

## **“Just Looking” at the Everyday: Marianne Moore’s Exotic Modernism**

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In a recent discussion of the everyday Rita Felski argues that modernism negates the everyday because it tries to transcend “the very dailiness it seeks to depict.”<sup>1</sup> My own analysis of a poem by the high modernist poet Marianne Moore adapts and revises Felski’s thesis suggesting that in the very process of constructing an aesthetics of transcendence modernism begins with and returns to the everyday. This attempt to transcend modernity’s rationalising processes often takes the form of an exoticism that appears, at first glance, to offer itself in opposition to the everyday. The exotic ‘other,’ however, is embedded in the everyday experience of modernity rather as Moore’s montage method illustrates. What might usefully be described as a dialectical relation between the exotic and the everyday is evident in Moore’s ekphrastic poem, “Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain” (1934). Etymologically, ekphrasis means ‘speaking out.’ The silent image is made to speak out, to articulate verbally what it portrays graphically. It is the silent experience of the everyday that Moore’s poem expresses though it does so via a typically high modernist investment in an exotic and untouchable ‘other.’ More specifically, it is the silent experience of ‘just looking’ at the object as commodity that is inscribed in Moore’s poem about ancient Chinese art forms.

Marianne Moore was a connoisseur of the everyday, an expert on the cultural clutter of the quotidian. While she accumulated a vast knowledge concerning birds, reptiles, plants and flowers as well as antiques, rare art objects and ancient artefacts, she was also immersed in the ephemera of modern life as it was reproduced in newspapers, magazines and journals. Moore’s poetry is not concerned with what one might describe as ‘the real thing’ but rather reproductions, things as they have been mechanically mass produced.

Particularly in the poem Moore wrote about Chinese art, “Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain” (1934) the exoticism of pre-modern culture is constructed out of the ‘fragments of modernity,’ the seemingly inconsequential waste accumulating in the wake of modernity’s expansion. Moore was a poet who intuitively understood the value and meaning of everyday objects as fractured images of her own contradictory historical moment. She understood that in the very act of reaching for what is extraordinary and strange the poet reaffirms and reinforces something all too familiar and mundane. Thus it should be no surprise that Moore’s ekphrastic tribute to the precision of Chinese art is not only constructed out of quoted fragments from newspapers and collector’s manuals but is based on a Chinese plate her mother saw in the display window for a Pierce Arrow Motor Car. The conjunction of the ancient hand-crafted artefact and the mass produced motor car suggests the ways in which Moore’s poetry deconstructs the high modernist binary dividing art from the everyday.

That divide is all too apparent in theories of modernity that reproduce a gendered binary and marginalize the experience of the everyday. Rita Felski’s *The Gender of Modernity* is attentive to the ways in which “theories of both the modern and the postmodern have been organized around a masculine norm and pay insufficient attention to the specificity of women’s lives and experiences.”<sup>2</sup> In her article, “The Invention of the Everyday,” Felski suggests that one way to reinsert that specificity into an understanding of the modern is to attend to the everyday *as* everyday. In other words, she rejects the construction of both women and the everyday in terms of “negation” but she also has little time for the glorification or fetishization of the everyday that transforms it into something other than itself (“Invention”: 18).

Felski’s call for a theory of the everyday that resists abstracting the daily routines and rituals of modern life seems a worthy one though not, at first glance, relevant to the study of high modernist poetry. Such poetry, after all, defines itself in opposition to what is familiar by identifying its own

aesthetic practice in terms of the strange and the extraordinary. Themes of alienation and exile dominate the modernist landscape while the everyday is associated with a stable and predictable domesticity. For example, in an attempt to define 'literariness' the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky coined the term "defamiliarisation" or *ostranenie* as the effected produced by literary language to "make strange" the communicative function of everyday language. Ezra Pound urged his contemporaries to "make it new" while William Carlos Williams in *Kora in Hell* stated that "nothing is good save the new."<sup>3</sup> The fetishization of the new was also an attack on the routine familiarity of everyday life that operated to reinforce the materialism of modern culture. In order to resist this materialism modernist poets sought to develop shock tactics to disrupt habitual ways of seeing a shared reality.

