

MODERNIST POETIC MANIFESTOES

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Abstract: From Modernism to American modernism, American literary modernism, American modernism in poetry, to Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens, the paper narrows down to "Poetry" by the former and "Of Modern Poetry" by the latter as poetic manifestoes of modernism. Even though written in full Modernism (and twenty-three years apart), the two poems can be presented as embodiments of most features that we can identify in early and late modernist writing: poetry of ideas, reason and sensibility, poetry containing a theory of poetry, syllabic or free verse, total poetry of inclusion... The two poems are shown as similar in many respects, but the main point is rather that of viewing them as landmarks in the evolution of American poetry, proposed by two of the most remarkable of its representatives.

Keywords: modernism, Moore, Stevens, poetry, imagination and reality

Rooted in Enlightenment philosophies of the 18th-century and rejecting (partly—see Stevens, for instance) 19th-century Romanticism, Modernism may be said to be the cultural-artistic movement of the 20th-century; more specifically, it is described as having started during World War I and ended in the 1960s, when the first anti-modernism (and post-modernist) obvious signs are registered. As a trend of thought—its theorists being at times more numerous and prominent than the creators themselves (in cases when they were not the same)—it began by affirming the power of the individual human mind to define and redefine itself anew (Stevens: "We live in the mind"), with no outside help; that means individualism and anti-traditionalism, belief in change, experimentation, emancipation and progressiveness springing from a philosophy of no respect for the past and "creative destruction" (the case of cubism in particular). The great war added to these a sense of disillusionment with a violent, vulgar and spiritually empty world (a "Waste Land"), as well as one of alienation, isolation and loss of identity.

The typically modernist American culture responded promptly against the background of its intrinsic anti-historicism, utopianism and anti-conventionalism, by

developing such specific modernist inventions as the blues, and jazz (the Jazz Age as such), and experimental designs in architecture; then exoticism was added, coming from such immigrant cultures as the African (black slave), Caribbean, Asian, and European ones, and a new democratization of culture (including feminism—Emma Goldman, Djuna Barnes...) was perceived. The Armory Show Exhibition of 1913 brought across the ocean European Impressionists, Fauvists and Cubists, all of which contributed in the launching of such painterly movements as those represented by the Ashcan School, the Stieglitz circle in photography (including Edward Steichen and others), and the New York School; galleries (like “291”) representing Matisse, Rodin, Rousseau, Cezanne and Picasso were followed by native productions by Maurer, Hartley, Demuth..., Dove, Douglas, and O’Keefe.

American literary modernism (with such a powerful presence in the immediate background as Walt Whitman) came to be represented by some of the greatest American writers ever (Pound, Williams, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner), who responded imaginatively to the growth of modern science and technology (electricity, telephone, radio, cinema, automobile...), to the philosophies of Marx and Freud (with Darwin not far behind), to Einstein’s relativity, William James’ psychological ground-breaking investigations (stream-of-consciousness among them), or Bohr’s quantum mechanics, to fascism and the holocaust, to the Great Depression and World War II (late modernism already); fragmentation and nonlinearity, the themes of loss and exile (the Lost Generation), disillusionment and conflicting perspectives, gender roles and race relations, cruelty and anti-heroism are only a few of the more prominent features of their literature; concomitantly, New Criticism (John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, T. S. Eliot, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, R. P. Blackmur, W. K. Wimsatt...) developed as one of the most powerful critical (theoretical and practical) movements of the century.

American modernism in poetry is as long lived and diverse as the works of Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Pound and Moore, H. D., Cummings, Jeffers, MacLeish and Lowell..., i.e. imagism and symbolism, waste lands and ideas of order, disjointedness and multiple perspectives again, skepticism and unrest, alienation and madness, poetry and a theory of poetry at the same time, language and imagination, etc.

