The Reality of Imagination in the Poetry of Marianne Moore

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Reality means different things to different people. To most, fact and the stimuli of the senses define reality; to some, the products of the intellect may be added to the above; to a few, the offspring of the imagination must also be considered. Marianne Moore belongs to the last group, for she finds imagination as much a part of reality as fact. Many realists ignore the figments of the mind because they do not feel that such things have actuality; they deal only with the apparent, the sensed. Moore finds a more immediate reality in thoughts than in facts and the things that arouse the senses. The imagined, because it is more individual and more personal than the other phenomena, seems to her the very essence of reality. The way a thing sees is truth; its definition and its composition are not realities but stimuli to the imagination, which creates actuality. The experience of the fact and the sensed is reality.

In speaking of poetry, Moore says,

nor till the poets among us can be

"literalists of
the imagination"—above insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," shall we have
it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand, the raw material of poetry in all its rawness and that which is on the other hand genuine, you are interested in poetry.¹
It can be seen that she wants poets to accept the products of their imaginations as realities that can be put down in their poems as actualities. She sees no need for the poet to separate his imaginings from that which is sensed or founded in fact. A truer actuality exists in mental experiences than in sensuality. "A single shawl—imagination's—is wrapped tightly round us since we are poor." Morton Zabel says,

In her poem on Poetry Miss Moore improves Yeats' characterization of Blake by insisting that poets must be "literalists of the imagination"; they must see the visible at that focus of intelligence where sight and concept coincide, and where it becomes transformed into the pure and total idealism of ideas. By this realism, the imagination permits ideas to claim energy from what is usually denied them—the vital nature that exists and suffers, and which alone can give poetic validity to the abstract or permit the abstract intelligence to enhance experience.

In finding "the visible at that focus of intelligence where sight and concept coincide" Moore discovers the matter and the method of her poetry. With such an approach a poet can find material in everything; no limits restrict a poetic concept. "The idealism of ideas" accepts everything and rejects nothing in establishing material suitable to poetry. As R. P. Blackmur has said,

The whole flux of experience and interpretation is appropriate subject matter to an imagination literal enough to see poetry in it; an imagination, that is, as intent on the dramatic texture (on what is involved, is tacit, is immanent) of the quotient, as the imagination of the painter is intent, in Velasquez, on the visual texture of lace.

Imagination, then, must be looked upon as the force which blends the other qualities together; through imagination the experienced, the observed, the studied are brought into a single heightened experience, which enhances the singularity of the idea of a thing while discarding much that has adhered to it through constant usage and casual observance.

By accepting imagination as poetry's mechanism for ideation, Moore establishes a level of action far different from the rational level. For her, the rational is without the individuality and the sparkle of imagination. The rational, by its very definition, plods along to its conclusions, using only those precepts which it has investigated and accepted. The imagination has no such preconceived notions; it samples and accepts with a spongellike lack of censorship; it takes in everything given it by the total experiences of the mind and body, and then connects, sloughs off, and, finally, spins the accepted matter into newer and grander ideas. Moore says,

The "ability to be drunk with a sudden realization of value in things others never notice" can metamorphose our detestable reasonableness and offset a whole planetary system of deadness.

This emphasis on imagination gives the cohesive quality to many of her poems. At first, the reader may have difficulty in finding the connection between the various subjects brought into a single poem; the search for traditional logical development deludes him. When he is willing to accept the imaginative connections between the various matters of the poem, he will readily see that the common qualities are brought about by the ideal states of the many things mentioned. For this reason, most ideas can be compared with objects, with other ideas, with animals, and with man. Within the world of the imagination no barriers limit the poet or the reader to believe that only obvious likes may be compared with each other or that comparisons may be made only between members of a single class.

Moore has said that "the artist biased by imagination is a poet." By this definition many of our so-called poets may be placed in the artist class, which she seems to place below that of poet. The true poet, the person with aesthetic possibilities, permits his imagination to be the guide to his artistic capabilities. Such a person does not draw close distinctions between that which is dreamed of and that which is sensed. He accepts as the world of poetry all things that he can experience, whether physically or mentally. Imagination not only allows the poet to invoke comparisons that are fresh, interesting and constructive but to achieve a level of thought that is all-encompassing. The poet is the artist without bias, barriers, or prejudices of any kind; he permits his imagination to have full control of his creative processes and, by so doing, creates a world which seems new and startling to the unimaginative reader although the poet would say that this is the world that has always had existence, that has always remained the same while the factual was constantly changing through new concepts and ideas.

The power of imagination in its stimulation and growth from the factual and the sensed has the utmost importance to the poet. It demonstrates the mind at its most original and refreshing. The rest of experience is important only as stimuli; experience that does not stimulate the imagination is of little value. It is for this reason that Moore says, "The power of the visible / is the invisible." The "visible" gains importance only as it affects the imagination. In other words, Moore finds that the factual and the sensed, those things which most people
accept as the "all" of reality, are important only as the stimuli of the imagination. Such an idea turns the world of the realist upside down; actuality becomes that which is not concrete and which can never be "proved."

