Jeff Schaller: On "The Genuine Ethics of Marianne Moore"

Miss Moore’s poems are an example of a kind of art which is not as common as it should be; they delight, not only because they are intelligent, sensitive and beautifully written but also because they convince the reader they have been written by someone who is personally good. ?W. H. Auden, The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays (305)

The work of Marianne Moore has enjoyed a positive critical reputation during and after her lifetime, but given its abstractness and difficulty, an ethical evaluation initially seems unusual. However, looking at the work of other scholars, one sees that Auden is not alone. Cristanne Miller has written many articles on the intersections between Moore’s ethical and artistic convictions; specifically, how the world wars and an appreciation of early Hebrew poetry moved Moore to broader ethical commentary, touching on philosophical issues and Moore’s tendency to goad the reader into ethical rumination in the process (?Distrusting? 3; ?What is War For?? 57, 59). Heather Cass White’s ?Morals, Manners, and ?Marriage?: Marianne Moore’s Art of Conversation? moves through a discussion of the influence of conversation on Moore’s work to frame her general moral stance, showing the ways honesty and other traits act through manners-like social intercourse in Moore’s critical work and poems (5-7, 14).

Rather than analyzing her influences and personal life, this essay concentrates solely on the ethical import of Marianne Moore poetry, particularly what I call her ?genuine ethics.? Marianne Moore’s idea of ?genuine? consists of an unabashedly honest and wholly unpretentious way of living in the world. It carries the verity of authenticity without that word’s emphasis on authoritative qualifications. Moore’s definitions are anti-dogmatic but consistent: she questions common ways in which people treat each other, how we reveal our personalities and express our ideas, and how we live in society. Analyzing lines of conflict and overlap, she rarely comes down unequivocally on one side, in part because doing so is something she tends to argue against. Being genuine, her ethics are mutable rather than static. Oddly enough, labeling her ?personally good? will be shown to be a misunderstanding of her ethics.

Moore’s ?Voracities and Verities Sometimes Are Interacting,? provides an illustrative introduction:

I don’t like diamonds;

the emerald’s ?glass lamp glow? is better;

and unobtrusiveness is dazzling,

upon occasion.

Some kinds of gratitude are trying. (1-5)
The speaker makes a few simple judgments. Emeralds are preferred to diamonds—privileging personal taste rather than conventional beauty. These gems? unobtrusiveness? is their appeal (3). In turn, gratitude in expensive, diamond-like form is trying and aggravating.

Poets don’t make a fuss:

the elephant’s ?crooked trumpet? ?doth write?;

and to a tiger-book I am reading?

I think you know the one?

I am under obligation.

One may be pardoned, yes I know

one may, for love undying. (6-12)

In this first line the speaker removes him/herself from the community of poets. S/he does not endorse that about which they would fuss. This appears to be the contention that chiseled, near-perfect earthly beauty (diamonds) is not eminently desirable. One reason poets may fuss about this is because their work could be put in the same category. Aside from sharing an emphasis on beauty, both diamonds and poems are typical lover-to-lover gifts. Unobtrusiveness as/over beauty is at least a little insulting, if not threatening. No doubt aware of this, the speaker requests the poets not fuss because ?the elephant’s ?crooked trumpet? ?doth write?? (7). In an idiosyncratic endorsement of poetic metaphor, the speaker figures him/herself an animal, and a writing one at that. Playful and self-deprecating, s/he calls his/her writing apparatus ?crooked? and adds an archaic pseudo-poetic ?doth? (7).

The last two lines (?One may be pardoned, yes I know / one may, for love undying?) appear more serious (11, 12). The speaker resorts to a universalist aphorism, but exactly what ?love undying? may pardon is not immediately clear. The two possibilities for pardon I can conjure are obligation and gratitude; these are key concepts in the last sentences of the preceding stanzas and are conceptually related. Gratitude is a feeling of thankfulness towards another person or thing. Obligation is a feeling of debt or duty to another person or thing. If one were engaged in a relationship of ?love undying,? it?s likely that one would vacillate between use of the two frequently (12). Their functions within love and duty would be indispensable in such a situation.

Though, looking at the body of each stanza, the two would seem to make more sense switched. Most people would feel gratitude?not obligation?to books they are reading, just as most people would consider gifts of precious gems more an obligation (albeit a loving obligation) than an expression of gratitude. That there is a chance ?one may? be (as opposed to a guarantee that one will be) pardoned for what appears to be inappropriate or misguided use of these concepts keeps their values in the poem and roles in undying love unclear (11).

These strange states of gratitude and obligation may be reconciled through the voracities and verities to which the title makes reference. The fact that ?some kinds of gratitude are trying? speaks to an excess (a voracity) of gratitude (5). The speaker unequivocally mentions being ?under obligation? to a tiger book (a verity) (10). These two interact ?sometimes,? which accounts for the speaker?s unusual, ambiguous treatment. Sometimes, gratitude and
obligation work together, are mistaken for each other, and/or are simply indistinguishable. The voracity of the first stanza? s gratitude, the sheer excess inherent in such an expensive present, may speak to a verity of obligation which is simply called gratitude. It is referred to as ?trying,? which makes obligation the more conventionally accurate description. In turn, the verity of the second stanza? s obligation could simply be a voracity of gratitude? an inflated thankfulness purporting to duty. As a complement, the speaker? s obligation is to a book about carnivorous, voracious predators: tigers (8). Applying these considerations to the last stanza, one concludes that undying love is one time in which voracities and verities interact. This interaction may push one to make an unwisely extravagant gift, or it may lead one to oblige oneself to something one? s peers consider silly. Either way, the acts come from feelings churned up by love. A crucial part? one which makes the poem characteristically Moore? s? is that she does not argue for the existence or verity of undying love in and of itself. Instead she concerns herself with the ways in which it is exhibited through quotidian behaviors, using experiential data to render the abstraction real.

