Jeanne Heuving: On "A Grave"

In "A Grave," Moore begins with a meditation on the impossibility of seeing the sea, when a "Man looking into the sea" takes "the view from those who have as much right to it as you have to it yourself." Moore calls attention to two difficulties here: the problem of seeing "through" a man, including a man's viewpoint, and the related problem of establishing herself as a centered speaker when she cannot stand "in the middle of this." Moore's depiction of the sea, correspondingly emphasizes its opacity over its translucency and its surface activities over its symbolic meanings. While Moore may well have written this poem out of a personal crisis that involved thoughts of suicide, the speaker reminds herself that to seek relief in the sea is not to be mirrored in any improved way or to be freed of herself. The speaker works her way out of her crisis by establishing and confronting the actuality or literality of the sea and of death, and her difference from them.

The form of "A Grave" bears an inverse relation to the poetic genre described by M.H. Abrams as the greater Romantic lyric. In the greater Romantic lyric, a speaker resolves his initial sense of crisis through meditation on a natural scene. Typically the speaker?s initial mood of unhappiness or dejection is transformed through an aspect of change in the scene itself-- sudden winds, for example, or a clearing sky. Through his meditation, the speaker "achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem." For Abrams, then, the typical pattern of this kind of lyric is out-in-out; that is, the speakers attention is first focused outside of himself, then turns inward, and then returns to the world around him. The speaker, in fact, may be seen to possess a highly specular relation to the outer scene, projecting his problems onto it and eventually finding in it a happier reflection.

Moore's "A Grave" reverses this pattern. This poem begins and ends with a short meditation, positing a lengthy scenic description in the middle of the poem. Further, it is precisely through the speaker?s separation from the natural scene, which in dominant Romantic iconography is feminine, that she achieves a positive resolution of her crisis. In Moore's poem, the sea prohibits the self-projection and identification prominent in (male) Romantic poems, for it is "quick to return a rapacious look." The sea's "look" is very different from the viewer?s gaze, for her "look" can be destroyed:

There are others beside you who have worn that look?

whose expression is no longer a protest; the fish no longer

investigate them

for their bones have not lasted:

Whether Moore is alluding to her own thoughts about suicide, or to those of others, she repudiates suicide as a meaningful action. The sea is not a mirroring surface, but an actual grave. Consequently, it is man's surface activity--his particular and careful acts--and not his

self -projections, which ultimately save him. Whereas men "lowering nets" unconsciously "desecrate this grave," "as if there were no such thing as death," the speaker of this poem, conscious of the ultimate meaning of penetrating the depths of the sea, trains her vision to the surface:

> The wrinkles progress among themjselves in a phalanx?
>
>> beautiful under networks of foam,
>
> and fade breathlessly while the sea rustels in and out of the
>
>> seaweed;
>
> the birds swin through the air at top speed, emitting cat-calss
>
>> as heretofore?
>
> the tortoise-shell scourges about the feet of the cliffs, in
>
>> motion beneath them

As do greater Romantic lyrics, Moore's poem becomes more intense near the end. But, unlike these lyrics, the intensity causes the speaker to become more conscious of her meditation on the outer scene, as the sound of birds and bell-buoys make "noises" in what has previously been an almost entirely visual representation. The poem resolves its initial questions about perspective and of seeing the sea with an understanding of the opacity of the ocean and what the ocean is not:

> and the ocean, under the pulsation of lighthouse and noise of
>
>> bell buoys,
>
> advances as usual, looking as if it were not that ocean in
>
>> which dropped things are bound to sink?
>
> in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition nor
>
>> consciousness.

The tone of the ending is intriguing, sounding both of victory and defeat. But it is precisely because of its irresolute and provisional perspective, a perspective that does not claim too much in the face of death, that the poem can reach closure. Importantly, the poem concludes with "consciousness," not "volition," for it is the speaker?s unswerving awareness of the sea as a grave and not her will to power over it that allows her to resolve her crisis. Although Pound suggested that Moore invert the order of consciousness and volition to create a stronger ending, Moore elected to keep the order of her words as written. Unwilling to sentimentalize her own personal powers by urging a notion of will in the face of death, the speaker, and presumably Moore, establishes her strength ultimately through her circumspect

consciousness of this grave.

The overall effect of this poem is of a kind of containment, as if everything could be known only through its most pronounced boundedness. As a woman, Moore?s speaker is traditionally associated with the natural scene and with death itself; Moore resolves her speaker?s crisis by establishing the literalness of the sea and death, as entities entirely apart from and different than herself.

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