

Elizabeth W. Joyce: On "Poetry"

Moore used the poetic imagination to represent the transformative power of the arts over social tradition. Her original version of "Poetry," the one relegated to the "notes" section of her Complete Poems, presents not only her view of the operations of the imagination but that of twentieth-century American poets in general. As with Moore's abstraction through particulars, her investment in the power of the imagination in the arts is convincing proof of her denial of bourgeois conventions--there is no room for the imagination in a society based on pragmatic, materialistic lifestyles. Not only that, but the very fact that Moore reduced the overt presentation of this poem to a few lines in the body of this poetry collection illustrates her reluctance to admit her critique of the bourgeoisie and her reliance on the imagination to escape it.

By introducing this poem with "I, too, dislike it," Moore acknowledges the inherent triviality of poetry; it fulfills no "practical" function and, therefore, has no apparent role in culture. Her ironic tone in this line, however, negates its surface meaning and reinforces her belief in the power of the imagination to find a place for poetry in establishing meaning in culture.

Even though there is much poetry that she does not like, Moore admits that there is "in / it after all, a place for the genuine." To Moore, "the genuine" is the most essential attribute of good art. She treats it the way Wallace Stevens treats his notion of reality--as poetry's goal. Unlike Stevens, though, Moore does not believe that poetry is transcendental; its reason for existence is entrenched in its ability to capture a sincere response to life's experiences, those that accurately reflect the social context of the poet.

Moore believes that physical responses and instincts are "important . . . because they are / useful," not because they can be explained in the abstract terms of poetic analysis and criticism. The "eyes / that can dilate, hair that can rise / if it must" are human reactions to external stimulæ. Moore wants poetry to function in the same way--rather than being so complex and difficult that it connects only to our intellect, it should stimulate us also through our physical senses. When poetry becomes too abstract, "as to become un-/intelligible," it loses its audience because "we / do not admire what / we cannot understand." The poem then lists animal behaviors that are as indecipherable as modern poetry: the upside-down bat, the rolling horse. Human behavior is equally difficult to comprehend: "the base- / ball fan, the statistician." But these behaviors are admirable: even activities that lack a pragmatic purpose are "important" because they lend distinction to the variety found in nature and among human civilizations. Even the dullness of "business documents and // school-books?" are important to human existence, perhaps as a contrast to more exciting aspects of life. Despite our lack of comprehension of "phenomena," we must confront them repeatedly, following that human instinct to investigate and describe. Even though abstract poetry is obscure, Moore poses, it is worth our attention because it is no more difficult to understand than anything else around us: it remains a reflection of the changes in our culture. . . .

But, Moore says, there are dull things that really are useless, such as bad poetry, and it is bad poetry that makes her think at first that she "dislikes" the genre entirely. Poetry as a legitimate entity exists only when poets have learned to be "literalists of the imagination?" and when

they can create in their work "imaginary gardens with real toads in them.?" These quotations, one from William Butler Yeats and the other unacknowledged but perhaps by Moore herself, are the key to Moore's poetics.

The Yeats quotation is from his discussion of Blake in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, in which he describes Blake as a "too literal realist of imagination, as others are of nature." By this, Yeats is criticizing, yet admiring, Blake for wanting poetry and the visual arts to depict symbols in their naked state, without the embellishment of style or technique. For Moore, the essential goal of poetry is to explain the poem's purpose while excluding the "trivial" or the "insolent," those irrelevant or self-destructive elements of much of failed poetry.

The idea of the "imaginary gardens with real toads in them?" explains the force of imagination necessary for poets to avoid uselessness. They must, in order to be able to write authentic poetry, create a world in their minds that appears to be real. The toads, then, are the fabrications of the artist and are so highly refined by the artist's imagination that they have become tangible; the toads are the result of the artist's attempt to render the abstract into the concrete, Moore's own poetic goal, a goal that also allows her to draw directly into her poems the subversion that the abstraction serves to shield.

This goal is, however, as Moore acknowledges, unattainable. The effort to reach it is poetry's only hope. As long as the poet maintains this effort honestly, poetry is at least "interesting." Poetry is "raw" because it cannot have the polish of reality seamlessly constructed out of the imagination; it is "genuine," though, because the good poet tries with integrity to attain this reality. This passage presents the double nature of the imagination; it can create a visual image—the garden—but it can also create new phenomena in the form of abstractions—the formally "real" toads. A "literalist of the imagination?" is bent on using the imagination exactly as it evidences itself in the interior nature of the artist. The poet who can make use of this faculty without distortion will be true to the forces and transcendental qualities of the imagination. The imagination, then, works to divorce the poet from stifling conventions, while the abstraction that the imagination induces masks that very social deflection.

The ending of this poem, also reinforces the problem that Moore confronted in her work: the inescapable tension between codified social convention and the urge to modify that convention so that it is less irksome to the individual. Moore wants poetry to retain direct connections to her culture, to continue to be "genuine" (i.e., intelligible and reflective of her culture). But at the same time she cannot resist the gentle undercutting of that culture through the abstraction brought on by the imaginary.

The imaginary undermines bourgeois culture because it is no longer attached to the pragmatic; it is no longer materially useful. Yet, like the hair that rises for no practical purpose on the human nape, the imaginary seems to Moore to be one of those marvels of nature that should continue to exist merely to be understood. Even so, the imaginary, and its creation, the abstract, do have practical and political implications. As such, they are the earmarks of societal change, the disruption of bourgeois dogma that everything must have its use, and the movement away from the sheerly socially pragmatic toward the operations of the individual's interior. Moore's standard for pragmatism is itself abstract, in fact, and strives for the furtherance of life and the understanding of that life rather than the typical pragmatic stance that has interest only in the production of particular consequences.

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