

MARIANNE MOORE: A MODERN FABULIST

"It would seem that in an age of wonders there is room for wonder"¹, once wrote Marianne Moore and, consciously or not, by this remark she gave one of the best clues to the understanding of her work as an artist. None of the modern poets could, in fact, more than Marianne Moore herself, claim the right of having discovered new lands, new subjects for wonder to the human mind. Where these could be found she certainly knew, as it is revealed by her remark that "unfortunately, the romantic book which is insistently advertized as a compendium of fire and flavour, may darken more than it diverts and often it is in the child's book that one finds the really potent principle of which we hear so much"². In support of her preferences she quoted such books as Hawthorne's *Wonder Book*, or other classics of the children's literature as *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Little White Bird*, and *Alice in Wonderland*. And, if we look at her production as a poet, under the highly polished and even sophisticated surface, we shall find that same feeling, that love of wonder, which is usually a gift only of the primitive creature, be it the child or the primitive artist, the medieval painter or Picasso. It will not be surprising, then, to see that her imagination is stirred by the vision of the animal kingdom. Animals have always been the classical theme of the primitive, and because of this interest of hers, Marianne Moore has been well defined a fabulist, of a particular modern nature, which needs further identification. In so doing, the critics have come very near to confirm John Crowe Ransom's prophecy in regard to

1. *The Dial*, 80 (March 1926), 266.

2. *The Dial*, 80 (August 1926), 177.

Marianne Moore's poetry: "I have no doubt that before long the knowledge of Miss Moore's poetry will be so diffused that graduate students will be listing her objects and occasions in shining categories"³.

Her "objects" and "occasions" have, indeed, been listed and shown, in a body of critical thought that by now indicates, as Bernard F. Engel saw among the first, "that the armor of America's premier woman poet is not impenetrable"⁴.

What has not yet been fully attempted, and it is certainly worth trying, is a more exclusive and systematic concentration on her animal theme, among Miss Moore's "shining categories". From an ideal catalogue of that sort, a meaningful pattern could emerge, from which the insight into the poet's special vision could be improved.

Through the perspective of the 1967 *Complete Poems*⁵, the earlier part of the poet's production still appears fundamental for a reading of her "wild life" poems. It is also very important to note that, by 1945, her interest in that theme had brought about the suggestion by W.H. Auden to entrust her with the translation of the La Fontaine *Fables*, which she actually started then⁶. The inclusion of a selection of the La Fontaine translations in the 1967 *Complete Poems* finally confirms the importance of the animal theme in the poet's own view of her work. Furthermore, the presence of the translations, side by

3. JOHN CROWE RANSOM, "On Being Modern with Distinction", *Quarterly Review of Literature*, IV, No. 2 (1948), 188, also reprinted in *Marianne Moore. A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. by CHARLES TOMLINSON (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1969).

4. BERNARD F. ENGEL, "Marianne Moore", *Contemporary Literature*, XII, No. 2 (Spring 1971), 230.

5. MARIANNE MOORE, *Complete Poems* (New York: The MacMillan Co., The Viking Press, 1967). All lines quoted in this essay from Miss Moore's poetry are taken from the final version printed in the above volume, except where otherwise noted, and the abbreviation CP, followed by the indication of the page has been adopted.

6. GEORGE W. NITCHE, *Marianne Moore. An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 9, in reference to the interviews and articles: "Talk with Marianne Moore", *The New York Times Book Review*, 16 May 1954, and WINTHROP SARGENT, "Humility, Concentration and Gusto", *The New Yorker*, XXXII (16 Feb. 1957).

side with the poet's creative work, gives even greater relevance to her own original traits⁷.

Already in every one of the 150 pages of her slender 1951 volume of *Collected Poems* (which, however, won three major literary prizes), titles and names evoke for the attention of the reader all possible known and unknown representatives of the earth and sea fauna. More than a score of her poems in that volume deal exclusively with animals; and even in the others on different themes, the animals provide the poet with a perpetually new and living source of images, which sometimes she uses for her spare but always well-calculated metaphors.

Since Aesop and Fedrus' times, this kind of poetry has fallen under the general definition of "fable", and therefore, whenever a new poet has dealt with subjects taken from the animal world, he has universally been recognized as a fabulist. It has also been noted, however, that great differences exist in the nature of each poet, and that, in Marianne Moore's case, her approach to her themes is very different from that of the ancient fabulist or even of La Fontaine, who was the object of her particular attention. Perhaps no better definition of these differences has yet been given than by Vivienne Koch. She rightly observed that the great fabulists of antiquity were orators first of all, and Marianne Moore is in this sense one of their descendants, "for her method is the method of discourse"⁸. But it is also true that "the differential resides in her tone which is conversational, rather than as with the older fabulists rhetorical"⁹. To carry the definition a little further, references could be found, if necessary, in the literature of the past, for instance in the medieval bestiaries, besides the other

7. BERNARD F. ENGEL, in the article of *Contemporary Literature* already quoted in note No. 4, rightly points out the importance of the La Fontaine's translations in the poet's overall development, and in particular regard to her change of direction in the early forties. He also regrets that at least two of the books he is reviewing deal too superficially with the translations and offer no real discussion of their role in the poet's career, which should be indeed the object of a separate study.

