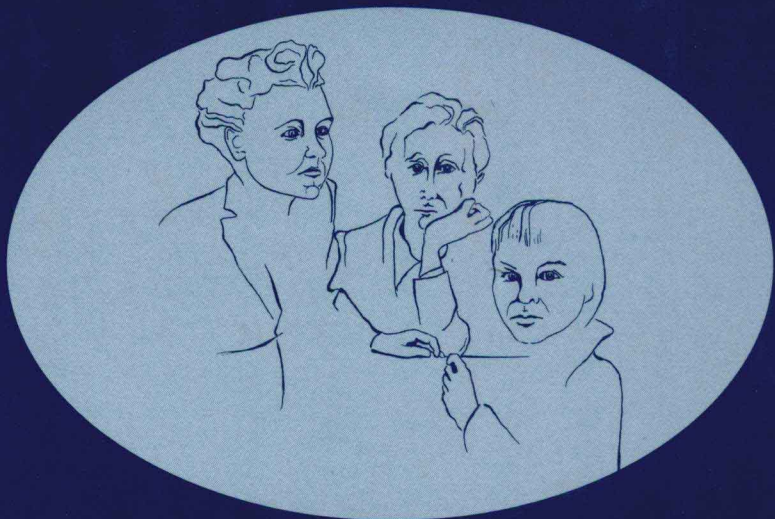


Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop,  
& May Swenson



THE FEMINIST POETICS  
OF SELF-RESTRAINT

Kirstin Hotelling Zona

*Marianne Moore,*                      The  
*Elizabeth Bishop,*                  Feminist Poetics  
*and*    of  
*May Swenson*                      Self-Restraint

KIRSTIN HOTELLING ZONA



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## Abbreviations

### ELIZABETH BISHOP

- CP     *The Collected Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.
- Prose   *The Collected Prose*. Ed. Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984.
- OA     *One Art: Letters*. Ed. Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994.

### MARIANNE MOORE

- AN     "Archaically New." In *Trial Balances*, ed. Ann Winslow. New York: Macmillan, 1935.
- CP     *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*. New York: Macmillan/Viking, 1982.
- ME     "A Modest Expert." *The Nation*, September 28, 1946, 354.
- MMC   Marianne Moore Collection, Rosenbach Museum & Library, Philadelphia.
- O     *Observations*. New York: Dial Press, 1924.
- Poems   *Poems*. New York: Egoist Press, 1921.
- SL     *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*. Ed. Bonnie Costello, Cristanne Miller, and Celeste Goodridge. New York: Knopf, 1997.

### MAY SWENSON

- HS     *Half Sun Half Sleep*. New York: Scribner's, 1967.
- IOW   *In Other Words*. New York: Knopf, 1982.
- LP     *The Love Poems of May Swenson*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.
- MSP   May Swenson Papers, Olin Library Special Collections, Washington University, St. Louis.
- MWW   *Made with Words*. Ed. Gardner McFall. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.
- N     *Nature: Poems Old and New*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.

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## *Introduction: Feminism and the Poetics of Self-Restraint*

**T**he self does not realize itself most fully when self-realization is its most constant aim.<sup>1</sup> Had this aphorism of Marianne Moore's first appeared as part of "Marriage" or "A Grave," it would have helped clarify the feminist design so central to each poem. Like the young women at Barnard to whom these words were delivered, Moore was the product of a selective women's college, an environment she credited with refining her notorious restraint in tandem with her feminist convictions.<sup>2</sup> For Moore, humility was not simply a moral stance, but a sign of her distrust of the claims of self-expression. Unearthing the overlap between Moore's moral insistence and her poetic reserve is central to understanding her feminism—to seeing, that is, why an admonition against self-absorption is an appeal to self-awareness, an urging of her audience toward revelation, not retreat.

While Moore's paradoxically insistent reserve both compelled and perplexed Elizabeth Bishop, the younger poet never questioned Moore's feminist commitment. In a critique of those who read Moore's restraint as feminine whimsy, Bishop turns to the poem "Marriage" and wonders, understandably, "how much of Marianne's poetry the feminist critics have read" (*Prose*, 144). Like Moore, Bishop was a feminist who never saw self-affirmation as a conduit to revelation; as a result, she did not have to choose restraint at the expense of social vision. Nevertheless, Bishop struggled throughout her life to reconcile Moore's aversion to self-indulgence with her penchant for strict admonitions (to which Bishop herself was occasionally subject). Subsequently, Bishop would be the first to commend Moore's feminist prowess even as she described her as "what some people might call 'prudish'" (*Prose*, 130).

