THE ART OF POETRY NO. 4
MARIANNE MOORE

American poetry is a great literature, and it has come to its maturity only in the last seventy years; Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson in the last century were rare examples of genius in a hostile environment. One decade gave America the major figures of our modern poetry: Wallace Stevens was born in 1879, and T.S. Eliot in 1888. To the ten years that these dates enclose belong H.D., Robinson Jeffers, John Crowe Ransom, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and Marianne Moore.

Marianne Moore began to publish during the First World War. She was printed and praised in Europe by the expatriates T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In Chicago, Harriet Monroe's magazine *Poetry,* which provided the enduring showcase for the new poetry, published her too. But she was mainly a poet of New York, of the Greenwich Village group which created magazines called *Others* and *Broom*.

To visit Marianne Moore at her home in Brooklyn, you had to cross the Brooklyn Bridge, turn left at Myrtle Avenue, follow the elevated for a mile or two, and then turn right onto her street. It was pleasantly lined with a few trees, and Miss Moore's apartment

was conveniently near a grocery store and the Presbyterian church that she attended.

The interview took place in November 1960, the day before the presidential election. The front door of Miss Moore's apartment opened onto a long narrow corridor. Rooms led off to the right, and at the end of the corridor was a large sitting room that overlooked the street. On top of a bookcase that ran the length of the corridor was a Nixon button.

Miss Moore and the interviewer sat in her sitting room, a microphone between them. Piles of books stood everywhere. On the walls hung a variety of paintings. One came from Mexico, a gift of Mabel Dodge; others were examples of the heavy, tea-colored oils that Americans hung in the years before 1914. The furniture was old-fashioned and dark.

Miss Moore spoke with an accustomed scrupulosity, and with a humor that her readers will recognize. When she ended a sentence with a phrase that was particularly telling, or even tart, she glanced quickly at the interviewer to see if he was amused, and then snickered gently. Later Miss Moore took the interviewer to an admirable lunch at a nearby restaurant. She decided not to wear her Nixon button because it clashed with her coat and hat.

—*Donald Hall, 1960*

INTERVIEWER

Miss Moore, I understand that you were born in St. Louis only about ten months before T.S. Eliot. Did your families know each other?

MARIANNE MOORE

No, we did not know the Eliots. We lived in Kirkwood, Missouri, where my grandfather was pastor of the First Presbyterian

Church. T.S. Eliot's grandfather—Dr. William Eliot—was a Unitarian. We left when I was about seven, my grandfather having died in 1894, February 20. My grandfather, like Dr. Eliot, had attended ministerial meetings in St. Louis. Also, at stated intervals, various ministers met for luncheon. After one of these luncheons my grandfather said, "When Dr. William Eliot asks the blessing and says, 'and this we ask in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,' he is Trinitarian enough for me." The Mary Institute, for girls, was endowed by him as a memorial to his daughter Mary, who had died.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you when you started to write poems?

MOORE

Well, let me see, in Bryn Mawr. I think I was eighteen when I entered Bryn Mawr. I was born in 1887, I entered college in 1906. Now, how old would I have been? Can you deduce my probable age?

INTERVIEWER

Eighteen or nineteen.

MOORE

I had no literary plans, but I was interested in the undergraduate monthly magazine, and to my surprise (I wrote one or two little things for it) the editors elected me to the board. It was my sophomore year—I am sure it was—and I stayed on, I believe. And then when I had left college I offered contributions (we weren't paid) to the *Lantern,* the alumnae magazine. But I didn't feel that my product was anything to shake the world.

INTERVIEWER

At what point did poetry become world-shaking for you?

MOORE

Never! I believe I was interested in painting then. At least I said so. I remember Mrs. Otis Skinner asking at commencement time, the year I was graduated, "What would you like to be?" "A painter," I said. "Well, I'm not surprised," Mrs. Skinner answered. I had something on that she liked, some kind of summer dress. She commended it—said, "I'm not at all surprised."

I like stories. I like fiction. And—this sounds rather pathetic, bizarre as well—I think verse perhaps was for me the next best thing to it. Didn't I write something one time, "Part of a Poem, Part of a Novel, Part of a Play"? I think I was all too truthful. I could visualize scenes, and deplored the fact that Henry James had to do it unchallenged. Now, if I couldn't write fiction, I'd like to write plays. To me the theater is the most pleasant, in fact my favorite, form of recreation.

INTERVIEWER

Do you go often?

MOORE

No. Never. Unless someone invites me. Lillian Hellman invited me to *Toys in the Attic,* and I am very happy that she did. I would have had no notion of the vitality of the thing, have lost sight of her skill as a writer if I hadn't seen the play; would like to go again. The accuracy of the vernacular! That's the kind of thing I am interested in, am always taking down little local expressions and accents. I think I should be in some philological operation or enterprise, am really much interested in dialect and intonations. I scarcely think of any that comes into my so-called poems at all.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder what Bryn Mawr meant for you as a poet. You write that most of your time there was spent in the biological laboratory. Did you like biology better than literature as a subject for study? Did the training possibly affect your poetry?

MOORE

I had hoped to make French and English my major studies, and took the required two-year English course—five hours a week—but was not able to elect a course until my junior year. I did not attain the requisite academic stand of eighty until that year. I then elected seventeenth-century imitative writing—Fuller, Hooker, Bacon, Bishop Andrewes, and others. Lectures in French were in French, and I had had no spoken French.

