DONA J. HICKEY

MARIANNE MOORE:
THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

The poets of the New Poetry Movement were obsessed with getting fact into Art. It was a necessary stage in freeing modern verse from what was believed to be a growing sentimentality and self-indulgence. Some poets, Williams and Pound, for example, went after facts philosophically or critically. Marianne Moore went after them with a flat-out challenge. The nature of her challenge reflected at least one major interest—science—and the qualities that accompany it: love of precision, disinterested description, identification and economy. She had studied biology at Bryn Mawr and at one time considered studying medicine. So Marianne Moore came to poetry with a love for objective truth, and at least in part, aesthetics based on the purity of bare fact. Considering her temperament and training, how was she to operate in a world that did not admit to rigorous logic, that in fact, was defined by the lack of it, and furthermore, was traditionally loved for its opposition to it?

Her subject matter and the vocabulary that accompanies it encourage a demand for logic. Readers expect to make sense out of non-symbolic, seemingly disinterested, detailed, precise descriptions of plants and animals, for example. The nature of poetry, however, encourages a demand for fancy; for unusual, imaginative information. And traditional verse encourages a demand for an emotionally charged vocabulary, one in which words are valued more for their connotative, rather than denotative, meanings.

What Moore tried to do is join two aesthetics: the beauty of fact and the language bound to it—meaning at its most monogamous, words with no outside attachments, faithful and true to the purity of bare fact; and the beauty of the imagination and the language bound to it—meaning at its most volatile, words stirred by the slightest spark from
a stranger felt beside them, true only to the possibilities of new relationships with other words, and in that, most faithful to the imagination. Pleasing both worlds of beauty required a delicate balance of attention.

To keep from simply running compressed facts down the center of the page, Moore complicated the form (syllabics and rhyme), making it so restrictive that the very act of compression made the logic less apparent. This alone helped relax, at least partially, the demands of subject matter from two opposing worlds. There were other delicate balances between fact and imagination, but what I want to focus on here is diction--Moore’s use of words to satisfy both her love of science and her love of art. “The Buffalo” is a perfect example:

Black in blazonry means
prudence; and niger, unpropitious. Might hematite--
black, compactly incurved horns on bison
have significance? The
soot-brown tail-tuft on
a kind of lion
tail; what would that express?
And John Steuart Curry’s Ajax pulling
grass--no ring
in his nose--two birds standing of the back?

(Complete Poems 27)

On what is Moore lavishing her love here—the possible symbolic meaning of shades of black on bison body parts, or the little shapes and sounds she has to work with: the message or the medium? There’s so much in these lines to argue for message. The attention to factual, precise detail, words staked out like road signs leading directly to the objects they name: That’s one strong case for absolute fact finding—the hot pursuit of truth seen in the route taken, the straight line between word and idea, the mathematician’s love for short distances. Then there’s the sound of the message, the high-minded voice of the lady scientist getting her facts right, moving cautiously toward speculation, articulating her questions. No confusion must be made in the asking, you understand. What inexactitude, what unscrupulousness would that express?

There’s much in these lines, however, to argue for love of the medium, for love of the words spoken. the different shapes of words attract the eye—the longer, fancier squiggles of words drawn from Greek, Latin, and French, such as “blazonry,” “prudence,” “unpropitious,” or “significance” or “hematite.” These mingle with the short, simple shapes of “horns,” “soot-brown tail-tuft,” and “black.” In their
intermingling, each sort adds to its own attractiveness by contrast with the other. Imagine your two (or three) favorite physical types of men or women. Then imagine a dinner party where only one type in all its perfection is seated in every chair at the table. You and five ideal specimens of type A--too good to be true? After about five minutes, you wonder what you found so striking; they're all so ordinary. Imagine instead the same dinner party with one of each type represented, a small gathering--you and the two or three of them. Each one appears more extraordinary in contrast. Meeting words from different origins well-seated at the same place is like that, a little.

My point is simply that words have aesthetic beauty apart from the visual images or ideas they evoke. Combining words from different origins (and this often means from different levels of formality) to create interesting diction contrasts leads to an aesthetic response that is separate from meaning.

