

'Its native surroundings':

Marianne Moore, England and the idea of the 'characteristic American'

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Marianne Moore claimed, famously, in a letter to Ezra Pound in 1919 that she was 'Irish by descent, possibly Scotch also, but purely Celtic'.¹ Critics have even gone so far as to claim Moore as an Irish-American poet.² But in so doing they have glossed over the English side of her family background (as did Moore herself). This is perhaps unsurprising, considering that it was Moore's father, from whom she was estranged throughout her life, who was of English ancestry; and that Moore's persona comments famously – in the only instance of such self-assertion in her poetry – 'I am troubled, I'm dissatisfied, I'm Irish' in her 1941 poem 'Spenser's Ireland'.³ Nevertheless Moore's English ancestry still lurks, like her absent father, in the background of her imagination. And evidence points to the fact that Moore was at least aware of this connection to England. A printed piece, found among Moore's papers at the Rosenbach in Philadelphia, describes the English ancestry of the Moore family. A 'History of the Moore Family', written 'for a family reunion by Mrs. Mittie Moore Sharp' (a distant cousin of Moore), mentions William Moore, Moore's paternal grandfather. Moore Sharpe explains how a 'Thomas More [sic] came over in a boat named the "Mary and John" from London, England, in 1630'.⁴

While this article moves away from biography to focus on some of the allusions made in Moore's poetry and prose to England and Englishness, this knowledge of her English family background is important when we assess how far, for Moore, 'Englishness' might map onto 'Americanness'. We might consider this in light of Paul Giles's argument that 'Englishness' is a kind of residual commodity within American

expression: a commodity that writers such as Herman Melville and Thomas Pynchon have ‘compulsively appropriated and reinvented’ in order ‘to advance their own aesthetic designs’.⁵ This process of appropriation and re-appropriation doubles back on itself once the American becomes the tourist in England and then returns home. In Moore’s poetry and prose she is both the American tourist and the American settler, regarding a colonial legacy in which Englishness is so heavily imprinted that it leaves its own uncertain mark. So in considering the ways in which English and American cultures converge and diverge within Moore’s writings – particularly in relation to the arguments she rehearses in her essay on that great Anglophile ‘Henry James’, ‘Henry James as a Characteristic American’ (1934) – we begin to see how Moore’s ‘English’ background might not be incidental after all. By highlighting some of the English accents in her work, and by drawing these into a contemplation of her own reflections upon the American tourist as well as the American settler, we are given a greater understanding of Moore’s views of what she terms one’s ‘native surroundings’; and we are shown how this might relate to her view of the ‘characteristic American’ both at home and abroad.

I remember a black swan on the Cherwell at Oxford

With flamingo-colored, maple-

Leaflike feet.

– So begins the second stanza of Moore’s early poem ‘Critics and ‘Connoisseurs’ in the version that appeared in Alfred Kreymborg’s magazine *Others: A Magazine of New Verse* in July 1916.⁶ Linda Leavell tells the story of its publication, noting that William Carlos Williams edited this special issue: he ‘welcomed discomfort’ in the content (the issue is subtitled ‘A Competitive Number’), and he requested of Moore “‘something you are willing to see stand alone – some one thing – new’”. ‘As soon as she received Williams’s

letter', Leavell notes, 'she started writing a poem about "ambition without understanding", an ant with a stick, and a swan she had seen in Oxford. "Critics and Connoisseurs" would be her first mature poem'.⁷ There are two ironies to this commentary, though. The first is that the poem, focusing at it does on the topic of 'unconscious / fastidiousness' and honing in on an 'ant with a stick' as well as an obstinate swan, takes Williams's desire for something that can 'stand alone' almost to the extreme – so that not only the poem but the characters within it 'stands alone'. The second is that Moore is unlikely to have seen a black swan at Oxford, as black swans are not native to England; it is no accident that the phrase 'black swan theory' has become synonymous in recent years with an unlikely event.⁸

In Moore's letter to her brother John Warner Moore (from 5 July 1911), recounting her day in Oxford, she certainly claims to have seen a black swan. In the letter, which begins '*Oxford* for rich fat olfactory impressions', Moore notes:

The river is the nicest thing of all, a mere streamlet, but bordered by magnificent trees and a nicely kept path and there are swans on it, one black fellow we noticed with a red beak and it is full of fish. The water is so clear that you can see every movement of the fins and of the swan's 'webs'.⁹

This tells us that Moore at least thought she saw a black swan; yet such a sighting would have been unusual. Its associations, importantly, are not 'English': in an article for *The Independent* from 2012, which argues that the numbers of black swans are increasing (37 pairs having been confirmed as nesting wild in Britain), the writer points out that 'if we know anything about a spectacle such as the black swan, we know it's an Aussie creature: it's an icon of Australia'.¹⁰ If Moore *had* seen a black swan on the Cherwell in Oxford – unlikely but not impossible, as sometimes black swans escape from private

lakes and several have been seen living on the River Thames¹¹ – this would have been a remarkable occurrence.

