

Marianne Moore and Racheal Blau Duplessis: Thick Language and Form

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Marianne Moore and Racheal Blau Duplessis lived and wrote at different times but their work still share some similarities. Both authors use thick language and form in their poetry to abstract the meaning. Thick language is the arrangement of words in a body of work that displaces conventional usage. The words are not used to directly express a message and this challenges the reader to use his or her own interpretive ability. The reader cannot rely on academia or established literary devices to approach the work. Moore's poetry uses thick language to conceal her meaning. She chooses words that illicit a tone contrary to the poem's underlying content and these words allow her to hide the message within. Moore also plays with the form of her poetry to mimic the hidden meaning. The thick language in the poem is repositioned spacially and broken up grammatically, which can mimic the message and the complexity of the language. Like Moore, Duplessis uses thick language and form in her poetry. She plays with form several times in Draft: 58-76. The most innovative use of form is in "Draft 68: Threshold," where Duplessis uses black "highlighter" to disrupt the reading frame and mimic the themes of corruption and mourning. Duplessis writes about corruption and sorrow in "Draft 68: Threshold" and the black highlighter visually displays those themes. Though Moore and Duplessis wrote at different times, they both use thick language and form to enhance their work.

Thick language seems to be the way in which specific words are strung together in a manner that displaces conventional usage and meaning. The words the author chooses and the way he or she arranges them can change the feelings they arouse in the reader and the meaning they convey. The use of thick language allows the author to create a tone in his or her poem that contrasts the meaning. In Moore's poem, "To a Snail," she uses thick language obstruct a direct criticism of culture (Joyce 27). Moore criticizes bourgeoisie society but hides her meaning within thick language. She uses scientific, bland descriptions of animals and quotes from other works to deliver her message. Her choice of words and quotes and the way she arranges them makes the reader feel as if the poem is nothing more than

scientific descriptions of astonishing animals. Through these bland descriptions, which are laden with thick language, Moore is able to deliver her message to readers who choose use their own imaginations and inventive interpretive skills.

Thick language makes the true meaning in the work more elusive. It “raises the significant question of how we might respond to what we recognize as “the different” before a value has been assigned to it or before it becomes qualified – as 'sexual' or 'racial' difference” (Ngai 252). The reader does not know if the language is gendered, critical or has taken another slant entirely. This allows authors, such as Moore and Duplessis, to enter a new niche in poetry and challenge readers to look at a poet's work in a new light. Their work “invites a critical journey not into the self, but into the more complex problem of the self's relationship to a particular kind of linguistic difference that does not yet have a concept assigned to it”(254). When a reader comes across Moore or Duplessis' work they may not know what to make of it. Both authors use thick language and this allows the reader to question what value and meaning will they assign the work without the boundaries of the literary traditions to aid them? The reader is left to decipher the work alone, with no resources to compare their answers. Ngai suggests that “by pointing to what obstructs aesthetic or critical response [...] astonishment and boredom ask us to ask what ways of responding our culture makes available to us, and under what conditions” (262). Duplessis and Moore's use of thick language is new and culture has not yet told readers how to respond. As a result, readers are left dazed and confused, unable to use what is in their literary tool boxes to decipher each authors' work. Since the reader cannot make any definitive sense of the work before them, they are left with many choices about what to take away from the work. The reader could happily place the “best fit” meaning on the work and walk away feeling satisfied; or they could disregard the work as useless because they fail to see a singular message behind it. Both of these scenarios lead to a detrimental line of thought – that all literary work must have a clear meaning to be valuable. Since the reader may deem the work muddled or poorly executed because they could not

extrapolate a firm message, all work that is complex would be deemed worthless. Once this line of reasoning is established, authors would have a limited freedom of expression, as their work must convey a clear message in order to be recognized as valuable. Moore recognized this possibly and in her poem, "In the days of Prismatic Color," she argues that complexity achieved through thick language can hold as much truth and meaning as work in which meaning is apparent.

"In the Days of Prismatic Color," Moore criticizes the male literary tradition. Moore finds that the male literary space is simple and has little complexity. She argues that complexity is not vacant and that one can gain substantial truth from it. Moore begins the poem by setting the stage,

not in the days of Adam and Eve, but when Adam
was alone; when there was no smoke and color was
fine, not with the refinement
of early civilization art, but because
of its originality" (Moore 41).

This space is devoid of female influence. Moore suggests it was a time where only males were contributing to the world and women had yet to enter the field. She establishes that this space contains only males, it is a space where "Adam was alone" (41). Moore depicts the male realm as simplistic, a space without the abstract. There "was no smoke" to provide cover, leaving everything clear and in view. Moore uses colour to reinforce the clarity in the male space. Colour has retained "its originality" (41), suggesting that colour is unaltered - red would exist as red with no shades or other alterations. She states that colour does not have "the refinement of early civilization art" (41) in its original form, suggesting that the purity and simplicity of this unaltered state is devoid of art.

