

COMPLETE POEMS

MARIANNE MOORE



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COMPLETE POEMS

Marianne Moore was born in Kirkwood, Missouri, on November 15, 1887, and spent much of her youth in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. After graduation from Bryn Mawr College in 1909 she taught for four years at the Carlisle Indian School. Her poetry first appeared professionally in *The Egoist* and *Poetry* magazines in 1915, and she moved to New York City in 1918. Her first book, *Poems*, was issued in England by the Egoist Press in 1921. *Observations*, published three years later in America, received the Dial Award. From 1925 to 1929 she served as acting editor of *The Dial*, the preeminent American literary periodical. She moved to Brooklyn in 1929, where she lived for the next thirty-six years. In 1935 *Selected Poems*, with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot, brought her work to the attention of a wider public.

Three additional books of poetry were followed, in 1951, by her *Collected Poems*, which won the Bollingen Prize, the National Book Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. She went on to publish a verse translation of the complete *Fables of La Fontaine*, a collection of critical essays, and three more volumes of poems.

Among the many awards Marianne Moore received are the National Institute of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Poetry, the Poetry Society of America's Gold Medal for Distinguished Achievement, and the National Medal for Literature, America's highest literary honor. A member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters since 1947, she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1955. In 1967 she was made Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Republic and in 1969 she received an honorary doctorate in literature from Harvard University, her sixteenth honorary degree. Marianne Moore died in New York City, in her eighty-fifth year, on February 5, 1972.

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

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Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue,

Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand. London WC2R 0RL. England

First published in the United States of America by

The Macmillan Company and The Viking Press 1967

This edition first published by Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., and The Viking Press 1981

Published by Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., and Penguin Books 1982

This edition published by Macmillan Publishing Company/Penguin Books 1994 20

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Certain of these poems first appeared in *Active Anthology*, *Art News*, *Art News Annual*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Boston Sun Globe*, *Botteg Oscure*, *Broom*, Bryn Mawr College (*The Lantern*, *Tipyn O'Bob*, *The Title*), *Chimera*, *City Center Souvenir Program 1962* (New York), *Contemporary Poetry*, *Contemporary Verse*, *The Criterion*, *Decision*, *The Dial*, *The Egoist*, *Furioso*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Harvard Advocate*, *Horizon*, *Hound and Horn*, *Imagi*, *Kenyon Review*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Life and Letters Today*, *The Listener*, *The Nation*, *New Directions*, *New English Weekly*, *The New Republic*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *Others*, *Others Anthology 1917*, *Partisan Review*, *Perspectives USA*, *Poetry*, *Poetry in Crystal*, *Quarterly Review of Literature*, *Literary Supplement* (London), *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Vogue*, and *What's New*.

Twenty-three of the poems in this edition appeared originally in *The New Yorker*.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Moore, Marianne, 1887-1972.

The complete poems of Marianne Moore.

Includes index.

eISBN : 978-1-101-12747-6

I. Title.

PS3325.05616A .52 82-6608 AACR2

Set in Monotype Waldbaum

<http://us.penguin.com>

TO LOUISE CRANE

Omissions are not accidents.

M.M.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The text conforms as closely as is now possible to the author's final intentions. Five of the poems written after the first printing of this volume have been included. Late authorized corrections, and earlier corrections authorized but not made, have been incorporated. Punctuation, hyphens, and line arrangements silently changed by editor, proofreader, or typesetter have been restored. Misleading editorial amplifications of the notes have been removed.

Clive Driver

Collected Poems (1951)

TO MARY WARNER MOORE (1862-1947)

SELECTED POEMS (1935)

THE STEEPLE-JACK

Dürer would have seen a reason for living
in a town like this, with eight stranded whales
to look at; with the sweet sea air coming into your house
on a fine day, from water etched
with waves as formal as the scales
on a fish.

