
MARIANNE MOORE

(1887–1972)

Marianne Craig Moore was born in the Kirkwood, Missouri, home of her grandfather, John Riddle Warner, a Presbyterian minister, where her mother, Mary Warner Moore, retreated after her husband was institutionalized following a nervous breakdown. Moore and her older brother, Warner, never knew their father. After Mr. Moore was released from the sanitarium his wife never returned to him, preferring to raise the children on her own, despite the economic and social trials of such a choice. When Moore was seven, her grandfather died, and the family moved to a Pittsburgh suburb to reside with an uncle. Two years later they resettled in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where Mrs. Moore taught English at the Metzger Institute, a preparatory school for girls that her daughter attended. These early hardships created a tight bond between the Moores that they solidified through their Presbyterian faith, an ethos of strict privacy, and a determination to bear difficulty with fortitude and equanimity. The family's fierce insularity and religious devotion provided Moore with the emotional and philosophical support that buttressed her career and motivated her ideas about art. Moore is a consummate Modernist, although her moral bent—such as her attacks on pretentious behavior and egotism, her advocacy of precision, endurance, and humility, and her insistence on hope in the face of despair—chafes against definitions of Modernism that consider experimental work incompatible with Christianity.

In 1905, Moore matriculated at Bryn Mawr College, where, denied admission to the English major, she majored in law, history, and politics and minored in biology. But Moore was undissuaded from pursuing her writing. She contributed poems to the college literary magazine, *Tipyn O'Bob*, and served on its editorial board. She also took a class in "Imitative Prose," in which students were required to model their own essays on the work of seventeenth-century prose stylists such as Thomas Browne and Francis Bacon. "I was really fond of all those sermons and the antique sentence structure," she later said. Her minor in biology also influenced her poetry. She later remarked that the habits of careful observation she had cultivated in her science courses helped foster the attentiveness to detail that characterizes her writing: "Precision, economy of statement, logic employed to ends that

are disinterested, drawing and identifying, liberate—at least have some bearing on—the imagination."

After graduation in 1909 she returned to Carlisle, where she completed the business course at Carlisle Commercial College in 1910, taught stenography and typewriting at the Carlisle Indian School, and worked for women's suffrage. Meanwhile, she began to place poems in magazines such as the *Egoist*, *Poetry*, and *Others*. In 1916 she and her mother moved to Chatham, New Jersey. Moore made frequent trips into New York, solidifying her connections to avant-garde writers and artists. She also established friendships through correspondence, exchanging letters with H. D., whom she had known briefly at Bryn Mawr, and William Carlos Williams. In 1918 mother and daughter moved to New York, where Marianne worked half days at the Hudson Park Branch of the New York Public Library. Mrs. Moore staunchly supported her daughter's literary career, and in drafting her poems Moore found her mother's incisive criticism indispensable.

Moore's composition process was eclectic, for she often drew from the notebooks in which she meticulously recorded quotations from her diverse readings, letters she had received, lectures and sermons she had heard, and even conversations. In the poetry, Moore integrates her own words with material from the notebooks. From a paragraph-long quotation, she would lift a sentence or a phrase to splice into a poem, sometimes acknowledging her borrowings through quotation marks and citations, sometimes not. Moore strands, along with T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams, as one of the poets who first developed the Modernist method of juxtaposing fragments from other sources against her own words to create a collage effect. As early as 1907—well before Eliot's quotation-laden poem, *The Waste Land*, appeared—Moore was weaving quotations into her poems. She also became notorious for her revisions, changing poems after she had published them, usually through cuts rather than additions.

In 1919 Moore began corresponding with Pound, and in 1921 with Eliot, both of whom contacted her about publishing her poems. Their initial inquiries led to supportive friendships that were sustained primarily through letters. But her first book was made possible by H. D. and her companion Bryher, who gathered many of the poems that Moore had contributed to journals in *Poems* (1921). The book's appearance came as a surprise to Moore, who felt that she was not yet ready for a collection.

In 1924 she released a longer book, *Observations*, whose chronological arrangement included fifty-two of the sixty-five poems she had published since 1915, some of them in revised versions. The book was distinctive not only because of the poetry—particularly the remarkable longer poems, "Marriage" and "An Octopus"—but also because of its extensive notes and index. Her choice to write about uncommon subjects, such as a steamroller or an elephant, and her eschewal of traditional forms in favor of free verse or the intricate patterns of syllabic verse, underscored her call, in "Poetry," for poets to be "literalists of the imagination." Her work paid precise attention to literal details, but framed them in unexpected, highly subjective ways. The book won the prestigious Dial Award in 1924 and solidified Moore's reputation as a key Modernist poet.

