« Reflecting the Other: The Thing Poetry of Marianne Moore and Francis Ponge »

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Centre for Comparative Literature
University of Toronto

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2012

Abstract

Across continents and independently of one another, Marianne Moore (1887-1972) and Francis Ponge (1899-1988) both made names for themselves in the twentieth century as poets who gave voice to things. Their entire oeuvres are dominated by poems that attempt to reconstruct an external thing (inanimate object, plant or animal being) through language, while emphasizing the necessary distance that exists between the writing self and the written other. Furthermore, their thing poetry establishes an “essential otherness” to the subject of representation that (ideally) rejects an objectification of that subject, thereby rendering the “thing” a subject-thing with its own being-for-itself.

This dissertation argues that the thing poetry of Marianne Moore and Francis Ponge successfully challenged the hierarchy between subject and object in representation by bringing the poet’s self into a dialogue with the encountered thing. The relationship between the writing self and the written other is akin to what Maurice Merleau-Ponty refers to in *Le visible et l’invisible* when he describes the act of perceiving what is visible as necessitating one’s own visibility to another. The other becomes a mirror of oneself and vice versa, Merleau-Ponty explains, to the extent that together they compose a single image. The type of reflection involving self and others that
Moore and Ponge employ in their thing poetry invokes the characteristically modern symbol of the crystal with its kaleidoscopic reflective properties. Self and other are distinct yet indissolubly bound, and rather than a hierarchy between subject and object there are only subjects who exist for-themselves and for-each other, reflecting the kind of reciprocal Pour soi that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology envisioned.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee at the University of Toronto for their excellent feedback on the ideas that went into this dissertation: Professor Victor Li, Professor Pascal Michelucci, and Professor Malcolm Woodland.
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Introduction

Across continents and independently of one another, Marianne Moore (1887-1972) and Francis Ponge (1899-1988) both made names for themselves in the twentieth century as poets who gave voice to things. Marianne Moore was born in Missouri, United States and began writing poetry at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania before moving to New York City in 1918, where she became acquainted with poets like William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. They, along with others like Ezra Pound, H. D. and T. S. Eliot (who were by then overseas), recognized a great and unique talent in the emerging poet. Francis Ponge was born in Montpellier, France in 1899, and during the First World War moved to Paris where he too soon made the acquaintance of various literary figures like Jean Paulhan and André Breton.

Although Moore and Ponge came from very different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they began writing a remarkably similar kind of poetry that is best termed a poetry of things, or “thing poetry.” By this name I recall the German term Dinggedicht, which is defined by Michael Winkler in the New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics as “[a] type of poetry that seeks to present concrete objects (or a pictorially perceived constellation of things) with factual precision and in symbolic concentration,” and which enables “detached expression of inner experiences evoked through contemplative contact with the object” (295-6). My own definition of Moore and Ponge’s thing poetry varies slightly from this, as it is poetry that attempts to reconstruct an external thing (inanimate object, plant or animal being) through language while emphasizing the necessary distance that exists between the writing self and the written other. This kind of thing poetry establishes an “essential otherness” to the subject of representation that (ideally) prevents that subject from being objectified, thereby rendering the “thing” a subject-thing with its own being-for-itself.

Moore and Ponge were both highly concerned with the (im)possibility of mimesis in poetic representation, and their writing displays this concern in its frequently self-reflexive consideration of its subject matter. In other words, their thing poems refer not only to the subject of representation but equally to the act of writing itself. In such a way the writing self of the poet is defined in and against his/her written other and the two enter a relationship of interdependence and reciprocity. This relationship is akin to what Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes in Le visible et l’invisible when he writes that the act of perceiving what is visible necessitates being visible
(to another) oneself. The other becomes a mirror of oneself and vice versa, Merleau-Ponty explains, and even still “nous-mêmes n’avons pas, de quelqu’un et de nous, deux images côte à côte, mais une seule image où nous sommes impliqués tous deux, [et] ma conscience de moi-même et mon mythe d’autrui sont, non pas deux contradictoires, mais l’envers l’un de l’autre” (“we don’t actually have, between one another, two images side by side, but rather one single image in which we are both implicated, [and] my own consciousness of myself and my myth of the other are not contradictory of one another, but the mirror of one another;” 115). The type of reflection involving self and others that Moore and Ponge employ in their thing poetry invokes the characteristically modern symbol of the crystal with its kaleidoscopic reflective properties. Self and other are distinct yet indissolubly bound, and rather than a hierarchy between subject and object there are only subjects who exist for themselves and for each other, reflecting the kind of reciprocal *Pour soi* that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology envisioned.

I chose to write on these two poets in conjunction with one another because their very similar approach to the poetic representation of things reveals two larger issues that preoccupied artists and thinkers in the early twentieth century. Firstly, there is the problem of mimesis—what Moore referred to as “genuine” writing—and the difficulty of portraying a subject honestly and accurately. Moore and Ponge were just two poets amongst an entire generation of writers and artists honing their craft in an age where the romantic ideal of a natural language was giving way to the structuralist-formalist notion of the arbitrary sign. While many writers quickly distanced themselves from the former with highly abstract language play, however, Moore and Ponge preferred to question the limits at both ends of the debate, never settling on a fixed definition of what language was or should be. The second modernist preoccupation that comes to light in their work concerns the limits of human perception and the extent to which we can know the world around us. This was also the primary concern of phenomenology, a branch of philosophy which began in the late nineteenth century with the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and was subsequently adopted and adapted by a succession of thinkers in the twentieth century. Moore and Ponge’s thing poetry is oriented towards phenomenology because it questions the extent to which one can know things in-and-of-themselves as opposed to things that are extensions of one’s own mind. Their poetry benefits from a reading through the lens of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology because he espoused the same non-hierarchical approach to representing others that Moore and Ponge attempted within their poetry. By granting their subject-things an
essential otherness, Moore and Ponge dissolved the traditional hierarchy between subject and object, self and other, and created a more egalitarian relationship between the two.

The importance of the thing

The idea of the thing was extremely important to modernist artists, as it emphasized the materiality of the phenomenal world and the limits to what can be grasped by consciousness. In England and America, the literary movements of imagism (which Pound proclaimed through his 1913 manifesto) and objectivism (founded two decades later by Louis Zukofsky) both stressed the importance of isolating the thing in poetic description. For the imagists, the image consisted of “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Pound 120). The “rules” to which an imagist writer must adhere included ensuring “direct treatment of the ‘thing,’ whether subjective or objective,” using “absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation” and “composing in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (119). Poets whose work appeared in the original four imagist Anthologies included H. D., Amy Lowell, Richard Aldington, John Gould Fletcher and F. S. Flint. ¹ Marianne Moore, who began publishing her poetry in 1915, was not featured in these anthologies although she has been since categorized as an imagist poet. ² A couple of decades after imagism there was objectivism, a similar movement founded in large part by the New York poet Louis Zukofsky. In his 1930 essay “An Objective,” Zukofsky promotes the “sincerity” to be found in writing that is “the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody” (12). Although Moore was not directly associated with the objectivist

1 These were published in 1914, 1915, 1916 and 1917. Pound had control only of the first anthology (Des Imagistes, An Anthology) and the rest were collected and edited by Lowell under the series title, Some Imagist Poets.

movement, Zukofsky refers to her poem “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish” as an example of how a thing can represent a “historic and contemporary particular” (12).³

A similar preoccupation with reality and its representation in art took place in France at the time. The object was by no means a new focus in French poetry, having long occupied the focal point of the French lyric beginning from the Middle Ages and continuing up to the present day. François Rouget and John Stout describe the tradition of object poetry: “En tant que topos, hantise, figure d’éléction ou miroir du sujet, l’objet se situe très souvent au centre du poème, alors que le sujet, lui, reste en marge ou à l’arrière-plan. Cette poésie présente des descriptions d’objets à la place d’un lyrisme conventionnel” (“In the capacity of topos, obsession, elected figure or mirror of the subject, the object is very often at the centre of the poem while the subject remains in the margins or in the background. This kind of poetry offers descriptions of objects instead of conventional lyricism;” Rouget and Stout 7). The object played a different role in poetry according to the literary tastes of the period, and in the twentieth century it naturally lent itself to the modern desire to understand the world beyond one’s subjective experience of it, or what Michel Collot calls the modern “ouverture à une extériorité et à une altérité” (“opening towards an exteriority and an alterity;” “Lyrisme” 443). If symbolists like Rimbaud and Mallarmé were interested in foregrounding objects in order to understand their own selves in relation to them, Collot sees the twentieth-century poets’ turn towards the object in-and-of-itself, or a “lyrisme objectif” (“objective lyricism;” 446), as a partial reaction against this. For all his modern inclinations, Francis Ponge did not entirely keep pace with his avant-garde peers but rather continued to address—somewhat in the tradition of his symbolist predecessors—his own experience of perceiving the subject-things of his poems. The thing-in-itself was very important to Ponge, and because—not in spite—of his sense of its importance, he could not hide or deny his own manipulation of that thing for the sake of poetry.

In his introduction to “Thing Theory,” Bill Brown differentiates things from objects, claiming that there is a “discourse of objectivity” that enables us to understand objects through what they

³ “It is understood that historic and contemporary particulars may mean a thing or things as well as an event or a chain of events: i.e. an Egyptian pulled-glass bottle in the shape of a fish or oak leaves, as well as the performance of Bach’s Matthew Passion in Leipzig, and the rise of metallurgical plants in Siberia” (Zukofsky 12).
reveal about ourselves, but that there is no corresponding discourse of “thingness” (4). “[W]e look through objects,” he writes, “but we only catch a glimpse of things” (4). Drawing in part from both phenomenology and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Brown characterizes the thing as that which can never entirely be apprehended and whose existence is negated by the very presence of the object:

Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). But this temporality obscures the all-at-onceness, the simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic and the fact that, all at once, the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names some thing else. (5)

The difficulty with formulating a theory of the thing, which Brown readily admits, is that the thing is more or less imperceptible. What we seize with our eyes and hands is the object, whereas the essence or inner life of the thing remains beyond our reach. It is this inner life that many poets and artists in the early twentieth century were so eager to uncover, as it seemed to hold the key to their understanding of the world. The anthologized words of William Carlos Williams—“no ideas but in things” (Paterson 6)4—or Wallace Stevens’s poem title “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself” betray this eagerness, as does Henri Michaux’s claim to have found tranquillity only by placing himself in the apple of his observation.5 In writing about Marianne Moore and Francis Ponge’s thing poetry, I hesitated to designate the poets’ subject matter as objects, since this term carries the connotation of a hierarchical subject-object relation whereby the one uses the other. Since the poets themselves were interested in both their relation to things and the essence or life of those things in-and-of-themselves, I chose to use the term “subject-thing” to refer to the inanimate objects and animate beings (plants and animals) that populate

4 Bill Brown makes an interesting observation concerning the first appearance of this phrase in Williams’s early lyric “Paterson” in 1926, which was the same year that Henry Ford published his article on “Mass Production” in the New York Times and the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Of the irony of this coincidence, Brown writes: “American poetry’s best-known decree appears as the inverse (or perhaps the specular completion) of American industry’s best-known managerial contribution” (A Sense of Things 8).

their poetry. In this way, it should be clear that the subject-things have—in the poets’ minds, at least—an aspect to their composition or being that cannot be accessed through poetic representation.

My avoidance of the term “object” pertains to the absence of objectification I find in Moore and Ponge’s thing poetry, although my argument does not focus specifically on the writers’ resistance to the object’s commodification in the manner of, for example, Jon Erikson’s *The Fate of the Object. From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art, and Poetry* (1995). Rather, I approach the topic from a literary perspective in order to explore how the poets engage with language as a means to convey the essence of their subject-things. In this respect my work is more in accordance with Bill Brown’s *A Sense of Things. The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003), as well as the essays collected and edited by Cristina Giorcelli in *The Idea and the Thing in Modernist American Poetry* (2001). Brown’s book focuses on American narrative fiction in the pre-modernist era (1890s) and explores what he calls “the indeterminate ontology where things seem slightly human and humans slightly thing-like” (*A Sense of Things* 13). In a way that relates more specifically to my project, he also explores the “poetics and politics of the object” (18) and the importance of understanding the essence or alterity of things in relation to understanding oneself. The essays in *The Idea and the Thing in Modernist American Poetry* pertain primarily to imagism and objectivism but also explore, as Giorcelli writes in her introduction, the way in which modernist poets’ “radical problematization of language […] anticipated the gap we daily register between consciousness and the other” (7). Marianne Moore and Francis Ponge, I contend, felt deeply this gap and tried to reconcile it through their understanding of things. A third scholarly work that my project acknowledges is Barbara Johnson’s *Persons and Things* (2008), which explores how persons can be differentiated from things (and vice versa) and how our relationships with inanimate things may reflect or influence our relationships with other persons. Johnson’s object of study ultimately proves to be personhood over thingness, but her book is relevant to my dissertation because it includes a short chapter entitled “The Poetics of Things” that deals exclusively with Moore and Ponge. Johnson

6 Brown references Theodor Adorno’s claim, from *Negative Dialectics*, that “granting the physical world its alterity is the very basis for accepting otherness as such” (18). My discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the necessity of granting others in the world being-for-oneself in order to possess one’s own being-for-oneself echoes Adorno’s claim.
argues that Moore and Ponge’s poetics of things seeks to understand and represent “the impossible knowledge of the thing” (28) primarily through form, illustrating her argument with the examples of Moore’s “To a Steamroller” and Ponge’s “L’huître.” Her claim that Moore’s poem “is not interested in getting to the thingness of the thing by stripping away the human presence” (30) and that Ponge’s poem only demonstrates an initial desire to do so, make relevant, I hope, my own study on the very importance in their poetry of that interaction between human presence and thingness of the thing. To date, Johnson’s work is the only substantial scholarly work to treat Moore and Ponge’s poetry in conjunction with one another.

Ponge: the genuine and l’objet

When Moore relocated to New York City in 1918, she quickly became involved in the Manhattan arts scene and in 1926 was appointed editor of the literary magazine *The Dial*, where she remained until its closing in 1929. During this period, she wrote a large number of art and literary reviews and essays, a practice which would remain with her until the end of her career. Moore’s literary criticism is unmistakeably faithful to her own goals and values as a poet, and so we frequently see her praise values such as naturalness, precision, feeling (without affectation), imagination, humility, truth, reserve, sincerity, and so on. In an address she gave to the University of California in 1956, Moore characterized her propensity for honest, unaffected writing as a “mania for straight writing,” which she defined as “writing that is not mannered, overconscious, or at war with common sense” (*Prose* 510). Lest this seem a reduction of her work into the dull and ordinary, the word “mania” jumps forth and recalls Moore’s predilection for imagination and originality, the latter of which she describes, in an essay from 1949, as obtainable in no other way than as “a by-product of sincerity” (*Prose* 421). Out of the many important ideas to have emerged from Moore’s prose writings, the above two strike me as particularly complementary and fitting in a discussion of her approach to representing things. Moore abhorred affectation and self-pretension in art and literature to the extent that her own poetry is wildly precise, difficult yet straightforward, and highly colourful yet honest. In other words, it reflects the rigorous mind of a scientific, creative and diligent poet. The contradictory and complex nature of her writing style is perhaps best summed up in her famous poem
“Poetry,” (famous in part for its reduction to three lines from its original twenty-nine), which begins in its original form,

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

and proceeds to say that not

[...] till the poets among us can be 
‘literalists of the imagination’—above insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them, shall we have it. (Selected Poems 36-37)

Poetry’s value, according to Moore, derives from what it can present of “the genuine,” which itself is a product of the poet’s most sincere imagination and mental world-making. “Literalists of / the imagination” who produce “imaginary gardens with real toads” are those who understand the limits of their knowledge of the outside world but nonetheless try to instill the things of their imagination with a subjecthood and sense of autonomy that would recreate their actual existence. The poet, for Moore, is s/he who gives life through the imagination.

The equivalent to Marianne Moore’s “genuine” can be found in Francis Ponge’s “objeu,” which he defines in his meditation on the sun entitled “Le soleil placé en abîme” (1948-1954). This text is similar to Ponge’s other thing poems except for the fact that, as Ponge points out, the sun is not an “object” but rather a hole, a metaphysical abyss, and the very condition necessary for all other objects to exist (O.C. I 781). The sun is also not an object because it controls the life and death of the same subjects who would gaze upon it as an object, Ponge remarks (790), and for this reason any representation of it must take into consideration the sun’s representation of oneself in return. In order to make the sun rise upon his writing paper, Ponge chooses to understand it through the complexity of their (his and the sun’s) relationship. Such is the idea of l’objeu, which he defines as:

C’est celui où l’objet de notre émotion placé d’abord en abîme, l’épaisseur vertigineuse et l’absurdité du langage, considérées seules, sont manipulées de telle façon que, par la multiplication intérieure des rapports, les liaisons formées au niveau des racines et les significations bouclées à double tour, soit créé ce fonctionnement qui seul peut rendre compte de la profondeur substantielle, de la variété et de la rigoureuse harmonie du monde. (778)
It’s that where the object of our emotion is placed first of all in abyss (*en abîme*), and the staggering thickness and absurdity of language—considered separately—are manipulated in such a way that, by the internal multiplication of relations, the links formed at the root level and the double-knotted significations, this mechanism is created which alone can render an account of the world’s substantial depth, variety and rigorous harmony.

*L’objeu* accepts that the subject-thing is an object produced by emotion and that therefore does not properly belong to the real world as such. Like Moore’s real toad in the imaginary garden of the mind, however, it becomes something real within the poet’s imagination by way of creative manipulation of language and a keen understanding of its corresponding thing-in-the-world. Throughout his life Ponge was politically engaged, yet his poetry rarely reflects his politics explicitly—a factor which occasionally drew criticism from his contemporaries. His habit of putting his subjects *en abîme* might explain why explicit social commentary cannot be read immediately within most of his poems, even though it lies just below the surface and is often reflected through humour or irony. Like Moore, Ponge realized the efficacy of a self-reflexive poetic language which would simultaneously try to capture the being of a subject-thing while at the same time call attention to its own act of creation—that is, to the way in which language constructs new worlds through words.

**Chapter presentation**

This dissertation is divided into four chapters, each of which pertains to a different aspect of Moore and Ponge’s poetics. The first chapter, entitled “Mimesis and the Concept of Natural Language in the Modernist Period,” explores the poets’ sense of moral duty in representing their subjects with honesty and fidelity. Beginning with a brief overview of the history of mimesis and its role in modern art and literature, I look at how the writers in general of this period were caught between desiring a kind of “natural language” and rejecting the possibility of the latter in light of the increasing pressure to accept language as an arbitrary system. Gérard Genette’s study of the history of Cratylic language in *Mimologiques* serves as my theoretical starting point for this chapter, as I build upon his notion of the “subjective” Cratyism of the romantic period in order to explain the lasting effect of romanticism’s natural language theories by the likes of
Wilhelm von Humboldt and later Walter Benjamin. These are then contrasted with the early-twentieth-century work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who suggested that most linguistic signs are arbitrary and have no causal relationship with the things in reality they depict. Ushering in the new structuralist and formalist schools of linguistics, Saussure proposed that our language system operates successfully because meaning is derived from the way in which signs differ one from the other, with all signs relying upon the system as a whole. By establishing the dominant arguments on both sides of the language debate, I show how Moore and Ponge’s thing poetry reflects a tension between the two extremes.

“Reflection as Discovery” is the title of my second chapter, and here I argue that the above-mentioned tension (between desiring a natural language and accepting the arbitrary conventions of language) resulted in the poets’ creation of a multi-dimensional reflective language. I demonstrate that the way in which their words reflect not only their subject-thing, the poet’s self, but also the self in the eyes of the subject-thing and vice versa, can be read through the metaphor of a crystal. The pluralized reflection afforded by the crystal’s many sides and angles once again points to Moore and Ponge’s egalitarian approach to the self-other divide. Finally, this chapter also considers the shell motif that frequently appears in their poems and argues that the shell provides an ideal symbol of the necessary distance between the writing self and written other.

The third chapter of my dissertation is entitled “From Pictures to Words; From Words to Pictures” and here I look at the keen interest Moore and Ponge both took towards the visual arts and the manner in which they were influenced by various artistic movements—particularly cubism—and artists of their time. I also consider how they used ekphrasis as a means to equalize the writing self and written other by returning the gaze to the subjects of the images they represented. Adopting W. J. T. Mitchell’s idea of the triangular exchange process involved in ekphrasis, I suggest that their ekphrastic poems—and non-ekphrastic thing poems—draw attention to the frames around both painting and poem so as to make the reader “see” his/her own act of seeing and feel his/her gaze returned. Moore and Ponge achieve this by portraying the represented subject in its own act of seeing, as it either returns the reader’s gaze or directs that gaze elsewhere to somewhere beyond the canvas and the page that the reader cannot immediately access. In accordance with the way that Moore and Ponge’s ekphrastic poems subvert the traditional dominance of viewing subject over viewed object, they similarly reject the rivalry that Mitchell claims characterizes the relationship between image and word. Their poems and art
criticism maintain the essential otherness of images in order to reveal the interdependence between word and image.

The fourth chapter of this dissertation is entitled “The Language of Animals” and here I look at the poets’ approach to non-human animals as their others. In writing about animals in order to comment upon the human condition, Moore and Ponge adopt the age-old tradition of literary animal metaphors. Where they reveal their modern sensibility, however, is in their acknowledgement of the essential otherness of animals, an acknowledgement that considers the being-for-oneself of animals and positions them on a more or less equal plane with humans. Drawing on Cary Wolfe’s ideas of posthumanist representations of animals in modern and contemporary art, as well as Akira Mizuta Lippit’s theory of the “animetaphor”—what he calls the “living metaphor” that is the animal—I argue that Moore and Ponge’s animal poems are caught between their desire to portray the otherness of animals and their realization of the limits to such a representation in language. As poets, they oscillate between a fidelity to their subject-animals and the temptation of mining the animal for its rich metaphoric potential.
Chapter 1
Mimesis and the Concept of Natural Language in the Modernist Period

Moore and Pongé’s poetics of things are founded upon two essential questions: what is the function of poetry and how does language act as a mimetic device in poetry? These are questions to which the poets returned frequently in their work and to which they offered sometimes contradictory responses that reflect their evolution as thinkers and poets in the twentieth century. In general, they approached the first question by considering the moral imperative of the poet to represent his/her subjects faithfully, thereby invoking a mimetic tradition that goes as far back as Plato. Although the arguments they formulate in this respect differ from one another, there is some similarity between them in the fact that, as the poetic guardians of their subject-things, they felt a personal responsibility towards that which they represented. One reads in both of their oeuvres a sense of this kind of intimate connection between poet and thing, even when, as in Pongé’s “La guêpe,” the poets display their frustrations in struggling to portray their subjects accurately. This chapter will look at the poets’ sense of moral responsibility to represent their subjects truthfully in light of the modernist crisis of language in which they found themselves. In considering their poems that deal directly with how they select their poetic subjects and how they go about representing them, I will argue that Moore and Pongé’s work reflects a tension between the myth of a natural language and their awareness of the limitations of language as an arbitrary system. What happens to things—and occasionally, experiences—when they are transported into the context of a poem? In the act of poetic representation, what is lost and what is gained?

The poets’ sense of duty and responsibility arose from their desire to give voice to things, which itself was not an easy task in the modernist period in which they began writing. This period has often been characterized by a “crisis of language” that forced writers to struggle to find a language that accurately represented human consciousness and the social order. Richard Sheppard attributes this crisis in part to “the supersession of an aristocratic, semi-feudal, humanistic and agrarian order by one middle-class, democratic, mechanistic and urban” (325). Language had been uprooted from society and “cerebralized,” Sheppard goes on to explain, meaning that its structures were now revealed to be “partial and repressive,” its forms “only superficially impressive” (325). Even the emerging linguistic theories at the time, led in part by Saussure’s pre-structuralist theory of the sign, seemed to support Yeats’s warning that “the
centre cannot hold.”⁷ Julia Kristeva has explored the political significance of the shifts in poetic language that occurred in the late nineteenth century in *La révolution du langage poétique* (1974). She argues that avant-garde poets like Mallarmé and Lautréamont were revolutionary because their language revealed its own inner tensions and processes of representation. Combining modern semiotics with Freudian psychoanalysis, Kristeva’s theory of signification consists of the semiotic (or “*le sémiotique*,” not to be confused with semiotics or “*la sémiotique*”) and the symbolic. Signification cannot occur without the combination of these two elements since whereas the semiotic consists of the bodily drives behind communication, the symbolic puts order (grammar, syntax) and coherence into its utterance.⁸ As Kristeva explains, the poetic revolution occurred when poets began to expose the semiotic element of their language and in turn exposed the subject behind the enunciation. The result was a destabilization of meaning that offered a *process* of signification rather than a fixed entity. Since the same destabilization applied to the subject, the latter became a “sujet en procès” (a subject in process or on trial)⁹. Kristeva writes:

lorsque le langage poétique et, davantage, le langage poétique moderne, transgresse les règles de la grammaticalité, la position du symbolique que la *mimesis* explorait depuis toujours, se trouve subvertie non seulement quant à ses possibilités de *Bedeutung* (de dénotation) que la *mimesis* contestait, mais elle se trouve aussi subvertie en tant que détentrice du *sens* (toujours grammatical voire plus précisément syntaxique). […] En effritant ainsi, outre l’inévitable vraisemblable qui sous-tendait la *mimesis* classique, la position même de l’énonciation, c’est-à-dire la position du sujet absent du signifiant, le langage poétique met en procès le sujet à travers un réseau de marques et de frayages sémiotiques. (57-58)

when poetic language and, furthermore, modern poetic language, transgresses grammatical rules, the *position* of the symbolic that *mimesis* had always explored finds itself subverted not only in respect to its possibilities of *Bedeutung* (of denotation) that *mimesis* contested, but it also finds itself subverted as the holder of *meaning* (always grammatical or even more precisely, syntactic). […] In thus dissolving, as well as the inevitable likelihood that underlay classical *mimesis*, the very position of enunciation, that is to say the position of the subject absent from the

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⁷ Yeats, W.B. “The Second Coming” (1919).

⁸ Kelly Oliver describes it as the following: “Without the symbolic element of signification, we have only sounds or delirious babble. But without the semiotic element of signification, signification would be empty and we would not speak; for the semiotic provides the motivation for engaging in signifying processes” (xv).

⁹ This is Kelly Oliver’s translation.
signifier, poetic language puts in process the subject by means of a network of marks and semiotic openings.

One of the bodily subjects that Kristeva claims was put in process or on trial in the late nineteenth century is that of Mallarmé. The lyric essay “Crise de vers” (1895) encapsulates the approach Mallarmé took throughout his career to the problem of the mimetic failure of words. Here he elaborates on his idea of the “notion pure,” or the truth value to be found in representing one’s idea of a thing if not the thing-in-itself: “À quoi bon la merveille de transposer un fait de nature en sa presque disparition vibratoire selon le jeu de la parole, cependant; si ce n’est pour qu’en émane, sans la gène d’un proche ou concret rappel, la notion pure” (“What good is the wonder of transposing a fact from nature into its near vibratory disappearance within the game of speech, however; if not to have it emit, without the disturbance of a nearby or concrete reminder, the pure notion;” 250). Verse makes up for the shortcomings of individual words, Mallarmé writes, since by isolating speech and remaking it anew, it negates the arbitrariness of the words and causes the memory of the represented object to bathe in a new atmosphere (“la réminiscence de l’objet nommé baigne dans une neuve atmosphère” [251]). Following Mallarmé, many other poets took creative measures in their attempts to write against language, resulting in semantic, syntactic and visual wordplay. Gertrude Stein questioned the foundations of English grammar in works such as How to Write (1931) and Tender Buttons (1914) by deliberately confusing verbs and nouns, syntax and orthography. In the chapter entitled “Sentences” from the former, she writes: “What is a participle verb adverb and noun. Renown. They made their renown. This makes them like. This makes them like it that they made this which is what has made for them their renown” (124). Stein’s work has been frequently compared to that of the cubist poets in France at the time, and one can read a similar design in a poem such as Max Jacob’s “Avenue du Maine” (1912), for instance, in which the entire text plays on variations of the words manège (merry-go-round, game, trick) and ménage (household, relationship). Jacob was never strictly a cubist poet, though his close friendship with Picasso led to the latter illustrating his 1909 novel Saint Matorel with engravings in the analytic cubist style. (These engravings would later become quite famous examples of Picasso’s early work, far surpassing the success of Jacob’s novel.) As

10 Les manèges déménagent.
Manèges, ménageries, où?…et pour quels voyages?
Moi qui suis en manège
Depuis…ah! il y a bel âge! (Jacob 229-230)
literature, *Saint Matorel* is not particularly cubist in style but Picasso’s illustrations complemented it because both artists were working in non-conventional modes of representation. Marjorie Perloff describes the connection between the text and the illustrations in this way, claiming that although “the images are neither illustrative—they tell us nothing about Jacob’s narrative itself—nor are they formally integrated,” their “affinity is one of period style—the move toward non-representation” (“Cubist Collaboration”).

In Italy, F.T. Marinetti founded the Futurist movement with his 1909 manifesto, in which he called for a violent rejection of the past in favour of new energy and audacity in all forms of artistic expression. In his heavily-charged poem “All’Automobile da corsa” (1908), the poet willingly surrenders himself to his automobile (which he describes as a god, a monster and a demon) and also surrenders his language to the unintelligible sounds of this machine. Rather than translate its motor sounds into Italian, he transcribes them onomatopoeically with utterances like “ebbrrrra,” “frrremi” and “crrrrollanti.” Similar to the Futurists in their rejection of tradition but contrary to them in their strong anti-war sentiments, the members of Dada, led by the Romanian-born poet Tristan Tzara, sought new ways of conceiving of words as tools of representation. In “Pour faire un poème dadaïste” (1924), Tzara suggests cutting words from a newspaper article and randomly positioning them on a page, claiming that if one does so, “le poème vous ressemblera” (“the poem will resemble you;” 228-229). Incidentally, the advice was purely ironic; Tzara himself never followed this method in his own poetry. The Belgian-born Henri Michaux was another poet who frequently resorted to nonsensical language to confront the difficulties of mimetic representation. In “Le grand combat” (1927) for instance, he strings together a series of nonsensical verbs, nouns and adjectives in a way that is entirely grammatically correct and, like Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky,” contains sense within nonsense. 

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11 Veemente dio d’una razza d’acciaio, 
Automobile ebbrrrra di spazio, 
che scalpiti e frrremi d’angoscia 
rodendo il morso con striduli denti… (excerpt from “All’Automobile da corsa”)

12 Il l’emparouille et l’endosque contre terre; 
Il le rague et le roupète jusqu’à son drâle; 
Il le pratèle et le libuque et lui barufle les ouillais; 
Il le tocarde et le marmine,
Rainer Maria Rilke was composing his own *Dinggedichte* in Paris with poems like “Der Panther” and “Blaue Hortensie” (both published in *Neue Gedichte*, 1907). Writing from within the German aestheticist movement, Rilke tried to emphasize the materiality of his words and relied upon this concrete, almost tactile dimension of language to enhance the representational effect of his poetry. Carsten Strathausen contends that aestheticist poetry around the turn-of-the-century felt the need “to compete aesthetically with the increasing popularity and ‘reality effect’ of photographic images” (13) and therefore strove not merely to recreate an experience of visual perception—what it is like to see a thing with one’s eyes—but rather to create a unique linguistic experience in which one sees a thing through words.

All of the above examples describe poets striving to re-invent their language and its mimetic possibilities in light of the current crisis they were experiencing. Their efforts reveal what Gérard Genette describes as the modern incarnation of mimology or Cratylism, in which the belief in a motivated relationship between word and thing is adapted to the aesthetic trends of the period. In *Mimologiques*, in which he explores the evolution of mimology from Plato to the twentieth century, Genette suggests that “[I]l*la conscience poétique moderne est très largement ‘gouvernée’ par les principes d’équivalence et de motivation” (“modern poetic consciousness is very largely ‘governed’ by the principles of equivalence and motivation;” 312), principles which are upheld by a “triple valorisation de la relation analogique” (“triple valorisation of the analogical relationship”) between signifiers (e.g. homophones, puns), signifieds (metaphors) and signifiers with signifieds (mimetic motivation) (313). Genette cites the late-eighteenth-century birth of linguistics as a turning point for mimology, since from then on it took on new energy and forms, beginning with the “subjective” Cratylism of romanticism (428). As I will demonstrate, this subjective, romantic Cratylism continued to influence modernist poets like Moore and Ponge, in the same way that it continued to influence modern theorists like Walter Benjamin. In his 1916 essay “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” (“On Language as such and

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Le mange rape à ri et ripe à ra.  
Enfin il l’écorcobalisse. (*excerpt from* “Le grand combat,” *Qui je fus*)

13 Genette defines “mimologie” (“mimology”) as a relation between word and thing whereby the latter motivates or justifies the choice of the former (9). The synonym “cratylisme” (“Cratylism”) refers to Plato’s dialogue with the eponymous character.
on the Language of Man”), Benjamin wrote of a “silent language of things” and the potential for humans to translate this language using our God-given capacity for nomenclature. Benjamin’s essay falls loosely into a tradition of philosophers who sought a kind of “natural language” that would reveal ancient truths about humans’ relationship to nature, along the lines of Giambattista Vico’s work in *Scienza Nuova* (c. 1730). In Benjamin’s case the language was Adamic, but in the work of his contemporary Owen Barfield, it was a metaphoric use of language that could lead us to forgotten knowledge about our world. These twentieth-century theorists echoed the sentiments of the German language philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), who nearly a century prior to them had taken the idea of a natural language further by exploring the connection between language and thought development. Given that Humboldt was writing in the midst of German romanticism, it is noteworthy to explore the extent to which the notion of natural language embedded itself in romantic thought. While the modernists were to a large extent writing against the romantic tradition they had inherited, many of them were unable to shake off entirely this idealist view of language.

My discussion of the approaches Moore and Ponge took towards the changing role of language in the modernist period will begin by looking at the particular moral responsibilities felt by the two poets as they attempted mimetic representation in their poetry. More specifically, I will explore their sense of duty towards their subject-things in conjunction with their duty to their poetic craft. In the section that follows, I will argue that the crisis of language felt by the thing poets and their subsequent approach to language as a mimetic device stemmed from an attraction to the myth of a so-called natural language, combined with a modernist suspicion of the limits of the conventional system of language they had inherited.

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14 Benjamin refers to Vico in his commentary on Carl Gustav Jochmann’s essay “The Regression of Poetry” (1940) (from *Selected Writings IV*).
1.1: Mimesis and the moral imperative of poetry

Modern conceptions of the term *mimesis* revolve predominantly around the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Pre-5th century B.C.E., the term pertained exclusively to mime, dance and music, and thus signified the expression of an interior reality rather than the reproduction of an external reality (Lichtenstein and Decultot 786). Around Plato’s time, mimesis began to be used in reference to the visual arts as well, and Plato’s own approach to the issue was to consider the disparity between the object-in-and-of-itself versus its representation. Lichtenstein and Decultot’s essay on mimesis in *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies* explains the Platonic change in thought in this passage: “Le problème [de mimesis chez Plato] ne concerne plus, comme dans le cas de la *mimèsis* théâtrale, l’identité du sujet, la confusion entre l’acteur et l’auteur, mais l’identité de l’objet, c’est-à-dire la relation de l’image […] à son modèle” (“The problem [of mimesis for Plato] no longer concerns, as it was the case in theatrical mimesis, the identity of the subject and the confusion between the actor and auteur, but instead the identity of the object, that is to say the relationship between the image […] and its model;” 787). In other words, Plato considered mimesis in terms of the artist’s moral responsibility to represent something honestly and accurately. In what is regarded as his critique of poetry in the *Republic*, Plato disparages artistic imitation for being “at a distance three removes from truth” (399). A painter, for example, imitates an earthly object (made by a craftsperson), which is itself an imitation of the original or true thing that was made by God (397). The same is the case with the poet and his/her ability to represent virtue; s/he is removed from the truth of this matter by three steps, since between the poet who writes of virtue and the God who created it, there are those who actually practice it in the real world. Thus, even a great poet can lay little claim to be a teacher of morals and without any moral authority, poetic imitation—according to Plato—does little more than stir up unnecessary or undesirable emotions in its audience. These emotions derive from the “inferior part[s] of the soul” (405), he writes, summing up his judgement on the entire poetic profession.

This brief explanation of Plato is but a broad outline of the ideas put forth in *Republic X* and as theorists such as Stephen Halliwell and Frederick Burwick have pointed out, there are many other elements to Plato’s work that contradict his hard stance on mimesis. Burwick, for instance, notes how Plato’s *Laws* encourage mimetic arts for their educational value in that they
demonstrate the beauty of form (49). In the *Sophist*, Plato distinguishes between two types of mimesis, *eikastic* and *phantastik*, and condemns only the latter for being purposely deceptive (Lichtenstein and Decultot 787). Yet while Plato’s theory of mimesis expands into a much wider discussion than that which I have summarized here, what is significant for my argument’s purpose is the emphasis he places on poetry and morality. For both Moore and Ponge, the question of the poet’s moral duty—towards his/her craft and towards the represented thing—is of great importance. To a certain degree, Moore and Ponge each adopt a realist responsibility towards their object of consideration and take nearly obsessive measures (particularly Ponge) to avoid misrepresenting that object. Thus, although they cannot literally *become* their subject-thing and avoid that third level of remove from the truth, they strive to assimilate their language to it as much as possible. The poet of things is driven by a moral imperative that tries at all costs to avoid the objectification of the poetic subject. In a 1923 review of H.D.’s *Hymen*, Moore equates artificiality with dishonesty and says that by contrast, “respect for the essence of a thing makes expression simple” (*Prose* 79). H.D., according to Moore, achieves “exacting sincerity” in this regard. In the introduction to *La rage de l’expression*, “Berges de la Loire,” Ponge asserts that he will not sacrifice his account of the object for poetry, since the latter is but one way of scrutinizing the object: “L’entrecho des mots, les analogies verbales sont *un* des moyens de scruter l’objet. Ne jamais essayer *d’arranger les choses*” (“The clash between words and verbal analogies are but one way of scrutinizing the object. Never try to arrange things;” O.C. I 338).

Although their motives were similar, Moore often looked for subtlety of expression—in which complex ideas, language, metre and rhyme are hidden beneath a seemingly plain-spoken exterior—whereas Ponge explicitly over-analyzed the words he used in describing a thing, to the point that many of his poems became part representation of a thing, part writing manual.

**Gardens and toads**

Many of Moore’s ideas on the moral importance of poetry can be found appropriately enough in her poem entitled “Poetry” (C.P. 266). First published in *Others 5* (1919), the original poem of twenty-nine lines was reworked several times to result in the three-line version Moore published in her *Complete Poems*—although she did include the original version in the author’s notes at the back. In order to extract the most from her argument, I will consider the original, lengthier...
version in my present discussion (C.P. 266-268). After initially dismissing poetry as “all this fiddle,” the poet admits that there is within it “a place for the genuine. “Hands that can grasp, eyes / that can dilate, hair that can rise” are “useful” to us because they refer to real emotions and a real world; they are indicators that a poem exists for something beyond itself, “above / insolence and triviality” and the kind of needless self-importance often created by those whom Moore would refer to as “half poets.” Rendering something more conspicuous than it is does not make it poetry: “One must make a distinction / however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry.” Portraying something real (or that pertains to reality) within a creative context, however, is poetry at its most genuine and it is as a model of this ideal that we repeat Moore’s celebrated description of “imaginary gardens with real toads.”

In an essay from 1949 Moore makes a similar claim about the genuine within poetry while describing the impossibility of doing or saying something that is one hundred percent original. She writes: “Originality is […] a by-product of sincerity; that is to say, of feeling that is honest and accordingly rejects anything that might cloud the impression, such as unnecessary commas, modifying clauses, or delayed predicates” (Prose 421). According to Moore, too much clutter in writing detracts from the nugget of truth that a good poem may contain, such as the bat, elephants, wild horse or toads that “Poetry” evokes. The poet’s job is to clear the way so that these elements of truth do not become lost within a maze of rhetoric, or become “so derivative as to become unintelligible.” “Unemphasized rhymes, a flattened rhetoric, and retreating verse patterns,” Moore wrote in a 1931 poetry review, “are likely to be sincerer than is convenient to the reader” (Prose 265). A certain simplicity of expression is needed, paradoxically enough, in order to convey the complexity of a thing as it exists in reality.

“When I Buy Pictures” (C.P. 48) (published in 1921 in Poems and then modified for Observations, 1924) is another poem about art and the potential truth value of art. Here the poet relates her desire to seek out the “piercing glances into the life of things” hidden within seemingly ordinary subjects that would, she muses, “give [her] pleasure in [her] average moments.” This poem reveals Moore’s sensibility towards and belief in the brief moments when art reveals truths about the real world, while encapsulating her own approach to poetic mimesis. “I fix upon what would give me pleasure in my average moments,” the poet reveals, while warning that “Too stern an intellectual emphasis upon this quality or that detracts from one’s enjoyment. / It must not wish to disarm anything; nor may the approved triumph easily be
honored—/that which is great because something else is small.” She goes on to list a number of subjects that she might enjoy, such as “the medieval decorated hatbox” or the “snipe-legged/hieroglyph,” for instance, which are reminiscent of the odd assortment of subjects she mentions in “Poetry.” By gathering these things together in a list, Moore provides her subjects with originality by way of context, since they have likely never before been assembled in such a way. The collage technique she employs here evokes the *objets trouvés* that were being presented at art shows of the time by contemporaries such as Marcel Duchamp, shows of which Moore was well aware. These things have no connection to one another apart from the fact that they are would-be imaginary possessions of the poet, but because they have been removed from an ordinary context they gain new mimetic value as representative of the creative forces that inspired them. Unlike Duchamp’s objects, however, Moore’s subjects are themselves already works of art, so by representing them in words, she is removing them to an even further degree from reality. Yet they are “genuine” in the sense that they are a product of the poet’s imagination and poetic aesthetic. In a review of some poems by Elizabeth Bishop, Moore writes:

> We cannot ever be wholly original; we adopt a thought from a group of notes in the song of a bird, from a foreigner’s way of pronouncing English, from the weave in a suit of clothes. Our best and newest thoughts about color have been known to past ages. Nevertheless an indebted thing does not interest us unless there is originality underneath it. (*Prose* 328)

Moore’s chosen subjects in “When I Buy Pictures” too are adopted and transformed to reveal how poetry can re-interpret art and breathe new life into that which has been viewed already many times over.

Bonnie Costello has argued that the implication of the self in the act of “imaginary possession” entails “acts of self-reflection and self-possession which confer the sense of ownership that is objectively denied” (33). Moore is “both a buyer and a seller,” Costello claims, “[f]or while she gathers these images in she is also projecting them outward in her own picture, not only in this poem but in all her galleries of quotation and description” (33). Indeed, as Costello implies, the act of “buying pictures” should be taken not as the literal depiction of an art enthusiast but as a poet of things who seeks out material for her poems. To be an “imaginary possessor” of these objects is to be fortunate enough to perceive something within their being that may be represented by words, and rendered into a poem. The opening lines of the poem even allude to the fact that *buying* pictures is an insufficient analogy because it denotes permanence in
ownership. In order to represent mimetically a thing-in-the-world, one must admit that one can offer only a fleeting perspective on that thing before it will evolve into something new in the imagination of another observer.

The fleeting and providential nature of “buying pictures” is further summoned by the allusion to “the spiritual forces which have made it” in the poem’s final line:

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.

All of Moore’s poetry—and her thing poetry in particular—seeks to capture these “piercing glances” without falling into platitudes and reducing the subject to a simplified version of itself; it thereby hopes to justify the use of poetic language as a means to understand better and imitate truthfully the external world. The poet’s near-religious devotion to the subject is evoked when the process of artistic creation is referred to as “spiritual,” indicating a kind of communion that takes place when poetry “finds” its subject things. The plural of “forces” arguably points to a secular and not Christian force, since the communion takes place within poetry and not in any divine realm.15 Furthermore, the earlier version of the poem published in Poems contains the extra two lines: “and it must admit that it is the work of X, if X produced it; of Y, if made / by Y. It must be a voluntary gift with the name written on it.” The poet is able to dodge the difficulty of strict, Platonic mimesis because her ideal of imitation is one of collage and creative evolution.

Ponge’s poetic burden

Francis Ponge bore the weight of a similar moral duty towards his subject-things, for his poetry reveals a constant preoccupation with the possibility of wrongly portraying, or failing to capture the essence of, his subject in question. Like Moore, Ponge understood and acknowledged the great difficulty of imitating the external world through words, and in many instances of his work he questions whether or not such a feat will ever be possible, whether his efforts will ever be

15 My position is supported by Linda Leavell, who herself refers to Eileen G. Moran and Andrew J. Kappel when she writes that “the ‘spiritual forces’ Moore acknowledges in art are ‘entirely apart from, though not contradictory to,’ her Christian beliefs” (144).
worthwhile. According to Ponge, there exists a mute world of objects and a language-based world of humans and these will forever remain distinct. The best solution to this insurmountable distinction, he claims in “La pratique de la littérature” (1956), is to use the elements of language (words, grammar, sounds) in such a way that these elements imitate the external world:

Il faut que les compositions que vous ne pouvez faire qu’à l’aide de ces sons significatifs, de ces mots, de ces verbes, soient arrangées de telle façon qu’elles imitent la vie des objets du monde extérieur. Imitent, c’est-à-dire qu’elles aient au moins une complexité et une présence égales. Une épaisseur égale. […] On ne peut pas entièrement passer d’un monde à l’autre, mais il faut, pour qu’un texte, quel qu’il soit, puisse avoir la prétention de rendre compte d’un objet du monde extérieur, il faut au moins qu’il atteigne, lui, à la réalité dans son propre monde, dans le monde des textes, qu’il ait une réalité dans le monde des textes. (O.C. 1 678)

It is necessary that the compositions that you can make only with the help of these significant sounds, words and verbs, be arranged in such a fashion that they imitate the life of the objects of the external world. Imitate, meaning that they have a least an equal complexity and presence. An equal thickness. […] One can never pass entirely from one world to the other, but it is necessary, in order for a text—whatever it might be—to have the hopes of rendering an account of an object from the external world, it is necessary that it achieves the reality of its own world, of the world of texts—it is necessary that it possesses a reality within the world of texts.

Although the theory Ponge propounds might seem to negate the role of Platonic mimesis in poetry, I would argue that the methods he uses to create the sense of a “reality in the world of texts” offer a semblance of hope for the existence of an intrinsic and possibly natural link between words and thing. The emphasis he places on the poet’s responsibility in knowing his/her limitations implies a moral duty that must be honoured in order to remain faithful both to the world of things and to poetry. In stressing the latter, he writes: “Il me paraît très important que les artistes se rendent compte de cela. S’ils croient qu’ils peuvent passer très facilement d’un monde à l’autre […] Il n’est pas question de ça” (“It strikes me as very important that artists understand this. If they believe that they can pass very easily from one world to another […] It is not a question of that;” 678).

Ponge certainly took this duty personally as he dedicated nearly his entire poetic career to reconciling the human and object worlds and to striving for a mutual understanding between the two. In his appendix to “Carnet du bois de pins” (1940), the poet writes: “La naissance au monde humain des choses les plus simples, leur prise de possession par l’esprit de l’homme, l’acquisition des qualités correspondantes—un monde nouveau où les hommes, à la fois, et les
chose connaîtront des rapports harmonieux: voilà mon but poétique et politique” (“The birth of the most simple things in the human world, their entering into the minds of man, the acquisition of correspondent qualities—a new world where men and things simultaneously will exist in harmony: therein lies my poetic and political goal;” O.C. I 406). The following poems reveal Ponge’s near-obsession with the moral responsibility of the poet in what amounts to a kind of politics of aesthetics. “Ressources naïves” (1927) and “Berges de la loire” (1941) demonstrate Ponge’s sense of fidelity to the object, while “La Mounine” (1941) centres upon the dilemma of how to create a moral argument through aesthetics.

“Ressources naïves” (O.C. I 197) is a short manifesto-like text in which the poet claims that rather than projecting his personality and intellect upon external objects, he will re-make his entire person based upon the way in which he conceives of these objects. In this way the poet could better capture a faithful rendition of his poetic subject because the external object that inspired it would equally influence the poet’s entire being. In a manner of speaking, then, the external thing would enter the poet’s consciousness and from there the poet would translate it onto the page. Michel Collot has referred to this technique as a kind of “renversement copernicien” (“Copernican reversal”), where things are imposed upon the man rather than vice versa (49). While Ponge is the first to remind his readers that such a transfer does not mean that the external thing comes to exist on the page in its original form, there is arguably still a degree of mimetic idealism present in the poet’s decision to let the objects “enter his soul” rather than to instil his own soul in the objects: “l’attention que je leur porte les forme dans mon esprit comme des compos de qualités, de façons-de-se-comporter propres à chacun d’eux” (“the attention that I give them causes them to form like compositions of qualities in my mind, or ways of behaving unique to each of them”).

