pared for, not the other guy's darkness, and our darkness is dramatic, but it has also as we know the same root that the worst things in history have come from, that we belong to them—oddly enough, we're human before we finish. And I would repeat again that in the very last poems of H.D., the agony was always present and the agony increases about couldn't she be put to rest, couldn't this poetic disturbance and trouble finally end. There are days when—I hope none of my critics are here—when I fantasize disappearing and being a milkman or something, not being any thing connected with even my own tasks. The tasks are all emerged from one's own psyche, deep from one's own psyche, and they also are tasks laid on it by the openings of the spirit. The spirit—here again is where I was close to H.D., so her poetry spoke to me right away. There are spiritual directions, and I don't mean they are all good. Throughout the universe, if you increase possibilities, you increase possibilities of evil as well as possibilities of good. But in that struggle you also learn obedi ences; and the sense of her obeying the call of the poem in the last poems—this is one, if you wanted the contrast, Marianne Moore became more and more beloved of New York because she didn't write what was called for by anything but Manhattan, and that was not the Manhattan that Whitman had calling him. And H.D., on the contrary, questions in the narrative poem "Vale Ave," for instance, very severely that she couldn't—it was the command she obeyd—and she couldn't tell whether that command came from Luciferian or the Satanic. In the spiritual world, spirits also had double natures as psyches do.

San Francisco, California

George Nichite
Condensation and Affection: Some Observations on Marianne Moore

In terms of critical sophistication, this has turned out to be an almost desperately low-profile paper, as though written by one of Marianne Moore's humbler animals, as perhaps indeed it has been, though I'm not really able to judge that. It is a matter of observations, not because of a mere wish to echo her own early book title but because I could think of no word more accurate for what I seemed to be doing. I'm going to begin (and very possibly never get very far beyond) three little bundles of observations that seem to me to have some resonances in common, and that I like to think may turn out to be categorical imperatives, at least for the kind of paper this is and the kind of critic I apparently am.

First is the frontispiece portrait of Marianne Moore in Laurence Stapleton's fine book Marianne Moore: The Poet's Advance. The photograph's subscript indicates that it was taken "about 1935," which means she was close to fifty at the time. But anyone seeing it and not knowing the who or when would surely see a very beautiful young woman of about thirty.

Second are some statistics. There is the Festschrift for Marianne Moore's Seventy Seventh Birthday, put together by Tambimuttu; it includes forty-six contributions in prose or verse, of which either thirty-seven or thirty-eight are by men. And there is Charles Tomlinson's volume on Marianne Moore in the Twentieth Century Views series, which contains twenty-two items, twenty-one of which are by men (the single eccentric item is a 1919 letter from Marianne Moore herself to Ezra Pound).

Third is a little cluster of fragments from some of the men in question. There is William Carlos Williams, writing in his autobiography, "Marianne was our saint—if we had one—in whom we all instinctively felt our purpose come together to form a stream. Everyone loved her." Next is Allen Ginsberg, when he was forty, addressing her on the occasion of her seventy-seventh birthday as "Little Flower." Next is William Wasserstrom, like me and Ginsberg some thirty to thirty-five years Marianne Moore's junior, telling of arrangements for an appointment with her at Schrafft's in 1958, when she was seventy or seventy-one, she wondering by telephone how he would recognize her since he had never seen her in person, and he
finding that “it was no hard task to identify a beautiful woman wearing the tricorn hat and great cape which then served as customary dress.” And there is Ruthven Todd, telling of the experience of being shown some of Marianne Moore’s sketches by the lady herself in her Brooklyn apartment: “There, poring over these meticulous marvels, I fell in love with her and have remained in the same condition ever since.”

Well, there’s a constellation. “Statements that took my fancy which I tried to arrange plausibly,” to quote Marianne Moore’s headnote to “Marriage,” that fine Baconian essay about men and women. I think there are resonances in that constellation; I think they’re real, and I think they may bear some brooding over. I think also that they may get one into a remarkable lot of trouble, so I shall disarm all criticism at the outset by admitting that I do not know whether what follows is really a paper or merely a kind of pre-geriatric mumble. I don’t believe that I ever exactly fell in love with Marianne Moore. Indeed, I never met her in person, though probably we all know that that’s no hindrance to falling love. My only direct contact with her came about as a result of my writing her to ask permission to quote early versions of some of her poems. She had given me permission originally (typed note, typed signature) to quote only the most recent versions, and that would have demolished a whole chapter of my book. So at my editor’s advice, I wrote again, explaining the circumstances and keeping my fingers crossed. The letter came back promptly (literally, my letter came back), endorsed in her handwriting, “Scrupulous Mr. Mitchie!” and signed Marianne C. Moore. It was my only Marianne Moore holograph, and it disappeared into the legal records of the Columbia University Press, whose authorities concluded that she had indeed given the permission I had requested.