8. VIVIENNE KOCH, "The Peaccable Kingdom of Marianne Moore", *Quarterly Review of Literature*, IV, No. 2, 152.

9. *Ibid.*

sources already suggested by the poet herself or by the critics. Because of her impassionate, almost scientific objectiveness, Marianne Moore's art recalls, in fact, in several ways, that of the primitive *animalier*, at times more than that of the most famous fabulists themselves. For La Fontaine, as Charles Tomlinson has clearly indicated, animal existence was a minor concern, while for Marianne Moore animals, as well as objects, have an independent life, on which she inserts "the ethical extension of fact itself, all her own"¹⁰. Therefore, in a position closer to that of the authors of bestiaries, Marianne Moore's poetry could be placed at middle way between the fable, or story of animals with a moralization, and that part of the encyclopedia which described the animals with scientific rather than purely ethical preoccupations.

The scientific bent of the poet's "objectiveness", according to Marianne Moore's biographers, is obviously related to her early interest in biology, as we read that in college, at Bryn Mawr,

She spent hours in the biology laboratory. She found the courses exhilarating.... The precision, the drawing and identifying, the economy of statement and logic used for disinterested ends appealed to her. She thinks now that these methods of scientific study had a bearing on liberating her imagination¹¹.

There is a distinctive trait, which Marianne Moore shares with the most celebrated authors of bestiaries, from Brunetto Latini to Franco Sacchetti, Luigi Pulci and Leonardo da Vinci, as well as with the French and English exemplars of the genre: like all of them, she draws her inspiration, in many cases, from printed or illuminated sources, rather than directly from nature. Therefore, a basic distinction of two different categories of poems emerges at this point from the general pattern of her animal theme: the poems inspired by indirect

10. *Marianne Moore. A Collection of Critical Essays*, "Introduction: Marianne Moore Her Poetry and Her Critics", in CHARLES TOMLINSON, p. 2.

11. DONALD HALL, *Marianne Moore. The Cage and the Animal* (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p. 18.

sources and those which reproduce nature directly. Each kind, at a closer analysis, will show its own originality and characteristics.

For the first type of poems, mentioned before, on most occasions, the poet quotes her own sources with scholarly precision, and much has been said about the special value of the inverted commas in her poetry. But, even when she does not quote, it is not unlikely to find her reference by chance. As a possible evidence of her indebtedness to the bestiary, one might read, for instance, the opening stanza of "The Elephants":

Uplifted and waved until immobilized
wistaria-like, the opposing opposed
mouse-grey twined proboscises' trunk formed by two
trunks, fights itself to a spiralled internosed

deadlock of dyke-enforced massiveness. It's a
knock-down drag-out fight that asks no quarter?

(C.P., p. 128)

The amazing compactness of these images finds its visual correlative in one of the most reproduced illustrations from a bestiary of the XII Century, where a group of elephants may be seen. Two of them in the foreground, are engaged in a fight, standing one in front of the other with their proboscises intertwined, while the others watch. This contest is shown against a bare background in which the exotic landscape is symbolized by four gigantic flowers, or trees, or artichokes - one does not really know what they are.

Because of such poems as "Elephants", "The Jerboa", "The Plume Basilisk", "Snakes, Mongooses, Snake Charmers, and the Like", where her source of inspiration is clearly in the visual arts, Marianne Moore has contributed toward reviving the Horatian tradition of *Ut pictura poesis*¹². But she has also

12. The vitality of pictorialist poetry through the ages has been shown and documented by JEAN HAGSTRUM, *The Sister Arts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago

proceeded to extend the classical and medieval tradition, including in what she has called her "hybrid method of composition", many printed sources: animal books, encyclopedias, pamphlets, magazines. At her best, she always has the power to lend reality to objects never actually seen, be it the jerboa or the plumed basilisk, the pelican of the seventeenth century emblem books, or the sea unicorns and land unicorns of the classical and biblical myths. For that particular quality of her *Observations* (which is also the title of one of her early poetry collections), Kenneth Burke has called them a "deceptively technical synonym for 'visions'"¹³. The poet herself has shown her awareness of that faculty, in her comments on Blake's ability to portray "The incontrovertible actuality of seen impossibilities, as when in conversation he revisualized a fairy's funeral"¹⁴. Elsewhere, she stresses the importance of visual observations, quoting one of Ruskin's sayings: "Thousand of people can talk, for one who can see"¹⁵.

