MARIANNE MOORE AND HARRY

"Rosie?"

"Yes...?"

"Ummm. How's your poetry?"

"Fine, thank you, and yours?"

"Stop! Seriously now; can you help me with a poem tonight? I thought it would be easy to write a couple of pages about a poem and how it relates to chapter 17 of Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery, but I am finding it very difficult. It wouldn't be too hard just to translate the poem into prose to show that I understand the images and metaphors, but somehow that seems no longer appropriate."

"What do you mean 'no longer appropriate'?"

"Well, that is more or less the way I was taught poetry, and unfortunately, it was probably the way I taught poetry when I was teaching seventh grade English at Fessenden. I guess the feeling was that if one could explain the images, the metaphors, and the rhyme scheme and all that other technical stuff, then one has shown that he understands the poem. Now, however, after reading all the John Dewey that I have been reading, that no longer seems appropriate, but I'm really not sure what is appropriate. I still think that the first step in understanding and appreciating poetry is being able to say what exactly is happening in the poem or what is it the author is writing about, but no I don't necessarily think that that is all there is."

"Clue me in. What poem are we talking about?"

"The references in chapter 17 is to a poem by Marianne Moore entitled 'The Mind Is An Enchanted Thing.' Lisa said that, when her father read it to her, it went over her head, and after my first reading, I was inclined to agree with her. But, after I looked up a couple of words and re-read it several times, it started to grow on me."

"Too bad both you and Lisa didn't have some background material on Marianne Moore. It might have helped both of you if you had known that she is very much concerned with precise expression and meticulously delineated details. It is as though she puts things under a microscope and expresses what she sees with a clarity of detail; the details are as important as the whole."

"Where did you learn all that?"

"I read. But you know, the kids in Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery, although they probably wouldn't say it in so few words, have become enchanted with their own minds in many of the same ways that Moore sees this enchantment."

"Huh?"

"Well, think about it. First, they loved to use their minds and it grew on them. The more they used their minds, the more enchanted they became with them and the more they wanted to use them. In fact, they were very much concerned that, after vacation, they wouldn't be allowed to continue their discussions with Mr. Spence which suggests that maybe they feel that his classes are the only opportunities the school offers for them to exercise their minds."

"Yeah, okay, Rosie. And the image in the poem of the mind 'feeling its way as though blind,/ walks along with its eyes on the ground,' is a lot like Harry falling into the logic and his simple language. The kids feel their way through it, never sure which way they are going but ever mindful of the progress they are making. The whole image also brings to mind a lot of what John Dewey has to say, I think."

"Easy now, Walter."

"What I mean is that the process of inquiry is a kind of a feeling of the way. We try things and if they work, we proceed, and if not, we back up and try again. Dewey would say that we're not blind but rather that reason or the rational process guides us."

"Wait! Wait! All that is true, but the important thing, it seems to me, is the enchantment that the kids experience throughout the story with their minds is the same enchantment Marianne Moore writes about. Like a locomotive gaining speed and power as it leaves the station, the kids become more and more enthralled with their minds; they sense its power and its enchantment the same way Moore does. Remember, the kids almost go to war with Mr. Partridge about the right to use their minds to think for themselves."

"So you're saying that the experience that the kids have as they use their minds more and more is the same experience that Moore captures in her poem?"

"In the sense that both are enchanted by it. They both sense this and, whereas it causes the kids to use their minds more, it causes Marianne Moore to examine it in meticulous detail."

"Okay, Rosie."

"Remember when you struggled through Art as Experience? Someplace in there Dewey says that mind is primarily a verb. Harry's friends may not realize this, but the exemplify it as they notice, remember, care, inquire, and think. Much of Moore's enchantment with the mind has to do with its verb-like qualities. She says that it is animated like the dove's neck and it 'tears off the veil....'"

"Well, it's food for thought. It's too bad Lisa couldn't have put a little more thought into it; she might have had a true insight into both her mind and poetry."

"It's too bad her father didn't start with Marianne Moore's poem, 'Poetry':

> 'I, too, dislike it.
> Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one dis-
> covers in
> it, after all, a place for the genuine.'"

Walter N. Plaut, Jr.

Sources

1. Matthew Lipman. Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery. New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1982.
2. Marianne Moore. The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967.