Did laboratory studies affect my poetry? I am sure they did. I found the biology courses—minor, major, and histology—exhilarating. I thought, in fact, of studying medicine. Precision, economy of statement, logic employed to ends that are disinterested, drawing and identifying, liberate—at least have some bearing on—the imagination, it seems to me.

INTERVIEWER

Whom did you know in the literary world, before you came to New York? Did you know Bryher and H.D.?

MOORE

It's very hard to get these things seriatim. I met Bryher in 1921 in New York. H.D. was my classmate at Bryn Mawr. She was there, I think, only two years. She was a nonresident and I did not realize that she was interested in writing.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams through her? Didn't she know them at the University of Pennsylvania?

MOORE

Yes. She did. I didn't meet them. I had met no writers until 1916, when I visited New York, when a friend in Carlisle wanted me to accompany her.

INTERVIEWER

So you were isolated really from modern poetry until 1916?

MOORE

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Was that your first trip to New York, when you went there for six days and decided that you wanted to live there?

MOORE

Oh, no. Several times my mother had taken my brother and me sightseeing and to shop; on the way to Boston, or Maine, and to Washington and Florida. My senior year in college in 1909, I visited Dr. Charles Spraguesmith's daughter, Hilda, at Christmastime in New York. And Louis Anspacher lectured in a very ornamental way at Cooper Union. There was plenty of music at Carnegie Hall, and I got a sense of what was going on in New York.

INTERVIEWER

And what was going on made you want to come back?

MOORE

It probably did, when Miss Cowdrey in Carlisle invited me to come with her for a week. It was the visit in 1916 that made me want to live there. I don't know what put it into her head to do it, or why she wasn't likely to have a better time without me. She was most skeptical of my venturing forth to bohemian parties. But I was fearless about that. In the first place, I didn't think anyone would try to harm me, but if they did I felt impervious. It never occurred to me that chaperons were important.

INTERVIEWER

Do you suppose that moving to New York, and the stimulation

of the writers whom you found there, led you to write more poems than you would otherwise have written?

MOORE

I'm sure it did—seeing what others wrote, liking this or that. With me it's always some fortuity that traps me. I certainly never intended to write poetry. That never came into my head. And now, too, I think each time I write that it may be the last time; then I'm charmed by something and seem to have to say something. Everything I have written is the result of reading or of interest in people, I'm sure of that. I had no ambition to be a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Let me see. You taught at the Carlisle Indian School, after Bryn Mawr. Then after you moved to New York in 1918 you taught at a private school and worked in a library. Did these occupations have anything to do with you as a writer?

MOORE

I think they hardened my muscles considerably, my mental approach to things. Working as a librarian was a big help, a tremendous help. Miss Leonard of the Hudson Park branch of the New York Public Library opposite our house came to see me one day. I wasn't in, and she asked my mother did she think I would care to be on the staff, work in the library, because I was so fond of books and liked to talk about them to people. My mother said no, she thought not; the shoemaker's children never have shoes, I probably would feel if I joined the staff that I'd have no time to read. When I came home she told me, and I said, "Why, certainly. Ideal. I'll tell her. Only I couldn't work more than half a day." If I had worked all day and maybe evenings or overtime, like the mechanics, why, it would *not* have been ideal.

As a free service we were assigned books to review and I did like that. We didn't get paid but we had the chance to diagnose.

I reveled in it. Somewhere I believe I have carbon copies of those "P-slip" summaries. They were the kind of things that brought the worst-best out. I was always wondering why they didn't honor me with an art book or medical book or even a history, or criticism. But no, it was fiction, silent-movie fiction.

INTERVIEWER

Did you travel at this time? Did you go to Europe at all?

MOORE

In 1911. My mother and I went to England for about two months, July and August probably. We went to Paris and we stayed on the Left Bank, in a pension in the rue Valette, where Calvin wrote his *Institutes,* I believe. Not far from the Panthéon and the Luxembourg Gardens. I have been much interested in Sylvia Beach's book—reading about Ezra Pound and his Paris days. Where was I and what was I doing? I think, with the objective, an evening stroll—it was one of the hottest summers the world has ever known, 1911—we walked along to 12, rue de l'Odéon, to see Sylvia Beach's shop. It wouldn't occur to me to say, "Here am I, I'm a writer, would you talk to me a while?" I had no feeling at all like that. I wanted to observe things. And we went to every museum in Paris, I think, except two.

INTERVIEWER

Have you been back since?

MOORE

Not to Paris. Only to England in 1935 or 1936. I like England.

INTERVIEWER

You have mostly stayed put in Brooklyn, then, since you moved here in 1929?

