

Selected Poems by Marianne Moore (1887-1972)

Poetry¹

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important
beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,
one discovers that there is in
it after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not be-
cause a

high sounding interpretation can be put upon them
but because they are
useful; 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. The bat,
holding on upside down or in quest of some-
thing to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll,
a tireless wolf under
a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a
horse that feels a flea, the base-
ball fan, the statistician – case after case
could be cited did
one wish it; nor is it valid
to discriminate against "business documents
and

school-books"; all these phenomena are important.
One must make a distinction
however: when dragged into prominence by half
poets,
the result is not poetry,
nor till the autocrats among us can be
"literalists of
the imagination" – above
insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads
in them, shall we have
it. In the meantime, if you demand on one hand,
in defiance of their opinion –
the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness, and
that which is on the other hand,
genuine, then you are interested in poetry.

¹ First published in 1919 in *Others: A Magazine of the New Verse*

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POETRY²

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² As revised and published in *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, 1967.

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A Graveyard²

Man, looking into the sea—
taking the view from those who have as much right to it as you have it to yourself—
it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing
but you cannot stand in the middle of this:
the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave.
The firs stand in a procession—each with an emerald turkey-foot at the top—
reserved as their contours, saying nothing;
repression, however, is not the most obvious characteristic of the sea;
the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look.
There are others besides you who have worn that look—
whose expression is no longer a protest; the fish no longer investigate them
for their bones have not lasted;
men lower nets, unconscious of the fact that they are desecrating a grave,
and row quickly away—the blades of the oars
moving together like the feet of water-spiders as if there were no such thing as death.
The wrinkles progress upon themselves in a phalanx—beautiful under networks of foam,
and fade breathlessly while the sea rustles in and out of the seaweed;
the birds swim through the air at top speed, emitting cat-calls as heretofore—
the tortoise-shell scourges about the feet of the cliffs, in motion beneath them
and the ocean, under the pulsation of light-houses and noise of bell-buoys,
advances as usual, looking as if it were not that ocean in which dropped things are bound to sink—
in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition nor consciousness.

² First appearing in *The Dial*, 1921. Published in her collection, *Observations*, in 1924.

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THE STUDENT³

"In America," began
the lecturer, "everyone must have a
degree. The French do not think that
all can have it, they don't say everyone
must go to college." We
incline to feel
that although it may be unnecessary

to know fifteen languages,
one degree is not too much. With us, a
school—like the singing tree of which
the leaves were mouths singing in concertis
both a tree of knowledge
and of liberty—
seen in the unanimity of college

mottoes, *Lux et veritas,*
Christo et ecclesiae, Sapient
felici. It may be that we
have not knowledge, just opinions, that we
are undergraduates,
not students; we know
we have been told with smiles, by expatriates

of whom we had asked "When will
your experiment be finished?" "Science
is never finished." Secluded
from domestic strife, Jack Bookworm led a
college life, says Goldsmith;

and here also as
in France or Oxford, study is beset with
dangers, —with bookworms, mildews,
and complaisancies. But someone in New
England has known enough to say
the student is patience personified,
is a variety
of hero, "patient
of neglect and of reproach" -who can "hold by

himself. " You can't beat hens to
make them lay. Wolf's wool is the best of wool,
but it cannot be sheared because
the wolf will not comply. With knowledge as
with the wolf's surliness,
the student studies
voluntarily, refusing to be less

than individual. He
"gives his opinion and then rests on it" ;
he renders service when there is
no reward, and is too reclusive for
some things to seem to touch
him, not because he
has no feeling but because he has so much.

³ First published in 1941 in *What Are Years?*