“Omissions are not Accidents”

Reminiscences

ARTHUR GREGOR

In 1966, an authorization form to approve a new printing of the *Collected Poems* of Marianne Moore came across my desk at The Macmillan Company. As a senior editor in that company’s tradebooks department, a position I held during most of the sixties, it had been my responsibility to authorize new printings of books in the categories which I handled; this included Macmillan’s poetry list. Since the company was fortunate in having among its authors poets whose books continued to be in demand—Hardy, Yeats, Robinson, Tagore, Lindsay, Masefield, Teasdale and others—approving new printings, generally in editions of one thousand copies, was a fairly routine task. But when I looked over the form before me and thought of the books Marianne Moore had published since she had changed publishers from Macmillan in 1951 to The Viking Press, I realized that the title *Collected Poems* was no longer an accurate description. Since leaving Macmillan she had published with The Viking Press *Like A Bulwark* in 1956; *O To Be a Dragon* in 1959; her translations of The Fables of La Fontaine in 1954—and later that year, in 1966, she was to publish, again with The Viking Press, what turned out to be her last collection of new work, *Tell Me, Tell Me*. Why should a volume labeled *Collected Poems* not also include these more recent books?

I was not sure then of Miss Moore’s age. I was aware only that she and Pound were the last survivors of the generation which had given us our modern masters—Frost, Stevens, Williams, Eliot. Looking her name up in *Who’s Who* I discovered, to my delight, that she was to celebrate her eightieth birthday a year later, on November 15, 1967. Why not bring out a combined volume to celebrate that occasion? There was little doubt in my mind that a book containing her complete poems would become a landmark book in literary history; not only would it represent a full assessment of her work but, as she was by then an acknowledged representative of the modernist tradition in American literature, a single volume of her work would best demonstrate her enormous contribution to that tradition. From an editorial point of view at least, this was a sound publishing project; I was certain of that. But I was also aware that such a project would involve, I believe hitherto unprecedented, legal complications. One volume published jointly by two firms was hardly common practice; in fact, I knew of no such book. I headed, therefore, for the office of Gerald Gross, then the vice president in charge of all tradebook publications. I presented my proposal to him and queried him about the probable legal hassles. He agreed with me on the appropriateness of the book and asked me to proceed with it. I should take care of the editorial side of this project, he would look after the business aspects (which he did, but the contractual problems turned out to be so thorny that there was no signed agreement until just shortly before the book appeared).

Before contacting Viking, Jerry thought it advisable that I first approach Miss Moore and propose the book to her. If she agreed, Viking could hardly desist from joining. I wrote to her at once, suggesting such a volume and asking her whether or not she would welcome it. Yes, came the immediate reply on a postcard—her usual form of communication by mail, at least in my correspondence with her—yes, she would welcome it! And thus, in early 1966, began my acquaintance with Marianne Moore. In no way could I have anticipated the deep satisfactions this would bring. I should have, for I had cherished her work—ever since my intense involvement with American poetry had begun, twenty years earlier—but I could not have known, until I had the privilege of this affiliation, to what extent she, the person she was, represented the qualities, tone, charm, wit, precision, the spirituality of her work.

Even the way she appeared—that too her work suggested. Emily Dickinson said of herself that her eyes were like the sherry the guests had left behind in the glass; one senses that observation from her poems even if she had not said it. Similarly, Miss Moore “looked” like her work; conventional in style, yet traditional in purpose and intent; she had flair, but the flair of the idiosyncratic individual, not of the attention-getter; of someone so wary of showiness that the insistence on simplicity, modesty, and harmony becomes its own striking style.

My first real meeting with Miss Moore occurred in 1966 at her
apartment on West Ninth Street in Manhattan, but I had, in fact, been introduced to her some years before. My friend, the poet Jean Garrigue and I had attended the yearly ceremonies in May—I believe it was 1962—at the National Institute and American Academy of Arts and Letters. Miss Moore was a member. We spotted her later that afternoon, as we were walking up 155th Street toward Broadway. She was standing with a companion on the corner probably waiting for a taxi or a bus. Though she was in fact not very tall, she appeared so, possibly because of the steep incline of the street, but more so because of the long black cape she wore and that famous tricorn hat. She was lean and that too made her appear taller than she was. On that occasion she looked to me like an exotic animal in action, one of her exotic birds about to leave the ground. Like the unusual animals in her poems, she projected an alertness, a duty to be fully aware. Her very appearance and quiet liveliness, the keenness of her presence suggested a moral principle. Jean knew her somewhat but had long been an ardent admirer of her poems (some years later, in 1965, she published what continues to be one of the best studies on Moore in the University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers Series), and she introduced me to her. Though very little was said other than what is customary on such a meeting, the heightened sense of the moment that I came to know later on whenever I was in her presence was there then as well. As in her poems there was total attention to the moment, to detail created to heighten sense, and observation so acute that it resulted in the utmost precision of expression, an unexpected terseness, the complete opposite of gushiness—even a reticence in the exactness, the care of utterance.

