

Meeting Marianne · *Mary Barnard*¹

ONE DAY IN mid-April I came home to my furnished room on West Eleventh Street to find a note from R.L. Latimer of the Alcestis Press. He had called to see me while I was out. The note was an invitation to a party at an apartment in Brooklyn. William Carlos Williams was coming over to sign the colophon sheets of his new book, *Adam & Eve & the City*; Marianne Moore would also be there. Naturally, I went. Following Mr. Latimer's directions, I found my way over to Brooklyn Heights by subway. The party was in a penthouse apartment with a magnificent view of the Manhattan lights. I arrived early (a bad habit I have never been able to break). Dr. Williams and young Mr. Latimer, who had been having dinner together, arrived later, as did Miss Moore. Meanwhile I was in the awkward situation of having to introduce myself to people I had never heard of, who had never heard of me and could not quite imagine what I was doing there. Miss Moore arrived and was introduced, but failed to catch my name until Dr. Williams came in and greeted me. After that we tried to talk, but she was the center of attention, so that we had no private conversation though she promised to come to see me the following week. Only Williams, of the people at the party, had met her before, and he said that he hadn't seen her for years. I was delighted with her.

She's a grand person. I'm very enthusiastic about her and not scared of her any more. [I had found her letters somewhat intimidating.] She talked a blue streak, and Williams said it was because she was frightened and was trying to build up a barrier of words to hide behind. I don't know about that, but she did get quite flushed, and she probably did realize that she was the center of the party. Anyway, she was most entertaining.

At this time Miss Moore was a straight and slender middle-aged woman who had not yet assumed her well-known trademark of the tricorne hat. She wore her once-red and still luxuriant hair braided in a coronet around her head, as she continued to do until the end of her life. At age forty-nine she dressed, not like my mother, but like my grandmother, in almost ankle-length skirts. In other words, she dressed

like *her* mother. Her eyes were round and very alert, not sharp, but completely frank, open and observant—so observant that I tended to look instinctively for cover when they turned in my direction. Her voice, as is well-known from recorded readings of her poems, was nasal and unattractive, but listening to her talk I forgot the voice as I tried to keep up with her quick turns of thought. I felt as though I were one half of an unrehearsed flying-trapeze act. In a tête-à-tête conversation she would have been frightening except for her open, almost confiding manner.

When Miss Moore left, Latimer exclaimed that he had been trying to run that woman down for years. A young poet to whom I had already taken a dislike aroused my ire by crying out that she was “just like Emily Dickinson!” Not to my mind. I could not imagine Emily Dickinson as editor of *The Dial*.

Miss Moore kept her word. On the 28th she came to see me and stayed two hours. My report to my family on that visit is unfortunately brief. “I couldn’t begin to tell you what she said—” I told them, “she talked too fast.” Apparently we talked about the manuscript I had brought with me, and which poems to include or exclude when I submitted it to a publisher. A letter had come that morning from Dr. Williams, who had made a list of poems I should leave out. It is not surprising that their opinions differed. We talked about his criticism, and “she said not to pay any attention to what Dr. Williams told me—as to content. As for technical advice, he might be very good. Then after some more, she said she was a menace, and I oughtn’t to pay any attention to her either.” I believe it was also at this meeting that she cautioned me against Dr. Williams and his friends: “It is NOT necessary to be Bohemian,” she said firmly.

Finally: “She said she really knew very few people, but if she could help me at all she would be very glad to. She stopped on her way here to leave a note in T.C. Wilson’s mailbox to tell him I was in town.” She had surmised that I would be diffident about calling people to say, “Here I am!” because she found it almost impossible to do herself. In London she had seen none of the literary people with whom she had corresponded, because she did not know how to go about letting them know that she was there.

