Response to Pat Willis’ "'Contrarieties Equally True':
Marianne Moore and William Blake
Bonnie Costello

This is literary scholarship at its very best, packing a volume's worth of indispensable research into 20 pages. "If 'compression is the first grace of style,'/ you have it"! Willis begins her argument with a modest accounting of the places and ways Moore, early in her career, connected with Blake. What unfolds from these findings feels less like annotation and more like the key to Moore's art. “Here,” in this scholar's art, “we have thirst /and patience, from the first.” By posing questions and carefully following each step of Moore's intricate study of Blake, Willis brings her reader along in the process of discovery. Once again we must be grateful for the brilliant, resourceful work of our greatest Moore scholar.

What I most enjoy about this essay is the way it follows Moore's leads, bringing us close to her reading, her thought, her creative process, and her development as a young artist. Moore's mention of Blake in the note for “Poetry” is familiar, and we are aware of her inclusion of Blake among influences when interviewed about her work. But Willis opens her essay with a stunning piece of data: Moore “refers to William Blake in at least seventeen of the poems she wrote between 1914 and 1919.” The essay goes on to detail and analyze these references, which arise, as Willis says, in various forms—in “specific, non-thematic Blake references,” in “Blakean themes” that are directly tied to the precursor, and in “substantial ties to Blake's ideas and images.” Willis is doing much more than
cataloguing in this table (though her talent as one of America’s most distinguished curators is certainly on view here). For one thing, she notices that these three ways of engaging with Blake follow a kind of development that shows a deeper connection to Blake each year as Moore finds her own way in poetry.

With patience and ingenuity Willis follows Moore back not only to Blake’s own texts, often lesser known ones, but also to surprising and often indirect sources, especially biographical and critical statements about him (Yeats, Gilchrist, Symons, etc.). By returning to these sources Willis shows us how Moore conversed with her precursors, never simply relying on received opinion, but forming her own view in dialogue with Blake and his commentators.

Now we know for certain how “the raw material of poetry” links to Blake through Arthur Symons’ biography. But the biggest revelation of this essay is how carefully Moore studied Blake’s drawings and worked the details of his vision into her poems. This shouldn’t surprise us given what we know about Moore’s interest in visual art, and the profoundly visual nature of her imagination. But it hasn’t been remarked before. There is room for further study in connecting Moore’s word/image poetics with Blake’s, and their mutual interest in the abstract design and ontology of representation. Visual source material is only the beginning of this connection. Willis points out that Moore acquired several black and white prints, and kept *The Ancient of Days* above her desk (as did W.H. Auden, by the way) throughout her writing life. But Willis also discovers, by careful study of Blake’s prints, the sources for some of Moore’s obscure imagery. Here it is, the “real toad” in the “imaginary garden” associated with Milton’s *Paradise Lost* but drawn directly
from Blake’s illustration of it, his “Adam and Eve Sleeping.” In Blake’s illustration our first parents lie dreaming in a highly stylized bed of ferns and rosebuds. Moore looks at the drawing through the lens of Gilchrist’s commentary, which confirms the “imaginary” character of this garden with its “invented, foliaceous forms[s].” A fairly detailed but innocuous-looking toad sits in plain sight but somewhat camouflaged on the flowery bed, ready to whisper his temptation into Eve’s ear.

William Blake and Marianne Moore may suggest “contrarieties” to many, and I confess that I was always a bit suspicious of Moore’s inclusion of Blake as a major influence. What did this poet of “observations,” so engaged with the visible world and natural history, have in common with the great visionary, for whom “nature” (as it is known by the physical sciences and realist representation) was a sign of our fallen condition. For Blake our fixations on the material world and vegetable nature were obstacles to the fulfillment of our visionary potential. Moore may not have been a “literalist” of nature, but her catalogues of flora and fauna, her detailed accounts of the movements and habits of the pangolin or the jerboa, her regard for science and engineering, would have alienated Blake. But, as Willis reminds us, for Moore “the power of the visible / is the invisible.” Even in her particularity Moore is, as Willis says, “acknowledging a spiritual dimension expressed in the material world,” not fetishizing the material world as such. As we continue to discover the relationship between Romanticism and Modernism, and the place of visionary poetics in twentieth century poetry, Moore’s engagement with Blake is an essential and hitherto neglected focus.
In arguing for Blake’s impact on Moore’s artistic development, Willis focuses persuasively on the idea of contrarieties. She cites Moore’s early motto “The place where contrarieties are not equally true is nothing to me” as a foundational principle that she will pursue into her late work, and which we can find in her paradoxical slogans and aphorisms, in the construction of her images, and in her embrace of apparently opposite sensibilities. Contrarieties in Moore are not negations (as they so often are in Modernist texts), at least not as she grows into her mature work. Moore seeks, like Blake, the union of opposites, held in balance. Perhaps we could call them, after “The Pangolin,” “conversities.” Willis’ essay, by placing Moore with Blake, takes us a long way toward understanding what she means by this.