One by one in two's and three's, the seagulls keep
flying back and forth over the town clock,
or sailing around the lighthouse without moving their wings
rising steadily with a slight
quiver of the body—or flock
mewing where

a sea the purple of the peacock's neck is
paled to greenish azure as Dürer changed
the pine green of the Tyrol to peacock blue and guinea
gray. You can see a twenty-five-
pound lobster; and fish nets arranged
to dry. The

whirlwind fife-and-drum of the storm bends the salt
marsh grass, disturbs stars in the sky and the
star on the steeple; it is a privilege to see so
much confusion. Disguised by what
might seem the opposite, the seaside
flowers and

trees are favored by the fog so that you have
the tropics at first hand: the trumpet-vine,
fox-glove, giant snap-dragon, a salpiglossis that has
spots and stripes; morning-glories, gourds, or moon-vines trained on fishing-twine

at the back door;

cat-tails, flags, blueberries and spiderwort, striped grass, lichens, sunflowers, asters, daisies—yellow and crab-claw ragged sailors with green bracts—toad-plant, petunias, ferns; pink lilies, blue ones, tigers; poppies; black sweet-peas.

The climate

is not right for the banyan, frangipani, or jack-fruit trees; or for exotic serpent life. Ring lizard and snake-skin for the foot, if you see fit;

but here they've cats, not cobras, to keep down the rats. The diffident little newt

with white pin-dots on black horizontal spaced-out bands lives here; yet there is nothing that ambition can buy or take away. The college student named Ambrose sits on the hillside with his not-native books and hat and sees boats

at sea progress white and rigid as if in a groove. Liking an elegance of which the source is not bravado, he knows by heart the antique sugar-bowl shaped summer-house of interlacing slats, and the pitch of the church

spire, not true, from which a man in scarlet lets down a rope as a spider spins a thread; he might be part of a novel, but on the sidewalk a sign says C. J. Poole, Steeple-Jack, in black and white; and one in red and white says

Danger. The church portico has four fluted columns, each a single piece of stone, made modest by white-wash. This would be a fit haven for waifs, children, animals, prisoners, and presidents who have repaid

senators by not thinking about them. The place has a school-house, a post-office in a store, fish-houses, hen-houses, a three-masted schooner on the stocks. The hero, the student, the steeple-jack, each in his way, is at home.

It could not be dangerous to be living in a town like this, of simple people, who have a steeple-jack placing danger-signs by the church while he is gilding the solid-pointed star, which on a steeple stands for hope.

THE HERO

Where there is personal liking we go.
Where the ground is sour; where there are
weeds of beanstalk height,
snakes' hypodermic teeth, or
the wind brings the "scarebabe voice"
from the neglected yew set with
the semi-precious cat's eyes of the owl—
awake, asleep, "raised ears extended to fine points," and so
on—love won't grow.

We do not like some things, and the hero
doesn't; deviating head-stones
and uncertainty;
going where one does not wish
to go; suffering and not
saying so; standing and listening where something
is hiding. The hero shrinks
as what it is flies out on muffled wings, with twin yellow
eyes—to and fro—

with quavering water-whistle note, low,

high, in basso-falsetto chirps
until the skin creeps.
Jacob when a-dying, asked
Joseph: Who are these? and blessed
both sons, the younger most, vexing Joseph. And
Joseph was vexing to some.
Cincinnatus was; Regulus; and some of our fellow
men have been, although devout,

like Pilgrim having to go slow
to find his roll; tired but hopeful—
hope not being hope
until all ground for hope has
vanished; and lenient, looking
upon a fellow creature's error with the
feelings of a mother—a
woman or a cat. The decorous frock-coated Negro
by the grotto

answers the fearless sightseeing hobo
who asks the man she's with, what's this,
what's that, where's Martha
buried, "Gen-ral Washington
there; his lady, here"; speaking
as if in a play—not seeing her; with a
sense of human dignity
and reverence for mystery, standing like the shadow
of the willow.

