

"Taking the Potomac Cowbirdlike": History Through Space in Marianne Moore

1

Since her college years at Bryn Mawr where she majored in both History and Politics, Marianne Moore was always extremely conscious of contemporary society and deeply immersed in history at the same time. In this respect her letters are a rich source of information often providing unexpected details. Writing to her mother and brother about a conference at Bryn Mawr on the Modern Democratic ideals ill relation to women's suffrage ill February 1909, she stated: "no decent, half-kind, creature could possibly think of fighting suffrage if he or it had heard her arguments" (*Letters* 63). With her increasing involvement as a Republican supporter,¹ she abandoned none of her fervor: "America is pestered at present by a mall named Franklin D. Roosevelt, as Germany has been with Hitler, but I think Mr Hoover will 'win', as our neo-Hitler would put it" (October 3, 1932, *Letters* 279). As this passage suggests, in the 1930s, and even more so during World War II, Moore's concerns do not focus on US domestic affairs alone, but the poet also takes the European situation deeply to heart.

Moore's essays and notebooks opened up new horizons showing another of her interests in history, dealing this time with the American past, the colonial period and the native inhabitants of the New Continent: The American Indians.² While editor of *The Dial* (1925-29) and during her life-long career as an essayist and reviewer, the poet often commented on events, exhibitions or volumes dealing

with these subjects. An exhibition at the New York Public Library on Dutch New York, the autobiography by Luther Standing Bear *My People the Sioux*, the publication of William Carlos Williams's *In The American Grain* or a collection of papers on Lincoln all served as opportunities for her to touch on the issue of the birth and the subsequent development of the American nation.

In this essay I wish to focus on Moore's relation to American history through the analysis of two poems, "New York" and "Virginia Britannia," that I consider as parallel both for their theme and communicative strategy. Although one is short and the other rather long, one is centred in the New York area and the other in Jamestown and Virginia, one is published in 1921 and the other in 1935, both works offer an overview of the development of the United States from the colonial years to the contemporary period Moore lived in, most interestingly using space as a tool to present and relate the past. Through this "spazialization of history" the poet is free to glide over the history of her country in an apparently detached and objective way, presenting facts vividly and directly without the mediation of thought. This strategy allows the poet to introduce, bear witness and give voice to all the elements that form the contemporary United States each in its own way not only as static groups in opposition to one another, but also focusing on their dynamic relationships and the consequences of their interactions.

Both poems adopt the pronoun "we," as their speaking voice openly revealing that the "we" represents Anglo-Saxon tradition, and the moment of narration, the 20th century. By stating their points of view the two poems recognize the partiality of their visions and give the reader the consciousness that what he is reading is just one of the possible narrations, and not *the* narration of the past. In Moore's writing, confrontation with history begins by admitting/defining one's point of view, a fundamental pre-requisite for any reading of

past events and for any attempt to eliminate the assumptions and stereotypes of one's culture.

I will then conclude the essay with a short reference to another poem "Enough: Jamestown: 1607-1957," a poem written later in Moore's career for a special occasion, where she again focuses on United States history but in a more traditional and formal way, recounting past events directly without the mediation of space.

2

"New York" appeared in the *Dial* for December 1921, three years after Moore's move to Greenwich village and her final decision to live in the city.³ In this extravagant, creative, almost difficult-to-discern portrait of urban space, the poet presents contemporary New York relating it to its past and consequently to another kind of landscape typical of the undiscovered America of its origins: the wilderness. Described by Cristanne Miller as "another poem about colonization" (*Questions* 152), in this case space narrates history as Moore proposes her personal reading of the past of the United States not only through the typical spatial opposition wilderness/city but also through a dual and intertwining vision of New York itself: a forest when occupied by Indian Natives and a sophisticated built-up space after the arrival of the white man.⁴ This co-existence and crossing of several perspectives create all ambiguous scene of unrelated details and elements as if Moore were applying the technique of assemblage often admired in works of the artistic *avant-garde*. (On this aspect see Leavell 123.)

Through the juxtaposition of different points of view Moore opposed the idea of a possible unique vision of things, in this case New York history, accepting relativity and pluralism. However, through the pronoun "we," that explicitly declares her personal

identity, the poet goes a step further as she admits that even this attempt at a democratic and multiple vision is always dependant upon the observer: the vision can change if one open-minded observer is replaced by another open-minded observer. Even the 20th century assumption of a 360° perspective has its own limits.

