

The New Criterion

Books

February 2004

The mystery of Marianne Moore

by [William Logan](#)

A review of *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, by Marianne Moore, edited by Grace Schulman and *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907-1924*, by Marianne Moore, edited by Robin G. Schulze.

What most readers remember of Marianne Moore are her beasts—her jerboa, her ostrich, her pangolin. Late in her life, when the brilliant strangeness of her early poems had receded into the mists, she became a fabulous beast herself, poetry’s most endearing mascot. In her tricorn hat she looked as if she’d just emerged from a meeting of the Daughters of the American Revolution; and her befuddled, otherworldly air suggested that poets were absentminded nocturnal creatures, unused to daylight. Her antics made poets, and poetry, seem slightly ridiculous—she threw out the first ball at a Yankees game and met that poet of the ring, Cassius Clay (soon to be known as Muhammad Ali). The Ford Motor Company asked her to help name a new car, then apologetically, and with great delicacy, rejected her bizarre suggestions: the Intelligent Whale, the Arcenciel, the Mongoose Civique, the Pastelogram, the Turcotingo, and, surely the weirdest and most delightful, the Utopian Turtletop. The company eventually decided to call this disaster of design the Edsel.

Of all the modernists, the poets who invented the American poetry of the twentieth century and in whose haberdashery we still write, Moore has been least well served by her editors, of which she was the most tyrannical. We have sturdy editions of Frost, Stevens, Williams, and the early poems of Pound, if mostly mediocre ones of Eliot. For Moore, readers have long relied on the serial acts of butchery she committed in *The Complete Poems* (1967), whose author’s note reads, in its entirety, “Omissions are not accidents.” This volume could have been titled *Half the Complete Poems* with some justice.

Moore was an intrepid and reckless reviser of her work (one who preferred the ax to the scalpel), taking poems cast into delicate stanzas, among the most beautiful syllabic verse ever written, hacking out lines here and there or crushing their fine crystalline structures into a squarish mass closer to prose, then printing the mutilated version without apology. Her poem “Poetry” went through a bewildering number of amputations and grafts and amputations again, until in the end it was just three lines long:

I, too, dislike it.
 Reading it, however, with a perfect
 contempt for it, one discovers in
it, after all, a place for the genuine.

Perhaps, after their poems are published, poets should not be allowed within a country mile of them.

Poetry of obscure genius is often the embodiment, not the rejection, of the poet's origins. Moore's mother abandoned her husband before Marianne was born—he had gone mad after losing his money trying to build a smokeless furnace. The omnipresent mother, not the absent father, was the condition of Moore's eccentric growth (Sylvia Plath's mother was similarly smothering after her husband's death). The Moore household, with its family newspaper, written mostly by Marianne, its cutesy puns and tedious pet names and private jokes, fostered a childhood that lasted most of her life (her mother died still living with Marianne, who by then was sixty). The Moores were the Brontës of the Philadelphia suburbs.

The Poems of Marianne Moore begins with a long section of juvenilia, work not of adolescence but of her college years and after. [1] Even into her mid-twenties, Moore's poems breathed the fire-smoke of antiquity, living in romantic tales illustrated by N. C. Wyeth—their Christabel-like aura of the supernatural might have roused Coleridge to seduce her (“Her eye is dark, her vestment rich,/ Embroidered with a silver stitch,/ A lady or a tiger lily,/ Slave, come tell me which?”). The coy, teasing rhymes have the faux innocence of chorus girls and seem to anticipate Edna St. Vincent Millay's titillating sensuality.

Devices as slender as pennons float
Up high in the air and sink down; the moat
Encases her head like a casque;
Her light
Sorties, like highlights on a flash,
Requite
Men with torrents of toads from lips of lead
And then grind up her bones to make their
bread.

After a while, however, you realize there's nothing behind the fairy-tale innocence but more innocence—these are poems of a life queerly sheltered, and the armor it forged couldn't be penetrated even by an education at Bryn Mawr.