RESCUE WITH YUL BRYNNER

(appointed by ~~President Eisenhower~~ special consultant to the United Nations commission ~~of~~ Refugees, 1959-1960)

with Dances Galanta by Zoltán Kodály
favorites of Budapest Symphony Orchestra
now refugee Symphonia Hungarica in Marl-
CBS; December 10, 1960

Head, down ~~low~~ over the guitar,
he barely seemed to hum; ~~ending~~ "all come home";
did not smile; came by air;
did not have to come.
The guitar's an event.
Guests of honor ~~is old, doesn't~~ dance; ~~can't~~ smile.
"Have a home?" a boy asks. "Shall we live in a tent?"
"In a house", Yul answers. His neat cloth hat
has nothing like the glitter ~~that~~ reflected on the face
of milkweed-~~seed~~ brown dominating a ~~palace place~~ palace
~~in those hells devoid of solace~~ that was nothing like the place
where he is now. His deliberate pace
~~is~~ a kind's however, "You'll have plenty of space."
Yul? – Yul lay for the Christmas-fire tale-spinner –
Yul fairy-tales that can come true: Yul Brynner.
"Recital"? 'concert is the word.'
and stunning,
~~in Marl Austria's Marl~~, by the Budapest Symphonia Symphony –
displaced but not deterred; –
listened to by me – though with detachment the
~~detachedly then~~ –
like a ~~frog or~~ grasshopper that did not
know it ~~had~~ missed the mower, a pigmy citizen;
~~in any~~ case, too slow a grower.
There were thirty million; there are thirteen still –
healthy to begin with, kept waiting till they're ill/
History judges. It ~~certainly~~ will
~~remember~~ Winnipeg's incredible
conditions: "Ill; no sponsor; and no kind of skill."
Odd – a reporter with ~~small~~ guitar – a puzzle.
Mysterious Yul did not come to dazzle.

Magic bird with multiple tongue –
five tongues – ~~embarked on~~ a crazy twelve-month tramp
~~or~~ plod), he flew among
the damned, found each camp
where hope had slowly died – (some had never even a plane).
~~came to end that sort of death;~~
Instead ~~did not~~ feather himself, he exemplified the rule that self-applied
~~"Two small fishes and five loaves of bread.~~
~~Nourished seeds of dignity. All were fed.~~
He said, "You may feel strange; ~~– not dressed the way they dress.~~
Nobody notices; you'll find some happiness.
No new "big fear"; no distress."
~~He~~ Yul can sing – twinned ~~with~~ an enchantress –
elephant-borne ~~fairy with blue sequinned~~ spangled dress –
~~curled~~ swirled aloft by trunk, with star-tipped wand, ~~Tamara,~~
~~tru-er~~ to the beat ~~than~~ Symphonia ~~Hungaria~~. Hungarica.
as true as

Zoltán Kodály: Folk Music of Hungary
166 pp. Bakery & Rockliff 3 & 2
Times Lit Supplement Feb 1 - 1960

Eric Salzman: N Y Times, Jan 7, 1961 Beverly Wilson
Concert by the word not recital: Sarah Stratton
Lazzo 205 and 383 Schumann Dauphin Op 58
Tanga Op 6 and Chopin B minor Sonata Op 58
... underlying tension ... burled beneath the most
controlled and delicate moments ... a sense of phrase and
shape that grew right out of the music.

A manuscript page from a poem by Marianne Moore

MOORE

Except for four trips to the West: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Puget Sound, and British Columbia. My mother and I went through the canal previously, to San Francisco, and by rail to Seattle.

INTERVIEWER

Have you missed the Dodgers here, since *they* went West?

MOORE

Very much, and I am told that they miss us.

INTERVIEWER

I am still interested in those early years in New York. William Carlos Williams, in his *Autobiography*, says that you were "a rafter holding up the superstructure of our uncompleted building," when he talks about the Greenwich Village group of writers. I guess these were people who contributed to *Others*.

MOORE

I never was a rafter holding up anyone! I have his *Autobiography* and took him to task for his misinformed statements about Robert McAlmon and Bryher. In my indignation I missed some things I ought to have seen.

INTERVIEWER

To what extent did the *Others* contributors form a group?

MOORE

We did foregather a little. Alfred Kreymborg was editor, and was married to Gertrude Lord at the time,* one of the loveliest persons you could ever meet. And they had a little apartment somewhere in the village. There was considerable unanimity about the group.

* Moore was likely refering to Dorothy Bloom

INTERVIEWER

Someone called Alfred Kreymborg your American discoverer. Do you suppose this is true?

MOORE

It could be said, perhaps; he did all he could to promote me. Miss Monroe and the Aldingtons had asked me simultaneously to contribute to *Poetry* and the *Egoist* in 1915. Alfred Kreymborg was not inhibited. I was a little different from the others. He thought I might pass as a novelty, I guess.

INTERVIEWER

What was your reaction when H.D. and Bryher brought out your first collection, which they called *Poems,* in 1921 without your knowledge? Why had you delayed to do it yourself?

MOORE

To issue my slight product—conspicuously tentative—seemed to me premature. I disliked the term "poetry" for any but Chaucer's or Shakespeare's or Dante's. I do not now feel quite my original hostility to the word, since it is a convenient, almost unavoidable term for the thing (although hardly for me—my observations, experiments in rhythm, or exercises in composition). What I write, as I have said before, could only be called poetry because there is no other category in which to put it. For the chivalry of the undertaking—issuing my verse for me in 1921, certainly in format choicer than the content—I am intensely grateful. Again, in 1935, it seemed to me not very self-interested of Faber and Faber, and simultaneously of the Macmillan Company, to propose a *Selected Poems* for me. Desultory occasional magazine publications seemed to me sufficient, conspicuous enough.

INTERVIEWER

Had you been sending poems to magazines before the *Egoist* printed your first poem?

MOORE

I must have. I have a little curio, a little wee book about two by three inches, or two and a half by three inches, in which I systematically entered everything sent out, when I got it back, if they took it, and how much I got for it. That lasted about a year, I think. I can't care as much as all that. I don't know that I submitted anything that wasn't extorted from me.

