Margaret Holley

Marianne Moore and the Capacity for Change: the Shape of a Career

What I have felt a need for in my work, and what I have therefore set out to make, is a kind of map, an overview, a topography of Marianne Moore’s poetic work as a chronological whole. I wanted to indulge the urge to categorize, name, and anatomize the ways in which she experimented and changed, the ways in which her work grew beyond itself in each decade of her career. And in order to achieve such an overview, I had first to find a vantage point outside of the one volume, The Complete Poems, that for many years had given me all I knew of Moore’s work.

The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore is a book that has stood in the way of its own author as few others have. The volume is such a unique treasury of poetic delights that the brightness of its virtues has for a long time quite thoroughly and rightly concealed its obscuring effects.

The Complete Poems is not only incomplete, containing only two-thirds of the poems that Moore published during her lifetime; it is also unchronological in its presentation. It begins in the middle of her work, progresses back toward the beginning, then jumps ahead to continue from the middle, and finally ends up with a mixture of early and late. In other words, the book has all the partiality and rich jumble of life, and no one would seriously fault its table of contents for not exhibiting the wholeness and order of a catalogue in retrospect.

A completely Complete Poems, however, is not exceedingly difficult to assemble, at least in one’s files and in one’s imagination. The early and missing pieces have to be gathered from various journals in libraries around this country and from the Rosenbach and Bryn Mawr College Archives; these pieces then need to be interleaved with the ones in the volume we have and those poems in turn unscrambled into their original order of appearance. What this jigsaw, visionary process then discloses is a surprisingly clear and detailed picture of the shape of Moore’s career.

The whole and chronological collection of her work reveals, in a way in which The Complete Poems cannot, the successive directions that Moore chose to follow in the range and tonalities of her work. In the complete body of work we are able to see the nature of each phase she embarked on—the initial incision and then long early expansion, the two middle waves of compression, and the later relaxation. By my way of looking over Moore’s career, there are eight groups or stages of poems, the first five of which are particularly interesting to me, because I think that they lead up to and include her finest work. And the larger rhythm of expansion and compression enables us to understand each individual poem more fully as a departure and destination, as part of a progress that the poet forged only half-blindly.

Moore’s first move as a serious poet was to ground the poem in the formal wit and wisdom of the epigrammatist. She and her contemporaries grew up bathed in the sensuous, lilting sound of Swinburne and the in the jaunty, song-like swing of Kipling, and Moore’s juvenilia (first published on this campus) echo some of this current dreamy softness and ballad sound. But the first sound of the voice of the Marianne Moore whom we have come to recognize has a fine, dry, arresting, aphoristic edge. If you open the Bryn Mawr magazine The Lantern for spring of 1910, you find Caroline Reeves Foulke’s poem “Lullaby”—beginning “Baby is drifting thro’ Sunset Land/In a rainbow-raft of dreams” and after twenty-seven lines like that ending

—Little Dream-Ship, with your white sails furled,
Rest in your haven deep;
A moonlit silence is flooding the world
And the baby is fast asleep

—followed immediately by Moore’s contribution—

My coat is nearer than my cloak;
Inside
My coat is an integument of pride.

Right from the start, Moore’s conception of art was diametrically opposed to that of her peers. Where they wrote (in the same issue of The Lantern, p. 103),

O sweet! the wind that thrills the pines
Has no such music to my ears;
There is a sweetness in her voice
Too sweet for all to hear,

she wrote,

Art is exact perception;
If the outcome is deception
Then I think the fault must lie
Partly with the critic’s eye,
And no man who’s done his part
Need apologize for art.
The eighteen Bryn Mawr poems, published by the campus magazines *Tipyn O’Bob* and *The Lantern* between 1907 and 1913, dramatize vividly the emergence of a sensibility squarely at odds with the prevailing winds of poetry at that time. It was a sensibility that, like those of Pound and Williams, would eventually reshape our conception of poetry and our ear for its sounds in this century.

