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Line Breaks in America: the Odds and Ends of Poetry

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“Cut Prose”? The Sentence and the Line in Marianne Moore’s Poetry

Aurore Clavier

[B]etween the poem (that is, a writing mode which remembers orality and the internal apparition of meaning) and the prose poem and prose, a whole series of temporary negotiations have been attempted for two centuries; and it seems that today the pure poem [*le poème-poème*] is impossible because it would assign poetry to the poorest idea of itself, i.e. to a superior and autonomous mode of enunciation, in spite of all. Conversely, prose is not condemned to remain within a strictly narrative framework. If we can braid together the poem and prose, we may write prose as a poem [*faire de la prose en poème*]. The goal is to depose the legacy and the pose contained within the genres. What I call “cut prose” is what strives to exist as a pure form, that is, as an open and movable form. (Bailly, 2001 n.p.; translation mine)

“Subtly Discordant Harmonies” (Monroe 214): Hearing Moore’s Rhythms

- 1 In a posthumous memoir dedicated to Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop affectionately recalled, among other whims and peculiarities, some of the older poet’s strangest writing idiosyncrasies. While Moore’s precision and scrupulousness find a rather expected confirmation in Bishop’s anecdotes, readers might be more surprised (or possibly relieved if ever faced with Moore’s strange music) to learn about her

inexplicable resistance to traditional prosody and to the instinctive usage of rhyme and rhythm.

For my own amusement, I had made up a completely unscientific theory that Marianne was possessed of a unique, involuntary sense of rhythm, therefore of meter, quite unlike anyone else's. She looked like no one else; she talked like no one else; her poems showed a mind not much like anyone else's; and her notions of meter and rhyme were unlike all the conventional notions—so why not believe that the old English meters that still seem natural to most of us (or *seemed* to, at any rate) were not natural to her at all? That Marianne from birth, physically, had been set going to a different rhythm? Or was the explanation simply that she had a more sensitive ear than most of us, and since she had started writing at a time when poetry was undergoing drastic changes, she had been free to make the most of it and experiment as she saw fit? (Bishop 129; Bishop's emphasis)

- 2 Interestingly, Bishop chose to support her "theory" by sharing a few memories surrounding one of Moore's latest endeavors at the time, namely the painstaking translation of Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables*, a work she took more than eight years to complete until its publication in 1954. The choice of this source text seemed natural enough for an author reputed for her passion for animal figures and reverence for ancient and classic literatures. More ambivalent did this task appear in the perspective of form. For if La Fontaine's verse is famously associated to his groundbreaking use of *vers mêlé* (also called *vers irrégulier* or *vers libre classique*), in reference to a flexible combination of meters at the scale of a single poem,¹ adapting his rhythm to another language seems to have become, according to Bishop, a most taunting exercise in Moore's own hands. More than the difficulty inherent to any poetic translation and more particularly to the delicate negotiations between syllabic and accentual systems, the process appears to have revealed the poet's most intimate conflicts with rhythm as such. Indeed, Bishop continues:

Marianne was doing her best, one saw, to go *umpty-umpty-um* when she sensed that La Fontaine had gone that way, but it seemed to be almost—I use the word again—physically impossible for her to do so. If I'd suggest, say, that "flatter" rhymed with "matter," this to my embarrassment was hailed as a stroke of genius; or if I'd say, "If you leave out 'and' and 'the' [or put it in], it will go *umpty-umpty-um*," Marianne would exclaim, "Elizabeth, thank you, you have saved my life!" (29; Bishop's emphasis and punctuation)

- 3 My intentions are as pacific as Bishop's: I am not quoting her text with a view to exposing anything like Moore's secret failure, nor even to merely celebrate her irreducible originality. What I would like to suggest, instead, is that her outlandish musicality rather stems from a persistent and willing hesitation, from a reluctance to choose between the *sentence* and the *line*, between the apparent continuity of oral speech and written prose on the one hand and the trimming of verse on the other—a process in which her radical line breaks play as crucial a part as the quaint rhythms Bishop attempts to describe. It might be argued that such a tension is by no means limited to Moore's writing; that, quite to the contrary, it constitutes one of the most essential features of verse, or of any form of poetry for that matter. The interplay between syntactic, semantic, visual, and aural designs have long determined the way poems are read, interpreted, and studied, whether their shapes espouse or hinder their own utterance. But rather than traditional signs of a *tension*, or mutual *support* between such components, I find in Moore's poems symptoms of an even more disquieting *indecision*, made particularly perceptible by the idiosyncratic use of syllabic verse she was mainly associated with throughout her career—a combination of visually

implacable but hardly audible counting patterns that have consistently challenged readers more accustomed to accentual-syllabic prosody or to the rhythmical units of free verse. To go even further, it would seem that the more conspicuous her line breaks appear in Moore's carefully wrought stanzas, the more undecidable reading becomes, as if, rather than suspend itself, turn back or invite us to move down the stanza, the line insidiously kept extending its reach well over the limits assigned to it by the layout of the poem, and repeatedly flirted with that other margin, the right edge of the page, dangerously paralleling the freer run of the prose sentence and threatening to dissolve into its *un-poetic other*. Where it should therefore present itself as a visual limit and an oral turning point circumscribing the generic contours of verse, the line break could very well entail the poem's "enlargement" (Bailly, 2015; translation mine) or displacement, and create the paradoxical conditions of an "extensible writing" in Jean-Christophe Bailly's words (Bailly, 2015 111; translation mine).²

