

## CLOSET POET



*Dennis O'Driscoll*

BONNIE COSTELLO, CELESTE GOODRIDGE  
AND CRISTANNE MILLER (EDS.),

*The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore.* Faber & Faber, stg £30.

Marianne Moore's longest poem is called "Marriage"; and, on the cover of her *Selected Letters*, she looks like the twinkle-eyed grandmother of the bride: wide-brimmed hat, white gloves, brooch, elegant braided jacket and pearl-buttoned pleated blouse. In reality, though, she never became a grandmother or bride; a passing reference to "7 suitors" notwithstanding, there is only one serious hint in these 550 pages of letters that marriage was a possibility; this occurs, not in correspondence with an intimate friend, but in a business letter to a monumental mason. Paying a deposit on the cost of her mother's Vermont marble headstone, she tells the mason that—despite the fact that she does not "expect to marry" (she was 60 at the time)—"it would be best to have my name engraved...below my mother's as planned, but to leave space for a line beneath it (*above my date of birth*) were a line ever to be inserted there, designating marriage". How the mason, Mr Meals, reacted to this convoluted instruction is not divulged; readers of her poems will, however, recall her depiction of marriage as "this amalgamation which can never be more / than an interesting impossibility".

One factor which would have made it impossible for Marianne Moore to marry was her single-minded devotion to her mother, Mary, who was 85 when Mr Meals's monumental efforts were called for. Her family circle, or rather triangle (Moore never met her father), also included her brother, Warner, with whom she corresponded so regularly and at such length that her later letters to him had to be destroyed in order to assuage his wife's jealousy. The introduction to this book notes that "The Rosenbach Museum and Library, which houses the correspondence between members of the Moore family, lists over 13,500 leaves (often written in small hand on both sides)" between the years 1905—when Moore entered Bryn Mawr College—and 1947. Nothing in Marianne Moore's life was complete until relatives had been informed. Warner, the worshipped brother, is addressed as Bible in certain letters; but, like Mary (variously called Bunny, Mole, Mouse, Bear and Fawn), Warner is assigned animal names

too—canine ones, like Biter, as well as Toad, Turtle and Badger. A letter from Marianne to 57 year-old Warner begins “Dearest Elephant-Ears, Your brother is back from Bryn Mawr”. The “brother” alluded to here is none other than Marianne, who sometimes referred to herself in the third person and the masculine gender; even the assiduous editors of this volume cannot quite make sense of the opening remarks about herself (“Willow”) which she makes in another letter to Warren: “Willow has exhibited his coon at two drug stores for 50 cents in each case and was only induced by his Uncle Snapper to liberate it...” No wonder Marianne Moore was so expert at avoiding self-exposure in her poetry.

Moore’s student correspondence is atwitter with news of her crushes at the all-female Bryn Mawr; there are intense friendships (“terribly fond”), special relationships (“I’ve just been out walking with Frances (B). She is ‘it’ for me”), fallings-out and makings-up. But—given the limited evidence—it would be idle to speculate too much about Moore’s sexuality; it would be intrusive also: one of the most attractive aspects of her work is—to use a phrase of her own—its “reticent candor”, the ability to be individual without being personal, to adumbrate but not to confess. Rifling through her correspondence might in itself constitute behaviour unbecoming were it not for the fact that her letters—written with a chiselled elegance that would do credit to any monumental mason—clearly meant a great deal to their author. Even as a student, she was evaluating their literary merits (“My letters are better than my stories...”). She later expressed herself “most impatient to read Flaubert’s correspondence” and her review of a selection of Emily Dickinson’s letters praised the book for enabling one “to forget the ruses and dust-observed emulations of ambitious biography.”

A biographer in search of character traits would find Moore’s letters extremely revealing—not in content, but as confirmation of their author’s tireless professionalism and conscientiousness. It is clear that she responded promptly and comprehensively to all letters—whether from friends, fellow-poets or the readers and autograph-hunters whose “tons of irrelevant mail” necessitated up to fifty or sixty replies a day in the last decades of her life; as she declares in her poem, “Bowls”, “he who gives quickly gives twice / in nothing so much as in a letter”.