Interestingly, while Bishop positioned herself as rebellious protégé in relation to Moore, she adopted a remarkably Moore-like temperament in her extensive correspondence with May Swenson. Swenson



labored over the contingency in Bishop's writing between revelation and reserve, especially as it shaped Bishop's depictions of lesbian desire. But as their letters reveal, Swenson's frustrations with Bishop's self-restraint had as much to do with her own emerging poetic as they did with her friend's. In order to come to terms with Bishop's reserve, Swenson first needed to examine her conflicted draw to what she once called the "physical" realm (MWW, 224–28). In doing so, she would refine the poetic elements that shaped her own fraught relations with feminist critics: a ripe sensual immediacy that questions the claims of sexual authenticity or bodily truth.

These overlaps among Moore, Bishop, and Swenson invite not only an articulation of the feminist potentials of self-restraint, but an account of the lingering conventions that posit such an equation as unlikely. All three of these poets wrote with a certain reserve—precisely the motive against which most feminist poets and critics of the last thirty years have established themselves. In response to the largely male-dominated field of poetry and criticism in America through the 1960s, many feminist poets sought the establishment of an alternative female tradition, the central goal of which has been, in Alicia Ostriker's words, the "quest for autonomous self-definition."<sup>3</sup> The premise of this project, Paula Bennett explains, is that the "acceptance of the self, whatever that self is, is the base upon which the woman poet must work, the source of her greatest authority and strength."<sup>4</sup> Ostriker calls this tradition "gynocentric," for as her readings suggest, when "defining a personal identity, women tend to begin with their bodies."<sup>5</sup> In the wake of this critical reclamation, female poets as different as H.D. and Millay are praised for what Bennett describes as a "readiness to look unflinchingly at themselves as women," to "release their power fully and base their craft upon their sex."<sup>6</sup>

By locating feminist purpose in self-expression, and self-expression in sexual frankness, this narrative of feminist poetry can account only partially for the poets who make up this project. Though Moore, Bishop, and Swenson differ in dramatic ways, their writings converge around a common tension: a thirst for accurate observation underscored by a wariness of objective truth. While this tension signals modernist poetry in general, these three poets were distinct in their embrace of its implications—the surrender of ultimate authority that authorship can seem to confer. Such surrender, however, is anathema to a search for autonomous self-definition.

The source of this disjunction has less to do with degree of feminist commitment than the conceptions of self that underpin one's poetry. In recent years a handful of Moore and Bishop critics have focused our attentions on the strategic potentials of self-restraint, and to them my project is indebted.<sup>7</sup> Bonnie Costello and Cristanne Miller, for instance, have shown that for Moore and Bishop, self-reserve signals a skepticism of the essential, coherent subject, that presence which is often assumed in overtly autobiographical verse. Such readings enable us to rethink the premium feminist poetry has often placed on self-expression, and to argue, as Miller does, for a wider understanding of what feminist poetry might be.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, with the exception of Miller's instructive book on Moore, a gap is growing between feminist repossessions of Moore and Bishop and recent readings of their antiessentialist poetics. On the one hand, these poets are appearing more frequently in the feminist canon, but the price of this inclusion is usually the suppression of their strategies of self-restraint. On the other hand, critics have focused recently on the ways in which reserve signals a wariness of the coherent, confessional self, but these readings do not suggest the feminist potential of such poetics. My analysis builds on the banks of this critical divide in an effort to help bridge it. In the following pages I suggest that Moore, Bishop, and Swenson expressed their commitment to feminism by exposing its most treasured assumptions: not only do they challenge the ideal of autonomy, but they contest the integrity of a sensual or sexual authenticity by which that ideal is measured.

