

Reading Over a Poet's Shoulder

"Predilections," by **Marianne Moore** (Viking Press, 171 pp. \$3.50), is a group of literary essays by one of America's most important and individual poets. It is reviewed here by William Barrett, associate editor of Partisan Review.

By William Barrett

MARIANNE MOORE is one of the most individual writers alive. She could write out a bank statement, leave it unsigned, and the devoted readers of her verse—and now, with this volume, of her prose—would probably be able to spot its authoress. It would probably be a very accurate financial statement, too, for Miss Moore's individuality as a writer does not consist in any arbitrary assertion of the whims of personality but in her rare and incomparable ability to let the object speak for itself. "Feeling and Precision" is the title of the first essay in this collection, and the phrase is the most accurate description of her poetry that one might wish. It turns out now—with this her first volume of collected essays—to be the right phrase for her prose, too. Prose and verse issue from the same very individual sensibility.

Miss Moore is not a "professional critic," whatever this may mean. She has written a number of essays and reviews over the past twenty years, and some editor at Viking was intelligent enough to see them collected into a volume. The result should be a small but very felicitous occasion for all the admirers of Miss Moore's poetry.

To be sure, there are many domains of the art of literary criticism into which Miss Moore does not even attempt to enter. She does not attempt any final assessment or evaluation of her author, to place him in his exact relation to all other authors living and dead, and she does not seek to relate the literary work to history, society, or the spirit of the age. What Miss Moore does instead is simply to let us read the book with her, looking over her shoulder as it were, watching her as she underlines, points, quotes. To the rapidly reading eye her essays might seem but strings of quotations, but there is a great art to

quoting, and Miss Moore has a genius for singling out the apt line or passage. Even her poems seem to give the effect of quotations—as if in the bright vivid arrangement of images she was letting reality speak for itself. With Miss Moore the eye must travel slowly over the page as in poetry, for the extraordinary pattern of detail establishes her meaning, indeed is her meaning.

Naturally enough, with this critical style Miss Moore is most at home with her own kin, the poets, and the best essays in this book are those on Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, E. E. Cummings. But she is able to go as far afield as Francis Bacon and by her nimble ability to pounce on the right quotation illumine aspects of this writer which a more ambitious and rambling essayist would miss. With the more intellectual poets like T. S. Eliot and Auden she is at a somewhat greater distance, but it is good to have these poets seen through the eyes of a radically different poetic sensibility.

Her essay "Henry James as a Characteristic American" would probably not be understood by anyone unfamiliar with the Jamesian theme of the American in Europe, but it is all the same a wonderful mine of observed detail. And though Miss Moore does not usually tackle the big and panoramic literary subject, she does in one essay, "The Dial: A Retrospect," give us a literary portrait of the Twenties that tells us more about the quiet and dedicated atmosphere of the period than usually appears in our literary memorials to a roaring decade.

But first and last the book is interesting as an exhibition of Miss Moore's own sensibility as this rare and remarkable poet goes about the task of teaching us to read by showing herself in the act. An essay "Humility, Concentration, Gusto"—good names, by the way, for her own critical qualities—ends with the sentence: "The thing is to see the vision and not deny it; to care and admit that we do." At a time when the methods of mass production, of rapid production for still more rapid consumption, have entered the practice of literature, Miss Moore does care and she admits it.



—George Platt-Lynes.

THE AUTHOR: Singlehandedly Marianne Moore, of Brooklyn, N. Y., has exhausted the United States' supply of major poetry awards. Her first five volumes of verse—the first appeared in 1921—had already won a closetful of them when, in 1952, "Collected Poems" made a clean sweep of the Bollingen, the National Book Award, and the Pulitzer. The other day Miss Moore, in her apartment overlooking roofs, trees, and Dodger fans, chatted self-effacingly and charmingly about prizes, about writing, and particularly about the sloppy use of quotation marks. "Expressing a thing one way rather than another reveals the little touches of temperament," she said, adding good-naturedly: "I don't believe I have ever been quoted precisely." [A statement like that can put the fear of God into an interviewer's use of the ", all right.] *Paraphrased*, Miss Moore said somebody will tell me I once said, after winning an award, I sincerely hope I justify this award. I would never in the world say that! I'll say this was given me as an optimism, thinking I might do well and I hope I shall. Read that last sentence out, please. (It was read out.) Now that's exact! You've got it verbatim! Misquotation's good-natured foe, who is also blue-eyed and almost white-haired, is an elegant sixty-seven-year-old Missourian by birth, who has been living in the same apartment in Brooklyn's Hill section since 1929. Her five rooms contain hundreds of books, dozens of pictures, and several of the most-photographed cartwheel hats anywhere. After a tour of the apartment Miss Moore said if what she wrote did not seem direct simple writing, direct simple writing was what she liked. She also said her prizes did not mean she won out over other people, that anybody could write what she did. Then, making it clear that she didn't care even if she were misquoted, she said, "What I write could be called poetry only because there is no other category in which to put it. Maybe it's verse. But I never in my life have referred to myself as a poet."