T.S. Eliot, H.D., Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams were among Moore’s earliest literary regulars; indeed, it is astonishing how soon after graduation from Bryn Mawr—where she was advised “not to major in Eng. if I want to be sure of my degree”—she was publishing poems in magazines like *Poetry* and *The Egotist* and edging close to the centre of influential literary and artistic circles. Moore, born in 1887, had grown up in Missouri and Pennsylvania; an ambitious and determined perfectionist,

her move with her mother to New York City in 1918 provided what her beloved Henry James called—in a phrase she cited at the end of her poem, “New York”—“accessibility to experience”.

By 1925, Fangs (another of Moore’s pet names) was top dog at *The Dial*, one of the best literary magazines of the time. During her four-year editorship (the journal closed for financial reasons in 1929), she wrote no poems but published terse, densely-argued, quotation-laden criticism and “comment”; and there were innumerable business and editorial letters (she took critical secateurs to any over-luxuriant work submitted). D.H. Lawrence was one of the more revered contributors with whom she corresponded. While Marianne, whose family sobriquets also included Weaz, Rat, Gator and Basilisk, was an animal-lover by nature as well as name and could be counted on to savour some of Lawrence’s poetry (“Snake” was a special favourite), one wonders how she overcame her puritanical instincts to do business directly with the author of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

Moore was an original, with an eye for originals, and she had a confidence in her judgement derived from her Bryn Mawr “literary apprenticeship” and the unconditional approval she enjoyed from her family; yet, the puritanical side surfaced sometimes. “Prudery and conventionality” were among the accusations levelled against her by contributors unhappy with what they regarded as the narrowness of her *Dial* code of conduct. She loved *Dubliners* and *Chamber Music* but was out of sympathy with *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Even the use by Elizabeth Bishop of “water-closet”, in the poem “Roosters”, was too much for Moore to stomach; she remarked to her fellow-poet: “If I tell Mother there is a feather on her dress and she says, ‘On my back?’ I am likely to say, ‘No. On your rump,’ alluding to Cowper’s hare that ‘swung his rump around’. But in my work, I daren’t risk saying, ‘My mother had a feather on her rump.’”

The plot of Marianne Moore’s friendship with Elizabeth Bishop has been too often rehearsed to need a repeat performance here. But the publication of Moore’s letters within a few years of Bishop’s (*One Art*, 1994) means that, in some cases, both sides of the story can now be heard at first-hand. The fact that Bishop’s correspondence was published within fifteen years of her death, whereas Moore’s has had to wait twenty-five years, accurately reflects the current state of their respective reputations. Bishop is now praised beyond the limits of her undoubtedly genuine and important achievement, whereas Moore’s present reputation is no match for her exquisite talent. If Bishop is a bishop, then Moore—*il miglior fabbro*—is a cardinal.

Though busily observing and describing, Moore’s verse is marked by poise and sang-froid. It is not that she has tamed the world but that she has ordered it, sometimes grappling with tricky syllabics and knotty

rhyme schemes in the struggle to do so. With her devastating eye, moral mind and inscrutable countenance, she might be America's Wislawa Szymborska. Michael Hamburger associates Moore with the "anti-poets" of Eastern Europe; for all her social orthodoxy and decorum, she was a nonconformist—even revolutionary—poet. If part of the pleasure of Moore's poetry lies in seeing the rules broken with metre-defying panache, the fact that the rule-breaker is a law-abiding, God-fearing woman who cannot reconcile herself to the use of "water-closet" adds to the diverting improbability of the spectacle.