Understanding ethics as a way to live in the world, Moore endorses most clearly the primacy of idiosyncratic individual identity and the ever-changing, overlapping quality of conceptual knowledge and feeling. Again, emeralds are placed above diamonds; working to know so much about a person that one can deduce what is really important to him/her instead of deferring to social mores is what is actually ?dazzling? (3). At the same time, the speaker is clearly willing to forgive when the mistake is made. S/he understands that gratitude and obligation interact enough to be nearly indistinguishable, that one may employ one in the guise of the other purely by accident. Moore argues that we must realize how open to interpretation our personal conduct is, and that even within a conceptual framework (?love undying?), intention is not always coherent (12).

This is not an exclusive interpretation of ?Voracities and Verities Sometimes Are Interacting.? The ambiguousness of ?sometimes? and ?interacting? leave room for the text to be read other ways. Instead of privileged, emeralds could merely be slightly less disliked than diamonds; what I read as their ?unobtrusiveness? could be a related (instead of consequent) thought, and emeralds are simply a slightly-less-so example of trying, gem-based gratitude. One may even dispute that the work is not an argument for the existence of undying love, given the hypothetical bent of the final stanza. The point is that Moore hints rather than advises because she wants the reader involved. Abstract, heavily referential work like hers necessitates an above-average investment of a reader? s time; she gives the clues but one must uncover the crux [1]. Note that the poem? s closing aphorism means little standing alone; it cannot be excised and memorized like personal-conduct shorthand, but must be weighed rigorously against the other lines for its value to emerge. This uneasiness with certainty is an intellectual value, and intellectual values are ethical values in many of Marianne Moore? s poems. Moore makes little discernment between the way a person thinks critically about the world and the way s/he acts towards others. The two are endlessly enmeshed, and as ?Pedantic Literalist? and ?In This Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance Is Good And? show, poor intellectual habits are poor ethical ones.

Fighting the kind of pretentious formality indicated by its title, ?Pedantic Literalist? is a lament/tirade exploring the effects of intellectual practice on a personal relationship. Stanzas function as images, formally expressing the full-stop between the speaker and the addressee. Each line rips into the addressee with a prudence absent from the average insult, slanting into his/her faults with justification so vigorous one does not wonder whether s/he deserves it.

Quoting a passage from Richard Baxter? s The Saints? Everlasting Rest, the speaker claims
that with power to say unkind / things with kindness, and the most irritating things in the midst of love and / tears,? the addressee invites destruction (Marianne Moore?s Notes? 376, 2-5). His/her method of thinking puts him/her at odds with the most rudimentary standards of personal relationships. In the second stanza, the addressee is said to be like the meditative man / with the perfunctory heart; its carved cordiality . . . like an . . . immutable production? (6-8, 10). Crucially, the speaker singles out meditation?a variety of thought in which a thinker focuses entirely on a single subject or series of subjects?and connects it with social artifice. Though, I don?t think Moore?s speaker attacks meditation in and of itself; the addressee is said to be like the meditative man,? and the tone seems more concerned with the single-mindedness associated with the practice, the solitary concentration which may lead one to neglect other people and the world at large in favor of thought on (as the title implies) pedantic facts, the deeper? things (6). The addressee spends his/her time on these greater things? instead of life, which has made the literal and metaphorical center of his/her existence (the heart) perfunctory. Instead of something genuinely intuitive, his/her feeling is mundane, routine, and its expression carved?created, synthetic (10). The addressee has such disciplined control over him/herself that s/he manages to make sure that the production (i.e., his/her feelings) neglected to be / painful? (11-12). The addressee lacks many of the characteristics which separate humans from machines and objects. S/he interacts with his/her peers as if they were such.

Moore employs multiple levels of critique in this excoriation of single-mindedness. Stanzas are consistent in length and shape. Each ends on a single rhyming sound: destruction, production, obstruction, production (5, 10, 15, 20). While Moore typically pulls from a variety of sources (e.g., the previous poem), Pedantic Literalist? four quoted passages all come from a single book (Marianne Moore?s Notes? 376). Additionally, unlike most of her other works, Pedantic Literalist? is direct. The first two lines have a few odd images (Prince Rupert?s drop, paper muslin ghost, / white torch?) but Moore?s speaker makes clear that these objects are associated with the addressee, and their symbolic import is clear:each is conventionally pure, beautiful, and easily destroyed (1, 2). Just like the addressee, Pedantic Literalist? is a formally immutable production? (20). Moving from various individual issues to take on the entirety of the text, a strange situation emerges: Moore uses artifice, a created piece (i.e., one not meant to be taken as an exposition of strict facts) to show that too much focus on the world of strict facts can lead one to act with artifice, thereby obstructing the goal of focusing on strict facts. Through artificiality she exposes a fact: too much emphasis on facts leads to artificiality. Crucially, Moore?s artifice is shown to be appropriately placed and the addressee?s is not. The latter approaches living experience on false premises and Moore makes a poem, turning experiential matter into art. She shows that life does not adhere to any pedantic or literal interpretation. Ignoring these obstacles disguised as advantages is how to access the clear-headed insight pedantry and literalism claim to possess.