In "New York" the world of the past is re-enacted through the picture of a lively and abundant "wilderness," directly cited in the poem, rich in animals (ermine, foxes, deer, horses, beaver, otter, puma), food supply ("meat and berries") and the kingdom of the "savage." Indians are explicitly referred to through the elements of their daily life ("tepees," "picardels," "calico horses," "war canoe") and, above all, through geographic names ("Monongahela," "Allegheny," "Niagara") that strengthen the pre-colonial setting and act as a contrast to the title that defines the city by its Anglo-Saxon name, New York. In the poem, naming is responsible for one of its two representations of past and present in terms of space, the more traditional vision that sees the past as the world of the wilderness and Indian Natives and the present, identifiable with New York and the "Anglo-Saxon." Moore also uses Indian names in "Virginia Britannia" and in other poems, always with the intent of reconizing Native culture and underlining the close relationship that exists between the Indians and the American continent. (For observations on Indian names see Axtell, Cronon, Wilson.)

The title and first line announces the theme of the poem with great precision, although there is no other explicit reference to New York and the link between first line and text is to be searched for in Moore's note to "fur trade": "in 1921 New York succeeded St. Louis as the centre of the whole sale fur trade." This note becomes intrinsic for the understanding of the poem as it clarifies and confirms its subject.

During the writing process Moore places in central position

what is usually considered marginal and an aspect that she herself ironically permits to be overlooked: "Perhaps those who are annoyed by provisos, detainments, and postscripts could be persuaded to take probity on faith and disregard the notes" (*CP* 263). Indirectly through the organization of her poem, Moore carries out her undermining of imperialistic and monolithic visions that assume to know, and to establish for ever, what is to be considered primary and what secondary. As this note cannot be omitted for the understanding of the poem, in the same manner marginalized events such as its Indian past cannot be set aside when considering a complete and exhaustive recollection of the history of New York, and the United States in general.

In its internal organization the poem can be divided into three parts each composed of one sentence. The first part extends as far as the end of line nine and contains a long series of predicates to the subject-title, listed one after the other without explicit connections and each characterizing the city in its own way. New York is initially seen as the "savage's romance" where the word "accreted" introduces temporality and the past through the image of gradual accumulation. The romance of the "savage," that in the American context identifies the Indian, has enhanced with time and has a long history. Fascinating and adventurous for the modern man as the word "romance" implies, the roots of Indian culture are however set deeply "where we need a space for commerce," an impossible co-existence for two profoundly different traditions, the unreal "romance" and the down-to-earth "commerce," in spite of their assonance. The semantic contrast implied by the two words romance/commerce represents the opposition between the Indian space of the past and the business world of the present, two cultures that have come to share the same space where however the heritage of the past does not seem to answer the demands of the present:

"Indian abundance depended on a kind of mobility and flexible use of the landscape that would prove incompatible with the colonists' ways of interacting with the environment. . . . European and Indian ways of using the land could no more share the same ecosystem than could matter and antimatter share the same space."⁵

"The centre of the wholesale fur trade" confirms the space of the poem, New York, and introduces the aspect of the city, which forms the focal point of the text. The following six lines offer a multiple and composite picture of New York that can be read both as a winter Indian camp ("snow") and as the New York fur market, the specific place in the city foreseen for such a trade. What links the past Indian camp with the present fur market is the presence in both spaces of several animal furs although they represent a far different role: a precious and superfluous product for the modern world, an essential commodity for survival for the Natives. Sharply set apart and opposed at the beginning of the poem, the Indian past and contemporary urbanity could have elements in common in spite of all. In addition to sharing the same area, past and present are associated by the fur trade as much as by death. If the fur market is saturated with dead animals, the Indian camp is a desolate land: desert, the ground "dotted" with dead animals ("skins") and "wilting eagle's down" in the sombre and monotonous colors of winter.

While the distance between the New York of the past and that of the beginning of the 20th century is threaded through the weave of the representation, "it is a far cry" explicitly states the cultural difference between the New York of Moore's time and the wild space outside its borders. The location of the wild space through the expression "the conjunction of the Monongahela and the Alleghany" declares that this space is an historical—now lost—space that confronts New York also on a temporal level. History comes

vividly back to life through the use of Indian place names, names of rivers but also of the local battles between the Indians and English colonists, and through the depiction of the area around Pittsburgh (the place where the two rivers meet) as it appeared in the past and not in the heavy industrialized present.

Often alluded to, the wilderness is directly cited in line fourteen in the expression "the scholastic philosophy of the wilderness."⁶ Moore proposes a personal, uncommon and paradoxical conception of the wilderness that undermines and questions some of the pivotal oppositions of the poem: past/present, wilderness/city, Indian/colons. Linking the wilderness with Europe ("scholastic") and theoretical reasoning ("philosophy") Moore turns into European what is mostly conceived as typical America, namely the wilderness, presenting this space as only apparently free, spontaneous and natural. Such a space is instead a complex site, with its own "philosophy," perspective on the world and internal laws.⁷

The final section of the poem centres on the search for a faithful definition of New York City listing all what this city is not through an increasing repetition of "it is not." In spite of all negations, the elements cited are undeniably all aspects of New York, although none of them captures its essence. that lies — as we discover in the end — in its "accessibility to experience," an attitude, an experiential opening more than a fixed and definite experience. In the last lines past and present, wilderness and city, romance and commerce, Indians and colonists are opposed no longer, but are unified in that each of them represents a trait of New York. In a democratic and inclusive vision all elements are fundamental for the comprehension of contemporary New York, that becomes a symbol for the entire nation because of its very hybridity, multiplicity and relativism.