Moore distrusts facts because they are seldom what they appear to be. Today's fact becomes tomorrow's myth. For this reason she treats the factual with little respect; she mixes the factual with myth and with imaginings, giving equal importance to the first two and added importance to the latter. When she states, "What is more precise than precision? Illusion," she shows that the precision of fact is a false estimate. True precision cannot exist in a world of everchanging facts; it must have the fertile field of the imagination, where the idea of the thing has greater importance than the thing itself. Fact without the presence of its guide, imagination, must take its place with the other provable-unprovable (Moore would enjoy such opposition) things of the world. Since any proof must be conditioned by imagination, the standards that are usually considered to be the proofs of actuality are not acceptable to this poet. It is the supremacy of imagination over fact that she speaks of in:

Taller by the length of
a conversation of five hundred years than all
the others, there was one, whose tales
of what could never have been actual—
were better than the haggish, uncompanionable drawl

of certitude; his by-
play was more terrible in its effectiveness
than the fiercest frontal attack.
The staff, the bag, the feigned inconsequence
of manner, best bespeak that weapon, self-protectiveness.\(^9\)

Wallace Stevens compares Marianne Moore's asceticism to Plato's; he says,
Mr. Lewis says that for Plato the only reality that mattered is exemplified best for us in the principles of mathematics. The aim of our lives should be to draw ourselves away as much as possible from the unsubstantial, fluctuating facts of the world about us and establish some communion with the objects which are apprehended by thought and not sense. This was the source of Plato's asceticism. To the extent that Miss Moore finds only illusion tolerable she shares that asceticism. While she shares it she does so only as it may be necessary for her to do so in order to establish a particular reality or better a reality of her own particulars: the "overt" reality of Mr. Lewis.\(^10\)

"A reality of her own particulars" is especially apt in its description of the reality of these poems. Such reality is true only as it seems true to the poet. However, it should be emphasized that where Plato attempts to thrust aside fact and the senses, Moore is willing to give them some credence as stimuli to the imagination. She does not attempt to cut imagination away from other things; she merely subordinates these other things to it and makes them stimulators or originators of the imaginative process.

It should be apparent then that the reality in Moore's poetry is, as Wallace Stevens says, "not the thing but the aspect of the thing."\(^11\) The "aspect," the state, the idea of the thing is reality at its most basic. It differs from the usual conception of reality in that it is reality individual to her. To quote Stevens again:

The difference signalizes a transition from one reality to another. It is the reality of Miss Moore that is the individual reality. That of the Encyclopædia is the reality of isolated fact. Miss Moore's reality is significant. An aesthetic integration is a reality.\(^12\)

Thus it can be seen that this individual reality, because it has significance, is the only type of reality that can interest Moore; the reality of fact has little, if any, importance because it has little, if any, significance to her. In her world Moore sees all things with a completely egocentric perspective. Egocentricity is her perspective, not because she has so chosen it, but because it is the only perspective available to her. Things exist only as they seem to her; there are no other standards available. If it were possible (and it is not possible for Moore) to base reality on fact, various perspectives would present themselves; that is, poems could be written in logical or chronological orders, in forms such as the couplet or the sonnet. It can be seen then that this poet treats fact, not as anything that has been "proved," but as something that is given attention because it has seemed to be so by other people. Such facts then must be experienced by her before they have proper recognition; they must become facts, not of the senses or the intellect, but of the imagination.

In her essay on the sculpture of Alfeo Faggi, "Is the Real the Actual?"\(^13\) Moore develops her idea of the imagination as the seat of reality. She speaks especially of Faggi's bust of Dante, which she finds to be exceedingly suggestive. Here she mentions that she does not care whether or not the bust is a facsimile of Dante; she feels that the face presented has all of the spiritual vigor and intellectual strength that the writer of the Divine Comedy should have. This is the face of a man who
could have written this great book; whether or not it looks like Dante is of little consequence. She would say that a photograph, while it gives a likeness of a person more accurate in physical detail than can be given by the most skilled artist, is a poor substitute for portraiture of a high order. In proper portraiture the artist not only presents the physical but suggests the mind and the personality. He sees deeply into his subject and reveals those things that are hidden from the sensuous picture. As Moore says,

Spiritual imagination as is apparent, is especially potent in interpreting subjects which are spiritual, seeming to derive feeling from the subject rather than to have to bring feeling to it as in the theme which is palpable and easily comprehensible; therefore as could be expected, in the exhibition, the more purely philosophic and intellectual concepts—the Ka and the Dante—make the most powerful impression.  