Moses would not be grandson to Pharaoh.
It is not what I eat that is
my natural meat,
the hero says. He's not out
seeing a sight but the rock
crystal thing to see—the startling El Greco
brimming with inner light—that
covets nothing that it has let go. This then you may know
as the hero.

THE JERBOA

Too Much

A Roman had an
artist, a freedman,
contrive a cone—pine-cone
or fir-cone—with holes for a fountain. Placed on
the Prison of St. Angelo, this cone
of the Pompeys which is known

now as the Popes', passed
for art. A huge cast
bronze, dwarfing the peacock
statue in the garden of the Vatican,
it looks like a work of art made to give
to a Pompey, or native

of Thebes. Others could
build, and understood
making colossi and
how to use slaves, and kept crocodiles and put
baboons on the necks of giraffes to pick
fruit, and used serpent magic.

They had their men tie
hippotami
and bring out dappled dog-
cats to course antelopes, dikdik, and ibex;
or used small eagles. They looked on as theirs,
impalas and onigers,

the wild ostrich herd
with hard feet and bird
necks rearing back in the
dust like a serpent preparing to strike, cranes,
mongooses, storks, anoas, Nile geese;
and there were gardens for these—

combining planes, dates,
limes, and pomegranates,
in avenues—with square
pools of pink flowers, tame fish, and small frogs. Besides
yarns dyed with indigo, and red cotton,
they had a flax which they spun

into fine linen
cordage for yachtsmen.
These people liked small things;
they gave to boys little paired playthings such as
nests of eggs, ichneumon and snake, paddle
and raft, badger and camel;

and made toys for themselves:
the royal totem;
and toilet-boxes marked
with the contents. Lords and ladies put goose-grease
paint in round bone boxes—the pivoting
lid incised with a duck-wing

or reverted duckhead;
kept in a buck
or rhinoceros horn,
the ground horn; and locust oil in stone locusts.
It was a picture with a fine distance;
of drought, and of assistance

in time, from the Nile
rising slowly, while
the pig-tailed monkey on
slab-hands, with arched-up slack-slung gait, and the brown
dandy looked at the jasmine two-leafed twig
and bud, cactus-pads, and fig.

Dwarfs here and there, lent
to an evident

poetry of frog grays,
duck-egg greens, and egg-plant blues, a fantasy
and a verisimilitude that were
right to those with, everywhere,

power over the poor.
The bees' food is your
food. Those who tended flowerbeds
and stables were like the king's cane in the
form of a hand, or the folding bedroom
made for his mother of whom

he was fond. Princes
clad in queens' dresses,
calla or petunia
white, that trembled at the edge, and queens in a
king's underskirt of fine-twill thread like silk-
worm gut, as bee-man and milk-

maid, kept divine cows
and bees; limestone brows,
and gold-foil wings. They made
basalt serpents and portraits of beetles; the
king gave his name to them and he was named
for them. He feared snakes, and tamed

Pharaoh's rat, the rustbacked
mongoose. No bust
of it was made, but there
was pleasure for the rat. Its restlessness was
its excellence; it was praised for its wit;
and the jerboa, like it,

a small desert rat,
and not famous, that
lives without water, has
happiness. Abroad seeking food, or at home
in its burrow, the Sahara field-mouse
has a shining silver house

of sand. O rest and
joy, the boundless sand,
the stupendous sand-spout,
no water, no palm-trees, no ivory bed,
tiny cactus; but one would not be he
who has nothing but plenty.

Abundance

Africanus meant
the conqueror sent
from Rome. It should mean the
untouched: the sand-brown jumping-rat—free-born; and
the blacks, that choice race with an elegance
ignored by one's ignorance.

Part terrestrial,
and part celestial,
Jacob saw, cudgel staff
in claw-hand—steps of air and air angels; his
friends were the stones. The translucent mistake
of the desert, does not make

hardship for one who
can rest and then do
the opposite—launching
as if on wings, from its match-thin hind legs, in
daytime or at night; with the tail as a weight,
undulated out by speed, straight.

