

Review · Marilyn Krysl

The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore.
Edited and with an Introduction by Patricia C. Willis. New York: Elizabeth Sifton Books, Viking Penguin Inc., 1986. 723 pp. \$24.95.

"I would rather die having spoken in my manner than speak in your manner and live." Moore quotes Socrates' statement as an example of antithesis, which she believed was one of the devices writers use instinctively in mastering their subjects. Studying Moore's prose suggests that antithesis was a fundamental fact not just of her writing but of her manner of being. Robert Lowell said, "You won't see anyone as strange as Marianne Moore again, not for a long while." His amazed and baffled remark acknowledges the fact that Moore stood out from the background. She lived, as it were, antithesis. A woman writing, a woman unmarried, a woman who remarked that chastity has a certain power, she lived a life in opposition to the norm for a woman of her time (1887–1970). The authoritative tone of the prose, like that of the poetry, reveals how determined she was. Within the confines of her particular circumstances, she insisted on the absolute accuracy and rightness of her manner of speaking.

The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore, edited by the curator of the Moore Collection at the Rosenbach Museum and Library, is divided into three periods: The Dial Years (1921–1929); The Middle Years (1931–1947); and The Later Years (1948–1968). Appendices include letters to the editor, puffs and short interviews. One gets the feeling that in putting together this collection Willis became so mesmerized by Moore's contradictory indirection that she was demonically inspired not to provide a Table of Contents. The absence of this guide is maddening. Brevity is one of Moore's hallmarks, and the amassing of many very short essays without a retrieval system guarantees Moore fans considerable irritation. One must thumb backward and forward through all six hundred plus pages of text, looking for this piece on Stevens, that review of Bryher.

The prose. How closely it resembles the poetry. The stylistic techniques and the characteristic manner of thought common to the poetry are common to the prose as well. Heavy use of quotation; the despising of connec-

tives; aphorism; getting at a thing by avoiding the door and coming in through the windows; a predilection for exotic animals as creatures surpassing man—these are her trademarks, always. To a personality like Moore's, distinctions of genre were scarcely the issue. The point was precision, and whether Moore worked in the strophe or the paragraph, her relation to the sentence remained consistently and idiosyncratically hers. Compare:

Denunciations do not effect
the culprit: nor blows, but it
is torture to him not to be spoken to.
They're natural—
the coat, like Venus
mantle lined with stars,
buttoned close at the neck,—the sleeves new from disuse.

And:

We are a many-foliaged tree against the moon;
a wave penetrated by the sun. Some authors
do not muse within themselves; they "think"
—like the vegetable shredder which cuts into
the life of a thing. Miss Bishop is not one
of these frettingly intensive machines.

In an essay entitled "Feeling and Precision" Moore wrote, "you don't devise a rhythm, the rhythm is the person, and the sentence but a radiograph of personality."

A radiography of personality. It is interesting, in the prose, how much is left unspoken. Moore had much to say, but more precisely (and I must be precise, I feel she would wish it so), she had much to say on selected subjects, cagily chosen. On other subjects—fascinating—she is mum. This "autobiography," alternately loquacious and silent, provides a tracery of Moore's whimsical and very particularistic volubleness and reticence, her impulse both to exposit and to omit. The omissions pique my curiosity. I like to imagine her both gratified and amused by such seeking and by my consequent satisfaction and frustration. For her manner of

speaking and her decision to address some subjects and avoid others is challenging. To talk, to be silent. To reveal, and to secret away.

These two complimentary psychological impulses manifest themselves in almost every essay, and in both style and content. The reader is led from epigram through embellishment and back again to the succinct *mot*. “We are often reminded that the civilized world is uncivilized” is followed by paragraphs of ornate evidence of this claim, punctuated now and again by epigrammatic summary statements, such as “The wish of Mr. Rockefeller that there should be a new museum of antiquities in Egypt seems generous” and (quoting Lewis Carroll) “no deed of ours on this side of the grave is really unselfish.” Interplay between capsule and embellishment is characteristic of the essays in all three periods. Her much quoted remarks on Eisenhower in 1961 are a charming illustration from the later work.

I am deplored for extolling President Eisenhower for the very reasons for which I should reprehend him. Attacked for vetoing the Farm Bill—April 1956—he said, “To produce more crops when we need less, squandering resources on what we cannot eat or sell . . . would it solve the problem? Is it in the best interests of all?” Anything reprehensible in that?

