“Combat Cultural”:
Marianne Moore and the Mixed Brow

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MARIANNE MOORE’S WRITING CAREER SPANNED MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS, and over that time her methods evolved to engage the changing world and to chart her unfolding responses to it. One often-noticed shift, sometimes described as a movement away from modernist edginess and toward a sentimental poetry of celebration, can be elucidated as a switch in brow level, from highbrow to middlebrow—from elevated to popular positioning. This essay explores this switch and its roots in Moore’s early work, looking at Moore’s readers’ perceptions of her and her work and at the ways in which she addressed questions of brow, including explicit poetic argument, formal choices, and her public self-presentation.

When Moore began publishing in 1915, she entered a world fully engaged in the “Battle of the Brows,” which, as Lawrence Levine demonstrates, has been ongoing in America since the mid-nineteenth century, in diverse configurations.1 The brow terminology describes a social division based not directly on birth or wealth but on culturelness, a category that evades firm definition. The terms were tools of the effort to establish cultural order and hierarchy in the immigrant-thronged American scene, and their connotations mutated steadily. Highbrow, lowbrow and (later) middlebrow were employed to characterize both individuals and the texts and activities they consumed. Such characterization of individuals suggested the possibility of stable culture positions—that one might be one or another kind of consumer (the source of the brow terminology in racial theory is most obvious here).2 Then as now, however, while fixed-brow terms might indicate an individual’s or an author’s intention, a mixed-brow experience was the norm for many, in a world of myriad media and countless cultural encounters. Clear determination of the brow level of a text was also dubious, both because the level of reflection with which one addressed a given text affected the experience and because the wider culture’s ranking of the brow status of cultural productions often changed over time.

The cultural landscape of the early twentieth century was reshaped by development of the concept of the middlebrow. As Joan Shelley Rubin shows, in the twenties, thirties, and forties, middlebrow culture burgeoned: “Americans created an unprecedented range of activities aimed at making literature and other forms of ‘high’ culture available to a wide reading public.”3 Proponents specifically sought to bridge the brow gap, in a manner that was often seen as a watering down rather than a combination of diverse experiences. Virginia Woolf (1942) offers a lively characterization of the field: the highbrow is “the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea” and the lowbrow “the man or woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life.” She champions both high- and lowbrows, as essential to one another and to life, and sets them against middibrows, whom she derogates as “the man, or woman, of middlebrow intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige.” But while the first two seem initially to differ from the third in being pure, Woolf insists that, while she counts herself a highbrow, her “imperfections in that line are well known to [her].”4 Highbrow status is in this definition something to be labored toward, but Woolf does not account for the status one holds when one fails or succeeds imperfectly. She hints, however, at an interstitial option, wherein someone may occupy an unstable mixed-brow position, markedly distinguished from the middlebrow.

A similar instability is hinted at, but again not articulated, in Clement Greenberg’s influential essay “Avant Garde and Kitsch” (1939). Greenberg defines the high/low divide in relation not to individuals but to the art they choose to view or read. The distinguishing factors are profit and reflection: kitsch is commercial and calls for no reflection where avant-garde work is done (largely) for its own sake and requires it. Reflection, for Greenberg, involves the work of thinking things through for oneself, rather than receiving a predigested meaning from the author, and is linked to class. The leisure enjoyed by the upper classes allows them the luxury of reflection, while the extended drudgery of the lives of industrial workers both reduces their opportunities for reflection and makes the effort reflection requires undesirable.5