“Berges de la Loire” (O.C. I 337-8) further confirms poetry’s place as secondary to that of its object of representation and serves as the opening text of La rage de l’expression. In this text, Ponge explains that poetry is but one way of uncovering new and unseen aspects of the object and that one should never go so far as to re-arrange the object to fit the poem. Poetry may be useful in uncovering “certains aspects demeurés obscurs de l’objet” (“certain aspects of the object that have remained obscure”) through its “jeu de miroirs” (“game of mirrors”), he writes, but it should be always a means to something rather than an end in-and-of-itself. Ponge demonstrates again in this text how poetic language should follow the form and movement of its
subject, writing of his experience describing the Loire through water-based verbs: “Ainsi, écrivant sur la Loire d’un endroit des berges de ce fleuve, devrai-je y replonger sans cesse mon regard, mon esprit. Chaque fois qu’il aura séché sur une expression, le replonger dans l’eau du fleuve” (“Thus, writing on the Loire from a spot on the bank of this river, I will have to resubmerge continually my regard, my mind. Each time that it will have dried upon an expression, resubmerge it into the water of the river;” 337). Once again, the poet enables his subject to enter his consciousness so that he behaves—and writes—in a manner that corresponds faithfully to its nature.

“La Mounine ou Note après coup sur un ciel de Provence” (O.C. I 412-32) is the final text in La rage de l’expression and it summarizes Ponge’s struggle to render an aesthetic experience into something moral. The prose-poem recounts a drive taken by the poet in the countryside of Provence—part of France’s unoccupied territory at the time and near the region where Ponge spent his early childhood—in May 1941. What might have begun as a simple desire to describe that experience becomes a four-month odyssey into the intricacies of relating the experience faithfully and genuinely, to separate the subjective from the objective and to try to understand why he felt the way he did that day, on an early-morning drive. Similar to the other texts in La rage de l’expression, “La Mounine” consists of both a number of renditions of the “poem” as well as ruminations on its writing, with phrases from the latter inserted into the former. Ponge summarizes his endeavour in the following way:

Il s’agit d’éclaircir cela, d’y mettre la lumière, de dégager les raisons (de mon émotion) et la loi (de ce paysage), de faire servir ce paysage à quelque chose d’autre qu’au sanglot esthétique, de le faire devenir un outil moral, logique, de faire, à son propos, faire un pas à l’esprit. Toute ma position philosophique et poétique est dans ce problème. (424)

It consists in clarifying this, in shedding light on it, in liberating the reasons (of my emotion) and the law (of this countryside), to make the countryside serve as something other than an aesthetic sob, to make it become a moral and logical tool, to use it to make a step towards the mind. My entire philosophical and poetic position is in this problem.

Unlike the romantics prior to him, Ponge is not trying to render the countryside a reflection of his inner emotions but rather to separate the two, to understand what parts of the experience can be attributed to his emotions, and what parts can be attributed to the laws of nature (or the external world of things). Furthermore, he is trying to render an experience he found emotional into
something moral and logical that can be conveyed through the intellect rather than mere feeling; this challenge, he claims, is at the heart of his poetics.

Bernard Beugnot explains Ponge’s reaction towards his sense of helplessness in the midst of the German Occupation and the absence of God in a post-Nietzschian world as manifesting in a fervour to write and re-write, as though he might fill these voids with the “rage” of his language:

Ponge, dans un geste qui allégorise le paysage, expose son texte sous le regard de la tradition [littéraire]. Mais cette dépendance, cette dette qui s’exprime dans tout le réseau intertextuel s’accompagne d’une conquête de la liberté, d’une affirmation de soi dont témoigne la rage de l’expression. Le tragique du ciel fermé et le sentiment d’impuissance sont combattus par les réécritures, réaction contre la désespérance mallarméenne. […] [E]n déplaçant le centre de gravité du texte vers ces états successifs, Ponge transfère à l’acte même d’écrire les valeurs esthétiques du paysage et les valeurs spirituelles qu’avait évacuées le silence de Dieu. (154)

Ponge, in a gesture that allegorizes the countryside, exposes his text to the look of [the literary] tradition. But this dependence, this debt that is expressed by the entire intertextual network is accompanied by a conquest of liberty, by a self-affirmation testified by the rage of expression. The tragedy of the closed sky and the feeling of powerlessness are combatted by re-writings, a reaction against Mallarméean despair. […] [I]n displacing the centre of gravity from the text towards these successive states, Ponge transfers the countryside’s aesthetic values and the spiritual values evacuated by God’s silence to the very act of writing.

Ponge allegorizes the Provence countryside at dawn to represent the birth and re-birth of his own poetry, Beugnot maintains, and by leaving his poem incomplete he is able to establish himself as an evolving voice within the tradition of literature rather than fixing his words for posterity. Ponge uses the silence of God—symbolized by the silence of the sky—as an invitation to make poetry the new creative and politically engaged force by which to understand the world. Nonetheless, the moral weight he places upon his language is twofold. In rendering his experience in the Provence countryside into a poem, he needs to worry about the correspondence of image to word but also, and more importantly, he needs to find a way to express the freedom he experienced that morning in a language that for many of his fellow citizens is severely oppressed. This ultimately seems to be what prevents Ponge from completing his poem and underlies what he refers to as the “passion trop vive, infirmité, scrupules” (“overly vivid passion, infirmity, scruples;” 432) that he concludes are the obstacles holding him back. At a time when so many individuals’ language is monitored, compromised and restricted, how can one begin to express a singular feeling of liberty and peacefulness?
Ponge’s aesthetic struggle in *La rage de l’expression* echoes the words written by his contemporary Pierre Reverdy two decades earlier in the essay “L’image” (published in March 1918 in *Nord-Sud*), with one important exception. Whereas Reverdy is content to celebrate entirely the emotion that arises from a poetic image, Ponge wishes to make the image itself something greater than mere emotion. Reverdy claims that an image is born from two realities which are distant but pertinent to one another and that while the image itself cannot be great, the feeling that results from it can be so. He writes: “L’émotion ainsi provoquée est pure, poétiquement, parce qu’elle est née en dehors de toute imitation, de toute évocation, de toute comparaison” (“The emotion thus provoked is pure, poetically, because it is born outside of all imitation, evocation and comparison;” 74). Reverdy was writing within a cubist tradition—one with which Ponge flirted but never wholly committed himself to—and to him the motivation or justification of the sign is less important than the feelings it effects. Thus it is that in another article written a year earlier, “Sur le cubisme,” Reverdy claims that there is no need for mimetic representation of objects when originality is entirely wrapped up in style: “Et qu’important après cela les objets dont on se sert, qu’importe leur nouveauté si l’on s’en sert avec des moyens qui ne sont pas nés avec eux et pour eux? De là seulement, de cette appropriation de moyens totale naît le style qui caractérise une époque” (“And what matters afterwards about the objects we use, what does their newness matter if one uses them with means that are not born with them and for them? In here alone, in this total appropriation of means is born the style that characterizes a period;” 20). Throughout his career Ponge grappled with this modernist aesthetic summed up by Reverdy, but never came to accept it wholeheartedly in the manner of his contemporaries. In some ways, he was still clinging to a tradition that saw words as belonging to something greater than individual style of expression.

1.2: On natural language

In *Mimologiques*, Genette explores in great detail the tradition of justifying words as motivated, or part of something greater than individual style of expression. He begins his study with an account of Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus*, in which a debate occurs between the eponymous character
and his friend Hermogenes over whether or not every word is, as Cratylus suggests, motivated by that which it represents. Socrates proceeds to analyse the proposition by arguing the merits of each position and concludes by adopting what Genette calls a position of secondary Cratylistism or mimologism. According to this view, language has the potential to refer to the natural state of things but frequently falls short of doing so. Genette also calls this undecided position Cratylistism within anti-Cratylistism, “qui s’en prend à la langue telle qu’elle est, mais non pas telle qu’elle pourrait être; ou plutôt, qui en appelle de la langue telle qu’elle est à la langue telle qu’elle pourrait, et par conséquent devrait être” (“that takes issue with language as it is, but not as it should be; or rather, that appeals against language as it is to language as it could be, and consequently should be;” 36). This is the position adopted by most modern poets, Genette argues later in the book, since in much of modern poetry—post-neoclassical, that is—poetic language has been seen as a response to the proposed arbitrariness of the sign. The idea of poetry as a natural language, he claims,

\begin{quote}

domine en fait l’idée même (en général et quelle qu’en soit la spécification) de langage poétique, métaphore fourvoyante qui procède toujours de la dichotomie entre poésie et “langage ordinaire”, et qui transpose mythiquement sur le plan linguistique (relation entre signifiant et signifié) des caractéristiques d’organisation discursive appartenant en fait à un tout autre niveau: figural, stylistique, prosodique, etc. Le fait de discours devient ainsi subrepticement un fait de langue, et l’“art du langage” un “langage dans le langage”. (313-314)

\end{quote}

donominates in fact the very idea (in general and no matter its specification) of poetic language, misleading metaphor that always proceeds from the dichotomy between poetry and “ordinary language”, and that mythically transposes on the linguistic plane (relationship between signifier and signified) the characteristics of discursive organisation that in fact belong to an entirely other level: figural, stylistic, prosodic, etc. The fact of discourse covertly becomes a fact of language, and the “art of language” becomes a “language within language”.

Genette explains that this elevated notion of poetry is a rather modern phenomenon. In the following section I will explore the modern incarnations of the natural language theory from romanticism to modernism, followed by its intersection with Saussure’s theory of the arbitrary sign. As I will discuss, Moore and Ponge were both inevitably influenced by (secondary)

\footnote{Cratylus allows for the fact that some people and things were mis-named, thereby resulting in a false connection between word and referent. He therefore argues that Hermogenes, for instance, who is poor and whose name means one of the wealthy, has not been given his \textit{real} name (Genette 16).}
Cratylism and its impossibility, and their poetry represents a tension between these two perspectives on language.

**Humboldt and the romantic tradition**

The idea that language may possess something beyond an arbitrary design can be read in the work of North American and European romantics in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The romantic poets claimed that language was a reflection of the self and considered poetry to be not a mimetic means of representation, but a way to access the inner workings of the human imagination. Poetry offered a (beautiful) reflection of our world, according to romantic poets like Lamartine, Hugo, Shelley or Wordsworth, rather than a direct copy of it. In *A Defence of Poetry* (1821-1840), Shelley links poetry back to ancient language and claims that poets see the world in a clearer light than others. He writes:

> In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry; and to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful—in a word, the good which exists in the relation subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression. […] Poets […] are the institutors of laws and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. (206-7)

Poetry would assume the role of religion, according to Shelley, because the language of poetry enables us to uncover truths about the world and to better understand humans’ relationship to nature. Frederick Burwick has argued that the romantic period in Western literature marked a turning point in self-reflexivity, in which the new mirror perspective introduced by individualism caused artists to conceive of the external world as something to be reflected, rather than copied, through words. “Reflected images,” writes Burwick, “as a special and peculiar province of mimesis in romantic literature, involve a meticulous verbal account of visual details and typically implicate, as well, details of the perceptual and psychological response” (148).

The romantic view of mimesis derives mostly from the Aristotelian tradition—as opposed to the strict Platonic tradition—and allows for the intermediary role of the poet to be recognized amongst the thing-in-the-world and its representation through words. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle
calls imitation “natural” both in our desire to perform it and in the pleasure that we derive from it. Aristotle claims that the three main interconnected functions of poetry are pleasure, understanding and emotion and that these affect both the poet and his/her audience or readers (Halliwell 176). Stephen Halliwell describes Aristotle’s conception of mimesis as that which possesses a “‘dual-aspect’ function as a way of holding together the ‘worldlike’ properties of artistic representation—its depiction [...] of things which could be the case—with its production of objects that possess a distinctive, though not wholly autonomous, rationale of their own” (152). Aristotle’s mimesis need not be directly referential, since it allows for and even promotes the role played by the poet’s imagination in conceiving of this representation. In a similar fashion, the romantics played up the poet’s role as an interpreter of nature, one who reclaims the natural world as a subjective experience in order to universalize that experience and the feelings that accompany it. This trend continued up into the very early twentieth century with the aestheticism or “art for art’s sake” movement that infiltrated European writing circles around the turn of the century.

The very language used in the nineteenth century to describe mimesis was also affected, as German romantics began distinguishing “representation” from “imitation” and the English poet Coleridge tried to promote the idea of “imitation”—in which likeness and difference, art and nature, are joined together—over that of “copy” (Halliwell 364-5). The increasing visibility of the poet and his/her presence as subject within the poem has been taken as a sign that mimesis lost favour around the time of romanticism and the aestheticism movement that followed. Jean-Michel Maulpoix, for instance, claims that the romantics’ desire to place man as the subject of their art diminished the role played by mimesis: “Or, le sujet ne saurait passer au premier plan sans rejeter dans l’ombre le principe de l’imitation; car il aspire à être et à se dire singulièrement et totalement dans un monde qui n’existe qu’au travers de son verbe” (“And yet, the subject would not be able to be foregrounded without casting the principle of imitation to the shadows; for he aspires to be and to express himself singularly and totally in a world that exists only by means of his verb;” 58). According to both Halliwell and Burwick, however, the turning point

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17 Shifts in the language used to describe mimesis were not uncommon; the term “modèle” came about in sixteenth-century France to characterize a greater distance between the object and its representation than the more commonly used term of “imitation” (Maulpoix 43-5).
marked not the end of mimesis but rather a re-evaluation of its meaning. With the advent of reflection came the perception of mimesis as an interpretive process involving both poet and reader.

Wilhelm von Humboldt began writing at the height of German romanticism and during the first-wave of *Dinggedichte* in Germany. His interest in language and its effects on thought and behaviour came later in life after a career in the civil service, but it nonetheless grew into a considerable oeuvre for the statesman-turned-linguistic philosopher. Humboldt conceived of language as a non-arbitrary, non-image-based system of communication, one which was not the product of an activity but the activity itself, or “an involuntary emanation of the mind” (*On Language* 24). He argued that language is more than a system of convention because it reveals an original relationship between humans and nature and is therefore a highly determining factor in the development of thought. Like the preeminent Swiss romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Humboldt granted the self a position of higher prominence than it had previously held. For Humboldt, a study of the self revealed the very roots of language. His romantic influences emerge even more strongly in his claims that there is a connection between language and the natural world, and that words originally arose as the result of a human need to express thoughts and feelings. He claimed that

individual words were first formed out of the natural feeling of the speaker and understood by the similar natural feeling of the hearer. Hence, linguistic studies teaches, in addition to the use of a particular language, the analogical relation between man and the world in general, and each individual nation in particular, which is expressed by language. (*Humanist* 249)

According to this viewpoint, the roots of language reveal something of humans’ relationship to our world. To study language as a merely arbitrary system of signs would be impossible because the “infinite chain along which thinking winds through language” (*Essays* 72) eventually leads back to original sources of human mental activity. Language is a world of its own that humans use to make sense of the world of things (*On Language* 157), Humboldt explains, and our use of language “unites” the things of the real world with their reflections that we have cast in our minds (*On Language* 184-5). This union is possible, according to Humboldt, only because language was originally humans’ way of connecting to our natural world.
In an essay from 1820 Humboldt states that “the use of a poetic expression foreign to prose often has no other effect than to predispose the mind not to look on language merely as a sign but to give itself up to it in all its singularity” (Essays 19). Poetry, for Humboldt, reinforces the unique properties of language and reflects our thought processes by revealing the non-arbitrary connection between words and world. While Humboldt praises the creative potential of poetry, he also maintains that there is a distance between the verbal image created through a poem and the reality to which it pertains. “Every true poet’s poetry is always at the same time a world view,” he writes. “It originates in the way in which his individuality confronts phenomena and is in turn determined by them, both in such intimate interrelationship that no one can tell whether the first impulse comes from the individual or from the objects” (Humanist 214). Humboldt accepts language’s necessary distance from things-in-the-world and rather than seeking to reduce that distance, he embraces it. He sees language as an autonomous system which need not try to imitate the world since it creates its own world and worldview within it. Although he does argue for a connection between language and thought as well as words and nature, he does not stretch this argument to conclude that words stand in for the objects they designate in an idealist Platonic fashion. Words exist in an autonomous system that correlates to the real world of things but which, unlike the real world of things, incorporates the subjective human world of thought and emotion. According to Humboldt, then, language enables us to push beyond established knowledge or even lost knowledge to truths that were previously undiscovered (Essays 18). In such a way language enriches our existence and brings us closer to understanding our world.

Benjamin’s language of things to Saussure’s modern linguistics

Humboldt wrote during the period of German romanticism and most likely was influenced by—while also influencing—poets such as Goethe, Schiller and others.18 Some of the ideas he developed, however, are echoed in the twentieth-century literary criticism of Owen Barfield and Walter Benjamin, both of whom also suggested that there are certain properties unique to poetry that assist us in understanding our world. In Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning (1928), Barfield

18 Humboldt was close friends with both Schiller and Goethe and collaborated with each of them on different projects (On Language, Intro. viii).
maintains that ancient language was both inherently poetic and better connected to the natural world and that modern poetry can approach the wisdom of ancient language through metaphor. Modern language hides an entire past of understanding and connection to the natural world, he writes, such that: “The full meanings of words are flashing, iridescent shapes like flames—everflickering vestiges of the slowly evolving consciousness beneath them” (57). Barfield claims that through metaphor, poetry brings us closer to an *instinctual* understanding of things and even one another, since it mediates the “intuition” to which individuals necessarily resort in communication. Through poetry we are all connected to one another and to our world, Barfield implies, echoing the sentiments of the romantic poets of whom he wrote.

Benjamin’s work resonates even more poignantly with the poetry of Moore and Ponge because he refers specifically to a silent “language of things.” In 1916, around the same time that Moore and Ponge began writing poetry, Walter Benjamin penned his early essay “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” (“On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”). In this essay Benjamin argues against a bourgeois theory of language that would treat it as a conventional system and claims instead that there is a silent language of things which humans in turn translate into a communicable language. Only humans are able to name things, he maintains, but the ability to name things is not the only form of language that exists in the world. On the translation that must occur between things and humans, he writes:

> The translation of the language of things into that of man is not only a translation of the mute into the sonic; it is also the translation of the nameless into name. It is therefore the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect one, and cannot but add something to it, namely knowledge. The objectivity of this translation is, however, guaranteed by God. (*Reflections* 325)

Benjamin’s idea of nomenclature as an act that “perfects” the silent languages of things-in-the-world (by designating them in human language) is pertinent to the thing poetry of Moore and Ponge because it corresponds to their desire to speak faithfully *for* their subjects of representation and render them into autonomous subject-things, things which possess their own language but which, to be understood, need to be translated into the language of poetry.

Benjamin’s system of language is premised on the existence of God at the top of the chain of translation; below God exist humans, who are meant to learn the language of things (granted by God) through nomenclature. God leaves things-in-the-world nameless in order that humans may
fulfill their creative potential, but nonetheless “the name-language of man and the nameless one of things [are] related in God and released from the same creative word” (Reflections 326). Although religion and spirituality play different roles in Moore and Ponge’s work, both poets tend to shift the focus from religion to the importance of nature in presenting moral examples. As a practicing Presbyterian, Moore avoided overtly Christian themes while figuring moral arguments into her poems in a more secular—and often aesthetic—manner. Jeredith Merrin has drawn several connections between Moore’s work and that of the 17th century religious poets she admired such as Greville, Donne and Herbert, noting that whereas these metaphysical poets used introspection to understand their world, Moore adopted the stance of a naturalist and questioned humanity through physical and moral observations of the outside world. In order to maintain objectivity, however, Moore endeavoured to grant the things within her poetry the same freedom they possessed in nature—in other words, she tried to translate the language of the thing rather than grant it a new language altogether.

Ponge did not share Moore’s strong Christian beliefs, as his Protestant upbringing was far more moderate than hers.19 Like Moore, however, he approached things in the manner of one seeking to learn from them and in this regard his poetic voice too resembles Benjamin’s translator of the language of things. In an entry from “My Creative Method” (1947), Ponge explains how ideas are far more trying to him than tangible things, since the latter need no other explanation beyond the fact that they exist. Elaborating upon his anti-Cartesian position, he writes:

Leur présence, [...] leurs trois dimensions, [...] leur existence dont je suis beaucoup plus certain que la mienne propre, [...] leur côté “c’est beau parce que je ne l’aurais pas inventé, j’aurais été incapable de l’inventer”, tout cela est ma seule raison d’être, à proprement parler mon prétexte; et la variété des choses est en réalité ce qui me construit (O.C. I 517).

Their presence, [...] their three dimensions, [...] their existence of which I am much more certain than my own, [...] their aspect “it’s beautiful because I could never have invented it, I would have been incapable of inventing it”, all this is my sole reason for being, properly speaking my pretext; and the variety of things is in reality what constructs me.

19 Ian Higgins notes that Ponge attended the Protestant school in his early childhood town of Montpellier, for instance, only on the days when the state school was closed (1).
Ponge extols the virtues of objects whose creation and existence are entirely separate from his own, because it is only in considering them and translating them into poetic language that he is able to exist himself. Ponge himself once claimed to want to write a kind of De rerum natura and indeed one can see strains of atomistic influence in his thing poetry. This is the thesis of Patrick Meadows’s Francis Ponge and the Nature of Things, in which he claims that Ponge’s “writings convert the Bible to materialism by rereading its metaphysical explanations in scientific and sensual contexts” (51) and that Epicurean materialism “is at the center of the salvation and paradise that his work proposes” (51). Ponge creates a world in which beings—animate and inanimate—depend upon other beings, rather than making all beings dependent upon a single divine entity. Like Moore, he seeks understanding for human existence and poetry’s existence through the things he observes; even more so than Moore, the translations he makes as a poet appear precarious and unstable, revealing his fears that the names he assigns to things may not in fact be the “correct” ones.

Ponge’s fears, along with the language crisis many writers experienced around the turn-of-the-century, were paralleled in the shifts taking place within linguistic circles. In the first decade of the twentieth century, several years before either poet began writing seriously and consistently, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure was giving lectures in linguistics at the University of Geneva on the signifiant and signifié (signifier and signified). The ideas he proposed, including the demotivation of the sign and the importance of differentiating it from other signs through diachronic and synchronic categories, helped to initiate (among other things) what would later become the structuralist school of linguistics. As well, they marked a significant moment in modernism as they ushered in concepts such as the arbitrariness of words and the systematic and dependent nature of language. Saussure’s lectures, though anchored in linguistics, paralleled the overall shift in modernist thought towards a self-conscious awareness of one’s role working in and against tradition.

Just as Saussure dismissed the idea of origins in language, artists began to question to a greater degree the originality of their work against the centuries of art that had preceded them. T.S. Eliot

20 “Ainsi donc, si ridicullement prétentieux qu’il puisse paraître, voici quel est à peu près mon dessein: je voudrais écrire une sorte de De rerum natura” (“Thus, as ridiculously pretentious as it might seem, here is more or less my design: I would like to write a kind of De rerum natura;” “Introduction au ‘galet’”, O.C. I 204).
drew attention to this problem in his 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which concludes on the following lines:

The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, until he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living. (22)

Eliot was concerned with the possibility of creating rather than simply re-creating, with how to weave a new entry into the existing fabric of literary ideas and modes of expression. In his *Cours de linguistique générale*, Saussure projects his linguistic sign to a similar fate of dependence, in which it can exist only in its relation of difference to the other signs in a system. A phoneme or even a word cannot signify on its own, but requires the support and cooperation of all the other components in its system of signification.

Saussure’s theory of a dyadic or two-part sign consists of a combination of the *signifié* (signified, or the concept of a thing) and *signifiant* (signifier, or the “sound” representing the concept of the thing). Neither element can be privileged over the other because they exist in a completely symbiotic relationship. He states:

Une suite de sons n’est linguistique que si elle est le support d’une idée; prise en elle-même elle n’est plus que la matière d’une étude physiologique. Il en est du même du signifié, dès qu’on le sépare de son signifiant. Des concepts tels que “maison”, “blanc” […] ne deviennent entités linguistiques que par association avec des images acoustiques. (144)

A string of sounds is not linguistic unless it supports an idea; taken by itself it is nothing more than matter for a physiological study. It is the same for the signified, the moment one separates it from its signifier. Concepts like “house,” “white,” […] become linguistic entities only by association with acoustic images.

The connection between signified and signifier is entirely arbitrary, but the fact that they form a sign when combined reveals the system of convention behind language. Saussure also distinguishes between the faculty of language (*langage*) and spoken language (*langue*) and by doing so separates the inherent (intuitive) mental capacity from the social product of a spoken sign system. *Langage*, he explains, is the faculty of language, or the mental capacity for communication inherent to all humans. Saussure characterizes *langage* as both social—since its aim is communication—and individual—since it is a mental development—as well as physical,
physiological and psychological (25). *Langue*, by contrast, is a social development, a ‘principle of classification’ that is both acquired and conventional and that permits the faculty of *langage* to be exercised between individuals (25). By distinguishing between these two terms, Saussure forfeits the possibility that either a spoken language (*langue*) or its manifestation (*parole*) could be connected to the thought patterns of its speakers, since the *langue* is merely a conventionalized use of one’s inner *langage*.

Saussure’s conception of language as an arbitrary system is emblematic of the modernist climate that developed around him. Jonathan Culler has argued that modernism can in fact be defined in light of Saussurian linguistics, for as a field of study, linguistics was essentially reinvented at the start of the twentieth century, due in no small part to Saussure. Culler argues his position based on three aspects of the *Cours*: Saussure’s perspectivist, relationalist and synchronistic approaches to language. In the first instance, Culler shows how Saussure embraced a perspectivist philosophy which permits multiple versions or views of reality to co-exist without contradiction. This was done by focussing his study on *la langue* rather than *la parole* (the latter of which was the emphasis of most linguistics prior to the twentieth century). Saussure isolated *la langue*, writes Culler, so as to show how “heterogeneous elements can fall into place, as elements in a system” (16). The same kind of inclusive emphasis on perspective and reality can be seen in modern novelists’ use of stream-of-consciousness and limited point of view narratives (16). The second element in Saussure’s linguistics that Culler finds paralleled by modernist artists is the linguist’s way of viewing language as a series of relations. Culler points out not only the obvious connections to cubism but also to modernist poetry, where “the references of words or groups of words to objects outside the poem must be initially suspended until a pattern of internal references and relations is built up and grasped as a unified network” (16). The “internal references and relations” are the complex systems of rhetorical devices and imagery favoured by the poets of the time. The third element Culler mentions is the fact that Saussure, again breaking with traditional approaches to linguistics, favoured a synchronic rather than diachronic method of study. In the same way, writes Culler, many modernist writers tried “to neutralize internal time as far as possible—to make the work a synchronic system” (17).
Writing with an open *Littré*

Francis Ponge’s poetry and prose reveal the poet’s lifelong conflict with natural language and the arbitrariness of signs. On the one hand, we see him try repeatedly to reconcile the etymologies of words with their meanings. On the other hand, we watch as he dismisses these etymologies and the *Littré* as a whole for being inadequate in capturing the essence of a thing through mere definitions. Two of his collections, *Proêmes* (1948) and *La rage de l’expression* (1952), begin with a foreword explaining the poet’s desire to resist an easy approach to language and to acknowledge the subjectivity, fallibility and, in a sense, randomness of words chosen to represent external phenomena. Yet the very fact that he feels the need to explain himself and justify his writings underscores Ponge’s belief in the remote possibility that language might be made to accord perfectly with one’s thought. In his “Réponse à une enquête radiophonique sur la diction poétique” (1953), for instance, he claims that writers and poets are able to make sense of human existence and our emotions simply by giving names to things-in-the-world. In answer to the question of what differentiates the language of writers and poets from that of other artists, he writes:

\begin{quote}
Eh bien, c’est que leur langage : la parole, est fait de sons significatifs, et qu’on leur a dès longtemps trouvé une notation, laquelle est l’écriture. Si bien qu’il s’agit là d’objets très particuliers, particulièrement émouvants : puisque à chaque syllabe correspond un son, celui qui sort de la bouche ou de la gorge des hommes pour exprimer leurs sentiments intimes — et non seulement pour nommer les objets extérieurs… etc.

… Si bien qu’il suffit peut-être de nommer quoi que ce soit — d’une certaine manière — pour exprimer tout de l’homme… (O.C. I 647-648)
\end{quote}

Well, it’s that their language: *speech*, is made of *significant sounds*, and that for a long time now we have given them a notation which is *writing*. As a result it is a question of objects that are very particular, particularly moving: since each syllable corresponds to a sound, which exits the mouth or the throat of men to express their intimate feelings — and not only to *name* exterior objects… etc.

...As a result it is perhaps enough to *name* this or that — in a certain way — to *express* everything about man…

The language we speak in expressing ourselves and communicating with one another reveals a good deal about who we are, he implies, and so to write about things-in-the-world, to name them even, is akin to expressing the human condition.
Included in this same essay, however, is Ponge’s claim that language is a finite signifying system in which every word must act as a sign for several things-in-the-world. He does not subscribe to the notion of a natural language in the sense that certain words are entirely bound to their material referent; rather, the systematic nature of language is what holds it together. Furthermore, not all things or sensations can be expressed in language, especially those things that we hold most dearly. In “Tentative orale” Ponge describes what he sees as the absurdity of expression:

N’importe quel objet, il suffit de vouloir le décrire, il s’ouvre à son tour, il devient un abîme, mais cela peut se refermer, c’est plus petit; on peut, par le moyen de l’art, refermer un caillou, on ne peut pas refermer le grand trou métaphysique, mais peut-être la façon de refermer le caillou vaut-elle pour le reste, thérapeutiquement. (O.C. I 660)

No matter the object, it is enough to desire to describe it, and in turn it opens, it becomes an abyss, but this can be resealed, it is no longer small; one can, by means of art, reseal a stone, one cannot reseal the great metaphysical hole, but perhaps the means of resealing the stone works for the rest, therapeutically.

The absurdity, for Ponge, lies in the fact that the objects of our description are always more than we can perceive, which means that we may never understand and represent the stone, for instance, in all of its complexity. Words are often unable to do a thing justice, says Ponge, pointing out that this problem was also something felt by a number of his contemporaries.

“La guêpe” (1939-1943) (O.C. I 339-45) is a poem in which the poet seeks the best way of describing the wasp; to do so he makes two brief and quickly discarded observations about the way in which an etymological root of a word relates to its signified’s present state of being. In the first case, he considers the scientific name of the wasp, *hyménoptère*, which is descriptive of the insect’s wing. While noting that the only obvious but incorrect sound association to the word would be *hymen*, he then dismisses the scientific word as being “un mot abstrait, qui tient ses concrets d’une langue morte” (“an abstract word, whose concreteness comes only from a dead language;” 340-341). The poet comes around, however, reasoning that if “abstract” means something concrete made “light,” “vapid,” “strained,” “pretentious” and “doctoral,” then in fact such a description might very well suit the wing of a wasp. This tongue-in-cheek line of argument demonstrates Ponge’s dissatisfaction with the notion of Cratylic language as well as his unwillingness to let the possibility of it disappear. “Mais je n’avancerai pas beaucoup plus loin en ce sens (“But I won’t advance much further in this direction/sense;” 341), he writes, thereby dismissing the argument as something that cannot be resolved.
In another instance of the poem, he notes the etymology of the word *essaim*, which derives from *exagmen*, meaning “to push out of.” He speculates on whether a wasp’s frenetic energy derives from the cramped nature of its diaphragm and then proceeds to make an observation in parentheses about the lexical relationship in ancient Greek between thought and diaphragm:

*Essaim*: de *exagmen*, de *ex agire*: pousser hors.
Frénétique peut-être à cause de l’exiguïté de son diaphragme.
(On sait que chez les Grecs la pensée siégeait dans le diaphragme… et que le même mot désignait les deux choses: φην, justement.) (342)

*Essaim*: from *exagmen*, from *ex agire*: to push out of.
Frenetic perhaps because of the cramped nature of its diaphragm.
(We know that for the Greeks thought resided in the diaphragm…and that the same word designated both things : φην, accordingly.)

It is significant that the observation is made in parentheses, for these indicate once again Ponge’s conflicted desire to research etymologies in the *Littré* and to consider the richness offered in a language’s history, against his suspicion that these will lead to nothing and that language’s arbitrariness will ultimately shine through. The parentheses indicate hesitation but not outright dismissal. Henri Maldiney comments on Ponge’s method of returning to the roots of words by affirming that the poet does indeed achieve a revitalization of language through these types of etymological games. He writes:

Or ressaisir dans des mots un radical et, même si c’est possible, dans ce radical la racine, c’est retrouver l’articulation phonétique-sémantique qui est la condition de possibilité de la langue humaine. […] Les affinités phonétiques-sémantiques, qui convergent dans le moment de l’articulation, restituent aux mots leur champ de possibilités directionnelles, que seule l’écriture amène par condensation à leur état de rigueur. (74-5)

And yet to retrieve in words a radical and, even if it is possible, within this radical the root, is to recover the phonetic-semantic articulation that forms the condition of possibility for human language. […] The phonetic-semantic affinities that converge in the moment of articulation restore to words their directional field of possibilities, that only writing condenses to their state of rigour.

For Maldiney, the process of (good) writing is akin to a chemistry experiment where all the elements combine and react in an ideal manner so as to create the perfect conditions to match words to things. Ponge, however, is rather more hesitant to accept such an ideal equation.
In Méthodes, Ponge writes of the increasing importance of typography within literature. Authors and subsequently their readers, he claims, are placing more and more value in the visual presentation of a literary text. Of his own preoccupation with this matter, Ponge writes:

Il s’agit de mots usinés, redressés (par rapport au manuscrit), nettoyés, fringués, mis en rang et que je ne signerai qu’après être minutieusement passé entre leurs lignes, comme un colonel. Et encore faudra-t-il pour que je les signe que l’uniforme choisi, le caractère, la justification, la mise en page, je ne dis pas me paraissent adéquats mais non trop inadéquats, c’est bien sûr. (O.C. I 642)

It is a question of words that are manufactured, straightened out (compared to the manuscript), cleaned, dressed, put in order, and which I will sign only after having passed through their lines with great care, like a colonel. And even then in order for me to sign them, the chosen uniform, character, justification and page setting will have to seem—I won’t say adequate, but then not too inadequate, that’s for sure.

Two examples of his own poetry that Ponge provides here are “L’abricot” (1955-1957) and “La chèvre” (1953-1967), since in both of these poems he focuses upon the title words’ initial vowel in order to relate it back to the characteristics of the subject. In “L’abricot,” firstly, the poet would have it that the letter a were printed in such a way as to best resemble the fruit’s roundness. In “La chèvre,” the poet narrows in on the feminine and deliberate nature of the letter e’s accent grave to argue why the goat moves more slowly and more methodically than the horse (cheval) who bears a similar-sounding name:

donnons, le menton haut, à entendre que chèvre, non loin de cheval, mais féminine à l’accent grave, n’en est qu’une modification modulée, qui ne cavale ni ne dévale mais grimpe plutôt, par sa dernière syllabe, ces roches abruptes, jusqu’à l’aire d’envol, au nid en suspension de la muette. (O.C. I 807)

let’s say, chin up, that goat, not far from horse, but feminine with its grave accent, is no more than an inflected modification, that neither runs about nor slides down but rather climbs these steep rocks by its final syllable until taking off—in an “r”—from the suspended nest of the silent “e.”

“Le Mimosa” (O.C. I 366-376) is another prose poem from La rage de l’expression in which the poet searches for his subject in language. Initially, Ponge admits that the name mimosa is, to him, already perfect in its ability to capture the essence of the plant in question. Yet despite his

21 I have tried to translate this passage in a way that indicates the play on letters—notably the “r” and silent “e”—that Ponge calls attention to in the word “chèvre.”
intentions to ignore the name in favour of exploring the plant’s inner being, he keeps returning to nomenclature in the hopes of better connecting thing to word mimologically. Ponge extracts “mima” (“mimed”) from the first part of the word in order to consider its relationship to pantomime and mimes. He also fashions two anagrammatic poems using the letters of the word:

   MIracleuse
   MOrmentanée
   SAtisfaction

   MInute
   MOusseuse
   SAfranée! (369)

   MIraculous
   MOmentary
   SAtisfaction

   MInute
   MOussey
   SAffron-tinged

By pronouncing each line aloud and laying emphasis on the first two capitalized letters, one figuratively folds the adjectives into the thing until they appear to become one with it. Furthermore, the poet tells us that these are the very words spoken by the mimosa as it releases its fragrance; these are the olfactory sounds that the mimosa itself forms.

The anagrammatic play in which Ponge engages brings to mind that of his contemporary, Michel Leiris. In one of his more celebrated works, *Glossaire j’y serre mes gloses* (1939), Leiris constructs a kind of annotated dictionary that is composed at times of anagrams, semantic analyses, lexical analyses and a combination of the latter two. The entry for “croisade” (“crusade”), for instance, reads: “royauté des croyants, sadisme de la croix” (“royalty of believers, sadism of the cross;” 81). Genette explains that for Leiris, the conventional sign is that which functions for a collective, whereas the motivated sign is in fact arbitrary since it is motivated by something personal (Genette 374). Ponge too seeks a deeper, more personal and potentially mimological connection to his mimosa, and he does so in part by playing with the sound and visual appearance of its name. Beugnot calls this process an attempt “à retrouver son essence [de la chose], sa fraîcheur, son origine, à produire au regard ce que finalement par trop d’usage le nom commun avait perdu et dissimulait” (“to retrieve its [the thing’s] essence, its freshness, its origin, to produce to the eye that which has been lost and concealed by the overuse
Ponge’s attempts, however, are always playful and flirt not only with mimology, but also scepticism. On the one hand, the mimetic effect of “Le Mimosa” is heightened both by mimological connections and by the supposed provenance of the words—derived from the very mouth (source of speech) of the plant. On the other hand, the mimetic effect is decreased because the poet draws attention to his medium, and reveals the personal, phenomenal experience involved in representation.

Two other poems that partially attempt to uncover mimological connections between word and thing are “Notes prises pour un oiseau” (1938) (O.C. I 346-55) and “Le gymnaste” (Parti pris des choses) (O.C. I 33). In the first, Ponge begins by approving the fact that the word “oiseau” contains all five vowels, but admits that he would have preferred if the “S” in the middle of the word were an “L” or even a “V.” OILEAU, he claims, would have captured the impression of the bird’s wing (l’aile), and OIVEAU would have conveyed the look of the wishbone or the wingspan of the flying bird:


(346)

The word BIRD (OISEAU): it contains all the vowels. Very good, I approve. But, instead of the S as the single consonant, I would have preferred the L of the wing (l’aile): OILEAU, or the V of the wishbone, the V of the spread-out wings, the V of opinion (avis): OIVEAU. The common slang is zozio. I see that the S resembles the profile of a resting bird. And oi and eau on either side of the S, these are the two fillets of fatty meat that encase the wishbone.

Similarly, in “Le gymnaste” the male gymnast is described in a way that corresponds with the formation of the letters in the word Gymnaste, so that his facial hair can be seen in the capital G and the fit of his leotard over his torso and groin can be seen in the lowercase y. Neither poem pushes the mimological connections to the extreme, however. In the first, Ponge ultimately finds that the Littré’s definitions for “oiseau” reveal nothing about the real essence of the bird, leading him to conclude: “Et voilà. Il y a de bonnes choses à prendre, apprendre. Satisfaction pourtant de constater que rien n’est là de ce que je veux dire et qui est tout l’oiseau (ce sac de plumes qui s’envole étonnamment). Je n’arriverai donc pas trop tard. Tout est à dire. On s’en doutait” (“And there you go. There are good things to be taken, to be learned. Satisfaction however in noting
that nothing is there that is both what I want to say and entirely the bird (this bag of feathers that
amazingly flies away). Thus I will not arrive too late. Everything is still to be said. This was in
doubt;” 350-351). Words—and their definitions—cannot account for the thing in-and-of-itself;
that remains to be written. In “Le gymnaste,” the male subject is ridiculed, compared to a
monkey (although less adept than one), a caterpillar and finally referred to as “le paragon adulé
de la bêtise humaine” (“the paragon of human folly”). Gérard Farasse reads this poem in part as
an “auto-portrait,” in which Ponge, “se soignant par la dérision, tente d’exorciser le risque que
lui fait courir une virtuosité conquise” (“curing himself by derision, attempts to avoid the risk
posed by a conquered virtuosity;” 183). It appears that Ponge emphasizes the gymnast’s—or his
gymnast’s—folly in order to highlight the folly of his own mimetic endeavours. As a self-portrait
of the poet, Ponge’s gymnast is both hopeful—waving at his audience upon his finale—and
comical, reduced by art to a mere caricature of a man.

Picking and choosing words

Marianne Moore’s style of literary criticism is generally far more subtle than that of Ponge,
which means that her meditations on poetry and the mimetic value of language are often more
deeply embedded in observations on other works of art or commonplace things. In both life and
art, Moore tended towards subtlety and restraint rather than excess, and frequently expressed her
dislike for things like “affectation or exhibitionism” (*Prose* 436), qualities which she felt
afflicted much of poetry. Her own poems, then, do not explicitly confront the limitations of
language, but rather use imagery and metaphor to explore how poetry communicates ideas and
experiences. Bonnie Costello contends that Moore’s poems “inevitably fail at exact description,”
but “succeed in imaginative representation, which becomes an imaginary possession in
consolation for the reality that poetry can never possess” (17). Costello’s remark is pertinent to a
discussion of Moore’s attitude towards the function of language because it reveals the
importance the poet lent to the poetic potential of language. When it comes to good poetry,
Moore writes, “we forget about what we think and automatically we are helplessly interested”
(*Prose* 436). It is for this reason that she bestowed upon poetry the moral duty to be truthful and
non-deceptive; the one way that she could hold her own poetry to this standard was by making
her language correspond to the world of the poem, rather than to the real (external) world.
According to this model, language would be freed from the constraints of an ideal which tried to make its words inextricably bound with their objects of reference, which meant that the poet could not be accused of false representation. At the same time, however, language would be shown to offer more than merely arbitrary sign substitutes for things; when introduced to the world of the poem, its rhetorical devices would draw relevant connections (between word and thing) that might otherwise not exist. The difficulties Moore encountered in implementing this model lay in not losing the essence of the subject-thing when bringing it into the world of the poem. The following three poems, “Critics and Connoisseurs” (1916), “Picking and Choosing” (1920) and “Bowls” (1923) reveal how the poet reconciled the difficulty of “holding” her subjects in language with her determination to give them life in her poetry.

“Critics and Connoisseurs” (C.P. 38-39) may be something of a precursor to Moore’s animal poems, for it celebrates the “unconscious fastidiousness” embodied by certain animals she observes in nature. The poet recalls various observations she has made of animals and claims that the poetry she finds in these images is greater even than the poetry to be found in veritable art objects (“Certain Ming / products, imperial floor coverings of coach- / wheel yellow”). Having described an encounter with a strong-minded swan, she writes: “I have seen this swan and / I have seen you; I have seen ambition without / understanding in a variety of forms.” The second-person address comes as a bit of a surprise in this poem (it is rare in any of Moore’s poems, for that matter), since the unspecified “you” appears seemingly from nowhere and disappears just as quickly as it surfaced. The “you” looms up almost strangely in the transition between the image of the swan and that of the ant, as though to emphasize the self-other divide that characterizes the poet observing her subject-things. Moreover, Moore “sees” these things “without understanding” and celebrates the poetic experience to be had in observing from a distance the other.22 “Critics and Connoisseurs” is more than the catalogue of items that “When I Buy Pictures” describes, since it tries to recreate and finally understand the motivations or raison-d’être of its subject-things: “What is / there in being able / to say that one has dominated the stream in an attitude of self-defense; / in proving that one has had the experience / of carrying a stick?” There is the

22 Admittedly, the line “I have seen ambition without / understanding” could be read as the poet having seen a creature that does not understand its own ambition. This interpretation conflicts with Moore’s habitual approach to non-human animals, since in the majority of her animal poems she imbues her subjects with intelligence, morality and an understanding of their own selfhood.
sense that Moore is asking this question not only in regard to the animals’ actions, but also in regard to her poem’s ability to recreate these experiences through words. The Sisyphus-like “experience / of carrying a stick” could very well be the poet’s own experience of trying to render an observation into words. For either action one might ask: what is the point of such a struggle?

“Picking and Choosing” (C.P. 45), as its title would suggest, is more explicit in confronting the difficulties involved in reading and writing literature: “If one is afraid of it, / the situation is irremediable; if one approaches it familiarly, / what one says of it is worthless.” The poem praises straightforwardness and honesty both in composition (the artist’s) and analysis (the critic’s), so that literature, itself “a phase of life,” does not clash with the truth values we promote in our other activities: “The opaque allusion, the simulated flight upward, / accomplishes nothing.” The poem also hints at the possibility of writers performing more or less naturally and writing something of their selves into their art. On Thomas Hardy, we read: “It is not Hardy the novelist / and Hardy the poet, but one man interpreting life as emotion.” The second stanza, in particular, hints at the idea of art naturally finding truths through the image of the small dog “nipping the linen and saying / that [he has] a badger.” “A right good salvo of barks,”23 the poem reads, is all that is necessary to initiate the path towards the genuine, although even the image of the small, wrinkly-faced dog bears the trace of “When I Buy Pictures”’s catalogued items, genuine in the imagination if not in reality. Bonnie Costello has noted a passage that Moore copied into her reading diary a short time prior to composing “Picking and Choosing,” which further complicates the latter image. The passage reads: “An artist’s touches are sometimes no more articulate than the barking of a dog who would call attention to something without exactly knowing what. This is as it should be and he is a great artist who can be depended on to bark at nothing” (Costello 35). Whether or not Moore saw some truth to this passage is unclear; what is clear is the fact that she saw through some of its hyperbole and seized the opportunity to parody it by making a literal image out of its idea. By depicting the small dog feigning its hunting skills, “Picking and Choosing” makes literal the analogy between artistic inspiration and the barking of a dog, while also playing with the line “A right good salvo of barks.” Moore both parodies and

23 Moore presses the reader to “remember Xenophon” when she introduces this quote.
benefits from the “overdetermined image” of the dog (to borrow Costello’s term) in order to pick and choose images that fit both her literary criticism and creative endeavours.

The last poem I will discuss in this section is “Bowls” (C.P. 59), which begins on a cricket pitch and ends in the writing of a letter. The first eight lines of the poem describe the sporting event in such a way that they could either be describing a painting or they could be a verbal painting of an actual event. Reality may become art to the poet’s precise eye, for to transfer one to the other does not entail freezing an (animated) experience into a static representation:

   in the manner of Chinese lacquer-carving,
   layer after layer exposed by certainty of touch and unhurried incision
   so that only so much color shall be revealed as is necessary to the picture,
   I learn that we are precisionists,
   not citizens of Pompei arrested in action
   as a cross-section of one’s correspondence would seem to imply.

The poem is imbued with an energy that refuses arrest and complacency and which is mirrored in the minimal punctuation of its twenty-nine lines. Using the title as the subject of the first line, the poem contains only two sentence periods and a handful of commas and dashes, all of which lend the impression of a breathless speaker in a hurry to accomplish her verbal endeavours. With the deftness of a cricket match in which balls are bowled and pins “quickly dispersed”—albeit over a long period of time—the poet catches an idea and runs with it, as though she is aware that to dally too long would result in an intellectual dispersal similar to that of the cricket pins.

The idea caught by the poet pertains to writing and maintaining currency in an age where words and ideas can quickly become used and outmoded. Hence she affirms:

   Renouncing a policy of boorish indifference
   to everything that has been said since the days of Matilda,
   I shall purchase an etymological dictionary of modern English
   that I may understand what is written,

The speaker’s industriousness is partly the result of her feeling that were she to be idle like Aesop’s grasshopper (counterpart to the ant mentioned in line sixteen), language would pass her by and no longer be relevant to her modern age. The example of the magazine which “will appear the first day of the month / and disappear before one has had time to buy it” is also a metaphor for the fleeting value of language. The poem suggests that we can never read language as something static, for to read but “a cross-section of one’s correspondence” would be akin to considering only one layer of the “Chinese lacquer-carving,” a feat that is not only near-to-
impossible, but also highly deceptive. “Bowls” captures the same fastidiousness that one reads in “Critics and Connoisseurs” and “Picking and Choosing,” in that it refuses complacency and a passive approach to poetry. There may be no such thing as a natural, mimetic language, the poems imply, but there is such a thing as good poetry that can replicate the effects of this kind of language.

