

POETICALLY SPEAKING

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WHEN I BUY PICTURES

BY

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COMMENTS

BY

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WHEN I BUY PICTURES

or what is closer to the truth, when I look at
that of which I may regard myself as the
imaginary possessor, I fix upon that which would
give me pleasure in my average moments: the satire upon curiosity,
in which no more is discernible than the intensity of the mood;

or quite the opposite—the old thing, the medi-
æval decorated hat box, in which there
are hounds with waists diminishing like the waist of the hour-glass
and deer, both white and brown, and birds and seated people; it may be no more than a square
of parquetry; the literal biography perhaps—in letters stand-

ing well apart upon a parchment-like expanse;
or that which is better without words, which means
just as much or just as little as it is understood to
mean by the observer—the grave of Adam, prefigured by himself; a bed of beans
or artichokes in six varieties of blue; the snipe-legged hiero-

glyphic in three parts; it may be anything. Too
stern an intellectual emphasis, i-
ronic or other—upon this quality or that, detracts
from one's enjoyment; it must not wish to disarm anything; nor may the approved tri-
umph easily be honoured—that which is great because something else is small.

It comes to this: of whatever sort it is, it
must make known the fact that it has been displayed
to acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it;
and it must admit that it is the work of X, if X produced it; of Y, if made
by Y. It must be a voluntary gift with the name written on it.

I have read that Marianne Moore (Moore from here on) was one of the modernists. This may well have been true because of the unorthodoxy of her poetry in terms of construction and presentation. It was different, and did not meet with great approval. However, I do not think it was a matter of making the effort to be different. This was how she wrote, with purpose and patience. As to any similarity to others, definitely not Eliot, Pound or HD. My personal opinion is that there is something reminiscent of Williams.

The word modernist is quite a hideous word to use to describe a poet or their work. As to what this actually means is mostly according to personal opinion, like poetry itself. It often refers to the period of 1890 to 1950, but this can always be disputed. Most of the so-called modernists made a shift away from the personal toward the intellectual.

It is without a doubt that we may be tempted to assume Moore as being rather eccentric in her poetic compositions. More so, she had a style of her own which many would find quite disturbing to say the least. Many of Moore's poems that I have read come to me as a conversation of sorts, or a stream of consciousness becoming the written word. This is all very interesting, and all is from a person with a very different understanding of the world around them.

Having read this poem many times, I find it a most charming and meaningful poem. There is also something very innocent and honest about it—a truth you could say. The apparent lack of capitalization and unorthodox hyphenation may raise some eyebrows until we understand what is happening.

What we may note is that the last stanza begins with a capital letter whereas the only others appear in the fourth stanza. Otherwise there is an apparent lack of capitalization apart from the name Adam in the third stanza. As for the lack of capitalization, we find that the the first three stanzas and first verse of the fourth stanza complete a rather long, but well punctuated sentence following from the title. The second sentence beings that the end of the first verse of the fourth stanza and continues to the end. Hence overall, there are four sentences with the last stanza consisting of two straight-forward statements.

One of the most interesting facts about this (and many other of her) poems is the consistency of the number of syllables. Not the same number of syllables for each verse, but the same number of syllables for the verses in each stanza. In the case of When I Buy Pictures, the syllable count for each verse in each of the five stanzas is 12, 11, 15, 21 and 18. Oddly enough this point is not always recognized, and as to the numerical pattern, there does not appear to be one.

We note that the differing syllable counts give a unique rhythm to the verses and so the poem. The fact that there are unusual breaks at some syllables really has little bearing on the reading. It would be odd to read the poem as precisely as it has been written. I would say that this is merely an eccentric form of enjambment. Personally, I feel no need for the hyphen at the end of some verses. It is reminiscent of the dash or pause which at the end of a verse, for all intended purposes, holds a meaning of nothingness.

Metrical analysis is interesting, but it lacks in importance due to the poem being constructed on the number of syllables in each verse, being a purposeful act in composition. However for completeness, I will consider some verses.

Taking the first two verses from the first stanza:

or what is closer to the truth, when I look at
that of which I may regard myself as the

| ōr whāt | ĩs clōsĕr | tō thĕ trūth | whĕn Ī | lōok āt (12)
 | thāt ōf whĭch | Ī mǎy | rĕgārd | mýsĕlf | ās thĕ (11)

Irrespective of the style in which poets choose to write, the nature of the beast is that the metrical feet can always be found. Whether there is any purpose to this activity is questionable, especially for the poet. However, we do notice that there is a definite rhythm albeit irregular. It is quite obvious that when keeping a specific syllable count, words must be carefully chosen.

Now the first and second verses of the second stanza:

or quite the opposite—the old thing, the medi-
 æval decorated hat box, in which there

| ōr quĭte thĕ | ōppōsĭte | thĕ ōld thĭng | thĕ mĕdĭ
 | ævāl | dĕcō | rātĕd | hāt bōx | ĩn whĭch thĕre (12)
 (11)

Again we see that the rhythm (being organized meter) and the combination of these metrical feet produce the rhythm. Also note that even though the counts for the stanzas are the same, the metrical feet are not. Regardless, this is dissimilar to merely jotting down random thoughts.