An incident that took place shortly after I had gotten to know Miss Moore in the course of preparing her forthcoming Complete Poems, illustrates this unexpected terseness and attention to essential details. Early in 1967, Macmillan published a charming, unusual anthology of brief poems entitled Eight Lines And Under, edited by William Cole. I was the house-editor of the book, which sold so well and was so well received that the company decided to advertise it. Usually, I was shown copy for advertisements of books of which I was the editor, but in this case, due to some oversight, the advertising department neglected to do so. When the ad appeared in the New York Times, the New Yorker and elsewhere, I received an irate phone call from William Cole. An outrage had been committed, an irreparable transgression: to advertise the book’s contents, Moore’s four line poem, “I May, I Might, I Must” had been reprinted in the ad but the line-break of one of the lines was incorrect. “What will Miss Moore say, what will she think of me?” Cole wailed into the phone. I told him I could write to Miss Moore and apologize, pointing out to her that he (Cole) was not the culprit. I wrote and a postcard came back from Marianne Moore which said, simply: “Dear Mr. Gregor; it does us no harm.”

In the interest of honesty, her desire for precision was so acute that there were often digressions as there are in her poems, in her conversations about even the most ordinary things. Digressions, jumps, unexpected associations, but these were always detours meant to amplify and strengthen the point she wished to make, the tale she wished to tell, which had to be relived or the transmission would not be honest. These digressions seemed sometimes to stray so far that one wondered why they were made, when suddenly she would bring one back to the original idea or experience which these digressions amplified and illuminated. Listening to her talk was often like reading her poems. How frequently in conversation with her in person or over the telephone, I wished that what she said was being recorded, for the wit, precision, humor, morality in her poems were there in her casual conversations as well—if one can call them “casual” for they were too precise for that.

Modesty. In her presence she made one aware of its meaning. The modesty that results from being accurate, from doing what one must do, and from doing that well. One of her nieces, often with her in the late sixties, worked as a secretary. Miss Moore talked of her excellence in her job, of her devotion to it. This appreciation reminded one of her praise of her many animals—the Paper Nautilus, the Frigate Pelican, the Arctic Ox—who by doing precisely what they must do establish a harmony in life’s rhythms whereby they attain an absolute freedom men rarely achieve. To lose oneself in what one is, to transcend oneself by doing one’s duty, to reach beyond personality and become truly individual—that is modesty. She talked of it frequently, quoting various sources including Winston Churchill; made one aware of it by being it. When she was awarded America’s highest literary honor, the National Medal for Literature, at a ceremony at the Ford Foundation building on East 42nd Street, her acceptance speech consisted almost entirely of quotations on modesty.

Often when I called on her—to talk over the preparation of the forthcoming “birthday” volume—she would ask me, after I had been with her for a while, whether I ought not to get back to my office; she did not want me to stay on merely out of politeness, did not want to be
responsible for that. Her talk was always so witty and charming, it was hard to tear oneself away. Two things stand out in my memory of my first “business” meeting with her—her eyes, which had a luminous clarity and kindness; and that when I, at last, took my leave, she insisted on taking me down to the street and seeing me into a taxi. Each time I visited her, she was all courtesy, every gesture was meant to make one feel welcome and at ease—so much so that it took a while to feel at ease. The walls of her living room were covered with memorabilia, photographs, documents, letters, of Eliot, Bishop and others. She talked amusingly, to me informally, about them. But she also talked of the elevator man, of his kindness, his family. Her attention and exactness were the same whether she was talking of the men who ran her building, the people of the Jefferson Market across the street where she shopped, the improvements at the nearby Jefferson Market Library that she approved of, or of literary matters and the great literary figures—Pound, Stevens, Williams—she had known so well.