Whatever Moore is ‘remembering’ in this early version of ‘Critics and Connoisseurs’, then, is not a particularly ‘English’ scene – and its accuracy is challenged further when we take into account that black swans have pink bills but grey-black legs and feet (unlike the ‘flamingo-colored, maple-| leaflike feet’ of Moore’s poem). We might note that in her letter to Warner Moore stated that the ‘black fellow’ had a ‘red beak’ and that she could clearly see their ‘webs’. These ‘webs’ would not have been red, as it is only the white-bodied South American species of swans that has pink feet.¹² Thus Moore’s ‘black swan’, gliding apparently on the Cherwell at Oxford, is a ‘black swan’ twice over: because a black swan with flamingo-coloured feet does not, in fact, exist. The black-necked swan of South America comes close, and the famed black swan itself, which hails from Australia, has grey-black feet: but neither fits Moore’s description.

So is this just a case of Moore’s idiosyncratic style – fusing a real memory with an imagined one, elaborating upon an impression of a place by which she was clearly dazzled? Indeed elsewhere in her letter to Warner she says of Oxford, ‘Everything we have seen is a rush light in comparison (and a garbled metaphor)’ (p.88). Or might she be inserting a swan met on the pages of a book – with pink feet – into an actual sighting on the river at Oxford? She does describe Charlecote Park in Warwickshire (which she names ‘The Lucy Estate’) as ‘all like a fairytale’ in the same letter (p.89). It is pointed, I think, that Moore’s ‘I remember’ in ‘Critics and Connoisseurs’ takes in not only this ‘black swan’ but also the ‘Cherwell in Oxford’ – so that for the careful reader at least the wonderful jars against the particular within this over-stimulating poetic scene.

In later versions of the poem – from *Collected Poems* (1951) and with very slight differences in the final version in *Complete Poems* (1967/8) – the ‘swan’ is no longer black, and neither is the river named. But it still has those pink feet:

I remember a swan under the willows in Oxford,
with flamingo-colored, maple-
leaflike feet.¹³

The naturalness of these lines leads us to think (understandably) that the swan in question is white, and to accept its having pink feet: but with the facts in front of us this seems, again, unlikely. It is only the South American swan that in its white form has pink, webbed feet. Nevertheless, despite lingering inaccuracies, this later version does at least hint at greater veracity – Moore has removed the ‘black’, perhaps because someone has alerted her to the improbability of seeing such a swan. Perhaps she had thought she had seen a black swan, but maybe it was in fact a goose. But this comes at the same time that she has replaced ‘on the Cherwell’ with ‘under the willows’. These two moves seem to be counterintuitive until we realise that adding a syllable, by replacing ‘on the Cherwell’ with ‘under the willows’ to counteract that lost by removing the ‘black’ (l.9), keeps intact the poem’s syntactical and rhythmical arrangement (with both lines standing at 14 syllables). Moreover the latter version is lent a more wistful, ‘fairytale’ English quality, stemming from removing the specificity of both the unsettling ‘black’, with its far from English associations, and the particular ‘Cherwell’.

What the changes denote, then, is a move away from geographical specificity (whereby we know that we are in Oxford, on the river Cherwell) towards a more idealised ‘English’ idyll, where (white) swans are gliding under the willows in a town that now becomes a symbolic place. ‘Oxford’ in inverted commas is very different from Oxford the university town, and Moore knows it. The ‘black swan’ might have been a

disruption to this scene, pulling up the reader at the very moment that the poet tries to re-collect an image of tranquillity. The inaccurate 'maple-| leaflike' feet' remain almost as an overhang of Moore's preference for aesthetics over accuracy – suggesting that this picture postcard scene becomes a combination of what Moore remembers and what she imagines. But even for her, the arriviste 'black swan' might be one impressionist brushstroke too many.

The dizzying ethereality of the later version of the poem is further underlined by its wordiness: where the early version notes of the swan's behaviour, 'It stood out to sea like a battle-| ship' (ll.11–12), the later version has 'It reconnoitered like a battle-| ship' (ll.11–12). While the later version's use of 'reconnoitered' is arguably more effective in rendering the swan as 'battle-ship', the earlier is more direct and therefore more clearly a scene about a swan on the river Cherwell in Oxford, eating the bread that the speaker gave it. In the later poem, too, the swan's 'proclivity to more fully appraise such bits | of food as the stream | bore counter to it' (ll.16–18) stands as a replacement for the earlier 'its | Inclination to detain and appraise such bits [...] (ll.16–17), echoing the earlier 'Disinclination to move' (l.15). The earlier poem's directness is replaced by a more elusive style of storytelling in the later version. By the later version, then, we have a scene that is much more stylised and aestheticised – but yet less grounded in an actual *place* – than the earlier version, in a step that idealises the English location of the poem at the same time that it walks away from it.

