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Modernist Style & the Paradox of Pedantry:
Thoughts on Patricia Willis’ Essay on Moore and Blake

While clearly a poet preoccupied with the religious and theological, Moore has seen less critical attention paid to her interest in the mystical dimension of the spiritual arts. Patricia Willis’ remarkable essay on Moore and William Blake goes a long way towards correcting that: in her excavation of Blake’s hitherto mostly unremarked presence in Moore’s poetry and thought, we learn how Blake provided Moore, over the course of her career, with a model for holding contrarieties “equally true”—that is, positively balanced and together and not in negation of each other.

Of the many intertextual gems Willis brings to our attention, one stands out in particular to me: that the quotation in the first stanza of “Pedantic Literalist” comes not, as Moore herself omissively implies in her notes, from Richard Baxter’s *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest* but (inexactly) from Book I of Blake’s *Milton*. Specifically, the source passage—“To do unkind things in kindness! with power armd, to say / The most irritating things in the midst of tears and love”—comes from Leutha’s defense of Satan before the Great Solemn Assembly (12:31-32). Leutha is Satan’s emanation and the figure for “Inspiration,” or sexual love as inspiration (as well as, we learn, in her Miltonic form, Sin itself), but she is also a daughter of Beulah (“where Contrarieties are equally True”) and thus offers herself as a ransom for Satan’s transgressive intrusion into the work of his brother Palamabron (another son of Los and a figure for Pity). But her explanation, designed to belie Satan’s aggression, ends up betraying it. For it is not only a meek and ultimately disingenuous tactic to claim that one “irritates” out of love but also a more fundamental mystical (or dialectical) possibility that love and destruction can be the same thing. As Blake’s bard suggests, Satan does not merely conceal his fury beneath his more characteristic “mildness,” but he is, more importantly, unable to differentiate between the two: “And Satan not having the Science of Wrath, but only of Pity: / Rent them asunder, and wrath was left to wrath, & pity to pity” (9:46-47). Unable to express his feelings transparently and discursively, Satan pressurizes (or is pressurized by) his peculiar alchemy of wrath and pity, aggression and mildness, in such a way that it explodes apart into opposing poles. Leaving behind his conspicuous (if still, by all indications, earnest) performance of pity, Satan can now but violently embody wrath—literalizing his emotions in way that leaves them opaque, suffocated, deadened—that is, pedantic—and divorced from the vital and transparent breath of Imagination: "He sunk down a dreadful Death, unlike the slumbers of Beulah" (9:48).


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In this sense, I offer that the transition to a “complex modernism” of balanced juxtaposition in Moore’s poetics, which Willis suggests begins around 1918 or 1919, in fact begins at least slightly earlier in Moore’s engagement with Blake in “Pedantic Literalist,” even if, at the level of syntax, Moore is still presenting contrarieties as negatives. On one hand, what this might simply mean is that Moore’s development towards a modernism that finds a way to sit comfortably with the opposition between the “real,” concrete, and immediate and the morally abstract and mediated proceeds conceptually before it does stylistically, as if still searching for a fitting form. On the other hand, this might also suggest that the difficulty of moving conceptually from negative to positive opposition will itself inevitably reproduce a kind of negative opposition at the level of style through which it is expressed, at least at first—not only as it applies to the poem’s addressee (that is, it is the pedantic literalist’s kindness, cordiality, and spontaneity themselves, qualities meant to overcome some sort of opposition, that produce their opposites; the qualities do not lose their effectiveness simply because they wither with time) but also to modernist practice itself. Just as Milton himself, in Blake’s retelling, hears the bard’s song and sees himself in the figure of mild but intrusive, rebellious but ultimately Urizenic (because repressively rational, “making to himself Law from his own identity”) Satan, so Moore might, in fact, see herself in the pedantic literalist. It is a career-long preoccupation of Moore’s, after all, the question of how one might be more forward, authoritative, or “real” with one’s personality and intellect without it becoming too overbearing or self-defeating. As she puts it far later in her 1949 lecture “Humility, Concentration, Gusto,” in rhetoric that echoes the Blakean imagery of Satan’s descent: “Concentration—indispensable to persuasion—may feel itself crystal clear, yet be through its very compression the opposite.” Aspiring to be a full-fledged “literalist of the imagination” is a dangerous pursuit: one risks becoming a mere “pedantic literalist,” instead.

What Willis’ essay opens up, then, I think, is a new literary-historical vein through which to connect Moore to other modernists—especially of, say, the heroic or Satanic variety with which Moore is not normally associated, whether Joyce, Pound, even, or others. Not only to see how Blake knits them intertextually together, but also how the unique impasses and paradoxes of Blakean poetics, of giving representational and stylistic form to

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2 First published in *The Egoist* 3.6 (1 June 1916), “Pedantic Literalist” initially ended with the word “reduction” before Moore changed it to “production” in later versions. What this change—made over the course of Moore’s poetic development—suggests to me is that the pedantic literalist’s once-“erect” and “spontaneous core” is not merely reduced into a withered “palm tree” trinket by the passage of time or some other external factor but that it is indeed produced in such a way that already occasions its withering.

3 “Urizen is the insane form that reason takes when reason pretends to supremacy over all other human faculties. Satan is Urizen because he is intolerant, despotic, and punishing.” Anthony Apesos, “The Poet in the Poem: Blake’s Milton,” *Studies in Philology* 112.2 (2015): 388.

4 In *Milton* “the paved terraces of / His bosom inwards shone with fires, but the stones becoming opaque: / Hid him from sight, in an extreme blackness and darkness” (9:31-33); “The nature of a Female Space is this: it shrinks the Organs / Of Life till they become Finite & Itself seems Infinite / And Satan vibrated in the immensity of the Space! Limited / To those without but Infinite to those within” (10:6-9). The shrunken “Organs of Life,” perhaps, suggest the shadow of a source for the phallic note of Moore’s once-erect “palm tree.”

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abstract contrarieties made “equally True,” might also motivate or obtain in any number of modernist practices and problematics—from, say, modernism’s interest in animals and the posthuman/inhuman to its historical role as an incubator for different forms of queer identity.