I have at present three onerous tasks, and each interferes with the others, and I don't know how I am going to write anything. If I get a promising idea I set it down, and it stays there. I don't make myself do anything with it. I've had several things in *The New Yorker*. And I said to them, "I might never write again," and not to expect me to. I never knew anyone who had a passion for words who had as much difficulty in saying things as I do and I very seldom say them in a manner I like. If I do it's because I don't know I'm trying. I've written several things for *The New Yorker*—and I did want to write *them*.

INTERVIEWER

When did you last write a poem?

MOORE

It appeared in August. What was it about? Oh . . . Carnegie Hall. You see, anything that really rouses me . . .

INTERVIEWER

How does a poem start for you?

MOORE

A felicitous phrase springs to mind—a word or two, say—simultaneous usually with some thought or object of equal attraction: "Its leaps should be *set*/to the flageo*let*"; "Katydid-wing subdivided by *sun*/till the nettings are *legion*." I like light rhymes, inconspicuous rhymes and un-pompous conspicuous rhymes: Gilbert and Sullivan:

Yet, when the danger's near,
We manage to appear
As insensible to fear
As anybody here.

I have a passion for rhythm and accent, so blundered into versifying. Considering the stanza the unit, I came to hazard hyphens at the end of the line, but found that readers are distracted from the content by hyphens, so I try not to use them. My interest in La Fontaine originated entirely independent of content. I then fell prey to that surgical kind of courtesy of his:

I fear that appearances are worshiped throughout
France
Whereas pre-eminence perchance
Merely means a pushing person.

I like the unaccented syllable and accented near-rhyme:

By love and his blindness Possibly a service was done,
Let lovers say. A lonely man has no criterion.

INTERVIEWER

What in your reading or your background led you to write the way you do write? Was imagism a help to you?

MOORE

No. I wondered why anyone would adopt the term.

INTERVIEWER

The descriptiveness of your poems has nothing to do with them, you think?

MOORE

No; I really don't. I was rather sorry to be a pariah, or at least

that I had no connection with anything. But I *did* feel gratitude to *Others*.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you think your style of writing came from? Was it a gradual accumulation, out of your character? Or does it have literary antecedents?

MOORE

Not so far as I know. Ezra Pound said, "Someone has been reading Laforgue, and French authors." Well, sad to say, I had not read any of them until fairly recently. Retroactively I see that Francis Jammes's titles and treatment are a good deal like my own. I seem almost a plagiarist.

INTERVIEWER

And the extensive use of quotations?

MOORE

I was just trying to be honorable and not to steal things. I've always felt that if a thing had been said in the *best* way, how can you say it better? If I wanted to say something and somebody had said it ideally, then I'd take it but give the person credit for it. That's all there is to it. If you are charmed by an author, I think it's a very strange and invalid imagination that doesn't long to share it. Somebody else should read it, don't you think?

INTERVIEWER

Did any prose stylists help you in finding your poetic style? Elizabeth Bishop mentions Poe's prose in connection with your writing, and you have always made people think of Henry James.

MOORE

Prose stylists, very much. Dr. Johnson on Richard Savage: "He was in two months illegitimated by the Parliament, and disowned

by his mother, doomed to poverty and obscurity, and launched upon the ocean of life only that he might be swallowed by its quicksands, or dashed upon its rocks. . . . It was his peculiar happiness that he scarcely ever found a stranger whom he did not leave a friend; but it must likewise be added, that he had not often a friend long without obliging him to become a stranger." Or Edmund Burke on the colonies: "You can shear a wolf; but will he comply?" Or Sir Thomas Browne: "States are not governed by Ergotisms." He calls a bee "that industrious flie," and his home his "hive." His manner is a kind of erudition-proof sweetness. Or Sir Francis Bacon: "Civil War is like the heat of fever; a foreign war is like the heat of exercise." Or Cellini: "I had a dog, black as a mulberry . . . I was fuming with fury and swelling like an asp." Or Caesar's *Commentaries*, and Xenophon's *Cynegeticus:* the gusto and interest in every detail! In Henry James it is the essays and letters especially that affect me. In Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance:* his definiteness, his indigenously unmistakable accent. Charles Norman says in his biography of Ezra Pound that he said to a poet, "Nothing, *nothing,* that you couldn't in some circumstance, under stress of some emotion, *actually say.*" And Ezra said of Shakespeare and Dante, "Here we are with the masters; of neither can we say, 'He is the greater'; of each we must say, 'He is unexcelled.'"

INTERVIEWER

Do you have in your own work any favorites and unfavorites?

MOORE

Indeed, I do. I think the most difficult thing for me is to be satisfactorily lucid, yet have enough implication in it to suit myself. That's a problem. And I don't approve of my "enigmas," or as somebody said, "the not ungreen grass." I said to my mother one time, "How did you ever permit me to let this be printed?" And she said, "You didn't ask my advice."

INTERVIEWER

One time I heard you give a reading, and I think you said that you didn't like "In Distrust of Merits," which is one of your most popular poems.

MOORE

I do like it; it is sincere but I wouldn't call it a poem. It's truthful; it is testimony—to the fact that war is intolerable, and unjust.

INTERVIEWER

How can you call it not a poem, on what basis?

MOORE

Haphazard; as form, what has it? It is just a protest—disjointed, exclamatory. Emotion overpowered me. First this thought and then that.