3

Commonly acclaimed as Moore's "longest meditation on ethnocentric colonization" (Miller, *Questions* 132) "Virginia Britannia" (CP 107-11) was published in *Life and Letters Today* for December 1935. If "New York" can be indirectly linked with the poet's general experience of the city, the source of inspiration for this later poem lies in two specific journeys with her mother to Norfolk, Virginia, in the summers of 1934 and 1935, to visit her brother Warner, military chaplain there in that period.

Focused on United States history, Moore is also attracted by nature in Virginia during her days there history and geography mingle and intertwine, in her poem space and time are both present, the composition being like a picture detailing moments of the past, and telling its own history through juxtaposed spatial images. With a single look the reader/onlooker moves through the history of the United States and experiences the changes imposed on the American territories from the arrival of the first colonists to the 20th century principally through the transformation of nature.⁸

As in "New York," space is a central moment in the recounting of history because past events are generated by details of the landscape; in addition almost all the principal characters presented are defined in terms of their relations to the American continent: toponymy and topography are two ways of introducing history in "Virginia Britannia." At the beginning of the poem the reader is given the impression of facing untouched nature: abundant lists and noun phrases materialize the tangled vegetation, rich in sounds that confront whoever wishes to enter this wild space. But the consequences of the temporal journey become manifest soon after, and at every line the reader stumbles on an element alien to the wilderness, that reveals itself to be completely transformed at the

end of the poem, now a mixture of native and imported, wild and tamed flora and fauna, no longer an unlimited natural extension but grounds and gardens with obvious external borders and internal barriers of walls, fences, lines of trees and bushes. Sale tries to explain the first colonists' ungovernable impulse to alter nature as follows:

the psyche of Europe to confront the wilderness of America . . . produced bewilderment, dislocation, and disorientation, a sense of being out of place, imprisoned in a hostile environment full of hostile strangers To this terror of the wild the European mind opposed the serenity of the garden: nature tamed, nature subdued, nature, as it were, *denatured*. . . . But for all the talk of gardens, we must not forget that the task of control and subjugation was to be done violently, with all the technology and power at Europe's command. (272, 289)

"Pale sand edges England's Old Dominion": the poem meets the reader with an arrival at destination that the topographic detail "England's Old Dominion" sets back in the colonial period of American history. In relation to this opening, Jeffrey Westover writes: "The language of the first two lines makes clear that the speaker belongs to the present and is engaged in an act of historical meditation In fact what the reader describes both is and is not a colony. Once upon a time it was, under the governance of England, but now it is one of those sites whereby the poet's nation commemorates its birth" (29). A recollection of past events set in the present, the point of view adopted is however that of the first Europeans approaching the American shore, in order to make the contemporary reader experience that arrival and follow the colonists' steps on the sands of the New Continent. Moreover, through this perspective, Moore highlights the historical encounter

between Old and New World through a spatial device, the "pale sand," a specific, concrete and natural border that evolves to become a political and cultural boundary, in the movement from East to West, being the point where the European world, preserved in the microcosm of the ship, meets the New World and must come to terms with it. The destiny of the United States begins with this temporal/spatial encounter. America's atmosphere is enchanting: "the air is soft, warm, hot" and the emerald water meets the white beach in peaceful and undisturbed solitude. But this place is only apparently deserted and the verb "known" is linked to a series of creatures for which this space is a home. Deceptively a list of animals and flowers — "red-bird," "trumpet-flower," "red-coated," "wild" — the first catalogue of the poem introduces American history mentioning a representative of the English military on the American soil, the "musketeer," the word that sets in motion that intertwining between space and history unravelling throughout the poem, reinforced by the "cavalier," related to the previous example through assonance and as belonging to the same cultural background of the English Crown.

Following a "deer-track," the traveller abandons the shore and plunges into the heart of the continent and into what he/she expects to be a wild space, where the encounter with a church and its cemetery contradicts any possibility of wilderness and introduces the temporal dimension. Impossible to be found at the time of the first discovery during travel on American ground, the ruins embedded in nature recall the historical perspective and remind the reader of a site not uncommon in the Old Continent, alluding to the possible superimposition by the first colonists of a familiar space over the alien empty expanse of the New World.