The period in which the middlebrow developed coincides (not coincidentally) with the modernist period, wherein the upper reaches of the cultural hierarchy came to be fenced off from the crowds by difficulty of interpretation and obscure rules of approach. When modernist writers broke with conventional literary modes, they participated in the cultural ranking process, gaining highbrow authority through a complexity that excluded many. But at the same time, their work often challenged such categorizations and emphasized ambiguity over hierarchy. The work of Marianne Moore inhabits and explores this paradox.
Upon entering the field, Moore found quick acceptance among the modernist elite. Her highbrow status was well established by 1925, when Richard Aldington, reviewing *Observations*, declared that “[w]ithin the bounds of my feeble knowledge, Miss Moore is indeed the most high-brow poet in the world.” The height of her brow, he indicates, is demonstrated by her sophisticated irony, which gives her a most menacing superiority; one is conscious of a clear piercing gaze and an unfavourable judgment of oneself somehow emanating from the pages. Instinctively one straightens one’s tie and tries hard to rub up a claim to something more than insignificance. I always feel I ought to apologise for having the presumption to read Miss Moore’s poems; and at the thought that I am actually trying to review them the pen trembles in my hand.7

Aldington’s comic trembling has several valences, one of which involves mimicking the ironic element that he includes among her highbrow qualities. He concludes saying, “with perfect sincerity that I think Miss Moore the best poet now living in America.”8

Nine years earlier, H.D. took a more sober attitude, introducing Moore to the audience of the *Egoist* as an elite, ironic warrior, terms that also convey her superiority:

And if Miss Moore is laughing at us, it is laughter that catches us, that holds, fascinates and half-paralyses us, as light flashed from a very fine steel blade, wielded playfully, ironically, with all the fine shades of thrust and counter-thrust, with absolute surety and with absolute disdain. . .

Miss Moore helps us. She is fighting in her country a battle against squalor and commercialism. We are all fighting the same battle. And we must strengthen each other in this one absolute bond—our devotion to the beautiful English language.9

Moore’s humor is portrayed as a cauterizing protection against “squalor and commercialism,” synonyms for the lowbrow here. Highbrow realms, H.D. implies by contrast, have more refined concerns of aesthetics and morality.10

But the equation of commerce with the lowbrow is not so clear-cut, since highbrow art also has a commercial side. This side was displayed in 1925, when a remarkable series of articles appeared in the *Dial*, two in January and one in each of the succeeding five months. They concerned Moore, the fourth winner of the $2,000 *Dial* prize for distinguished service to American letters, who had published ten poems in the *Dial* previous to her award, but was, as editor Scofield Thayer noted in his announcement of her honor, “among the unfortunate American public, so meagrely relished and so signal unacclaimed.”11 Yet, Thayer asserted, “those qualified to judge” held Moore in universal high esteem. And it was his aim in honoring her both to acknowledge Moore’s greatness as “America’s most distinguished poetess” and to “flare” her work. This “flaring” he did not for Moore’s sake—“(s)he does not go in for personal flaring)—but for the sake of those who read the *Dial*.12

We flare not in glorification; we flare in practical service. Service not to that Juggernaut, the Reading Public,—that Juggernaut which is well served in being served badly. Service rather to the Imaginative Individual, to him who is in our world always the Marooned Individual. The towns, the villages, the armies and the sandbars, of this North American Continent support many such. For since neither by the public pictures nor by the family radios are the hungerings of imagination appeased, therefore have these their being for ever in isolation, for ever shut and cut off. Therefore have these sharp eyes, the sharper for long fasting, eyes which, I have been encouraged to believe, are wont to pick out and to follow our own irregular and unchartered sailings. And it is for these important eyes that we run up, as one does a gala pennon, this blithe and gala name, this meadow-lark and white-heeled name, this name of Marianne Moore. . . And it is to the hearts of these—being neither gross nor lax—that I do hereby commend the admonitory ascetics of Miss Marianne Moore.13

Here Thayer directly engages in the maneuvering essential to the editors of little magazines, the effort to educate their public into interest in the material the magazines purvey through appeal to their sense of exclusivity. The Imaginative Individual for whom Thayer labors will find a soulmate in the Imaginative and Individual Moore and solace in subscribing to the *Dial*. In being thus “flared,” Moore is both advertised and advertisement. And the blending of commercial and aesthetic concerns is continued, as Robin Schulze shows, in Thayer’s synchronizing of the *Dial* award with his own Dial Press’s publication of Moore’s *Observations*. Correspondence documents that he was simultaneously concerned with furthering Moore’s career and in boosting sales of the magazine and the book (*BMM* 30–31). The $2,000 prize money emblematizes the commercial element in even this most erudite of awards.