My own reading of Moore's poetry raises questions about the presumed opposition between modernism and its everyday 'other.' It does so by analysing Moore's method of composition, her reliance on the quoted fragment and her interest in and engagement with a range of non-canonical, textual material. My argument draws extensively on Walter Benjamin's historical materialism, particularly the concept of montage, a formal method capable of giving voice to the experience of everyday life. Underpinning my discussion of Moore's poem is the recognition that the experience of the everyday is not simply available for recovery or representation because it is not fully recognised or wholly assimilated into consciousness. As Ben Highmore helpfully points out in his discussion of Benjamin: "In putting forward 'an absent minded' critical examination, which might be able to articulate aspects of modern everyday life, Benjamin is positing the everyday as something that can't be approached as a fully conscious experience."<sup>4</sup> In order to break through the illusory dream world of experience that appears to be 'reality,' formal methods need to be deployed to disrupt the narratives reinforcing that 'reality.' Moore's extensive use of quotation from a range of sources produces a montage effect that is similar to that used by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*. While Moore's method is not identical to Benjamin's the similarities are worth noting and the consequences of such a strategy are worth analysing. Moore's use of quotation invites the reader to recognise the poem as a site of textual collision rather than aesthetic fusion. As such the construction of the exotic art object and of 'China' as a site of cultural otherness in opposition to the experience of the everyday is always already compromised by the use of extra-textual sources.

## **I Montage and the Everyday**

The relation between the life of everyday objects and modernity has been conceptualised in the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's textual montage of extracts collected in *The Arcades Project* can be understood as a vast monument to the discarded waste of modernity, the antiquated and outdated objects left in the wake of modernity's expansion. Benjamin's aim, he explains is "to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components."<sup>5</sup> The "trash" of history, as Susan Buck-Morss points out is, for Benjamin, evidence of its "unprecedented material destruction."<sup>6</sup> The discarded object contains within it what he refers to as the "secret history" of the commodity; it bears the traces of an unconscious experience that has taken place in the past. The experience of modernity itself is at least partly unconscious, argues Benjamin, because of its traumatic nature; traumatic because of the material destructiveness left in the wake of modernity's progress. The shock of the modern inevitably results in a form of repression that returns to haunt the material world. Rather like the trace of a memory, modernity leaves its "afterimage" behind in the object.<sup>7</sup>

By recovering things just as they are about to disintegrate and wrenching them from their historical moment, Benjamin composes a fractured, hidden history out of the remnants of the past. By collecting things from another epoch and displaying them in a new context, the past becomes understood in the present. As Benjamin explains: "The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space)" (*Arcades*, 206). The conception of the dialectical

image that is capable of looking backwards and forwards simultaneously is embodied in the fragment that bears the traces of the collective’s everyday life.

Moore’s method of composition might be compared to the process of collecting objects and arranging and categorising them. In “Eduard Fusch, Collector and Historian” Benjamin describes how the object might be “illuminated by the shafts of dialectical insight” if taken away from its “reified historical continuity.”<sup>8</sup> For Benjamin, Fuchs developed a method of collecting that could serve as a model for the historical materialist. When the historian examines the culture of the past through its discarded fragments, he is like the collector who arranges objects into categories. It is the process of detaching the object from its “original functions” that allows it to develop a network of relations to “things of the same kind.” Objects contain within them “an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch.” They are storehouses for “everything remembered, everything thought, everything conscious” (*Arcades*, 205). As such, the object assembled becomes the means by which to disrupt the progressive myth of history.

This explains why the montage technique underpins the method of Benjamin’s historical materialism. In *The Arcades Project*, he develops the “art of citing without quotation marks” allowing the extracted, excised material to build up into a knowledge of the incipient stages of modernity. The collected object, once transferred from its original context, becomes a dialectical image capable of producing a shock that awakens the “dreaming collective” from its everyday stupor. Thus rather than conceiving of the object as embedded within its historical moment, Benjamin suggests that the historical moment is contained or embedded within the object. The montage method disrupts the “premise of a continuous and homogenous temporality” by constructing a history that is composed of discreet “things,” collectibles that intersect and collide rather than cohere and unify. This is an historical method that resists the overarching and incremental narratives of “monumental history” for these narratives serve the interests of those with power. In order to recover a history that serves the interests of the disempowered, Benjamin excavates the everyday object from its origins in order to shatter the traditions that relegate the everyday to the margins of history.