One cannot get too much more concise than the three-line epigram and the one-word line, and having made the singular, naked statement her starting point, Moore began a gradual process of building and expansion. Her initial program in doing this may perhaps be described as a sense of “empirical trust,” for the Bryn Mawr poems carried titles like “My Senses Do Not Deceive me” and “Things Are What They Seem.” With this kind of epistemological confidence in the reliability of one’s own perceptions, Moore set about replacing sentimental feeling with satirical observation.

The next forty-two poems to appear are missives sent out largely from her home in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to appear in a variety of literary journals in 1915, 16, and 17. These are Moore’s first appearances in print beyond the circle of her Bryn Mawr peers and fellow alumnae, and they immediately place the poet in conversation with such people in the wide world of art and politics as William Butler Yeats, Robert Browning, George Bernard Shaw, Benjamin Disraeli, William Blake, and George Moore. These Carlisle poems include most of the pieces that Helen Vendler has described as the “deadly anatomies,” the “gallery of self-incriminating fools,” but they also include celebrations and praise. I call them “judgmental lyrics,” because even though the speaker prefers the “you” form of address rather than the “I” of self-expression, these poems have as much to say about their speaker as about their chosen object.

The Carlisle poems also introduce the other principal speaker of Moore’s work, the quoted voice of her mother and of anyone who chances a remark in the tone and spirit that the poet wished to appropriate. The Bryn Mawr poems had quoted axioms and adages of the public world, but these judgmental lyrics quote the individual and unique utterance. She does not leave the maxim behind but rather adds to it the color of individuality, even peculiarity, to come up with a title like “Diligence is to Magic as Progress is to Flight.” And the 1916 poem entitled “The Just Man And” opens by quoting what surely must be the voice of Mary Warner Moore on both the waste and the value of words of praise:

**THE JUST MAN AND**

His pie. “I would be
Repossessed of all the
Superlatives I have squandered,
That I might use them in praise of it.”

The measure of how far from the three-line axiom Moore came in the Carlisle poems is “Critics and Connoisseurs,” a 36-line exploration of the behaviors of the swan-like and ant-like humans inhabiting the world of art. She is still busy defining her art, this time by saying that “There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious / fastidiousness.” But “Critics and Connoisseurs” is one of the earliest poems to exhibit that peculiarly Moore-ish form of syllabically measured stanzas punctuated with inaudible rhymes. It was a shock to me, after I had dutifully counted up all these syllabic patterns with columns of little pencilled numbers next to each poem, to see on Moore’s worksheets at the Rosenbach absolutely no such evidence of syllabic counting. This seems especially fantastic in some of her poems of the nineteen-thirties which have stanzaic patterns ten or even twenty-five lines long. The calculated aspect of her syllabic verse is as well-hidden in the working papers as it is in the printed texts, and of course it is totally submerged and inaudible in the poem read aloud.

There is no discernible difference between the poems of 1917 and those of 1918, and yet the run of publications over the next seven or eight years moves quite steadily toward poems of such different range and subject matter that a new perspective and intent had clearly announced themselves by the time *Observations* appeared in 1924. Therefore I have located the seam of this fabric at the point of the Moores’ move from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and Chatham, New Jersey, into New York City, specifically Greenwich Village, in 1918, and I think of the thirty poems that appeared that year and 1925 as the “later observations.”

In her piece entitled “New York” Moore defined the essence of the city as “accessibility to experience,” but her sense of adventure and the changing times brought a broader world than the mere metropolis into the arena of her talents. These later observations gradually expand both in scope and in length, till they culminate in the three so-called “serial” poems—“Marriage,” “An Octopus,” and “Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns” of 1923 and 24. Moore facetiously called them serial poems because their to-her nearly Dickensian length surely warranted publication in parts rather than all at once. The observations of the twenties are filled to overflowing with people, objects, artifacts, sights, souvenirs, and curiosities—all the furnishing of a wide and fascinating public world from the seashore to the harbor of New York to the great mountain of Washington state. Their characteristic form is the list that strings out items like beads or the catalogue that amasses the things of the world in high piles, long inventories, with a seemingly endless energy for adding and including. One can easily imagine the strong-minded young poet, having finally convinced her mother not to move back to sleepy Carlisle but to take up residence in the city she loved, standing exhilarated at the New York harbor. As she wrote in “Dock Rats,”