One important part of this response is the pleasurable sounds these unlikely pairs make on the page. Moore is an expert at creating intricate melodies and rhythms from word patterns. Diction-contrasts account for some of the intricacy since latinate and anglo-saxon words have their own weight, their own measured pace, and present their own hurdles and ease in delivery. A mix of both types creates less predictable and therefore more interesting rhythms. Notice the contrast and balance produced mainly by the mix in these lines: The hesitance, then roll of

...Might
hematite--
black, compactly incurved horns on bison
have significance?

followed by the consistently short beats of

...The
soot-brown tail-tuft on
a kind of lion

tail; what would that express?

What is heard within and across both sentences is a kind of break and roll, then bump, bump, stumble, slide. The weight and measured pace of individual words account for much of the contrasting rhythms we hear. They also account for our casual descriptions of latinate words as fancy; anglo-saxon as simple. Aside from relative differences in length, the
visual differences we claim to see are largely influenced by sound—number of syllables, relative dominance of vowels or consonants. Of course in these same lines are the more traditionally familiar sounds of alternating voiced and unvoiced consonants, alliteration and assonance.

"Leonardo Da Vinci's" illustrates similar sound patterns. In the following stanza, these words make nice music together—all those like-consonant blends and vowel sounds strung across the sentence as notes on a staff, each repeated sound altered slightly by its position in the word and by the word's position in the sentence:

LEONARD DA VINCI'S

Saint Jerome and his lion
in that hermitage
of walls half gone,
share sanctuary for a sage—
joint-frame for impassioned ingenious
Jerome versed in language—
and for a lion like one on the skin of which
Hercules' club made no impression. (201)

In music, repeated notes are stressed differently to add interest to the melody line; it's called phrasing. Leaning into the piano key or away from it, sliding your finger from the front to the back of the key or from back to front, alters the voice, allows a subtle change of stress in a series of like sounds. How much stress is applied depends on where the note is in the series and on where the series occurs in the line, and beyond that, where the line occurs in the composition.

Marianne Moore has subtle ideas about voicing too, separate from the general melody line that runs across a sentence, the cruder intonation contours most of us can hear if we respond to sentence sounds at all. We all know how to stress subjects and verbs in order to stress the sense in involuted sentence patterns. And all poetry readers hear the stress of line-end rhymes, even subtle off-rhymes that trail into the next line when they're having a high concentration day.

What they don't often hear and what Moore arranges so expertly are the little repeated patterns within words strung across a line. She designs them so well that they practically perform themselves. Her poems, like some
musical compositions, are grateful pieces. They improve our musical sensibilities.

In the lines above, the central interest for me is the consonance. A running pattern of voiced and unvoiced sounds from the same family (j--voiced and sh--unvoiced) cuts across the stanza. These sounds are accented or unaccented depending on their position in the word, and are further stressed depending on where the word occurs in the sentence. The consonant pattern creates a background rhythm for the assonance. These intricate rhythms are not only pleasurable to hear, but pleasurable to produce, to roll your tongue around the shapes of them. I suppose someone could argue that such patterns are accidental, that they come uninvited as part of the packaged personality of latinate words. But if you think they're accidental, try listening to some ordinary latinate prose--academic articles, for instance.

Anglo-saxon noun phrases like "walls half gone" and "joint-frame," as well as the series of mono-syllabics, "like one on the skin of which," add rhythmical units with short, heavily stressed beats. The third also alternates the rhythm in its series of quick short beats.

Diction-contrasts like those I've been describing produce two important musical effects: they complicate rhythms and they add dissonance to otherwise fairly predictable harmonies. A few well-placed anglo-saxon words, for example, add just the right rough edge to the harmony of latinate diction tunes.

