ROSANNE WASSERMAN

MARIANNE MOORE AND THE NEW YORK SCHOOL: O'HARA, ASHBERY, KOCH

As the eighties pass, critics increasingly recognize the major stature of Marianne Moore’s poetry. In 1981, Bonnie Costello’s Imaginary Possessions envisioned not “the timid, frightened lady in the black hat,” but “a poet whose most persuasive images are those of combat and warfare” (Martin 7). Moore’s newly published Collected Prose exhibits her delight in the boxer Cassius Clay, the “smiling pugilist” for whose record album I am the Greatest! she composed the liner notes in 1963. Still, the misapprehending myth persists. For example, John Ashbery has recently been misquoted as calling her “a Mary Poppins of poetry.” In a 1967 review of her Complete Poems, he does not condone but characterizes those who underestimate her:

Is she not a sort of Mary Poppins of poetry, or, to state the case against her as quickly as possible, an American La Fontaine, who, great poet that he is, always seems to be on the verge of becoming a tiresome moralist like Joubert or even Poor Richard?

He corrects such views, however, by insisting that “she is not a moralist or an antiquarian, but a poet writing on many levels at once to produce work of an irreducible symphonic texture,” and exhibiting “a mastery which defies attempts to analyze it, an intelligence which plays just beyond our reach.” “These are not the manners of a governess, whether endowed with magical powers or not,” he concludes. Her work contains “that magic which consists in awakening sensations with the help of a combination of sounds . . . that sorcery by which ideas are necessarily communicated to us, in a definite way, by words which nevertheless do not express them.” The meaning in her poetry, as in music, is more than the sum of its structure.

Such emphatic championing by a distinguished postmodern poet suggests that the extent of Moore’s accomplishments may become more visible in hindsight.
Nevertheless, certain recent studies neglect her, tending to name Auden as sole forerunner of the postmoderns. Correcting this oversight is Taffy Martin's study *Marianne Moore: Subversive Modernist*, which makes a particularly strong case for relating the work of Moore to the postmoderns.

A valuable way to approach this topic would be to single out those poetic practices of Moore's that seem "post-modern" or more accurately, if more horrifically, "pre-post-modern" and which set precedents for the New York School poets afterwards. Part of the challenge would be to sort out from the postmodern bag those elements which could be identified specifically as Moore's legacy, as opposed, for instance, to Stevens's, Pound's, or Williams's. Frank O'Hara cites Stevens and Pound, along with Moore, Olson, and Auden, for "instances of remarkable and strong design" (*Standing Still* 34). Though Ashbery's influences clearly include Stevens, as well as composers Cage and Webern, his taste in predecessors has focused on Moore for some decades. In reviewing *Tell Me, Tell Me*, he claimed her as, "with the possible exception of Pound and Auden, the greatest living poet in English" ("Jerboas"). He elaborates in a later review:

I am tempted simply to call her our greatest modern poet. This despite the obvious grandeur of her chief competitors, including Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. It seems we can never remind ourselves too often that universality and depth are not the same thing. MM has no *Arma virumque cano* prefacing her work: she even avoids formal beginnings altogether... But her work will, I think, continue to be read as poetry when much of the major poetry of our time has become part of the history of literature. ("Straight Lines")

What elements so attract Ashbery to Moore's work? Martin claims that Moore's poetic "patterning bears the marks of other artists whose works have become reference points for postmodernism." Her poems make one think of John Cage's music, in which artificial time constraints and found sounds replace traditional phrasing. Moore's attention to curious objects, her refusal to set most poems into a recognizable narrative, and her nearly too startling metaphors become not precious mannerisms but postmodern credentials when they appear in Frank O'Hara's poems. (Martin xii)

Other postmodern elements include "accuracy, patterning, and repetition"; inclusivity of "irresolvable multiplicity" rather than defensiveness or escapism; acknowledgment and
exploitation of the machine; and scientifically accurate observation. Calling Moore's work "a continuous fictive discourse that replaces the lyre of traditional poetry with everyday words and with heretical ideas about language itself" (xiii), Martin might be describing the poems of Ashbery, Koch, and O'Hara.