The award also led to Moore's appointment as editor of the *Dial*, a leading arts and letters magazine. During her tenure, lasting from 1925 to 1929, she became a powerful literary arbiter. In addition to editing, Moore dedicated herself to writing prose for the magazine: book reviews and a total of forty-two editorial columns in which she reflected not only on art and literature, but on an idiosyncratic array of subjects. Moore developed a prose style that shared many attributes with her poetry: complex syntax, frequent quotations, and electric shifts of thought that seem to launch the argument in unrelated directions but whose relevance Moore establishes as the essay develops. She continued to write prose after the *Dial* folded in 1929, publishing her essays and reviews in both mainstream and literary journals.

Although her work for the *Dial* gave her considerable power in the literary world and a venue for her essays, it left her little energy to draft poems. From 1925 until 1932 she did not publish any poetry. In 1930 Moore and her mother moved from Manhattan to Brooklyn, where distance from the literary scene enabled her to write new poems, including such important works as "The Steeple-Jack," "The Jerboa," and "The Plumet Basilisk," many of which intensified her focus on animals as analogues for virtues, such as perseverance and discipline. She positioned the group of new poems at the end of *Selected Poems* (1935). More new work appeared in *The Pangolin and Other Verse* (1936) and *What Are Years* (1941).

Despite her self-imposed distance from the literary life of Manhattan, Moore visited the city often and kept up her relationships with other writers through extensive correspondence. She served as a mentor to younger women writers, particularly Elizabeth Bishop, whom she met in 1934.

The vast devastation of World War II challenged Moore to change some of her ideas about poetry, and her poems became less dense and more direct than they had been before. (After the death of her mother in 1947, Moore shifted her style, becoming even more pronounced.) Nevertheless, her *Collected Poems* (1951) won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Bollingen Prize—the three most significant awards in American poetry—and Moore followed the book with four new volumes of poetry before she published *Complete Poems* (1967) on her eightieth birthday.

Moore's later poetry often featured accessible subjects such as baseball, and she became a minor celebrity, the subject of articles in popular magazines as diverse as *Life*, *Vogue*, and *Sports Illustrated*. She appeared as a guest on *The Tonight Show* and became friends with athletes such as Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali). But the media tended to feature Moore as a grandmotherly eccentric rather than as a major poet, and her achievements as a Modernist innovator were ignored in favor of her interests in baseball, fashion, and zoos. Nevertheless, at the time of her death from a stroke in 1972, readers of poetry and especially other poets considered her work indispensable and counted her among the most important American poets of the twentieth century.

In her essay "Idiosyncrasy and Technique," Moore explores possibilities for affirmation in a jaded time. In this piece we can see not only Moore the poet and demanding reviewer, but also Moore the cultural critic. As always, her prose is refreshing for the aptness and openness of her observations.

IDIOSYNCRASY AND TECHNIQUE

I. TECHNIQUE

In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford,¹ Mr. Auden said, "There is only one thing that all poetry must do; it must praise all it can for being as for happening." He also said, "Every poem is rooted in imaginative awe." These statements answer, or imply an answer, to the question: Why does one write?

I was startled, indeed horrified, when a writing class in which I have an interest was asked, "Is it for money or for fame?" as though it must be one or the other—and writing were not for some a felicity, if not a species of intellectual self-preservation. Gorgeously remunerated as I am for being here, it would seem both hypocritical and inappropriate to feign that I love of letters renders money irrelevant. Still, may I say, and with emphasis, that I do not write for money or fame. To earn a living is needful, but it can be done in routine ways. One writes because one has a burning desire to objectify what it is indispensable to one's happiness to express; a statement which is not at variance with the fact that Sir Walter Scott, driven by a fanatically sensitive conscience, shortened his life writing to pay what was not a personal debt. And Anthony Trollope, while writing to earn a living, at the same time was writing what he very much loved to write.

Amplifying the impression which Bernard Shaw, as music critic, himself gives of his "veracity, catholicity, and pugnacity,"² Hesketh Pearson says of him as stage manager of his plays, "No author could be more modest than Shaw. He did not regard his text as sacrosanct. He laughed over his own lines as if they were jokes by somebody else and never could repeat them accurately. Once, when an actor apologized for misquoting a passage, he remarked, 'What you said is better than what I wrote. If you can always misquote so well, keep on misquoting—but remember to give the right cues!'"³ Writing was resilience. Resilience was an adventure. Is it part of the adventure to revise what one wrote? Professor Ewing has suggested that something be said about this. My own revisions are usually the result of impatience with unkempt diction and lapses in logic; together with an awareness that for most defects, to delete is the instantaneous cure.

