

## Darlene Williams Erickson: On "No Swan So Fine"

In this poem one finds the syllabic stanza pattern 6-7, 8, 6-7, 8, 8, 5, 9. The pattern is altered only in the last line, where the addition of one syllable disrupts the pattern and forces the reader to break the pace. That phrase commands special attention: "The king is dead." Each seven-line stanza has end rhymes only in lines 2 and 5. But what lingers in the ear is the repetition of more than thirty "s," or "z," or "ch" sounds, which gives the poem an unusual sibilance. Perhaps it is meant to capture the hushed stillness of the Versailles fountains. Or more probably, the large number of sibilants may suggest the sound made by the whistling swan, the "swan song" romantically believed to be sung by the dying swan. The term "swan" has a literary meaning too; it has come to mean the poet, one who sings sweetly a song of unusual beauty, excellence, or purity. Thus, with the most delicate of signals, Moore sets up a "swan song" for both the ear and the mind.

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The poem opens with a quotation about the past, about "the dead fountains at Versailles." Once a place of sparkling light, life, and activity, the stilled fountains, although resurrected, as it were, seem almost frozen in their beauty and their stillness. Only echoes of another era, ghosts from another moment in history, inhabit the environs now. Similarly, there is no living swan like the chintz china one lodged in the Louis XV candelabrum captured in time among the carved dahlias, seurchins, and (appropriately) everlastings. Unlike the real swan, with its peculiar dark, blind look, its superior attitude, and its webbed feet propelling its body, like a Venetian gondolier guiding his gondola, the carved swan seems "at ease and tall," its "toothed gold / collar on to show whose bird it was." The work of art is, in its way, owned by its creator, the artist, and therefore does not have a will, a destiny of its own. It does, however, have a kind of permanence in time as well as a posed elegance, carefully colored and polished to perfection. The real swan, by contrast, may appear a bit foolish as it takes its gondoliering sea legs ashore and waddles up the river bank. One senses, though, that the artwork swan, although it has its own kind of duration, is somehow deficient. It lacks Bergson's *élan vital*--that vital impulse that is continually developing and generating new life. It cannot offer even the most rudimentary movement, the most elementary change of expression.

Moore's attitude toward artifice sometimes seems clear, as in these lines from "To Statecraft Embalmed" (1915): "As if a death-mask could ever replace / life's faulty excellence!" Reality, even with its flaws, seems preferable to the perfection achieved in art. The real swan, "with swart blind look askance / and gondoliering legs," is always better than the chintz china one. But is that what Moore says syntactically in this poem? As Donald Hall has pointed out, one must not be too quick to assume simple irony in Marianne Moore. She may well be saying precisely what she means, not intending that the reader infer the opposite. There is something in itself ironic about a criticism of artifice embedded in the super-refined stanzas of "No Swan So Fine." If Moore is so opposed to artifice, why does she work to produce art (i.e., poetry) at all? Or why did she labor so patiently to sketch the swan candelabrum if she found it less beautiful than a real swan?

What Moore is saying is beyond the expected, beyond the either-or. Executing a woman's way of knowing, Moore is including paradoxical ways of looking at the same thing; she is refracting rather than synthesizing. She is operating in the realm of magic, performing an extraordinary balancing act--about time and a relativity of values. She is, I would suggest, offering a kind of Hegelian dialectic in her thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, although the argument is never really brought to a permanent solution. There is no swan so fine as the chintz china one; but the real swan has vital qualities no artifice can duplicate; yet both kinds of swans have real importance to the human beings who observe them. In one sense, time and real swans are always passing; hence one must make some effort to capture permanence in an always-changing and less-than-perfect world. One kind of time, whether measured in milliseconds or in dynasties, becomes history; it passes on, leaving only the human attempts at catching *durée* in works of art. The gondoliering swan represents that kind of time, one in movement, in process, one that is and will be replicated by swanness throughout time, although each swan will be a unique unrepeatable individual, having its own peculiar quality of the *élan vital*. The other swan, the "chintz china one," represents another kind of time, the *durée*, the swan above time that has an existence beyond the limitation of days and years. It is interesting that Moore has the china swan perched among everlastings, flowers that keep their color and shape beyond their actual life span, retaining a kind of beauty even when dried and preserved. So too is the quality of the swan created by artifice. Here is a permanence, not unlike that of Keats's "Grecian Urn."

But Moore's use of the words "chintz" and "china" to describe the china swan makes another interesting qualification. Chintz has a fascinating etymology. It is a Hindu, Sanskrit word meaning multicolored or bright. But over time, the beautiful glazed cotton cloth called chintz has been tinged by the pejorative. Since the late 1850s, some chintz cloth has come to be thought of as sleazy or tawdry. Thus Moore causes careful readers to qualify their judgments again. If the poem is not ironic, (and Hall argues that it may not be), Moore seems to be saying that no real swan is "so fine / as the chintz china one." And yet the very word "chintz," which may only mean "brightly colored" in its candelabrum-tree of carved flowers, tugs at the mind. For it may also suggest a showiness, a contrived artifice, like the era of the Versailles fountains, now rendered "so still," even when preserved in the new life of art. And china, although beautiful, is also fragile, as was the era of Versailles. Moore makes reference to an era like that of the court of Versailles in another poem, "Nothing Will Cure the Sick Lion But to Eat an Ape." She writes,

Perceiving that in the masked ball attitude, there is a hollowness that beauty's light

momentum can't redeem.

That "hollowness," no matter how artfully captured in the renovation of Versailles (or in the china swan), remains shallow. It may be beautiful and brightly colored, but it is showy, fragile, and hollow nonetheless, a perfect enactment of its time.

The living swan, with "gondoliering legs," though it has locomotion and can look with apparent disapproval at the world around it, still suffers from a blind limitation in time and history. The sculptured bird enjoys the ability to be complete, to stand tall and at ease, to operate from an established and permanent perspective. The china swan, the work of art, must replace the real one for an era that is gone; it provides duration and gives us a glimpse of an era's values, as well as its version of perfect beauty.

But there remains one all-important phrase in the poem. When one hears "The king is dead," the unspoken response should also be heard: "Long live the king!" One must be ready to welcome new realities and new art forms when the old ones have passed, although one may have some access to the past and to an existence beyond time through art. Thus Willis's intuition that the poem may have to do with passing, and perhaps even the passing of a particular magazine of the arts, seems valid. The poem can be seen as an accolade to Poetry's support of the arts, and at the same time a kind of swan song, a consolation for the possibility of its demise by reminding those associated with the magazine of their part in capturing permanence and beauty in a changing world. Nonetheless, any institution, even one associated with what at one point must have seemed the avant-garde, must be ready to greet the new king. That is the only realistic thing to do. Perhaps one should even smile at the "hollowness" of what once had seemed so glittering and so fine as well as at the realities that art represented. And once again Moore has surprised the careful reader, has done her magic with painstaking precision and accuracy, giving us an awareness that is not the expected view about time, history, and art. She has achieved Bergson's charge to the poet to move beyond being merely a doer to becoming a knower. The poet has brought the attentive reader to a new dimension of a multifaceted truth, to a real intuition, which is for Bergson the highest stage in the evolution of understanding.

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