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Laura Nicosia

Montclair State University, nicosiala@montclair.edu

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Laura Nicosia
Montclair State University

“Prodigiousness of Diction”:

Marianne Moore and Sir Thomas Browne, Secret Sharers of a Like Tradition

Although T. S. Eliot proclaims that Marianne Moore has “no immediate poetic derivations” and that her poetry is “primarily descriptive,” her work is neither devoid of allusions, nor disjointed from a long line of Western literary traditions (xi). It is true that Moore’s works are unfamiliar in expression for today’s readers, and wresting meaning from and context for Moore’s poetry is no easy task, to be sure. Her complicated system of quotations and quirky allusions place a heavy burden upon critical readers who must expend a significant amount of time to investigate the sources and multifarious influences that affected her writing style, voice and topics. There is, however, a writer to whom Moore repeatedly referred by name and upon whom she patterned her literary style and structures: Sir Thomas Browne, physician, knight and tract writer of the seventeenth century.

Moore’s affinity for the seventeenth century is well documented, having been noted by such critics as Glenway Wescott, Louise Bogan, Jeredith Merrin, and Bonnie Costello. Patricia C. Willis notes in *Marianne Moore: Vision into Verse* that while at Bryn Mawr, Moore attended a course in “Imitative Writing” where she “concentrated on the well-known seventeenth-century stylists Bacon, Browne, Andrewes, Traherne, Hooker, and Burton” (5). In her editorial section of *The Dial*, written from 1926 to 1929, Moore frequently quotes medieval writers from anonymous lyricists to the Venerable Bede and “praised and appraised in terms of the seventeenth century” (Merrin 16). This forum enabled Moore to solidify and codify her own aesthetics; she chose to emulate writers from her favorite era—the seventeenth century. From her first personal commentary published in 1926, Moore asserts that:

there is a kind of virtuosity or prodigiousness of diction which is distinctly associated in one's mind with some . . . good writers. We attribute to let us say, Machiavelli, Sir Francis Bacon, John Donne, Sir Thomas Browne, Doctor Samuel Johnson, a particular kind of verbal effectiveness--a nicety and point, a pride and pith of utterance, which is in a special way different from the admirableness of Wordsworth or of Hawthorne. (*Dial* 80, 444)

It is only fitting that, since Moore wrote her first "Commentary" praising the talents of the seventeenth century (and specifically Browne), she included in her final entry of *The Dial* a similar evaluation of her beloved period: "the attributes of the 17th century keeps rising into our vision from time to time like the bouquet of a fountain, its gaudy phrases less richly than the more shadowy ones in Jeremy Taylor, Richard Hooker, or Sir Thomas Browne. . . and there were others besides Sir Thomas Browne to whom ashes were more than dust" (*Dial* 86, 540).

It is possible and perhaps preferable, therefore, to regard Moore's works as following the creative and innovative traditions developed and practiced by her role model. Moore imitated Browne as *homage*. She mimicked his stance as a neutral observer; assumed his highly stylized arguments; and appropriated his diverse subjects, themes, vocabulary and theological base. These elements are clearly reflected by and integrated into Moore's poetry.

Browne's influence as a disinterested spectator who inquires into the curiosities of nature, is mirrored in Moore's works. Separately and without direct connection, both Browne and Moore have been referred to as "natural historians," of a sort. Marie Boas Hall claims that Browne should be seen "as a naturalist, a pure natural historian, a serious collector of every sort of fact" (170). John Slatin articulates that Moore's affinity for landscape and fauna adheres to traditional, Western history and the "major myths of our culture" as displayed in the form appropriated by natural

historians (275). Slatin clearly counters Eliot's evaluation of Moore's poetic non-parentage and sets her firmly along the path of a highly stylized Western tradition.

Some critics, such as Adam Kitzes, have seen Browne's prose as "no 'well-wrought urns.' They are more like the urns he writes about with such interest in *Hydriotaphia* (1658): subject to corruption, hard to pin down, and seemingly animated by some spectral agent that carries them along an undetermined trajectory" (137). Others have suggested over the years that Browne's style indulges in the sensual pleasures of its wordplay and that he revels in linguistic gymnastics—it seems true that Browne enjoys his abilities as a craftsman of words—but, Kitzes' evaluation regarding Browne's seeming inability to sustain sense *or* his purposeful use of paradox as obfuscation are harsh.