INTERVIEWER

Your mother said that you hadn't asked her advice. Did you ever? Do you go for criticism to your family or friends?

MOORE

Well, not friends, but my brother if I get a chance. When my mother said "You didn't ask my advice" must have been years ago, because when I wrote "A Face," I had written something first about "the adder and the child with a bowl of porridge," and she said, "It won't do." "All right," I said, "but I have to produce something." Cyril Connolly had asked me for something for *Horizon*. So I wrote "A Face." That is one of the few things I ever set down that didn't give me any trouble. She said, "I like it." I remember that.

Then, much before that, I wrote "The Buffalo." I thought it would probably outrage a number of persons because it had to me a kind of pleasing jerky progress. I thought, "Well, if it seems bad my brother will tell me, and if it has a point he'll detect it." And

he said, with considerable gusto, "It takes my fancy." I was happy as could be.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever suppress anything because of family objections?

MOORE

Yes, "the adder and the child with a bowl of porridge." I never even wanted to improve it. You know, Mr. Saintsbury said that Andrew Lang wanted him to contribute something on Poe, and he did, and Lang returned it. Mr. Saintsbury said, "Once a thing has been rejected, I would not offer it to the most different of editors." That shocked me. I have offered a thing, submitted it thirty-five times. Not simultaneously, of course.

INTERVIEWER

A poem?

MOORE

Yes. I am very tenacious.

INTERVIEWER

Do people ever ask you to write poems for them?

MOORE

Continually. Everything from on the death of a dog to a little item for an album.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever write them?

MOORE

Oh, perhaps; usually quote something. Once when I was in the library we gave a party for Miss Leonard, and I wrote a line or two of doggerel about a bouquet of violets we gave her. It has no life

or point. It was meant well but didn't amount to anything. Then in college, I had a sonnet as an assignment. The epitome of weakness.

INTERVIEWER

I'm interested in asking about the principles, and the methods, of your way of writing. What is the rationale behind syllabic verse? How does it differ from free verse, in which the line length is controlled visually but not arithmetically?

MOORE

It never occurred to me that what I wrote was something to define. I am governed by the pull of the sentence as the pull of a fabric is governed by gravity. I like the end-stopped line and dislike the reversed order of words; like symmetry.

INTERVIEWER

How do you plan the shape of your stanzas? I am thinking of the poems, usually syllabic, which employ a repeated stanza form. Do you ever experiment with shapes before you write, by drawing lines on a page?

MOORE

Never, I never "plan" a stanza. Words cluster like chromosomes, determining the procedure. I may influence an arrangement or thin it, then try to have successive stanzas identical with the first. Spontaneous initial originality—say, impetus—seems difficult to reproduce consciously later. As Stravinsky said about pitch, "If I transpose it for some reason, I am in danger of losing the freshness of first contact and will have difficulty in recapturing its attractiveness."

No, I never "draw lines." I make a rhyme conspicuous, to me at a glance, by underlining with red, blue or other pencil—as many colors as I have rhymes to differentiate. However, if the phrases recur in too incoherent an architecture—as print—I notice that the words as a tune do not sound right. I may start a piece, find it obstructive, lack a way out, and not complete the thing for a year,

or years, am thrifty. I salvage anything promising and set it down in a small notebook.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder if the act of translating La Fontaine's *Fables* helped you as a writer.

MOORE

Indeed it did. It was the best help I've ever had. I suffered frustration. I'm so naive, so docile, I *tend* to take anybody's word for anything the person says, even in matters of art. The publisher who had commissioned the *Fables* died. I had no publisher. Well, I struggled on for a time and it didn't go very well. I thought, I'd better ask if they don't want to terminate the contract; then I could offer it elsewhere. I thought Macmillan, who took an interest in me, might like it. *Might*. The editor in charge of translations said, "Well, I studied French at Cornell, took a degree in French, I love French, and . . . well, I think you'd better put it away for a while." "How long?" I said. "About ten years; besides, it will hurt your own work. You won't write so well afterward."

"Oh," I said, "that's one reason I was undertaking it; I thought it would train me and give me momentum." Much dejected, I asked, "What is wrong? Have I not a good ear? Are the meanings not sound?"

"Well, there are conflicts," the editor reiterated, as it seemed to me, countless times. I don't know yet what they are or were. (A little "editorial.")

I said, "Don't write me an extenuating letter, please. Just send back the material in the envelope I put with it." I had submitted it in January and this was May. I had had a kind of uneasy hope that all would be well; meanwhile had volumes, hours, and years of work yet to do and might as well go on and do it, I had thought. The ultimatum was devastating.

At the same time Monroe Engel of the Viking Press wrote to me and said that he had supposed I had a commitment for my

Fables, but if I hadn't would I let the Viking Press see them? I feel an everlasting gratitude to him.

However, I said, "I can't offer you something which somebody else thinks isn't fit to print. I would have to have someone to stabilize it and guarantee that the meanings are sound."

Mr. Engel said, "Who do you think could do that? Whom would you like?"

I said, "Harry Levin," because he had written a cogent, very shrewd review of Edna St. Vincent Millay's and George Dillon's translation of Baudelaire. I admired its finesse.

Mr. Engel said, "I'll ask him. But you won't hear for a long time. He's very busy. And how much do you think we ought to offer him?"

"Well," I said, "not less than ten dollars a book; there would be no incentive in undertaking the bother of it, if it weren't twenty."