This is both an ethical argument and and a justification for looking to literature as a source of ethical/philosophical insight. An intellectual sense which ties itself too tightly to facts, neglecting the dirty reality of human life for a purity? based on primacy of mind, will fail to express most of reality. As Moore later wrote in her most famous poem, the malleability of poetry provides a place for the genuine? (Poetry? 3). Pedantic Literalist? turns this intellectual principle into an ethical one by showing the visceral, personal toll of adhering to improper methods of thinking. Being genuine is not just about personal identity; humans lose humanity when every facet of interaction from which an acquaintance assembles a personality is inconsiderate and fake. The issue is more than a disagreement in etiquette; again, the addressee has made him/herself utterly incapable of considering the desires and needs of
other people. S/he has cultivated a selfishness and vanity which make him/her inhuman enough to ?invite destruction? (5). This is a mean way of saying the addressee is a waste of life. S/he has squandered the opportunity in favor of his/her ego. Antisocial behavior is equated with unethical behavior, and Moore refines this through less human characters (gods) in ?In This Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance Is Good And.?

To ?finish? the title, ??really, it is not the / business of the gods to bake clay pots.? They did not / do it in this instance? (1-3). The gods are too great to finish up the labor of humans; they have little motivation or need to participate in mortals? everyday lives, or, as Moore?s speaker narrates, they don?t ?venture the / profession of humility? (6-7). Gods keep their distance and the ?polished wedge / which might have split the firmament,? and thus connected them with the human world, ?was dumb? (7-9). The tool which could connect the gods? world and ours cannot speak. It is difficult or impossible to understand and so use. Throwing itself away and falling down, this wedge then ?was conferred on some poor fool, a privilege? (9-10). This privilege makes the poor fool ?taller by the length of / a conversation of five hundred years than all the others,? and his ?tales / of what could never have been actual? / were better than the haggish, uncompanionable drawl / of certitude? (11-12, 13-15). Despite his fictions, the apparently accidental boost from the polished wedge renders the fool?s speech better than that of those who are sure of what they say. Because of the wedge?s relation to the firmament, it is likely that the poor fool?s tales either concern the gods or possess some sort of divine/important truth. Whether or not his opponents speak the truth goes unsaid, but they are certainly certain. The poor fool?s theatricality is ?more terrible in its effectiveness / than the fiercest frontal attack? (17-18). This effectiveness means that there is a utility in what the fool says, even though he can be more difficult to understand than those straightforward and certain folks. Finally, Moore paints the fool?s person: ?the staff, the bag, the feigned / inconsequence / of manner, best bespeak that weapon, self protectiveness? (19-20). The fool may have a great influence, but he makes sure to not appear to think of himself as great.

Along with invocation of gods, the fact that the poor fool tells tales that are fortifying despite being about ?what could never have been actual? recalls Greek mythology (14). Again, mythology is useful because of its ?by- / play,? its ambiguity (16-17). The need for interpretation, which such fiction possesses, causes the reader to work harder to reach insights. As the speaker says, ?it is not the / business of the gods to bake clay pots?; artifice presents one with a molded lump to harden into something useful rather than simply handing one something hardened and useful (1-2). Insight is not truly insight until one works on it.

Aside from making people work for their ideas, Moore?s speaker argues that artifice is simply a better transmitter of important ideas than explicitly expository methods. S/he brings up the image of ?the polished wedge / that might have split the firmament? (6-7). The wedge is a symbol for quasi-divine knowledge and intuition; though just a prospect, that it may have the ability to open the heavens to humans means it?s worthy of investigation. Being a wedge?a tool?it has clear practical value. However, the wedge itself cannot speak (8). It cannot directly express knowledge, so (indirectly) it confers on the poor fool the ability to tell amazing stories.

That the story teller is a poor fool, as well as the way in which he tells the stories, are crucial. He is outwardly humble, and therefore implicitly placed against the gods who do ?not venture the / profession of humility? (6-7). The profession (more in the sense of ?occupation? than ?declaration?) detail unequivocally avoids deifying the poor fool. In non-religious terms, this means his job of telling useful tales necessitates that he not be the unquestionable authority on said knowledge. He is privileged, but not exclusive, lacking the ?haggish, uncompanionable? certitude of his competitors (15). These persons may very well share of
his knowledge (in that they may think the same things), but their uncompanionable nature means they do not share it in actuality. Whether or not they know, they cannot express effectively enough for it to matter to anyone but themselves. The poor fool and his tales get through to people because of his ?feigned inconsequence / of manner? (19-20). He is nonchalant. The poor fool does not present himself as being an intensely knowledgeable and serious person, which makes him more approachable and understandable to more people. His words carry weight; he is just smart enough to make them sound as if they don?t.

In ?In This Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance Is Good And,? artificial nonchalance is placed alongside real significance while certitude and self-importance are equated with unintelligibly and irrelevancy. ?Uncompanionable,? exclusive, individualistic, solitary approaches to knowledge are ineffective, and negatively associated with gods (15). They do not speak to others, so their divinity (knowledge) is effectively nonexistent. The message is similar to ?Pedantic Literalist?: meditative methods of thought are ineffective. Knowledge?s primary function is social. When knowledge is not social it loses its value.