However, Moore has had her share of detractors, too. Commenting on her elliptical and obscure style, Howard Nemerov has written, "Miss Moore is so often found going the long way around, making complexities out of simplicities, loading lines with detail until they are corrupted in sense of measure, and writing, in consequence, absurdly bad English" (359). By not recognizing the pure joy of her Brownian linguistic operations, however, Nemerov ignores the complex condensations and the quasi-scientific play of her meditations.

Both Browne and Moore were trained in medical and scientific fields and their writings have a unique humor and an intricate system of disinterested observation. When asked whether her pre-med classes and scientific bent influenced her writing style, Moore acknowledged that, "Precision, economy of statement, logic employed to ends that are disinterested, drawing and identifying, liberate—at least have some bearing on—the imagination, it seems to me" (qtd. in Therese 13-14).

A liberated imagination and an ability to focus on the "now-ness" of life are the keys to understanding both Browne and Moore. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, who believed that effective writings come to us spontaneously and make moments great, both Browne and Moore get caught up

in the grandeur of the moment, leaping about unpredictably and digressing, to “reveal the odd twists and paradoxes of [their] profoundly inquisitive imagination[s]” and to portray the world around them through epiphanic moments of understanding (Post 57).

This essay focuses on parallels between Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, and the middle period poetry of Moore. I examine correlations in: eclectic diction, subject matter, rhetorical devices, syntactical structures, and the emblematic nature of their writings. Both writers’ styles evolved over the durations of their careers, and to ignore this fact would be a flaw in the premise. It is striking though, to note Moore’s consistent echoes of Browne’s eccentric and stylized writings.

Prodigiousness of Diction

Two of the most obvious similarities between Browne and Moore are the complexity and antiquity of their vocabularies. It is not uncommon for the modern reader to refer to an unabridged dictionary to understand the literal meaning of either author’s text. Because of his diction, Browne has been referred to as “a literary cormorant who hatched an exotic species of Latinate English” (Post 58). He writes in the first book of his *Pseudodoxia*, “the quality of the Subject will sometimes carry us into expressions beyond meer English apprehensions; and indeed if elegancie still proceedeth, and English Pens maintain that stream . . . we shall within few years be fain to learn Latine to understand English” (Browne 99).

Some examples of his verbal, Latinate eccentricities are, “desume,” “reminiscentiall,” “manuduction,” “extispicious,” and “secondine.” All of these are derivatives of the Latin and are entered in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Many of these words are now archaic or obsolete, but there are other words that Browne coined that have stayed with us to this day, such as his use of “medicine.”

Moore, too, is a collector of the quirky and the Latinate. Bernard Engel notes that Moore will occasionally “use Latinate vocabulary for philosophical reflections” and not for the purpose of obfuscation. Taffy Martin treats Moore’s diction as a consciously constructed tool for literary subversion. For Harold Bloom, Moore’s diction plays “endlessly upon the dialectic of denotation and connotation” (3). Referring to Moore’s compulsion to horde oddities, bric-a-brac, and snippets of conversations, Bonnie Costello echoes Moore’s self-evaluation as a “kleptomaniac of the mind” (qtd. in Merrin 19). She was a “great collector of odd objects, phrases, and quaint lore. . . [enjoying] whatever seems 'new and strange' in the work of others” (19). Moore once said in an interview that her writing is, a “collection of flies in amber” (Engel 28).

An example of Moore’s Latinate diction is evidenced in “Critics and Connoisseurs,” where she discusses the aesthetics of art and the need to embrace naturalness rather than foolishly submitting to “vulgar errors.” She utilized Latinate words, phrases and clauses such as “unconscious fastidiousness,” “ballasted,” “proof against its proclivity” (38), exhibiting the kind of philosophic language Eliot thought to be a purely American phenomenon, the result of “universal university education” (Willis 11-12). However, Moore extends her *materia poetica* to include the conversational along with her scientific and Latinate observations of the natural world.