He said, "That would reduce your royalties too much on an advance."

I said, "I don't want an advance, wouldn't even consider one."

And then Harry Levin said, quite soon, that he would be glad to do it as a "refreshment against the chores of the term," but of course he would accept no remuneration. It was a very dubious refreshment, let me tell you. (He is precise, and not abusive, and did not "resign.")

INTERVIEWER

I've been asking you about your poems, which is of course what interests me most. But you were editor of *The Dial,* too, and I want to ask you a few things about that. You were editor from 1925 until it ended in 1929, I think. How did you first come to be associated with it?

MOORE

Let me see. I think I took the initiative. I sent the editors a couple of things and they sent them back. And Lola Ridge had a

party—she had a large apartment on a ground floor somewhere—and John Reed and Marsden Hartley, who was very confident with the brush, and Scofield Thayer, editor of *The Dial,* were there. And much to my disgust, we were induced each to read something we had written. And Scofield Thayer said of my piece, "Would you send that to us at *The Dial*?"

"I did send it," I said.

And he said, "Well, send it again." That is how it began, I think. Then he said, one time, "I'd like you to meet my partner, Sibley Watson," and invited me to tea at 152 West Thirteenth Street. I was impressed. Dr. Watson is rare. He said nothing, but what he did say was striking and the significance would creep over you because unanticipated. And they asked me to join the staff, at *The Dial*.

INTERVIEWER

I have just been looking at that magazine, the years when you edited it. It's an incredible magazine.

MOORE

The Dial? There *were* good things in it, weren't there?

INTERVIEWER

Yes. It combined George Saintsbury and Ezra Pound in the same issue. How do you account for it? What made it so good?

MOORE

Lack of fear, for one thing. We didn't care what other people said. I never knew a magazine that was so self-propulsive. Everybody liked what he was doing, and when we made grievous mistakes we were sorry but we laughed over them.

INTERVIEWER

Louise Bogan said that *The Dial* made clear "the obvious division between American avant-garde and American conventional

writing." Do you think this kind of division continues or has continued? Was this in any way a deliberate policy?

MOORE

I think that individuality was the great thing. We were not conforming to anything. We certainly didn't have a policy, except I remember hearing the word "intensity" very often. A thing must have "intensity." That seemed to be the criterion.

The thing applied to it, I think, that should apply to your own writing. As George Grosz said, at that last meeting he attended at the National Institute, "How did I come to be an artist? Endless curiosity, observation, research—and a great amount of joy in the thing." It was a matter of taking a liking to things. Things that were in accordance with your taste. I think that was it. And we didn't care how unhomogeneous they might seem. Didn't Aristotle say that it is the mark of a poet to see resemblances between apparently incongruous things? There was any amount of attraction about it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think there is anything in the change of literary life in America that would make *The Dial* different if it existed today under the same editors? Were there any special conditions in the twenties that made the literary life of America different?

MOORE

I think it is always about the same.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder, if it had survived into the thirties, if it might have made that rather dry literary decade a little better.

MOORE

I think so. Because we weren't in captivity to anything.

INTERVIEWER

Was it just finances that made it stop?

MOORE

No, it wasn't the depression. Conditions changed. Scofield Thayer had a nervous breakdown, and he didn't come to meetings. Dr. Watson was interested in photography—was studying medicine; is a doctor of medicine, and lived in Rochester. I was alone. I didn't know that Rochester was about a night's journey away, and I would say to Dr. Watson, "Couldn't you come in for a make-up meeting, or send us these manuscripts and say what you think of them?" I may, as usual, have exaggerated my enslavement and my preoccupation with tasks—writing letters and reading manuscripts. Originally I had said I would come if I didn't have to write letters and didn't have to see contributors. And presently I was doing both. I think it was largely chivalry—the decision to discontinue the magazine—because I didn't have time for work of my own.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder how you worked as an editor. Hart Crane complains, in one of his letters, that you rearranged "The Wine Menagerie" and changed the title. Do you feel that you were justified? Did you ask for revisions from many poets?

MOORE

No. We had an inflexible rule: do not ask changes of so much as a comma. Accept it or reject it. But in that instance I felt that in compassion I should disregard the rule. Hart Crane complains of me? Well, I complain of *him*. He liked *The Dial* and we liked him—friends, and with certain tastes in common. He was in dire need of money. It seemed careless not to so much as ask if he might like to make some changes ("like" in quotations). His gratitude was ardent and later his repudiation of it commensurate—he perhaps being in both instances under a disability with which I was

not familiar. (Penalizing us for compassion?) I say "us," and should say "me." Really I am not used to having people in that bemused state. He was so *anxious* to have us take that thing, and so *delighted*. "Well, if you would modify it a little," I said, "we would like it better." I never attended "their" wild parties, as Lachaise once said. It was lawless of me to suggest changes; I disobeyed.

INTERVIEWER

Have you had editors suggest changes to you? Changes in your own poems, I mean?

MOORE

No, but my ardor to be helped being sincere, I sometimes *induce* assistance: the *Times,* the *Herald Tribune, The New Yorker,* have a number of times had to patch and piece me out. If you have a genius of an editor, you are blessed: e.g., T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Harry Levin and others; Irita Van Doren and Miss Belle Rosenbaum.