The Guise of Verse

- 4 Opening any of Moore's poetry books, the reader may not perceive the signs of such discomfort at first. However strange in their designs, her texts certainly *look* like verse, sometimes spectacularly so, judging by their carefully wrought patterns or long sequences of free verse. As Elizabeth Bishop reminds us in her memoir, the poet's career began at a moment in which, mutinous as poets were against nineteenth-century diction, or what Pound termed "glutinous imitations of Keats, diaphanous dilutions of Shelley, woolly Wordsworthian paraphrases, or swishful Swinburnianism," (Pound, 1918 188-189) they did not so much dismiss the notion of the poetic line itself, as extend its rhythmic possibilities well beyond the "sequence of a metronome" (Pound, 1974 3). If verse was disjointed, displaced, reconfigured, it was never entirely denied. Like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, who soon praised her writing when her texts started to appear in various little magazines after 1915, Moore was quick to depart from the conventions that were the norm of her college education and genteel culture, and to experiment with the recently naturalized *vers libre* or to break up the semantic integrity of the strophe in favor of "sight stanzas."³
- 5 But as comparable as her formal experiments might seem to that of her peers, a closer consideration also reveals what a cursory look or a quick historical overview might not. If her texts, to Ezra Pound's delight, baffled the "Palgravian"⁴ for their way of "rhyming in places" and "not fit[ting] in with preconceived notions of *vers libre*" (Pound, 1918 188-189), they also caused many modern-minded readers to fret over the exact nature of what they were reading. The little volume of *Poems*, that was secretly edited by Bryher and H.D. and published in Great Britain in 1921 against Moore's own will, attracted a few more devoted admirers' notice, but also elicited lukewarm reactions among the very promoters of modernism. Editor of *Poetry* magazine Harriet Monroe, for instance, chose the seemingly neutral guise of a collective "symposium" to confirm, rather than counterbalance, her own skeptical views as to the poetic quality of Moore's writing. The following lines of introduction make her intentions clear: "If one were to accept the challenge of the title, and the geometrical verse-designs which frame these cryptic observations, one might be led straight to the ancient and rather futile inquiry, What is poetry?" (Monroe 208). If the subsequent views she goes on to confront all insist on the poems' emotional distance and intellectual complexity to account for their

dazzling—or irritating—effects, nothing seems as disorienting as their prosodic features, and their use of line breaks in particular. While Bryher celebrates the skillful carving of the texts through the image of a finely-sculpted gem,⁵ their overwrought shape is viewed as mere artifice, hardly hiding their truly hybrid, if not entirely prosaic nature, according to poet and critic Pearl Anderson:

As to form, the fact that [Moore] wavers between prose and poetry is not disguised by the breath-taking line-formation. Indeed, I should say the incongruous effect was heightened, rather than diminished, by occasional rhyming. The same, for the most part, may be said of content as of form. Such poems as "Picking and Choosing" and "Poetry" are hybrids of a flagrantly prose origin. (Anderson, quoted in Monroe 211)

- 6 Harriet Monroe finally concludes the review by acknowledging Moore's "brilliant array of subtly discordant harmonies" only, as it were, to criticize her use of

stanza forms which impose themselves arbitrarily upon word-structure and sentence-structure instead of accepting happily the limitations of the art's materials, as all art must. When Miss Moore uses the first syllable of the word *accident* as a whole line to rhyme with *lack*, or the article *a* as a line to rhyme with the end of *Persia*; when she ends a stanza in a split infinitive, or in the middle of the swift word *very*—indeed, anywhere in the middle of words or sentences, she is forcing her pattern upon materials which naturally reject it [...]. (Monroe 214)

- 7 In the radical line-breaks Monroe deplores, familiar readers will certainly recognize Moore's most famous formal signature, a meticulous version of syllabic verse in which an identical syllable count—rather than number of beats—is repeated for each line occurring in a given position in every stanza. While Hugh Kenner attributes this feature to an implacable mechanical process, determined by the tabulations of the typewriter,⁶ Margaret Holley describes a more balanced relationship between the organic form of what she identifies as a "model stanza" and its more artful reproduction in subsequent stanzas (Holley 185, 182).⁷ The history of this form in Moore's work is as consistent as it is complex: the author's poems and comments of the 1910s show evidence of its early development and conceptualization, though it was later partly abandoned in favor of free verse in poems of the 1920s (the long sequences of "An Octopus" and "Marriage" being cases in point), before reappearing after 1932 and becoming Moore's most enduring method until her death in 1972. In addition, as Moore scholars know too well and as recent editorial undertakings have shown,⁸ this apparent coherence is complicated by Moore's revising practices, which often led her to rework her syllabics (in addition to her phrasing), rearranging the template of stanzas for a whole text, shifting from syllabics to free verse and back again, or merely cutting through a poem and altering its formal integrity altogether.

