent of the internet has transformed our access to formerly recondite material.¹ Nevertheless, many of the questions that motivated *TCL*’s early work remain as pressing as they ever were, as the contributions to this present issue will show.

In 1984 *TCL* devoted its Summer and Fall numbers to a special “Marianne Moore Issue.” Andrew Kappel, then deputy editor of the journal, guest-edited it. In 1984 Kappel was 33, and at the beginning of a shift in the focus of his scholarship from Ezra Pound (the subject of his 1978 dissertation and three published essays) to Marianne Moore. Eight years later, in December of 1992, he died of AIDS-related complications. His work in Moore studies during those years,

including the special issue he edited and the lengthy introduction he wrote for it, influenced the scholarly generation that followed his, and suggest how much Moore studies lost when he died. Between 1990 and 1994 he published five essays on Moore, three of which appeared posthumously, each of which continues to be cited today.² His subjects were Moore's readings in religion, and her work's textual history, two poles whose magnetic force in Moore studies has only increased in the decades that followed.

TCL's Marianne Moore Issue, which Kappel edited years before most of his own writing on Moore saw print, was itself a major contribution to Moore scholarship. Kappel assembled a group of writers, including Bonnie Costello, Celeste Goodridge, Margaret Holley, Taffy Martin, and John Slatin, whose books became part of the core of modern Moore scholarship. Although they were writers of markedly different interests and angles of approach, what they had in common was a will to move Moore scholarship away from readings of the poems as "demonstrations of their author's personal virtues" (Kappel 1984, xix). Kappel argued that the critical tendency toward "domesticating admiration" of Moore's work, while tacitly encouraged by Moore's own shrewd management of her public persona, left crucial gaps in our understanding of her achievement:

Compared with the vast and sophisticated scholarly and critical literature devoted to her great contemporaries, work on Moore seems almost negligible [...] Many of the things we like to know about our poets, we simply do not know about Moore. For instance, we know very little about her place in the tradition of American and British literature; we have only the crudest sense of the shape of her career; we do not have a tradition of competing interpretations of her poems, nor any well-developed sense of which poems are greatest, which lesser. (xxii)

In 1984, as Kappel and his generation of Moore readers set out to separate Moore's poems from her personality, they had timing on their side. Although Kappel begins his introduction to the Moore issue by noting that "'stories about the first time I met Moore' [...] dominate the historical record of the poet's life" (v), he was himself too young to have any such stories, or any vivid memories of Moore's late-in-life fame. That lack was an advantage, permitting him and the generation of readers he was a part of the freedom to read the work afresh. Twelve years after her death in 1972, Moore's writing was well on its way to becoming a body of work with a life independent of the physical life of its author. Kappel and his cohort were thus the right group to address the more abstract, scholarly questions about tradition, textuality, and evaluation his introduction raises.

They also had a powerful new lens through which to read Moore: the archive of her papers at the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia, PA. Moore's papers arrived at the Rosenbach in 1969. Patricia Willis was the first, and for a number of years the only, visitor to a collection consisting in a lifetime's worth of papers (letters, notes, calendars, etc.) gathered in shopping bags and cartons, several thousand books, drawers full of household objects, and more (Willis, 16). Willis's work there remains the foundation of contemporary Moore scholarship. She was the first to read through the material in its massive entirety, and to begin to organize it in such a way that other scholars could make use of it. Such a trove of primary material would enrich the study of any poet, but as Willis herself rightly argued, Moore's "rock-like poems," composed so insistently of strata of cultural referents of all kinds, languished during the New Critical era, awaiting critics "interested in the history of the text and the poem's place in its historical context" and with access to an archive to support those interests (Willis, 15). The

contributors to Kappel's 1984 issue made use of the archive in ways that still resonate: tracing the development of Moore's thought by consulting draft material for poems, arguing for readings of her intent by investigating the sources from which she quotes, and investigating lesser-known versions of well-known poems.

