Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop: Friendship and Influence

Bonnie Costello

Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop claimed not to understand the critical inclination to compare them in reviews and articles, and on many occasions dismissed anything more than juvenile and superficial resemblances. Reporting one such conversation with a critic, Moore wrote to Bishop (June 21, 1959):

You have sometimes asked what I thought, Elizabeth; but even if you ever took my advice, did you ever get to sound like me? or I like you? You sound like Lope de Vega and I sound like Jacob Abbot or Peter Rabbit.¹

Such remarks ought to be fair warning against elaborate claims of influence. Nevertheless, this was one of the most abiding and significant literary friendships in either woman's career, so that the nature and evolution of that friendship should be of interest to readers of their poetry.

As women and as writers, Moore and Bishop were kindred spirits. But they complemented as much as mirrored each other in their friendship. The Protestant poet of manners and morals, Moore, and the skeptic poet of mysteries, Bishop, approached life and language from separate vantage points, but their enduring friendship centered in the intersection of their angles of vision.

It is tempting to read their relationship within a mother/daughter paradigm. Twenty-two years older than Bishop, unmarried and childless, Moore may have found in her young friend an object of maternal affection and concern. Such attention was certainly missing in Bishop's life. Her father died when she was eight months old. Her mother became permanently insane in 1916, when Bishop was seven, and died in 1934, the same year she met Moore. Moore's parental and Bishop's filial attitudes show themselves most often in the letters of the first ten years, later letters demonstrating a growing mutuality, although with continued deference on Bishop's part. But neither poet thought of their relationship in this way. Though fully self-conscious about the obstacles confronting women artists, they did not think of their lives or their art in specifically feminist terms. We may, retrospectively, recognize their aesthetic or personal choices as determined by an inherent feminism, but we should also recognize how multi-faceted their common interests were, addressed to both wider and more specific issues than the experience of women in patriarchal society. The category of mentor and protégée makes a better fit. Moore schooled Bishop in the practice of poetry, not in a visionary stance or a code for living.

Still, art and life, aesthetics and morality, are deeply linked for both poets. If the nouns of family life (mother, daughter, sister, etc.) do not quite fit, the verbs still do, not the oedipal verb "struggle" which dominates our Bloomian notion of literary influence, but the centrally female verb "nurture." Indeed, when the young Bishop made Moore the present of a paper nautilus shell, Moore's gift in return was a poem about mother love and its relationship to writing. While the poem most directly figures an artist's creative gesture (perhaps complimenting Bishop for her care and devotion as a writer), it might also stand for the relation between mentor and protégée.

The Paper Nautilus

For authorities whose hopes
are shaped by mercenaries?
Writers entrapped by
teatime fame and by
commuters' comforts? Not for these
the paper nautilus
constructs her thin glass shell.

Giving her perishable
souvenir of hope, a dull
white outside and smooth-edged inner surface
glossy as the sea, the watchful
maker of it guards it
day and night; she scarcely
eats until the eggs are hatched.
Buried eightfold in her eight
arms, for she is in
a sense a devil-
fish, her glass ram’s-horn-craddled freight
is hid but is not crushed;
as Hercules, bitten
by a crab loyal to the hydra,
was hindered to succeed,
the intensively
watched eggs coming from
the shell free it when they are freed,—
leaving its wasp-nest flaws
of white on white, and close-
laid Ionic chiton-folds
like the lines in the mane of
a Parthenon horse,
round which the arms had
wound themselves as if they knew love
is the only fortress
strong enough to trust to. 2

The poem describes a careful balance between firmness and gentleness by which the nautilus nurtures her eggs. She is indeed a strong figure, compared to Hercules, to a Parthenon horse and ram’s horn, but also a delicate figure. Like the wasp nest she combines the Greek qualities of fortitude and refinement. Her power of love and support surpasses but encompasses the power of force. And this love is not possessive or narcissistic, it is “hindered to succeed” for “the intensively watched eggs coming from the shell free it when they are freed.” That mutual freedom meant an acknowledgment of and respect for difference. We see that difference most clearly from the point of view of Bishop’s emerging poetic identity.

The partnership between Moore and Bishop is in part that between the gentlewoman and the seeker. I mean no value judgment here, for the gentlewoman looks after the good and the beautiful (or the good as the beautiful) while the seeker looks after the true. Of course in the Platonic realm these are one, and even in this less perfect realm they often overlap. But each poet defined a point of view in this triadic scheme. Moore approached vision from the point of view of values, Bishop approached values from the point of view of vision, and these points of view carried implicit priorities that sometimes required choice. Our predilection in this doubting age is naturally for the poetry of the seeker, but Bishop was deeply attracted to the high civility, and more profoundly the metamorphic power, of Moore’s charmed imagination. Remembering the gentle and genile qualities of Moore’s mind, Bishop quotes Hopkins’ letter to Robert Bridges about the ideal of the “gentleman”:

"... to be a gentleman is but on the brim of morals and rather a thing of manners than morals properly. ... [a] chastity of mind which seems to lie at the very heart and be the parent of all good, the seeing at once what is best, and holding to that, and not allowing anything else whatever to be even heard pleading to the contrary."