The clarity and originality of Marianne Moore's images is achieved by a device already noted by William Carlos Williams in her poetry: "she treats words with acid to remove amudges"¹⁶, and in so doing she is closest to Williams' own "objectivism". Both artists, among the modern writers, show a particular kinship with the primitives. In her vision of the concrete, however, Marianne Moore's art is also specifically American, as Ezra Pound was prompt to acknowledge in his reading of her early poems, "a distinctly national product", in

Press, 1958), and "The Sister Arts: from Neoclassic to Romantic", *Comparative as Work* (Waltham, Mass.: Blaisdell, 1968), pp. 169-194.

Among those who disclaimed pictorialist poetry as a misconception were the Imagists. Poets were also specially instructed not to imitate the painter by EZRA POUND, *Literary Essays* (Ed. by T. S. ELIOT, London: Faber & Faber, 1954).

13. KENNETH BURKE, "Motives and Motifs in the Poetry of Marianne Moore", in *Marianne Moore. A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. C. TOMLINSON, p. 87.

14. *The Dial*, 83 (June 1927), 540.

15. *Ibid.*

16. KINGSLEY A. WHEATHERHEAD, *The Edge of the Image. Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams and Some Other Poets*, (Seattle and London: Un. of Washington Press, 1967), p. 4.

his opinion, "something which could not have come out of any other country" ¹⁷.

In her successful quest for identity, she has, therefore, been able to preserve both her humanistic and American heritage. "Her consolatory, fabulous bestiary", as Jarrell said, "is more accurate than, but is almost as arranged as, any medieval one" ¹⁸. At the same time, "she is a lot more American (if to be American is to be heir or heiress of all ages) than Thomas Wolfe or Erskine Caldwell" ¹⁹.

As her imagination can find an incentive to work in the museum or in the library, with a peculiarly alert sensitivity to all products of modern and ancient civilizations, Marianne Moore's poetry also belongs to the tradition of the *musée imaginaire*. According to A. Malraux, that tradition includes poets who "visit museums, or collect engravings... and use all possible means", as sources of inspiration ²⁰. Knowledge was, in fact, from the very beginning, the key word to her world of widening horizons and amazing discoveries in obsolete aspects of common things. "Always I am learning, always it is interesting, often it is exciting" - she says; and what is even more important, always she is able to convey that excitement, that interest and ardour of research through her compact lines, faithful to the Emersonian prescription, "ask the fact for the form" ²¹.

In her "imaginary garden" her love for the exotic and the fabulous provides "the excitement of unusual, but also avoids stock associations... relying on faithful dogs, sly foxes, and innocent sheep" ²². In drawing the pattern of her preferences,

17. EZRA POUND, "Marianne Moore and Mina Loy", in *Marianne Moore. A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. C. TOMLINSON, pp. 46-47.

18. RANDALL JARRELL, "Her Shield", in *Poetry and the Age* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1953), p. 199.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

20. JEAN HAGSTRUM, "The Sister Arts: From Neoclassic to Romantic", in *Comparatists at Work*, pp. 172-173.

21. CHARLES TOMLINSON, "Introduction *cit.*", p. 6.

22. BERNARD F. ENGEL, *Marianne Moore*, (New York: Twayne Publ., 1964), p. 29.

therefore, it is very important to follow her to the far-away continents of her imaginary geography, above all Africa and Asia. Within those lands, Egypt, Arabia, China provide the settings for some of her most successful poems. Nevertheless, in using the term setting, it is indispensable to remember that her indications of places are never given in the traditional descriptive form of landscape. Very seldom she plays on the fascination of names, but she proceeds rather by suggestions, notations, indirect allusions to characters of the countries and their civilisations, arts, literatures, by which she enhances the sense of discovery in the reader. With this method, Egypt is recognized as the land of the jerboa, only through allusions to its lavish ancient civilization, in contrast with the thriftiness of the animal described:

...Others could
 build, and understood
 making colossi and
 how to use slaves, and kept crocodiles and put
 baboons on the necks of giraffes to pick
 fruit, and used serpent magic.

.....
 It was a picture with a fine distance
 of drought, and of assistance

.....
 in time, from the Nile
 rising slowly...

(*C.P.*, pp. 10-11)

Here "the Nile", the only real geographical connotation, is supported by others of a different nature. The importance of the scenery is emphasized, once again, at the end of the second part of the poem, where the exotic jerboa, by contrast with the opulence of the previous picture, is almost identified with the desert land where it lives:

....Abroad seeking food, or at home
 in its burrow, the Sahara fieldmouse
 has a shining silver house

of sand. O rest and
 joy, the boundless sand,
 the stupendous sandspout,
 no water, no palm trees, no ivory bed,
 tiny cactus; but one would not be he
 who has nothing but plenty.

(C.P., p. 13)

The enchantment of the dry landscape reminds one of Baudelaire's "paysage fait avec la lumière et le mineral", where the "végétal irrégulier", symbol of disorder, and therefore in contrast with an ideal of classical beauty, is equally banished²³. In one of the entries of her diaries, Marianne Moore herself quoted at length from the "petit poème en prose" *Anywhere out of the world*, which reproduces in greater details the same vision of the "Rêve Parisien"²⁴.