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Mimetic representation was a pressing issue for Moore, Ponge and a large number of their contemporaries, because they found themselves at a point in time where many wished to reject the possibility of mimesis outright, despite its lingering holdover from romanticism. Their preoccupation with the mimetic function of poetry caused many poets to turn inwards and to examine their own habits of manipulating language to get closer to their subject-things. As I will argue in the following chapter, the turn inwards resulted in a new kind of self-reflective poetry in the modernist period. For the thing poets, poetic reflection offered a way of understanding and representing the other without creating a hierarchy between subject and object, poet and thing.
Chapter 2
Reflection as Discovery

As writers in the twentieth century increasingly questioned the honesty and accuracy of their literary representations in a self-reflexive manner, the concept of literary reflection grew increasingly pluralized. To build upon M. H. Abrams’s metaphor, writers were neither holding a single mirror up to the world nor shining a lamp upon it, but rather holding a series of reflective glasses up to their subjects in order to make evident their manipulation of language in the act of poetic creation. In the previous chapter I explored how the nineteenth-century ideal of a natural language continued to influence Moore and Ponge into the modernist period in which they began writing, and in the present chapter I will consider the reflective techniques they employed as a result of the tension they felt between their desire for a natural language and their awareness of the actual limitations of language. More specifically, I will explore the reflective capacities of their poems in terms of their ability to reflect inwards as well as outwards, and their ability to engage the subject-thing as an other.

The first section of this chapter will consider Moore and Ponge’s use of reflection in terms of the crystal, an image common to modernist thought. The crystal metaphor was popular in modernist literature and design, and can be seen most notably in the early-twentieth-century architecture inspired by German expressionism. I have chosen the crystal as a symbol for the mimetic representation of things in Moore and Ponge’s poetry because it captures the plurality of reflections taking place in their poems. While attempting to reflect the subjecthood of various things into poetry, the poets inevitably reflect their own selves—and their act of seeing and writing—into the realm of their language as well. In this way they demonstrate the intersections between writer, the act of writing and that which is written, but also the gaps between them that prevent an absolute seizure of the latter through language.

In the second section I focus specifically on one form of reflection occurring in their thing poems: the double-sided reflection between self and other. In many of their poems, language assimilates itself to the subject-thing to the extent that the subject of the poem becomes not only the thing of representation but also the act of representation. As their poems attempt to adopt the characteristics of that which they represent—either iconically, or through rhythm, sound,
imagery or metaphor—the poets begin to engage with these things as proper subjects (rather than objects) in the world. In this way they confront the phenomenological limitations of their poetry and consider the other (even in the case of inanimate objects) as a subject with being. Phenomenology was a growing field of philosophy around the time of early modernism, and one philosopher who bears particular relevance to Moore and Ponge’s poetics is Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of what it means to be conscious of others is explained through the metaphor of a double-sided mirror, in which self and other become implicated in one another’s image. As a phenomenologist he shed important light on the notion of multiple reflection, and it is for this reason that I discuss his work in the context of Moore and Ponge’s relationship with their poetic subjects.

The third part of this chapter looks at the role of the shell motif in their poems, and considers how shells are made to symbolize the impenetrability or non-representability of the other. Shelled creatures have been a prominent feature of all kinds of poetry for ages, in large part because there is a sense of mystery and wonder tied to the intricate nature of their design. In Moore and Ponge’s shell poems, the exterior design of the shell is presented as a thing to be admired and it is furthermore given as a model for good poetry. In spite of the poets’ desire to reflect the shell’s qualities into the language of their poems, however, there is a quality of resistance to this thing that refuses to yield to language. They use the shell motif to capture, once again, the sense of distance or otherness the poet encounters between his/her self and the other s/he tries to represent in words.

2.1: The modernist crystal

The way in which artists and philosophers have conceived of art’s reflective capacities has evolved over time, although several important shifts occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Romantic theorist M. H. Abrams argues in The Mirror and the Lamp (1953) that the nineteenth century saw a shift away from the conception of art as an act of passive reflection towards that of art as an active projection of the artist’s experience onto the world. Abrams illustrates the shift through the work of primarily English poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Byron, and notes a decline in mimetic technique as the poets touted the importance of the individual mind’s contributions towards its objects of perception. More recently, Frederick
Burwick has argued that the romantic period in Western literature marked not the end of mimesis and reflection but a turning point in self-reflexivity, in which the new mirror perspective introduced by individualism caused poets to conceive of the external world as something to be reflected off of the artist, rather than directly copied through words. “Reflections,” he writes, “often prompt us to ponder both the internal and external aspects of visual experience. Often, too, they reveal possible connections between mimetic description and poetic invention” (141). Thus in Burwick’s view, the rise of individualism during this period did not negate the reflective aspect of art, but simply widened its scope to include the inner experience of the artist him/herself. Reflection no longer entailed a mimetic movement from thing to image to word, but rather a non-linear movement from thing to image to poet to word.

Burwick also explains the early romantic aesthetic of *l’art pour l’art* as possessing “a mimetic process that required an interplay of the object perceived, the imagination of the perceiver, and the material medium in which its form and essence were to be communicated” (44).24 According to this logic, the material component—in the case of poetry, language—is highlighted in the act of representing or reflecting into poetry something from the outside world. This three-part interplay arguably saw an increase in most modernist poetry since by the twentieth century, the majority of poets were no longer satisfied with taking a purely individual, subjective approach to representation and tried rather to procure a voice for their poetry that would speak for a collective. A century after Wordsworth’s deeply confessional “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (1798) there emerged Pound’s succinct and abstract account of being “In a Station of the Metro” (1916). Instead of Lamartine’s personal lament to lost love in “Le lac” (1817), there was Reverdy’s minimalist expression of loss in “Soleil” (1918). In the case of both of the later poems, the individual “I” has been replaced by a more distant or even non-apparent speaker and the experience and emotions evoked are abstract enough to leave room for interpretation. In the modernist climate, then, the notion of artistic reflection could not merely encompass the internal meditations of the poet as they made their way onto the represented object. Reflection also needed to account for the plurality of these thoughts and meditations—the

24 The term *l’art pour l’art* came long before the fin de siècle aestheticism that popularized the term. As Burwick reports, it was first uttered in Germany in 1804 in a conversation between Henry Crabb Robinson and Benjamin Constant in reference to the work of Schelling (Burwick 18).
artist’s desire to present a more objective view of a subjective experience—which frequently meant reflecting on the medium of language and its aptitude for poetic representation.

The poets’ drive towards plurality should lead us to consider reflection in terms of a group of mirrors, rather than a single one reflecting thing to image, with the poet somewhere in between. Better, perhaps, would be to consider reflection through the lens of a new kind of glass entirely, one which could reflect multiple images from a variety of angles. Thus from the notion of art offering a perfect mirror-like reflection of the thing-in-the-world (Plato’s ideal of mimesis), to the romantics’ conception of art as the individual’s interpretation of that mirror, we might consider modernism’s reflected image as a kaleidoscopic crystalline structure encompassing the original object, the artist and the artistic medium used (i.e. language). W. J. T. Mitchell alludes to this shift in perception in Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology, when he writes that “the distinctive modernist emphasis is on the image as a sort of crystalline structure, a dynamic pattern of the intellectual and emotional energy bodied forth by a poem” (25). Mitchell argues that the verbal image reached its peak of “sublimation” in modernism as poets and writers perceived the potential for an entire text to be defined as an image or “verbal icon,” “not as a pictorial likeness or impression, but as a synchronic structure in some metaphorical space” (25). According to this description, the modernist image reflects in a number of directions in order to accommodate the plurality of sources that assist in its creation. It is both thing and idea—or, as W. C. Williams wrote and Mitchell quotes, “no ideas but in things” (25)—as well as language and expression. The plurality of sources that influence and make up an image can be symbolized by the crystal, which itself reflects light and images in a variety of directions with its multiple sides and angles. Bonnie Costello writes that “[w]hat is satisfying about the variant angles of a crystal […] is that they seem to direct themselves inward and outward at once” (206). In a literary context, then, the crystal symbolizes the non-linear transfer between thing, image, poet and word, a transfer in which at any point one element may be highlighted over another.

The symbolism of the crystal is rich with mysticism, alchemy and divinity, R. H. Bletter explains, which makes it a perfect structural accompaniment to what Mitchell characterizes as the sublime modernist image. Bletter describes how the crystal metaphor saw a great popular resurgence through the German expressionists, due entirely to its symbolic associations from the past. Appearing first in literature (beginning with the work of Paul Scheerbart), it was taken up by a circle of architects led in part by Bruno Taut. The image appeared in the work of other
architects and designers as well. In reference to the Swiss architect Le Corbusier (working around the time of, though not in collaboration with, the German expressionists), Dagmar Motycka Weston describes the crystal as “an icon of purity, truth, perfection and harmony,” “the pure embodiment of the laws of nature: its geometric order and organic growth” (171). The crystal metaphor also was not limited to architecture. Around the same time in the early twentieth century, its form captured the interest of avant-garde groups such as the imagists and the cubists, whose very technique involved representing an object from as many simultaneous perspectives as possible. Its non-direct, non-linear mode of reflection captured the anti-mimetic aspirations of these artists who sought new and plural modes of expression.

Finally, there is some direct mention of the crystal metaphor in the work of both Moore and Ponge. In “Des cristaux naturels” (1946) (O.C. I 632-3), Ponge calls crystals the best approximations of pure reality, since they are perfectly defined solid matter yet fluid, transformed and energized by the light that they trap within their translucent walls. We are mesmerized by crystals, Ponge claims, because they are mineral matter with some semblance of life. They go beyond the usual “non-résistance passive” (“passive non-resistance”) of stones because of the way in which they interact with light when it enters their structure. Referring to them as stars amidst a sea of clouds, he writes:

Il s’agit ici d’espèces homogènes, aux éléments parfaitement définis, qui croissent par juxtaposition des mêmes atomes unis entre eux par les mêmes rapports, pour apparaître enfin selon leurs contours géométriques propres. […] Vides de toutes nuées, de toute ombre, la moindre lumière aussitôt s’y sent prise, et ne peut plus en sortir: alors, elle crispe les poings, s’agite, scintille, cherche à fuir, se montrant quasi simultanément à toutes les fenêtres, comme l’hôte éperdu d’une maison (par lui-même) incendiée … (633)

It is a matter here of homogeneous species with perfectly defined elements who grow by juxtaposition from the very atoms united by them by the same rapports, to appear finally according to their own geometrical contours. […] Devoid of all clouds, of all shadow, they immediately trap the slightest light and prevent it from exiting: and so it clenches its fists, fidgets, sparkles, seeks a method of fleeing, appearing quasi simultaneously at all windows, like the frantic host of a house set ablaze by his own hands…

The reflective power of crystals is what makes them so enticing and even—as Ponge suggests with the metaphor of a host burning in his own home—somewhat dangerous and unpredictable. Moore’s “Four Quartz Crystal Clocks” (1940) (C.P. 115-116) also reflects upon the power of
crystals and addresses the uses to which they have been put in “the world’s exactest clocks”—those, according to her notes, kept in the Bell Telephone Laboratories in New York. The poem stresses the importance of maintaining the accuracy of these clocks lest time itself be lost, a procedure which involves careful consideration of the delicate and somewhat volatile properties of quartz crystal:

[…] a quartz prism when
the temperature changes, feels
the change and that the then
electrified alternate edges
oppositely charged, threaten
careful timing; so that

dthis water-clear crystal as the Greeks used to say,
this “clear ice” must be kept at the
same coolness.

Crystal’s volatility is similar to that of language, the poem makes a point of mentioning, as it takes practice and repetition to avoid confusing a phrase like “glass / eyes for taxidermists / with eyeglasses from the optometrist.” Repetition, the poem suggests, is what trains one to achieve the reflections one comes to expect from language. The reflective glass of the crystal provides a good starting-point from which to consider the reflective plurality of many of Moore and Ponge’s thing poems. The following poems, “An Octopus” and “Le savon,” are analysed for their crystalline structure in order to show how they both reflect their subject-things into language as well as reflect upon the role of language in this same act.

The many sides of Mount Rainier

In Marianne Moore’s “An Octopus” (1924) (C.P. 71-6), the poem’s subject matter—the ice-covered Mount Rainier, in Washington—is crystal-like both in its glassy physical appearance and in the great number and diversity of subjects that dwell on its exterior. Its surface area is covered in zones and pockets where different plants and animals reside, and in crystal-like fashion these pockets each reveal a different aspect to the mountain’s overall function in nature. The octopus metaphor that sustains the poem reins in and unifies the diversity of the mountain’s inhabitants, yet at the same time it portrays the mountain as a fascinating, elusive and predatory creature, one whose habits and disposition would be unknown to the majority of readers and
potential visitors of the national park. The poem’s imagery is fast and vibrant and captures the plurality of the mountain’s many sides. The sharp descriptions of colour draw our mind’s eye from image to image incessantly and mimic the glare light emits when it hits a crystalline figure: we see the mountain-side’s “dots of cyclamen-red and maroon;” the rock bed’s “vermilion and onyx and manganese-blue interior;” the reflective pool’s “indigo, pea-green, blue-green, and turquoise;” and the bears’ den, “Composed of calcium gems and alabaster pillars, / topaz, tourmaline crystals and amethyst quartz.” Along with the vivid colours, details abound that convey the potential danger lying beneath the “sea of shifting snow-dunes,” indicating the restless creature that might stir at any moment. Descriptions such as “killing prey with the concentric crushing rigor of the python,” or “the rock seems frail compared with [the fir-trees’] dark energy of life” hint at the destruction to come, just as the prevalence of animal and plant life over human life indicates the wild, unconquered nature of the mountain.

Potential wild dangers notwithstanding, “An Octopus” maintains its connection to culture through its ample reflections on poetry. Early on, the rather delightful image of “The Goat’s Mirror” is described as “that lady-fingerlike depression in the shape of the left human foot, / which prejudices you in favor of itself / before you have had time to see the others.” In fact it is Moore who prejudices us in favour of this image by describing it first, before the others, and with vivid detail. Where the goat sees himself in the reflective lake, then, we might choose to see the poet’s hand embellishing the metaphor. The final eleven lines of the poem’s first half can be read in a similar light:

> these conspicuously spotted little horses are peculiar;  
> hard to discern among the birch-trees, ferns, and lily-pads,  
> avalanche lilies, Indian paint-brushes,  
> bears’ ears and kittentails,  
> and miniature cavalcades of chlorophylless fungi  
> magnified in profile on the moss-beds like moonstones in the water;  
> the cavalcade of calico competing  
> with the original American menagerie of styles  
> among the white flowers of the rhododendron surmounting rigid leaves  
> upon which moisture works its alchemy,  
> transmuting verdure into onyx.

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25 Moore herself visited and climbed a portion of Mount Rainier in 1922, accompanied by her mother and brother.
The “original American menagerie of styles” can be read as a characteristic of both the North American landscape as well as the poem, since these “spotted little horses” which are used to guide thrill-seekers up the mountain are lost both literally amongst the flora of the mountain, and figuratively amongst the vivid descriptions of the poem. The mention of “Indian paintbrushes” and the image of fungi “magnified in profile” further reflect the act of artistic creation and suggest that Moore is using the already-metaphoric ice from her octopus-mountain to reflect back upon her poetics.

As mentioned above, the poem is divided into two parts and it is in the second half that the self-reflexive discussion of poetry is brought into a more explicit light. This part begins by evoking the aesthetic pursuits of the Greeks who, the poet claims, “liked smoothness, distrusting what was back / of what could not clearly be seen.” As Patricia Willis has remarked, the Greek model of aesthetics and morality is raised in order to contrast with and accentuate the difficulty and irregularity, or the lack of “smoothness,” inherent to Moore’s own aesthetics (Willis, “First Notes”). “An Octopus,” like many of Moore’s poems—particularly the longer ones—is unquestionably complex, displaying precise factual description, complex metaphors, a well-disguised rhyme scheme and prosody, and obscure vocabulary. All of these elements lead the poem to behave like its object of representation, for the mountain too hides all sorts of plant and animal life, is difficult to climb and, due to its three-dimensional shape, can never be perceived at once in its entirety. Within the lines “It is self-evident / […] that one must do as one is told / […] / if one would ‘conquer the main peak of Mount Tacoma,’” there is a tenacity and even stubbornness that accompanies the determined individual trying to climb or write the mountain in all its difficulty and remoteness. Indeed the mountain is “damned for its sacrosanct remoteness— / like Henry James ‘damned by the public for decorum’; / not decorum, but restraint.” In a piece she wrote for Hound and Horn in 1934 entitled “Henry James as a Characteristic American,” Moore characterizes her fellow writer and at-one-time countryman as having seemed “haunted by awareness that rapacity destroys what it is successful in acquiring” (Prose 321), and claims that “[h]is respectful humility toward emotion is brave” (317). As Willis remarks, James figures in “An Octopus” as a counterpart to the Greeks (“First Notes” 259), but he also appears as a model of restraint, a model Moore would like to follow in deference to her subject-things. Both mountain and poem are easily misread and misunderstood, implies Moore, because we are too quick to ascribe rules and order to what cannot and should not be restrained.
Perhaps in order to avoid any definitive conquest, the poem ends with a paradoxical “Neatness of finish!” as what has been painstakingly constructed and minutely detailed suddenly comes tumbling down in an avalanche “‘with a sound like the crack of a rifle, / in a curtain of powdered snow launched like a waterfall.’” The poem ends by burying its subject-thing, the octopus of ice, which suggests that to have left it intact on the page would have given the false impression of the real mountain having been conquered. Unconquered and unfinished, the mountain and poet are left to renew their images.

Clean and proper language

In the spring of 1967, Francis Ponge did a series of radio interviews with author and founder of Tel Quel, Philippe Sollers. The last interview in the series focussed on Ponge’s most recent publication, Le savon (1967) and the concept of l’objoie, which is a follow-up term to l’objeu introduced in “Le soleil placé en abîme” (1928-54). Whereas l’objeu is a way of getting at the essence of a thing through a kind of mise-en-abîme, l’objoie is the result of a structure’s self-awareness, when it realizes and can thus rejoice in the fact that it is a structure based entirely upon convention. According to Ponge, the greatest statement a text can make is one of tautology in which it says: “je ne suis que ce que je suis” (Sollers 190). It matters not if the world is set in such entirely conventional terms that, as Ponge claims in the Sollers interview:

toute structure, quelle qu’elle soit, est déjà, bien entendu, conventionnelle par elle-même. Qu’il s’agisse des mots, des personnes, des machines, du monde entier, et de l’horlogerie universelle enfin, […] il est évident que tout cela est parfaitement conventionnel, dès l’origine. (189)

every structure, no matter what it is, is already conventional in-and-of-itself. Whether it is a question of words, persons, machines, the entire world, or of universal clockwork, in the end, […] it is clear that all of it is perfectly conventional, from its very origin.

Ponge embraces the necessity for tautology brought on by arbitrary language by rendering his poems self-referential entities in which he makes the same claims for language as he does for the thing he is describing. In this way language and thing reflect one another in mimetic fashion, but also reflect away from one another in order to show the irretrievable distance between the two.
Le savon (O.C. II 355-405) consists of a number of texts—poetic, self-reflective and essayistic in nature—which all focus on the nature of soap and the poet’s (and consequently humans’ in general) relationship to this cleansing material. Although it might seem an unlikely parallel at first glance, the common-enough yet precious substance that is soap bears crystalline properties in two ways. Firstly, its physical properties are altered when it comes into contact with other subjects—with each use it grows smaller—and the degree to which this occurs varies according to the nature of the subject with whom it comes into contact. Depending on how quickly soap diminishes and what properties it takes away from its user (dye, odour, dirt, etc.), we are given an impression of that individual. Secondly, just as we cannot hold onto the reflective images we perceive in a crystal when we alter our physical perspective, we cannot hold onto a bar of slippery soap easily in our hands. As we shift our bodies, the images we perceived in both crystal and soap are affected or lost. In both we may find only fleeting reflections of ourselves, ones that can never be immortalized. The slippery, elusive quality that soap adopts in one’s hands serves as a metaphor for Ponge’s own difficulties in holding his subject in writing, yet the bubbles it releases while foaming in water reveal its true essence, what Ponge refers to as “la perfection et la particularité d’un être-sous-tous-les-rapports” (“the perfection and the particularity of a being-in-every-respect;” 403). Much of Le savon consists of the poet describing his efforts to write a new text about soap despite all the existing sign systems to which this subject-thing already belongs; he tries to seize it, as it were, “tout nu” (“in the nude;” 385). As it turns out, he gets closest to his subject not by rubbing it against his body, but by observing the bubbles it releases as it dissolves in water. He writes: “Tout cela est bien plus, je pense, que métaphores continuées. Ces bulles sont des êtres sous tous (leurs) rapports. […] Ainsi, échappent-ils au symbole. […] Il ne s’agit plus d’un rapport d’utilité ou de service d’homme à objet. Au lieu de servir à quelque chose, il s’agit d’une création et non plus d’une explication” (“All this is more, I think, than continued metaphors. These bubbles are beings in very respect/in all of their relationships. […] In such a way they escape the symbol. […] It is no longer a relationship of utility or of the object’s service to man. Instead of serving some purpose, it is a question of creation and no longer one of explanation;” 403). No longer grasping the subject-thing within his hands (or on paper), the poet is able to see it in-and-of-itself, free from its functional purpose.

The text in which the bubbles make their appearance is the second-to-last text in Le savon, followed by the short text “Rinçage,” in which the poet literally rinses away the subject-soap to
make way for a new thing—the *serviette-éponge*—which would constitute the subject of a hypothetical new book. “Rinçage” implies the same message that we find at the end of “An Octopus,” for the subject-thing is removed from view in order to avoid fixed representation and to enable the words and images to renew themselves. In fact, in an earlier entry of *Le savon* Ponge admits that soap is merely a pretext to coerce his readers into reciting his own words with him, since he cares far more for the process of writing than for the prolonged existence of the words themselves (387). The message in both texts seems to be that words, once produced and gathered into speech or a text, hold less potential than words still in the process of combination. The exception to this rule is when a text achieves what Ponge refers to as *l’objoie*, which arguably occurs in the second-to-last text, entitled “De l’eau savonneuse et des bulles de savon.” Here the poet very explicitly aligns his act of writing with the description of his interactions with a bar of soap:

> Saturés de notre sujet, pas un mot qui ne se développe en allusions diverses. Nous sommes devenus susceptibles d’une succession indéfinie de bulles, que nous lâchons como elles nous viennent, isolées ou par groupes et sans trop y toucher: car nous savons qu’elles exploseraient, je ne dis pas seulement à la moindre provocation, mais au moindre contact, et même au moindre souffle, ou regard critique — comme aussi bien à la moindre exagération, exaspération de leur vanité intérieure … (402)

Saturated by our subject, every word develops according to different allusions. We have become susceptible to an indefinite succession of bubbles that we release as they come to us, alone or in groups, and without touching them too much: for we know that they would explode, I do not mean only when mildly provoked but also at the slightest contact, and even at the slightest breath, or critical regard — the same goes for the slightest exaggeration, exasperation at their interior vanity…

The words refer to the soap but then reflect back upon the poet in the act of writing. As the soap begins to adopt a life of its own by mixing with water and releasing bubbles, the poet sees his descriptions and his overall text as more than drawn-out metaphors. He sees traces of his subject-thing within these bubbles and the bubbles, translucent and reflective in nature, in turn reveal the traces of his own process of writing.

2.2: Reflection and the other

As poets of things, Moore and Ponge refused to treat their things as objects, preferring rather to grant them a subjecthood that entailed autonomy and being-for-oneself. In large part, the things
they adopted as subject matter are (or were at one point) imbued with life, as their poems frequently discuss animals, but also plants, fruits and vegetables. For Moore, the non-living subject-thing is often another work of art (“Nine Nectarines,” “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish”) that itself represents something of the human or natural world, although in a few select poems she addresses inanimate objects as proper subjects (“To a Steamroller,” “Sun,” “An Octopus”). As well, her titles occasionally will indicate inanimate objects such as “Armor’s Undermining Modesty” or “His Shield,” only to have them segue into a discussion of human attributes. In Ponge’s case, the things he observed and recorded into poetry do include inanimate objects like stones, candles and cigarettes, all of which he granted proper subject status. By *subject status* I mean that they are depicted as existing-for-themselves, and not solely in relation to humans or the function they serve us. While the poets’ desire to grant subject status to the things of their poetry was partly the result of their poetic aspirations towards genuine writing, it also indicates their willingness to consider non-human things-in-the-world as their others. In this regard, the crystalline nature of their poems is essential because it enables their own selves and acts of writing to be reflected into their poems and thereby shown to exist on a more or less equal level as their subject-things. Their poems’ capacity for multiple acts of reflection creates an intimate relationship between the poet and the thing or the writing self and the written other, whereby the relationship becomes one of definition through reflection. That is, when a thing is written into a poem, the *real* thing (or the thing-in-the-world) is altered to conform to the subjective system of language, and hence we are left with only its reflection in the poem. At the same time, however, the poet who is self-conscious about his/her adaptation of the subject, writes a self-reflexive critique into the poem. The poet and the subject-thing meet within the space of the poem as a series of reflections, which brings self and other into closer proximity as elements or shades of a common work of art.

Moore and Ponge’s poetics undermined the Cartesian division of self and other at a significant moment in philosophical thought, since during this same period philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre (among others) were exploring how knowledge pertains to the perception of things-in-the-world and the other. Phenomenology, as their discipline came to be known, can be described as “the unprejudiced, descriptive study of whatever appears to consciousness, precisely in the manner in which it so appears” (Moran 1). Because Ponge was more geographically proximate to the phenomenology movement—which took place
predominantly in Europe—he was acquainted with Sartre and drew praise and commentary from both him and Merleau-Ponty. In his review of Ponge’s *Le parti pris des choses*, Sartre reads Ponge as a poet who would *like* to find something in external objects that extends beyond our selves, but who ultimately recognizes the futility of doing so. According to Sartre, the fact that Ponge’s subject matter describes both the behaviour of a thing and the behaviour of those who observe that thing negates his potential materialism and reveals instead a phenomenology of nature:

> il est tant d’autres passages où Ponge nous révèle en même temps le comportement de la chose et notre propre comportement que son art nous paraît, comme il est de règle, aller plus loin que sa pensée. Car Ponge penseur est matérialiste et Ponge poète—si l’on néglige les intrusions fâcheuses de la science—a jeté les bases d’une Phénoménologie de la Nature. (Sartre 293)

there are so many other passages in which Ponge reveals to us at the same time the behaviour of the thing and our own behaviour that his art, as the rule goes, appears to surpass his thought. For Ponge the thinker is a materialist and Ponge the poet—if one ignores the unfortunate intrusions into science—has laid down the basis for a Phenomenology of Nature.

Although Marianne Moore was not involved with the phenomenology movement, her thing poetry, like Ponge’s, is in many ways a phenomenological study in how what we perceive may be transferred into poetry. Of all the theories that grew out of the movement, the philosopher to whom their poetics bears the most proximity is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, most notably the position he takes in his final, posthumous publication, *Le visible et l’invisible* (1964). In this study Merleau-Ponty posits that our vision of a thing is neither a part of ourselves nor a part of the thing-in-itself, but rather a combination of the two in which the seeing subject and seen thing move together towards a single being. This premise is in keeping with Merleau-Ponty’s earlier works, which stress the importance of our bodily and mental connection to one another as subjects sharing a world. He introduces this position in the foreword to *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), where he writes:

> En tant que je suis conscience, c’est-à-dire en tant que quelque chose a sens pour moi, je ne suis ni ici, ni là, ni Pierre, ni Paul, je ne me distingue en rien d’une “autre”

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26 In his essay “Le langage indirect et les voix du silence,” Merleau-Ponty writes that words transport their speaker and listener into a new, shared universe, and quotes Ponge in writing that this is their “épaisseur sémantique” (“semantic thickness;” *Signes* 94).
conscience, puisque nous sommes tous des présences immédiates au monde que ce monde est par définition unique, étant le système des vérités. (vi)

Insofar as I am a consciousness, that is to say insofar as something has sense for me, I am neither here nor there, neither Pierre, nor Paul, I do not distinguish myself in any way from an “other” consciousness, since we are all immediate presences in the world that is by definition unique, being the system of truths.

Merleau-Ponty’s concept of being accounts for the plurality of other beings in the world, and so he conceives of interactions with and representations of others as materializing through a series of reflections. In his final work, Merleau-Ponty explains his notion of reflection by way of a double-sided mirror. The problem with “I” perceiving an other, he writes in Le visible et l’invisible, is that an other, like myself, would be a pure source of vision; thus, in the other’s eyes, I too become merely an other. In order for me to perceive the life of the other and vice versa, I must grant him/her Pour Soi (Being for him/herself), which would make us mirrors of one another, implicated in one another’s image. Our existence as seeing entities depends upon a reciprocal relationship of being for the self and being for the other, and we cannot exist independently of that system of reciprocity.

The above system notwithstanding, the fact that we are corporeal bodies that both see and can be seen instils in us what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a “fundamental narcissism,” for we constantly see ourselves in the objects of our perception as they reflect our gaze back to us. The same occurs with things:

Il y a vision, toucher, quand un certain visible, un certain tangible, se retourne sur tout le visible, tout le tangible dont il fait partie, […] ou quand, entre lui et eux, et par leur commerce, se forme une Visibilité, un Tangible en soi, qui n’appartiennent en propre ni au corps comme fait ni au monde comme fait,—comme sur deux miroirs l’un devant l’autre naissent deux séries indéfinies d’images emboîtées qui n’appartiennent vraiment à aucune des deux surfaces, puisque chacune n’est que la réplique de l’autre, qui font donc couple, un couple plus réel que chacune d’elles. De sorte que le voyant étant pris dans cela qu’il voit, c’est encore lui-même qu’il voit : il y a un narcissisme fondamental de toute vision; et que, pour la même raison, la vision qu’il exerce, il la subit aussi de la part des choses, que, comme l’on dit beaucoup de peintres, je me sens regardé par les choses, que mon activité est identiquement passivité […] (Visible 183)

There is vision and touch when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns upon the entire visible and tangible of which he is a part, […] or when, between him and them, and by their commerce, a Visibility and Tangibility within oneself are formed that belong de facto neither to the body nor to the world,—as though two indefinite series of interlocked images arise from two mirrors one in front of the other, but in fact
belong to neither of the two surfaces since each is only the replica of the other, and
the two therefore form a couple that is more real than either of them on their own.
The result is that when the seer is caught in that which he sees, it remains himself
that he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision; and that, for the same
reason, the vision that he exercises is subjected to the part of things as well, and so,
as it is often said of painters, I feel myself looked upon by things, and so my activity
is equally passivity [...]
In defence of things

Moore was once described by William Carlos Williams as “a saint,” and while the benevolent title no doubt referenced her personal interactions with others, it might also be extended to her treatment of poetic subjects.27 With very few exceptions, Moore approached the latter with an air of protection and affection, as though to take the side of things meant literally to defend them and celebrate them. In protecting her subjects, however, Moore was also to some extent protecting her own self that she exposed in writing, for within the things of her poetry—from snails, to bulrushes, to jerboas—we see elements of the moral and artistic values she strived to uphold as a poet. Such is the example of “To a Snail” (1924) (C.P. 85), which is written in a compressed, modest, slow-moving fashion that mimics the snail’s own movement. An apostrophe in twelve lines of which none is longer than sixteen syllables, the poem has ample punctuation to maintain a steady pace and rhythm. There is no rhyme scheme (internal or otherwise) and no outlandish metaphors that might break with the simple nature of the subject. Furthermore, each descriptive element depends upon the next so that the lines give the appearance of an uninterrupted flow; this is aided by the fact that there are only three sentence periods in the poem, which occur in its second, third and final lines. Propositions build upon one another in much the same way that a snail’s overall grace is the result of “not the acquisition of any one thing” but rather the entirety of its being.

In the manner described thus far, “To a Snail” reads as a mimetic tracing of the snail both structurally and thematically, but beneath the imitation or the reflection of the real snail into the poem, there are equal amounts—if not more—of self-reflection taking place. The poem is about “style,” as indicated in the first line and then reiterated in the eighth. Style is judged on a system of values and the poet makes sure to emphasize the social importance it wields with qualifying statements such as “If ‘compression is the first grace of style” and “It is not the acquisition of any one thing / […] / that we value in style” (all italics mine). By implying that she is merely restating agreed-upon values, Moore distances herself from the role of the critic and better aligns

27 “Marianne was our saint—if we had one—in whom we all instinctively felt our purpose come together to form a stream. Everyone loved her” (Autobiography 146).
herself with the modest, unassuming snail. The climax of the poem’s meditation on poetry accompanies the statement that that which we value in style is:

[...] the principle that is hid:
in the absence of feet, “a method of conclusions”;
“a knowledge of principles,”
in the curious phenomenon of your occipital horn.

All of these descriptions—save the last, which I discuss below—lend themselves not only to the snail but equally to the poet (Moore) whose poems may lack a distinct metre but are still suited to reach conclusions and understand principles of composition, both of which qualities equate with an understanding of truth and correctness. As Moore explained in an interview late in her career, rhythm was always her “prime objective” as a poet but beyond that one motivator she did not wish to submit her poetry to any distinct poetic movement or style, claiming that “[t]he individuality and emotions of the writer should transcend modes” (*Prose* 587-88).

The snail embodies the poet’s independence and indifference to artistic trends because it is able to escape its surroundings by retreating into its shell. It also signifies her creative talents because it promises something unknown and possibly unexpected—hence the occipital horn—in the modesty afforded to it by this same shell. (More on the shell motif will be discussed in a later part of this chapter.) The “principle that is hid” is the anticipated unknown of the snail’s essence, and that which the poet uses to describe the essence of her own writing craft. It also recalls the piercing glances in “When I Buy Pictures” or the waving, unwavering truth from “In the Days of Prismatic Color” (C.P. 41-42), where the poet explains truth as that which does not adhere to style or formal principles:

[...] Truth is no Apollo
Belvedere, no formal thing. The wave may go over it if it likes.
Know that it will be there when it says,
“I shall be there when the wave goes by.”

All three poems convey the sense that artistic truth is not to be found only in complex, overly-determined works of art, but also—and more frequently—in mundane things, those that suit one’s “average moments” and that will remain before and after the trend waves pass it by. Truth is to be found in complexity with order, complexity—like the snail’s nature-given physical complexity—that can be understood for its higher purpose in the world of nature.
The final line of “To a Snail” refers to the all-important principle hid “in the curious phenomenon of your occipital horn,” the latter being a characteristic unique to the snail that is strange (or curious) to those unfamiliar with it. In this line Moore, being true to her mimetic form, increases the line’s syllable count so that it too protrudes from the other lines in the manner of the snail’s protruding horn. Furthermore, the image reflects upon the physical characteristics of poetry and conveys the element of “strangeness” modern poets like herself bring to the genre. Hence, whereas many modernist poets deliberately obscured their signifieds in order to demonstrate the lack of a direct correlation between sign and thing, Moore doubly emphasizes the signified through both the form and content of her poetry. “To a Snail” thus demonstrates the possibility for words both to fulfil their mimetic function and to reflect back upon this function. The poem adopts the inner qualities and physical characteristics of the snail through structure and content—thereby rendering itself something of a linguistic equivalent to a snail—while using these same qualities and characteristics to describe the nature of poetry itself.

Another way of reading the final line, however, is as a self-directed criticism of art’s inability to capture the inner essence of its subjects. As an aesthetic form, poetry invents, embellishes and draws connections by selecting certain images it deems suitable over others. While certain properties of the snail such as its “compression,” “contractility” and “absence of feet” can easily apply to the poet’s style, its occipital horn stands starkly out of place, unable to fit into an otherwise neat piece of poetry. Elizabeth Joyce contends that this line enters the modernist “form/content controversy” and that Moore “can never abandon overt content sufficiently to foreground form exclusively,” a factor that allows her to distance herself from the cultural critiques she makes (28). In fact, however, Moore emphasizes the ill-fitting image in order to reveal explicitly the limitations of her poem’s mimetic capacities and to make obvious her attempts to reflect the subject into language. Her critique—of language—is brought into the open when the ill-fitting image of the occipital horn reflects the act of writing. In this respect, the expository qualities of the final line have more to do with the reverse side of a mirrored glass than to its shiny, reflective side. Derrida terms the dull, non-reflective backing of a mirror its “tain” (see *La dissémination*). Rodolphe Gasché explains how Derrida’s philosophy seeks to show the limits of perceivable or knowable reflection, writing that “rather than being a philosophy of reflection, [it] is engaged in the systematic exploration of that dull surface without which no reflection and no specular and speculative activity would be possible, but which at the
same time has no place and no part in reflection’s scintillating play” (6). By considering the mirror’s reflection from the perspective of its tain, Gaschê explains, Derrida reveals how reflection is limited by the “infrastructural agencies written on its invisible side, without which it could not even begin to occur” (238). Derrida’s deconstruction theory is in many respects an adaptation of phenomenology, which makes him relevant in discussing the thing poets in the context of Merleau-Ponty. Derrida critiques Cartesian self-reflection for ignoring the other and rendering the world one of objects for the subject’s consideration (Gaschê 14). In “To a Snail,” Moore critiques the supposition that art can conform to a thing-in-the-world because the manner by which art reflects its subjects is inevitably determined by a multitude of aesthetic factors that have no real bearing on the original subject. By giving her readers a glimpse of the reverse side of the reflective glass, as it were, Moore reveals the limitations to her poetic reflection and permits the snail to maintain its essential otherness.

Another example in which Moore’s self-reflection is both made explicit and then critiqued is in the early, unpublished poem, “To a Stiff-winged Grasshopper” (Poems of Marianne Moore 34):

As I unfolded its wings,
   In examining it for the first time,
      I forgot the war:
         I thought I had discovered something. Then I discovered
            That Others, also, thought they had discovered something.
               We stood like the snake swallowing its tail, comprising a ring.

Superstition forges rings
   Of iron. A ring is the most extreme form
      Of symbol. Rings mar
         The symmetry of loyal regard: we philosophized:
            And said we could not have been acts in anyone’s ring,
               Had it not been inevitable in the case of this thing.

Apart from the shape which iconically approximates the outstretched wings of a grasshopper, the poem resonates immediately with a sense of culpability. In the first stanza a lesson is taught by experience; in the second, the poet contemplates this lesson and laments the inevitability of the experience repeating itself on a larger scale. The two stanzas reflect one another visually, which accentuates the culpability and self-judgement of the poet. The experience described in the poem is one common enough to novice poets since it involves the assumption that meaning can be found anywhere within the realm of art and that symbols need not pertain to anything real in the world. The fact that the observer uses the grasshopper’s wings as a launching pad from which to
reflect upon something else implies that anything in the world is an object at a subject’s disposal. The image of the vulnerable grasshopper, either dead or subdued and with outspread wings, implies that even animals can be objectified for the purposes of artistic reflection, which in turn creates ever-lasting symbols. The poem of course rejects these implications in its second stanza (which mirrors the first), and we are left with the impression of a poet painfully aware of her own limitations within language and more specifically, the rhetorical language of poetry.

Another early poem by Moore, “The Fish” (1918) (C.P. 32-33), presents a somewhat more optimistic view of artistic reflection and its treatment of the other. In this poem we are introduced to a slightly fantastic rendition of the sea, one in which the fish “wade / through black jade” (italics mine), “crow-blue mussel-shells” are likened to “an / injured fan,” and barnacles “encrust the side / of the wave.” Whereas “To a Snail”’s modest structure and unembellished imagery conveyed the superficial structure of a mollusc, “The Fish” dives straight into an elaborate system of metaphors and similes that convey the terrific and elusive nature of the sea—a topic Moore again explored in “A Grave” (1921). The formal structure of the poem too is noteworthy since it is written in syllabics with a pronounced rhyme scheme of a / a / b / b / c, which also reflects the steady tidal movement of the waves. As Costello has noted in reference to the poem’s final image of the cliff face, “The poem itself is a kind of chasm: its steady rhythm bears a varying texture of elements that ‘slide each on the other’ in a blending of images” (74). Indeed, Moore blends images by moving from thing to thing in the manner of a fish swimming swiftly in the water.

Much of the imagery of “The Fish” pertains to interiors and exteriors, elements hidden and revealed, or gathered and stored. The water in which the fish navigate is described as thick and dark (“black jade”); the mussels continually open and close their shells; the barnacles try (unsuccessfully) to hide in the waves; and the sea, finally, remains and “grows old” in the cliff. Light too is used in a way that both conceals and reveals, as we see with the sunlight reflected off the water (“shafts of the / sun, / split like spun / glass, move themselves with spotlight swiftness / into the crevices”) and the description of the jellyfish, crabs and toadstools as “stars.” This kind of imagery serves well to accentuate the reflective nature of the sea, and the fact that water can be both translucent and opaque. That is to say, when gazing at water, one can see both the things that reside beneath it as well as one’s own reflection. Moore says as much in her poem “A Grave” (C.P. 49-50), in which, warning of the powerful though indifferent nature of the sea, she
writes: “the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look.” When the sea mirrors the look of a person who would like to conquer it, it not only mirrors the person superficially, but also assumes a parallel desire to conquer that person in return. “A Grave” warns that the sea is not an object to be controlled by humans, that although “it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing, / but you cannot stand in the middle of this.”

The human element in “The Fish” is replaced by the image of the cliff, which in fact does stand in the middle of the sea due to its ability to co-exist with the latter. The cliff can be read as a metaphor for poetic language, as we see with its description in the following lines:

All
e external
marks of abuse are present on this
defiant edifice—
all the physical features of
ac-
cident—lack
of cornice, dynamic grooves, burns, and
hatchet strokes, these things stand
out on it; the chasm side is
dead.
Repeated
evidence has proved that it can live
on what can not revive
its youth. The sea grows old in it.

The cliff has been worn down both at the hands of humans and as a result of nature taking its toll, but it is “defiant” in its continued will to live. Its strength comes from the fact that its overall structure remains intact, meaning that despite the “marks of abuse” that scar its exterior, it stands its ground and defies the waves like no other element of the sea. Poetic language operates in the same way as the cliff. Words may grow old and be used and abused in a variety of ways—adopting new meanings and losing their old—but they thrive on this very manipulation for it keeps them alive. The poet who tries to represent the genuine nature of things is faced with the problem of how best to use language that already bears the marks of abuse in a way that is still new enough to convey the vitality of the other’s being. The first half of the poem that focuses on the sea approaches the issue in earnest and with rhetorical flourish, as though following the cry
of Pound’s “Make it new!”\textsuperscript{70}. The second half, stopped short at the edge of the cliff, is forced to reflect on just how this is possible with such a rough-handled language at one’s disposal.

It is not surprising that William Pratt included “The Fish” in his 1963 anthology of imagist poems,\textsuperscript{28} because in many ways it captures the intensity of emotion of an early H. D. poem like “Sea Rose.” The imagist movement, “founded” through a manifesto by Ezra Pound in 1913,\textsuperscript{29} aimed to treat the object as a thing-in-itself, without obscuring it through external description that did not inextricably belong to the thing’s properties. The imagist object furthermore had to be infused with energy, act as “a vortex or cluster of fused ideas” and operate on a level akin to that of music (Pound, “Affirmations” 293). While both Moore and Ponge shared many poetic principles in common with the imagists, they can be distinguished from the latter group in precisely the neutrality of their poetic (self) reflection, which avoids drawing the poetic subject into a metaphor for their own selves. Consider the above-mentioned “Sea Rose” by H. D.:

\begin{verbatim}
Rose, harsh rose, 
marred and with stint of petals, 
meagre flower, thin, 
sparse of leaf, 

more precious 
than a wet rose 
single on a stem— 
you are caught in the drift.

Stunted, with small leaf, 
you are flung on the sand, 
you are lifted 
in the crisp sand 
that drives in the wind.

Can the spice-rose drip such acrid fragrance 
hardened in a leaf?
\end{verbatim}


\textsuperscript{29} Imagism’s roots, however, can be traced back several years earlier to the British poet T.E. Hulme and his Poet’s Club. In 1908, according to F.S. Flint’s “History of Imagism,” Hulme met with a group of literary friends and proposed the idea of the club, and it was this group that first began writing in what became known as the Imagist style. Thus it was Hulme, prior to Pound, who first promoted the idea of the image as a way of using emotion to capture the truth of reality (Taupin 81).
H. D.’s sea rose and Moore’s cliff face in “The Fish” are both described in a vivid yet terse language that does well to capture the tenacity of the subject-thing in face of its hardships. Yet where the sea rose may be read as a metaphor for the poet’s person, the cliff face can be read only as a metaphor for the poet’s craft. Moore’s cliff—like her snail and other subject-things—possesses an essential otherness that prevents it from being subsumed entirely into a metaphor for the poet. As a metaphor for language, the cliff both reflects the poem and reveals the limits of that reflection, whereas H. D.’s sea-rose may be viewed simply as an extension of the poet’s self. A. K. Weatherhead has distinguished the two poets along the lines of Moore’s predilection for fancy, versus H. D.’s predilection for imagination, and contends that Moore used fancy to restrict feeling in her poetry by creating such well-defined images that the reader cannot further penetrate them. “[F]eeling is expressed by concrete images,” writes Weatherhead; “these are very carefully perceived, and to the extent that the poem pays attention to them, elaborating them for their own sakes with the play of fancy, the feeling is restrained” (58). By restraining feeling, Moore distinguishes the subject-thing from herself, which makes it better equipped to function as her reflective other.

Rooted in language

In his poem “Faune et flore” (O.C. I 42-46), Ponge suggests that the so-called “flowers” whose beauty and fragrance we all revere, are in all likelihood merely blemishes that plague an unfortunate species of plant that has little other means to attract attention. The ironic tone we find here can be detected in much of his thing poetry, as his approach to understanding things often consists of putting an original or unusual spin on our common understanding of these things in an attempt to uncover the unique experience of the other. His mode of entry into understanding things, however, is by poetically identifying with them, or obliging his own craft of writing to share their experience and/or situation (as he sees it). Plant life—and especially trees—proved particularly attractive subjects for Ponge because they are beings whose existence

30 The sea rose arguably can be read also as a metaphor for the poem.

31 Drawing on Coleridge’s distinction between imagination and fancy, Weatherhead calls the former “the molding and shaping of individual images” and the latter “the association of sensuous particularity” (26).
is more or less fixed and determined by the earth in which they are rooted and the seasons that cause them to grow, wither and renew themselves. In this respect they present ideal metaphors for poetic language which, according to Ponge, is equally fixed and determined in nature. In *Le parti pris des choses* (1942), the poet is drawn several times to the subject of plants with poems such as “Faune et flore” and “Le cycle des saisons,” both of which focus on plants which are determined and to a large extent constrained by their position in the world. 

Ponge uses the restricted nature of his subjects’ existence to make statements about the similar fate of language, and he equally demonstrates language’s constraints by reflecting upon his real-time (within the text) act of writing. By focusing as he does on the way in which plants demand a symbiotic relationship with their surroundings, Ponge comes to suggest that his writing too is part of this structure of dependency.

“Le cycle des saisons” (O.C. I 23-24) and “Faune et flore” both treat the subject of the reproductive cycles of plant life. The first concern Ponge has over plant life is that it is, to a large extent, predestined by the weather and the seasons. “Le cycle des saisons” describes trees’ efforts to express themselves in the springtime, after a winter of silence and retreat: “Ils ne peuvent plus y tenir: ils lâchent leurs paroles, un flot, un vomissement de vert (“They can no longer stand it: they release their words, a flood, a vomiting of green”). In “Faune et flore,” however, the poet characterizes plants’ development as similar to that of crystals:

Le temps des végétaux se résout à leur espace, à l’espace qu’ils occupent peu à peu, remplissant un canevas sans doute à jamais déterminé. Lorsque c’est fini, alors la lassitude les prend, et c’est le drame d’une certaine saison.

Comme le développement de cristaux: une volonté de formation, et une impossibilité de se former autrement que d’une manière. (O.C. I 44)

The vegetation period is determined by the plants’ space, by the space that they occupy little by little, filling a canvas that will undoubtedly forever be determined. Once it is finished, lassitude overcomes them and this is the tragedy of a certain season.

Akin to the development of crystals: a desire to form, and an impossibility to form other than *in a certain way*.

