Modernist Women Writers and Whimsy: Marianne Moore and Dorothy Parker

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**Abstract:** T.S. Eliot wrote of the ‘several ways’ in which his book of *Old Possums* might be a ‘failure’, deciding there were more ways of going wrong with whimsy than going right: this article suggests the cultures of modernism made the stakes particularly high for twentieth-century women poets. It explores the ‘cost’ of whimsy by bringing into conversation the work of Dorothy Parker (1893-1967) and Marianne Moore (1887-1972), considering the questions their poetry and its reception raise for understanding cultural value, genre, and form. It considers the powerful charge of whimsy in American literary culture, assesses the nature of attacks and defences on both writers surrounding it, and explores ideas of cost, risk, and value in their poetry.

**Keywords:** Moore; Parker; whimsy; poetry; poetics; New York; modernism

**Paper:** Dorothy Parker’s 1933 short story ‘The Waltz’ contains the first known use of the word ‘scaredy-cat’ (Parker 1952, p.18): a droll narrator attempts to keep an unwelcome dance partner at bay, teasing him with the threat of catching beri-beri if he gets too close. The word summons its particular power from denaturing the hunter-beast: the cat quivers with fear rather than prowling. Though he never used the word directly, one of her poetic contemporaries was also sounding surprisingly timid as he wrote to his publisher about a feline poetry collection three years later (Eliot 2015, p.41):

The various Poems (how many should there be?) might not be good enough. The matter such as here attached may be not at all amusing: a book simply of collected animal poems might be better. Finally, the contents and general treatment may be too mixed: there might be a part that children wouldn’t like and part that adults wouldn’t like and part that nobody would like. The *mise-en-scène* may not please. There seem to be many more ways of going wrong than of going right.

What was T.S. Eliot scared of? His fears about the reception of *Old Possum’s Book of Cats* (1939) suggest the pitfalls of publishing whimsical verse and of going public with often private, joking envois. As Marianne Moore put it, ‘any concern about how well one’s work is going to be received, seems to mildew effectiveness’ (Moore, 506). For Eliot, the question of quality is fringed with quantity: what happens when a light poem outstays its welcome, or a collection tries its audience’s patience: will their ‘eccentric confusions’ manage to ‘defy examination’ (‘Mr Mistoffelees’, Eliot 1998, p.27)? Does the comic mode depend on consistency across individual works, or does the genre call for the ‘mixed’ and the ‘various’? Does the pitch for a wide audience lead to a frustrated one? The writers of comic verse, as Eliot suggest, can be ‘knockabout clowns, quick-change comedians, tight-rope walkers and acrobats’ (‘Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer’, Eliot 1988, p.17). But Eliot’s concerns that there are ‘many more ways of going wrong than going right’ suggests that herding together his *Cats* – like ‘The Naming of Cats’ itself - is a ‘difficult matter’ (Eliot 2015, p.39) and, more generally, writing poetry for diversion is not without revisions, indecisions, or deviation. Perhaps his worries had been shaped by the audience rejoinders he felt Moore’s poetry required in his introduction to her 1935 *Selected Poems*: ‘only the pedantic literalist could consider the subject-matter to be trivial; the triviality is in himself’ (Moore 1935, p.9). Something about the quality and reception of Moore’s poetry had encouraged him to be cautious, to acknowledge that particular poets needed to deflect criticism as well as summon praise. When we encounter playful poetry, is the reader in danger of going wrong too? Why would Eliot pre-empt an attack on her work?

The risk of poetry being ‘trivial’ or light verse not being ‘good enough’ might be felt particularly sharply by modern American poets: as Bonnie Costello has noted, the dominant mode of twentieth-century American poetry is tragi-comic, yet its reception often gives the humour short shrift (Costello 2012, p.340). Its critical readers were given little space for play either: I.A. Richards’ *Practical Criticism* (1929) attempted to drum out the ‘personal-whimsy’ response of untutored eyes and ears (Richards 1930, p.255), as English studies worked to consolidate its position as a rigorous academic subject. This distrust of play runs from New Criticism right through to the new aesthetics of the 1960s – Susan Sontag upbraids the ‘cold’ and ‘self-referring’ whimsy of Ionesco where ‘the terrible is always, somehow circumscribed by the cute’ (Sontag 1966, p.111). More recently, Geoff Dyer has suggested ‘nothing makes any difference with whimsy, whimsy is for lower stakes […] there are no risks in whimsy. People think of whimsy as doing whatever you feel like, but there’s less to whimsy than that’ (Dyer 2012, p.45). In as far as it is part of any critical conversation, it continues to be the word put at the furthest reach from anything worthy of our sustained attention. Yet in this article I want to suggest that the stakes of whimsy are often far from low, and that cultures of modernism made the stakes particularly high for twentieth-century women poets. I will explore the cost of whimsy by bringing into conversation the work of Dorothy Parker (1893-1967) and Marianne Moore (1887-1972), considering the questions their poetry and its reception raise for understanding cultural value, genre, and form. I will begin by outlining the particular power and threat whimsy has in American literary culture. I will go on to assess the nature and defences of the attacks on both writers against this charge, and the way both writers located themselves within and against modernism. I will explore the presentation of ephemera in Parker and Moore’s work, and their construction of the ‘minor’ writer in their poems. I will then suggest how cost, risk, and value is explored in their poetry, and how their criticism and early work considers the worth of whimsy. \*

