



**Writing and Animals; A Response to  
Marianne Moore  
and Some Conjecture On Humanity**

**William Kobe Stone  
2025**

## **Writing and Animals; A Response to Marianne Moore and Some Conjecture On Humanity**

*Upon Reading Marianne Moore's 'My Crow, Pluto - A Fantasy' and 'To Victor Hugo of My Crow Pluto', written in prose and verse, respectively.*

It had been a while since I had been moved to tears by poetry I didn't write, or prose that didn't involve hours of commitment to the characters or the world, in which cases my tears are usually confined to the moment in which those characters or that world is coming to their forever end. And not only were those two pieces of writing, six pages combined, capable of making me cry, but they so inspired me that I immediately shut *'Tell Me, Tell Me'*, and opened my laptop to write a response.

I had to write a response, in lieu of having a conversation with you (I'm now addressing Marianne Moore directly), as you died some twenty-five-or-so years before my birth. When I realized that this was the case, and I instead had to address my questions and my envious (not covetous) opining to what is essentially an empty void, it dawned on me that you had likely felt something similar when you remembered (not that it wasn't well understood, just currently unconsidered) that Victor Hugo and Poe had both died before you were born. I am convinced, and bothered by it to the point that it consumes my thought, that art and history and magnanimity and great minds and people worth admiring and remembering, are all things of the past; but the thought that you (who had lived an entire life and to its punctuation well before I was born) also had people you admired, or at least read, who had lived entire lives before your own, makes the

path of history before me a little less grey and meaningless. Maybe even there is still an entire generation after I'm long dead who can read and feel.

I wanted to say, "*I'm sure you felt the same thing at times, as any craftsman can and will*", but you probably didn't feel that way very often. You were a suffragette. You were inspired and hopeful and confident in the future that you were working towards. You were an inspired writer (maybe the first female modernist poet?). You were becoming eternal. Reassuring myself, that, '*even the most brilliant and inspired and self-actualized among us has clinical depression*' would have just been a desperate attempt to absolve myself of my own lack of, whatever it is that causes despair. You were not Poe. I would venture to describe you as gothic, if only by way of chance; you just happened to wear those clothes. I later found out, upon finishing '*Tell Me, Tell Me*', that this was the correct assumption to make. In the literary prose of '*Subject, Predicate, Object*', you described the end result of writing and finishing a piece as, "Consolation, rapture..", whereas I've always found the opposite to be the case. That, in the vein of Daniel Day Lewis's character in '*Phantom Thread*', following an extended period of manic creative output, once the whole piece of work is finished, I just feel - maybe satisfied, somewhere - but hollow. It's, to me, as if I had emptied out all of my feelings.

I also wanted to say that, "*I'm sure your views on religion would be different if you were born in my generation*", but decided that it was such a meaningless presupposition to not even merit theorizing. Who knows and who

cares? You'll never be born in my generation, and I can still have meaningful interactions with the religiously devout.

Then I thought about how ridiculous, or at least often pointless, it is to measure anyone by the standards of the current cultural zeitgeist. Ezra Pound supported fascism in Italy. I am typing away on a machine that (you *maybe* could have imagined while looking at a typewriter and wanting a simpler means of editing your writing), if you were to appear in my studio right now, would require at least two hours of recounting and explaining the history of technology to you as a precursor before I could get around to asking what I wanted to ask you about Pluto.

I think that, if someone that was born a hundred years after you, can read something you said half-a-century ago and relate to it with visceral, immediate and unthinking emotion - then you have succeeded in the art of communicating a feeling or a time. The surest sign that you've accurately hit on a universal truth, relayed a timeless theme. Maybe it's my constant romanticizing of the past, and everything else that is impossible for me to experience; but when I read Dostoevsky, a man who died a century ago and lived on the other side of the world, and can find a new way to think about an everpresent event that is just a byproduct of living, or when you can find similitudes between one of his characters and one of the characters in your own life, is when I am at my most impressed.