Recalling his essay “Des cristaux naturels,” we know that Ponge admired crystals for their clarity, self-sufficiency and accurate self-representation. It is interesting therefore that he chooses

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32 Plants also feature in the collection’s poems “Végétation” and “La Mousse.”
the crystal as an analogy to plants, for it implies that he admires their natural formation and situation—such that they grow and take shape without will or desire, but simply due to the fact that all their essential parts are programmed so as to combine in a certain way. While a crystal is not a living organism, it does give the appearance of reacting to its environment due to the way in which light and images reflect off its sides. Plants, while they are very much alive, display similar properties to an observer in that they react unconsciously to their environment. Ponge’s assimilation of plants and crystals furthermore implies that plants may reflect outwards if not inwards—that is, they may reflect the images of things external to them in the way that trees reflect seasons, but not the properties inherent to them. This shortcoming necessitates the role of the poet, since it becomes his job to write the plants in order for them to express themselves.

In both “Le cycle des saisons” and “Faune et flore” a variation of the following line appears: “L’on ne sort pas des arbres par des moyens d’arbres” (“One does not exit the trees by means of trees”). One cannot explain “trees” by means of trees. A tree that can only express itself by means of its leaves and branches can never obtain enough distance to go beyond a tautological explanation of what it is, and can never say more than “les arbres,” as the trees in “Le cycle des saisons” seem destined to repeat. These same trees realize as much at the end of summer (their season of prosperity) and in their dismay at the futility of their situation, they welcome the arrival of autumn and the death of all their words: “Une nouvelle lassitude, et un nouveau retournement moral. ‘Laissons tout ça jaunir, et tomber. Vienne le taciturne état, le dépouillement, l’AUTOMNE’” (“A new lassitude, and a new moral return. ‘Let all of this yellow and fall. May the taciturn state, the bareness, and AUTUMN arrive;’” 24). If the trees can no longer speak for themselves, whether or not the poet can assist them by speaking for them is debatable; this is the dilemma that forms the crux of Ponge’s poetics. After all, the poet too might find himself in a similar tautological situation at the end of writing a text if he were to realize that all he had expressed was his self—“Francis Ponge”—in various incarnations.

Derrida plays with this issue in his essay Signéponge, in which he finds that an author (or signature) within the text can never remain autonomous from the subject-thing because as soon as the signature comes close to it, it becomes involved in the writing of the thing and hence changed (or sacrificed). Derrida calls the thing-in-the-text-as-it-would-exist-in-reality the “impossible thing,” because a writer can never escape his/her own selfhood to represent a purely objective image of an other. The relationship between author and thing is one of infinite debt,
claims Derrida, in which the author’s signature is continually serving a never-ending chain of signifieds. The only (theoretical) way out of this contract of debt would be for the author to combine his/her signature with that of the impossible thing: “en transformant son texte en signature obliger la chose, l’obliger-à, mais à rien d’autre qu’à signer elle-même, à se signifier elle-même […] à devenir écriture-signature, à contracter avec Francis Ponge l’idiome absolu d’un contrat: une seule signature contresignée, une seule chose signant double” (“in transforming his text into a signature obliges the thing to do nothing other than sign itself, to signify itself […], to become writing-signature, to enter into the absolute idiom of a contract with Francis Ponge: a single countersigned signature, a single thing signing double;” 49). This contract can never happen, according to Derrida, because words are always involved in an infinite regress of signification and any such contract would be subjected to an endless mise-en-abyme. The sign is ultimately a sponge, he writes (playing on the proximity of “éponge” to “Ponge”), which erases the very thing it tries to represent:

la chose est toujours autre, parce que le propre disparaîtrait dans le commun, parce que la structure spongieuse du signe épongerait le nom propre dont il voudrait parler, dont il voudrait signer. Elle l’inscrirait dans un système de classification, de généralité conceptuelle, de répétition et de mise en abîme allant comme de soi. Le signe éponge la signature. (101)

the thing is always other, because that which belongs to oneself (le propre) would disappear in what is shared, because the spongy structure of the sign would sponge up the proper name of which it would like to speak, and which it would like to sign. It would inscribe the name into a classification system of conceptual generality, repetition and mise-en-abîme proceeding from the self. The sign sponges the signature.

The only solution to Derrida’s infinite debt is to embrace it, and to consider one’s self in perpetual relation to the other. Ponge’s plant poems propose this solution by showing how both subject-plant and poet need one another in order to express themselves. Ponge speaks for the plants as an external (other) voice because they themselves can never go beyond their selves to express anything other than a tautological self-declaration. And by speaking for the plants, Ponge finds himself engaging (or “sponging,” as Derrida put it) with the other that he both helps to define and that in return helps to define him as a writer.

In “Le cycle des saisons” and “Faune et flore,” Ponge recreates the plight of trees unable to move beyond the act of extending their pre-existing appendages in order to show how the writer, similarly, cannot move words beyond an extension of their already-existing roots and uses in the
history of language. “Faune et flore” describes the plants’ dilemma of being unable to express themselves in a manner that extends beyond their already-existing limbs: “Aucun geste, aucune pensée, peut-être aucun désir, aucune intention, qui n’aboutisse à un monstrueux accroissement de leur corps, à une irrémédiable excroissance” (“There is no gesture, no word, perhaps not even a desire, no intention, that will not result in a monstrous bodily growth, in an irremediable excrescence;” 42). By equating written language with plants, Ponge characterizes the former as something that always builds upon itself, that can never start anew but rather always from the seed of a previous thought. Just as every action of the plant leads to reproduction and a multiplication of its elements, every action of a word leads to another reference point, another signifier, another signified. Such is the position of entrapment in which both plants and writers find themselves. The connection between plants and words is made quite explicit with little attempt to disguise the allusion; the second sentence of “Le cycle des saisons,” for instance, provides a direct metaphor from leaves to words with the image of trees “vomiting words.” Furthermore, at a later point in “Faune et flore,” the poet distinguishes between plants and animals and in reference to the former, casually inserts the nous and me pronouns into the proposition about multiplying plants: “Infernale multiplication de substance à l’occasion de chaque idée! Chaque désir de fuite m’alourdit d’un nouveau chaînon!” (“Infernial multiplication of substance on the occasion of every idea! Each new desire to escape shackles me with a new link!”; 45). By making explicit this connection, however, Ponge more faithfully reproduces the plants’ constrained situation. Through the metaphor that connects plants to words, the reader gains a description of both nature and the act of writing as one and the same element, as though they are two branches growing from the same tree. In this way Ponge connects his writing self to the plant that is his other, and each offers a reflection of the other within the poem.

Near the end of his self-explanatory piece “My Creative Method” (1947-1948) (O.C. I 515-537), Ponge reveals the importance of differences in his work:

Les analogies, c’est intéressant, mais moins que les différences. Il faut, à travers les analogies, saisir la qualité différentielle. Quand je dis que l’intérieur d’une noix ressemble à une praline, c’est intéressant. Mais ce qui est plus intéressant encore,

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33 Ponge took this English title from a commentary on his writing by Better Miller, whose article was published in Horizon 16 (London) in September 1947 (O.C. I 1091).
c’est leur différence. Faire éprouver les analogies, c’est quelque chose. Nommer la qualité différentielle de la noix, voilà le but, le progrès. (536-7)

Analogies are interesting, but less so than differences. One must, through analogies, seize the differential quality. When I say that the interior of a nut resembles a praline, that is interesting. But what is even more interesting is their difference. To make analogies felt is one thing. To name the quality that makes the nut different, therein lies the goal, therein lies progress.

The fact that Ponge stresses the importance of describing a thing through its differences indicates his awareness of the inherent flaws of language that constantly threaten its use in poetic description. That is, he would rather rely on describing what a thing is not, than have words fall short of grasping their intended referent. His interest in the differences between things also reaffirms his demonstrated respect for the otherness of things and their own being-for-themselves in respect to himself as a subject. In another section of Méthodes, Ponge writes:

[Q]u’est-ce qu’un langage? Sinon un univers, comme l’autre, mais un univers fini, qui comporte moins d’objets que l’autre. […] Si bien que chacun des objets de cet univers—du fait même que ces objets sont en quantité limitée par rapport aux objets naturels—si bien donc que chacun des objets de ce monde, c’est-à-dire chaque mot, doit forcément être un signe pour plusieurs des objets du monde. Il s’agit d’un système signifiant. (O.C. I 647)

What is a language? Otherwise a universe, like the other one, but a finite universe, that consists of fewer objects than the other one. […] So that each one of the universe’s objects—due to the very fact that these objects are in limited supply compared to natural objects—so that each of the objects of this world, that is to say each word, inevitably has to be a sign for several objects of the world. It consists of a signifying system.

According to Ponge, there are only a limited number of words (“objets de cet univers”) to account for the entirety of things-in-the-world (“objets naturels”) and therefore each word must signify several things. By admitting this, Ponge seems to accept that language is a conventional system that shapes the way in which we perceive and/or conceive of our world.

It is perhaps his acceptance of the conventional nature of language that drew Ponge to quotidian objects such as “La cruche” (c. 1948-1949). The pitcher is a hollow container, basic in design and entirely functional. Yet poetically speaking, it bears a tangibility and sense of utility that cannot be found in language alone and it is these qualities that make it suitable to reflect the poet’s self and vice versa. The hollowness of a ready-to-use pitcher indicates its adaptability for both human and poetic use and throughout his poem Ponge tries to “fill the vessel” with the kind
of empty words that capture its vacuous essence. Ponge frequently selected subject-things that were solidly constructed, so that they might define themselves against his own mind as firmly as they did against other matter. As he wrote in “La Seine,” he preferred “n’importe quel objet résistant aux yeux par une forme aux contours définis, et aux autres par une densité, une compacité, une stabilité relatives également indiscutables” (“no matter what object that resists the eyes by means of well-defined contours, or a density, compactness, or stability that are equally indisputable;” O.C. I 246). The pitcher presented itself to Ponge as an attractive subject because its plain material composition required no lengthy amount of description. Its simplicity enabled the poet to focus on that which it was not—and what better object to do so than one that is defined by its lack of content?

“La cruche” (O.C. I 751-752) begins with a consideration of the visual proximity of word to thing in the word “cruche” which, the poet declares, is an entirely apt choice of typographical representation. The word appears to describe its thing-in-the-world because of the middle position of the letter “u,” since the vessel-like shape of this letter mimics the shape of the pitcher or “cruche” in question.\(^{34}\) The poet claims that a pitcher (“cruche”) is more hollow (“creux”) than a hollow in the ground (“creux”), since the latter does not bear the same typographical proximity to its referent. With this statement, “more hollow than hollow,” the subject-thing is reduced more or less to a non-entity, to a complete void with no other function than to be filled. Indeed, the repetitive and simple language of the first three stanzas conveys a similar impression and reinforces the idea that a pitcher is a dull, hollow and simplistic subject that requires little effort in its representation. Hence it is named without a designating article (“Cruche d’abord est vide…;” “Pitcher firstly is hollow…” and sentences come across as mere fragments (“Dans plusieurs verres (par exemple) alors avec précision la répartir;” “In several glasses (for example) then share it with precision”). Une cruche, furthermore, is slang for a stupid person, and the poem also alludes to this common meaning by deriding the pitcher for being “Un peu grossier, sommaire, méprisable” (“A bit crude, cursory, contemptible”). The poet repeatedly emphasizes the mediocrity of his subject-thing and the fact that it is nothing more than “un simple intermédiaire” (“a simple intermediary”), but this immediately should serve as a signal to the

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\(^{34}\) This argument recalls the poet’s dissatisfaction with the word oiseau in “Notes prises pour un oiseau,” discussed in the previous chapter.
reader that “la cruche” is an ideal Pongean subject-thing. As a simple intermediary, the pitcher is a perfect vessel for Ponge to draw analogies to his other favourite subject apart from things: language. “C’est donc un objet utile;” he writes, “qui n’a de raison d’être que de servir souvent. / Un peu grossier, sommaire; méprisable? –Sa perte ne serait pas un désastre… / La cruche est faite de la matière la plus commune; souvent de terre cuite. / Elle n’a pas les formes emphatiques, l’emphase des amphores” (“It is therefore a useful object, whose only reason for being is to serve often. / A bit crude, cursory; contemptible? –To lose it would not be a disaster… / The pitcher is made of the most common of materials; often of terra cotta. / It has no emphatic forms, the emphasis of amphorae;” 751).

As with a number of his poems, Ponge has chosen an unremarkable, quotidian object to reflect the act of writing. Unlike other poems such as “Les mûres,” however, the end result is not a transformation of that object into something more notable but rather an analogy with language that brings words into the pitcher’s quotidian existence. The pitcher, empty vessel that it is, is subsequently filled with its language of representation, which implies that poetic language is merely filler for an empty vessel. The poet hints as much at the poem’s conclusion, when he claims that it would be a pointless exercise to try to draw analogies between the pieces of a broken pitcher and certain poetic subjects such as rose petals or eggshells, for instance. “Mais n’est-ce pas une dérision?” he asks. “Car tout ce que je viens de dire de la cruche, ne pourrait-on le dire, aussi bien, des paroles?” (“But is it not a mockery? For everything that I said about the pitcher, could one not say it equally about words?”; 752). Poetic language and the subject-thing come together in a shared state of being, but rather than the status of the subject-thing being elevated, poetry is lowered into the state of the pitcher. The poem’s conclusion arrives quite suddenly, since once the poet realizes that words function in the same way as the pitcher, there is no room for him to continue. If words are merely functional devices that become useless— laughable, even—when separated from one another, then the poet of “La cruche” must admit that his entire piece is a work of “dérision” (irony, mockery, but also of small importance), since the aptness of its description is as precarious and prone to destruction as the pitcher itself. Far from an objectification of the pitcher, then, Ponge brings it into a relationship of being with his act of writing. However mocking and derisory the tone of “La cruche” may be towards its subject-thing, the poem concludes by self-deprecatingly equating the pitcher with language, thereby undermining the entire act of the poem.
2.3: The impenetrability of the shell

The technique of using multiple reflections—whether to create a sense of plurality within the poets’ voices or to emphasize the intimate connections they draw between themselves and their subject-things—facilitates the poets’ exposition of language’s shortcomings while increasing the mimetic effect of their thing poems. Another device that manifests their poetry’s underlying tension between adhering to the idea of either natural or conventional language is the shell motif. Shelled creatures can symbolize the limitations of language in connecting one’s self to an other because they are, by design, separated from other beings by well-defined walls. The creature within can be known only by way of its external encasement and, like language, this encasement is not necessarily an accurate representation of the animal’s inner being. The intricacies of the shells’ physical design also render them attractive subjects for art, as the work of numerous artists and poets over time attest. To cite just a few examples around the modernist period, for instance, Archibald MacLeish’s “Dr. Sigmund Freud Discovers the Sea Shell” (c. 1950) uses the mysteries of the shell’s provenance as a means to challenge the certainties of science and other beliefs. Amy Lowell’s “Sea Shell” (1919) appeals to the childish belief that if one holds a sea shell up to one’s ear, it will reveal all the secrets contained within the vast, unconquered world of the ocean. Paul Verlaine sees traces of his lover’s appearance within “Les coquillages” (1869) that lie in their place of intimacy, and Paul Valéry, finally, wrote an entire essay on his difficulty in understanding the creative provenance of shells. (More on Valéry’s essay to follow.) These and many other poets were drawn to the shell motif and the creatures that inhabit shells in part due to the beauty and intricacy of the shells’ external shape and design and in part due to the mystery and elusive nature of their interiors.

Moore and Ponge wrote frequently about shelled creatures (or other external mechanisms of defence that act as shells) because they perceived something admirable in the qualities associated with protective shells. In Moore’s poems, shells are celebrated for their embodiment of modesty, subtlety and a sense of restraint, since they promote passive defence over aggression and permit their inhabitants to be completely self-reliant. With Ponge, it is the perfect proportions and self-containment of these works of nature that make shells things to be admired. For both poets, the superficial characteristics of the shell are equated with the inner qualities of its inhabitant, which means that shelled animals frequently are presented as models for good poetry. As I discussed above in relation to Moore’s “To a Snail,” their poems strive to reflect the qualities of shells in
their language and structure, to varying degrees of success. Because shells are mysterious things laden with symbolism, much of the poets’—and our own—attraction to them comes from the fact that they are notoriously difficult to understand and represent.

Gaston Bachelard, in his phenomenological study of space, *La poétique de l’espace*, explains the difficulty of writing a shell:

À la coquille correspond un concept si net, si sûr, si dur que, faute de pouvoir simplement la dessiner, le poète, réduit à en parler, est d’abord en déficit d’images. Il est arrêté dans son évassion vers les valeurs rêvées par la réalité géométrique des formes. Et les formes sont si nombreuses, souvent si nouvelles, que, dès l’examen positif du monde des coquilles, l’imagination est vaincue par la réalité. Ici, la nature imagine et la nature est savante. (105)

To the shell corresponds a concept so clear, so definite, so rigid that, in want of being able simply to draw it, the poet, reduced to speak of it, is initially in want of images. He is stopped from escaping towards its imagined values by the geometric reality of its forms. And the forms are so numerous, often so original that, after a favourable examination of the world of shells, the imagination is defeated by reality. Here, nature imagines and nature is genius.

According to Bachelard, the shell in reality already possesses so much plurality in the forms it may take (this demonstrating the infinite creativity of nature), that it is almost impossible for a poet to invent new ways of expressing it. Bachelard’s aim is to uncover what he calls the “intersubjectivity” of images in regards to the different subjects who perceive them, and he is interested in the phenomenological importance of the shell as a place of refuge and primal comfort. The poetic image, Bachelard argues, liberates language by constantly reinterpreting its limits (10). The shell—along with its aviary counterpart, the nest—are two poetic images which refer back to the primal feeling of refuge within an enclosed space, and it is for this reason that they so frequently are employed and reinvented by different poets and their readers. Bachelard offers the example of Valéry’s fascination with the *formation* of shells in the latter’s essay “L’homme et la coquille” (1937). In this essay Valéry anticipates the above quote from Bachelard by equating shells with crystals and flowers, which he calls “privileged objects” of nature:

Comme un son pur, ou un système mélodique de sons purs, au milieu des bruits, ainsi un cristal, une fleur, une coquille se détachent du désordre ordinaire de l’ensemble des choses sensibles. Ils nous sont des objets privilégiés, plus intelligibles à la vue, quoique plus mystérieux à la réflexion, que tous les autres que nous voyons indistinctement. Ils nous proposent, étrangement unies, les idées d’ordre et de
fantaisie, d’invention et de nécessité, de loi et d’exception; et nous trouvons à la fois dans leur apparence, le semblant d’une intention et d’une action qui les eût façonnés à peu près comme les hommes savent faire, et cependant l’évidence de procédés qui nous sont interdits et impénétrables. (Valéry 887)

As with a pure sound or a melodic system of pure sounds in the middle of noises, so too are the crystal, the flower and the shell detached from the ordinary disorder of the ensemble of perceivable things. They strike us as privileged objects, more intelligible to the sight although more mysterious in reflection than all the others that we see indistinctly. They suggest to us, in ways that are strangely united, ideas of order and fantasy, of invention and necessity, and of law and exception; and we find at once in their appearance the semblance of an intention and an action that would have moulded them in a way similar to that known to men, but also evidence of procedures that are prohibited and impenetrable to us.

With a symbolist sensibility for the power possessed by certain images over others, Valéry privileges these elements for the complexity of their organisation, made all the more complex by the fact that no human hand was involved in their making. To him, crystals, flowers and shells are wonderful because by their physical properties alone they are utterly foreign and inexplicable. Valéry does not bother to wade into the question of what secrets shells hide in their interiors because their exteriors are a source of wonder all on their own. For Valéry, the important question is that of their provenance: “Qui donc a fait ceci?,” he asks. “Mon premier mouvement d’esprit a été de songer au Faire. L’idée de Faire est la première et la plus humaine. ‘Expliquer,’ ce n’est jamais que décrire une manière de Faire: ce n’est que refaire par la pensée” (“Who then made this? My first mental impulse was to reflect upon the Making. The idea of Making is the first and the most human. ‘To explain,’ is always simply to describe a manner of Making: it is but a remaking through thought;” 891). The poet is faced with the impasse of a phenomenological understanding of the shell, since he is able to know it only through his own subsequent creation of it—a remaking of the thing through his imagination. Yet even here he is at a loss, since the animal shell is a natural oeuvre that cannot be matched by the thought-out, reflective skills of a person. He distinguishes human production from animal production by the former’s ability to deliberate:

[T]oute production positivement humaine […] s’opère par gestes successifs, bien séparés, bornés, énumérables. Mais certains animaux, constructeurs de ruches ou de nids, nous ressemblent assez jusqu’ici. L’œuvre propre de l’homme se distingue quand ces actes différents et indépendants exigent sa présence pensante expresse, pour produire et ordonner au but leur diversité. (896)
All positively human production operates according to well-defined, limited, enumerable and successive gestures. But certain animals, constructors of hives or nests, more or less resemble us up to this point. What distinguishes the work of man is when these different and independent actions force his deliberate thinking presence to produce and command their diversity towards a goal.

Due to these differences, then, Valéry finds (human) art at a remove from the art of nature. Valéry blends his meditations on the shell with meditations on art and, like Moore and Ponge, he is most fascinated by the former for what it can teach the latter. In the shell he perceives a design that even the most “perfect” artwork can only dream of achieving, one in which there is ‘certitude of execution, necessity of internal origin and an indissoluble and reciprocal connection between the figure and the material’ (904-905). A similar stance is taken by Ponge in poems such as “Escargots,” “Notes pour un coquillage” and “L’huître,” for these three poems from Le parti pris des choses use the inner and outer characteristics of shelled creatures to reflect upon the nature and durability of good poetic writing.

Perfect proportions

Although as a prose poem it differs in form, “Escargots” (1936) (O.C. I 24-27) proceeds in a manner similar to Moore’s “To a Snail” in that its rhythm and pace echo those of its subject. The poet describes the snails slowly, beginning with their attachment to the ground and dirt and the way in which they belong to the latter, carrying it with their bodies, consuming it and excreting in it. “Go on,” he has them say in the second sentence, thereby encouraging his own poetic journey to adopt the snails’ characteristics with English words that better emulate the phonetics of their name. The poem follows the steady movement of the snails along the ground, noting with particular interest the “bave” or dribble they leave behind them, which Ponge refers to as a “bave d’orgueil” (“dribble of pride”). “Quel bonheur, quelle joie donc d’être un escargot,” he writes. “Mais cette bave d’orgueil ils en imposent la marque à tout ce qu’ils touchent. Un sillage argenté les suit. Et peut-être les signale au bec des volatiles qui en sont friands. Voilà le hic, la question, être ou ne pas être (des vaniteux), le danger” (“What happiness, what joy, therefore, to be a snail. But they leave the mark of this dribble of pride on all that they touch. A silvery wake follows them. And perhaps signals them to the beak of the birds (volatiles) who are fond of them. There’s the snag, the question, to be or not to be (vain), the danger;” 26). Through
the image of the snails leaving behind a trail of secretion on the ground, the poet summons the image of his own words secreted onto the page. The risk of falling prey to greedy fowl (with a play on “volatile” which might indicate the temperament of certain readers and critics) can equally be applied to the poet, who must therefore also ask himself—in the dramatic tone of a Prince Hamlet—should one indeed live by writing?

For the snails, of course, secreting is a necessary condition for living; for the poet this proposition must be taken less literally. Yet their necessary production of secretion is one of the things the poet seems to admire about the snail, whom he equates with honourable qualities such as “noblesse” (“nobility”) and “sagesse” (“wisdom”), as well as the slightly more hubristic ones like “orgueil, vanité, fierté” (“pride, vanity, haughtiness”). Indeed Ponge makes moral judgments on the snails in calling them happy and in referring to their slime secretions as a “bave d’orgueil,” as though what comes as instinct to these creatures is to them equally a source of pride. He attributes this sense of pride to the protection afforded to them by their shells as well as to the fact that their shells are works of art in-and-of-themselves. Because they literally belong to these works of art, Ponge describes the snails as “plutôt des héros, c’est-à-dire des êtres dont l’existence même est oeuvre d’art,—que des artistes, c’est-à-dire des fabricants d’oeuvres d’art” (“rather heroes, that is to say beings whose very existence is a work of art,—than artists, that is to say fabricators of works of art;” 27). There is something noble or heroic, in Ponge’s eyes, to dedicating one’s life to one’s art, and the snail embodies this ethos. His contention is not far off from the religious beliefs of the Ancient Carolingians (7th c. A.D.), described by Charbonneaux-Lassay in Le bestiaire du Christ and again by Bachelard, who considered shells to represent the perfect harmony of human body and soul (Bachelard 114-115). (It is also a theme Ponge raises in “Le mollusque,” in which he stresses the latter’s inability to live without its shell.) In the case of “Escargots,” the harmony offers not a spiritual solution but a poetic one in which, based upon the model presented by snails, the gap between the arbitrary cloak of language and the inner essence of a represented thing might potentially be reconciled. Ponge translates the potential reconciliation between exterior and interior into a moral lesson that concludes “Escargots:” “Perfectionne-toi moralement et tu feras de beaux vers.” In order to write good verse, poets must first make themselves good.

“Notes pour un coquillage” (1927-1928) (O.C. I 38-41) begins by manipulating the titular shell’s size through proportion and imagination; the poet claims he will “démesurer” or “make
excessive” the shell he perceives by comparing it to a single grain of sand lying in his hand. By making the shell larger than life, he can then consider it in relation to colossal human creations and with this figurative movement his discussion digresses—as it does in “Escargots”—towards the subject of human creativity or art. According to Ponge, shelled creatures live the most proportionate and well-balanced existence because their dwellings and/or œuvres are sized in exact conformity to their bodies. The writers he claims to most admire—Horace, Malherbe and Mallarmé—are those who have adopted this sense of proportion because “leur monument est fait de la véritable sécrétion commune du mollusque homme, de la chose la plus proportionnée et conditionnée à son corps, et cependant la plus différente de sa forme que l’on puisse concevoir: je veux dire la PAROLE” (“their monument is made of the same secretion common to the mollusc man, the thing that is most proportionate and conditioned to his body, and yet the most different from his form that one can imagine: I mean SPEECH;” 40). Speech is the most proportionate thing to our bodies because it defines us as humans, according to Ponge. The poet who uses the words and grammar of best fit is thus the most “natural” writer and comes closest to portraying the external world in a genuine manner. Furthermore, the shell also protects the writer from those who would try to learn too much of the creative mind that dwells beyond the words. In Ponge’s own case, the shell in question is often a system of metaphors and wordplay through which the poet can allude to, rather than explicitly state, his ideas. Of Ponge’s shell motif, Collot writes: “Elle est par excellence l’emblème de cette construction de soi que Ponge poursuit à travers l’écriture. Sa sympathie pour les ‘êtres à coquilles’, […] tient à ce qu’ils ont su tirer de leur propre substance une forme qui les exprime et les dépasse tout à la fois” (“It is quintessentially the emblem of this self-construction that Ponge pursues through writing. His sympathy for shelled creatures […] pertains to the way in which they learned how to extract from their own substance a form that both expresses their selves and surpasses them at one and the same time;” Mots et choses 195). As Collot rightly remarks, Ponge’s use of shelled creatures goes beyond the development of a mere model of art to an entire construction of the self—a self that is indissolubly bound with its subjects of creation. Shelled animals present the (unobtainable) ideal for a poet who longed for a perceivable connection between content and form, art and reality.

A third shell poem, “L’huître” (1925-1929) (O.C. I 21), differs from the other two in that it explores the world that exists within the shell—and more specifically, in terms of that which it
offers humans. The oyster dwells in “un monde opiniâtrement clos” (“an obstinately closed world”) that humans may enter only with some struggle, although once inside they find “tout un monde, à boire et à manger” (“an entire world of which to drink and eat”). In an interview with Philippe Sollers, Ponge explained how his goal was to find the most fitting and most precise language (words and phrases) to describe the compact world inhabited by the oyster (Sollers 107-116). His efforts to make the oyster resonate throughout the poem result in a surplus of words bearing the circumflex accent of the word “huître”—“blanchâtre,” opiniâtrement clos,” “verdâtre” and “noirâtre”—and what Ponge calls the creation of a “formule” (“formula” or small form, as he explains to Sollers [115]) of a poem that is equivalent to the oyster’s pearl. In “L’huître,” then, the emphasis is not so much on the external appearance of the mollusc’s shell as it is on that which is created inside it. The oyster shell is celebrated for the environment it maintains between its two walls since it consists of an autonomous world, which neither invites nor facilitates contact with the outside (human) world. It is all the more extraordinary, therefore, when it produces the rare and precious token that is the pearl.

It is no stretch to see the oyster pearl as a metaphor for an aesthetic idea, as pearls are produced only rarely and even then prove quite difficult to grasp. Caught in the oyster’s—or poet’s—throat, a pearl is occasionally formed that immediately stands out for its beauty and rarity (or originality). Yet the pearl also serves as ornamentation: “Parfois très rare une formule perle à leur gosier de nacre, d’où l’on trouve aussitôt à s’orner” (“On rare occasions a formula pearls in their pearly throat, where one then finds something with which to adorn oneself”). And, unlike traditional forms of ornamentation, it is formed on the inside of a thing rather than the outside; the oyster pearl is an ornament that one never comes across unless one probes beneath the shell’s surface. In his interview with Sollers, Ponge admitted that his own writing was necessarily ornamented or embellished because it is only in ornamentation, he claimed, that we might see ourselves in our representations of others:

Il y a là comme une sorte d’autocritique à l’intérieur du texte, du fait que je m’orne, moi-même, de la qualité précieuse et rare de mon style. C’est-à-dire qu’on m’a fait […] le reproche d’être précieux. Eh bien! là, je me critique moi-même. Je m’orne, on s’orne, on fait une perle de cravate, […] mais le plus volontiers, le poète ou l’écrivain s’en orne, d’une formule,—c’est dans Mallarmé—dans l’espoir de s’y mirer. Eh bien! ce n’est pas un miroir, mais c’est un ornement. (116)

There is there something of an auto critique within the text, in the fact that I decorate myself with the rare and precious quality of my style. That is to say I have been […]
reproached for being precious. Well then! There, I am criticising myself. I decorate myself, one decorates oneself, one makes a pearl tie pin, [...] but it is with the most readiness that the poet or writer decorates himself with a formula—it’s in Mallarmé—in the hopes of seeing his reflection within it. Well then! It’s not a mirror, but it is an ornament.

The analogy drawn between writing and ornamentation supports the notion that Ponge’s poems reflect, at one and the same time, himself as a perceiving subject, the subjecthood of the things he represents, and the effects of the interaction upon each party. Ponge’s ornamentation, as he sees it, does not merely entail a change to the subject of representation—in this case the oyster—since it also entails a change in himself. Because Ponge actively chose words ending in -tre to echo the look and sound of the word “huître,” the oyster he creates in words is a hybrid of his language and the oyster as he understood it in-and-of-itself. The “formula-pearl” that emerges at the end of the poem is therefore a self-made ornament, an indication of the creativity inherent to his representation of the shell or, as Barbara Johnson put it, an indication of the poet’s preoccupation with “form” (33). Likewise, all human interference upon the outside surface of the shell is marked by scrapes that convey the difficulty of entering the world of an other. Ponge’s poem, too, while it goes beyond words scratched out upon the shell, makes no claims to being anything other than a reflective, ornamented and embellished representation of the oyster. While “L’huître” meditates on the oyster as a commodity for humans (a world in which to eat and drink), it maintains a sense of respect for that which cannot be pried open.

The shell as a symbol of inner strength

Ponge’s use of the shell motif frequently pertains to the mollusc shell. Echoing the work of many artists before and of his time, his poems demonstrate a fascination with the intricate designs of these shells and their mysterious provenance in nature. Moore’s work reveals a slightly different approach to this motif, since the shells that figure in her poems appear in a variety of guises, at times not as animal shells at all but rather man-made armour or shields that serve a similar purpose to shells. The aforementioned “To a Snail” does feature a mollusc shell, while “The Pangolin” and “The Paper Nautilus” explore animal shells of another sort (those of a scaly anteater and cephalopod, respectively). In other of Moore’s poems, however, shells appear in the form of armour, shields and even thick skin (both literally and figuratively, in the case of “Black
Earth”). Like Ponge and other poets fascinated by the external design of shells, Moore let her perception of the inner being of shelled creatures be influenced by their exterior qualities. Hence, the shelled animals of her poems are admired for their modesty and sense of restraint, qualities which Moore prized both in her writing and in her personal life.

As previously mentioned, the shell motif in “To a Snail” informs the overall sense of reserve that characterizes the snail and the poem, and enables the poet to leave a certain important “principle” hidden and/or unexplained. On a self-reflexive level, the qualities associated with the shell might be projected back upon the language of the poem, to describe or inform the poet in the act of representation. “The Paper Nautilus” (1940) (C.P. 121-122) operates in a similar manner by likening the reproductive act of the small, octopus-like argonaut to the poet’s act of reproducing a thing into poetry. Once again the poem self-consciously questions the suitability of using a shell as a metaphor for poetry, and this time the issue is made all the more difficult due to the emotional nature of the subject material. Constructed by the female argonaut to protect her eggs, the shell is described in careful, apprehensive language that captures the precarious and fleeting nature of the maternal egg-laying endeavour:

Giving her perishable
souvenir of hope
white outside and smooth-
edged inner surface
glossy as the sea, the watchful
maker of it guards it
day and night; she scarcely
eats until the eggs are hatched.

The expression “perishable / souvenir” suggests the strength of the maternal bond, since whether or not the argonaut’s hopes are fulfilled she will no longer need the souvenir of this transitory state, her motherhood-to-be. As Moore would have discovered through her careful research, the female argonaut tends to burrow herself into the nest-shell along with her eggs, which means that if anything were to happen to the latter it would also affect her. Indeed, it is this intricate, indissoluble bond between mother and offspring that leads Moore to describe the paper nautilus’s arms as winding around the shell “as if they knew love / is the only fortress / strong enough to trust to.” The argonaut shell that doubles as a nest signifies security and comfort and, as Bachelard points out, these are primary images that we tend to project through animal
metaphors: “En cherchant dans les richesses du vocabulaire tous les verbes qui diraient toutes les dynamiques de la retraite, on trouverait des images du mouvement animal, des mouvements de repli qui sont inscrits dans les muscles” (“In seeking, within the richness of our vocabulary, all the verbs that would express the dynamics of retreat, we would find images of animal movement, movements of withdrawal that are inscribed into the muscles;” 93).

Moore, however, is careful not to simplify or objectify her representation of the argonaut mother by reducing its shell to a symbol of a maternal “fortress” of love. Just as “To a Snail” qualified its tidy compactness with the awkward inclusion of its “curious” occipital horn, “The Paper Nautilus” qualifies the statement on love’s fortress with the clause “as if.” Despite a potential emotional proximity to her subject, Moore nevertheless is a poet writing from the outside of the argonaut shell looking in, and her awareness of this distance causes her to reflect characteristically on the potential flaws of her metaphors. Her uncertainty is all the more evident in the opening lines in which she compares her own poetic shell with the real shell constructed by the paper nautilus:

For authorities whose hopes
are shaped by mercenaries?
Writers entrapped by
teatime fame and by
commuters’ comforts? Not for these
the paper nautilus
constructs her thin glass shell.

By articulating all the reasons that fail to explain the paper nautilus’s construction of her shell, Moore reveals the potential motivators that might influence her as a poet—or at least those she fears might influence her. Moore’s poetic shell-making, no matter how intimate and engaged it may be, can never dissociate entirely from these kinds of entrapments in the way that the paper nautilus’s reproductive shell-making does. The “thin glass shell” she constructs around her subject-thing in the shape of a poem is inevitably a series of reflections that encompass a variety of perspectives and interactions, and in this respect it comes nowhere near the argonaut’s shell formed entirely by the animal’s reproductive drive. And yet, Moore proceeds to construct her shell just as cautiously and carefully as she imagines the argonaut to do. Bonnie Costello writes that Moore’s “ideal language announces its finitude in addressing infinite matters [and] offers itself as a vehicle not as a tenor, a shell in which our impression of the world can take shape without calcifying,” concluding that the “shell is not interesting for itself, then, but as a souvenir
of desire and struggle” (119-120). Costello’s use of the word “souvenir”—which the poem also employs—strikes an interesting chord because the argonaut shell, precisely for its fragility, vulnerability and perishability, is the antithesis of a typical seaside souvenir. If the paper nautilus shell is a souvenir of maternal life-giving which endures only in the offspring that hatches from it, then Moore’s poem is the opposite of this. It is a shell that endures precisely as a shell, as a tangible reflection upon a subject which, in turn, exists somewhere beyond the poem-shell’s confines.

“The Pangolin” (C.P. 117-120) takes the subject of shells away from the water and into the trees, where the title’s scale-backed anteater resides. His shell is composed of bone-like scales or shingles that overlap in the manner of plated armour; accordingly, the pangolin is described in the opening line as “Another armored animal.”35 His armour extends to other aspects of his physique, however, including his contracting ear, nose and eye apertures, his ability to roll himself into a ball and his habit of stepping carefully, “that the outside / edges of his hands may bear the weight and save the claws / for digging.” The poem describes all of these qualities with an admiring tone, noting that “Pangolins, made / for moving quietly also, are models of exactness.” In a case of life imitating art, in the later editions of this text Moore hushed the sounds of her poem by adjusting her line breaks in order to suppress some of the more forced rhymes of the original edition. For example (my italics added):

Another armoured animal—scale
lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity […]

becomes
Another armoured animal—scale
lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity until they

and
and toiler, of whom we seldom hear.
   Armour seems extra. But for him,
the closing ear-
ridge—[…]

becomes

35 The “another” leads one to speculate on what other animals (or poet, as many critics have suggested) preceded it.
impressive animal and toiler, of whom we seldom hear.  
Armour seems extra. But for him, 
the closing ear-ridge—

Attracted by what she perceived to be her subject’s elusive, hidden qualities, Moore attempted to replicate these in the later edition of her poem.

“Pangolins are not aggressive,” the poem informs us, but rather imbued with a kind of “fragile grace” pertaining to nature, poetics and theology. The pangolin is repeatedly characterized as moving gracefully while analogies are made between it and works of art like “the fragile grace of the Thomas- / of-Leighton / Buzzard Westminster Abbey wrought-iron vine” or “the furled fringed frill / on the hat-brim of Gargallo’s hollow iron-head of a / matador.” Grace in nature is echoed in graceful works of art, which justifies Moore’s characterization of compression in “To a Snail” as “the first grace of style.” For this reason the pangolin’s tail becomes a “graceful tool, as prop or hand or broom or ax.” The connection between pangolin tail and writer’s pen has been noted by a number of critics, and this connection is reinforced later on in the poem when the subject of “The Pangolin” evolves from animal to man. “Man” is referred to as “writing- / master to this world” and, aware of his own flaws and good-natured to that extent, he “writes error with four / r’s. Among animals, one has a sense of humor.” The man of this poem is aware that he may not be fully capable of representing the world in an entirely accurate manner, but he accepts this shortcoming gracefully and appeals to a higher power (the “sun” or “Son,” from a Christian perspective) to assist him in his daily work. By comparing man to the pangolin, the poet suggests that our inner being (our soul, in the spiritual sense that she raises and reinforces in the final line) is intimately connected with the outer shell we project while going about our daily tasks in the world. Man, however, when he emerges in the latter half of the poem, is not necessarily adorned with any visible outer shell, appearing either “Bedizened or stark / naked.” The poem suggests that what man wears on the outside is of no importance, since his “shell” is his ability to direct his thoughts internally, to self-reflect and approach the world through introspection. Man retreats into his shell figuratively while the pangolin does so literally. If outer decoration matters little and man’s shell is a metaphor for inner strength and grace under adversity, then one is led to read “The Pangolin” as a shell of a poem in much the same way as “The Paper Nautilus.” The pangolin in-and-of-itself disappears midway through the poem in order to make way for man and his quest to understand his place in the world of nature, art and spirituality. As the subject
evolves from pangolin to man, the pangolin shell is removed from the animal and affixed to the human being.

**Additional armour**

The five poems discussed in detail above—“Escargots,” “Notes pour un coquillage,” “L’huître,” “The Paper Nautilus” and “The Pangolin”—all employ subjects equipped with actual shells. In several other poems by Moore and Ponge, however, the shell motif surfaces in non-literal forms such as armour or other hard exteriors. Moore’s “His Shield” (1944) and “Armor’s Undermining Modesty” (1950), for instance, both associate these means of defence with the wearer’s modesty and self-restraint. In the former, the shield in question belongs to the legendary Christian king Presbyter John, who is said to have ruled in a peaceful manner. The king’s stoic, humble nature is described in conjunction with the dangers and temptations that surround him:

[...] he can withstand

fire and won’t drown. In his
  unconquerable country of unpompous gusto,
gold was so common none considered it; greed
and flattery were unknown. Though rubies large as tennis-balls conjoined in streams so
that the mountains seemed to bleed,

the inextinguishable
  salamander styled himself but presbyter. His shield
  was his humility. (C.P. 144)

In “Armor’s Undermining Modesty” (C.P. 151-152), armour is lauded for its passive fortitude and the fact that its wearer need not launch an offensive to feel safe:

A mirror-of-steel uninsistence should countenance continence,

  objectified and not by chance,
  there in its frame of circumstance
  of innocence and altitude
  in an unhackneyed solitude.

The self-reflexive subtext of poetry lies close to the surface in both poems. In the fourth stanza of “Armor,” we read: “What is more precise than precision? Illusion.” This line, often-quoted as a
kind of summary of Moore’s poetics, may refer to the poet’s propensity for not saying too much, and for alluding to something sufficiently enough to create the impression of that thing while not trying to recreate it entirely. “Excess is the common substitute for energy” (Prose 400), she laments in her essay “Feeling and Precision,” and it is a substitute which she tries ardently to avoid in her own work. Just as armour need not include weaponry, good poetry need not strive to mirror something else. The final lines of “His Shield” warn against a similar fate and further promote the poet’s ideal of humility in both conduct and writing: “Don’t be envied or / armed with a measuring-rod.”

Many of Ponge’s poems play with the contrast between interiors and exteriors and suggest the importance of considering both the external and internal qualities of things. “Le cageot” and “L’orange,” for instance, (both from Le parti pris des choses), consider their subject-things from both perspectives. “Le cageot” (O.C. I 118) celebrates the exterior frame of its subject because in fact it is nothing more than a well-defined structure enclosing an empty space. The word “cageot” (“crate”) lies, linguistically, somewhere between “cage” and “cachot” (“dungeon”), and it is used to transport the most delicate of fruit without causing bruising. The crate is an object of admiration for the poet since it is a fragile coat of armour that exists solely to protect something else. “Cet objet est en somme des plus sympathiques” (“This object is in sum one of the most likeable”), he writes, emphasizing the importance of the outer container versus that of the fruits inside that it so carefully protects. In “L’orange” (O.C. I 19-20), the fruit itself is metaphorically peeled away to reveal the juice and the seeds which lie inside it. The poem proceeds inwards from a description of the outer peel, and as it ends on the orange’s seeds of reproduction, the descriptive cycle comes full circle. The peel is both the shell and the essence of the orange, as it releases its fragrance and juices ever so subtly when the fruit is squeezed. In both “Le cageot” and “L’orange,” then, the outer shell of a thing dictates much of the thing’s disposition and even its chances of survival.

36 While my focus has been on the connection between Moore’s armour and her ideas on poetry, it should also be noted that the majority of her armour or shell poems emerged during the inter-war period. As Costello notes, Moore’s preoccupation with the war often found a way into her poetry and her discussions on art, which means it is useful to consider the political and social situations that inspired these works (108-132).
Reflection is an illusory device used to give the appearance of something being closer—or more distant—to another thing than it actually is. It can multiply the quantity of something so that we see it many times over, or it can reverse the order of that thing’s features so that everything appears backwards. Poets use reflection to draw connections between things in the same way that they use metaphor and similes to creatively alter their subjects and inspire new ways of thinking of the latter. For Moore and Ponge, reflection presented itself as a means to draw further connections between their language, their selves and the subject-things of which they wrote. Their use of reflection is not limited to a one-way transfer of thing to poetic image, but rather highlights all the intermediary characters involved in poetic representation. The difficulty of representing a subject in language never ceased to inform Moore and Ponge’s poetry, and the extent to which it preoccupied their poetics can be seen in the frequency of reflective devices they use. Their thing poems, in many ways, are equally poems about themselves and their encounters with language.
Chapter 3

From Pictures to Words; From Words to Pictures

Living, respectively, in New York and Paris in the first half of the twentieth century, Moore and Ponge were well immersed in the rich artistic life these cities had to offer. In addition to being acquainted with other poets and writers with whom they came into contact through newspapers, magazines and publishing houses, the poets also got to know a number of contemporary visual artists and published essays on their work. In both Moore’s and Ponge’s poetry and art criticism, one can see the influence the visual arts had on their aesthetic development. The representational strategies they encountered in these arts posed new avenues of possibility for the poets in their quest to portray their subjects in a genuine manner and avoid objectifying the other of which they wrote. As the previous chapter aimed to demonstrate, Moore and Ponge used the poetic device of reflection as a way to accentuate the divide between their writing selves and the things they brought into language in order to grant an essential otherness to their subject things. In the present chapter I will explore the ways in which they wrote about paintings, sculptures and other visual artworks in order to reflect once again upon the medium of language as a representational device. I will focus on a few select artists and/or genres in which they took interest and look at how they represent the artists’ visual strategies in their poetry. In doing so, I will argue that the poets use ekphrasis—the representation of visual images through words—in an attempt to dissolve the hierarchy between (writing) self and (written) other.38

W. J. T. Mitchell and Elizabeth Loizeaux have both theorized on the discourse between self and other that occurs in ekphrasis and I use their models as the point of departure for my own

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37 “Notes prises pour un oiseau,” O.C. I 352.

38 I am using Mitchell’s definition of ekphrasis: “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 152).
argument. My use of the term “ekphrasis” interprets Mitchell’s definition quite literally, as I consider Ponge’s texts on artists in *Le peintre à l’étude* (1948) and *L’atelier contemporain* (1977) to be examples of ekphrasis even though they are not poems per se. Although they are literary essays, they come close in style and form to much of Ponge’s prose poetry. As works of art criticism, they are digressive, metaphoric and frequently self-referential, and in fact often devote little space to a description or analysis of the actual works of art in and of themselves. Mitchell himself states that art history is the “disciplinary principle” of ekphrasis (*Picture Theory* 157) and more recently Jas Elsner has claimed that there is essentially no difference between the two. Both Moore and Ponge, moreover, push the limits of traditional conceptions of ekphrasis because they grant more focus to the creativity that went into the making of an artwork rather than to the appearance of the finished product itself. By focusing on the original act of creation, they portray the represented thing as a subject in motion rather than a passive object, and thereby instill it with a sense of *Pour Soi*, in Merleau-Ponty’s use of the term. The reading subject and read subject-thing therefore become reciprocal entities, whereby the reader (viewer) not only perceives the image but senses the image perceiving him/her in return.

The idea of an active subject empowering itself by gazing upon a passive object has been the topic of much aesthetic theory and political philosophy; in the past century, for instance, it has been addressed notably by, among others, Sartre (1943), Merleau-Ponty (1945; 1964), Berger et al. (1972), Foucault (1975) and Mulvey (1989). Like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty recognized the potential alienation or objectification of the gazed-upon subject, but argued that this was resolved by the fact that one sees oneself in the other upon which one gazes, and therefore that other comes to exist as an extension of oneself. As a result, s/he who looks is necessarily looked upon, for in order to see what is visible, one must be visible in return: “celui qui voit ne peut posséder le visible que s’il en est possédé, s’il en est, si, par principe, selon ce qui est prescrit par l’articulation du regard et des choses, il est l’un des visibles, capable, par un singulier retournement, de les voir, lui qui est l’un d’eux” (“he who sees can possess the visible only if he is possessed by it, if he is of it, if, by principle, according to what is prescribed by the articulation

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40 “Reading subject” can refer to either a reader of a written text or one who reads a painting.
of the look and of things, he is one of the visible ones, capable of seeing them, by a singular reversal, he who is one of them;” Visible 178). My discussion of the gaze in this chapter will focus on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological understanding of it, since Moore and Ponge’s thing poems and ekphrastic poems elicit the kind of reciprocal exchange of the gaze that he put forth in his philosophy.