In complimenting Faggi for his ability to capture spirituality through his “spiritual imagination,” Moore has shown her preference for the spiritual. In the spiritual and the mysterious she finds her greatest challenge and satisfaction. She says,

A reverence for mystery is not a vague, invertebrate thing. The realm of the spirit is the only realm in which experience is able to corroborate the fact that the real can also be the actual.  

This last sentence gives an important clue to her attitude toward the reality of imagination. In it she shows that the spiritual has an actuality much more “experienceable” than does the factual.

In a review of the poems of Jean de Bosschere, Moore states her feelings about the life to be found in other than living things:

This Frenchman, like certain modern poets of our own language, sees the characteristics, as of individual life, which lurk in inanimate objects and even in situations, as well as in living things. He feels what might be called the soul of these… To one with a developed sensitiveness this form of individuality is a thing as real—in this world of illusions—as material appearances are.

This statement about another she might well have applied to herself, for she certainly looks for the “soul” of the animals and ideas she discusses. These innate characteristics which she finds at the very core of her subject matter show her that things that are totally unlike on the surface are often similar in their “souls.” It is this searching into the idea of a thing that causes her to find these similarities and use them as images. Again, the casual observer, who sees only the apparent, is disturbed by the poet’s placement of ideas and animals, of the animate and the inanimate, of the abstract and the concrete in juxtaposition; he does not see that these things, so unlike in their appearances, often have great likeness in their qualities. Such depth of vision displays sight through imagination; she looks from her “soul” into the “souls” of everything she experiences.

This constant movement between genres in which she finds a common quality is one of the major keys to the poetry of Marianne Moore. Vivienne Koch says,

It is her entirely social shuttling from the actual to the imagined, or from what is imaginable in the actual, to its actuality, that is at once the key and the meaning to her charmed movement between the human and the animal kingdom.

In “As We Like It,” Elizabeth Bishop states,

With all its inseparable combinations of the formally fabulous with the factual, and the artificial with the perfectly natural, her animal poetry seduces one to dream of some realm of reciprocity, a true lingua unicornis.

Kenneth Burke says,

It is, then, a relation between the external and the internal, or visible and invisible, or background and personality, that her poems characteristically establish.

These three critics agree as to the movement between opposites and as to the unity found in the idea behind the various things mentioned. To the reader there may be “shuttling,” but to Moore there is the concentration upon likes.

There is another form of movement that takes place within these poems; the constant shift from the stimuli of the senses, to the intellect, to the imagination. Such shifting, while it may seem to lack coherence and plan, is explained if the reader will accept the idea that Moore presents these three divisions of experience through a constantly imaginative outlook; that is, the senses and the intellect are treated always through the imaginative process. She does not find the divisions here that separate these things from others. In her discussion of “The Steeple-Jack,” Louise Bogan says,

As we read, we begin to understand that we are not being offered a piece of mere realism: we are participating in a play of imagination over a time and place. Miss Moore gives us, you will notice, not only the look of things but their sound, smell, and movement; she is rendering her material, as all artists must, through the senses. At the same time her wit is in operation; the tone of the poem is light, almost gay, but with an underlying seriousness. This seriousness becomes more and more apparent
as the poem proceeds; and soon we are aware that the poet is
beginning to draw general inferences from specific facts ob-
served.29

In this single poem, then, the various approaches (singularized through
the imagination) that are used to create the reality that is its essence can
be seen. It is as if the poet, in attempting to present the gem-like thing,
has described each individual facet, has presented each ray of light and
its effect on the appearance of the thing, and has integrated these
various elements into a reproduction that gives the reader a facsimile
in appearance, effect, and essence. This type of poetic reproduction
can be based only on imaginative precepts; the rational and the sensed
would give narrower and not so satisfactory facsimiles.

To study the way in which Moore uses imaginative reality to create
a poem it is necessary to quote, in toto, a poem in which this technique
can be clearly illustrated.

The Mind is an Enchanting

Thing

is an enchanted thing
like the glaze on a
katy-did wing
subdivided by sun
till the nettings are legion.
Like Gieseking playing Scarlatti;
like the apteryx-awl
as a beak, or the
kiwi’s rain-shawl
of haired feathers, the mind
feeling its way as though blind,
wants along with its eyes on the ground.
It has memory’s ear
that can hear without
having to hear.
Like the gyroscope’s fall,
true unequívocal
because trued by regnant certainty,

it is a power of
strong enchantment. It
is like the dove-
neck animated by
sun; it is memory’s eye;
it’s conscientious inconsistency.

