Eileen G. Moran

Portrait of the Artist: Marianne Moore’s Letters to Hildegarde Watson

Among the words of praise lavished on Marianne Moore’s poetry a few words keep reappearing in critical texts—her poetry is “cerebral,” even “cryptic”; and her habit of adding notes to her letters does nothing to dispel the belief that her poems are “intellectual.” This means that what we do not get from her poems is a sense of the person writing them—one word that will never be used to describe her poetry is “confessional.” Yet new-critical insistence on the autonomy of the work itself aside, the reader usually longs for a sense of the person who has created this poem, the mind that has imagined this piece of beauty. Marianne Moore’s poetry seldom satisfies this yearning. It does give a true picture of her intellect—which was certainly formidable and worthy of scholarly attention—but reveals little of her rich and complex personality.

I have been asked to speak about Marianne Moore’s life—an attempt that seems a bit presumptuous of me, since there are several people here who are fortunate enough to have met Marianne Moore: Robert Duncan shared the podium with her as a colleague; Barbara Guest shared a taxi-cab; Albert Gelpi escorted her around Harvard; and Perdita Schaffner, H.D.’s daughter, grew up knowing her as a friend of the family. I have come to know Marianne Moore by looking into a part of her life—reading the more than nine hundred letters she wrote to her closest friend, Hildegarde Watson. Hildegarde Watson was the wife of James Sibley Watson, co-owner of The Dial during the twenties. He and his partner, Scofield Thayer, were among the early admirers of Miss Moore’s poetry; they gave her the Dial Award in 1924. The following year she took over Thayer’s duties as editor while he went to Europe; and the Watsons soon returned to their original home in Rochester. The letters Marianne Moore wrote to Mrs. Watson over the next thirty years touch on virtually every aspect of her life, thought, personality, and feelings. While the letters still cannot be called “confessional,” when they are put together with what else we know about her—from the writings of other people, from her own notebooks, and even from her poetry—we can form some sense of what Marianne Moore might have been like. Like “People’s Surroundings,” they answer one’s questions.

Some of the popular ideas about Marianne Moore are based on partial truths. For example, because she wrote several poems about sports—notably “Hometown Piece,” “Tom Fool at Jamaica,” and “Baseball and Writing,” and because she achieved some fame among the non-literary public for such escapades as throwing out the first ball at Yankee Stadium on Opening Day, or writing a poem in a restaurant alternating lines with the boxer Muhammad Ali, it is often assumed that she frequently went to sports events. The fact is that she followed her favorites, the Brooklyn Dodgers, mostly from her own living room by reading about them in the Brooklyn Eagle, and she gained her expertise not through analyzing technique on the mound but by studying it in a book.

This is not to suggest that she never attended any events at all—certainly she did, and with great enthusiasm—but the enthusiasm was not always focused on the score or the excitement of the action. George Plimpton tells of a baseball game where Marianne Moore was watching a pitcher who had a habit of cupping his groin after each pitch; the group they were with decided that if this “faintly obscene” gesture were to be pointed out to him, it could destroy his pitching rhythm. Miss Moore wrote down the pitcher’s name in a little book she carried: “Monbouquet,” she said, barely audibly. “My little bouquet. Absolutely correct.”

Alfred Kreymborg, the editor of Others, one of the earliest journals to publish Marianne Moore’s poetry, recounts her first trip to a baseball game, when he accompanied her partly for the pleasure he might have of hearing her stumped about something, for once:

As the pitching began, he asked her, “Do you happen to know the gentleman who threw that strike?”

“I’ve never seen him before,” she admitted, “but I take it it must be Mr. Mathewson.”

Kreymborg could only gasp, “Why?”

“I’ve read his instructive book on the art of pitching—”

“Strike two!” interrupted the umpire.

“And it’s a pleasure,” she continued imperturbably, “to note how unerringly his execution supports his theories—”

Such excursions, however, were rare, contrary to the impression she has given her readers. They have become cherished lore about Marianne Moore, not because of any great importance she attached to sports events, but because of their neat anecdotal quality. While she did follow the sports news, she confessed in a letter to Mrs. Watson, “I never go to anything, just read it in the paper” (February 13, 1957).

The misconceptions about Marianne Moore’s involvement in sports are minor in comparison to the misconceptions that abound regarding her personal life. Speculation is rife about why she never married (though some of the strange conclusions people draw never, fortunately, see print); and questions arise constantly about the relationship with her mother, with whom she lived until Mrs. Moore died in 1947, when Marianne was sixty years old. There are no simple solutions to these puzzles, and indeed they are more fully comprehensible when dealt with together.