Once a foreign intruder in the American landscape, the church in ruins looks harmless to the natural American landscape that it

contributed to transform in the past, a relationship that seems to be reversed with the "the now tremendous vine-encompassed hackberry," higher and more powerful than the church tower, a spatial, more specifically architectonic, visualization of a "new dominion" of nature, of the native tradition, over the Old Dominion of the imported European culture represented by the church. In contemporary America, however, fixed opposition seems to vanish and also the division between native/colonial does not seem so meaningful any longer. In her notes for one of her lectures Moore reveals that "[the] very tall hackberry-tree — a solid pillar of ivy— [is] said to be brought from England as a sapling" (Prose, Rosenbach II:09:06). A natural element but not indigenous to the New World, the tree has so perfectly adapted to the American environment that it is camouflaged in its wilderness, another example of hybridism of the American tradition derived from different cultures.

Echoing another fundamental American component, the Puritans, the funeral formula that ends the first stanza introduces the idea of sin: under the sycamore in this churchyard in ruins "a great sinner lieth." The sycamore, the symbol of New World's development after the arrival of the colonists, has its origins in the sin of the first Europe all occupants, To proceed in recounting American history, one must avow one's sins and consequently the poem must "spell out not a linear history of simple integrity but rather a history of principles perverted in the application and from the start" (Slatin 246).

The second stanza begins with a butterfly flying zigzag over the tombs: a movement that interrupts the spatial description to delve into history. The detailing of two historical characters, the Indian chief Powhatan and the English captain John Smith, also an explorer of the coasts of North America, openly sets the confrontation between two different cultures and its implied native/colonial

opposition, previously indirectly represented by elements of the landscape.⁹ The first trait related to the native figure is of a topographical nature, as if to stress from the start the relationship between Indians and the space they occupy and indirectly recognize their territorial right to free movement on the New Continent. The Indian chief is not referred to by his personal Indian name but is called Werewocomoco, or the name of the capital of his territories, "a confederacy of about thirty tribes of Algonquins occupying tide-water Virginia" (CP 279) as Moore specifies in her note to this topographic expression.

The introduction of the speaking voice in line 18 openly reveals the perspective from which the history of Virginia is re-told, a perspective that an attentive reader might have already guessed at considering the poem's initial point of view, that of the newcomers approaching the shore. In the attempt to persuade us that the Indian "fur crown / could not be odder than we were" to the Indians because of the rather peculiar and unrelated elements adorning Captain Smith's coat-of-arms, Moore highlights that colonists "do not realize that what they find is no more culturally bound, no stranger that what we have brought" (Miller, "Categorization" 802). All cultures are relative and what might be natural for one tradition looks unconventional for another and vice-versa.

If the Indian chief is portrayed as a person deeply rooted in his territory, John Smith establishes himself as a frontier man. Explorer and tireless traveller between the two shores of the Atlantic, the object used to represent him, his *coat-of-arms*, unifies elements coming at least from three different traditions: the Latin culture in the motto *Vincere est Vivere*, African mythology in the image of the ostrich that digests metals, and the world of the Middle-East in the three heads of Turks. It is on this point, their relation to space and their greater or lesser fixedness in a place, that the two cultures are

differentiated in the poem: as a matter of fact it is the Europeans and not the Indians who have abandoned their territories. The coronation ceremony of Powhatan by Christopher Newport, that closes the historical moment, is only an apparent recognition on the part of the Europeans of the power and supremacy of the Natives on those lands that have always been their own. Imposing on another culture rites typical and immanent to their own specific tradition, the English colonists subject the Indian chief to their world, conception, and school of thought, making of him no longer a free authority independent of the English Crown but part of a system whose rules he must respect and whose orders he must obey. Through this coronation ceremony "Powhatan, whom the English with their own dream of empire exerting terrific force typically nominated 'Emperor' of the Algonquians inhabiting the Jamestown area, was translated into English political terms, where he becomes a power subject to the English crown" (Cheyfitz 60).

The two historical figures vanish in the background and the gaze travels back from the landscape, focusing on its "grounds," "green," "wall-rose," "walls of yew," "Fort Old Field," and culminating with "Jamestown." Place names and the reference to Daniel Boone, that relate to John Smith and Christopher Newport, continue the theme of exploration and of the consequent submission of unmapped territories, making it explicit that the goal of the handling of nature is to transform the American wilderness into an English landscape; the general human/natural opposition is once again reiterated with the colonial/native contrast of the beginning. The repetition of "Old Dominion" strengthens the colonial setting but the landscape is now different from that encountered at the beginning of the poem, at the first occurrence of this topographical specification. Limits have been imposed on nature and artificiality has turned trees into statues or walls.

