

THE EKPHRASTIC *PARAGONE* IN LOUISE BOGAN AND MARIANNE MOORE

by

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(Under the Direction of Susan Rosenbaum)

ABSTRACT

Ekphrasis as a literary mode tends to foreground the charged relationship between word and image, verbal and visual. This antagonistic relationship has often been figured in gendered terms, by critics like W. J. T. Mitchell and James Heffernan, as a contest between the masculine word and the feminized image. This thesis focuses on the ekphrastic poetry of two women poets, Louise Bogan and Marianne Moore, and examines how they engage with and respond to the gendered ekphrastic *paragone*, or contest. I argue that Bogan identifies with the feminized image and discovers in the art work a mirror for the female self. Moore, on the other hand, identifies with the artist rather than the art object, and consciously resists taking sides within the paragonal frame.

INDEX WORDS: Louise Bogan, Marianne Moore, Ekphrasis, Visual Art

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1. Introduction: Women Poets and Ekphrastic Self-Reflexivity

To the lay person, the idea of ekphrasis may seem quite straightforward—a literary mode that renders works of visual art into words. A useful definition of ekphrasis proffered by Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern, and Willard Spiegelman is “the act of speaking to, about, or for a work of visual or plastic art” (15), and another more elegant definition is James Heffernan’s “the verbal representation of a visual representation” (3). But a little reflection gets us entangled in myriad possibilities. A “verbal representation of a visual representation” suggests a transparent one-to-one mapping from the visual domain to the verbal. However, there are many more possibilities for what an ekphrastic poem can do, as the earlier quote suggests: it might describe, narrate, apostrophize, envoice, interpret, and so on, so that ekphrasis is not merely a transparent rendering into words. Even if we allow only the simplest possibility, that of pure description, a seemingly objective recording of details is still an interpretation, as Stephen Cheeke points out in *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (34), for the writer has selected, arranged, and presented those details in some particular way. Similarly, the artist himself has also selected, arranged and presented the details that have gone into the work of art, so that neither the artwork nor the ekphrasis is “innocent or disinterested” (Cheeke 35). Some external object or scene (assuming that it’s representational art¹) has been rendered into the artist’s

¹ For the much rarer variety of ekphrasis based on nonrepresentational works of art, see “‘A Space for Boundless Reverie’: Varieties of Ekphrastic Experience” in Willard Spiegelman’s *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

medium, and finally into language. At each juncture, it is transposed into a new medium and a new sign system, filtered through and transformed by the artist's/poet's consciousness. If a poem is a 'made thing' (Greek *poiema*, from *poiein*, 'to make'), we might think of an ekphrastic poem as a 're-made thing.'

In other words, far from being disinterestedly mimetic, ekphrasis foregrounds the relationship between word and image, and raises larger questions about perception, cognition, representation, and epistemology. It reflects on the epistemological encounter between the perceiving self/subject/consciousness and an art object external to it that it tries to assimilate. As such, it is an allegory for the relationship between the self and the other that is beyond itself, and perhaps beyond its grasp. In "Ekphrasis and the Other," W. J. T. Mitchell theorizes on ekphrasis as a mode in which "texts encounter their own semiotic 'others,' those rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or 'spatial' arts" (156). He expounds upon the power dynamics of the relationship between the perceiving self and the ekphrastic other in which "the 'self' is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the 'other' is projected as a passive, seen, and (usually) silent object," one that needs to be spoken for, like a racial or colonized other (157). James Heffernan, in *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, develops a 'paragonal'² theory of ekphrasis, casting these power relations in gendered terms: ekphrasis as a "struggle for dominance between the image and the word," a duel or contest with "the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space" (1).

² From Leonardo's *Paragone*, or contest between the arts.

Given the “gendered antagonism” (Heffernan 7) that is supposedly inherent to the ekphrastic mode that pits the masculine word against the feminine image, ekphrasis might not seem too inviting to women poets. In “Women Looking: The Feminist Ekphrasis of Marianne Moore and Adrienne Rich,” Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux posits a “feminist ekphrasis” that “recognizes the power of a sexually charged, male tradition of looking, takes it on, and challenges its gendered dynamics” (81). Feminist ekphrasis interrogates these gendered dynamics of power, recognizing that they can be “exposed, used, resisted and rewritten” (81) and other, alternative relationships can be established between word and image, self and other. Indeed, the essays collected in *In the Frame: Women’s Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*, edited by Hedley, Halpern and Spiegelman, examine ekphrastic poetry by women in order to “expose the limitations of the paragonal theories of ekphrasis in favor of a broader, more variegated, and more nuanced account of what poets ... see in pictures” (24). Ekphrastic poetry by women, then, might consider how the relations between the poet/viewer, the art object and the artist are inflected and complicated by gender.

A further dimension of ekphrasis that needs to be taken into consideration is its potential for self-reflexivity. A work of art “constitutes a statement already made about/in the world” (Loizeaux 5), so that making a further transposition from visual to verbal, i.e. making a further statement based on an already constituted statement, is a self-conscious and self-reflexive activity. According to Jo Gill, women’s poetry in general, across cultures and across centuries, has tended to be markedly self-conscious, their poems often concerned with “their own authority, their own status, their own place in a cultural context which has, historically, tended to find them aberrant” (23). If women are self-conscious about their writing to begin

with, art provides a fertile subject for exploring their relationship with artistic creativity, a means of figuring out a woman poet's relationship to her art. Ekphrastic poetry by women, then, is doubly self-aware.

This paper focuses on the ekphrastic poetry of Louise Bogan and Marianne Moore, who were contemporaries and wrote poetry from the 1920s to the 1960s. Besides the similar chronology, they also share an intensity of looking that takes the form of the ekphrastic gaze, and an equally intense attention to form (metrical verse and syllabics, respectively) even during the height of modernist experimentation with free verse. Both exhibit a high degree of self-awareness and self-reflexivity—Bogan's ekphrastic poems often involve a figure for the female poet, sometimes in search of a muse, while Moore's ekphrasis tends to be an occasion for reflecting on her own poetics and herself as an artist. Though they differ in their approach, both use ekphrasis as a means of figuring out their place as a woman and an artist, of exploring the relationship between self and other. Both poets also engage with and respond to the gendered *paragone* of ekphrasis and take a deliberate stance within/against the paragonal frame. In Chapter 2, I will explore how sculpture enters Bogan's poetry, and how she engages and subverts the paragonal tension inherent in the ekphrastic encounter. I will argue that Bogan tends to identify with the feminized work of art and discovers within it a mirror for the female self, so that ekphrasis becomes a means of addressing subconscious or submerged aspects of the self. Chapter 3 focuses on Moore's use of ekphrasis in three poems concerning porcelain *objets d'art* from different centuries and cultures. I will argue that, unlike Bogan who takes up the position of the feminized image, Moore identifies with the artist rather than the work of art, and places herself outside the paragonal frame altogether.

