

Marianne Moore

(1887-1972)

Critics and Connoisseurs (1935)

There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious  
fastidiousness. Certain Ming  
products, imperial floor-coverings of coach-  
wheel yellow, are well enough in their way but I have seen  
something  
that I like better—a  
mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly ballasted  
animal stand up,  
similar determination to make a pup  
eat his meat from the plate.

I remember a swan under the willows in Oxford,  
with flamingo-coloured, maple-  
leaflike feet. It reconnoitred like a battle-  
ship. Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were the staple  
ingredients in its  
disinclination to move. Finally its hardihood was not  
proof against its  
proclivity to more fully appraise such bits  
of food as the stream

bore counter to it; it made away with what I gave it  
to eat. I have seen this swan and  
I have seen you; I have seen ambition without  
understanding in a variety of forms. Happening to stand  
by an ant-hill, I have  
seen a fastidious ant carrying a stick north, south, east  
west, till it turned on  
itself, struck out from the flower-bed into the lawn,  
and returned to the point

from which it had started. Then abandoning the stick as  
useless and overtaking its  
jaws with a particle of whitewash—pill-like but  
heavy, it again went through the same course of procedure.  
What is  
there in being able  
to say that one has dominated the stream in an attitude of  
self-defence;  
in proving that one has had the experience  
of carrying a stick?

ANALYSIS

“Marianne Moore’s miracle in this poem is that she packs so much into four strict stanzas, intricate in shape. Only a most fastidious poet could do it. As the poet says in her opening sentence, ‘There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious/fastidiousness.’ Repeated in three variations, fastidiousness is the key to this poem: in stanza one, the unconscious fastidiousness of children; in the second stanza, the swan at

Oxford (the connoisseur become conscious) with its disbelief and disinclination to move; in the third stanza, the fastidious ant (a critic), which has 'ambition without/understanding.' Fastidiousness, not even mentioned in stanza four, thus diminishes steadily from its highest point in the beginning to its utter disappearance at the end of the poem.

Similarly, the warm feeling of the poet diminishes from her obvious love of the children in stanza one. Her admiration of the Oxford swan in stanza two that 'reconnoitered like a battle-/ ship' is slightly less than wholehearted. The warmth becomes chill indeed in stanzas three and four, where the poet contemplates the 'fastidious ant' going through its ambitious motions without understanding, and in the final five lines she demolishes with two cold, unanswerable questions both the connoisseurs and the critics.

As always, Miss Moore's techniques are impressive. There is not much rhyming in this poem: in each of the first three stanzas, the second and fourth lines rhyme and the seventh and eighth lines rhyme approximately in all four stanzas, thus producing an effect of intermittent music. In stanza four the expected rhyme of the second and fourth lines seems deliberately avoided, perhaps to emphasize the dullness of the critics. Marianne Moore often hides her rhymes, or deliberately misses a perfect rhyme.

The visual shape of the poem is challengingly jagged, with the very short line in each stanza following in sharpest contrast immediately after the longest line. The rich imagery of stanzas one and two...slopes off to the positively dull images, the redundancy, and the jargon words ('the same course of procedure,' for example) of stanzas three and four. All this is part of the poem's design. The poem ends in frigid hostility and not 'a particle of whitewash' for lowly critics who have 'ambition without/understanding'."

James M. Reid  
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