When I returned from a visit to Cambridge in May, I wrote again to Marianne Moore and invited her to have lunch with me, but she countered with a proposal that I meet her in her dentist’s waiting room. I met her as she suggested, and in a letter I wrote that evening, said:

I had quite a long and interesting conversation with Miss Moore—all about my poems and my future. I've hardly thought about anything else since. She gave me some advice I thought was very good and some I'm doubtful about. Also found out that keeping up a correspondence with Ezra as long as I have without being insulted is a record. He even insults her. But maybe she would think she was insulted when I wouldn't. She was very pleased when I told her how nicely he always spoke of her in his letters.

Marianne Moore is the only person I have ever known who always said "Mr. Pound." She and "Mr. Pound" had not yet met, but had been corresponding for a long time, I gathered. She discounted the bluster, and emphasized his kindness. Once, she said, she wrote to him complaining that she was not getting anything published. Shortly thereafter she began to hear from editors not only in the United States and England, but from as far away as India and Australia. All the letters said the same thing: Ezra Pound had informed the writer that she might be willing to let him have some of her work for publication in his magazine.

She also chided me gently for not writing better prose. She had found my letters not very well written, and impressed upon me her view that a good prose style was very important to poets. I lamely explained that fright had probably helped to make my style a bit stilted; she nodded understandingly and said that she had thought that might be part of the trouble.

Sometimes Miss Moore seemed impossibly Victorian, as when she informed me that she never rode the subway alone at night, not because she was frightened (almost no one was, at that time), but because she did not consider it "suitable." However, too much has sometimes been made of her primness. I was once told that when she was editor of *The Dial*, she refused to publish anything by E.E. Cummings, but that was not true. She published several of his poems; and she was the first person ever to tell me to read *The Enormous Room*.

During our conversation I told her about my visits to Concord, Salem and Marblehead, and especially about the cemetery at Marblehead. As I remember, it was on a small promontory overlooking the water. Among the graves there were a number of monuments inscribed with lists of names of men lost at sea, and just behind this green knoll we came upon a little pond where children were sailing toy boats with colored

sails. There was a germ of a poem in it, but I never wrote the poem. Instead I told Miss Moore, who never forgot it. Several times in after years she mentioned the Marblehead cemetery, and once she told me that friends had taken her and her mother to Marblehead. She remembered about the cemetery, she said, and would have liked to have seen it, but unfortunately her mother was unable to leave the car, and of course she stayed with her mother. This kind of thing made me want to beat my head against the wall. And in this connection a letter she wrote me the next day after our talk is worth quoting almost in full:

It strikes me in connection with the Concord group, what ascetics they were; how little they had materially, yet what great givers they were: their writings are lasting and we have to remember that they were the expression of what they—the writers—daily lived. I think young writers naturally feeling the weight of work coming can scarcely believe enough that often the foundation for it is in giving to others and taking care of their interests. Many things in life have been hard and I have often thought how much better it would be for me if circumstances were different; but a remark of Katherine Cornell—in a magazine—about her art stays in my mind since acting is the most obstructed form of expression perhaps that we have—: “Nothing is keeping me back but myself.” But even the force in that idea does not enlarge one so much as the above idea, that in giving to others and taking care of their interests one has real self-expansion.

I spoke of hoping that you will read the (Sheed and Ward) Henry W. Wells edition of *Piers Ploughman*; and perhaps you would care to read too when you can, Kagawa’s novel, *A Grain of Wheat*.

I hope you can feel too that opposition and advice are appreciation, not an illegitimate cutworm.

Sincerely yours,

Marianne Moore.

I regretted that she herself found it necessary to give quite so much, but when, a few years later, I came upon her poem, “What Are Years” in the current issue of *Kenyon Review*, I had to ask myself whether the

poem was not worth the price she had paid. It seems to me one of the great modern lyrics, and certainly one of the finest ever written by a woman.

NOTES

¹ These reminiscences are excerpted from a work-in-progress entitled *Assault on Mount Helicon*. They are based on letters I wrote home from New York during my first visit there in the spring of 1936. M.B.