Emerson’s essay ‘Self-Reliance’ (1841) outlines whim as the writer’s natural expedient: it is the excuse which keeps unwelcome visitors at the door and carves out their time from familial or social obligations:

I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. I hope that it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation. (Emerson 1983, p.262)

As Emerson makes clear, whim is the bottom of the literary barrel: it is that which the literary must always define itself against and rescue itself from becoming, poetry’s means of ‘going wrong’ or mapping out what it is in danger of becoming. His playful rewriting of Deuteronomy, which bids readers to hang God’s commands from their doorposts, suggests the American writer must follow their genius by making rather less grand claims to their immediate public about the outcome of their creative endeavours: following Dyer’s formulation, it may be something that makes no difference. The promise of whim buys writers enough time from social concerns or other ethical obligations to write something which might well surpass the efficacy of their original excuse. They set off not necessarily because they have something worth saying, but because they have had a calling which might get something said, worthless or otherwise. It suggests a creative mission statement attenuated sharply to what poetry can try to or fails to be, and this is something we find in both Moore and Parker’s work. ‘I too, dislike it’ (Moore 2017, p.27) opines Moore, notoriously, of poetry: ‘there is poetry and there is not’ (Parker 1927, p.77) is Parker’s stark assessment from a 1927 review. The rest is no better than whim.

The domestic choreography of Emerson’s image suggests the threat this unorthodox leave-taking might present to familial or civic models of democracy, and also indicates how serious a charge a ‘whimsical’ dismissal of a poem might be. There is a gendered dynamic to the image too: the errant writer is the male genius absent from wife or father. Perhaps informed by this image, Susan Howe in *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* makes the case for American culture having a particular fraught relationship with the capricious and the whimsical: she notes fancy is ‘an irredeemably feminine word for most Americans’, and its poetic culture is policed accordingly: the call of Whitman’s ‘hail my fancy’ is a ‘truant expression in canonical American literary expression’. The basis of its democratic structures is saying goodbye to ‘false notion, caprice, whim’ (Howe 1993, p.12). As with Emerson, it is the thing we leave behind, the failure which we endeavour to free ourselves from in order to yoke ourselves to structure and sentences more permanent. Howe is also drawing on a much longer Anglo-American of using ‘whimsy’ as a term to demarcate poetry not only from other forms of literary caprice, but to articulate a concern about sexual identity and gender: it is no surprise that Moore settles for less bedevilled term of ‘gusto’ when outlining the role for poetic energy and spontaneity (Moore 1987, p.423).

As I have noted elsewhere (Brain 2019, p.74), the word ‘whimsy’ has often been used to undermine and contain the role of intellectual women in society, as in Mary Wollstonecraft’s observation that her educated female contemporaries are said to be ‘teeming with capricious fancies’ (Wollstonecraft 2004, 103), or Margaret Cavendish’s conviction that female wit needs the ‘discretion’ of male prudence in *The Female Academy* (Cavendish 1668, p.654). The term’s pejorative associations haunt the reception of a number of female American poets, as in the baffled account in *Atlantic Monthly* of Emily Dickinson’s poetry as ‘whimsical memoranda’ which ‘have a certain something, which, for want of a more precise name, we term *quality*’ (Aldrich 1892, p.133). The critical formulation is telling here: ‘whimsical’ stands in for a term the male reader cannot find for a poetics he cannot decipher. His ‘quality’ is less a seal of approval than the identification of particularity, an acknowledgment of something distinct rather than something with distinction. It also suggests the double-bind of whimsy for female poets: its power of disavowal can be applied equally to the experimental and obscure, as with Dickinson, or that which appears generic and ephemeral.

If Moore and Parker had opposing reasons for a readers’ dismissal, their careers had more opportunities for cross-over: they lived much of their lives on two islands joined by a bridge. They both found unlikely celebrity in their later years, and spent more time than is usual for poets absorbed with advertising commissions. Their careers were also marked by sharp swerves of renunciation: Moore’s heavy revision of individual poems post-publication or their subsequent removal from her collected works, and Parker’s abandonment of poetry altogether after three collections. Both knew the power of compression. The indefinite pronouns of Parker’s advertising captions find unlikely corollaries in Moore’s gnomic utterances, and we never quite know how formally or cryptically we are going to be addressed (or, in one of Parker’s most famous captions, semi-dressed):

From the foundations of the autumn wardrobe, one may learn that brevity is the soul of lingerie. (Meade 1988, p.35)

If “compression is the first grace of style,” you have it. (‘To A Snail’, Moore 2017, p.19)

If beginning a conversation between copy-editor’s tagline and the first line of a modernist poem seems specious, much of Moore and Parker’s critical writing encourages us to move repeatedly between the high and low, whether it's Parker’s review of Ford Madox Ford’s *Last Post*, asking her readers forgiveness that she was more gripped by a poison-pen story in the newspaper and let literature fall ‘flat on its face’ (Parker 1970, p.58), or Moore’s defence of Ogden Nash in ‘Feeling in Precision’, wondering what would have become of him ‘if he only wrote in accordance with the principles set forth by our manuals of composition’ (Moore 1944, p.203).