As for the poem, we may notice a lack of orthodoxy, or rather what appears to be. This would be regards to capitalization and hyphenation. We may even say that it looks like one because of the consistent use of stanzas and indentation. We will only see this if the poem has been presented correctly.

Casual reading brings it across to be rather prosy, but the repeated syllable counts and verse endings tell us something quite different, and this allows Moore to seize our attention and imagination. The poem is an intense explanation of what there is to look for in art. What is it that catches our eye or draws us toward it? What it needs to possess.

The emphasis here is on pleasure rather than the intellectual. We should appreciate art in whatever form.

it may be anything. Too
 stern an intellectual emphasis, i-
 ronic or other—upon this quality or that, detracts
 from one's enjoyment;

There is little to be made of the what or who, as long as it is given with a name. Whether we understand its fullness and what it meant to the artist are minor details to us as the observer and possible new owner. We can make ourselves become part of it for our pleasure, and create our own reality within it.

The last stanza tells us:

It must be a voluntary gift with the name written on it.

The who behind the what. Even today, we have a lot of whats but very few whos because of mass production for profit and the use of technology. We see a well-known name, we know it is not original. It has not been given as a gift, only to seek money. There are no spiritual forces in these.

However, with the voluntary gift, there is a sense of possession and the art's possession of a memory in an instant of time. What is it we wish to possess? To have? To cherish?

We may say it is the memory, the memory of the who (the name written on it) producing the work at that period of time. The artwork has captured the truth, or at least their understanding of it. True art is not forced, it is something voluntary. There is something of the artist in it (spiritual forces). Without this, it is a blank canvas. There is nothing given and nothing to be had. It is empty.

If it is something, one should never disown it because it represents a part of us no matter how great or small.

THE STANZAS

The construction of the poem itself can create some difficulty when analyzing what each particular stanza is telling us. There is also the problem that one may read more into the verse than is obvious, but I suppose there is room for creative interpretation of sorts.

The main difficulty is that the first three stanzas and verse one of the fourth are all connected. As was mentioned before, the entire poem consists of four sentences with the first involving the complete first three stanzas. Thus it does not make a great deal of sense to analyze any particular stanza in great detail, but consider them as a whole.

The first stanza follows directly from the title. Into the first stanza, we understand that the speaker is not necessarily buying the artwork, but thinks mostly of what if. The thought is about what gives pleasure in those average moments. They are not interested in thinking about it, but how it makes them feel. The second stanza follows immediately describing an old mediæval hat box and its decorations. More of a description rather than desire. The language is simple and the images described are easily understood by the reader. The description continues into the third stanza, but comments that words are not necessarily required, which means we may delve into its meaning as much or as little we desire:

which means
just as much or just as little as it is understood to
mean by the observer—

As a result, what we see could be anything apart from and including the visual. It is basically what gives us pleasure as to what we see and understand. Note that the comments are still from an observer or prospective buyer's point of view.

The fourth stanza begins the second stream of thought, this time considering the intellectual aspect. If we try to think about the artwork too much it becomes an intellectual activity and will detract from the enjoyment of possessing it—the pleasure it brings. The second sentence finishes in that perhaps the intellectual aspect is greater, but it cannot be allowed to detract from one's enjoyment or pleasure.

The final stanza (consisting of two sentences) steps back away from both pleasure and intellect. There are certain things to be acknowledged. This is very powerful and you may say, an intense ending which is quite unexpected when compared with the previous four stanzas.

it
must make known the fact that it has been displayed
to acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it;

These are powerful verses. We may look at this in another way. What if the artwork was never displayed? There is no proof of its existence. If there is no name, then there is no acknowledgement. Can this detract from the pleasurable or intellectual, or both?

If there is a name, there is acknowledgement that the artist did exist which tells us that there must have been a reason for its creation. What they produced clearly gave them pleasure and perhaps the same that the observer experiences now. There may also be that intellectual aspect to it, but we read:

just as much or just as little as it is understood to
mean by the observer—

The artwork, of whatever type, would be a memory of the artist captured at a particular instant, a memory which we may possess depending on what we read into it.

The final sentence:

It must be a voluntary gift with the name written on it.

A gift has more meaning when inscribed with the name of the giver, else it means little. On the whole, gifts are voluntary. They are given purely to give pleasure or intellectual satisfaction to the receiver. It is a moment in time captured by the artist, it is their memory and knowing that, the possessor allows not only the memory but the artist to live on within us.

The move to the intellectual here does not play much importance at all, it is more the pleasurable aspect that is dominant throughout the poem.

Question: Was she looking at a piece of artwork at the time? If so, did she buy it? Who knows, but she had many knickknacks.