2. "Carved Out of Agony": The Sculpted Verse of Louise Bogan

In a letter to Theodore Roethke in 1935, Louise Bogan commends to the younger poet the importance of looking: "you will have to look at things until you don't know whether you are they or they are you" (Bogan, *Lived* 96). She offers Rilke as a model to be emulated, praising one of his poems for its "terrific patience and power of *looking*" (her emphasis); regarding another, she writes: "Now a poem like that cannot be written by technique alone. It is carved out of agony, just as a statue is carved out of marble" (*Lived* 96, 97). The letter is instructive because she articulates in it several themes that are interwoven through her poetry: the importance of looking, to the point of becoming one with the object of one's gaze; the importance of deeply felt emotion as a basis for art;³ and the metaphor of the poet as a sculptor. The image of the poet as a sculptor shaping emotion into art occurs again in the ars poetica "Single Sonnet," where she apostrophizes the sonnet form as a "heroic mould" (1) through which she can relieve herself of the burden of emotion whose "dreadful mass" (6) is colder and heavier than "stone, slate, metal" (7). In other words, poetic form is the mould that gives formal shape to and bears "as it were lead or gold" (5) the weight of lived experience. In a letter to her editor John Wheelock in 1936, she mentions the influence of Theophile Gautier's "L'Art," another poem that talks about

³ In her essay "The Heart and the Lyre," Bogan writes of the "deep and powerful emotional streams" (*Prose* 319) that must be opened for art and literature to flow. Similarly, in her journals, she writes that "a writer's power is not based upon his intellect so much as upon his intuition and his emotions. All art, in spite of the struggle of some critics to prove otherwise, is based on emotion and projects emotion" (*Journey* 120).

the poet's craft in terms of sculpture. According to Gautier, creating superior art requires one to wrestle with intransigent material, whether it's marble, bronze, stone, or verse. Even the gods will die, but verse will endure if it is carved in stone. The poem ends with an exhortation in which both the work of the poet and the medium he works with are figured in terms of sculpture: "Carve, file, chisel; let your irresolute dream be sealed in the unyielding block!"⁴

Given the influence of the plastic arts on Bogan's aesthetics, the critical discourse of ekphrasis provides a useful framework for talking about her work. The intensity of looking she mentions in her letter often takes the form of the ekphrastic gaze, especially in the poems influenced by her visit to Italy in 1933. In his highly influential essay "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laokoön* Revisited," Murray Krieger describes ekphrasis as the poet's desire to 'freeze' the temporal and achieve the stillness and presence of the plastic arts. That quality of stillness is something we encounter again and again in Bogan. In her book *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, too, speaks of the "immediacy" and "presence" (4) of works of art that poets can only aspire to achieve with words. Loizeaux focuses mostly on painting, but sculpture in fact has even greater presence since it is three-dimensional and therefore comes as close as possible to being life-like. In this chapter, I propose to examine how Bogan makes use of ekphrasis to engage with the plastic arts, and sculpture in particular. More specifically, I will explore how she challenges and resists the power dynamics of ekphrasis, finding kinship with the silent, static, feminized image and rescuing it in order to reclaim her own selfhood and creativity.

⁴ Prose translation by William Rees in *The Penguin Book of French Poetry: 1820-1950*, ed. William Rees (London: Penguin, 1992) 124.

Since the ekphrastic encounter begins with the act of looking, a useful place to begin our discussion is the early poem "Medusa." The mythical Medusa, of course, is not only the object of the speaker's gaze, but is herself a creature whose fearsome power resides in her look, in her ability to turn those who look at her into stone. The speaker of the poem, a stand-in for the female artist, goes on a kind of quest and finds herself confronted with a Medusa-like figure whose petrifying gaze renders her and her entire world frozen: "This is a dead scene forever now. / Nothing will ever stir" (10-11). After that moment is an eternity of stasis, with everything frozen exactly as it was in that moment. As in Keats's Grecian urn, life and stasis are held in balance: "The water will always fall, and will not fall, / And the tipped bell make no sound" (14-15). However, Keats's speaker exults in the "happy, happy boughs" (21) that will never lose their spring and the "happy, happy love! / For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd" (25-26). In the Bogan poem, the enforced stasis produces dread, not exultation, and far from reaching an edifying or inspirational conclusion, as Keats does with the Grecian urn, the speaker's quest ends in failure and stasis.

The Medusa's gaze, in effect, fixes the speaker and the scene into the stillness of art that Krieger believes ekphrastic poetry aspires towards. Whether the poem is based on an actual or imagined work of art, we have no way of knowing. Bogan's biographer, Elizabeth Frank, does not mention any actual work of art as a source for this poem, although she does document the sources of other ekphrastic poems in Bogan's oeuvre. Certainly Bogan may have been aware of the many representations of the Medusa that exist in European painting and sculpture, and it's possible that she may have had a particular work or a composite of several works in mind as she wrote. In any case, the Medusa figure in the poem is certainly treated as if it were a work of

art: her head is framed by a window and “seen through a door” (7). The frozen landscape is described as though it were a painting: a “dead scene” (10) which the “end will never brighten ... / [n]or the rain blur” (12-13). The speaker even makes a pilgrimage to a particular place to find her—a house in the woods, akin to a museum.

Mitchell, Heffernan, Loizeaux, and others have expressed the dynamics of ekphrasis in gendered terms: the visual image as embodied, passive, and feminine, and language as abstract, active, and masculine. The ekphrastic image is often treated as a female ‘other’ towards which the poet harbors ambivalent feelings. Heffernan, for instance, speaks of the contest between the verbal and visual staged in ekphrastic poetry, about “male speech” trying to master and control “a female image that is both alluring and threatening” (1). In his discussion of this gendered tension, Mitchell offers Shelley’s “On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery” as a poem that exemplifies ekphrastic anxiety. The poem’s speaker/viewer finds his gaze riveted by the Gorgon until he turns into stone. Mitchell calls this the “primal scene” of ekphrastic poetry because the Medusa is “the perfect prototype for the image as a dangerous female other who threatens to silence the poet’s voice and fixate his observing eye” (172). The ekphrastic poet’s fear of being silenced or paralyzed by the threatening female image is enacted literally by the Gorgon and the gazer in the poem. Sigmund Freud links the fear and horror of the Medusa with the fear of the female genitalia:

If Medusa’s head takes the place of the representation of the female genitals, or rather if it isolates their horrifying effects from the pleasure-giving ones, it may be recalled that displaying the genitals is familiar in other connections as an apotropaic act We read

in Rabelais of how the Devil took to flight when the woman showed him her vulva. (qtd. in Mitchell 176)

The Medusa's power is thus located in her femininity, and it is her association with female sexuality that inspires dread in the male viewer.

In Bogan's "Medusa," however, it is a female poet writing about the Medusa, and like many other twentieth-century women poets, the speaker/poet in this poem is on a deliberate quest to find a mythological female figure for guidance and inspiration. But for daring to do so, she finds herself punished, faced with a monstrous version of herself, or "her own demonic aspect" (99) in the words of Mary DeShazer. Being able to look intensely is important to Bogan as a poet, and yet looking is a male prerogative, as we know from the highly influential concept of the male gaze posited by film theorist Laura Mulvey in the 1970s. What happens when the woman looks is dramatically illustrated in the genre of the horror film. In her article "When the Woman Looks," Linda Williams argues that when the woman dares to look at the monster, "[her] gaze is punished" (17) by her becoming frozen or lifeless since women are supposed to be looked at, not to look. The woman who looks "not only sees a monster, she sees a monster that offers a distorted reflection of her own image. The monster is thus a particularly insidious form of the many mirrors that patriarchal structures of seeing hold up to the woman" (Williams 22). This is the punishment Bogan's speaker receives for seeking out and looking at the Medusa. The speaker's metaphorical journey into the psyche results in the discovery that her own creative self or poetic subjectivity is unspeakably hideous, and her paralysis is caused by this recognition of her own creative impulse as frightening instead of liberating. This is perhaps the danger of the intense looking that she writes to Roethke about, the danger of becoming one with

the object of the gaze, and thus becoming paralyzed. It is this terror of poetic daring that explains the unnamable, inarticulate dread that suffuses so many of the female figures in Bogan's early poetry, and that she struggles with.

