The articles that constitute this special double number of _Poetics_ were delivered as talks at the Bryn Mawr College English Department symposium on H.D. and Marianne Moore as part of the observances of the college centennial. If an exception was to be made to our intention to keep _Poetics_ focused exclusively on contemporary verse, this certainly seemed the appropriate occasion, in view of the distinguished panel of speakers and the remarkable women who were the subjects of the talks. Some two hundred and fifty people attended the program on March 29 and 30 of this year, composing an audience that ran the gamut from alumnæ and supporters of Bryn Mawr and students of modern poetry generally to practicing poets who may have come primarily to hear the poets on the program. There were feminists (how not?) and traditionalists, scholars, publishers, undergraduates, at least one lawyer, and maybe even a deconstructionist or two.

What they observed was a program divided roughly between the primarily critical commentary of the first day and the more or less purely biographical focus of the second. The papers will speak for themselves, and I will limit this gesture toward an introduction to observing that the striking pertinence of Professor Alicia Ostriker’s keynote talk to almost all the papers was prophetic: the papers all dovetail to a remarkable degree, though none of the participants had any prior idea of what anyone else was to do. The symposium was a revelation in its entirety, I think, of the deep significance these two women possessed and possess for many, many people. In the introduction for one of the speakers, it was observed that a spirit of great reverence seemed to inform all the talks. I think that reverence was eminently appropriate, and it is in similar spirit that _Poetics_ presents this issue in celebration of Hilda Doolittle and Marianne Moore.

Alicia Ostriker

_What Do Women (Poets) Want?: Marianne Moore and H.D. as Poetic Ancestresses_

“We think back through our mothers, if we are women,” wrote Virginia Woolf in 1928, making a statement which is memorable not only because it is a ringing pentameter line. It is mysterious. We think back through our mothers, if we are women. Let me draw your attention, briefly, to the first person plural, the creative identity as a female “we”; the unconventional association of women and mothers not with feeling, or loving, or caring, or tenderness, but with thinking; and, lastly, the new verb formation Woolf has invented. We think back through our mothers. To think back is to remember. But what does it mean to think back through something, another person, a set of people?

We trace our own past with their help, perhaps. Or we remember it through remembering theirs—but how does one do that? Or we re-think ourselves by re-thinking them. And there is the strange sense in the line that to think back is not easy, but is a groping, a feeling in the darkness. And, too, we know that when Woolf says think back, she means move forward; for she is talking, after all, of the need for a usable past that will enable us, if we are women, to say what we mean.

While tracking in _A Room of One’s Own_ the embattled but live tradition of women’s fiction, Woolf insists over and over that “it is the poetry that is still denied outlet.” Shakespeare’s sister lies dead at the crossroads of the Elephant and Castle, and is yet to be reborn, she says. If women writers have five hundred a year and rooms of their own, if they have “the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what they think,” if they look past Milton’s booby at the world of reality, Woolf estimates that the woman poet will be born in a century or so. “As for her coming without that preparation...that would be impossible.”

In 1928 H.D. had written most of her early poems, surely with something like the androgynous incandescence Woolf says she longs for. Marianne Moore had published _Poems_ and _Observations_. Amy Lowell was three years dead. Elinor Wylie, Sara Teasdale, Edna Millay, Leonie Adams, Louise Bogan, and others, were creating a body of lyric poetry worthy of comparison with Elizabethan and Jaco-
bean song. Emily Dickinson’s works had gone through multiple editions. So that one wonders whether, when Woolf claims that “it is the poetry that is still denied outlet,” she had only England in mind and not America.

In America too, however, women poets have lamented the lack of mothers. Amy Lowell in “The Sisters” begins by remarking how queer women poets are and “how few of us there’ve been;” and ends after imagining meetings with Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson, by rejecting all three as mothers for herself. Yet of course there were not really “few” women poets when Lowell wrote, for what Hawthorne in the nineteenth century called “the d——d mob of scribbling women” included scores of women poets—indeed, the hegemony of poetesses over poetry in 19th century America has been complained of as constituting a debilitating feminization of culture.