Though the discussion of nativity with regard to the 'black swan' in Moore's 'Critics and Connoisseurs' might seem forced, it points to a problematics of definition that runs through Moore's references to England and Englishness in her poetry and prose. The 'black swan' of 'Critics and Connoisseurs', later removed, is not native to England, and

neither is the poet/speaker; she can only view the scene as a tourist, and thus is liable perhaps to make mistakes, to make incorrect observations of the scene at hand. Her images of England, and in this case Oxford, are necessarily contrived. However, this sense of contrivance is not always regarded pejoratively in her descriptions of England both as tourist and as more knowing poet.

In her poem 'England', first published in *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse* for 1919 (1920) and collected later in *Selected Poems* (1935) and *Complete Poems* (1967/8), Moore painstakingly depicts England as an apparent seamless whole: 'with its baby rivers and little towns, each with its abbey or its cathedral', it becomes 'the| criterion of suitability and convenience'.¹⁴ Yet this contrived touristic impression sees a more knowing speaker than the nostalgic 'I' feeding the swans in 'Critics and Connoisseurs' (the stanza, we recall, opens 'I remember'). Throughout 'England' – which, in keeping with Moore's practice of using the title as the first line, sees 'England' more as a springboard of association than as a title encompassing the whole poem – countries including Greece, France and China all come under the poet's scrutiny. For example, Italy is accused of 'contriving an epicureanism | from which the grossness has been extracted' (ll.5–6). The poem as a whole gently mocks the 'noted superiority' of each country, and particularly of the American gaze through which each country is seen: this gaze inevitably encompassing the speaker's own.

Therefore it comes as little surprise that the argument comes full circle, as the speaker (and the poem) conclude:

of all that noted superiority –
if not stumbled upon in America,
must one imagine that it is not there?
It has never been confined to one locality. (ll.37–40)

'England' questions to what extent 'superiority' might be something that is transferred, through the process of travelling and seeing and coming back again, from 'there' to 'here'. Of course what is 'there' and what is 'not there' are always linked, in Moore's poems about place, to 'imagination': both in apparent pre-emption of the kind of idea expressed by Elizabeth Bishop in those well-known lines from her 1965 poem 'Questions of Travel' ('Think of the long trip home. | Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?')¹⁵ and as an assertion of place-making as something that happens more often in the pages of a book than as a result of an actual visit to the place itself.

This comes despite the fact that, as we have seen from 'Critics and Connoisseurs', Moore had already travelled to the real 'England' (Leavell tells us that on her first visit with her mother in 1911 she took in the Lake District, Oxford, Warwick and London¹⁶) and she would continue to travel again to England and the British Isles in 1927 and, much later in life, in 1964.¹⁷ 'There', 'here', and 'not there', then, take on extra resonance when the speaker doing the looking is both knowing poet and naïve American, both non-traveller and traveller. In particular, the contemplation of England, the country at the focal point of this gaze, has cultural implications for the seer herself.

As an American of Irish and British Protestant background,¹⁸ and as a poet aware of the cultural residue of Englishness within American literary life, it is perhaps unsurprising that for Moore an acknowledgement of a shared Anglo-American heritage raises its own problems not only of self-identification but also of responsibility. In Moore's later poem 'Virginia Britannia', often regarded as the companion-piece to Moore's troubled, and troubling, poem 'Spenser's Ireland' (from 1941), Moore gently mocks the American settlers' tendency to replicate their vision of a boxed-in English world. But at the same time the manicured visions of loveliness are troubled by a legacy of settlement and

displacement – so that contemporary America’s New England, in its echoing of its ‘Old Dominion’, finds itself with a colonial heritage that it has yet to take responsibility for.

Charles Berger points out, in a chapter on Moore’s poems from the 1930s, that ‘Virginia Britannia’ (first published in the English journal *Life and Letters Today* in December 1935 and heavily revised for *What Are Years* in 1941) fuses intricately so many stories of cultural clash that the poem becomes ‘Moore’s most ambitious ode to the “not-native” as constitutive of the ground of identity, of ground-as-identity’.¹⁹ This notion of ‘ground’ is important within a poem that discusses not only contested territories but also the identifying stamp that inhabitants place upon them; and the poem is significant, also, for its shifting narrative voice that, as Berger points out, avoids ‘the opportunity to strike a stance, to assumed an authoritative pose or position on the grounds of origin’ (p.160). In a chapter on ‘Moore’s Curatorial Practices’, Catherine Paul links too Moore’s choice of species to a larger commentary on how the native and the coloniser might collide within such ‘grounds’. For example, in a discussion of Moore’s use of different types of ‘sparrow’ in the poem she notes that this bird ‘represents the great natural luxuries the colonists found in Tidewater Virginia, as distinguished from the “stark luxuries” brought with them’.²⁰ As Paul points out, Moore creates a sort of ‘habitat group’ within ‘Virginia Britannia’ wherein ‘animals, plants, land-marks, place-names, and human beings’ are clustered together to ‘criticize more locally’ the nature of colonial consumption (p.190).