Benjamin’s collector as historical materialist is interested not in the strange or exotic objects of past cultures but the ordinary, everyday objects. As Scott McCracken explains: “Traces of the forgotten or only dimly remembered dream are to be found in the most transitory elements of modernity. In fact, the more transitory, the more likely they are to evoke that which has been lost to consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> It is not the timeless, transcendent art object that the collector is attracted to but the shifting, ephemera of daily life. In this respect, Marianne Moore has much in common with the collector for she too is attracted to what she describes as “miscellany – to music programs, composite picture exhibitions, newspapers, magazines, and anthologies.”<sup>10</sup> Moore’s investment in the assortment signals her willingness to dispense with “continuity and completeness” (182). She wrenches the pithy phrase from its origins as the collector detaches the object from its time and place. Her method of collecting operates to disrupt the conceptual frames of modernity that assign value to things. It does so by shattering the literary tradition that canonises some texts at the expense of others. The varied and eclectic range of material she uses in her poetry signals an unwillingness to privilege certain kinds of writing over others. Her preference for the collection, the miscellany and the museum expresses a desire to get beyond the “fiddle” of poetry. “I too dislike it” she wrote in “Poetry” and the reason she disliked it was because it so often seemed to her to betray the things it claimed to value. It sought to transform the quotidian into something else, something ‘poetic.’ Central to the discussion embedded in this poem and implicit in all Moore’s montage poems is the question of what qualifies as ‘poetry.’ For Moore, poetry is a capacious category that includes the language of the “baseball fan” and the “statistician” as well as “business documents and/school books.”<sup>11</sup> Moore’s poetry includes the everyday *as* everyday resisting what Felski calls the “lure of the exotic,” the temptation to transform the everyday into something other than itself. More specifically, Moore’s montage technique locates the exotic in that very mundane and ordinary of objects: the commodity.

## II Modernity's Exotic 'Other'

In "Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain" the dialectic of the exotic and the everyday is embedded in the Chinese porcelain plate or, more specifically, the image depicted by the Chinese artist on the plate. Moore gathered many of her sources on China from the *Illustrated London News*, one of her favourite publications of the nineteen thirties. She repeatedly returned to the *Illustrated London News* for information on the creatures that inhabit her poetry. She found W.P. Pycraft's regular feature, "The World of Science" particularly useful basing some of "The Plumet Basilisk" (1932) upon Pycraft's article on "The Frilled Lizard" published in February 1932.<sup>12</sup> Here Pycraft marvels at the remarkable "basilisks" of Central and South America, creatures capable of scuttling along the surface of water. Likewise, much of Moore's information on China was gleaned from Frank Davis's regular column in the *Illustrated London News*, "A Page for Collectors." For instance, in "Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain" (1934) Moore refers to Davis's article "The Unnatural History of China: The Lions of Buddha" for information on the Chinese unicorn or kyllin.<sup>13</sup> It seems useful, therefore, to consider the ways in which the *Illustrated London News* represented China in terms of an exotic pre-modern otherness.

Even a cursory glance at the *Illustrated London News* between 1930 and 1934 shows an avid interest in modern China and ancient Chinese culture and art. It is no surprise then that Moore, a keen reader of that newspaper, found herself drawn to the subject in and around 1934. Frank Davis frequently devoted "A Page for Collectors" to exploring and explaining aspects of ancient Chinese culture. For instance, in "Chinese Enamels" Davis examines this ancient art arguing that China was not as culturally isolated as the West had previously supposed: "The mysterious and forbidden country that thrilled imaginations of the West for so many centuries was not utterly cut off from intercourse with the great world as is popularly supposed."<sup>14</sup> Moore would have been particularly fascinated by Davis's articles on "Two Aspects of Chinese Genius" which is a review of *A History of Chinese Art* by Osvald Siren. Here Davis notes that "this Chinese had a remarkable feeling for animals of all sorts."<sup>15</sup> As we know from her footnotes to "The Plumet Basilisk," Moore used Davis's article on "The Chinese Dragon" for details concerning this mythical creature of ancient Chinese legends.<sup>16</sup> It is clear from Davis's descriptions of Chinese art, particularly of sculpture and porcelain, that he prefers the Chinese style to that of most others. For instance, he appears quite impatient with modern sculptors who imitate "decadent Greek or Assyrian or Negroid" sculpture rather than the "no less foreign but incomparably finer Chinese" examples.<sup>17</sup> While "A Page for Collectors" was also devoted to an assortment of objects such as chimney pieces, old pistols, sword hilts, chairs, early chests, court cupboards and "the tallboy," Chinese cultural artefacts were returned to with great regularity and clearly occupied a privileged place in Davis's hierarchy of collectibles.