Common to both writers and their reputations was a need to keep whimsy at arm’s length, from sophistication on one hand, and decorum on the other. Catherine Keyser notes Parker’s ‘professional self-presentation was determined by the vagaries of public life’ rather than ‘the desires of the individual writer’ (Keyser, p.141), but her book reviews proved useful for shifting the conversation to her own advantage. As Parker’s first poetry collection *Enough Rope* (1927) passed into its third edition, her publisher made plans to sell her as ‘another A.A. Milne’, sparking a temporary unloved nick-name of ‘Dotty-the-Pooh’ (Adams 1935, p.706), an advertising strategy she was anxious to abandon. Milne was a writer imprisoned by his reputation – a 1956 profile in *Time* magazine carried his complaint that ‘if I write anything less realistic, less straightforward than “the cat sat on the mat”, I am [called] whimsical”, that “most loathsome adjective” (Unsigned Review 1956): Parker’s notorious review of Milne had done much to lock him in. Written under her ‘Constant Reader’ pseudonym for the *New Yorker*, it quotes Piglet’s lyric ‘The more it / SNOWS-tiddely-pom’ before holding its nose and alerting the reader to his ‘frequent droppings into more cadenced whimsy’. Its kiss-off confession that this ‘Tonstnat Weader Fwowed up’ by the time by the first mention of ‘Hunny’ (‘Far From Well’, Parker 1970, p.101) drips with disdain: Parker take no chances in having her readers make connections between his whimsy and her own work.

Moore’s allies were similarly on the watch for any damage the word might do. Elizabeth Bishop marshals the defence in her posthumous essayistic memoir:

Lately I have seen several references critical of [Moore’s] poetry by feminist writers, one of whom described her as ‘a poet who controlled panic by presenting it as whimsy’. Whimsy is sometimes there, of course, and so is humour (a gift these critics sadly seem to lack). Surely there is an element of mortal panic and fear underlying all works of art? Even so, one wonders how much of Marianne’s poetry the feminist critics have read. (Bishop 1994, p.143-4).

Bishop’s dismissal of the criticism never makes it clear if she is bristling on account of the panic or their pre-emptive control and disguise. Certainly, it is not only feminists who have found Moore’s poetry inhabiting this space: Robert Crawford notes the pull between ‘whimsy and correctness’ (Crawford 2004, p.251) in her work (once again, the fear of ‘going wrong’ rears its head). Moore criticism of a certain vintage offers a particularly eccentric form of special pleading too: writing in 1982, David Bromwich compared her use of poetic form to ‘a friend’s matinal fondness for mango juice’ (Bromwich 1982, p.114); John Ashbery likened her to Mary Poppins, presumably one administering medicine to help us stomach the sugar rather than the other way round (O’Connor 1988, p.30). Here is a natural critical urge to out-quip a famously self-effacing and off-kilter poet, who tended to describe herself in terms more till more bizarre than these: in a 1959 letter to Bishop, Moore cast herself halfway between ‘Jack Abbot and Peter Rabbit’ (Costello 1984, p.130). The poem which begins her first collection is a dedication to an inter-mural rat, yet it’s Moore’s extra-mural activities which have given critics more cause for concern: extolling the virtues of baseball or, in 1955, agreeing to devote serious time to naming the Ford Motor Company’s newest car. That so different writers with such distinct publishing contexts might be guarding their critical reception against the same charge suggests the word has less value as a precise critical term or genre, but a dynamic relationship both to their gender, and to how they accommodated themselves to the publishing expectations of the period.

In a skittish parody subtitled ‘Showing that Anyone Can Write Modernist Verse’, Parker offers a wry sequence of four poetic pastiches: Eliot’s ‘newspaper from vacant lots’ from ‘Preludes’ (Eliot 1999, p.9) become ‘A litter of newspapers / Piled in smothering profusion’ in ‘Sunday’ (Parker 2010, p.227). Yet the speaker cannot quite part from the image, and gives way instead to inventory, from the ‘Supplements sprawling shamelessly open, / Presenting their lurid contents’ to the ‘Editorials, crumpled in a frenzy of ennui’. The irony of the subtitle redoubles: not everyone can write modernist verse, or be understood to be, as the ensuing poem demonstrates. The ‘endless’ and ‘beginningless’ heaps of newspapers pile ever higher, with studied disdain for that indecorous journalism. Those tottering damp newspapers in Parker’s parody might have included her own work: modernism was too good a satiric movement to ignore in Parker’s weekly *New Yorker* column, where she described a literary party where ‘the gentleman were small and somewhat in need of dusting’, a ‘guest of honour’ who ‘had won the prize of $20 offered by *Inertia: a Magazine of Poesy* for the best poem on the occupation of the Ruhr district’, and a lady who had completed a long work on “Southern Californian Bird-Calls” and was ready for play’(Parker 1970, pp.62-3). As her essay drolly records, ‘to have written anything, whether it be a *Ulysses* or whether it be a report of who sat next to whom at the P.E.N. Club dinner, is to be a writer’ (p.64). Yet if Parker’s sharp portraits of poetic ornithologists and literary periodicals at times summons up Moore, it is less severe than her own self-assessment: in a 1956 *Paris Review* interview Parker declared ‘my verse is terribly dated […] I gave it up, knowing it wasn’t getting any better, but nobody seemed to notice my magnificent gesture’ (Capron). In moving to Manhattan, Parker recalled her pretensions to be Edith Sitwell giving way to following Edna Millay’s footsteps in ‘horrible sneakers’ (Cowley 1958, p.75).

