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“IMAGINARY GARDENS WITH REAL TOADS IN THEM:” A REALITY CHECK WITH “POETRY” AND “PIANO LESSONS”

ABSTRACT: For students who are at a loss to understand how poetry helps them distinguish the real from the imaginary in a world increasingly turning ‘virtual,’ Marianne Moore’s “Poetry” and Russell Edson’s “Piano Lessons” offer some valuable insights. Reading poetry “with a perfect contempt for it,” as Moore suggests famously, students soon begin to realize that the ethics of poetry are not all that different from the aesthetics that embody other modes of discourse. In their reading they begin to see the asymmetrical relation the verbal shares with the non-verbal when writers try to capture everyday reality in a language purportedly ‘poetic’ and ‘imaginative.’ Observing how students gain such insights, a teacher learns that the “aliteracy” of young adults growing up in our globalized, media-rich environs is largely a myth. The teacher’s pleasure after all begins precisely when he/she is sure that poetry, now and here, makes more sense to its readers in a class (in 2010-11, in India) than what it was meant to suggest in another place or circumstance to its earlier implied readers. If the class at least begins to see a philosophy of reading implicit in imagining language differently, one couldn’t ask for more of a course in American Poetry and Poetics.


Among the assets that one cannot ignore is the power of concentration. A preamble on television or snatch of phonograph music is not part of it. Are you able to ignore a disparaging comment, insult, slander? Smother your desire for revenge? Make allowance for the defiant salesman who writes, goes on writing and will not look up? The traffic man hardened to explanation? The asset of assets was summed up by Confucius when asked, ‘Is there a single principle that you can practice through life to the end?’ He said, ‘Sympathy. What you don’t want, don’t inflict on others.’ — Marianne Moore, “Profit is a Dead Weight” (569).

Those of us who still read literature and sometimes watch the media for diversion are used to the banality of art. Television is art that knows its banality; only that the millions who watch it daily have no idea at all of this medium’s sophisticated banality. We might be expected, really, to be alarmed by the rate at which they break stories by the seconds. But we
are not. The buffoonery of ‘reality’ television, again, is not to be confused with the reality of televisionary buffoons. In all this, the imaginary and the real, our safest poles of reference so far in appreciating the arts, often seem indistinguishable. We know that ever since the cinema started invading our living rooms, we have made meek adjustments to our tried and tested senses of imagination and reality. Of course we can’t tell the prankster from the prank, but why bother? Rather than despairing, however, that I am (still!) teaching poetry to generations of students for whom Ripley’s Believe it or not! has nearly edged out Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith,” I take comfort that poets like Marianne Moore and Russell Edson still make sense to my wards. It is not unusual for me to begin the opening sessions of an elective course “American Poetry and Poetics” with this epigraph from Moore.\(^1\) Would anyone, then, find poetry an “infliction”? I don’t think so. Twenty years ago, John Barth cited “the very substantial decline…in reading as a source of information and entertainment, and the attendant, quite measurable decline in verbal skills among both students and their teachers” as reasons to safely predict a bleak future for fiction not only in the U.S. but elsewhere too. He characterized students’ addiction to the electronic media as their “general aliteracy” (p.357) the truth of which I have grudgingly known for myself and regretted among other things in my profession.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) This is a 4-credit elective I have offered now and then to M. A. Semester III students at the University of Hyderabad. Although there is no explicit prerequisite for this course, all students in this class have read some introductory texts in two compulsory surveys called “American Literature and Thought: From the Puritans to the Present, I and II.”