This notion of an askew narrative viewpoint, through which ‘colonial consumption’ is rehearsed as much as it is subtly critiqued, converges on Moore’s source text for the poem. Moore’s ‘Notes’ to the poem call our attention to the 1612 work by an early English settler in what would become Virginia – ‘c.f. *Travaile into Virginia Britannia* by William Strachey’²¹ – and Strachey was one of the first to record the history of the

English colonisation of North America. Virginia, significantly, was the first state to be named in America; the gendered association of the name is clear, with its connection to the 'Virgin Queen' Elizabeth I (1533–1603). Thus 'Spenser's Ireland' – responding as it does to Edmund Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596)– and its linked poem 'Virginia Britannia', allude to England's history of colonisation in Ireland and America respectively, under the reigns of Elizabeth I (1558–1603) and, following the union of England and Scotland, James I (1603–1625). But whereas in 'Spenser's Ireland' Moore questions the value of her assertion of Irish identification as an American poet regarding Ireland's policy of neutrality during World War II,²² in 'Virginia Britannia' the pattern of colonisation is complicated by turning the gaze onto the American settlers whose uncertain legacy is that of colonised and coloniser. This poem therefore asks not only where American settlers' responsibilities lie, but also whether their evoking of the 'Old Dominion' becomes a sort of lie in itself.

This 'lying' operates on several levels within the poem, which from the start places 'England', and our ideas of it, at the centre of this manifold deception:

Pale sand edges England's Old
Dominion. The air is soft, warm, hot
above the cedar-dotted emerald shore
known to the red-bird, the red-coated musketeer,
the trumpet-flower, the cavalier
the parson, and the wild parishioner. (ll.1–6)

First then, is the 'lie' of the land, the poem opening with an upturning of 'New England' as: 'Pale sand edges England's Old | Dominion' (ll.1–2). Following this we are given a beautiful yet muddled description of the atmosphere, whereby the 'red-coated musketeer' and the British 'cavalier' meet against the backdrop of the red and green of

the 'cedar-dotted emerald shore', an Irish-American confabulation. Everything seems slightly askew, slightly out of place. Again, as with 'Critics and Connoisseurs', this is at once a real place and a no-place, so that the actual location of 'New England' becomes a space of cultural confusion despite the dissemblance of the 'soft, warm, hot' air.

Later in the poem, the inhabitants' attempts to recreate 'Old England' are contrasted with the reality of American natural life. Here, despite the colonisers' attempts to cover up their American backdrop –

[...] The Old Dominion has
all-green box-sculptured grounds.
An almost English green surrounds
them. [...] (ll.27–30)

– 'Care has formed among unEnglish insect sounds' (l.30). The inelegance of 'unEnglish' combines with the imagined sound of the (American) grasshopper, rounding down the end-rhyme and bringing us back to earth with a stridulation.

This thinly veiled deception is extended, later still in the poem, to a contemplation of the oddity of every one of its subjects. Thus 'Englishness' becomes part, too, of a confusing list in which things and people are measured by their native or learned qualities. Extending an almost panoramic perspective over the scene, the poetic eye sees a:

[...] Feminine
odd Indian young lady! Odd thin-
gauze-and-taffeta-dressed English one! Terrapin
meat and crested spoon
feed the mistress of French plum-and-turquoise-piped-chaise-longue;
of brass-knobbed slat front door, and everywhere open

shaded house on Indian-
named Virginian

streams in counties named for English lords. (ll.88–96)

Partly in echo of the earlier poem 'England', where England is considered against other countries by virtue of its own self-presentation, the 'Feminine | odd Indian young lady!' is set both with and against the 'Odd thin | gauze-and-taffeta-dressed English one': and here, too, is a 'mistress' of a 'French plum-and-turquoise-piped-chaise-longue'. These vaguely foolish figures contrast with the formidable 'Virgin Queen' who hovers over the poem – asking further questions not only about colonial legacy but also of what women might have done (however unwittingly) with their own feminine inheritance.