Moore resists predictability by her use of uncommon and exotic phrases placed incongruously next to the commonplace. In conjoining disparate dictions, Moore posits an aesthetic of correspondence and conversation, rather than an aesthetic of elite convention. In “The Mind is an Enchanting Thing,” Moore first compares the human mind to the simplicity of a “katydid-wing / subdivided by sun / till the nettings are legion,” and in the next stanza, in more bizarre fashion to “the apteryx-awl.” Moore’s logic and expression are at once profoundly simple and syntactically complex—elliptical rather than linear.

Additionally, both Browne and Moore employed conversational phrases to disclose the imprudence of accepting authority without critical inquiry. By contrasting conversational vocabularies with elevated ones, the poets expose paradoxes and errors that exist in this world.

Browne, in his treatise on the elephant writes:

Which conceit [that elephants do not possess jointed legs] is not the daughter of latter times, but an old and gray-headed error, even in the daies of Aristotle, as he delivereth in his book, *de incessu animalium*; and stands successively related by severall Authors: by Diodorus, Siculus, Strabo, Ambrose, Cassiodore, Solinus and many more. Now herein me thinks men much forget themselves, not well considering the absurdity of such assertions. (185)

Browne points out the grievous error inherent in blindly accepting the voice of authority by juxtaposing the Latinate phrases next to an idiomatic phrase such as “herein me thinks.” This appeal to common sense and to an unfettered way of thinking makes clear the obfuscation of unquestioned beliefs.

Moore’s poem of the same name, “Elephants,” interrogates the acceptance of inherited wisdom “as Socrates, / prudently testing the suspicious thing, knew / the wisest is he who’s not sure that he knows” (130). Moore calls out from the wasteland of modern America for an experiential knowledge of life rather than the mere acceptance of fact—not for “ambition without understanding,” as she articulates in “Critics and Connoisseurs,” but for knowledge that results from inquiry, experience and experiment (38).

Materia Poetica and Literary Devices

In what appears to be too similar to allow mere chance as Moore’s muse, the table of contents to her authorized *Complete Poems* closely resembles Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*.

Browne writes observances “Of the Elephant,” “Of Snayles,” “Of the Cameleon,” “Of the Oestrige,” “Of the Pelican,” “Of the Unicorns,” “Of the Basilisk,” “Of the Dove,” “Of the Sperma-Ceti and the Sperma-Ceti Whale,” “Of the Dragon,” and so forth. There are too many animals mentioned within Browne’s texts to enumerate, but Moore’s titles read like a modernization of Browne’s. In her corpus, she examines most of the same animal species—mirroring Browne’s list and paying reverence to his *magnum opus*.

Beside the parallels involving subject matter, Moore has apportioned exact words and terms (usually Latinate) from Browne’s text into her own. For example, she appropriates Browne’s term “camel-sparrow” into her poem, “He 'Digesteth Harde Yron',” to describe the ostrich. She also addresses Browne’s entire thesis regarding the fallacious belief that these regal birds eat iron horseshoes by using his phrase as her title. Further, in stylistic veneration, Moore reproduces Browne’s sibilance—as exemplified by his line, “silent in this singularity; either omitting it as dubious, or as the comment saith, rejecting it as fabulous” (Browne 207)—in her own manner with, in “he’s / been mothering the eggs / at night six weeks - his legs / their only weapon of defense./ He is swifter than a horse; he has a foot hard / as a hoof” (Moore 99). Both topically and stylistically, Moore’s text is to be read as a dialog with Browne’s.