While a partnership between feminism and antiessentialism is commonplace within studies of fiction and feminist theory, it has been less welcome in the world of poetry. This critical gap is the inspiration behind *Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory*, edited by Cristanne Miller and Lynn Keller.<sup>9</sup> This important collection offers evidence that the distance between current feminist theory and discussions of poetry is narrowing, just as the genre of feminist poetry is becoming more varied and complex. But because the editors' goal is to account for the current range of these "feminist measures," they are more concerned with the continuities among various perspectives than with the differences between them:

Feminist theory and criticism are cumulative as well as developing fields. Kinds of inquiry particularly central in earlier decades—

explorations of female traditions and influence, retrieval and revaluation of lost female writers or of typically female genres—have not been abandoned but instead continue, often incorporated into other currently more urgent kinds of inquiry. (9–10)

Clearly, Keller and Miller trace this genealogy in an effort to underscore the diversity of feminist approaches available to us today. Nevertheless, this gesture of inclusion inadvertently displaces those feminist practices that *have* abandoned the kinds of inquiry so central to earlier decades—namely, those strategies that are deeply skeptical of the rhetoric of “retrieval” and “female tradition.” That several of the essays in *Feminist Measures* do, in fact, take this skepticism for granted points up the deep degree to which the project of feminist poetry in this country is wed to the language of self-affirmation.

Such tenacious devotion to an ideal of authenticity signals a broader trend within American poetry since midcentury. James Longenbach has observed that the “breakthrough” narrative dramatized by Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* lingers in a certain preoccupation with form; while the privileging of personal confession is not as widespread today as it was twenty years ago, “its assumptions are perpetuated by many poets and critics who, whatever their differences, agree that a great deal of cultural weight depends upon the choice of poetic form.” Thus, “an easy confluence of formal and social vision is assumed, and almost any new development in American poetry is heralded at the expense of a previous ‘breakthrough,’ now seen to be either too timid or too severe.”<sup>10</sup> It is no coincidence that Bishop is the one poet my book has in common with Longenbach’s; within feminist criticism, the “breakthrough” narrative is fueled by the privileging of sexual frankness over sexual reserve, in the belief that female agency is contingent upon the shedding of a sexual repression to which all women are subject. Such an account sees Bishop’s cagey love poems as “stillborn,” Moore’s lack of intimate expression as asexual and unfeminine, and Swenson as irrefutably “Sapphic.”<sup>11</sup> Despite the useful questions such readings may raise, they foreclose an analysis of the strategies of self-restraint. Consequently, the fact that these poets contest the plausibility of an authentic, unmediated sexuality (the presumption by which they are so often read) remains overlooked.

In order to articulate the feminist potential of such poetry we need a critical discourse that questions the conventions of self-expression, just

as it strives for what Moore called "self-realization." Recent work by Kaja Silverman and Judith Butler is especially useful in this regard. Despite their differences, Silverman and Butler meet in their mutual efforts to challenge the "dominant fiction" by using its narratives in unorthodox ways.<sup>12</sup> For example, in the now classic *Gender Trouble* Butler applies Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis to Freud's version of the Oedipus scenario, showing that its "success" depends upon a primary taboo against homosexuality. In the process, she appropriates elements of Freudian analysis in order to critique its heterosexist premise. In complementary fashion, Silverman maintains Lacan's insistence that subjectivity is engendered through the acquisition of language in order to turn the patriarchal presumption of dominant culture against itself. Her most recent book, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, runs counter to more traditional trends within feminist and psychoanalytic film theory by suggesting that the processes of identification—that series of psychic maneuvers through which we come to "know ourselves" within normative terms—can be employed as an agent of social change.

Butler and Silverman stand out because of their abilities to craft unlikely allegiances, as does Donna Haraway, another theorist whose presence is palpable in the following pages.<sup>13</sup> Like the poets at the heart of this book, these writers craft agency from impurities and have no use for innocence. Haraway articulates this perspective in her notion of "situated knowledges," wherein "partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational claims" (173). She asserts the feminist potential of the particular, arguing that "feminist objectivity" is not enabled by a search for identity. Because identity is always an unfinished, imperfect process, we must emphasize the slippages, the failures—what Butler calls the "weakness in the norm." In the process we may refigure that norm, forging overlaps and exchanges where oppositions traditionally triumph.