In a similar vein, India and China in "Snakes, Mongooses, Snake-Charmers and the Like", are seen against the background of the land

... in which everything is hard work, the country of the
 grass-getter,
 the torch-bearer, the dog-servant, the messenger-hearer, the
 holy-man.

(C.P., p. 58)

The reindeer in "Rigorists" is located in a northern landscape, almost as in a modern Christmas tale, told by a "friend who'd been in Lapland" (C.P., p. 96). But, in any case, the poet always remains faithful to the principle that she once expressed after visiting a circus, namely that animals should not be taken from their proper surroundings.

The "first distance" of her pictures is not always produced in terms of space, but it may be a distance in time and the mythological may substitute the exotic fabulous. "The Plumet

23. CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1935), Vol. I, pp. 115, 488.

24. MARIANNE MOORE, *The Tiger's Eye. On Arts and Letters* (Woodstock, Vermont: Elm Tree Press, Oct. 1947), p. 22.

Basilisk" has a right to belong to the poet's world because his name is highly evocative of its Greek descent, from the *basiliskos*, the little "basileus" or King of the Greeks, so called for its erectile crest in the shape of a crown on his head, as it may be noticed in Aldrovandi's reproduction in his *Historia Serpentum et Draconum*, as well as in an ivory figure of the XI Century in the National Museum of Florence. For Marianne Moore, now that the monstrous legends of the past are no longer believable, he is "the harmless god", "the amphibious falling dragon, the living firework".

...king with king,
helped by his three-part plume along the back...
(C.P., p. 20)

One could admire some exemplary in sculpture:

...In
Copenhagen the principal door
of the bourse is roofed by two pairs of dragons standing on
their heads - twirled by the architect - so that the four
green tails conspiring upright, symbolize fourfold security.
(C.P., p. 21)

And even when no allusion at all is made to the "ancestry", as in the case of "The Frigate Pelican", praised for its actual qualities ("a marvel of grace... In the height and in the majestic display of his art" C.P., pp. 25-26), the hidden motivation of his election to poetry may be read between the lines, in the legend of the bird, which was identified with Christ by a whole civilization.

In "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns", the same principle leads to a more complex structure of the poem, which reminds one of a complicated embroidery, drawn on the several myths of the fabulous animals. Their appearance, to begin with, is that "described by the cartographers of 1539".

defiantly revolving
 in such a way that
 the long keel of white exhibited tumbling,
 disperses giant weeds
 and those sea snakes whose forms, looped in the foam, 'disquiet
 shippers'.

(*C.P.*, p. 77)

The images are completely "imagined ones" and they recall Marianne Moore's remarks in regard to "Durer's Rhinoceros, Pollajuolo's Battle of the Nudes, and various concepts by Mantegna and by Leonardo da Vinci", which, as she said, "have for us that attraction which originality with precision can exert, and liking is increased perhaps when the concept is primarily an imagined one - in the instance of the rhinoceros, based apparently on a traveller's sketch or description"²⁵.

Once the imagination is set to work, it begins to weave its subtle texture, linking historical allusions to mythological themes, supported by the use of quotations. The descriptive passage of the unicorns is followed by the detail on the famous horn given as a gift to Queen Elisabeth because of its supposed power against poison. Immediately after, there is a reminder of the mythical theme of the traditional enmity between lions and unicorns, which gives way, further on, to a little moralization on the possibility of the conniving of opposite natures. The legend of the tameness of unicorns toward virgins is revived through a concise evocative adaptation of embroidered figures from ancient tapestries, coat of arms, emblems or medals, which provide from time to time the material for the poem.

There is undoubtedly in all this the humanist's delight in reproducing traditional figures and exploiting the gifts of her wide culture. However, as her faithful readers know,

25. *The Dial*, 83 (July 1928), 89.

Marianne Moore's poems never result in idle exercise, because "an ideal of ethical preference inserts itself among the facts"²⁶.

The personal form of her moralization contributes to establish her identity, apart from that of the previous fabulists. Her message, in the animal poems, always comes in an indirect way, and it is rather to be discovered in the manifestation of her preferences, than in the open statement. Accordingly, she often shows her love for the less known or the secluded, the thrifty, even the shy representatives of certain categories of rodentia, which live in solitude their underground life:

a small desert rat,
and not famous, that
lives without water, has
happiness....

(C.P., p. 13)

To her, the jerboa embodies the mythical ideal of a double life, "part terrestrial and part celestial", leaping more than walking.

...launching
as if on wings, from ist march-thin hind legs, in
daytime or at night; with the tail as a weight,
undulated out by speed, straight.