Of Elizabeth Bishop, Moore wrote: “The specific is judiciously interspersed with generality.” The same applies to Moore herself. Evidence of Moore’s impulse to speak out and to keep silent is her interest in this phenomenon in others. Moore notes in both Eliot and Stevens that quality she calls “reticent candor.” Both, she asserts, achieve “emphasis by understatement.” And in a review of H.D.’s *Collected Poems*, Moore tells us they “present a fastidious prodigality—an apparent starkness which is opulence.” Oxymoron amounts to an aesthetic, both inscribed and lived.

To reveal, to secret. Moore takes up subjects. Though the majority of the essays address literary matters, in fact Moore wrote further afield. Over the course of this collection, the essays seem so varied as to suggest an all inclusiveness—baseball, Abe Lincoln, greed, Churchill, the educating of artists, Brooklyn, fashions in dress, Bryn Mawr, courage, psychonanalysis, “contagion” in poetry, Henry James, humility, the sculpture of Malvina Hoffman. Yet there are subjects surely of interest to her, which she does not speak to. We learn little, for instance, about Moore’s

opinion of Modernism as a movement. And yet at least one scholar, Taffy Martin, has made a case for Moore's advance action, describing her not simply as a Modernist but as a writer who anticipated the postmodern as well. What the prose reveals is that Moore appears to be pleased to be included among Modernists; but *her* view of the Modernist aesthetic is almost always purely descriptive. She quotes and reiterates the pronouncements of Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Williams, but makes little pronouncement of her own. Seldom does she qualify her descriptive praise of The Gang of Four, so that instances of even mild rebuke stand out. "Mr. Stevens is never inadvertently crude; one is conscious, however, of a deliberate bearishness—a shadow of acrimonious, unprovoked contumely." It is as though she did not wish to question her hard won but often unacknowledged place.

Her truly severe critique is reserved for Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry: 1945–1960*. Here she makes clear that her sympathies lie with her generation. Even so, she is at pains to praise individual writers in the anthology and to direct criticism at the group's aesthetic instead. She quarrels with Olson's "Projective Verse," but does not so much criticize it as restate the matter in terms which satisfy her as Olson's do not. With regard to content in general, she asserts:

Good content, as Samuel Butler said, is usually matched by good treatment, and poets specializing in "organs and feelings"—severed from culture and literature, dogged by redundancy and stench—have a stiff task. By comparison with the vocabularies of science, which are creative, in fact enthralling, exhibitionist content—invaded by the diction of drug-vendors and victims, sex addicts and civic parasites—becomes poetically inoperative. "Imagination can be forced," as Alfred Kazin said, "but it cannot be simulated."

Her final judgment of the anthology seems something akin to Steven's remark that the "essential thing in form is to be free in whatever form is used. A free form does not assure freedom. . . ."

Though she does not directly discuss either literary friendships or literary quarrels of the time, her outspokenness in criticizing *The New American Poetry* (*The*, she thought, should be omitted from the title) suggests

she might have liked to but felt constrained. A pity, for she might have done so charmingly, given her wit, her perspicacity, her bright eye and her sharp though bridled tongue. An essay in *The Dial* in December 1926 comes as close as Moore came to articulating her view of the relation of contemporary artists to one another. The essay asserts, among other things, that in "blindly disparaging another, one shows merely that one envies him his realness and wishes that he were what one says he is." Moore subsumes the contradictions that must have arisen between her contemporaries, and between herself and them, into the synthesis she probably wished. Although "the judgment of experts on one another is at variance," she writes, "their genius is not; perception is always, as Traherne would say, 'innocent.'"

Similarly, Moore says nothing about the status of women writers in her own or in other periods. In a roundabout way she discusses particular writers and their work (she reviews Mabel Loomis Todd's *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, for instance, E. F. Benson's biography of Charlotte Brontë), but she does not address either women writers or women as a group, their circumstances, their chances. Certainly she would have considered "rising above" gossip to be a virtue. She quotes Confucius. "What you don't want, don't inflict on others." And "there is nothing I dislike more than the exposé or any kind of revenge." But she could be gabby about Henry James or the Cantos. When she does speak, it is with absolute authority. She proceeds as though the world agrees with her. *We*, she says, asserting her accord with society at large. Why not then spout her own view of matters aesthetic? And why not discuss the position of women, both in and out of the literary world? Given her penchant for being on the side of virtue, wouldn't such matter be her meat?

Helen Vendler, in her essay on Moore in the *Modern Critical Views* series, suggests that Moore was simply too exotic for America. She was simply too much for us. Since Moore values understatement, Vendler suggests, it may have seemed to her "that most people around her were shouting, and that a brief or dry phrase from her would be 'mute' to them. It may be that she gave up hope . . . of reaching a general audience. . . ." There is surely truth in this. But, more to the point, it would seem that a woman of Moore's intelligence knew the score only too well. As in *Naked and Fiery Forms*, Juhász writes, "Marianne Moore did not exaggerate her sense of danger. In her life and in her art she trod delicately, purposefully,

skillfully through enemy lines, deflecting attack by eluding it, by denying it, by never appearing to be at battle. . . .”