Haraway's articulation of the subversive potential of "partiality" helps to complicate Moore's asexual reputation. In chapter 1 I draw a parallel between Moore's supposed prudishness and her antiessentialist poetic. At the heart of this reading is what I call Moore's "strategic selfhood," a style of authorship by which self-restraint enables an interrogation of subjectivity without recourse to self-promotion. Exploring the feminist implications of Moore's strategic selfhood, the discussion shows how her poetry deconstructs the lyric "I" along with the sexed

body through which this "I" is made to seem a priori. Consequently, we are able to see that Moore, though reserved, was not asexual; on the contrary, she was fascinated with the discursive practices that instruct "sex." Moore's interest in embodiment takes us to the heart of her relations with feminist critics. Although Bishop and Swenson share Moore's aversion to self-indulgent poetry, it is Moore's unmatched ability to proffer moral standards without recourse to a fleshy, lyric "I" that has made her, for feminists, the most difficult and diversely read poet of this century. Grounding feminist principle in autonomous selfhood, and the autonomous self in female sexuality, the most vocal feminist critics of the past thirty years have contributed largely to what Taffy Martin terms the "myth" of Marianne Moore:<sup>14</sup> the popular conception of a self-protective, well-mannered eccentric who flirted coyly with her peers, went dutifully to church, and wrote reticent poems with what Louise Bogan called "her delightful innocence of approach."<sup>15</sup> In some ways, of course, Moore was all of these things. However, in search of autobiography, political purpose, and sexual frankness, the majority of feminist critics through the mid-1980s glossed over the intricate and often paradoxical ways in which Moore was also none of these things at all. As Bishop once wryly reminisced, Moore "was rather contradictory, you know, illogical sometimes. . . . You could never tell what she was going to like, or dislike."<sup>16</sup>

In the last ten years, several critics have sought to complicate this portrait of Moore, but it lingers tenaciously.<sup>17</sup> Undoubtedly its persistence is due in part to Moore's own complicity in fostering this persona within the public spotlight of her later life. Miller notes that this stereotype of Moore was so firmly entrenched by midcentury that even Bishop seems to have encouraged it, at least in part. Bishop's memoir "Efforts of Affection" (*Prose*) and especially her poem "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore" frequently construct an "image of the poet as quaintly harmless."<sup>18</sup> At the same time, as I discuss in chapter 2, recent feminist scholarship on Bishop often endorses the image of Moore as archaically prim and private in an effort to position Bishop as a different—namely autobiographical—poet.

And indeed, while feminist reclamations of Moore have been slow in coming, such readings of Bishop have flourished in recent years. Adrienne Rich offered the first revision of this sort in her 1983 review of Bishop's *Complete Poems*, and her words set the tone for the interpretations to follow. Conceding that Bishop's poetry "now seems . . . remark-

ably honest and courageous," she simultaneously mourns the fact that "attention was paid to [Bishop's] triumphs . . . not to her struggles for self-definition and sense of difference."<sup>19</sup> As if in response to Rich's regret, recent critics have focused largely on the details of Bishop's biography (her lesbianism, her alcoholism and asthma, and her emotional hardships), culling evidence from her later poetry in particular in an effort to emphasize coded sexual longings and the unfolding of an autobiographical bent.<sup>20</sup> These timely studies have helped cultivate a fast-growing interest in Bishop's poetic restraint, pointing out, as Rich goes on to do, that Bishop's reserve is inextricable from her identity as a lesbian. But while such efforts grant Bishop a place in the feminist canon, they do not alter the logic of the earlier readings that kept her out. Such reclamations often assume a notion of selfhood—progressive, stable, authentic—that Bishop's poems routinely call into question. As a result, this body of writing champions Bishop's later, ostensibly more personal poetry at the expense of her early work. The new feminist Bishop is achieved in exchange for the old, more ambivalent one, while her self-restraint remains a mark of misfortune, a silent plea for sympathy.<sup>21</sup>

In chapter 3 I suggest that Bishop's reserve is more than a protective guard: it expresses her distrust of the confessional lyric speaker, that presence so often preserved in the poetics of sexual masking. Moreover, I posit that in her most personal poems Bishop offers her keenest challenge to the notion of coherent selfhood that the term *autobiography* often assumes. Bishop's later turn to her own history is inextricable from her lifelong focus on *otherness*; for Bishop, exploring one's self is dependent upon exploring one's notion of difference, so that the pursuit of one will always come on the heels of pursuing the other. Juxtaposing Bishop's early poems about fantastical others with her poems about race and class, I maintain that the constant negotiation of the abject and ideal within her poetry provides the possibility of Silverman's "productive look," a conscious, though always limited, determination to reidentify with what one initially finds repulsive or merely other.