Another paralyzed artist figure who seems frozen by the Gorgon's gaze appears in "Statue and Birds," an ekphrastic poem about a marble statue of a girl in a garden. A general sense of stasis or paralysis pervades the poem: the girl is frozen and cannot "flee" even though her "heel is lifted" (15) as though she wishes to escape from the lifeless arbor and the captivity of marble. The poem begins with "Here" (1), an adverb of place that gains additional emphasis by starting the poem on a stressed monosyllabic word followed by a caesura. The emphatic, deictic "Here" fixes our attention on a particular spot in a particular arbor, the spot where the statue stands permanently fixed. The fixity and stasis of the statue is emphasized in the details of the poem: the "arrested wind" (1), the action of the statue being "stands" (3), the quill of the fountain that "falters" (7), the "marble girl" (9) whose "heel is lifted" and who "would flee" (15) if she could. The wind is normally associated with freedom and expansiveness, but here in this arbor, even the wind is arrested and held motionless. The verse reflects the stasis and obstruction of movement through the two caesuras that interrupt the first line, almost preventing the line from its forward impetus, followed by the preponderance of heavy stresses in the second line along with another caesura, all of which serve to slow it down:

Hére, || in the wíthered árbor, || líke the arrésted wínd,

Stráight sídes, || cárven knées... (1-2)

The girl is trapped by the "woven bracts of the vine" (5) and the "brusque tangles" (8) of the woods, and even her desire for escape is restrained by the verse. The phrase "she would flee"

(15), the one place in the poem where we get an expression of the girl's volition, is enclosed and set off from the rest of the line not only by a pair of dashes, but by a pair of commas as well. This makes her entrapment that much more emphatic, that her desire to escape needs to be contained within not one, but two pairs of punctuation marks, that the force of her will is just barely contained from breaking out of the poem. The effort at containment makes the line swell to fifteen syllables (seven beats), making it the longest line in the poem. It's also the resistance of the girl that makes the verse so irregular—not a single line of the poem is smoothly iambic, even though the poem gestures towards meter and rhyme. In contrast to the silence and immobility of the girl, the birds of the title are free to walk around and even whistle. There is a threatening phallic quality to their "arrowy wings" (11) and "sharp tails" (12), and their circling action seems hostile and predatory. Her desire to flee and her hands "flung out in alarm / Or remonstrances" (3-4) may very well be caused by the circling birds who seem explicitly male. Birds have often been a figure for the (male) poet, from Keats's nightingale and Shelley's skylark to Yeats's golden bird and Frost's oven bird, and the birds in the poem circle the girl in the same way that male poets have traditionally circumscribed women in their verse. The birds have agency and power of movement and speech, all of which the marble girl is deprived of.

The image of a girl trapped and obstructed in her desire to escape suggests the general condition of women in a patriarchal society, and of a female poet specifically due to the poem's references to texts: to pattern in line 6, and to weaving in line 5 (the word *text* is derived from Latin *texere*, 'to weave').⁵ Here the girl is literally objectified into art—her being and her vitality

⁵ Philomel, who had to weave her story because her tongue was cut out for speaking up, is also a type for the female artist.

subsumed by cold marble and the sculptor's artifice. We might imagine the creator of the statue as male, as is the case with most of the iconic statues of Western culture. Perhaps the girl was remonstrating with the sculptor, and her protest itself became objectified into art. In the writing of the poem, she is looked at anew, but this time through a woman's eyes. There is a tension along gender lines not only between the girl and the birds but also between the poet and the imagined sculptor. The poem in fact exemplifies the paragonal tension theorized by Heffernan who describes the "contest" between word and image in ekphrastic poetry as "the expression of a duel between male and female gazes" (1). "Statue and Birds" is effectively a field of battle between the gaze of the female poet and that of the male sculptor. It is his artistic gaze that literally objectifies the girl into art—she is stripped of speech, motion, subjectivity, and even volition. Bogan attempts to undo this objectification and reclaim her subjectivity by entering imaginatively into the mind of the marble girl and trying to ascribe meaning and volition to her gestures.

Heffernan also describes the paragonal energy as a contest between "the driving force of the narrating word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image" (6). While Krieger thinks of ekphrastic poetry as aspiring to freeze time and reach the still moment of art, Heffernan contends that "ekphrasis is dynamic and obstetric; it typically delivers *from* the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse, and thus makes explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication" (5). Paradoxically, "Statue and Birds" does not actually narrate anything, but simply describes the statue in the present tense. However, the description itself appropriates the "pregnant moment" of the still image, so that a narrative is implicit rather than explicit in the poem. Loizeaux talks about how ekphrasis is "inherently dialogic"

since the poet is writing about an art object that “constitutes a statement already made about/in the world” (5). Through the poem, Bogan talks back to the sculptor as she attempts to restore language and volition, the very things the girl has lost at the sculptor’s hands. The poem also points out that the sculptor was not in fact able to efface the girl’s will entirely—her gesture of remonstrance and her uplifted heel remain in silent protest even though her vitality has been lost to the sculptor’s artifice.

The battle waged in the field of the poem is not just between the rival arts of poetry and sculpture, or the rival artists of poet and sculptor, but also between a female poet and a male poetic tradition. Lee Upton identifies the poem as a version of the Daphne-Apollo myth: “in attempting to escape Apollo as cultural authority and male law, Daphne (like the statue in Bogan’s poem) is rendered mute and immobile.... Bogan’s metaphors centering on trees and woods allude to Daphne at the moment of her transformation into the laurel” (35). The male sculptor’s effect on the girl is analogous to Apollo’s on Daphne, since it is Apollo’s lustful gaze that causes Daphne to become objectified into a tree. In the chapter she devotes to feminist ekphrasis, Loizeaux refers to “the powerful association between looking and the exercise of specifically male power” (80). Working within and against this tradition, women’s ekphrastic poetry recognizes that “the patterns of power and value implicit in a tradition of male artists and viewers can be exposed, used, resisted, and rewritten” (81). It is just this sort of looking, resisting, and rewriting that Bogan attempts in “Statue and Birds,” but what complicates Bogan’s response is the fact that the offending Apollo is also the deity that presides over poetry. By staging her protest in Apollo’s own domain, she also asserts her power and agency as a poet,

subverting not only the gaze of the male sculptor, but also the authority of the god of poetry himself.