With the exception of the poem “Marriage,” Moore does not directly address relations between the sexes. And of women, her rare remarks are contradictory. She speaks at length of Carey Thomas’ tribulations, describing Thomas as “sobered by obstruction.” Thomas, Moore writes, the “virtual administrator and dean of a college was made president officially by a majority of but one vote; then only after years of ‘wary foresight in holding back and driving forward at the right moments,’ was grudgingly elected to the board of trustees.” Yet in the next breath Moore asserts “. . . women are no longer debarred from the professions that are open to men,” as though the matter had since been settled once and for all.

What she did do was to review books by women writers with care and considerable enthusiasm. Her reviews of Brhyer, H.D., and Bogan, for instance, are fully as admiring as those of Auden, Williams, Stevens, Pound and Cummings. She describes H.D. as one in whom we find “intensive, unmixed and unimpeded, the white fire of the poet.” With wit and acerbity she defends Dickinson against the accusation of vanity.

A certain buoyancy that creates an effect of inconsequential bravado—a sense of drama with which we may not be quite at home—was for her a part of that expansion of breath necessary to existence, and unless it is conceited for the hummingbird or the osprey to not behave like a chicken, one does not find her conceited.

And in reply to Dame Edith’s father’s remark, “Edith will commit suicide when she finds she cannot write poetry,” Moore writes dryly, “Need for this has not arisen.” Though Moore did not review Amy Lowell’s work, she wrote *The Dial*’s eulogy, describing Lowell as a “self-dependently American, sometimes modern American writer.”

The death of Amy Lowell emphasizes the force of her personality. Cosmopolitan yet isolated, essentially distinct from “the imagist group,” of which she has been called “the recognized spokesman,” she has by a misleadingly armored self-reliance, sometimes obscured a generosity, a love of romance, the luster of a chivalry which was essentially hers.

She could be cutting, but her infrequent sharp remarks are generally reserved for her male contemporaries. A one sentence review of *Chills and Fever*, by John Crowe Ransom, reads:

Unrewarding dissonances, mountebank persiflage, mock medieval minstrelsy, and shreds of elegance disturbingly suggestive of now this, now that contemporary bard, deprive one of the faculty to diagnose this “dangerous” phenomenon to which one has exposed oneself.

In her review of *The New American Poetry*, she manages to compliment Allen Ginsberg, then adds by the by, that he “can foul the nest in a way to marvel at.”

Though it appears Moore made a conscious decision to be unfailingly gracious toward her female contemporaries, her praise is occasionally couched in attitudes we would now describe as male-biased. It is today a left-handed compliment to say, as Moore does of Bogan, that one is struck by her “restraint,” that “women are not noted for terseness, but Louise Bogan’s art is compactness compacted.” Such praise too closely resembles Auden’s treatment of Adrienne Rich’s early poems, which he wrote were “neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs.”

Moore will not decide to speak to woman’s condition generally, and yet when questioned point blank on this matter for the *Encyclopedia Year Book* (1957), she responds:

With regard to careers outside the home, delegated motherhood can be a threat, for I believe that our integrity as a nation is bound up with the home. Good children are not the product of mothers who prefer money or fame to the well-being of their families. . . . We dare not regress by suppressing intelligence or forbidding women to be useful. But steadfastness, conscience and the capacity for sacrifice. . . are basic. . . .

Such a statement gives us pause. Then we remember Moore’s context. She died before Mary Daly had reclaimed the word *spinster*, thus accomplishing what Moore most devoutly wished and heartily approved: the

passing on of language, as Eliot wrote, “more highly developed, more refined, more precise than it was before.”

Moore’s “reticent candor,” her “fastidious prodigality,” are a challenge. Precision is not clarity, nor is it autobiography. What, were it known, might have been the true state of affairs? Recent feminist criticism acknowledges, from a range of perspectives, Moore’s sometimes obvious, often hidden, power. In *Naked and Fiery Forms*, Suzanne Juhasz makes the case that Moore did not escape the double bind of the woman writer, and remarks Moore’s “marked exclusion of feminine experience from art.” Still Juhasz notes that Moore’s separation in herself of woman and poet gained her “a victory that may have been qualified by the very methods used to gain it but which was nevertheless a prize that few before her had won.” In *Marianne Moore: The Poet’s Advance*, Laurence Stapleton reads “Granite and Steel” as a corrective to Hart Crane’s “grandiose vision of a voyage to Atlantis” and as affirmation of the mind’s power. Vendler does not see Moore’s “armored” stance as defensive but as one of “superior amusement and denegration.” She reads “Black Earth” as a description of the self in much the same way Alicia Ostriker, in *Stealing the Language*, sees “Sojourn in the Whale” as a portrait of relations between the sexes. Vendler also points out that male critics of Moore make her out to be “more shrinking and squeamish than she is.”