*On what a river; wide—twinkling like a chapped sea under some of the finest shipping in the world: the square-rigged four-master, the liner, the battleship, like the two-thirds submerged section of an iceberg; the tug—strong moving thing, dripping and pushing, the bell striking as it comes;*

*There is the sea, moving the bulkhead with its horse strength; and the multiplicity of rudders and propellers; the signals, shrill, questioning, peremptory, diverse; the wharf cats and the barge dogs—it is easy to overestimate the value of such things.*
This exhilarating multiplicity did not only lengthen and fill up Moore's poems: it also tempered the strong strain of the moralist in her work. The judgmental tone of the earlier poems is joined here by a free and nearly runaway delight in description, presentation, mentioning, sharing the joys of sheer plenitude, variety, and astonishing presence. The inexhaustible store of sense impressions that the world offers now flows into her work, and the pleasures of sensuousness and pure discovery act as a releasing, enriching agent. This curiosity and exploration have their ethical counterparts: the poet is now rarely interested in judging an individual and is usually rather occupied in setting up criteria for judgment, probing the grounds on which we judge, by exploring groups and types of people. Plurality informs titles like “Reinforcements,” “Dock Rats,” “People's Surroundings,” and “Novices,” and instead of comparisons with the Imagists that the Bryn Mawr and Carlisle poems invited, we now find interesting echoes of Whitman's long lines and long lists and far view of things.

Expansiveness has an effect on the verse forms of this period as well, for Moore released her initially confined lines in a short-lived experiment in free forms. The syllabically determined line gives way to free verse in many of these works, and some of them has actually rewritten from syllabic form into free form for purposes of republication. “A Grave,” for instance, was originally written in a series of three syllabically measured stanzas when Moore mailed it to Pound in 1918, but she set the poem with almost exactly the same wording into free verse for The Dial in 1921. And free verse is the form for her longest, most crowded, nearly encyclopedic poems—“People's Surroundings,” “Marriage,” and “An Octopus.” Moore seems to have built her poem up by a process of accretion made possible by a shift of axis from the incisive cut of judgment to the expansive appetite for experience, for parasitism or gathering together side by side and line after line the multitude of mansions and wonders of the world.

If Moore had continued this trend of expansion, she might well have moved right on with Pound and Williams into the long poem almost without end, that extension of making poems into a lifelong process of spinning poetry in a skein as endless as experience. But she didn't—she called a halt, and somewhere in the hiatus between 1925 and 1932, when she published no poems at all but gave her energies instead to The Dial, her allegiance to the syllabic form returned with a new consistency and finesse. After all, if one can rearrange the same poem syllabically or freely without any difference in sound, why not cross the natural and free verse rhythms of speech over the visible stanzaic form? As Frost would put it, why not play tennis with a net? And so when we open up The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore, this is the point at which we begin that book—in the middle with “The Steeple-Jack,” a poem about a New England seaside town. We begin with the astonishing nine poems that Moore produced when she was already in her mid-forties with ninety published poems to her credit. The well-hidden drama we come upon in “The Steeple-Jack” is the struggle of open versus closed form being won by closed form. For example, the catalogue of flowers in that poem, which Moore deleted in 1951 because she felt it was a bit much and then later restored, is another list—

the trumpet vine, foxglove, giant snapdragon, a salpiglossis that has spots and stripes; morning-glories, gourds, or moon-vines trained on fishing twine at the back door:
cattails, flags, blueberries and spiderwort, striped grass, lichens, sunflowers, asters, daisies—yellow and crab-claw ragged sailors with green bracts—toad-plant, petunias, ferns; pink lilles, blue ones, tigers; poppies; black sweet-peas. (CP, 5-6)

—and yet this catalogue is syllabically counted and punctuated by fairly audible rhymes on the second and fourth lines (“trumpet-vine” with “fishing-twine" and “daisies” with “sweet-peas”). The confusion, abundance, and danger of this town on the edge of the sea is conveyed through that staple of Western poetry, the repeated stanza form.

Consequently the poem on the opening page of The Complete Poems represents one of the significant decisions of Moore's career, a formal swerve away from the endless and the immeasurable, an affirmation of the classicist's deliberate form and the achievement of culture that it represents.