(C.P., p. 14)

And these are not the only hidden reasons of her predilection: agility, to a mind as mobile as that of Marianne Moore, is also a title of excellence: "... its restlessness was / its excellence; it was praised for its wit" (C.P., p. 13), she says of the Pharaoh's rat. Otherwise, courage, strength, fierceness, resistance, are the virtues that most frequently appeal to her, whether they be found in the buffalo:

26. CHARLES TOMLINSON, "Introduction *cit.*, p. 4.

nor are there any
 ivory
 tusks like those two horns which when a tiger
 coughs, are lowered fiercely
 and convert the fur
 to harmless rubbish.

(*C.P.*, p. 28)

or in the arctic ox (or goat):

... Its great distinction
 is not egocentric scent

or in the ostrich:

the large sparrow
 Xenophon saw walking by s stream - was and is
 a symbol of justice.

(*C.P.*, p. 99)

What distinguishes Marianne Moore's animals from those of other modern poets is their independent life, aside from any particular symbolic meaning attributed to them for human reasons by others (Lawrence, Eliot, Yeats). On the contrary it is man, "the less limber animal, with his practical mottoes, who must accomodate himself to sea, jungle, frigate pelican and lizard, and the ethical and the imaginative are one in Miss Moore's animal poems in urging this accomodation"²⁷.

In the case of snakes, it is well to bear in mind the poet's explanation of her predilection for them which might otherwise seem far-fetched:

The usefulness, companionableness, and gentleness of snakes is sometimes alluded to in print by scientists and amateurs - she observed -. Needless to say, we dissent from the serpent as deity; and enlightenment is preferable to superstition when plagues have to be combated.... A certain ritual of awe - animistic and animalistic - need not, however, be effaced from our literary consciousness. The

27. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

serpent as a motive in art, as an idea, as beauty, is surely not beneath us, as we see it in the stone and the gold amadryads of Egypt; in the turtle zoomorphs, feathered serpent columns, and coiled rattle-snakes of Yucatan; in the silver-white snakes, 'chameleon lizards', and stone dragons in Northern Siam. Guarding the temple of Cha-Hong in Nau, the hundred yard long pair of blue-green-yellow painted monsters... with reared head and flowing, skin-like rise of body - are, one infers from Reginald Le May's description and partial photograph, majestic worms²⁸.

The passage, besides its interest as a significant specimen of Marianne Moore's prose style and as a complement to some of her poems on the subject, makes it clear that in the form of the serpent she does not look for any symbolic meaning in D.H. Lawrence's fashion. The qualities that she admires are clearly indicated and above all, her visual art sources are precisely acknowledged.

The same attitude persists in "No Swan so Fine" or "Critics and Connoisseurs":

.... No swan
with swart blind look askance
and gondoliering legs, so fine
as the chinz china one with fawn-
brown eyes and toothed gold
collar....

Lodged in the Louis Fifteenth
candelabrum-tree....

(C.P., p. 19)

This swan is no relation to its most famous poetic counterparts (Leda's in Yeats' poem, or Baudelaire's "Le cygne"). The "object" here is sought for itself and the poetic image is given full roundness with an almost augustan love for descriptive finish, in the best tradition of the "iconic" poem, inspired by an *objet d'art*, like Achille's shield in the *Iliad*, or

28. *The Dial*, 83 (August 1927), 178.

Keats' Grecian urn²⁹. The outside world has a fundamental importance in the poet's vision, while at the same time it does not fail to provide a point of reference to the human world. ("The power of the visible is the invisible", *C.P.*, p.100). And the desired effect is obtained through a constant attention to the ideal compactness of style, which the poet treasures above all other qualities. A look at the variations of the "Swan" poem confirms that preoccupation with style in conveying the message. In the 1951 edition the poem reads:

.... Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were the staple
 ingredients in its
 disinclination to move.
 ...I have seen this swan and
 I have seen you; I have seen ambition without
 understanding in a variety of forms.

In the final version of the poem, only the sentence "The King is dead" (*C.P.*, p.19) is left in cryptic form at the end.

Not unlike the swan, the tiger is not the embodiment of a religious myth, as for Eliot's *Gerontion*, where it was no less than an allegory in the Dantesque tradition of the "fiere" representing the coming of Christ. For Marianne Moore, the tiger is the embodiment of motion itself, of perennial change as a principle of life in comparison with the stability of the elephant:

Who rides on a tiger can never dismount;
 asleep on an elephant, that is repose.

(*C.P.*, p.130)

Most of the poems read so far have their counterparts in the visual art sources, usually indicated by the poet. But there are others, which draw their subjects directly from nature and not necessarily from unfamiliar and exotic places.