But Moore's diction also reflects an aesthetic interest in meaning. Her scientific self is disinterested, emotionally disengaged from the observed phenomena. Paradoxically, for scientists, the more disinterested, the more passionate their concern for phenomena themselves. To know objective reality is to see things in the world in their own terms. To appreciate, to love what's out there, requires nothing less. It is only the intellectual fraud or the false lover who obscures his vision with subjective impressions and sees not what's out there, but some variance of himself. With repugnance for both, Moore chooses words that do not obscure the purity of her observations, that serve not as mirrors, but windows:

There are four vibrators, the world's exactest clocks;
and these quartz time-pieces that tell
time intervals to other clocks,
these workless clocks work well;
individually the same, kept in
the 41° Bell
Laboratory time

vault. Checked by a comparator with Arlington,
they punctualize the "radio,
cinema," and "presse," --a group the
Giraudoux truth-bureau
of hoped-for accuracy has termed
"instruments of truth." We know--
as Jean Giraudoux says

certain Arabs have not heard--that Napoleon
is dead; that a quartz prism when
the temperature changes, feels
the change and that the then
electrified alternate edges
oppositely charged, threaten
careful timing; so that

this water-clear crystal as the Greeks used to say,
this "clear ice" must be kept at the
same coolness. Repetition, with
the scientist, should be
synonymous with accuracy......
("Four Quartz Crystal Clocks" 115)

These lines describe in "clear ice" the facts. They are
objective description, not literary imagery or symbolism.
"Crystal" refers to transparent quartz, not something clear
like crystal. "Four" has no reference to number magic or
traditional literary symbolism. There are simply and
exactly four clocks in the Bell Laboratory time vault. What
Moore brings to poetry here is an aesthetic appreciation of
the world of science: the pure pleasure of knowing fact. As
her diction so scrupulously shows, this pleasure need not be
disguised as anything else. This is precisely where the
trouble comes in for many poetry readers.

Traditional lyricism has so often prevented an
aesthetic appreciation of objects for their own sake. It
graciously permits readers to indulge in the privacy of their
feelings, in the peculiar habit of seeing themselves in
something else. What's out in the world is valuable for its
metaphorical possibilities, for its potential to mirror and
magnify feeling states. A lamb, for example, is not
beautiful for its lameness, for its own woolly complexity,
but for its suggestive powers, for its potential as a symbol of
innocence. Many readers therefore have learned to look for
themselves in the subject matter and past the referential
meaning of words into their associative meaning. To these
readers, Moore is an unwelcome surprise. What they hear in
the first four stanzas of "Four Quartz Crystal Clocks" is little more than a fussy collection of data. What they are straining to hear is something about Mutability. And they don't.

To Moore, words have value apart from the emotions they stir. This was radical news to a world based on subjectivity and fanciful flight. But Moore had news for the world of fact too, the one based on objectivity and a strict allegiance between word and idea. How to share a love for fact with a love for the medium without suffering divorce from either was the artistic problem she worked hardest to solve. Appreciating her solutions means engaging in two different activities: looking past design to meaning and looking at design itself. It's like looking through the window and at the window. In general these are mutually exclusive.

If we turn our attention from what can be seen through the window to the window itself, the realities of clocks disappear, and only the design of words remains. We turn from the aesthetic of fact to the poetry. There the realities of rhythms and sounds transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. Words too ugly and noisy for poetry are patterned into melodies, such as the "or" and "s" sounds in stanza one. Awkward, clumsy word forms, such as "exactest" and "workless," are sparked into a kind of elegance when heard beside words of similar sounds. They happily pick up a new beat. If a household of otherwise musical clods can make melody with the help of a director with an expert ear, that's poetic news. Suddenly, for poets like Moore, there's raw talent everywhere.

In lots of Moore's poems, it's her love of precision, the very act of scrupulous describing that directs our vision away from the objects of her attention. We focus instead on design. As we do of course, the occasions for art, the objects, begin to blur.