That was a bit of a digression, but I think my telling you about it is another fragment of the resonances I’m concerned with in this examination of condescension and affection, resonances having to do with the relationship of her chiefly male commentators to the woman and her work. So once more, I don’t believe that I ever fell in love with Marianne Moore, but there’s no question about my occupying that border country between affection and condescension, and that I suppose might as well be love, whether fallen into or achieved (I see myself as an achiever, not a faller into). A reviewer of my book thought that I sometimes treated Marianne Moore “preciously, as if she could not take care of herself.” I don’t really think he was right, but I know what he meant; I think he meant that “art, admired in general, is always actually personal,” and that the small-bore academic critic, especially of the masculine persuasion, had better be very, very careful about how he lets the personal and the general contaminate one another unless he understands what he’s doing. I am reminded of a daughter of mine, many years ago, confronted with a delectable casserole she had never experienced before and asking, with the heavy suspicion of the very young, “What’s dat stuff?” Well, what indeed? and happy the man who can answer with assurance. I am not at all sure that I can, and I think you should be aware of the difficulty.

The difficulty arises, partly at least, from two circumstances. First, I am not at all sure that I want to keep the personal and the general from contaminating one another. That is an entirely personal matter. Confronted with a beautiful and de-lightful woman, I can detect in myself a somewhat more sophisticated variety of the impulse to curl my mustaches and say gallant and foolish things—treading chasms, in fact, on the uncertain footing of a spear. Ultimately, I suppose, it is the male desire to tame the shrew all of whose criminal ingenuity is devoted to a contrary effect, and who tells me that I love myself so much that I can permit myself no rival in that love. I am challenged, and I respond to that challenge, as if incapable of looking at anything with a view to analysis. And I trust your ears are catching the fact that I am speaking in tongues here, that she has been there before me, that if there is wit in it the wit is hers and not mine. She knows something about the spiked hand that has affection for one and proves it to the bone, experience attesting that men have power and sometimes one is made to feel it. As a particular kind of woman, she does things to the particular kind of man that my fantasy versions of myself assure me I really am, and I enjoy the things that she does. Once more, I am not sure that I want to keep the general and the personal from contaminating one another.

All right. Second (and this may be heresy, but it is surely not one of the greater heresies), I doubt that there is much point in trying to keep the personal and the general from contaminating one another, because in the first place it probably cannot be done, and in the second place the results would be something less than desirable even if it could be done—that odorless, colorless, tasteless product pure criticism (criticism as an autotelic activity, as John Crowe Ransom has described it; criticism with its head up its own backside, as it may seem sometimes to others). Here, I may be engaging in a bit of wish-fulfillment, generalizing the personal response I’ve spoken of, but I don’t think so, at least not entirely. It does no harm, certainly, to remember that Paradise Lost was written by a blind man (even by a blind man who had had to hide for his life); it does no harm to remember that Keats was as good as dead at twenty-four; it does no harm to remember that “Little Gidding” is the last work of a man who much earlier had left it to his lawyers, while he himself was lecturing in America, to tell his wife that he was initiating proceedings for formal separation, and who wrote ten years later of the shame:

Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others’ harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.

