"Mending the Break in Time" (on Marianne Moore)

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Introduction to an event titled "Finding the Words: Responses to crisis from the Marianne Moore papers & Philadelphia poets" - at the Kelly Writers House, November 7, 2001, a program co-sponsored by the Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia.

The wartime letter exchanged between and among modern poets was a place "where the fragments met," as Marianne Moore put it in "Nevertheless" - forming a temporary whole that was nevertheless no illusion of enduring wholeness. In 1944 Moore's book Nevertheless was published, mutedly proclaiming that the old perfectly shaped lyric fruits were marred although delicious as ever--but, again, marred so that the hard process of fruition now bore in the final sweetness. "Nevertheless / you've seen a strawberry that's had a struggle." Frost kills rubber-plant leaves but can't destroy down to the roots. A prickly-pear leaf clings to barbed wire, but roots shoot down for a later greener day. "Victory won't come / to me unless I go to it."

In his charming November 7, 1944 letter to Moore, William Carlos Williams wrote to her about--exactly as we've categorized it tonight--"the uses of art" in a time of worldwide crisis. While in November '44 it was "hard to focus the mind on praise," Williams said he especially loved the title poem of Moore's new book, which she had sent him: "Nevertheless." I cannot think of a better gloss on Moore's wartime poetics than what Williams wrote here about what "we get from writing": "All artists are secretive and fly from a style which has been found out." This is why H.D. in her moving 1940 letter is "so keyed-up and happy in our fortress"--that fortress being London hunkered against the Luftwaffe which at the time many believed augured the destruction by air of England. In her poem "May 1943" H.D. wrote that the carpenter "has his chisel" while "I have my pencil": "he mends the broken window-frame of the orangery, / I mend a break in time."

And it is precisely why Winnifred Ellerman, a.k.a. "Bryher," could speak of the "irreality and great beauty" of a wartorn night sky, not to say that beauty made sense but precisely that it didn't, any more. It is why she, too, received Moore's homefront letters, as physical things, "with such joy," personal impressions on paper, the crabbed inimitable handwriting, seen immediately upon the postman's delivery, that announced the arrival of what Bryher calls Moore's "strength." Williams's typewritten letter ends with the briefest
handwritten postscript: "Paul Sr. is at sea--a destroyer." We can sense here, in this letter--but also everywhere in Williams' writing at this time--how worried about his son he was. Paul eventually made it all the way to Tokyo, part of the time on an aircraft carrier--in the vicinity of the most terrifyingly difficult fighting of the war. What could the father do? Well, he was putting together the first drafts of Paterson I, another hard-bitten place where the modern fragments would meet. But with Paul in the Pacific, he did what homefront grandfathers do. He took the disconsolate Paul Jr. on an outing--the perfect Williams outing, down to the dirty but stately Hackensack River, to a "marvelous old-car dump," with "hundreds of junked cars." Paul was beside himself with joy as the grandfather poet "paraded him up one alley and down another, old cars on all sides." He, too, so keyed-up and happy in his fortress. "The weak overcomes [the world's] menace," Moore wrote in "Nevertheless," "the strong over- / comes itself. What is there / like fortitude! What sap / went through that little thread to make the cherry red!"