Moore shows that the male space is simple. In this space, there is "nothing to modify it but the /

mist that went up, obliqueness was a variation / of the perpendicular, plain to see and / account for” (41). Moore points to the lack of variation in this space. The variation of perpendicular, a line intersecting another line, is obliqueness, a line moving diagonally across space. There is only a small difference between the angle of these types of lines; there is little variation and curves or elaborate designs do not exist in this space. Furthermore, Moore states that all is “plain to see and / account for” suggesting that there is no abstraction in this space. The tone Moore uses in her poem is critical and bleak. Her tone may be the result of her own, current struggle in the literary space and Moore argues that “complexity is not a crime” (41). In the poem, Moore recognizes the discomfort that Eve's entrance into Adam's space brought – the simple did not mix easily with the complex. Moore understands the value of complexity in poetry and begins to justify the use of her thick language. Though thick language is rejected and labelled as a feminine fallacy, Moore knows its potential. She argues

Complexity,
 moreover, that has been committed to darkness, instead of
 granting itself to the pestilence that it is, moves all a-
 -bout as if to bewilder us with the dismal
 fallacy that insistence
 is the measure of achievement and that all
 the truth must be dark (41).

In this section, Moore displays what complexity can accomplish. She uses thick language to describe complexity as an irremovable injection into literature and dispels the assumption that it does not give truth any light. Moore notes that the male way of articulating truth involves insistence with no

abstraction. Moore would like to disperse this former measure of achievement. She also refutes the notions that all “truth must be dark” (41), as she knows that if thick language is implemented the complexity it creates will relieve truth to those who work to seek it. Moore notes that only misused complexity, that which has been committed to darkness, will hide the truth.

As the poem progresses, Moore uses thick language to animalize simplicity and complexity. She suggests that they are antipodes to one another (41). Complexity takes the form a pseudo-centipede with many legs. It is a odd creature, “part of it was crawling, part of it / was about to crawl, the rest / was torpid in its lair” (41). Moore depicts complexity as withholding the truth - making it difficult to obtain though still present. Complexity, in centipede form, holds the truth out for all to see, “crawling,” yet masked within potential, “about to crawl,” and dormant but soon to awake, “torpid in its lair” (41). Moore portrays simplicity as a pathetic creature. Simplicity has a “short-legged, fit- / ful advance, the gurgling and all the minutiae” and Moore labels this creature as “the classic” (41). Through these creatures, the reader can see that Moore acknowledges that thick language confuses the audience. The complexity-centipede has a “multitude of feet” and Moore questions: “to what purpose! Truth is no Apollo / Belvedere, no formal thing” (42). Moore's thick language complicates meaning within its excessive words. The complexity-centipede uses an excessive number of legs to walk and one cannot fathom the purpose of having so many of one appendage to accomplish what only a few could do. In addition, Moore ties in Apollo Belvedere, a beautiful statue, and suggests that this symbolic model is not what critiques desire in their literature. They do not wish for meaning masked in beauty, they only desire the plain truth. Her male counterparts may argue that one could create the same meaning with fewer words, just as a centipede could walk with fewer legs, but Moore defends the complexity created by thick language and wishes to create a place in the male literary space for her Apollo Belvedere.

In the previous section, Moore mimics her argument with form. Visually, her poem is complex, which mimics the mention of complexity caused by the thick language. “Complexity,” as described by

Moore, physically moves about the page. She uses breaks, indentation, commas and dashes to disrupt the flow of the poem and mimic the motion of complexity. The previous section is not a simple read and the reader must navigate around the diverting language while following the lines as they move down, over, and back again on the page. Her form is very detailed and almost microscopic. Moore breaks up “a- / bout” (41) with a dash and break to emphasize the message in the stanza and accentuate the form of the poem as a whole. Moore uses form in combination with thick language to hide the message in the poem and create beautiful imagery.

Moore has established her stance, that thick language and complexity can convey as much truth as simplicity. In her poem “O to be a dragon,” Moore uses thick language and form to express a longing for freedom and to shake off constriction. In the poem, Moore associates herself with a dragon - a masculine symbol. Moore admires the dragon's “silkworm / size or immense; at times invisible.” (177). The dragon has the ability to hide, whether it be by size or magical phenomenon. For Moore, this ability is a desirable “felicitous phenomenon!” (177). The dragon's “ability to both exceed boundaries or disappear altogether is indicative of the enormous span of its potential moral behaviour” (Stamy 59). Through thick language, Moore is able to convey her desire to break free from the traditional form of the poem and the fear of critique in her current society. Once again, she uses grammatical devices such as repetitive periods and dashes to break up the reading frame and jostle the reader. The inability to read through her poem smoothly makes the meaning harder to obtain. Moore's poem is also short, leaving a vast open space on the rest of the page. The large blank space mimics the dragon's ability to hide, to be wondrous and influential even if only present for a brief moment. Like the dragon's appearance, Moore's poem is brief but saturated with meaning and beauty.