Davis's articles appeared towards the back pages of the *Illustrated London News* while current affairs dominated the front pages. For instance, in 1930 photographs depicting the civil war in China take precedence over European events.<sup>18</sup> Images depicting boats full of refugees on their way to Nanking, a wounded soldier on a stretcher, troops in an open railway truck all reveal the extent to which China is being torn apart by military conflict. In contrast to the images of a war torn nation are the staged photographs of China's youngest governor, Field Marshal Chang Hsueh Liang. Pictures of Liang playing golf and in his new de Havilland 'moth' signal his 'Western' credentials as a sportsman, as a military leader and as a supporter of new technologies. The accompanying article on the modernization of China emphasises the conflict between the ancient and the modern:

China is a complex. It is the oldest and the newest country in the world. It boasts of the most ancient civilization and yet it is in its infancy so far as modern progress is concerned. At the moment, as for the past twenty years, China is in the throes of a revolutionary war. Like a vast giant waking from an age-long sleep and suffering terrible pains when stretching time-stiffened limbs, China is suffering in her efforts to adapt herself to present day methods.<sup>19</sup>

The Japanese invasion of Manchuria makes the front cover of the *Illustrated London News* on 10 October 1931 and is followed by a series of articles comparing Japan and China. For instance, “The Mentalities of the Japanese and the Chinese: The Responsible and The Irresponsible” are described in an article from 21 November 1931 and this is followed by “Some Reflections on China and Japan” in December. The Japanese are characterised as being more ‘responsible’ and ‘nationalistic’ than their Chinese counterparts whose loyalty is to family first rather than to the state. The lack of discipline amongst the Chinese contrasts to the superior organization of the Japanese. In other words, Japan has embraced the rationalizing forces of modernity while China’s response to ‘progress’ is ambivalent and divided. Thus Japanese military superiority is linked to its ability to modernize and, implicitly, to dispense with the archaic and inefficient aspects of its pre-modern identity. Previous articles on Japan emphasized the speed with which that country had successfully modernized.<sup>20</sup>

That ‘China’ becomes a commodity to be consumed by Western art connoisseurs, collectors and aficionados is reinforced in the back pages of the *Illustrated London News*. To be found among the ads for cigarettes, motor-cars and foreign travel are frequent advertisements for “The Finest Chinese Porcelain” accompanied by photographs and descriptions. These photographs, with detailed captions identifying the period the piece belongs to and its characteristic features, are indistinguishable from the photographs in the Frank Davis articles on Chinese culture. It is as if the Davis articles function as advertisements for the discerning consumer keen to acquire an expertise on the subject of ‘China’ before investing in rare and expensive porcelain. The similarity between the photographs of objects to be auctioned off and the images accompanying Davis’s articles collapses the distinction between the rare and the mass produced, the exotic and the everyday. The authenticity of China’s otherness is subsumed into Western modernity as the techniques of mechanical reproduction produce endless imitations of the ‘real thing.’

In *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration*, David Sparr explains the complex response to exoticism in the twentieth century in the following way:

With this rationalization of experience one might expect a radical demythologizing of the noble savage and the reduction of idealized exoticism into a more banal and predictable cultural eccentricity [...] At the same time, however, this rationalization of the Third World – the transformation of the cultural Other into simply one more component of the global system – produces a curious countereffect which ends by reinforcing the exotic and idealized qualities of the Other, as if the Western imagination harboured a secret resistance against its own movement toward a completely rational and instrumental view of the world.<sup>21</sup>

Rita Felski also explains the ways in which the “exotic sublime” came to symbolise a resistance to the rationality of modernity: “Imagined as an atemporal space of eternal truth, the Orient provided a source of authentic spirituality against which the progress-oriented and materialist impulses of the West could be judged and found wanting” (“Invention”: 136). Both Felski and Sparr identify the exotic not in opposition to the everyday but to the rigid structures of a rationalizing and homogenizing modernity. The exotic becomes an imaginative site outside or beyond modernity that offers some kind of resistance to the oppression of the modern. Yet just as the exotic is a Western fantasy of otherness so too is a modernity that operates with such monolithic efficiency. In between the exotic and the rationalizing systems of modernity is the experience of the everyday. This experience is, as Benjamin suggests, only partly revealed to consciousness. The fissures or cracks in the experience of the everyday are exposed in the object as dialectical image. In other words, while the fantasy of an exotic ‘other’ might well serve as an antidote to the rapid transformations brought about by modernity, it is an analysis of the everyday that, for Benjamin, leads to the “shock of recognition” and the possibility of social change.