The "walls of yew" divide the American landscape into two well distinct spaces: the inner space of "Fort Old Field" and Jamestown, and the outer space characterised by the presence of the Indian who looks towards the walls of yew with an out/in perspective and "knows," probably guesses, what is going on behind those walls. The treatment of space openly shows the consequences of the colonists' arrival — their appropriation of the land and its successive transformation according to European criteria begins to tarnish the picture of union and pacific mixture between native and imported elements that the analysis of the landscape had previously suggested.

The flight of another creature, a bird, moves the attention from the landscape to another specific character, the mocking-bird itself. Like the two previous historical figures the bird enters the scene through a spatial connotation. Introduced as a human being by the expression "the terse Virginian," the mocking-bird is another hybrid element of the poem, an inhabitant of the New World but unequivocally linked to the foreign European tradition by topography that calls him by the name of the English colony. The single word "Virginian" sums up the long and complex process of co-existence, mixture and failed integration between native and imported cultures. Despite its American origin, the expansionistic and conquering behavior of the mocking-bird "that drives the owl from tree to tree," together with its love of solitude and of a space of its own, "musing in the semi-sun . . . conspicuous, alone," do not remind the reader of the American Indians but of the recently arrived colonists in that every movement they make "involves driving others out" (Miller, "Categorization" 802).

What links the mocking-bird to the description of flowerbeds in the following stanza is spatial contiguity, the funeral garden being the space they share. Wilderness, "box-sculptured grounds," garden — nature has become increasingly artificial and tamed.

The explicit reference to the "flower-bed" is to be found again at the end of the sixth stanza, when it becomes clear that the project of the poem is to depict in the spatial terms of a flower-bed the history of Virginia, and in general the birth and consequential development of the United States: "Moore's effort [is] to redeem the founding American story by casting it in botanical and zoological terms" (Berger 284). This perspective is reinforced by placing between the two descriptions of the flowerbed a historical section listing specific events of the American past.

The historical catalogue recalls slavery, the driving out of the Indians from their timberland territories, religious obscurantism, the Puritan period and the life on the wild frontier. The fundamental trait of the American experience reveals itself to be the intermingling of cultures, that implies submission and violence. Citing what in the poem is defined as an African American idiom, "advancin' back- / ward in a circle," Moore denies the conception of history as a continuous progress exactly because of "what has come about," all the negative events of American history previously cited, in addition to conferring to this language, the language of the black American, a dignity and a status: "in this poem, naming both aspects colonizes and subverts colonization, as Moore implies by including Indian names and the 'Black idiom'. In her poem" (Miller, "Categorization" 804). The theft of land from the Indian and the acceptance and promotion of slavery are equalized as both examples of the colonists' domineering attitudes. The topographic expression "Chickahominy" is particularly revealing as it is the name of the Indian tribe who lived in the closest proximity to the site where Jamestown was founded in 1607, and is the region whose tribes first went through the experience of being forced out of their homeland. In the early period, occupied by British settlers, "Chickahominy," was one of Virginia's eight original shires, also known as being the place with

Virginia's oldest and most historic plantations, the traditional original site of slavery. The word sums up the expansionistic and violent action of the early colonists in two ways: their forcing of one people out of its native territories and their imposition at the same time of another ethnic group on territories totally foreign to them.

Linked to the flower-bed of the seventh stanza through the references to clothing, the eighth stanza introduces two female characters — parallel to the two male figures of the Indian chief Powhatan and the English captain John Smith: the Indian Princess Pamukey and an aristocratic colonist, both depicted through their ornaments.¹⁰ Moore returns to the issue of cultural relativism using again the adjective "odd" as she had done with Powhatan's fur crown, this time doubling the use of this term and explicitly using it in reference to both women, or more precisely to the things that surround and identify them. With this strategy Moore removes "the grounds for establishing a hierarchical arrangement of them" (Westover 42). Used to earrings made of gold, silver or precious stones, the "birdclaw-ear-ringed" princess would have looked peculiar to European colonists, as is peculiar the native American raccoon (an Indian word) never seen before by inhabitants of the Old World, who compare it to a bear — "(what a bear!)" — in their attempt to adapt unknown realities to their cultural world view and classification. Even in this case toponymy is revealing, Mattaponi being the name of one of the oldest reservations in the country established by an act of the Virginia General Assembly in 1658. The theme of the land and of the right to it is always in the foreground. No less peculiar should have appeared to the eyes of the Indians the young English lady dressed in "gauze-and-taffeta" (inappropriate clothing for the American surroundings), whose French chaise-longue shows her roots deep set in the Old Continent.