In *'My Crow, Pluto - A Fantasy'*, Marianne Moore (I'm not addressing Marianne Moore directly anymore) starts the three-pages of poetic prose by describing the poem she was writing that inspired it, (which relied on a stricter meter and form of two syllable lines and two line stanzas, uncharacteristic of her style), *'To Victor Hugo of My Crow Pluto'*, following the description up with her explaining that she had more to say outside of the rigid 2x2. She then spends the next three pages of prose lamenting on how intelligent her pet crow was, whose acquaintance Moore had theorized started with Pluto being attracted to the feathers in the hat she wore.

I tried researching Pluto because Moore doesn't say quite how long he had been in her life, but couldn't find anything - unbelievable, to me, as she says at different points in the story (which is essentially a loving description of her pet crow's personality) that not only would Pluto perch on her head when she took him out on errands with her, but also that she was allowed to take him into the markets and the pharmacy. So, it's hard to tell how long Moore had Pluto, or how long a crow is expected to live with a human actively feeding it and ensuring its survival.

After she retells their introduction to one another, (which Moore described as Pluto adopting *her*) she gives a short history lesson on the crows tendencies to steal (they are especially, and to my thinking miraculously, attracted to shiny jewels and gems in the same way we are) and their place in the western mythos as a thief or a negative omen, both claims she goes on to deny, saying that (again,

uncharacteristically) vague “official investigations” revealed that their thieving was so minimal to be a nonissue.

The prose mostly consists of how Moore and Pluto could actually communicate with one another. They had a system set up of binary answers to questions when applicable - two caws for no, three for yes. How she had noticed Pluto had a proclivity for the sounds that came from certain radio shows or her typewriter. That he would pronounce his name as either Pluto or Plato based inversely on the operating vowel of the word that preceded his name, (“after “eraser” it would be Pluto”). She even claims that he knew commands; that, if she said to Pluto, “dictionary”, he would go retrieve her pocket-sized dictionary for her.

Marianne Moore ends the final paragraph of the story with two questions that opens the entire piece up to interpretation and imposes on the reader to decide what of Pluto’s story was true, if any of it. It reads, “If what you have been reading savors of mythology, could I make it up? and if I could, would I impose on you?” An ending that I had virtually missed on my first read through, as it hangs on the end of a paragraph in which the narrative changes, suddenly, from smatterings of descriptions to a scene. In the last paragraph (which seems to come on unannounced and unimagined) Marianne asks Pluto where he was born, and he responds with two words whose consonants sounded passingly similar to Connecticut. She repeated Connecticut as a question, and he responded with three caws. Then, in the same sentence, Moore takes him to the woods of Connecticut and “emanicapate(s)” him. She told him, “Spread your wings. Fly.” To which

Pluto responded, “Fly?” And before the two questions I mentioned earlier, Moore says, “Losing him was not simple but the spirit of adventure finally got the best of him.” It left me with this imagining of a bird, beloved pet, hesitant to leave familiarity if not for the insistence of one whose guiding hand had fed him and kept him; who maybe had even returned to the spot in which he and Marianne had last seen each other. This was the point that brought me to tears. I am in tears summarizing it now, and have been while typing this entire paragraph.

The quickness in which Moore switches from her proud description of Pluto to letting him loose leads the reader into the next entry just as quickly, which also pertains to her crow; the poem she referenced at the beginning of the narrative, ‘*To Victor Hugo of My Crow Pluto*’. Just below the title of the poem, and before the verse starts, Marianne includes a quote from Victor Hugo that reads, “Even when the bird is walking we know that it has wings,” which I choose to believe means that Moore believed that Pluto was still alive at the time of her writing the poem.

I won’t go into a summary or analysis of the poem, written in partial Esperanto interspersed with English and Italian, except for sharing the ending, which reads, “And so / dear crow - // gioiello / mio - // I have to / let you go; // a bel bosco / generoso // tuttuto / vagabondo, // serafino / uvaceo. // Sunto, / oltremarino // verecondo / Plato, addio.”