One way people try to explain Marianne Moore’s private life is to imagine a love that
was forever unrequited; attempts have been made to link her romantically with Scofield Thayer. William Carlos Williams reports in his autobiography the rumor that Scofield Thayer proposed to her, but since at that time Thayer was struggling with another complicated marital entanglement, it is unlikely that the proposal took place—or if it did, that Miss Moore would have taken him seriously. Although she admired Thayer and was intensely loyal to him all her life, there is no evidence that she was romantically involved with him or with anyone else.

It is easy, of course, to look to her poems and to their critics for a psychological explanation. Many critics have written of what they see as her lack of passion; Blackmur observes, with others, that there is "no element of sex or lust" even in her poem "Marriage"—although "the strange experience of beauty" could obviously be interpreted as sexual attraction, at least. But it is true that neither poems, letters, nor journals explicitly discuss sex or romance or render any expression of any sort of passion that might threaten self-control. Perhaps an awareness of the potential threat to herself, determination not to lose control, is what made her, in her life as in her poetry, veer away from sensuality or romantic attachment; Kreyborg noted that her "heart...has always been under the control of a mind devoted to the impersonal, to reasoning and logic, to beauty evolved in cool detachment." But a pervasive influence on her attitude and desires surely was her mother, a woman who once described marriage as "something you do in the dark that you have to stand by in the light." Motherhood did not fare much better, in Mrs. Moore's opinion; having a baby, she once said, "makes a perfect idiot of a person."

Other men than Scofield Thayer were certainly attracted to Marianne Moore; Kreyborg admits that he and William Carlos Williams "held the mind of Marianne Moore in absolute admiration. What they lacked in intellectual stability was supplied by her, and her familiarity with books on every conceivable theme astonished them. 'How she can spin words!' Kreyborg would say and Williams would add, 'We're a pair of tongue-tied tyros by comparison.'"

But it was not her mind alone that made her attractive; on at least two occasions, men who knew little about her intellectual attributes danced around the issue of marriage with her. Her cheese-butter-and-egg man, a widower who had only recently discovered that she was a poet, had a rather wishful conversation with her about why she objected to marriage, she giving her age as one drawback (she was sixty-one at the time). He finally said, "'You wouldn't need much, would you, but a desk and a certain amount of quiet?'" Miss Moore responded, "'I wouldn't even need that, but Mr. Price, you don't marry for practical reasons but for impractical reasons.""

Another male acquaintance, recently widowed, thought first of Marianne Moore when he began to entertain notions of remarriage: he broached the subject to Gladys Berry, the part-time housekeeper they both employed. When Mrs. Berry tried to discourage him with the announcement that Miss Moore didn't want to marry, he asked, "'Not if she had a good house and everything she wants?' "'I don't think she would," said Mrs. Berry; "she wouldn't want to leave her brother." (Her brother Warner, incidentally, was married and had four children, and lived many miles away.) The reply was, "Well, I'd be glad to have him too; I think I could make him happy; at least I could try.'" When this conversation was repeated to Miss Moore, she said, "'A very idealistic man, Gladys, but he doesn't know what he's escaping. He would have a rude awakening. I don't keep house; I just live here; you clean their house, have formal meals for them, are always washing the curtains, and getting luncheon for guests.'"

But for all her scoffing at practical reasons for getting married, it is not fair to assume that "impractical reasons" never intruded on her, or tempted her. When she wrote of Handel in a letter, "he might never have been known to have fallen in love which is quite different from saying he never did fall in love." (August 11, 1961), she may have been hinting that she too could keep a close secret about herself. She did agree with a statement that W.H. Auden made during his class on Shakespeare offered at the YMHA: "One of the most frightening things in literature [is] to find yourself in love with someone you don't love," and added her explanation, "infatuated merely." (January 25, 1956). Perhaps she spoke from experience, and had endured the pangs of infatuation; perhaps she had suffered the confusion that arises from the conflict of logic and desire. If so, she kept a discreet silence.

Miss Moore was certainly well aware of the potential "practical reasons" for marrying, indeed welcoming the material advantages as a form of rescue for an impoverished acquaintance who was struggling to support a young son. At the announcement of her friend's engagement, Miss Moore wrote, "I am counselled by this not to worry night and day....The second miracle of this kind which has emancipated me from constant sighs....I know nothing except that the friend's fiance—is not an invalid or on relief!" (August 29, 1957). But she was equally aware of practical disadvantages. In her Reading Diary, a running account she kept of various reading material and in which she included lengthy passages that captured her attention, she quoted, some time during the first nine years after her graduation from Bryn Mawr College, a limerick about Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

There was a young lady named Liz
Who made writing poems her biz
But when she met Bob
She gave up the job
It took all her time to read his.10

And she was painfully aware of the current jokes and stereotyped attitudes about women and marriage. She once wrote to Hildegarde, who at the time had been married for nearly forty years, "A rather rude joke in this N[ew] Y[orker] but I take it to heart. The group of men conferring, a 4th answering the phone: 'It's your wife. Do you want to listen to her?' " (November 27, 1954).

