

Classic Poetry Series

Marianne Clarke Moore

- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Marriage

This institution,
perhaps one should say enterprise
out of respect for which
one says one need not change one's mind
about a thing one has believed in,
requiring public promises
of one's intention
to fulfill a private obligation:
I wonder what Adam and Eve
think of it by this time,
this firegilt steel
alive with goldenness;
how bright it shows --
"of circular traditions and impostures,
committing many spoils,"
requiring all one's criminal ingenuity
to avoid!
Psychology which explains everything
explains nothing
and we are still in doubt.
Eve: beautiful woman --
I have seen her
when she was so handsome
she gave me a start,
able to write simultaneously
in three languages --
English, German and French
and talk in the meantime;
equally positive in demanding a commotion
and in stipulating quiet:
"I should like to be alone;"
to which the visitor replies,
"I should like to be alone;
why not be alone together?"
Below the incandescent stars
below the incandescent fruit,
the strange experience of beauty;
its existence is too much;
it tears one to pieces
and each fresh wave of consciousness
is poison.
"See her, see her in this common world,"
the central flaw
in that first crystal-fine experiment,
this amalgamation which can never be more
than an interesting possibility,
describing it
as "that strange paradise
unlike flesh, gold, or stately buildings,
the choicest piece of my life:
the heart rising
in its estate of peace

as a boat rises
with the rising of the water;"
constrained in speaking of the serpent --
that shed snakeskin in the history of politeness
not to be returned to again --
that invaluable accident
exonerating Adam.
And he has beauty also;
it's distressing -- the O thou
to whom, from whom,
without whom nothing -- Adam;
"something feline,
something colubrine" -- how true!
a crouching mythological monster
in that Persian miniature of emerald mines,
raw silk -- ivory white, snow white,
oyster white and six others --
that paddock full of leopards and giraffes --
long lemonyellow bodies
sown with trapezoids of blue.
Alive with words,
vibrating like a cymbal
touched before it has been struck,
he has prophesied correctly --
the industrious waterfall,
"the speedy stream
which violently bears all before it,
at one time silent as the air
and now as powerful as the wind."
"Treading chasms
on the uncertain footing of a spear,"
forgetting that there is in woman
a quality of mind
which is an instinctive manifestation
is unsafe,
he goes on speaking
in a formal, customary strain
of "past states," the present state,
seals, promises,
the evil one suffered,
the good one enjoys,
hell, heaven,
everything convenient
to promote one's joy."
There is in him a state of mind
by force of which,
perceiving what it was not
intended that he should,
"he experiences a solemn joy
in seeing that he has become an idol."
Plagued by the nightingale
in the new leaves,

with its silence --
not its silence but its silences,
he says of it:
"It clothes me with a shirt of fire."
"He dares not clap his hands
to make it go on
lest it should fly off;
if he does nothing, it will sleep;
if he cries out, it will not understand."
Unnerved by the nightingale
and dazzled by the apple,
impelled by "the illusion of a fire
effectual to extinguish fire,"
compared with which
the shining of the earth
is but deformity -- a fire
"as high as deep as bright as broad
as long as life itself,"
he stumbles over marriage,
"a very trivial object indeed"
to have destroyed the attitude
in which he stood --
the ease of the philosopher
unfathered by a woman.
Unhelpful Hymen!
"a kind of overgrown cupid"
reduced to insignificance
by the mechanical advertising
parading as involuntary comment,
by that experiment of Adam's
with ways out but no way in --
the ritual of marriage,
augmenting all its lavishness;
its fiddle-head ferns,
lotus flowers, opuntias, white dromedaries,
its hippopotamus --
nose and mouth combined
in one magnificent hopper,
"the crested screamer --
that huge bird almost a lizard,"
its snake and the potent apple.
He tells us
that "for love
that will gaze an eagle blind,
that is like a Hercules
climbing the trees
in the garden of the Hesperides,
from forty-five to seventy
is the best age,"
commending it
as a fine art, as an experiment,
a duty or as merely recreation.

One must not call him ruffian
 nor friction a calamity --
 the fight to be affectionate:
 "no truth can be fully known
 until it has been tried
 by the tooth of disputation."
 The blue panther with black eyes,
 the basalt panther with blue eyes,
 entirely graceful --
 one must give them the path --
 the black obsidian Diana
 who "darkeneth her countenance
 as a bear doth,
 causing her husband to sigh,"
 the spiked hand
 that has an affection for one
 and proves it to the bone,
 impatient to assure you
 that impatience is the mark of independence
 not of bondage.
 "Married people often look that way" --
 "seldom and cold, up and down,
 mixed and malarial
 with a good day and bad."
 "When do we feed?"
 We occidentals are so unemotional,
 we quarrel as we feed;
 one's self is quite lost,
 the irony preserved
 in "the Ahasuerus & the banquet"
 with its "good monster, lead the way,"
 with little laughter
 and munificence of humor
 in that quixotic atmosphere of frankness
 in which "Four o'clock does not exist
 but at five o'clock
 the ladies in their imperious humility
 are ready to receive you";
 in which experience attests
 that men have power
 and sometimes one is made to feel it.
 He says, "what monarch would not blush
 to have a wife
 with hair like a shaving-brush?
 The fact of woman
 is not `the sound of the flute
 but every poison."
 She says, "`Men are monopolists
 of stars, garters, buttons
 and other shining baubles' --
 unfit to be the guardians
 of another person's happiness."