But though Moore’s early admirers insisted upon her high brow, her work points to the instabilities in such claims, challenging both this assignment and the brow division itself. Many critics have pointed to the destabilizing quality of Moore’s frequent inclusion in her poems of quotations from non-literary, generally middlebrow sources (*The National Parks Portfolio, Vogue, the Illustrated London News*, etc.).14 Her poem “England,” first published in 1920, addresses the hierarchy of brows within a critique of hierarchy in general. In “England,” the highbrow accomplishments of Europe and the Far East (older, thought-through cultures, “from which the grossness has been extracted”) are contrasted with an apparently lowbrow America,
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where there
is the little old ramshackle victoria in the south,
where cigars are smoked on the street in the north;
where there are no proof-readers, no silkworms, no digressions;

the wild man’s land; grassless, linksless, languageless country in which
letters are written
not in Spanish, not in Greek, not in Latin, not in shorthand,
but in plain American which cats and dogs can read!

(CPo 46)

How much lower than the beasts can we go? Readers of Moore’s animal-centric work will recognize the turnabout embedded in the logic here. The poem then goes on to make an explicit case for America as a place that does indeed manifest a valuable culture and an aesthetic sophistication, in spite of appearances:

the flower and fruit of all that noted superiority—
if not stumbled upon in America,
must one imagine that it is not there?
It has never been confined to one locality.

(CPo 47)

The poem itself offers evidence of sophistication—skillful as it is, for instance, at turning its praise of Europe into, mitigated, censure, when it describes France as

the “chrysalis of the nocturnal butterfly,”
in whose products mystery of construction
diverts one from what was originally one’s object—
substance at the core.

(CPo 46)

Old world and new world, highbrow and low, it is suggested, have each their own satisfactions. A substanceless sophistication can offer only limited gratification, and likewise with unsophisticated substance. But Moore’s poem emphasizes and embodies a third alternative: one where high and low interpenetrate to create a thicker version of reality than either can provide alone, one that admits the complexity of individual enjoyment of daily life. As in common experience, Moore’s poems move from elite subjects to mundane, from erudition to commerce. And these movements suggest the embeddedness of the terms in each pair.

Returning to the poem, in the line about cats and dogs, Moore plays with diction to demonstrate this thicker reality and names the special language that she employs in this project “American”—a language pointedly distinguished from English. The term “plain American” sounds like what it says, echoing the plain language of the plain man or woman on the street in its nationalism and in its colloquialism. But the plain American speaker of this phrase has a sophisticated point, put home through the artful manipulation of diction and the exuberant homespun metaphor. The plain American language (operative in spite of the earlier exaggerated claim that America is a “languageless country”) functions differently from other languages (like English). It is extremely democratic—extending its offices even to animals, and, by implication, crossing many other dividing lines as well.

The animal reference gestures toward the canny wisdom of folk tales, camouflage in apparent simplicity. The poem’s title gives a related structural lesson in looking beyond initial impressions, since the title (“England”) turns out not to indicate the subject of the poem overall, but rather to serve only as the subject of its first five lines. The expected hierarchy of cultures (England over America) is overturned along with expectations about the poem’s focus. The poem gives a lesson about the inadequacy of familiar hierarchies to account for what matters—including the hierarchy of the brows. Apart from its brief descent into “American” the poem as a whole employs a markedly refined diction, but one that is destabilized by its own claims as its quotable maxims and humorous moments carry the poem into the realm of broad audience accessibility.