- 8 Whenever Moore agreed to "justify" her revisions—which, quite expectedly, she hardly ever did—she generally invoked a concern for verbal clarity and economy. If anything, however, these changes only tend to enhance the hesitations that were already there in the first place, and to render her poems more complex to read, not only disrupting the link between sense and rhythm but also blurring the relation between *rhythm* and the *line breaks* that should supposedly guide the eye and the voice through the text. If the poet, as she asserted,⁹ did seek to approach the spontaneous flow of oral speech and to cultivate simplicity (the oxymoron is an apt one in her case), how should we interpret a form which relies so much on what Kenner terms the "implacable arbitrariness" of her "cutting, cutting, cutting" (Kenner 99)? Or if we choose to follow Margaret Holley's theory of a "model-stanza" shaped by more organic forces, why did Moore alter so

many of her texts, at the risk of erasing this initial, more "natural" pattern? More generally, what is it in Moore's syllabics that so confuses readers, even when French and, as such, supposedly better practiced in syllable count?

Thwarted Prose?

- 9 Drawing on recent biographical finds about what Linda Leavell terms Moore's "ineptitude with numbers" (Leavell 72)¹⁰ despite her fascination for scientific or artistic measures of all kinds, including the poetic foot, Fiona Green attributes our unease to the asynchrony between two competing perceptions:

Syllabic verse differs [...] not so much in the indifference of prosodic unit to sense unit (this it shares with accentual verse), nor in the "arbitrariness" or "abstraction" of the units themselves. Rather, its strangeness is in its putting counting and reading out of step. You can't read a syllabic line and count it at the same time because, for English speakers at least, syllables do not catch in the ear nor animate the body. With syllabics, counting always comes after reading—and it's the kind of counting in which the question "how many" is the one that really matters. It's not the seemingly reckless line-breaks that make Moore's prosody appear "arbitrary" (in fact, once you notice the pattern of light rhyme, you realize that it has required considerable coordination with line endings); it is the removal of number from the felt rhythm of verse, where it seems to belong, and where, in the accentual-syllabic tradition, it compels us to believe that counting itself, and especially counting in fours and fives, is somehow "natural." (Green, 2017 59)¹¹

- 10 *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* brings the analysis of Moore's inaudible metrics one step, if not one foot, further. Indeed, the "syllabic verse" entry—in which, as in many other handbooks and academic works, Moore serves as the very epitome of the kind—suggests that, barely audible as it is, this type of verse could very well evade its own designation and simply belong to another *genre*:

[I]t is very doubtful that verse lines regulated by nothing more than identity of numbers of syllables would be perceived by auditors as verse, for there would be nothing to mark that as such except for end-of-line pauses in performance [...]. Further, absent the whole notion of meter as *pattern*, one may question whether syllabic verse is "metrical" at all. And, if not metrical, and not free, one may question whether "verse" at all. The examples usually given are Robert Bridges and Marianne Moore, though other examples occur in Elizabeth Daryush, Kenneth Rexroth, and Dylan Thomas. [...] [I]t is of interest Moore first worked in free verse. Fuller suggests that Moore thus brought into poetry the resources of prose; this suggests that the form of syllabic verse should be conceived more properly alongside those of the verset and the prose poem. (Brogan, in Preminger, 1993 1249; Brogan's emphasis)

- 11 Moore herself would certainly have readily welcomed this association with prose, which she valued as much as poetry, and quoted or wrote extensively. Whenever asked about her reading tastes and literary influences, whether in the first letter she sent to Pound in 1919¹² or for Raymond Queneau's 1956 questionnaire *Pour une bibliothèque idéale*,¹³ for instance, she would unfold one of her long lists, placing such authors as Henry James, Samuel Johnson, or Montaigne side by side with poets like Coleridge or Stevens, whose letters, autobiographies, and essays she would put on an equal footing with their poetical works. Not uncommonly, the same names appear in poems which read like critical essays, as in "Picking and Choosing" where the speaker evaluates the literary merits of George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy, Edmund Burke, or Gordon

Craig, while blurring the frontier between literary genres and critical writing (Moore, 2002 249-250).