These are facts. In some varieties of critical game-playing, such facts are quite properly ruled out of order, but I think no one pretends that such game-playing represents the experience of what Yeats called the whole, normal, passionate, reasoning man. (And do we not all regard ourselves, secretly, as whole, normal, passionate, reasoning men?) It does no harm to remember these things and to incorporate them into our teaching. And it does no harm to remember that “Marriage,” for instance (from which most of my echoes and allusions have of course been taken), was written by a woman in her mid-thirties, a woman whose older brother had some eight years earlier had to risk a degree of serious estrangement from their mother in order to establish his own career and to marry—a woman who herself had never married, who “lived with and looked after her mother until the
latter’s death in 1947. In fact she was rarely away overnight.” 60 Sixty years of mother-watching! The circumstances were such that a genuinely private life appears to have been virtually impossible. Mrs. Moore involved herself in the poems and articles her daughter was writing, read her correspondence, doled out money to her for shopping. But the family bonds held; correspondence among the three Moores was constant and affectionate, and Marianne was intensely and evidently genuinely appreciative of her mother, whose death in 1947 appears to have been the deepest personal sorrow Marianne Moore ever experienced. And my point is that you would have to do something I at least cannot do if the personal and the general are not to contaminate one another when I read “Marriage” (and other poems as well, of course) in the light of that knowledge.

In the light of that knowledge, I wish she had not spent all that time translating La Fontaine. But by that I may chiefly mean, “I wish she had not had to spend all that time translating La Fontaine.” 61 (Would I feel differently if Auden or Harry Levin had undertaken it—Auden, who had originally been approached for the project but who thought Marianne Moore the more appropriate person; Harry Levin, who advised her, at her request, throughout the translation. Would I feel differently? and I suspect I would, though I do not know very clearly just what the difference would be. It would be very much involved, however, with the almost-if-not-altogether collegial relationship between mother and daughter, and I do not know whether it is a form of male condescension that makes me raise the question, or whether it is a form of almost loverly resentment at being excluded from a set of affections I can only be outside of.

So I shall assume that I mean “I wish she had not had to spend all that time translating La Fontaine.” 62 The seven or eight years of translating were the seven or eight years after the death of her mother, that object and source of the central affections of her life, and I remember her remark somewhere to the effect that she did not care for the volumes her mother had not worked on with her. And I think her judgment did not fail her there. Laurence Stapleson, again, has shown us something of the way the two women must have worked together; Marianne Moore kept a notebook of her mother’s remarks, witticisms, observations, and evidently she used it rather in the way Wordsworth used his sister Dorothy’s journals. And I wonder whether publication of that notebook will tell us little that we don’t already know, or whether it will make us do some substantial revising of our ideas about collaboration, about the shadowy other figure in such relationships. I say “shadowy”: we know, more or less, what is in Dorothy’s journals; we know little about the conversation at Race-down and at Alfoxden and at Grasmere, the daily give and take that went into the lives and the poems. We don’t know whether the poems were really by William, helped out by Dorothy, or whether they were really by William-lynch-Dorothy or even Dorothy-lynch-William, with William just as the one who did the writing as it were by the flip of a coin or the flip of a gender. The gender question doesn’t raise itself in the same way with the two Moores, to be sure, except in the ambiguous resonances attaching to male-devised formulas about “these two women living and working together,” attended by elements of mother-dominance and daughterly obsession with writing, and by masculine uneasiness about these things.

“T wish she had not spent all that time translating La Fontaine,” and you’re going to have to endure some more self-fascinated masculine narcissism here. By that do I mean, “I wish she had not drained off all that fine energy into a piece of superior hackwork,” or do I mean, “I wish she had simply stopped writing verse when it became evident that the central source of energy for writing verse had collapsed”? Or do I mean (the small-bore male academic critic, unable to keep the personal and the general from contaminating one another, being a little bit disingenuous about what dat stuff really is)—do I really mean, “I wish she hadn’t been locked in on that hopelessly sterile mother-daughter tie-up when there were good mustache-twisters like me around”? Perhaps we need to say that criticism too, admired or more appropriately despised in general, is also always personal.

I remember an uneasy uncorrected feeling of that I was aware of all the time I was writing my book on Marianne Moore. What did she live on? (My reviewer, once more, was at least half right.) Her salary as editor of The Dial? The royalties on her books, the honoraria from readings and speaking, the occasional grants? One of the notices of her death straightened it all out: she left an estate valued at $450,000. 63 It’s not easy to condescend to $450,000. And I think that my most vivid sense of that fact is one that strikes even more as excessive: she didn’t need me after all. And I suspect that knowing that has made it possible for me to come back easily to the poems, has made affection easy and unapologetic and guiltless, without condescension and without sentimentality. We talk properly about respecting Marianne Moore, but the deeper truth, I think, is that we love her. And perhaps that’s what that stuff really is.

**Notes**

7. Moore, p. 192.
10. Abbott, p. 121.