A brass-green bird with grass-green throat smooth as a nut springs from
twig to twig askew, copying the
Chinese flower piece--business-like atom
in the stiff-leafed tree's blue-
pink dregs-of-wine pyramids
of mathematic
circularity; one of a
pair. A redbird with a hatchet
crest lights straight, on a twig
between the two, bending the
peculiar
While Marianne Moore seems hard at work getting the picture right, most readers are hard at work trying to get the referents right. And there's a lot here to give them trouble. Word choice only intensifies the already existing problems of shifting subject matter and complex sentence design. First, there's the sheer number of words used to describe an object. Readers start paying more attention to the list itself than to what the words in the list refer. For example, it is hard not to get caught up in the making of "in the stiff-leafed tree's blue-pink dregs-of-wine pyramids of mathematic circularity." The describing is more interesting than the thing described. Second, are the sounds the words make.

That trouble begins in the first line. The natural tendency is to hear "grass" for "brass," and even after correcting an easy visual mistake, readers might still have trouble "seeing" the right color--"brass" keeps changing to "grass" as soon as "green" is heard. As soon as the true image is fixed (and of course all this fixing takes place in a few seconds), the "false" one is affirmed two words later in the phrase "grass-green throat." The whole first noun phrase, "A brass-green bird with a grass-green throat," reads like a tongue twister, the words tripping the tongue with lots of stopped, related consonant sounds. These produce heavy, short rhythms, slowing the voice and, in some ways, the perception of images. The images keep shifting at a quick pace, but the reader is held back by the sound of the images. The feeling is a little like trying to run through water over your knees. The sounds, like the water, are resistant to speed.

The same is true of the phrase "businesslike atom in the stiff-leafed tree's blue-pink dregs-of-wine pyramids of mathematic circularity." Attention is immediately drawn to the fastidiousness of the phrase, and to the non-traditional word choice. Moore is not content with a lyrical impression of a bird furiously working at clusters of dark berries. She wants readers to see the exact thing she sees, and that means imagining something from the non-romantic world. Don't imagine, for example, a pretty fluttering, but "a businesslike atom." Don't imagine a rosy wine-colored cluster of berries, but "pyramids of mathematic circularity." When you can imagine the beauty in the world of science, in the language there, then you can imagine the beauty Moore sees in the myrtle. Admiring the object requires
admirably the language. And always the object returns you to the language, to the place of poetry. That is finally what you are asked to savor.

Savoring these lines means rolling your tongue around “pyramids of mathematic circularity.” It means hearing rhythmical patterns--the roll of “as a nut springs from twig to twig askew, copying the Chinese flower piece” against the slow, short spurts of “stiff-leafed tree’s blue-pink dregs-of-wine.” Some rhythms carry you smoothly for a distance, others trip you up, and all of them in patterned excellence make music for the pictures.

For all Moore’s scrupulous describing, what we see when we do try to make the right images, are not clearly focused realities. We are not looking at photographs. The myrtle in the poem is not a whole tree; parts are rubbed out just as parts of the birds are rubbed out. The words refer us to tiny fragments, bits of color, specks of movement, like what we see or think we see for an instant in our peripheral vision. We create the illusion of totality and then believe what we see. We look at a Jackson Pollack painting and see a piece of the world in it. That’s all very pleasant, to be sure, but the poem, like the painting, has a firmer reality.

I’ve been insisting that words have power apart from what they suggest about the world we live in and apart from what they lend to our habit of mending fractured objects. One is the power of standing in interesting relationships to one another. It’s not often, if ever, that “businesslike” stands so comfortably close to “atom.” Equally unlikely is the word “elephant” next to “columbine.” And who’d expect “dregs-of-wine” to be chummy with “pyramids”? Yet here they all are together as if this were the most usual of events. In the world we live in, these ideas and objects have no friendly connection, but in the world of poetry, the words that point to them do. There the tensions of logic relax, and the most unlikely words bear an uncanny resemblance to one another, share similar temperaments and march across the page in happy pairs.

Another power words have is that of making musical speech. Voice melodies, either those of rhyme and accent, or those produced by sentence tones (intonation patterns), may be determined by, or related to, meaning, but are not necessarily enjoyed solely for their relationship to message. Although some poets may intend that the rhythm in a poem mimic the subject matter in some way, the
mimicry is not what's lovely. The rhythms themselves are. It's the intricacy and variety of rhythms we admire. "Stiff-leaved tree's blue-pink dregs-of-wine" is musically interesting because it is what it is and because it is a pleasant variation on other rhythms surrounding it. It is not interesting because it suggests the stiffness of leaves or some such nonsense like that. The same rhythms could just as easily suggest a man with a wooden leg walking to the mailbox, a bird hopping down the walk, or some poor soul spitting out the truth after a good sob.