For Hopkins, it should be noted, where there arises a choice between artist and gentleman the artist must be despised. In her essay “Efforts of Affection,” from which this quotation is taken, Bishop presents an amused but also deeply affectionate and admiring portrait of her friend, summed up with these alternative epithets: “manners and morals; manners as morals? Or is it morals as manners?” 3 Finally, it does not matter. Moore, as Bishop describes her, is a figure both mannered—eccentric, flirtatious, self-conscious—and mannerly: decorous, tasteful, virtuous in the deepest sense, a figure committed undeviatingly to civilized values. In Moore, surfaces and styles of behavior are the outward shows of inner attitudes. Manners express the rock foundation of an ethical system, and aesthetics are rooted to morality. Moore’s evaluative turn of mind pervades every aspect of experience, from social etiquette to modern warfare. The poetic gestures which accompany this preoccupation are those of praise, condemnation, selection, purification, transformation. She insists on these attitudes at a cost, of course, the cost of comprehensive vision. Moore’s is by no means a naive vision, but she chooses not to depict (only to condemn) what is infelicitous, tragic, evil in the world. Her real toads are never repulsive. Bishop’s priority of feeling over precept, of psychic authenticity over artistic transformation, of mystery and meaning over manners and morals, causes her to make a different set of poetic gestures, those of inquiry, evocation, elegy, exposure, penetration. If Moore is the poet of ethics and aesthetics, Bishop is the poet of epistemology and ontology, asking what we can know and who we are rather than what we should do and what we should admire or condemn.

Bishop learned a great deal more from her mentor than either recognized. Their friendship nurtured certain habits of mind (particularly of careful observation), certain techniques and standards (of accu-
racy, decorum, musical precision). But from their base of mutual interests and traditions she evolved a voice and style of her own, putting inherited instruments to use in mapping her distinctive world and defining her own aesthetic priorities. Bishop never ceased to look up to Moore, as a poet of remarkable skill and discipline, whose great confidence in the metamorphic powers of art allowed her to sustain a lively moral vision in a grim world. Bishop's own darker vision took her repeatedly away from sustaining orders, into a receding, at once cherished and ominous prospect.

Answering Anne Stevenson and perhaps qualifying an earlier warning against superficial comparisons with Moore, Bishop wrote in 1963:

By all means say I'm a friend of Marianne's! I met her in 1934 through the college Librarian, an old friend of hers, and it was one of the greatest pieces of good fortune in my life!5

This was the beginning of a literary and personal relationship which was to last until Moore's death in 1972. Usually terrified of famous people, Bishop recalled (in a letter to Anne Stevenson dated March 6, 1964) the ease she felt in getting to know Moore:

If I really like someone well enough I don't get them [terrors]—Marianne, for example—the one "celebrity" I have ever deliberately tried to meet in my life.—We got along immediately.

Among other things, she said, she was attracted to Moore's democratic sense of people and things, and to her "wit." "Perhaps I need such people to cheer me up," she wrote to Anne Stevenson (January 8, 1964). Moore represented not only the successful career, but the successful outlook—a charmed way of being in the world.

In addition to providing serious attention to each other's work, they shared friends, concern for each other's health, successes and failures, literary titles and opinions but most of all descriptions—of objects, events, places. Letter after letter indulges in the mutual pleasure of tracing particulars. The subject might be Bishop's cat Minnow, sights at a circus, an art exhibition, a postcard, a feather, a shell. Their bond was based in a mutual enchantment with the play of words and things. The relationship had a practical side as well, for Moore went out of her way to help Bishop acquire grants and find publishers for her work (she arranged for her first publication in book form, in the anthology Trial Balances in 1935). She even typed out a few of her poems for her. In return she derived vicarious enjoyment from watching the young poet develop, from hearing about her many travels and receiving regular "tributes" from exotic places. When Bishop's self-confidence began to lag, Moore as nurturing parent would bolster her.

On August 21, 1936, two years after Bishop graduated from college she wrote to Moore:

I cannot, cannot decide what to do—I am even considering studying medicine or bio-chemistry, and have procured all sorts of catalogues, etc. I feel that I have given myself more than a fair trial, and the accomplishment has been nothing at all.6

Moore replied on August 28, 1936, recalling Bishop to her natural vocation:

What you say about studying medicine does not disturb me at all, for interesting as medicine is, I feel you would not be able to give up writing, with the ability for it that you have; but it does disturb me that you should have the feeling that it might be well to give it up. To have produced what you have—either verse or prose is enviable, and you certainly would not suppose that such method as goes with a precise and proportioning ear, is "contemporary" or usual.