While “Statue and Birds” is about an imagined sculpture,⁶ “The Sleeping Fury,” the title poem of Bogan’s third volume, revisits the earlier “Medusa” and does in fact take its genesis from an actual work of art. The Elizabeth Frank biography tells us that the poem is based on a relief sculpture titled “L’Erinni Addormentata” (literally “The Sleeping Fury”), which is also known as the “Medusa Ludovisi” and is housed in the Museo Nazionale delle Terme in Rome. The Furies in Greek mythology were avenging goddesses who punished crimes by turning the offenders mad. They wreaked their terrible wrath especially on people who committed crimes against their own family, such as Orestes who killed his mother, Clytemnestra. The poem seems almost a response to the earlier “Medusa” since it involves an encounter with another terrifying, destructive, serpent-haired female from mythology. However, the tenor of this second encounter is very different from the first. In “The Sleeping Fury,” the tone is peaceful and the direction of the gaze is reversed—it is now the speaker who is able to look at the Fury unafraid, since it is asleep and harmless, and no longer “loud and feared” (2). Having “once met [the Fury’s] eyes” (33), she is “[a]lone and strong in [her] peace” (34). Unlike the previous poem, here the tables have turned: the speaker who was once like the hunted is now able to turn and look at the hunter who, divested of its power, must return the gaze. In “Medusa,” the speaker of the poem was rendered frozen and silenced, but here the speaker (once again a stand-in for the poet) addresses the Fury directly. It is as though the demon has been tamed, so that she can now look at it with equanimity, even with something approaching compassion. The speaker’s

⁶ John Hollander’s term for poems about imagined works of art is “notional ekphrasis” (4).

gaze is not one that seeks to master (as the ekphrastic gaze is often thought to do), but to reconcile and forge a fragile peace. Mary DeShazer identifies the Fury as “an awesome and frightening aspect of her self, one which ... she must confront and control if her art is to flourish” (100). The Fury is a spirit of vengeance, but it also has the power of revelation, so that it is as much a muse as a “scourge” (6), as the speaker calls it. For Deborah Pope, the Fury is “both muse and inner self” (44) as she reads the poem as an *ars poetica*: “Bogan’s description of the Fury captures the very essence of her conception of poetry.... The poet is ‘hunted’ by the force of her vision, seeking to release the ‘anger and grief’ in other means, until none avails but the rage of authentic poetry” (45). The creative self that appeared horrid and monstrous in “Medusa” has now been accepted and made peace with in “The Sleeping Fury.”

In her biography of Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Frank speaks of “The Sleeping Fury” as a poem that helped Bogan “achieve psychic reconciliation” (260) with her mother, with whom she had had a difficult relationship. Following Frank, other critics too have tended to interpret the poem psychoanalytically. Gloria Bowles, for instance, discusses the poem using Freud’s concept of grief work (116-17). Similarly, Lee Upton reads the poem as a confrontation between “the betraying mother and the injured child” in which Bogan finally “frees herself from the position of traumatized child to meet and return the maternal gaze” (110-11). Comparing the poem with the earlier “Medusa,” Upton remarks that “Bogan revises the script of early paralysis and allows the mother to attain rest, the daughter to attain subjecthood” (111). It is significant, then, that the “L’Erinni Addormentata” (or “Medusa Ludovisi”) on which the poem is based is a much more muted version of the usually terrifying goddesses. It is not depicted as repulsive or grotesque as the Medusa and the Furies usually are, nor is it facing the viewer *en face* as images

of the Medusa usually do. A museum catalog describes the face as arousing “compassion for a being in whom we see such an infinite capacity for suffering”⁷ and Elizabeth Frank describes the sculpted form as lying “in a repose of serenity, innocence, and peace” (242). The choice of ekphrastic object is as important as its poetic treatment, and the fact that Bogan chooses a peaceful, even poignant, version of the terrifying figure reflects her changing relationship to her mythical muse.

If the Fury represents an unacceptable aspect of the self or the relationship to the maternal, we can now examine how Bogan uses ekphrasis to mediate between herself and what the Fury represents. Heffernan views ekphrasis as a “narrative response to pictorial stasis, [a] storytelling impulse that language by its very nature seems to release and stimulate” (4-5). If indeed Bogan is coming to terms with her mother through this poem, as critics have suggested, it’s as if the mother figure has always been intractably lodged in her psyche, with the recalcitrant stillness of a sculpted image. By apostrophizing it in a poetic meditation, she challenges its powerful stillness by subjecting it to discourse which necessarily brings it into the realm of the temporal and thus weakens its authority. According to Mitchell, a central goal of ekphrasis is “the overcoming of otherness” since ekphrastic poetry is “the genre in which texts encounter their own semiotic ‘others,’ those rival, alien modes of representation” (156). The ekphrastic attempt to encounter the “semiotic other” is analogous to the speaker’s attempt in both “Medusa” and “The Sleeping Fury” to encounter and reconcile with her demonic other, which she finally achieves in the later poem. Here the poem’s paragonal contest takes place not

⁷ Walter Copeland Perry, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Collection of Casts from the Antique in the South Kensington Museum* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1887) 91.

against the rival work of art, but against what is represented therein: the self or the maternal that the sculpted figure represents for the female speaker/poet.

In fact, 'paragonal' may not even be an appropriate characterization. The account of inter-art rivalry and paragonal tension put forward by Mitchell and Heffernan has been highly influential in the critical discourse on ekphrasis, but as Loizeaux points out, this is a limited view of the genre, one that reduces all ekphrastic poetry to rivalry and antagonism between word and image (15). She suggests that we also explore other kinds of relationships, in addition to the paragonal, that might be expressed in ekphrastic poetry. Similarly, in their introduction to *In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*, Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern and Willard Spiegelman propose to look at ekphrastic poetry by women and "expose the limitations of the paragonal theories in favor of a broader, more variegated, and more nuanced account" (24).

Recognizing that the paragonal model works for a poem like "Statue and Birds," but not for all ekphrastic poems, I'd like to suggest that in "The Sleeping Fury," the poet/speaker looks at the art object not with a gaze of mastery, but with a gaze that is assimilative and reconciliatory, the poet's stance being to absorb and assimilate rather than to encounter as 'other' and master. The poem is not ekphrastic in the traditional sense, in that it is not focused on describing the image itself, but uses it as an occasion for thoughtful reflection. It is ekphrastic in a more oblique sense than Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," for instance. In both "Statue and Birds" and "The Sleeping Fury," the sculpture that provides the seed of the poem is not treated as an 'other,' but as a fellow being that the poet can identify with, or an aspect of the self that the poet comes to recognize and accept. We might perhaps call this ekphrastic identification —

taking as an ekphrastic object a work of art that represents something that the poet identifies with on some level, or something that is part of her self. In that sense, the work of art serves not as an 'other' but as a mirror for the self, allowing the poet to speak of things (such as her anxieties about being a woman poet, the tormented aspects of her self, and her troubled relationship with her mother) that she cannot confront except through this form of ekphrastic displacement. Women poets have often resorted to various strategies for distancing themselves from their poetry, such as the use of masks.⁸ Perhaps ekphrastic displacement is another such strategy.

Thus, a consideration of Bogan's ekphrastic verse demonstrates how she makes use of but also goes beyond Heffernan's paragonal model. I agree with Loizeaux's characterization of ekphrastic poetry as inherently dialogic, a means of talking back to the imagined sculptor in "Statue and Birds," for instance, but also a means of talking to a submerged part of the self. Even the poems themselves seem to be in dialogue with each other, the gaze of one ("Medusa") apparently affecting another ("Statue and Birds") or being reversed by yet another ("The Sleeping Fury"). If male poets look at the feminized image and see an alien 'other,' for Bogan as a woman poet, the work of art serves as a mirror and returns the image of entrapment that she herself feels, or aspects of her own self that the larger society finds unacceptable and monstrous. The chapter on Moore that follows will engage the paragonal model in a very different way: it is the other—the ancient, the foreign, the exotic—she seeks to understand, not the self, and while

⁸ For instance, Cheryl Walker's *Masks Outrageous and Austere: Culture, Psyche, and Persona* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), is devoted to the masks adopted by women poets. It includes a chapter on Bogan's use of what Walker calls the "stoic persona" (173).

her ekphrasis is also dialogic, she herself stands back from the dialogue and does not take sides.

If Bogan's ekphrasis is psychological in nature, Moore's is philosophical.