As these younger poets would do, Moore "leads her readers to expect traditional images, solutions, and verbal structures; but she gives them images that dissolve, epigrammatic endings that solve nothing, and quotations that disfigure rather than preserve speech" (Martin xiv). Like theirs, her poetry proceeds by discursive engagement, positing an "I" and "thou" as argumentative poles or as mentor and hearer. All use paradox, mystery, word play, and ironies that refuse to open readily to a reader who approaches the work casually. Says Martin, "she admits the insufficiency of her fictive constructs and argues for radical ambiguity and indeterminacy as positive alternatives," shaping both content and form of the poem from disordered co-ordinates. Many of these elements can be quickly exhibited, handled with a kind of ultimate self-consciousness, in Ashbery's "And Ut Pictura Poesis is Her Name" (Selected Poems 235):

You can't say it that way any more.
Bothered about beauty you have to
Come out into the open, into a clearing,
And rest. Certainly whatever funny happens to you
Is OK. To demand more than this would be strange
Of you, you who have so many lovers,
People who look up to you and are willing
To do things for you, but you think
It's not right, that if they really knew you...
So much for self-analysis. Now,
About what to put in your poem - painting:
Flowers are always nice, particularly delphinium.
Names of boys you once knew and their sleds,
Skyrockets are good--do they still exist?
There are a lot of other things of the same quality
As those I've mentioned. Now one must
Find a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed,
Dull-sounding ones. She approached me
About buying her desk. Suddenly the street was
Bananas and the clangor of Japanese instruments.
Humbdrum testaments were scattered about. His head
Locked into mine. We were a seesaw. Something
Ought to be written about how this affects
You when you write poetry:
The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate
Something between breaths, if only for the sake
Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
For other centers of communication, so that understanding
May begin, and in doing so be undone.

There are still other similarities of structure,
 motif and meaning, taste and temperament, shared by
 Moore, Ashbery, Koch, and O'Hara. All were drawn to the
 French tradition, Moore dedicating much of her later career
to a "translation"—actually, a recasting—of La Fontaine's
 fables; the three younger poets adopting and championing
 the writings of the surrealists, Eluard, Jacob, Apollinaire,
 Giorgio de Chirico, Arthur Cravan, Raymond Roussel. Her
 poems, like theirs, often observe artworks—paintings or
 sculptures, as in "When I Buy Pictures" and "No Swan So
 Fine"; animals, as in "Peter" or "The Monkeys"; or "people's
 surroundings"—landscapes, cityscapes, interiors. She freely
 shifts from such locales to considerations of language,
 poetic creation, and truth, like "England," which begins with
 landscapes, then discusses "plain American which cats and
dogs can read!," and ends by claiming that superiority "has
 never been confined to one locality" (Complete Poems 46-
 47). So Ashbery's claim, implicitly, in a poem entitled "As
 You Came from the Holy Land"—"of western New York
 state," as the first line continues (Selected Poems 167).

In her poems and theirs, paradox and mystery are
 presented in a language so precise as to constitute, in itself,
 another dimension of riddle. O'Hara could speak as an
 irresolvable multiplicity of selves in "In Memory of My
 Feelings" (Selected Poems 105-110), contained within imme-
diacy by his creation of the poem. Ashbery's long poem
 "The Skaters" (Selected Poems 171) may be compared to
 Moore's masterpiece, "An Octopus" (Complete Poems 71), for
 landscape imagery, abrupt and dazzling juxtapositions,
sudden turns, lists and quotations, levels of meaning,
multiple voices, and musicality. Koch's playful puns and
 word-changes in "Lunch"—"O launch, lunch, you dazzling
 hoary tunnel to paradise!" (Selected Poems 55)—are used by
 Moore in such poems as "Efforts of Affection"; "Genesis tells
 us of Jubal and Jabal. / One handled the harp and one
 herded the cattle" (Complete Poems 147). And Koch's
 obsessive descriptiveness in "The Railway Stationery"
 (Selected Poems 64) shows a scientific method as exacting
 as any of Moore's zoological detail. Nevertheless, I must at
 least repeat Martin's caveat, that Moore's self-devised poetic
 forms did not permit her the kind of open-endedness valued
 and exploited by the New York School group:
She does not blow apart the familiar world in order to create her own energetic system. While she reactivates meaning by loosening form from statement, she never violates the rules of composition. This allows her to rebel without culpability or offense... Moore's syntax is impeccable, if not cooperative, (101)

