The Tao of the non-human: ineffability, materiality, and ecosemiotics in Marianne Moore's assemblage poetics

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Abstract

Through her engagement with the aesthetic and onto-epistemological principles of Zen and Taoism, Marianne Moore's poetic imagination develops assemblages that foreground the interdependence and entanglement between human and non-human agencies. Moore opposes traditional forms of anthropocentric writing by amplifying a poetics that decenters human subjectivity, acknowledges the limitations of language and reason, and elevates more-than-human agency beyond the recognition of its ineffability by human frameworks of knowledge. In particular, she enables this through the minimalism of her Zen/Tao-inflected later poems and through the drastic revisions of earlier works. The impact of Zen and Taoism on her work enables her to create a universal poetics that amplifies material-spiritual entanglements within heterogeneous assemblages of matter and meaning.

Keywords: Marianne Moore / Zen / Taoism / new materialism / material-semiotic assemblages

When describing her contact with Taoism, particularly through the medium of Chinese painting, Marianne Moore writes that the Tao is "a way of life, a 'oneness' that is tireless" (*A Marianne Moore Reader* xiv). The impact of the Tao on her poetic imagination is evidenced by the apprehension of a non-totalizable whole that foregrounds the interdependence and interrelationality between the human and the more-than-human. In this paper, I argue that the longstanding impact of East Asian thought and spirituality on Moore's poetics, particularly through the aesthetic and onto-epistemological principles of Zen and Taoism,[1] amplified her ability to manifest extra-human material becomings, whilst also pushing human agency to unfamiliar grounds, beyond the limits of logical thinking and language, to the point where language stutters and gives way to the transformative realms of the supra-linguistic, the supra-logical, and the more-than-human. It is in the limits of human reason and language that Moore rejects forms of oppressive anthropocentric writing in favor of a poetics that manifests the very ineffability of the non-human, particularly through the minimalism of her later poems. Her awareness of such ineffability is evident in the shift from complex assemblages in her earlier works to an acute awareness of the limitations of familiar uses of language in the later poems, particularly through drastic revisions of the earlier works and the use of concision and blank space. Such techniques emphasize a poetics that is deeply aware of existing more-than-human agency and meaning-making. They enabled her to develop a poetics of universal agency that integrates non-human beings into hybrid, heterogeneous assemblages and interweaves the material and the spiritual within a cosmopoetic imagination.

Moore's poetic imagination, which fuses materiality and spirituality and engenders an experience of more-than-human, ineffable realities, engages with her interest in Zen and Taoism from an early age. She was exposed to Tao-infused Chinese artworks and artifacts since her formative years, which included attending exhibitions at the University of Pennsylvania, at the British Museum and in New York City, where she encountered an array of Chinese objects and artworks seized after the decline of the Qing Dynasty (Qian 22-43).[2] Additionally, she admired "the sublimated wisdom of China," frequented Chinese restaurants, watched Chinese plays, and collected Chinese texts. Indeed, in a letter to Elizabeth Mayer

from 1945, she stated: "I have admired Chinese writing all my life" (458). And in an earlier letter from 1933 to William Rose Benét, she stated that she was "born pro-Chinese" (313). Beyond mere Orientalism or fetishization of East Asia, such an engagement with Chinese art and culture contributed to the development of her early poems published in *The Egoist Press* in 1921. In *Marianne Moore and China*, Cynthia Stamy emphasizes Moore's familiarity with both Confucian and Taoist classics (31, 41) through translated versions such as Arthur Waley's *The Analects of Confucius* (1938), Pound's *Confucius: The Great Digest, The Unwobbling Pivot* (1951), and Witter Bynner's *The Way of Life According to Laotzu* (1944).

While Confucianism has been considered the most influential Chinese philosophy for modernism,[3] Zhaoming Qian suggests that Moore's aesthetic draws from Taoist sources, and although she read Waley's translation of *The Analects of Confucius* in 1938, she would have been influenced by a "Daoist aesthetic [which] saturates even works of art with strong Confucian ideas" (64).[4] In particular, modernists found resonances in elements of Taoist aesthetics that support an antirepresentational poetics, such as "observing things in terms of things," "forgetting the self" (Shao Yong in Qian 2003, 69), and contemplating "spirit over physical likeness, intuition over logic" (69). Moore's fascination with Tao-infused Chinese art culminated in the late 1950s, when she received the book set of *The Tao of Painting* and *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* by Chieh Tzu Hua Chuan, translated by Mai-Mai Sze. Qian observes that the book "gives her a philosophy, a spirit with which to rethink her aesthetic and resurrect early experiments" (188-189), such as those with Chinese motifs "The Plumet Basilisk," "The Buffalo," and "Nine Nectarines".

