

Baseball and Writing · Nancy Knutson

*Fanaticism? No. Writing is exciting and baseball is like writing.*¹

Marianne Moore loved baseball. The Brooklyn Dodgers were her favorite team. To explain her interest in animals and athletes, she wrote: “They are subjects for art and exemplars of it, are they not? minding their own business. Pangolins, hornbills, pitchers, catchers, do not pry or prey—or prolong the conversation; do not make us self-conscious; look their best when caring least. . . . I don’t know how to account for a person who could be indifferent to miracles of dexterity, a certain feat by Don Zimmer—a Dodger at the time—making a backhand catch, of a ball coming hard from behind on the left, fast enough to take his hand off.”²

Moore admired the skill and accuracy displayed by the ball players. The “precision” positions—first base, pitcher, third base—always intrigued her, as did the commanding role of the catcher. Her favorite players were Clete Boyer, the Yankee third baseman, and two quarterbacking catchers, Yankee Elston Howard and Dodger Roy Campanella. She named her pet alligator after Howard because it was a very flexible animal. “The batter I like to watch is Willie Mays. Vim marks every action—an effect of knowing he has what it takes, without being conceited. Responsibility and talent; calling it enough. There’s a moral to it.”³

She admired the players’ humility, more prevalent then. Today we see many “we are number one” fingers in the air and “high-five” hand slapping instead of a mere passing handshake at hip level as players move through the game. She likely would disapprove of players advertising products and enjoying tremendous celebrity status. Marianne Moore downplayed her own use of form. She referred to her poems as “prosaic things” and said they were called poetry because there is no other category in which to put them.

Baseball is basically a defensive game and, interestingly, one of Marianne Moore’s major themes throughout her work is defense or self-defense for survival. Her animals are “battle-dressed” and have “magnificent” abilities to survive whatever comes at them. Her heroes make order out of disorder, not unlike baseball players reacting swiftly to a hard-hit ball.

Marianne Moore was a poet of the eye, alertly positioned to see things coming at her. She strove to make each of her poems “a rock crystal thing to see” by using startling clear images and precise word choice. She cared how the poem looked on the page. Syllabics gave her a method to control the line lengths and make each *stanza* look like the others. Marianne Moore didn’t want each line to look alike. She would vary the number of syllables from one to twenty in her lines, but each stanza would be patterned after the first. These stanzas resemble one another as baseball diamonds across the country do: close but not exact replicas of each other.

As a spectator, Moore paid close attention to the action on the field. Once she noted how a certain pitcher cupped his genitals at the end of each pitch. She wrote her impressions in a little notebook that she carried with her. “One of the handsomest things about the game, I think, is accuracy that looks automatic in fielding fast balls. I never tire of a speedy ball from the catcher finding the glove of the pitcher, when half the time he isn’t even looking at it.”⁴ The ball’s trajectory seemed like magic to her, a kind of magic she often tried to imitate by leaping from one image to another, from one phrase to another, without the use of connectives.

Moore’s deployment of quotations is central to her form. Her quotations are so completely integrated into what she is saying that where they came from doesn’t matter. Sometimes they are from books, government pamphlets, people she knew, or what she heard on the street. They can be verbatim, although usually not. She tended to play with them and paraphrase to make them fit. Like stealing bases, she would steal quotes. They became hers, and she spring-boarded off them, but not at the expense of who said them first. At the end of her books are extensive notes attributing these bits of language. In her poem, “Baseball and Writing,” we are told at the outset that it was “suggested by post-game broadcasts.” There are ten quotations in the poem, with each stanza except the first having at least one.

Rhyme is prominent in “Baseball and Writing” and in Moore’s other poems. All types of rhyme are found. She had a special fondness for unaccented rhyme, which she felt promoted naturalness. She also used alliteration. In fact, one finds it is the consonant sounds that tend to be heard most in reading her poems aloud. In many of her lists, it is the sound that makes them work and carries the reader through without stopping to analyze the necessity of each item. She loved the names of the ball players

and rolled them in her mouth. She thought “Vinegar Bend Mizelle” was a wonderful name.

She wrote, “Prosody is a tool; poetry is ‘a maze, a trap, a web. . . .’”⁵ And it was a game for her, to see how she could escape from the maze, the web, with all the finesse of a short-stop like Pee Wee Reese. Baseball players, “the boys of spring,” live in a warm, playful world of their own, perhaps more so in Marianne Moore’s mind, or time, than today. To her they were “the real toads in imaginary gardens.” For Marianne Moore the answers were *me, yes* when it came to baseball and writing: “*Who is excited? Might it be I?*”

Notes

1. Marianne Moore, *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1981) p. 221.
2. Marianne Moore, *A Marianne Moore Reader* (Viking Press, 1961) p. xvi.
3. Marianne Moore, “Ten Answers, Letter from an October Afternoon, Part II,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Vol. 229 (November 1964) p. 98.
4. *Ibid.*, p.97.
5. Marianne Moore, *A Marianne Moore Reader*, p.xvii.