Surely Marianne Moore thought about sex and marriage; she invited Hildegarde to join her at two lectures by Alfred Adler—one was "Sex Different" and the other, "Love and Marriage." Moreover, the fact that her longest poem is devoted to the institution of marriage indicates that she pondered it deeply and seriously. The poem is such a collage, however, of so many different aspects and attitudes that it would be difficult to draw from it any clear conclusion about her attitude toward marriage except that she respected its tangled complexity.
In all likelihood, Marianne Moore had weighed the advantages and disadvantages and had decided to avoid the pitfalls and temptations of romance and marriage, and a sense of discreetness and privacy kept her from describing in detail either her opportunities or her reasons for resistance—although she once wrote to Ildegarde Watson, in reference to the impending marriage of Ildegarde’s daughter Jeanne, that she had “automatic resistance to the earthquake of finding that the happiness of ‘a creature’ like Jeanne is to be to some extent in the keeping of a human creature, however good and encouraging” (November 30, 1941). She seemed to believe, “Any woman can marry but it takes a very smart woman not to marry.”

Marianne Moore’s mother was surely another factor in her decision to remain single. She was devoted to Mrs. Moore; she asked her advice about poems, quoted her endlessly in her notebooks, and shared virtually everything with her, including her friends—much to their annoyance at times. Robert McAlmon, married at that time to Bryher, writes in Post Adolescence (a thinly disguised roman a clef about many of the New York artists in the early twenties) that during his visit Mrs. Moore (Mrs. Wullus in the book) “drew out her observations, making distinctions of her exact meaning with a too careful honesty that had its limitations, it seemed to him, who felt his impetuosity repelled by the older woman, who was much given to moralizing.” Mrs. Moore’s ubiquitous presence in her daughter’s life evidently disturbed McAlmon and interfered with his ability to see Marianne clearly and as an individual; Marianne “needs to be seen,” he writes, “apart from the background of her mother to be actual” (106).

Marianne Moore spared her friends details of some of the problems she undoubtedly had with her mother, and rarely wrote a word of complaint in her letters. Her prose notebooks, however, often tell a different story; they reflect an intense relationship that was both loving and difficult. Mrs. Moore was a woman of intelligence and wit, but one who could turn her knife-edged tongue against anyone, including her daughter. She once said of E.E. Cummings, “I wouldn’t touch Cummings with a pole that I didn’t mean immediately to burn”; and she remarked of T.S. Eliot, “he’s plodding and he lacks ingenuity.” On one occasion, when Marianne was telling her mother of the pictures she had seen in a bookstore window of the recent Pulitzer Prize winners, her mother replied, “As if anybody would care, but kidnappers.” No doubt intended to instill a sense of humility and perspective, such a comment was sure to last in her daughter’s memory and to undermine her own sense of achievement as she won prize after prize, including the Pulitzer a few years after Mrs. Moore’s death. And when Marianne Moore expressed her nervousness about a forthcoming speaking engagement at Bryn Mawr, no doubt exacerbated because it was her alma mater, her mother admonished her: “But remember—you won’t be able to talk all night. That is, they wouldn’t be able to listen to you all night.” Small wonder that Marianne Moore, although renowned as a conversationalist in private, agonized for weeks over every word that she was to deliver to an audience.

As a result, perhaps, of her mother’s kind of flinty rectitude, Marianne Moore developed a sense of herself as an incompetent person. She signed one letter, “your loving harassed, delinquent falling over its own paws” (May 6, 1963), and complained ceaselessly of her inability to do the right thing in nearly any situation. The facts had nothing to do with her conclusions. Even though she spent months nursing a dying friend, for example, she castigated herself in a letter to Ildegarde Watson: “I do nothing but default. Am doggedly overcoming myself exteriorly when wisdom is what I need” (February 18, 1955). She believed she was equally unable to observe the smaller amenities required in social interaction with strangers: “After church,” she wrote, “I decided to delay in the Parish House to shake hands with new members, but by the time I made my way there, all had departed!! That is typical of my cordialities” (April 7, 1958).