I also suggest that Sze's work helped Moore articulate in new ways ideas she had manifested in many poems over decades. Her engagement with *The Tao* and its Chinese author helped redefine her poetics in the late 1950s and 1960s, particularly in books such as *O to be a Dragon* (1959) and *Tell Me, Tell Me* (1966), of which the former is the main object of my analysis, since it expresses Moore's deep awareness of the Tao. These books demonstrate the Zen-/Tao-inflected dimension of her later experimentation by means of extreme revisions of earlier poems, omissions, concision, and an acute awareness of form and

formlessness through the use of empty space. Additionally, her reading of *The Tao of Painting*, along with her previous contact with and lifelong interest in Taoist aesthetics, contributed to her later development of a poetic imagination that questions the Judeo-Christian notion of "man's dominion over nature," instead reinforcing the intrinsic interdependence between all beings and environments. Indeed, Moore's longstanding interest in East Asian aesthetics and philosophies aligned with her personal religious views on the relations among all aspects of creation through her version of Presbyterianism (Leader 2016; 2017) and her interest in William Blake's mediation between seemingly opposite ideas, such as self and other, human and non-human, the material and the spiritual, the real and the imagined (Willis).[5]

"imaginary gardens with real toads": poetic imagination and the limits of representation

The precision of Moore's poetics is often associated with a scientific tendency to objectively dissect the real. João Cabral de Melo Neto, who attributed his own analytical or mathematical mode of writing to Moore's influence, indicates the knife-like sharpness of her verse and suggests that she, instead of pen, employs a scalpel that dissects reality "to produce, on leaving, / a neatly stitched poem" (153).[6] Similarly, her contemporary and friend William Carlos Williams writes that, in her poems, "a word is a word most when it is separated out by science, treated with acid to remove the smudges, washed, dried and placed right side up on a clean surface" (318). Indeed, such precision has been the scientific desideratum of Modernism's engagement with reality (Cecire 84). Nevertheless, Moore herself argued in the essay "Feeling and Precision" that, instead of focusing on an "unbearable accuracy" that attempts to faithfully represent reality, "precision is a thing of the imagination" (500). What she evidences here is a shift in thought from a poetics that attempts to accurately represent reality at all costs to the characteristic precision of the generative force of the imagination.[7]

Imagination as the main concern of precision has been the leitmotif of Moore's poetics. In a 1936 lecture at Brooklyn College, she argues that the imagination is "a quality if not the quality on which poetry rests" (Moore in Ross 340). A case in point is her metapoem "Poetry," first published in 1919,[8]

which blurs the boundaries between the real and the imagined. This is particularly evident in the oft-anthologized lines of the poem, which demand that poets be "literalists of the imagination" and present "for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads" (27). The expression "literalists of the imagination," one of the many quotations employed by Moore in her poetry, refers to W. B. Yeats' critique of William Blake's extreme attachment to his visions at the expense of style (297). Moore disagrees with Yeats and, instead, suggests that the emphasis on the imagination enables words to be reconnected with life and thus prevent an overemphasis on human subjectivity and on the extreme self-referentiality of poetic language.

Moore's poetics attempts to promote an awareness of reality unbound by reason and logical language. It indicates that there is a continuity between the perception of reality and the imagination, as illustrated by the combination in "Poetry" of "the raw material of poetry / in all its rawness" and what is "genuine" (27). Julia Fiedorczuk argues that the "genuine" appears "when the barrier between reality and poetry dissolves" (29), in other words, when there is no gap between material reality and the imagination. Moore's idea of the genuine foregrounds the vital force of the imagination, which actualizes material reality within poetic language. Such a vision of the poetic imagination anticipates an ecopoetic sensibility that is attuned to what Jane Bennett defines as "vital materiality" (vii), characterized by *agentic assemblages*. These are "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts" (23-24) which emphasize an "open-ended collective" and "non-totalizable sum" (24) integrating diverse agentic forces that interact with one another. In other words, an "animal-vegetable-mineral-sonority cluster with a particular degree and duration of power" (23).