- 12 The very way she conceived her own oeuvre reveals much about her "prosaic" leanings: a prolific letter writer, she also tried her hand at fiction—with little success however¹⁴—in addition to the numerous essays she penned throughout her career, for little magazines mostly, though no exclusive collection of her prose texts was edited while she was living.¹⁵ But more significant maybe was the desire she regularly expressed not merely to write both in prose and verse, but to foreground the former while giving the latter a more marginal position. When first encouraged by H.D. and Bryher to gather a collection of the versified poems they had first published in *The Egoist* or read in other magazines, Moore side-stepped the invitation on the ground that her awkward poetic style was unsuited to what she called her "observations," a title she would give to her first American poetry book three years later: "I should attempt observations in prose I think—nothing absolute. To put my remarks in verse form is like trying to dance the minuet in a bathing-suit but for the time being I have some things to say about acacias and sea-weeds and serpents in plane-trees that will have to appear in fragments" (Moore, 1997 137-138). Nondescript scraps of writing would have to do, further blurring the limit between prose and verse and possibly fusing romantic and modernist ideals, unless a "book of prose" should appear instead, "with the poems published as an appendix," as she suggested in another 1920 letter to Bryher (Moore, 1997 133). As for the reviews that surrounded the actual publication of this first undesired volume, they did not seem so agonizing in the light of Moore's reaction since she rather rejoiced over the hesitations inspired by her texts, as she explained to Robert McAlmon in a 1922 letter:

There is something to be said for [the critics'] reluctance to call it poetry for sometimes I deliberately insert a prose phrase with a view to its standing as prose and I myself should not have called the collection in my book "poems," but "observations," but I also think that if a piece of writing is not ridiculous in itself, yet sounds highflown as prose, it might as well be classified as poetry. (Moore, 1997 188)

- 13 Her "so-called poems" (Moore, 1961 254) obviously maintain this generic ambivalence: if the subjects she chooses—the moral attitudes, scientific wonders or works of art she describes, evaluates and criticizes—bring them closer to the prosaic and generically indefinite forms of the essay, the moral portrait, or the comment, if her meditations seem more discursive than lyrical in mode, their prose-like content finds a most appropriate form in the quaint features of her verse, and of her varying syllabics in particular, however inaudible they might be. The "insertion of a prose phrase" she mentioned in her letter to Robert McAlmon (Moore, 1997 188) is more than an "occasional" process, as highlighted by the innumerable quotations she clipped, imported, and rearranged along new lines, transposing them from the most diverse range of texts and utterances—literary works but also newspaper articles, advertisements, or even private conversations. Similarly, while some lines appear rather brief, approaching the rhythmical terseness of a trimeter or a tetrameter, others frequently override the limits of regular or even perceptible meters, their count of 15, 17 or 19 syllables making their meter as imperceptible as in a prose sentence, and even rendering the shape of the stanza unclear, as later examples will illustrate. Not uncommonly either, the process contaminates the paratext, when for example a body of notes exceeds the size of a poem such as "Tom Fool at Jamaica" (Moore, 1981 162-3,

284-7) or when a title becomes the beginning of a sentence, whose completion can only occur if no interruption is made between the title and the first line of the poem:

The Fish
Wade through black jade.
Of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one
Keeps adjusting the ash-heaps;¹⁶
(Moore, 2002 234)

An Octopus
of ice. Deceptively reserved and flat,
it lies "in grandeur and in mass"
beneath a sea of shifting snow-dunes;
(Moore, 2002 312)

- 14 However dissimilar in shape, these two examples rest on a comparable movement through which both the neatly carved syllabic stanzas of "The Fish" and the dense accretion of free verse in "An Octopus" are launched by the same inaugural sweep between subject and predicate, one that asserts, however inconspicuously, the firm pull of the sentence. It would then be tempting to conclude with Louis Untermeyer that her "poems are essays in the disguise of verse, arguments or statements which seem continually to be seeking their prose origins" (Untermeyer; in Gregory, 2003 49), a comment that anticipates Marjorie Perloff's attack against the "linear fallacy" of more contemporary verse, however different in quality (Perloff). Her line-breaks would in that case ultimately reflect or determine, both in visual and generic terms, the conditions of a thwarted prose.