Shortly after the issue's publication archival material became more widely available, allowing us to know about Moore some of Kappel's "things we like to know" about a major poet: in 1986 Willis published the now indispensable *Complete Prose*, and in 1997 Bonnie Costello, Celeste Goodridge, and Cristanne Miller edited Moore's *Selected Letters*. Five years later Robin Schulze's facsimile edition of Moore's early poetry, *Becoming Marianne Moore* (2002), began to establish a precise history of publication and revision that had been erased by the misleadingly titled *Complete Poems* (1967; rev. 1981). Heather White's editions of Moore's poetry in the 1930s (*A-Quiver with Significance* [2008] and *Adversity and Grace* [2012]) extended that history. Linda Leavell's 2013 authorised biography, *Holding on Upside Down*, is the most recent addition to this body of archival scholarship, and the one that has brought Moore's life and writing to the attention of the widest public. And the future looks bright: by the time this issue is in print Heather White's edition of Moore's collected poetry, *New Collected Poems*, will have been published, and the Marianne Moore Digital Archive, which aims to provide annotated transcriptions of all of Moore's more than one hundred and twenty notebooks, will be live at moorearchive.org.

The response to Moore in 1984 was motivated in part by the need to separate the poetry from the person, the body (so to speak) from the corpus. Since then, Moore's particular historical moment has come, with passing time, to seem ever more complex. With conceptions of modernism reworked and contested, critical practice has generated multiple ways of re-situating

Moore's verse. The historicist turn in literary studies has had a particular impact on work in this period, with a variety of institutions, technologies, and media coming under as much scrutiny as the poems, fictions, and plays for which they were once understood as mere context. Much attention has focused, for example, on the production and circulation of experimental writing in early twentieth-century coteries and little magazines, and on the later absorption of the avant-garde into mid-century institutions and commodity cultures. Marianne Moore sets a fine project for criticism on both these scores: her early poems were published in the most influential little magazines, and she exerted considerable influence herself as the editor, from 1925-1929, of one particular institution of modernism, *The Dial*. *Becoming Marianne Moore*, as well as White's subsequent facsimile-based editions, have brought into focus Moore's importance to this milieu, as well as its importance to her developing poetics. The access to Moore's habits of publication and revision enabled by these editions has its counterpart in a new set of queries and obligations for Moore scholars: as White puts it in her essay in this issue "at present it is still not standard critical practice to identify the version of a poem one is reading, or consider earlier versions as a matter of course." Such accuracy about the textual record, a concern of each of the essays in this volume, contributes to the still-ongoing work of refining what Kappel called our "crude" sense of the shape of her career.

Moore's career is a case study also for the mid-twentieth century assimilation of avant-garde experiment to the mainstream, because of the public persona she cultivated in later life. On Kappel's query over "which [Moore] poems are greatest, which lesser," the consensus of his generation was that Moore's strength lay in the poetry of the twenties and thirties; there was, in the twentieth century, general agreement that the poetry declines in quality in parallel with

Moore's rise to public notice and popular acclaim, the downturn coinciding with World War II.

John Slatin put it strongly in 1986:

[Moore's] sense of history virtually collapses with the outbreak of the Second World War, to be replaced by a deepening, simplifying nostalgia for a world and a self gone beyond all hope of recovery, and the proud, critical intelligence takes to itself a shield of humility [...] Nostalgia and humility combine forces to simplify not only Moore's vision of America and her own relation to it, but her poems as well. And it is just at this point that she becomes a popular poet and an estimable public character. (209-210)