But the "Terrapin / meat and crested spoon / feed the mistress,"

a sign of an initial inter-contamination between the two cultures, together with the house that she owns made up of European and native elements, a front door decorated with a "brass-knobbed slat" but mobile walls that makes it "everywhere open." Such a closed apparently harmonious space lies in an open space apparently harmonious as well: "on Indian- / named Virginian / streams in counties named for English Lords." The three topographical names display in just three lines some issues of America's complex 'cultural story: the two traditions that meet in this area of the New Continent, the Indian and the English, have tried to establish their primacy on the land by an act of naming, each according to its own tradition. Deeply in contact with nature and living according to the rhythm of seasons and the characteristics of the territory, native names identify the natural elements necessary and intimately related to their survival, while English relies on property and name according to political and economical strategies. Despite the fact that rivers have Indian names and counties English ones, it is the hybrid term "Virginian," set between "Indian" and "English," that best sums up the essence of American experience, a term already used to define the mocking-bird, a linking point between these two traditions.

So far indirectly represented through the spatial structures of the poem, with the ninth stanza the issues related to the presence of different cultures on the American soil, the relations of power between them, their mingling, integration, segregation or submission, are now openly dealt with in a theoretical reflection that covers a good part of the last section of "Virginia Britannia." Here history takes the main role and proposes a possible recounting of itself, while space plays a more descriptive role, although very central, for its pictorial and immediate vividness in exemplifying some of the facts narrated.

Once again the harmony alluded to through spatial elements and the world of nature clashes with actual history and human

behavior and this stanza evokes past events of the United States relating to oppression and abuse rather than to a peaceful cohabitation between different cultures. There are instances of hybridization in this New Continent, as the "unique / Lawrence pottery," echoing the long English tradition of precious china, is listed as one of the traits of this "spot" together with the native "high-singing frogs," "cotton-mouth snake" and the "too / unvenomous terrapin in tepid greenness." However, as was hinted before by the phrase "establishing the Negro," the problem of slavery emerges again in the images of "cotton-fields" and "tobacco-crops," places that most directly bring back the history of Virginia slavery, in open contrast with the "tactless symbol" of the new republic of Virginia, in the motto "Don't tread on me" on its "once dashing / undiffident first flag."

Rebelling against its condition as a colony and born as the land of freedom, the United States is a land of compromise, that opposes all kinds of slavery in principle but that ends by accepting it for trivial economic interests, probably the guilt which makes the dead under the sycamore in the opening stanza a great sinner and for which he must make amends. Using the adjective "our" in relation to Virginia's first flag, Moore confirms her belonging to the tradition of the European colonists and re-reads in her own terms the mythical history of the birth of the United States learnt at school and handed down by the founding fathers: to some degree the poem accepts the grade-school mythology of the nation's origins that is inculcated in every citizen, native and naturalized alike. . . . On a second look . . . however, the admiration becomes decidedly less innocent . . . The terse tag ['once dashing / undiffident'] acknowledges the expression to be the work of tyro statesmen defending a youthful nation" (Westover 45).

The list of elements characteristic of Virginia includes "the one-

brick- / thick serpentine wall built by Jefferson," a spatial structure that through the term "wall" connects with the "walls of yew" formed by the undefined but surely not native "Care", which seemed to create a barrier between the Indians in the wilderness and the colonists in Jamestown. Different because of the material of which it is made, this wall maintains the function of separation between Indian and colonists previously performed by the walls of yew. In this case the division is sharper as it serves not to protect a small colonial settlement but to mark the boundary of the University of Virginia, a place of cultural propulsion and transmission, evidence of how the imported traditions of the colonists have developed and are witness to its strong intention to exert its influence.

The following theoretical statement is the centre of the tenth stanza, where Moore overtly reveals the motif sustaining her poem. The birth of the United States is entangled with a form of colonization, an act defined in terms of "taking what we / pleased"; like any kind of colonization it enforces a slow death, "like strangler figs choking / a banyan" and it can be all but "a synonym for mercy." Using a plant image to introduce her statement Moore explicitly talks of colonization and defines it, using the first person pronoun for the third time and for the third time admitting her perspective.

With all abrupt change the theoretical and abstract reflection is followed by a list of "stark luxuries," commodities and frivolities the Virginian aristocracy cannot give up and that are in deep contrast "with what the colonists / found here ill tidewater Virginia," the simplicity of a landscape characterised by beautiful and luxuriant untouched nature, but also the austere and ecological life-style of the Indians in addition to the dreadful and unbearable living conditions of slaves, thanks to whose oppression, abuse and exploitation Virginian aristocracy could afford such luxuries and a life of leisure. Representative of the simplicity and frugality of the native and

natural American is the "hedge sparrow," a little bird that with its joyous even nocturnal song announces the last stanza, totally focused on a redundant landscape portrayed at sunset, with history once again exemplified through space.