3. "Essential Perpendicularity": Marianne Moore's Ekphrastic Practice

It almost goes without saying that looking intensely is as important to Marianne Moore as it is to Bogan, and perhaps even more so, as the title of the first book she published, *Observations*, suggests. Critics have noted and commented extensively on the importance of sight in Moore, which Bonnie Costello calls her "dominant sense" (186). Hugh Kenner's essay on Moore is titled "The Experience of the Eye"⁹ and the first chapter of Margaret Holley's book on Moore is titled "Art as Exact Perception."¹⁰ Another Moore scholar, Linda Leavell, writes that "despite its verbal medium, Moore's is an art of *seeing*" and she quotes Moore as saying, "Language is a special extension of the power of seeing, inasmuch as it can make visible not only the already visible world, but through it the invisible world of relations and affinities" (9).

That Moore had an intensely visual imagination is clear from almost any of her well-known poems. As a young girl, she enjoyed drawing and painting, and even wanted to become an artist. Later, as a resident of New York, she frequented art galleries and museums, and befriended practitioners, collectors, and critics of art. She wrote art criticism and reviews of exhibitions, and continued to read extensively about the arts. Not surprisingly, her interest in the visual arts had a significant impact on her own art. "She drew her material, and often her subjects," Costello informs us, "from art, from representation, not from life," so that "[a]lmost

9 Kenner's essay, however, is as concerned with the reader's eye traversing the Moore's syllabic grids as it is with the poet's eye recording what it sees.

10 Margaret Holley, *The Poetry of Marianne Moore: A Study in Voice and Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

every poem Moore wrote involved a picture or art object at some stage of composition" (192). This astonishing fact compels us to take into account the inherently ekphrastic nature of Moore's oeuvre. Even her poems that aren't directly about works of art are still "a kind of submerged ekphrasis" (82), according to Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, since they are often based on photographs. But many of her poems are also explicit ekphrases, not merely submerged ones, invoking or addressing works of art as well as various kinds of curios and *objets d'art* that she would come across in her reading or in museums.

As discussed earlier, the gendered nature of ekphrasis that conventionally pitches the masculine word against the feminized image might make ekphrasis seem inhospitable for women poets. Loizeaux takes up this point in her chapter on the "feminist ekphrasis" of Marianne Moore and Adrienne Rich in her book *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*. She posits a feminist ekphrasis that "recognizes the power of a sexually charged, male tradition of looking, takes it on, and challenges its gendered dynamics" (81). Through a detailed analysis of two poems on tapestries, "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns" and "Charity Overcoming Envy," Loizeaux explores how Moore practices "non-predatory looking" (84) and resists the ekphrastic desire to master or possess by allowing "word and image [to] both have their space, the Gordian knot left intact" (92), her famed 'restraint' being her response to the ekphrastic *paragone*. If Bogan identifies with and takes the position of the feminized image, Moore acknowledges the forces in tension and yet restrains herself from choosing or privileging the word over the image, or vice versa. What Bogan does is to directly challenge the dominance of the masculine word by taking up the position of the feminine object. However, I would like to suggest that Moore steps outside of the gendered paragonal frame altogether, recognizing, as

Loizeaux rightly observes, that to simply “invert the power dynamic” (91), as Bogan does, means to perpetuate and be complicit with that dynamic. Instead, Moore acknowledges the competing impulses of word vs. image, poet vs. artist, viewer vs. viewed, and so on, that exist in fraught relations within the ekphrastic *paragone*, but she consciously chooses not to privilege either of those rival factions. She chooses instead to position herself outside the gendered paragonal frame, often by identifying with the artist. Rather than a rivalry, she discovers a fraternity of kindred enterprise. She recognizes that the artist has rendered an actual or mental image into the medium of the plastic arts, and that she, likewise, is taking that image as an input and transposing it into yet another sign system. The artist and the ekphrastic poet are alike in their endeavor to make sense of the world—to cognize, to imagine, and to create. Thus Moore tends to align herself with the artist who makes, since the poet, too, is literally a ‘maker.’ In writing about the ekphrastic object, she is aware of her own poetic making, or re-making, rather, of an already made thing. Hence we find in her ekphrastic poems repeated self-reflexive references to the process of artistic creation rather than the product (i.e. the art object) that ekphrasis traditionally concerns itself with.

Positioning herself outside the paragonal frame frees Moore from the endlessly circular and ultimately irresolvable ekphrastic *paragone*, so that she can instead address larger questions that ekphrasis raises about perception, representation, and epistemology. My discussion in this chapter will focus on three poems dealing with ceramic or porcelain *objets d’art*—one from the Middle East, one from the Far East, and one from Europe—which illustrate the ways in which Moore’s ekphrastic practice not only engages with, but in fact transcends the paragonal in order to grapple with larger issues of the relationship of art to the mind and the world.

A poem that exemplifies Moore's identification with the artist and artistic process, and that almost explicitly states her ekphrastic credo of nonpartisan restraint, is "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish." The poem is based on a photograph she saw in the *Illustrated London News* of an Egyptian artifact housed in the British Museum and dating back to the 14th century B.C. Characteristically, she combines acute visual observation of the object with aesthetic and moral observations. "Here," the poem begins, a deictic gesture¹¹ that directs our gaze to the bottle as well as to the poem, "we have thirst / and patience, from the first, / and art" (1-3). Rather than beginning with a description, she focuses first on forces that brought the glass bottle into being. "Thirst" and "patience" cannot be epithets describing the bottle; rather, it is the artist and the process of creation that she imagines: a "thirst" that may be both physical and artistic, and the patience that is required to create art. The bottle is both something utilitarian that can quench a thirst, as well as an art object that required the patience of the artisan. Suzanne Juhasz describes the poem as "tracing the process of creation itself, so that it leads to the presence of the bottle as its conclusion" (41).

As an artist herself, Moore is very much aware of the process of artistic creation, but as an ekphrastic poet, she is aware too of the viewer's gaze: the bottle is like "a wave held up for us to see" (3), and the fish is described as "spectacular" (derived from the Latin *spectāre*, 'to look'). According to Loizeaux, "[t]he dynamics of looking, and the pleasures and problems it presents ... are at the very core of Marianne Moore's practice as a poet" (82), and Moore actively strives to resist the kind of looking that is possessive or predatory. Thus she invites us to look at

11 Loizeaux calls ekphrasis "an emphatically deictic mode" (4), often beginning with words like 'Here,' 'Look' or 'See.' Bogan's "Statue and Birds" also begins "Here, in the withered arbor..."

the fish/bottle, and yet its scales “turn aside” (8) or deflect (or more specifically, refract and, in a sense, disintegrate) the light rays that allow us to see. “Here” is the fish, she seems to say, as though she is holding it in front of us, and yet it does not remain still for us to behold—rather, the “nimble animal” (7) is just on the threshold of slipping away after a sprightly flash of the spectrum. Like the elusive fish, the rhyme too slips away after the perfect rhyme of the first couplet, with the rest of the poem reduced to half rhymes.¹²

As in other ekphrastic poems by Moore, such as the ones discussed by Loizeaux, this poem grapples with and responds to the ekphrastic *paragone* of the encounter between the masculine word and the feminized image, and by extension the poet and the artist, by consciously refusing to take sides. She brings to the fore many oppositions that parallel the ekphrastic *paragone*: thirst vs. patience, utility vs. art, stillness vs. motion, modern American viewer vs. ancient Egyptian artifact. However, as Loizeaux points out, “Moore’s poetic seeks to subvert the oppositions inscribed in the very ekphrastic situation itself” (83), so that ekphrasis need not necessarily be antagonistic. In “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle,” Moore points out and holds together the oppositions without actually taking sides, effectively sidestepping the ekphrastic *paragone* or contest. While highlighting the oppositions, she does not privilege one or the other, but finds instead in the glass bottle a merging of opposites, all remarkably melded into the space of a single sentence that constitutes the poem: the still object is compared to a moving wave and later, a fish; the concrete object calls forth abstractions like ‘patience’; the particular gives rise to universals; and the physical ‘thirst’ that seeks immediate quenching

¹² See/perpendicularity and fish/polish may seem like perfect rhymes at first, but they aren’t because in both cases, a stressed syllable is made to rhyme with an unstressed syllable.

coexists with the quality of patience that delays immediate gratification. It is the dialectic between these oppositions, active desire vs. deliberate restraint, held in tension that produces art: "Here we have thirst / and patience, from the first, and art." Moore espouses "an ideal of dynamic reciprocity" (Costello 154) that goes beyond mere *paragone*.