Decades pass, but we continue to hear these wistful complaints. A fellow student at the Iowa Writers Program in the ’40s told the young Jane Cooper that a woman poet was a contradiction in terms, and she noted that “men’s praise of women’s poetry didn’t seem to go much beyond Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop.” Adrienne Rich in the fifties was “taught that poetry should be universal, which meant, of course, nonfemale,” and even when she read “the older women poets” like Sappho, Rossetti, Dickinson, and so on, as well as the maidenly and discreet Marianne Moore whom all the men recommended, she “was looking in them for the same things I had found in the poetry of men.” Carolyn Kizer in “Pro Femina,” published in 1965, complains that the women poets of the past are all either “old maids to a woman,” or ugly cigar-smokers, or “the sad sonneteers, toast-and-teasdales we loved at thirteen.”

When a woman says she cannot locate poetic mothers, I think it means something like the following. She too despises the mob of scribbling women and wants to dissociate herself from their presumed mediocrity. Louise Bogan, asked to edit an anthology of women poets for The Nation, responded that “the thought of corresponding with a lot of female songbirds makes me acutely ill.” If a woman is ambitious and means perhaps to be a major poet, she will have read major critics—men of course—writing about the poets she might consider identifying with. Adjectives will have entered her bloodstream: modest, reticent, graceful, delicate, pure, Womanly. She will not, in connection with women poets, have often encountered terms like great, powerful, forceful, violent, brilliant, or large. If learning how to write in the fifties, she will read, perhaps, Blackmur on Dickinson: “She was neither a professional poet nor an amateur; she was a private poet who wrote indefatigably as some women cook or knit. Her gift for words and the cultural predicament of her time drove her to poetry instead of antimacassars.” (This is like saying Pound wrote indefatigably the way some men go to the office, and that the gift for words and his cultural predicament drove him to poetry instead of golf.) Or Ransom on Dickinson: “a little home-keeping person” who in common with other women poets “makes flights into nature rather too easily and upon errands which do not have metaphysical importance enough to justify so radical a strategy.” Or Ransom on Millay: “the imitation of Miss Millay...is her lack of intellectual interest,” more precisely defined as “deficiency in masculinity.” Of H.D. the young woman poet will learn from The Pound Era that imagism was a trivial pebble in the great Pound stream, and that H.D. was neurotic; from Douglas Bush’s great work on Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry comes the pronunciation that “H.D. is a poet of escape,” whose Greece “has no connection with the Greece of historic actuality” (no more does Keats’s, or Matthew Arnold’s, or Poe’s, but never mind). And she will read, and believe, that Marianne Moore is “unassuming,” “unpretentuous,” and “her humility is vast.”

In sum, it is difficult to discover who our mothers are, much less think through them, thanks to a long history of criticism—brilliant and authoritative, gallant and condescending—which veils them from us.

What then do we want in our poetic ancestresses? My belief is that we want strong mothers; and I use the Bloomian term not because I believe that the woman poet’s achievement depends on killing and superceding her predecessor. Rather than Oedipal and Latus at the crossroads, the model among women writers, critics as well as poets, is Demeter and Kore: only it is the daughter who descends to Hades, groping in the dark, to retrieve and revive her mother, who is strong and beautiful and wise, but has been raped—or is it seduced—by a powerful male god. As the mother returns to earth, the daughter will blossom.

I believe that we seek, in our strong mothers, three linked qualities. First, we want models we can seize on for sheer excellence as poets: poets who have themselves mastered and contained the past, who speak in their own voices and yet with the voice of the age, who work at the highest levels of poetic imagination and technical skill. Second, we want poets who are subversive: whose work constitutes a critique of culture, who are in Adrienne Rich’s words “disloyal to civilization.” For civilization systematically oppresses, excludes, marginalizes and trivializes the female, and privileges values which women not uncommonly feel to be deeply wrong—or, at any rate, deeply partial. If the subversiveness of our mothers has been disguised, as is often the case, by apparent compliance, it is our business as poets and critics to retrieve it. Third, we seek not merely critique but the promise of alternative vision: acts of imagination whereby we might conceive, as it were, the valleys being exalted, the crooked made straight and the rough places plain.