Even as late as 1942 Bishop still compared her meager production with that of Moore and contemporaries, and Moore offered consoling advice (May 11, 1942):

... don't let writing be a threat ... it is unjust to probity to reproach oneself for lagging, when often premature and dogged struggle spoil one's ability to treat the material right at a maturer and more favorable time.

Bishop never lost the sense of being inadequate to her vocation and to Moore's example, but at the same time that example encouraged her in the worth of her own pursuits. Above all, Moore was among the first to recognize and insist that Bishop had a calling.

Bishop felt Moore's influence strongly for a long time. Sending a poem on September 15, 1936, she apologizes for "an extremely impolite, if true, display of your 'influence.'" A week later, she speaks of "your effect in one's interpretation of other poetry." A few months after this (January 5, 1937), she apologizes for having unconsciously "stolen something from 'The Frigate Pelican'" for her story "The Sea and Its Shore." She was so impressed in 1942 by Moore's essay "Humility, Concentration and Gusto" that, she said, she hummed the title all day. And years later (June 5, 1956) its impression seems to have remained: "I was interviewed by a journalist friend for a literary newspaper here, and imitating you, I'm afraid, I said I liked three things in poetry: Spontaneity, Accuracy, and Mystery." This last imitation of Moore is perhaps the most revealing, for while the two aphorisms look

134
alike, they suggest important differences in emphasis. Both poets admire “accuracy” (indeed Moore often praised Bishop for her accuracy), but Moore’s sense of accuracy seems more classical—located in technique, moral posture and rhetoric, in the good and the beautiful more than in the visionary true. Spontaneity and Mystery were certainly important to Moore, but they do not top her list. They tend to reflect the Romantic priorities of the seeker, placing less emphasis on skill and performance, more on imaginative experience and personal reflection.

Moore's advice and praise were most often specific to individual poems, but certain emphases emerge in her response which display the fastidiousness of the gentlewoman. Her concern for “neatness of finish” dominates her detailed comments on poem after poem, which point out infelicities of diction, awkward phrases, redundancies. Of “A Miracle for Breakfast,” for instance, she writes (December 22, 1936): “in stanza 2, line 2, of the poem, I resist ‘bitterly’ and ‘very’ in ‘very hot’ in line 3; and ‘gallons of’ in 4th line from the end.” Of “Large Bad Picture” she writes (November 16, 1943): “The thought in the sight of the aquatic animal is just what is needed; and in prose, ‘sighing’ seems high art. But here it seems not so expert as the rest? Perhaps it is the rhyme, ‘air,’ that seems a little facile.” Moore felt especially strongly about the advantages of economy and understatement in art, attacking intensifiers—very, all, usually—mercifully. “Perhaps you would let me omit some words, the habit having fastened on me irremediably” (March 12, 1937). Moore’s mother also read most of Bishop’s early work, and many of the suggestions, especially omissions of distasteful explicitness, were, Moore admitted, “contributed.” Of “The Sea and Its Shore” she wrote (December 17, 1936): “Mother is a rabid advocate of the power of suggestion versus statement and wishes you need not say just at the end that he was drunk.” Moore stressed the importance of sound as scintillating surface in poetry, and regularly offered suggestions on this aspect of Bishop’s work, such as her comment on the sestina “A Miracle for Breakfast” (December 22, 1936): “although I tremble to say so, since you confirm the words more than once, are not ‘crumb’ and ‘sun’ almost too nearly the same sound even as a phrase of Chinese chromatics?” Of a Bishop story she writes on December 17, 1936: “The tempo and fastidious avoidance of night-riding rush makes me very apprehensive of suggested dispatch at certain points, but with a grave pace as with staccato effects, one really heightens the effect, I think, by concealed contrasts?” We see in these details a larger concern for refinement of surface, economy of style, precision of word choice as the aesthetic expressions of modesty, restraint, courtesy, judiciousness. In these instances Moore’s suggestions did not challenge alternative aesthetic values. Later on, as Bishop’s voice developed, her own priorities of representational and experiential truth, and of inclusive vision (pain as well as pleasure addressed) would cause her to pass over some of Moore’s suggestions.

Besides these matters of craft a strong sense of literary propriety (or perhaps even censorship, to use a stronger term) often determined Moore’s responses. To the poet of manners and morals certain words and phrases simply did not belong in poems. After a number of suggestions about Bishop’s war poem “Roosters,” which Moore copied out with corrections, she writes of her objection to Bishop’s use of the phrase “water closet” (October 16, 1940):

Regarding the water-closet, Dylan Thomas, W. C. Williams, E. E. Cummings, and others feel that they are avoiding a duty if they balk at anything like unprudishness, but I say to them “I can’t care about all things equally, I have a major effect to produce, and the heroisms of abstinence are as great as the heroisms of courage, and so are the rewards.” I think it is to your credit, Elizabeth, that when I say you are not to say, “water-closet,” you go on saying it a little (like Donald in National Velvet), and it is calculated to make me wonder if I haven’t mistaken a cosmetic patch for a touch of lamp-black, but I think not. The trouble is, people are not depersonalized enough to accept the picture rather than the thought. . . . I exclaimed “the mermaid’s pap” in Christopher [Smart] but few of us, it seems to me, are fundamentally rude enough to enrich our work in such ways without cost. If I tell Mother there is a feather on her dress and she says, “On my back?” I am likely to say, “No. On your rump,” alluding to Cowper’s hare that “swung his rump around.” But in my work, I don’t risk saying, “My mother had a feather on her rump.”