Rhetorical Devices

Beyond the similarity of their subject matter and literary devices, there are other significant similitudes, such as the inclusion of formal, rhetorical structures of presentation and stylistic parallels. Both Browne and Moore were fond of the same rhetorical devices. One such device is the polyptoton, which refers to “the repetition of words from the same root but in different forms or with different endings” (Post 61). An example of this device is found in Browne’s “Of the Elephant”: “unable to *lie* down, it sleepeth against a tree . . . whereon the beast *relying*, by the fall

of the tree falls also down it self, and is able to rise no more” (185, emphasis mine). Moore, in *her* “Elephants” poem, writes of “the opposing opposed “ and of “revery not reverence” (128-129). Use of the polyptoton lends an air of verbal playfulness that is reminiscent of a riddle or paradox. Such verbal gaming creates instances of “sharp juxtaposition[s] of nearly identical abstractions [making the] meaning of each nearly impenetrable and contributes to our sense of the gnomic inscrutability of the human condition” according to Post (62).

Syntactical Structures

In terms of syntax, both writers employ writing styles and structures where “peculiar style must precede peculiar expression” (*Dial* 80, 444). Such elaborate syntax reflects their equally complex empirical approaches to reality. Their poetic phraseologies vacillate between factual accounts of scientific data and “the idiosyncracies of private narration” (Post 64). Though written about Browne’s asymmetric syntactical structures, the following is also applicable to Moore: “[These authors vary] concise, seried [sic] utterances of differing length with loose, run-on sentences often held together by weak ligatures . . . [giving the effect] in Morris Croll’s well-known formula, of portraying 'not a thought, but a mind thinking, or in Pascal’s words, *la peinture de la pensee*'” (Post 64-65).

Becoming so involved in their descriptive and perceptive prowess, their texts are swept up in the “thing itself,”² leaping unexpectedly to a life-corresponding analogy. And, in their unpredictability, they do not progress in linear fashion to a fixed goal or climax. Rather, serial clauses are loosely conjoined via delicate linkages and paratactical syntax (by using “for,” for example) or terms of negation, such as “nor,” and “but.”

Browne posits a mode of conversational musing rather than a formal argument. Take for example, his supposed refutation of the erroneous belief that elephants have no joints. He begins

discussing the elephant and drifts to the pitiful human condition. Browne starts his argument with several strong declarations made in conversational diction. Next, he presents his evidence and overwhelms the reader with corresponding authoritarian support. Last, by creating emblems of the subjects, he leaps to human application in didactic fashion to pursue his true agenda. Moore's syntactical poetic pattern is the presentation of a long line of verse followed by shorter clauses of quotes or witticisms. These clauses and phrases do not follow the original thesis of the poem because, like Browne, Moore conflates seemingly disparate objects, ideas or subjects. These disruptive shards of thought disarm the reader and suggest spontaneous, innocent musings.

Take for example, the first stanza of "The Buffalo" where Moore links together a series of descriptive phrases that have unclear reference to a buffalo.

Black in blazonry means
prudence; and niger, unpropitious. Might
hermitite--
black, compactly incurved horns on bison
have significance? The
soot-brown tail-tuft on
a kind of lion-
tail; what would that express?
And John Steuart Curry's Ajax pulling
grass--no ring
in his nose--two birds standing on the back? (27)

The quirky, spasmodic stanza structure, coupled with the introduction of personifications, lions, rings in the nose, and birds, all seem disjointed and contort the poem. In order to wrest meaning from this poem, the reader must supply missing data, decompress line structures and fill in the not-

said. Engel writes that readers must “proceed from phase to phase of a poem by juxtaposition rather than by obvious transition. This method forces the reader to stretch his imagination” and perform imaginative cognitive gymnastics (25).

Emblematic Nature of the Physical World

Browne and Moore regard objects in nature, specifically animals, as expressions of intangible truths that when placed under exacting scrutiny, reveal universal truths. Browne writes, “this visible World is but a picture of the invisible, wherein as in a Pourtraict, things are not truly, but in equivocal shapes, and as they counterfeit some real substance in that invisible Fabrick” (qtd. in Merrin 27). Concomitantly, Moore posits in “He 'Digesteth Harde Yron” that “eight pairs of ostriches / in harness, dramatize a meaning / always missed by the externalist./ The power of the visible / is the invisible” (100).