Agentic assemblages epitomize Bennett's development of vital materialism, a reaction to the longstanding philosophical tradition of vitalism that maintains the assumption of a fundamental difference between inert matter and organic life, thus deconstructing received notions of agency, action, and freedom. The underlying power or force of the agentic assemblages represents the vitality within materiality which Bennett calls *matter-energy* (xi) or *thing-power* (2). Bennett does not propose a vitalism *per se*, in which a life force enters and animates matter, but a "vitality intrinsic to materiality as such" (xiii). According to this view, materiality can no longer be pronounced as passive, mechanistic, or

divinely infused. This suggests a drastic shift from the language of epistemology to that of a non-anthropocentric ontological stance, "from a focus on an elusive recalcitrance hovering between immanence and transcendence (the absolute) to an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness (vibrant matter)" (3). The vital force of Moore's poetic imagination anticipates Bennett's thing-power in that it not only actualizes material reality in poetic language, thus equally foregrounding the vital forces of non-human matter and human semiosis, but also merging such immanent vital forces through the spiritual dimensions of her Zen/Tao-inflected poetics.

Moore explores the vital force of the poetic imagination through the development of agentic assemblages that highlight a non-dualistic approach to the relationship between beings and environments. Her assemblages indicate the interdependence between the human and the more-than-human whilst preserving their particular agencies, materialities and semiosis. As such, her poetic imagination evokes a non-anthropocentric and non-dualistic perspective akin to the main principles of Zen Buddhism. Zen is inherently non-anthropocentric in that it does not support hierarchical structures in which human beings are the center of meaning and agency. Zen is founded upon the principle of the non-duality of *all beings* [悉] and Buddha-nature [仏性], that is, the possibility of all beings to reach enlightenment.[9] In other words, all beings are originally endowed with Buddha-nature and, therefore, capable of achieving enlightenment as such, in their original form and nature. The self, imbued with Buddha-nature, illustrates the non-duality of both the *Tao*[10] and the Buddhist *Way* (or *Middle Way*), which refer to the integrated and harmonious unity between *samsara*, the cycle of birth and death, and *nirvana*, its transcendence through enlightenment. In essence, Buddha-nature represents transcendence-within-immanence, since it pertains to all beings as a potentiality. The self directly experiences the concreteness of material reality consisting of what the Buddhists call *tathātā*, the *suchness* of things in their nonverbal, nonconceptual state. In turn, these particular things are always interdependent and realize becomings or processes of emptiness or *śūnyatā*. Such an awareness leads to the awakening to a universal, non-dualistic, and vital force epitomized by the Zen concept of *nothingness. Nothingness* expresses an active, positive, and

expansive onto-epistemology derived from a negation, thus manifesting non-duality by integrating both *being* and *non-being*, *emptiness* and *suchness*, form and formlessness. Indeed, non-duality is the root and source of Moore's agentic assemblages since they foreground the irreducible vital force at the heart of all beings: the Zen notion of nothingness and the potentiality of Buddha-nature.

In the essay "Is the Real the Actual?," published in *The Dial*, Moore affirms that the imagination's capacity to intensify experience is a spiritual or mystical occurrence. Upon observing a bust of Dante sculpted by Alfeo Faggi, Moore stresses that she is not interested in whether or not the bust is a perfect replica of Dante. Rather, she suggests that the face displayed before her embodies the "spiritual axiom" (622) and intellectual power that the writer of the *Divine Comedy* is believed to have possessed. Moore defines this phenomenon as the "spiritual imagination" (620), which extracts reality from the painting itself rather than connecting it to a referential point from the external material reality. She argues that the spiritual is not a "vague, invertebrate thing," but "the only realm in which experience is able to corroborate the fact that the real can also be the actual" (621). If Moore contends that the spiritual actualizes the real, her poetics also reveals that, in turn, the imagination actualizes spiritual experience. In particular, her statement supports a modernist poetics that questions the role of art as mimetic representation as well as the role of the poet as a self-centered and anthropocentric subject. Moore's poetics, particularly her later poems which make use of concision and omissions, serves to create, and not to recreate or represent the real.

The specific terms of her "spiritual imagination" align with Moore's early contact with Zen and Taoist principles through Chinese art, culminating with her presentation in 1957 of a lecture on Taoist aesthetics entitled "Tedium and Integrity in Poetry" at Mills College in Oakland, California. The subject of "integrity" was suggested to her by *The Tao of Painting*, edited and translated by Mai-Mai Sze, and derived from Sze's exposition of the meaning of the Tao. "Tedium," on the other hand, stemmed from Sze's understanding of "egotism". Sze's elucidation in the first chapter "On Tao and the Tao" had a significant impact on Moore, who associated it with her own material-spiritual poetics. Indeed, Sze evidences the indefinable nature of the Tao by directly quoting the first and most striking lines of Lao-

Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*: "the Tao that can be called the Tao is not the eternal Tao" (15).[11] Such a reading arguably reaffirmed to Moore that the Tao's emphasis on the ineffability of reality—also found in discussions of the aesthetics of Chinese poetry and painting—"appeared akin to her own modernist poetics" (Qian 62), since both promote an art that "centers much less on seeing the real world than on making of it another world" (Moore 144). Here, Moore emphasizes the role of the generative force of the imagination in actualizing ineffable, often inscrutable, realities.