Though the poem in this reading critiques cultural hierarchies, that was not the impression received by Wilbert Snow, reviewing Observations in the insistently middletbrow New York Herald Tribune in 1925. Snow echoes Aldington, but he reads the highbrow claims of Moore’s work negatively as signs of an “aesthetic snobishness” that seeks to exclude ordinary readers and to be read “by little cliques only.” He even cites, as evidence of Moore’s failure to reach a wide audience, a portion of her antihierarchical claim that “[t]he letter a in psalm and calm when pronounced with the sound of a in candle, is very noticeable,” leaving off the mitigating “but // why should continents of misapprehension / have to be accounted for by the fact?” (CPo 46). Clearly, misapprehension did not disappear upon request. Snow’s review both allows that Moore’s work does, “beneath all the lumber and nonsense[,] . . . [have] a real poetic quality,” and chafes at its difficulty. The missed signals here suggest both the extent to which no author controls how readers will receive a text and the multiplicity of ways that each text may be received upon any reading. This uncontrollability in itself challenges the notion of static brow positionings and supports Moore’s challenge to received ideas of brow and of hierarchy in the poem.

Around the time that Moore wrote “England,” Alfred Kreymborg took her to a baseball game, doing so to “give myself the pleasure at least once
of hearing her stumped about something.” Recounting the episode in his memoir *Troubadour* (1925), he continues:

Certainly that only an experience completely strange to her would be the thing. I invited her to a ball game at the Polo Grounds. This descent into the world of the low-brow started beautifully. It was a Saturday afternoon and the Cubs and Giants were scheduled for one of their ancient frays. The ‘L’ was jammed with fans and we had to stand all the way uptown and hang on to straps. Marianne was totally oblivious to the discomfort anyone else would have felt and, in answer to a question of mine, paraded whole battalions of perfectly marshalled ideas in long columns of balanced periods which no lurching on the part of the train or pushing on the part of the crowd disturbed. . . .

But Moore wasn’t stumped:

“Well, I got her safely to her seat and sat down beside her. Without so much as a glance toward the players at practice grabbing grounders and chasing fungos, she went on giving me her impression of the respective technical achievements of Mr. Pound and Mr. Aldington without missing a turn in the rhythm of her speech, until, I, a little impatient, touched her arm and, indicating a man in the pitcher’s box winding up with the movement Matty’s so famous for, interrupted: ‘But Marianne, wait a moment, the game’s about to begin. Don’t you want to watch the first ball?’ ‘Yes indeed,’ she said, stopped, blushed and leaned forward. The old blond boy delivered a tantalizing facade which hovered in the air and then, just as it reached the batter, Shorty Slagle, shot from his shoulders to his knees and across the plate. ‘Strike!’ bawled Umpire Emslie. ‘Excellent,’ said Marianne.

‘Delighted, I quickly turned to her with: ‘Do you happen to know the gentleman who threw that strike?”

‘I’ve never seen him before,’ she admitted, ‘but I take it it must be Mr. Mathewson."

‘I could only gasp, ‘Why?’

‘I’ve read his instructive book on the art of pitching—'

‘Strike two!’ interrupted Bob Emslie.

‘And it’s a pleasure,’ she continued imperturbably, ‘to note how unerringly his execution supports his theories—'

‘Strike three, batter’s out!’ concluded the umpire and, as Shorty Slagle slunk away, glared toward the Chicago bench for the next victim. . . .’

While some of what Kreyemborg “remembers” in his autobiography may be apocryphal, the story fits Moore’s profile, and it certainly conveys Kreyemborg’s sense of Moore as consummate highbrow. In presenting Moore thus, Kreyemborg, founder of the avant-garde magazine *Others*, and not without his own intellectual credentials, marks her as an intellectual’s intellectual. But this story, like “England,” complicates its claims, pointing as well to something problematic in the characterization of Moore as unswervingly highbrow. Not that it isn’t true that she and her work fit that category, but it isn’t sufficient.