What the best of Moore's letters share with her poems is a refusal to accept a drably functional world—her dazzling descriptive powers are deployed as a blow against the mundane. She reconciles us to the world by presenting incontrovertible evidence of its marvels, drawing up an inventory of its assets like some unimaginably articulate estate agent. We may smile in recognition at the ostrich "whose comic duckling head on its / great neck revolves with compass-needle nervousness / when he stands guard", but with less familiar animals (such as the jerboa) the more exact the description the more fascinatingly incredible the creature that answers to it: "It hops like the fawn-breast, but has / chipmunk contours...Its leaps should be set / to the flageolet; / pillar body erect / on a three-cornered smooth-working Chippendale / claw".

Moore's descriptive gifts do not desert her in her letters; indeed, many of the early letters are like sketchpads for poems. No detail escapes her: visiting a critic's "quarters", she notes for Warner that the cushions were "panne velvet and African brown taffeta with ruffles"; on another occasion, she tells him of seeing at the zoo "a blue bird of paradise from New Guinea—with a jet black head and breast like sealskin—black shoe button eyes with a dazzling white line above and below each eye, two long limber black tail feathers, a haze of cinnamon brown feathers back of each leg and a similar smoketree of bright blue under the tail". As time passes, one senses that the best lyrical observation is being conserved to meet the incessant demand for poems and articles, though the letters never entirely lose their descriptive bite—as when she excitedly thanks Elizabeth Bishop for a package containing "the snake-fangs, the rattle, the alligator-teeth, and the shells": "The rattle in nine or ten ways is a mechanism of inexhaustible interest. I foolishly used to imagine that it was a series of pockets with little 'nasturtium-seeds' in them, and am amazed to see this nesting of a chained membrane in another membrane. Also the varied tones of the brown when the rattle is held up to the light, suggest a great many things."

Moore's knowledge of the natural world is very much a city dweller's, gleaned from magazines like *The National Geographic* and visits to zoos,

circuses, and museums. One likes to think that, had she lived long enough, she would have pitched in support for the ecology movement as energetically as she did for baseball. It is, however, surprising to find no reference to Rachel Carson or *Silent Spring* in this book or in her *Complete Prose*. Having been radical when young (socialist and suffragetist), she became conservative when older (“a staunch Republican who supported Hoover over Roosevelt”); while firmly distancing herself from anti-Semitic sentiments, she lapsed into the hectoring phonetics of Ezra Poundspeak when writing to the old know-all: “I hated George Meany till he said he was agoing to get to Washington to tell Nayroo to his face that he is a Russian Agent”. Overall, the style of these letters ranges from the simple (“Shakespeare is certainly hard to beat”, addressed to Warner) to the mixture of mannered and good-mannered which—addressing to impress—she resorted to in correspondence with figures like T.S. Eliot: “I received a few days ago your play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and you are truly to be thanked; also to be envied, because the triumph of living is to influence others; sorry as one is that there should be knowledge that would make the writing of some parts of it possible.”

This book of eloquent and engaging letters will not hold much appeal for non-specialist readers. Far less entertaining than Larkin’s, far less gossipy than Plath’s, the correspondence can be stiff and stilted and self-consciously Jamesian in places—Moore rarely unbraids her hair outside of the family; letting it down would be to let herself down... Nonetheless, there is some wonderful writing in this volume and devotees of Moore’s ingenious poems will hang on to every word, paragraph and P.S. Discreetly and efficiently edited though it is, for the most part, the book does contain blemishes at the level of annotation, indexing and dating. Why, to give just one example, is a question mark needed in dating a letter (to Louise Crane) “February 14 [1940?]”, when internal information in the letter—readily verifiable against Bishop’s *One Art*—leaves no doubt whatsoever as to the year in question?

Feisty, fussy, funny, prim, punctual, lovable and exasperating—one misses hearing from Miss Moore when her cape and tricorne hat disappear into the void. Actually, because of illness, the flow of letters ceases some years before her death in 1972: the last post is dated January 3 1969—“I still want to paint”, she tells Elizabeth Bishop and her companion in that final letter, “—all the fur on my bushy best paintbrush-brush eaten up by a moth.” Marianne Moore was a collage artist more than painter, incorporating newspaper cuttings and magazine images into her poems—poems which remain mothproof and timeproof.