Moore's contact with Taoism through Sze's work not only reinforced the philosophical scaffolding of her poetics, which focused on the imagination, but also contributed to its later development in the form of her last two books of poetry, *O to be a Dragon* (1959) and *Tell Me, Tell Me* (1966). These books emphasize the renewal of her experimental modernism in old age, particularly in her use of concision and conscious employment of open or empty space. Most significantly yet, such a Taoism-rooted aesthetics is evidenced in the dynamics of her revisions and the reissue of older poems. Qian argues that citations from *The Tao of Painting* that favor the "use of empty space over crowdedness" (69) must have contributed to Moore's shortening of poems collected in later anthologies. Although printed for the first time in book form in *O to be a Dragon*, the poems "I May, I Might, I Must" and "A Jellyfish" were written and first published some fifty years earlier, respectively titled "Progress" and "A Jelly-fish" (407). The 1959 version of "A Jellyfish," for instance, has half the size of its 1909 counterpart. Furthermore, both of these poems have been published in Moore's definitive collection entitled *The Complete Poems* (1967). As Heather Cass White points out, "rarely has a title been more misleading" (Moore 347). Not only does it contain just over half the poems Moore published during her lifetime, but it also presents poems that were radically shortened and modified in later revisions.

One of such examples is "Poetry" which, from its 1924 version in *Observations*, containing five six-line stanzas, was shortened to a skeleton of only three lines in its 1967 rendition: "I, too, dislike it. / Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in / it, after all, a place for the genuine" (364). According to Qian, Moore's main reason for rewriting "Poetry" to the extreme is directly related to her

reaction to the fourteenth-century painting *A Breath of Spring* by Zou Fulei [Figure 1], reproduced in *The Tao of Painting* and suggestive of the Tao or integrity (70).

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[Caption] **Figure 1:** Zou Fulei, *A Breath of Spring*. China, c. 1360, ink on paper. Freer Gallery of Art, Public Domain, CC0 1.0.

The title of Zou's painting itself emphasizes the vast empty space that surrounds the plum branch, thus drawing the viewer's attention to "the real world" or, in Moore's words, to "what did not exist until sensibility and imagination created it" (144). Andrew Kappel argues that, by omitting her remarkable "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," Moore creates a "textual void" which is "a silence more eloquent than the finest phrases" (154). This omission affirms Lao-Tzu's statement in the *Tao te Ching*, translated by Charles Q. Wu, that such sentences are an unnecessary padding or "surplus food and unwanted fat" (Wu 55).[12] Additionally, the 1967 version of the poem resembles "a remarkably active form of passivity" (Altieri 266-267). By silencing the metalinguistic verbiage of "Poetry," Moore manifests the Taoist concept of *wu wei*, namely the practice of the Tao without forceful action, which is the achievement of non-action or nonconscious action by which "True mastery can be gained / by letting things go their own way. / It can't be gained by interfering" (Lao-Tzu 48).

The suspension or erasure of self-centeredness in Moore's poetics echoes the Zen rejection of the ego-self, which, as she explains in her 1957 lecture, is a form of "egotism—or what the Buddhists call ignorance—[that] obscures a clear view of the Tao" (147). The Taoist critique of egocentricity traces back to the ancient Chinese philosopher Lieh Tzu, who lived circa 400 BCE and whose maxim "To a mind that is still, the whole universe surrenders" was mentioned by both Sze in the *Tao of Painting* (18) and Moore in the Mills College lecture (146). In Moore's view, the suppression of egocentricity is a necessary measure in order for the imagination to actualize material realities by openly making use of its raw materials from which the genuine is able to appear:

> How are we going to express it, a creative principle? It should in any case be the opposite of the uninstructed teaching the lesson, the unnecessary. It should be the initiate making explicit the intangible. Now, what kind of poetry is not tedious? What is tedium? One of my compositions is entitled "Poetry," and I said, "I, too, dislike it." What do I mean by that? *I mean that we dislike manner for matter, shadow for substance, and ego for rapture*. (Moore 143) [emphasis added]

For Moore, poetry is the closest manifestation of the force of the imagination which recognizes the ineffable and, as a result, the poet is capable of suspending egocentricity and the human overreliance on reason and logical language.