In these poems, Marianne Moore deals with the relationship between ethics and intellectual methods with irreverence and humor; ?Pedantic Literalist? is mostly insults, gods are lazy, and the most effective thinker is a poor fool. Unafraid of silliness, Moore?s method is one with her contentions. She tackles exclusivity and single-minded intellectualism with artistry multifarious enough to include intellectualism and silly humor under its umbrella, exemplifying her validity as she argues for it. The density of her poetics and references to things like Prince Rupert?s Drops show she knows that she is of the culture she critiques. One could call her inconsistent, and it may be true. Regardless, I see it as evidence of her genuineness. Moore is willing to show her seams and unwilling to alter her honest opinion so as to avoid contradiction, going so far as to argue that freedom is surrender on multiple occasions. This conflict is more problematic than one act which constitutes a contribution and critique of a culture. Moore portrays the relationship between freedom and surrender as hinging on the self, but atypically; freedom is not about having unlimited options, but knowing what is worth doing and working to make doing it actual. We have responsibilities to people and things we may not like. To be real, freedom must not unquestionably oppose to these obligations, as ?Peter,? a poem about a housecat so named, explores (?Marianne Moore?s Notes? 376).

On the surface, most of ?Peter? is a description. Peter is said to be ?strong and slippery?; he ?sleeps his time away? and ?lets himself be flat- / tened out by gravity? (1, 2, 7-8). Peter knows gravity is not worth fighting. His tendency to sleep is analyzed extensively: ?sleep is the result of his delusion that one must do as / well as one can for oneself; sleep?epitome of what is to / him as to the average person, the end of life? (10-12). Though a necessary bodily function, these lines call sleep the result of a problem in the mind?more a choice or a flaw. The sleep theme recurs; when Peter ?has been got the better of in a / dream?as in a fight with nature or with cats?we all know it.? (19-20). Whether through movement or social disposition, others are made to know when Peter has been dreaming. Dreaming is referred to as ?profound sleep? and described as an unfixed illusion (21-22). Delusion and illusion are not the same thing, but they?re close enough to merit notice. As evidenced by everyone knowing when Peter dreams and the label ?profound sleep,? dreaming has some connection to reality that non-dreaming sleep lacks.

The poem transitions to Peter?s waking activities, which the speaker links to business and productivity. For Peter, ?to sit caged by the rungs of a domestic chair would be unprofit- / able?human. What is the good of hypocrisy? It / is permissible to chose one?s employment . . . when it shows signs of being no longer a pleas- / ure? (24-28). Rather than with Peter the
cat, negative domestic subordination is aligned with humans, mockingly suggesting that the hypocrisy the speaker sees in either this human domesticity or unpleasurable employment was supposed to work out better.

Interpersonal concerns come next; Peter ?can / talk but insolently says nothing? (28-29). ?What of it?? the speaker asks, then says, ?when one is frank, one?s very / presence is a compliment? (29-30). Here is humor (cats can?t talk), alongside advice to think past what may immediately appear factual. Cat owners tend to make judgments about what cats are thinking or doing based on poor information, and these lines imply that our judgments about other people are often based on knowledge similarly lacking. Obviously Moore herself does this in ?Peter,? but the self-questioning ?re-writes? carefully placed throughout (?May be? I should say, / might have been? in lines 18 and 19 and ?He can / talk but insolently says nothing. What of it? When one is frank one?s very / presence is a compliment? in lines 28-30) show she is aware. A person apparently insolently silent may simply be a quiet person; that s/he is present and comfortable enough to be his/her natural self in the first place could be a compliment. We know as much to make either judgment, and must ask ?what of it?? before a conclusion.

Peter too sees ?the virtue of naturalness? and, in an elaboration on the endorsement of questioning, he does not ?regard the published facts as surrender? (31, 32). Unlike gravity, Peter does not submit to the authority of facts. What has been put forth by others is not immutably true because, as the speaker puts it, ?an animal with claws wants to have to use / them? (33-34). The easy intellectual analogy: an animal with brains wants to have to use them. Working, thinking people do not want to be handed facts; experience, experiment, and discovery are the valuable parts. Though domesticated, Peter does not accept that these facts will always be his lot in life. Someday, he could find an outlet for his wildness, as the speaker summarizes:

To

leap, to lengthen out, divide the air?to purloin, to pursue,

to tell the hen: fly over the fence, go in the wrong way?in your perturba-
tion?this is life; to do less would be nothing but dishonesty. (34-37)

?Peter? analyzes two major sections of life: resting time and waking time. The speaker associates one version of the first (sleep) with delusion. People sleep because they trick themselves into thinking that they have done enough for one day (?as well as one can?) (11). Sleep is not connected with death, exactly, but rather the ?end of life,? the end of the practice of living which?as the last stanza contests?is activity (12). Sleep is a surrender, an acceptance of one?s personal progress, an avoidance of efforts to further it. Still, it is suspicious that the speaker positions a physical necessity as a mental dilemma. ?Profound sleep? (dreams) complicates this further; the label moves toward distinguishing two kinds of sleep but falters by keeping dreams under the general category of sleep (21).