She denigrated not only her social competence but, despite all evidence to the contrary, her intellectual ability as well. Her erudition was legend. Morton Zabel claimed her mind was “constructed like a card catalog.” The sculptor Malvina Hoffman writes in her memoir that she once asked Sir Osbert Sitwell who the “Samian Sage” was in Byron’s poem Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage. His response was, “Let’s write Marianne Moore. She will know, I’m sure!” Miss Hoffman continues, “so we did, and by return mail came her answer—Zoroaster.” Yet, Miss Moore could with equal conviction write of herself, “I am ignorant of all that goes on in either Spain or Portugal, as a migrating bird. Remember, I know nothing” (December 13, 1955).

Because of what she saw as her constitutional inability to do anything right, Marianne Moore believed that her nervousness about forthcoming events was fully justified. “Being the least proud friend you have,” she wrote in surely the truest part of the statement, “I promise to tell you if in a panic, Ildegarde...Humbled I should be to confess it, in my bewitched destructiveness, through incompetence” (April 12, 1939). This “incompetence” stemmed in part, she felt, from a kind of helplessness, an inability to act at all. Twice she described herself as “a spider suspended in space” (October 13, 1957 and August 4, 1960). Her mother, rather than being a help to her, was equally inert; Marianne Moore once described them as “a pair of mechanical toys...that do not see or move unless there is a hand to help them” (November 28, 1935). And the dilemma fed upon itself—one she was aware of or even considered the possibility of any lack of ability in any area, there was no way out because, as she wrote in Predilections, “Fear of insufficiency is synonymous with insufficiency.”

This insufficiency further reflected, she felt, a failure on her part to have ever outgrown her childish ways. She once wrote, “Very childish, Ildegarde but I never outgrow my naiveté, do I?” (October 19, 1954); and, “forgive my childish soliloquys, Hildegarde. I don’t ever grow up” (May 23, 1960). She saw everything she did as reflecting this immaturity. Her writing, she claimed, was “too childish to be mentioned in the same breath with these lectures for academicians” (August 27, 1943), and her lectures had a “primary class character” (June 2, 1941). Depicting also her inability to manage money, she wrote, “I must not eternally be Baby Goat, innocent of every possibility, and possible expenditure” (December 13, 1956).

Essentially a nondrinker, Miss Moore did not assume a self-righteous stance when refusing alcohol, but rather took fresh opportunity to accuse herself of childishness. Even when she did have a few tiny sips, she did not see herself as participating but as indulging in an activity that was somehow different, and perhaps as assuming
a kind of false maturity: "'Cocktails for others. Don't think I've grown up,—but I was so hoarse I ventured upon about as much sherry as would fill a peanut-shell'" (April 23, 1944). She gave her first cocktail party in 1957, at the age of sixty-nine, having asked Hildegarde and Sibley Watson for their advice about what to buy, she was enormously pleased when Sibley referred to her as a bartender: "'Bar tender!'" she wrote; "'It is the eye of one who thinks I am, Hildegarde. A great promotion'" (September 26, 1957). But even a "promotion" to adulthood did not relieve this tainted view of herself—because, in another circular dilemma, it was immature to mention one's own improvement. "I'm getting better!" she wrote to Hildegarde, with the simultaneous disclaimer, "let me childishy add" (October 3, 1958). Such a self-censuring attitude naturally fostered deep feelings of insecurity. She lamented, "I behave like a drunkard or shattered windmill...at these overpowering Christmas parties" (December 28, 1957). Her reticence at large gatherings was due in part to her fear of failure, so that "Many a time I say nothing because what I say would seem too lowly, an offense" (September 3, 1961).

Her insecurity about her social behavior carried over into her attitude about her professional behavior. She was a popular speaker, and T.S. Eliot, among others, praised her effectiveness on the stage; but she wrote of her performance at speaking engagements at various colleges, "mine are amateur things from which I am grateful to escape with my life!" (June 16, 1940). She was often more specific in her denunciation: "I read like a laboratory frog with an electrode on its leg" (March 5, 1958). And of a reading at Bryn Mawr she once wrote, "I discovered that by holding the text about 2 feet (!) higher than my head and attempting a very light nursery-like tone as though cajoling a baby bird from a tree, I did change the gruesome air of demise by adhesive tape" (April 23, 1944). She claimed to be grateful to her Wellesley audience because they "didn't knit!" (May 7, 1957). Her audiences obviously did not share her evaluation of her ability; but the fact that others did not criticize her performances failed to bolster her confidence, and instead convinced her that she was too unimportant to bother with. "And please tell me, how I should have done or been different?" she urged Hildegarde; "Not a soul cares enough about one to say: you mumble, your posture was unbearable, I didn't know whether you were talking about yourself or the poet!! OR: When you stop, stop!" (May 6, 1953). Her insecurity about her speaking had one benefit—it contributed to the development of one of the most outstanding features of her style: her unique way of incorporating the words of other writers into her own work. Fearful that her own words would not stand up, that she was "the merest filament of a feather," she found the happy solution: "I fortified my paper with quotations" (August 24, 1950).

