

## The Poetry of Engagement · *Laura Jensen*

*Marianne Moore: The Poetry of Engagement*,  
Grace Schulman. Urbana and Chicago:  
University of Illinois Press, 1986.

My reading last summer of a study by Clark Moustakas,<sup>1</sup> a work distinguished by its sincere effort to examine education as a cause of many difficulties, led me to question what poetry has done, or has not done, to cause those same difficulties, and in part, how it is increasingly isolated from potential audiences. One clear factor is the poet's tendency to cherish separateness, to find within it a place to flourish, even at the price of loneliness and isolation. We cherish separateness as a means of accomplishing our work. But this important need inhibits our ability, in a world of promoters, to convey our work to others.

In *Marianne Moore: The Poetry of Engagement*, by Grace Schulman, I do not find revealed how we are to lessen our isolation and come closer to possible audiences, whether through videos as some writers, such as Diane Wakoski<sup>2</sup> have suggested, or by other means. But I do find a larger understanding of why this should matter. Schulman's introduction states, "This study deals with the poetic methods of presenting [Moore's poems], and for enacting the struggle of the heart and mind to see the realities of this world and to seek 'the genuine,' or the truths of an ideal realm" (2). That "struggle" reminds me of everything we do, from waiting for a bus to searching for work, and "truths" suggests our minds may not fail us always. Schulman's book makes me wish many more persons would know the experience she describes.

By lines and stanzas, poets reach for revelations in a troubled world. Moore's work is an essential part of modern poetry, an influence on a way of thought. In "A Way of Seeing," Schulman writes, "Marianne Moore's poetry of engagement evolves from the early years, when she developed an aesthetic inquiry into modern life. . . . Making use of traditional modes, she created a form for understanding modern attitudes" (32). The evolution of that inquiry continues now as poets search for new forms for the same reasons—to understand and convey contemporary attitudes and experience.

In "The Evolution of an Inner Dialectic," Schulman writes of Moore's

“manner of argumentation”—“These techniques culminate in a poetic embodiment of the mind’s movement from its lower ranges of reverie through stages of waking and knowing to the extreme limits of judgment” (44). The sentence is prose and an abstraction, but I find it beautiful in itself. It also appeals to ideas that matter and that I have found in Denise Levertov’s idea of inner voice,<sup>3</sup> and in an essay called “Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation” by James Moffett,<sup>4</sup> which urges composition students to follow inner speech for original thinking. In the same chapter of Schulman’s, I find, “The discipline of meditation, which involves having to see a thing before the process of analytic reasoning can take place, illuminates the image of ‘seeing’ that dominates Marianne Moore’s later poetry” (48). I became curious about whether training in meditation is different for the blind. The Washington State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped tells me that it is the same.<sup>5</sup> For Moore, of course, seeing was primary, though her imagery employed every sense.

In “The Mind’s Transforming Power,” Schulman writes, “Perception is the result of the mind’s tendency to change a thing into something else, not so much by contradiction as by self-correction” (93). Schulman argues for the mind’s power. Her reminder that perception is change and leads to change indicates a value poetry offers its readers. In a world where much of our daily existence confronts the legal burdens and obligations of real property, whether belonging to us or to others, the mind’s ability to see, to think, and to transcend those burdens is essential.

I was pleased with Schulman’s approach. It is a virtue of criticism to take the part of the curator of a museum, to display the artist’s work for the benefit of the reader. Schulman always uses Moore’s work in this generous way. This summer I read in *A Marianne Moore Reader*, in her *Collected Poems*, and in her newly collected prose to make my estimation more complete. I had decided Moore’s work was tapestry, detailed, textural. Schulman enlarges the room where the tapestry is displayed, creates architectural levels for my viewing. Again and again she uses plain words where more complicated words were possible, and she explains her terms.

I enjoyed the “Ford Correspondence,” the charming letters between Moore and the Ford Motor Company, for whom she had attempted to name a car. Their omission from Schulman’s discussion reminds me of the dedication to *The Collected Poems*, “omissions are not accidents.” The Ford correspondence reveals more of Moore’s character than her approach and

beliefs. Schulman chose more revealing anecdotal material for the chapter on biography. The brief early biography comes in part from a letter from Moore to Pound (2), and from an interview with Donald Hall (4): the day T. S. Eliot could not come to tea with Moore and her mother, but she decided to attend the party they offered anyway. "I have no pride," Moore wrote. Of this incident, Schulman writes, it "illustrates her characteristic conflict between propriety and the desire to discover things at first hand. Confronted with a choice between pride and experience, she opted for experience, developing a direct though elegant manner" (13). Any single woman understands the words, "I have no pride." Madeline DeFrees treats the situation in "The Odd Woman" — "I pat the head of the beagle / nosing in my crotch and try to appear / grateful."<sup>7</sup> Most of the biography given here chooses from references to Moore's worklife.

The chapter on prosody and scansion will be of most interest to critics. It traces the revisions, which were influenced by many readings live and for tape. We might wonder whether "The Spoken Art" is not best handled by a series of radio programs presenting recordings of Moore. I never want Schulman to be more a promoter at the expense of losing separately written careful books. Still, I was less interested in this chapter than in others, which portray the movement of a mind and remind us that the nature of the poet matters.

Maxine Kumin describes Marianne Moore giving a reading:<sup>8</sup>

. . . and suddenly it's the fifties. I've become  
a freshman English instructor, a freshman poet  
as well. Marianne is reading her poems  
at Wellesley. Surely the ones I know by heart

will trickle through the leaky microphone.  
My fingers riffle pages of the texts  
but the black tricorn bending low deflects  
that flat small voice from reaching anyone . . .

Kumin does not portray a glowing performance but reinforces the idea of the poet's separateness. If separateness is at fault when we reach such a small audience, it remains essential to the poet's nature. So it remains a paradox that the work of the poets is needed and missed by many people,

here and elsewhere. Schulman underlines the importance to many more in this enthusiastic description of the work of Marianne Moore as an act of mind. Moore's work documents human perception and can teach us all to think.

#### Notes

1. *Personal Growth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Howard A. Doyle Publishing Company, 1969).
2. "The Future of Poetry: Is It an Endangered Species?" *raccoon*, 24/25 (1987), 23.
3. "Work and Inspiration: Inviting the Muse," in *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 23.
4. *College English*, Volume 44, Number 3 (March 1982), 233.
5. Telephone interview with representative of Washington State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Seattle, Washington, 11 August 1987.
6. In *A Marianne Moore Reader* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 215-224.
7. In *When Sky Lets Go*, (New York: George Braziller, 1978) 19-20.
8. "Marianne, My Mother, and Me," *Poetry*, May, 1987.