Though the fripperies of the scenes are amusing, and the cultural collisions a feast for the seer, at the same time something more troubling is at play: it is no accident that the 'house' of the settler is 'open| shaded' – appearing to be more at ease within its surroundings than it actually is. The problematics of such scenes are therefore brought into focus at the end of the stanza, whereby the whimsical nonsenses of sitting down and dressing up are replaced by a contemplation of situation wherein 'Indian-| named Virginian streams' find themselves 'in counties named for English lords'. The near end-rhyme between 'Indian' and 'Virginian' has the feel of a jingle to draw our attention to the fact that they make uncomfortable bedfellows; while the iambic tetrameter final phrase – 'in counties named for English lords' – seems out of place in its metrical certainty. We might ask what else this apparent self-satisfaction is glossing over. It is no accident, here, that 'for' and 'Lords' leads us to read 'countries' for 'counties' in seeking out a further internal rhyme: so that we question, in turn, whether there really is much slippage between naming a 'county' and a 'country' after all. A further level of irony is added by Moore's American 'named for' here. What, the poet seems to ask, did it mean to

be 'American' then, and what does it therefore mean to be 'American' now? And how does the naming of place alter our perception, or indeed our imagination of the same place? Can the 'unEnglish sounds' of grasshopper and misplaced preposition really be drowned out by the mere appearance of civilisation?

This idea of 'naming for' recalls the linked poem to 'Virginia Britannia' 'Spenser's Ireland', with its famous ringing opening –

SPENSER'S IRELAND

has not altered:-

a place as kind as it is green,
the greenest place I've never seen.

Every name is a tune.²³

These opening lines seem to ask a similar question. Is Ireland 'the greenest place I've never seen' merely because the speaker hasn't visited it yet, or because (as in the 'Oxford' of 'Critics and Connoisseurs', or in the 'England' of 'England', or 'Old Dominion' of 'Virginia Britannia') 'Ireland' doesn't really exist in this state, as a green place to end all green places? Again the end rhyme between 'green' and 'seen' strikes the reader as forced and therefore disingenuous. This is 'Ireland' in inverted commas rather than the troubled Ireland of 1941. Moreover, in the context of 'Virginia Britannia's' self-satisfied 'counties named for English lords', the line 'Every name is a tune' is rendered more sinister, with its implication of 'harmony' becoming as much a lie as the naming of native American people's lands by English colonisers. It is no accident that the dactylic rhythm of 'Every name is a tune' sounds a further note of forced harmony. Is 'every name' a 'tune' in Ireland because our tourist gaze wills it to be? In fact these two poems, when read together, lead us to consider to what extent such 'names' in Ireland might as much

be the products of a history of colonisation as the names of 'counties' in American (British) Virginia.

For the last section of this chapter I want to turn to Moore's writing on that great Anglophile Henry James in order to consider in particular how her essay 'Henry James as a Characteristic American' (1934), written in the period in-between 'England' and 'Virginia Britannia', complicates and extends the discussions of England and Englishness in her poems. But I also want to show how for Moore the convergence of Englishness and Americanness upon the figure of James places her definition of what makes a 'characteristic American' as central to her understanding of the colonial legacy of Englishness within American culture. At the same time, for Moore as for James, Englishness can also be regarded as something that is absorbed and regurgitated, through the processes of travel and return, onto American soil.

Though much of what Moore writes in her essay on James is humorous and lightly mocking, like 'England' and 'Virginia Britannia' it operates also on another level whereby it considers seriously the relationship between Americanness and Europeanness, focusing in particular on what American culture can glean from English culture and possibly even *vice versa*. First published in 1934 in the Harvard-founded *Hound and Horn*, 'Henry James as a Characteristic American' reverberates with Moore's attempt to make sense of her own sets of identifications as an American with Europhilic (and Anglophilic) tendencies. Moore and James shared a similar Scotch-Irish Presbyterian background, and in the same letter to Pound in which she described her 'Irish' descent Moore also named James as one of the 'direct influences bearing on my work'.²⁴ Indeed, Linda Leavell goes so far as to claim that James may have been the only writer who satisfied Moore's definition of a 'model American', someone whom she

‘adopted as her own model of identity’.²⁵ The implication of elision in Leavell’s statement between ‘model’ and ‘characteristic’ is problematic, however. In fact ‘Henry James as a Characteristic American’ is still ‘characteristic’ of Moore – containing criticisms, and light mockeries, disguised thinly behind a veil of apparently indulgent over-quotation and praise of the more senior literary figure.

Nevertheless it is true that Moore wrote the essay partly in response to those who viewed James’s adoption of English nationality as evidence of abandoning his native land. Indeed she uses her essay as a platform for her contention that it was James’s very openness to experience that made him American:

He feels a need ‘to see the other side as well as his own, to feel what his adversary feels’; to be an American is not for him ‘just to glow belligerently with one’s own country’. Some complain of his transferred citizenship as a loss; but when we consider the trend of his fiction and his uncomplacent denouements, we have no scruple about insisting that he was American; not if the American is, as he thought, ‘intrinsically and actively ample, ... reaching westward, southward, anywhere, everywhere,’ with a mind ‘incapable of the shut door in any direction’.²⁶

Moore’s description is of a writer whose mind is open rather than obtuse, careful rather than complacent: his writing will not plunder from experience but rather select from it. As James explains it, in his essay ‘The Art of Fiction’ (in which the word ‘experience’ appears fifteen times), ‘[e]xperience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue’.²⁷ In Moore’s mind the American writer’s freedom to access experience is integral to his or her identity, and reflects back upon their self-definition *as* American.