\(^2\) John Barth’s prognostication is dated 1990; three years before that date, we hear another voice, rather dissimilar to Barth’s in every other respect than on the deleterious effects of the electronic media on young mental habits of thought, pronounce thus: “It scarcely seems that this generalized accessibility offered by the new cultural goods is strictly speaking a progress. The penetration of techno-scientific apparatus into the cultural field in no way signifies an increase of knowledge, sensibility, tolerance and liberty. … Experience shows rather the reverse: a new barbarism, illiteracy and impoverishment of language, new poverty, merciless remodelling of opinion by the media, immiseration of the mind, obsolescence of the soul…” (Lyotard 1987/88:63). Words much stronger than Barth’s indeed!
It is quite unbelievable to me therefore that a batch of 20-odd students in their early twenties regularly come to my classes every semester. There we read and enjoy English poetry and discuss the language poets use, and what use we (the television-watchers, text-messagers, bloggers, and social networking people) have for poetry and poetics. One of the poems upon which we often spend considerable time is Moore’s “Poetry” (1919). And the poem does seem to make sense to us—in varying degrees and kinds. Some students even essay a study of Moore who predicted for them this new-age experiment of life, in lines that zigzag through speculations about what poetry is, what it might be, or what, if anything, it ought to be. Amazingly, Moore’s slim definition of poetry survives, regardless of its uneasy formulation and rather tortuous syntax: “nor till the poets among us can be/ ‘literalists of/ the imagination’— above/ insolence and triviality and can present// for inspection, ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’, /shall we have/ it” (p.267). We shall have poetry, that is. Moore’s it is both wisdom and trademark caution. Her poems seldom talk down to us; their Borgesian irony involves us nevertheless from a distance she marks so carefully. A furtive eavesdropper on life, she hardly advances a thesis on the lives she had known from close quarters— lives of plants, animals, the vast National Geographic of her own making and loving of things that exist on the outskirts of academic politics, culture, and history. At least if one cares to know that much about Moore, the poet, then it is fairly easy to see why she begins “Poetry” with the line: “I, too, dislike it” (p.266). No wonder students could easily, perhaps instantaneously, recognize this roguish Metaphysical Poet, a woman the likes of John Donne could only marvel at.

Moore’s continuing relevance and supreme importance as a poet today cannot be better explained. She is the best reminder we have in our engagement with the imaginary and the real in a world of make-believe public media and screen technologies that lie to us. We are apt to lapse into all too human errors of dull habit and certain muddles of sense and reason in our increasingly marginal relationship with the socio-political world of happenings. We tend to seek the familiar and homely in the fiction we read rather in the lives of our making and being. Garden, on this count, is fiction; imagination will blamelessly summon it by day or night. After all, who does not want to return to the best of places whence
we came? Toads, by the same logic, are *non-fiction*; reality opens up the bucolic environs in which they breed and croak (*cf.* the “ugly and venomous toad” of Shakespeare’s Forest of Arden). What Moore is suggesting is that as long as we are still hung on this age-old binary (imaginary-real), the quest for “the genuine” must begin in poetry. “Reading [poetry], however, with a perfect contempt for it,” notes Moore concessionally, “one discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine” (p.266). The familiar world, as a rule, is a world familiar to the self. When this self reads fiction, it writes its “familiar world” into what it reads even when the fiction is ostensibly about completely unfamiliar worlds. Moore would only want us to realize this, and no more.

That explains this poet’s allusions to *Genesis* 2.8 and *Paradise Lost* (IV. 800) and the ever so many ‘falls’ thereafter in western literary and ordinary lives. Gardens must be “imaginary” while toads “real,” if only in plain deference to conventional comfort. That would be quintessentially American as well, if we think of the foundational Puritan myth of the American Garden. It further assumes that those who subscribe to this dream will pluck it only when it is ripe, Satan, who “squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve” notwithstanding. Upon this reminiscent ethics of gardens and toads informing her aesthetics, Moore will not harangue us for sure, but she is round and about a proposition Martha Nussbaum advances so succinctly in her *Love’s Knowledge*: “A novel, just because it is not our life, places us in a moral position that is favourable for perception and it shows what it would be like to take up that position in life. We find here love without possessiveness, attention without bias, involvement without panic” (p.162).