In these dreadful verses, the techniques of Moore's later poetry gradually, almost shyly, accumulate—the long and peculiar titles; the titles that serve as the first line of the poem; the shaped syllabic stanzas; the presumptive use of “we” (the shyer the I, the bolder the we); the quotations from her eclectic reading; and soon, everywhere, her animals, especially unlovely ones like toads, jellyfish, grasshoppers. (There are no points for seeing the psychology here.) She was a poet who reveled in her oddities, who created a self that courted rejection—convention cannot wound what has first rejected itself. That might be the porcupine's philosophy.

It's surprising, even so, to find the manner and technique, the particular quizzical tone of her best poems (like that of a great-aunt's great-aunt), highly developed before the poems are any good. For all their bristling, her poems are lonely and born of loneliness. They have the shorthand obscurity of private arguments, and after a while don't seem to care how unpoetic they are. In the years after Bryn Mawr, when Moore was living at home and teaching at the Carlisle Indian School (she called her students “sluggards and gnats,” according to her biographer Charles Molesworth), her poems are sometimes marginal quarrels with the books she read: reading compensated for isolation.

Moore found the poetry lying asleep within prose, in manuals and monographs, advertisements and government reports, even in Tolstoy's antipoetic “business documents and// school-books.” Sometimes she ended up sounding like a college lecturer (“In these non-committal, personal-impersonal expressions of appearance,/ the eye knows what to skip;/ the physiognomy of

conduct ... "); but in the next poem, or the one after, she would escape from what she called "the supertadpoles of expression" and discover real tadpoles again. The moderns did not refuse the possibilities of prose or of sources foreign to poetry: Moore was fortunate to come to the attention of magazines like *Poetry* and the *Dial*, and poets like Pound and Eliot, when what constituted a poem was an open question.

To address a poem to a prize bird is one thing, to address one to a steamroller quite another. Moore's fancies took metaphysical flight (sometimes she seems like a metaphysical poet gone rogue); but her poems bore her whimsy by returning to abstract questions of aesthetics and identity, by squeezing the romance out of romantic forms without losing her puckish or even slightly sarcastic character—Moore got a lot of service out of *not*. The syllabic structures into which her poems increasingly fell allowed her to imprison this romance of prose in a form whose tensions were poetic:

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 ballasted animal stand up.

The Ming goods are the merest distracting byway in a poem about the behavior of swans and ants. That was the charm of Moore's mature poetry—she could start almost anywhere, could make a medieval emblem of a steamroller, and by diverse paths (almost a drunk man's walk at times) sidle toward, or at least rub the poem's fur against, a more profound abstract question. If the comic twinkle was part of her manner, so was the schoolmarmish gravity—she could be both beautifully obtuse and winsomely naive. Her ingenious descriptions, her intimacy with a world seen, if rarely felt, were kept in restraint by these larger questions, even as the prose in her lines was checked by the syllabic count and usually knitted by rhyme as well.

Sometimes you shake your head in bewilderment, wondering if such odd things can really be poems (just as scientists at first shook their heads over the platypus and declared it couldn't exist). Such a manner, absorbing microscopic observation of nature (how Dürer would have loved her—or Leeuwenhoek) as well as snippets from the daily paper, could confront almost any subject—and yet some poems almost identical in form to her strange masterpieces are the most awful failures. "I do these/ things which I do," she says, "which please/ no one but myself." That is as true as most of her generalizations, but it doesn't explain why some privacies mean so much more than others.

There's no direct source for Moore's infinitely refined syllabic verse (it has the purity of trigonometry), and she thought so little of it that when revising she sometimes jettisoned what must have seemed merely superstructure. "Syllabics? Oh, I repudiate that," Moore once said to the editor. English poets in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had written verse by counting just the syllables (the French have always done so, the way insomniacs count sheep), and Robert Bridges and others tried, with scant success, to revive the practice. Moore's patterned stanzas seem homegrown, something cranky and backyard, perhaps at first accidental. The syllabics appear shortly after her graduation from Bryn Mawr; possibly she was drawn to them—to spend much time adjusting and perfecting them—because they advertised her rhymes.

The pleasure of Moore's eye lies in the way it troubles what we've seen, or ought to have seen. Her "observations" are mock-precise readings, as well as a moral record.