The artistic movement that arguably best explains the poets’ aesthetic preoccupations is cubism, the avant-garde style of painting that began in France with artists like Braque and Picasso. Cubist painting, which emerged in Paris and then New York just prior to the poets’ relocation to their respective art capitals, attracted the attention of both Moore and Ponge early on in their careers. The cubist notion of expanding the medium of painting to incorporate both spatiality and temporality on the canvas parallels the thing poets’ desire to stretch the limits of language. For the poets as well as for the cubist painters, it was necessary to try to portray the subject from as many perspectives as possible. In addition, Moore and Ponge both display the cubist tendency to leave their poems “open,” which in their case meant that throughout their careers they continually revised drafts of earlier poems. My claim that cubism “explains” many of the poets’ aesthetic preoccupations is not to say that Moore and Ponge were cubist poets in the manner arguably of Stein, Apollinaire, Jacob or Reverdy. Rather, I suggest that they shared with the cubists a similar dissatisfaction with art’s frequent objectification of the represented thing. Cubism’s rise to popularity in the early twentieth century embodied the dominant artistic desire for new modes of conceiving of and representing the other. Moore and Ponge’s ekphrastic poems, as well as their non-ekphrastic thing poems, employ cubist-like techniques which incur motion on the part of the reader in order to equalize the gazing subject with the subject-thing of the poem. These techniques, discussed in the second section of this chapter, include visually manipulating the stanzaic and typographical format of the words on the page, returning the gaze to the represented subject-thing and most importantly, portraying—or referring to—the artist in the act of creation.

The third section of this chapter will consider two types of ekphrasis with which the poets engaged. The first part will look at Ponge’s writings on Jean Fautrier’s Otages, a series of abstract paintings that depict tortured victims of the Nazis, to which Ponge dedicated over sixty pages in his Atelier contemporain. In this essay Ponge struggles to understand how horrific subject matter can be made into beautiful art, and he finds that in Fautrier there is indeed room
for this compromise. In addition to struggling with the latter issue, Ponge also questions the possibility of ekphrasis and his own personal ability to represent a visual image through words. Ultimately, he finds similarities between himself and Fautrier in that they both have “la rage de l’expression.” The second part will look at two objet d’art poems and the manner by which Moore attempts to understand the thingness of the antique art objects represented in these artworks. This section considers Moore’s approach to ekphrasis and the difficulties the poet encounters in trying to reconcile the inherent problems of art with her own desire to produce art. Prior to discussing cubism or the poets’ ekphrastic poems, however, I will begin with an introduction to the concept of ekphrasis and offer a brief overview of the historical relationship between literature and the visual arts.

3.1: Words and (or versus) images

For numerous art critics and literary theorists, there has long existed a so-called “rivalry” between literature and the visual arts, and in the past few decades this debate has been addressed with more frequency in academic criticism (for example, see Steiner 1982; Mitchell 1986 and 1994; Krieger 1992; Loizeaux 2008). W. J. T. Mitchell explains the relationship between word and image as one of subversion,

in which language or imagery looks into its own heart and finds lurking there its opposite number. One version of this relation has haunted the philosophy of language since the rise of empiricism, the suspicion that beneath words, beneath ideas, the ultimate reference in the mind is the image, the impression of outward experience printed, painted, or reflected in the surface of consciousness. (Iconology 43)

Wendy Steiner explains aesthetic theory’s long-standing preoccupation with equating literature to painting as a never-ending shift between two perspectives: “the history of the interartistic comparison swings back and forth like a pendulum between eager acceptance and stern denial” (xi-xii). As Steiner also points out, this preoccupation has been inextricably bound with the question of mimesis, since painting was long considered mimetic whereas literature frequently was not. The critically established relationship of literature and the visual arts thus has been repeatedly redefined. Lessing’s Laocoön (1766) famously drew a line between the two arts by claiming that the visual arts are inherently spatial, while the literary arts are inherently temporal. His essay, which remains influential today, was both relevant and vexing to modernist poets,
many of whom were interested in inscribing spatiality into their literary texts. Steiner explains the modernist situation as one brought on by an accentuation of the artistic medium by avant-garde art forms:

The programmatic tension between artistic medium and represented world so crucial to Cézanne, cubism, abstractionism, and surrealism has changed the meaning of the literature-painting analogy. By claiming that a poem is like a modern painting one is no longer stressing their mirroring function but their paradoxical status as signs of reality and as things in their own right. This ‘semiotic concreteness’ […] constitutes a line of critical and artistic thinking that runs throughout the twentieth century. (xii)

Modern poets, in keeping with the romantics, no longer tried to simulate the visual effect of paintings but rather celebrated their own verbal images as “icons” in their own right (Mitchell, Iconology 25). Many of them also took to writing about paintings and sculptures in order to reproduce the visual effect of an image in a verbal medium, a practice otherwise known as ekphrasis. Ekphrastic poems, or poems that portray visual works of art, are not to be confused with concrete poetry that visually approximates its subject matter. Rather, ekphrasis is the process of transferring the medium of representation from pictures to words.

Mitchell reads ekphrasis as a social practice in which the arts are in contest (paragone) with one another, and describes the process as “the overcoming of otherness […] in which texts encounter their own semiotic ‘others,’ those rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or ‘spatial’ arts” (Picture Theory 156). Mitchell more specifically calls this process “ekphrastic hope,” or the belief that it is possible to transfer the properties of a visual artwork into words. Ekphrastic hope can be contrasted with ekphrastic indifference—the belief that it is impossible to do so—and more importantly with ekphrastic fear—the realization that we do not want this to occur, that such a transfer leads to idolatry, fetishization and frozen language. Within most instances of ekphrasis, according to Mitchell, we can read power discourses between text and image that equally reveal hierarchical power discourses that exist in society (such as discourses on gender, colonization, poverty and so on). The subtext is enhanced by the fact that ekphrasis is a multi-reflective process that by nature actively engages its reader. Mitchell describes it as a triangular process involving two sets of exchange between self and other. First

41 Lessing’s essay prompted the responses of two modernist critics, Irving Babbitt with “The New Laokoon” (1910) and Clement Greenberg with “Towards a Newer Laocoön” (1940).
of all, the poet converts a visual representation into a verbal one. Upon receiving this verbal representation, the reader then must reconver it back to the original visual object that inspired the initial representation. Within both processes of conversion, there would seem to be a seizing of the object (the other) by the subject who both gazes upon it and renders it into a new medium. Mitchell writes:

The ‘working through’ of ekphrasis and the other, then, is more like a triangular relationship than a binary one; its social structure cannot be grasped fully as a phenomenological encounter of subject and object, but must be pictured as a ménage à trois in which the relations of self and other, text and image, are triply inscribed. If ekphrasis typically expresses a desire for a visual object (whether to possess or praise), it is also typically an offering of this expression as a gift to the reader. (164)

One example Mitchell offers is that of Homer’s depiction of Achilles’s shield (widely accepted as one of the earliest and most famous examples of ekphrasis), which Mitchell claims undermines the fundamental divide of spatiality and temporality that saturates much of ekphrastic discourse. Through Mitchell’s reading of the “imagetext” of the shield,42 we are given a view of this famous passage from Homer as a self-reflexive representation of the work of art through its act of creation, a “utopian site that is both a space within the narrative, and an ornamented frame around it” (178). Mitchell is responding to Lessing’s argument that the shield is not ekphrasis for the very reason that it is described through its process of becoming rather than as a finished product. Countering Lessing, Mitchell argues that it is both ekphrasis and a “prototype” or explanation of how ekphrasis reveals the otherness of the image within the imagetext.

Given the provenance of the above example, it suffices to say that ekphrasis is by no means a modern phenomenon. However, as Elizabeth Loizeaux points out, ekphrasis did become notably popular during the modernist period. Loizeaux attributes the rise in popularity to both the increase in the availability of images (the eighteenth century’s founding of public museums and the nineteenth century’s discovery of photography and then film), as well as to the attraction poets had towards ekphrasis’s dialogic properties (which enabled the poets to engage their audiences as well as their subject). According to Loizeaux:

42 “The term ‘imagetext’ designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text” (Mitchell, Picture Theory 89).
Ekphrasis is a mode of poetry that, by its very nature, opens out of lyric subjectivity into a social world. In the twentieth century, it has been one means of making the lyric, the dominant poetic mode, more flexible; of expanding lyric subjectivity into a field that includes at least one other, the artist/work of art, with a third always present and sometimes active in the exchange, the audience. (5)

Treading a line similar to Mitchell’s, Loizeaux explains how modern ekphrastic poems frequently draw attention to the fact that a (visual) work of art is something we gaze upon without expecting that thing’s gaze in return, and that these poems force the reader to be aware of that uneven exchange. As an example, Loizeaux states that since ekphrastic poems often assert gender or other social power hierarchies, a number of modern female poets—including Moore—helped to subvert traditional perceptions of these dynamics (83). Loizeaux likens ekphrastic discourse to Bakhtin’s notion of discourse in the novel since it is an artistic response to a work of art that preceded it, and thus it alludes both to the context in which the original was created as well as to the context in which the poet is writing. Furthermore, as Loizeaux illustrates, many ekphrastic poems speak to other ekphrases or art commentaries. According to Bakhtin’s dialogical theory, all “verbal discourse is a social phenomenon,” and “no living word relates to its object in a singular way” because every word is affected by the larger environment of words and social context to which it belongs (Bakhtin 259 and 276). Even though Bakhtin himself said that dialogization could not be applied to poetry, 43 Loizeaux rightly contests this by stating that ekphrasis “participates in the development of the modern polyvocal poem” (18).

Where Loizeaux most diverges from Mitchell’s argument is in her acceptance of the notion of a “friendship” between the visual arts and literature. Mitchell, Loizeaux points out, sees the relationship as strictly paragone, but this is not necessarily the case. Arguably for many if not most modern poets no such rivalry existed, for they were working on principles very similar to those of the visual artists, only through different means. Wallace Stevens explained the connection between the two arts as their common goal of representing the human condition, writing in his essay “The Relations between Poetry and Painting” (1951):

43 “The world of poetry, no matter how many contradictions and insoluble conflicts the poet develops within it, is always illumined by one unitary and indisputable discourse. Contradictions, conflicts, and doubts remain in the object, in thoughts, in living experiences—in short, in the subject matter—but they do not enter into the language itself. In poetry, even discourse about doubts must be cast in a discourse that cannot be doubted” (Bakhtin 286).
No poet can have failed to recognize how often a detail, a propos or remark, in respect to painting, applies also to poetry. The truth is that there seems to exist a corpus of remarks in respect to painting, most often the remarks of painters themselves, which are as significant to poets as to painters. All of these details, to the extent that they have meaning for poets as well as for painters, are specific instances of relations between poetry and painting. (8)

In his *Autobiography*, William Carlos Williams credited modern painters for initiating the modern movement:

> It is the making of that step, to come over into the tactile qualities, the words themselves beyond the mere thought expressed that distinguishes the modern, or distinguished the modern of that time from the period before the turn of the century. And it is the reason why painting and the poem became so closely allied at the time. It was the work of the painters following Cézanne and the Impressionists that critically opened up the age of Stein, Joyce, and a good many others. It is in the taking of that step over from feeling to the imaginative object, on the cloth, on the page, that defined the term, the modern term—a work of art, what it meant to them. (380-381)

Like many of their contemporaries, Stevens and Williams were drawn to paintings and sculptures as subject matter, and so a number of their poems read as verbal representations of visual works of art.

My discussion of Moore and Ponge’s writings on art will follow the models set by Mitchell and Loizeaux by focusing on the social implications of ekphrastic discourse. Mitchell and Loizeaux illustrate the importance of ekphrasis for self-reflexivity, a technique claimed by many modernist poets. Because the visual artwork is a “writing self” in its own right, self-reflexive ekphrasis enabled Moore and Ponge to equalize the relationship between writing self and written other—which included both the visual artwork and the subject of that visual artwork. I will not argue for a strict ekphrastic reading of their art-inspired poetry, however. Rather, I will claim that in order to avoid a rivalry between word and image and to break down the hierarchy between self and other, the poets tended to focus on the act of creation that went into the artwork instead of trying to re-create the artwork for the reader. In light of this we may discover Moore’s attempts to channel the artist’s imagination or creative spirit and Ponge’s efforts to recreate the interior of the artist’s workshop. More than ekphrasis, their words try to recover the original creative action and to connect the visual arts and literature on the level of conceptualization and materialization. As with ekphrasis, they reproduce for their readers the visual effect of the original artwork. Their poems ultimately depart from ekphrasis because they are less static, less photograph-like and
more concerned with the synthesizing of an image and with portraying the thing from multiple perspectives. In this respect, indeed, they come closest to the cubist tradition of modern painting.

3.2: Painting a poem with lines: the cubist model

The cubist style of painting originated in Paris as early as 1906 (Cooper 11). The first general exhibition of cubist paintings took place in Paris in 1911 at the Salon des Indépendants, although according to Apollinaire, the name “cubism” had been coined three years earlier by Matisse. Cubist painting is dominated by a concern for perspective, more specifically with displaying an object from multiple perspectives. As Jean Metzinger explained in “Cubisme et tradition” (1911): “They [the painters] have allowed themselves to move around the object to give a concrete representation of several aspects of it in succession, under the control of the intelligence. The picture used to occupy space, now it reigns in time as well” (Antliff and Leighten 123). Writing in 1911, Metzinger’s reference pertains more to the first stage of cubism, known as analytic cubism, in which objects are broken down into elements for analysis, often through geometrical lines and shading techniques that give the impression of three-dimensionality. This style of painting, which is also characterized by a dull, muted colour palette, was soon replaced by the second-stage synthetic cubism (around 1913), which played with the idea of collage and involved layering secondary materials onto the canvas. The collage of synthetic cubism, again, created the effect of a three-dimensional image. In both stages, the cubists’ response to mimesis was to avoid any straightforward representation of a subject which would limit a painting to its spatial confines, in favour of a depiction that mimicked the effect of movement and temporality. Furthermore, according to Metzinger (this time in an essay from 1913), the artist’s goal was not to capture a purely objective rendering of his/her subject, but rather to reveal the “original emotion” behind it (Antliff and Leighten 604). This emotion, in

44 “La nouvelle école de peinture porte le nom de cubisme; il lui fut donné par dérision en automne 1908 par Henri-Matisse qui venait de voir un tableau représentant des maisons dont l’apparence cubique le frappa vivement” (“The new school of painting was known as cubism; the name was given in the autumn of 1908 in an ironic fashion by Henri Matisse, who had just seen a painting of houses whose cubic appearance struck him profoundly;” Apollinaire 66).
other words, is the artist’s complex and multi-faceted perception of a thing at the moment of the artwork’s conception.

The prominence of the original emotion behind an artwork confirms cubism’s place within a modern tradition that includes symbolism (which preceded it) and surrealism (which eventually overtook it). It was revolutionary as a visual art form because it refigured the mimetic relationship between content and abstract form. Apollinaire explained it not as an art of imitation but one of conception and even creation. “En représentant la réalité conçue ou la réalité créée,” he claimed, “le peintre peut donner l’apparence de trois dimensions, peut en quelque sorte cubiquer” (“In representing a conceived or created reality, the artist can give the appearance of three dimensions, he can in a certain sense cubicize;” 67). Douglas Cooper furthermore explains cubist painters’ desire not to lose touch with the representational aspect of their work: “there was a vital division between anything Cubist in style or spirit and those supposed extensions of Cubism which turned into non-figuration. Cubism was essentially an art of realism” (264). The fact that cubist artists saw a link between their abstract form and the represented subject reveals cubism’s propensity to cross the line between the viewer and the viewed, or the mind which conceives of something and the thing that is conceived. They are connected, in Merleau-Pontian terms, because the artist instils a part of him/herself in the artwork and sees him/herself in that which s/he creates. Finally, and most importantly for my discussion, the abstraction of the image that accompanies the effects of movement and temporality prevent the viewer from objectifying the image as though it were a passive object. The cubist image challenges the viewer’s preconceptions of what it means to look upon and possess an image because the represented subject—with its own sense of temporality as well as spatiality—is not immediately available for possession.

The appeal of this kind of avant-garde aesthetic was not lost on poets, particularly given that a number of them were directly involved in the visual arts movement from the beginning. Max Jacob’s 1909 novel Saint Matorel, for instance, was accompanied by engravings done by Picasso in the early style of analytic cubism. In 1913 Apollinaire published a series of texts on cubism and its leading painters entitled “Les peintres cubistes: méditations esthétiques,” and Pierre
Reverdy later wrote a defence of cubism in his journal *Nord-Sud*.\textsuperscript{45} In North America, Gertrude Stein began writing in a cubist style around 1909,\textsuperscript{46} and arguably a number of poems by other prominent modernist poets, including Stevens, Williams and cummings, bear distinctly cubist techniques. As these poets all differ significantly from one another, establishing a comprehensive definition of cubist poetry can be challenging. Jacqueline Brogan offers a working definition in the introduction to her work on American cubist poets, in which she writes:

[Cubist poetry] is likely to be marked by concern with visual form [...] ; by a distortion of normal stanza, line, and word boundaries; by a thematic concern with its own modernism and an intense preoccupation with perception; by narrative and temporal disjunctions that, in a collage-like fashion, employ multiple voices, sections, and textual fragments; and finally by a heightened sense of textuality itself. (6)

We see certain elements of the above definition in Moore and Ponge’s poetry, and different ones for each. In Moore’s case, the cubist aesthetic can be seen most in the collage effect of her subject matter and her distinctive rhymed, syllabic stanzas. In Ponge’s poems, as I discussed in the previous chapter, the visual element plays a larger role due to his concern with typographical appearance. In both poets, of course, we can see a self-reflexive sense of textuality and preoccupation with their own perception of a thing, and what Brogan refers to as the “heightened sense of textuality itself” is the poets’ habit of describing the visual artwork as an imagined thing, in the manner by which the artist might initially have conceived of it.

Disparities arise as well, and hence neither of the two poets are generally considered to be cubist poets in the accepted sense of the term. I would suggest, however, that they became aware of cubist techniques and experimented with them to further their own goal of language-subject rapprochement. Ponge frequently wrote of his strong admiration for the cubist masters Braque and Picasso, and it is easy enough to draw connections between the artistic movement and his own poetry. In Moore’s case, the connections are present although less direct, as she never wrote specifically about cubist artists even though her notebooks indicate she followed the movement with some interest. With Moore, then, one can discern an affinity between her poetics and those


of cubism, and detect some influence of one to the other. In the sections that follow I will discuss, firstly, Ponge’s professed admiration for the cubist painters Braque and Picasso, and then a few of Moore’s early ekphrastic poems that bear a cubist sensibility.\footnote{47} Cubism likely attracted the poets because it appears to equalize the writing subject and the written thing. Since the cubist aesthetic bears no pretence to portraying a thing objectively, subjectivity—or the artist’s singular vision—is considered “truth.”\footnote{48} This “subjective truth” entails the artist’s acknowledgement that a part of him/herself exists in the aesthetic object s/he has created. The notion is not far from Merleau-Ponty’s idea of a “fundamental narcissism,” in which we see ourselves in the objects of our perception, and it lends itself furthermore to a rejection of the subject-object hierarchy.

Observations from within the artist’s Atelier

Francis Ponge wrote many texts on contemporary artists, although his earliest and longest-standing admiration seems to have been directed towards Georges Braque, one of the leading proponents of cubism in Paris during the 1900s and 1910s. In \textit{L’atelier contemporain} (O.C. II 696-721), Ponge describes his first encounter with a Braque canvas in the studio of his friend Jean Paulhan, around 1923 or 1924. The painting was of a violin, he remembers,\footnote{49} and twenty years later as Ponge is writing his first essay on Braque, this same painting (on loan from Paulhan) hangs on his wall. While Ponge admitted to distancing himself from the Parisian literary scene in the inter-war period (Sollers 53-68), he did not cease to study and appreciate the output of visual art of his contemporaries. In the six-month period in which he and his family took refuge from the Nazis in Fleury, Ponge had few possessions, but of these were two prints by

\footnote{47} Since Ponge wrote few ekphrastic poems, I will not discuss his poetry in this section of the chapter. A number of his poems focusing on typography do benefit from a cubist reading, however, since they attempt to break apart words to uncover or disprove their mimological correlations to things. These poems include, but are not limited to: “Le Mimosa,” “Notes prises pour un oiseau,” “Le gymnaste,” “La chèvre” and “L’abricot.” For more on Ponge’s concern with typography, please refer back to chapter one.

\footnote{48} In “Du cubisme,” Metzinger and Gleizes write that “there is only one truth, our own, when we impose it on everyone” (Antliff and Leighten 435).

\footnote{49} Braque did several violin still-lifes, both in his analytic and synthetic phases of cubism.
Braque and Picasso. He writes of the prints hanging on his wall: “Voilà pourquoi je pouvais vivre. Heureux. Voilà pour quelle société (d’amis) je me battais, contre ceux que je croyais ses seuls ennemis” (“This is why I was able to live. Happy. This is the society (of friends) for whom I was fighting, against those I believed were its only enemies;” 706). The visual arts affected Ponge on both personal and political levels and he considered the revolutionary potential of art to be of utmost importance; only art, he believed, ultimately had the power to confront the horrors of WWII and could help to transform the reality in which they manifested themselves. In terms of which genre of art held the most revolutionary potential, Ponge put his faith in the modern and/or avant-garde art that emerged in the early twentieth century. The wild colours of fauvism (see his praise of Chabaud in “La Mounine,” for instance) and the free spontaneity of the surrealists (with whom he associated for roughly a year around 1930 [Sollers 73-5]) both engaged Ponge’s creative nature, and he held a particular appreciation for the innovative and abstract multi-media work of Jean Fautrier. His primary and dominant influences in the visual arts, however, still can be traced back to Braque and Picasso. It is to the cubist work of these two artists that Ponge attributes the early twentieth century’s art “explosion:”

C’est qu’en effet les plus forts esprits de l’époque, “ces géants, ces génies” avaient profité de cette atmosphère matinale pour repenser entièrement le problème de la peinture et y accomplir la révolution la plus importante qu’elle ait connue depuis la Renaissance. Ainsi avaient-ils jeté les bases d’une rhétorique et d’un style qui eussent pu donner des fruits pendant plus d’un siècle. (O.C. II 585)

In fact the greatest minds of the period, “these giants, these geniuses” profited from the atmosphere of dawn to rethink entirely the problem of painting and to achieve the most important revolution it had known since the Renaissance. In such a way did they lay the foundations for a rhetoric and style that could have flourished for over a century.

According to Ponge, cubism—had it not been interrupted—would have marked the tipping point for future generations of artists in terms of its avant-garde revolution, the likes of which had not been felt since the Renaissance.

While Braque and Picasso were by no means limited to their cubist periods, cubism (both in its analytic and synthetic manifestations) was arguably the most influential movement for Ponge for several reasons. Firstly, it was a style of painting that introduced temporality to the canvas, which meant that its practitioners did not need to confine themselves to the perceived limited spatial nature of their medium. For a poet like Ponge who continually struggled under the constraints of language, this freedom was obviously very appealing. Furthermore, there was
something daring and even politically revolutionary in cubism’s non-conformism, which Ponge alluded to in an interview in 1975 when he claimed that Picasso’s “heroic moment” was during the cubist phase he shared with Braque, when the two of them “n’étaient pas du tout compris, mais censurés au maximum” (“were not at all understood, but censured to the maximum;” O.C. II 1417). Ponge too would have been attracted to the manner by which cubism rejected the singular and empowering gaze with which we often approach paintings, in favour of demonstrating how artist, subject and viewer are all three connected. In an interview Braque did with the American poet and art critic Gelett Burgess who had asked him, à propos of his “Nude” (1907-08), why he had drawn three female profiles prior to the painting, Braque replied:

I couldn’t portray a woman in all her natural loveliness…I haven’t the skill. No one has. I must, therefore, create a new sort of beauty, the beauty that appears to me in terms of volume, of line, of mass, of weight, and through that beauty interpret my subjective impression. Nature is a mere pretext for a decorative composition, plus sentiment. It suggests emotion, and I translate that emotion into art. I want to expose the Absolute, and not merely the factitious woman. (Fry 71-2)

Braque’s “Absolute” appears to offer a way of representing a subject-thing without objectifying it, in which the artist takes a more multi-reflective, phenomenological approach to composition and tries to subvert the traditional power dynamics between viewer and viewed. It is equivalent to the cubist technique of multiple perspective, which Ponge himself adapted to his poetry. This technique enabled the poet to take a more well-rounded and comprehensive approach to his subject-things, which in turn helped him to reduce their objectification through language. Similarly, in his texts about artists, Ponge did not try to portray the artist as a fully-formed individual but rather emphasized him/her in the act of creation, as a creative force.

Ponge dedicated several of the essays in *L’atelier contemporain* (1977) to Braque and Picasso. The essays were all written between the 1950s and the 1970s, and although the cubist epoch was well over by this time, Ponge continued to emphasize the cubist tendencies of their oeuvres and the innovations these artists achieved in the early half of the century. “Braque ou un méditatif à l’œuvre” begins with an invitation to the reader to completely alter his/her course of navigation and prepare to enter the unconventional terrain that is Braque’s studio: “Braquez à fond, pour vous dégager du créneau (en arrière, d’abord; puis, en sens inverse, vers l’avant) et vous voici, déjà, tranquillement, en route, dans la lecture d’une tout autre chose qu’une rangée de voitures à l’arrêt” (“Turn the wheel all the way, to free yourself from the parallel park (reverse, firstly; then, in the opposite way, go forward) and you will find yourself, already, peacefully, on your
way, towards a reading of something entirely different from a row of parked cars;” (696). The pun on Braque’s name in the initial imperative verb is of course quite clear, as is the suggestion that a text on Braque far surpasses the ordinary and possibly mundane stuff of one’s daily existence. By means of this initial driving metaphor, Ponge leads his readers into a meditation on the phenomenological experience of observing a painting, in which he questions the pleasure people derive from looking at paintings, calling it “assez étrange” (“rather strange;” 699). His focus on the physical experience involved in contemplating a canvas—and more specifically one of Braque’s canvases—leads him to compare the experience with poetry. A reader who is aware of both the form and the content (or the signifier and signified) of a visual or written text, he writes, is one who will be able to appreciate both poetry and Braque, because in both “reading” experiences the medium is as important as the message (713).

Ponge’s emphasis on the material aspect of Braque’s painting pertains to the atomistic approach to knowledge that he takes in this essay, which he sets up near the beginning with a quote from Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*: “To what can we relate, then? What can we have that is more accurate in distinguishing what is real and what is false than the senses themselves?” (702).

Ponge’s emphasis on physicality and perception also pertains to his notion of the way in which an individual’s senses physically connect him/her to a text (whether it is a painting or a poem). “Quand vous vous placez devant un tableau,” he asks his reader, “avez-vous l’impression que, principalement, *vous* le regardez, ou, au contraire, que c’est lui qui vous regarde?” (“When you are in front of a painting, do you have the impression that it is primarily *you* who is looking at it, or, on the contrary, that it is looking at you?” (698). Ponge is interested in what exactly—material and intellectual—goes into a painting, since as an art form it is an entirely human endeavour whose “truths” exist only relative to everything else in the world: temporality, spatiality, the human condition, languages (701). Does the material of paint really know a painting better than the painter, he wonders. Recalling Merleau-Ponty, one might consider the fact that we project much of ourselves into a painting, so that what returns our gaze might also be a part of ourselves. Braque, according to Ponge, recognizes the perplexity of these questions and

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50 My translation.
therefore strives only to paint things in their act of becoming and unbecoming. Ponge sums up the effect of Braque’s paintings with a direct reference to Lucretius:

Ce que nous donnent à voir les peintures de Braque, ce ne sont que de nouvelles choses (res) qui comportent (car elles sont faites des mêmes “corpores” ou atomes que le monde dit extérieur) l’obscurité et la lumière des choses, qui s’éclairent les unes les autres (ita res accendent lumina rebus).\(^{51}\) (718)

What Braque’s paintings make us see are simply new things (res) that contain (since they are made of the same “corpores” or atoms as the so-called external world) the obscurity and the light of things, that illuminate one another (ita res accendent lumina rebus).

Braque’s genius, according to Ponge, lies in his (recognizably cubist) ability to paint in such a way that he better illuminates the nature of things in the world without letting them expire in a frozen tableau. Ponge’s own text “Braque ou Un méditatif à l’oeuvre” strives for the same effect, as the poet does not try to recreate Braque’s artwork but rather introduces it to his readers through a number of theoretical and artistic questions that paint a picture of the artist at work.

“Texte sur Picasso” is an equally laudatory essay on the Spanish painter and friend of Ponge. The text has a rhythm and energy to it that would appear to mimic the energy and spirit Ponge finds in Picasso’s oeuvre, which he compares several times to a kaleidoscope in its ability to recombine images in a variety of different ways. Picasso is the “machine operator” who puts everything into movement, Ponge writes, akin to a divine creator who constantly alters his world:

Nous avons la chance de vivre à une époque du monde où quelqu’un, le plus grand machiniste imaginable, en modifie à chaque instant l’apparence. D’un coup de pouce, il fait varier l’univers. Périodiquement, nous rouvrons les yeux: tout est changé. Non détruit. Arrangé autrement. Et chaque fois nous nous lançons dans ce monde tout neuf avec une ardeur nouvelle. (732)

We have the fortune of living in a period where somebody, the greatest machinist imaginable, modifies in every instance the appearance of the world. With a flick of the thumb, he changes the universe. Periodically, we re-open our eyes: everything is changed. Not destroyed. Arranged otherwise. And each time we launch ourselves into this new world with new enthusiasm.

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\(^{51}\) From *De rerum natura*, meaning: “facts shine light on facts”. 
Through the example of Picasso, Ponge claims that distinguishing between images and things is important because it underlines the creative potential of humans, a species that can imagine (new) things beyond those that already exist in the world. Picasso’s cubist period, he argues, demonstrated the artist’s ability to discern the eternal being of his subjects through “une sorte d’abstraction enracinée à notre être nerveux” (“a kind of abstraction rooted within our nervous system,” 736), which as a result enabled his audience to learn more about that which is “eternally human” in ourselves. By calling attention to the form of his paintings, Ponge claims, Picasso made us aware of the various facets of humanity we might take for granted and how, in artistic representation, the distortion of these can necessitate a re-evaluation of their intrinsic worth.

In his texts on Braque and Picasso, Ponge draws attention to the importance of formal abstraction in the oeuvres of these two artists—a formal abstraction which he perceives to have originated in the cubist stage of their work. As such, he also dedicates a good part of his texts to the artists themselves, rather than the artworks that they produced. This is a trend that can be seen in all of Ponge’s writings on artists. Indeed the very titles of his two collections which these writings comprise, *Le peintre à l’étude* (1948) and *L’atelier contemporain* (1977), promise a window into the artist at work in his/her studio, which means that Ponge’s focus is not so much on describing the finished product but rather the production itself, the tools and materials used, the habits and behaviour of the artist. As Adelaide Russo has remarked, Ponge’s writing on the visual arts marks a dissolution of the boundaries between finished, closed works and notes in progress (159). Similarly, Russo writes, he places almost more value in Braque’s and other artists’ sketches than in their actual oeuvres, because he found more authenticity and excellence in the initial drawings that spawned an idea (160-1). The same principle of focusing on the action behind an artwork can be seen in a number of his thing poems, particularly those of *La rage de l’expression* discussed in the previous two chapters. Although those poems were not ekphrasis per se, their concern with the visual arrangement of words indicates Ponge’s awareness of how his poetry coincided with the larger artistic context in which he wrote. It is noteworthy also that not only did Ponge admire cubist painters and sculptors, but many of these artists themselves held a reciprocal admiration for the poet of *Le parti pris des choses*, in whom they saw a new manifestation of poetic cubism. In later years, however, Ponge brushed aside this connection by
arguing that the poems in *Le parti pris des choses* were too closely tied to an initial emotion to be properly cubist in nature.52

The gaze of the female subject

Moving to New York in 1918, Marianne Moore was already well acquainted with a number of other working writers—poets, editors, literary critics—as well as artists involved in painting, sculpture and photography. Her first visit to Alfred Stieglitz’s Gallery 291, for instance, was in December 1915 during a trip to New York that followed the acceptance of some of her poems in the magazine *Others*. *Others* was edited at the time by Alfred Kreymborg and as Moore’s personal correspondence reveals, Kreymborg played a notable role in escorting Moore to galleries and artists’ meetings and introducing her to a variety of important players in New York’s art world (Leavell 28). Moore had been published in a number of little magazines by the time she visited Kreymborg in New York—including *Poetry* and the *Egoist*—and it was as an emerging but confident young poet that she made her forays into the city’s art scene.53 In the first chapter of her book *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts*, Linda Leavell paints a thorough and extensive portrait of the poet’s acquaintance with visual artists and her interest in the various visual arts movements of the period, all of which she pieces together by means of Moore’s correspondence and notebooks. The rest of Leavell’s book traces Moore’s development as a poet in connection to the avant-garde visual artists with whom she shared many theoretical and formal preoccupations—including those working in collage and cubism. The context of my argument

52 “On ne peut pas […] parler de poésie cubiste le moins du monde, même à propos de mes textes du *Parti pris des choses*, pas du tout, parce que c’est quelque chose qui sourd d’une émotion—je ne dis pas qu’il n’y ait pas d’émotion chez les cubistes, mais enfin, d’après ce qu’on prétend, c’est parce qu’ils présentent toutes les faces de l’objet en même temps, on dit ça, mais ce n’est pas ça” (“One cannot […] speak of cubist poetry in the slightest, even in reference to my texts from *Parti pris des choses*, not at all, because it is something that takes shape from an emotion—I’m not saying that there isn’t emotion in the cubists, but in the end, according to what they say, it’s because they present all sides of the object at the same time, they say that, but it isn’t that;” O.C. II 1417-1418).

53 Leavell points out that Moore herself, on her 1915 trip, took the initiative to visit Gallery 291, the Modern Gallery and the Daniel Gallery, needing no prompting or accompaniment from Kreymborg to do so: “In fact, after her first visit to 291 when Kreymborg asked her if she had mentioned his name to Stieglitz, Moore said, ‘No, I didn’t know he knew Mr. Kerfoot or you or any of the men who are interested in poetry’” (quoted from a letter to the poet’s brother, dated 12 December 1915) (Leavell 28).
therefore owes much to Leavell’s establishment of the artistic climate through which Moore became interested in cubist art.\textsuperscript{54}

Moore’s first introduction to cubist painting may well have been through the press coverage of the 1913 Armory Show in New York, from which she pasted an array of articles into her scrapbooks (Leavell 21; Costello 188). The Armory Show was the first International Exhibition of Modern Art (its official title) in North America and featured works by over three hundred artists, including cubists like Picasso, Braque, Metzinger, Gleizes, Léger and Duchamp. The exhibition was both immensely popular and controversial. Its cubist works were arguably some of its most provocative—Duchamp’s \textit{Nude Descending a Staircase} being a prime example—and it is not surprising that a number of American writers were interested in appropriating its techniques for literature. Stein, for one, had already written about Picasso in an issue of Stieglitz’s \textit{Camera Work} that followed the 1911 exhibition of the painter’s work in Steiglitz’s Photo-Succession Gallery. Jacqueline Brogan refers to Stein’s article, titled simply “Pablo Picasso,” as a retrospective embodiment of early “cubist literature” (14). The article begins:

\textit{One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming. (Camera Work 29)}

With the heavy rhythm of these nearly identical phrases the reader is cautioned against reading too quickly or too passively, lest s/he miss the slight variation within them. This kind of writing aligns itself with Picasso’s analytic cubism of the time, embodied in a painting like \textit{Man Smoking a Pipe} (1911).

Marianne Moore was by no means a cubist poet in the manner of Stein, yet as Bonnie Costello and Linda Leavell have remarked, her proclivity for collage and formal abstraction reveals a cubist-minded approach to rendering visual images into verbal representations.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} Leavell herself does not suggest that all of Moore’s “cubist” techniques were directly influenced by cubism. At the time of the Armory Show, for instance, Moore had already written a substantial amount of poetry and as Leavell remarks: “Her use of quotation predates synthetic cubism by five years […] her ‘found poem’ [“Councell to a Bachelor” 1913] predates Duchamp’s \textit{Fountain} by at least four years” (102).

\textsuperscript{55} Linda Leavell has drawn parallels between analytic cubism and a number of Moore’s poems, particularly those in which she displays the formal innovation of her rhymed syllabic metre. Leavell compares Moore to the cubists in
Whereas Leavell stresses the cubist connections to Moore’s formal abstraction (notably her syllabic metre), Costello shows how her collage demonstrates a cubist-like affect of distance and evolution, as though her subjects were constantly in the process of changing (212-213). In line with Costello’s analysis, I contend that Moore employed cubist-like collage techniques—particularly in her early (pre-1920s) poems—in order to represent through ekphrasis her experience viewing images. In these poems, the subject-thing is fragmented and never revealed in its entirety, so that the reader can never hold it in his/her gaze. The result of Moore’s self-reflexive cubist-like collage is that the poetic craft is more explicitly put on display and questioned for its own mimetic or ekphrastic capabilities. My discussion of the following three poems, “Those Various Scalpels” (1917), “Kay Nielsen in Cinderella” (c. 1914) and “Kay Nielsen’s Little Green Patch in the Midst of the Forest” (c. 1914) will endeavour to illuminate Moore’s cubist tendencies in respect to the reciprocal gaze she establishes between her readers and the subject of the image she describes.

“Those Various Scalpels” (C.P. 51), which Leavell calls “Moore’s most ‘cubist’ poem” (75), is an ekphrastic poem that presents a woman as a work of art. In the manner of a blason, the poem presents a female subject who has been dissected into parts that include her hair (“the tails of two / fighting-cocks head to head in stone like sculptured scimitars re- / peating the curve of your ears in reverse order”), her eyes (“flowers of ice and snow / sown by tearing winds on the cordage of disabled ships”), her hands, cheeks, jewels and dress. The title’s scalpels are reflected both in the poem’s dissection of its subject matter as well as its metric dissection, which requires an aural and visual reading in order to discern the various rhymes and sound patterns within. The poem also treats the parts of the subject’s body and her decorative jewellery with equal degrees of importance—if not granting more importance to the latter—so that, for example, her hand is described as “a bundle of lances all alike,” while the jewels that adorn it are:

[...] emeralds from Persia

terms of her abstraction of form, claiming that “her geometric, abstract stanzas break up the natural fluidity of prose sentences as the geometric, abstract planes of cubism break up the fluid images of nudes, faces, and landscapes” (74).
and the fractional magnificence of Florentine
goldwork—a collection of little objects—
sapphires set with emeralds, and pearls with a moonstone, made fine
with enamel in gray, yellow, and dragonfly blue;
a lemon, a pear

and three bunches of grapes, tied with silver […]

The importance attributed to the decoration reveals the poet’s preoccupation with the visual appearance of her subject, but also her unease in trying to portray her subject with any real sense of being. The colour and embellishment lent to the descriptions also call explicit attention to the poet’s subjective voice, as there is little attempt to portray the “woman” (real or imagined) as she might exist in her entirety, but only the various pieces of her that one might perceive from different angles. Unlike a traditional blason, Moore’s poem dissects its female subject not in order to claim intimacy with the subject but rather to show how little of her inner being the poet can actually see and represent. The approach calls to mind the words of Georges Braque when he claimed: “I couldn’t portray a woman in all her natural loveliness…I haven’t the skill. No one has” (Fry 71-72). In the case of both artists’ work, realistic representation is forgone in order to avoid the objectification of the subject.

Moore was always interested in the connection between outer form and inner content, as her frequent representation of shelled and/or armoured beings well demonstrates. Animals like the pangolin, the paper nautilus and the snail are presented as models for morality and/or aesthetics, since Moore likens the qualities of strength, endurance and modesty that are associated with their shells, to the animals’ inner characters. In “Those Various Sculpels,” however, no sense of the female subject’s inner character is given whatsoever. One might infer that the subject bears an inner strength equivalent to the “scimitars,” “lances” and “sculpels” that characterize her external appearance, but such an inference would be merely speculation based upon Moore’s habit of equating form and content. In fact, Moore renders the inner being of her subject impenetrable by clothing her in an armed tower (a “cathedral tower of uniform”) and equipping her with various “weapons.” The poem further reverses our expectations for a traditional blason when at the end the speaker takes hold of certain “instruments” of dissection (possibly the same weapons or scalpels she uses to arm her subject) and undermines the entire poem by asking why it was written at all: “But why dissect destiny with instruments / more highly specialized than components of destiny
itself?” In the poem’s final two lines the focus moves from the sharpness of the subject’s dress—sharpness understood both literally and in its figurative sense of “powerful” or “stunning”—to a self-reflexive meditation on the transfer of optical image into written description. The “rich instruments” shift from signifying beauty’s tools of decoration to signifying the poet’s tools of decoration; hence, while breaking the frame of her poem, Moore points to the artifice contained within the visual image as well.

In “Those Various Scalpels,” Moore foregrounds the potential shortcomings of ekphrasis and the objectifying power of the gaze when she initially supplies her subject with rhetorical shields and weapons that deflect the reader’s gaze, but then proceeds to question the artifice of these same battle metaphors. By drawing the reader’s attention to his/her own act of gazing, the poem subverts the traditional self-other hierarchy between word and image as well as that between subject and object. Her conclusion suggests that the artist, writer and reader can be just as destabilized as the gazed-upon and written subject, since any given viewer projects much of him/herself into that which s/he observes and records and therefore must be self-consciously aware of his/her own interpretative act. In the following two poems this proposition is rendered more literal when the subject of the ekphrasis commands a gaze of her own. In “Kay Nielsen in Cinderella” and “Kay Nielsen’s Little Green Patch in the Midst of the Forest,” Moore attributes a sense of vision to the female subjects so that they not only see, but see us, the readers, and return or at least divert our gaze so that we cannot merely visually consume them as passive objects, but rather are forced to recognize the way in which we appear in their eyes. The result is that the reading subject and read subject-thing become entangled in a reciprocal relationship whereby the reader sees him/herself in the subject upon which s/he bestows his/her gaze. Moreover, once the gaze of the aesthetic subject has been established, it captures the reader’s gaze and diverts it elsewhere, to somewhere that it hypothetically “sees” that the reader cannot.

Both “Kay Nielsen in Cinderella” (Poems of Marianne Moore 59) and “Kay Nielsen’s Little Green Patch in the Midst of the Forest” (Poems of Marianne Moore 60) respond to fairy-tale illustrations done by the Danish illustrator named in their titles, Kay Nielsen. The dates of composition for the two poems are uncertain, although through a letter Moore wrote to her

56 Please refer to figures 1 and 2 in the appendix.
brother we know that she had acquired a copy of Sir George Dasent’s *East of the Sun and West of the Moon: Tales from the Old North* by the beginning of 1914 (Willis, “Kay Nielsen”). Furthermore, the 1913 Christmas Number of the *Illustrated London News* published a series of Nielsen’s illustrations to accompany tales by Charles Perrault, including one of *Cinderella.*

The fact that Moore inserts Kay Nielsen’s name into the titles of these poems indicates the centrality of the illustrations in her reading experience of the fables and also serves to draw attention to the illustrator’s subjective hand within the images themselves. These are Kay Nielsen’s pictures, the titles imply, and as such one should not hesitate to locate the artist himself within the pictures’ frames. As well, both poems attempt to capture the feeling of the illustrations in a fragmented manner which would approximate the poet’s own eye as it narrowed in on particular elements of the illustration that compelled her attention. This fragmentation, like that of “Those Various Scalpels,” lends considerable credence to a cubist reading of the poems.

“Kay Nielsen in *Cinderella*” is brief enough to be quoted here in its entirety:

The eye, the slipper, 
but particularly the eye

Kay Nielsen’s cinder-wench’s disembodied glance:

“Nothing will cure the sick lion but to eat an ape.”

Omnis, amens, amens
omnis *amans* amens
The lover raves.
Where passion is
Capacities are slaves.

The poem is not so intent on describing the illustration as it is on describing the artist’s interpretation of the story through his illustration—hence the use of the possessive in “Kay Nielsen’s cinder-wench.” It refrains from commenting upon the heroine’s physical beauty and clothing (details which are central to the fairy-tale’s plot), but rather isolates elements of Nielsen’s style that Moore finds particularly revealing of his aesthetic vision. In fact, we read the protagonist only through her slipper (indicating her absence), her eye and her “disembodied glance,” the latter serving to restore the power of the gaze to a subject who, in the original tale, is for the most part a silent and obedient object of beauty. By playing with the reader’s focus in

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evoking the heroine’s eye, then her slipper and then again laying emphasis on her eye, the poet skips over the rest of her features and thus invites us to rethink the fairy-tale not in terms of Cinderella being an object of beauty, but rather in terms of her as an active subject who sees but cannot be seen. The poem does not specify in what direction the heroine’s glance is cast, but the fact that it is “disembodied” suggests that she is gazing at somewhere beyond the superficial spectacle to which she belongs. Because the reader cannot visualize Cinderella from these words, s/he can only try to follow her line of sight to gain an impression of that somewhere beyond the confines of the poem. The “sick lion” quotation points to a somewhat darker direction by suggesting that love can be a question of dominance and aggression rather than goodwill. If the result is a somewhat less enchanted—if not disenchanted—portrait of the well-known fairy-tale, it is not Moore’s vision alone; her poem attempts to convey Nielsen’s interpretation of the story as captured through his illustration, and the fragmentation she depicts through words narrows in on what she sees as the artist’s vision.

The second Kay Nielsen illustration that caught Moore’s eye was from the “Old North” tale East of the Sun and West of the Moon. This illustration depicts the female protagonist in a moment of grief and despair before her fortune is restored in the tale’s conclusion. Moore’s reaction to the illustration is strong and excited, marked by sporadic but emphatic rhymes, repetitions and interrogations. Several lines down her poem reads:

It is not trees
That the protagonist of the piece sees.
As always is the case.
It is not this:
It is the essence of a place
That is not here.

Rather than describing the scene of the illustration, the poem attempts to look beyond what is on the page to what the poet believes the artist wished to convey—in other words, the inner essence of the image. The poet’s language is excited but reticent, the repetitions seeming to convey an

58 This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Moore later placed the quotation as the title of a poem (in Selected Poems) in which we read that “in the masked ball / attitude, there is a hollowness / that beauty’s light momentum can’t redeem.” The later poem, too, appears to be in part an ekphrastic response to Kay Nielsen’s illustration of Cinderella, and here the poet makes more explicit her and Nielsen’s subversion of the romantic.
initial hesitancy followed by a resolve to follow through with her language and put the picture to words. Reading this poem one senses the poet’s emotion and reaction to the illustration, but learns nothing of the narrative which the image was originally made to represent. The single reference to the protagonist (a young girl) is her act of seeing. As with “Kay Nielsen in Cinderella,” this is significant because the poem’s unseen protagonist is herself given sight and is permitted to gaze upon the very “essence of a place” which the poet wishes to convey and which the reader hopes to see. In Nielsen’s illustration, the female subject is shown from a sideways view kneeling on the ground, her face covered by her hands in an act of dejection. Moore rejects a literal representation of the subject in these terms by imagining the somewhere else that the subject herself can “see.” This somewhere else or “essence of a place” is the same thing that, to her, good painting and good poetry would strive to represent: the genuine being of a thing that exists beyond the confines of the artistic medium. Hence, when Moore depicts the female subject in the act of seeing this essence or being, she also draws the reader’s attention to the latter and consequently we do not hold Nielsen’s female subject in our gaze. Rather, we are attempting to partake in the very gaze that she herself initiates.

Once again, the deliberate destabilization of the viewer in the Kay Nielsen poems recalls the manner by which cubism rejected the singular and empowering gaze which most painting tends to encourage, in favour of demonstrating how artist, subject and viewer are all three interconnected. Cubism is just one lens through which to read Moore’s ekphrastic poetry, however, and in doing so one must acknowledge that the strong fragmentation she performs in early poems such as the above three is not as noticeable in her later work. Thus, while one can and should detect an affinity between Moore’s poetics and the cubist strategy of democratizing the viewing subject and viewed thing, one must consider this affinity only as a part of the much larger discourse taking place at the time between literature and the visual arts.

Another important feature of the above three poems, finally—and one to which Braque incidentally alludes in his comment on the “Nude”—is that they subvert the dominant male gaze from the female object. Loizeaux, referring to Moore’s style of ekphrasis as “non-predatory looking” (84), sees this as a reaction against the typical gender dynamics inscribed into the history of ekphrasis (dominated by male poets), and argues that Moore’s work can be read as a re-evaluation of these gender dynamics in the early twentieth century (82). Indeed, the three poems discussed above all subvert the reader’s gaze from the typical female object and elicit
rather a new, shared perspective between reader, poet and female subject. They reject the kind of self-objectification that Berger et. al use to characterize European painting, in which female subjects, even those who look back at their spectator, are depicted as being in submission to the gaze of the male viewer (45-64). In fact they come closer to performing the kind of self-reflexive, non-realist display of multiple gazes that Laura Mulvey called for in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In none of the poems is the female subject “given” to the reader in a passive manner; in the Kay Nielsen poems the reader is invited to actively share her experience and in “Those Various Scalpels” the poet shields the subject from view entirely. Not all of Moore’s non-aggressive ekphrastic poems dealt explicitly with issues of gender, as I will discuss in this chapter’s final section on Moore’s objets d’art. In these too, however, Moore uncovers not just objects indicating someone else’s wealth, but subjects with a rich existence all of their own.