Her most intense anxiety was about her writing. "Why am I not Shakespeare or Chaucer?" she asked; "I am abashed ever to attempt a line of script. Like an illiterate I should forever more confine myself to spoken words" (December 7, 1960). She called her critical writing "deplorable," and was certain that whatever she had to say would not be "good by comparison with the subject" (September 3, 1933). Of her ability as a poet she made a statement that would be comic were it not so sincerely meant: "I haven't the equipment" (June 24, 1960).

Her official statements about writing revealed none of this insecurity; in "Feeling and Precision," for example, she wrote confidently of art as "feeling, modified by the writer's moral and technical insights" (Predilections, p. 11). Her Collected Poems was a major success, and she was the recipient of honorary degrees from several colleges, seven of which were awarded between 1949 and 1955. Yet her private fear persisted that no publisher would admire her newest work, even if it had been written at the publisher's request; she was "in a frenzy," she wrote, "over the Atlantic Monthly due August first....I know they won't care for it!" (August 2, 1957). Even after acceptance and publication she remained convinced that nobody would appreciate her work. When some of her poems were published without their notes, she was mystified—and in a reiteration of her belief in her childishness she wrote, "I don't know how anyone could want them without the notes, which really are the thing to read and the stanzas, are just a schoolroom try at composition" (August 5, 1956). And after leaping all the hurdles of writing, submitting, revising, and printing, she was convinced that her books would never sell. Of both Selected Poems and The Fables of La Fontaine, she wrote, in an echo of Charles Lamb, that her books would be "as safe at the publishers' as if chained to the shelves of Bodleian" (May 27, 1936 and May 21, 1954).

The myriad awards she was receiving did little to dispel her feeling of inadequacy. She called the Guggenheim award "an expression of good will rather than anything earned" (April 27, 1945). And despite all evidence to the contrary, she could not believe that her manuscripts had any monetary value; when John Hay Whitney, owner of the racehorse that was the subject of "Tom Fool," requested that she name her price for the original manuscript of the poem, she instructed The New Yorker to "give it to him" (June 24, 1953).

But with the kind of fortitude she admired in the strawberry, each time one editor rejected a poem or a review, she resolutely sent it on to another. She wrote Hildegarde of her poem "My Crow Pluto," "You call my crow a gem! The [New Yorker] editors' find that it presents problems. (I hope [Harper's] Bazaar will like a bird that has never studied syntax.)" (March 30, 1961). Her problems in finding acceptance for "Hometown Piece", her poem about the World Series, were detailed in a series of letters: "Frederic Morgan did not like it, and Howard Moss of the [New] Yorker said—a little sooner and it would have been used. Probably Life will return it. It is constantly being improved so I should not grumble" (September 16, 1956). And earlier, with even greater cheerfulness, she had written, "received back my Dodgertopie as 'not my best,' So I set to work and dinging it if it isn't my best now, it is not that I have spared labor." In an unusual display of confidence she continued, "I shall get it back (but as routine, perhaps, rather than that it is too bad).! (Am hard to crush.)" (September 10, 1956).

Although Marianne Moore expected rejection and believed that her work deserved it, she remained cheerfully stoic. When Poetry seemed to "veer away from" her review of Elmi, by E.E. Cummings, she noted that "for that matter Mr. Cummings himself doesn't score with them" (July 31, 1933). And she joked of her attempt to see her poem "Melchor Vulpis" into print, "the Atlantic will never use my contrapuntalist. It is too unsterotyped. As one of Warner's classmates said, 'anyone who would marry me, I wouldn't look at.' Anything Mr. Weeks would like,
I couldn’t write” (August 14, 1957). Even a damning review, such as one written by Karl Shapiro for The New York Times, did not daunt her; she said of the letters of protest that resulted; “I just would let it all pass; it isn’t that what my Bulwark piece is all about?” (October 12, 1959). Her guiding philosophy was spelled out in Preflections: “We must not be sensitive about not being liked or not being printed” (20).

