

Marianne Moore

(1887-1972)

What Are Years? (1941)

What is our innocence,  
 what is our guilt? All are  
     naked, none is safe. And whence  
 is courage: the unanswered question,  
 the resolute doubt—  
 dumbly calling, deafly listening—that  
 in misfortune, even death,  
     encourages others  
     and in its defeat, stirs

    the soul to be strong? He  
 sees deep and is glad, who  
     accedes to mortality  
 and in his imprisonment, rises  
 upon himself as  
 the sea in a chasm, struggling to be  
 free and unable to be,  
     in its surrendering  
     finds its continuing.

    So he who strongly feels,  
 behaves. The very bird,  
     grown taller as he sings, steels  
 his form straight up. Though he is captive,  
 his mighty singing  
 says, satisfaction is a lowly  
 thing, how pure a thing is joy.  
     This is mortality,  
     this is eternity.

#### ANALYSIS

“The hard-packed thought in ‘What Are Years?’ lies nearer the surface and hence is easier to get at than it is in most of Marianne Moore’s poems. Nevertheless, it has the depth and profundity we have come to expect from her. Stanza one propounds the huge philosophical questions. What are good and evil? Where do we get courage? How do we inspire courage in others? How do we face misfortune and death?

In stanzas two and three come the poet’s answers—in memorable succession. In all fairness one would have to quote practically all the lines. But the poem reaches its climax in the unforgettable image in stanza three: ‘...The very bird, / grown taller as he sings, steels / his form straight up.’ True courage, first of all, consists of accepting our mortality without yielding to it. It is, in the second place, continuing the struggle to be free. Mere acceptance of mortality brings satisfaction, a lowly thing. The ongoing struggle brings joy, a higher thing. Thus, a kind of eternity may be achieved by a mighty and enduring struggle against the prison of morality.

Cunningly contrived sound effects build up stanza by stanza a great crescendo of thought and feeling. In stanza one the *d*’s of *doubt*, *dumbly*, *deafly*, *defeat* hammer their insistent questions. In stanza two the recurrent *s*’s of *soul*, *strong*, *sees*, *is*, *accedes*, *his imprisonment*, *rises*, *himself*, *sea*, *chasm*, *struggling*, *its*

surrendering finds its pile up the tensions, until in stanza three the stressed *e* sounds of *he, feels, behaves, very, he, steels, he, mighty, lowly, joy, mortality, eternity* rise to a paean of joy and triumph.”

James M. Reid  
*100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century*  
 (Harcourt 1966) 101-02  
 with Laurence Perrine

“The sentiment here is Adamic *par excellence*: with its sense of the great glory in sheer mortality. Yet the poem is made to argue its case; and the figurative language functions as a controlling similitude, like an afterthought which reinforces, not develops, its substantial concern. It is significant, I think, that Miss Moore came to publish such a poem and others like it (‘In Distrust of Merits’ and ‘Bulwarked against Fate,’ for example) after she had established her reputation as a descriptive-meditative poet—in the 1940’s and after. Such poems have, besides their intrinsic merit, that of guiding us into an understanding of her oeuvre. Truth in these poems is...formal; but the quality of its formality is somewhat eased when they are place in their proper context. Such poems point to her later, and greater ones: ‘Nevertheless,’ ‘The Mind is an Enchanted Thing,’ ‘His Shield,’ ‘Amour’s Undermining Modesty,’ ‘Tom Fool,’ and ‘Blessed is the Man.’ In these poems, Miss Moore’s precise sense of place, occasion, motif, and the like...is most like Emily Dickinson, though without Emily Dickinson’s range and passion.”

Roy Harvey Pearce  
*The Continuity of American Poetry*  
 (Princeton 1961) 372

Michael Hollister (2015)