Like the qualities the speaker gives the two kinds of sleep (delusion and unfixed illusion), sleep and profound sleep are different in critical ways. Delusion is something working improperly inside the brain; delusion/sleep involves issues inside Peter, and he shows little sign of being able to alter them. Tellingly, Peter is tamest in the passages closest to sleep. When he is giving up his life, people capture and handle him (12-17). Illusion is an outside stimulus that the brain interprets incorrectly; being unfixed, Peter can change this and thus
make his dreams realities. The unfixed illusion/profound sleep issues are outside Peter, and in these passages, he moves on his own, conducting his waking duties (21-25). The conflicting aspects exist equally in Peter, which suggests that sleep has a dual character. Its negative, surrendering side is as unavoidable as its positive, fighting side. Waking time shares this dual character. Peter is himself when he is freely ?springing about?; for him to ?sit caged by the rungs of the domestic chair? is ?unprofitable?human? (22, 24-25). As with resting time, movement signals freedom and stillness signals subordination. That sitting caged by the domestic chair is called ?human? could mean the speaker is more sympathetic of waking than resting. Some people can get trapped in domesticity through purely human (i.e., ones which aren?t their fault) circumstances. However, again, Peter is a cat; I cannot help but think that to call him ?human? carries connotations similarly malicious to that of calling a person ?animal.? Backing this is the question ?What is the good of hypocrisy?? and the ?it / is permissible to choose one?s employment . . . when it shows signs of being no longer a pleas-ure? (25-28). These tendencies are as common and dislikable in people as wildness and savagery are said to be in animals.

Employment is usually for money rather than pleasure, so it is not rare for people to dislike their work. This is one reason why the sort of sleep described earlier in the poem is so attractive. Too, work is a lot like sleep. On one hand it is necessary: people need food and shelter (regular sleep). However, clinging to the mindset that this is all to be gained from work is misguided. People need to exercise their skills (profound sleep). These sides of employment are not necessarily mutually exclusive; one day a job may be the former, the next the latter. A point ?Peter? is trying to make is that we should not settle for necessity exclusively. We should not ?regard / the published facts as surrender? (31-32). Here, the speaker in ?Peter? unites life and work. S/he argues that it is hypocritical and unprofitable to the real business of life to spend so much time doing something miserable and passionless. Humans are born with brains, drives, goals, and inclinations that they want ?to have to use? (33).

However, again, the last few stanzas recognize how ?human? (in the human sense) dreadful but economically advantageous employment can be. Social frankness, naturalness, honesty, and a fighting spirit are not ways to overcome the trials of either waking or resting time, but simply the best ways to go about moving within them. You want to have to use your gifts, but you will invariably ?go the wrong way?in your perturbing for?ion? for ?this is life? (36-37). Waking time is as conflicting and confusing as resting time; doing wrong things is simply part of doing things. Acting within the world, again, is essential. Preparing the mind, fighting delusions, and remolding illusions can help us work toward a life only occasionally infected by submissive, domestic, boring surrender. As the analyses of resting/waking times show, life has positives and negatives enough that one will invariably run into a few of each. The battle never ends, but ?to do less,? as the speaker says, ?would be nothing but dishonesty? (37).

This last line works on a number of levels. Firstly, to approach life expecting only one of these sorts of experiences is dishonest, a mindset which refuses the stipulations of life just as sleep refuses progress. Secondly, though the speaker clearly finds some situations preferable, s/he acknowledges that people will not always be in such a position. Just as we should not settle for unfulfilling work, we should not expect dream jobs. S/he is being honest with the reader; one will not constantly live a rewarding and enjoyable life. There will be times when one is ?lifted and handled,? times when one is caught like ?the dangerous southern snake???a forked stick? placed on either side of one?s ?innocuous neck? (16, 13, 13-14).

The house cat is a good symbol. As an animal it is unpredictable and inaccessible, apart and
free from certain aspects of human life, but with freedom contingent on being a domesticated part of human life. Cats can’t be controlled, but without us they wouldn’t live long. Peter suggests the same is true for humans in society. This relationship is moved from issues of employment and identity to quasi-political terrain in Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns.

Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns? tells of the relationship among the titular beasts, their respective lions, and humans (1). Sea unicorns are known to disquiet shippers, which has caused a few problems (9). Once, a voyager obtained the horn of a sea unicorn to give to Queen Elizabeth, but the sea unicorns know how he got it so they persevere in swimming where they like, searching for their natural adversaries: sea lions (10-11, 13). A quote from Sir John Hawkins describes the strength and nature of these species’ aversions. On viewing Florida, he proclaimed it abounding in land unicorns and lions; since where one is, its arch-enemy cannot be missing? (19-21). From this Moore’s speaker concludes:

Thus personalities by nature much opposed,
can be combined in such a way
that when they do agree, their unanimity is great,
in politics, in trade, law, sport, religion,
china-collecting, tennis, and church going.? (22-26)

Points of agreement for the naturally opposed sea/land unicorns and sea/land lions are cultural. They may fight in the ocean/forest, but they can cordially compare china collections.

However, the speaker spends many more lines on the lineaments of their differences. Much of the text is on how these ostensibly free and wild lions are tools of subordinating forces. Unlike the unicorn, the lion is tame and concessive, twisting its traditional image (40). Rather than courageous, lions are domestics, animals best suited to use by humans (46). Lions embody traditional authority’s values, as illustrated by the fact that an originator of arguably the ultimate conventional institution (Church Doctor Saint Jerome) has one (46) [2]. Through the opposition to unicorns, Moore implicitly posits that humans’ certainty of lions’ existence?their intellectual/conceptual taming of the beasts?is evidence of their domesticity.

The lions are also deemed civilly rampant? (39). Though apparently paradoxical, this phrase concisely illustrates one of Moore’s central points: true freedom is distance, extricating oneself from the oppressive force rather than directly fighting it. Even in poses of rebellion, lions stick to the values of the status quo, like rebels who try to overthrow a violent power through violence: apparently progressive, but by adopting the tactics of their oppressors they ultimately support the cycle, shifting a state rather than making genuine change. Lions do not recognize the problems inherent in civility and in confusing disrupting it with destroying it they support it. Paradigms need to be lifted away, not mixed around.