When specific points of revision came packaged with such firm precepts and values, they must have been very hard to resist. But perhaps Moore intended them to be resisted to some extent. By confronting Bishop with aesthetic and moral principles she forced the young poet to consider her own artistic decisions on a larger scale. Such necessary defenses played a crucial part in Bishop’s development, making her more self-conscious about her artistic intentions.

What I’m about to say, I’m afraid, will sound like ELIZABETH KNOWS BEST. . . . However, I have changed to small initial letters! and I have made several other of your corrections and suggestions. . . . But I can’t seem to bring myself to give up the set form, which I’m afraid you think fills the poem with redun-
dances, etc. I feel that the rather rattletrap rhythm is appropriate—maybe I can explain it.

I cherish my "water-closet" and the other sordidities because I want to emphasize the essential baseness of militarism. In the first part I was thinking of Key West, and also of those aerial views of dismal little towns in Finland & Norway, when the Germans took over, and their atmosphere of poverty. That's why, although I see what you mean, I want to keep "tin rooster" instead of "gold," and not to use "fastidious beds." And for the same reason I want to keep as the title the rarer contemptuous word ROOSTERS rather than the more classical COCK; and I want to repeat the "gun-metal" (I also had in mind the violent roosters Picasso did in connection with his GUERNICA picture).

It has been so hard to decide what to do, and I know that aesthetically you are quite right, but I can't bring myself to sacrifice what (I think) is a very important "violence" of tone—which I feel to be helped by what you must feel to be just a bad case of the threes. It makes me feel like a wonderful Klee picture I saw at his show the other day, "The Man of Confusion." I wonder if you could be mesmerized across the bridge to see it again with me?

I have quoted the letter at length to indicate the detail of Moore's suggestions, and also Bishop's strong need to find reasons for every suggestion she turned down. Clearly her emerging aesthetic did not hold "neatness of finish" so high as naturalness and spontaneity of effect and did not always hold aesthetic standards above mimetic ones. Moore's magnificent surfaces and cerebral, civilized manner on the page contrast early with Bishop's rhetorical simplicity and deliberate roughness or flatness within the artistic frame. For Bishop, the language of poetry is justified by its faithfulness to the texture of experience rather than to an ideal of taste. (We may be amused by Moore's suggestion of the title "Cocks" as more classical than Roosters. Moore's imagination clearly did not entertain vulgar connotations.)

For Moore, ecstasy stimulated art, expediency determined its forms. Bishop's art emerged from a more troubled vision and its forms as well are sometimes self-consciously inexpedient. I do not want to suggest, however, that Bishop's poetics gave license to ugliness or formlessness as truer to reality. The claims of art to organize, if not ameliorate, experience were strong for Bishop (if not as strong as in Moore). Finally, too, the lesson of restraint learned from Moore served her well in finding an art that intensified truth under the pressure of artistic control.

For Moore, imaginative orders possess something like the power of salvation, however individual. Bishop was no less attracted to form, but to her aesthetic order was a means of heightening the sense of tragedy. In a letter to Anne Stevenson (March 23, 1964) she wrote:

... the real expression of tragedy, or just horror and pathos, lies exactly in man's ability to construct, to use form. The exquisite form of a tubercular Mozart, say, is more profoundly moving than any wild electronic wail and tells more about the famous "human condition."

The classicist upholds the standard of instruction as high as that of beauty; dolce, to cite Horace, must have its utile.

Moore was most persuasive, and most influential, when she questioned the purposiveness of Bishop's art and the depth of its moral intentions. Bishop did not always meet her standard of usefulness and instruction. In a letter of March 7, 1937, Moore writes:

I enclose the suggestions I spoke of, about THE LABORS OF HANNIBAL. Your things have the insidiousness of creativeness, in that the after impression is stronger than the impression while reading, but you are menaced by the goodness of your mechanics. One should, of course, have the feeling, this is ingeniously contrived; but a thing should make one feel after reading it, that one's life has been altered or added to. When I set out to find fault with you, there are so many excellences in your mechanics that I seem to be commending you instead, and I wish to say, above all, that I am sure good treatment is a handicap unless along with it, significant values come out with an essential baldness. I hope the unessential baldness of this attack will not make it seem that I am against minutiae.