While Moore was no political radical (indeed she was an ardent supporter of Herbert Hoover in the nineteen thirties and thought F.D.R. a scoundrel), Moore’s poetry, excavated as it is out of the textual

landscape of her daily reading, is inscribed by the dialectic of the exotic and the everyday. Particularly in her poem about China she deploys imagery and tropes in circulation in the newspapers and literature she was reading on the subject of China and Chinese art and culture. As such her method of composition reveals the derivative and inauthentic nature of the 'China' Moore celebrates. This is no mere nostalgic lament for the lost auratic art of pre-modern cultures though, for Moore makes poetry, as we have seen, out of the recycled object. She finds in the experience of the everyday an historical resonance that makes it powerfully suggestive. Examining "Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain" firstly as a tribute to the art of the Chinese, then in terms of its sources, it becomes possible to trace the exotic back to its everyday origins.

### III "The Spirit of the Wilderness"

First published in *Poetry* in 1934, "Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain" was originally eight stanzas and included references to the European tradition of china making. Moore, a compulsive reviser of her own work, edited the poem down to four stanzas for *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* omitting the stanzas that dealt with French and British porcelain. My own discussion of the poem uses the first published version thereby recovering this excised half of the poem. In fact, it is those omitted stanzas that are in many ways most suggestive and historically resonant.

The poem begins by drawing attention to the graphic nature of the object it observes. Emphasis is placed on spatial imagery, on the arrangement of nectarines on the twigs and branches of the nectarine tree:

Arranged by twos as peaches are,  
at intervals that all may live –  
eight and a single one, on twigs that  
grew the year before – they look like  
a derivative;<sup>22</sup>

Moore's poem reinforces 'China' as a site of exotic difference by repeatedly pointing to its own difficulties in translating this ancient art into its own Western terms. It enacts this difficulty through ekphrasis, the poetic representation of the graphic image. The attempt to translate pictures into words is compared to the attempts of the Western speaker to understand the inscrutable culture of the Orient. Thus the poem works at closing down the figurative gap between poetry and painting in its emphasis on space, line, colour and contour. Moore pushes signs into condensed and compact clauses in imitation of the replete picture. Shapes become semantically loaded as in the "slender crescent leaves" and the "four/pairs half-moon leaf mosaic." Subjects, verbs and conjunctives are excluded from a language intent on reproducing itself as a materially dense and complex moment rather than a sequential narrative. Yet the poem falters frequently in its attempt to imitate its graphic counterpart. In spite of itself, it offers information that refers to narrative sequence and chronology noting that the nectarines grow "on twigs that/grew the year before." The non-sequential aspect of the picture is momentarily abandoned as the poem acknowledges the passage of time, a concept the graphic image has difficulty in conveying. Again, when attempting to identify the exact colour of the leaves, there is some indecision: "green or blue – or both," the speaker cannot seem to decide. The "puce-American-Beauty pink/ applied to bees wax gray" piles noun upon noun in an attempt to capture the subtlety and complexity of colour as it appears on the Chinese plate.

Like "prudent" de Candolle who reserves judgement when it comes to establishing whether or not the nectarine is "wild," Moore's speaker does not claim a full knowledge or understanding of 'China.' This hesitancy is best exemplified when the poem depicts the kylin, a Chinese unicorn. Unlike the jerboa or the basilisk (other "animiles" of interest to Moore), the product of the Chinese imagination proves difficult to represent. Unable to identify the creature, the speaker makes several stabs at

categorising it: “an unantlered moose, or Iceland horse/ or ass.” The kylin is a creature peculiar to Chinese myth making and is resistant to Western scrutiny. It is only the Chinese artist who is able to “understand the spirit of the wilderness” through his depiction of the mystical creature. He does so using an “unenquiring brush” capable of conveying with delicacy the “slender crescent leaves” of the nectarine tree and the “gray discs” of the kylin’s eyes. The art of the Chinese becomes not a form of enquiry or ‘observation’ but a distillation of something ancient, mystical and ultimately untranslatable. The accuracy of the Chinese artist’s representational scene is linked rhetorically to the peach, the fruit that, according to Chinese lore, “cannot aid the dead,/ but eaten in time prevents death.” Across time, transcending the geographical boundaries of space, the art object resonates with an aura that transmits the essence of ancient Chinese culture:

Imperial  
Happiness lives here  
On the peaches of long life  
That make it permanent.