29. JEAN HAGSTRUM, "The Sister Arts: From Neoclassic to Romantic," in *Comparatists at Work*, p. 172.

Among these, "The Monkeys", "Peter", "An Octopus", "Bird-witted", "The Fish" have attracted the greatest critical praise for their distinctive poetic qualities. But the list can be made longer, by adding other just as successful poems on the animal theme, such as "The Pangolin", "The Paper Nautilus", "Tom Fool at Jamaica", "The Arctic Ox(or Goat)", "To a Giraffe", "The Jellyfish". In these poems, although the poet's vision includes the more familiar representatives of the animal species, her manner is still distinctly original and different from that of the other fabulists. It is here, perhaps, that the poet shows best of all her rejection of the condescending or ignoring attitude towards animals of the classical fabulists or of the eighteenth century Frenchman, La Fontaine. Marianne Moore's attitude at her best is always and unsentimentally a woman's approach, with a truly Franciscan gift of humility.

There is, in this second group of poems, a religious undercurrent of motivation, quite distinct from the more prominent esthetic vision of the pictorial poems. In this regard, Bernard F. Engel has complained that the religious motivation in Marianne Moore's poetry has not yet been sufficiently emphasized by the critics³⁰.

"Bird-witted" offers perhaps the most typical example of the utter humility with which an episode of bird life is portrayed by the human witness. The bird scene has a completely independent life, even if observed with the precision of a slow-motion film. The first stanza (*C.P.*, p.105) shows the little ones waiting to be fed by their mother; then the mother eventually arrives and starts feeding them. Each stage of the scene has its distinctive features: the description of the birds' plumage in the third stanza, the changing sounds of their voices in the fourth, the new element of the cat and therefore of danger introduced in the last two stanzas. The subject was good enough for an "idyll" or, in any case, for an elegiac treatment of it. On the contrary, all possible traces of sentimentality are banished from the lines; the birds

30. BERNARD F. ENGEL, "Marianne Moore", *Contemporary Literature* (Spring 1971), 232-233.

are full-size as in nature, and the precision of the ornithological terminology probably is the main factor for the amazing objectivity.

"Thickly-filamented", "pale pussy-willow-surfaced coats", are certainly not terms which belong to the language of the "emotions". And we are rather inclined to look at the scene, as if it were a Chinese flower piece in its minute precision. For this reason, in such poems, the pictorial process rather appears in reverse: instead of reproducing the images from a visual art source, the images themselves achieve a "stasis" of their own, as in a work of art.

It is not surprising to find that eight of these poems were indeed selected by an artist for illustrations in the rare edition printed by the New York Museum of Modern Art.

Six of the *Eight Poems*³¹, selected by the painter A. Parker, are animal poems: "The Plumet Basilisk", "The Fish", "He Digesteth Harde Iron", "A Jellyfish", "The Pangolin", and "The Monkeys". The pictures are unusually successful in capturing the quality of the images from the written page, which faces them in the poet's handwriting. This contributes in turn, with its minute and precise calligraphy, to emphasize the general feeling of the text. The Parker illustrations properly recapture the neat linear edges of the images, while the watercolors, all in tones ranging from light-brown to green-yellow-oranges are superimposed with added paint brushes of distinctly Chinese quality and with a value of their own.

The illustration of "The Pangolin", the less known among the animals of the group, offers a welcome "vision" of what the poem is about: grace, exactness and form perfectly concluded in itself.

.... To explain grace requires
a curious hand....

31. MARIANNE MOORE, *Eight Poems*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1962).

...Pangolins, made
for moving quietly also, are models of exactness,
on four legs....

(C.P., 118-119)

As to her almost Franciscan attitude of humility in front of her subjects, already mentioned before, Marianne Moore herself authorized the reference, as she often does, when she wrote: "As is observed by a writer upon St. Francis in a recent article in the *Spectator*, humility is a quality which attracts us - though not to imitation... Egotism is usually subversive of sagacity"³².

In that spirit, "The Wood Weasel", "determination's totem", is for her a "noble little warrior", but no patronizing tone is implied in the adjective, which just acknowledges an actual dimension. "To a Snail", another of her hymns to virtue, is again in praise of modesty, a virtue that, transposed in literary terms, has its equivalent in compression of style: "the principle that is hid" finds its illustration in nature in "the curious phenomenon of the occipital horn" of a snail. On the role of animals as visual images for the qualities of literary style, Randall Jarrell aptly said:

She thought of the animals as models and of the exactness as armor - and for such a writer, there was no armor like exactness, concision, irony....hard, objective, absolute precision.[That]leads inevitably to quotation; and quotation is armor and ambiguity and irony all at once - turtles are great quoters!³³

The obvious problem of obscurity, arising from conciseness of style, was not neglected by Marianne Moore, who gave this assessment of it:

Three foremost aids to persuasion which occur to me are humility, concentration and gusto.... Concentration may feel to itself crystal clear, yet be through its very compression the opposite.... I myself, however, would rather be told little than too much. The

32. *The Dial*, 82 (March 1927), 267.

33. RANDALL JARRELL, "Her Shield", in *Poetry and the Age*, pp. 200-201.

question then arises, how obscure may one be? And I suppose one should not be consciously obscure at all. In any case a poem is a concentrate and has, as W.H. Auden says "an immediate meaning and a possible meaning"³⁴.