The quotation ‘incapable of the shut door in any direction’, which Moore uses in the above passage from ‘Henry James as a Characteristic American’, is taken from James’s second volume of memoirs, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, published in 1914. Linda Leavell notes that, ‘By 1920 Moore had read all three of James’s biographies and most likely read them soon after they appeared in 1913, 1914, and 1917’. Moore also read editions of letters of Henry James and his brother, the psychologist and philosopher William James, published in 1920, and encouraged her mother to do the same. Of course Leavell goes even further, contending that throughout Moore’s career, ‘no writer would appear more consistently among those to whom she professed indebtedness’.²⁸

But in the opening sentences of her essay Moore is more evasive than Leavell’s commentary might suggest, hinting that at the same time that she admires James’s sniffing in of all the experiences around him, she is also suspicious of what the fruits of those olfactory labours might be. Thus she retreats in the same instant that she appears to go forward, regurgitating James’s expressions back at him – with all the insinuations of digestion and indigestion that such a technique connotes:

To say that ‘the superlative American’ and the characteristic American are not the same thing perhaps defrauds anticipation yet one must admit that it is not in the accepted sense that Henry James was a big man and did things in a big way. But he possessed the instinct to amass and reiterate, and is the rediscerned Small Boy who had from the first seen Europe as a verification of what in its native surroundings his ‘supersensitive nostril’ fitfully detected and liked. Often he is those elements in American life – as locality and as character – which he recurrently studies and to which he never tired of assigning a meaning.²⁹

Moore’s ‘Small Boy’ refers to James’s first collection of reminiscences, *A Small Boy and Others*, published in 1913 and describing in detail his first trips to Europe – and Moore

draws heavily on this here. At first it might seem unfair to ascribe naivety to James's consciously naïve recollections of his travels here – particularly considering the sophistication with which James treated the topic of the American abroad in several of his later novels – but I think Moore discerns in these early reminiscences the roots of the topic of American Europhilia that he 'recurrently studies' in his later works.

Also important to Moore, and implicit to *A Small Boy and Others*, is the notion of James's continual return to Europe, through which he is able to 'amass and reiterate', and to take stock of (or 'rediscern') the relations between over there and over here. By experiencing Europe and bringing it back home, Moore argues, he is able to 'assign a meaning' to 'those elements in American life – as locality and character' – which require being returned to, as characteristics which continue to elude easy definition.

Later in the essay Moore seems increasingly uncomfortable with James's depiction of the American tourist in Europe: 'On his return from Europe', she notes, 'he marvelled at the hats men wore, but it is hard to be certain that the knowledge-seeking American in Europe is quite so unconsciously a bumpkin as James depicts him' (p.316). Nevertheless her narrator must admit that James's tendency to return to himself – to 'rediscern' the situation at hand – lends his accounts an authenticity which is difficult to ignore, however uncomfortable this might make the American reader in particular. Therefore she continues, '[s]ince, however, it is over-difficult for Henry James in portrayals of us, not to be portraying himself, there is even in the rendering of the callow American, sharpness and tightening of the consciousness that threaten the integrity of the immaturity' (p.317). 'The integrity of the immaturity' is a telling phrase. It's as if Moore wants the immaturity of the 'bumpkin', the 'knowledge-seeking American in Europe' to be exposed in all its warts-and-all provincialism at the very same time that she winces at his depiction of it (and, by further implication, its indictment of her own

behaviour). It is perhaps no accident that Moore's most famous description of poetry as 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them' likewise conflates childlike naivety with poetic seriousness, as if one cannot find the latter without embracing the former.³⁰

At the same time, that young tourist Moore, gazing out onto the river in Oxford to take in that impossibly marvellous scene, is looking over her shoulder as she comments on James's own remembrances as a young traveller. Where it comes to James's depictions of England, Moore is at her most sarcastic – quoting James's words back at him, and letting their naivety ring through. Nevertheless, Moore's extensive quotation implies that she is still fond, that she somehow enjoys the naivety at the same time that she half apologises for it. Moore, after all, includes herself in the 'our' that concludes her summary of James's responses to England. And so we return to Oxford once more:

The 'fatal and sacred' enjoyment of England 'buried in the soil of our primary culture' leads him to regard London as 'the great distributing heart of our traditional life'; to say of Oxford, 'No other spot in Europe extorts from our barbarous hearts so passionate an admiration'; and for the two Americans in 'hedgy Worcestershire' beneath an 'English sky bursting into a storm or light or melting into a drizzle of silver, ... nothing was wanting; the shaggy, mouse-colored donkey, nosing the turf, ... the towering ploughman with his white smock-frock, puckered on chest and back.' 'We greeted those things,' says the narrator, 'as children greet the beloved pictures in a story-book, lost and mourned and found again ... – a gray, gray tower, a huge black yew, a cluster of village graves, with crooked headstones ... My companion was overcome ... How it makes a Sunday where it stands!'³¹