The chosen vehicles for these invisible certainties, for both poets, are birds and reptiles—uncommon messengers of truth. Browne, concentrating on the “Chameleon,” examines the belief that the creature exists for long periods of time without sustenance by surviving on the alimentary qualities of the invisible—air. Regardless of how the chameleons survive, Browne admits that their emblematic adaptation and physical survival are the significant points. He writes first of the creature, then of man: “For we reade of many who have lived long time without aliment; and beside deceits and impostures, there may be veritable Relations of some, who without a miracle, and by peculiarity of temper, have far outfasted Elias. Which notwithstanding doth not take off the miracle” (206).

Moore suggests in her version, “To a Chameleon,” that the creature is an emblem of spiritual rather than physical survival. She depicts a creature whose survival tactics and powers are superior to even the “Dark King’s” serpent, for the serpent “could not snap the spectrum up for food as you

have done” (179). She engages in an intertextual dialogue with Browne regarding the chameleon’s ability to live off light and air. However, she makes his scientific investigation of physical survival suit her purpose of spiritual immortality.

Both authors know that the didactic, when cloaked in concerns dealing with creatures lower on the evolutionary chain, is less insulting to their readers. By using animals in their idiosyncratic ways, neither writer commits a pathetic fallacy because, though the creatures may be used as a springboard to understanding humans or as a receptacle to embody (un)desirable qualities, they are not meant to be humans in miniature. They are simply mirrors that reflect and exemplify specific characteristics. In this way, both writers are thematically *homo sapien*-centric, despite the misleading titles of their pieces.

The exotic animals depicted within both Moore’s and Browne’s poems are natural, honest, and self-sufficient. It is because of these very traits that the poets impose certain situations upon the animal, allowing humans who live in error to glean much-needed lessons regarding life, death and the afterlife. This use of the emblem-animal frees each writer for intellectual movements through all the worlds of experience. Each writer may move from the microcosmic world of the individual animal to the macrocosmic existence of man and then, by analogy (or faith) to the universe as a whole.

The Confluence of Two Great Traditions

There are many similarities between the prose of Sir Thomas Browne and the poetry of Marianne Moore. Both writers approach their work with the perspective of a scientific observer who gets caught-up in the moment—the “thisness” of the thing itself. They utilize both Latinate and conversational diction, twisted and serial linguistic syntax, inconsistent subject matter, allusions to authorities, similar subjects, didactic tones, and the convention of the emblem. Moore

consciously styled her prose after the works of Browne by revisioning his texts and mimicking his ideas, words and demeanor. Her poetic career became an intertextual dialogue with Browne; so much so that Glenway Wescott wrote in his review of Moore's *Observations*, "her work is the product of a novel intelligence, a strange sensibility, a unique scholarship. It is woven, as the curious notes manifest, with phrases from neglected books. . . . The prototype of Miss Moore's 'observation' is the Baconian essay, or the prose of Sir Thomas Browne and Burton" (*Dial* 78, 2-4). Louise Bogan, in *The New Yorker* declared that Marianne Moore "does not resemble certain seventeenth-century writers; she might be one of them. She stands at the confluence of two great traditions as they once existed" (qtd. in Merrin 18).

Eliot's evaluation therefore, of Moore having no literary predecessors is contestable. It is not enough to simply admit to Moore's innovations, talents and influences on other writers; it is important to recognize that her poetic talents are a part of and a contribution to a long-standing seventeenth-century tradition practiced by Sir Thomas Browne. This recognition does not detract from Moore's uniqueness. Rather it proves her mastery and subversions of literary techniques, and displays her ability to convey to her readers a bit of the joys and musings of a period in literary history that she believed had some peculiar beauty.

Notes

¹ This quote is from Moore's "Commentary" of 1926, Volume 80: 444.

² Browne holds that this experience of the "thing itself" is necessary. He quoted from Julius Scaliger on the frontispiece of his text, "*Ex Libris colligere quae prodiderunt Authores longe est periculosissimum; Rerum ipsarum cognitio vera e rebus ipsis est*" (To cull from books what authors have reported is exceedingly dangerous; true knowledge of things themselves is out of the things themselves).

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