The final image of thick vegetation reminds the reader of the initial vision of "England's Old Dominion" dotted with cedars and gives the poem a circular movement bringing the wilderness back to the foreground. In this green area the second part of the stanza sets the space of the city, a kind of space already mentioned in the poem through the reference to Jamestown, itself also cited following the description of a natural landscape. Only hinted at and not described in great detail, the urban space is central to the dynamics of the text as representative of a site conceived and built by human beings and above all linked to the European history imported by colonists. The presence of the city undoubtedly changes the connotation of the wilderness.¹¹ Usually a domineering and influencing site, this space is "dwarf[ed]" and made insignificant by clouds expanding above it, clouds that obscure and cover its "assertiveness," dwarfing at the same time its "arrogance / that can misunderstand importance." Objectively correlative of the human beings who have built it, and here more specifically of the European tradition of the colonists, the town is not able to read the natural landscape and understand through it "what glory is." The newcomers from the Old World are not moved by the American landscape.

A new continent of wilderness transformed and manipulated into a bed-flower by the newcomers, at the end of the poem the natural space seems to win back power and strength and to appear again as an untrespassable and fearful site, although transformed in its traits by the presence on its soil of alien species artificially imposed. Parallel in some ways to human history, the evolution of nature in the American continent tells more a story of adaptation

and integration, a story that involves violent destruction and deep transformation, but that nature and the landscape seem somehow able to survive. With natural history as a model, human events on the American soil still wait to create a possible harmonious co-existence, not achieved in the first encounter between Indian and colonists, but not even in the ensuing course of United States history.

4

Now a public figure, "spending a great deal of her time in responding to 'tons of irrelevant mail' . . . increasingly a participant in . . . popular culture" (*Letters* 487), and winner of major poetic prizes, Moore wrote in 1957 the poem "Enough," which testifies to her eminence since it was commissioned by the *Virginia Quarterly Review* to celebrate the 350 years of the foundation of Jamestown, the first permanent settlement of what was to become the United States of America. In addition to the subtitle "Jamestown, 1607-1957," the introductory note to the poem explicitly links it with the celebration of this anniversary, reporting that on 13 May 1957 three United States Air Force super sabre jets named after the three ships of the Jamestown settlers "flew non-stop from London to Virginia" (*CP* 292).¹²

As a celebration for this particular occasion, this poem "in audibly rhymed couplets" (Holley 150) lacks the force and complexity of "New York" and "Virginia Britannia," narrating past events directly with just a few hints at spatial representation. In spite of this and in spite of the atmosphere of national exaltation and ceremony, "Enough" manages to maintain in part that doubtful look at the myths concerning the origins of the United States, that had already distinguished her before, if one reads between the lines and is able to capture Moore's veiled but stinging irony.

As with the two previous texts located by toponymy through their titles, this poem also defines its territories from the beginning, in its subtitle however and not in its title. This choice shows the centrality of "enough," a concept towards which all the reasoning in the poem tends and is directed, and the subsidiary role of space which is no longer mentioned in the following lines, devoid of any topographic connotation. The poem opens describing the same arrival as "Virginia Britannia": the perspective is still that of the first colonists coming from Europe and landing on American shores. But the arrival here is already tainted by the knowledge of future events. While the "pale sands" edging "England's Old Dominion" with a "soft, warm, hot" air gave, at least at the beginning, a promise of paradise and of a wonderful and pleasant land, here colonists find a "too earthly paradise," a place of death, pests and pestilence "the living outnumbered by the dead." Sale writes of the first English permanent settlement in the New World in this terms: "The most compelling fact of life in the Virginia colony, from the beginning and for many decades, was death . . . Withdrawal: apathy: famine: death. That, in pure form, was the pattern of the settlement of Jamestown for virtually all of its first two decades" (271-7).

Regardless of other visions of the first colonists on the New Continent, in the following lines Moore gives no idyllic picture of the first years of Jamestown. In spite of his role of "master" and consequently of model for the entire colony, Captain Dale becomes a "kidnapper" driven by desperation; colonists are incapable of helping each other economically even in the most desperate initial conditions, and their attempt at communism is "doomed" "as a system of economic support" (Miller 149); the romanticized story of Pocahontas is simply an expression of the imperialistic attitude of colonists that through the "insidious recourse" of teaching "turn to usurpation of other's rights" (Miller 149). Powhatan, Pocahontas'

father, is "forced to make peace / embittered man" and the girl— "in rank above / what she became" — ends up in a marriage renouncing her name; Indians are revealed as being better persons than the first colonists and the reversal of perspective seems to be totally accomplished with the description of one of the colonists as a "cannibal," once "tested until so unnatural," a depiction that "helps correct the historical inaccuracy of early European descriptions of Amerindian social practices" (Westover 50).