The Fish

wade

through black jade.

Of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one keeps

adjusting the ash heaps;

opening and shutting itself like

an

injured fan.

The metaphors, so beautifully Aristotelian, came naturally to her. You see the same habits of observation in Moore's letters—she once wrote her brother about crowned cranes she had seen, “slate blue with a pompom of centipede's legs on their heads about the size of a silk pompom on a slipper.” Elizabeth Bishop, with a fanfare Barnum would have envied, called her *The World's Greatest Living Observer*. Things in the net of her descriptions were not caught, but released.

Many of Moore's best poems came in the years before and immediately after her most remarkable book, *Observations* (1924), the first book in which she chose the poems herself. (Her earlier book, *Poems* [1921], had been prepared and printed in secret by friends, who then mailed it to the somewhat shocked poet.) Moore's poetry dried up during the years, from 1925 to 1929, when she worked for and then edited the *Dial*, the most important literary magazine of the Twenties. Though she suffered a dry spell again in the late Thirties, her poems grew bolder and more complicated, often cast into sequences whose richness has not always been appreciated. Yet the poems had already started to turn fussy, hardening into manner, eventually becoming almost parodies of the lightness and daring of her best work. Those Byzantine stone traceries she called stanzas, with their languorous banner-like sentences (not a lower form of poetry but a higher form of prose), could suddenly seem mere papier-mâché.

Moore was such a remarkable beast (like her poems she lay outside the common taxonomies), it was difficult for readers to decide what to make of her. She was long disliked for the wrong reasons (mainly, that her poems were peacockish, opaque, and not “poetic” enough). In the special issue the *Quarterly Review of Literature* devoted to her in 1948, serious critics and poets (Bishop, Ransom, Stevens, and Williams among them) grasp at her like blind sages surrounding an elephant. One caresses the trunk, one grabs the tail, and each comes away with his own impression. She is said to be indebted to Thomas Browne, then Poe, then Hopkins—at the end, the poor, quizzical reader is no better off than when he started, except in knowing that even the professionals found Moore difficult to get hold of.

Moore's poems often seem, in their crabbed insufficiencies, matters not seized but avoided or fended off, not admissions of what she can do but confessions of all she can't. Randall Jarrell was taken with a line I love: “The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;/ not in silence, but restraint.” It has a hard truth and then, after a hesitation, a deeper truth—Moore never relinquished her modesty or her mildness, even when saying the most devastating things (William Carlos Williams once claimed he was “in perfect terror” of her). And yet, with their affectless delivery (like that of a junior assistant file clerk), you get the slightly melancholy feeling, as you do with Larkin, that life was occurring elsewhere.

The later books, when she had become a public monument to Eccentricity, were sometimes

rapturously reviewed despite poems that were an insult to her earlier work. She wrote some of the worst flag-waving poems of World War II (“With set jaw they are fighting,/ fighting, fighting”), and became longwinded and tiresome, as if delivering an Armistice Day address she’d found on the back of a soup can. She seems to have swallowed certain naive, sentimental notions about America: when she refers to the president as “our/ hardest-working citizen,” the reader can only splutter. She was speaking of that golfer, President Eisenhower.

Her animals, those refugees from medieval bestiaries and emblem books, once offered her access to an ethical world; later they seemed merely the point, or beside the point—her tone came to lie somewhere between that of Queen Victoria and the girl who sat on a tuffet. You think the nadir has been reached in a poem about the Brooklyn Dodgers; but, no, there are worse to come: a poem commemorating the rescue of Carnegie Hall; a paean to the actor Yul Brynner, special consultant to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (“equipped for a crazy twelve-month tramp/ [a plod], he flew among/ the damned, found each camp”); a poem to a mechanical crow, in what pretends to be Esperanto (it’s a joke, but not a good joke). By the time she writes a second poem about the Dodgers, you lower your head in embarrassment and say, “Oh, Miss Moore!” A P.R. flack for good causes, she has forgotten that supreme good cause, her poetry.