Which, roughly, translates as, “And so, dear crow - my jewel - I have to let you go; to lovely woods, generous, complete gypsy, grape-black seraph. In short, ultramarine, modest Plato, farewell.”

Of course, I am familiar with the idea of “If you love something, let it go, etc.” both as a well-known idiom and as a literary trope. But fathoming the idea of acting on that idiom is so far out of my purview that, what was likely intended to relate a reluctant joyousness, became a parable of tragedy to me, so much so that it has brought me to flowing tears. Marianne frames her freeing of Pluto as an attempt to not feel hypocritical after telling one of her neighbors to free a raccoon he had captured. And, if that is the case - if all of what she said in her narrative were true - and it was essentially a bargain for one animal's freedom at the cost of her own pet, then my heart aches for her all the more.

What stuck out to me most, in retrospect, was discovering that I had forgotten that crows (and I think the rest of their genus?) can speak. I knew, vaguely, that crows were supposedly intelligent creatures that could communicate with humans, but had completely forgotten that they are capable of mimicking us to the point of being able to speak human language after a fashion. It reminded me of my last encounter with a talking bird, which had to have been two-plus-years ago; when delivering mail to customer's house who, unbeknownst to me would put their pet parakeet's cage outside on nice days and, only after I had shut the mailbox and was thoroughly confident that I was alone on that porch and would not have to have a conversation with a customer, did the parakeet, a foot or two away from me, say something - I can't remember what it was.

And now I think about how many murders of crows I have seen in my life, undomesticated animals who are intelligent enough to have learned to copy our

speech, who have the same predilection for shiny objects that has guided so much of human society. And then I think of the pigeon, who are essentially on the opposite side of the genetic spectrum from crows, as far as any two birds could be, as different as humans are to a chimpanzee, who can't speak, but were intelligent enough and with such highly evolved homing capabilities that they warranted domestication. And, in the popular lexicon, they are regarded with the same status that we regard rats, or roaches, or whatever else is arbitrarily considered the lowest of the low in terms of evolution. These creatures, who have lived beside us for millennia and across continents, who have been physically close enough to us to evolve with us (and who we likely owe some credit to for our own evolution), are so universally hated now that, especially in bigger cities, will actually drive people to violent anger at their mere presence.

This is especially heartbreaking to me when you consider the pigeon, who, from the time of the Roman Empire all the way until around the end of WW2 were relatively frequently kept pets and the quickest resource for sending messages across countries until the telegraph and later the telephone innovated them out of having purpose to human civilization - immediately leaving them as the lowest status possible; an unproductive.

Think about that; an animal that was essentially a pet to humans for two-thousand years, and now, suddenly relegated to antiquity overnight, and less than a hundred years out from us not needing them to be domesticated anymore, when they instinctually walk up to a human because after two millennia they come to believe that they could rely on us for food, and had evolved to be

conscious of our relationship, now, unbeknownst to them, not even capable of comprehending what had changed, or if anything had changed at all, instead of food or water or shelter they get kicked. Some people will actually go out of their way to run over them if they see them in the road.

These are intelligent creatures who, like us, likely have no ceiling to how far they could evolve. As is the case with *most* animals. But, because of some calculation someone made involving cute-and-cuddly-rating divided by what it takes to keep them alive, only two animals are deemed worthy enough for us to cohabitate with - and only then just barely. We, as the dominant, most advanced species on our planet, have been terrible wardens of the planet and stewards of life.

Our nearest relative in the animal kingdom, the bonobo, not only rely on their own territory-based group for survival but, unlike other chimpanzees that *didn't* evolve into humans, will actually work with *other* bonobos, instinctually, by default, treating outsiders kindly. Now, consider that kind of de facto trust and fosterment, and consider it from the perspective that, that was the environment that chimps evolved into humans under. Now consider what, some nondescript subspecies from any genus, could potentially evolve into if human beings, with all of our industry and all of our problem solving and pattern recognition abilities actually created an environment that fosters life across all groups?

