



With a Perfect Contempt - On Editing Marianne Moore
Heather Cass White - Marianne Moore

In trying to sum up the experience of having spent the last ten years editing the poetry of Marianne Moore, most recently in the *New Collected Poems*, I think of a recent classroom interaction I had. Toward the end of a course on twentieth-century poetry, one of my students, clearly at the end of her patience with me, demanded to know why I kept asking them, “But what is a poem?” It’s probably a measure of how deeply I feel that question that I hadn’t noticed I’d asked it even once before she pointed it out.

I do know why I am stuck on it, however. Editing Moore’s work will deprive anyone of their certainty about what a poem actually is. All poetry editing raises a fundamental issue: Is a poem a specific ordering of words on a page? And if so, which page? The one the poet originally wrote, whether by hand or type; or the one that was first published; or the one that was last published? If all of those arrangements of words are identical, one may duck the question, but they rarely are. Typesetters and proofreaders make mistakes, and they also make corrections which poets find agreeable. Poets change their minds. Conventions of spelling and punctuation vary from house to house, and change over time. There are competing theories about how to handle such issues, and consensus views to guide practitioners, but the questions must always be confronted.

At the risk of seeming to brag, I will claim that confronting these questions in Moore’s work is unusually torturous. Someone had to, though, because the final record Moore left of her own work—and the standard Moore edition for several decades—has been her mendaciously titled *Complete Poems* (1967). That collection is anything but complete, containing only just over half of the poems she actually published during her life. Perhaps more importantly, many of the poems it does contain are extensively altered versions of poems she first wrote decades earlier. Readers have needed a chronologically arranged edition of her actual complete poems, with a record of her revisions, ever since its publication.

Creating one, however, is tricky. Her lifelong practices of revising, reordering, and redacting her poems make a special kind of hash out of any attempt to be definitive. Certainly her revisions are the most spectacular problem. Moore didn’t just write poems, she rewrote them, often completely, often more than once. The most famous example of this predilection for revision is found in her poem “Poetry.” It was reprinted dozens of times over the course of her life, and she took many of those occasions as opportunities to revise it. The longest version she published is thirty lines long; the shortest version is three lines long. There are versions of eighteen lines and versions of thirteen lines. There are versions in free verse and versions in the syllabic stanzas for which she is famous. Some of them contain one of her most beloved metaphors—“imaginary gardens with real toads in them”—and some of them don’t. So which poem is the real “Poetry”?

There are other puzzles. If she writes a poem and publishes it in a magazine in 1916, then re-titles it and publishes it in a book in 1924, then reverts to the original title and publishes it as new work in 1964, 1966, and 1967, then where should it appear, chronologically speaking, in the *New Collected Poems*? If she publishes three poems as a sequence under a group title in a magazine in 1932, then, in 1935, keeps the group title but drops one of the poems when she publishes the remaining two in a book, then completely rewrites the dropped poem and publishes it alone in a book in 1941, which version of the dropped poem should be reprinted, and under what year? Should it be part of a sequence or not?

And these are only large-scale questions. There are just as many tiny ones. Moore had a prodigious vocabulary, drawn from the many branches of knowledge that fascinated her. She read theology and biology as intensely as she read literature; when she read newspapers and magazines she was as interested in the language of their advertisements as she was in that of their features. She was also, however, an indifferent speller. She cared about the accuracy of her poems' words, but sometimes achieved it only after a publication or two, often at the suggestion of a friend, or reader, or editor. So how far should her present editor go in correcting the terminological mistakes that have remained? She herself altered misspellings ("frangipan" became "frangipani," for example) even when doing so altered the syllable count and meter of a line. Does her editor have the same privilege? And what if a technical mistake ("tuatera" for "tuatara") is now part of the ear's knowledge of a canonical poem? Is the music of a poem as it has come down to readers what the poem "is," or is a given printing of a poem (as Moore's constant revisions suggest) more like the trace of a deeper poem whose record she would want to be made ever more correct?

In my experience, paying sustained attention to successive iterations of a poem is a little like observation in particle physics: the closer you look, the less certain you get about exactly what it is you're looking at. Moreover, I've come to think that another principle of particle physics, that the object under observation is shaped by that observation, is proved with admirable thoroughness by the process of literary editing. Most readers (I used to be one of them) don't know what a poetry editor does, or bother to learn what ideas guided the creation of any given edition. But those ideas shape everything; they are the lens through which we know a poet at all. The fewer editions of a poet's work that exist, the more consequential an editor's choices are for anyone who reads. Knowing what I know now, I think every edition of a poet's work should come with a warning label: "What you are about to read is what your editor has chosen to show you. Caveat lector."

Moore deserves careful editorial attention because she is, by any measure, a major poet. She was and is revered by her poet peers for her inventiveness, her fierce intelligence, her wit, and her moral vision. Her work is original, with an original's perennial newness. In editing the *New Complete Poems* I have done what editors do: devised a working set of procedures to present the poet I know and value. I have not, because I cannot, settled any questions about what her poetry is or may become. Original things always exceed definitive presentation and containment. Long may her poems confound us.

New Collected Poems - [Amazon.com](#)[Barnes and Noble](#)[IndieBound](#)[Google](#)[books](#)

Marianne Moore (1887–1972) was an American poet, critic, editor, and translator, greatly admired for her formal innovations and startling vision. Her poetry received many honors, including the Dial Award, the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Bollingen Prize.

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