A long poem like "Peter" shows consistently throughout a successful compression of style, evading obscurity. The cat, whose main character is given elsewhere as being "intellectual" (*C.P.*, p.106), with his "prune-shaped head and alligator eyes", who "sleeps his time away", offers an implicit meaning more effective than a whole sermon against hypocrisy:

springing about with frog-like ac-
curacy, emitting jerky cries when taken in the hand
he is himself again.

(*C.P.*, p.43)

In fact, "What is the good of hypocrisy?" Fidelity to one's own nature is very important: "When one is frank, one's very presence is a compliment". The cat on this occasion quite exceptionally is not only present, but has been given the faculty of speech:

The eel-like extension of trunk into tail is not an accident.
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 perturbation - this is life;
to do less would be nothing but dishonesty.

(*C.P.*, p.44)

A fruitful example of Marianne Moore's own method of composition can also be drawn from a comparison between her treatment of "The Paper Nautilus" with that of a famous predecessor. Holmes' poem read:

34. *A Marianne Moore Reader* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), pp. 123-125.

Build thee more stately mansions, o my soul,
 As the swift seasons roll!
 Leave thy low-vaulted past!
 Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
 Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
 Till thou at length art free,
 Leaving the outgrown shell by life's unresting sea³⁵.

The poet's main romantic preoccupation here was with his soul, while the nautilus was confined to a pretext. Marianne Moore simply presents her accurate knowledge of the nautilus' parable, with its implicit lesson of love for beauty, search for new horizons in its shifting from one shell to another:

For authorities whose hopes
 are shaped by mercenaries?
 Writers entrapped by
 teatime fame and by
 commuters' comforts? Not for these
 the paper nautilus
 constructs her thin glass shell.

(C.P., p.121)

Once again, "the poet has herself taken (from her verses) what time could take away, and left a skeleton the years can only harden"³⁶. On the use of language, Marianne Moore had advised the young artist in "Novices" about the things to be avoided:

Acquiring at thirty what at sixty they will be trying to forget,
 blind to the right word, deaf to satire
 which like 'the smell of the cypress strengthens the nerves
 of the brain,

35. O. W. HOLMES, "The Chambered Nautilus", in *A Little Treasury of American Poetry* (New York, 1952), p. 5.

36. RANDALL JARRELL, "The Humble Animal", in *Poetry and the Age*, p. 183.

.....
they write the sort of thing that would in their judgment
interest a lady;
(C.P., p. 60)

As an ideal term of contrast, she suggested: "the spontaneous unforced passion of the Hebrew language/ an abyss of verbs full of reverberations and tempestuous energy/ In which action perpetuates action and angle is at variance with angle" (C.P., p. 61).

Furthermore, in her use of the language, Marianne Moore constantly shows her competence as a musician, both in her source of metaphors and in her control of sounds. So "The mind is an enchanting thing... like Gieseking playing Scarlatti". (C.P., 134) "Tom fool at Jamaica", the horse, is a champion like "Fats Waller/ with the feather touch, giraffe eyes, and that hand alighting in / Aint't Misbehavin'! Ozzie Smith and Eube Blake" (C.P., p. 163). In her unconventional way, she shows that there may be a coexistence of *Ut pictura poesis* and *Ut musica poesis*. She certainly knows the "plain American which cats and dogs can read". In her poem "England" she defines it with linguistic skill, as the language in which "the letter *a* in psalm and calm/ when pronounced with the sound of *a* in candle, is very noticeable" (C.P., p. 46), or, with greater details in some of her prose notes: "in Maine the harbour-master is the *habber-masts*,... in New York seabirds are *Seaboids*, ... in the negro vernacular the tenth becomes the *tent*, certainly is *certainy*, and Paris is *Parus*"³⁷.

The careful selection of words is always directed in her writing by her love for the "essential": "Not decorum, but restraint;/ ...the love of doing hard things (C.P., p. 76), is what she admires in Henry James. "Neatness of finish! Neatness of finish!/ Relentless accuracy..." (C.P., p. 76) is the lesson that she acquires from an octopus.

"The Fish" more than any other poem displays all her qualities of style at once. The images reveal at their best the

37. *The Dial*, 80 (May 1926), 446.

"X-ray-like inquisitive intensity" of observation, as has been defined with her own words her natural way of perceiving external and internal qualities, the whole and the details³⁸.

The color, the form, the details, the motion and silences of the subaquatic life of the aquarium are captured as if at one glance. For this the poem enjoys great favor with critics like Donald Hall, who appreciates the "imaginative mystery"³⁹ conveyed by the mastery of technique and style.

The title itself of "The Fish" (*C.P.*, p.32), as in many of Marianne Moore's poems, is part of the "essential", not a useless explanation; while the verb *wade*, which forms the second line by itself, sets in one word the tone of the subaquatic world:

The fish

wade
through black jade.