That Marianne Moore and H.D. satisfy our first hunger, that of excellence, I do not need to demonstrate to this group. Rather, I want to talk about the excitement of their challenge to traditional authority and the beauty of their alternative vision, elements which they share with each other and with other women, and which have been obscured by readings that stress their differences.

Briefly to review some key differences: where H.D. is subjective and intense, Moore writes from a stance of apparent objectivity and reason, at a cool distance from the self. Where Moore is determinedly secular and concrete, H.D. is preoccupied with the sacred, the mythic and occult. And where the art of H.D. dwells increasingly on issues of sexuality and gender, reflecting—in however refracted a way—the life of a woman who loved, married, was divorced, bisexual, and the mother of a daughter, Moore’s world seems asexual, reflecting a life of tranquil celibacy. Others before me have proposed, of course, that this last difference was crucial to their reputations. Of the great women moderns, Moore, H.D., Gertrude Stein and possibly Mina Loy, only Moore was famous for chastity—or, to put it more conventionally, Moore was a lady in ways that the others distinctly were not, and she was also the only one who won a National Book Award, the Bollingen
Prize and a Pulitzer, academic respect and a respectable representation in anthologies. H.D. on the other hand, despite the discipleship of distinguished poets like Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, has been until recently all but non-existent within the academy. Yet as Donald Hall has observed, attention to Moore’s filigreed reasonable surface may deflect us from some dangerous depths and passionate irrationalities. And as several feminist critics of H.D., such as Susan Friedman, Rachel DuPlessis and Susan Gubar have found, H.D.’s escapist fantasies are in fact political documents.

Power in a woman poet is often, to quote Moore, “disguised by what/might seem the opposite.” If then we gaze beyond the brilliant and deceptive surfaces for what unites these two poets, we find at least three important motifs: the issue of power and powerlessness, the attack on authority in general and masculine authority in particular, and the identification of creativity with femaleness.

Moore’s preoccupation with danger and self-protection is evident in her earliest work. “All are naked, none is safe,” implicitly, even in the tidy world of the steeplejack, where the “exotic serpent” may not appear, but the Danger sign stands consequently beneath the steeple’s star of hope. To gild the star of hope, making it more hopeful, is dangerous and creates danger, for the steeplejack—a figure for the poet?—may fall and kill himself, or may drop some equipment on you. Moore’s armored animals, as many critics have observed, are figures for the self: “everything is battle-dressed” defensively, for, as Suzanne Juhasz notes, “Moore is concerned with surfaces, and the relation of dress to distress.” Like Yeats she is her own artifact, though it is in glass not gold that we find “that nimble animal the fish, whose scales turn aside the sun’s sword by their polish.” Her snail, whose “contractibility is a virtue/as modesty is a virtue,” is herself as artist, with a “principle that is hid.” The salamander skin of “His Shield” is a “humility” that protects the self from flattery and greed, from provoking others’ envy and from one’s own potential to dominate others.

Vulnerability and the need to protect/disguise the self is a central feminine theme from Dickinson’s “mirth is the mail of anguish” to poems like Sylvia Plath’s “In Plaster” (about a plaster cast as a double self), Louise Glück’s “Aphrodite” (where a rocky headland is a defense against sexuality), or Margaret Atwood’s “A Fortification,” where rational consciousness is a space suit enabling the speaker to cry, “I am safe: safe: the grass can’t hurt me, I am barrièred from leaves and blood.” It has been suggested that the most pervasive fear experienced by women poets is a fear of seeming immodest and being rejected by male mentors and critics, so that one’s very consciousness of worth and ambition is a danger. Donald Hall notes: “Humility...is a shield for rather curious reasons...After all, if one can do something well, what is the point of pretending that one can’t?” Ask any woman, would be the obvious response. The self-effacing cannot be effaced by others. “Humility is a shield because it seeks to disarm,” Hall continues, but is “an armor necessary only to those who want, more than anything, to be best. Contrived humility can only bespeak a soul not very humble.” If this is the case, we may look with renewed eyes at Moore’s famous pangolins, which like the poet “are not aggressive animals” and are things “made graceful by adversities.” For the pangolin is described not only as both artist-engineer and work of art; its grace under pressure identifies it with Christ, and its noble fearfulness and courage identifies it with Man. Were the poet to make such identifications with the self overt, she would seem immodest indeed.