The rhythms of the King James Version of the Bible stand forever as writing, although certain emendations as to meaning seem obligatory. The King James Epistle of Paul to the Philippians, 3:20, reads: "For our conversation is in heaven"; the Revised Standard Version reads: "We are a heavenly body"; each a mistranslation, according to Dr. Alvin E. Magary, who feels that Dr. Moffat got it right: "We are a colony of heaven"—a Roman outpost as it were, in which people

Originally delivered as one of the inaugural lectures of the Ewing Lectures of the University of California, Los Angeles, October 3 and 5, 1956. Published as *Idiosyncrasy and Technique: Two Lectures* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958). The notes are Miss Moore's.

1. *Making, Knowing and Judging: An Inaugural Lecture by W. H. Auden Delivered before the University of Oxford on 11 June 1956* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press).

2. Michael Tippett, "An Irish Basset-Horn," *The Listener*, July 26, 1956.

3. Hesketh Pearson, "Bernard Shaw as Producer," *The Listener*, August 16, 1956.

conformed their lives to the life of Rome—an interpretation which makes sense as applied to Christianity”; Dr. Magary also emphasizes that the beatitude, blessed are the meek, should have no connotation of subservience, since if rendered more strictly, the word would be, not the meek, but the “begging.”

The revisions by Henry James of his novels, are evidently in part the result of an insistent desire to do justice to first intention. Reverting to pronouncements on Milton and Goethe made previously, T. S. Eliot seems to feel that after-judgment can not merely be taken for granted, and when accepting the Goethe Prize in 1954 he said, “As one’s reading is extended [one begins] to develop that critical ability, that power of self-criticism without which the poet will do not more than repeat himself . . .”; then further on: “To understand what Wisdom is, is to be wise oneself; and I have only the degree of understanding that can be obtained by a man who knows that he is not wise, yet has some faith that he is wiser than he was twenty years ago. I say twenty years ago, because I am under the distressing necessity of quoting a sentence I printed in 1939. It is this:

Of Goethe perhaps it is truer to say that he dabbled in both philosophy and poetry and made no great success at either; his true role was that of a man of the world and a sage, a la Rochefoucauld, a La Bruyère, a Vauvenargues.”

Mr. Eliot says he “. . . never re-read the passage in which this sentence is buried [and had] discovered it not so long ago in Mr. Michael Hamburger’s introduction to his edition and translation of the text of Holderlin’s poems.” He then goes on to say of Goethe, “It may be that there are areas of wisdom that he did not penetrate: but I am more interested in trying to understand the wisdom he possessed than to define its limitations. When a man is a good deal wiser than oneself, one does not complain that he is no wiser than he is.”⁴

Since writing is not only an art but a trade embodying principles attested by experience, we would do well not to forget that it is an expedient for making one’s self understood and that what is said should at least have the air of having meant something to the person who wrote it—as is the case with Gertrude Stein and James Joyce. Stewart Sherman one time devised a piece of jargon which he offered as indistinguishable from work by Gertrude Stein, which gave itself away at once as lacking any private air of interest. If I may venture to say again what I have already said when obscurity was deplored, one should be as clear as one’s natural reticence allows one to be. Laurence Binyon, reflecting on the state of letters after completing his Dante, said: “How indulgent we are to infirmity of structure . . .”⁵ and structural infirmity truly has, under surrealism, become a kind of horticultural verbal blight threatening firmness to the core; a situation met long ago in *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius*:

Enjoy the good yet sink not in excess.
True scholar stands by his steadfastness.⁶
.....
Lamb-skin for suavity, trimmed and ornate,
But a good soldier who will get things straight.⁷

4. “Discourse in Praise of Wisdom,” reentitled “Goethe as the Sage.”
5. *The Dalhousie Review*, January 1943.
6. Translated by Ezra Pound (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 55.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