I call Moore's poems of the thirties the “animiles,” using the term that she used for them in a letter to T.S. Eliot, consenting to his placement of these first nine pieces at the opening of Selected Poems. The work of the 1930's includes those opening nine as well as the group from the middle of The Complete Poems that was first published in the volume entitled The Pangolin—“Half Deity,” “Pigeons,” “The Old Dominion” quartet, and “The Pangolin” itself.

In the animiles, the encyclopedic appetite of the later observations has been curbed and channeled somewhat. The range is still quite broad, but the vast accumulating heaps of the twenties have been limited by a more selective and penetrating vision and by a finely tuned tension between the natural and the man-made. This is the period—and the only period—in which the poetic speaker's personal pronoun “I” virtually disappears from Moore's verse. If expansion into sensuous discovery had the effect of tempering Moore's judgmental streak, this reafirmation of form and focus resulted in the near identity of fact and value in the language of the poems. As Gertrude Stein remarked, “Description is evaluation.” Those creatures—the jerboa, the frigate pelican, the buffalo, the pangolin—are repositories of value that can be plundered largely by inventory of the facts and attributes of each.

This brings us to 1936, a pre-war year, as we are reminded by the sense in which “The Pangolin” is a war poem about “another armored animal”—man—Moore's first overt mention of armor in her poems. Again there is a hiatus, from 1936 till 1940, when she published “Four Quartz Crystal Clocks.” In 1941 and 1944 the two volumes appeared, What Are Years and Nevertheless, containing what I have described as the lyrics of the war years. What is remarkable to me about this group is
the emphasis with which the poetic speaker’s personal pronoun “I” returns, joined significantly by the communal form of “we,” as if the war brought that personal speech back out of hiding in a newly shared form, as in “Light Is Speech”: “England/guarded by the sea,/we with re-enforced Bartholdi’s/Liberty holding up her/torch beside the port, hear France/demand, ‘Tell me the truth,/especially when it is/unpleasant.’ And we/cannot but reply,/‘The word France means enfranchisement...’” (CP, 97-98).

If the twenties and thirties are Moore’s virtuoso period, her height as a poet’s poet, these two volumes of the nineteen forties represent her great period, her height as a poet for people outside the professional critics’ circle. These are not the “difficult” poems that students frown at—these lyrics speak directly to a world in the perpetual crisis of war, as in “What Are Years?”:

The very bird,
grown taller as he sings, steels
his form straight up. Though he is captive,
his mighty singing
says, satisfaction is a lowly
thing, how pure a thing is joy. (CP, 95)

More than any others that she wrote, these are poems of plain speech. In her piece about the ostrich, “‘He Digesteth Harde Yron,’” Moore tells us straight out that “The power of the visible/is the invisible” (CP, 100). And in “In Distrust of Merits,” which she wrote after seeing a newspaper picture of a slain soldier, the first person speaker is no longer the judge but the one on trial: “O/quiet form upon the dust, I cannot/look and yet I must” (CP, 138). The special clarity and resonance of this group of poems is partly a result of their shorter lines and overall shorter length; but clarity is made possible also by the fact that Moore has learned how to undercut her own baroque verbal densities. In “His Shield,” a war lyric of 1944, she opens on the armored world in a veritable thicket:

The pin-swin or spine-swine
(the edgehog miscalled hedgehog) with all his edges out,
echidna and echinoderm in distressed-
pin-cushion thorn-fur coats, the spiny pig or porcupine,
the rhino with horned snout—
everything is battle-dressed.

She then suddenly speaks out smoothly and simply for her own contrasting approach to life:

Pig-fur won’t do, I’ll wrap
myself in salamander-skin like Presbyter John.
A lizard in the midst of flames, a firebrand
that is life. (CP, 144)

Again the poetic speaker’s “I” has become central, in the midst of things, on the line. The “I” that judged and disappeared has returned here not to confront and criticize but to represent and share. The long catalogues of discovery have disappeared, and fascination with plenitude has given way to more focus and to greater depth of the feelings that are explicitly conveyed. The aphoristic brevity of the early poems has been harnessed here to emotion and to axiomatic statements of the human condition—“This is mortality,/this is eternity” or “Heroism is exhausting” or “What is there like fortitude.”