These last features take us to our two poets, Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens (the order is that of the two poems we have chosen for our illustration). Moore (1887-1972), eight years his junior, was a lifelong ally and friend of Stevens; from her 1921 Poems, the 1951

Collected Poems (National Book Award, Pulitzer Prize and Bollingen Prize) and others (with such editors and preface authors as Williams and Eliot—her 1924 Observations was also closely reminiscent of Eliot’s 1917 Prufrock and Other Observations, something the two poets corresponded about), to the 1967 Complete Poems, the poetess also published ...Literary Essays (1955), adaptations from Perault and translations from La Fontaine’s Fables, a dramatization of a novel by Maria Edgeworth (The Absentee: A Comedy in Four Acts), a Homage... to Henry James (a 1971 collective volume), and letters (1997). An editor (of The Dial, 1925-29) and patron of poetry (much like imagist Amy Lowell), Moore lived for most of her life in Brooklyn and Manhattan.

A good introduction to her “Poetry” may be these two related quotes (from an interview edited, in 1963, by George Plimpton and, respectively, from a 1967—i.e. when she was eighty—interview with Jane Howard): “A writer is unfair to himself when he is unable to be hard on himself”; and hard she is four years later: “I’m all bone... I’m good-natured, but hideous as an old hop toad /n.b./. I look like a scarecrow. I’m just like a lizard... I look permanently alarmed, like a frog... A crocodile couldn’t be worse... My physiognomy... is like a banana-nose monkey...” So she was “fascinated” with toads, lizards, frogs and monkeys, but also octopi, pangolins, jerboas, bats, dragons, silkworms, sea lions, unicorns, mice and porcupines (in various places in her poems). Also in view of what follows, one can remind here that she was a devoted baseball fan (our emphasis) and in 1955 wrote a poem about the Brooklyn Dodgers published on the front page of the New York Herald-Tribune on the opening day of the World Series.

In his turn, poet Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) worked almost all his life as a businessman—an insurance executive for a Hartford, Connecticut company. His literary preoccupations are best defined by his titles: Harmonium (1923), Ideas of Order (1936), The Man with the Blue Guitar/Picasso (1937), Parts of a World (1942)..., “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” (1947), The Necessary Angel (essays, 1951); in 1980 Harold Bloom considered him “the best and most representative poet of his time,” and “a vital part of the American mythology.” The main effort of this meditative, philosophical “poet of ideas” is an engagement in finding order and meaning in a world that is, in the end, the product of the poet’s imagination as he attempts to find harmony in the chaos of reality; “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”:

“We keep coming back and coming back

To the real...

We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object
At the exactest point at which it is itself.

...We seek

Nothing beyond reality.”

But he also reminds us that “reality is not what it is. It consists of the many realities which it can be made into;” and, in The Necessary Angel, “the imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real.” So let us have a look at the two poems and their “account” of the “genuine” (i.e. real, not pretended) and the “real” (i.e. true, actual, not false).

Marianne Moore

Poetry

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 that there is in it after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes

that can dilate, hair that can rise

if it must, these things are important not because a

high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful; when they become so derivative as to become unintelligible, the same thing may be said for all of us, that we

do not admire what

we cannot understand: the bat

holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under

a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea,

the base

ball fan, the statistician—

nor is it valid

to discriminate against “business documents and
school-books”: all these phenomena are important. One must make a distinction
however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not
poetry,
nor till the poets among us can be
“literalists of
the imagination”—above
insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them, shall we have
it. In the meantime, if you demand on one hand,
the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, then you are interested in poetry.

And, of the eleven versions (between 1919 and 1967—but criticism-as-revision is no
part of our intention here, as we already have our Ph.D. title, see infra)-- , here is the 1924 one:

Poetry

I too, dislike it:
there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
The bat, upside down; the elephant pushing,
the tireless wolf under a tree,
the base-ball fan, the statistician—
“business documents and schoolbooks”—
these phenomena are pleasing,
but they have been fashioned
into that which is unknowable,
we are not entertained.
It may be said of all of us
that we do not admire what we cannot understand;
enigmas are not poetry.

And the final, 1967 version, where Moore overtly functions as a reader watching her own “thematization of omission” (J. D. Petersen), as her epigraph here was “Omissions are not accidents”:

I, too, dislike it...

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

Side by side with Wallace Stevens’

Of Modern Poetry

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. It has
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, and invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one. The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise.

It must

Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.

