# Marianne Moore: The Poet Who Disliked Poetry

I.

*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.*
(Marianne Moore, "Poetry")

I would not have said, as a fourth-year Literature student, that I *disliked* poetry rather that I simply did not "get" it. I had enjoyed what I had read of T.S. Eliot (although *The Waste Land* had given me a headache) and was beginning to find comfort in George Herbert. However, I did not naturally gravitate towards poetry as a form which I either enjoyed or appreciated. In my own writing, I clung firmly onto prose, and the same went for my literary studies; poetry was too open, too complicated, too unclear for my perfectionist self.

At many points throughout my second semester course on poetry, I found myself fascinated but altogether confused by what I was reading. Most of the poems we read were lost on me, and I was deeply grateful that the final paper that we had to write for the course was a very flexible task in which we could choose whichever poems we felt served our purposes best. I know I read Henry King, Alexander Pope and Thomas Wyatt; I could not tell you anything about any of their poems. One poem, however, stands out from among the rest, one of the first poems which I distinctly remember enjoying which was written by neither T.S. Eliot nor George Herbert. It went:

*What is our innocence,*
*what is our guilt? All are*
*naked, none is safe. And whence*
*is courage: the unanswered question,*
*the resolute doubt,–*
*dumbly calling, deafly listening – that*

*in misfortune, even death,*
*encourages others*
*and in its defeat, stirs*

*the soul to be strong? He*
*sees deep and is glad, who*
*accedes to mortality*
*and in his imprisonment rises*
*upon himself as*
*the sea in a chasm, struggling to be*
*free and unable to be,*
*in its surrendering*
*finds its continuing.*

*So he who strongly feels,*
*behaves. The very bird,*
*grown taller as he sings, steels*
*his form straight up. Though he is captive,*
*his mighty singing*
*says, satisfaction is a lowly*
*thing, how pure a thing is joy.*
*This is mortality,*
*this is eternity.*[1]

There was something about the overlapping stanzas, the elliptical spacing, the fluid yet compact movement of the poem across the page, that spoke to me about the kind of freedom within constraint that was so perfectly captured in that second stanza:

*the sea in a chasm, struggling to be*
*free and unable to be,*
*in its surrendering*

[1] Marianne Moore, "What are Years?", in *Collected Poems*, London: Faber and

*finds its continuing.*

When I later gave a presentation in class on Dylan Thomas' "Fern Hill" – another poem which I had recently discovered and fallen in love with – my teacher observed how similar these lines of Thomas' were to Moore's:

*Time held me green and dying*
*Though I sang in my chains like the sea.*[2]

Thomas' poem remained with me, soon established as a favourite while my love of poetry took deeper roots and flourished unexpectedly. Moore's poem, however, lingered only as a vague impression of a poem which had astonished me but which I had never quite understood. I would return to it years later, however, and would find in it an almost perfect expression of what Moore – always enigmatic, fascinated by form and by animals – expressed throughout much of her altogether entrancing career as a thoroughly ambivalent poet.

One of the more infamous moments in Moore's poetry lies in her much-revised poem, aptly and simply entitled "Poetry". Beginning with the fascinating and blunt declaration that "I, too, dislike it", the poem is an exploration of Moore's chosen form of writing, made all the more intriguing by the fact that, by the time it was included in Moore's *Complete Poems*, she had reduced it to only an abbreviated version of its opening three lines. In this act, Moore shows a degree of kinship with her contemporary, W.H. Auden, who also famously edited and re-edited his own work, continually doubting its veracity and validity. For Moore, poetry seems to require simultaneously imagination and fact. Poets are to be "literalists of the imagination", a line which Moore has borrowed from W.B. Yeats. Poetry, it seems, needs to be "useful", not just the fodder for "high-sounding interpretation". After all:

*…we*

[2] Dylan Thomas, "Fern Hill", in *Deaths and Entrances*, London: J.M. Dent, 1968, p.66.