Exotic surface complexity is often contrasted here with plain speech, and yet this plainness and clarity are still cast in a prosody every bit as intricate as that of the later observations and the animiles. In “In Distrust of Merits” the simple, hymnlike utterances, often rhymed couples, are fractured on the page by the text’s syllabic measures. Moore often has two poems going on simultaneously—the spoken sound and the text on the page—which foil one another richly by undercutting the traditional expectations set up by each one.

The new voice of these lyrics of the war years is the voice of the poet speaking to and on behalf of a large audience, and this sense of an appreciative audience remains with Moore now to the end of her career. Much of her remaining work—the poems of the Fables years (written while she was translating the fables of La Fontaine), the late poems (published from 1956 to 1966), and the baker’s dozen final poems (from ’66 to 1970)—is playful and occasional. These last three volumes of poems include her pieces on baseball, celebrating the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Yankees; her equestrian poems, “Tom Fool” about the race-horse and “Blue Bug” about the polo pony; and the dance and sport poems, “Style” about tennis and Spanish dancing, “Combat Cultural” about Russian dancers and wrestlers, and the piece about dancer Arthur Mitchell. These celebrations of physical prowess lend a certain dynamic energy to Moore’s later work. The “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” as she described poetry in the twenties, had often had a certain stillness about them, what Williams Carlos Williams called a “quality of the brittle, highly set-off porcelain garden,” but these later poems rejoining in physical strength and grace are not at all procainel; they are characteristic of the more generally relaxed and celebrative air of Moore’s work of the fifties and sixties. There are poems about an amusement park, a television broadcast, and a day at the races; there are pieces requested of Miss Moore by Vogue magazine, by the Boston Arts Festival, by Harvard students, by the Prospect Park Centennial Committee, and even (heaven help us) by whoever ran National Pencil Week. The prosody too relaxes, the syllabic measures becoming increasingly approximate, until in her last volume many of the poems are cast in visually or rhythmically shaped stanzas without any strict numerical counts.

And what is interesting to me, in the midst of all this delight in physical grace and acquiescence to the peculiar demands we sometimes put to our public figures, is the elegiac, even melancholy thread that appears from time to time in the fabric. This elegiac quality barely shows in the first piece Moore published after her mother’s
death, "A Face," which closes with the musical quatrains,

Certain faces, a few, one or two—or one
face photographed by recollection—
to my mind, to my sight,
must remain a delight.

The most poignant elegies of these later years are two poems which, like Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Thou art indeed just, Lord," addresses the poet's own sense of failing powers. The piece called "An Expedition—Leonardo da Vinci's—and a Query" speaks of Leonardo's dejection, but the other poem speaks directly of her own. Moore answers her own earlier declaration "The Mind Is an Enchanting Thing" with the later title "The Mind, Intractable Thing." It is as if in this poem Moore moves aside the mask of the poet and shows her own face beside it. Poet and self are not entirely identical, for the self can address the poet: "O magnifico./ wizard in words—poet... You understand terror, know how to deal/with pent-up emotion... I don't." The poet is apparently "unafraid/of disparagers, death, dejection," but that, the self confesses, is now a "craft with which I don't know how to deal" (CP, 206). This is a poignant note from a modernist of indomitable wit and optimism, but it comes as an honest and natural part of the generally relaxed feeling of the work of her later years.

So these are the eight stations on the path of Moore's career: the Bryn Mawr juvenilia, the satiric Carlisle poems, the expansive observations of the twenties, the anamnesis of the thirties, the lyrics of the war years, the poems of the Fable years, later poems, and final poems. The labels may have their limited value. What is of greater importance, however, is the sense of Moore's career as an ongoing endeavor with its distinctive landmarks, early, middle, and late—expansion, compression, relaxation, each phase with its characteristic verse forms and ethical tasks.

