

Jeanne Heuving: On "Sojourn in the Whale"

"Sojourn in the Whale" addresses the problem of "every kind of shortage" with which feminine presences, such as Ireland, must contend. "Sojourn in the Whale" is one of Moore's few published poems of feminine complaint. However, it is a complaint that enacts its own victory over those "men" who would patronize Ireland's struggles, failing to take any responsibility for her "shortages," but rather blaming them on her "feminine temperament" and "native incompetence." And while the poem is ostensibly about Ireland, it is also probably about Moore, who was Irish, and her artistic struggles:

You have been compelled by hags to spin
gold thread from straw and have heard men say: 'There is
a feminine
temperament in direct contrast to
ours which makes her do these things. Circumscribed by a
heritage of blindness and native
incompetence, she will become wise and will be forced to
give
in.

In addition to having "to spin gold from straw," several other enterprises that Ireland's temperament purportedly makes her do are "Trying to open locked doors with a sword, / threading the points of needles, planting shade trees / upside down." Each of these magical, fairy-tale endeavors involves an activity in which the physical properties of the "things" present an "obstruction to the motive that they serve," but are also enhanced by their unusual use. That is, while the poem conveys the frustration inherent in these endeavors, it also relishes their magical improbability. While the length and threat of a sword make it hardly the tool to open a locked door, it is intriguing to imagine the turning of such a small mechanism as a lock with the even smaller, distant tip of a sword. Likewise, while it is impossible to thread the eyeless point of a needle, the familiar difficulty of threading needles is intensified by imagining a thread pointing at the narrow, unperforated end. And shade trees indeed become trees of the shade if they survive a planting which would place their dense foliage pointed down into an even denser earth.

John Slatin in *The Savage's Romance* discusses "Sojourn in the Whale" as an example of Moore's struggle to maintain "an imperviousness" that in the end is overwhelmed by "common

experience" and acknowledgment of her indebtedness to the larger literary tradition. At this time in her life, argues Slatin, Moore is dependent on her isolation as a form of self-protective identity and so willfully guards it. Like Ireland, Moore is obtusely still "trying to open locked doors with a sword." However, in not taking into account the alienating languages in which Moore as a woman must write--her representational as well as other material "shortages"--Slatin fails to appreciate both the dimensions of Moore's struggles and the extent of her achievement in this poem. Moore's felt isolation is her shared "feminine experience," and thus her relation to the literary tradition is necessarily oblique. As is Ireland's art, Moore's art lies in diligently carrying through impossible feats--attending to without falsely resolving the contradictions that structure her literary endeavors, and her existence. Indeed, Moore's imaginative care in conceiving impossible feats caused by "shortages" reveals her desire to share the "common experience" of feminine and oppressed others.

The poem concludes with a wonderful image of rising water. Like the complacent "men's" speech set "in motion" in such poems as "To a Steam Roller" and "To Be Liked By You Would Be a Calamity," the men's patronizing observation about water set "in motion" is their own undoing:

"... she will become wise and will be forced to give

in. Compelled by experience, she

will turn back; water seeks its own level": and you

have smiled. "Water in motion is far

from level." You have seen it when obstacles happened to

bar

the path--rise automatically

The water is the poem's own rising anger, coolly stated. However, it is not an anger bent on convincing those who would find the anger only another example of a "feminine / temperament," but an anger intent on washing away what it did not originate, rising as freely and as spontaneously as a smile. It is a "byplay more terrible in its effectiveness / than the fiercest frontal attack." It is Moore's "white ink"; her laugh of the Medusa. And while this poem is motivated by considerable anger, it rises above this anger in its imaginative portrayal of feminine activity that is finally superior to the usual functioning of swords, needles, and shade trees--warring men, domesticated women, and established knowledge.

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