We can return to Greenberg’s terminology and note that Moore’s work certainly calls for reflection on the part of the reader, but, as we’ve seen, it also challenges the divide between high and low. In the Kreyemborg story this challenge occurs again, not only from the “high” side (where borrowings from the world of the “low” might arguably be seen as a kind of slumming) but from the other direction too: Moore portrays Mathewson (exactly the sort of writer her notes tell us she might read) as an author, like Moore and Kreyemborg, and a theoretician. A man of the mind as well as of the body. In Kreyemborg’s description, we might recognize in both Moore and Mathewson a shared narrative principle: If a pitch can be defined in literary terms (and the game certainly unfolds like a narrative), Mathewson’s fadeaway pitch would be a modernist pitch, with its self-conscious interruption of expected form (the sudden drop from shoulder-level to knee-level). Moore, or Kreyemborg channeling what he knew of Moore, challenges the view of the brows as a static binary of high vs. low (or static triad, when the middlebrow is included), and presents them instead as a set of interactive cultural positions, which each individual may occupy serially or even simultaneously. And in yet another line-crossing move, Kreyemborg intervenes in the creation of a popular persona by publishing this story about an “elite” poet.

Recently there has been increased critical focus upon the mutual entwining of high culture with low. On the one hand, we can recognize that “high” culture incorporates some of the pleasures of “low” culture—which might include humor, sentimentality, and narrative coherence—not just as a foil to play against but as a part of its own story. Robert Scholes points to the satisfaction readers take in finding the “resolution” (and which “resolution” depends on the reader) to the story of Molly and Poldy Bloom—in spite of, or in addition to, the pleasures found in *Ulysses’s* lessons about the irresolvability of language’s multiple levels of significance. On the other hand, “low” art may be read as embodying a serious critique of the bad faith of the “high,” which is based in pretension to higher absolute value when the real difference is leisure and the wealth that affords the time to be reflective, time that multiple-shift workers don’t have. This kind of critique operates through metastructural effects, including not just the physical structures of any given work but also the web of invisible structures—of reference, context, and expectation—through which a full meaning is actualized. This is the realm of intertextuality, in which not just other literary works but the world at large *qua* text enters into dialogue with the work at hand.

This metastructural dynamic, which requires the reader’s reflective participation, is essential to reading Moore’s work as well. Through her un-
usual line breaks and rhymes, her peculiar syllabic verse, her use of quotation where “originality” is expected, the exceptional range of sources from which she quotes, and the interaction of all these elements with the argument of the text, Moore makes every poem, no matter what its apparent subject, a consideration of the operation of poetry. Brow claims play a major role in this operation, defining the kind of cultural authority sought for the work and the writer. From early on, Moore’s work engaged issues of brow, in part through a playful mobile wit, displayed at all levels of the text. Cristanne Miller links the “singular associative leaps, puns, and word play that characterize Moore’s verse,” with an iconoclastic creativity that “opens a space beyond fixed truths, conventions, perfection.” This challenges fixed-brow positioning by, among other things, undercutting the high seriousness that supports such claims. Marie Boroff remarks upon Moore’s “solemnity-retardant” mode, and Miller points to its contribution to Moore’s consistently antihierarchical attitude. Among other things, this playfulness allowed Moore to mock her own role as elite poet, or to open herself to mockery in a manner that encouraged critique of the position of the high by the low.

“I, too, dislike it,” the opening line of Moore’s 1919 poem “Poetry,” epitomizes this self-deprecating mode. The line invites readers into an initial compact against Poetry with a highbrow capital P, a world in which Moore is implicated by the context in which the poem appears. From this point, the poem moves on to redefine its art in terms that admit ordinary material (the stuff of daily life) and ordinary readers:

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful.