Since what comes out of this inventory, as I see it, is an argument for the sustained and major quality of Moore's poems of the nineteen forties, it seems appropriate to end here by commenting on one of these lyrics of the war years, a poem that comments as much on the artist's changing mind as on the moral and historical urgency of the capacity for change in the human animal. It is a poem with the intricate and tightly compressed form that is typical of her work of the thirties and forties. Its stanzas are chiselled in a suggestive and nearly perfect pattern contracting from 6, 5, and 4 syllables per line and then expanding to 6, 7, and 9 syllables per line, punctuated by highly regular but unaccented rhymes—"of" with "dove," for instance, "sun" with "legion," and "the" with "Scarlatti."

This tight and very uniform vehicle, however, carries thematically an unresolved tension between certainty and self-contradiction. Moore wrote the piece in 1942 and '43 after listening to the religious and political thinker Reinhold Neibuhr give a lecture in which he spoke of "that admirable virtue, inconsistency".1

THE MIND IS AN ENCHANTING THING

is an enchanted thing
like the glance on a
katydid wing
subdivided by sun
till the nettings are legion.
Like Gieseking playing Scarlatti;
like the apteryx-awl
as a beak, or the
kiwi's rain-shawl
of haired feathers, the mind
feeling its way as though blind,
wakes along with its eyes on the ground.

The poem is a catalogue, a list of similes and metaphors, set in about ten positive statements and ending in one abrupt double negative that juxtaposes the foregoing loveliness with the appalling tragedy of that wartime moment in history. The mention of Herod's oath, his vow to slaughter all of the children of Bethlehem, addresses these lines to the corresponding spectacle in Moore's and our own day. "Unconfusion submits/its confusion to proof; it's not a Herod's oath that cannot change." While certainty is placed dead center at the midpoint of the poem, Moore's hope for us in the end rests in our capacity for change.

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Notes

1The Lantern, XVIII, p. 102. Issues of The Lantern were made available through the courtesy of The Miriam Coffin Canaday Library, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania.
3One of "Two Poems by Marianne Moore" in Bruno's Weekly, 3 (December 30, 1916), 1233.
4The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore (New York: The Macmillan Company/The
5Pigeons," which appeared in Poetry, A Magazine of Verse, XLVII, 2, pp. 61-65, repeats its 25-line-long syllabic pattern five times over.
9Marianne Moore, Letter to T.S. Eliot, July 2, 1934, Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia. Hitherto unpublished material by Marianne Moore is used by permission of Clive E. Driver, Literary Executor of the Estate of Marianne C. Moore. All rights reserved.
10Tomlinson, p. 54.

Robert Duncan
H.D.'s Challenge

Virginia Woolf's Three Guineas is a great book for illuminating any young mind, because I think young women and young men both are dumb on the subject of what a hazard it is for women to write. And also strikingly in Three Guineas—and it's one of the contrasts between Hilda Doolittle and Marianne Moore—Virginia Woolf points out that women—she is thinking of English women—do not have a legal claim to a nationality. If they marry a Dane, they are a Dane. They go wherever the husband goes, and consequently are not chained by the false loyalties that—the main argument in the Three Guineas is of a series of false loyalties that make for deep falsehood in writing.

One of the falsehoods that Virginia Woolf sees no way out of involves writing: she says get to a mimeograph machine, but do not go through an editor, do not go through a publisher, because you will find you are writing in order to please the editor or the publisher or whomever. Of course Virginia Woolf’s most difficult person to please was herself. Where Marianne Moore could share with her mother, Virginia Woolf couldn’t even share with herself; and her terrific doubts...she was a very keen appreciative reader, and a wonderful essayist, but when it came to relation to her own work, the whole world that wants to stop writing was nothing like her own sense of having gone wrong in a sentence or a paragraph and yet it’s one shared by all writers.

Well, Virginia Woolf’s answer was that she didn’t believe there was a writer of distinction who had not an independent income, an income that didn’t come from a job, I can think right away of something that Virginia Woolf was conveniently overlooking, which was the work of Dorothy Richardson; all her life Virginia Woolf denied that work. But Dorothy Richardson never really could bring the great Miriam novel to a completion. She is the one working writer that I know of in the twentieth century, the kind that has to earn her living daily and write like Trollope early in the morning before going to work and kept to it over years. In the same period when Pound was raising money to try to rescue Eliot, who was on the point of a nervous breakdown, and Eliot’s career was complicated by his emotional life,