As noted previously, in this first published version of the poem Moore takes a digression in the sixth and seventh stanzas to examine the china of France and Britain. Using *China – The Collectors Pocket Companion*, by Mrs Bury Pallister, Moore extracts details concerning the traditional scenes found on French and British china. From this source she takes the “officer/ in jack boots seated in a bosquet” as well as fragments on Chinese culture such as the “Precious Things” which turn out to be paper, brush and pumice stone.<sup>23</sup> These European examples of porcelain depict scenes of apparent serenity and order. These are familiar images of pastoral life which contrast with the strange and exotic spectacle previously described on the Chinese plate. The opposition between the ‘domestic’ and the foreign reinforces the cultural difference between the West and the inscrutable Orient. The “gold-glossed/serpent handles,” the “mammal freaks” of the Chinese imagination are contrasted with the more sedate and familiar arabesque ornamentation on Sevres china, the Dresden cross swords or the familiar emblems of the rose in Spode china.

After this brief acknowledgement of the European tradition of porcelain, the poem returns to the untamed and free spirited scene depicted on the Chinese plate. It concludes rather enigmatically with the “nectarine-loving kylin,” a shape shifting creature that, unlike the domesticated animals represented in the European examples, is uncategorizable. It is a unicorn but “of pony appearance;” it has “no horn” and yet does have “antelope feet.” Sometimes it has a long tail and at other times it is “tailless.” Yet here, “enamelled on porcelain” is the “small cinnamon-brown common/camel haired unicorn” the Chinese refer to as the kylin. In the final couplet of the poem the speaker acknowledges the limitations of her own imagination and, implicitly, of the Western imagination:

It was a Chinese who  
Imagined this masterpiece.

Moore first identified the kylin in the pages of the *Illustrated London News* in March 1931. In an article written by Frank Davis, the kylin is described in some detail: “It has the body of a stag, with a single horn, the tail of a cow, horse’s hoofs, a yellow belly, and hair of 5 colours and is moreover a paragon of virtue.” Davis continues his research on the kylin the following month in an article entitled, “More about the Unicorn:”

Just as the European legend makes him the emblem of chastity, so in the far East he is a paragon of virtue, appearing only under wise rulers as a lucky omen. This enthusiasm for Chinese art is evident in the following passage: ‘Time and again one is astonished not only by their skill in sculpture (the Chinese) but by their uncanny interpretation of the spirit of the wilderness.’

From Davis's article Moore extracts the pithy essence of 'China' as "the spirit of the wilderness;" but it was not only Davis that she appropriated. As noted above, she also used Pallister's *China – The Collectors Pocket Companion* for the information on English and French porcelain; and Moore gleaned her information about the peach and the nectarine from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as well as Alphonse Louise Pierre Pyramms de Candolle's *Origin of Cultivated Plants*. The textually derivative nature of Moore's tribute to china making, taken as it is from text books, collectors' manuals and the *Illustrated London News*, suggests that the authenticity of 'China' as reproduced via Western journalism and scholarship, has been compromised. In other words, "the spirit of the wilderness" is somehow a product of the Western imagination as it seeks to define itself in opposition to the East.

The Chinese porcelain plate, in Moore's poem, like Keats' Grecian urn, is made to speak out, to articulate verbally what it portrays graphically. Yet in the act of attempting to render into words the visual image, the process of translation is foregrounded. In other words, as Heffernan suggests, the ekphrastic poem ultimately represents representation itself. Moore's poem is extremely self-conscious about its inability to translate accurately the 'masterpiece' it observes. It demonstrates its own limitations, suggesting the inadequacy of language to fully respond to the density of the visual image. Repeatedly, we are reminded that what we are reading is a mere 'derivative,' that fails to reproduce in language what is "emblematic." The poem refers to the processes of image making that are "enamelled," "depicted" and "drawn." This inability to fully translate or reproduce the art object observed might be not only an insistence on the distinction between poetry and painting but also on the cultural difference of 'China' as a site of otherness not fully knowable to the Western subject.

To further complicate this reading, however, it is useful to turn to J.W.T. Mitchell's *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* for an account of the assumed differences between image and text. According to Mitchell such differences are: "riddled with antithetical values [a] culture wants to embrace or repudiate: the paragone or debate of poetry and painting is never just a contest between two kinds of signs, but a struggle between body and soul, world and mind, nature and culture."<sup>24</sup> Thus the difference between image and text, the impossibility of full translation and transmission from one media to the other serves as a corollary to China's mysterious impenetrability. Mitchell's alertness to the ideological significance of the image/text binary is a helpful reminder concerning the ideological significance of the East/West opposition. For while Moore's respect for Eastern difference might appear to be an enlightened attempt to refuse the Orientalist impulse to accumulate knowledge of the 'other' thereby reinforcing Western hegemonic power, the fact that her poetic observations of 'China' reproduce it as a site of exotic and unfathomable otherness suggests its general complicity with European exoticism described by Felski and Sparr above.