Moore's rejection of egocentricity can be traced back to her earlier poems and is directly related to a poetics concerned with the relationship between the human and the non-human, as well as the material and the spiritual. Jeredith Merrin situates Moore's rejection of the self—in poems such as "A Grave" (published in *Observations* in 1924)—in the larger purpose of the subversion of the male Romantic subject's focus on the individualistic ego and his appropriation of non-human life. Moore subdues "his imaginative egocentricity, replacing his 'I-ness' with her appropriative, minutely observant eye" (79-80) and, by doing so, "subtly mock[s] his delusion of dominion, of imaginative sway" (77) over the non-human world. In this sense, she downplays the role of egocentrism to reflect the wider ethical stance of her poetics, which contradicts a dominant anthropocentric perspective towards the non-human. The non-anthropocentric tendency of her poetics points to what Josh Aron Weinstein defines as an "ecopoetics of humility" which manifests a highly sophisticated ecological system (177).[13] Whilst Weinstein identifies this ecological system within the formal elements and experimentation of Moore's poems, he also points out that this system indicates an ethics of humility that attempts to "transcend the perhaps limiting bounds of avant-garde poetry to create an ecological system of a high degree of complexity in her work" (176). In the next section, I examine Moore's imagined ecosystem consisting of agentic assemblages of human and non-human materialities and semiosis, thus manifesting the openness of her poetics to ecosemiotic

networks. Such networks are reframed in her later work due to her interest in Zen/Taoist aesthetics and philosophies.

"a true *lingua unicornis*": non-human agency and semiosis in Moore's hybrid assemblage poetics

In "As We Like It: Miss Moore and the Delight of Imitation," Elizabeth Bishop draws attention to Moore's poetic imagination as the centerpiece of her assemblages integrating human and non-human agencies at the material-semiotic level. Bishop writes that "with all its inseparable combinations of the formally fabulous with the factual, and the artificial with the perfectly natural, her animal poetry seduces one to dream of *some realm of reciprocity, a true lingua unicornis*" (686) [emphasis added]. Moore attempts to reach such a "realm of reciprocity" by opening her poetry to the non-human alterity of beings that are "at once embodied and proliferating, partially connected and seen, partially separate and unknowable" (Mason 326). By creating linguistic and thematic hybridity, her poetics evidences the interweaving of human and more-than-human beings.

In "To a Snail" (*Observations*, 1924), Moore compares human semiosis, particularly in the form of poetry, to the body of a snail:

> If "compression is the first grace of style,"
> you have it. Contractility is a virtue
> as modesty is a virtue.
> It is not the acquisition of any one thing
> that is able to adorn,
> or the incidental quality that occurs
> as a concomitant of something well said,
> that we value in style,
> but the principle that is hid:
> in the absence of feet, "a method of conclusions";

"a knowledge of principles,"

in the curious phenomenon of your occipital horn.

(Moore 19)

Although the snail is described by its "compression" in a shell, its "absence of feet" and the appearance of an "occipital horn," in fact, each of these physiological attributes represent directives for Moore's *ars poetica* (Cecire 87). Consequently, the snail's physical compression is equaled to a verbal poetic compression related to "the first grace of style"; the snail's "absence of feet" parallels the lack of meter in the poem, as well as evidences "a method of conclusions"; and, finally, the peculiar appearance of an "occipital horn" in the snail reveals "a knowledge of principles" and the assemblage between imagination and material reality at the core of the poem. Such a "curious phenomenon" may be interpreted as Moore's description of the snail's sensory tentacles, which she contemplates in poetry as the symbol of the snail's processing center and organ of visual perception—that is, the snail's "eye". On the other hand, as Sabine Sielke points out, the "occipital horn" may be a way of imagining the presence of a horn at the back of an equally imaginary snail skull (125). The suggested assemblage of material reality and imagination in the poem indicates the development of a hybrid being that does not fully conform to mimetic representation. Such a material-semiotic assemblage produced by the poetic imagination emphasizes the insufficiency of human reason and logical language in understanding the nature of more-than-human beings. By partially assimilating and recreating the snail, the poem foregrounds a "lingua unicornis" that integrates an active, hybrid process of assemblage.