whereas that of the New York School poets is often run over and through.

At first sight, caveats of all kinds appear to be in order. For example, it seems a daunting task to descry similarities between the intentionally self-structured work of Marianne Moore and that of Frank O'Hara. His long, rambling odes, a form used by his French and Russian masters as well as by Koch and Ashbery, seem unrelated to Moore's precisely designed stanzas, although she too occasionally chose a free discursiveness. But O'Hara's work, like that of Koch and Ashbery, often exhibits more complex poetic patterns. He continually turned to sonnets and drama, and his earlier pieces show him experimenting with a whole bouquet of forms--humorous dirges in strophes and antistrophes, triolets, madrigals, epitaphs, pastorals, poems in French, portraits and parodies of Joyce, Auden, Wordsworth and Shelley. It seems unlikely that he would hesitate to take what he valued from Moore's inventions. And O'Hara does imitate Moore's familiar title-into-poem maneuver, in such pieces as "Having a Coke with You," with a second line "is even more fun than going to San Sebastian" (Selected Poems 175).

Moore and O'Hara also share certain temperaments. Both have a rhapsodic side; for example, in poems that directly address the sun. If O'Hara is following Mayakovsky, as in "A True Account of Talking to the Sun on Fire Island" (Selected Poems 138), Moore is quoting manas-pangolin, who "says to the alternating blaze, / 'Again the sun! / anew each day; and new and new and new; / that comes into and steadies my soul" (Complete Poems 117). Both address animals with a sense of nostalgia for Eden, of an alternative otherness to human life. O'Hara's impassioned apostrophes are surely not foreign to those of Moore, as in "In Distrust of Merits" (Complete Poems 136):

...O shining O
fimn star, 0 tumultuous
ocean lashed till small things go
as they will, the mountainous
wave makes us who look, know
depth. Lost at sea before they fought! O
star of David, star of Bethlehem,
O black imperial lion
of the Lord—emblem
of a risen world—be joined at last, be
joined... 

... that I
may yet recover from the disease, My
Self; some have it lightly; some will die. “Man’s
wolf to man” and we devour
ourselves.

Although O’Hara’s sense of self, of selves, is far more
hysterical and exposed than Moore’s, what may surprise us is
that Moore’s vision can be just as dark.

We can see the questing self-questioning for
meaning of Moore in O’Hara and in Ashbery (as also in
Elizabeth Bishop’s and James Schuyler’s quick parenthetical
asides). O’Hara replied, when asked in an interview
(Standing Still 14), “What’s the criterion of truth in poetry?”

Where you don’t find that someone is making themselves more
elegant, more stupid, more appealing, more affectionate or more
sincere than the words will allow them to be.

And Koch and O’Hara both follow Moore in their
delighted inclusions of showbiz folks: witness Moore’s “Tom
Fool at Jamaica” (Complete Poems 163), a poem in which
she says, “Well, this is a rhapsody”:

Of course, speaking of champions, there was Fats Waller
with the feather touch, giraffe eyes, and that hand a lightning in
Ain’t Misbehavin’! Ozzie Smith and Eubie Blake
enliven the atmosphere...

Compare the rhapsodic list of film stars in O’Hara’s “To the
Film Industry in Crisis” (Selected Poems 99), a comic
masterpiece of accuracy, patterning, and repetition.