Such a letter could not but deeply affect a young poet. Another letter a year later reinforced the point and showed Moore's confidence in the possibility of holding and expressing fundamental beliefs, especially Christian ones (May 1, 1938):

I feel that although large-scale "substance" runs the risk of inconsequence through aesthetic impotence, and am one of those who despise clamor about substance—to whom treatment really is substance—I can't help wishing you would sometimes in some way, risk some unprotected profundity of experience, some characteristic private defiance of the significantly detestable. Continuously fascinated as I am by the creativeness and uniqueness of these assemblings of yours—which are really poems—I feel a responsibility against anything that might threaten you; yet fear to admit such anxiety, lest I influence you away from an essential necessity or particular strength.
golden eggs can’t be dealt with theoretically, by presumptuous mass salvation formulae. But I do feel that tentativeness and interiorizing are your danger as well as your strength.

The wrought excellence and infectious continuity of your thinking—the abashingly as I said above—formidable demureness, disgust me with my own bald performances, and what I have said sounds preceptorial but such clumsiness perhaps is better than the conscientious timidity which kept me from writing.

Bishop responded that she had “some severe meditations on the theme of criticism you imply so gently.” But finally she is too skeptical a poet to offer wisdom in the form of a creed. Perhaps Moore’s neoclassical preference for sententiae over obfuscate questionings, of maxim over negative capability, blinded her from the searching vision of Bishop’s descriptions. And Moore’s Protestant faith provided her with certainties to which Bishop did not have access. Bishop worried a great deal throughout her career about being a “precious” poet, and did strive increasingly in her verse and fiction for such “profundity of experience.” A distinct deepening occurs after 1938, most apparent in her last volume, Geography III, but it is not the deepening of moral guidelines, rather of moral inquiry. Affection for objects continues to generate the major values in her poetry, though she had a great deal of doubt about this method. In a letter to Moore (September 11, 1940), she describes this method:

... I have written a half-dozen phrases that I can still bear to re-read without too much embarrassment. But I have that continuous uncomfortable feeling of “things” in the head, like icebergs or rocks or awkwardly-shaped pieces of furniture—it’s as if all the nouns were there but the verbs were lacking—if you know what I mean. And I can’t help having the theory that if they are jiggled around hard enough and long enough some kind of electricity will occur, just by friction, that will arrange everything.

Moore tended to balance her gyroscopic observations on a firm moral base, secured in epigram, however complex or paradoxical. Her wisdom is instructive and evaluative. She offers precepts to live by. Bishop’s tendency, however, was to move toward the moral condition of uncertainty and mystery, the moral atmosphere of loss, temporality, memory and desire, the questions we live by.

Nurture requires as much as instruction. Moore’s discerning praise, which affirmed talent even where it differed from her own, may have kept Bishop writing even when self-doubt inflicted its

hardest judgments. Letters like the following would have affected how Bishop viewed her own accomplishments (September 20, 1936):

... the poems are so fine, and dart-proof in every way,—especially THE WEED and PARIS, 7 AM—that they shiver my impulsive offers of helpfulness. This exteriorizing of the interior, and the aliveness all through, it seems to me are the essential sincerity that unsatisfactory surrealism struggles toward. Yet the sobriety and weight and impact of the past are also there. The great amount of care, the reach of the imagination, and the pleasure conveyed, make it hard for me not to say a great deal; but I fear to make suggestions lest I hamper you.

In reviews Moore recognizes that Bishop’s strengths are tied to what in her own verse would be weaknesses. Poetry should, she wrote in one review, “pierce you to the marrow without revolting you,” and we feel that while Bishop may have transgressed that border more often than her mentor liked, Moore knew that Bishop’s aesthetic rested in exploring that border. 7

Reviewing Bishop’s North and South, Randall Jarrell immediately perceived its indebtedness to Moore’s work. And while his insights may not have pleased either poet, they are difficult to refute:

When you read Miss Bishop’s “Florida,” a poem whose first sentence begins, “The state with the prettiest name,” and whose last sentence begins, “The alligator who has five distinct calls: friendliness, love, mating, war, and a warning” you don’t need to be told that the poetry of Marianne Moore was, in the beginning, an appropriately selected foundation for Miss Bishop’s work. 8

Jarrell was pointing to their practice of description, of course, their observationists’ capacity for fact, which far exceeded imagism in pursuing the path of the particular. Robert Lowell similarly matched their “elaborate descriptive technique” in his review of North and South. 9 Relentless accuracy was not merely a slogan for these poets. In her 1948 essay on Moore, “As We Like It,” Bishop celebrated her friend’s “delight of imitation,” the same quality Moore had earlier praised in Bishop’s work. 10 “As far as I know, Miss Marianne Moore is The World’s Greatest Living Observer.” Claiming that Moore had bettered Hopkins in “feats of description,” she paid her highest compliment, for Hopkins was Bishop’s literary father. Accurate description was no by-product or bonus of expression but a primary literary quality for Bishop, accompanied by a “ritualistic solemnity” even in light or ironic poems. Such solemnity (undiminished by other tones) characterizes many of her own descriptions, as this one from “At the Fishhouses”:

“All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea, / swelling slowly as if consid-
erding spilling over.”11 Moore, Bishop argues in “As We Like It,” seems “entirely to give herself up to the object under contemplation, to feel in all sincerity how it is to be it,” a self-forgetfulness she would later admire in Darwin. Intention for these poems should not obscure the surface of things. Bishop sensed in Moore a “compulsion to imitation,” an obsessive search for the particular beyond the support of the general or ideal. In “Questions of Travel” she examined the same compulsion in herself and concluded with a list of irresistible details which begins:

But surely it would have been a pity
not to have seen the trees along this road,
really exaggerated in their beauty,
not to have seen them gesturing
like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.