The argument in the 1919 “Poetry” (in *Others 5*, No 6) is meant to take the reader into the poet’s confidence, as she appears (Ian Lancashire) now sensible and passionate, now querulous, indignant or pompous, while describing her contempt or dislike for poetry that is not “genuine,” i.e. avoids the “important” and “useful” emotions, represented by “hands that can grasp,” “eyes that can dilate,” or “hair that can rise,” and thus becomes “derivative” or “unintelligible” even as a result of the interpretation put upon these; “we do not admire what/we cannot understand,” i.e. the bat, the elephants, a wild horse, a tireless wolf, the baseball fan (herself) or the statistician (Wallace Stevens to some extent—unintentionally, of course) given to us by half poets, who are opposed to the real (genuine?) ones, “literalists of the imagination,” giving us “imaginary gardens with real toads in them”; the “raw material of poetry,” once again, has to be genuine; therefore, if the protagonist/speaker dislikes a particular kind of poetry in which intellectualization has led to incomprehensibility, she would prefer poetry whose omnipresent raw material is grasped imaginatively. And Stevens could not agree more: “enigmas are not poetry.”

The “key to Moore’s poetics” (E. W. Joyce) seems to be found in the two quotations telling us that poetry exists only when poets have learned to be “literalists of the imagination” and can create in their work “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” These quotations raise a couple of problems. Marianne Moore’s (very much like T. S. Eliot’s) is a quotation-studded poetry, so the readers are sent on wild quests for sources and for other possible allusions. As to “business documents and schoolbooks,” Moore’s own note refers to Leo Tolstoy’s *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth*, translated by C. J. Hogarth (New York: Dutton, 1912): “Where the boundary between prose and poetry lies, I shall not be able to understand. The question is raised in manuals of style, yet the answer to it lies beyond me. Poetry is verse; prose is not verse. Or else poetry is everything with the exception of business documents /Stevens must have known it quite well as a businessman/ and schoolbooks.” Moore’s poetry is in syllabic verse or free verse (the 1924 version), i.e. cadenced prose, in fact, and very often (as Ian Lancashire notes), her vocabulary and syntax do belong to business correspondence and

academic argumentation (she was also a teacher for a time)—but this may be only one of the several modernist ironies in the poem.

The “literalists of the imagination” is an almost-quote from W. B. Yeats’ 1903 Ideas of Good and Evil (London: A. H. Bullen, p.182), where the Irish poet writes about Blake’s illustrations to The Divine Comedy: Blake was “a too literal realist of the imagination.” And the most famous of all quotes, “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” having often been attributed to Moore herself (self-quotation), sent a critic like Laurence Stapleton to Milton’s Paradise, i.e. “the prototypical poetic garden... in which Satan... sits ‘Squat like a Toad, close at the ear of Eve’” (Paradise Lost, book 4, l.800, in Elizabeth Gregory, [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/moore/poetry.htm)

[m_r/moore/poetry.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/moore/poetry.htm)). The imaginary gardens are Stevens’ stages, while “why toads?” has been the most frequently asked question.

And the answers are as many: first, Moore seems to have been attracted by all sorts of strange creatures that occur in many of her poems (see supra) and she herself also sees herself as a toad in the Jane Howard interview; then the ugly, miserable, untailed, poisonous, unpoetic toad may also refer to any person regarded scornfully or contemptuously, who also embodies the power of the irrational or the uncanny, and is thus an emblem of failure; finally, there is a self-destructive, aimless, conceited, spoiled and impulsive, but also jovial, friendly, and kind-hearted toad in Kenneth Grahame’s The Wind in the Willows (1908)—a classic of children’s literature (turned into a play, Toad of Toad Hall by A. A. Milne) that includes other characters such as the Rat, the Mole and the Badger, plus weasels, stoats, ferrets, foxes, rabbits...

But there also seem to be other quotes, including “I, too, dislike it” (from her notes copied from The Notebooks of Samuel Butler, 1912), “the raw material of poetry” (a clipping from the Spectator of 10 May 1913 about a Greek anthology), “hands that can grasp,” “we do not admire what/ we cannot understand,” etc. All these may mean, in her own words, that “we cannot ever be wholly original,” that modernists we might well be (rejecting tradition), but originality is always combined with indebtedness to the past, that T. S. Eliot’s “modernist inclusion” (the two-hundred-and-fifty odd notes to The Waste Land) is no accident.