Additionally, the poem evidences Moore's extensive use of quotations, a feature so commonly employed by her that she claimed, in "A Note on the Notes," to be unable to outgrow this "hybrid method of composition" (295). Interestingly, however, she does not offer a bibliographic reference to her direct quotations in "To a Snail" but, instead, simply refers to a single author who evokes a whole line of thinking. Thus, the quotation "compression is the first grace of style" is related to the rhetorical writings of Athenian orator Demetrius Phalereus. Similarly, Moore directly attributes "a method of conclusions"

and “a knowledge of principles” to theologian Duns Scotus, although these sentences are taken from Henry Osborn Taylor’s summary of Scotus’s reflections on whether theology could be considered a form of science (Taylor 516). Natalia Cecire argues that this mode of referencing “conjures up a web of scholarship and associations […] a whole body of thought now metonymically represented by the name ‘Duns Scotus’” (89). This practice follows an epistemological stance that camouflages aesthetic principles in favor of drawing up a direct relationship between material reality and poetic language, thus “Poetic principles can inhere in the body of a snail, just as a snail can be recapitulated in the physical form of a poem” (Cecire 91). Moore’s use of quotations further reinforces her understanding that the poetic imagination is capable of actualizing material-semiotic interrelations not strictly bound by human reason and familiar uses of language. In other words, she develops a hybrid poetic language that rejects rigid boundaries between the human and the non-human and, instead, emphasizes their interdependence.

In “The Paper Nautilus,” published in *What Are Years* (1941), Moore develops a hybrid agentic assemblage that merges human imagination and non-human materiality and semiosis. This becomes clear in her imagining of the reproductive cycle of a female paper nautilus as a series of identifiable semiotic signs:

> Giving her perishable
> souvenir of hope, a dull
> white outside and smooth-
> edged inner surface
> glossy as the sea, the watchful
> maker of it guards it
> day and night; she scarcely
>
> eats until the eggs are hatched (158).

This passage, extracted from the final version of the poem, highlights the role of the paper nautilus as "the watchful / *maker*" [emphasis added], which implies a theistic perspective and indicates that the poem ties both material and spiritual forms of "creation, creativity, and production to procreation and reproduction" (Sielke 130). It also counteracts the anthropocentric definition observed in an earlier version of the poem: "*animal* takes charge of / it herself and scarcely // leaves it till the eggs are hatched"] (397) [emphasis added].

Moore develops an assemblage of diverse material-semiotic agencies which establish "a site of narrativity, a storied matter, a corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed" (Iovino 451). Written narrativity occurs quite literally in the paper nautilus's body:

> the intensively
>
> watched eggs coming from
>
> the shell free it when they are freed,—
>
> *leaving its wasp-nest flaws*
>
> *of white on white*, and close-
>
> laid Ionic chiton-folds
>
> like the lines in the mane of
>
> a Parthenon horse (158) [emphasis added].

The impression left by the nautilus's eggs suggests "difference within sameness, separation within connectedness and inscribes a slight, though significant difference" (Sielke 136) which amounts to an imagined writing. Such writing negotiates the dynamics between relationality and difference, between form and formlessness, thus resonating with the Zen principles of emptiness [*śūnyatā*] and suchness [*tathātā*], respectively, the decentering of human egocentricity through the foundational interdependence of all beings and the affirmative autonomy of particulars, that is, the "thusness" of all things. Thus, it is

not only related to Moore's "poetological reflexivity" (Sielke 129), but also evidences its dissimilarity from human writing and discourse, since it leaves homogeneous marks "of white on white". By contemplating the inscrutability of the paper nautilus's writing, Moore also compares it to silence and to love: "round which the arms had / wound themselves as if they knew love / is the only fortress / strong enough to trust to" (158). Since love aptly reveals the nature of reality as intrinsically interdependent and interrelational, these last lines manifest Moore's assemblage poetics of entangled human and non-human beings. By writing assemblage becomings attuned to Zen enlightenment, she stretches the limits of a human-derived poetics and demonstrates an acute awareness of universal semiosis and imagination.

The movement from complex assemblages to a non-totalizing, hybrid poetic whole is accentuated even further in Moore's later works, especially after her discovery of *The Tao of Painting*. In addition to featuring her characteristic juxtapositions of observations and quotations and her omission of quotation marks around quotations, her poem "O to be a Dragon," published in 1959, is also punctuated by the omission of complete citations:

> If I, like Solomon,…
> could have my wish–
> my wish… O to be a dragon,
> a symbol of the power of Heaven–of silkworm
> size or immense; at times invisible.
> Felicitous phenomenon!
> (209)