Looked at by daylight,
the underside's white,
though the fur on the back
is buff-brown like the breast of the fawn-breasted
bower-bird. It hops like the fawn-breast, but has
chipmunk contours—perceived as

it turns its bird head—
the nap directed
neatly back and blending
with the ear which reiterates the slimness
of the body. The fine hairs on the tail,
repeating the other pale

markings, lengthen until
at the tip they fill
out in a tuft—black and
white; strange detail of the simplified creature,
fish-shaped and silvered to steel by the force
of the large desert moon. Course

the jerboa, or
plunder its food store,
and you will be cursed. It
honors the sand by assuming its color;
closed upper paws seeming one with the fur
in its flight from a danger.

By fifths and sevenths,
in leaps of two lengths,
like the uneven notes
of the Bedouin flute, it stops its gleaning
on little wheel castors, and makes fern-seed
foot-prints with kangaroo speed.

Its leaps should be set
to the flageolet;
pillar body erect
on a three-cornered smooth-working Chippendale
claw—propped on hind legs, and tail as third toe,
between leaps to its burrow.

CAMELLIA SABINA

and the Bordeaux plum
from Marmande (France) in parenthesis with
A.G. on the base of the jar—Alexis Godillot—
unevenly blown beside a bubble that
is green when held up to the light; they
are a fine duet; the screw-top
for this graft-grown briar-black bloom
on black-thorn pigeon's-blood,
is, like Certosa, sealed with foil. Appropriate custom.

And they keep under
glass also, camellias catalogued by
lines across the leaf. The French are a cruel race—willing
to squeeze the diner's cucumber or broil a
meal on vine-shoots. Gloria mundi
with a leaf two inches, nine lines
broad, they have; and the smaller,
Camellia Sabina
with amanita-white petals; there are several of her

pale pinwheels, and pale
stripe that looks as if on a mushroom the
sliver from a beet-root carved into a rose were laid. “Dry
the windows with a cloth fastened to a staff.
In the camellia-house there must be
no smoke from the stove, or dew on
the windows, lest the plants ail,”
the amateur is told;
“mistakes are irreparable and nothing will avail.”

A scentless nosegay
is thus formed in the midst of the bouquet
from bottles, casks and corks, for sixty-four million red wines
and twenty million white, which Bordeaux merchants
and lawyers “have spent a great deal of
trouble” to select, from what was
and what was not Bordeaux. A
food-grape, however—“born
of nature and of art”—is true ground for the grape-holiday.

The food of a wild
mouse in some countries is wild parsnip- or sunflower- or
morning-glory-seed, with an occasional
grape. Underneath the vines of the Bolzano
grape of Italy, the Prince of Tails
might stroll. Does yonder mouse with a
grape in its hand and its child
in its mouth, not portray
the Spanish fleece suspended by the neck? In that well-piled

larder above your
head, the picture of what you will eat is
looked at from the end of the avenue. The wire cage is
locked, but by bending down and studying the
roof, it is possible to see the
pantomime of Persian thought: the
gilded, too tight undemure
coat of gems unruined
by the rain—each small pebble of jade that refused to mature,

plucked delicately
off. Off jewelry not meant to keep Tom
Thumb, the cavalry cadet, on his Italian upland
meadow-mouse, from looking at the grapes beneath
the interrupted light from them, and
dashing round the *concours hippique*
of the tent, in a flurry
of eels, scallops, serpents,
and other shadows from the blue of the green canopy.

The wine-cellar? No.
It accomplishes nothing and makes the
soul heavy. The gleaning is more than the vintage, though the
history *de la Vigne et du vin* has placed
mirabelle in the *bibliothèque*
unique depuis seventeen-ninety-seven.
(Close the window,
says the Abbé Berlèse,
for Sabina born under glass.) O generous Bolzano!

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