

ON “MELCHOIR VULPIUS” BY MARIANNE MOORE

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Marianne Moore’s “Melchoir Vulpius” (1958) refers both to the composer and to a particular hymn he wrote called “Gelobt sei Gott im höchsten Thron” [God be praised on [the] highest throne]. The transitions she makes between biography and the composition intertwine in a way that makes it worth quoting the poem in full:

Melchoir Vulpius

c. 1560-1615

a contrapuntalist —

composer of chorales
and wedding-hymns to Latin words
but best of all an anthem:

“God be praised for conquering faith
which feareth neither pain nor death.”


We have to trust this art —

this mastery which none
can understand. Yet someone has
acquired it and is able to

A ARTE ALEGRE
#13

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Leia depois:  Kindle

direct it. Mouse-skin-bellows' -breath
expanding into rapture saith

"Hallelujah." Almost
utmost absolutist
and fugue-ist, Amen; slowly building
from miniature thunder,
crescendos antidoting death —
love's signature cementing faith.

Moore begins "Melchoir Vulpius" by saying he is a "contrapuntalist" and "composer of chorales." The biographical comments provided in this stanza, nevertheless, serve as a gateway to a reflection on one particular hymn by Vulpius ("Gelobt sei Gott im höchsten Thron" [God be praised on [the] highest throne]) first published in a Lutheran hymnal in 1609. The identity of the hymn is slightly concealed by the fact that Moore refers to it by quoting the first line of the hymn's second stanza ("God be praised for conquering faith") and not the very first line of the hymn ("God be praised on [the] highest throne"). Although the hymn is from the early 17th century, it is not filled with the tensions and uncomfortable harmonies characteristic of some Renaissance music; its sturdy consonances and bright tones touch on a kind of universality found in select Renaissance and early Baroque sacred music that, for example, Martin Luther's "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott," [A Mighty Fortress is our God] (c. 1529) has achieved.

In the second stanza, Moore crisscrosses between the man [Melchoir Vulpius] and the music he has composed. At the beginning of this exercise, she writes "We have to trust this art — / this mastery which none / can understand. Yet someone has / acquired it and is able to / direct it." This statement "we have to trust this art," dressed as a command, feels rather unfamiliar to us nowadays. Reflecting on this turn of phrase, it seems that this kind of trust is often placed on the side of concepts and not on the side of actual people. To explore this further, we can experiment with it on more common ground. A similar

phrase might be: we have to trust the Enlightenment. Or better: we have to trust progress; we have to trust the good sense of nations. These all can be contrasted with how infrequent one might hear "we have to trust our community; we have to trust our neighbor; we have to trust the educators of our children." It seems that an overarching sense of cynicism has entered into our thinking about the world and about the future, and even more so with respect to how we use the word "trust." On the surface it looks like we are talking about concepts, but at the end of the day it is still a question of the exchange between the work of one and the work of another.

Let us not get carried away by this, because Moore is not really using "trust" in the same way we might say this word in everyday conversation or opinion pieces. She is certainly not talking about a trust in people. The focus is on *this art*, "we must trust this art —" at once meaning a skill and a secondary trust in the composition. The depth of this trust pulls the stanzas of the poem together: we trust the composition as an artefact that continually breathes new life each time it is performed, and we trust the skill that brought this composition into being in the first place. Moore seems to be saying that we can, in fact, trust what this hymn represents in the poem: it is a small aesthetic object that stands in for a much larger meaning or enterprise.

What is at stake here, nevertheless, is that we need to find it in ourselves to be able to trust something – and something aesthetic at that. The skill to compose the hymn, and especially its counterpoint, is the object of the poet's admiration. She seems most taken by this aspect of the work in addition to the crescendos—the "expanding" and "building"—that we attribute to an actual performance and are not exactly the authorship of Melchoir Vulpius. (Moore's insistence on crescendos as powerful conveyors of meaning is curious from a musicological point of view because they were certainly not written into the original hymn.)

The question of Vulpius's skill of composition is at the heart of the poem and it gave rise to the profound hymn. We can argue here that Vulpius acquired this skill through his talent

in music. The skill, "this mastery," is baffling in itself as Moore states "no one can understand." The context of Moore's phrase suggests a variation on Proverbs 3:5: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding" (AV). In this light, it makes sense that we are unable to understand "this mastery." It is beyond the poet's (or our own) comprehension to grasp why Melchoir Vulpius had this gift and why so many others have so little or nothing at all. Vulpius sowed this talent of his, which leads to Moore's next phrase "yet someone has / acquired it and is able to / direct it."

In this sense, the composer starts off with a predisposition, a gift for music, and hones that talent to thus acquire the skill of counterpoint. The skill of counterpoint is then *directed* toward the end of composing this (and not only this) hymn. The equation is rather simple: we recognize a rather mystifying skill in art; we see that a particular individual indeed had this skill; and the individual put that skill to good use.

In reality it seems more and more difficult for talent to be identified, let alone someone trusting a product of any apparent skill as representative of Talent itself. Moore rightly emphasizes that mastery has to be worked for (that is, acquired) and it has to be successfully directed toward an end. There certainly is something mysterious in all of this when we think about the countless students of the arts and how few are able to create a masterpiece that calls attention to a process and creator much larger than themselves. The genius of Moore's statement is that it applies to a broader spectrum than music or literary arts. It is, nevertheless, easier to say "we have to trust this art that gave us *Moby Dick*" than to say that we have to trust the "art" of a particular statesman or surgeon. It seems that the true art in question—Melchoir Vulpius's hymn, for one—has the ability to point to its meager material form at the same time as bringing into being a great joy initiated by the aesthetic experience.

Moore's final stanza is more *musical* than the others in the sense that it attempts to read in the way that the music sounds. She does this through the repetition of consonants and cadences made up of three words (mimicking the

repetition of the word "Hallelujah" in the hymn). As Moore herself concedes, this stanza is "almost." For all that the hymn reaches and does, it is not yet the unmediated representation of grace. In a way, it shows that beauty should not be probed and torn apart through excessive examination because the answers one may find within will not make what one is looking for any more intelligible than it was at the moment of one's intuition. We know that there is this signature beneath the layers of counterpoint, but it cannot be heard or felt with greater intensity if the hymn is considered in parts and fragments. As a conclusion we are left with Moore's poem which, as a meditation on the hymn, is a testament of what she has found without laying bear the violence of repeated interrogation of her own experience. The lightness of performance and the mystery of talent lead to her final remark. And in this she reveals the dignity of an individual and their art, by showing what a person cannot do by themselves alone.