Although Moore directs the reader to the source of symbolism of the dragon in the title (Moore 329), that is, Volume II of *The Tao of Painting*, she does not reveal the full extent to which the poem produces an assemblage of quotations and observations related to the profound impact that *The Tao* had on her. Qian identifies three important quotations in the poem. The first is "a symbol of the power of Heaven,"

extracted from Volume I of *The Tao*. The second, "of silkworm / size or immense; at times invisible," can also be found in Volume I and derives from Sze's translation of sixth-century BCE philosopher Guanzi. The third is "O to be a dragon" which Moore revealed in the 1957 lecture and then in the 1961 foreword to *A Marianne Moore Reader*:

> the Tao led me to the dragon in the classification of primary symbols, "symbol of the power of heaven"—changing at will to the size of a silkworm; or swelling to the totality of heaven and earth; at will invisible, made personal by a friend at a party […] who exclaimed obligingly as I concluded a digression on cranes, peaches, bats, and butterflies as symbols of long life and happiness, "O to be a dragon!" (The exclamation, lost sight of for a time, was appropriated as a title later.) (xiv-xv)

The poem not only demonstrates Moore's experimentation with unacknowledged quotations but also her use of a collage of observations and quotations in a minimalist way, demonstrating her simultaneous employment of concision and the subversion of the language of reason which consolidates her poetics of hybridity.

Additionally, the image of the dragon in the poem points to her longstanding fascination with the Chinese dragon, which may be traced back to 1923. In separate letters responding to her brother John Warner Moore and friend Bryher, she paid homage to "a dragon in the clouds" in the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition of Chinese paintings. The Chinese dragon appears again in 1932 in her poem "The Plumet Basilisk": "As by a Chinese brush, eight green / bands are painted on / the tail—" (109). However, differently than previous poems, her later rendition of the dragon in "O to be a Dragon" is characteristically concise. Inspired by her encounter with Sze's *The Tao of Painting*, she uses compact form to simultaneously call attention to the poem's and the dragon's form, both "of silkworm / size or immense; at times invisible" (209).

In her later reissue of the earlier poem "A Jellyfish" (*O to be a Dragon*, 1959), Moore further stretches the limits between the human and the non-human by creating a poem attuned to the language of the other, more-than-human being, a language infiltrated by an ecosemiotic poetic imagination. What ensues is a hermeneutical endeavor that operates at the limits of the humanly intelligible, between the visible and the invisible. The poem describes a jellyfish's organism as simultaneously opened and closed, in and out of view, embodying form and formlessness:

> Visible, invisible,
> a fluctuating charm,
> an amber-tinctured amethyst
> inhabits it, your arm
> approaches, and it opens
> and it closes; you had meant
> to catch it, and it quivers;
> you abandon your intent
> (211)

Paulina Ambroży argues that this organism dissolves the boundaries between surface and depth in the poem, since "the transparent surface is at once the creature's depth, encouraging the reader to linger over the visible/invisible surface of her description and form, if only for the very pleasure and adventure of the encounter with this 'open cypher'" (87). The final lines of the poem also reveal a conscious Taoist impulse on Moore's part to acknowledge the ineffability of poem and organism. These last lines motion towards a clear manifestation of *wu wei*—the action of non-action or nonconscious action—in response to such ineffability. Above all, they demonstrate the complex interrelations between human semiosis and non-human materiality within a poetic imagination that contemplates their universality.

Conclusion

This paper offered a comprehensive analysis of the material and spiritual aspects of Moore's poetics, which emphasizes a generative imagination capable of developing assemblages of human and non-human agencies. It analyzed Moore's poetics via a Zen/Taoist and new materialist framework. By recognizing the limitations of human reason and language, rejecting mimetic representation, and decentering human subjectivity, Moore reached a greater degree of detachment from anthropocentric poetics. Such a detachment enabled her to acknowledge the ineffability of non-human beings and their ultimate integration into hybrid, ecosemiotic assemblages that evidence processes of becoming and the interweaving of the material and the spiritual.

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Notes

[1] Zen (Chan 禪, in Chinese) is a school of Mahāyāna Buddhism that started in China during the T'ang dynasty. Whilst the relationship between Zen and Buddhism is widely acknowledged by scholars and practitioners, less acknowledged is the significant influence of Taoism on Zen. Alan Watts considers that Zen and Taoism share the same universal principles, such as non-duality, and argues that the "old Chinese Zen masters were steeped in Taoism" (1958 n.p.). Additionally, Stephen Mitchell, who translated the *Tao te Ching* into English, claims that "the most essential preparation for my work was a fourteen-years-long course of Zen training, which brought me face to face with Lao-tzu and his true disciples and heirs, the early Chinese Zen Masters" (Lao-Tzu ix-x). In this regard, I use the term "Zen" in this paper as it contemplates the relationship between these converging modes of thought.