I sometimes think that Moore’s poetry is text-cum-philological commentary of sorts, textual precept and interpretive practice in one. Perhaps she was preparing the ground, as in most of her expansive reflections on art and poetry, for theoretical approaches that recognize the interaction between poetics and hermeneutics. In other words, Moore might be heard asking us discreetly to mind our poetics (“imaginary gardens”) in order that we speak some coherent hermeneutics (“real toads”). For we cannot think of poetry as supremely other and

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3*As You Like It*, II.i, line 13.
transcendent; it is always dependent on those who love and recognize
the poetic as such. *Imaginary* gardens, but *real* toads whose presence
constitutes and complements imagination. A complete severance between
beautiful poetics and ugly hermeneutics is inconceivable as long as
readers live and their oppositional communities grow all around us.
Interpretive community is not singular but democratically plural. That
was Moore’s way of promoting the reader to a respectable station, both
central and aesthetically non-negotiable, long before theories of reception
made readers imperial. What Reception theory neglected to consider,
Moore considered more urgently: What if readers do not respond?

Hermeneutics admittedly is hair-splitting of a kind, but let us also concede
that it is imperative that we distinguish between mere ‘understanding’
(as in our language-comprehension tests) and a disciplined understanding
of what understanding involves, or how we understand the things we
claim to understand. We might be closer, then, to Moore’s “Reading it,
however, with a perfect contempt for it” (p.266). The contempt, let us
say, is not for the poetry we are reading, but for the sloppy reading we
practise. Of course the syntax and the habit that formulates it are likely
to elicit that “perfect contempt” (p.266), of which more below. Anyhow,
we know that much of what passes for interpretation and commentary
is often undertaken by persons far less gifted than their poets for purposes
purely fashionable in the academy to which the interpreters/commentators
belong. It is not without some demonstrable logic and proof that Moore
observes that “these things [hands, eyes, hair—all emblems of aesthetic
stimuli and appropriate human responses] are important not because a/
/ high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them/ but because/ they
are/ useful” (pp.266–267). No poet could have been more precise and
pertinent than Moore when she proposes a new theory of reading
literature (a domain capacious enough for all things genuine in life and
the arts) at a time when schools of critical theory have been rising and
falling on popular votes and journal-ratings. The point is that when a
shadow falls between readers and what they read, the penumbral does
not constitute feasible hermeneutics. Much of what we read as critical
interpretation or scholarly commentary falls within this penumbral region.
Neither has the poet said anything nor has the interpreter heard anything.
Once again we suspect that the *real* and the *imaginary* have played
truant.
We shall be remiss, again, if we tried hard to extract or develop a simplistic ‘theory’ of reading poetry from Moore’s poem, but it is plausible that the poem nevertheless seemed to suggest to our class why reading (not only poetry, but just about anything genuine, a word Moore repeats here⁴) has a grammar, an ethics of words, of its own. It is not always the way we read (or what we read) that eventually takes the shape of our commentary. The experience of reading, in other words, is certainly not the “reading” we present as ‘our’ experience. Each of these, reading as well as the understanding of that experience, is subject to completely different protocols. Yet another way of putting this is to remark that Moore’s “Poetry” (a poem that makes such a metapoetic bid, as it were) is an utterance not only in language but by language. Are we able to imagine language doing such things on our TV shows? Hardly. But when language speaks itself in poetry, we ought not to interpret its language strenuously. We have heard enough. And what we have heard is “the rustle of language,” as Roland Barthes calls it, when the poet’s creatures (elephants, wild horse, the tireless wolf, the immovable critic, the baseball fan, the statistician …) live and move and have their beings in that world created out of nothing that we can record or reproduce electronically or mechanically.

For all this, however, Moore’s “Poetry” occupies only a secondary status among the landmarks of American modernist poetry. Most anthologies print only its drastically edited/excised opening, a reminiscental token from an era that first learnt to be circumspect about poetry in all its forms. While other poets recognized “Poetry” as a minor achievement in speculative aesthetics that drove modernist energies, it was seldom given a pride of place beside the touchstones of poetic modernism: The Waste Land, Mauberley, or Spring and All. The material questions that Moore raises here, those regarding the real and the imaginary, however, have since then found echoes in postmodernist practices. To Moore we owe the idea that Poetry is preëminently an Idea, that every poem is trying to come to grips with the Idea of Poetry, that to keep trying to have this Idea is why poets are in this world, and why we read

