Patricia C. Willis: On "No Swan So Fine"

In March 1930, Moore wrote to the English critic George Saintsbury:

The loss of your friend, Lord Balfour, must be a great one to you; for even we who knew him only as a personage, will remember his death with lasting regret. In his relations with America he was so exceedingly kind, chivalrous, and hopeful. But I myself knowing less than I ought to know about government, found it pleasant to know that Lord Balfour played a good game of tennis.

Later that year, Moore noticed a Christie’s sale announcement in the Illustrated London News. In her notebook, she sketched one of a pair of Louis XV candelabra, “the property of the late Lord Balfour,” pictured in the advertisement. When she sent the finished poem to her brother, Moore wrote:

Lord Balfour had a pair o' these candelabra which were sold last year at Christie's with his other things. Each swan has a gold saw-toothed collar and chain and both feet are planted on a tree.

A year later, Moore read in the New York Times Magazine an article by Percy Philip, "Versailles Reborn: A Moonlight Drama." This piece was prompted by the restoration of Versailles sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation. Philip wrote his "drama" in a fanciful vein, pretending that the statues on the grounds protested the dullness of Versailles without the court of the Kings Louis. Moore clipped one of the accompanying pictures and wrote above it the caption from another which showed the defunct fountains, "There is no water so still as the dead fountains of Versailles."

A third element is present in the poem, one which ties in with the theme of "passing." In the same letter to her brother in which she sent the poem, Moore explains that she has written this poem for Poetry's twentieth anniversary number; her duty to finish it was compounded by the announcement that the magazine would probably cease publication in the spring. The impending passing of that magazine--which fortunately did not happen--would have been cause for sadness, particularly since its editor, Harriet Monroe, had welcomed Moore's work after The Dial ceased publication in 1929.