[2] Victoria Bazin emphasizes that Moore's "Sinophilia" has an intrinsic relation with the Eight-Nation Alliance's invasion of Beijing in 1900, which supplied the British Museum, as well as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (which she visited in 1956), with a vast collection of Chinese artifacts: "The Western image of China in the first half of the twentieth century cannot, therefore, be extricated from the history of the West's plunder of Chinese art" (156).

[3] Timothy Materer suggests that Pound rejected Buddhistic thought altogether in favor of Confucianism in works such as the China Cantos (187 n.7). However, David Hinton argues that, since all dimensions of ancient Chinese culture are manifestations of a single conceptual framework—including language, Confucian/Taoist/Ch'an thought and practice, and the arts—when "Pound brings a few of these dimensions into Western culture, he implicitly brings all the others" (31). Indeed, Pound was responsible for handing such a conceptual revolution down to the tradition of Zen-/Taoist-inflected poetics that followed.

[4] Qian observes that Moore "has learned to overlook the distinction between Confucianism and Daoism/Buddhism" from Sze's translation of the *Tao of Painting* (189). In a 1963 essay, Moore mentions the Taoist/Buddhism objection to egotism

alongside a quote by Confucius: "In valor, there is small room for egotism. As Confucius says, 'If there be a knife of resentment in the heart, the mind fails to act with precision'" (in Qian 2003, 189).

[5] Barry Ahearn assesses the existing scholarship on the relationship between Moore's poetry and her religious beliefs, particularly Protestantism. He observes a series of specific elements in Moore's poetics which he associates with her Christian faith: the concept of precision as related to ineffability; the rejection of the ego-self; omissions and deletions as a means to concision, such as in her reworking of earlier poems; and a deep-seated skepticism towards language and awareness of its insufficiency. On the other hand, Ahearn observes that, in relation to Moore's skepticism towards language, "to a considerable extent she departs from the traditional Presbyterian reverence for human reason" (278, n. 3). Indeed, Qian argues that such elements are particularly amplified in her later poems due to her contact with Taoism through *The Tao of Painting*. Whilst I find Ahearn's reading to be a valuable addition to what he himself detects as a thin scholarship on Moore's religious ideas (277, n. 3), his neglect of her interest in non-Christian beliefs presents an incomplete picture of the extent to which religious or spiritual ideas influenced her poetics. The Protestant reading of Moore's poems should not exhaust the poetic manifestation of her interest in and fascination for other spiritual ideas. On the contrary, such complementary readings converge analogous elements pertaining to different beliefs in her poems.

[6] Translation by Richard Zenith.

[7] Ahearn offers a Presbyterian reading of Moore's precision by associating it with the religious dimensions of her work, particularly the human relation to the sacred (216-217). He argues that Moore's awareness of the ineffability and vagueness of the divine implies the use of precision in language at the service of that very vagueness.

[8] Due to the fact that "Poetry" is one of Moore's most revised and reprinted poems, I should clarify that I refer to the version published in *Observations* (1924) and reprinted in *New Collected Poems*.

[9] The Zen principle of non-duality, which undermines distinctions between subject and object, self and other, cause and effect, consistently appears in a number of traditions such as Advaita Vedanta, Mādhyamika Buddhism, and Taoism.

[10] Tao [道] itself is often translated as the "Way," hence the *Tao Te Ching* is the book of the Way.

[11] Lao-tzu's line contains a pun in the word *Tao* [道] which is often translated as the "way" or "road" but also means "thinking" and "speaking". Thus, literally, the line could be translated as 'the Tao that can be Tao is not the eternal Tao' [道可道，非常道]. Zhang Longxi compares the polysemy of the word with the Western concept of *logos* and argues that *Tao* contains the duality between thinking and speaking, it is "the ineffable, the 'mystery of mysteries' beyond the power of language. Even the name *tao* is not a name in itself: 'I do not know its name; so I just call it *tao*. The *tao* is for ever nameless'" (27-29).

[12] Ahearn relates Moore's drastic revisions—in the form of deletions and omissions—to acts of precision in which the gap between the human and the ineffable would remain unspoiled (223).

[13] In considering non-human agency, Moore's poetry precedes "the environmental movement by several decades" by focusing on themes such as "a disdain for human rapacity, plunder, and anthropocentrism, a celebration of nature's variety, economy and ingenuity" (Costello 133). Indeed, Fiedorczuk argues that Moore's interest in non-human beings and environments, along with an imagination that refuses to conquer them or "pastoralize" them, suggests that she was "a forerunner of what is today known as ecopoetics" (23-24).