In attaining this noble firmness, one must have clarity, and clarity depends on precision; not that intentional ambiguity cannot be an art. Reinhold Niebuhr is not famed as easy reading, but is at times a study in precision as when he says, “The self does not realize itself most fully when self-realization is its conscious aim”; and of conscience says, “We will define it provisionally at least as capacity to view itself and judge obligation in contrast with inclination.”⁸ It is not “the purpose [but] the function of roots to absorb water.” Dr. Edmund Sinnott notes in his book *The Biology of the Spirit*, in which he discusses the self-regulating properties of protoplasm—digressing, with a shade of outrage, to deplore untidiness in the use of terms. One is corrected when referring to certain African tribes for saying they worship the devil; they appropriate the devil; and if precise, one weeds text of adjective, adverbs, and unnecessary punctuation. As an instance of such concision, we have Mr. Francis Watson’s account of Edward Arnold, “the traveler, linguist, and semi-mystic, with whom Matthew Arnold did not like to be confused.”⁹ Informing us that Edwin Arnold had been married three times and that two of his wives had died—a lack-luster kind of statement which few of us perhaps would avoid—Mr. Watson says, “after being twice bereaved, he found a third wife from Japan, a land whose culture he extolled in articles. . . .” Paramount as a rule for any kind of writing—scientific, commercial, informal, prose or verse—we dare not be dull. Finding Akira Kurosawa’s film *The Magnificent Seven* too reiterative, Bosley Crowther says that “the director shows so many shots of horses’ feet tromping in the mud that we wonder if those horses have heads.”¹

In his “Advice to a Young Critic” (Golding Bright),² Bernard Shaw says, “Never strike an attitude, national, moral, or critical”—an axiom he did not observe too fanatically if judged by the telegram he is said to have sent to an actress with a leading part in one of his plays: “. . . wonderful, marvelous, superb . . .” to which the actress replied, “Undeserving such praise”; and he: “I meant the play”; and she: “So did I.”

I have a mania for straight writing—however circuitous I may be in what I myself say of plants, animals, or places; and although one may reverse the order of words for emphasis, it should not be to rescue a rhyme. There are exceptions, of course, as when Mr. Oliver Warner, speaking of Captain Cook, the explorer, in commending the remarkable drawings made by members of the Captain’s staff, says: “None of Cook’s artists worked to preconceived notions. They drew what they saw and wonderful it was.”³ To say “and it was wonderful” would have been very flat. We have literature, William Archer said, when we impart distinctiveness to ordinary talk and make it still seem ordinary.

Like dullness, implausibility obscures the point; so, familiar though we are with “Feminore Cooper’s Literary Offenses,” by Mark Twain,⁴ allow me to quote a line or two. “It is a rule of literary art in the domain of fiction,” Mark Twain says, “that always the reader shall be able to tell the corpses from the others. But this detail often has been overlooked in the *Deerslayer* tale. [Cooper] bends ‘a sapling’ to the form of an arch over [a] narrow passage, and conceals six Indians

8. *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Scribner, 1955).
9. “Edwin Arnold and ‘The Light of Asia,’” *The Listener*, June 14, 1956.
1. *The New York Times*, November 20, 1957.
2. *The Listener*, June 14, 1956.
3. “In Honor of James Cook,” *The Listener*, June 14, 1956.
4. *The Shock of Recognition*, edited by Edmund Wilson (New York: Doubleday, 1943).

in its foliage." Then, "... one of his acute Indian experts, Chingachgook (pronounced Chicago, I think) has lost the trail of a person he is tracking. . . . turned a running stream out of its course, and there, in the slush of its old bed, were that person's moccasin-tracks. . . ." Even the laws of nature take a vacation when Cooper is practicing "the delicate art of the forest."

What has been said pertains to technique (*tekhnikos* from the Greek, akin to *tekto*: to produce or bring forth—as art, especially the useful arts). And, indeed if technique is of no interest to a writer, I doubt that the writer is an artist.

What do I mean by straight writing, I have been asked. I mean, in part, writing that is not mannered, overconscious, or at war with common sense, as when a reviewer of *The Evolution of Cambridge Publishing*, by S. C. Roberts, refers to "a demure account of Cambridge's flirtation with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*."⁵ At the risk of seeming to find every virtue in certain authors and these authors in a certain few books or critiques, let me contrast with the unreal manner, W. D. Howells' *My Mark Twain* and a similar uninflected retrospect by the Duke of Windsor. "Of all the literary men I have known," Howells says of Mark Twain, "he was the most unliterary in his make and manner. . . . His style was what we know, for good or for bad, but his manner, if I may difference the two, was as entirely his own as if no one had ever written before. [Hel] despised the avoidance of repetitions out of fear of tautology. If a word served his turn better than a substitute, he would use it as many times on a page as he chose. . . . [There] never was a more biddable man in things you could show him a reason for. . . . If you wanted a thing changed, very good, he changed it; if you suggested that a word or a sentence or a paragraph had better be struck out, very good, he struck it out. His proof sheets came back each with a veritable 'mush of concession,' as Emerson says." "He was always reading some vital book. . . . which gave him life at first hand," Howells continues. "It is in vain that I try to give a notion of the intensity with which he compassed the whole world. . . ."