Miss Moore may have been unflappable about the reception of her poems and essays, but she was turmoil itself during the act of creating them. It was enormously difficult for her to set pen to paper—to some extent in writing poems, but more in tackling critical pieces. She once wrote, “I think each time I write that it may be the last time,” as she complained of some “onerous tasks” that she was wrestling with. Her problems resulted largely from her inability to organize, to set priorities, and to refuse irrelevant assignments and requests; “am not too wise a worker,” she confessed: “over-do and half-do” (April 11, 1954); “I am like a wheel or a ball in a gambling-alley, in violent motion accomplishing nothing” (August 24, 1954); and “am delving and detaching myself with minutiae” (September 10, 1956).

Her vast quantities of minutiae resulted in part from her constant willingness to re-write what should have been considered finished. Malvina Hoffman would ask her to explain a poem:

She would start, and then say, “You know, I don’t really understand much of it myself!” and she’d laugh and say, “Of course, I was convinced I understood it when I wrote it. I’ll have to work some more on it,” and then there would be jottings in the margin, and revision (321).

The result of all her writing and rewriting was wild disorganization. “I have been like a mouse—a rat—in a waste basket,” she wrote, “furiously rummaging some sense out of my untidy notes for this book-review” (October 22, 1956). She explored this state of affairs, and constantly resolved to improve it: “I must—like a ribbon in a tornado—subdue my chaos. I work at six things at once and will not let one clipping be disturbed lest my whole Soviet Union fall to pieces” (June 18, 1956). But things sometimes went from bad to worse; three months after this letter, she wrote that the chaos was spreading into all aspects of her life: “I’m bewildered by arrears, in a terrible state, four days mail, no food in, mislaid my box key” (September 16, 1956). And soon afterwards, she wrote again: “As if in a hallucinatory trance, I can’t get on, can’t hem my coat, can’t quell the telephone, can’t retape my talks” (September 27, 1956). Some of these problems were the result of various illnesses that incapacitated her, but the reverse is also true: it seems obvious that her relentlessness about her work often debilitated her. She saw her work almost as an adversary at times; she was “battling” material for one appearance, “attacking” another translation, and was “demolished” by her commencement speeches. “Am demented with work,” she complained—“a kind of Coney Island fun fair victim” (August 19, 1957). To manage her tasks she needed to work in an isolation that most people would find unbearable, and once in an echo of La Fontaine she wrote, “my helplessness is a pain to me—am ever the rat retired from the world...from outside the reprehensible cheese, Hildegarde, pray for me” (November 27, 1954).

This “pray for me” reminds us of another cherished belief about Marianne Moore—that she was a very religious person. It is true that in her letters she expresses a quiet certainty that is the hallmark of an obedient daughter from a solidly religious family—her grandfather and later her brother were ministers, and her mother, steeped in the Bible, constantly reminded her about and reinforced the traditional beliefs. Nor did Marianne Moore rebel against her early training. Outwardly a convinced member of the Presbyterian church, she faithfully attended Sunday services and participated in the activities of the congregation. Her whole demeanor evidently reflected a sort of unquestioning religiosity; McAlmon wrote that she was “a churchgoing, cerebralizing moralist who observes sabbath day strictly” (105); Yvor Winters spoke of the “ethical and emotional fastidiousness” of this “exciting moralist”; and Richard Aldington asked, “what moral earth-quake, what astounding upheaval, could ever dislodge Miss Moore from her pinnacle?”

Certainly one might expect her background to lead to a set of orthodox beliefs, but observations such as these, who succumbed to the obvious by interpreting her brand of religion along narrow lines, erred in assuming that her beliefs were dry and devoid of human content. McAlmon was perhaps on the right track when he mused, “I can’t quite understand why with a mind like hersagnosticism hasn’t eaten into her a little, but it seems not to have, or she conceals it well, for her mother’s sake possibly” (106). Surely respect for her mother was an essential factor in this aspect of Marianne Moore’s life, too; but it is clear also, from her letters, that while she did not overtly challenge the tenets of her faith, she felt entirely free to interpret them in her own way.

She did value the idea of faith: “Is not faith the evidence of things not seen? the substance of things hoped for?” she wrote (September 3, 1961); and, summing up her conviction, “Faith is indispensable” (August 15, 1958). She believed also in prayer and in God’s personal interest in and intervention in individual lives, though this belief was tempered by the reality of what she observed daily. “I know, Hildegarde that prayer is powerful,” she wrote. “And maybe we are cast into fiery furnaces to teach us this.” But she immediately retreats from the precariously of this position: “though I guess not!” (May 1, 1956). When the Watson’s daughter Jeanne was suffering difficulties, Marianne Moore wrote indignantly, “I don’t see how God could permit” (April 5, 1956), a statement that challenges the traditional notion of accepting God’s will without protest.