⁴Considering that the pre-Latin source of genuine meant ‘native, free-born,’ a genuine person is free from the affectations and hypocrisies endemic to her age.
them. Both the “imaginary gardens” and the “real toads in them” are infinite parts of an ideational compound; they guarantee each other. The strife is real. It takes a poet like Moore to tell us that it is real, and that it is here, in poetry, that we recognize its complex reality. The exploratory logic and rhythm of its speculation has made “Poetry” a minor classic, a text that inaugurated so to speak such speculative narratives involving gardens and toads by contemporary poets like Russell Edson. At first my students seemed slow to appreciate these family resemblances, but they became very real when the students were reminded of Moore’s poetic menagerie, her very suggestive variations upon La Fontaine’s *Fables*, beside Edson’s fables of animal or non-human identity. Edson versifies absurdities to such an extent that readers turn genealogists of sorts — isn’t this fable a cross between Samuel Beckett’s plays and Marianne Moore’s poetry? Let’s examine a sample:

**PIANO LESSONS**

There was once a girl who was learning to play piano by taking it for walks in a wood.
She would guide it with an elephant goad.
Mother would say, oh do be careful, its [sic] such a costly piece of furniture.
The piano farted.
Father said, take that horrible old man out of here or I shall really have to remember who I am, for I shall be shouting in such a manner to be quite unlike my self.
But in time the piano became the greatest girl player in all the world.
Father said, how odd.
Mother said, oh my.
The piano used an elephant goad in quite such a manner as to bring the girl to song.
It is quite lovely, said father.
It is not unlovely, said mother.
Very soon the house was filled with little pianos.
Father said, well, I hardly expected this.
And mother said, well, this was not
quite expected, but past the initial shock
one learns to expect what has already happened.

(Edson 1973:78)

To the tweeters and iPoders of my class of twenty-year-olds, this
narrative, I believe, first sounded no less bizarre than Moore’s “Poetry”
probably had to my generation that put up with long delays at bus-train-
stations, post-offices, and public offices. Someone interested in the
evolutionary epistemology of human behaviour might yet tell us whether
there is any correlation between the reading habits of a people socially
tutored to stand patiently in serpentine queues (or wait endlessly for an
overseas telephone link-up) and the narrative velocities and textual
dynamics of books published for them. Whatever that research might
bring us, Moore does not seem all that far away and long ago from
Edson’s world as far as we are concerned. At least my students did not
think so when they read “Piano Lessons” and did not find it as funny
simply as I had thought they would. If they learnt anything at all from
Moore it is this: poets do not follow professional style manuals or write
learned papers. They could therefore see why Edson must have felt
free, light of mind and hand, when he wrote this poem. And when the
poet further wants to share this rare pleasure of writing with us, it turns
out, its ‘story’ is just as much its pleasure. Moore’s “Poetry” is a testament
to this indulgence, to the genuine freedom of poets to be themselves
rather than the official selves into which a reading public casts them.
The poet is a maker. Edson makes, and makes it all up. The prose-poem
with which readers have come to identify his work is a Janus-faced
genre which allows room for a piece of prose to evolve from the poem
it once was, and for a poem to be a piece of prose which it might still be.
That room, we believe, is still the largest room in the world—the room
for improvement, which story indeed is what “Piano Lessons” subtextually
tells us. That would be Moore’s “place for the genuine.” On this count
alone, we might call Edson a “[literalist] of the imagination,” in Moore’s
borrowed but perfect phrasing.5