*do not admire what*
*we cannot understand.*

Thus, a poet needs to be able to present "imaginary gardens with real toads in them". If the toads cannot be recognised to be real, then they are of no value as "raw material of poetry" because they are not "genuine".[3]

It is fitting perhaps that Moore quotes Yeats here. Like Moore and Auden, Yeats – in many ways the father of Modernist poetry – also shifted back and forth between seeing poetry as valuable and useless, and was often troubled by the illusiveness of the meaning poetry and indeed of his own work, a sentiment expressed wonderfully in his short, blunt poem, "A Coat":

*I made my song a coat*
*Covered with embroideries*
*Out of old mythologies*
*From heel to throat;*
*But the fools caught it,*
*Wore it in the world's eyes*
*As though they'd wrought it.*
*Song, let them take it,*
*For there's more enterprise*
*In walking naked.*[4]

Motivated often by political concerns, Yeats – like many of his fellow Modernists – played with the form and content of poetry to find new and powerful ways of conveying the realities of the world he saw around him. Yet that was far from an unproblematic process, as "A Coat" demonstrates: poems can become something altogether different in the hands that receive them to what they were in the original transmission, a fact which is perhaps at the heart of it as an art-form yet

[3] Moore, "Poetry", in *Collected Poems*, pp.40-41.
[4] W.B. Yeats, "A Coat", in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2000, p.104.

which makes the moral and social imperative behind much poetry a difficult beast to harness.

Is this why Moore "disliked it"? Perhaps. Certainly, in her own words, "there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle". This, however, begs the question: if poetry is mere "fiddle", then what were the "things that", for Moore, were "more important beyond" it?

II.

*Words are constructive*

*when they are true; the opaque allusion – the simulated flight*

*upward – accomplishes nothing.*

(Marianne Moore, "Picking and Choosing")

In writing about Moore's poetry, Auden expresses something of the difficulty of encountering her work and making sense of it. First of all, there is the challenge of "'hear[ing]' the verse". Moore writes in a form which Auden terms "syllabic", a style of verse which is altogether uncommon in English verse, both modern and traditional. Traditional English poetry is typically accented: the iambic pentameter, for instance, for which Shakespeare was famous is based entirely on alternating stresses and breves to place emphasis on key syllables over others. In Moore's poetry, on the other hand, "accents and [poetic] feet are ignored and only the number of syllables count".[5] This is certainly a curious feature of Moore's poetry on first encounter with it. There is clearly a pattern and structure to her work, yet this is primarily a visual rather than an aural one, because our ears are more attuned to hearing accents and feet in poetry than they are to counting out syllables. Moreover, when Moore – as she often does – finishes a line halfway through a word and continues that word into the next line, few if any ears would be able to identify what she is doing without seeing it. Nor does it

[5] W.H. Auden, "Marianne Moore", in *The Dyer's Hand and other essays*, London: Faber and Faber, 1953, p.296-7.

even appear logical on a page. Take this curious moment from "In the Days of Prismatic Colour":

*Complexity,*
*moreover, that has been committed to darkness, instead of*
*granting it-*
*self 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 init-*
*ial great truths.*[6]

The accusation often levelled against modern poetry – that it is merely "prose chopped up into lines" – could almost be made against Moore, although unfairly so. For those who can be bothered, this poem – like most of Moore's work – has a highly consistent pattern in terms of the number of syllables per line. The seemingly haphazard line breaks are in fact far from haphazard; the hyphenated words signal the end of one group of syllables and the beginning of another. In this sense, Moore's poetry could be said to only become poetry when read on a page; if read out loud, it may sound beautifully worded and the imagery may be arresting, but there would be little to distinguish it at times from poetically written prose. When, however, arranged on a page, the poems come to life, springing with variety and complexity like the life that Moore so intricately depicted.

Aside from the complexity and, at times, impenetrability of Moore's form, there is the "inordinate interest in animals".[7] Most of Moore's poems feature animals,

[6] Moore, "In the Days of Prismatic Colour", in *Collected Poems*, pp.48-49.
[7] Auden, "Marianne Moore", p.296.

many of them obscure. From frigate pelicans to snakes and mongooses, with a multitude of elephants along the way, Moore continually demonstrates a fascination with "all creatures great and small", often in a manner which is altogether difficult to make much sense of. Take, for instance, the wonderfully odd title to one of her poems, "Nothing Will Cure the Sick Lion but to Eat an Ape". Tremendous fun such titles may be, but it is difficult to see immediately how Moore could square this kind of obscurity with the strict expectations she set for her art-form in "Poetry".