3.3: Ekphrasis in Ponge and Moore

From an examination of the cubist principles that inform Moore and Ponge’s thing poems, one can proceed to an exploration of the poetic approach they took to existing artists and/or works of art. The following sections will attempt to illustrate the interplay that occurs within their writing of what Mitchell calls ekphrastic hope and ekphrastic fear. Moore and Ponge’s concern with genuine representation led to a paradoxical relationship with art and artifice, in which they embraced the one while condemning (or at the very least vowing to expose) the other. As I will demonstrate with Ponge’s text on Jean Fautrier and Moore’s objet d’art poems, the poets employed cubist-like techniques of equalizing the viewing subject (poet) and viewed object (painter or artwork) in order to present a non-competitive, non-objectified verbal account of visual works of art.

Ponge, Fautrier and la rage de l’expression

On the 26th of October, 1945, Paris’s Galerie René Drouin exhibited a collection of paintings by the artist Jean Fautrier, entitled Otages. These paintings, the result of roughly two years’ work during the Occupation, depict in abstract manner the tortured, mutilated and murdered bodies of victims of the Nazis. The collection of Otages marked the beginning of Fautrier’s
experimentation with *haute pâte*, or “high paste,” a process that involved laying a canvas flat on a table, covering it with paper and then applying a thick white primer to the surface upon which a preliminary drawing was made. This primary layer was then covered by a layer of gesso, or plaster-like substance which was manipulated with tools and then covered with yet another layer, to be repeated several times. The final layer was sprinkled with coloured powder, and then the finished product was left to dry (Carter 20). When *Otages* was first exhibited, it was met with strong reactions both for its form and its content. One of the most controversial aspects to the exhibit lay in the fact that despite the horror the paintings depicted, they struck their audience as exceptionally beautiful.

Prior to the *Otages*’s gallery début, Francis Ponge had been asked by his friend Jean Paulhan, also a friend of Fautrier, to write a preface to the exhibition. Although this preface was ultimately replaced by one written by André Malraux, Ponge went on to publish his piece the following year under the title *Note sur “Les Otages.” Peintures de Fautrier*. Ponge begins his *Note* by addressing the aforementioned difficulty of rendering something horrible into something beautiful: “Ce serait trop peu dire que je ne suis pas sûr des pages qui suivent: voici de drôles de textes, violents, maladroits. Il ne s’agit pas de paroles sûres” (“It would be an understatement to say that I am unsure of the pages that follow: here are strange, violent, clumsy texts. It is not a case of assured words;” O.C. I 92). The combination of beauty and horror with which he was faced undoubtedly shook his foundations, but as the text proceeds we realize that Ponge’s uncertainty refers not only to Fautrier’s depiction of his victim-subjects in painting; in typical Pongeian fashion, he is referring also to his own act of writing about the paintings. In keeping with a tradition of what W. J. T. Mitchell refers to as “ekphrastic indifference,” or the belief that it is impossible to represent pictures through words, Ponge is concerned that he will not do justice to Fautrier’s images through his writing. His concern is far from artistic self-involvement, however. As an artist and a poet of things, Ponge was interested in the possibility of portraying his subjects in their entirety, of granting them *Pour soi* or being-for-oneself in terms of phenomenology. In his poetry we see that Ponge felt compelled to identify with his subjects in order to reduce the chances of objectifying the other in the act of representation. To reiterate a

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59 Malraux was not only better-known than Ponge at the time, but also a friend of Fautrier.
point from the previous chapter, he tried, as Merleau-Ponty might explain it, to show how his own being was intrinsically connected to the being of the subject he portrayed, since his perception of an other was tied to his perception of himself. Hence, when Ponge attempted to write about Fautrier’s *Otages*, he had to take into account both his relationship to the original subjects of the paintings, as well as the ekphrastic relationship between his literary medium and Fautrier’s painterly medium.

Ponge’s response to both the challenge of representing horror through beauty and the challenge of representing pictures in words was the same: in both cases, difficulties could be overcome by reducing or eliminating the objectification of the represented thing, and creating rather a dialogue between subject, image, words and reader. In justifying the painter’s creation of beauty in his portrayal of Nazi horrors, Ponge argues that Fautrier created a new humanist symbol for the modern age within the abstract faces of his nameless *otages*—one that will unite people in their resistance against atrocity and horror. In justifying his own representation of the images in words—a task which proves far more challenging to the poet—Ponge deliberately exposes his literary act and thereby creates a kind of dialogue between his text and Fautrier’s paintings in which they each appear to “write one another.” This dialogic relationship between text and image that he establishes acts as an equalizer between the two and eliminates what Mitchell refers to as the “paragone” or contest of ekphrasis. Through his non-competitive dialogue with Fautrier’s paintings, Ponge attempts to promote the universal resistance message that he reads within the latter.

Fautrier’s *Otages* are highly abstract—some a bit less so than others—depictions of the bodies of individuals murdered by the Nazis. Many of them represent only a head, which is often oval-shaped to suggest a frontal view, although sometimes a more contoured sideways view is also given. Ponge dedicates most of his essay to the head (“Tête d’otage”) portraits. The colours Fautrier uses are vivid and stunning, causing Ponge to comment several times on the beauty of their harmony and to compare them to the soft colours of a flower: “de couleurs si charmantes, si harmonieuses, si pareilles à la carnation rose, bleue, jaune, orange ou viride des fleurs” (“such

60 Other paintings depict bodies, torsos and hands, for instance, with titles like “Corps d’otage,” “Torse” and “L’otage aux mains.”
charming, harmonious colours, so similar to the pink, blue, yellow, orange or virid skin of flowers;” 95). Furthermore, the paintings draw attention to their medium, or the weight and thickness of their materials on the canvas. Karen Butler, co-curator of Columbia University’s 2003 Fautrier exhibit, describes the experience of confronting “Tête d’otage, no. 14”61 as a dual perception of the subject and its form:

Confronted by the work’s viscerality, the body of the viewer mediates between the form of the painting, the heavy pâte, and its subject, the hostage. […] Standing before this painting, one cannot help but be engaged by the tension of the materials, especially the weight of the thick, whitish mound of gesso in the center, pulling on the fragile support of the papier marouflé (paper mounted on canvas) that Fautrier used as the ground for his paintings. (51)

Ponge too was struck by Fautrier’s emphatic use of his materials and writes:

Dirons-nous à présent que les visages peints par Fautrier sont pathétiques, émouvants, tragiques? Non: ils sont épais, tracés à gros traits, violemment coloriés; ils sont de la peinture. […] Ils n’imitent pas la chair. La peinture sort du tube, elle s’étale par endroits, ailleurs elle se masse; le dessin se trace, s’informe; chacun de son côté, chacun pour sa part. (108)

Shall we say now that the faces painted by Fautrier are pathetic, moving, tragic? No: they are thick, drawn with broad strokes, violently coloured; they are painting. […] They do not imitate the flesh. Paint exits the tube, is spread out in some spots, in other areas it clumps together; the drawing draws itself, discovers itself; each to its own corner, each for its own part.

Emphasizing one’s artistic medium is central to Ponge’s self-reflexive style as a poet, and as I discussed earlier, he relies on this technique to lessen the objectification of the things he represents and to create subjects with whom his own being is implicated. With the Otages, however, Ponge finds that Fautrier has been able to go further by making the victim-subjects “pretexts” from which to model beauty out of horror. The violence within the paintings, Ponge implies, comes from the artist’s own “rage de l’expression:” a combination of his rage against the Nazi atrocities and his desire to express this rage on a canvas, with colour. The painter’s “rage,” then, becomes a part of the subject of his paintings. By rendering the original subjects “pretexts,” Fautrier achieves the contrary of objectification, since the victim-subjects become

61 Please refer to figure 3 in the appendix.
part of a larger appeal and reproach to humanity. While on the one hand the number and variety of his portraits grant some individuality to the victims—and Ponge himself admits that he has named the two portraits he owns—on the other hand the abstract, informal manner in which they are painted lends them a kind of universal quality that suggests they could represent any and all persons. The dialogue is further cemented as the painter signals his presence on the canvas by drawing attention to his craft, and the viewer tries to uncover and make sense of the horror—literally the mounds of gesso—that lies beneath the soft colours of the artistic representation.

The dialogue that Fautrier creates, according to Ponge, occurs entirely on and from the canvas, which renders the poet’s task of describing the paintings’ effect through non-visual means especially daunting. “Y a t-il des mots pour la peinture?” He asks early on in the essay. “Évidemment, on peut parler à propos de tout. […] Ou au contraire: non, évidemment non, pas de mots valables; la peinture est la peinture, la littérature est autre chose” (“Are there words for painting? Evidently, one can speak of anything. […] Or on the contrary: no, evidently not, no valid words; painting is painting, literature is something else;” 98). After further debating his commission to write about an artist’s work, Ponge finally makes up his mind to proceed with his criticism by comparing himself to one entering a boxing ring: “Cherchons des mots. Engageons sérieusement la partie” (“Let’s find words. Let’s engage seriously with the match;” 100). Like any competitor, he meets his subject (the Otages) directly in the ring. Unlike most competitors, Ponge does not seek to overcome his subject, but simply to follow its movement, and thus he opens his text to a description not only of the paintings, but also of Fautrier’s painting methods and finally his own literary methods as well. Ponge’s essay on Fautrier, like all of his essays on

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62 Ponge suggests that the disfigured heads adopt the properties of religious symbols, since they serve as a powerful reproach to the cruelty humans are capable of but also as a reminder of art’s potential to overcome horror with beauty.

63 “Les miens s’appellent R. L. et M. P.” (“Mine are called R. L. and M. P.;” 105). The editors’ notes in Oeuvres complètes suggest that these initials refer to two of Ponge’s friends who were killed by German occupants, René Leynaud (also the subject of “Baptême funèbre”) and Michel Pontremoli (to whom “Carnet du Bois de pins” is dedicated) (937).

64 The boxing metaphor is introduced in Ponge’s introduction: “Alors, il s’agit seulement de tenir debout, de finir à tout prix le combat et de ne s’écrouler qu’ensuite, après le coup de gong” (“Thus, it is simply a question of staying upright, of finishing the fight at any price and of not getting destroyed until afterwards, after the bell;” 92). Shirley Ann Jordan also comments on the boxing metaphor and the way in which the poet faces his subject “head-on” (54).
contemporary painters and sculptors, follows the artist through the process of creation. Bernard Vouilloux singles out the important idea of subjects “looking at one another” through the exchange of their different art forms and argues that Ponge was drawn to modern art in large part because it lends a subjecthood to its “objects” of representation:

> plus encore qu’au tableau, l’intérêt de Ponge va au peintre et à la chose peinte en train de se faire: au sujet-peintre en tant qu’il fait quelque chose. Le dispositif d’écriture se complexifie: il n’y a plus un sujet face à un objet; il n’y a plus que des sujets s’entre-regardant par le biais de ces objets métalogiques, textes, tableaux, qu’ils s’échangent. (48)

even more than the painting itself, Ponge was interested in the painter and in the painted thing in the process of being made: in the painter-subject as long as he is making something. The writing system is complicated: there is no longer one subject facing an object; there are only subjects looking at one another by means of these meta-logical objects, texts, paintings, that they exchange with one another.

If Ponge were merely to consider Fautrier’s paintings on their own as completed works of art, without any degree of self-reflexivity, the gaze would be likely one-way and the subject-object designations would be clear. Because he describes the paintings in the act of becoming, however, he uncovers a world in which they act regardless of whether or not he gazes upon them. Thus they become *subjects*. The dialogic relationship between them is compounded by the fact that Ponge describes his own text in its act of creation. This self-reflexivity brings Ponge’s text onto a level equal to that of Fautrier’s paintings, since they are both shown to be works in progress, or open texts. With deference to the artist he admires, Ponge creates a literary space in which they not only look at one another through their artistic mediums, but also write one another. Revealing the artist at work means also revealing the image in its process of becoming; hence Ponge’s words describe movement rather than stillness, and active subjects rather than passive objects.

Fautrier’s technique, for instance, is described first in precise detail, from the meticulous layering of paste and gesso to the time at which the artist rises to begin his work (dawn). After this literal description, however, Ponge approaches his subject through metaphor and refers to him as “un chat qui fait dans la braise” (111), or a cat that excretes in embers or cinders in order to cover up its excrement. This is a reference to the painter’s way of putting colour (which is beautiful) on top of mounds of white gesso (which in Ponge’s interpretation symbolize violence and atrocity). The oddness—and perhaps aptness—of this metaphor serves as a reminder that Ponge is not
purely an art critic, but that rather he is a poet writing an artist at work. This brings one to the question of ekphrasis and the description of the making of an artwork. When Ponge describes the *Otages* in the process of their making, he no longer enables himself or his readers to fix our gaze upon the paintings because they are in motion, taking form before our eyes. Activity is an important element to Ponge’s texts on artists, and it is the same principle that he applies in his thing poems when he makes his own craft reflect itself through the descriptions of his subjects. By foregrounding the act of creation in the creation itself, he undermines an opposition of text and image (or subject and object) so that they appear equally to the reader as creative acts. The more the writer displays the process of production, the less the resulting product can be seen as a passive, finished object.

My claim owes in part to W. J. T. Mitchell’s argument on Achilles’s shield in his essay “Ekphrasis and the Other,” in which he defends, against Gotthold Lessing’s contrary position, the ekphrastic designation of Homer’s description of Achilles’s shield. Lessing, in his 1766 essay *Laocoön. Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, argued that since so much detail is given to the shield’s creation, the passage is not ekphrasis as it lends the image the sense of temporality that only literature can provide. Painting, Lessing argues, is inherently spatial, whereas poetry is inherently temporal. Mitchell on the other hand sees the passage as one which “equivocates between the categories of time and space” (177), stating that

Homer’s whole point seems to be to undermine the oppositions of movement and stasis, narrative action and descriptive scene, and the false identifications of medium with message […] The shield is an imago-text that displays rather than concealing its own suturing of space and time, description and narration, materiality and illusionistic representation. (178)

According to Mitchell, the description of the making of Achilles’s shield enables the reader to enter the world of the text and read the still, visual image of the shield, but also to remain outside the text and read the literary making of the image. Under this model, one can neither claim that in ekphrasis the words become the image, nor that the words cannot become the image; the words are both the image and the frame of the image at one and the same time. Hence Mitchell calls this passage “a utopian site that is both a space within the narrative, and an ornamented frame around it, a threshold across which the reader may enter and withdraw from the text at will” (178).
When Ponge writes from the perspective from inside the artist’s studio, his readers are left clearly outside the threshold of the text. Thus, although we do gain an impression of the nature of the images he writes about, we cannot hold them in our gaze as objects. What then do we see? Prior to calling him “un chat qui fait dans la braise,” Ponge describes Fautrier’s painting through another feline metaphor which suggests a feminine and seductive quality to his work. He writes:

After Picasso: masculine, leonine, solar, virile member, erection, rising line, generous, roaring, offensive, self-expressive, leading to the attack, Fautrier represents the feminine and feline side of painting—lunar, meowing, spread out in puddles, swampy, enticing, retreating (after attempts at provocation). Enticing one towards it. Calling one towards it, towards its interior. In order to scratch you?

The description initially paints Fautrier’s work in clichéd terms of passive femininity: soft-spoken, attractive and non-aggressive—in sum, the ideal object upon which to gaze. This notion is subverted, however, with the delicately put suggestion that, once seduced towards his paintings, Fautrier’s audience might find themselves face-to-face with something far less docile than they had expected. Once again, Ponge portrays Fautrier’s images as subjects in their own right and warns his readers against reading them in any other way.65

The bold presentation of the Otages is also likened to the tuning of a new instrument, which at first we cannot recognize but which with time and experience we will come to appreciate and value. “Démonstration laborieuse et pénible,” Ponge writes. “Insistance comme de temps battus par les tambours ou les cuivres. Enforcez-vous bien cela dans la tête. Résistance bon signe” (“Laborious and painful demonstration. Insistance like the time beat by drums or trumpets. Beat this into your head. Resistance is a good sign;” 113). The audience of the Otages are told to submit to the paintings’ drumbeats, to feel the subject enter them rather than the other way around. So too one can read Ponge’s essay as an acceptance of and submission to the drumbeat of Fautrier’s Otages. Ponge describes waking up some mornings to see “ma tête d’ôtage” (“my

65 Nonetheless, the feline metaphor of femininity to describe something that is both seductive and threatening at the same time is a cliché all of its own.
hostage head;” 105-6), which as Shirley Ann Jordan points out, brings to mind rather easily the impression of the poet gazing in the mirror. 66 In fact, the drumbeat that he evokes near the end of the essay can be read as an echo of the “grêle de coups” (“hail of blows”) with which his subject assails him. The structure of his essay also reinforces this rhythm, consisting of five numbered sections, each broken into paragraphs or stanzas and punctuated by numerous “beats” (of one, two, or three sentences each) separated by asterisks.

The representation of human subjects differentiates this text from many of Ponge’s other writings, which mostly deal with inanimate objects, plants or animals. This is not to suggest that Ponge’s thing poems, a number of which were written during the Occupation, were not politically charged. As he stated in an interview in 1981, these kinds of non-ideological writings can function in just as subversive a manner as ones that are ideologically explicit:

Je n’ai jamais été un peintre de batailles, je n’ai pas fait de poèmes, comme Éluard et Aragon, contre l’occupant. Mais ma Lessiveuse a été considérée comme un texte de résistant. Je suis un peintre de natures mortes. Les écrits qui ne sont pas directement inspirés par aucune des idéologies de l’époque peuvent être aussi subversifs que les textes directement inspirés par ces idéologies. […] Je crois même que l’écrit peut être une espèce de bombe à retardement à faire éclater plus tard; les valeurs subversives sont intérieures, ne sont pas visibles. (O.C. II 1434) 67

I was never a painter of battles, I never made poems against the occupier like Éluard and Aragon. But my Lessiveuse was considered a resistance text. I am a still-life painter. Writings that are not directly inspired by any ideologies of the period can be as subversive as texts that are directly inspired by these ideologies. […] I believe even that what is written can be a kind of delayed-action bomb that can be set off at a later date; the subversive values are inside it, are not visible.

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66 Jordan suggests that the removal of the agents of violence in Fautrier’s Otages makes the observer more conscious of his/her ambiguous role in gazing, perhaps voyeuristically, upon these victims, but also of seeing him/herself within these faces. Of the latter, she writes: “There is a certain subtle genius in the elimination of the aggressors from the pictorial field, for the face-to-face aspect also permits more easily the suggestion of the canvas as mirror (see the ambiguity of Ponge waking in the morning and rising to see ‘ma tête d’otage’” (59).

67 67 One might consider the final lines of “La lessiveuse” in such a manner: “Mille drapeaux blancs sont déployés tout à coup—qui attestent non d’une capitulation, mais d’une victoire—and ne sont peut-être pas seulement le signe de la propreté corporelle des habitants de l’endroit” (“A thousand white flags are suddenly deployed—that attest not to a surrender, but to a victory—and that perhaps are not merely the sign of the physical cleanliness of the inhabitants of an area;” O.C. I 740).
Given the subject matter of Fautrier’s paintings and the brutality of the Nazi Occupation, however, an emphasis on the specifically human nature of things was both inevitable and necessary. Furthermore, as Jordan points out, the self-reflexivity in Ponge’s writing can be read as an affirmation of his resistance during the war years:

[A]ny act of creativity during the war years, irrespective of its content or message, was considered as combative, subversive, an act of resistance, by the oppressed and the oppressor alike. The fact that expression is always equated with virile resistance and non-expression with limp acceptance explains why most of Ponge’s texts convey, by direct or indirect means, the fact that he is actually engaged in the effort of expression and that we are engaged in the effort of reading. (56)

Jordan rightly explains Ponge’s sense of responsibility as pertaining both to his subject-things and to his audience. In a time of war and political oppression, this responsibility was all the more pressing and important. Ponge’s self-identification with his subjects of representation displays his social and political engagement as an artist. In his Note sur “Les Otages,” we see the true strength of this engagement as it manifests itself in the poet’s own rage de l’expression.

Moore’s objets d’art

The following two poems Moore published in the early 1930s focus on a specific type of artwork which is the objet d’art. The objets in question are both receptacles: a candelabrum for “No Swan So Fine” (1932) and a patch-box for “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle” (1935). The dual purpose of aesthetics and utility that these artworks embody makes them the easy target of objectification, as they are things both to be used and gazed upon at one and the same time. “No Swan So Fine” and “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle” attempt to expose the artifice that entraps the subjects of the objets d’art by evoking not only the materiality of the artworks and the human hands by which they were crafted, but also the subjects’ being-for-themselves. Moore achieves the latter by making anthropomorphized animal figures out of the birds depicted on each of the two objets d’art and by dramatizing in her poems the way that these animals are literally and figuratively trapped by artifice. Her ekphrasis seeks to “liberate” the subjects by breaking the frames of artifice and encouraging an empathetic reading whereby the reader, as with the Kay Nielsen poems, would recognize the gaze of the poetic subject and thus refrain from objectifying that subject through his/her own reading and looking. Similar to Ponge’s encounter with
Fautrier’s *Otages*, Moore approaches her *objets d’art* with a mixture of respect for the subjects’ *Pour soi* and admiration for the artist’s techniques of representation. Her ekphrasis seeks not to shield her readers from the apparent artifice but rather to emphasize it in order to meditate on the descriptive function of the visual arts and the role of poetry by contrast. Moore’s indirect approach to recreating the art objects for her readers includes alluding to the way in which they were made and the function they served for humans in the past, as they are both artefacts from another time and another place.

For a poet who wrote frequently and sympathetically about animal subjects, the challenging tone of the title “No Swan So Fine” (C.P. 19) will strike the reader as curious, if not ironic. The claim is that no swan, real or imagined, can compare in “fineness” to the decorated and decorative swan that embellishes a Louis XV candelabrum, and that this precious figurine in lavish display mode trumps any real animal saddled with the burden of having to act for itself.

[...]

No swan,
with swart blind look askance
and gondoliering legs, so fine
as the chintz china one with fawn-brown eyes and toothed gold collar on to show whose bird it was.

The “real” swan is depicted as awkward, unsteady and unfocused, compared to the decorative swan that is poised and posed amongst the candelabrum’s other ornaments. The decorative swan, however, is clearly a passive, immobile object, trapped on its perch and marked by its gold collar as someone’s possession. Nonetheless, the poet’s opinion of the value of something real versus its artificial copy is not as immediately clear as one might expect, for there is no definitive statement that would denounce the one in favour of the other. Taffy Martin reads the poem in this way and designates “No Swan So Fine” as “Moore’s response to Yeats’s thwarted dream in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’” (32), arguing that the poem could be read both “as an outraged indictment of artifice and stasis” and as an affirmation that “artifice guarantees continued recognition beyond any organic life cycle” (31). Indeed, the china bird is lodged amongst “everlastings” and other permanent flowers, and as an inanimate object it outlasts even the king. Thus while its gold collar may remember the king to future generations, only the artificial bird will retain physical permanence. According to this reasoning, the line “The King is dead” might suggest that the impermanence of (real) life accentuates and glorifies the permanence of art.
Martin argues that Moore is unrelentingly ambiguous in this poem, but she does not take into account the opposition of stillness and action that Moore so clearly establishes. In her essays Moore frequently writes of the need for energy in art, for the need to be “galvanized against inertia” (Prose 397) in order to access the genuine. In “No Swan So Fine,” the still fountains of Versailles are “dead,” indicating a lack of activity or excitement on the palace grounds, and the king too, as mentioned above, has been reduced to nothing.⁶⁸ The chintz swan on the candelabrum is equally still, “lodged” as it is in the branches. In fact, the only thing that moves in this poem is the real swan that stands on “gondoliering legs” and “look[s] askance.” Amidst a scene of stillness and passivity at which the observer may gaze at leisure, Marianne Moore’s swan hovers into view, and surprises the reader by assuming a gaze of its own. Its gaze, though “blind,” is suspicious, and it is enough to suddenly make the reader self-conscious that s/he is being gazed upon in return. The appearance of the real swan within the otherwise ekphrastic poem should unsettle the reader enough that s/he sees, to paraphrase Mitchell, the frame around the poet’s ekphrasis, and him/herself in the act of looking.

The apparition of the real swan works in yet another way, however. Like all of Moore’s poetic animals, the swan is granted a sense of moral superiority which the poet uses to comment on social and artistic values. In this case, its presence in an otherwise ekphrastic poem serves as a reminder that the artwork upon which we gaze is mere artifice, and one deeply embedded in a social context which tells another story altogether. Indeed, the well-contained scene depicted on this eighteenth-century candelabrum alludes to the monarchy-ruled period of France’s Ancien Régime. Louis XV is remembered for being an extravagant and insouciant king, one whose lavish lifestyle led in part to the Great Revolution that arose during the reign of his successor, Louis XVI. The sculpted china swan thus is more than mere decoration; it is an artistic subject of the Ancien Régime and an embodiment of the monarchy’s decadence. Moore’s poem illuminates a subtext not explicitly presented by the artwork in order to accentuate the irony of her statement “no swan so fine”—for it is indeed ironic—and to contrast the genuine “nobility” of this awkward animal with the artificial decadence of the late monarchy. As in many of her animal

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⁶⁸ In the “Notes” to her Complete Poems, Moore quotes Percy Phillip from New York Times Magazine, May 10, 1931: “There is no water so still as in the dead fountains of Versailles” (C.P. 264).
poems, an unassuming animal is contrasted with avaricious humans and praised for its quiet modesty.

“Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle” (C.P. 103) depicts the nature scene from a patch-box consisting of three birds in a tree—two green and one red—along with some “moths and lady-bugs” and “a boot-jack firefly with black wings.” Unlike the chintz china swan, the birds are depicted in motion and given a more active existence (however unfortunate it may be) within the artwork. The poem begins:

A brass-green bird with grass-green throat smooth as a nut springs from
twig to twig askew, copying the
Chinese flower piece—business-like atom
in the stiff-leafed tree’s blue-pink dregs-of-wine pyramids
of mathematic circularity; one of a
pair. A redbird with a hatchet crest lights straight, on a twig between the two, bending the peculiar bouquet down […]

The birds are introduced as characters in a narrative, with action verbs such as “springs,” “lights straight” and “bending” indicating the movements they make along the branches of the tree. Their descriptions are vivid and their colours bright, all of which saturates the scene with such vitality that it is not until the third stanza that the reader even knows for certain whether the poet is describing a real scene from nature or a creative reproduction thereof. The illusion is broken with the revelation of an epigraph inscribed beneath the image on what turns out to be the lid of a decorative patch-box:

[…] It was artifice saw,
on a patch-box pigeon-egg, room for fervent script, and wrote as with a bird’s claw under the pair on the hyacinth-blue lid—“joined in friendship, crowned by love.”

After these lines the tone of the poem changes, becoming more sombre, more reflective and even less colourful. With the rupture of the illusion of life and reality comes the realization that these aviary “characters” are trapped within their image, and the single redbird “that is usually a pair,” is sentenced to eternal loneliness.
Evidently, the poet blurs many lines between reality and artifice in this poem, which we can see in the fact that the painted bird is pitied for his loneliness and personified to the point that he recites a line from the Japanese poet Yone Noguchi (1875-1947): "without / loneliness I should be more / lonely, so I keep it." This instance of the painted bird reciting someone else’s poetry is not merely art imitating life, however; it is art imitating art. The same applies to the image of the green bird depicted as “copying the / Chinese flower piece,” as though it were the bird—rather than the artist—who had drawn himself into the picture. Moore herself imitates the pastoral art of Thomas Lodge in her allusion to the “Rosadlindless / redbird” and the final quoted proverb, which she attributes in her notes to the title page of Lodge’s Rosalynde. Life also imitates art, as in the descriptions of the “patch-box pigeon-egg” and the script written “as with a bird’s claw.” In both instances, the real thing (patch-box and inscription) is portrayed as belonging to the realm of the artifice, which makes the poem’s transition from ekphrastic hope to ekphrastic fear all the more seamless. The entire poem revolves around art, in fact, and the only line that truly exits the edifice of art is the final line of the third stanza: “Art is unfortunate.” What exactly does Moore mean by this line, which she pronounces so bluntly in the middle of her own work of art? Is it even possible to escape artifice, given that the rest of her poem’s allusions fall into its realm?

George Plank’s illustration for this poem that accompanied its publication in The Pangolin and Other Verse (1936) further complicates the issue, since it is a visual interpretation of an ekphrastic poem—an artistic full circle of sorts. Heath Cass White notes in A-Quiver with Significance (which reproduces a facsimile version of the original poem with its illustration) that Plank worked “in close consultation with Moore” on his illustrations (127); hence, a discussion of the latter is worthwhile in relation to the theme of “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle.” The square illustration features a single bird perched upon the end of a bending branch, with the “bouquet” of the plant below it. At the bottom of the square two hands—trimmed, as White remarks, by a modern and an old-fashioned cuff respectively—are joined in a handshake that is punctuated by a large exclamation point. A ray of light, furthermore, cuts across the modern-

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69 Moore credits this source in her notes to the poem.

70 Please refer to figure 4 in the appendix.
looking hand on the left, while the rest of the illustration (apart from bird and plant, which are white), appear in the shade. White explains the connections between Plank’s illustration and the title-page of the 1590 edition of Lodge’s Rosalynde published by Thomas Orwin—which Moore’s notes explain is the provenance of the proverb “By Peace Plenty; as / by Wisdom Peace”—and furthermore considers the connections between the illustration for “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle” and that for “Virginia Britannia.” In another context, however, the joining of modern and old-fashioned hands might signal the transfer of ideas—or proverbs—between works of art over time. The exclamation point would support the idea of this transfer since it highlights the artifice of the illustration; superimposed on a pastoral scene, it signals the poet’s manipulation and the mark of words upon image. If the clasped hands signify imitation and adaptation between works of art, the punctuation mark breaks the frame of the illustration to allude back to the poem, which itself breaks the frames of the visual images it describes.

The realm of artifice which the reader enters in this poem is better constructed and more alluring than that of “No Swan So Fine,” though not to the extent that its frames remain intact. As with “No Swan So Fine,” Moore singles out one of the artwork’s subjects—in this case the redbird—in order to draw our gaze towards it and have it gaze upon us. The redbird of Moore’s poem reverses our expectations because he “comes where people are, knowing they / have not made a point of / being where he is.” He is granted an active existence by the poet because he acknowledges his loneliness and the fact that he is trapped within the confines of the patch-box’s picture. Is it him to whom the poet alludes when she suggests the epigraph was written “as with a bird’s claw”? The moral tone of “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle” is ambiguous, more so than that of “No Swan So Fine.” On the one hand, the poet appears to lament the ultimate stillness of the objet d’art (“Art is unfortunate”), but on the other hand she celebrates its beauty. The final proverb, which alludes to Lodge’s early romantic comedy of concealed identities and of which Moore asks “what of,” does not lessen the ekphrastic ambiguity. As the poem dismisses its

71 White comments upon the fact that both illustrations feature hands either poised for, or in the midst of, a handshake. In “Virginia Britannia,” the hands—one black and one white—are divided by a serpent-emblazoned flag (a variation on America’s Gadsden flag). White suggests that the joining together of the two hands in the illustration for “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle” may not be as benevolent as one might initially think, since the skin colour of the one obscured by shade is unclear: “Perhaps the sartorial detail suggests that a more sinister agreement, between past and present versions of the same race, is what the intervening ‘art’ has led to” (129).
questions with the lamenting sigh “Alas!”, the onus is placed upon the reader to reconsider the problems and misfortunes associated with art—both visual and verbal.
“Poetry is an unintelligible unmistakable vernacular like the language of animals—a system of communication whereby a fox with a turkey too heavy for it to carry, reappears shortly with another fox to share the booty.”—Marianne Moore. 72

Chapter 4
The Language of Animals

By now it is clear that the scope of Moore and Ponge’s thing poetry includes a wide variety of things, ranging from man-made inanimate objects, to natural phenomena, to works of art. One subject category that is especially prominent in their oeuvres—and that assumes, for reasons I will discuss below, particular relevance in contemporary literary studies—is their poetic animals. From mollusks to mammals and insects to birds, non-human animals are frequently granted the central focus of their writing and what is more, they are frequently upheld as models for good living, good writing or both. The natural world, with its animal life, is significant to Moore and Ponge because it offers subject matter that is—or should be—untouched by human subjectivity. I have already discussed how Moore and Ponge were concerned with the authenticity of the poetic voice. As subject matter, animals are models of objectivity because in their natural state—i.e. in nature—they exist independently of human interference and interpretation. Animals furthermore exist outside the confines of human language, which means there would seem to be no risk of their words intruding upon those of the poet. The combination of the latter two properties renders animals the perfect figure of the “other” from which to learn more about the self and humans’ relationship to the natural world. 73 In this respect, Moore and Ponge’s animal poems fall into a modern tradition in which animal metaphors are used, as Steve Baker puts it, to symbolically construct human identity. In spite of the metaphors, however, the self-reflexive nature of their poetry travels beyond a simple reconstruction of human identity to in fact question the animal identity constructed through language. The result is a reflection on how we understand—and to a larger extent create—animal being through words.

72 Complete Prose 329.

73 Moore says as much in the foreword to A Marianne Moore Reader: “Why an inordinate interest in animals and athletes? They are subjects for art and exemplars of it, are they not? minding their own business” (xvi).
In the past fifteen or so years the so-called “question of the animal” has been gaining ground in literary studies, with Derrida’s essay *L’animal que donc je suis* (2006) arguably figuring as one of the seminal texts of this dialogue. In a spirit that is partly a reformulation of Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of “becoming-animal” from the 1970s, current posthumanist theorists call for a de-centering of the human subject in order to make way for the previously unseen perspective of the non-human other, the animal that is usually denied agency, let alone perspective. Cary Wolfe, writing of artworks which he characterizes as posthumanist, notes the importance of that which cannot be seen or experienced by the human: “what must be witnessed is not just what we can see but also what we cannot see—indeed, that we cannot see. That too must be witnessed. But by whom if not by the other?” (167). Poets and authors throughout time have situated animals at the centre of their stories in order to try to understand and comment upon the human condition, but I would argue that in the literature of the past century animals have been written increasingly in ways that begin to break down the strict Cartesian divide between humans and non-human animals. This is not to say that all or even much of modern literature can be deemed posthumanist—indeed, many writers who fall into this category likely did not intend to de-centre the *human* but rather simply our faith in mimetic language. What it does suggest—and what I hope to demonstrate is the case with Marianne Moore and Francis Ponge—is that the advent of social, scientific and technological changes that altered our relationship with animals in the past century (Darwinism being an important factor) made their way into literature and upset the traditional role played by the animal figure.

This chapter seeks to explain what happens to the animal figure as metaphor in Moore and Ponge’s self-reflexive poetry. In *Electric Animal* (2000), Akira Mizuta Lippit writes of the animal metaphor (or what he calls the “animetaphor”) as a rhetorical device that transforms language by imbuing it with a foreign, extra-linguistic presence. According to Lippit, “the magnetic property of the animetaphor does not simply sway language but actively transforms it, assailing logos with the catachrestic force of affect” (166). I argue that Ponge and Moore were drawn to the catachrestic property of the animal as poetic subject because it signified the potential for originality—and thus authenticity—in their poetic use of language. The risk of *writing an animal* authentically, of course, is that the very act of representing an animal subject on the page entails human interference and capture, which means that their poems threaten to destroy the very otherness they wish to hold on to. Hence Moore and Ponge’s animal poetry can
be seen paradoxically as both creative and inherently destructive, as it destroys the very autonomy and originality of the subjects it tries to preserve. Their calling attention to this paradox, however, effects a reconsideration of the relationship between the writing subject and written thing, as well as that between the human and non-human animal. In this respect they endow their poetic animals with an essential otherness that suggests the existence of another perspective left unseen or unexplained, since it is that of the animal.

This chapter begins by considering the history of animal figures in modern literature as well as the significance of establishing an animal as one’s other. To do the latter, I explain, is in fact to reduce the species gap between humans and animals, since it entails a consideration of the animal’s own agency. To consider an animal as one’s other is counter to many, including modern, western philosophers’ notions of human subjecthood, but in recent years it is increasingly being accepted in academic communities. After establishing the critical context, I proceed to look at how animal metaphors can be used to symbolically construct human identity, from the ancient tradition of fables (by which both Moore and Ponge were influenced) to the identification of animals with marginalized human subjects. In this section I also consider Moore and Ponge’s self-identification with animals and demonstrate how this resonates with Deleuze and Guattari’s “becoming-animal.” In the final section of this chapter I explore the limits of animal metaphors and argue that these limits lend agency to the represented animals. Reading Moore and Ponge’s poems through a posthumanist lens, I argue that by coming to terms with these limits, the poets reveal the essential otherness of their animal figures and display their unwillingness to entirely capture and “humanize” their poetic animals through writing.

4.1: The animal figure in modernity and modern literature

In the past decade, many academic books and articles have emerged on the subject of animals in modern literature; see for instance Lippit (2000), Bleakley (2000), Malamud (2003), Rohman (2009), Dekoven (2009), McHugh (2009) and Payne (2010). The number of scholarly works on the philosophical question of the animal has also increased; see for instance Agamben (2002), Derrida (2006), Calarco (2008), and Wolfe (2003, 2010). What role, then, did modern literature play in the rising importance of the animal figure in academic study? In explaining the surge in animal poetry in early twentieth-century America, Randy Malamud recalls the nation’s growing
interest in the study of nature, from an increased emphasis in school curricula on nature studies
to the formation of exploration and environmental clubs like the Audubon Society and the Sierra
Club. Malamud also points to the proliferation of nature and animal writers like Jack London,
E.T. Seton, Charles D. Seaton and William J. Long (Malamud 17). On a causal level, the
animal figure assumed new importance in the twentieth century in part because as people
congregated to urban centres, they began to have fewer real encounters with animals in the wild.
This is the crux of John Berger’s argument in his essay “Why Look at Animals?” (1980), in
which he claims that modern industrialization has greatly distanced us from animals to the extent
that humans and animals can no longer observe one another in a reciprocal gaze. Rather, Berger
argues, we humans are always observing animals within a context of spectacle. Indeed in the
twentieth century our cultural relationship with animals began to change. Whereas in the
nineteenth century zoos, stuffed animal toys and the widespread domestication of pets were all
relatively new, in the twentieth century these became as commonplace as packaged meat at the
grocery store. Animals grew increasingly domesticated (pets, stuffed animal toys), visually
objectified (zoos, picture books, nature documentaries) or simply used, as Berger puts it, as “raw
material” (11) (food and, in the late twentieth and now twenty-first centuries, artworks such as
Damien Hirst’s mounted animal carcasses). These changes signified a new kind of relationship
between humans and animals, which on the one hand saw us more emotionally involved with
them (pets and, paradoxically, zoos, make us feel closer to animals), but on the other hand saw a
distancing the likes of which was unprecedented (factory farming, popularized in the 1950s,
advocated animals to be viewed as machines; Safran Foer 108-109).

For Lippit, our modern lack of contact with animals translates into a gaze redirected back
towards ourselves: “Modernity can be defined by the disappearance of wildlife from humanity’s
habitat and by the reappearance of the same in humanity’s reflections on itself: in philosophy,
psychoanalysis, and technological media such as the telephone, film, and radio” (3). Lippit posits
that the animal figure took on greater importance in Western modernity as people grew more
interested in how we transmit ideas from one to another. He writes:

74 These four writers, incidentally, were accused by another naturalist writer, John Burroughs—and later by
President Roosevelt—of falsifying their depictions of animals in the wild for sentimental purposes (Malamud 18).
For more on this controversy, please refer to Ralph H. Lutt. The Nature Fakers. Wildlife, Science and Sentiment.
With the Darwinian revolution, Freudian psychoanalysis, and the advances of the optical and technological media, animals symbolized not only new structures of thought but also the process by which those new thoughts were transported. Animals—and their capacity for instinctive, almost telepathic communication—put into question the primacy of human language and consciousness as optimal modes of communication. (2)

No longer part of people’s everyday lives, animals grew into utterly foreign yet attractive beings from which we might learn more about ourselves and our language. They became, according to Lippit, “an essential epistemological category” (2).

Carrie Rohman reads the emergence of the animal subject in modern literature as the result of the Darwinian undermining of humanism, and her work aims to show how the “species problematic”—or the no-longer clear distinction between humans and animals—can be read within other ideological discourses of the time such as psychoanalysis and imperialism. “Modernist texts,” Rohman writes, “variously reentrench, unsettle, and even invert a humanist relation to this nonhuman other” (12). This inversion, she explains, on the one hand is related to Freud’s theory of organic repression, which would suggest that the human unconscious is the result of humans’ attempts to repress our animality (23). On the other hand, the inversion pertains to colonial discourses that used animal metaphors to subordinate certain categories of people. Rohman writes: “The displacement of animality onto marginalized groups served as a fundamental modernist thematic that sought to purify Western subjectivity and thereby discursively maintain the imperialist power dynamic” (29). Modernist literature is better suited for a becoming-animal, Rohman argues, because it is already open to challenging language norms and “writing the unconscious” through metaphors and imagery far more deeply embedded in language than they had been in the Victorian era, and which are now also tied into new knowledge of psychoanalysis and Darwinian science. The Cartesian division of humans and

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75 Citing works like Eliot’s “Sweeney among the Nightingales”, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent*, Rohman argues not only that negative animal metaphors are employed in racist, imperialist and/or misogynist discourse but also that the way in which these are embedded in language is unique to modernist writing: “The twentieth-century eruption of animality, often encoded as the eruption of the unconscious, parallels the modernist explosion of linguistic convention. […] In a sense, through their famed discontinuous and irrational speech, modernists write their own animality, which cannot be represented by traditional literary forms. Eliot’s linguistic representation of animality—his ‘Hoo ha ha’—can only be marked as literature in this modernist world where literary convention is rejected and revamped, where it is opened to unconventional forces” (39).

76 See Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of “becoming-animal” below.
animals is fractured in modernist literature due to the frequency with which “animality” inhabits human characters, particularly those marginalized by figures in power.

Not coincidentally, several philosophers have made a similar analogy in regards to the inhume treatment of certain groups of people (ethnic, religious, and so on), arguing that our capacity and willingness to mistreat animals for our own gain paves the way for the dehumanization and mistreatment of other persons for the same purpose. Theodor Adorno likened the two when he blasted Kantian idealism with the claim that its contempt for the animality of humans rendered the status of animals akin to that of the Jews under the fascist régime (Derrida, *L’animal* 143). Steve Baker also describes the way in which animal metaphors in the past century have been used to disparage or discredit an individual or political party by depicting them as strange, non-human and outside society (83-108).  

Although the projection of animal characteristics onto humans has been used to undermine individuals and portray them as foreign, inferior and possibly unhinged, the rhetoric has also been used in a more neutral capacity as a means towards understanding the connection between human and non-human animals. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming-animal,” for instance, explores the limits of a strict human-animal divide and instead considers the two as variations on a single being who exist on a kind of species continuum:

C’est une carte d’intensités. C’est un ensemble d’états, tous distincts les uns des autres, greffés sur l’homme en tant qu’il cherche une issue. C’est une ligne de fuite créatrice qui ne veut rien dire d’autre qu’elle-même. À la différence des lettres [de Kafka], le devenir-animal ne laisse rien subsister de la dualité d’un sujet d’énonciation et d’un sujet d’énoncé, mais constitue un seul et même procès, un seul et même processus qui remplace la subjectivité. (*Kafka* 65)

It is a map of intensities. It is an ensemble of states, all of them distinct from one another, grafted onto man as he is searching for an exit. It is a creative line of escape that means nothing other than itself. In contrast to [Kafka’s] letters, the becoming-animal lets nothing remain of the duality of a subject of enunciation and a subject of the enunciated but rather constitutes one single process, one unique process that replaces subjectivity.

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77 Baker uses the term “other” in this instance. I refrain from repeating it because, as I argue below, the philosophical implications of equating an animal as one’s “other” are in fact more positive than negative, as they reveal a willingness to consider the animal on a level more or less equal to that of humans.
An important phrase in this definition is “a creative line of escape.” Indeed, becoming-animal occurs through creative expression, and frequently through writing, as the authors affirm in *Mille plateaux* when they state that “écritre est un devenir” (“writing is a becoming;” 293). Deleuze and Guattari reject the principles of psychoanalysis in their concept of becoming-animal since they emphasize the transformation of a person rather than attributing his/her animal qualities to unconscious desires. Hence, in their analysis of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Lord Chandos*, they write that the protagonist comes to share a being with the rats that can be expressed only in an original, extra-human manner: “Le rat et l’homme ne sont pas du tout la même chose, mais l’Être se dit des deux en un seul et même sens dans une langue qui n’est plus celle des formes, dans une affectibilité qui n’est plus celle des sujets. *Participation contre nature*” (“The rat and the man are not at all the same thing, but the Being of both of them is expressed in one and the same meaning in a language that is no longer one of forms, in an affectability that is no longer that of subjects. *Participation against nature;*” *Mille plateaux* 315). The subjecthood of Lord Chandos and that of the rats get mixed together, implying a reciprocal exchange between self and other, or two subjects that become one. Thus, while the animal perspective is not presented autonomously from that of the human, its otherness is pronounced enough to challenge human subjectivity and in fact reclaim it as a part of animal nature.

The otherness of the rat (or any animal) is an important concept because previously it had been disregarded by many Western philosophers. Descartes, for one, equated animals with machines that lack consciousness. Heidegger designated animals as being “poor in world” compared to humans who are “world-making” and as Matthew Calarco points out, this distinction serves to separate animals from humans wholly by *kind*:

> Strictly speaking, Heidegger’s comparative examination is meant to highlight the *abyssal* differences between human and animal relations to world. There is no difference in *degree* or quantity between human and animal, Heidegger insists, but rather a difference in *kind*, and this difference in kind is meant to be understood in the most fundamental and radical way possible. (*Zoographies* 22)

Levinas, too, drew a definitive line between humans and animals by claiming that non-human animals cannot generate an ethical response from humans, which means that only humans can assume the role of the “other” (Calarco, *Zoographies* 55). Derrida, however, questioned Levinas and others by attempting to consider things from the perspective of the animal, to consider what his cat sees when her eyes settle upon his (human) figure. By permitting himself to consider what
the cat sees, Derrida finds his entire conception of the human identity shaken: “Comme tout regard sans fond, comme les yeux de l’autre, ce regard dit ‘animal’ me donne à voir la limite abyssale de l’humain : l’inhumain ou l’anhumain, les fins de l’homme à savoir le passage des frontières depuis lequel l’homme ose s’annoncer à lui-même, s’appelant ainsi du nom qu’il croit se donner” (“Like any look without end, like the eyes of the other, this so-called ‘animal’ look reveals to me the abyssal limit of what is human: the inhuman or the anhuman, the ends of man, namely the passing through of the frontiers from which man has dared to announce himself to himself, calling himself by the name that he believes to have given himself;” L’animal 30). By entertaining the idea that the cat may be his other, then, Derrida loses something of his firm grasp on the idea of that which makes him human.

To consider an animal as one’s other need not entail a redefinition of the human identity, however, as Calarco and Wolfe have shown. Calarco writes of the need for contemporary philosophy to stage an “ethical encounter” with animals, through which we would come face-to-face with animals and consider how they might be “radically Other” to us humans (64). Calarco calls this act “decentering the human” and “thinking from out of a new humility and generosity toward what we call ‘the nonhuman’” (Zoographies 64), in order to try to understand animals as beings in-and-of-themselves, distinct from the roles assigned by and beneficial to us. Unlike Derrida, Calarco argues that such a shift in thought could be achieved without losing the human identity if we were to undertake “a historical and genealogical analysis of the constitution of the human-animal distinction and how this distinction has functioned across a number of institutions, practices, and discourses” (140). By undertaking a more practical study, Calarco claims, we might learn more about both ourselves and other animals and how knowledge of each has been rearranged through dominant discourses.

Calarco’s argument falls along similar lines to that of Cary Wolfe, even though Wolfe considers himself to be working within the kind of posthumanist framework that Calarco has openly criticized for its consideration of the animal. Yet Wolfe too argues that animals are radically

78 Calarco is responding also to Levinas, who said that he was unsure of whether or not animals had “faces.”

79 In a review of two of Wolfe’s books written for Electronic Book Review, Calarco commends Wolfe’s scholarship while disparaging posthumanism as a field for being “grounded on a stubborn and dogmatic form of..."
other to humans in a way that strengthens rather than threatens our identity. In fact, in the introduction to *What is Posthumanism?* (2010), Wolfe defines the field in part by its rejection of humanism’s definition of the human as something “achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether” (xv). By decentering the human as the given, primary subject, posthumanism opens the lens of critical analysis to consider the animal subject as a seeing, experiencing being. As such Wolfe stresses the importance of the non-visible in artistic representation involving animal figures, for it is only when we cannot see something that we understand what the animal itself might see.