The other instance of straight writing to which I referred is "My Garden," by the Duke of Windsor.⁶ Prosperity and royalty are always under suspicion. "Of course they had help," people say, "Someone must have written it for them"; as they said of the shepherd made judge, in the fable of the shepherd and the King, ". . . *he* is given the credit; we did the work; he has amassed riches; we are poor."⁷ So let me say, I have in the following narrative an impression of individuality, conviction, and verbal selectiveness.

"I think my deep enjoyment of gardening must be latent," the Duke begins. "At least it was not inherited. . . . The gardens at Sandringham and Windsor. . . . made a fine show in summertime [a word with flavor, for mel], but people did not really live with them. A garden is a mood, as Rousseau said, and my mood was one of intimacy, not splendor." Of his present gardening at The Mill, not far from Paris, he says, ". . . French gardens can be remarkably beautiful things. They look like continuations of the Savonnerie of Aubusson carpets in the great chateaux rolled outside the windows onto the lawns, perfectly patterned and mathematically precise. . . . I

wanted an English type of garden, which means green grass and seemingly casual arrangement of flowers, and here I had the perfect framework." Commenting on one of the color photographs which supplement the account, he says, "The main entrance to the property has an old covered gateway with ancient oak doors and a cobbled drive which leads to the main building. There is a big sundial above the front door, put there when The Mill was restored about 1732. In the foreground is Trooper, one of our four Pugs." Technically an oversight, perhaps—the fo-r-e-ground and fo-u-r-pugs in close proximity—this clash lends authenticity, has the charm of not too conscious writing. Unmistakably all along, the article embodies a zeal for the subject, a deep affection for flowers as seen in the complaint, "The mildest stone-mason turns scourge when it comes to plant life." The piece smiles, whereas saturninity is a bad omen. "We do not praise God by disparaging man."⁸

II. IDIOSYNCRASY

In considering technique, I tried to say that writing can be affirmative and that we must, as Dr. Nathan Scott says, "reject the attitude of philosophic distrust." The writer should have "a sense of upthrusting vitality and self-discovery"⁹ without thinking about the impression made, except as one needs to make oneself understood.

We are suffering from too much sarcasm, I feel. Any touch of unforged gusto in our smart press is accompanied by an arch word implying, "Now to me, of course, this is a bit asinine." Denigration, indeed, is to me so disaffecting that when I was asked to write something for the Columbia Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa Class Day exercises, I felt that I should not let my sense of incapacity as an orator hinder me from saying what I feel about the mildew of disrespect and leave appreciation to Mr. Auden, to salute "literary marines landing in little magazines." I then realized that what I was so urgent to emphasize is reduced in the First Psalm to a sentence: Blessed is the man who does not sit in the seat of the scoffer.

Odd as it may seem that a few words of overwhelming urgency should be a mosaic of quotations, why paraphrase what for maximum impact should be quoted verbatim? I borrowed, at all events, Ambassador Conant's title *The Citadel of Learning*, taken for his book from Stalin: "[Facing us] stands the citadel of learning. This citadel we must capture at any price. This citadel must be taken by our youth, if they wish to be the builders of a new life, if they wish, in fact, to take the place of the old guard."¹

Blessed is the man

who does not sit in the seat of the scoffer—

the man who does not denigrate, depreciate, denunciate;

who is not "characteristically intemperate,"

who does not "excuse, retreat, equivocate; and will be heard."

5. Unsigned review in *The Times Literary Supplement*, London, March 2, 1956.

6. *Life*, July 16, 1956.

7. *The Fables of La Fontaine*, translated by Marianne Moore (New York: Viking, 1954), Book Ten, IX.

8. Dr. Alvin E. Magary.

9. Maxwell Geismar, *The Nation*, April 14, 1956.

1. As "freely translated" by Charles Poore, reviewing James B. Conant, *The Citadel of Learning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), in the *New York Times*, April 7, 1956.

(Ah, Giorgione! there are those who mongrelize and those who heighten anything they touch; although it may well be that if Giorgione's self-portrait were not said to be he, it might not take my fancy. Blessed the geniuses who know that egomania is not a duty.)

"Diversity, controversy; tolerance"—in that "citadel of learning" we have a fort that ought to armor us well. Blessed is the man who "takes the risk of a decision"—asks

himself the question: "Would it solve the problem?

