Response to Edward Allen’s “‘Spenser’s Ireland,’ December 1941: Scripting a Response”

David Anderson University of Louisville

First of all, I simply wanted to say that Edward Allen’s essay is remarkably rich and engaging scholarship. He approvingly cites Charles Bernstein’s argument that “the audiotape archive of a poet’s performance” is a “significant, rather than incidental, part of her or his work” (qtd. in 460), and Allen makes a strong case for such thinking with his exceptional archival scholarship on, and interpretation of, Marianne Moore’s Harvard recording of “Spenser’s Ireland.” He convincingly argues that Moore’s stylistic changes in the 1930’s and early 1940’s were “performative as well as stylistic,” and marshals a dazzling array of evidence, including the recording itself, her performance notes and circumstances, family correspondence, and historical context (466). Allen does a fine job of capturing Moore on the fly before and during a recording session, turning a poem about Irish cultural pride and obstinacy into a reflection on civic virtue during World War II.

I especially liked the essay’s engagement with Moore’s republicanism—her attraction to a political system that accommodated independent thought and spirit, but, to her mind, also necessitated civic virtue (the willingness to sacrifice self-interest at a time of crisis for the common good).

So Allen’s essay can, in one sense, be read as Moore’s reflection on poetic style, poetic method, and kairos, or the opportune time for communal action. Put differently, when is it time to come together as a community, and how does the poet facilitate such communal action? I was struck by Moore’s comment about the American public’s “porcine self-interest” during the 1932 presidential election, and her desire for Herbert Hoover to deliver a “humdinger [of a speech],
crafty and humourous but also deadly serious” (qtd. in 454). For Moore, it became increasingly important to write about social virtue, but also to find effective means of conveying those ideas.

Allen’s essay, then, opens up new opportunities to explore Moore’s ideas about rhetoric. When Allen writes that “rhetoricians have not always shown due regard for the conditions of political utterance,” he is discussing Aristotelian *kairos*—the need to create a timely argument for the political moment (451). He does a wonderful job showing that Moore is attuned to her potential audience and historical moment. In addition, my pupils dilated when I saw mention of Kenneth Burke, the great 20th century rhetorician who was also a good friend of Moore. I was reminded of Victoria Bazin’s essay “Marianne Moore, Kenneth Burke, and the Poetics of Literary Labour,” and other scholarship on Burke and Moore. I suspect that the subject of Moore and rhetoric is not exhausted, but can yield additional insights into her writing in the thirties and forties.

Questions about diversity, historical trauma, and public trust are also raised by Moore’s recording and Allen’s essay. There’s been a wealth of scholarship on social trust—including by the Pew Research Trust—which has found that historical oppression depresses social trust in a society for generations. (In short, historical oppression destroys civic virtue.) I mention this because many scholars have noted that “Spenser’s Ireland” is deeply engaged with questions of race, group loyalty, and perceived insularity. While Allen’s essay fairly interprets Moore’s recording as an expression of frustration with Ireland’s neutrality in the war, I also wonder if Moore is also expressing frustration with a legacy of trauma and broken public trust that undermines the willingness of people to come together at a time of crisis. The fault may not lie entirely with Ireland.
I would also like to find out more about the other poems that Moore read during her Harvard recording session to acquire a fuller understanding of Moore’s political and social engagement that day—especially with respect to Nazism. Allen notes that Moore read “Rigorists” and excerpts from “Virginia Britannica,” which are intriguing and provocative choices. “Rigorists,” for instance, emphasizes adaptation at a time of struggle, rejects the “porcine self-interest” that she saw as a threat to republics, celebrates biological diversity, but also celebrates Christian missionary work among Eskimos that elides the attempted erasure of their languages and cultures. In short, Moore is likely contrasting American history and values to those of Nazi Germany in her readings, and I would love to find out and interrogate what she did and how, and to place her reading of “Spenser’s Ireland” in a fuller context.

Finally, Allen’s essay raises important questions about Moore’s shifting ideas about technology and technique—both derived from their joint Greek root techne or craft. Prior to the thirties, Moore had developed a writing process that functioned as a form of self-discipline. Attention for Moore was a moral act, I believe Linda Leavell has written, and writing, for Moore, was a public responsibility to perceive accurately and to write carefully. She wrote in exceptionally challenging forms to force herself to rethink ideas and pre-conceptions. Allen’s essay suggests that public performance provided Moore with useful creative constraints—challenging enough to forgo the exceptional rigors of stanza templates, syllabic verse, and baroque internal and external rhyme schemes, and thereby freeing her to experiment with more direct forms of poetic utterance.

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