"Treading Chasms"¹⁷: the Art of Interval

- 15 There is no clear way to tell if Moore was somehow striking a pose, seeking a form of protection, or expressing a genuine preference. But whether prose represented a refuge or an ideal, her attraction to it, we see here, was in no way limited to a mere reader's taste or to a strategic way of building her own canon. Rather than just drawing a line among her writings, dividing and classifying her prose and poetical works, Moore then constantly attempted to erase the partition *within* the texts themselves, using the poetic line to blur the generic one separating verse from prose, in a way that paralleled her fascination for unclassifiable curiosities, natural wonders and unique feats of craftsmanship. But just as the creatures and objects she collected (both in her home and writings) strike us by their resistance to classification, the generic ambivalence of Moore's literary production does not seem to rely on assimilation so much as on a more negative principle of exclusion or deferral. It is certainly significant that Moore did not compose any prose poems, unlike a few of her contemporaries. Nor could her texts exactly fall into the category—however loose and inclusive it might be—of what Stephen Fredman names "poet's prose," a term he applies "to works that are conceived of and read as extensions of poetry rather than as contributions to one of the existing prose genres" (Fredman xiii).¹⁸ Moore was certainly sensitive to the musicality of the prose sentence, as an early essay dedicated to "The Accented Syllable" suggests¹⁹ and as her compositions confirm. As Fiona Green argues in her cogent comparison of Moore's and Pound's approaches to metrics, and the contrastive historical narratives they contributed to designing in the 1930s, Moore's simultaneous writing and reading practices fostered a hybrid method of composition, whose product "is not just verse

that sounds prosy because the ear accustomed to accentual rhythms is deaf to units measured by syllable count, but prose whose constituents come to its surface and, in forming a diversion from what the writing says, participate in the revived materiality that animates poetic language" (Green, 2017 429).

- 16 Rather than viewing her comments or essays as "extensions" of her poetry, it would seem more fitting in her case to invert Fredman's coinage and read her verse as "prosaist's poetry," if Moore herself did not prove so ambivalent about the latter term. If she could explain to Robert McAlmon that "if a piece of writing is not ridiculous in itself, yet sounds highflown as prose, it might as well be classified as poetry," she also famously declared to Donald Hall that what she wrote "could only be called poetry because there is no other category in which to put it" (Moore, 1961 258),²⁰ repeating the disclaimer she had pronounced upon accepting the National Book Award for Poetry in 1952. Far from encompassing diverse modes of writing, from versified stanzas to musical prose, from lyrical expression to self-reflexive meditations about language, "poetry" for Moore is what remains when no other designation is left to fit, a negative category relying on the sole exclusion of other forms, a blank space in the illusory continuum of literary genres.
- 17 If Moore's private correspondence and public statements consistently reassert Moore's critique of generic partitions and categories alike, no text connects it to the pull between the line and the sentence better than "Poetry." One of Moore's best-known poems, it certainly owes much of its fame to its editorial history. It was initially published in 1919, as part of the last issue of *Others*, when William Carlos Williams, taking advantage of his position as a guest-editor, sought to put an end to a little magazine he deemed moribund (see Fig. 1).²¹ The poem's life, on the other hand, was far from being over, for it was then published in most of Moore's volumes of poetry, not to mention the various anthologies which selected it as an adequate, although paradoxical, synthesis of Moore's art. By no means is it a stable text, however: as with many others of the author's writings, critics hardly ever read the same poem when commenting on "Poetry." Out of the dozens of existing versions, scholars usually distinguish four or five major variations: the initial thirty-line, five-stanza syllabic version (which I will mainly consider here for the clearer hesitation it displays between sentences and lines); a free verse version, which appeared in the second edition of her *Observations*, in 1925 (the first 1924 edition of the volume containing a four-stanza poem of twenty-nine lines, a model she would keep, with a number of significant changes, in both her 1935 *Selected Poems* and the 1951 *Collected Poems* of Marianne Moore); a three-stanza syllabic version published in Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson's 1932 anthology *The New Poetry*; and finally, a three-line revised text inserted in her final volume of *Complete Poems* in 1967, in which she reduced the initial poem to its title and first two sentences, even though, on her editor's suggestion, she kept the original text in the notes, somehow fulfilling the author's wish to "publish [her] poetry as an appendix" (Moore, 1997 133).²²

Fig. 1

First edition of "Poetry," *Others* (Williams, 1919 5)

- 18 But the poem would not have remained so famous, were it not for the very challenge it presents to critics and readers. In parallel with the effacing gesture of revision, the text—in each of its versions—immediately opposes a self-deriding disqualification to the rather assertive designation of its title: "I too, dislike it" (Moore, 2002 205). The next sentence, nonetheless, quickly introduces a corrective "however," the first move in a series of nuances, conditions and concessions which give the text the complex discursive cast of a critical essay or a conversational piece, as the first line also suggests. If the speaker's imaginary interlocutor remains unnamed, critics have identified as a possible source a quotation from *The Note-books of Samuel Butler* (1912) in which the British author replies to a young poetry amateur in Italy that "he [doesn't] greatly like poetry [himself]" (Butler, quoted in Willis, 1977 10).²³ Joining in Butler and the boy's discussion, the "poetic" voice therefore operates a series of displacements which disrupt the apparent stability of the title and make the space of the text a shifty, if not absent, one. Far from the clear category its initial placement seemed to presuppose, "Poetry" becomes a most ambiguous term, the opening word of a paradoxical *ars poetica*, a treatise on verse, rather than in verse, a reflection on what a poem should be rather than an illustration of what it is. In Magritte-like fashion, its very lines appear to contradict the optical illusion they create, asserting that "this is not poetry," all the while reflecting on its literary possibilities.
- 19 If this is not "poetry," then this should be prose, straightforward, useful, understandable, unscreened by sophisticated patterns. In a study of Moore's revisions, which she interprets as "textual Darwinism," a process of editorial selection operating under changing environmental conditions, Robin Schulze suggests Moore's shift to a shorter free verse version of "Poetry" might have been spurred by Harriet Monroe's