A particularly puzzling phrase, but one that I believe holds the key to Moore's ekphrastic practice, is the "essential perpendicularity" (4) that the bottle holds up for us to see. The word 'perpendicular' derives from Latin *perpendere*, meaning 'to balance carefully,' from *per* 'thoroughly' and *pendere* 'to weigh, to hang.' Indeed, the poem hangs oppositions in perfect balance, as does the bottle itself, embodying as it does both "thirst" and "patience." Perhaps this perpendicularity is what is "essential" to Moore's ekphrastic practice, and hence held up for us to see?

In Euclidean geometry and physics, a vector (a line of force) can be resolved into its components along the x and y axes. But if vectors intersect at a right angle, in other words, are perpendicular or orthogonal to each other, they don't affect each other's force or direction in any way. In "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle," the ekphrastic oppositions that Moore highlights exist in perpendicular or orthogonal relation to each other, so that they don't cancel each other out, but coexist in balanced harmony. The "Here" that begins the poem points to the poem as much as to the glass bottle, and the poem, too, is a carefully balanced structure. It is divided into two equal stanzas, and within each stanza is the balance between a pair of short lines and a pair of longer lines. In both stanzas, the pair of short lines is about something abstract, while the pair of longer lines demonstrates that abstraction with a concrete image. The abstract and the concrete don't cancel each other out, but exist in a reciprocal and orthogonal

relationship: the abstract idea is illustrated by the concrete image, and the concrete particular is given universal interpretation through authorial commentary. For both the poet and the glass blower, the thirst the bottle alleviates is a thirst for aesthetic harmony. Significantly, 'thirst' is the first rhyme word in the poem, quenched in the next line by 'first.' This thirst for harmony, then, is where art originates for Moore.

Not only does Moore step back from the paragonal frame, by focusing more on the artistic process than on the object itself, she also aligns herself with the glass blower, finding kinship in the similarities of their artistic needs and processes. In Chapter 2, I suggested that Bogan practices what we might call 'ekphrastic identification'—i.e. as a woman poet, she identifies with the feminized image rather than treating the image as an 'other.' In Moore's "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle," we find 'ekphrastic identification' of another sort—one where the poet identifies with or finds kinship with the artist rather than setting herself in opposition to him. Poet and artist, word and image, can be in harmony rather than in opposition, complementing each other and coexisting in the "essential perpendicularity" of Moore's art.

A similar kind of perpendicularity seems to be at work in "Nine Nectarines," a poem based on a Chinese porcelain plate depicting peaches on a branch and another one depicting the mythical Chinese unicorn, or kylin. The subject matter seems to lend itself to being turned into a 'feminized' image: "red-/cheeked" (18-19) peaches on a round porcelain plate, and an elusive mythical creature, both originating from the exotic Orient. Yet, Moore deliberately avoids taking sides within the paragonal ekphrastic frame, and instead makes her observations (in both senses of the word) from outside that frame. Once again, she concerns herself with the artistic process rather than the product: the peaches are "[a]rranged by two's" (1), painted "in the

Chinese style" (11), reproduced by the bookbinder's "uninquiring brush" (16), have "no flaws" (27), lack the curculio which "someone once depicted" (31), and so on. Paradoxically, though she describes the illustration as "accurate" (33) and having "no flaws" (27), she cannot tell from the picture if the animal asleep against the tree is an "unantlered moose or Iceland horse / or ass" (34-35), a point I will return to later.

As with "The Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle," this poem too is about both the art object and about the poem itself, and the poem too has flaws and inaccuracies, the most egregious one being the misrepresentation of the kylin. The kylin in the poem is "of pony appearance—the long- / tailed or tailless / small cinnamon-brown, common / camel-haired unicorn / with antelope feet and no horn" (42-46), whereas in the appended notes her source, Frank Davis in the *Illustrated London News*, describes it as having "the body of a stag, with a single horn, the tail of a cow, horse's hoofs, a yellow belly, and hair of five colors." In a discussion of "Nine Nectarines" in *The Modernist Response to Chinese Art: Pound, Moore, Stevens, Zhaoming Qian* explains that "although Chinese written texts frequently describe the *qilin* the way Davis describes it, it is not unusual that we see a somewhat changed image of the mythic creature in a Chinese picture ... because Chinese artists ... favor spirit over physical likeness. For them the very purpose of art is to go beyond representation" (120). In other words, "representing and misrepresenting its prototype" is a hallmark of the Chinese imagination, so that Moore's misrepresentation of the kylin is actually an homage to the imaginative spirit of the Chinese (Qian 120). As noted previously with "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle," in this poem too, Moore aligns herself with the artist, finding kinship between her own art and that of the artist.

“It was a Chinese / who imagined this masterpiece” (48-49), both the artist and the poet delighting in taking creative liberties with the mythical creature.

According to Loizeaux, ekphrastic poetry has typically “worked the trope of the active male poet gazing on the silent, passive, female image, and having his verbal way with her” (80). “Having his verbal way” might mean, for instance, imposing a narrative or an interpretation onto the silent work of art. Loizeaux contends that Moore refuses to take up that position of ekphrastic authority and actively resists the impulse to dominate or possess the image. In “Nine Nectarines,” too, Moore considers the issue of appropriation while being careful to avoid it herself. Interestingly, embedded in the very name of the peach, *prunus persica*, is a history of egotistic appropriation. The peach “was / found in China first” (24-25), as Moore notes in the poem, but the misnomer resulted from the mistaken idea that it originated in Persia. The issue of cultivation as a kind of appropriation is explored by Robin Schulze in her article “Marianne Moore’s ‘Imperious Ox, Imperial Dish’ and the Poetry of the Natural World,” in which she reads Moore’s flora and fauna poems as a commentary on man’s relationship to the natural world. She quotes from Darwin’s writings on the domestication of plants and animals, about how species have been bred, cultivated, and modified according to the needs and desires of human beings, so that the “cultivated peach” too bears “the marks of man’s unquenchable drive to shape the natural world” (10). In the poem, Moore emphasizes this issue by first referring to the peach as “wild spontaneous fruit” (24), then asking “But was it wild?” (25) and finally praising the Chinese for being able to appreciate “the spirit of the wilderness” (40). Appreciating the spirit of wilderness means being able to resist the urge to conquer nature, and Moore similarly resists the ekphrastic impulse to impose and appropriate. She approves of

“[p]rudent de Candolle” (26) who refrains from asserting what he doesn’t know. She, too, is cautious not to appropriate the object she describes, readily admitting what she doesn’t know. This explains the indeterminacies in her description: the “slender crescent leaves / of green *or* blue *or* / both” (9-11, my emphasis) and the animal that she’s not sure of, an “unantlered moose *or* Iceland horse / *or* ass” (34-35, my emphasis). The repeated conjunctive *or* expresses her humility towards a foreign art form that she cannot fully apprehend or represent, and her unwillingness to impose her admittedly limited knowledge. According to Victoria Bazin, the poem “demonstrates its own limitations” (65) and freely acknowledges the difficulty of describing in Western terms an art object from ancient China. “The attempt to translate pictures into words is compared to the attempts of the Western speaker to understand the inscrutable Orient” (Bazin 63), so that the inherent gap between the visual and verbal in ekphrasis parallels the epistemological gap between an Eastern culture and Western knowledge of that culture.