With these major similarities and differences
established, what remains in common to the New York
School and Moore? One characteristic, as Ashbery claims, is
“its avoidance of anything like a program,” a freedom like
that of the surrealists’ “grande permission.” It asks that
poetry
should be anything it wants to be; that the poet should be free to
sit down to his desk and write as he pleases without feeling that
someone is standing behind him telling him to brush up on his
objective correlates or that he’s just dropped an iambic
foot. (Text of speech)
So, too, Moore’s poetics, as her poems set it forth: “Where there is personal liking we go,” she declares in “The Hero” (Complete Poems 8); and, if we may read poet for cat in “Peter” (Complete Poems 43),

to sit caged by the rungs of a domestic chair
would be unprofitable—human. What is the good of hypocrisy?
It is permissible to choose one’s employment,
to abandon the mail, or roly-poly,
when it shows signs of being no longer a pleasure,
to score the nearby magazine with a double line of strokes.
He can talk but insolently says nothing.

Similarly, Ashbery or Koch can make sense, but insolently prefer mystery. In a conversation published by Interview Press (19), they elaborate:

KOCH--There’s no key to understanding the poem, of course, no hidden meaning?

ASHBERY--No, it’s just a bunch of impressions.
KOCH--Why is the idea of keys and hidden meanings not appealing to you?
ASHBERY--Because someone might find them out and then the poem would no longer be mysterious.
KOCH--I feel the same. Do you use any deliberate methods to make your poems mysterious?
ASHBERY--I don’t know…

Moore herself insisted that “there is power in mystery” (Martin 53). And indeed, mystery may protect a poet, as the cat’s claws are its armor. Reticence and contradiction are pleasures, and “complexity is not a crime,” as Moore states in “In the Days of Prismatic Color” (Complete Poems 41). They become one form of defense, as in O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings”:

My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent
and he carries me quietly, like a gondola, through the streets.
He has several likenesses, like stars and years, like numerals.

My quietness has a number of naked selves,
so many pistols I have borrowed to protect myselfs
from creatures who too readily recognize my weapons
and have murder in their heart! (Collected Poems 252)

And Moore values “armor’s undermining modesty” as a concomitant to her interior struggle for imaginative freedom and discovery. What appears evasive in the poet, then, may be the elusive life of the poem itself:
KOCH--Do you think the kind of art that you and I like and create might be called “evasive”? Do you think we like the feeling of ambiguity and multiple possibilities partly or wholly because we don’t want to be pinned down to anything we’ve done or are about to do?

ASHBERY--Possibly. But I think that if we like things that are evasive it’s because there is no point in pursuing something that is standing still. Anything that is standing still might as well be dead....

As Martin claims for Moore, “Her real contrast is not between natural and artificial or plain and complex, but between static and dynamic forms” (162).

Because the poem “must give pleasure,” the poet must be free to define and redefine the pleasurable. He must know what he likes and must go there: a heroic effort. “You just go on your nerve,” declares O’Hara in his mock-manifesto “Personism” (Standing Still 110). And Koch and Ashbery worry the problem:

KOCH--John, do you think we both might be too much concerned with matters of taste? or don’t you think it’s possible to be too much concerned with it?

ASHBERY--What else is there besides matters of taste? (5)

As Koch later recalls this exchange, in “Days and Nights” (Selected Poems 228):

“Taste, I said to J and he said
“What else is there?” but he was looking around.

Picking and choosing are the exercise of taste, and a poetry of quotation insists that taste be exercised. In this, Ashbery perhaps approaches most closely to Moore. As David Shapiro distinguishes, “The characteristic Ashbery tone is not that of the others. He is neither as celebratory as Koch nor as urbane and political as O’Hara” (Shapiro 26). Nor is he an autobiographical poet: David Kalstone recognizes that “Ashbery writes autobiography only inasmuch as he writes about the widening sense of what it is like to gain--or try to gain--access to his experience” (171). Charles Molesworth has called him more literary, in a hard-to-locate way (164). And he is indeed much more a man of letters, literally, in the same way that Moore was a collector of the word. We have seen that she kept intricate, fastidious, detailed records of her readings, of notebooks of what she read, of quotations that she would later return and reweave into her poetry (see, e.g., Willis 29-30). Ashbery has composed by similar picking and choosing, but with some interesting--and informative--differences. For exam-
ple, as he describes the composition of the long poem *Europe*:

I was trying to conceal the plot of a book I picked up on the quai called *Beryl of the Biplane*. At the same time I heard a piece on the radio by an Italian composer who had taken a recording of a poem by Joyce and transformed the words until they were incomprehensible but still gave an idea of the original. I got the title from the name of a subway station in Paris. It seemed to me that I was at last permitting myself to allude to Europe which had been my center of activity for several years, but by merely listing a lot of things and situations that could be found in most other places as well and by keeping the ceramic title of the subway station firmly in mind it seemed to me that I could convey the impression that Europe was just another subject, no more or less important than a lot of others....

I used some passages from *Beryl*. I think I might also have put in a few words from an article in *Esquire* as well as a mistranslation of something I saw written by an automatic toy in the museum of Neuchatel (des mécanismes précis nous animent, which I misread as nous aîment). (Ashbery/Koch 19)

Recall the fond quotation of a misquotation that Moore included in “Picking and Choosing” (*Complete Poems* 45): how one young writer, “very young and very rushed,” set Caesar crossing the Alps “on the top of a *diligence*!” Certainly, the style of Ashbery, O’Hara, and Koch would appear young and rushed to Moore. And yet it was she who blasted open the terrain of quotations within poetry for Ashbery: he can beg, borrow, and steal lines with far more ease than she, who often felt constrained to footnote sources (though there too she often let mystery and chance play more freely than at first it seems). From Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (*Selected Poems* 197): The locking into place is “death itself,”

As Berg said of a phrase in Mahler’s Ninth;
Or, to quote Imogen in *Cymbeline*, “There cannot
Be a pinch in death more sharp than this,” for,
Though only exercise or tactic, it carries
The momentum of a conviction that had been building.

Such momentum is like that of music, which certainly becomes part of the pleasure in poetic mystery. O’Hara felt

that the metrical, that the measure let us say,..... comes from
the breath of the person just as a stroke of paint comes from the
wrist and hand and arm and shoulder and all that of the painter.
So therefore the point is really more to establish one’s own
measure and breath in poetry...this sounds wildly ambitious
since I don’t think I’ve done it but I think that great poets do it--
rather than fitting your ideas into an established order, syllabically and phonetically and so on. (Standing Still 17)

Just so Moore’s work. In “Efforts of Affection,” Bishop praises Moore’s rhythm in particular (54):

I had already made up a completely unscientific theory that Marianne was possessed of a unique, involuntary sense of rhythm, therefore of meter, quite unlike anyone else’s. She looked like no one else; she talked like no one else; her poems showed a mind not much like anyone else’s; and her notions of meter and rhyme were unlike all the conventional notions—so why not believe that the old English meters that still seem natural to most of us were not natural to her at all? That Marianne from birth, physically, had been set going to a different rhythm?

In her stanzaic experiments, Moore creates a new measure for each poem, setting the poem into form by means of a first, randomly generated stanza, then fitting each following stanza to the requirements of that pattern. This method suggests how her poetry fulfills Ashbery’s taste for musicality. He has written, in an introduction for an edition of The Tennis Court Oath,

I feel I could express myself best in music. What I like about music is its ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of this argument remain unknown quantities. What remains is the structure, the architecture of the argument, scene, or story. I would like to do this in poetry.

So the paradoxical “Jelly-Fish” in Moore’s poem (Complete Poems 180):

Visible, invisible,
a fluctuating charm
an amber-tinted amethyst
inhabits it, your arm
approaches and it opens
and it closes; you had meant
to catch it and it quivers;
you abandon your intent.

WORKS CITED


———. Text of speech given at National Book Association Convention, n.d. From the poet’s archives.