and others' critiques of Moore's arbitrary line breaks, free verse approaching, in that case, the more unobtrusive flow of prose (Schulze, 1998 295-298). But Moore's return to syllabics may signal a much richer crossing between the two genres. Significantly, the speaker's answer to Butler is only the first in a series of virtual exchanges centering on the uneasy definition of poetry and its elastic limits, as suggested by another playful quotation taken from Tolstoy's diary and in which—an endnote added to the poem after 1923 reveals—the Russian novelist and poet ponders about the frontier separating prose and poetry. Moore, however, takes his indecision one step further, thereby blurring her own discourse: while Tolstoy expands the domain of poetry well beyond the limits of verse to "everything with the exception of business documents and school books" (Moore, 2002 96),²⁴ Moore, in rather modernist fashion, reintegrates these apparently insignificant editorial "phenomena" to the genre: "nor is it valid / to discriminate against 'business documents and / school-books'; all these phenomena are important" (Moore, 2002 205). Countering the poem's negative drive (poetry is not this nor that), the speaker thus initiates a more inclusive movement: if poetry is not what it seems to be, not even *what it is*, yet everything, anything *can potentially become* poetry—"business documents and / schoolbooks," and any kind of prose for that matter, including the text's own comment.

- 20 Rather than impose themselves arbitrarily to the run of Moore's sentences, the line-breaks, we see here, play a most central role in the generic redefinition she proposes. If the initial rupture between the title and the first line—a long prose-like period of 19 syllables—seemingly forced the reader to correct his assumptions about the nature of "Poetry," the following successive line-breaks once again invite him to reconsider his judgement, as they hesitate between reading on and literally suspending their decision as to what has now become an indefinite "it": "reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that there is in / it, a place for the genuine." "All this fiddle" in Moore's words, or what Jacques Rancière calls the "*violoneux's music*" (Rancière, 2016 10), a tune so familiar as to have become a somewhat pointless tautology, is suddenly displaced, sounding strangely out of tune, out of step, out of itself. By wavering between the sentence and the line, "Poetry," as a self-denying text and a negative category, gestures toward another site, which is neither that of prose, nor that of verse. Lines do not break so much as they shift, revealing that only *then* and *there* we shall have *it*. Marginal space is to the line what this neutral "it" is to poetry—an elsewhere only the line-break can open up. Not any more than prose represents the poem's end or origin is poetry a kind of prose in disguise. The cut is neither the sign of a thwarted sentence, nor the symptom of a dysfunctional meter. It does not mark off a measure or an interrupted utterance, but creates an *interval* between words and meanings, between prose and verse, gesturing toward a form in the making, provided we listen to Moore's strange music.

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NOTES

1. For an overview of the introduction of this form in seventeenth-century French poetry, see the "vers libres classiques" entry of the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Preminger 1345).
2. Jean-Christophe Bailly applies this notion to the essay, whose tentative and nimble quality enables it to escape—and possibly to jeopardize—generic classifications, renewing the dream of a continuous literature formulated by German Romanticism (Bailly, 2015 111-127).