It tears off the veil; tears
the temptation, the
mist the heart wears,
from its eyes,—if the heart
has a face; it takes apart
dejection. It’s fire in the dove-neck’s

iridescence; in the
inconsistencies
of Scarlatti.
Unconfusion submits
its confusion to proof; it’s
not a Herod’s oath that cannot change.31

Here the mind is held up for examination, and the poet attempts to
find things with like qualities with which to compare it. The sight
images are the easiest to understand: “the katy-did wing,” “the kiwi’s
rain-shawl,” “the dove-neck” give a single impression of iridescence, the
quality in the visual that best mirrors the constant change of mind. The
aural images pertain to the music of Scarlatti and the way Gieseking
plays this music. Here again is found a rapidly changing, shimmering
kind of beauty that gives the same impression to the ear that irides-
cence gives to the eye. This music, a mixture of fact, intellect, and
imagination, is transformed when the great pianist subjects the fact of
his technique and training and the intellectual harvest of his studies to
the grand sweep and freedom of his imagination. It is not merely
Scarlatti or Gieseking; it is the pianist revealing the composer through
his own imaginative interpretation: Gieseking’s Scarlatti is greater than
Scarlatti alone. The other images may be classified as imaginative since
they are neither sensuous nor intellectual; they present mixtures of
elements (“memory’s eye”) and seemingly unlike genres that have been
linked through imagination. The poet has brought material from the
various levels of imagination; the sense-stimulated and the intellect-
stimulated are mixed with those elements that seem to rise directly
from imagination, or that have become so separated from their stimuli
that it is unrewarding to investigate their origin. As Moore applies
image after image to her central idea, she never truly defines nor gives
replicas which she considers to have any degree of exactitude with the
idea modified. Her images are approximations which have individual
and additive value. However, the true value of the images is in their
overall configuration; their importance lies in their ability to add to and
blend with each other in order to sustain the total imagic effect of
the poem.
In such turnings and twistings of thoughts Moore finds her greatest power. Such a method allows her to explore her imagination to its extremities and to reveal to her reader the unsuspected glories she has found in things others have only glanced at. William Carlos Williams says,

Miss Moore uses the thought most interestingly and wonderfully to my mind. I don’t know but that this technical excellence is one of the greatest pleasures I get from her. She occupies the thought to its end, and goes on—without connectives. To me this is thrilling. The essence is not broken, nothing is injured. It is a kind hand to a merciless mind at home in the thought as in the cruder image.22

To have a writer who is willing to explore thought to its very limits is a fortunate thing. Too many are content with less. Moore, in her search for the idea behind the thing, finds that the thought can be extended far beyond the usual boundaries; her imagination carries the thought from the original stimuli to the most extreme comparisons. By always delving for the hidden essence, Moore keeps her theme and the images that modify that theme in a constant state of fluctuation. The merely decorative cannot sustain itself in matter that is striving toward an imaginative common level.

It has been shown that Marianne Moore is a realist, by her own definition and by her own actions. The standard conception of realist would exclude her and her poetic creations; but, by showing that only that which she herself has experienced has actuality for her, she has designated herself a realist of the imagination. In his essay “Jubal, Jabal and Moore,” M. L. Rosenthal says,

Miss Moore’s vivid emphasis on the details of subhuman organic life—she is the botanist’s and the zoologist’s poet, as well as the poet’s poet—makes her poetry swarm with symbolic observation. The pretense is that all this occurs in a hothouse or a zoo, where one watches the flora or the curious beasts with amused and sympathetic detachment, making polite conversation all the while. But how intense the interest really is, how uncompromising the preciseness of detail, how persistent the drive toward universalizing ethical import; how irritated the poet is with soft-headedness of any kind! The ostrich “digesteth harde yron” and is therefore superior to all the absurdities of his appearance and, more important, to his ridiculous common mortality. Sometimes her famous “imaginary gardens with real toads in them”—Miss Moore’s image for genuine poetic creations—are really not so far from Blake’s tiger-haunted forests.23

Rosenthal is not the only critic to point out Moore’s battle against soft thinking; others have commented on her constant struggle for thought that is as direct as it is stimulating. Wallace Stevens says that she has “the faculty of digesting the ‘harde yron’ of appearance.”24 It is important to emphasize Stevens’ use of the word “digesting,” because Moore accomplishes such a process through her imagination; she “digests” fact by using her imagination. Without such a function to act upon it, the fact itself would be of little or no importance to the individual. Imagination, then, has become the only criterion by which reality and actuality can be measured.

1 Marianne Moore, “Poetry,” Collected Poems (New York: Macmillan, 1951), p. 41. (All subsequent quotations from her poetry are from this work.)
9 Collected Poems, “In This Age of Hard Trying,” p. 39.
11 Ibid., 144.
12 Ibid., 144.
13 Marianne Moore, “Is the Real the Actual?” Dial, 73 (Dec., 1922), 620–22.
14 Ibid., 620.
15 Ibid., 621.
18 Elizabeth Bishop, “As We Like It,” Quarterly Review of Literature, 4 (1948), 135.
24 Stevens, op. cit., 149.