Yet a deeper examination shows that animals render Moore's poetry an unexpected earthiness, an act almost of levelling out humanity's pride and self-importance. The foreboding crow, for instance, who "falls" upon the victims of war, "calls" and "claps its wings…to revive again, War", is simultaneously an image of the fitting mourning which humans have failed to give those who have died from their own actions, as well as a shocking revelation of what is at the heart of such self-proclaimed "military progress".[8] Also, animals act based on instinct and simplicity, a fact which Moore frequently contrasts with the behavior of humans. At the end of one poem, she comments that "an animal with claws wants to have to use/them; that eel-like extension of trunk into tail is not an accident."[9] That is to say, animals act as they are created to act. They do so instinctively and naturally, much as the dogs of Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts" "go on with their doggy life". So when "man" is "wolf to man", what does this signify?[10] What is revealed, then, about the nature of humanity if it is somehow, paradoxically, human to behave like a savage beast?

Simultaneously, the animals of Moore's poetry reflect both the simplicity and complexity of her work. They often provide some of her most elliptical metaphors and comparisons; the hippopotamuses, alligators and elephants of "Melanchthon", for instance, arguably make a difficult poem more difficult. Yet they are also grounded in reality; Moore's animals show her extraordinary depth

[8] Moore, "To Military Progress", in *Collected Poems*, p.89.
[9] Moore, "Peter", in *Collected Poems*, p.51.
[10] Moore, "In Distrust of Merits", in *Collected Poems*, p.135.

of knowledge of the natural world, alongside her encyclopaedic knowledge of insects and plant-life. Think of the many "katydids" that feature throughout her poetry, symbols of the created world's beauty on one hand and of the human "mind" on the other. If Moore's desire for poetry was indeed that the readers might find "imaginary gardens with real toads in them", she seems at the very least a perfect contender to create such "real toads". Moore's work continually reveals a deep love and respect for animals, a feature of her work which, although intriguing on one level, also helps to provide that constant streak of the "genuine" which she valued so highly in poetry.

Yet as suggested already, Moore also desired to write about humanity, and her animals were often means of doing so. Auden writes that "for all the evil he does, man is, for her, a more sacred being than an animal".[11] To understand this statement, however, we must also understand two details which are core to Moore's worldview, though rarely stated explicitly in her work: her understanding of human evil, and her recognition and appreciation of the sacred.

III.

*You use your mind*
*Like a millstone to grind*
*Chaff.*
*You polish it*
*And with your warped wit*
*Laugh*
(Marianne Moore, "To Military Progress")

In one of her longer poems, Moore paints a rich and celebratory portrait of one of the most unlikely creatures, the pangolin, or, as it is perhaps better known, the scaly anteater. Moving fascinatingly between the pangolin and human endeavor – from art and architecture to the building of churches and the human inability to comprehend grace – Moore provides a complex, subtle and often intriguing exploration both of the pangolin and of the nature of "man in all his vileness".

[11] Auden, "Marianne Moore", p.304.

Though "another armoured animal", she writes, "pangolins are not aggressive animals", and in this Moore subtly distinguishes them from the humanity that she depicts in her more strident and openly anti-war poems, "To Military Progress" and "In Distrust of Merits". Moreover, the pangolin is a natural reminder of that grace which for humans is acquired "by adversities". Human endeavor to "grace…the spires" of churches "with animals" manage to some extent to reflect the kind of grace which is natural in the humblest of creatures like the pangolin. "A sailboat", for instance, "was the first machine" made by humans, but "pangolins, made/for moving quietly also, are models of exactness/on four legs".