When we think back through Moore’s armored animals, then, we find an obsessive image of protection against usually un-named dangers; then image stands for the self as woman, and artist, and work of art, and the humility it embodies is the shield of pride. We can pursue this a step further, for in “The Paper Nautilus” the shelved creature is explicidy feminine, a mother, and a creatrix—the roles of creation and procreation are for her one; she is also a hero, like Hercules, and a demon. Her natural enemies are the powerful and comfortable of this world, and her fortress is love:

For authorities whose hopes are shaped by mercenaries?

Writers enthrapped by
teatime fame and by
commuters’ comforts? Not for these
the paper nautilus constructs her thin glass shell.

When we turn to H.D. we continue to find the undermining modesty of an armor which protects the woman as artist, the artist as woman, and for H.D. too the shell does more than protect. In The Walls Do Not Fall, the anguish of World War II and her experience of the blitz turns into a shellfish whose jaw “snaps shut/at invasion of the limitless.” Like the worm who says “In me (the worm) clearly/is no righteousness but this—/peristence,” knowing her own limits, she can eat without being eaten, and can “beget, self-out-of-self,/selfless/, that pearl-of-great-price” which is art. Words, in The Walls Do Not Fall, are not the abstract Logos: they are “anagrams, cryptograms,/little boxes, conditioned/to hatch butterflies.” In Tribute to the Angels, the image for enclosure is the crucible in which the words for bitterness and the sea fuse and become “mer, mere, mere, mater, Maia, Mary, Star of the Sea, Mother.” Then, in H.D.’s vision of the Lady, we have a cognate image of mysterious enclosure and gestation. The world is full of culturally mandated images of the Lady, but “none of these, none of these/suggest her as I saw her,” says the poet. “She is Psyche, out of the cocoon.” Finally, in The Flowering of the Rod, we have a kind of multiplication of containers: the two jars containing the Mary-myrrh which is at once woman and poem, and the flawed jewel in the Magdalen’s headband which opens into the vision of Atlantis. To all these images of the poet’s imagination as protection, disguise, and creative womb—and there are more of them—we may of course contrast the armored figure of Achilles in Helen in Egypt—the warlord and woman-hater. Instead of the organic shell or chrysalis which protects the feminine figure from hate, yet allows living growth, Achilles’ armor is inorganic. It protects him from love, and it must be destroyed:

the body honored
by the Grecian host
was but an iron casement,
it was God's plan

to melt the icy fortress of the soul,

and free the man.

In looking at images of the woman artist's need for self-protection and capacity for self-generation, we have already entered the theme of anti-authoritarianism. "I go where I love and where I am loved,/into the snow...with no thought of duty or pity," says H.D. in Trilogy, leaving behind the hill of skulls, war and its makers.

"Where there is personal liking we go," says Marianne Moore in "The Hero," hoping to avoid the predatory owl with its "twin yellow eyes" and its "basso-falsetto chirps" (what man of letters she has in mind here I cannot help wondering).

"I am not, nor mean to be, the Daemon they made of me," cries H.D.'s Helen, defying almost three millennia of high literature. "O to be a dragon, a symbol of the power of heaven," cries Moore, defying the image of the eccentric spinster-poet in the tricorne.

Unlike their more renowned modernist contemporaries Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore and H.D. express no nostalgia for the hierarchic structures of past literature, religion and social order. Both poets dislike "(that which is great because something else is small,)", and like siding with underdogs, marginal figures, and the repressed. Relationships of dominance and subordination do not delight them; relationships of love and liking do. Among the civilizations to which Moore is disloyal, as representing a mentality dedicated to conquest and an art which is the exclusive possession of the wealthy, we find ancient Egypt and ancient Rome in "The Jerboa," the France of Louis XIV in "No Swan So Fine," imperial China in "Critics and Connoisseurs," and England, with its ostensible superiority to both America and Ireland. "Sojourn in the Whale" is a particularly interesting poem. Nominally about England's oppression—"swallowing"—of Ireland, it is also about men and women, and it contains an anger only light veiled. Moore in this poem addresses Ireland:

you have lived and lived on every kind of shortage... and have heard men say:

"There is a feminine temperament in direct contrast to ours,

which makes her do these things. Circumscribed by a heritage of blindness and native incompetence, she will be wise and will be forced to give in. Compelled by experience, she will turn back;

water seeks its own level!

and you have smiled. "Water in motion is far from level." You have seen it, when obstacles happened to bar the path, rise automatically.