5 Moore adapts this phrase citing W. B. Yeats’s Ideas of Good and Evil as her source.
Yeats calls William Blake a “literal realist of imagination” (Moore 1956:268).
Let me now explain what it was I think that made my class take to Edson’s poem in a manner that convinced me that only teachers age but not teaching. When we grumble that we are teaching poetry to a class whose “aliteracy” Barth had bemoaned, to those young readers who seem terribly short on the courtesies of decent reading (and writing), we are unwilling to admit a possibility Moore’s “Poetry” envisages most compellingly. And that possibility is that one still “discovers in/ it [poetry] after all, a place for the genuine” (p.266). I cannot claim an isolated superiority for my students in this respect, but I shall say this much with absolute confidence: they seemed to me more sensitive to language, its philosophy and social life, than some of our theorists and discourse analysts who are still mired in controversial hypotheses about language in society. These young readers of poetry, I found, have evidently gone beyond such simplicities as human language is reflexive in order to notice how that reflexivity works in a fundamental way when a poet uses the same language as they use in everyday life. If they found Edson’s poem “difficult,” it was not because they did not understand its words, not because it carried obscure allusions and analogies, not even because they were unused to its absurdities and non sequiturs. Edson was not so much “difficult” as challenging for another simple reason. While his narrative voice, they found, is using a language we all know to be so uncomplicated and effortless, it is using this language not to mean what we usually mean with the same words and phrases. At least not in the same way we want those words to mean for our settled comfort. They seemed, in other words, keen not to read the poem as a bad joke played on a suburban family but as a condition which certain thinking about language has created with which serious thinking, again, about language must reckon. My students were intrigued.

All I needed to do then was to remark to the class that Edson’s poem is reflexive in two important senses, each helpful in revising our ideas of the real/imaginary, and the language poets use to represent them. “Piano Lessons” reopens certain orthodoxies of realism and verisimilitude. Its narrative voice plainly debunks the stock-in-trade of a realistic fictional suburbia—the small family, parental care, romance in the woods, music, lovely scenes anticipating the lovely arrival of children, and a happy ending. Edson defaces the formulaic real so mercilessly that even a die-
hard fan of fictional realism will agree that realism is at bottom a lie ("an imaginary garden" whose "real toads" we are persuaded to ignore by a language that lies so cunningly) and the illusion so created owes everything, again, to a language of realist interpretations. The success, in other words, of any realist representation is directly proportional to the failure of words to capture the absolutely real in all its rawness and crudity. (Who wants to meet another drab day in all actual details in art?) Realism, as Terry Eagleton observes, "tends to conceal the socially relative or constructed nature of language: it helps to confirm the prejudice that there is a form of ‘ordinary’ language which is somehow natural" (p.117). A furtive revenge fantasy of sorts, "Piano Lessons" also reflects on a wide variety of truth-claims made by language, from the folk to the philosophical, of what understanding of the world human beings command when they use language.

Moore and Edson are not alone in speculating such deeply philosophical dimensions of the language they harness as poets but reading them together helps us appreciate the asymmetrical relation the verbal shares with the non-verbal in human lives. (*Speculum* in Latin means ‘mirror.’) We seem never quite happy with the words we have with which to explain, narrate, relate, describe, engage, or portray the ‘reality’ we believe to be ‘true.’ We seem never quite happy with the instruments of knowledge and belief we have at our disposal or the linguistic resources and energies at hand to be able to communicate the ‘real’ and be true to our own selves. The language of “Piano Lessons” is exceptional in the ease with which it narrates events, the difficulty of even imagining that which is inconceivable: such as taking a piano for walks, why this ordinary piece of furniture “farts” and is spoken of as an “old man,” the elephant goad being used “in quite such a/ manner,” etc. We are astounded, outraged, or feel terribly betrayed further when the poem ends with the girl’s mother just saying: “…well, this was really not/ quite expected, but past the initial shock/ one learns to expect what has already happened.” Really? Is this true of language generally, or of the exceptional language of Edson’s narrative? What, indeed, are our expectations of language— that it will give us only that which we might reasonably expect; or that it would give us only that which we could easily comprehend; that language will allow us to reconsider what it could do otherwise than supply us the
predictable or comprehensible? How much of reality, in the name of realism, could we bear? Would authentically realized fictional worlds demand authentically realizable language to match them? Further reflections on the topic of language seem quite implied in the phrase, “past the initial shock.” Learning one’s language actually means progressively getting past the initial shock, onto other minor and major shocks, one after another. We grow with language, much as our language grows with individual learners, and successive generations in whose lives it lives. It is debatable though whether we grow up ever, or what role, if anything, one’s language plays in this process.

