Interview:

Politics and Lyricism: A Conversation with Honor Moore

Susan Lilley and Jocelyn Bartkevicius

ON A WARM FLORIDA EVENING, poet Susan Lilley (whose work has appeared in these pages) joined editor Jocelyn Bartkevicius to drive to The Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach, where Honor Moore was teaching a residency. Moore's memoir, *The Bishop's Daughter*, had recently been listed as part of the National Book Critics Circle "Good Reads" recommended reading list and named an Editor's Choice book by *The New York Times*. More recently, the book was selected as a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Among Honor Moore's other books are three collections of poems (*Red Shoes***,** *Darling***, and** *Memoir***);** *The White Blackbird, A Life of the Painter Margarett Sargent by Her Granddaughter***; and a play,** *Mourning Pictures***, which was produced on Broadway and printed in** *The New Women's Theatre: Ten Plays by Contemporary American Women* **(which Moore edited). Her most recent book is** *Poems from the Women's Movement***, which was chosen for Oprah's Book Club and** *O, The Oprah Magazine'***s Summer 2009 Reading List.**

We joined Moore for dinner, and then walked along a boardwalk, surrounded by palmetto bushes and pines, to the cottage that was her home during residency. As we got settled, Moore searched the kitchen for refreshments and glasses, singing all the while—a lovely operatic soprano.

SL: Were you a singer?

HM: No, it was a sort of road not taken, but I sang in high school. Later, when I started giving poetry readings, I heard one on the radio. I said, "This will not do." And I started taking voice lessons.

SL: This is a real poet's question, what every poet wants to know about another, especially when you admire someone's work and want to know the secret, how they do the high-wire act. I've noticed, especially in *Red Shoes***, that you defy a predictable shape to your poems. Some of the poets I love, I know all their poems will be pretty much the same shape, say, long-lined couplets. But you are all over the map. In my own work, I tend to write in blocks, and I have to force myself to have stanza breaks. So, is there an inner architecture that you're fighting? Do you fight a tendency toward structure and shape? Or does each poem truly create its own structure?**

HM: I don't fight myself away from a shape. When I started writing poems—really way back—I was imitating stuff, trying to write a sonnet like Shakespeare and that sort of thing. When I started actually writing—it was the late '60s, early '70s—I was defying any kind of patriarchal form.

Then I started working with Richard Howard, and he got me reading Marianne Moore, got me into syllabics. From syllabics, I went into sestinas. Then with my second book, and my play, *Mourning Pictures***, which is a play in poems, every poem had a little form. Some of them were inspired by the broken sonnet form John Berryman used in** *The Dream Songs***, and they were all syllabic.**

But with *Darling***, I was just sick of it. I was sick of form. I'd count syllables, but I'd just say, well, between six and nine syllables make up a line, and see how that went, like some of those little poems in** *Darling***. Then I got interested in end-stopped lines. One day I thought, God, maybe I can**

actually end-stop lines. For a long time, I just didn't want to do that, too nervous.

In the last couple of books, I've just let the poems create their forms. When I would teach, I'd always say that form is part of the expressive vehicle, the resources of a poet. And that made me want to try different strategies. I used a new approach with the third section of *Red Shoes*—I *drafted* all those poems first. I had pages and pages and pages of drafts. Then I started working on the poems, and I was working on the ones that were short-lined and intimate first, and then I realized I wanted to work longer because the poems are a tribute to a person, the photographer Inge Morath, and I wanted to include more about her. The poems are now dedicated to the memory of Inge Morath and Arthur Miller, but they were written before Arthur died. It was only when he died, while the book was in press, that I added him to the dedication.

SL: What is the connection between Inge and Arthur Miller?

HM: They were married. Anyway, after working for a while in short lines, I opened up the process so that I could tell more of Inge's story. I set the margins on my computer wide and just went, and saw what happened with the lines. And that's how those long lines started. Then I worked on them, of course.

SL: So the inspiration of Inge is part of what let you go, let the work find a form.

HM: Well, I had the intimate, short-lined ones that are more about the speaker and death and identification, but the longer-lined ones are more portrait-like.