(CPo 266–67)

In contrast to “high-sounding interpretation,” uselessness has a common cast. The odd line breaks and indentations ironize any claim to ordinariness this poem might seem to make, but at the same time the funny effects they create align the poem with deflated pretension. The poem manages to stand firmly on both sides of the high/low line at once, and that balancing act further reinforces both the highness and the lowness—the poem is both complicated and a good joke, and the fact that it is both complicates it further and improves the joke.

From the start of her career, the metastructural dynamics of Moore’s work extended to her public persona. Created as much by those who responded to her as by herself, this persona had many of the qualities of a performance piece—a projection from the poetry, embodying its playful dynamics. In the examples cited earlier, Kreyemborg and Aldington, certainly no lowbrows themselves, feel pressed to ally themselves with the low position against her. But the situation Moore creates is so complex that the differentiation of brows is overthrown, even while Moore seeks to be accessible to readers of all brows—for example, through her humorously incongruous apposition of high (the Moore persona) and low (baseball) in response to Kreyemborg.

Pre-Warhol, and pre-Greenberg, but not before the point at which the high/low binary that Greenberg describes came into currency, Moore recognizes that the kind of division that Greenberg describes, and on which much modernist criticism has built, is flawed, if sometimes useful: reflection may and does occur within all brow contexts (though it may not be activated in all readings); and the narrative satisfactions of low- and middlebrow writing often also occur in highbrow work. This interrelation has recently been noted by modernist interpreters, and is a lesson with which readers of Moore have long been familiar.

Moore’s reflections upon the dynamics of the brows in the 1920s prefigure the more radical brow play in which she engaged in her later career. In the late 1940s Moore’s poetry became much more accessible to all readers, requiring little of the effort at the initial level that her earlier poetry had done; it was full of overt sentiment, fond humor, and celebrations of excellence. Simultaneous with these changes in her poetry, Moore promulgated a public performance of the highbrow as charmingly absurd. She actively took the part of ambassador between brows that Woolf (and others) disapproved. Her baseball poem “Hometown Piece for Mrssrs. Alston and Reese” (1956) and her “For February 14th” (1959) both appeared on the front page of the same middlebrow New York Herald Tribune in which Snow had spurned her in 1925. And from 1958 to 1970 her poems appeared regularly in the New Yorker. Although the New Yorker began publishing “serious” poetry after William Shawn became editor in 1952, its role as purveyor of urbanity to the rest of the nation gave it a middlebrow cast in the eyes of many. And whether or not other poets tailored their work to fit the New Yorker context (as fiction writers of all ranks were made to do), Moore was certainly perceived to do so: “There is no doubt that in [Moore’s] later work the cosy element in the poet, the element acceptable to the New Yorker, is in greater evidence,” wrote Roy B. Fuller in 1968.

Moore’s second New Yorker poem, “The Arctic Ox (or Goat)” (September 1958), invokes the (ostensibly lower brow) world of advertising. The poem’s final stanza begins with an unabashed summary of its disquisition
on the virtues of choosing *giviit*, "the underwool of the arctic ox," over fur: "If you fear you are / reading an advertisement, / you are" (CPo 193, 195). An experienced worker in the culture mines, Moore neither fears nor feels embarrassed about crossing the line into commerce, though she acknowledges that others may. The poem points quietly to the process enacted through its publication in this new venue: a similar, almost physical, crossing of that brow line.

In making that passage, Moore aids both the *New Yorker* and herself. The relation of the *New Yorker* to its readers in the fifties altered, as the magazine came to appeal to a wider variety of audiences than formerly—for various but linked reasons. Like the little magazines of earlier decades, the fifties' *New Yorker* makes an appeal to exclusivity—something it had done before, but this time with an element of literary sophistication formerly absent. Moore serves as a kind of archeological relic of the little magazines whose status the *New Yorker* now emulates. In 1957 Moore was featured in a *New Yorker* Profile. This celebratory piece constitutes a parallel to the series of *Dial* articles from 1925, insofar as it too "flares" Moore in pursuit of authoritative claims for the magazine.