3. The term "sight stanza" was originally coined by Philip K. Jason to deplore some contemporaries' tendency to cast "their non-stanzaic work in stanzaic shape" a legacy he attributed to William Carlos Williams's triadic line (Jason; quoted in Berry 21). Taking a closer look at Williams's work, and at his earlier poems more particularly, Eleanor Berry later proposed to revalue the "sight stanza" as engaging a more active reflection on reading and poetic language: "To arrange a text in sight-stanzas is to lay a grid across it that cuts the flow of language arbitrarily into visually equal segments; the interruptions made by the metrical divisions obtrude and have (will have until divisions of this kind are so accustomed as to go unnoticed) the effect of defamiliarizing individual words and the manner of their syntactical relations. The obstruction to syntactical interpretation created by the visual segmentation of the text has the further effect of making the world its language creates, come at with difficulty, strike us with greater force than it might otherwise; not only the words but the things they name (and, naming, make) and things of the 'real world' we associate with those things of the fictional world are defamiliarized, made apprehensible in their thingliness" (Berry 26).
4. Pound here takes aim at the poets, critics and readers who still considered Francis Turner Palgrave's 1861 anthology *The Golden Treasury* as a standard for the composition and evaluation of poetry.
5. "'Those Various Scalpels' is sharper than a diamond. [...] And 'Dock Rats' again, or 'England,' are wrought as finely as the old Egyptian wrought figures from an inch-high piece of emerald" (Bryher, quoted in Monroe 209).
6. "[The Fish] is a poem to see with the eye, conceived in a typewriter upon an 8½" x 11" sheet of paper. If metric is a system of emphases, centered in human comfort, human hope, syllable count is a system of zoning, implied by the objectivity of the words, which lie side by side for their syllables to be counted" (Kenner 99-100).
7. "My title phrase, 'the organic origin of Moore's syllabic verse,' means to suggest that her 'numbers,' the mathematical designs of her poetry, have their source in an 'arrangement of lines and rhymes' in which shape, sound and syntax converge in a 'suitable' and vital way. Her syllabic line scheme for any one poem 'develops itself from within,' to use Coleridge's description of organic form. The pattern originates in the dance and play of the organically whole model stanza" (Holley 185). As Holley reminds us, Moore herself used a similar image when, in an interview with Donald Hall, she described her method of composition: "Never, I never 'plan' a stanza. Words cluster like chromosomes, determining the procedure. I may influence an arrangement or thin it, then try to have successive stanzas identical with the first. [...] No, I never 'draw lines.' I make a rhyme conspicuous to me at a glance, by underlining with red, blue, or other pencil—as many colors as I have rhymes to differentiate. However, if the phrases recur in too incoherent an architecture—as print—I notice that the words as a tune do not sound right." (Holley 182; Moore, 1961 263).
8. Faced with the fragmentary oeuvre left by Marianne Moore herself after the drastic revisions imposed by her *Complete Poems* (1967), several scholars have recently attempted to make earlier versions of her poems accessible, all the while renewing discussions about editorial practices, authorial intention, and "readers' rights" (Hecht). Drawing from the extensive research and archival work surrounding the phenomenon of the little magazines, Robin Schulze first published a variorum edition of Moore's early texts in *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907-1924* (2002), closely followed by two more volumes edited by Heather Cass White, *A-Quiver With Significance: Marianne Moore, 1932-1936* (2008) and *Adversity and Grace: Marianne Moore, 1936-1941* (2012), and more lately, by Linda Leavell's reedition of Moore's first American collection *Observations* (2016). Also see Heather Cass White's edition of Moore's *New Collected Poems* (2017), and the method of selection described in her introduction.
9. Moore's answer to Donald Hall's is of particular interest in this respect, since it attributes the choice of syllabic verse—however reluctantly—to her ear for the sentence:

"Q: I'm interested in asking about the principles, and the methods of your way of writing. What is the rationale behind syllabic verse? How does it differ from free verse in which the line length is controlled visually but not arithmetically?"

A: It never occurred to me that what I wrote was something to define. I am governed by the pull of the sentence as the pull of a fabric is governed by gravity. I like the end-stopped line and dislike the reversed order of words; like symmetry" (Moore, 1961 262).

10. In order to account for her difficulties with dates, calculations, and arranging sequences of events or ideas, Leavell suggests Moore might have suffered from a learning disability now called dyscalculia (Leavell 73).

11. It might be added that the syllable count of Moore's verse is equally inaudible for a French ear, for it rarely corresponds to recognizable meters, in favor of more irregular numbers, sometimes adding up to 19 syllables.

12. Answering Pound's questions about her literary models, Moore candidly rejected his suppositions ("The resemblance of my progress to your beginnings is an accident so far as I can see [...]. I do not know [René] Ghil and [Jules] Laforgue and know of no tangible French influence on my work"), though she admitted to valuing both his prose and verse. She then listed some of her own influences: "Gordon Craig, Henry James, Blake, the minor prophets and Hardy, are so far as I know, the direct influences bearing on my work" (Moore, 1997 122-123).

13. Containing over a hundred references, the survey starts by listing twenty-five French authors and titles: "1. T. Corbière: *Les Amours jaunes*. 2-4. J. Cocteau: *Poèmes; Théâtre; Essais critiques*. 5. A. Dumas: *Les Trois Mousquetaires* [sic]. 6. J.-H. Fabre: *Souvenirs entomologiques*. 7. Littré. 8. Molière: *Théâtre*. 9. Montaigne: *Essais*. 10. Pascal: *Pensées*. [...]" It then mentions a few ancient Greek and Latin names, before citing mostly British, Irish and American authors, here again associating a wide range of periods and genres: "35-36. Donne: *Letters, Poems*. [...] 54-55. Keats: *Letters, Poems*. [...] 61-62. Melville. *Poems, Short novels*. [...] 84-86. T.S. Eliot. *Poems; Plays, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. [...] 102-103. Wallace Stevens. *Poems; Prose commentaries*. 104-105. Gertrude Stein: *The Making of Americans; The Geographical History of America*" (Moore, 1987 668-669).