In many ways the story of Swenson's career encompasses and exaggerates the disjunction that emerges in recent studies of Bishop and Moore. Effusive and unabashedly erotic, Swenson's poetry has enjoyed spare but steady approval from some feminist critics. But Swenson's poetry also thrives on the enigmatic—it revels in riddles and puzzles and the rewards of holding back. Because Swenson is so much more

exuberant than Moore or Bishop, her reserve seems more labored, and the provocative tension between her generosity and her restraint more bizarre; indeed, the relative critical silence surrounding Swenson implies that perhaps this tension has appeared to some the mark of a more careless, less mature poet.<sup>22</sup> This book suggests otherwise. While Swenson was fiercely independent, uncomfortable with the idea of influences in general, her letters reveal the deep, particular kinship she felt with Bishop and Moore. In chapter 5 I focus largely on Swenson's love poems in order to show how she disrupts the notion of female sexuality by which she is so often read. By appropriating heterosexual tropes, Swenson rewrites the terms of desire and broadens the scope of possible pleasures in her poems. In this vein my concluding chapter insists on the generative, productive power of language, the element that ultimately underpins the feminist poetics of these three poets.

Interlacing the three chapters on Moore, Bishop, and Swenson are two that explore the extensive correspondence they shared. I approach these poets' letters in much the same way I do their poems; that is, as carefully constructed texts, replete with their own strategies of self-restraint and revelation. As I examine the interrelations of these poets in chapters 2 and 4, my aim is not to establish a particular tradition among them, but to learn how our readings of their poems might be enlightened by their readings of each other and the relationships they shared. At stake in their own often fraught interpretations is the issue at the heart this study: the complex powers of a calculated self-restraint.

Thus, in chapter 2, "Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop," we see how each poet's attempt to understand the other was both fueled and frustrated by the paradox at the heart of Moore's poetry: an adamant moral urgency combined with a persistent admonition against self-assertion. In turn, I highlight the ways in which our own readings of Moore and Bishop often assume the simplified portraits left in the wake of their relationship. I conclude that reconciling Moore's feminist vision with her moral stance means understanding that her wariness of self-absorption goes hand in hand with her ethical urgency—that the two are one and the same.

Although the correspondence between Moore and Bishop is well known within American poetry circles, the relationship between Swenson and Bishop has yet to be explored in critical depth. Between their first meeting in 1950 and Bishop's death in 1979, Bishop and Swenson

exchanged 268 letters (making Swenson one of Bishop's primary correspondents, along with Moore and Robert Lowell). Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of this correspondence, along with discussion of the four poems Swenson wrote to Bishop. Swenson's playful and incisive readings of Bishop's work afford a richer view of what she once called Bishop's "cagey" love poems, granting Bishop's poetry a conscious agency, and hence respect, that she is sometimes denied. While Bishop clearly struggled against the confines of heterosexist culture, her restraint is not merely the product of repression or self-protection. On the contrary, Swenson helps us see that Bishop's silences were often strategic, in the service of unearthing assumptions instead of giving answers.

Moore, Bishop, and Swenson were never convinced that truth is something a poem could unearth. Rather, meaning for these poets is produced in the *process* of recording one's observations; representation is not secondary to that which it depicts. To some degree any poet struggles with this sense, but the poets to whom this study is devoted did not resist their understanding, for they never saw it as a reason for despair. And this commonality yields another, no less notable feature of their poems: a palpable lack of self-pity that does not sacrifice an ounce of acumen. Moore, Bishop, and Swenson did not narrate an intimate identity or an explicit sexuality because they were more interested in exposing the illusions such narratives uphold. As the poems at the heart of this study suggest, we may profit by shifting our focus from the contours of selfhood to the connections through which our selves are made real. After autonomy, feminist poetry may find sustenance in self-restraint.