It’s important to note that Moore’s poem is based not on the actual Chinese plate, but a poor photographic rendition of it, which allows her the opportunity to reflect on representation itself. Just as she stands outside of the paragonal frame, she also places herself outside the frame of the viewer and viewed, commenting on that relationship from outside that dyad. She is aware of the layers of mediation through which an American viewer looks at this foreign object. For instance, a Chinese person would not describe the picture as “puce-American-Beauty pink” (14), nor would he encounter it in the pages of an American magazine or book. She calls attention to the multiple layers of representation by references to the “uninquiring brush / of mercantile bookbinding” (16-17) and the “much-mended plate” (32): the poem is a verbal representation of a photographic representation of a Chinese plate illustrated with nectarines,

which in turn symbolize/represent longevity. She is aware, too, of the imperfection and mutability of art—the poor quality of the reproduction, and the plate that has ironically needed mending despite the life-giving nectarines it depicts. The gulf between the actual condition of the plate and what it represents parallels the gulf between the thing itself and the artist/poet's attempt to represent it in an artistic medium, be it paint or language. She admits the limitations of her knowledge (and de Candolle's), acknowledges that her view of the artwork is mediated by the poor quality photograph, and her understanding of the Chinese object mediated by Western sources—the scholarly account of de Candolle and the journalistic account of Frank Davis. In trying to comprehend the Chinese artist's understanding of the world, the poem is ultimately concerned with the limits of what can be known or imagined, always "self-conscious about its inability to translate accurately the 'masterpiece' it observes" (Bazin 65). "It was a Chinese / who imagined this masterpiece" (48-49) and we wonder whether an American can in fact imagine what the Chinese artist once imagined. Just as her poem is a representation of a representation, Western knowledge of the Orient is also gained through layers of mediation by scholars, travelers, and journalists who themselves cannot fully apprehend the Far East. China itself is probably as unknowable to the West as the porcelain plate is to Moore, but her poem, rather than asserting the superiority of one or the other, acknowledges that unbridgeable gap and celebrates the affinity she nevertheless discovers between her own art and that of the Chinese artist.

Like "Nine Nectarines," Marianne Moore's "No Swan So Fine" too is concerned with the role of art and the meaning it holds, and more specifically, how that meaning is mediated by the socio-historical context in which the work is produced, consumed, and patronized. The swan of

the title is part of a highly ornate candelabrum from the era of Louis XV, two such candelabra being on auction at Christie's according to an advertisement in the *Illustrated London News*, whence Moore's subject matter is derived. The irony is clear even from the advertisement—an object that once graced the royal château in Versailles is now on the auctioneer's block for any ordinary commoner to purchase and possess—and the poem plays up this irony.

On one level, "No Swan So Fine" is an elegy. The candelabra was in the possession of the British statesman Lord Arthur Balfour, and was auctioned at Christie's after his death. Patricia Willis notes the "theme of 'passing'" (42) in the poem, citing a letter of condolence Moore sent to the critic George Saintsbury, who had known Balfour as a friend. Willis also quotes from a letter Moore sent to her brother in which she included a draft of the poem and mentioned that the forthcoming twentieth-anniversary issue of *Poetry* (for which the poem was written) might be the last issue of the magazine (42). Thus, for Willis and for other critics following her, the poem registers the melancholy recognition of passing—of kings, statesmen, and literary establishments alike.

However, I find the sarcasm in the poem much more potent and palpable than the melancholy, which, after all, had to be gleaned from private correspondence that is external to the poem. If we turn to the poem itself, we find that the art object in this poem differs from the Egyptian glass bottle and the Chinese porcelain plate in important ways, which also affects Moore's attitude towards it. If she regarded the bottle and the plate with unreserved admiration, her appreciation of the swan's elegance seems undermined by sarcasm. It is "fine" (4) beyond any living swan, and yet made of "chintz china" (5), which suggests that it looks gaudy and cheap. Bernard Engel notes that "[t]he very buttons on the candelabrum tree are

'cockscomb-tinted'; the hodge-podge of decorations also includes dahlias, sea-urchins, and, ironically, everlastings; the tree's branches are made up of 'polished sculptured / flowers' — that is, spurious ones" (30). Even her tribute to its elegance is expressed as a negation: "No swan ... so fine / as the chintz china one" (2-5). If the nectarines and the kylin embodied spiritual qualities, or the glass bottle the "thirst and patience" of the artist, the candelabra merely displays the vainglory and ostentation of the French ancien regime. Hence the mocking tone of "chintz china" and the alignment of the swan with Versailles's lifeless fountains in the grammatically parallel opening lines.

Like the effete fountains and stagnant waters of Versailles, the swan's beauty seems moribund. "No swan so fine," the poem asserts, *fine* meaning 'beautiful' or 'elegant.' But *fine* can also imply an end or conclusion, as in the archaic "In fine," meaning "In conclusion." Given the French subject matter of the poem, we might fruitfully take into account the French adjective *fin*, which means 'fine' or 'elegant', and the noun *fin*, which means 'end.' The titular "No swan so fine" seems to draw attention, then, to both the finery and finitude of Louis XV's court. Indeed, swans have been associated with time and mortality in other well-known poems like Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole." It is also likely that, like Baudelaire, Moore was aware of the pun in the French word for swan, *le cygne* ('the swan'), which sounds exactly the same as *le signe* ('the sign'). The swan/sign thus symbolizes fineness/finitude—of Versailles, of Louis XV, of the French monarchy and kings in general.

The swan is also linked to (and symbolic of) its master in other important ways. The "toothed gold / collar" (6-7) it wears "to show whose bird it was" (7) suggests that the king takes pride in his power and ownership over things, even holding an inanimate object captive,

deluded in thinking that his power is eternal and absolute. Reminiscent of Shelley's "Ozymandias," the finely wrought swan is a symbol of the king's hubris. When we reach the end of the poem with the curt statement "The king is dead" (14), we realize that the swan was also a dead thing, and hence 'fine' in that sense of the word (as opposed to the live swan, which is neither so fine nor so dead as the china one). It remains "at ease and tall" (14) because it is oblivious what it is party to (the king's vainglorious display) and a sign of (his inevitable end), just as perhaps the king once stood at ease and tall, oblivious that all kings meet the same fate.

