

E. R. Gregory: On "Poetry"

In her most famous version of "Poetry," Marianne Moore engaged in a delicate balancing act between acknowledging poets' dependence on the past, demonstrated by the quotations she worked into her text, and recognizing that genuine poets must somehow make their materials new, as she herself does in questioning or contradicting Tolstoy and Yeats. Her method is subtle, demanding, for example, that readers fully consider both the denotation and connotation of "derivative" before integrating its meaning into the poem.

... 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....(1)

Charles Molesworth has taken "they" as referring to the "high-sounding interpretation" that can be put on the items mentioned in the preceding sentence as "genuine."(2) More likely, however, being plural, the word refers to the items themselves: "Hands that can grasp, eyes / that can dilate, hair that can rise / if it must...." These items become derivative when they are copied or adapted by others, a process that, denotatively speaking, can be good, bad, or indifferent. Connotatively, however, outside of specialized usage in fields such as chemistry, law, and linguistics, the bias in English is against the derivative, a fact that Moore counts on in her glance at the derivative process in writing poetry. A close look at synonyms is instructive. Chambers Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms (1989 ed.), for example, lists the following: acquired, borrowed, copied, cribbed, derived, hackneyed, imitative, obtained, plagiarised, secondary, second-hand, transmitted, trite, unoriginal. Some of the words, such as acquired and transmitted are neutral, but note how many of them are pejorative in their connotation: cribbed, hackneyed, plagiarised, trite, unoriginal. Note, too, how the rest are susceptible of pejorative connotation in some contexts: copied, imitative, secondary, second-hand.

Moore's careful use of both denotation and connotation suggests, then, that after a certain point ("when they become so derivative") the very act of deriving one's work guarantees that it will be second-rate as well as secondhand; but although most readers can understand her linking of the derivative process with the generally mediocre, some may question her specific linkage of it to the unintelligible. Do we really not admire the hackneyed and the trite because we do not understand it, or because we understand it only too well? Is an unoriginal versifier such as Helen Steiner Rice really less intelligible and less admired than a genuine poet like Moore herself, who is allusive, complex, and problematic? Sales figures would suggest the reverse.

"Poetry," however, affirms that poetasters give only the illusion of intelligibility. Their formulae and cliches encourage their readers to believe that greeting card verse provides a road map to life, love, and death that is both familiar and reliable; but if their readers ever take a good, hard look at the rich, treacherous chaos that surrounds them, they find that that road map simply does not fit the country to which it purports to be a guide. It is too "removed from the actuality of the experience" to be intelligible.(3) Small wonder that some readers at least end by not admiring what they cannot understand. Original poets, on the other hand, may disturb

and perplex us; but their direct rendering of "hands that can grasp," etc., makes those materials intelligible in a way that excessively derivative writers, whose work filters out the "genuine," do not.

Up to a point Moore admits the use of older poets as an aid in writing the ideal poetry that is "original and lucid."⁽⁴⁾ For her, the great divide between the acceptably and the excessively derivative is whether the poet truly adapts her source or merely copies it. Thus, she takes a criticism that Yeats had leveled at Blake, namely, that he was "too literal a realist of imagination" and reverses it, stating that we cannot have genuine poetry

till the poets among us can be "literalists of the imagination"--above insolence and triviality....

Her challenge to Yeats exemplifies a use of the past that goes beyond mere repetition to create insight, a use that reflects the critical stance that she took in her prose. Commenting on Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, for example, she wrote that "we cannot ever be wholly original ... Our best and newest thoughts ... have been known to past ages." She added, however, a significant caveat: "an indebted thing does not interest us unless there is originality underneath it."⁽⁵⁾ She gives no pat prescriptions as to how artists are to use the past without becoming unduly derivative. But her own practice seems the safest guide to what she meant, with "Poetry" itself, addressing a topic older than Horace, yet unmistakably twentieth-century in language and spirit, as brilliant an example of the genuine and the intelligible as we could wish

NOTES

1. *Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 267.
2. *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1990) 158-59.
3. Bernard F. Engel, *Marianne Moore*, rev. ed., Twayne's United States Authors Series, 1989, 41.
4. Bonnie Costello, *Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U P, 1981) 20.
5. *Complete Prose* (New York: Viking, 1986) 328.

From *The Explicator* 52.1 (Fall 1993)

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism ^[1]

Criticism Target:

Marianne Moore ^[2]

Author:

E. R. Gregory ^[3]

Poem:

Poetry ^[4]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/e-r-gregory-poetry>

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