

She Disliked It, She Did · *Sven Birkerts*

MARIANNE MOORE'S DECISION to cut her well-known anthology piece, "Poetry," down to an unremarkable three-liner bearing the same title has baffled readers and critics alike. Such a histrionic, exhibitionistic gesture—like a woman taking scissors and roughly shearing off an admired head of hair. (No sexism intended here—I'm referring to a celluloid archetype). Clearly it was an act of some kind of loathing, a deed perpetrated against the self. My guess is that Moore wished to inflict a symbolic injury upon a sensibility that could only produce poetry of a certain kind. Never mind that it was a poetry that had won for her a near-universal adulation. It was as if she knew in her heart wherein lay the real soul of poetry—in the *genuine*—and she knew that her own work could never get there. The disfiguring truncation of one of her best-loved poems was her way of incising the recognition directly into the body of that work.

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From the *Selected Poems* of 1935, as preserved in *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, we can cull a rather interesting set of aesthetic statements:

“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.

—from “In This Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance Is Good and”

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Prince Rupert's drop, paper muslin ghost,
white torch—"with power to say unkind
things with kindness, and the most
irritating things in the midst of love and
tears," you invite destruction.

—from "Pedantic Literalist"

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There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious
fastidiousness. Certain Ming
products, imperial floor-coverings of coach-
wheel yellow, are well enough in their way but I have seen
something
that I like better—a
mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly bal-
lasted animal stand up,
similar determination to make a pup
eat his meat from the plate.

—from "Critics and Connoisseurs"

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complexity is not a crime, but carry
it to the point of murkiness
and nothing is plain. Complexity,
moreover, that has been committed to the darkness, instead of
granting itself to be the pestilence that it is, moves all a-
bout as if to bewilder us with the dismal
fallacy that insistence
is the measure of achievement and that all
truth must be dark. Principally throat, sophistication is as it al-
ways has been—at the antipodes from the initial
great truths.

—from "In the days of Prismatic Color"

Small dog, going over the lawn nipping the linen and saying
that you have a badger—remember Xenophon;
only rudimentary behavior is necessary to put us on the scent.
“A right good salvo of barks,” a few strong wrinkles puckering
the skin between the ears, is all we ask.

—from “Picking and Choosing”

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—a collection of little objects—
sapphires set with emeralds, and pearls with a moonstone,
made fine
with enamel in gray, yellow, and dragon-fly blue;
a lemon, a pear

and three bunches of grapes, tied with silver: your dress, a
magnificent square
cathedral tower of uniform
and at the same time diverse appearance—a
species of vertical vineyard rustling in the storm
of conventional opinion. Are they weapons or scalpels?
Whetted to brilliance

by the hard majesty of that sophistication which is superior to
opportunity

these things are rich instruments with which to experiment.
But why dissect destiny with instruments
more highly specialized than the components of
destiny itself?

—from “Those Various Scalpels”

.

Perceiving that in the masked ball
attitude, there is a hollowness
that beauty's light momentum can't redeem;
 since disproportionate satisfaction anywhere
 lacks a proportionate air,

he let us know without offense
by his hands' denunciatory
upheaval, that he despised the fashion
 of curing us with an ape—making it his care
 to smother us with fresh air.

—from “‘Nothing Will Cure the Sick Lion but to Eat an Ape’”

I could go on citing passages. Indeed, I could argue—some probably have—that the whole of Moore's *oeuvre* is an aesthetics, a careful establishing through example and commentary of both what is seemly for human conduct and what is essential for true artistic expression. It is the latter that interests me here, especially since Moore appears to propose values that are at odds with her own poetic performance.

“Are they weapons or scalpels?” she asks of the hypertrophied refinements of civilization. We may well ask the same about her own lines. The first citation, from “In This Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance Is Good and,” would suggest weapons, but of a defensive, not a first-strike, variety. Moore praises the power of indirection over the “haggish, uncompanionable drawl / of certitude,” but then she mitigates that praise somewhat by tracing the origin of that power back to “self-protectiveness” and revealing it, ultimately, as a by-product of vulnerability. But this is nothing more than the age-old view of art as compensation.