Even at the end, you see in her poems traces of her beautiful stubbornness (the deeper you went in her, the more likely you were to strike iron). You can love her for her maze of syntax alone, for the abstractions she turns on and off like a light switch, for descriptions out of Ovid’s metamorphoses (Moore’s embody the wish to be transformed), for logic that leaps about, in the way of her jerboa, “like the uneven notes/ of the Bedouin flute.” You can love her for all these things, because there’s something winning about a poet who makes poems out of magazine cuttings and horsehide glue—to the last she remained an outsider. Beyond her conundrums and lists (she could have built a world out of lists), her armored animals and sometimes armored people, beyond the essential absurdity of her art, lie the plain fictions and devious facts of her most original poems: “To a Steam Roller,” “The Fish,” “Poetry,” “Marriage” (a subject about which she knew nothing, and everything), “An Octopus,” “The Steeple-Jack,” “No Swan So Fine,” “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle,” “The Pangolin,” “The Paper Nautilus,” “He ‘Digesteth Harde Yron,’” “Spenser’s Ireland,” “His Shield,” and many another. Whatever other poets have done, they have done nothing like Marianne Moore. Her virtue is not only that she is peculiar, but that she is ours.

Grace Schulman’s new edition tries to return to the reader all of Moore’s poems chronologically, including college verse that for the last century has gathered dust in the archives and poems Moore long ago banished. Schulman was a friend of Moore’s, only fourteen when she first met the poet; but this has given her no special insight into choosing texts for what will for some time be the standard edition. Indeed, it’s at first difficult, from the editor’s diffuse and rambling introduction, to discover how she chose as she did.

Moore’s revisions will always vex and harry a conscientious editor, because there are so many to choose from. Each new publication gave the poet a chance to tinker; and sometimes she ignored one version to return to an older one, like an indecisive lover. It’s tedious to read multiple versions of the same poem—textual instability is the abyss into which most readers refuse to stare. Schulman retains much of Moore’s *Complete Poems* (1967, revised 1981), which represents her final wishes (though you have little confidence in those wishes when you learn that during the Sixties Moore “suffered from aphasia after multiple strokes”). The editor, in her carefree way, here and there uses, she says, “versions that I liked from earlier editions and/or literary journals,” a method described as “conscientious inconsistency.” I would call it whim.

Beginning the book with the juvenilia has one good effect and several bad ones. It’s a revelation to see the poems laid out as Moore’s imagination discovered them, to read the awful productions of this naive and unlikely poet as she makes her way, unsteadily, up the slopes—it’s like reading the

listless early poems of Keats, only to be stunned by the brilliance of “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.” Yet not only do Moore’s poems now begin with a large mass of indifferent, often childish poetry through which the reader has to struggle, but the poet’s progress is illusory. The promised chronological order is nothing of the sort—the last two-thirds of the juvenilia is printed, with few exceptions, alphabetically by title, a fact the editor has chosen not to mention.

The book is somewhat bedeviled by errors. “Lizards” has been thinned to “lizard” in one poem; an extra word wanders into the last stanza of “Those Various Scalpels”; and “Critics and Connoisseurs” is afflicted with an errant stanza break, faulty indentations, and stanzas that seem to forget they’re meant to be eight lines, not nine. Moore’s oddball notes were part of her charm (some readers have liked them almost better than the poems), but the notes in this new edition are a sorry jumble. The editor first reprints a somewhat ratty selection of Moore’s own, but not always those meant for the versions of the poems here—and not in the same order as the poems have now been printed. Schulman’s notes follow in a separate section and often helpfully reproduce earlier or later versions of a poem, some of them dragged from drafts; otherwise they record little beyond where the poems were first published and which version the editor selected. Worse, neither set of notes is keyed to page numbers—you have to be a bloodhound to match the notes to poems.