This vacillating and questioning is far more typical of her religious declarations in these letters than any overt expression of orthodoxy. The one thing besides faith that she did not seem to question, although, again, she was aware of the discrepancies of logic and facts, was the existence of God; she once said to a young cousin, “No one can prove the fact of Deity, but I am as sure of it as that I am alive” (August 6, 1953). She did not seem interested in proof, however; theological arguments, while they intrigued her, usually failed to persuade her of anything. After quoting her minister as saying, “The mystery of God’s will is manifested in you through Christ,” she confessed, “But I am lost at times” (August 3, 1953). And she once wrote plaintively to Hildegarde Watson, “I wish some mysteries were slightly more definite than mystery” (September 11, 1933).
Marianne Moore did not accept unquestioningly the conventional Presbyterian belief in immortality. She did once write, "Christ within us surmounts mortality" (October 6, 1947), but that was only a few months after her mother's death, a time when she would most ardently wish for eternal life to be a fact. On a later occasion she quoted her brother Warner as saying that death is a "door to a larger life" (April 29, 1950). And she wrote, around the same time, that she was still comforted by Warner's words at their mother's death: "We are grateful that her spirit may have wider range. We pray that we may feel her presence, that the beauty of her love embrace us" (April 26, 1950). But for all the losses she and her friend suffered through all the years of their correspondence and through all their words of consolation to one another, Marianne Moore never made any clear statement of belief in life after death, especially not one that included the Presbyterian notion of salvation. On the contrary, in her most straightforward statement on this subject she once wrote, "I believe with all my heart what one of the astrologers says—One is 'born a natural body, and raised a spiritual body, not after death but here and now' " (March 31, 1936). She seemed to believe in immortality perhaps only as a metaphor for infinite possibilities, without having the impetus to incorporate this vague idea into an active theological construct. She seemed perfectly content, that is, not to be sure.

She attended church, apparently, more through habit and early training than anything else. Though she occasionally repeated to Hildegard her minister's words, she rarely added anything or interpreted what he said. The only full reports she gave Hildegarde of her Sunday morning activities involved the music sung at the service; she was very interested in the hymns, more their music and their poetry than their religious significance. She knew her Bible well, but refused to quote from it routinely, as did her mother and brother, her minister and Hildegarde, as a palliative in times of distress—but she sometimes found herself quoting them quoting the Bible. She always maintained an interest in the Bible—though she evidently saw it more as an intellectual challenge than as sacred writ—and as late as 1955 she was attending a regular Bible class early to attend a poetry reading given by E.E. Cummings (December 4, 1954). But even though she occasionally found inspiration in the words of the Bible, her solace came not because she necessarily believed that the words were true but because, for the moment and in times of need, the words felt true; she wrote often that she "prized" a verse, or that there was "help" in it, or that it was "compelling"; but never indicated that she accepted it as fact.

In her unorthodox attitude toward sin and evil, Marianne Moore departs sharply from Presbyterian tradition. Only once does she mention sin as an abstract concept—she writes, "It is a sin to be self protective and not to say why we hate debauchery and that no one ever combated sin by exhaustive portrayals of it" (June, 1960). Usually her idea of sin was that it represented a personal failure or was a manifestation of some sort of weakness; she referred to her sickroom, during a time when she and her mother were both ill, as a "den of sin" (May 28, 1936). Evil, for her, existed only in deeds, not as an embodiment of an actual force. And in comparison to traditional theological notions of sin, hers were mild indeed; she once denounced the excess of visitors to Mrs. Watson's hospital room by claiming, "Satan gets into them" (January 19, 1959).

Far more important to Miss Moore than the performance of good or bad deeds is the idea of the persistence and universality of suffering. "Testing" is a recurring theme, though she never surmises who is doing the testing and why; it is simply a part of the human condition—or, as in "Spenser's Ireland," a genetic affliction. The worst possibility, to her, was that a person could be tested beyond human endurance; her devout wish for the Watson's son and daughter was that they were "not being overtired" (July 30, 1944).