Other interesting questions follow. We have not yet come past Moore’s “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” That we have been negotiating (initially unawares) two incommensurable worlds in “Piano Lessons” becomes evident when our usual certainties of the word and the world are belied. We notice, for example, that this “girl who was learning to play a piano” has slowly begun to make a play for it/him, and that the piano has begun to play around with her. And what splendid lessons! Her parents observe all this but we are not sure that they are only mildly embarrassed or simply wonderstruck. Another question that engaged my class was the nature of this narrative. While Moore told stories allusively, Edson tells a story directly. But, again, we are not too sure that this is not quite a parable; it might well be a short commentary on the motives and methods of story-telling, or a bid to answer: What makes us *homo narrans*? One of the motives clearly discernible here is the mutuality of ‘being-in-a-world’ and ‘a-world-in-a-being’ afforded by narratives generally. Put in simple terms, human beings *are* stories variously told and made by the world to which they belong. My life therefore is a story (crisscrossing several others) *I* want to make, and make it cohere, more than anybody else. Any rupture in that narrative is inadmissible, most of all, to me. Nor do I want it to be incomplete or fragmentary, unless I want you to know that I am completely out of my mind. But how is this related to Edson’s peculiar story? Reading a poet like Edson, I imagine that he is testing me whether I manage still to have my wits about me, whether I have given up on my story-telling rights. I see therefore that “Piano Lessons” has designs on its readers. One way or another, I heard my students ask: Have we lost our world, our sensoria,
to the electronically-monitored- and-surveilled environs, the televised reality comprising soap, thriller, children’s, doctor, police, wildlife-stories? If we have, Edson (and Moore before him) will suggest some plans for therestitution of our precious senses. Once we regain sanity, we will be better placed to ask from whose situated perspective the poet has been telling his/her story, and whether we, as readers, share that same situated perspective. To that end, Edson tries hard, I think, to make language imagine what human beings ordinarily won’t or can’t. It was perhaps to this most peculiar imagination that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous image of language going on holiday appeals. One traces the genesis of philosophical problems, according to Wittgenstein, to those occasions when language goes on holiday (p.19). The ‘nonsense’ of “Piano Lessons” knows more about the sense we have lost purchase on than the sense we proudly claim to have won or kept in this age of information technology, virtual reality, and electronic superhighways. Perhaps it makes further sense to recall that the girl and the piano share a secret, the mentor now turning a sweet tormentor, the logic of which hardly appeals to Father and Mother who discharge no more than a choric function in this superb one-act.

I shall quickly note in conclusion the peculiar way the two poems ‘connected’ in our class because not all texts we read in a course speak to us compellingly about, and in tandem with, the conditions of our immediate learning and living. They do not, in other words, urge us to reflect on the ethics of reading life in the poetry before us. Since I had been urging the class to consider always not only ‘what a poem means’ generally, but also how a poem might mean to us as ‘knowing’ more than its poet had probably meant it to mean, and further perhaps what reflections might follow our collective reading on the ends of poetry, my students found Moore and Edson to be poets, unusual voices rather, whose address they found so irresistible and insistent. They were able to discern in their voices sincerity and authenticity — “assets [of another kind] that one cannot ignore,” like Moore’s “concentration” (p.569), that they seem to have all but lost in the virtual reality-whirligig of their days and nights. Moore’s address is direct and open; Edson’s, indirect and rather subtle. “The structure of address,” remarks Judith Butler who opens her Levinasian discussion of the moral demands others make on
imaginary gardens with real toads in them

us discursively, “is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained… [because] something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails” (p.130). It struck me as most beneficial that “Poetry” and “Piano Lessons” offered my students and me the ethical and aesthetic anchoring we badly needed by helping us all to return to that most intriguing phrase in Moore’s poem: a perfect contempt. The highlight of our session indeed was our noticing with amused irony that in “Piano Lessons” familiarity didn’t even get round to breeding contempt before it bred “little pianos.” A perfect contempt, surely, in Moore’s sublime sense, is another virtue worth having while negotiating the multiple virtual worlds of our everyday. Although my students haven’t quite articulated this much in writing or speech, I have the sense that without such assurance of another, alternative, reality afforded by these gardens and toads in them, our sessions would have meant nothing to us in terms of experience or knowledge.

REFERENCES


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