He says, "These mummies
must be handled carefully --
` the crumbs from a lion's meal,
a couple of shins and the bit of an ear';
turn to the letter M
and you will find
that ` a wife is a coffin,'
that severe object
with the pleasing geometry
stipulating space and not people,
refusing to be buried
and uniquely disappointing,
revengefully wrought in the attitude
of an adoring child
to a distinguished parent."
She says, "This butterfly,
this waterfly, this nomad
that has ` proposed
to settle on my hand for life.' --
What can one do with it?
There must have been more time
in Shakespeare's day
to sit and watch a play.
You know so many artists are fools."
He says, "You know so many fools
who are not artists."
The fact forgot
that "some have merely rights
while some have obligations,"
he loves himself so much,
he can permit himself
no rival in that love.
She loves herself so much,
she cannot see herself enough --
a statuette of ivory on ivory,
the logical last touch
to an expansive splendor
earned as wages for work done:
one is not rich but poor
when one can always seem so right.
What can one do for them --
these savages
condemned to disaffect
all those who are not visionaries
alert to undertake the silly task
of making people noble?
This model of petrine fidelity
who "leaves her peaceful husband
only because she has seen enough of him" --
that orator reminding you,
"I am yours to command."
"Everything to do with love is mystery;

it is more than a day's work
to investigate this science."
One sees that it is rare --
that striking grasp of opposites
opposed each to the other, not to unity,
which in cycloid inclusiveness
has dwarfed the demonstration
of Columbus with the egg --
a triumph of simplicity --
that charitive Euroclydon
of frightening disinterestedness
which the world hates,
admitting:

"I am such a cow,
if I had a sorrow,
I should feel it a long time;
I am not one of those
who have a great sorrow
in the morning
and a great joy at noon;"
which says: "I have encountered it
among those unpretentious
protégés of wisdom,
where seeming to parade
as the debater and the Roman,
the statesmanship
of an archaic Daniel Webster
persists to their simplicity of temper
as the essence of the matter:

`Liberty and union
now and forever;'

the book on the writing-table;
the hand in the breast-pocket."

Marianne Clarke Moore

Peter

Strong and slippery, built for the midnight grass-party confronted by four cats,
he sleeps his time away -- the detached first claw on his foreleg which corresponds
to the thumb, retracted to its tip; the small tuft of fronds
or katydid legs above each eye, still numbering the units in each group;
the shadbones regularly set about his mouth, to droop or rise
in unison like the porcupine's quills -- motionless. He lets himself be flat­
tened out by gravity, as it were a piece of seaweed tamed and weakened by
exposure to the sun; compelled when extended, to lie
stationary. Sleep is the result of his delusion that one must do as
well as one can for oneself; sleep -- epitome of what is to

him as to the average person, the end of life. Demonstrate on him how
the lady caught the dangerous southern snake, placing a forked stick on either
side of its innocuous neck; one need not try to stir
him up; his prune shaped head and alligator eyes are not a party to the
joke. Lifted and handled, he may be dangled like an eel or set

up on the forearm like a mouse; his eyes bisected by pupils of a pin's
width, are flickeringly exhibited, then covered up. May be? I should say,
might have been; when he has been got the better of in a
dream -- as in a fight with nature or with cats -- we all know it. Profound sleep is
not with him, a fixed illusion. Springing about with froglike ac­

curacy, emitting jerky cries when taken in the hand, he is himself
again; to sit caged by the rungs of a domestic chair would be unprofit­
able -- human. What is the good of hypocrisy? It
is permissible to choose one's employment, to abandon the wire nail, the
roly-poly, when it shows signs of being no longer a pleas­

ure, to score the adjacent magazine with a double line of strokes. He can
talk, but insolently says nothing. What of it? When one is frank, one's very
presence is a compliment. It is clear that he can see
the virtue of naturalness, that he is one of those who do not regard
the published fact as a surrender. As for the disposition

invariably to affront, an animal with claws wants to have to use
them; that eel-like extension of trunk into tail is not an accident. To
leap, to lengthen out, divide the air -- to purloin, to pursue.
to tell the hen: fly over the fence, go in the wrong way -- in your perturba­
tion -- this is life; to do less would be nothing but dishonesty.

Marianne Clarke Moore

Poetry

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 because 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 something 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 --
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 poets 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,
the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, then you are interested in poetry.

Marianne Clarke Moore

Silence

My father used to say,
"Superior people never make long visits,
have to be shown Longfellow's grave
nor the glass flowers at Harvard.
Self reliant like the cat --
that takes its prey to privacy,
the mouse's limp tail hanging like a shoelace from its mouth --
they sometimes enjoy solitude,
and can be robbed of speech
by speech which has delighted them.
The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;
not in silence, but restraint."
Nor was he insincere in saying, "` Make my house your inn'."
Inns are not residences.

Marianne Clarke Moore

To an Intra-mural Rat

You make me think of many men
Once met, to be forgot again
Or merely resurrected
In a parenthesis of wit
That found them hastening through it
Too brisk to be inspected.

Marianne Clarke Moore