The Profile makes a pointed connection to the *Dial* in an extended passage of which I quote a small part:

[Her 1924 Dial Award] led Miss Moore into a long association with the *Dial*, a magazine that in the twenties held a unique position in the van of the nation's progressive literary and artistic life. . . . Looking back, Miss Moore remembers the *Dial* as "an elysium for people who were really interested in quality," and, like many others who have memories of its beautifully printed pages, she cannot restrain a feeling of nostalgia for the era of intellectual exuberance that the magazine represented. The drab conformity of Marxist thought that later paralyzed the minds of so many writers in Europe and the United States had yet to make itself felt, and the great tide of mechanized mass communication and mass entertainment that has since threatened to swamp the minds of thinking individuals was still far off.  

The closing line sets itself in opposition to mass entertainment, and assumes a readership of thinking individuals who can still recognize the need to struggle against its threats. As a relic of this lost elysium, Moore's presence in the pages of the *New Yorker*, particularly the presence of her poetry, shores up the magazine's claims to a highbrow status similar to that here attributed to the *Dial*.

In the *New Yorker*, as she had in the *Dial*, Moore promotes highbrow claims, but in a manner suited to the magazine's rather compromised position. She spoofs her own highbrow role, and so fits the magazine's familiar humor mode (Moore becomes a kind of living cartoon: elderly woman at racetrack in tricorn). In the Profile, her poetry is barely mentioned, and when it is, we are reassured that she doesn't really take it seriously (a view that Moore encouraged), and that we shouldn't either.

Moore's poem "Combat Cultural," which appeared in the *New Yorker* in June 1959, suggests Moore's sense of her situation. The poem charts an associative path, moving from athletic animals to dancing Cossacks (imitating warfare) to "the quadrille of Old Russia," to the present (1958), where, according to Moore's note, the Moiseyev Dance Company performed a dance entitled "Two Boys in a Fight."

> Cold Russia
> this time: the prize bunnyhug
> platform-piece of experts in the
> trip-and-slug of wrestlers in a rug.

> "Sacked" and ready for bed apparently—
> with a jab, a kick, pinned to the wall,
> they work toward the edge and stick;
> stagger off, and one is victim of a
> flipflop—leg having circled leg as thick.

(CPo 199)

Though the title might be taken at this point to describe a cultured version of combat, a balletic battle, the next stanza raises issues that point to the battle of the brows, and Moore's position in it:

> "Some art, because of high quality,
> is unlikely to command high sales";
> yes, yes; but here, oh no;
> not with the frozen North's Nan-ai-ans
> of the sack in their tight touch and-go.

(CPo 199–200)

Here, Moore suggests, is high art that will find a big audience—in spite of the received knowledge that calls that impossible (the "yes, yes" marks the speaker's familiarity with that view).

The poem describes the same sort of mixed-brow phenomenon that it enacts: The Russian troupe presents lowbrow wrestling within a highbrow dance frame, and then crosses the line again into commercial success. Moore offers an artfully self-conscious reflection on the interplay of high and low art, that also makes itself accessible as a celebration of athleticism and beauty and a blague on the obscurity of elite poets. And this on the pages of the *New Yorker*, where it reaches a wider audience than Moore's books of poetry ever did. The poem too does "a flipflop," dancing for us a version of Moore's own history of wrestling with the high/low dynamic, a
comment on the cultural combat she observed around her, participated in, and intervened to alter. As she did in “England,” and “Poetry” four decades earlier, Moore plays on both sides of the line.