The discursive production of 'China' in the *Illustrated London News* operates, as we have seen, not only to reinforce the West as a superior site of knowledge and power but also to express a desire for something outside or beyond modernity's influence. Moore's poem is inscribed by that desire, producing an idealized image of Chinese art that is unfathomable and therefore beyond the reach of modernity's rationalizing processes. The poem looks with longing and nostalgia at the Chinese plate, an emblem of all that is lost through technological and economic 'progress.' In this sense, 'China' represents a Western and distinctly modernist fantasy of ideological immunity, signalling both the desire for and the impossibility of art forms 'untouched' by modernity. Inevitably, the attempt to resist co-opting 'China,' to maintain its otherness, its distinctiveness from the Western imagination only serves to reveal the extent to which it is not "a Chinese who/ imagined this masterpiece." In other words, this ekphrastic poem, so intent upon making the image speak for itself as a representative of authentic 'otherness' ultimately reveals the extent to which the image speaks on behalf of a familiar sameness.

The first version of the poem, however, transmits more than an anxiety about art in the modernised West. In the two stanzas dealing with English and French porcelain it hints at the relation between corrupt or decadent art forms and military aggression. It is in the depiction of the apparently tranquil English countryside scene that this aggression is subtly alluded to. The stanza dealing with the English tradition of china making is arranged around the figure of the soldier in 'jack boots.' By 1934 of

course, the jack boot was synonymous with the rise of Hitler and the Nazis. Moore and her mother were acutely aware of the situation in Germany as the following extract from a letter by Moore’s mother attests:

Yesterday the cards came, those from Frankfurt; Sir George of Cornwall, Hans Holbein [...] That Germany produced them tells us anew that Hitler is no German. How terrible that he should be dominating with an evil sleep the worthy, and making them trample with him, the helpless.<sup>25</sup>

In the context of the rise of German nationalism, the jackbooted soldier is a reminder of Britain’s own violent history as an imperial power. The peacefulness of the pastoral scene cannot fully conceal evidence of coercion and oppression. With the escalating arms race and the political and social conflicts in Europe, it is not surprising that Moore looks for alternatives to a self-destructive and barbaric European culture.

#### IV The Everydayness of the Exotic

If the exotic is no more or less than the projection of a distinctly Western fantasy then Moore’s poem merely confirms Felski’s suspicion that modernism seeks to transcend the everyday experience of modernity rather than to describe or reflect it. But this particular poem by Moore is interesting because its compositional history can be traced back beyond the quoted fragments and daily reading to what might be described in terms of a non-epiphanic moment. Moore’s poetry notebook reveals that the Chinese plate was first seen in a window display for the Pierce Arrow motor car. A detailed description of the plate exists in one of Moore’s notebooks providing an extraordinary insight into the origins of Moore’s exotic modernism:

Plate in Pierce Arrow Motor car window  
56<sup>th</sup> Street and Park Ave.  
(a Chinese plate on a teak stand)

I didn’t know automobile people did as well as that – about 1 foot and ½ in diameter – in a semi circular teak stand on a rectangular base – a vine or creeper in low relief carving, with a space of plain teak above the base, relieved by a pale green jade – the plate dull light greenish-gray ground – depicting a large tree branch in 4 or five directions, with uniformly occurring fruit – nectarines of duck egg greens with a mulberry tinted blush on the upper-left part – speckled like a bird egg – leaves long and pointed like Chinese water plant leaves only narrower – 2 yellow-green opposite two blue-green composing the cluster and below at the foot of the tree with its back to the trunk and its head reversed so it turned also toward the trunk a red-brown adult spotted animal – like a rocky mountain big horn without horns.<sup>26</sup>

Thus the poem emanates from that most modern and everyday of experiences, that of window shopping or what Rachel Bowlby describes as “just looking.” As cultural historian William Leach points out, by the twentieth century the department store had replaced the market in American cities resulting in an entirely different shopping experience. Instead of mingling amongst the goods for sale, customers were only allowed to look at them in window displays and glass cases. This dramatically changed the way in which the consumer encountered the commodity. She was no longer permitted to handle or smell the goods but was instead provided with a visual spectacle to entice her to consume. The emphasis upon the visual rather than the verbal in Moore’s poem reflects this shift away from contact with the commodity. It locates the reader on the outside, looking in through the shop window and gazing longingly at an object that will always be out of reach. As Mark Seltzer points out, “the advertising spectacle does not simply represent (or misrepresent) the object; it does not simply

supplement what Seltzer calls the ‘real thing.’ Rather it affirms the representation as the ‘thing desired.’”<sup>27</sup>