As she expressed her trust in modesty she spoke out, in her poems as in conversation, against the showy and overemphatic. In occasional articles in the New York Times she wrote against trends in fashion such as the mini-skirt, and pushed aside with a sharp comment flatteries which she sensed were meant not for her work but for the influential celebrity she had become by then. The hangers-on she dismissed but to true admirers she made known her gratitude. Once, as I was riding down the elevator with her from a cocktail party given by the publisher William Targ and his wife, the literary agent Roslyn Targ, she met a man who, many years ago, had written appreciatively of her work. She told him that she had never forgotten that and repeated her gratitude to him several times. Similarly, she attended with eagerness a small publication party given for Randall Jarrell when Macmillan published his book of poems, The Lost World, to show once again her indebtedness to him for his fine essays on her work. She met generosity with an abundance of it but rejected insincerity and opportunism with incisiveness; “where might there be a refuge for me/ from egocentricity/ and its propensity to biesc./ mis-state, misunderstand/ and obliterate continuity?” she asks in her late poem, “Tell Me, Tell Me.”

Much as she abhorred showiness she liked the elegance of naturalness—in people, expressions and things. She was fond of the restaurant in the exclusive River Club on East 52nd Street, perhaps for its modest elegance, a sort of sumptuous restraint. She had a friend, Ruth Stephan (poet, biographer, publisher of the fine literary journal The

Though I was responsible for the project, the actual editorial work on the Complete Poems was not handled by me nor the production by Macmillan. Viking looked after that and its long-time editor, Ed Kennebeck, who had worked with Miss Moore on her books published by Viking since 1951, had the editorial responsibility of details for this volume as well. He had gone over her manuscripts very carefully, had looked after all the details—type, margins, compositional matters important in a book of poems (especially with Moore’s “oddly” shaped poems)—and she had come to rely on his scrupulous attention. For some time then it was in the capacity as an editor for one of her publishers that she knew me. Treating me as such, she used to address me as “Mr. Gregor”—until one day, one most memorable day for me when she discovered what she had probably not suspected, namely my own activity in poetry, and she began to call me “Arthur” and asked me to address her as “Marianne.”

Early in 1967, Doubleday’s chief editor, Ken McCormick, who was
by then a legend in publishing, had accepted a volume of my poems for publication. This was Figure in the Door, published in January 1968. It had been scheduled for Fall 1967 but was postponed to allow Poetry magazine to print one of the book’s long poems in its December 1967 issue; therefore copies of the book were available quite a bit earlier and Ken McCormick had sent one to Marianne early in November. This had come as a total surprise to her; the extent of surprise and her seeming delight were indicated to me—to my immense delight, of course—at a reception given by Mrs. Drue Heinz at her townhouse in the East Fifties. Around that time a plan had been started by George Plimpton and was supported by a grant from the National Council on the Arts, to publish an annual anthology of contemporary writing culled from the literary periodicals. A number of publishers had agreed to participate and each year one was selected by lottery. The drawing of lots for the publisher of the next anthology was to take place that afternoon at the Heinz reception. Auden was to pull the lot out of a hat and the place swarmed with writers, critics, editors and publishers. I had no idea whether or not Marianne was to be there; for some reason the drawing was being delayed; they were still waiting for someone . . . for Marianne Moore, the hostess announced. And indeed, a while later, Marianne appeared. She stood in the doorway of the large jammed room, her niece behind her. As though royalty had come in, an opening formed in the crowd allowing Marianne to get to the other end where the drawing was to take place. To my great astonishment she walked straight up to me. She had read my book, she said, had thought it fine—I was too much in a daze to recall her precise words but knew that they were complimentary—and urged me to send a copy to Auden, she had already talked to him about it. It was then, during that brief talk, that she addressed me as “Arthur” for the first time.

After the drawing, Marianne’s niece told me that coming down in the car “my aunt talked of nothing but your book.” Thinking of it, reliving it—I remember walking down crowded Madison Avenue during lunchtime the following day, thinking of nothing else—that meeting uplifted me, ran through me like a celestial approbation. She continued to say something to me about the book each time I talked to her and when it was published she accepted an invitation to a celebratory dinner party given at her West 12th Street house by my good friend Eleanor Friede whom I had known for years and who was then a co-worker at Macmillan; in fact it was Eleanor who had established for me the contact with Ken McCormick whom she and her husband, publisher Donald Friede, had known well. What a festive occasion it was, for me “gala” in every way . . . Marianne in a most becoming light blue wool suit and tricorn was seated on a couch, friends and admirers in a circle around her on the floor—May Swenson, Howard Moss, Jean Garrigue, Jim Dickey, Ted Weiss and others . . . And some of my favorite authors were there, whose books I had handled at Macmillan and who had become cherished friends, Harold Clurman, Joe Papp; and there was Eleanor’s friend, Michael Field; and publishers Bill Targ, Ken McCormick, and others. Shortly after dinner, Bill Targ and I walked Marianne back to her apartment, but we returned to the festivities . . . wonderful memories all, especially those revolving around Marianne.