The innocence of this passage asserts itself despite Moore's apparent embarrassment at the extent of James's 'warmth' – as epitomised most fully by the beautiful trochaic line,

'How it makes a Sunday where it stands!' Though this line is borrowed from James, Moore is clearly delighting in its wholesome enjoyment of the scene it describes upon seeing something once read in a 'story-book' apparently rediscovered before one's eyes. How, we might conclude, would even the seen-it-all critic fail to be impressed by this – despite its lack of accuracy at the way that England really *is* (like Moore's Oxford swan); or despite the American tourist's inevitably inaccurate recollection of the scene? We can hear that likewise inevitable mispronunciation of 'Worcestershire' ringing out from these lines. What Moore is perhaps more troubled by is how, once the travelling has been done, and all the 'knowledge-seeking' has been carried out, might we carry it all back home and transplant it onto (or into) American soil.

In her poems touching on England, often in comparison with other European countries, as in her essay on James, Moore remains aware, sometimes mockingly, sometimes painfully, of her gaze as tourist or outsider. But she also understands what she perceives in Henry James's writings as the tendency for the American to seek in England (and in Europe more generally) a 'verification of what in its native surroundings' her own 'supersensitive nostril' fitfully detected and liked. Indeed, Moore discovers in James's method – which views an American enjoyment of England as a natural inclination, 'buried in the soil of our primary culture' – something innate to the process of American self-definition. Meanwhile, in positioning James as her idea of a 'characteristic' American, Moore is building a picture of Americanness that is based upon the principle of Anglo-American cultural recognition or discernment. She is not naïve in considering this brand of Americanness to be typical, however; it might be 'characteristic', but it is not widespread. Thus her essay concludes, with a sense of bathetic inevitability, '[w]hat we scarcely dare ask is, how many Americans there are who can be included with him in

his Americanism' (p.322). This is a close as Moore comes in her piece to implying that it is James's peculiar breed of 'Americanism' to which other Americans ought to aspire.

As we have seen, this sense of praise-making almost despite itself extends in the essay to Moore's commentaries on James's naïve traveller. For in Moore's depiction of the active experience-seeking of James's 'Small Boy' we find something of a staged pose that nevertheless produces an authentic result, thanks to the 'integrity of the immaturity' performed. This is not far from what Moore, in the longer version of 'Poetry', describes as the virtue of the act of writing poetry:

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine.³²

In her poems 'Critics and Connoisseurs', 'England' and 'Virginia Britannia', as well as in her essay 'Henry James as a Characteristic American', Moore embarks upon a quest to determine just what the American traveller and poet might discover within English culture, and what it might bring back. In all of these writings she teeters between the idealistic and the practical, and the romantic and the real, in an acknowledgement that although perhaps nothing can be brought back, or usefully settled upon, somehow, sometimes, a place for the genuine might be found.

Victoria Bazin contends that '[w]hile Moore acknowledges that things can never be extricated from ideas, she suggests that it might be practically useful to believe that they can be'.³³ Like the towers, trees and graves of James's descriptions, lost and mourned and found again, Moore seeks out and sometimes finds in England and in Englishness a confirmation of the pleasure, the pain and the sheer awkwardness of the Anglo-American experience when refracted through the prism of its own peculiar inheritance; but through this, too, a place for poetic expression can also be discovered.

¹ Moore to Pound, 9 January 1919, *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, ed. Bonnie Costello, Celeste Goodridge and Cristanne Miller (London: Faber, 1998), pp.122–125 (122).

² Consider, for example, Moore's inclusion in Daniel Tobin's *The Book of Irish American Poetry from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); or Cristanne Miller's analysis of Moore as a 'Protestant Irish-American' poet in *Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995), p. 267, note 42.

³ Moore, 'Spenser's Ireland', *Complete Poems*, ed. Clive Driver (London: Faber, 1968), pp., 112–4, l.67 (counting title as the first line, as was Moore's practice).

⁴ Rosenbach Museum and Library [RML], Philadelphia, USA, not catalogued, 'History of the Moore Family' by Mittie Moore Sharpe, p.1.

⁵ See Paul Giles, in *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p.1.

⁶ Moore, 'Critics and Connoisseurs', *Others: A Magazine of the New Verse*, 3.1 (July 1916): 4–5, ll.9–11.

⁷ Linda Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down: The Life and Work of Marianne Moore* (London: Faber, 2013), p.140. 'Ambition without understanding' refers to ll.12–13 of Moore's poem, 'I have seen ambition without / understanding in a variety of forms'.

⁸ See, for example, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House and Penguin, 2010).

⁹ Moore to John Warner Moore, 5 July 1911, *Selected Letters*, pp.89–91 (89, 90).