Parker’s mock-heroic disdain for her work is part of a defensive joking that runs throughout her poetry:

If, with the literate, I am

Impelled to try an epigram,

I never seek to take the credit;

We all assume that Oscar said it. (Parker 2010, ‘Oscar Wilde’, p.111)

The poem recalls T.S. Eliot’s comment on the difficulty of writing an epigrams, a verse ‘charged with intense feeling’ but ‘a feeling that is completely shared’ (Eliot 1941, p.6). Yet here, Parker pitches epigram-writing closer to self-abnegation than self-fashioning. Her disbelief at the glittering reception her poetry received is a constant throughout her career: what Moore calls the ‘concomitant of something well said’ (‘To a Snail’, Moore 2017, p.19) was not, for Parker, enough to justify her growing renown. By contrast, Moore is one of the few American women poets consciously curated and presented as a modernist during this period, from her editorship of *The Dial*, to T.S. Eliot’s 1935 edition of *Selected Poems* where, as Kappel notes, ‘his concern was to suggest Moore’s place in the Modernist movement’ (Kappel 1994, p.129). Her concern for concision, clarity, and collage, her technical interest in metrics, and her preoccupation with revision, offer her as the exemplary experimental American poet. Yet despite the differences between Parker and Moore, the cultures that embraced them both as icons worked hard to erase difference when turning them into celebrities: Parker saw things she had never said printed on guest towels (Capron) while Moore took up commissions from the Pencil Advisory Board. What might the work of a determined modernist on one hand, and a disavowed poet on the other, suggest about the way we understand and read modernism and the whimsical voice?

Whimsy is a measure of what is made or not quite made from the materials at hand: the relationship between Parker and Moore’s work suggests a blurry line between the things we preserve, the words which last, and the worth we attach to them. An implicit conversation between Parker’s poem ‘Bric-á-Brac’ (1928) and Moore’s ‘Walking-Sticks and Paperweights and Watermarks’ (1936) suggests the complex relationship between all three. Parker’s ‘Bric-á-Brac’ (1928) details the ‘Little things that no one needs - / Little things to joke about –‘ (Parker 2010, p.102). The two stanzas recount the domestic miniatures of ‘little landscapes’ and ‘little morals, woven out’, and the ‘little brigs of whittled oak / Bottled painfully in glass’. The combination of littleness and profusion is not accidental, we learn: ‘Lonely folk have lines of days / Long and faltering and thin’. We continue to march past trinkets until the final line brings us up short to ‘Little verses, such as these’. We are in the world of what Derrida has called the frivolous as opposed to the vain, where the ‘utility’ of what is being described bears only on ‘objects of little consideration or worth’ (Derrida 1987, p.118). The poem’s self-professed littleness matched Parker’s own diminutive comments on her poems, but the final line enacts a Janus-turn too: the poem moves from a sniggering if melancholy inventory of domestic craft to elegiac self-diagnosis. The final deixis ‘such as these’ does much painful work: by making an example of itself, the poem is both allowed to be entirely generic, and to sigh for being so. It is built from layers of the time-killing littleness it observes. The poem’s claim suggests it is no more substantial than Emerson’s ‘whim’ – it is unnecessary, but its knowingness, or rather its play with the notion of not being necessary, generates something not funny enough for a reader to ‘joke about’ but more complex than the earlier pathos for the ‘lonely folk’. From the early twentieth-century the word whimsy was used to describe the small objects made by potters or glassmakers for their own amusement: in Parker’s poem too, we find something of little worth made up entirely of the sum of its small parts. If it is made only for amusement, its final affect is closer to grief.