Is it right as I see it? Is it in the best interests of all?"

Alas, Ulysses' companions are now political—living self-indulgently until the moral sense is drowned,

having lost all power of comparison,

thinking license emancipates one, "slaves whom they themselves have bound."

Brazen authors, downright soiled and downright spoiled as if sound and exceptional, are the old quasi-modish counterfeit,

mitin-proofing conscience against character.

Affronted by "private lives and public shame," blessed is the author

who favors what the supercilious do not favor—

who will not comply. Blessed, the unaccommodating man.

Blessed the man whose faith is different

from possessiveness—of a kind not framed by "things which do appear"—

who will not visualize defeat, too intent to cower;

whose illumined eye has seen the shaft that glids the sultan's tower.

I had written these lines about denigration as treason, and was assembling advice for some students of verse, when I found that Rolfe Humphries, in his little treatise entitled "Writing the Lyric,"² has thrown light on the use of consonants.

"Take the letter s," he says, "one of the most insidious sounds in the language, one which will creep in, in a sibilant reptilian fashion like the original serpent in the garden, and if you are not careful, not only drive you out of Paradise, but hiss you off the stage; . . . see if you can write a quatrain without using it at all." Pondering my "Blessed is the man who does not sit in the seat of the scoffer," I could only say that another's expertise might save one considerable awkwardness. Initiate John Barry came to my rescue by citing the *Aeneid* (II,8):

Et iam nox unida caelo

praecipitat sudentique cadentia sidera somnos.³

Convinced that denigration is baneful, one readily sanctions the attack prompted by affection. In fact nothing is more entertaining than the fraternal accolade in reverse; as when *The London News Chronicle* of November 16, 1954, published a cartoon, and lines entitled "Winniehaha,"⁴ concerning Mr. Churchill—Prime Minister then—

after a cousin of his, Captain Lionel Leslie, had referred to the drop of Indian blood inherited by Sir Winston through his grandmother, Clara Jerome. The complimentary cast of the sally—a parody of Longfellow's *Hiawatha*—which was written before Mr. Churchill had been knighted, when the date of his retirement was a subject of speculation, is apparent from even a line or two:

In the center of the village

In the wigwam of the wise ones,

Where the head men of the nation

Come to talk in solemn council,

Squats the old chief, Winniehaha,

Also known as Sitting Bulldog; . . .

Some there are with minds that wander

From the purpose of the powwow;

Minds that wonder will he give us

Just an inking, to be candid,

Of the date of his retirement?

Not that we would wish to rush him,

Wish to rush old Winniehaha,

Rush our splendid Sitting Bulldog

From the headship of the head men

In the center of the village,

In the wigwam of the wise ones.

Still, it's just a bit unsettling

Not to know when Winniehaha

Will give place to handsome Pinstripie.

Will he tell us? Will he tell us?

In connection with personality, it is a curiosity of literature how often what one says of another seems descriptive of one's self. Would-be statesmen who spike their utterances with malice should bear this in mind and take fright as they drive home the moral of The Lion, The Wolf, and the Fox: "Slander flies home faster than rumor of good one has done."⁵ In any case, Sir Winston Churchill's pronouncement on Alfred the Great does seem appropriate to himself—his own defeats, triumphs, and hardihood: "This sublime power to rise above the whole force of circumstances, to remain unbiased by the extremes of victory or defeat, to greet returning fortune with a cool eye, to have faith in men after repeated betrayals, raises Alfred far above the turmoil of barbaric wars to his pinnacle of deathless glory."⁶

Walter de la Mare found "prose worthy of the name of literature . . . tinged with that erratic and unique factor, the personal . . ." reminding one of the statement by Mr. F. O. Matthiessen, in his study of Sarah Orne Jewett, that "style means that the author has fused his material and his technique with the distinctive quality of his personality . . ." and of the word "idiolect" used by Professor Harry Levin as meaning "the language of a speaker or writer who has an inflection of his own." In saying there is no substitute for content, one is partly saying there is no substitute for individuality—that which is peculiar to the person (the Greek *idionoma*). One also

2. In *Writers on Writing*, edited by Herschel Brickell (New York: Doubleday, 1949).

3. And now the night calls dew down from heaven
And the falling stars urge us to sleep.

4. Anonymous. Reprinted in the *New York Times*, November 17, 1954.

5. *The Fables of La Fontaine*, Book Eight, III.

6. *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, Vol. I: *The Birth of Britain* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1956).

recalls the remark by Henry James: "a thing's being one's own will double the use of it." Discoveries in art, certainly, are personal before they are general.