Moore’s poem engages with the commodity phantasmagoria encountered in the everyday experience of modernity. That phantasmagoria offers the spectacle of a “ghostly parade” of commodities, an illusory realm of ‘things’ just out of reach. What is untouchable, then, is not the aura surrounding the exotic art object but rather the commodity itself, the object recycled for consumption in ever new and inventive ways. For Benjamin, the “commodity as whore” appropriates a “shabby disguise” to conceal its true identity. In these terms exoticism masks or cloaks the art object as commodity, concealing its true identity. Displayed along with the automobile in a shop window, the Chinese plate is made to ekphrastically “speak out,” to betray the “secret history” of the aesthetic itself as recycled commodity.

Moore’s poem represses its history in the experience of the everyday by making no reference to its origins in the display strategies adopted by Pierce Arrow. Yet the experience of “just looking” and the desire for some ‘thing’ just out of reach underpins this and many other poems by Moore. The montage technique disrupts the notion of an exoticism untainted by modernity producing instead a dialectical image of the exotic and the everyday. As the fragments from the *Illustrated London News* suggest, the discursive production of the exotic is itself an image of ‘otherness’ bound up with sameness. It reflects modernity’s own anxieties about what is lost or discarded in the progressive march forwards. In these terms, the aesthetic itself is not fully knowable or ‘translatable,’ its power is enigmatic, difficult to quantify or explain. Art functions in alliance with “the spirit of the wilderness,” outside or beyond the rational borders circumscribed by modernity. Yet even as the difference or exoticism of the art object is proclaimed, Moore’s method of composition dissolves the distinctions between the exotic and the everyday, between art and the commodity. Moore’s ekphrastic poem does not offer a moment of contemplation or an epiphany that detaches the modern subject from everyday experience but rather, through its immersion in and deployment of modernity’s textual debris, it obliges the modern subject to look again at the objects of the everyday in all their complexity.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Rita Felski, “The Invention of Everyday Life,” *new formations* 39 (Winter 1999-2000): 26.

<sup>2</sup> Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, Olga Taxidou eds, *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 349.

<sup>4</sup> Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London: New York, Routledge), 70.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin Mclaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 461.

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- <sup>6</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, London, Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1989), 93.
- <sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Random House, 1999), 154-156.
- <sup>8</sup> Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London, New York: Verso), 352-353.
- <sup>9</sup> Scott McCracken, “The Completion of Old Work: Walter Benjamin and the Everyday,” *Cultural Critique* 52 (Fall 2002): 158.
- <sup>10</sup> Patricia Willis, ed. *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 182.
- <sup>11</sup> Bonnie Honigsblum, “Marianne Moore’s Revisions of ‘Poetry’,” in Patricia Willis ed. *Marianne Moore: Woman and Poet* (Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1990), 185-222.
- <sup>12</sup> *Illustrated London News*, vol.180: 210.
- <sup>13</sup> *Illustrated London News*, vol.178: 384
- <sup>14</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 20 December 1930: 1138.
- <sup>15</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 8 November 1930: 832
- <sup>16</sup> Frank Davis, “A Page for Collectors: The Chinese Dragon,” *Illustrated London News*, 23 August 1930: 346.
- <sup>17</sup> Davis, “A Page for Collectors: Through India to China and Japan. An Exhibition of Oriental Art,” *Illustrated London News*, 13 June 1931: 1020.
- <sup>18</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 2 August 1930: 238-9.
- <sup>19</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 26 July, 1930: 154.
- <sup>20</sup> “Where East is Fast Becoming West- Being an Appreciation of ‘The Changing Fabric of Japan,’” Captain M.D. Kennedy, *The Illustrated London News*, 13 December 1930: 1158.
- <sup>21</sup> David Sparr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1993), 129.
- <sup>22</sup> Marianne Moore, “Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain,” *Poetry* 45 (November 1934).
- <sup>23</sup> Poetry notebook, RML (I:03:15)
- <sup>24</sup> J. W. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 49.
- <sup>25</sup> Mary Warner Moore to Monroe Wheeler, 10 June 1933, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, fol.10.

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<sup>26</sup> These notes are from Mary Warner Moore's notebook – RML (VII:04:02).

<sup>27</sup> Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 169.