This is not to say that Moore prefers the pangolin to humanity. "Man, the self, the being we call human", is still supreme in Moore's world. "Among animals", she writes, "one has a sense of humour" and "humour saves a few steps, it saves years". Moreover, the human ingenuity which she refers to throughout the entirety of the poem is compared with the pangolin not in order to show that pangolins are greater than humans, rather that nothing a human can create compares to the innate and natural grace of God's creation.[12]

God is rarely represented overtly in Moore's poetry, yet of the three great Christian Modernist poets – the other two being Eliot and Auden – Moore's Presbyterian faith was arguably the most consistent and orthodox throughout her life. Her work – rich in quotations which are made mercifully accessible through the notes which often accompany her poems – demonstrates the depth of her own devotional reading.[13] Moreover, her own personal papers show her ongoing involvement in her local Presbyterian church and her regular correspondence with her minister brother.[14] Moore's personal faith is clear throughout her life, even if it rarely comes explicitly to the surface of her poetry. Here she could be said to display not so much an avoidance of or disinterest in matters of faith as much as a "restraint" in expressing it too overtly. "The deepest

[12] Moore, "The Pangolin", in *Collected Poems*, pp.118-121.
[13] Daniel Jenkins, "Marianne Moore: A Presbyterian Poet?", in *Theology Today*, 1984, 41 (34), p.37.
[14] Ibid., p.34.

feeling", she quotes her father as saying, "always shows itself in silence; not in silence but restraint".[15] It can also show itself in the margins of her work, as though her Reformed Christian worldview has so pervaded her writing that it is there without even being openly acknowledged. A key example of this is "In Distrust of Merits", one of her most powerful and accomplished poems.

Curiously, this poem is also one which Moore was especially reticent to even call a poem. This was, granted, an ambivalence which she felt for much of her career, noting once that "what I write…could only be called poetry because there is no other category in which to put it". [16] Yet she was particularly unwilling to call "In Distrust of Merits" a poem, stating that it was too "haphazard", "just a protest – disjointed, exclamatory".[17] This hardly seems reasonable; if it is "haphazard", it is no more so than any other poem she wrote. Indeed, it has quite a remarkable consistency of form, particularly seen in the variation of long and short lines and the regular tapering-out of each stanza at the end, each stanza becoming like a waving flag hoisted upon the page. Nor is it artless in its language. It contains some of Moore's most remarkable lines, including the powerful, drumming repetition of "they're fighting, fighting, fighting", and its repeated, longing apostrophes: "O shining O/firm star, O tumultuous/ocean…" It is also one of Moore's most distinctively Christian poems, not so much for its evocation of Christian imagery – although it is peppered with Biblical language, including fitting references to David and Bethlehem (the poem was written at the height of World War II) and stark allusions to "Job disheartened by false comfort". Rather, the poem's Christian power comes primarily from the way it has internalised a deep understanding of human depravity:

*They're*

*fighting in deserts and caves, one by*

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[15] Ibid., p.37.
[16] Donald Hall, "Marianne Moore, The Art of Poetry No.4", in *The Paris Review*, Summer/Fall 1961, No.26, http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4637/the-art-of-poetry-no-4-marianne-moore.
[17] Ibid.

*one, in battalions and squadrons;*
*they're fighting that I*
*may yet recover from the disease, My*
*Self; some have it lightly, some will die. 'Man*
*wolf to man' and we devour*
*ourselves. The enemy could not*
*have made a greater breach in our*
*defences.*[18]

Humanity is simultaneously exalted and a disease. Man is "wolf to man", a statement which both reflects his viciousness and the fact that he should know better; he should not be a wolf, and in becoming such has made himself his own enemy, the "breach in [his own] defences". Assumed in this poem is the fact that, not only are humans enemies to each other, but there is another "enemy" seeking to make a "breach in our/defences"; only, we have become his assistants, with every battle we fight within ourselves. Thus, in a manner similar to Auden's war-time poems, Moore, recognises that, at heart, all wars are reflective of the human heart:

*There never was a war that was*
*not inward; I must*
*fight till I have conquered in myself what*
*causes war…*

There is, however, another obstacle in this battle against self, namely that the self denies the need to be overcome:

*…I would not believe it.*
*I inwardly did nothing.*[19]

[18] Moore, "In Distrust of Merits", p.135.
[19] Moore, "In Distrust of Merits", p.137.