With this short introduction to the role occupied by animals in modern literature and modern philosophy, I hope to have established a sense of the complex relationship humans bore (and continue to bear) with animals in the modern age. As I will discuss in the following section on Moore and Ponge’s poetry, this complex relationship and understanding of animals resulted in a number of poems that attempt to use animals as metaphors for human attributes, yet end up unable to do so to the fullest extent because they necessarily allude to a portion of the animals’ (unrepresentable) essential otherness. Indeed, as it should be clear by my discussion of Derrida, Calarco and Wolfe, when I refer to the animal figure as the human being’s “other,” I imply that it bears a subjecthood equal to that of humans. In these poems, then, the animal metaphor is compromised by the poets’ self-conscious awareness of their creative distortion in representing the animal. In the third section of this chapter, I will return to the idea of the essential otherness of animals in greater depth in order to look at certain poems by Moore and Ponge that attempt more forcefully and directly to convey the independent being of their animal subjects. In these poems, the poets’ self-conscious awareness of their creative manipulation is emphasized in order to create a space for the animals to “disappear,” and thereby exist in-and-of-themselves in a manner that the poets are only able to suggest, rather than actually depict.

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80 It should be noted that Wolfe himself distinguishes between “good” and “bad” posthumanism; the latter, he claims in his introduction, is more in line with transhumanism which itself is merely an “*intensification of humanism*” (xv).
4.2: From animal metaphor to human identity

Aesop’s *Fables*, which are among the Western tradition’s earliest written stories featuring animals as anthropomorphized protagonists, are still today some of the most well-known of their kind. The tale of *The Lion and the Mouse*, for instance, or that of *The Fox and the Grapes*, has been retold countless times to the effect that it is embedded in cultural knowledge. Part of what has given Aesop’s *Fables* such staying power is their brevity, simplicity and the fact that they conclude with a (more or less) easily identified moral. Furthermore, the animals that populate the fables are stock characters, plucked from the wild, as it were, and situated in a given context where they behave according to our expectations of them. The lion is proud, the fox cunning and so on. The ease with which we accept these stock characteristics in animal figures owes to the fact that for the most part animals are seen as predictable creatures who operate according to certain behavioural patterns (ones that are either instinctual or projected onto them by humans). Hence, anthropomorphic animal characters often populate moral-based stories (mostly ones for children but occasionally those for adults too) that rely upon certain qualities *inherent*\(^81\) to the characters to drive the story. There is perhaps a sense of comfort for the reader in reading about characters who are *destined* to act in a certain manner, in the same way that in Greek tragedies we have foreknowledge of what is to happen.\(^82\) Apologues populated by human characters, on the other hand—while they do exist—are less popular, perhaps because they are apt to rely on cultural stereotypes which frequently are offensive. Perhaps also their lack of popularity is due to the fact that we prefer to celebrate humans as individuals, and not think of our actions as being driven by predetermined behavioural traits.

Both Moore and Ponge were interested in fables—specifically those of La Fontaine. In 1952, Moore published a collection of translations of his works—the only substantial work of

\(^{81}\) Again, qualities that we deem “inherent” to certain species may have originated from scientific study or simply folklore and popular culture.

\(^{82}\) The narrative of the Disney film *The Lion King*, for instance, follows the future king Simba as he struggles with his royal obligations, confronts his enemies and eventually assumes his position as king of the animal world.
translation in her career. In “La Mounine,” Ponge praises what he calls the “perfection quasi scientifique” of La Fontaine’s *Fables*, noting that his only improvement on them would be to focus exclusively on a single character (he cites the oft-appearing lion) and to engage in an extended character study in the manner of Theophrastus. In this way, he reasons, he would be able to express in writing the formula, history and sum total of the research that went into writing an ‘aesthetic impression’ of the lion (O.C. I 426). The approach, though phenomenological, would be nonetheless neither inaccurate nor deceptive, as it would clearly state its mission to be an account of the poet’s interactions with the lion. The proverbs that Ponge hoped to formulate through this model would be the result of the human-animal interaction and fall somewhere in between the two species.

The poets’ confessed interest in La Fontaine does not mean that they were altogether influenced by him, however. Despite Ponge’s expressed desire to create La Fontaine-like proverbs and the moral tone Moore adopts in her poems, neither poet actually employs the model of the fable in their own poetry. They set themselves apart from La Fontaine both in the complexity and subjecehdthd that they attribute to their animal characters and in their unwillingness to present a clear-cut moral that could be transferred from animal to human. Rather than writing their animals as caricatures, they write them as proper subjects with being—often while naming and drawing attention to the same caricatured qualities they try to avoid. And while they may interpret animal behaviour in anthropomorphic terms that initially seem to deny the animals agency, the poets inevitably acknowledge the sense of animal otherness that prevents them from entirely using animals to construct human identity. Thus, while a number of their poems do employ animals as metaphors, they are characteristically self-conscious of the human manipulation involved, and ever-careful to do representative “justice” to their animal subjects. In fact, although Ponge’s animals come to represent human creativity and Moore’s animals embody human spirituality, in both cases these metaphors help to confirm the animality of humans and suggest that the divide between human and non-human animals is not as great as it would seem. Moore and Ponge write animals in order to comment upon the human condition, but they do not lose sight of the animals’ subjedcehhood or agency when doing so. They use animals to reconsider and perhaps recover human identity, but always with respect to the real animal subjects themselves.

Ponge the hunter

In his posthumously published *Préface à un Bestiaire* (1959) (O.C. II 1223-1243), Ponge puts to words a question that is at the heart of all poetic representation of animals: what is it about animals that we so enjoy? His answer points to our inherent narcissism, to the fact that we see so much of ourselves in these creatures who are different, yet ultimately very similar to us:

Pourquoi nous plaisent-ils? Pourquoi nous plaît-il tant qu’ils existent? Comment se fait-il qu’ils deviennent pour nous une sorte de langage? À cause [cette fois] de leur proximité à nous, certainement. (Ceci est à reprendre dans mes *Hirondelles*.) Des traits (en eux) qui nous paraissent exister aussi en nous. Ces traits joints d’ailleurs [en eux] à d’autres qui nous sont entièrement étrangers [nous paraissent simples, fort nets et simples,] assurant [ainsi à l’ensemble] [leur] [sa] perfection [leur] [sa] netteté, tandis qu’en nous tout est trouble, tremblant, fondu et comme invisible, en tout cas indessinable (ou indescriptible). (Chacun de nos traits pris à part, et la machine de tous ensemble.) (1233-34)84

Why do they please us? Why does it please us that they exist? How is it that they have become for us a kind of language? Because of [this time] their proximity to us, certainly. (This is to be taken up again in my *Swallows*.) Traits (in them) that seem also to exist in us. These traits moreover joined [in them] to others that are entirely foreign to us [that seem simple to us, very clean-cut and simple] assuring [thus to the whole] [their] [its] perfection [their] [its] tidiness, whereas in us everything is blurry, shaky, combined and as though invisible, in any case undrawable (or indescribable). (Each of our traits taken on its own, and the machine of all of them together.)

The worldview that Ponge espouses in this essay is quite remarkable in that he pushes a Darwinian approach to extremes in order to see the world as having produced only a single type of being that, over time, has evolved into a multitude of different life forms. According to this view we are all, humans and non-humans, connected at the most fundamental level of nature. Although Ponge does not specifically use the term “other” to describe animals, he does claim that the existence of other beings around us essentially defines our own existence with regards to the space and matter of our environs:

84 All the parentheses and square brackets belong to Ponge. The editors of the *Oeuvres complètes* left undisturbed the author’s original modifications to his manuscript.
Il ne s’agit pas seulement de compagnie [mais (par ex.) de gibier] (de non-solitude) il s’agit d’espace [à parcourir] et de matière à informer et de mouvements possibles de vies indépendantes, [autres.] à contempler, à protéger ou [à combattre] à assassiner (au choix) enfin d’un champ de regard, d’observation et d’action dont l’exploitation (la mise en œuvre) donnent un sens à sa vie [constituent sa vie.] (1227)

It is not just a case of company [but, (e.g.) of big game] (of non-solitude) it is a case of space [to traverse] and of matter to inform and of possible movements of independent lives, [others.] to contemplate, to protect or [to combat] to assassinate (as one chooses) finally of a field of sight, of observation and action of which the exploitation (the implementation) give meaning to life [constitute one’s life].

Despite these observations, Ponge claims—anticipating Berger and Lippit—that most people no longer notice animals for who they are in-and-of-themselves. We no longer think about animals, he writes; they are no longer present to us. When we see an animal, we think only of how it resembles a human being, and when we consider one for artistic purposes, we nonetheless conceptualize it in an abstract manner, in order to project something of the animal onto the human (1234). Ponge says as much in explicit terms at the beginning of his Préface, where he writes that all artistic representations of animals serve to represent humans (1223).

His skepticism notwithstanding, Ponge himself tries to see beyond the humanity—to grasp the animality, as it were—within artworks such as Rembrandt’s lion. In considering the beauty of this drawing, Ponge asks if it is beautiful because it depicts the essential characteristics of the species, or rather the essential characteristics of one member of that species. The individual lion that is or is not represented on paper captivates Ponge as he speculates on the emotions and inner qualities that he sees drawn in its face. In an intertextual reference that seems to highlight the fatality of both the human and animal conditions, he compares the lion to Shakespeare’s tragic hero Timon of Athens, whose endeavours to help his ungrateful peers resulted in him loathing them. Is Ponge merely performing the same anthropomorphizing of the lion for which he criticizes most artists? In a manner of speaking the answer is yes, since he draws a human predicament out of the troubled lines that he perceives in the lion’s face. To his credit, however, he exposes the artifice inherent to this kind of metaphoric representation and interpretation, citing further down his own categorization of “animaux-monstres (ou démons)” and “animaux-merveilles ravissantes (des anges)” (“monster (or demon)-animals” and “marvelous-delightful-animals (angels);” 1226). Each category has its own “damnation particulière,” he muses, a
comment which could be taken to refer to the way in which animals are restricted to certain actions or capacities by nature, artists, or a combination of the two.

Ponge does mention “certains artistes” (whom he does not specify) who tried to “vraiment voir les animaux” (“really see animals”) and who distinguished themselves by having observed animals with kindness and respect: “Ceux qui les ont contemplés avec amour, respect, sentiment de fraternité” (“Those who contemplated them with love, respect, a feeling of brotherhood;” 1224). Although Ponge did not follow their model wholeheartedly in his own poetry, his poems frequently do remark upon the commonalities he recognizes between himself and animals, and in this respect they suggest a feeling of “fraternity” between poet and animal. His reaction to the similarities he encounters between himself and his animal subjects is often that of alarm, however, since—unlike Moore—his descriptions of animals are frequently made from the perspective of one who tracks or hunts them. Nevertheless, by writing himself into his animal poems, Ponge signals to his readers his presence as an interpreter of his animal subjects, which in turn suggests that the real animals might be seen independently from the metaphors to which he ascribes them. Although Ponge himself was not a vocal advocate for animals, his poetry conveys a certain sympathy, understanding and even respect for non-human beings through his attempts to understand their perspective of the world. The following poems that I have selected from his bestiary deal with animals whose appearance, disposition or behaviour lend themselves to metaphors of poetry and language. In his close observations of these animals, Ponge attempts to understand who and what they are through similes and metaphors. These attempts result in the poet’s self-reflexive observations on the insufficiencies of his metaphors, which in turn suggest that Ponge himself recognized the distinction between the animals he would have liked to write, and those that came to being on his writing paper.

“La grenouille” (1937) and “Ébauche d’un poisson” (1947) unfold as mini-narratives involving a poet and animal whose relationship is akin to that of hunter and prey. “La grenouille” (O.C. I 725) finds the poet contemplating a frog he has come across in nature. Described as both beautiful (“Elle a de jolies jambes […] ses muscles sont d’une élégance […]”; “She has pretty legs […] her muscles have a certain elegance”) and ugly (“Goitreuse, […] ces paupières ridées, cette bouche hagarde;” “Goiterous, […] these wrinkled eyelids, this haggard mouth”), the frog also straddles the worlds of nature and culture, hopping as it does in rhythm with the rain but also resembling a pitiful Ophelia: “Lorsque la pluie en courtes aiguillettes rebondit aux prés
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saturés, une naine amphibie, une Ophélie manchote, grosse à peine comme le poing, jaillit
parfois sous les pas du poète et se jette au prochain étang” (“When the rain in short aiguillettes
bounces off the saturated meadows, an amphibian dwarf, a one-armed Ophelia, barely as large as
a fist, springs up at times from under the steps of the poet and launches itself into a nearby
pond”). The reference to Shakespeare’s Ophelia (a symbol of innocence and misfortune) says far
more about the poet and the way in which he perceives his hunter-prey relationship with this
animal than it does of the frog. With the frog momentarily put aside, we get a glimpse in these
lines of the poet’s understanding of his relationship to animals and the natural world and how
these are inextricably tied to his (human) culture and interest in the arts. Interestingly, it is not
the beauty of the frog that prompts the speaker to let it go but its raw, animal desperation: “ce
coeur qui bat gros, ces paupières ridées, cette bouche hagarde m’apitoyent à la lâcher” (“this
heart that beats heavy, these wrinkled eyelids, this haggard mouth all move me to let her go”).

By animal desperation I refer to the survival instinct which humans and non-humans alike share
since, looking closely at the frog, the speaker indeed sees a face which strikes pity in his own
beating heart. Despite the unequal hunter-prey relationship between the two, then, poet and frog
are portrayed nonetheless as occupying the same plane of being, one on which they exist one for
the other in reciprocity. It is not as the tragic but fictional Ophelia that the poet really sees the
frog, but as a goiterous, wrinkly animal trying to escape his grasp. Likewise, it is not the tragic
heroine with whom he eventually sympathizes, but the living animal he holds in his hands.

“Ébauche d’un poisson” (O.C. I 754-757) finds the poet confronted with the same feelings of
wonder at the otherness of a non-human animal—in this case, fish—and similar feelings of guilt
towards the violence humans habitually inflict upon these beings. “Ébauche d’un poisson” quite
explicitly blurs the lines between the animal in-and-of-itself and the written animal or sign, so
that the poet is constantly second-guessing his representation of fish in words. Referring to what
is called the fish rally, or fish swimming together in their habitat, the poem begins:

Comme—mille tronçons de rail sous la locomotive—mille barres ou signes de
l’alphabet morse télégraphique—mille tirets en creux sur la partition de l’orgue
mécanique—les poissons se succèdent et fuient—d’une succession immédiate—
 choses qui ne sont pas à exprimer car elles sont à elles-mêmes leurs signes—étant
 choses si schématiques et choses qui ne s’arrêtent point. Mais… (754)

Like—a thousand parts of track under the locomotive—a thousand bars or signs of
Morse code—a thousand dashes carved into the partition of a mechanical organ—the
fish follow one another and flee—in an immediate succession—things that cannot be expressed because they are their own signs—being such simplistic things that never stop. But…

The poet’s initial impression of fish—and one to which he returns several times throughout the text—is that they are “signs” of their own accord (therefore difficult for an outsider to translate), and simplistic, schematic “things” that move in an almost mechanistic fashion. He develops the mechanistic idea further down, in fact, referring to a fish as “une pièce de mécanique [...] qui apporte dans le milieu où elle doit jouer à la fois son acier et son huile” (“a piece of machinery [...] that carries both its steel and its oil to the place where it must play;” 755). Describing the fish through non-living metaphors (a piece of machinery and, further down, coins in a purse) allows the poet to desensitize himself—and perhaps his readers—to the violence he will eventually do to the animal. The more gory details of this violence emerge in the final paragraphs:

Au col, les ouïes évoquent certaines persiennes, plus sèches, tendant du côté du papier, du bristol. Persiennes, jalousies en bristol rouge, sanglant…

Bien! N’insistons pas! (756-757)

At the neck, the gills evoke certain Persians, drier, coming closer to paper, to Bristol board. Persians, Venetian blinds in red Bristol, bleeding…

Well! Let’s not press further!

As with one who realizes the impropriety of attempting to peer through the closed blinds of a neighbour, Ponge refrains from taking his metaphor too far. The poet’s reluctance to delve too far into the bloody state of the dead fish’s gills is an attempt at propriety out of respect for his subject and out of respect for his craft: one must not insist on a metaphor that may be unsatisfactory, after all, and perhaps blood-red blinds are not the most apt description of a butchered fish’s gills. “Ébauche d’un poisson” is indeed merely an attempt to write a fish—much like “Notes pour un oiseau” and “La guêpe” are extended attempts to write a bird and wasp respectively. What makes these and other animal poems different from the rest of Ponge’s thing poems is that the poet is struggling not only with the relationship of words and things-in-the-world but also the relationship of humans and animals.

As opposed to a pebble or even a flower, the characteristics of a fish that humans also share are numerous and therefore disturbing to the poet who does it violence. “Surtout il a cette tête!” he
exclaims. “Tête à n’en pas douter! Tête si peu différente de la nôtre!” (“Certainly it has this head! Head without a doubt! Head so little different from our own!”; 756) As with his encounter with the frog, the poet is unnerved to recognize features similar to his own in a creature he has hunted and likely will consume. Self-identification with his animal subjects occurs frequently in Ponge’s poems, and another one where this trope takes particular effect is “Première ébauche d’une main” (1949) (O.C. I 765-767). Here Ponge extols the power and virtues of the human hand—“la main,” which is an anagram for “animal”—by introducing it as “l’un des animaux de l’homme” (“one of man’s animals”) and subsequently referring to it as a bat, dove, horse, crab, bull, sparrow and dog. He figuratively sees these animals within his hand and lets the animal metaphors lead his text in all kinds of directions—since the hand holds the pen that writes the words: “Agitons donc ici LA MAIN, la main de l’Homme!” (“Let us, then, wave THE HAND, the hand of Man!”; 765). To refer to the hand as one of man’s animals acknowledges at once the differences and similarities between humans and animals. Our hands distinguish us from most other species (Ponge does not take into account the hands of primates) but when described as various animals, the hand becomes something other, something with which we interact but cannot entirely control:

La main est l’un des animaux de l’homme: toujours à la portée du bras qui la rattrape sans cesse, sa chauve-souris de jour. 
Rreposée ci ou là, colombe ou tourtereau, souvent alors rejointe à sa compagne. 
Puis, forte, agile, elle revolette alentour. Elle obombre son front, passe devant ses yeux. 
Prestigieusement jouant les Euménides.

Ha! C’est aussi pour l’homme comme sa barque à l’amarre. 
Tirant comme elle sur sa longe; hochant le corps d’un pied sur l’autre; inquiète et têtue comme un jeune cheval. (765)

The hand is one of man’s animals: always at the reach of the arm that continually retrieves it, its daytime bat. 
Rested here or there, dove or baby dove, often then reunited with its companion. 
Then, strong, agile, it re-flutters about. It shields its brow, passes before its eyes. 
Playing Eumenides with prestige.

Ha! It’s also for man like his vessel in port. 
Pulling on it as though on its tether; shaking the body from one foot to another; 
Worried and headstrong like a young horse.

The repetition of animal metaphors instills an interactive effect between hand and animal in which not only is the hand (and consequently the human attached to it) animalized, but the
animals—bat, dove, horse and so on—are partially brought into the human realm. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming-animal is anticipated here as Ponge surrenders his most precious limb—and all the creative potential it holds—to animals.

Lionel Cuillé argues that Ponge’s representations of animals and the natural world reveal the poet’s mixed feelings towards Darwinism, and that on the one hand he favoured it, as it enabled him to situate man within the world of nature and refute Christian metaphysics, but that on the other hand he feared the conservative repercussions of social Darwinism and biological determinism that it might entail. Cuillé claims that “Première ébauche d’une main” reveals the new humanist conclusion Ponge eventually reached, since it is an illustration of the “point d’articulation entre la nature et la culture” (“point of articulation between nature and culture;” 234). He writes: “Chez Ponge, l’apparition de la main coïncide littéralement avec le moment et le mouvement de l’écriture du texte que nous lisons. Car, à l’initiale du texte, la main s’écrit elle-même, manifestant son pouvoir et sa maîtrise” (“With Ponge, the appearance of the hand literally coincides with the moment and the movement of the writing of the text that we are reading. For, at the beginning of the text, the hand writes itself, displaying its own power and control;” 242). Cuillé is correct in pointing out the self-creation and presentation of the hand which is depicted as always moving, always writing its own being into the text. Where his argument becomes problematic is in his claim that where the poem occasionally transitions from animal metaphors to mechanical metaphors, the hand is shown to have invented its own tools, become liberated from biological determinism and therefore positioned to affirm humans’ control over nature. It is true that Ponge attributes humanity’s progress to our command of language and our writing in the same way that in other poems he claims that writing, and more specifically poetry, are our most effective tools against political oppression.85 But in “Première ébauche d’une main” the hand never escapes its animal metaphors, ending on that of a dying bird who remains tense with energy until its final moments of life: “Fronçant alors le drap ou froissant le papier, comme un oiseau qui meurt crispé dans la poussière,—et s’y relâche enfin” (“Gathering the sheet, then, or crumpling the paper, like a bird who is all clenched-up and dying in the dust—and finally goes limp;” 767). The final image suggests that as much as our hands enable us to surpass our animal

85 See, for example, poems like “Témoignage,” “Pas et le saut,” “Rhétorique,” “À chat perché” and “Des raisons d’écrire” (all from Proèmes).
origins and write a new existence for humanity, they can never separate us entirely from the rest of the animal world, since we all inevitably succumb to the same fate of mortality.

Another series of poems in which Ponge identifies his poetic self with his animal subject consists of the five prose poems that make up La crevette dans tous ses états (1926-1934) (O.C. I 699-712). In the first poem of the series—entitled “La crevette dix fois (pour une) somnée”—the poet observes the shrimp swimming in thick, dark liquid that could either be the deep water of the sea, or the ink from his pen: “C’est alors du fond du chaos liquide et d’une épaisseur de pur qui se distingue toutefois mais assez mal de l’encre, parfois j’ai observé qui monte un petit signe d’interrogation, farouche” (“So it is that in the bottom of the liquid chaos and from pure depths which can barely be distinguished from ink, I occasionally have observed one who raises a small interrogation mark, timid;” 699). By referring to the shrimp as an interrogation mark swimming in ink, Ponge self-reflexively points to his act of writing his animal-subject, who nevertheless remains elusive and mysterious to him. Accordingly, the poet initially claims how easy it would be for him to capture the shrimp—informing his prey that “[t]es organes de circonspection te retiendront dans mon épuisette si je l’extirpe assez tôt de l’eau” (“your organs of circumspection will retain you in my shrimp net if I pull it out of the water soon enough;” 699)—but then in another section comments on the creature’s elusiveness: “par bonds vifs, […] elle échappe à la ruée en ligne droite des gueules dévoratrices, ainsi qu’à toute contemplation un peu longue, à toute possession idéale un peu satisfaisante” (“by quick leaps, […] she escapes the coming onrush of devouring jaws, and similarly that of any somewhat long contemplation, of any ideal possession that is at all satisfying;” 700). The contradictory nature of these lines can be explained by the fact that the shrimp is both visible and invisible, present as an outward sign, but hidden when it comes to understanding it beyond its external form and appearance. In this capacity it allegorizes the act of writing and the way that represented things are both visible to the reader as words, but also invisible in terms of their essence or thingness.

Bernard Beugnot describes Ponge’s shrimp as an allegory for the poet’s frustrations with writing, stating that “la crevette emblématise la rage de l’expression, le mouvement des signes sur la

86 These poems are collected in Pièces. Ponge also wrote a poem simply titled “La crevette,” which is included in Le parti pris des choses. This poem, which Ponge dated 1928 (O.C. I 916), is very similar to the final text in La crevette dans tous ses états, titled “La crevette seconde.”
page, les saccades ou foucades de l’écriture, ses saillies et ses surgissements” (“the shrimp emblematizes the rage of expression, the movement of signs on the page, the jerks and whims of writing, its projections and its eruptions;” 127). As Beugnot illustrates with his apt choice of nouns that call to mind the writer in action, the shrimp, as an allegory for writing, could equally stand in for the poet himself, “qui ne cesse de se donner présence dans ses textes et de s’en retirer” (“who never ceases to appear within his texts and then retreat from them;” Beugnot 128).

In fact, Ponge draws similarities between himself and his crustacean subject on a number of occasions. In “Lieu de la salicoque,” he remarks that shrimps are “gênés […] par la consistance du milieu, l’épaisseur de l’air qu’ils ont à respirer” (“restricted […] by the consistency of the environment, the thickness of the air they have to breathe;” 707), and compares this to the way in which financial constraints cause him to “respirer économiquement” (“breathe economically;” 707). In another section of the same poem he compares the shrimp’s need to maintain its composure amidst a sea of turmoil while also minding its enemies, to his own similar needs in the politically unstable times in which he found himself:

> si elle éprouve de la peine, [ce soit] à se maintenir au milieu des courants contraires, qui la bousculent contre les roches…. Ce soit aussi à fuir, en raison du caractère encombrant de ses trop nombreux organes de circonspection.

> (Gêne qui me fait aussi penser à moi: nous en connaissons de semblables, dans une époque privée de foi, de rhétorique, d’unité d’action politique, etc…, etc….) (707)

> if she experiences difficulty, [it is] in maintaining herself in the midst of contradictory currents, that shove her against the rocks… It is also in fleeing, because of the cumbersome nature of her too numerous organs of circumspection.

> (Disturbance that also makes me think of myself: we know similar ones, in a time deprived of faith, rhetoric, unity of political action, etc…, etc….)

The comparison of the shrimp and the poet Ponge is made most explicitly in this same poem when he calls the animal “le lustre de la confusion” (“the lustre of confusion”) and “un monstre de circonspection” (“a monster of circumspection”), and then admits that in fact, the same can be said about a poet (708).

Ponge’s relationship and identification with the shrimp is complicated by the fact that he continually returns to the shrimp’s “mort en rose” (“death in pink”), a phrase which playfully distorts—while alluding to—the gruesome nature of the shrimp’s death by cooking. Ponge uses this image to poke fun at the importance attributed to individuality and revelation in art, since he
suggests that the shrimps that are fortunate enough to be caught by human predators will experience the “revelation” of learning their true identities (709). Pink, after all, is the colour by which most of us know shrimps, since their elusive nature—and transparent exteriors—make it difficult to see them when they are alive. (Pink is the colour of the shrimp we eat.) By calling this colour their “propre identité” (“true identity”), Ponge suggests the limitations of knowing animals when we perceive them solely in relation to ourselves. He addresses this issue even more explicitly at the end of “La crevette seconde,” finally, when he acknowledges the gap between the shrimp of his imagination and/or perception, and the “petit être” (“little being;” 711) that swims in the sea. Here Ponge warns his readers (and himself, no doubt) that we should not ignore “l’extrême complication intérieure qui les anime” (“the extreme internal complication that animates them;” 711) in focusing on their external forms—despite the fact that these forms may resemble our own systems of signs and ideograms. Nothing less than “une exacte compréhension du monde animé” (“an exact understanding of the animate world;” 711) is at stake here, the poet claims. As we know by the dates of composition given for these poems, Ponge contemplated the shrimp for nearly a decade. The poems he wrote as a result of this contemplation employ a number of metaphors and allegories that remove the shrimp from its home in water and place it within a sea of ink. Ponge’s unwillingness to combine the two liquids, however, reveals his ongoing unease with obscuring the real being of animals for the sake of poetry.

Moore’s moral animals

The poetic tone Moore adopted in writing animals is much gentler, kinder and even more loving than Ponge’s, a quality which has not gone without criticism. Randall Jarrell, for one, commented that Moore’s depictions of nature and the animal world were simplistically benevolent and failed to capture the “amorality” of the animal world:

Nature, in Miss Moore's poll of it, is overwhelmingly in favour of morality; but the results were implicit in the sampling—like the Literary Digest, she sent postcards to only the nicer animals. [...] Because so much of our own world is evil, she has transformed the Animal Kingdom, that amoral realm, into a realm of good; her consolatory, fabulous bestiary is more accurate than, but is almost as arranged as, any medieval one. We need it as much as she does, but how can we help feeling that she relies, some of the time, too surely upon this last version of pastoral? (178-9)
Jarrell’s complaint—minor in an otherwise laudatory review of Moore’s *Complete Poems*—is justified. In all of Moore’s poems, animals are portrayed as innocent and good—often in contrast to malevolent humans—and even her depiction of the housecat “Peter” (C.P. 43), which comes closest to revealing the instinctual predatory drives of an animal, refrains from evoking its potential for any real violence but refers only to its capacity for mischief:

As for the disposition invariably to affront,
an animal with claws should have an opportunity to use them.
The eel-like extension of trunk into tail is not an accident.
To leap, to lengthen out, divide the air, to purloin, to pursue.
To tell the hen: fly over the fence, go in the wrong way
in your perturbation—this is life;
to do less would be nothing but dishonesty.

The hen, amusingly enough, is not attacked by Peter but told to fly away. The morality Moore attributed to her animal subjects is idealized, perhaps—as Jarrell suggested—to make up for what she perceived to be humanity’s shortcomings. 87 Her idealistic view of the morality of animals likely grew in part from her dissatisfaction with society’s frequent mistreatment of animals. “‘Savage’ and ‘brutal’ are false terms,” she wrote, “the brute is so often the man” (*Prose* 375). It also likely had much to do with her personal sense of morality and Christian faith, as spiritually-driven poems like “The Pangolin,” “Black Earth” and “Elephants” all suggest. Similar to the way in which Ponge used animal metaphors—and self-consciously drew attention to the artifice of these metaphors—in order to reflect upon the process of artistic creation, Moore self-reflexively employed animal metaphors to reflect upon human moral values. As with Ponge, her heightened awareness of the insufficiency of metaphor and particularly animal metaphors prevented her from drawing any conclusive parallels, and—to a greater extent than Ponge—led her to identify with animals and consider their similarities to her as other spiritual beings in the world.

Whereas Ponge’s bestiary consists mostly of familiar birds, insects, domestic pets, sea creatures and farm animals—most of which are of the *minusculae* variety—Moore widened her scope to

87 It should be noted that Moore’s projection of moral qualities onto her poetic animals does not reduce the scientific accuracy of her representation of them, however, an accuracy achieved by the substantial amount of research she conducted prior to writing. The obscure and precise details found in poems such as “The Jerboa,” “The Pangolin” and “He ‘Digesteth Harde Yron,’” for example, appear to have been taken from some of the articles Moore clipped and saved from newspapers and popular science journals that are now held at the Rosenbach Library.
include larger and more exotic animals like ostriches, basilisks, jerboas, pelicans, elephants, tigers and so on. In fact, the exotica of an animal seemed to appeal to her fondness for detail, since it required her to fully research her subject—behaviour, habitat, food, and so on—to the extent that she knew more about the hard-backed anteater that is the pangolin, than many of us know about the animals living in our midst. In an earlier chapter I discussed how “The Pangolin” (C.P. 117-120) intermingles the internal and external characteristics of the animal in order to portray it as a being with modesty, perseverance and a “fragile grace” reminiscent of artistic masterpieces. The titular animal, in whom Moore finds a perfect balance of outer and inner strength and modesty, becomes a model for human aesthetics and morality when the subject of the poem imperceptibly shifts from pangolin to man. The shift arguably occurs because the poet recognizes the limitations to using an animal entirely as a metaphor for humanity. Yet “The Pangolin” presents human and non-human animals as being separated only by degrees so that man, naked “among animals,” is compared not only to the pangolin but also to a wasp, ant and spider:

- a paper-maker like the wasp; a tractor of foodstuffs, like the ant; spidering a length of web from bluffs above a stream; in fighting, mechanicked like the pangolin; capsizing in disheartenment. Bedizened or stark naked, man, the self, the being we call human, writing-master to this world, griffons a dark “Like does not like like that is obnoxious”; [...] 

Moore accentuates the precarious division between humans and other animals in the line “the being we call human” and then suggests that it is humans’ ability to write our experiences that distinguishes us from other beings. Even this act of writing, however, is described by the verb “to griffon,” which is a somewhat rudimentary movement that conjures up images of scrawling animal claws (in French: les griffes) rather than the refined hand of a calligrapher. One also sees in this word the mythical lion-eagle hybrid that is the griffin (also spelled griffon), or even, following a rhetorical connection Eleanor Cook draws in Enigmas and Riddles in Literature (2006), the Latin word for enigma: griphus. It is noteworthy to consider the 1872 entry on griffins in Angelo de Gubernatis’s Zoological Mythology, which Cook quotes: “And as Apollo is the prophetical and divining deity, whose oracle, when consulted, delivers itself in enigmas, the
The unrefined, enigmatic nature of the human being’s writing renders him an elusive creature whose modest self-expression may shed little light upon the state of the world (his is a “dark” griffonage). In his elusiveness he resembles Moore’s pangolin, of whom we learn little more than its physical description, more specifically what the poet considers to be the animal’s built-in armour: the large plated scales that cover its body; its contracting ear, nose and eye apertures; and its ability to roll itself into a ball in self-defence. Perhaps because of the fact that her descriptions never manage to penetrate beyond the armoured surface to uncover the inner being of the pangolin, midway through the poem Moore abandons any attempt to “unroll” her animal subject and shifts her focus rather to man. The introduction of man entails a gradual kind of becoming-animal in which the life cycle of nature is allegorized through different animal metaphors. Proceeding from a description of the pangolin standing upright, we encounter the man who is described sequentially—as quoted above—as a wasp, an ant (the food of the pangolin, incidentally), and a spider. From there he is re-assimilated to the pangolin before being named human, and then three stanzas down the description of his humanity again confirms his animality: “warm blood, no gills, two pairs of hands and a few hairs—that / is a mammal; there he sits in his own habitat.” These lines recall the becoming-animal of Deleuze and Guattari, who write in *Mille plateaux*:

> [L]e devenir ne produit pas autre chose que lui même. […] Le devenir-animal de l’homme est réel, sans que soit réel l’animal qu’il devient; et, simultanément, le devenir-autre de l’animal est réel sans que cet autre soit réel. […] Le devenir est toujours […] de l’alliance. (291)

the becoming produces nothing other than itself. […] The becoming-animal of man is real, without the animal that he becomes being real; and, simultaneously, the becoming-other of the animal is real without that other being real. […] Becoming is always […] to do with alliance.

In Moore’s “The Pangolin,” an alliance occurs between the animal and human subjects when it becomes obvious that the one cannot merely be used as a model for the other. The poem shows
how they are all part of nature’s system in which animals and humans exist in and for one another. The becoming-animal in this poem entails a re-evaluation of what it means to be human and, as the conclusion suggests, an important element of humanity may be our animality.

Nature is but one of the bonds that connects humans and animals in this poem, however, with the other being spirituality (as the aural play on “sun” or son that brings each day to being and “steadies [one’s] soul” would suggest). The idea of spiritual importance is implied throughout the poem with the word “grace” mentioned six times in contexts that evoke both its aesthetic and religious connotations. The pangolin’s movements are described as bearing a “fragile grace” that is akin to one “made graceful by adversities,” and his tail—described as a “graceful tool”—is both “hand” and “ax” (or pen and sword, if one is to connect him once again to man the writing-master). As I discussed in my second chapter, Moore was drawn to shelled or thick-skinned animals like the pangolin because they allowed her to project their physical characteristics onto her understanding of their inner qualities, and thereby to consider them paragons of the moral strength-with-personal modesty combination she so admired in others and to which she herself aspired.88 What prevents Moore from entirely relying upon the animal in this poem to comment upon human values, however, is that the very grace for which she applauds it is itself very difficult to pinpoint, and the poet never entirely succeeds in defining this quality for her readers. “To explain grace requires / a curious hand,” we read, and what follows is a series of examples in which grace has been confused with other things: “a kindly manner, time in which to pay a debt, / the cure for sins.” By comparing her own description of the pangolin’s grace with “those who graced the spires” of churches with animals without knowing entirely what grace was, Moore admits her own shortcomings in using this animal as a metaphor within a work of art. Although she may wish to see in the pangolin a “model[ ] of exactness,” she is self-consciously aware of the difficulties—examples of which she sees within her own religious tradition—of reducing animals to symbols within a human system of signs. The becoming-animal of her poem is therefore all the more important since it prevents the poet from reducing the pangolin to nothing more than a metaphor for human morality. While the pangolin shell is celebrated in the first half

88 Her admiration for these qualities can be contrasted with her disdain for ego and indiscriminate use of force, qualities which she mocks in her poem “To a Steam Roller:” “You lack half wit. You crush all the particles down / into closer conformity, and then walk back and forth on them” (C.P. 84; excerpt).
of the poem, the animal that serves as a model for human behaviour and good morality is a becoming-animal, a human/non-human hybrid that represents the intersection of nature and spirituality.

Another animal that Moore singled out as a model for good moral values is the elephant. “Black Earth” (1918) (Selected Poems 43-45), later titled “Melanchthon,” addresses its readers from the first-person perspective of an elephant. Melanchthon literally means “black earth” in Greek, although it is also the name of the German theologian Philip Melanchthon, a leader of the Protestant reformation, and this is a clue to the spiritual tone that informs the poem. Like many of Moore’s poems, “Black Earth” accentuates the reflection of content into form, and like “The Pangolin,” it plays with the idea of an animal’s inner (and spiritual) qualities reflected in its physical characteristics. The poem is an extended meditation on how one might or might not distinguish what defines the inner life of a thing from that which encases it, prompting John Slatin to remark that, here more than in any of Moore’s other poems, “the intimate bonding of meaning and form, poet and poem, is most fully articulated” (60). Similar to the pangolin, Moore’s elephant presents itself as humble, stoic and strong—in other words, armed with a thick skin, both literally and figuratively. Nevertheless, the elephant is deeply concerned with introspection and understanding the nature of its inner being, or how its “soul” is distinct from its impenetrable “elephant-skin.” By making the elephant self-consciously question its own being and reflect upon the distinction between how others perceive it and what it believes itself to be, Moore both reinforces the animal metaphor at the heart of her poem and shatters it, entreated her readers—but more importantly, herself—to rethink the value of judging a thing by its surface appearance.

The poem begins by evoking the slow, methodical movements of the elephant through the elongated vowels of dactyls. The elephant “I” presents itself without affect or pride, referring to its actions as “natural” and comparing itself to other large animals with which one might associate it in nature.89

89 The animals named are the hippopotamus and the alligator, but in fact alligators do not share the same habitat as the other two animals. Whether Moore deliberately used an animal with which the elephant-speaker would not be familiar is uncertain, although if this were the case, it emphasizes the human hand who gives voice to the elephant. On the other hand, it is possible that Moore simply confused alligators with crocodiles. As for the hippopotamus,
Openly, yes
with the naturalness
of the hippopotamus or the alligator
when it climbs out on the bank to experience the
sun, I do these
things which I do, which please
no one but myself. Now I breathe and now I am submerged […]

Beneath the image of the elephant bathing, however, one might also understand this scene as a metaphor for baptism, with the word “renaissance” that appears in the third stanza indicating the act of rebirth through ritual submersion. The effect of the elephant’s submersion in the sediment-rich water is to “enrich what was / / there to begin with” and indeed the sediment “encrusts [his/her] joints” and makes the elephant appear increasingly darker. These lines can be read in two additional ways beyond a literal understanding, however. Within a religious reading, firstly, the water baptism ameliorates the elephant’s existence by giving him/her a sense of spiritual belonging; thus the sediment coat is a physical manifestation of a spiritual transformation. Within a religious sign system, the elephant becomes a symbol for Christian stoicism and deep-rooted faith, its “power” stemming from a soul that cannot be pierced. In the manner of a prophet, the elephant in the poem speaks of the failure of the human body “which was made / to see and not to see; to hear and not to hear.”

Its name “Black Earth,” moreover, implies that it embodies the very source of life in its being: “the elephant is / black earth preceded by a tendril?”

The river sediment that clings to the elephant may be seen in another light, however. As a self-reflexive metaphor for poetry, the sediment that makes the elephant grow darker—what is referred to as the “patina of circumstance”—could be equally the ink that captures the animal in language. “[D]o away / with it and I am myself done away with,” the speaker confesses, which

Slatin suggests that “Black Earth” was in part Moore’s response to T. S. Eliot’s “The Hippopotamus,” published in The Little Review in June 1917 (Slatin 79).

90 Of his manner of instructing the people in the crowd, Jesus says: “The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’” (New Revised Standard Bible. Matthew 13.13).
read through a self-reflexive lens would suggest Moore’s admission that her animal subject is little more than a written metaphor. In keeping with this train of argument, one pauses on the description of the “elephant-skin” as “a manual for the peanut-tongued and the / / hairy-toed” (italics mine), in which the speaker refers to his/her skin as a book—and an instruction book, no less—that would serve as a model for all other elephants. The elephant skin, its outer shell, might serve as a model for all members of the species because it is a common feature of the elephant and one easy enough for outside observers like Moore to describe. The speaker is much more protective of his/her inner being, on the other hand, claiming proudly that his/her “soul shall never / be cut into / by a wooden spear.” By making the distinction between his/her body and soul, the speaker appears to differentiate the creature referred to as the elephant from the “I.” Thus Moore, who speaks for the elephant, makes a distinction between the real animal and its metaphor.

This distinction is further accentuated by the comparison of the elephant to the human and the coral plant, both of which are also described by their external shells and therefore reduced to a kind of generic categorization similar to the one with which Derrida takes issue in the phrase “the animal.”91 “Black Earth” suggests that humans, animals and plants are connected on a spiritual level because they each possess an inner “element of unreason” underneath their perceivable shells. The metaphor of a “tree-trunk without / roots” to describe the human pokes fun at the poet’s use of the elephant as a metaphor for human morality, and highlights the emphasis she places on external coverings when trying to describe the nature of a thing. Kirstin Hotelling Zona claims that this poem suggests there can be no real distinction of materiality in the world, since “[b]y the end of the poem, the speaker floats among myriad metaphors of bodily existence,” and “the body […] is a continual process, marked but not moored in its contingency with the world it inhabits” (36). Zona reads the final stanzas as comingling the elephant, human and coral plant into a single “I,” whereby the final speaker of the poem is “a radically unfixed voice no longer linked to a self” (35). I agree with Zona’s claim that the poem is in part an attempt to transcend bodies and exteriors in order to understand the inner essence of things—

91 Of course, the phrase “the animal” (l’animal) is much more of a misleading umbrella term since it is used to refer to any sentient being that is not human. For more on Derrida’s critique of this term and his response to it, please refer to the third section of this chapter.
namely, the “beautiful element of unreason” that cannot be contained within a single form. The “I of each,” however, do not appear to be subsumed into one another but remain rather distinct entities. In fact, they are the distinctive entities that characterize each being as something in-and-of-itself, distinct from the shells or bodies they carry. The lines “The I of each is to / the I of each / a kind of fretful speech” convey the phenomenological limitations to knowing another thing-in-the-world and explain Moore’s own difficulty with portraying the elephant in-and-of-itself, in a manner that goes beyond the elephant-as-metaphor. It is fitting, then, that in the final three stanzas (following the “I of each” lines quoted above), the speaker no longer refers to him/herself as “I” but rather speaks in the third-person of “the elephant.” At this point the elephant-skin has been shed and we are left with the poet struggling to reconcile the animal with the metaphor. The rhetorical question left hanging at the poem’s close, then, seems directed as much to Moore herself as to her readers.

Moore returned to the elephant much later in her career in a poem simply titled “Elephants” (1943) (C.P. 128-130). This poem focuses on a particular group of elephants, those charged with the ceremonial transportation of Buddha’s Tooth, a procession which occurs annually in Sri Lanka. The elephants in this poem are once again presented as models of trust, upright morality and stoicism, but here these qualities are brought out by their relationship—or fraternity, as the poem stresses—with humans. The animal subjects of “Elephants” quite literally exist side-by-side with humans, and from the poet’s perspective the two have a bond that surpasses any species divide. And yet—once again, Moore reveals some hesitation in stamping her interpretation of the animals’ behaviour too readily upon the page. As with the other two poems I have discussed in this section, “Elephants” underscores both the poet’s desire to understand animals by projecting human values and expectations upon them, as well as her self-conscious awareness that any kind of projection of external values onto the animal subtracts from its actual being.

The poem is written in the third-person—back to where Moore was most comfortable—and begins with an observation of two elephants entangled in a play-fight:

Uplifted and waved till immobilized
wistaria-like, the opposing opposed
mouse-gray twined proboscises’ trunk formed by two
trunks, fights itself to a spiraled inter-nosed
deadlock of dyke-enforced massiveness. It’s a knock-down drag-out fight that asks no quarter? [...] The image of the two trunks locked and intertwined, along with the repetition (“opposing opposed”) and numerous hyphenated words, introduces the theme of fraternity that carries this poem. In the fourth and fifth stanzas we read of the sleeping elephant cradling the also-sleeping mahout, who is described as a “defenseless human thing” who sleeps “as if” he too were “incised with hard wrinkles, embossed with wide ears, / invincibly tusked.” The distinction between human and animal is made uncertain in these lines, as the man is also compared to “a lifeless six-foot / frog” and the elephant’s trunk, in what is a sadly ironic allusion to the ivory trade, becomes a human’s “hunting-horn.” Curled up with one another in repose, elephant and man become as one until the speaker breaks the spell with her own self-conscious retraction: “As if, as if, it is all ifs; we are at / much unease.” This retraction signals the poet’s concern that all such descriptions are merely her own interpretation of the human-elephant bond. Yet the retraction is quickly followed by a “But,” and then a series of lines that continue to celebrate the magic of this bond, until once again the poet addresses the hardships elephants have had to endure at the hands of humans. The elephant “is the child / of reason now,” the speaker affirms in a discomfiting echo of “Black Earth”’s celebration of the elephant’s “Beautiful element of unreason.” Jeanne Heuving suggests that in her later poetry (published after her tenure at *The Dial*), Moore surrendered her ideals of representing things in an all-encompassing, universal fashion and rather contented herself with presenting things in a definitive, if limited way:

From a poetry of understatement and inconclusive encounters with the larger literary tradition and system of representation, Moore begins to compose a poetry of overstatement and positive assertion of values. [...] For the first extended time in her poetic career, Moore promotes only one side of a proposition, writing a poetry of thematic and symbolic unity. (141)

Although I am reluctant to agree with Heuving’s assertion in relation to all of Moore’s later poetry, in regards to “Elephants” her comment raises an interesting issue. Is Moore resigning herself to representing the humanized animal rather than the elephant-in-and-of-itself as it might exist in the wild? Is the elephants’ fraternity with humans and other creatures—one which they themselves acknowledge in the poem as they “expound the brotherhood / of creatures”—real, or is it Moore’s way of filling in the gaps to reconcile the animal she cannot know with the moral animal she believes it to be? Heuving’s reading of Moore’s poetry would suggest that the answer
to the first and last questions is yes, and in the case of this particular poem, Heuving isolates the elephants’ “sign of defeat” as equally an indicator of how Moore surrenders “her poetic project of meaning more than she can express” (144).

My own reading of the “sign of defeat” in relation to Moore’s poetics is less absolute, however. It is true that the idea of elephants who exist in captivity and are exploited for human ritual, but cooperate with their captors because they are “too wise / to mourn” their fate, seems to be a projection of human stoicism upon these animals. The poem implies that they endure the hardships imposed upon them so that one day they might impart their wisdom and their understanding of the “brotherhood / of creatures to man the encroacher.” In this way the poem’s representation of the elephants as wise, patient and obediently stoic animals seems to support Heuving’s argument that Moore gave up on trying to uncover—or even merely hint at—the “beautiful element of unreason” in her (animal) subjects and that she grew complacent with employing them entirely as metaphors for good human moral conduct. Elephants, at least according to the portrait painted of them in this poem, are without a doubt among the “nicer animals” to which Randall Jarrell referred in his commentary. Yet such criticism fails to take into consideration Moore’s characteristically reflective and self-conscious habit of turning her poems around to illuminate her own act of writing and perceiving. One index in “Elephants” that points to this type of reflection is the reference to Socrates, and more specifically the value he places on recognizing the limits to one’s knowledge. While the poem seems to equate the elephants’ patience and outward calm with Socratic wisdom, it also remembers Socrates’s prudence when faced with things unknown:

Hardship makes the soldier; then teachableness
makes him the philosopher—as Socrates,

prudently testing the suspicious thing, knew
the wisest is he who’s not sure that he knows.
Who rides on a tiger can never dismount;
asleep on an elephant, that is repose.