The power of its littleness comes into sharper relief through a reading of Moore’s notoriously opaque poem ‘Walking-Sticks and Paperweights and Watermarks’ (1936), which Luke Carson and Heather Cass White have noted remains ‘mostly invisible to Moore scholarship’ (Carson and White 2010, p.341). If Parker’s poems offers itself a thing which no-one needs, Moore’s poem has been similarly discarded: Moore herself partially revised it before omitting it entirely from subsequent *Complete Poems* (1967). Like Parker’s ‘Bric-á-Brac’, it is built around a series of objects which make hovering analogies with the poem itself, mostly private gifts which circulated among Moore and her close friends. The references for many of its quotations often rely on intimate knowledge of a particular context, the tenor of its words on understanding what Empson called a ‘compacted doctrine’ (Empson 1948, p.230). Like Parker’s poem, it weighs up its own worth with ambivalence: in the course of the poem Moore’s speaker describes a copy of her collection *The Pangolin and Other Verse* (1936) as ‘an alphabet / of words and animals’, and doubts the ‘high -/ way’s wide giant trivia’ (Moore 2017, p.126). Much of Moore’s early poetry offers a medley of curios and decorative objects, from the ‘the medieval decorated hat-box’ in ‘When I Buy Pictures’ (Moore 2017, p.51), the ‘certain Ming / products’ that set in motion ‘Critics and Connoisseurs’ (Moore 2017, p.32), to the ‘lignum vitae balls’ on the village green in ‘Bowls’ (Moore 2017, p.60). Yet here the gifts are made frail by questions about their durability, purpose and utility, building a ‘fabric of inconsistency’ which is ‘motheaten by self-substractives’ (p.124). The ornate, private, and gnomic qualities of the poem re-animate Parker’s domestic crafts: the world of Moore’s poem is whimsical because while the eye can admire the beauty of the objects, it cannot ascertain their purpose of their arrangement, their significance to the figures bestowing them, or the relationship between them. The poem is laced with incentives to peel back its obscure layers, quoting the Dominican friar Giodarno Bruno who held that ‘“difficulty is ordained to check / poltroons,” (p.124), but the reader is found wanting courage. In a poem knit together by the human power of gift-giving, the gift of the poem itself is one readers often don’t know where to put or what to say on receiving. The two poems map the distance between a work which declares that no-one needs it, and a work which needs to be known, but which no-one knows they need.

This tightrope walk between difficulty and indifference is also caught in Moore and Parker’s frequent presentation of the minor writer, who may write *Whim* on the lintels of their door-post only to come back with nothing better. A series of Parker’s epigraphs for writers mock-memorialises the unlettered and ungarlanded:

His little trills and chirpings were his best

No music like the nightingale’s was born

Within his throat; but he, too, laid his breast

Upon a thorn.

(‘The Minor Poet, from Tombstones in Starlight’, Parker 2010, p.163)

The quatrain hovers between wry rib-tickling and gentle deflation. The accusation of being ‘minor’ or ‘little’ is qualified by being a subject worthy of elegy, though the poem’s preference for his ‘little trills’ might suggest, similarly, Parker’s poem is a minor one. Its final line cuts itself off in mid-song, flattened into a stubby elegy: this act of affinity – a minor epitaph for a minor poet – complicates his status as a subject of ridicule. It can also be read against a series of whimsical prose satires directed more obviously towards Parker: in 1927, her fellow *Vanity Fair* columnist e.e. cummings published a wry tribute to the fictional ‘poetess’ named Helen Whiffletree, murdered in Paris. His copy celebrates a verse where ‘naivetë is carried to a pitch of unheard-of poignancy’, and summons a comic portrait of the Algonquin set, as Helen arrives ‘penniless but exultant, in Greenwich Village’ to find a ‘*coterie* of struggling artists and models, many of whom lent her money in small quantities as a tribute to the surge of odes, triolets, roundels, roundeaux, chants royals, etc., etc., which poured for her teeming brain almost ceaselessly at this fecund time’ (cummings, p.123). As the ‘teeming’ suggests, this is the recurring model of the women writer as whimsical and over-productive, pandered to, over-indulged. Parker’s waspish reviews and criticism of her own work kept her the right side of these attacks, but they also highlight the precarious path of the poet who must demolish any claim to the literary standing of the work so much the quicker to pre-empt the work of a critic.

While Moore’s portraits are necessarily more abstruse, there is a telling evocation of a male history critic in her 1916 poem ‘“He Wrote The History Book”, It Said’:

THERE! You shed a ray

Of whimsicality on a mask of profundity so

Terrific that I have been dumbfounded by

It oftener than I care to say.

*The* book? Titles are chaff. (Moore 2017, p.30)

The poem, first published in the *Egoist* in 1916, recounts a conversation Moore had with a young boy named John, son of the historian Dr. C.M. Andrews, and takes his words as its title. The child’s off-hand comment is both dismissive of his father, shrugging his shoulders over the details, and laudatory, crowning him as the author of all history. Ostensibly, the poem mocks authority and individual claims to being definitive. Its central metaphorical tenet is to make whimsy a ‘ray’ and profundity a mask’: whimsy is that unexpected beam of light which illuminates and explains, and profundity the forbidding disguise that hides a subject from us. This inversion reveals other sites of play in the poem. There is in an invisible pun on Moore’s subject here, the historian’s sun who – like any sun worth of the name – sheds ‘rays’. But whether the poem is laughing at or with that same subject is more difficult to say. The dismissive ‘titles are chaff’ (another metaphor drawing indirectly on the sun’s rays) might also implicate the title of this poem as mere dictation. The poem’s final sentence – ‘Thank you for showing me / Your father’s autograph’ - attempts another kind of whimsical inversion, laying doubt on the whole literary discourse of the poem by signing off with a low-key envoi. It aligns the poem with the coy apology of William Carlos Williams’ ‘This is Just To Say’ (1934), where the speaker tries to explain away an ice-box of empty plums. Yet whereas that poem apologises for a whim and presents itself as one – a note scribbled on a fridge which could or could not become an artwork – Moore makes still greater claims for what a whim might be, something not with hidden depths but hidden *under* depths.