The firmer reality of music lies in the relationship between one note and the next, one melody line and the next, and one rhythm and the next, in all their subtle complexities and variations. The firmer reality of visual art, painting, lies in the relationships between colors, lines and textures, in all their complexities and variations. And the firmer reality of poetry lies in the relationship between one word and the next, one line and the next--lexically and musically. In poetry, as in music and painting, the medium becomes its own subject matter, a study of its own qualities apart from qualities of objects in the world or of human emotion to which the medium only incidently (and often, accidently) refers.

Marianne Moore insists that we focus on the language by relying on her readers' insistence on seeing objects, or making images. So if we refuse to focus on the medium, we find the objects still return us to the language. The stimulus is the same--Moore's scrupulous attention to detail. The harder she works at precision, at the truest representation of her subject matter, the less realistic the picture. What we can perceive in reality and what we can perceive through Moore's representation of reality are decidedly different. Neither Moore nor her readers are bionic viewers; no one records the small details of external appearance with the kind of focused attention found in her poems. The human eye is not designed for such fine apprehension of minutiae. But her poems are. And so the contradiction we find between what we see on the page and what we see in the world returns us to design, to the glass that distorts the image.

This contradiction is most apparent in poems where the subject is the appreciation of visible phenomena. Scrupulous diction works as a zoom lens that, unlike the eye, can be rapidly adjusted for close or distant shots while keeping the image in focus. The effect is the illusion of greater visibility. In this illusion lies the distortion: our
ability to see this sharply exists only in the poem. One example is the lines I’ve quoted from “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle,” but a better one is “The Jerboa” where Moore not only describes in fantastic detail the animal’s appearance but its appearance in motion:

By fifths and sevenths
in leaps of two lengths,
like the uneven notes
of the Bedouin flute, it stops its gleanig
on little wheel castors, and makes fern-seed
footprints with kangaroo speed.
Its leaps should be set
to the flageolet;
pillar body erect
on a three-corned smooth-working Chippendale
claw—propped on hind legs, and tail as third toe,
between leaps to its burrow. (14-15)

What’s recorded here could only be seen in a freeze-frame. It would be nearly impossible to apprehend such intense detail in the space of a few moments. As soon as readers become aware of the incongruity between experience and the printed design of experience, the world-picture becomes incidental to the word-picture. The subject fades in deference to the words used to describe it. In “Nine Nectarines,” the use of exacting detail works the same way:

Arranged by two’s as peaches are,
at intervals that all may live—
eight and a single one, on twigs that
grew the year before—they look like a derivative;
although not uncommonly
the opposite is seen—
nine peaches on a nectarine.
Fuzzless through slender crescent leaves
of green or blue or
both, in the Chinese style, the four

pairs’ half-moon leaf-mosaic turns
out to the sun the sprinkled blush
of puce-American-Beauty pink
applied to beeswax gray by the
uninquiring brush
of mercantile bookbinding... (29)

What diction points to over and over again in her poems is a love for surfaces, physical and linguistic. That her love for external appearances is subordinated to her love of language is a natural consequence of poetry. At this, the world of fact is little troubled. Rarely, if ever, has it been so reluctantly, so unconditionally, invited to the world of imagination. So expertly has Marianne Moore taken care
with its comfort—everywhere the barest truths, the attention to accuracy, everywhere the lack of false adornment. At her higher love for language, it can shrug. If language were so loved outside of poetry, the world of fact would be no less satisfied.

For too long a time, the language of fact and the language of the imagination had been isolates, each at a great distance from the other. Marianne Moore brought them together to be appreciated side by side. In her poems they find a place where, in proximity, neither's beauty is diminished; where, in each other's company, neither longs for home.

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