There is no doubt something in Moore that elicits this uneasiness in male commentators, no matter how strongly they extol her virtues. Perhaps her work is in fact more “feminine” than it may appear. . . . Or perhaps Moore’s occasional contempt for the world of male power provokes a counterattack on what may seem to some her miniature version of life.

In *Marianne Moore: Subversive Modernist*, Taffy Martin refuses the view that Moore’s proper place is within the European mode of Modernism, where her craft and precision are perceived as “defensive barriers around her.” Martin makes the case that Moore was thoroughly in Williams’ American stream, and that she acted as a subversive influence within it. Discussing Moore’s years at *The Dial*, Martin points out that during Thayer’s editing of the magazine, he attempted to build it into a bulwark against the contradictions of the age, and that once Moore became editor,

she turned *The Dial* into an “aesthetic equivalent” of those contradictions. She “was as opinionated and determined as she was retiring and private,” Martin states, and she altered *The Dial*’s previously defensive tone and “conducted” as one does an orchestra, by

enacting in her essays the multiplicity and disparateness of the world around her. Moore’s essays present judgments, just as Thayer’s do, but they are positive judgments that accept and mirror rather than attempt to diminish the fragmentation of the modern world.

Thus for Martin, Moore represents “a playful rather than a defensive spirit.”

Playfulness thrives on secrecy, indirection, sleight of hand. Now you see her, now you don’t. This, this, and this, but not that, my friends. The prose most certainly enacts Williams’ “necessary appearance of disorder in all immediacy,” but it also serves as a screen from behind which Moore steps fleetingly, unpredictably. “The unquiet nature of the artist is proverbial, genius being in some sense always in revolt,” she says, apparently speaking of someone other than herself. But is she? Responding to questions put to her by Howard Nemerov, she remarks, “I see no revolution in . . . creativeness.” And “Governance of the emotions . . . seem(s) to me ‘the artist.’” Here she seems to speak for herself. But again, does she?

“It is typical of Miss Moore’s poetry that the meaning is equivocal,” Donald Hall said. “She gives and takes away with the same motion, so that often, just as one believes he understands, the words start to fold back on themselves and an exactly opposite meaning begins to seem plausible.” Hall’s statement reminds us of Freud’s belief that contradiction is a fact of the unconscious. Dreams often combine and accommodate contrary things, and in the unconscious contradictory thoughts exist side by side. In “Feeling and Precision” Moore makes an intriguing assertion. “Instinctively, we employ antithesis as an aid to precision. . . .” She is speaking of writing, but she might as well have spoken for herself. Here, and in countless other assertions, she proclaims her authority, proceeding as though she and the world agree, when in fact she lived a life in contrast to quotidian expectations. *We*, she says, asserting publicly her accord with a milieu which perceived her as “strange.” “Instinctively, we”—but since

we all do not instinctively act as she asserts, the emphasis is thrown onto the adverb. And the adverb suggests the personal. It is as though she had in fact said, "Instinctively, I." Antithesis. Reticent candor. Moore, the oxymoron. To reveal, to secret away. In 1962 *Esquire* asked Moore to state her "most paradoxical quality." Her reply: Like to be inconspicuous but look well.

Perhaps Moore's penchant for perceiving oxymoron and her talent for being one are her attempt to achieve balance, the Greeks' moderation which she so often professed to admire. In H.D., Moore found "the verbal continuity, the controlled ardor, the balanced speech of poetry." She consistently criticized extremes. "Egotism is usually subversive of sagacity," she declared. ". . . excess is the common substitute for energy." And in *The Complete Prose* Moore twice quotes Confucius' statement: "If there be a knife of resentment in the heart, the mind fails to attain precision."

She may have hoped for balance, but it is an existential fact that its achievement is never permanent. Pushed too far, one is likely to declare the bottom line. *I would rather die having spoken in my manner than speak in your manner and live.* Socrates' declaration leaps from Moore's page, a *crie de coeur*. "Originals are better than replicas," she wrote, and stands as an illustration of her assertion.