Embedded between this and the final reasoning on the origins of Jamestown, Moore offers two detailed descriptions of flowers, an echo of the luxuriant and charming nature of "Virginia Britannia." But the vision of the New World as an irresistible and heavenly wilderness does not coincide with the desperation of the first colonists: the image of the "old deep pink" flower clinging to the tanbark in the sun is a "path enticing beyond comparison," but "not to begin with" in the first days of colonization. As Moore soon after affirms: "don't speak in rhyme / of maddened men in starving-time," contradicting herself in practice as she recounts the desperate first events of Jamestown in rhyming couplets.

The declaration, "Marriage, tobacco, and slavery, / initiated liberty," proposes the same reading of past events as she had already achieved years before in the spatial structure and imagination of "New York" and "Virginia Britannia." Not one of the first colonists would have been convinced that a permanent, powerful and all domineering nation would have resulted from their "feeble tower," but "it was enough." As Cristanne Miller notes, "there is nothing in the poem to make us respect or like these early colonists and much to make us dislike them" (*Questions* 151); however, Miller points out that the poem's conclusion — "it is enough / if present faith mend partial proof" — "questions whether their history of treachery, genocide, and enslavement may, in fact, ultimately, be 'good' . . .

giv[ing] a positive cast to that ambiguous and potentially ironic judgement" of the three elements at the base of the origins of the United States (*Questions* 151).

Probably influenced by the patriotic occasion and by the celebrative atmosphere, Moore concludes her poem on a positive tone echoing the words of the chaplain of Yale that "past gains are not gains unless we in the present complete them," as she explains in her note to the last line of the poem. However joyful the end, the dreadful excesses of the first colonists remain, and even in this later and surely less successful poem the ambiguity of the nation's origins cannot be erased from the white page, echoing the spatial analysis of the territories of "New York" and "Virginia Britannia."

NOTES

1. In the introduction to Moore's letters of 1930-34, Bonnie Costello writes that "Moore's political conservatism . . . stands in striking contrast to the socialist sympathies of many writers of the thirties" (*SL* 253).
2. It should be recalled that Moore had close contact with Indian people when teaching bookkeeping, stenography, commercial law at the U.S. Industrial Indian School in Carlisle from 1911 to 1914. This school had been founded in 1879 by Captain Richard Pratt, an army officer who sought to educate Indian prisoners of war, and wanted with this school to "achieve even more dramatic results by applying the same methods to Native American children" (Wilson 311). For one year, 1912, Moore had the founder of the school as superintendent, and must have perceived the atmosphere of the school that Pratt's motto effectively synthesizes: "kill the Indian and save the man", although probably in part weakened since the days of its foundation (Wilson 312). For a poignant testimony of days spent in this school in 1879 see Luther Standing Bear's account in Wilson 313-7.
3. Quotations from the poem are taken from the version published in

Observations (65) that maintains the lines "To combat which one must stand outside and laugh / since to go in is to be lost" omitted from the version in *Complete Poems*.

4. For another interpretation of "New York" focusing on history and the past see Joyce.

5. Richter 57-59. For analyses of the different conception of the land between Indians and Colonists see Cronon and Sale.

6. This line from Moore's poem is used by Axtell as title of the chapter of his book dealing with the influences of Indian culture on English settlers, arguing that the willingness of many colonists to become Indians proves "the educational impact of a culture marked by uncommon integrity, by social cohesion and a unity of thought and action. In short, New English captives stayed with their Indian families because they had become enchanted by 'the scholastic philosophy of the wilderness' . . . and the arcane complexity of the Puritan philosophy, with its burden of civility and constraint, could simply not release them from their spell" (166-7).

7. Costello links the two concepts of wilderness and scholastic philosophy: "[Moore] draws an analogy between the tortuous passage through mountains and forests and the experience of reading arguments by theologians. Their method — a *via negativa* — of defining God by what he is not, is also the structure of this poem" ("Wild Decorum" 45).

8. For other interpretations of the poem that always link time with space see Borroff, Slatin, Westover.

9. In a poetry notebook with annotations on the poem, there is a long passage on John Smith and the most important events of his life with particular reference to his geographic discoveries and his relation with the Indians (Rosenbach 1251/12, VII:04:07, pp. 32-6).

10. The Indian Princess here referred to is the one known to the Europeans with the name of Pocahontas, daughter of Powhatan. It seems that Moore was much interested in the life of this girl: in her reading diaries there are many

passages from books about her (Rosenbach 1250/6, VII:02:02, pp. 78-79,121-3,127-9). In these quotations there are many spatial details, as is often the case when Moore speaks about American Indians.

11. Not included in the first versions of the poem, the reference to the city is not the result of later revisions. This kind of space was present to Moore when she was writing: some of the typewritten versions kept at the Rosenbach are titled "Jamestown" and not "Virginia Britannia."

12. Quotations are taken from the version in *Complete Poems* (185-57).

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