Long before the publication party, Ken McCormick had received a note—a postcard—from Marianne. “Thank you, Mr. McCormick for sending me Arthur Gregor’s unsoiled Figure In The Door.” And she added that her customary refusal to permit her comments to be used for publicity purposes did not apply here. The briefest comment, yet for me the most charged. The word “unsoiled” has that power of summary so prevalent in Moore’s poetry. And in conjunction with what follows it—unsoiled figure—exerts powerful implications, extends the range of the phrase. To grasp the full significance of the word in this context it is important to remember when this note was written—in the late Sixties, toward the end of a decade that had sought to change, if not destroy, poetic traditions and attitudes, and had proclaimed a “freed” style, “spontaneous” outbursts crammed with expletives. Everything about these “new” practices must have been an offense to Marianne’s insistence, in her work as in her talk, on restraint, hard-won, shield-like form, and style as a way of being, as a way of action. Therefore, I took the use of the word “unsoiled” to suggest as well an attack on the “soiling” practices and consequent atmosphere she must have objected to—though I never discussed this with her. An amusing and telling incident took place on the occasion of the publication party for Marianne’s book Tell Me, Tell Me at the Gotham Book Mart late in 1966, which said something about the publicity proclivity of that new breed of “unrestrained, freed” poets. One of its leaders, perhaps its major spokesman, had said to my friend Jean Garrigue at an East side cocktail party that he didn’t like Marianne Moore’s work, dismissed it in fact because she never used a four-letter word. Yet, at
the Gotham Book Mart publication party, the backroom jammed with writers, publishers, television publicists, he sat on the floor, at Marianne's feet.

During one of my visits with Marianne in preparation of the *Complete Poems* volume, she made the startling announcement to Ed Kennebeck and to me that she would omit some poems and was planning to cut her famous “Poetry”—perhaps her most widely anthologized poem—to three lines. A drastic cut. Over the years the poem had undergone several revisions and now it was to be shortened by twenty-six lines (counting the run-on lines as single ones). Would Marianne state her reasons for this in a Preface, an Author's Note, I asked. No, she said, no preface, no author's note. "Omissions are not accidents" she added, in her characteristic manner of summary and precision. To my, "Why not use this?" she did not reply but when the book appeared, it said in the upper right-hand corner of the page preceding the Table of Contents,

Omissions are not accidents.
M.M.

On the afternoon of November 15, 1967, Marianne's eightieth birthday, Marshall Best, a senior executive of The Viking Press, Ed Kennebeck and I met at her apartment to express our best wishes. Some days before I had inquired in the name of Macmillan if we could arrange a small dinner party for her but she told me that her friends of many years, Glenway Wescott and Monroe Wheeler, were taking her out that evening. Macmillan had sent her a large bouquet of long-stemmed red roses and they, and other flowers in vases around the living room, created a festive atmosphere. Marianne had a corsage pinned to her light blue wool dress and she was full of gratitude for the many messages, flowers and gifts that kept arriving. It seemed that every one of her many friends and admirers wanted to greet her and be remembered on that day. There was a fire in the living room fireplace, and as was her custom she asked us to help ourselves to drinks—there was a large collection of every kind of bottle presented to her by visiting friends, on the bottom part of a large kitchen cabinet and as she said she hardly knew one bottle from another, asked us to choose whatever we wanted. I believe it was on that occasion that I stumbled by accident from the kitchen into her bedroom. A small room, books piled up on tables, and along the wall near the window a very narrow, high, brass-frame bed that looked austere, efficient, adequate to its purpose. In retrospect it seems to me that even her bed expressed her belief in adherence to essentials, in avoidance of excess, of anything reckless. Her bedroom was certainly not a Sybarite's place of retirement, it was more like a monastic cell.

Once we had our drinks and toasted Marianne, Marshall Best presented her with the gift from The Viking Press. She unwrapped it eagerly sensing its content—a copy of her new book, *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, bound in light-blue leather, a color the bookbinder must have gone to considerable trouble to obtain. But it was her favorite color, I must assume, for it was often the color of her dress, a color also that appears in her poems; in my memory, it was also the color of her eyes. Whether her eyes were, in fact, light blue I cannot say. But to me, they had the effect, the power of being that—clear, airy, sharp and distant; the all-encompassing space-like blue, the clarity that is the background of definition, of precision; the color in which the Hindu god Krishna appears.