—BERNARD KALB.

Poet's Savor

"Gentlemen's Relish," by Christopher Morley (W. W. Norton, 100 pp. \$3), is a most characteristic volume of verse from the pen of a onetime associate editor of SR.

By Sara Henderson Hay

Alas for me, lucidity
Was always breaking in . . .

says the Old Mandarin, Christopher Morley, lamenting, with delicate irony, what he refers to as his poetry's unfashionable fan-garde-ism. How fortunate for his readers that not only lucidity, but wit and zest and sensibility are always present in his literary household, not breaking in at all, but thoroughly at home. A housemate, too, is the delightful bibliophilic habit of mind which is one of Christopher Morley's special characteristics. He belongs to that elect circle of born-and-bred book lovers, men to whom books are more than the printed word, more than the magic casement, or frigates, or coursers, as Emily Dickinson put it—but friends, in fact, and vividly, intimately alive. Morley's fellow bibliophile and good companion, Vincent Starrett, remarks with pardonable extravagance that "human intercourse is never more stimulating than when it gossips of books."

With what an engaging and perceptive charm, and from what wide fields of reading, marking, and remembering, Christopher Morley gossips in his new book, *"Gentlemen's Relish,"* of his old friends—Will Shakespeare, "going good, in a working dream"; Chaucer, in the Kentish spring, looking outdoors on "that Aprille, with his shouers soote"; Whitman, filing everything on the floor and editing with the tip of his cane; Sherlock Holmes and his Boswellian Watson, realer than flesh and blood to the Baker Street Irregulars; Meredith, angrily writing a sixteen-line sonnet; and a host of others.

Much as he sojourns in the realms of gold, however, Christopher Morley finds enchanting and full of fine surprise the world on which he looks with an un-wooled, and not seldom ribald, eye. He appreciates with equal enthusiasm a well-turned figure and a well-turned figure of speech. He has many loves and a few hates, chief among these Interruptions and The Telephone.

"Gentlemen's Relish" is a characteristic collection of poems, ranging freely from epigram to ballad (notably the Ballad of that Town so big



Christopher Morley—"delicate irony."

men name her twice / Like so: N'Yawk, N'Yawk); from wisecrack and wanton pun to a singular delicacy and poignance of expression: from quip and crank to wisdom and profundity.

It is a temptation to quote unrestrainedly, to pass out generous samples of this gentleman's relish, so full of flavor and savor and tartness and unexpected sweetness. I like best those pieces which transcend the light touch—"It Will Last My Time," for instance, and the moving "Madrigal Not to Be Reprinted" with its grave concluding couplet:

Sorrow wants no one there,
Not anyone, anywhere

and "Britain for the Holidays," so graphic, so trenchant.

"Gentlemen's Relish" is the mixture as before, from a recipe we can trust. Heartily recommended for every table!



Howard Nemerov—"poetic patois."

Variegated Verse

"The Salt Garden," by Howard Nemerov (Little, Brown, 33 pp. \$3), is the work of a poet who is perhaps best known for his contributions to The New Yorker.

By Louis Untermeyer

HOWARD NEMEROV is in danger of being stigmatized as a New Yorker who writes for *The New Yorker*. A satirist as well as a straightforward storyteller, whose quality was evidenced in "The Melodramatists" and "Frederigo, or The Power of Love," he is also (or, perhaps, primarily) a poet. Unfortunately, Nemerov has not quite made up his mind what kind of poet he wants to be. Just when the reader is ready to conclude that Nemerov is an advanced sardonicist, he is confronted by an old-fashioned formalist hiding behind a new-fashioned imagist.

For example, "Fall Song," the first poem in his new book, *"The Salt Garden,"* is the kind of neatly made, tightly rhymed lyric which the casual reader will recognize as the sort of love song, slightly astringent but prettily melodious, which he has always liked. The same casual reader is likely to be lost between this and the end of the book, which wanders through a wide expanse of diverse and sometimes difficult terrain. "Deep Woods," the last poem, is an example of the darker territory which Nemerov explores with deceptive nimbleness, jauntily at home in a misty, mid-region of mixed legends, double meanings, and shifting frames of reference.

Almost as original as he is versatile, Nemerov is not without ascertainable influences. His literary ancestors, however, are mostly contemporary; the accents of Auden and Ransom occasionally twist his utterance into a curious poetic patois. At other times Nemerov responds to a more rustic idiom. For example:

We had the pond where none had
been before
To any memory . . .
Where even if a stream runs dry
in summer
You have the stream-bed still to
go by . . .
Only the water-birds on their
way south
Accepted it, and rested there at
night.

Frost, you say at once, and prepare
to let the poem go as another off-
(Continued on page 52)