SL: I could see that difference in the poems. Some of them have incredibly generous verbal gestures. And since it's not about the speaker, it's just such a beautiful use of that long line. And then other ones are so spare and sparse.

HM: I had this idea when I was just starting teaching that women didn't write long lines enough, and so I'd tell my students to write long lines. Because we didn't have to be locked inside these tiny little things anymore.

SL: Sort of the Emily Dickinson tiny things. I love her, but…

HM: Yes, and then, for a while, I didn't use long lines so much, but then I went back.

JB: Since we're talking about form, I'm fascinated by the prologue of *The Bishop's Daughter*. It's so unlike any prologue I've read. I keep rereading it, trying to articulate what it is. I think it's because you go back and forth—go from an image in a particular moment to a global reflection and then back to an image. I wondered how conscious you were of that as a kind of form. How did you put together this prologue?

HM: Well, I got to the end of the book, almost to the end of the last chapter, and I then had the idea to come back to the funeral at the end. Because I hadn't used the funeral when my father died, in the book. I had the idea that I could begin the book with those doors opening, with my father alive as the bishop on Easter morning, standing there in silhouette. And then end the book with those doors opening again for his coffin. I had a piece I had written before. Lincoln Center Theatre has a magazine, and they did David Hare's *Racing Demon*—he did a series of plays about different professions—and this one was about a bishop. So they asked me to write something about my father, and I wrote that image: the doors opening and the complication of it being your father, and not God. I wanted it to be a kind of overture. There were certain issues, like, how was I going to

introduce the bisexuality? One poet friend said, "Oh, withhold that information." And I thought, *no*, I know that information at that point in the narrative, after he's dead, so it would be coy to withhold it. I had written a lot of that prologue soon after he died.

I can't remember when I wrote the "when I was a child" part, possibly in one of my several attempts at the memoir before my father died. The scene with my father in the sacristy was from one of those attempts. I decided that the prologue had to introduce him as a priest/bishop in my life; it somehow had to introduce the gayness—which I'd prefer to call his secret life; and then it had to introduce something about our relationship and how difficult it had been. It also had to lead people into the book.

And I learned to do—*The White Blackbird* has a kind of…

JB: The book about your grandmother.

HM: Yes. The book about my grandmother has a kind of "prologuy" thing. With that book, my agent said, You're going to have to get people hooked on this character somehow. I'd already written an essay about her, "My Grandmother Who Painted," in Janet Sternburg's *The Writer on Her Work*, where I'd used the sentence: "You will have a bosom like your grandmother's." I just decided to open it with that, because it was strong. Part of it was crassness. You want something really strong, that hooks the reader who picks it up in the bookstore and looks at it for thirty-eight seconds. That's sort of like the prompt of a poem. It's a kind of formal requirement—how are you going to pull the reader in? I had all these requirements for the beginning of the book, but I also wanted to make the prologue work as a piece of writing.

SL: I heard you say in an interview you had with another writer…

HM: Victoria Redel, yes.

SL: You were both writing about your fathers, hers a fictional account, yours a memoir. I remember you saying that poetry is a non-linear process, and that you were interested in the concept of collage. That term captures what I see in your poems. The technique is fascinating, and sends the reader in so many directions in one poem.

I'm thinking especially of the poem "Gnostic," which has the threads of early Christianity. Meeting my mother. My mother is dead, my mother isn't dead anymore. Even the blunt haircut of the other person in the poem, the "you." The "you" is so slippery. Would you say something about how you work with these very separate elements that come together in a mysterious way to cast a light on a central relationship in a poem?

HM: Well, I was reading Elaine Pagels's *Beyond Belief,* because my father had just died, and somehow I was maybe thinking about writing the memoir. I was sort of thinking and not thinking. I was working on some poems for the first section of *Red Shoes*, and I knew I had these Inge poems for the last section of the book. I knew the Wallace Stevens poem was for a different section, and I thought, if I put it in the middle, what would go with it?