Weapons or scalpels? Scalpels they assuredly are not. For the scalpel is an instrument designed to cut through surfaces; its purpose is to get the user *inside*. And Moore's art is anything but interior. She is a taxonomist, a gleaner, a weaver. The most thrilling feature of her poetry is its attentiveness and deliberation—the way she ranges over the intricate surfaces of the material and textual worlds, drawing forth what she needs with an avian fastidiousness. Moore's poems are not written from within; they are *appliquéd*. She subjects what she has elicited from the near-infinite plenitude of

the *out there* to the stringent ordering system of her syntax. She produces her effects through shocks of precision and shocks of juxtaposition. Our diffuse imaging of the world collides with her insistently accurate ordering of things. If she strikes an occasional depth, if she produces what appears to be a penetration, it is not by virtue of any probing action of her own. This comes about, rather, because we, as readers, are forced to make an inference out of certain bits of adjacent information. *We* make the sequences yield sense—*we* do the penetrating.

How odd it is, then, that Moore should on so many occasions adumbrate artistic values that her own craft belies. Reading over these quotations, we can abstract a clear preference for frankness over duplicity, simplicity over ornamentation and needless complexity, directness over sophistication, and “unconscious” naturalness over the straining for effect that is artifice. A preference, in short, for the genuine. But Moore’s own poetry is nothing if not ironic and oblique. Her detailings are almost blindingly precise, but their accumulation produces a sly indirection. Moore is ornamental and deliberately disproportionate. When she inspects destiny, she does so with instruments more specialized than destiny itself. She is, herself, “principally throat”—and in this resides her idiosyncratic magic.

The tension between her beliefs—or, to use a Moore word, “preferences”—and her practice is immediately evident in these quoted passages. It manifests itself as a pervasive irony. Listen as she militates against complexity in a series of lines that are themselves semantically, syntactically, and prosodically complex:

Complexity,
moreover, that has been committed to darkness, instead of

granting itself to be the pestilence that it is, moves all a-
bout as if to bewilder us with the dismal
fallacy that insistence
is the measure of all achievement and that all
truth must be dark.

What is this self-reflexive rhetorical stratagem but an effort to distance and disarm a truth that she is compelled to iterate?

There is a second, even more obvious sign of her tension, her peculiar entrapment between preference and practice. Moore relies heavily on displacement. She speaks with a domino held in front of her features. She assigns the burden of speaking the truth to some creature (a cat, for instance, in a poem I did not cite here—"The Monkeys"), or to some incorporated literary source, like Xenophon. When she does use her own voice, as in "Critics and Connoisseurs" or "Those Various Scalpels," the linguistic screen—complexity—is securely in place. For Moore could not turn her recognitions directly upon herself without thereby negating her sensibility and her poetic mode—the work could not survive.

And yet this is precisely what she has done in her one act of self-mutilation. She has pronounced her truth directly, in the first person, and the second version shows us what results when the poet abides by her own strictures. The piece might make more sense if it were called "My Poetry."

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POETRY

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important
beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
discovers in
it, after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a
high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but be-
cause they are
useful. When they become so derivative as to become
unintelligible,
the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
do not admire what
we cannot understand: the bat
holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless
wolf under
a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a
horse that feels a flea, the base-
ball fan, the statistician—
nor is it valid
to discriminate against “business documents and

school-books”; all these phenomena are important. One
must make a distinction
however: when dragged into prominence by half poets,
the result is not poetry,
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.

POETRY (revised)

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one dis-
covers in

it, after all, a place for the genuine.

If the original version of “Poetry” was the symbolic site of Moore’s aesthetic assault upon herself, then we may reasonably regard it as representing the poetic sensibility that a part of her despised.

The poem is, in fact, a kind of anthology of the attributes and techniques that readers have most cherished in Moore—the very ones that

made her the revolutionist she was. The original is prosy, prosodically sprawling; it is syntactically complex, to the point of near-unintelligibility in places; it shows off Moore's taxonomic fetish, her delight in drawing together creatures from the various phyla of the natural and human world ("the tireless wolf . . . the baseball fan . . ."); it incorporates textual material from other sources (Tolstoy and A.H. Bullen on Yeats)—thereby sabotaging self-containment, and opening the poem out to the continuum of the printed word; it is rhetorically strategic, in the way that so many of her poems are, starting with a straightforward assertion, building and cantilevering sense outward until it almost evaporates (eg. the sentence that begins "When they become so derivative . . ."), then rounding to some clear assertion; it encloses, here more fully than elsewhere, an aesthetic formulation: a justification of what is now fashionably called "framing."

The revised "Poetry" has eliminated everything but the prosiness.

A short poem which is a shaved-down version of a well-known longer poem is not the same thing as an independent short poem—that should be obvious. Moore's second "Poetry" cannot be read except against the original text. It makes no declaration of independence. Indeed, Moore saw fit to include the first "Poetry" in the Notes to her *Complete Poems*. We are asked to read her gesture, to puzzle out her reasons for disapproving of the original.