Have I found "help" helpful? I certainly have; and in three instances when I was at *The Dial,* I hazarded suggestions the results of which were to me drama. Excoriated by Herman George Scheffauer for offering to suggest a verbal change or two in his translation of Thomas Mann's *Disorder and Early Sorrow,* I must have posted the suggestions before I was able to withdraw them. In any case, his joyous subsequent retraction of abuse, and his pleasure in the narrative, were not unwelcome. Gilbert Seldes strongly commended me for excisions proposed by me in his "Jonathan Edwards" (for *The Dial*); and I have not ceased to marvel at the overrating by Mark Van Doren of editorial conscience on my reverting (after an interval) to keeping some final lines I had wished he would omit. (Verse! but not a sonnet.)

We should try to judge the work of others by the most that it is, and our own, if not by the least that it is, take the least into consideration. I feel that I would not be worth a button if not grateful to be preserved from myself, and informed if what I have

written is not to the point. I think we should feel free, like La Fontaine's captious critic, to say, if asked, "Your phrases are too long, and the content is not good. Break up the type and put it in the font." As Kenneth Burke says in *Counter-Statement:* "[Great] artists feel as opportunity what others feel as a menace. This ability does not, I believe, derive from exceptional strength, it probably arises purely from professional interest the artist may take in his difficulties."

Lew Sarett says, in the *Poetry Society Bulletin,* we ask of a poet: Does this mean something? Does the poet say what he has to say and in his own manner? Does it stir the reader?

Shouldn't we replace vanity with honesty, as Robert Frost recommends? Annoyances abound. We should not find them lethal—a baffled printer's emendations for instance (my "elephant with frog-colored skin" instead of "fog-colored skin," and "the power of the invisible is the invisible," instead of "the power of the visible is the invisible") sounding like a parody on my meticulousness; a "glasshopper" instead of a "grasshopper."

INTERVIEWER

Editing *The Dial* must have acquainted you with the writers of the day whom you did not know already. Had you known Hart Crane earlier?

MOORE

Yes, I did. You remember *Broom*? Toward the beginning of that magazine, in 1921, Lola Ridge was very hospitable, and she invited to a party—previous to my work on *The Dial*—Kay Boyle and her husband, a French soldier, and Hart Crane, Elinor Wylie and some others. I took a great liking to Hart Crane. We talked about French bindings, and he was diffident and modest and seemed to have so much intuition, such a feel for things, for books—really a bibliophile—that I took special interest in him. And Dr. Watson and Scofield Thayer liked him—felt that he was

one of our talents, that he couldn't fit himself into an IBM position to find a livelihood; that we ought to, whenever we could, take anything he sent us.

I know a cousin of his, Joe Nowak, who is rather proud of him. He lives here in Brooklyn, and is* at the Dry Dock Savings Bank and used to work in antiques. Joe was very convinced of Hart's sincerity and his innate love of all that I have specified. Anyhow, *The Bridge* is a grand theme. Here and there I think he could have firmed it up. A writer is unfair to himself when he is unable to be hard on himself.

INTERVIEWER

Did Crane have anything to do with *Others*?

MOORE

Others antedated *Broom*. *Others* was Alfred Kreymborg and Skipwith Cannéll, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams. Wallace Stevens—odd; I nearly met him a dozen times before I did meet him in 1943 at Mount Holyoke, at the college's *Entretiens de Pontigny* of which Professor Gustave Cohen was chairman. Wallace Stevens was Henry Church's favorite American poet. Mr. Church had published him and some others, and me, in *Mésure,* in Paris. Raymond Queneau translated us.

During the French program at Mount Holyoke one afternoon Wallace Stevens had a discourse, the one about Goethe dancing on a packet boat in black wool stockings. My mother and I were there; and I gave a reading with commentary. Henry Church had an astoundingly beautiful Panama hat—a sort of porkpie with a wide brim, a little like Bernard Berenson's hats. I have never seen as fine a weave, and he had a pepper-and-salt shawl which he draped about himself. This lecture was on the lawn.

Wallace Stevens was extremely friendly. We should have had a tape recorder on that occasion, for at lunch they seated us all at a

* *Was*; killed; his car run into by a reckless driver in April 1961. —M. M.

kind of refectory table and a girl kept asking him questions such as, "Mr. Stevens, have you read the—*Four—Quartets*?"

"Of course, but I can't read much of Eliot or I wouldn't have any individuality of my own."

INTERVIEWER

Do you read new poetry now? Do you try to keep up?

MOORE

I am always seeing it—am sent some every day. Some, good. But it does interfere with my work. I can't get much done. Yet I would be a monster if I tossed everything away without looking at it; I write more notes, letters, cards in an hour than is sane.

Although everyone is penalized by being quoted inexactly, I wonder if there is anybody alive whose remarks are so often paraphrased as mine—printed as verbatim. It is really martyrdom. In his book *Ezra Pound,* Charles Norman was very scrupulous. He got several things exactly right. The first time I met Ezra Pound, when he came here to see my mother and me, I said that Henry Eliot seemed to me more nearly the artist than anyone I had ever met. "Now, now," said Ezra. "Be careful." Maybe that isn't exact, but he quotes it just the way I said it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you mean Henry Ware Eliot, T.S. Eliot's brother?

MOORE

Yes. After the Henry Eliots moved from Chicago to New York to—is it Sixty-eighth Street? It's the street on which Hunter College is—to an apartment there, they invited me to dinner, I should think at T.S. Eliot's suggestion, and I took to them immediately. I felt as if I'd known them a great while. It was some time before I felt that way about T.S. Eliot.