The unicorn embodies the extrication inherent in freedom. Unlike the lions, they do not allow their daily lives to be affected by the presence of humans (they swim where they like) (13). Unicorn freedom has been preserved by an unmatched device wrought like the work of expert blacksmiths? (56-57).

The blacksmith simile means the device is something the unicorns created, something
rigorously fashioned. Put alongside the fact that they know how the sailor obtained the horn of a sea unicorn to give to Queen Elizabeth, this device is a specific skill: an intelligent, proficient elusiveness (10-11). Again, unlike the lions, the unicorns can?t be captured; the sailor obtained a horn (i.e., he did not catch/kill a unicorn), they are a puzzle to hunters, and even fire is unable to consume them (10, 44, 52). The unicorns are so wary as to disappear for centuries and reappear, and thus have come to be unique, transcending the domestication to which the lions fell prey, using their skills rather than having been used (53, 63). Unicorns have vacated their place in human interest and governance; thus, they are imaginary.

Despite this, unicorns may be domesticated in a qualified fashion. They are not intrinsically tame but capable of being tamed in a single situation: by a lady inoffensive like itself?as curiously wild and gentle? (65-66). Their apparently paradoxical label (?wild and gentle?) expands their freedom in the same way ?civilly rampant? does the lions? domesticity (66, 39). Unicorns are so skilled in living freely that they have no qualms about surrendering advantageously. They are free to give up freedoms. The obtuse last section of the poem tells of a printed record (i.e., not visually witnessed, unsubordinated) chronicling such an event (69-79). This allows for Moore herself to tame the unicorn through her printed record. Aesthetically, she embodies their kind of freedom, making unconventional art without relying on traditional counterculture tropes like sex, violence, and cursing. ?Wild and gentle? is perfectly opposed to ?civilly rampant? because of the exactness with which it describes the unicorns? freedom from civility and its contingent/inverse stipulations to rampancy (39, 66). Having left the compromising grip of law, there?s little reason for brutishness, violence, and hatred. Unicorns share a culture of dissent with lions (the list of ?when they do agree?), but their opposed natures (unicorns? intelligent elusiveness versus lions? confrontational submission) keep the beasts from sharing a fate (24). It is as Moore once wrote in an article for The Dial: ?determination with resistance, not determination with resentment . . . results in poise? (177).

As the prose quote and ?Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns? illustrate, actual freedom keeps the self from traditionally oppressive institutions (civilization, government, religion) as well as ones one wouldn?t initially consider (hatred, fear, resentment). It gives one the agency to make informed decisions so as to construct the practical, intellectual, emotional, and social value of one?s own life. Sometimes this may take the form of surrender, but as ?Peter? and ?Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns? show, it will not necessarily compromise the self. This is a different kind of rebellion which neglects violence and confrontation for ?self-protectiveness? privileging the individual independent of the standards and constraints of tradition and society (?In This Age of Hard Trying Nonchalance Is Good And? 20). This freedom ties back to nonchalance as well. Freedom?s simple substance is more desirable than its confrontational and vicious appearance. People don?t even know unicorns exist, much less that they are free. They lack the loud roar of the lion because, like Moore, they know that ?silence is best? (?We All Know It? 1). Moore defines ?silence? as almost synonymous with ?genuine,? once writing that ?the deepest feeling always shows itself in silence? (?Silence? 11). Silence is an artistic value, and, as with intellectual methods and ethical methods, Moore connects artistic choices with ethical choices. Her method isn?t quite a combination of aesthetics and ethics. Rather than some artistic ideal being ethical or ethics being as culturally bound as aesthetics, Moore makes connections between the way one creates and digests art and the way one interacts with the self and others.

?Why That Question:? functions as a moral-esthetic manifesto. When asked ?what is the
difference between prose and poetry, Moore’s speaker immediately doubts the question’s validity, literally asking if it even qualifies as a question (2). The speaker concedes if the world is right about the / Thing, if there is indeed an issue to be debated, then it is entitled to a place on some feature / Of inquiry and there may / be a difference? (3-4, 4-6). Again, if one agrees that examining minute generic classifications of literature is a worthwhile pursuit, then it is entitled to inquiry, and one may come find that there is a difference between prose and poetry. However, the speaker warns that no one says so who is sure?; either those who say so are not sure, or those who are sure choose silence rather than comment (6). The next lines clarify: it is the people who know, who say nothing / Against whose principles it / Is, to be interested in what is uninteresting? (7-9).

A difference between prose and poetry is not the issue; the validity of searching for such a divide is the issue. Moore’s speaker makes an interesting claim: if one concedes that looking for a difference between prose and poetry is a good use of time and energy, one may find it (If . . . it is entitled to a place on some feature / Of inquiry . . . there may be a difference?) (3-6). This means there isn’t really a search; if one is shortsighted enough to look for a difference in the first place, anything will count for proof. The people who really understand literature, the ones an inquirer would ask for assistance in the matter, are silent. Because they know literature, they know that these questions are unimportant. However, they also know the issue of the existence of these questions is important. Again, it is against the very principles of the people who know . . . to be interested in what is uninteresting? (7, 9).