Goya—in *The Taste of Our Times* series,⁷ reviewed by Pierre Gassier somewhat as follows—should afford us creative impetus. After surviving a lethal threat, severe illness at Cadiz in 1792, Goya was left with his right side paralyzed, with dizzy spells, a buzzing in his head, and partial blindness. He recovered, only to find himself irremediably deaf. On returning to Madrid, he began work at once, painted eleven pictures for the Academy of San Fernando, and sent them with a letter to the director, Don Berardo Iriarte. "In order to occupy an imagination mortified by the contemplation of my sufferings," he said, "and recover, partially at all events, the expenses incurred by illness, I fell to painting a set of pictures in which I have given observation a place usually denied it in works made to order, in which little scope is left for fancy and invention." Fancy and invention—not made to order—perfectly describe the work; the *Burial of the Sardine*, say: a careening throng in which one can identify a bear's mask and paws, a black monster wearing a horned hood, a huge turquoise quadracorn, a goblin mouth on a sepia fish-tailed banner, and twin dancers in filmy gowns with pink satin bows in their hair. Pieter Bruegel, the Elder, an observer as careful and as populous as Goya, "crossed the Alps and traveled the length of Italy, returning in 1555 to paint as though Michaelangelo had never existed," so powerful was predilective intention.⁸ In a television interview after receiving the National Book Award for *Ten Norths Frederick*, John O'Hara was asked if he might not have to find, as a background for fiction, something different from small-town life in Pennsylvania, to which he replied, "There is in one room in one day of one man's life, material for a lifetime." The artist does not—as we sometimes hear—"seek fresh sources of inspiration." A subject to which he is susceptible entices him to it; as we see in the epics of Marko Marulic (1450–1524), the fifth centenary of whose birth Yugoslavia has celebrated, in honor of his Latin epic *Judita* (1501), enhanced by woodcuts such as *The Master at Dubrovnik*: trumpeters, men at arms in an elephant-castle; dog, king, queen, and attendants. The New York Yugoslav Information Center says, "What is important is that in following the classics, Marulic did not transplant . . . mechanically . . . but depended on his own poetic abilities," his novelty consisting in "comparisons taken from his own field of experience, in language abounding in speech forms of the people." An author, that is to say, is a fashioner of words, stamps them with his own personality, and wears the traiment he has made, in his own way.

Psychoanalysis can do some harm "taking things to pieces that it cannot put together again," as Mr. Whit Burnett said in a discourse entitled "Secrets of Creativeness." It has also been of true service, sharpening our faculties and combating complacency. Mr. Burnett drew attention to the biography of Dr. Freud by Ernest Jones, and to what is said there of genius as being not a quality but qualitative—a combination of attributes which differs with the person—three of which are honesty, a sense of the really significant, and the power of concentration.

Curiosity seems to me connected with this sense of significance. Thoreau, you may recall, demurred when commended for originality and said that it was curiosity: "I am curiosity from top to toe." I think I detect curiosity in the work of

Sybil Bedford—in her novel *A Legacy*—in the statement, ". . . no one in the house was supposed to handle used [banknotes]. Everybody was paid straight off the press. The problem of change was not envisaged"; sententiousness in the writing, being offset by the unstereotyped juxtaposing of a word or two such as querulous and placid. Grandma Merz, for instance, "was a short bundle of a woman swaddled in stuffs and folds . . . stuck with brooches of rather gray diamonds. Her face was a round, large, indeterminate expanse . . . with features that escaped attention and an expression that was at once querulous and placid."⁹ In Marguerite Yourcenar's "Author's Note" to her *Memoirs of Hadrian*¹—a study which does "border on the domain of fiction and sometimes of poetry," as has been said—one sees what concentration editorially can be. And Paul Delarue's "Sources and Commentary" appended to the *Borzoï Book of French Folk Tales*² are similarly impressive—besides affording an exciting knowledge of variants. In "The White Dove" (the story of Bluebeard, abridged by Perrault), the ninth victim's pretexts for delay become specific—in this early version—"to put on my petticoat, my wedding-gown, my cap, my bouquet." And we learn that "The Ass's Skin," entrusted for us by La Fontaine in "The Power of the Fable,"³ is the "Story of Goldilocks," and of Madame d'Aulnoy's "Beauty and the Beast" (1698). The pre-sentiment here of obscure minutiae, demonstrating that tales of all nations have a common fabric, makes the most artful of detective stories seem tame.