As we have seen, T.S. Eliot’s anointing of Moore as a pre-eminent modernist offered explanation as much as appreciation: ‘for a sensibility so reticent, the *minor* subject, such as a *pleasant little sand-coloured skipping animal*, may be the best release for the major emotions’ (Moore 1935, p.9). In this formulation, the poet moves towards impersonality not through rewriting the epic but attending to minor topics. This faint praise has proved a trap for Moore’s wider reception: as Sheila Kineke has noted, T.S. Eliot’s framing of Moore in the introduction to her *Selected Poems* in 1935 would set the tone for later, tempered assessments of her work (Kineke, 134). Yet in her own poetry, Moore turns the model on its head, offering wry nose-wrinkles to the male claims towards being definitive, comprehensive, and standard, even if He Wrote the Modernist Poem. Both Parker’s satiric portrait of the unsuccessful contemporary male poet and Moore’s crisp but generous account of the history professor’s scholarship offer minor shifts of where we might find and define the whimsical, and why we might come to welcome it.

Moore and Parker found another way through the critical traps applied to playful poetry by returning frequently to questions of worth, value, and cost in their work. As Moore’s poem ‘Novices’ notes, the artist is ‘the only seller who buys, and holds on to the money’ (Moore 2017, ‘Novices’, p.61). Implicit in Emerson’s account of writing *Whim* on the lintels of the writer’s doorpost is that genius does not work to commission, and that the writer must be afforded time bought out from financial obligation. Yet both Moore and Parker offer rejoinders to this position. As Jason Guriel notes, Parker’s deft epigrams sought brevity both for formal and pecuniary reasons: verbal economy ‘wasn’t just a matter of aesthetics, of making sure that every word contributes’, but a matter of financial ‘survival’ (Guriel 2013, p.149). Moore’s reduction-ad-absurdum of her collected works, vanishing stanzas when republishing her work or omitting numerous works altogether, offered a poetic economy that made new economic product from absence and destruction. Moore’s stringent aesthetic economy was married to a rather vague personal accounting: as Leavell notes in her biography, Moore ‘sometimes alarmed her impecunious friends by letting them believe she lived hand to mouth on the checks she received from magazines, and she sometimes accepted checks of $10 to $15 from such friends’ (Leavell 2014, p.382-3).

There is a long history of whimsy-as-financial composition in poetry, of course: Thomas Hood’s relentless financial obligation to ‘urn a lively hood’ (Lodge 2007, p.141) through his endless punning. Yet in accepting the 1955 commission from the Ford Motor Company, and republishing their correspondence first in *The New Yorker* and then *The Marianne Moore Reader*, Moore aligned modern American poetry squarely with capitalism: as Irene Ramalho Santon notes, the decision was ‘not in opposition to but taking into account the rhythms and achievements of material culture’ (Santos 2003, p.265). It might be worth pausing on this apparently playful endeavour. Perhaps, in an age which suggested that the poem should ‘work’, like machine or a pudding, this was no great mismatch (Wimsatt 1954, p.4). Yet the project, like the car itself, could hardly be considered a success, even if the resulting correspondence makes wonderful reading: Moore begins by refusing to take a fee for her pains as she wishes to carry out the commission with ‘unencumbered fancy’ (Moore 1955, unpaginated). Moore’s increasingly absurd suggested names for the Ford – Mongoose Civique, Dearborn Diamonte – were all politely rejected for the name of Ford’s son, Edsel. Yet the final tagline for the car that, after all, Marianne Moore did not name is revealing: ‘The EDSEL acts the way it looks, but it doesn’t cost that much’ (Neil 2016). By this point, the advertising campaign had nothing whatsoever to do with Moore, who had magisterially withdrawn from proceedings, but the tagline invites application to her own work: repeatedly, Moore’s own critical, editorial, poetic, and public interventions into her own reputation ensured that her work could bear the ‘cost’ of whimsy.

Her speaker seemed confident of any such risk in ‘Diligence is to Magic as Progress is to Flight’ (1915), where she summons forward motion

‘With an elephant to ride upon – “with rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,”

she shall outdistance calamity anywhere she goes.