There are two ways of looking at the matter—unless, of course, we ascribe her move to pure whimsy. If we think of the second version as a *re-write*, then the poem has to be seen as a replacement, effectively cancelling the first version. But then Moore would not have included it in her *Complete Poems* even as a note. More tellingly, the modifications made are not those of a re-write, but an edit. She did not alter a single word. The words (most of them) have been struck out; only punctuation and spacing have been altered. We are compelled, therefore, to regard the second "Poetry" as an operation performed upon the first. A cut, an erasure—our choice of words here carries large implications, determines whether we regard her action as one of subliminal violence, or some mere agitated impatience. . . .

If the short poem *is* an edit, then what interpretation can we make? One benign possibility is that Moore recognized, as an editor might, a prolixity; she saw "Poetry" as verbose and she moved to rectify the matter. She made her cuts in a spirit of "Enough said!" But this does not get rid of the larger symbolic statement. For according to that criterion, the bulk of

Moore's work is marred by a similar abundance. It is her very method: to harvest and arrange. Trim one detail and you are soon throwing everything out the window.

The other possibility, to which I incline, is that Moore was deliberately repudiating everything that followed the first two sentences. Not just verbal superfluity, but manner and tone as well. The word "genuine" is placed for maximum impact: Moore was henceforth connecting genuineness with simple, direct, unsophisticated utterance. She was establishing it as the primary moving force of all real poetry. So much the worse that she could not attain it in her own work.

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At the core of the issue is irony. Moore's poetry—and her "Poetry"—is the apotheosis of ironic discourse. It belongs to "civilization" as opposed to "culture," which means, according to the Spenglerian definition I'm using, that it represents vital forces embalmed, order and intellection set above instinct and energy. All ironic usage implies self-consciousness on the part of the speaker. An ironic statement does not fully coincide with itself—it incorporates a play between what is said and the underlying intention, between utterance and implication, between the content and the means. The etymology of the word gives us, from the Greek, "dissimulation" and "feigning"; an ironist is one who "says less than he thinks or means" (Skeat). Irony is, to put it bluntly, the inverse of the genuine.

We have Moore's statements on the matter. Using the image of the "drop," or concealing cloth, in "Pedantic Literalist," she asserts in no uncertain terms that duplicity—seen here as the gulf between affect and true feeling—is seen as inviting "destruction." In "Nothing Will Cure the Sick Lion," she strikes against the "masked ball attitude." Examples could be multiplied. And while in neither case is she addressing irony *per se*, she might as well be. Irony, like duplicity, depends upon a distance between feeling and expression; the difference between them is merely one of degree.

Irony, then, is the opposite of the "unconscious fastidiousness" that Moore celebrates in the child's attempt to prop the faltering pet (children, of course, are notoriously incapable of dissimulation). It shares nothing in

common with the dog's reaction, the "few strong wrinkles puckering the skin between the ears," that she fastens upon in "Picking and Choosing." In poem after poem, as it turns out, she aligns herself with the *naifs*, simple creatures and beings that coincide with themselves, that bear no taint of self-consciousness.

We can change what we do, but we cannot really change what we are. Moore was imprisoned—by disposition, by sensibility—in a condition of ironic self-consciousness. She could fully comprehend its limitations, but she was powerless to achieve the poetic simplicity and force she admired. Consciousness moves along a unidirectional path—it can strive to evolve, but it cannot undo previous evolutionary attainments. Moore was stuck.

Moore was not, however, a two-face. She did not say one thing while meaning another. No, her distinctive irony was the product of a disjunction between means and ends. Her technique, which we can see as her effort to come to terms with the gap between her belief and her natural endowment, was to render up the mind's motion, its progress toward some realization or certainty—even though, *especially though*, that realization finally argued against the hesitant discursiveness of the process. Moore set out after simplicity along the only route she could take: that of complexity. She stalked unsophisticated truths in a sophisticated manner. She could not help herself. But when her eye beheld what her hand had done, she had to cry out against it. The mere tension between expression and content was not enough. One time, and one time only, she excised as superfluous the manneristic approach to truth and gave just the truth itself. The truth she gave—her recognition of the genuine—reflected directly on her deed. And vice-versa: the deed was the warranty for the words.

Considered by itself, without the ghost-text of the original, the short version of "Poetry" is Moore's worst poem. We should be happy that she did not thereafter insist that *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit* are always the same thing. She continued to spin out her delightful and sublimely ironic poems for a good many years. Though she had cut off all of her beautiful hair, it did grow back again.