Of the crow-blue mussel shells, one keeps
adjusting the ash heaps;
opening and shutting itself like

an
injured fan.

The barnacles which encrust the side
of the wave, cannot hide
there for the submerged shafts of the

sun,
split like spun
glass, move themselves with spotlight swiftness
into the crevices -
in and out, illuminating

the turquoise sea
of bodies....

38. LLOYD FRANKENBERG, *Pleasure Dome: on reading modern poetry*, (Boston, 1949), p. 132.

39. DONALD HALL, *Marianne Moore. The Cages and the Animal*, p. 43.

The two notes of color, *black jade* and *crow-blue*, are followed by the metaphor of the *injured fan, opening and shutting*, which puts the scene into motion. With the greatest economy of language and extreme precision, there is at one time the connotation of the fish (crustaceous), its position (side) and immersion (wava). The element of light is masterfully added in the third stanza and each of the following ones contributes a new surprising detail, leading to the final conclusion: "the sea grows old in it".

The regular alternance of short and longer lines, the abundance of end rhymes (aa bb, c) in the structure of the stanza, reproduce the sliding effect of the scene ("slide each on the other"), which conveys toward the end a hidden meaning of instability ("All external marks of abuse are present on this defiant edifice - all the physical features of accident").

An important feature of Marianne Moore's method of composition is undoubtedly her spare use of adjectives, which she usually chooses from that category called by Empson the *cognitive words*, rather than the *emotive words*. Each epithet is, in fact, intended not so much to intensify the emotion as to supply the imagination with more material. Therefore, in "The Monkeys", the zebras are "*supreme* in their abnormality", the elephants have *fog-colored* skin and *strictly practical appendages*, the "hairy carnivora" has a resolute tail. All these are examples of the heightening and reenlivening of the language by the poet.

Robert Beloof has provided a study in depth of the complexity of technical devices implied in Marianne Moore's style. Their most striking characteristic, precision, has authorized the inclusion of the term "mathematics" in his definition of her prosody and tone⁴⁰. Her renewal of the use of syllabic verse and her fresh approach to free verse, as well as to rhyme, have been justly appreciated. Such devices as the split-end lines and the use of unimportant grammatical parts

40. ROBERT BELOOF, "Prosody and tone: The 'mathematics' of Marianne Moore", in *Marianne Moore. A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 144.

of speech at the end of the lines, confer an unquestionably unique look to Marianne Moore's poems, no matter what their subject is.

Perhaps to a foreign reader one of the most interesting uses of the language is her adoption or creation of compound words, which could form a glossary in themselves. She exploits this typically English device, both in prose and in verse, competing at times with Hopkins himself in the most monstrous word-formations (*meet-me-alone-by-moonlight maudlin troubadour*), or just being contented with the simpler forms drawn from everyday language (*all green, non-serious, four-fold*). Some of the most successful specimens are, once again, derived from the animal world. The *pig-tailed monkey*, the *pigeon's-blood*, the *ostrich-skin warts*, the *herring-bone-laid bricks*, the *bird-clawear-ringed princess*, *frog-like accuracy*, *snake-charming controversialist*, *dragon-fly blue*, *bird-witted*, *dove-neck's iridescence*, *duck-egg greens*, *clamsbell-tinted spray*, *zebu-shaped*, are only a few examples from a much wealthier reserve.

What makes them valuable is not the extraordinary verbal ability of the author, but their capacity to provide the imagination with more material in the most compressed manner. At a closer scrutiny, among these terms, the second, the eighth, the tenth, eleventh, twelfth provide indications of color through the corresponding evocative name of an animal. The first, sixth, and seventh compounds contribute definitions of characters; while the third, fourth, and thirteenth are concerned with the element of form. So that, within the same general type of word, the poet is able to communicate a variety of meanings and use them, according to the needs of the context. This is possible because of the special flexibility in her metric, derived from the frequent use of prose rhythms and free verse. It has been observed that "where read aloud, the lines are not always perceptible as such; ... but the underlying structure, its interplay with the rhythm, and the varied frequencies of rhyme, all contribute to a tension that unmistakably differentiates the form from prose". And in any case, the

quality resides in the use to which the structure is put and its appropriateness to what is being conveyed"⁴¹.

All this should be enough evidence of how Marianne Moore can be called a "modern fabulist:" her interests and subjects are undoubtedly those of the fabulist, but her approach is original and modern⁴².

CLAUDIA CORRADINI RUGGIERO

41. LLOYD FRANKENBERG, *Pleasure Dome*, p. 143.

42. Among the Italian critics, who have written on Marianne Moore's poetry, one of the articles most pertinent to our subject was contributed by Lina Unali; *Marianne Moore (Studi Americani)*, 1964, N. 9, pp. 377-424), which deals perceptively with the question of the use of the animal theme by the poet and also includes an Appendix from Marianne Moore's still unpublished *Reading Transcripts*, viewed by the critic with the poets' permission.