Charles Altieri: On "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish"

The first step in defining the qualities Moore establishes for her authorial energies is to turn to "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish," the poem that most clearly differentiates her model of composition from Williams's . . .

Here we have thirst

and patience, from the first,

and art, as in a wave held up for us to see

in its essential perpendicularity;

not brittle but

intense?the spectrum, that

spectacular and nimble animal the fish,

whose scales turn aside the sun's sword by their polish.

This is no Romantic plea for unity with nature; it is as insistent as Williams on the willfulness, or resistance to the given, that is necessary for the site art composes. Moore, however, is careful not to turn such resistance into a self-sufficient "masked ball / attitude" that might impose on the quest for personal identity "a hollowness / that beauty's light momentum can't redeem" (86). There are hollownesses or gaps that are necessary to beauty, and to redemption, but one must be careful not to fill them in too quickly with one's own self-image. Rather than turn back on a representable will, Moore makes the movement of the poem itself the only possible definition of ethos. There she can establish a willfulness that can be kept in public circulation, available for any consciousness willing to recapitulate the control giving this work its polish.

The result is a polish that extends beyond any social connotations, to the most intricate and intimate relations between life and art. Notice first the two nouns that initially define the poem's "here," and thereby establish some of the qualities giving art an "essential perpendicularity" not translatable into any simpler, more naturalistic terms. What other site could so combine the physical and psychological properties of thirst and patience? "Here" we see the bottle's shape and function; we see the thirst it should alleviate strangely connected to the fish it represents; and we observe the traces of craft that ultimately align patience with another mode of thirst that only this play of forces might satisfy. No wonder these appearances so quickly transpose what we see, from physical object into the more abstract
defining of the art itself as a wave, which we can envision cutting against the planes that pure perception must occupy.

All that the wave implies immediately takes psychological form in the second pair of adjectives syntactically linking the two stanzas. "Brittle" describes the glass, but, in conjunction with "intense" (and after the oxymorons of the first stanza), the adjectives expand to refer also to the activity (and thirst) of both the artist and the viewer. Yet the temptation to turn all of this into mere metaphor?into what the farmer might keep in his head?is denied, by the fact that the poem is also speaking about the spectrum of light growing inseparable from the movements of the fish. Now the fish begins actually to swim, although in an element that the artist has composed for him. And that light becomes something quite different from the "sun's sword," something whose polish does transform that sword into the perpendicularities of the poem's own prismatic waves. Language makes us see a new object. In fact, the movement of this language so fuses the abstract and the concrete that it becomes an example of that polish which, in the visual object, literally gives the fish a different medium.

Moore's celebration of art brilliantly combines the presentational forces of the two media, glass sculpture and language, showing how each transforms a world of thirsts into a world where the dynamic properties of the artistic acts compose a perpendicularity considerably more satisfying than any physical shape. Moore reveals no hidden symbolic forces and works out no deep psychological conflicts. She does, though, define modes of activity where it may be possible not to have to live in the sets of oppositions that are generated by those conflicts. "Egyptian Glass Bottle" suspends the claims of realism, in order to create the effect of liberating the self and language into an awareness of how the world can be contained by what our arts can make of our care and attention. There is no denying Williams's insistence on the artist's will as antagonist to the sun's sword, but there is also no need, with such intricate objective displays of what language can do, to turn that will into a specular icon of itself, which threatens to become a thirst that no mode of polished play will be able to satisfy.


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**Publication Status:**
**Excerpted Criticism** [1]
**Publication:**
- Private group -
**Criticism Target:**
Marianne Moore [2]
**Author:**
Charles Altieri [3]
**Poem:**
An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish [4]

**Source URL:** https://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/charles-altieri-egyptian-pulled-glass-bottle-shape-fish
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