Moore refuses to place her art in either the poetry or the prose camp, because dallying with such trifles is against her principles. Her work is not motivated by a desire to make art in one or the other genre, but from the impetus of her ideas and convictions. Again, her methods and ideas are one; she can only transmit in the forms her ideas take, not a premeditated or traditionally molded fashion. That her disregard for such concerns is principled places the uninteresting on unethical grounds. It conflicts with principles?core values rather than simple opinion or taste. The context of uninteresting labeling methods translates to explicit ethics thus: the principles underlying an act are its value, not the labels and words (be they from culture, religion, philosophy, or W. H. Auden) used to categorize it. Genuine ethical value transcends these uninteresting things. That the people who know? are silent adds to this; those who genuinely understand how to act rightly don’t categorize their acts and let importance rise from their actions without comment (7). We All Know It? refines this understanding of silence, beginning with its first postulation: silence is best? (1). Again linking silence with action, the speaker notes that action and re- / Action are equal? (1-2). As sheer events these are the same, and their apparent difference rises from the way we talk about them. Continuing this devaluing of speaking and language, the speaker says we all know that control, discipline, and / Liberation are bywords when spoken by an appraiser? (2-3). Calling false? words from an economically interested party who spends his/her time applying value to things is nothing new, but the three words Moore?s speaker chooses seem odd until the next lines: Accidental sometimes achieves perfection, loath though we may be to / admit it? (3-5). According to the speaker, we want to believe that the perfect things come from human forces, like control, discipline, and liberation, but many perfect things are simply accidents, free from conscious human intervention. S/he refers to control, discipline, and liberation from the appraiser?s mouth as bywords??idiomatic jargon meant to sell, words which aspire to appeal rather than express reality (2).

More specifically than Why That Question?: the first stanza of We All Know It? shows how and why applying categories and other confining words to works of art is a petty and
suspicious activity. Though the accidental does not always achieve perfection, the speaker’s opposition of the two certainly suggests that trying to control the aesthetic import of art is incompatible with perfection. When accidental perfection does occur, we hate to admit it.

The second stanza makes similar contentions. Beginning enjambed, it finishes the accidental thought: ?the realm of art is the realm in / Which to look for ?fishbones in the throat of the gang?? (6-7). Art seems to be where one can finally find some silent people?ones who don’t try to attribute the perfection of the accidental to discipline. In conjunction, the ?contin/ual diet of artists? is said to be ?pin/pricks and the unstereotyped embarrassment,? two spontaneous, genuine, speechless acts (7-8, 6-7). The pinpricks imply that art is a minor pain. ?Unstereotyped embarrassment? separates, slightly, the artist from general society while also poking fun at him/her (7). They are enough a part of the masses to be embarrassed (their reputation and standing mean something to them) but not enough that they seek to be so in conventional ways. The embarrassment is sincere. It has not been devalued by any appraiser, thus may not be linguistically or even actually comprehensible to conventional society. Therefore, it is silent.

However, some artists do speak. Stanza two bleeding into stanza three, the speaker says that ?in spite of it all, poets ask us just what it / Is in them that we cannot subscribe to? (9-10). A specific type of artist (poet) speaks to people in general. Why the people in general cannot subscribe is not made clear. Perhaps, being a poet, Moore is admitting that she herself is guilty and stumped. Poets are also a noteworthy choice because poetry is the most speech-reliant art. Then, the speaker pulls back and positions the poets as people: ?people overbear till told to stop,? s/he says (11). Though artists, poets are humans and share non-artistic urges and faults with those who ?cannot subscribe? to their art (10). They may appear distant from people in general, but poets are motivated by the same inner feelings. ?Poet? is just a different name, and occasionally includes different names for its feelings.

Continuing, the speaker says that ?no matter through / What sobering process they have gone,? some poets/people ?inquire if emotion, true / And stimulated are not the same thing? (11-12, 12-13). Even though they have reached a degree of insight (sobriety) through their sometimes silent (?)fishbones in the throat?) and socially distant lifestyle, some poets/people still ask if there is a difference between true emotion and stimulated emotion (7). To me, true emotion is emotion we would immediately label as emotion, like falling in love with someone. Stimulated emotions are either the sorts of feelings we can?t immediately describe because they are unclear, hard to articulate feelings, or the kinds of feelings we experience through art. Because art is created, convention often dictates it ?false?; a stimulation or even simulation akin to an experience rather than an experience in itself. Here poets, as people, express this opinion. They are breaking life and art into two categories just as those in ?Why That Question?: did for prose and poetry (?Why That Question?: 1). Separation is again shown frivolous. The only ?difference? between the two sorts of emotions is what they are called. Art and life are not so easily cut apart. Poets share inner urges with non-poets. This exemplifies the bond between art and life by showing that these concerns are not characteristic of just art or just life, but essential questions in and of themselves.

However, uncertainty about the authenticity of emotion is understandable. The language and categories which make it possible also give rise to confusion and alienation. Every day we encounter situations which put the truth of the relationships between our feelings and what we call our feelings into question. Again, love is an easy example: love-story movies, jewelry store advertisements, pop songs, etc., construct an image of love which tends to differ from lived experiences. Some people have no problem with these representations, some even find
comfort in them, and (indeed) these examples are all arguably art. The problem is when these become emotional authorities and begin marking true and false boundaries around feelings. Moore’s speaker could easily fall into the trap s/he criticizes by marking lines around true and false art, but s/he sees this difficulty and avoids it. Instead of defining true and false emotional stimulators, s/he argues that true and stimulated emotion are the same. There is no checklist of qualifications for either ?true? or ?stimulated? emotions because such a system goes against the core value of emotions: the experience of feeling. Emotions are about feeling feeling, not describing, debating, and applying words to feeling. Even if we can?t say it, we know we feel it, and this is more important than some linguistic hierarchy. This is elaborated upon as stanza three becomes stanza four: ?promoters request us to take / our oath / That appearances are not cosmic? (13-15). Another appraiser appears, requesting that we label what seems to be our feelings not cosmic?not non-transcendent, possibly false, making feelings about words instead of feelings. The last lines return to silence:

mis- Fits in the world of achievement want to know what bus- Iness people have to reserve judgment about undertakings. It is A strange idea that one must say what one thinks in order to be understood. (15-19)