Speed is not in her mind inseparable from carpets […]

the substance of it is embodied in such of those

tough-grained animals as have outstripped man’s whim to suppose

them ephemera, and have earned that fruit of their ability to endure blows,

which dubs them prosaic necessities – not curios. (Moore 2017, p.18)

The vehicle for his poem – like the ill-fated Edsel, which never manages to ‘outdistance calamity’ – is apparently laboured, yet more dextrous than the audience. Moore performs a deft manoeuvre here, attributing the whim of the poem not to diligence, the tutelary diety bestriding the elephant, but to the men who might dismiss her as ephemeral. Whim, Emerson’s expedient alibi of creation, becomes instead the reader’s own misjudgement: to dismiss fancy as ephemeral is to submit to one’s own passing critical whim. Ellen Levy has noted Moore’s attraction to elephants, their thick-skinned participation in the circus, and their vulnerability to the routines mapped out for them (Levy 2011, p.98). As More writes elsewhere: ‘routine is the carefully right word, since an elephant is graceful when doing things it could not do if not taught to do then, and is enhanced by a skirt as the grace of a venerable live oak would be enhanced by a skirt’ (Moore 1946, p.145). Yet the elephant’s gracefulness might be one way of re-reading her ruthless excision or rewriting of her early work. In 1923, Matthew Josephnson’s review of her in *Broom* contrasted her sincerity and dedication to the ‘coarseness’ of American women who ‘go horseback riding’ and ‘have no shame and no pride’ (Josephson 1923, p.139). Two years later Moore responded by withdrawing from her canon the 1915 poem which prompted his remark: she responds to a reader’s whim with a gesture which is rather more serious.

This might return us to the cost of whimsy – both in the poet’s art of concealing it, or the reader’s art of retrieval in winkling it out. Parker is keen to challenge our expectations of worth at every turn: her humour works most often by upending our hierarchies of the valuable, as in ‘Ornithology for Beginners’ from *Death and Taxes* (1931):

The bird that feeds from off my palm

Is sleek, affectionate, and calm,

But double, to me, is worth the thrush

A-flickering in the elder bush. (Parker 1999, p.162)

Parker’s hammers out the proverb-turned-cliche in two directions, uncurling its epigrammatic brevity into a lyric insight, while also suggesting that the ungained possibility is more valuable than the already-possessed. A bird in the hand is not always what we are looking for. Its neat quatrain is unmoored by the preference for movement: the ‘A-flickering’ is to be prized above the ‘sleek’. A similar repositioning takes place in Moore’s bestiary of animal poems: her ode to the ostrich makes a virtue of keeping one’s head in the sand:

unsolicitude having swallowed up

all giant birds but an alert gargantuan

little-winged, magnificently speedy running-bird.

This one remaining rebel

is the sparrow-camel. (‘He “Digeseth Harde Yron’, Moore 2017, p.153)

Like Parker finding something worthy in a proverb by questioning its common-sense wisdom, Moore notes that the bird famed for not paying attention remains ‘alert’. Evolution has reached a different conclusion to common-sense and critical convention.

Both writers’ commitment to the exceptional over the commonplace was defended and defined best in Moore’s 1949 essay, ‘Humility, Concentration, and Gusto’. This tricolon, like Moore’s tricorn hat, has sometimes been used against her: James Jiang has noted how the unorthodox term ‘gusto’ marginalised the role of Moore’s substantial critical prose (Jiang 2019, p.375). She could pay the price for gusto in practice too: Robert Graves, exasperated with her use of quoted newspaper headlines in her poetry, wished aloud they had been left in their ‘original setting’ (Graves 1970, p.141). Yet her defences both of the terms and the practice challenges its readers to attend to the bravado in humility, the distraction that might cleave to concentration, and the restraint that can sometimes result from gusto. Moore begins the essay with a close reading of a letter from the Federal Reserve Board of New York which describes the appearance of counterfeit notes. Here, her attention seems to wander, enchanted by the bureaucratic dazzle of its prose. Yet the ‘infectiousness’ of this non-poetic example shows the importance of not making assumptions about value; forgery is only possible to guard against with a keen eye. Money haunts her subsequent poetic examples too: she alights on the moment in Edward Lear’s ‘The Owl and the Pussycat’ when the Pig becomes, for a moment, Piggy, so that when he sells his ring for a shilling, he will fit into the tetrameter line. She then defends the whimsical coinages of Edmund Spenser, creating new words to fit his rhyme scheme. Her apparently unrelated examples – from the letter on counterfeits, to the Piggy selling his ring, to Spender’s unorthodox coinages – make a telling comment on the kinds of prices poets might pay for breaking the rules, and what the reader might miss by refusing to follow them. Moore’s poetics is one where whimsy doesn’t come without its cost, but often encourages the reader to split the bill. If Moore’s distinct poetics was dismissed by the *TLS* as ‘the latest device for disguising a lack of inspiration by means of a superficial unconventionality’ (*TLS*, p.471), or ‘too eccentric to pass as prose’ (Selincourt 1936, p.52), her critical essays reminded poets and readers why ‘we must have the courage of our peculiarities’ (Moore 1944, p.502).

Dorothy Parker’s publishing career begins with two women discussing the now forgotten British novelist William John Locke, whose novel *The Fortunate Youth* was one of the best-selling books of 1914 in the US:

“I’m reading that new thing of Locke’s

So whimsical isn’t he? Yes – “

“My dear have you seen those new smocks

They’re nightgowns – no more, and no less.”