The final stanza tells us that “Two Boys in a Fight” was danced by one person dressed as two, and ends with a moral: “we must cement the parts of any / objective symbolic of sagesse” (CPo 200). This rather obliquely phrased dictum might be understood to suggest that wisdom is best represented through recognition of continuities between apparent opposites. Certainly this method was Moore’s, in the realm of the brows as in others. I have argued elsewhere that rather than devolving into sentimentality, the later Moore activated critical and reflective elements within a middlebrow position. But my point here is not to choose between available readings of the older Moore, for instance as sell-out, dupe, retiree, or critical undercover agent, readings which might interestingly be mapped against middle-, low-, and highbrow positions. Instead I want to consider her as a willing mixture of the set. A commercially alert, sentimental and ironically self-conscious poet. All at once. A mixed-brow poet, skillfully guiding her cultural float.

Throughout her career, Moore’s mixed-brow references challenge clear divisions and engage readers in the work of thinking through their own assumptions about how the high/low divide operates. In so doing, Moore offers herself as model, through both the poems and the persona that attaches to them, of the complexity of each individual’s brow position and of what the division into brows may mean, as well as of the pleasures associated with all brow levels and inherent in the free play between them. This pointed complexity challenges reigning definitions of the poem as discrete from the real. Rather than representing a diminished portrait of experience, Moore’s poems offer an emphatically multilayered, mixed-brow version of experience that calls for similarly multiplex responses on the part of their readers.

NOTES

2. See Levine on the theoretical association of skull shape and brow height with intelligence in the nineteenth century. “Lowbrowed” people were non-Caucasians and Caucasians from southern and eastern Europe (221–23).
7. Ibid., 75.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 20–21.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 53–54.
14. In flaring Moore, Thayer continues his relation to the other award winners, but the number of articles increases threefold.
21. Miller, Questions of Authority, 91.
23. At least one Moore poem appeared annually.
Critics and Poets on Marianne Moore

"A Right Good Salvo of Barks"

Edited by
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In Distrust of Good
Hope Is an Orientation of the Spirit
What Matters Today Is The Spirit of the Modern

Relentless Accuracy and a Capacity for Fact:
Authorship in Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein
HEATHER CASS WHITE

Mannerist Moore: Poetry, Painting, Photography
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Preface

Small dog, going over the lawn nipping the linen and saying that you have a badger—remember Xenophon; only rudimentary behavior is necessary to put us on the scent. “A right good salvo of barks,” a few strong wrinkles puckering the skin between the ears, is all we ask.

—(“Picking and Choosing,” *CPh* 45)

For Marianne Moore the task of the critic and the task of the poet were never far apart. Both must engage in “picking and choosing.” Like the advertiser, both must “educate[e] visualization” (*CPh* 215); like Xenophon’s hunting dog, both must “put us on the scent.” The essays and poems collected here attempt to show that the trails to understanding Marianne Moore and her place in literary history are as redolent as ever.

Moore’s poems, moreover, “put us on the scent” to understanding the pressing issues of the twenty-first century, just as they did those of the early twentieth century when she began writing. The continuing relevance of Moore’s poetry was brought most dramatically to public consciousness following September 11, 2001, when Robert Pinsky chose to read “What Are Years” on public television, presenting Moore’s rumination on personal responsibility and the horrors of World War II as a poetic call to courage. Several of the essays in this volume address Moore’s responsiveness to national and international cultural and political crises or controversies, as reviewed below. In other areas as well, her engagement at multiple levels with multiple issues remains instructive. In “The Labours of Hercules,” first published in the *Dial* in 1921, Moore concludes with emphatic insistence that despite “controversialists’ “one keeps on knowing / ‘that the negro is not brutal, / that the Jew is not greedy, / that the Oriental is not immoral, / that the German is not a Hun” (*BMM* 265). While her vocabulary (“negro” “Oriental”) and the reference to American prejudices during World War I (Germans as “Huns”) now sound dated, the conviction that it requires constant “labor” to resist prejudices exacerbated by international conflict strikes us with new timeliness today, in light of the anti-Arab sentiment that threatens to overtake reasonable response to the dangers of terrorism. Moore’s life and poems also prove useful in relation to current reconsiderations of the identity politics of sexuality. As late twentieth-