(CP, p. 108)

She “goes on” just as Moore often does, if with less iridescent display.

But a comparison of their descriptive acts defines the difference between the poetry of manners and morals, on the one hand, and that of moods and mysteries on the other. Moore continually attaches value to fact, where Bishop attaches yearning, fear, uncertainty. Moore celebrates the jerboa, for instance, for its harmony of form and function in contrast to the waste of Pharaoh’s Egypt. Her eye clings to the desert rat’s surfaces, finding in them ideals of economy and modesty that become aesthetic standards:

it turns its bird head—
the nap directed
neatly back and blending
with the ear which reiterates the slimness
of the body. . . . .

. . . . It

honors the sand by assuming its color;
closed upper paws seeming one with the fur
in its flight from a danger.

(CP, p. 14)

Bishop’s eye is more likely to focus on loss, on traces of decay, on mysterious resemblances to the human which the mind cannot dissect. In “Florida,” for instance, the poem Jarrett singles out for its Moorish qualities, we find a passage Moore would not have written:

Enormous turtles, helpless and mild,
die and leave their barnacled shells on the beaches,

and their large white skulls with round eye-sockets
twice the size of a man’s.

(CP, p. 32)

Here is tragic rather than exemplary beauty. And while the passage exudes the deepest moral sadness, it affirms no particular set of values, offers no “moral.” As Moore herself recognized in reviewing Bishop, it is the poetry of knowledge but not of instruction: “at last we have someone who knows, who is not didactic.”12

The art of personification, scorned by most modernists, is revived by these two observationists. They modernize the technique by making it an art of reciprocity rather than an imposition on things. “There are morals aplenty in animal life,” Bishop writes in “As We Like It,” “but they have to be studied out by devotedly and minutely observing the animal, not by regarding the deer as a man imprisoned in a ‘leathern coat.’” Moore’s poetry, she felt, found a balance of self and other.

“With all its inseparable combinations of the formally fabulous with the factual, and the artificial with the perfectly natural, her animal poetry seduces us to dream of some realm of reciprocity, a true lingua unicornis.” Moore’s Plumet Basilk, Pangolin, Jerboa, Frigate Pelican; Bishop’s Man-Moth, Fish, Rooster, Sandpiper, Giant Toad, Strayed Crab, Giant Snail, Hanging Mouse, are only a few examples of such reciprocity at work. A regard for the otherness of what the imagination fixes on means ultimately a willingness, as Moore wrote, to “relinquish what one would keep.” Moore’s Plumet Basilk dives into water and his sudden splash “Marks his temporary loss.” While “victory filled up the little rented boat” Bishop must “let the fish go.”

For both poets personification was as much a way of getting outside the limits of the human perspective as of imposing a human point of view, though ultimately the aim may be to find themselves anew. Bishop takes this technique farthest, locating her interest not as Moore does on the outside of things, on their behavioral characteristics of habitat and coloring, but on the inner lives of creatures. She takes on a voice of things as well as a voice for things. Moore celebrates elephants for the morals they exemplify, but hesitates to ascribe intention to them or go beyond what fact will verify. They are “a pilgrims’ / pattern of revery not reverence.”

With trunk tucked up compactly—the elephant’s sign of defeat—he resisted, but is the child of reason now. His straight trunk seems to say: when what we hoped for came to nothing, we revived.

(CP, p. 129)
Moore marks the difference between fact and association. They seem to say, they offer a pattern for the pilgrim. Bishop's sandpiper has a more identifiable inner life:

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
and that every so often the world is bound to shake.
He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

(CP, p. 153)

Bishop's animals represent human fallibility as often as the possibilities for heroism. She imagines, in fact, how the world would look to us did we share the sandpiper's point of view, as figuratively we do. Yet the poem insists on particularity, and ends much as a Moore poem might, in a list of facts: "The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray, / mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst" (CP, p. 153). We would see this ourselves had we the sandpiper's scale of vision. "To a Snail" and "The Man-Moth" offer a sharper contrast in their use of personification. Moore's snail, a figure for her aesthetic predilections, suggests by his appearances a "principle that is hid," but her attention is to the evaluation of surface. A figure for the marriage of manners and morals, aesthetics and ethics, he demonstrates that "contractility is a virtue as modesty is a virtue." Bishop's imaginary "man-moth," equally self-reflective, works from the inside out, exposing the secret side of the human spirit.