14. When an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr, Moore penned a few short stories for the college paper, stories now published in *The Complete Prose* (1987). During the 1930s, she also wrote a novel, *The Way We Live Now*, which remains unpublished.

15. Moore did fulfill her wish to associate a selection of prose and poetry pieces in *The Marianne Moore Reader*, published in 1961. But it was not until 1987 that her *Complete Prose* was edited and published by Patricia C. Willis, showing the extent of Moore's production.

16. "The Fish" provides a striking example of Moore's changing poetic patterns. In later editions of the poem, Moore only uses capital letters at the beginning of sentences (instead of the beginning of each line), while using a much more geometric stanzaic pattern, inspiring Monroe her comment about the poet's unnatural cuts.

17. "Marriage" (Moore, 2002 295).

18. "The term 'poet's prose' is a response to the terminological nightmare surrounding non-versified poetry. The more common 'prose poem' is unsatisfactory for two reasons: it is an oxymoron aimed at defamiliarizing lyric poetry, and it remains redolent with the atmospheric sentiment of French Symbolism. 'Poet's prose' escapes the oxymoron and is proposed as a more encompassing term to cover all (not only lyric) poetry written in sentences and without versification. The term is descriptive instead of normative; it applies to works that are conceived of and read as extensions of poetry rather than as contributions to one of the existing prose genres" (Fredman xiii).

19. After stating that "[f]or the most part, in what we read, it is the meaning rather than the tone of voice which gives us pleasure," Moore's essay begins by quoting a series of prose passages (from a few words to several lines in length), in which, conversely, "the meaning has very little to do with the pleasure the words give us." "By the tone of voice," she goes on to explain, "I mean

that intonation in which the accents which are responsible for it are so unequivocal as to persist, no matter under what circumstances the syllables are read or by whom they are read" (Moore, 1987 31-32).

20. Moore's complete answer to Donald Hall's question regarding her reaction to H.D. and Bryher's publishing initiative proposes a few more terms to qualify her writing: "To issue my slight product—conspicuously tentative—seemed to me premature. I disliked the term 'poetry' for any but Chaucer's or Shakespeare's or Dante's. I do not now feel quite my original hostility to the word, since it is a convenient almost unavoidable term for the thing (although hardly for me —my observations, experiments in rhythm, or exercises in composition). What I write, as I have said before, could only be called poetry because there no other category in which to put it" (Moore, 1961 258; emphasis mine).

21. Rather than transcribe the poem, I have chosen to reproduce the 1919 edition of the poem from *Others*, vol. 5, no. 6 (July 1919), p. 5, as provided by the Modernist Journals Project and reproduced in Robin Schulze's edition of Moore's first poems, *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907-1924* (2002 205). Indeed, the lay-out of the page adds a level of complexity to the text, since the house conventions imposed an additional cut and an indented *rejet* to the longer lines, further blurring the limits between prose and verse.

22. For an overview of the numerous editorial changes undergone by "Poetry," see for instance Honigsblum and Schulze.

23. Here is Butler's whole transcription of the dialogue: "'And you shall read Longfellow much in England?' 'No, I replied I don't think we read him very much.' 'But how is that? He is a very pretty poet.' 'Oh yes, but I don't greatly like poetry myself. [...] You see, poetry resembles metaphysics, one does not mind one's own, but one does not like anyone else's'" (Butler, quoted in Willis, 1977 10).

24. The full note reads: "Diary of Tolstoy; Dutton, p. 84: 'Where the boundary between prose and poetry lies, I shall never be able to understand. The question is raised in manuals of style, yet the answer to it lies beyond me. Poetry is verse; prose is not verse. Or else poetry is everything with the exception of business documents and school books'" (Moore, 2002 138).

ABSTRACTS

This article seeks to examine Marianne Moore's line breaks and the formal tensions they reveal or even create between the grammatical sentence and the poetical line. While the poet is commonly associated with the most radical and idiosyncratic verse patterns, from her earliest modernist experiments to her signature use of syllabic verse, her work is also marked by a less conspicuous, but equally thorough pull toward the continuity of prose, a genre she was consistently drawn to. Lending an ear and an eye to intervals opened up by these crossings leads to a refined assessment of the generic ambiguities of Moore's writing.

Cet article explore l'œuvre de Marianne Moore à travers les sauts de lignes et les tensions formelles qu'ils révèlent ou même créent entre la phrase grammaticale et le vers poétique. Bien que l'on associe l'auteur aux formes les plus radicales et idiosyncratiques, depuis les premières expériences modernistes à son emploi caractéristique du vers syllabique, son travail est également marqué par un attachement plus discret mais tout aussi constant à la continuité de la prose, genre qu'elle affectionnait particulièrement. Prêter l'œil et l'oreille aux intervalles que

recèlent ces croisements permet d'envisager à neuf les ambiguïtés génériques de l'écriture de Moore.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Marianne Moore (1887-1972), Modernisme, poésie, prose, genre

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