By contrasting Socrates’s prudence with the claim that “asleep on an elephant, that is repose,” is Moore paradoxically admitting her own lack of prudence in resting her metaphor upon the back of this animal? A few lines earlier, the sense of caution found in the clarifying lines “As if, as if” is repeated when the poet borrows words from an unnamed source to attempt once again to explain the fraternity between elephants and humans: “These knowers ‘arouse the feeling that
they are / allied to man’ and can change roles with their trustees.” The hesitation in this line is indicated by Moore’s use of an outside quotation and her suggestion that the animals “arouse the feeling,” rather than wholeheartedly convince one that such a fraternity is real. This hesitation, however slight, should be enough to remind the reader that Moore is unable to trade her subjects in wholeheartedly for metaphors, or to betray the “beautiful element of unreason” for a poem neatly constructed around a metaphor. The poet’s self-doubt is a sign that her desire to understand her animal subject as an essential other may yet surpass her temptation to use what little she does know of it for poetic gain.

4.3: From animal metaphors to the language of animals

In the preceding section I explored how the poets’ attempts to use animal metaphors to reflect upon human identity resulted in a recognition of both the animality of humans and, to a lesser degree, the unrepresentable otherness of animals. In the present section I will look at several of their poems in which we can discern the poets’ more acute recognition of this otherness and their better understanding of the limits to representing animals as they exist in-and-of-themselves, or beyond the confines of human language and the metaphoric structures to which we assign them. The ways in which Moore and Ponge consider animals as poetic subjects vary significantly between the two, as I have already discussed. Whereas Moore’s protective and caring attitude towards her animal subjects led her to celebrate them as moral beings, Ponge’s etymological obsessions led him to scrutinize the poetic worth of his animal subjects using his Littré as a kind of field guide. Differences notwithstanding, both poets recognized that the elusive nature of animals as subjects for poetry indicated the essential otherness of their beings, and that to capture animals within language would entail a loss of their essential otherness. In a number of their poems, then, Moore and Ponge try to avoid this potential loss by self-reflexively pointing to their own movements within language in order to—ideally—enable the real animal subject to escape back to the natural world whence it came.

Akira Mizuta Lippit, working within a Freudian framework, suggests that the animal is a priori a metaphor in language:
the animal is already a metaphor, the metaphor an animal. Together they transport to
to language, breathe into language, the vitality of another life, another expression:
aminal and metaphor, a metaphor made flesh, a living metaphor that is by definition
not a metaphor, an antimetaphor —“animetaphor”. The animetaphor may also be
seen as the unconscious of language, of logos. (165)

Since animals exist outside of language, Lippit argues, they bring to language a foreign element
which bears the trace of the other, an other that perhaps, as Derrida has suggested, points back to
a world before language. Lippit furthermore posits that in a literary context, the trace of the
animal/other causes language to extend past mere communication towards self-reflexive
discourse on its own limitations (162-3). He writes: “The contact between language and the
animal marks a limit of figurability, a limit of the very function of language” (163). When a
writer represents a sentient being from another system of communication through the system of
human language, s/he must acknowledge the divide that exists between his/her language and the
essence (or selfhood) of the being that is represented. Indeed there is always such a divide when
one represents anything phenomenal through language—every person, every thing is an other—
but there is arguably more of a rift when it comes to non-human animal life, which is why the
“animal problem” has continually arisen throughout the centuries in philosophical thought. What
are (non-human) animals? Or rather, who are they?

The latter question was raised famously by Jacques Derrida in his posthumously published work,
*L’animal que donc je suis*. Written near the end of his career, it offers an amalgamation of most
of his earlier thoughts and ideas concerning animals, a subject which long preoccupied his
philosophical work.⁹² Derrida’s aim in the seminar, he tells us, is to re-examine the philosophical
problem of the animal in order to get us to reconsider our responsibilities and obligations—and
sense of compassion—towards animals as living beings (48). More significantly, he claims that
there is no single definite line between humans and animals since the border is composed of
multiple lines all directed towards an abyss (“en abîme”) (53). By engaging in the kind of
language play for which he is famous, Derrida connects humans and non-human animals with
the first-person singular of the verb “to be:” *je suis* (I am) which is also the first-person singular

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⁹² *L’animal que donc je suis* is based on an extended (ten-hour) seminar that Derrida delivered at the 1997 Cerisy
Conference.
conjugation of the verb “to follow” (suivre). Je suis therefore implies both “I am” and “I follow.” He finds himself (or rather searches for his self) somewhere behind the animal that is his other:

Que veut dire “être après”? Cette démarche suivie devra bien ressembler à celle d’un animal qui cherche à trouver ou qui cherche à échapper. [...] L’animal que donc je suis, à la trace, et qui relève des traces, qui est-ce? [...] Supposez-le signant une déclaration, trace parmi d’autres, à la première personne, “je”, “je suis”. Cette trace serait déjà le gage ou l’engagement, la promesse d’un discours de la méthode autobiographique. Qu’il soit ou non prononcé, exposé comme tel, thématisé, le “je” toujours se pose autobiographiquement. (82-3)

What does it mean “to be after”? Following this approach will resemble that of an animal who seeks to find or who seeks to escape. [...] The animal that therefore I am (or that I follow), at the trace, and that is lifted from the traces, who is it? [...] Suppose it were signing a declaration, a trace among others, in the first person, “I,” “I am (or I follow).” This trace would be already the proof or the engagement, the promise of a discourse in the autobiographical method. Whether or not it is pronounced, exposed like that, characterized, the “I” always presents itself autobiographically.

Derrida succeeds less in defining the animal by locating its scent as he does in losing himself—or that which makes him properly human—amidst the animal traces that he follows and that follow him. In so doing, he renders himself an other in the eyes of another animal, so as to consider things from that animal’s perspective. Gerald Bruns poses the situation in the following way: “To the question ‘Who am I?’ there is no answer, for the simple reason that I am as much an other to myself as I am to my neighbor or to my host or, for all of that, to my cat. This in fact seems to be the regulating theme of Derrida’s autobiographical writings” (420). Derrida’s focus on the phrase “the animal” (l’animal)—a single word which manages to group all different species and individual creatures into a single category—can be connected back to his much earlier theory of the trace in language. In De la gramma
tologie, Derrida argued that writing is defined by différence, or the constant differentiation and deferral among signs. No sign can remain constant in this system because every signified is at the same time a new signifier for something different; the only element in the system to which we can refer is the trace of a sign, which in itself is incomplete since it implies the absence of an other.

What does grammata
tology have to do with animals? It pertains to the way in which we conceive of animals through language. First of all, Derrida objects to the singular term “the animal” (l’animal) to describe all of animal life; humans, after all, would be included under this large umbrella. To correct this misnomer, he refers to the entity as animot, which encompasses mot
(word) and also sounds phonetically like the plural of “animals” (animaux). Hence, when given the singular article l’, l’animot is jarring to the ear because it sounds like a grammatical inconsistency. Derrida’s reasons for coining this neologism are twofold. Firstly, by making a plural-sounding word singular, he lends it the trace of all the individual animal beings who are usually herded into the singular word l’animal. Secondly, by including mot, he emphasizes the linguistic and arbitrary basis to our conception of animals. We designate them through human language only, and through the process of naming we claim dominion over the other creatures who lack the power of nomenclature. Of the latter reason he writes:

Le suffixe mot, dans l’animot, devrait nous rappeler au mot, voire au mot nommé nom. Il ouvre à l’expérience référentielle de la chose comme telle, comme ce qu’elle est dans son être, et donc à cet enjeu par lequel on a toujours voulu faire passer la limite, l’unique et indivisible limite qui séparerait l’homme de l’animal, à savoir le mot, le langage nominal du mot, la voix qui nomme, et qui nomme la chose en tant que telle, telle qu’elle apparaît dans son être (moment heideggerien de la démonstration qui nous attend). L’animal serait en dernière instance privé du mot, de ce mot qu’on nomme nom. (74)

The suffix word (mot), in the aniword (l’animot), should make us think of the word, or even the word named noun. It suggests the referential experience of the thing as such, in its very being, and thus it suggests this issue of which we have always wanted to draw the limit, the unique and indivisible limit that would separate man from animal, namely the word, the nominal language of the word, the voice that names, and that names the thing as such, as it appears in its being (Heideggerian moment of the demonstration that awaits us). The animal would in the last instance be deprived of the word, of this word that we name noun.

The word is part of l’animot, Derrida says, but at the same time the animal being is denied it since language is a human construct.

The difficulty with poetic language that celebrates the autonomy and non-(humanly)-subjective worldview of animals is that in the act of representing the latter, the poet risks effacing the very qualities s/he wishes to retain. By locating the animal in language and embellishing its essence with rhetorical and linguistic devices, the poet necessarily loses something of the animal’s original state of being. The lacuna created by this dichotomy is one that Cary Wolfe attempts to confront in his work on posthumanist theory. Posthumanism, as Wolfe understands it, is an approach to self-other relations in which the human is no longer of necessity the primary subject. Indeed, a posthumanist discourse cannot rely upon introspection and self-reflection to establish itself but rather must implicate “another observer, using a different set of distinctions” and this
other observer can be non-human (122). The resulting discourse, Wolfe argues, is an exchange between two (equal) others:

It is only on this basis […] that a first-order observer (the “subject” in humanist parlance) is opened, and unavoidably so, to the alterity of the other: not by “taking thought” or by benevolent reflection but by the very conditions of cognition and communication, conditions that, in their constitutive “blindness”, generate the necessity of the other. (122)

In a formulation recalling that of Merleau-Ponty in *Le visible et l’invisible*, Wolfe argues that one must be seen or considered by an other in order to be able to see others oneself. In terms of discourse involving animals, the other must be non-human because it is only through a non-human perspective that one can escape the anthropocentric and humanist framework to consider the animal in-and-of-itself.

If the alterity of the non-human animal is essential to opening a discourse beyond the confines of human language and subjectivity, then a properly posthumanist work must tread a fine line between revealing not only the differences that lie between humans and animals but also what Wolfe calls the “fundamental […] bond between human and nonhuman animals as beings who not only live and die as embodied beings, but also communicate with each other in and through a second form of finitude that encompasses the human/animal difference” (123). Mark Payne’s recent book *The Animal Part. Human and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination* (2010) explores literary texts that he sees as adhering to a posthumanist paradigm in what he explains as their “insistence that human beings’ emotional experience is continuous with that of other animals,” an insistence which “marks the poet as an outsider with regard to the norms of cultural expression against which this assertion is made” (22-3). Payne is interested in writers who seek out the narrative behind an animal’s life because it is only in this way, he argues, that readers are able to identify with them as protagonists and individuals. In my discussion of the following set of Moore and Ponge’s poems, my concern lies with the poets’ treatment of animals as protagonists whose lives are ultimately unrepresentable in language. As Wolfe explains it, a posthumanist representation of an animal recognizes the limitations of its own properly human discourse and therefore has the tendency to leave things unsaid, so as to create a dialogue with other species as opposed to speaking for them: “what must be witnessed is not just what we can see but also what we cannot see—indeed, that we cannot see” (167).
From cage to desert sand: seeing and not seeing animals

Two of Moore’s poetic animals whose essential otherness ultimately limits the extent to which they can be represented in poems are the tiger and the jerboa. The tiger, “that Gilgamesh among / the hairy carnivora—that cat with the / wedge-shaped, slate-grey marks on its forelegs and the resolute tail” (C.P. 40), is the subject of “The Monkeys” (1917)93 and “Old Tiger” (1932), each of which depict the animal as an intelligent and mysterious creature whose capture within a work of art is as ill-fitting as its enclosure within a cage at the zoo. “The Jerboa” (1932), on the other hand, is a nomadic desert rat whose lack of greed or want and subsequent freedom and independence from others make him an unobtainable model for human behaviour. All three poems present a dichotomy between art and nature and consider the value of the one in terms of the other, and in all three poems this dichotomy extends to a consideration of the relationship between humans and animals. The artificially constructed zoo setting in “The Monkeys” and “Old Tiger,” for instance, serves as a metaphor for the limitations imposed by language upon a subject. In “The Jerboa,” a critique of the objectification of animals (and marginalized persons) for the sake of art strikes a self-reflexive note in the poet’s representation of her subject animal. As I will argue, Moore’s comments on the mimetic difficulty of artistic representation can easily be seen as a commentary on the captivity and objectification of animals in society. Within the space of her poems, however, Moore’s tiger and jerboa manage to escape the latter by disappearing, by the poet’s volition, from the page. In this way their inner being is suggested but not captured by poetic representation.

“The Monkeys” (C.P. 40) begins in a run-off from its title, introducing the titular characters only to dismiss them quickly in order to describe the other animals in the zoo. Zebras, elephants, small cats and parakeet are all mentioned and quickly dismissed, as the poet admits she cannot “recall the ornament, speech, and precise manner of what one might / call the minor acquaintances twenty / years back.” The word “ornament” highlights the display value of these creatures, although the characterization of them as “minor acquaintances” suggests the poet saw them as more than mere entertainment, despite the fact that she had encountered them in a zoo.

In contrast with these animals, the tiger, that “Gilgamesh among / the hairy carnivora,” is remembered in all his detail, and occupies such importance in the poet’s mind that the second half of the poem assumes his voice. The tiger’s speech critiques the way that art freezes nature into its rigid moulds and treats aesthetic beauty as a commodity to be possessed and exchanged. The thing-in-itself is forgotten when it enters the world of art, goes the critique, to the extent that it is dismissed for being unable to judge its own artistic worth:

[...] “They have imposed on us with their pale half-fledged protestations, trembling about in inarticulate frenzy, saying it is not for us to understand art; finding it all so difficult, examining the thing.”

The “us” of this passage is unclear, although it would seem that the “Gilgamesh” tiger is speaking for the rest of the now-forgotten animals kept at the zoo. Bonnie Costello and others have read this speech entirely for its metaphoric value, seeing it purely as a commentary on art—what Costello refers to as “art that sacrifices the ‘magnificence’ of nature for the narcissistic satisfactions of baroque complexities, high-sounding interpretations, and intellectual emphasis” (30). Costello claims that the speech has but “a secondary relation” with the animal in the zoo, and even then only because the cage metaphor can be used to present the artist as one who exists both inside and outside of its confines—that is, “as a ‘natural’ but also as an artificer who converts nature to flattery” (31).

To read this poem as an allegorical critique of art is undoubtedly correct, but such a reading should not deflate the importance of the poem’s animal subjects—particularly as they stand in relation to Moore’s other animal poems. If the animals are the “artwork” that is gazed upon and the tiger is their spokesman, then the passage quoted above gives not only voice but also vision to the animals enclosed within their cages/frames. They see those who look at them and find them just as “difficult” to understand as the others find them in a reverse situation. The very image of the observers “trembling about / in inarticulate frenzy” reads as a reversal of the human-animal distinction, as it is now the humans who behave in an incomprehensible fashion without language or system of communication. Speaking for his fellow zoo mates, the tiger mocks the idea that animals might be objectified to the extent that they would lack any being-for-oneself whatsoever and bear meaning only for those who observed them, in the manner of something “inconceivably arcane” and “symmetrically frigid.” At the same time, however, he
equates himself with the same observers he chastises by referring to “the thing”—the animal spectacle of which he is a part—as having “power over us” (italics mine). Arguably, it is this paradoxical identity shift that prevents Moore’s poem from anthropomorphizing the tiger wholeheartedly. As it becomes clear that the spoken words in fact do not belong to the tiger alone, the tiger—a captive zoo animal—appears to straddle the worlds of human and non-human. As he begins to speak and criticize the falsities of art, the tiger steps out of his cage and becomes an observer of art, in addition to the artwork itself. And lest the poem return to a pure allegory on artists, the final item in the list of commodities evoked by the tiger—fur—is merely an empty shell of the animal and ironically points to the absence of the real tiger in-and-of-itself. Perhaps, also, the final emphasis on fur suggests the widely accepted dissociation we as a society have made between animals in-and-of-themselves and the commodities they have become for us.

The otherness of the animal subject is more explicitly addressed in “Old Tiger” (Pound, Profile 61-64), a lengthier, more sharply-toned poem that reveals Moore’s deeper understanding of the issue of non-human agency. (The subject had had time to mature, after all, since “Old Tiger” was published nearly fifteen years after “The Monkeys.”) The later poem is situated once again in a zoo, where the poet again begins by offering a series of brief descriptions of various zoo animals before settling on the large cat, whom she singles out for his “mysterious look.” “Old Tiger” is roughly twice as long as “The Monkeys” and differs from the earlier poem also in its apostrophic address; no longer pretending to speak for the tiger, Moore speaks at him. In the later poem, too, the tiger is granted a more assertive gaze, as references to his powers of sight and observation are in strong supply: “you / see more than I see but even I / see too much;” “observe;” “To see, to realize with a prodigious leap is your / version;” “As for you—forming a sudden resolution to sit / still—looking at them” (all italics mine). Granted the power of sight and observation, the tiger once again becomes both observer and observed, artwork and spectator. In this respect he is further distanced from the other animals in the zoo, who are, in the speaker’s eyes, “of one thickness,” and whose depth and inner being are not summoned to any extent. The speaker tells the tiger that these animals "are nothing / to you"—although the "you" in this instance may designate not only the tiger but the reader as well.

The other animals that the speaker, reader and tiger observe participating in the spectacle of the zoo are referred to as “human,” but the tiger is not. Their two versions of culture are also distinguished from one another:
[...] in that exposition

is their passion, concealment, yours, they
are human, you are inhuman and the mysterious look, the way
in which they comport themselves and the conversation imported from the
birdhouse, are one version of culture.
You demur? To see, to realize with a prodigious leap is your
version and that should be all there is of it. Possibly so, but when one
is duped by that which is pleasant, who
is to tell one that it is too much? [...]

The “exposition” to which the speaker refers is the animals’ physical self-display, their habit of—in the poet’s eyes, at least—revealing everything about themselves immediately and explicitly, with whatever language (an imported conversation, perhaps) is available to them. The tiger, on the other hand, deals in long periods of concealed observation and sudden bursts of insight, his “prodigious leap” conjuring up the image of a hunter suddenly seizing the opportunity to catch its prey. The line might have prompted what Moore referred to as the “lion’s leap” in her later essay “Feeling and Precision” (1944), which she characterizes as a precise articulation of feeling. “[T]he lion’s leap would be mitigated almost to harmlessness if the lion were clawless,” she writes in this essay, “so precision is both impact and exactitude, as with surgery” (Prose 396). The lion’s—or tiger’s—leap signifies the communication of what comes most naturally to us; it is an impulse captured in art, or a sharp, to-the-point expression of inner feeling that lacks excess or affectation. Within an artistic metaphor, the old tiger is an artist set apart from his contemporaries because his “version of culture” consists of these kinds of precise bursts of expression, whereas those around him—the “other animals of one thickness”—engage in more explicit, drawn-out representations of little depth. And yet, the tiger himself is rendered slightly “ludicrous,” lumped in with a group of wise, but old, few from “the enlightenment” who hold onto their artistic ideals while dismissing the work of others. Although “cultured” and “profusely lettered,” these critics no longer seem able to understand things within any context, as their knowledge has become so fixed that it would seem obsolete.

The presence of Moore’s old tiger within the ranks of the fallibly cultured signals the poet’s self-conscious awareness of her (mis)use of the tiger as metaphor. The poet designates the tiger as “inhuman” compared to the other animals in the zoo, and then several stanzas down she stresses the human element of art. The attention placed upon art’s “half human” property on the one hand
emphasizes the importance of feeling in an artwork, but also suggests the division between the real tiger and the “old tiger” character cast in the poem. By asserting the humanity of art and the inhumanity of the tiger, Moore accepts the animal’s essential otherness and its unrepresentability within her poem. Moreover, by emphasizing her tiger’s power of sight and observation, the poet also suggests a dichotomy between what she sees and what he sees. “[Y]ou / / see more than I see but even I / see too much,” she tells the tiger in the sixth stanza, and that “but” serves as a kind of warning that her poem will see the zoo and its animal inhabitants as metaphors for something else—in this case, art. In this regard, Moore's apostrophe to the tiger reads almost as an apology, since the poet frames her metaphor around the tiger in the same way that the bars of his cage frame him within the zoo.

The connection between artistic frame and prison frame also appears in the lines referencing Dante:

> [...] You have “read Dante’s Hell

> till you are familiar with it”—till
> the whole surface has become so polished as to afford no little seam or irregularity at which to catch.

Dante’s circular depiction of Hell signifies the tiger’s perpetual enslavement, and is perhaps an oblique reference to Rilke’s panther repeatedly and futilely pacing the circumference of his cage. Their cages are the animals’ hell, worn smooth and predictable by the hours and hours they spend reflecting upon and within them. Both poems capture this sense of circular inevitability and, in the case of Rilke’s “Der Panther” especially, use it to create the underlying tension of the poem. Indeed, as much as “Old Tiger” doubles as a metaphor of art, its final two lines underscore the impoverished existence of the real tiger in the zoo: “You know one thing, an inkling of which has not entered their minds; you / know that it is not necessary to live in order to be alive.” While the comment serves as an attack on art that merely pretends to be profound and full of genuine feeling—art that is “alive” without actually “living” with gusto—the fact that it is addressed to the old tiger at the zoo indicates that in Moore’s eyes, the tiger is alive but not living, as it cannot express itself with the freedom necessary for its prodigious leap. Hence, by admitting this, Moore distinguishes the real tiger from her poem and keeps that animal outside the frames of its metaphor.
A final note à propos of “The Monkeys” and “Old Tiger” concerns the simian creatures who introduce both poems. In each case, the monkeys are noticed and then quickly dismissed. In the early poem, we read that “The Monkeys / winked too much and were afraid of snakes.” In the later poem the description is longer but equally disdainful:

You are right about it; that wary,  
presumptuous young baboon is nothing to you; and the chimpanzee?  
An exemplary hind leg hanging like a plummet at the end of a  
string—the tufts of fur depressed like grass  
on which something heavy has been lying—nominal ears of black glass—  
what is there to look at?

If the two poems focus on their inability to express the otherness of the magnificent tiger, they do not even attempt to portray the complexity of the monkeys’ existence. In both cases, however, the poet clearly hints at the impoverished state of the monkeys in the zoo, to the extent that I would suggest Moore shied away from them as subjects because their intelligence and physical features render them so similar to humans. The chimpanzees in “Old Tiger” display fur that is “depressed,” as though borne down by the weight of something heavy. Based on the animal advocacy Moore displays in poems like “He ‘Digesteth Harde Yron’” or “An Arctic Fox (Or Goat),” it would not be a stretch to read these lines metaphorically as a description of the chimpanzees in despair. Perhaps, too, Moore’s reticence to portray a subject so close to humans caused her to change the original name of “My Apish Cousins” to “The Monkeys.”

The second animal I will discuss in this section is the little-known rodent found primarily in deserts, the jerboa. Moore’s “The Jerboa” (C.P. 10-15) is a poem in which the subject animal, although neglected until mid-way through the poem, emerges as an emblem of modest virtue and a model for good living, albeit an unobtainable one for humans. The poem is divided into two parts, entitled “Too Much” and “Abundance.” In the first, we have descriptions of Roman and Egyptian rulers with incredible wealth who appropriate and use every animal, person and material they can find to procure food, shelter, entertainment and decoration. Their possessions are so ornate and so excessive that they literally re-create a perverted replica of the original thing into a new, hedonist’s object:

[…] Lords and ladies put goose-grease  
paint in round bone boxes—the pivoting  
lid incised with a duck-wing
or reverted duck-head; kept in a buck
or rhinoceros horn,
the ground horn; and locust oil in stone locusts.

People, too, are objectified, as “Those who tended flower- / beds and stables were like the king’s cane in the / form of a hand” and those who tend the bees and the cows are reduced to their functional names, “bee-man and milk-maid.” The images of excess in “Too Much” are contrasted in “Abundance” with the description of the titular desert rat, the jerboa, who is “not famous,” “lives without water” and “has happiness.” The jerboa is an entirely well-proportioned creature who lives within its means and its most basic needs and according to the poet “one would not be he / who has nothing but plenty.” As with many of her other animal subjects, there is indeed an ascetic quality to the jerboa that would have appealed to Moore’s Presbyterian values.

Poetically, the jerboa’s presence is felt throughout both sections of the poem through the rhythm, alliteration and rhyme schemes of the language. In “Abundance,” we read of the nimble desert rat’s quickness, its manner of barely touching down upon something before springing back up and its ability to be anywhere and everywhere amidst its home in “the boundless sand.” In “Too Much,” the language operates in much the same manner as the characteristics described above, with the imagery leaping from the fountain, to the captivity of various animals, to the fabrication of various “playthings,” to the servitude of people and so on, down to the Pharaoh’s “rust- / backed mongoose” and finally to the jerboa itself. “By fifths and sevenths, / in leaps of two lengths” is how the poet describes the jerboa’s movements and as many critics by now have pointed out, each stanza (with some exceptions) begins with two lines of five syllables and ends on a line of seven syllables. The rapid movement between images alone might not conjure the jerboa, but these are interspersed with such light alliterations as “contrive a cone,” “Placed on / the prison,” and “dappled dog- / cats to course antelopes,” all of which also adopt the graceful movement of the desert rat whose features all blend in with one another as well as with its sandy environment. The poem’s subtle rhymes, finally (for example: “A Roman had an / artist, a freedman” or “Others could / build, and understood”) cause the reader to adapt his/her usual course of reading to the rhythm of the verse, which itself follows the “uneven” leaps of the jerboa.
Mimetic play notwithstanding, “The Jerboa” admits defeat by showing that humans, with our art, cannot attain the same moral goodness as other animals because we are limited by our capacity for artifice. Benjamin Johnson claims this poem paradoxically “imagines art as both inherently sinful and potentially graceful,” since it is only by endowing her language with the artifice condemned in the first section that Moore is able to understand and describe the very subject of her poem, the jerboa (71-72). This argument recalls Lacan, who said that a distinguishing factor between humans and non-human animals is our ability to pretend to pretend (Derrida, L'animal 175). Indeed, as Benjamin Johnson and others have pointed out, the only manner by which Moore can approach her animal subject is by metaphor and allusion, meaning that her language bears more proximity to the ornate decorations in “Too Much” than to the simple being of the jerboa.

There is, however, a saving grace to Moore’s representation of the jerboa and that is her ability to differentiate the poetic artifice from the animal. Lippit claims that the introduction of the non-linguistic animal in a literary context entails a self-referential nod to the artifice or constructed nature of language. Thus, when a poem envelops a living, sentient being that does not belong to its world of language, the poem arguably tries to translate the “originary metaphor” that is the animal (to use Lippit’s expression) into a linguistic metaphor that can be communicated from poet to reader. Such a translation arguably would equal a loss in the animal’s original being. What Moore attempts in “The Jerboa” and other poems like “The Monkeys” and “Old Tiger,” however, is a kind of escape route for her animal subject by which it can disappear back to its original state. If one considers the final stanza, one notices the almost photographic (and artificial) effect of the image of the jerboa frozen between the aesthetics of music, painting and artisan furniture:

    Its leaps should be set
to the flageolet;
    pillar body erect
    on a three-cornered smooth-working Chippendale claw—propped on hind legs, and tail as third toe,
    between leaps to its burrow.

Despite its momentary capture in art, the jerboa ultimately escapes, breaks the frame and “leaps to its burrow” where it can no longer be seen. It seems that Moore is here admitting poetry’s inability to fully capture a thing in words and so rather than do the jerboa injustice by falsely representing it, she enables it to re-assume a life of its own beyond the printed word. By pushing
her jerboa to the edge of artistic decoration—to the point of artisanry—before releasing it, she forces her readers not only to re-think the relationship between art and reality, but also the one between humans, language and animals. The jerboa’s trace, its “fern-seed / footprints,” are in the end all that remain.

No animals were used in the writing of these poems

If Ponge playfully flirted with the difficulties of writing animals in poems such as “La grenouille” and “Ébauche d’un poisson,” the following set of poems from the collection Pièces present a more wholehearted resignation of his inability to do so. “L’araignée” (1942-48), “La nouvelle araignée” (1954-57), “Les hirondelles” (1951-56) and “Le lézard” (1945-47) are all explicit exercises in connecting animals to words, in which the poet repeatedly fails in his attempts to find mimological correlates in language to these animal beings. Unlike the Marianne Moore poems I have discussed, the following poems do not attempt even to see the animal in-and-of-itself, let alone represent it for the reader. Rather, Ponge performs a kind of reverse anthropomorphism—or zoomorphism—in which he writes himself into his poems in the guise of an animal. By distorting the perception of his own being rather than that of the animal, Ponge displays the same principle that can be found in all of his poetry, namely his refusal to “sacrifier […] l’objet de [son] étude à la mise en valeur de quelque trouvaille verbale” (“sacrifice […] the object of [his] study for the use of some verbal discovery;” O.C. I 337). Every ‘verbal discovery’ that he makes—mostly etymological connections between an animal’s name and its manner of moving—are described only in order to embellish the animal guise he has adopted. In this respect he acknowledges the animal—and animal perspective—that cannot be seen, since it becomes clear to his readers that he has left the real animal outside the confines of his poem. As I will discuss, the spider, swallow and lizard of the following poems never actually appear in any manner remotely independent from what is obviously artificial language play; rather, an animalized Ponge assumes their voice.

The musical composition to “L’araignée” (O.C. I 762-765) might owe something to the dance of the Tarantella, in which legend dictated that a victim of the deadly spider bite could be saved through frantic, energetic dancing. The poem is preceded by a compositional outline in the form of an epigraph that explains the dances that will occur—the sarabande and the jig—and as
Patrick Meadows explains, the poem is divided into sections that recall those of a baroque suite (55). If the spider’s movements are those of a dance, it is a dance that the poet is eager to learn and to imitate. For this reason he applies “spiderly” verbs to describe himself in as early as the opening lines, when he begins to recall facts that he knows about his subject: “Sans doute le sais-je bien… (pour l’avoir quelque jour dévidé de moi-même?” (“Of course I know it well… (having some day unwound it from myself?”; 762—italics mine). Having begun to give details of the spider’s manner of weaving its web with descriptions of the “fil de son discours” (“thread of its discourse;” 763), the poet proceeds to speak for the spider in the following words:

DE RIEN D’AUTRE QUE DE SALIVE PROPOS EN L’AIR MAIS AUTHENTIQUEMENT TISSUS—OÙ J’HABITE AVEC PATIENCE—SANS PRÉTEXTE QUE MON APPÉTIT DE LECTEURS. (763)

OF NOTHING OTHER THAN SALIVA SUBJECTS IN THE AIR BUT AUTHENTICALLY WOVEN—WHERE I LIVE WITH PATIENCE—WITHOUT OTHER PRETEXT THAN MY APPETITE OF READERS.

These lines already are not the trace of the spider, but of the spider-poet, whose web-like oeuvre consists of words and is designed to trap the attention of his readers. Following the dance of the real spider who supports itself by the very web it spins, the spider-poet makes sure to tread lightly (“faire ma demarche assez légère;” “make my step light enough;” 763) while composing his words. Upon completing his web-poem, the spider-poet recites a long list of “prey” he hopes to trap within it, a list which consists of a motley of insects, humans, supernatural monsters, plants, inanimate objects and abstract ideas like songs and dreams—essentially the entire gamut of Ponge’s subject repertoire and more. Centred in the middle of the page and consisting of forty-three (often rhymed) lines of around five syllables each, the list reads in much the same frantic, breathless manner as one would perform the dance of the Tarantella. It reaches a crescendo when the words grow into capital letters and only relents when it is suggested that much time has passed and the web is long empty: “Beaucoup plus tard,—ma toile abandonnée” (“Much later—my web abandoned;” 765). “L’araignée” clearly allegorizes the act of writing, but it does not suggest that the spider is a metaphor for the poet. Rather, Ponge learns the spider dance in order to imitate it and to present a spiderlike Ponge, as opposed to a Pongelike spider. By imposing spiderlike qualities upon himself instead of imposing humanlike qualities onto the spider, furthermore, Ponge reveals the degree of fancy inherent to both zoomorphism and anthropomorphism.
Composed in the decade following the writing of “L’araignée,” “La nouvelle araignée” (O.C. I 799-802), skips the pretence of observing a real spider in nature and proceeds directly to trace one in language:

Dès le lever du jour il est sensible en France—bien que cela se trame dans les coins—et merveilleusement confus dans le langage, que l’araignée avec sa toile ne fasse qu’un.
Si bien—lorsque pâlit l’étoile du silence dans nos petits préaux comme sur nos buissons—
Que la moindre rosée, en paroles distinctes,
Peut nous le rendre étincelant. (799)

From the dawn of day it has been understood in France—although this is woven in corners—and is marvellously confusing in language, that the spider with its web makes one.
To the extent that—when the star of silence turns pale in our small little meadows as on our bushes—
The slightest dew, speaking distinctly,
Can cause it to glitter.

The spider traced is one whose name now fuses old and new, since as the Littré explains, in old French (prior to the sixteenth century) there were two words that distinguished the animal from its creation: aragne, which meant spider, and araignée, which meant web. Ponge references the Renaissance epoch when this etymological change occurred with the metaphor “le lever du jour,” which he then carries further by referring to the fading evening star and the apparition of dew on the ground. In Ponge’s poem, the dawn of day is literally reenacted. As the editors’ notes to Oeuvres complètes reveal, Ponge was more than delighted to learn of the Renaissance’s amalgamation of aragne and araignée in the French language, and in a note he composed elsewhere he writes of his admiration for the etymological fusion: “Voilà ce que j’ai demandé à ma Parole, illuminante comme la rosée, de rendre claire à la France ce matin” (“Here is what I asked of my Speech, illuminating as the dew, to render clear to France this morning;” 1185). His poem proceeds to illustrate the linguistic change with a metaphoric re-enactment of the spider becoming one with its web:

Cet animal qui, dans le vide, comme une ancre de navire se largue d’abord,
Pour s’y—voire à l’envers—maintenir tout de suite
—Suspendu sans contexte à ses propres décisions—
Dans l’expectative à son propre endroit,
—Comme il ne dispose pourtant d’aucun employé à son bord, lorsqu’il veut remonter doit ravaler son filin :
Pianotant sans succès au-dessus de l’abîme,
C’est dès qu’il a compris devoir agir autrement. (800)

This animal that, in the void, like a ship’s anchor unfurls itself off the deck,  
In order to—or even the other way around—hold itself steady then and there  
——Suspended without context to its own decisions——  
In the uncertainty of its own area,  
——As it nonetheless makes use of no employees on its deck, when it wants to  
ascend it must re-swallow its rope:  
Like hands tapping a piano unsuccessfully over the abyss,  
It’s at that point that he has understood the need to move in another manner.

Drawing on the nautical metaphor of the anchor suggested by the Littré, Ponge imagines his  
spider hoisting itself over the deck, only to change its mind midway down, at which point it  
begins to crawl back up, legs stretching awkwardly like the fingers of an amateur piano player.  
An independent worker, the spider is both anchor, rope and crew member, and responsible for all  
that it leaves behind. Similar plays on language occur in the description of the spider’s deadly  
tightrope act, which in French is rendered its “funambule funeste” (“fatal tightrope act”) and  
repeated further down in Latin as “de funus à funis” (“from funeral to rope”). Referring to the  
spider’s “funambule funeste,” the poet remarks that the animal is unique in its ability to tie these  
two things together: “Seule d’ailleurs, il faut le dire, à nouer en une ces deux notions, / Dont la  
première sort de corde tandis que l’autre, évoquant les funérailles, signifie souillé par la mort”  
(“Alone, moreover, it must be added, in tying these two notions into one, / Of which the first  
emerges from the rope whereas the other, evoking a funeral, signifies the taint of death;” 801).  
What is remarkable to the poet is the proximity in sound between these words that have little in  
common etymologically, yet semantically can indeed (unfortunately) be linked. The definition he  
offers for “funeste” is of course from the Littré, and one only has to refer to the epigraph of the  
poem to find a Littré citation of “funambules,” which is that of a quote from Voltaire.94 The  
spider resembles a tightrope walker and the web it weaves is a deadly trap.

“La nouvelle araignée” is one of Ponge’s more Littré-centric poems, and the spider is the “étoile”  
at its centre that continually weaves new metaphors from the etymologies of words with which it  
is associated. By jumping between Littré definitions and descriptions of the spider at work,  
Ponge himself becomes the spider weaving his text. His descriptions of the spider who,  

94 The quote is from Voltaire’s “Art dramatique” in Dictionnaire philosophique. According to the Littré, the word  
“funambule” did not appear in the Académie Française’s dictionary prior to 1740.
“rayonnant, […] file et tisse, mais nullement ne brode” (“radiating, […] spins and weaves, but never embroiders or embellishes;” 800), are worded as double-entendres that could just as easily be applied to his act of writing. Mid-poem, he asks if all poetry is not merely a “syl-lab-logisme,” or a logical marriage of form and meaning. His adoption of the spider persona nearly enables him to realize this marriage since all of his descriptions refer to the spider and the web (through the modern word “araignée”), as well as to the act of writing. When the spider dies, finally, and everything goes silent (“La réponse est muette;” “The answer is silenced;” 801), the poet turns to the same evening star he had evoked at the beginning of the poem. In this way he ushers in the new day that might—he hopes—bring with it other etymological marriages like that of “l’araignée.”

The swallow (“Les hirondelles ou Dans le style des hirondelles (Randons)” O.C. I 795-799) is another animal whose image Ponge projects onto himself in order to write, since its “plumes” are by physiognomy attached to its body, already dipped into its inky-blue skin: “Plume acérée, trempée dans l’encre bleue-noire, tu t’écris vite!” (“Sharp quill, dipped in blue-black ink, you write yourself quickly!”; 795) Swallows, like the spider, write their own existence in the sky through their fluid, soaring movements. Yet Ponge wants to write them himself, to appropriate (or “swallow”) their words so that they may become his words and his poem. Watching the soaring birds with envy, the poet exclaims:

“Avec retournements en virevoltes aiguës, épingles à cheveux, glissades rapides sur l’aile, accélérations, reprises, nage de requin. Ah! je le sais par cœur, ce poème bizarre! mais ne lui laisserai pas, plus longtemps, le soin de s’exprimer. Voici les mots, il faut que je les dise. (Vite, avalant ses mots à mesure.) (795)

“With turn-arounds in high-pitched twirls, hairpins, rapid glides on the wing, accelerations, repeats, a shark’s swim. Ah! I know it by heart, this bizarre poem! but will not let it speak for itself much longer. Here are the words, I must say them. (Quickly, swallowing its words as I do so.)

Nonetheless, despite his efforts to circumnavigate the name “hirondelle” in order to come to a kind of syllablogisme, the poet recognizes the fact that his own words will necessarily impose something human, or something other onto the animal subject. These birds, after all, “font dans les cieux ce que ne sachant faire, nous ne pouvons que souhaiter; dont nous ne pouvons avoir
qu’idée” (“perform in the skies that which, not knowing how to do it, we can only dream of; of which we can only imagine;” 796-797). In another line he considers reproducing “Le texte de leur loi” (“The text of their law”) before admitting that it would be inevitably his law that he wrote down. Similarly, he warns his readers that while the swallows may appear to resemble aspects of ourselves (namely our souls and sense of desire), they are far more than that: “Mais elles ne sont pas que cela; que des idées, des gestes à nous: attention!” (“But they’re not only that; only ideas, movements towards us: careful!”; 797). Referring both to the speed of the swallows’ flight and the speed with which something can escape the mental image we have of it, Ponge cautions against turning one’s back on the (real) swallows in nature.

One way in which Ponge attempts to learn more about the nature of swallows is through the literary quotations included in the Littré. These lead him to remark, in reference to a quote from Charles Bonnet’s Contemplation de la nature (1764), that “Parmi les animaux, ce sont ceux qui se rapprochent le plus de la flamme, de la flèche” (“amongst animals, they are those who come closest to the flame, to the arrow;” 797). Ponge likens the swallows’ flight patterns to those of flaming arrows (what he calls “flammèches”) due to the manner by which they violently shoot through the air, chasing their prey (insects). He, as well, it should be noted, is madly shooting arrows in the hopes of catching his prey—the swallows—and learning their words and their movements. Yet while Bonnet’s description leads Ponge to the metaphor of “flammèches,” it also makes him question his understanding of the character of these birds. What kind of character lies beneath the swallows’ “masque vénitien” (“Venetian mask;” 797)? Another quotation in the Littré is taken from La Fontaine’s fable of Procne and Philomela, which takes place after the two sisters have been transformed into birds (a swallow and nightingale respectively). In La Fontaine’s fable, which takes place well after the events in the Greek myth, the swallow Procne flies deep into the woods to entreat her sister the nightingale to leave her wilderness refuge. In

95 Bonnet is quoted in the Littré describing a mother swallow who, returning to her nest to find the house on which it sat ablaze, flew through the flames in order to feed and look after her young (Littré 2027).

96 The designation of who turned into which bird varies according to different versions of the myth. In the fable La Fontaine penned as a kind of sequel to the myth, however, Procne (the sister who married Tereus) is rendered a swallow while Philomela (whose tongue was cut out by Tereus after he raped her), is given the nightingale’s gift of song.
“Les hirondelles,” Ponge finds himself contemplating the happiness and/or unhappiness of swallows, without knowing why:

Ce Bonheur-malheur, serait-ce à cause de leur cruauté?
La cruauté, serait-ce bonheur-malheur?

Parfois, quand elles se posent, elles halètent.
Leur désespoir les reprend.
Elles attendent dieu sait quoi, l’œil rond.

Mais allez donc, hirondelles!
Hirolondelles, à tire-d’aile,
Contre le hasard infidèle,
Contre mauvaise fortune bon cœur! (798)

Happiness-unhappiness of the swallows. I already wrote: ‘the unhappy ones’: why?
This happiness-unhappiness, could it be due to their cruelty?
Could cruelty be happiness-unhappiness?

Sometimes, when they are resting, they gasp.
Their despair seizes them again.
They await who knows what, eyes round.

But go, then, swallows!
Swallows, in a flurry of wings,
Against unfaithful fortune,
Against misfortune, go heartily!

While these lines should not be read exclusively in relation to the myth of Procne and Philomela, it is interesting that Ponge feels uncertain in justifying his choice of words (happiness-unhappiness) to describe the swallows. His uncertainty represents a struggle to understand the birds as he sees them, as they appear in language, and finally as they appear in cultural mythology: “Ce qu’on sait, et ce qu’on ne sait pas…” (“That which we know, and that which we don’t know…”; 798).

It is with a combination of mixed feelings towards these cruel but misfortunate birds, and his exasperation at being unable to swallow their words, that Ponge ends the poem with an appeal to his subjects’ strength and talent in writing themselves. He instructs the swallows to go forth from their perch and clean up the mess in the sky and on the page, likening his own words to pesky insects that can be gobbled up by the quick-soaring birds. Most notably, however, he instructs them to leave the page, to escape the confines of language and express themselves with their own
“cris aigus” (“piercing cries;” 799). In doing so, the poet relinquishes his control over his animal subjects and reveals the line where language ends and animal being begins.

“Le lézard” (O.C. I 745-748) is one of Ponge’s most explicitly self-referential attempts at weaving an animal into words and vice versa. The poem begins by stating its aim of creating an allegory for language which will then dissolve back into the mind (esprit) of the poet. The text proceeds to create the titular subject through wordplay, and the lizard appears through a crack in the wall which is described by the verb “se lézarder” (“to crack”). By using this pronominal verb and reflexive pronoun to describe the crack formation, Ponge reveals to his readers the process of giving life to ideas through language: the lizard literally appears to our eyes through the combination of letters in the chosen verb. Similar wordplay occurs further down, when the poet writes of the lizard in a wriggling state (“tortillant”) and then, several lines down, of its “zèle tortillard.” “Tortillard,” in this sense, could either be a neologism related to “tortiller,” or taken literally, a train locomotive. Ponge uses this dual signification to jump to his next metaphor of the lizard, which is of a small locomotive that wriggles around on the ground. Thus, we gain a visual image of the “Z” shaped lizard through the description of its wriggling as well as through the typographical spelling of its name. Ponge plays with the power of nomenclature when he shows how easy it is to jump from sign to sign by re-arranging the signifiers and signifieds of his language. The lizard becomes a lizard because it appears through a crack in a wall which has deteriorated or “s’est lézardé.” The lizard then becomes a small locomotive because its shape mimics the “tortillant” shape of the letter “Z” and its name possesses a “zèle tortillard.”

At the end of the poem, the poet vows to reveal his tricks and to show the reader the technique involved in creating the conditions in which a lizard (both real and written) might appear. He proceeds to recreate—in different words—the beginning of the poem and the description of the lizard’s apparition through the wall. Suddenly he stops; and he asks himself why he chooses to remain trapped within the poem—just as he was trapped within the yard with the lizard:

“Pourquoi m’en tenir au poème, piège au lecteur et à moi-même? Tiens-je tellement à laisser un poème, un piège? Et non, plutôt, à faire progresser d’un pas ou deux mon esprit?” (“Why hold onto the poem, trap for the reader and for me? Am I so insistent on leaving a poem, a trap? And not, rather, advancing my mind by a step or two?,” 747-748). The poet wishes to free himself—and the lizard—from the constraints of the written text by revealing the mind (“l’esprit”) that lies behind it. Hence he makes explicit the connection—already obvious by now—between the blank
wall scattered with cracks and the blank page upon which words emerge one on top of the other until they consist of a circular, self-devouring train of signs:

Page par un violent désir d’observation à y inscrire éclairée et chauffée à blanc. Faille par où elle communique avec l’ombre et la fraîcheur qui sont à l’intérieur de l’esprit. Qu’un mot par surcroît s’y pose, ou plusieurs mots. Sur cette page, par cette faille, ne pourra sortir qu’un…(aussitôt gobant tous précédents mots) … un petit train de pensées grises,—lequel circule ventre à terre et rentre volontiers dans les tunnels de l’esprit. (748)

A page, by a violent desire to inscribe it with an observation, illuminated and heated to white. A fault through which it communicates with the shade and the freshness inside the mind. Let one word moreover impose itself, or several words. On this page, by this fault, only one will be able to leave… (immediately gobbling up all the previous words)… a small train of grey thoughts,—which circles belly to ground and returns readily in the tunnels of the mind.

In a kind of post-structuralist vision, words are capable only of exiting single file from the poet’s mind, and each time a new word escapes it swallows the preceding word into its new system of signification. Every word must take its meaning based on the words around it and, since words file out in a continuous stream, we must consider language on a present-tense spectrum: one word eats the other and so on. The poet, whose mind is the tunnel through which enter and exit the lizard-words, can no longer differentiate himself from his thoughts, which in turn become words, which in turn become the animal-poem he is writing. They are all caught in the same trap, the trap of language.97 The only one who is free from this circular game is the real lizard who, we realize, has been elsewhere all along.

97 In an interview with Philippe Sollers, Ponge asserted that these lines of writing (that make up his poem “Le lézard”) arose “du plus obscur de l’esprit et aussi du chaos du dictionnaire” (“from the most obscure part of my mind and also from the chaos of the dictionary;” Sollers 43). The poem, then, is a way to organize and make sense of the chaos of language by revealing its limitations and then manipulating them to serve the poet’s own purposes.
Like Moore, Ponge uses an animal figure to poke fun at the limitations of language in representation. And like Moore’s jerboa, the lizard he writes lays no claims to being a “real” animal, for it exists entirely in and through language. I would argue that the poets’ emphasis on the distinction between animal representations and animals in-and-of-themselves reveals modernism’s changing attitudes towards animals. Animals continued to figure as metaphors for all aspects of human life and behaviour, yet many poets, writers and artists also began to consider more thoroughly the animal being that existed behind the metaphor. In other words, poets like Marianne Moore and Francis Ponge became interested in their animal others.

Veterinarian and anthropologist Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence has described the connection between poetry and animals as the most immediate bond between humans and animals:

Of all the forms which celebrate and illuminate the bond between animals and people, poetry possesses the most immediacy. Its expressions are composed of spontaneous outflows of affirmation for life, untempered by dependent variables. [...] In poetic terms, animals may take on human qualities and humans may take on animal qualities. But antithetically, the poetic process also makes use of and preserves the separateness that exists between people and animals. (47)

In light of the poetic interpretation of animals in the works of poets like Marianne Moore and Francis Ponge, it may be noteworthy to view modernism’s changing attitudes towards animals as pointing towards a growing awareness of the way in which the otherness of animals challenges our own sense of perspective and signals literature’s role in addressing the importance of the other, non-human ways of perceiving the world.
Bibliography


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Appendix

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4