Moore makes fun of the central institution of patriarchy, marriage, which it takes all her criminal ingenuity to avoid, and of Adam, the husband who experiences

a solemn joy in seeing that he has become an idol. "Men have power...and sometimes one is made to feel it." Eve in this poem remarks: "Men are monopolists/of *stars, garters, buttons and other shining baubles*—unto to be the guardians/of another person's happiness." The stars, garters, etc., are of course emblems of imperial power, and among the shining baubles are women. (This is a critique almost identical to Virginia Woolf's mocking dissection of patriarchy in A Room of One's Own, by the way.) Nor does Moore confine her attacks to what is far from home. Associations of masculine authority, complacency and violence appear also in "To Statecraft Embalm'd," "Pedantic Literalist," "Critics and Connoisseurs," with its wonderful mockery of "proving that one has had the experience/of carrying a stick," "The Labors of Hercules," "To Military Progress," and "To a Steam Roller." Now a jibe is not a diatribe, and I do not mean to suggest that Marianne Moore is, as the saying goes, strident. She is unflaggingly charming. Yet if we read her matter as well as her manner carefully, it is clear that what her undermining modesty undermines is the same structures of power, in the worlds of politics and intellectual life, that feminist poets and critics are attacking less modestly.

Like Moore, H.D. defies authority throughout her career, pausing only to gain strength to defy it ever more ardently. Her early work shows this only in hints. Devotees calling on gods everyone says are dead cry out their confidence: "You will come, you will come...you will answer our taunt hearts./you will break the lie of men's thoughts." The goddess Demeter redeems her own identity in defiance of the image men have made of her, and announces "enough of tale, myth, mystery, pre-cendent,"

"as Adrienne Rich will later setaside 'the book of myths/in which/our names do not appear.' H.D.'s "Helen" tells us that men and nations hate the woman-as-erotic object they claim to love, until they can embalm her as art, reminding us of Erica Jong's less polite remark: "The only good poetses a dead,"

"Calypso Speaks" and "Euridice" are violent attacks on Odysseus and Orpheus, and on the literary tradition of the egocentric and complacent male as hero, lover, poet. Among the women poets who have written Euridice poems along similar lines is the poet-critic Rachel DuPlessis.

As the pathbreaking work of recent feminist criticism has demonstrated, H.D.'s quarrel with patriarchy became a governing principle of her late work. "The Professor was not always right," she says demurely of Freud, though she compares Freud with Moses, the prophets and even Christ, and though he played the role of personal guide, healer and father to her. "There was an argument implicit in our very bones," she says; and Tribute to Freud—marvelously punning title—suggests a tax one pays to the powerful as well as an homage one pays to the meritorious. As Susan Friedman shows us, the daughter in this extraordinary work in effect seduces the father, affirming his spiritual nature rather against his will, confirming the validity of a female vision, rearranging the balance of power between the polarities: man against woman, science versus religion, objective versus subjective reality, authority versus rebellion.

All H.D.'s major late poems follow the same pattern. She sees "what men say is not," she delicately and gently dismantles orthodox patriarchal structures, and she pursues, in her exploration of what she calls "all myth, the one reality," a lost and distinctly female truth. Her challenge to orthodox Christianity in Trilogy at
first takes the rather mild form of identifying Christ with Osiris. Later she politely
defies the John of Revelation with his 7 angels of apocalyptic destruction, super-
posing her own vision of the Lady who is not-fear, who is not-war—and not only
her own vision but her own interpretation, for the Lady has “none of her usual
attributes”:

She carries a book but it is not
the tome of the ancient wisdom,
the pages I imagine are the blank pages
of the unwritten volume of the new...
...she is not shut up in a cave
like a sybil; she is not
imprisoned in leaden bars
in a coloured window...
her attention is undivided,
we are her bridegroom and lamb,
her book is our book.