“I don’t call Mrs. Brown *bad*,

She’s *un*-moral, dear, not *im*moral-“

“Well, really, it makes me so mad,

To think what I paid for that coral!” (Parker 2010, p.203).

The poem ‘Any Porch’ continues with sixteen couplets which yawn their way through the speakers’ indifferent conversation: it was itself sufficiently tiresome for Parker to merit excision in her *Collected Poems*, although its publication in *Vanity Fair* secured her first job as staff writer for *Vogue* (Meade 1988, p.34). Satires on the generic can blur the lines between mimicry and echo: her biographer glosses her early poems as ‘trivia’ (Meade, p.31). Yet it is telling her first published poem begins by recording a response to a male contemporary by a female reader that is half-engaged, half-dismissive in its gloss of ‘whimsical’, reversing the usual direction of traffic. The poem dares us to ask whether it is ‘no more or no less’ than trivia, and who might be the target of its mockery. Like her first speaker, who throws up her voice in horror to ‘think what she paid’ for her coral, Parker buried this poem away from her corpus, happier to remember what she was paid for the poem than the significance, if any, of its conversation. Yet if the emotional charge of the conversation is weak, the topics are pointed: Parker’s first published work considers the relationship between style, substance, morality and value in its opening two quatrains.

In 1704, John Dennis’ ‘The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry’ attempted to lay out the rules for poesy. The stakes for getting the rules right, he claimed, were high: ‘poetry is either an Art, or Whimsie and Fanaticism’ (Dennis 1704, p.5). His use of these words is significant: whimsie, still associated with the four humours in the early eighteenth century, is akin to a kind of madness, and his essay helped set up the word as a term always hostile to poetry, too. A late poem by Moore suggests the stark binaries of this model might need rethinking, as well as the motives of those often saddled with them:

Am I a fanatic? The opposite.

And where would I like to be?

Sitting under Plato’s olive tree

Or propped against its thick old trunk,

Away from controversy

or anyone choleric. (Moore 2017, p.268)

She absents herself from the model of whimsy as an internal miscalibration. In the final stanza of the poem, she finds solace in some quotations from Ben Jonson’s *Discoveries*, which espouse the value of personal truth. She may well have known the earliest recorded use of the word whimsy in English came in Jonson’s play *Volpone* (1606), where it explains the slave Mosca’s ability to be in all places at once. He struts the stage with what Moore would properly call ‘gusto’, delighting in and a poetry which ‘can rise / And stoop, almost together, like an arrow’ (III.i, l.23-4, Jonson 2019, p.69).

**Conclusion**

In a 2004 review, William Logan identified whimsy as a ‘besetting weakness’ in Moore’s work, her status as a public figure making ‘poets, and poetry, seem slightly ridiculous’ (Logan 2004). Yet a draft of Eliot’s own playful contribution to the genre is helpful here: the first version of ‘The Naming of Cats’ suggests its speaker ‘may be quite right’ and ‘may be quite wrong’ (Eliot 2015, pp.55-6). This article has argued that the ways of going ‘quite wrong’ with whimsy were often compounded in American modernist poetry by the gender of the poet publishing the poem: it is a category which has afforded male poets more opportunities for error.

Both Moore and Parker’s work mitigates the power of ‘going wrong’ as a critical accusation in a variety of ways: by reshaping our ideas about objects and ephemera; by offering parodies both of minor poets and male authority figures; by using criticism to repitch the accusation of whimsy, and linking it to wider questions of economic and cultural worth. Rather than playing merely by playing the game, the whimsy of Moore and Parker is a serious rejoinder to what Martha Nussbaum has called the ‘fact-seekers’ (Nussbaum 1995, p.4), encouraging them to see ‘curios’ and ‘necessities’ (‘Diligence is to Magic as Progress is to Flight’, Moore 2017, p.18), and to look for ‘unreason’ below ‘depth’ (‘Black Earth’, Moore 2017, p.41). As Parker’s ‘Bohemia’ puts it, poets can, in fact, ‘start off from anywhere’ (Parker 116), and there are numerous means for the reader to find them. Marianne Moore’s cat poem ‘Peter’ (1920) encourages us to ‘fly over the fence’ and ‘go in the wrong way’ (Moore 1922, p.x); whimsy might be the way poets might make right from our wrongs, and attending more carefully to its pawprint might show us how many trails it leaves in modernist women’s poetry and its reception. If the fear of this whimsy’s charge reverberates through modernism, in Moore and Parker’s work it tugs at the possibility our inability to figure whimsy in poetry limits us, rather than our poets. As Moore put it in her commission from the Lead Pencil Manufactures Association: ‘Velvet mat / is my cat […] Our best pencils / write like that’ (Moore 2017, p.420). Careful attention to the cultural politics of whimsy not only allows us to understand why and how poets are said to ‘write like that’, but rethink how dangerous ‘that’ might be: judging by Moore and Parker, those more at risk of the accusation proved the most dextrous in reframing it as a possibility.

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