About inaccuracies—when I went to see Ezra Pound at St. Elizabeths, about the third time I went, the official who escorted

me to the grounds said, "Good of you to come to see him," and I said, "Good? You have no idea how much he has done for me, and others." This pertains to an early rather than final visit.

I was not in the habit of asking experts or anybody else to help me with things that I was doing, unless it was a librarian or someone whose business it was to help applicants; or a teacher. But I was desperate when Macmillan declined my *Fables*. I had worked about four years on them and sent Ezra Pound several—although I hesitated. I didn't like to bother him. He had enough trouble without that; but finally I said, "Would you have time to tell me if the rhythms grate on you? Is my ear not good?"

INTERVIEWER

He replied?

MOORE

Yes, said, "The least touch of merit upsets these blighters."

INTERVIEWER

When you first read Pound in 1916, did you recognize him as one of the great ones?

MOORE

Surely did. *The Spirit of Romance*. I don't think anybody could read that book and feel that a flounderer was writing.

INTERVIEWER

What about the early poems?

MOORE

Yes. They seemed a little didactic, but I liked them.

INTERVIEWER

I wanted to ask you a few questions about poetry in general. Somewhere you have said that originality is a by-product of sin-

cerity. You often use moral terms in your criticism. Is the necessary morality specifically literary, a moral use of words, or is it larger? In what way must a man be good if he is to write good poems?

MOORE

If emotion is strong enough, the words are unambiguous. Someone asked Robert Frost (is that right?) if he was selective. He said, "Call it passionate preference." Must a man be good to write good poems? The villains in Shakespeare are not illiterate, are they? But rectitude *has* a ring that is implicative, I would say. And with *no* integrity, a man is not likely to write the kind of book I read.

INTERVIEWER

Eliot, in his introduction to your *Selected Poems,* talks about your function as poet relative to the living language, as he calls it. Do you agree that this is a function of a poet? How does the poetry have the effect on the living language? What's the mechanics of it?

MOORE

You accept certain modes of saying a thing. Or strongly repudiate things. You do something of your own, you modify, invent a variant or revive a root meaning. Any doubt about that?

INTERVIEWER

I want to ask you a question about your correspondence with the Ford Motor Company, those letters that were printed in *The New Yorker*. They were looking for a name for the car they eventually called the Edsel, and they asked you to think of a name that would make people admire the car—

MOORE

Elegance and grace, they said it would have—

INTERVIEWER

" . . . some visceral feeling of elegance, fleetness, advanced

features and design. A name, in short, that flashes a dramatically desirable picture in people's minds."

MOORE

Really?

INTERVIEWER

That's what they said, in their first letter to you. I was thinking about this in connection with my question about language. Do you remember Pound's talk about expression and meaning? He says that when expression and meaning are far apart, the culture is in a bad way. I was wondering if this request doesn't ask you to remove expression a bit further from meaning.

MOORE

No, I don't think so. At least, to exposit the irresistibleness of the car. I got deep in motors and turbines and recessed wheels. No. That seemed to me a very worthy pursuit. I was more interested in the mechanics. I am interested in mechanisms, mechanics in general. And I enjoyed the assignment, for all that it was abortive. Dr. Pick at Marquette University procured a young demonstrator of the Edsel to call for me in a black one, to convey me to the auditorium. Nothing was wrong with that Edsel! I thought it was a very handsome car. It came out the wrong year.

INTERVIEWER

Another thing: in your criticism you make frequent analogies between the poet and the scientist. Do you think this analogy is helpful to the modern poet? Most people would consider the comparison a paradox, and assume that the poet and the scientist are opposed.

MOORE

Do the poet and scientist not work analogously? Both are willing to waste effort. To be hard on himself is one of the main

strengths of each. Each is attentive to clues, each must narrow the choice, must strive for precision. As George Grosz says, "In art there is no place for gossip and but a small place for the satirist." The objective is fertile procedure. Is it not? Jacob Bronowski says in *The Saturday Evening Post* that science is not a mere collection of discoveries, but that science is the process of discovering. In any case it's not established once and for all; it's evolving.

INTERVIEWER

One last question. I was intrigued when you wrote that "America has in Wallace Stevens at least one artist whom professionalism will not demolish." What sort of literary professionalism did you have in mind? And do you find this a feature of America still?

MOORE

Yes. I think that writers sometimes lose verve and pugnacity, and he never would say "frame of reference" or "I wouldn't know." A question I am often asked is: "What work can I find that will enable me to spend my whole time writing?" Charles Ives, the composer, says, "You cannot set art off in a corner and hope for it to have vitality, reality, and substance. The fabric weaves itself whole. My work in music helped my business and my work in business helped my music." I am like Charles Ives. I guess Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller would not agree with me.

INTERVIEWER

But how does professionalism make a writer lose his verve and pugnacity?

MOORE

Money may have something to do with it, and being regarded as a pundit; Wallace Stevens was really very much annoyed at being cataloged, categorized, and compelled to be scientific about what he was doing—to give satisfaction, to answer the teachers. He wouldn't do that. I think the same of William Carlos Williams.

I think he wouldn't make so much of the great American language if he were plausible; and tractable. That's the beauty of it; he is willing to be reckless; if you can't be that, what's the point of the whole thing?

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