By the close of Trilogy H.D. has written something like a new Gnostic Gospel,
fusing the figures of the virgin-mother and the magdalene, and revealing to Kaspar
the wise man the patriarchal vision his wisdom has erased. In Helen in Egypt H.D.
rewrites both Homer and Euripides, creating a questing heroine who redefines the
meaning of war and love; indeed, who redefines the meaning of civilization and its
discontents. H.D. called Helen in Egypt her Cantos, and it is clear that the poem is
a counterweight to Pound’s Cantos: gynocentric to his androcentrism, anti-fascist
and anti-heroic to his fascism and hero worship. To his Chinese ideograms, emblem
of an exclusively masculine culture, she proposes the Egyptian hieroglyph, emblem
of a culture that worshiped both Isis and Osiris. And how is Helen to understand
this sacred script? Not by authority, not by tradition, but by self-discovery: “She
herself is the writing.” Again, in the very late poem *Hermetic Definition*, she
insists on a woman-centered, woman-inspired vision, despite criticism:

why must I write?
you would not care for this,
but She draws the veil aside,
unbinds my eyes,
commands,
write, write or die.

To define what I have called the alternative vision of the woman poet is of course
a larger task than I can undertake here; it is in fact being undertaken by dozens of
poets and critics at this moment. But let me suggest some elements of it. There is

a preference for continuities over dualities. There is a related drive to centralize
what is culturally marginal and repressed. Have we, for example, sufficiently
appreciated what a radical thing Moore does in her constant relation of the human
to the animal kingdom? In the context of modernist alienation, this is as bold as
H.D.’s revival of the Goddess. There is an absolute insistence on our need for
feeling, a refusal to divide feeling from thinking, and a corollary insistence on re-
defining what the culture should mean by heroism. Achilles must be dis-arm’d, must
learn to love what he has hated, must relinquish the iron band of war and recover
his connection with the mother. “The Hero” according to Moore’s astonishing
definition, is no conqueror or superior being. Rather, he is: like us; not afraid to be
afraid; vexingly unconventional; a pilgrim. He is like a Negro servant, and like
Moses he is no grandson to Pharoah. He is a visionary and he is not greedy. Most
astonishingly, and right in the middle of the poem, the hero has “the feelings of a
mother—a/woman or a cat.”

It is a lovely thing, I think, that the figure of the mother is such a central and
active one in both Marianne Moore and H.D. Moore, we know, lived with her
mother for most of her life, and in the postscript to *Selected Poems* in 1935 at-
tributed to her mother “the thinking and often the actual phrases” of her poems.
H.D.’s mother was an accomplished musician and artist who had surrendered her
talents to the duties of wifehood and motherhood, and was, according to her
daughter, “morbidly self-effacing.” Much of the poet’s later career involves an
attempt to re-imagine her mother as muse and as power, and in her final work the
roles of lover and seeker, mother and poet are often fused.

It is to be expected that when contemporary women poets think back through
their mothers they will gain strength from the achievements of these two. We already
know that, for example, Elizabeth Bishop and May Swenson, Denise Levertov and
Adrienne Rich have done so. But there are many others, some of them at the em-
battled borders of respectability, whose matrilineal heritage is also unmistakable.
I think of the moral connection between Moore’s “In Distrust of Merits” and the
underground classic by the poet Judy Grahn, “A Woman Is Talking to Death,” and
the spiritual empowering by H.D. of Grahn’s Helen cycle in *The Queen of Wands. I
think not only of Denise Levertov’s snail but of Marge Piercy’s “The Spring Of-
ensive of the Snail.” When I think of the Lady freed by a poet’s imagination from
the leaden bars of a colored window I must think also of a short poem describing the
nursing of a daughter by the radical feminist poet Alta:

it was not stained glass
windows: it was the pressure
& release of milk from
my body to yours: our
deep communion.

Pressure and release, nourishment and communion. Marianne Moore and H.D.
offer themselves to us as mothers, though this power of theirs has been half-hid in
a benign critical underworld. They will be increasingly restored by the daughters
who know what they are looking for: “Resurrection/is a sense of direction.”

Rutgers University
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 tightly 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.