And this technique is also combined with revision as a modernist method of self-reflexivity (as in Picasso’s lithograph series David et Bethsabée, where the modernist painter reflects on the subject of staring, while Moore reflects on the subject of poetry within a poem); Marianne Moore in “Poetry” is both poet and critic, answering her “iconoclastic and reformist

frankness” (Jean Garigue) as she writes and re-writes her modernist manifesto over a period of fifty years, accumulating in it (probably) a multitude of influences (readers, critics, family, editors...). But there also others, like Hugh Kenner, who sees here a series of “textual mutilations,” with the 1967 (shortest) version as “the most calamitous revision of all;” or, more mildly, Bonnie Costello, who sees the first and last versions standing “not as original and revision but as two alternative statements;” or Anthony Hecht, who thinks that “she has provided a field day for Ph.D. candidates for years to come, who can collate versions and come up with theories about why the changes were made” (in Petersen); or K. L. Goodwin (in Ungar), who sees the 1967 version as a three-line aphorism upon the poem’s own evolution; or Moore herself, kind of complaining: “It is quite cruel that a poet cannot wander through his regions of enchantment without having a critic, forever, like the old man of the sea, upon his back.” Or the present author of this paper, who chose to regard the whole thing as a number of statements about modernist poetry, its ambivalences and ambiguities, its complexities, ironies and difficulties, its conflicting impulses, its exclusive inclusivism (willful contamination!!).

Stevens’ argument also develops a theory of poetry in a piece of poetry in the voice of “a man speaking to men,” in order “to face the men of the time and to meet/ The women of the time.” The poem is constructed as a scenario, as a dramatization, showing us that the old (Romantic?) theater’s fixed scripts do not match modern realities as the new theater requires a new discursive thought, i.e. a poetry “about how the mind’s eye can represent itself, when it reflects on its acts.” (Charles Altieri) The mind is thus simultaneously both subject and object of the poem. Very much like Moore’s, Stevens’ modernist consciousness is based upon a process of negation, with the words becoming actors in a self-reflexive world.

The poem can be easily seen to move from “It has to...,” and “It must...” to “may be,” becoming, as it does so, another manifesto on what the poet believed to be crucial to the further development of (modernist) poetry. In spite of MacLeish’s famous adage in his “Ars poetica” (“A poem should not mean/But be”), Stevens’ poetry is a search for meaning (“to find what will suffice”); this new poetry needs “a shareable virtual space” (Altieri), a stage that combines writing and reading, speaking and listening, acting or performing and watching or witnessing; this is the full containment of the mind, that offers both its own perception and construction.

The poem also contains a merging of Romanticism (Wordsworth, Coleridge) with modern literary concepts; for both Wordsworth and Coleridge is simultaneously artist and critic

(as they both were as well), or both mind and sensibility for Stevens; if Wordsworth's poetry was the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" or "emotion recollected in tranquility," for Stevens it is a well thought out idea, merging (like with Coleridge) literary theory and criticism controlled by the "secondary imagination" or the self-reflexive mind: "accuracy of observation is the equivalent of accuracy of thinking." Living in the mind (see *supra*), the poet regards imagination as thought, and thought as part of life, which also includes artifice; so, again, total inclusivism defining once more the modernist poetics.

Consequently, Stevens' translation of the famous statement is that poems are imaginary stages with real actors/poets on them; these metaphysicians in the dark (also including Eliot with his burglar in the dark) watch either the baseball fan and the statistician, or the man skating, and the woman combing... on a large stage, "a physical framework that is literally the ground for /such/ theatrical gestures" (Altieri) meant to exhibit the "complex energies of negation." "Genuine" is "real" in this imaginary setting, where the "it" of Moore ("poetry") and the "it" of Stevens ("the poem of the mind") become the "raw material" for a new act on a new stage. With such manifestoes, modernism may be said to continue forever.

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