Moore hides her meaning within thick language and leaves the reader to interpret her work without the restraints of tradition. Though they lived at different times, Moore's and Duplessis' work share this factor. Duplessis also uses thick language and form to mask her meaning and leave the reader

to venture through uncharted territory when attempting to draw a message from her work. In “Draft 68: Threshold,” Duplessis criticizes the war in Iraq using thick language and form.

Duplessis use of thick language allows her to comment on the United States' occupation of Iraq. She utilizes the images and feelings that thick language can invoke to illustrate her point. The fifth stanza in her poem mimics the form of a dream. It is broken and disjointed. This dream seems to reflect the mind of someone, perhaps a soldier, experiencing post traumatic stress. The dream begins with a tranquil image of “floating downstream” amongst “coral-coloured cities” (Duplessis 67). This dream soon transforms into a nightmare:

Now dreams of human shit in doorways,
 Lumps, humped-over [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] damage
 [REDACTED] everything? [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] What creased map? But never mind
 That all roads [REDACTED] never
 Mind the sleeplessness, the [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] what action
 Can [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] (67)

The dream shifts from a pleasant drift to a horrific scene filled with carnage and slumped bodies. The person cannot make sense of his or her surroundings. At first, he or she makes only observations of “lumps, humped-over / damage” (67). Then, this individual's mind begins to question “everything? / What creased map?” and then slowly the mind decelerates and the thoughts become more spaced out

and short. The mind of this person seems confused and disjointed and his or her thoughts are scattered and darkened. The mind's disoriented state is emphasized by the form of the poem. The effect of confusion and spacial arrangement of this individual's thoughts is achieved through the black “highlighter” on the page.

Form plays a very important role in enhancing the meaning found within the thick language of Duplessis' work. The two previous poems by Moore used grammatical structures and line movement to jostle the reader. Instead, Duplessis uses black “highlighter” in her poem to disrupt the reading frame. The black boxes that cover the page make it more difficult for the reader to obtain the true meaning behind the words. This visual device takes complexity to another level. While both Moore's and Duplessis' disruption of the reading frame makes the meaning behind the words harder to follow, Duplessis' black highlighter suggests that there is hidden words that the reader will never see. What are these lines hiding? Is it words to complete the poem? Words to break up the meaning even further? Or nothing at all? The reader will never obtain the answers to these questions. The reader's trivial pursuit to find the meaning behind the black highlighter could mimic the feelings of American citizens in their quest to obtain answers about the war in Iraq. Why does this war continue? What is really happening over seas? Or when will the war end? By using this visual technique, Duplessis manages to add another level of complexity to the poem that also evokes emotion.

The black highlight used in Duplessis' poem mimics the content of the poem. This is a similar technique used in Moore's poem, “In the days of Prismatic Color.” The form of the stanza in Moore's poem that discusses complexity is itself complex. She breaks up words and sentences to further emphasize its content. Similarly, Duplessis uses the black highlighter in “Draft 68: Threshold” to emphasize the themes of entrapment and sadness. The black highlighter can be found on both sides of “trapped” (66) to emphasize literal meaning with visual barriers enclosing the word from both sides. This trend continues in the fifth stanza, the black colour represents darkness, confusion and mourning.

As previously mentioned, the fifth stanza could represent a postwar dream. This dream is fragmented; it transitions from one scenario to the next or from one thought to the next. Just as Moore uses grammar and space, Duplessis uses the black highlighter to chop up the reader's stream of consciousness so that the form reflects the feeling of the content.

Thick language is difficult to define but its use in female poetry has heightened the reader's experience. Moore and Duplessis use thick language to hide their meaning and challenge the reader to look at their work through new, untrained eyes. The reader does not have a specific set of tools they can use to decipher the thick language and this allows a new form to emerge. Moore and Duplessis use the form of their poems to emphasize the meaning of the words. Moore uses grammar and space to shift the lines around and disrupt the reading frame. This shift makes meaning harder to obtain. Duplessis' form is more radical as she uses a visual device to disrupt the lines. Duplessis uses black highlighter to disrupt the reading frame and reflect her meaning. The black bars on the page reflect the themes of hidden words, corruption of structure, and mourning found in the poem. Both these authors abstract meaning to add another dimension to their poetry, which ultimately heightens the experience for the reader and allows a new way of interpreting the text.

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