Her idea of good and evil was more practical than abstract. She reserved her highest contempt for those who did not observe social amenities, as when an acquaintance failed to thank her promptly for a book she had sent (June 14, 1935). Conversely, right living, rather than righteous living or any sort of spirituality, seemed to be her idea of godliness. Right living involved observing the amenities, caring for one's health, and—especially—controlling one's emotions. Preferring concrete manifestations to abstract theories, she admired her minister's idea about "Finding God in unlikely places"—in the words or a face of some person in the subway, in a store,—and found compelling his admonition to "be Christ in act perhaps yourself" (July 9, 1962). Miracles were performed, she believed, not by deities but by human beings: she once claimed that the Watsons "constantly influence [miracles] into being for others" (April 3, 1950). On another occasion she wrote, "People talk lightly of the good Lord, of God's gifts, You and Sibley are that" (March 4, 1948). And the Biblical word became reality for her, too, not through faith but through action: "How you manage, Hildegarde to see the other's need—not pity yourself, mainly what the New Testament is about" (October 25, 1954).

This concretizing of abstract ideas explains the attraction Christian Science had for Marianne Moore. Hildegarde Watson, although married to a medical doctor, greatly admired the writings of Mary Baker Eddy, and sent Marianne Moore Science and Health and subscriptions to various Christian Science periodicals. While Moore never accepted Christian Science as a religion, she favored it as a prescription for a healthy body and a healthy mind, finding its tenets "very strong and quieting" (August 4, 1939). "If one could but incorporate in the living, not just assent to and revere, these things your Christian Science Sentinel teaches," she wrote, "how freed we would be of all our unnatural things" (March 18, 1941). But she was too much a devotee of medical science (she once wrote, "I should have been a janitor in...a medical library," [May 24, 1955]) to reject its practices in favor of Christian Science.

Though she seemed unwilling or unable either to embrace her Presbyterian doctrines with total acceptance or to articulate any religious schema of her own, she was absolutely convinced that individual moral behavior would solve the problems of the world. The individual has responsibility, she believed, for self-discipline, after which all else will follow: "There never was a war," she writes in "In Distrust of Merits," "that was not inward...I am suffering from the disease / my self," And though she was not sure how far she would be willing to stretch other beliefs, she delighted in the clever statements or restatements of others. She wrote to Hildegarde,
Laura Benet has seen Walter dela Mare recently and, when invited to go again, said, "I should like to ask a question, which for me your poems haven't answered entirely. Do you believe in another life?" He said, "Let us get away from the word 'believe'; we do not believe in a butterfly; it is."

But lest she should be guilty of seeming to agree too heartily with dela Mare's statement, she added, "And still...we inhabit a mystery" (December 16, 1950).

In a questionnaire for a Bryn Mawr reunion pamphlet, Marianne Moore was once asked about her political beliefs; "none," she replied, "but impassioned." That word "impassioned" defines and incorporates both her poetic vision and her private behavior; it is the concept that makes whole the parts of her spiritual, personal, artistic, and intellectual life that in other respects seem sometimes at odds with one another. In fact she uses the word in her poem "The Frigate Pelican" in a stanza about both the bird and the composer Handel, which could also apply to Marianne Moore herself:

As impassioned Handel—

meant for a lawyer and a masculine German domestic career—clandestinely studied the harpsichord

and never was known to have fallen in love,

the unconfiding frigate bird hides

in the height and in the majestic display of his art....

Like the pelican, the unconfiding poet hides her passion in the height and majestic display of her art.

From Marianne Moore's own words emerges a personality that both resembles and gainsays the stereotypes and misconceptions about her—because the personality is sane and strong and infinitely complex—and impassioned. The editor obsessed by perfection was also a woman of wit and spontaneity. The poet renowned for her achievements was tortured by self-doubt and self-recrimination. The writer who lived in isolation except from the most brilliant minds of her generation could be generous to a fault in donating her time, especially to persons who had suffered misfortune. And the woman who is widely believed to be an inhibited conformist stands out at times as a fearless and uncompromising individual. A fitting summary of the special kind of passion and courage she showed in her work as in her life is the precept she offers in Predilections (20): "The thing is to see the vision and not deny it; to care and admit that we do."

Bryn Mawr College

Notes


7 RM 1250/30.

8 Kreyberg, Troubador, p. 191.

9 This anecdote and the following, unattributed but probably included at the direction of Hildegard Watson, are part of the Bryn Mawr College collection.

10 RM 1250/30.


12 These and the following statements are taken from RM 1250/30.


17 Yvor Winters, "Holiday and Day of Wrath," in Poetry 26, No. 1 (April 1925), 39; and Richard Aldington, review of Observations, in Criterion 3 (July 1925), 593.


19 Phoenix Profiles, ed. Fannie Barber Berry (Bryn Mawr: Bryn Mawr College, 1959); published on the occasion of the fiftieth reunion of the Class of 1909.