It would have been far more useful to integrate Moore’s notes with the editor’s and to provide basic annotation. If you want to know who Kay Nielson or Will Honeycomb was, or whether “Coral-and-Brown” was a woman’s outfit, or what Excello might have been, you’re on your own. If you simply must find out how Elston Howard was robbed of the batting title, or why the second stanzas of two different poems are almost line-for-line the same, good luck. Because they’re so often based on stray news items and quirky facts, Moore’s poems are richer after scholars have had their way with them (no one has yet found where she borrowed the phrase “imaginary gardens with real toads in them”). Explication sometimes tells us no more than what everyone at the time would have known. It’s a pity the editor did not accept this as her task, or her duty.

Many of Moore’s early poems are also available in the brilliantly edited *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907–1924*,^[2] a lavishly produced photo-facsimile of *Observations*, followed by facsimiles of the poems’ first appearance in magazines. Robin Schulze, the editor, exemplifies what Moore called *conscious* fastidiousness. Each poem is accompanied by a long note on its first publication (or, as Schulze solemnly calls it, first “presentation”), its relation to subsequent ones, and a table of variants for the early versions. (She might have expended a few lines on the poems’ later histories.)

Schulze has written an entertaining essay on each of the little magazines in which Moore appeared, and includes facsimiles of poems Moore published in magazines but didn’t collect in *Observations*, though this ignores dozens of poems Grace Schulman has rescued from the archives. Readers will need both volumes for the panoptic, or stereoscopic, view (to confound matters, Schulze includes a poem Schulman overlooks). *The Early Poems* is beautifully laid out, thoroughly illustrated, lushly printed, a tribute to the editor’s art and the book designer’s craft. The whole would be a sterling example of bookmaking if it hadn’t been glued together with what seems to be library paste—halfway through, it began to fall apart in my hands.

Schulze’s introduction, at times unfortunately marred by academic cant, reviews some recent scholarly quarrels over editing—over how, in essence, to regard an author’s revisions. Variants are the rage: rather than choose one state of a work (representing the author’s final intentions, say), editors love multiple versions. Readers are now often given, for example, both the quarto and folio texts of *Hamlet*, rather than an eclectic version uniting them. There’s something to be said for this method, when a poet changes his mind as often and as radically as Moore; but, though it is good for editors, it is hell for readers, whose interest in poetry may have worn out long before the sixth or seventh variant text of “Poetry.” One school of editing, for which Schulze has some sympathy,

stresses the contribution to meaning of the book's original design, layout, and typeface. Schulze fails to see that this makes a fetish of things not only beyond the author's control, but also far more transparent to a contemporary reader. Design is almost invisible at first, but readers a century after must often read through the design to get to the words (a photo-facsimile is itself a gesture of romantic antiquarianism, exalting even typographical errors). Once in a while, scholars might ask poets what they think.

Schulze has chosen for her facsimile the first edition of *Observations*, largely on the specious grounds that Moore was awarded the *Dial* prize for it and became known because of it. The editor has been at pains to point out, however, that the proprietors of the *Dial* were eager to publish Moore's book mainly to take advantage of the prize they were about to award her. Moore rushed the manuscript into readiness in less than a month. A few months after the first printing, when a second was called for, she revised the poems thoroughly. Surely this more considered edition should have been used. The revisions, with one exception, go unmentioned and are not even included among the *variora*. It seems as if the idea of taste has been locked out at the front door only to sneak in the back.

One must be grateful, nevertheless, to a scholar who so obviously loves the work she has labored over. She hasn't annotated the poems, but her thoroughness elsewhere recommends her for the job. It's a mark of a great poet that, no matter how the age changes, his poems, or hers, will still attract such adoration even from scholars, those famously dried-up souls. For all her armor, Marianne Moore could never protect herself against the admiration of her readers. She was an Emersonian original, who unlike Whitman and Dickinson let her terra incognita lie uncharted within herself—she made her American bed and then, for half a century, lay in it in her prim American way.

Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, by Marianne Moore, edited by Grace Schulman; Viking Press, 449 pages, \$40. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907–1924* by Marianne Moore, edited by Robin G. Schulze; University of California Press, 506 pages, \$50. [Go back to the text.](#)

William Logan's most recent book of poetry, *Strange Flesh* (Penguin), was published last year.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 22 February 2004, on page 66

Copyright © 2009 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/The-mystery-of-Marianne-Moore-1594>