Creative secrets, are they secrets? Impassioned interest in life, that burns its bridges behind it and will not contemplate defeat, is one, I would say. Discouragement is a form of temptation; but paranoia is not optimism. In an essay entitled "Solitude" (the theme chosen by the *Figaro* for an essay contest), Maxime Bennebon, a boy of seventeen, visualizes "Michelangelo's Moses, head in hands, the attitude of the child who prays with eyes closed; of the pianist—his back to the audience; they must be alone that they may offer what is most treasurable, themselves."

The master secret may be steadfastness, that of Nehemiah, Artaxerxes' cup-bearer, as it was of the three youths in the fiery furnace, who would not bow down to the image which the king had set up. "Why is thy countenance sad, seeing that thou art not sick?" the King asked. Nehemiah requested that he be allowed to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and the King granted his request; gave him leave of absence and a letter to the keeper of the forest that he might have timber for the gates of the palace—subject to sarcasm while building, such as Sanballer's, "If a fox go up, he shall break down their wall." Summoned four times to a colloquy, Nehemiah sent word: "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down." Then when warned that he would be slain, he said, "Should such a man as I flee?" "So the wall was finished."⁴ A result which is sensational is implemented by what to the craftsman was private and unsensational. Tyrone Guthrie, in connection with the theater, made a statement which sums up what I have been trying to say about idiosyncrasy and technique: "It is one of the paradoxes of art that a work can only be universal if it is rooted in a part of its creator which is most privately and particularly himself."⁵

9. Sybil Bedford, *A Legacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957).

1. Translated from the French by Grace Frick (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1954).

2. Translated by Austin E. Fife (New York: Knopf, 1956).

3. *The Fables of La Fontaine*, Book Eight, IV. "The moment The Ass's Skin commences, Away with appearances, I am enraptured, really am."

4. Nehemiah 2, 4, and 6.

5. *The New York Times Magazine*, November 27, 1955.

7. "Essay on Prose," *The National and English Review* (in three sections, concluded in March 1955), quoted by Arts (New York).

8. Fritz Grossmann, *The Paintings of Bruegel* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1955).

Thomas Mann, fending off eulogy, rendered a service when he said, "Praise will never subdue skepticism." We fail in some degree—and know that we do, if we are competent; but can prevail; and the following attributes, applied by a London journal to Victor Gollancz, the author and publisher, I adopt as a prescription: we can in the end prevail, if our attachment to art is sufficiently deep; "unpriggish, subtle, perceptive, and consuming."⁶

1958

— T. S. ELIOT —
(1888–1965)

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born the seventh child of Henry Ware Eliot and Charlotte Champe Stearns Eliot in St. Louis, Missouri, where his father was a prominent executive in the Hydraulic Press Brick Company. His grandfather, the Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot, had settled in St. Louis in 1834, eventually founding Washington University. A poet and biographer, Charlotte Eliot was highly influential in the development of her son's literary sensibilities. The family summered in Maine and Massachusetts, and at seventeen Eliot went east to Milton Academy. He entered Harvard in 1906, where his distant cousin, Charles William Eliot, was then president of the university. After taking his degree in 1909, Eliot began graduate studies in philosophy at Harvard. By then he had encountered his teacher Irving Babbitt's dislike of Romanticism, and also, in 1908, he read Arthur Symonds's highly influential study of late nineteenth-century French poetry, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*—a book that profoundly affected his own aesthetic. He had written poetry since childhood with his mother's approval, but now the work took new directions. He wrote his first masterpiece, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," while still at Harvard in 1910.

That same year, having earned his master's degree, Eliot went to the Sorbonne in Paris. There he heard the lectures of philosopher Henri Bergson on personality. Upon returning to Harvard, Eliot began his dissertation on the philosopher F. H. Bradley, author of *Appearance and Reality*. He was also studying modern poetry and learning Sanskrit. Although Eliot's attitude toward religion was skeptical at this point, he objected to the way the Harvard Philosophy Department distanced itself from religious studies. Eliot was already a serious student of comparative religions. He was also taking dancing lessons to compensate for his intense shyness with women. After a year's assistantship at Harvard, Eliot obtained a fellowship to travel and study in Europe. He intended to go to Germany, but the outbreak of World War I forced him instead to take up studies at Oxford.

At the time, the London literary scene was full of vitality and ferment. Ford Madox Ford was editing and writing; Years held forth in his *salon*, where he was visited by young poets like Ezra Pound and Robert Frost. In September 1914, Eliot met Pound in London. Pound, who had already

6. *The Observer*, March 11, 1956.