¹⁰ Michael McCarthy, 'Extravagant, yes, exotic, certainly – but black swans aren't as rare as you may think', *Independent*, 12 December 2012: accessed online [www.independent.co.uk], 14 April 2015.

¹¹ Information gleaned from 'The Swan Sanctuary' online [www.theswansanctuary.org.uk], accessed 14 April 2015.

¹² The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* explains that '[o]f the seven or eight species' of swans, 'five are all-white, black-legged birds of the Northern Hemisphere' and the last two (from the Southern Hemisphere) are 'the black swan (Australia) and two pink-legged forms (South America): the black-necked swan, an especially bad-tempered but beautiful bird, with white body, black neck and head, and prominent red carbuncle (fleshy outgrowth) on the bill; and the coscoroba, an all-white bird that is usually considered the smallest swan'. *Encyclopaedia Britannica online* [www.britannica.com], 'Swan / Bird', accessed 14 April 2015.

¹³ Moore, 'Critics and Connoisseurs', *Complete Poems*, pp.38–9, ll.10–12.

¹⁴ There are few variations between the versions of this poem. For ease of reference, I refer here to the version published in *Complete Poems*. See Moore, 'England', *Complete Poems*, pp.46–7, l.2, 3–4 (counting title as first line, as was Moore's normal practice).

¹⁵ Elizabeth Bishop, 'Questions of Travel', *Elizabeth Bishop: Complete Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2004), pp.93–4, ll.13–14.

¹⁶ Leavell, *Holding On Upside Down*, p.113.

¹⁷ See *Selected Letters*, pp. 215, 231 and 552 for further discussion of these trips.

¹⁸ I have discussed the exact nature of Moore's family background elsewhere: see 'Irish by descent? Marianne Moore's American-Irish inheritance', *IJAS online*, 1 June 2009:

<http://ijas.iaas.ie/index.php/irish-by-descent-marianne-moores-american-irish-inheritance/>.

¹⁹ Charles Berger, 'The "Not-Native" Moore: Hybridity and Heroism in the Thirties', in *Critics and Poets on Marianne Moore: 'A Right Good Salvo of Barks'*, ed. Linda Leavell, Cristanne Miller and Robin G. Schulze (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), pp.150–164 (p.160). Berger describes the complicated publishing history of the poem, noting that in addition to being revised several times between 1935 and 1941, it also appeared as part of the sequence 'Old Dominion' in *The Pangolin and Other Verse* printed in London in 1936.

²⁰ Catherine E. Paul, "'Discovery, Not Salvage': Marianne Moore's Curatorial Practices', *Poetry in the Museums of Modernism: Yeats, Pound, Moore, Stein* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002) pp.141–194 (p.190). In the final version, from *Complete Poems*, the 'stark luxuries' of the colonists' imports are contrasted with what they 'found here in tidewater Virginia' – and the 'mere brown hedge-sparrow' is held up as an example: see Moore, 'Virginia Britannia', *Complete Poems*, pp.107–111, ll.121–132.

²¹ Moore, 'Note' to 'Virginia Britannia', *Complete Poems*, p.279.

²² I have treated this subject elsewhere: see Tara Stubbs, 'New readings of Marianne Moore's "Spenser's Ireland"', *Peer English: A Journal of New Critical Thinking*, 2 (December 2007): 32–44.

²³ Moore, 'Spenser's Ireland', ll.1–5 (counting title as first line, as was Moore's practice).

²⁴ Moore to Pound, 9 January 1919, *Selected Letters*, p.123. For further discussion of the similarities between Moore and James, in respect of their family and educational background, see Linda Leavell, 'Marianne Moore, the James family, and the Politics of Celibacy', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 49. 2 (Summer 2003): 219–245.

²⁵ Leavell, 'Marianne Moore, the James family, and the Politics of Celibacy', 237, 221.

²⁶ Moore, 'Henry James as a Characteristic American', *Horse and Hound*, 7, April-May, 1934, reprinted in Patricia Willis, ed., *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore* (London: Faber, 1987) pp.316-22 (pp.321-2).

²⁷ Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', *Partial Portraits* (London, 1884), p.388.

²⁸ Leavell 'Marianne Moore, the James family, and the Politics of Celibacy', p.231.

²⁹ Moore, 'Henry James as a Characteristic American', *Complete Prose*, p.316.

³⁰ Moore includes the phrase 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them' as an apparent citation in the longer version of her poem 'Poetry', which was eventually excised to just three lines. See Moore, *Complete Poems*, pp.266-7 and p.36.

³¹ Moore, 'Henry James as a Characteristic American', *Complete Prose*, p.318. Ellipses, punctuation markers and spellings are Moore's own, to emphasise her shifting of register between the 'American' and the 'English'.

³² Moore, 'Poetry', longer version, *Complete Poems*, pp.266-7, opening lines.

³³ Victoria Bazin, *Marianne Moore and the Cultures of Modernity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p.136.