A look into Louis XV's reign sheds further light on the connection between the swan and its owner. Louis XV became king at the age of 5 and reigned from 1715 to 1774. As he was initially too young to rule, the affairs of state were handled by regents until he finally assumed power in 1743 at the age of 33. But he was a weak and indolent ruler, and during his reign, France lost its overseas territories to Britain and came close to bankruptcy due to overspending. Other people, including his mistresses, would call the shots, most notable among them being Madame de Pompadour who would even fire ministers and military leaders, and appoint new ones as she wished. She was also fond of luxury and lavish interiors, and the art of decoration and ornamentation reached a peak during Louis XV's reign. In fact, the artistic, decorative and architectural style of that era, Rococo, is also called the 'Louis XV style.' However, the extravagant spending of Madame de Pompadour was heavily criticized when France was in financial ruin towards the end of Louis XV's reign. The weakening of the monarchy during his reign played a part in precipitating the French Revolution, and hence the overthrow of the monarchy altogether ("The king is dead.") Thus, like the gold-collared swan, Louis XV seems to have been captive in his gilded château, first by the regents who ruled in his stead, and later by

the courtiers and mistresses who controlled the affairs of state. Like the statue of Ozymandias, the swan may have been intended by the king to display his power and grandeur, but later ends up working against him, symbolizing the finitude as well as the finery of his reign.¹³

Since the poem is about a porcelain swan, it's significant that Madame de Pompadour liked fine porcelain, so much so that she spent a million *livres* on the construction of a royal porcelain factory at Sèvres. In his book *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century French Porcelain*, George Savage explains that the royal factory's task was to make "the finest porcelain in the world, regardless of cost" that would be "fit to be associated with the name of the King of France" (120). Its products were so expensive that very few people could buy them, and its costs had to be supported, and its losses made up, by the king. Of course, porcelain wasn't the only area in which the Marquise liked to spend. Jacques Levron writes in *Pompadour* that Mme de Pompadour spent a total of 7.5 million *livres* buying, restoring and furnishing various châteaux and country houses (102). Because of her extravagant spending, she became known as the "leech who sucked gold out of the Treasury" (Levron 95). The most expensive of her châteaux, the one at Crécy on which she spent 4.3 million *livres*, was eventually looted and pulverized during the revolution. Towards the latter part of his reign, Louis XV's ineptitude as king cost him the goodwill of his people, and having once been called *Le Bien-Aimé* ('the well-beloved'), the popular sentiment swung in the opposite direction to the extent that calumnious verses such as the following (quote here in prose translation) would be bandied about:

13 Historical information taken from *France: A Reference Guide from the Renaissance to the Present* by William J. Roberts and *Europe 1450 to 1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World* (6 vols.), edited by Jonathan Dewald.

Louis, you cowardly squanderer of your subjects' wealth, you who number your days by the number of crimes you commit, slave of a minister and an avaricious woman, learn the fate in store for you. For some time you were worshipped by us all, but your vices were not yet ripe ... You will see the daily decrease of our zeal, the soaring of a rebellious flame in our hearts. You have worn out the State with unsuccessful wars; you have no generals and you will have no soldiers. (Levron 110)

I quote at length here because this unflattering verse connects the dots between Louis XV's extravagant spending, his out-of-control mistress, his failure as king, and the inevitable overthrow of the monarchy. Perhaps if he had spent less time and money on expensive hobbies (such as the Sèvres porcelain) and more on the affairs of state, he and his heirs might have fared better. Clearly, the porcelain swan of the poem implicates Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour's luxury and prodigality in the eventual downfall of the ancien regime.

In keeping with her strategy of presenting and acknowledging ekphrastic oppositions, the poem is full of oppositions and ambiguities that Moore does not resolve. It's never clear whether she genuinely thinks the china swan is finer than the real one; whether she really considers it elegant or chintzy/tawdry; whether the china swan is "at ease and tall" *because* the king is dead, or simply because it is oblivious of historical events. The poem does not "deliver" a narrative from "the pregnant moment of visual art," i.e. it does not perform the "obstetric" function ascribed to ekphrasis by Heffernan (5). Instead, Moore refrains from narrative or commentary, preferring to simply bring into focus the paradoxes inherent in the object. The swan is both a captive of the king as well as a symbol of his own captivity in the machinations of others. It's his and his mistress's love of fine things (such as the porcelain swan) that led to

the depletion of the treasury, and because he enjoyed such indulgence and indolence that his kingdom gradually crumbled. The swan ultimately works against him, just like the statue commissioned by Ozymandias, and ends up meaning something quite different from what its owner had intended.

In Moore's conception, art is not inert or dead, but alive and quick with "the spiritual forces which have made it" as she says in "When I Buy Pictures." If Moore's is "an art of *seeing*," as Linda Leavell calls it (her emphasis), her perspicacity allows her to see far enough into the object to unravel the spiritual forces of its creation, which she believes the artwork always acknowledges. For Moore, language illumines through "the already visible world ... the invisible world of relations and affinities" (qtd. in Leavell 9), and indeed a consideration of her ekphrastic seeing reveals the many layers of relations and affinities she discovers: the perpendicular relations between quantities normally held in paragonal tension; the relations between art, knowledge, representation, and history; and the affinities between her own art and that of artists belonging to very different times and traditions, as well as their modes of relating to the world and to the other. By stepping back from the paragonal frame of ekphrasis—the dyad of poet and artist, word and image, viewer and viewed—she is able to take a larger view and reveal unlikely connections and hidden relations, looking not just *at* the work of art, but through it and far beyond it.

4. Conclusion

As women poets entering the paragonal tradition of ekphrasis, Louise Bogan and Marianne Moore find different ways of addressing that tension. Bogan responds to the gendered *paragone* by taking up the position of the silent and still feminized image, and so her speakers (in her poetry more generally, not just in the ekphrastic poems discussed here) often find themselves paralyzed, rendered mute and immobile. In a sense, she uses ekphrasis as a tool for grappling with and trying to claim her selfhood and subjecthood as a woman and poet, and the relations and reversals among the three ekphrastic poems discussed in Chapter 2 (“Medusa,” “Statue and Birds,” and “The Sleeping Fury”) seem to provide a narrative of this journey of self-discovery. It is in the later poem, “The Sleeping Fury,” that the direction of the gaze is reversed, and she is in the position of the power, finally released from the paralysis of the speaker in the earlier “Medusa” and the stasis of the marble girl in “Statue and Birds.” “The Sleeping Fury” too has a kind of stillness and quietude, but it is restful and peaceful, not because the speaker is frozen or mute or turned to stone. The verse, likewise, is freer, in long flowing lines of free verse. When Bogan looks at the female ‘other’ of the ekphrastic image, she sees a reflection of her self which she seeks to reclaim and assimilate, and so her identification with the feminized ekphrastic image is a way of exploring her relationship to the (predominantly male) poetic tradition in which she seeks a voice.

Moore, however, in keeping with her famed 'reticence' and 'restraint,' does not take part in the paragonal struggle and steps outside of it altogether. She acknowledges the tensions and oppositions that exist, and incorporates them into her poems, but she does not privilege one side or the other, and instead holds them in balance, in what she calls an "essential perpendicularity." She wants to resist the ekphrastic urge to appropriate or possess the image, and seeks instead to understand and find kinship. Just as Bogan's ekphrasis is a self-conscious exploration of her own place within the poetic tradition, Moore's ekphrasis is also a self-reflexive articulation of her own poetics/aesthetics: of restraint, decorum, and respect for what one doesn't know or understand; and about the thirst for harmony out of which artistic creation arises. For Bogan, ekphrasis takes her inward into the psyche; for Moore, it takes her outward in time and space, where she seeks to explore and understand other times and places, and celebrate the kinship she finds with other art works and artists. If ekphrasis deals with an already made thing, Bogan seeks to unmake it in order to assert herself, whereas Moore celebrates its craftsmanship and its congruity with her own art.

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