How much we know and understand about ocean life compared to how quickly we are destroying their habitats is the perfect example of exactly the opposite of what we should be doing. Dolphins are theorized to have been fish

that, like us, evolved into a land-dwelling creature, then evolved again *back* into an ocean-dweller - which is why they need oxygen. Then, there are octopus. Octopus have nervous systems in their appendages. They have one large, central brain, and a complex nerve center in each of their eight tentacles which are capable of independent problem-solving. These creatures have nine brains; they are advanced enough so that each individual suction cup is capable of feeling, tasting, and smelling. Though colorblind, the Octopus can determine what color to camouflage themselves by the amount of light, and they take ocean currents and shadows into account. Octopus, as a latent motor function, edit their RNA in real time, letting them respond to changes in temperature or water pressure by modifying their nervous system temporarily, without making any permanent changes to their DNA. This creature, even if it can't speak a human language or drive a car or put money into the stock market, is more advanced than us in every way - how many humans still die from exposure to weather conditions every year? - yet, we have the audacity to presume the right to destroy their habitats.

But, maybe nothing is more illustrative of our unconscious ability to destroy life, just as a half-forgotten byproduct of our constant industrial expansionism, than the parakeet. Doing a bit of quick research earlier, with the sole intention of making sure that parakeets *could* talk and I wasn't mistaking them for some other subspecies, I learned about the Carolina parakeet. I was pretty positive that parakeets weren't native to anywhere north of ~Costa Rica or thereabouts, when I saw an article covering the, now-extinct, Carolina parakeet. Referred to as *puzzi la née* by the Seminole nation, the earliest written reference

to the Carolina parakeet dates back to 1583. They had an estimated range of up to 2.5 million km<sup>2</sup>, with a population density of .5 - 2.0 parakeets per km<sup>2</sup>, estimating their total population at somewhere in the hundreds-of-thousands to millions. They generally traveled in giant, loud flocks of up to three-hundred birds, which means that there are *numerous* written accounts of these birds from the pre-colonial period until the 19th century, when most of what was written about them pivoted from how colorful and how various they were, to how sparse they had become. This, to me, reads as an obvious consequence of European expansion, as the region with the most dense population, Florida, was the first Spanish claimant in what is now the United States, claimed by Ponce De Leon in 1513. The last known Carolina Parakeet, named Incas died in captivity, in the Cincinnati Zoo, a year after his mate in 1918. He died in the same cage that the last Passenger Pigeon had died in, four years earlier.

As I said earlier, it is pointless to look at the decisions of those who came before us through a modern lens, especially the current modernity of the last decade, in which culture and the world are so quickly switching and switching back as a reaction to switching in the first place. So, of course, I don't blame you (I'm now addressing Marianne Moore directly, again), but I cannot help but think about how different even something as innocuous as having a pet bird has become. I work outside, and still, wild animals are so uncommon anymore that those few rare instances, which occur by some divine gift, when I am actually lucky enough to glance a bunny rabbit out of the corner of my eye as it runs away

from me, is often the highlight of whichever day it is. Let alone any other kind of animal that isn't a starving stray cat.

If I were ever blessed enough to receive - what anyone would consider as innate proof as to their good-nature - the miraculous gift of animal kinship, and I was picked by a wild bird that can talk to me in the English language, I would spend the rest of its life ensuring it stayed alive. It would be just as if the crow were God's messenger, and its comfort around me was proof positive of my admittance into heaven. I wanted to ask you, more than anything, if it had been today, and that crow waddled up to you from within a noticeably smaller murder population than a hundred years ago, would you ever be able to let it go? If your neighbor was just planning on feeding that raccoon, would you still counsel him to set the raccoon free?