While Jarrell was one of the first to remark on Bishop's indebtedness to Moore, he also recognized such significant distinctions. Bishop, he says is "simpler, milder, less driven into desperate straits or dens of innocence, and taking this century of Polycarp (martyr) more for granted." Jarrell's casual remark locates a profound difference in voice which helps to explain apparently minor differences of aesthetic judgment—word choice, rhythm and phrasing. In Moore, a tone of indictment and superior irony, an inclination to pick and choose, combines with a fundamental optimism about the ties between morality and aesthetics, and about the triumph of the imagination over an imperfect world. Her intricate surfaces and her daunting intelligence give her world a strained redemptiveness. Moore culs usable bits and fragments from the flux of things, to construct a dazzling, highly idiosyncratic and independent reality. Bishop, a disarmed traveler rather than a collector, pursues an elusive image of stability, with less confidence about the self-protective value of art. "Less idiosyncratic, and less magnificent," in Lowell's words, she is also "softer, dreamier, more human and more personal" unlike the armored Moore. A philosophical and moral
gloom characterizes her excursive vision. She is more impressed by the mess of life than by its neatness of finish.

These differences emerge in a comparison of Moore's "The Steeple Jack" (CP, p. 5-7) and Bishop's "Little Exercise" (CP, p. 47), both poems depicting seaside scenes from several perspectives. Both poems suggest danger glimpsed and contained. They both include interpretive metaphor and self-conscious pictorial ordering. And yet Moore, even with her irony, invests much more confidence in her elegant surface than Bishop does in her simple one. The world Moore entertains is safe despite its fallibility; Bishop's world is less comfortably balanced, less decorative and less pastoral.

Moore's poem depicts elements dangerous elsewhere but tamed and aestheticized in this holiday world. She describes, to use William Empson's concept of pastoral, a partial world as if it were a whole world. For "exotic serpent life" there is the "diffident little newt," "cats, not cobras, to keep down the rats." Even the storm is part of the local color, "a whirlwind lile-and-drum" which, though it "bends the salt marsh grass" and "disturbs stars in the sky and the / star on the steeple" still evokes pleasure: "it is a privilege to see so much confusion." There is a certain mockery of this tourist response to flux, but even positive figures in the poem share the view. "Dürer would have been seen a reason for living in a town like this." To him "eight stranded whales" are objects of aesthetic contemplation, not pity. One is secure in one's point of view. Every danger, every negative element is counterbalanced or even dismissed within an overriding pictorialism. Moore does not suggest that this is reality, but that it is a possible way of experiencing reality. "Disguised by what/might seem the opposite, the sea-side flowers and trees are favored by the fog." While Moore admits the place is formed in the eyes of its beholders, she never disparages such aestheticizing. Each character might be "part of a novel," and each character finds a "home" in this place. The old puritan town is far from upright, its steeple (based on one in Brooklyn) is "not true," and the steeple jack, dressed in devil's red, looks for all the world like Jonathan Edwards' spider. Nevertheless, he is placing danger signs by the church/while he is gilding the solid-pointed star, which on a steeple/stands for hope." Hope and imagination always successfully counterbalance evil in Moore.

While Moore's last word is hope, Bishop's is "disturbed" and an atmosphere of disturbance dominates "Little Exercise." No major hurricanes shake this Florida scene, but a general agitation pervades the poem. Metaphor tends to draw out the latent danger. The storm is
“roaming the sky uneasily like a dog looking for a place to sleep in” and the little palm trees are “suddenly revealed/as fistfuls of limp fish-skeletons.” The pictorializing is more cinematic, the point of view moving, so that the repeated imperative to “think” does not offer a secure point of view. Neither the reassuring guide nor amused ironist directs our sight. As the storm looks like a stage set from afar, “a series/ of small, badly lit battle-scenes,” this does not make its effects less real.

The last scene is the most telling in this respect.

Think of someone sleeping in the bottom of a row-boat tied to a mangrove root or the pile of a bridge; think of him as uninjured, barely disturbed.

The figure in the boat is a kind of surrogate for the reader, who in being asked to “think” of him is asked in a sense to identify with him, but with the weight of superior knowledge. While “someone” sleeps in the boat we remain apprehensive, aware of the dangers just escaped, for his hold is precarious, he is “tied to a mangrove root or the pile of a bridge” and while he is “uninjured” the suggestion of injury lingers, in “barely disturbed.” While Moore concludes by restoring balance, by asserting that her town “could not be dangerous” (however ironically she may mean this), Bishop closes in an atmosphere of imbalance. This little exercise has no confident moral; instead, it shakes the confidence implied in an authorial stance.

Bishop’s tribute to Moore, “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” (CP, p. 82–83), tells us much about the relationship between these two poets. Moore delighted in the piece and undoubtedly recognized herself in its flourish of detail (August 24, 1948): “Your magic poem—every word a living wonder—with an enfoldment that does not ever go back of itself, and the colors!”