?Mis- / fits in the world of achievement? refers back to the poets (remember the embarrassment), and paints them again in the sympathetic, human hue. They are not wrong in asking (speaking) why people reserve judgment (do not speak) about undertakings; they?re just misguided or new to the undertaking process. In conjunction with the appraiser becoming a promoter (turning from one who labels to one who asks others to label), poets turn from artists who question why people don?t pay attention to them to misfits who want to know what people who pay attention to them think. The last three lines sum up the confusion coming from language nicely. Taken together with the misfits lines, expressed judgment and/or judgment in itself become suspect. Aside from being something misfits of achievement (i.e., people who do not often achieve things) want, the last sentence implies that judgment may not be comprehensible. The idea that ?one must say what one thinks in order to be / understood? is ?strange? (18-19). The way the speaker puts this makes speaking sound like an entirely foreign avenue for sharing thoughts with others.

Basically, ?We All Know It? expresses the relationships between art and society, as well as the way in which language acts on expression and experience. The essential restriction is the fact that it segregates expression and experience into artistic and human categories. These categories are false and create a false emotional/experiential hierarchy. Genuine expressions and experiences are beyond such uninteresting things, and their value emerges silently, through feeling, without direct and labeling intervention. Language is too easily muddled, made meaningless, and/or appropriated for ulterior motives (the appraiser, the promoter, even the overbearing poet/persons) to be given this sort of status. ?Silence is best? and equated with action (1). Taking the first (?,silence is best . . . action and re- / action are equal?) and last (?,It is / A strange idea that one must say what one thinks in order to be / understood?) lines together, one comes to the conclusion that one must do what one thinks in order to be understood (1-2, 17-19).

Though the poem is emphatically against categories, the art world is said to be the place to find the most silent (?,fishbones in the throat of the gang?) and therefore most action-oriented people (7). However, a specific type of artist (poets) ask people why they do not pay attention to their art?why their art is not valued. Here language gets muddled again: artists who use it as their medium also use it against audiences, overbearing and becoming their own
appraisers/promoters (11). This shows that silence/action is itself easier to understand than words. Using it as often as poets do entangles art and commerce. However, one must remember that Moore herself uses language as an artistic medium. She values silence, but she is not silent in a strict sense. Her sense of silence consists of a rejection of categories and an acceptance of complex things which allow them to exist as they are. Moore is creating?acting?through language rather than relying on the sorts of words used by the appraisers, the promoters, and even the poets. Thus, she is silent insofar as she is performing action.

The formal choices of ?We All Know It? illustrate this excellently. Almost every line is enjambed, and most of the ostensibly complete thoughts end in colons. Ideas/lines bleed together. Though the text is divided into stanzas, the stanzas aren?t clean breaks; the ideas from one continue into the other (e.g., the poets ask us just what it? at the end of stanza 2, and continue with Is in them we cannot subscribe to? in stanza 3) (9-10). As these illustrate the overlapping, somewhat contradictory nature of Moore?s vision of silence, the speaker literally acknowledges it through revealing the inner urges poets share with non-artistic people. Artists are humans, and (as ?Peter? showed) holding contradictory natures in oneself is part of being human.

The key to working within this problem is action. Again, as ?Peter? showed, there are unsavory parts of life one cannot avoid. In ?We All Know It? these parts are in language. Even the title implies that these are things we know are wrong but cannot dodge. There are times when speaking and even categorizing are necessary. The important thing is to privilege action?which can include uses of language and uses of category?because meaning arising silently will not be as obscure as meaning arising from comment. Really, the authoritative, ulterior-motive comment done by appraisers and promoters is the language Moore?s speaker fights. This language lacks action and places itself above it. Silence is the genuine choice. Being interested in what is uninteresting goes against principle by negating action and twisting meaning to fit the needs of either people who don?t know what they?re talking about (as in ?Why That Question:?) or people who want to make money (as in ?We All Know It?). They use words to mask, not to express. There are times when masking is unavoidable, so one does not need to seek to do so. Rather, one should simply, nonchalantly, and continually act within the world.

Marianne Moore primarily explains the ethical import of ?genuine? through idiosyncratically defining and analyzing nonchalance and silence. Rather than allowing conventional authority over what these words mean, Moore explores her experiences and feelings to create composite definitions. The poor fool of ?In This Age Of Hard Trying Nonchalance Is Good And? possess a nonchalance which is socially effective and influential (13-18). In ?Peter,? Peter?s silence is a complement rather than an instance of insolence (28-30). Combined they create an image of how to live, stipulating action with minimal pretension and maximum honesty, endorsing a purity synonymous with the genuine rather than the immaculate.

Notes


2. Queen Elizabeth works perfectly versus Saint Jerome: a Protestant, female ruler bending
the traditional rules (e.g., she never married, never provided an heir of her body) to fit her rather than the other way around.

Bibliography


Author: Jeff Schaller
Criticism Target: Marianne Moore

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