Since 2000, significant critical attention has turned to the cultural contexts of Moore's celebrity, along with calls for a revaluation of the late work, so that the shape of her career remains open to scrutiny.³ The five essays collected in this special issue focus closely on the period Slatin and others have identified as a turning point for Moore: the poems and essays she published between 1935 and 1944. The recent editions of *The Pangolin and Other Verse* and *What Are Years* account in part for this focus, but there are particular aspects of Moore's career in this crucial decade that also compel attention. Like other poets of her generation, Moore turned her mind more fully to national and world events in the 1930s; with this came the explicitly ethical emphasis in her writing discussed in the first and last essays in this issue, by Heather White and David Herd respectively. Like these two, the other articles make their larger claims—about criticism, about revision, about verse form, about performance, about politics—by means of detailed case study. Morton Zabel's question "but where was 'Pigeons'?" is the starting point for Heather White's essay about a poem that did not survive Moore's brutal mode of self-revision, and about the two strands of Moore criticism that have consolidated in last twenty years, one of which has attended to the poet's knowledge of natural science, the other to her learning in

Protestant theology. These two come together, argues White, in the lost “Pigeons,” a poem that, once we have recovered it, teaches us to read Moore into the twenty-first century. Christina Pugh also addresses recent tendencies in the criticism through the lens of a single poem. Her essay on Moore’s revisions of “Half Deity” argues that the poem moves, with the larger trajectory of Moore’s oeuvre, towards a more autonomous lyric mode, and so pushes back against recent claims for the “indeterminacy” of this habitual reviser’s corpus. Fiona Green’s essay is about the book in which “Half Deity” appeared, *The Pangolin and Other Verse*. Its concern is Moore’s return, in the 1930s, to syllabics, and her correspondence in the same period with Ezra Pound. Green argues that Moore’s thinking about history in the mid-1930s diverges from Pound’s partly because of the differing modes of attention they bring to their prose source material.

Edward Allen identifies a new form of mediation and a new kind revision in Moore’s sound archive. His reading of “Spenser’s Ireland” brings out the illocutionary force of a recording Moore made at Harvard immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. This marks the beginning of Moore’s career as media strategist, responsive to historical circumstance, schooled in public speaking, and finding yet another opportunity for revision in the reading scripts she annotated for her vocal performances. David Herd’s essay brings the issue full circle to further discussion of “ethical Moore” and centers, like Allen’s article, on a live performance, the 1943 *Entretiens de Pontigny* where Moore delivered her lecture “Feeling and Precision.” By examining its public occasion Herd finds in Moore’s essay an ethics that reaches both backward and forward in her work, and whereby she engages more fully with mid-twentieth-century philosophical discourse than has yet been recognised. The bearer of moral force in Moore’s later work, and which repositions her poems of the 1950s and 60s in relation to postwar poetics, argues Herd, is not the technique of collage or cut up, but the mastery of detail.

In his introduction to *Selected Poems*, one of the earliest and most consequential evaluations of Moore, T. S. Eliot is careful to praise “the genuineness” of her work without presuming to evaluate its “greatness.” “Greatness,” he writes, is a historical quality, and “we cannot tell, in advance, what any poetry is going to do, how it will operate on later generations” (vii). Implicit in his caution is the idea that one measure of poetry’s greatness is its continued capacity to act on future generations at all. Most literature is forgotten; some becomes fossilized; and some part, very small, continues to answer the needs and expectations of future generations of readers. Kappel’s 1984 introduction was pervaded by his sense of urgency: so much work, he argued, of such foundational importance, remained to be done before we could properly measure Moore’s achievement. It is telling that all the work that has been done since that time has served not to sate our curiosity about Moore, but to sharpen it. In 2017 we, the editors of the present special issue, are no less sure than was Kappel that many of the really vital questions about Moore’s work – the essays collected here focus in particular on its ethical force, its verbal texture, and its philosophical and historical resonances – remain enticingly open, and offer grounds for new speculation. It is a testament to Moore’s poetry that those who come after us will likely feel the same. Evidence is accumulating that her work is both genuine, and great.

¹ The introduction to *Critics and Poets on Marianne Moore* (2005) remains an excellent guide to the impact on Moore studies of feminist, queer, history of science, globalist, and ecocritical theories.

² See Kappel 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994a, 1994b.

³ Of the items listed in Elizabeth Gregory’s “Bibliography in Progress” of Moore scholarship since 2000, more than a dozen focus on the late work.

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