The gesture of invitation rather than challenge or homage is itself significant in relation to an earlier poet, suggesting camaraderie above rivalry. This is also an invocation, an acknowledgment of lack and a call for support. Indeed, Moore becomes a kind of aerial spirit, bringing lightness into a drab world. The poem begins by readying the world for the visit. The ordinary world is metamorphosed in expectation, anticipating a poetic presence:

Enter: two rivers, gracefully bearing countless little pellicul jellys
in cut-glass epigones dragging with silver chains.

Moore herself appears oxymoronically as a good witch or necessary angel, at once gracing the world with imaginative glitter and casting a moral eye upon its stains. She has a “slight censorious frown and blue

ribbons,” wears an austere black cape “full of butterfly wings and bon-mots.” Such Mozartian conjunctions of light and dark mirror Moore’s aesthetic. Bishop admires her ability to see the world as it is, without being crushed by it, admires her “natural heroism” by which she can hear a higher music and connect the good with the beautiful.

Mounting the sky with natural heroism, above the accidents, above the malignant movies, the taxicabs and injustices at large, while horns are resounding in your beautiful ears that simultaneously listen to a soft uninveted music, fit for the musk deer.

Moore’s art tames the brute world and raises it out of lassitude: the lions outside the library follow her through the doors to the reading rooms, the grim museums “behave like courteous male bower-birds.”

But Bishop seems less confident about what ultimate impact such a “daytime comet” will have on the world. When she offers her invited guest various entertainments, they seem incommensurate with the pleasure of her company:

We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping, or play at a game of constantly being wrong with a priceless set of vocabularies, or we can bravely deplore, but please please come flying.

Is this Bishop’s reminder about the limits of art? The options are not as arbitrary as the list makes them sound. They describe the sadness of the world, its consumerism, but also the pleasure Moore takes in picking and choosing. They describe Moore’s relentless accuracy (which to Bishop, as to Stevens, may have a tragic dimension), and they describe Moore’s courage.

Bishop manages to be similarly specific, in this apparently whimsical piece, about the techniques she admires in Moore, techniques which facilitate her transformations. The “inaudible abacus” is of course Moore’s syllabic method, the “dynasties of negative constructions” those double negatives which render positives and those ironic reversals. Moore’s poetry generates something indeed “unnebulous” (not yet obvious), but still celestial. Out of her enchanting presence, Bishop again sees the corrupt world seething underneath compelling surfaces. But her skepticism never dampens her genuine appreciation for Moore’s spirit—rather, it heightens the need for it. In a remark she made later to Anne Stevenson (January 8, 1964) we can understand the place of this spirit:

147
My outlook is pessimistic. I think we are still barbarians.... But I think we should be gay in spite of it, sometimes even giddy, to make life endurable and to keep ourselves “new, tender, quick.”

Though more often than not in different parts of the world, the affection of these two women for one another and for art sustained their correspondence until Moore’s death. As the older poet’s own artistic energy naturally declined with her health, her admiration for the now mature Bishop, and her wish to be reunited with her, grew stronger. Her penultimate letter to Bishop, in shaky handwriting, expresses this need: “Art seems to have desisted? I still want to paint—all the fur on my bushy best paint brush eaten up by a moth.... Come back!” (January 3, 1969).

Living such different lives as they did, these women in many ways complemented one another. Bishop seems to have found in Marianne Moore a source of stability, vigorous enchantment, optimism, and dedication to craft. Moore found in Bishop a source of vicarious adventure and mystery, but was also drawn to her personal and artistic courage, and to the promised continuation of many of her own poetic values, in an entirely individual voice. As readers, we are fortunate in having both poets, the gentlewoman and the seeker, who together preserve for us the good, the true and the beautiful.

All previously unpublished material by Marianne Moore is printed with the permission of Clive E. Driver, Literary Executor of the Estate of Marianne C. Moore.

1 Letter from Marianne Moore to Elizabeth Bishop, June 21, 1959. Vassar College. All other letters from Moore to Bishop noted in text.
4 Ibid., p. 156.
5 Letter from Elizabeth Bishop to Anne Stevenson, October 2, 1963. Washington University. All other letters from Bishop to Stevenson noted in text.
6 Letter from Elizabeth Bishop to Marianne Moore, August 21, 1936. The Rosenbach Foundation. All other letters from Bishop to Moore noted in text.

10 Elizabeth Bishop, “As We Like It,” Quarterly Review of Literature, 4 (Spring, 1948), 129–35.
14 Robert Lowell, “Thomas, Bishop and Williams,” 497.

This essay is a revised version of a paper presented to the MLA panel “American Women Writers: Influence and Tradition,” December, 1982. For another detailed discussion of the tone, style and progress of the Bishop/Moore correspondence see Lynn Keller, “Words Worth a Thousand Postcards: The Bishop/Moore Correspondence,” American Literature, 55 (Fall, 1983), pp. 405–429, which appeared after this essay was accepted for publication.