

Incomplete Transaction: The Meditative Gaze in “When I Buy Pictures”

In *Poetry and Criticism*, Marianne Moore borrows from Joseph Conrad in an attempt to articulate the complex matrix of language, perception, and imagination that constitutes the human soul as an inherently creative reality inventing fictions in and through which to recognize both the world and itself:

“Seeing, and saying;—language is a special extension of the power of seeing, inasmuch as it can make visible not only the already visible world; but through it the invisible world of relations and affinities.” The world of the soul? Deficient as it is to define the soul, “creativity” is perhaps as near a definition as we can get (in Costello, 137).

For Moore, seeing and saying are part of one indissoluble imaginative act; rather than language functioning to report upon an already constituted experience, language exists as the experiential ground of the ever-circulating “relations and affinities” beneath all human fashionings of the “real.” Objectivity and subjectivity merge, for Moore, as saying it as one sees it becomes inseparable from seeing it as one says it. Language thus serves as the means of connection to oneself, others, and the world even while it prohibits, due to its intermediary status, any direct, univocal, static knowledge.

The creative base of perception finds expression not only in the meta-poetic musings of Moore’s critical essays but also in her overall poetic project. Indeed, that prefix meta- becomes redundant, as Moore’s poetry is always simultaneously reflecting and reflecting upon its reflecting. An example of this is Moore’s “When I Buy Pictures,” a poem that in its form and content demonstrates the doubleness, duplicity, and “creativity” inherent in perception.

In the context of “When I Buy Pictures,” the concrete act of buying a picture becomes a trope for the act of perception itself. More specifically: the notion of buying a picture as a means of owning it functions as an analogue for a certain kind of perception in which appropriation of the thing perceived is the ultimate goal of the perceiver. The quest to master a concrete object

through the human act of perception is, for Moore, not close enough to the ambiguous truth of the actual transaction between self and world. Instead, the opening lines of the poem serve as a foil for the notion of ownership implied in buying pictures:

or what is closer to the truth,
when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the
imaginary possessor,

Being an “imaginary possessor” of a picture – a perception – is quite different from literally possessing it; it implies an unavoidable go-between separating self and world, so that imaginary possession (possession of something by or through the imagination) becomes the most complete act of possession/perception possible. Though an object can be approached, approximated, and enjoyed in its unmasterable otherness, it can never be fully owned by the human subject who buys it. Also important in these opening lines are the two simultaneous forms of looking presented by the speaker of the poem. The speaker describes both looking at an object and looking at herself looking at it: “when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the / imaginary possessor...” In these lines “look” and “regard” occur as two parts of one complex act of seeing in which the speaker discovers both herself and an object – discovers them not in their separateness but in the mysterious place where they collude and collide. Of course, a third form of looking going on in the poem involves the reader’s gaze into the language that, through its simultaneous mirroring and projecting, contains the other forms of looking and makes imaginary possession a “visible” reality.

Does this imply a Romantic form of solipsism in which the human self swallows up the outer world in the act of perception (buying and eating both at once in a kind of capitalistic cannibalism)? The speaker of the poem, in elaborating the nature of her looking, appears to suggest this:

sparks the interest to look at them and formulate this looking in language. In addition, Moore anticipates deconstruction by at least thirty years in seeking to displace any standard interpretation (“the approved / triumph”) invisibly based on hierarchical ordering (“that which is great because something else is small”).

The final lines of the poem brilliantly embody the quiddity of poetic looking and the double-gaze inherent in perception:

It comes to this: of whatever sort it is,
it must be “lit with piercing glances into the life of things”;
it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it.

If the perception that Moore favors is “lit with piercing glances into the life of things,” it therefore involves looking at an object while simultaneously seeing the object looking back. This double look in turn involves the imagination, which provides associations and fills in the gaps between the always elusive, never-finally-graspable things of the world. This process of imaginative vision is revealed in content and process in Moore’s pithy line: though the quotation marks enclosing it mark it as a source lifted from another context (Moore’s notes confirm this), they also mark the line itself as double, capable of existing in this context even while it can be lifted into another one. In other words, the line itself looks back at the poem, and therefore the reader, through its quotation marks.

“When I Buy Pictures” is a tour de force enactment of the kind of vision Moore is engaged in repeatedly throughout her poetry. Perhaps more overtly than in other poems, however, it also demonstrates the similarity between the poet’s project and the reader’s reading of it. Language as an organ of perception connects both writer and reader as they seek to glimpse the movement of the mind in its engagement with an ever-fleeting world in which it is always immersed. This act of imaginative perception through language involves a spiritual

dimension – “it must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it.” Looking into the things of the world to glimpse the fleeting sparks of spirit that animate them and mysteriously connect them to the human requires a meditative gaze content with partial knowing. Moore contrasts this meditative approach to the world with the hard, level gaze of ownership that is blind to the piercing glance of its own subjective fantasy of objectivity looking back at it from the uncontainable things of the world.

Works Cited

Costello, Bonnie. Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981