Thus Moore, like the rest of humanity, is guilty of an "Iscariotlike crime", permanently its own betrayer, permanently fighting against the "beauty" that is "everlasting" and wrestling in the "dust" that is only "for a time".[20]

Alongside this brutality sits the pangolin, armoured yet not needing armour, content and embodying a grace which humanity, for all its grandness, has altogether left behind. That the human is in its nature far higher than the pangolin – or than any other creature for that matter – is all the more to its own shame, for humanity has started "a little lower than the angels" and in the end has made itself nothing better than the basest of wolves. The anguish and tension which this evokes lies squarely at the heart of much of Moore's work, tempered always alongside the wonders and beauties against which such horrors are set.

IV.

*This man said – I think that I repeat*
*his identical words:*
*'Hebrew poetry is*
*prose with a sort of heightened consciousness.' Ecstasy affords*
*the occasion and expediency determines the form.*
(Marianne Moore, "The Past is the Present")

Asked why she began to write poetry when she had no personal interest in it, or indeed in writing for that matter, Moore once stated that she continually intended to stop writing but found herself always returning to it by an impulse prompted by her participation in life:

> *With me it's always some fortuity that traps me. I certainly never intended to write poetry. That never came into my head. And now, too, I think each time I write that it may be the last time; then I'm charmed by something and seem to have to say something. Everything I have*

[20] Moore, "In Distrust of Merits", pp.135-7.

*written is the result of reading or of interest in people, I'm sure of that. I had no ambition to be a writer.*[21]

It is perhaps this fact which, paradoxically, makes Moore such a great writer. For all its obscurity, her work is never pretentious. Everything she wrote was written with a "genuine" purpose at heart, at times celebratory, at others morally indignant. Moore would look at a pangolin and be prompted to celebrate its features in overflowing lyricism; equally she would look in disgust on "military progress" and decry it in verse that could be alarmingly stark and pointed.

Moore once wrote of poetry that "ecstasy affords the occasion". Perhaps more than "ecstasy" afforded much of her poetry, unless we are going to understand the word to mean simply translation, a movement towards something profound, rather than necessarily the heightened joy or happiness with which it is often associated today. Certainly it is hard to see how "ecstasy" could have "afford[ed] the occasion" for "In Distrust of Merits", unless it was an ecstasy of grief or anger.

Yet it is an apt statement of her philosophy of poetry nonetheless. In the poem in question, "The Past is the Present", Moore begins by addressing the Biblical prophet Habakkuk, whose work she "shall revert to", if "external action is effete/and rhyme is outmoded".[22] Habakkuk is a fitting reference point for Moore's work: drawing on the animal world to convey the complexity and violence of his world, driven to poetry by the anguish of political and religious circumstances, Habakkuk has written some of the most powerful poetry of the Bible, yet – like most Biblical poetry – it is by no means what modern European eyes or ears would recognise as poetry. For Moore, it is the "heightened consciousness" of Habakkuk, along with the "expediency" of his "form" that makes him a poet she can identify with. Moved to poetry by a kind of ecstasy – though hardly a joyful one – Habakkuk also wrote with a striking rawness and immediacy. So did Moore.

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[21] Donald Hall, "Marianne Moore", http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4637/the-art-of-poetry-no-4-marianne-moore.

[22] Moore, "The Past is the Present", p.93.

Moved to write not for the sake of writing, and finding herself a poet much against own wishes, her work often has the feeling of a rich and complex world being constrained expediently to fit a form within which it only just manages to be contained. Bursting at its own seams, Moore's poetry is neither comfortable as prose nor as verse. It celebrates life, yet longs for life to be better; it celebrates man, yet decries him as well; it moves always between the finite and the immortal, and "in its surrendering/finds its continuing": a body of work simultaneously content and discontent, surrendered and yet fighting, living on earth, yet longing always for eternity. In this, I believe, lies its greatness and certainly its power.