I was at Yaddo, and Lynn Emanuel was there, and we were talking about poems. I had that dream that comes into "Gnostic," and I was reading that book, and I was in love with this man. If you've read the memoir, that man is also in the amazing story my father tells about the man in the armor. You know, he says, "Once upon a time," and he tells me that story. So I'm deep into my unconscious with this man, my father's death, storytelling, and the evocation of the Gnostic stuff about imagination.

SL: I love what you said about thinking and *not* thinking, because when you're not thinking is when

you can let the unconscious things come up.

HM: There was a bureau at Yaddo that I liked—the carved oak—and I found a little bit of gray hair, and I got into this panic that it was going to get out of control and I was actually going to have to dye my hair.

I was originally thinking at Yaddo I'd work on the Inge Morath poems. But there was just too much death. She had died, my father had died. So I started working on the poems in the beginning of the book. I didn't even think they'd *go* **in a book, but when I showed them to Lynn Emanuel, she was very excited by them, and I started thinking about the book differently. So then I really wanted something to go in the middle and I wrote "Gnostic." Then I had this stuff, for the other poem, "Exactly Perpendicular."**

SL: That was another one that was very collage-like.

HM: Yes, I was working with the idea of repeating things, repeating sequences over and over again in different configurations. There was a piece I'd written, "The Pink Dress," that was never published in a book because it was sort of an experiment with pornography. It was published in *Conjunctions***. It was very bold.**

JB: A poem?

HM: It's like "Gnostic" in a way, but uses words like "cunt" and "cock"—all those words. I had four different versions of it and then I thought I'd just put them together and work with repetition, create something incantatory. Those two poems. "Gnostic" and "Exactly Perpendicular" plus the Wallace Stevens poem did what I wanted to, they made it possible to go from those crazy erotic poems in the first section into the elegies in the sequence to Inge that ends the book.

SL: It does make a beautiful bridge into the work—elegiac and also beautiful and sexual in its own way.

JB: You mentioned at dinner that your vocation as a poet and your father's as a priest and bishop have something in common, that they are ways of working with the unseen. Was that something you were thinking about early on?

HM: *I did* **think about it because it was something I had to diffuse. How was I going to diffuse that he was a man of God? I go to church once in a while, but I'm not a practicing Christian person anymore. And I was identifying with this father, and one day it occurred to me that I could think about his priesthood as a form of art, and that way I could talk about it, you know the way I talk about my grandmother's painting in** *The White Blackbird***.**

JB: As opposed to him up there as God…

HM: Yes, he was very tall!

JB: Do you think of memoir in that way, as being like poetry, and getting to the unseen? Or is it a different category?

HM: I don't think of it as that different. I mean, it is a different category, because poetry differs from prose, but I'm only half joking when I say I think of *The Bishop's Daughter* **as a great big poem. Years ago, when I did a reading from** *The White Blackbird***, in Minneapolis, Trish Hampl said**

to me, "You've really learned from writing poems how to put a lot of different things into a work." I was especially looking forward to writing *The Bishop's Daughter* because *The White Blackbird* is a biography. It has bits of memoir, but it's a biography, and I was really looking forward to this book, to doing the whole thing out of that quasi-dreamy consciousness, and even having the factual material serve that part of the book.

It's really about trying to get two people's dream lives together, in a way. Or existence on another plane. I think memoir can capture existence in a kind of dream state. It's the conscious, it's the unconscious. It's the inner, it's the outer life. One of the reasons memoir is such a great genre is that it's so elastic.

JB: I was struck by the way you were able to stay on the plane of imagination even as you were dealing with the factual material, reading your father's journals. You're out there doing the research, as if you were a journalist. But it doesn't feel like it.

HM: I was trying to capture the experience of looking at all those artifacts, the unfolding of memory. That's why I was using all that stuff like tattered envelopes and boxes. It's using all that fairy tale stuff that's so evocative.

SL: Jocelyn and I have talked about connections between poetry and nonfiction for years, because I do one, and she does the other. One thing Jocelyn said to me years ago, that I love, is that we should call memoir *nonpoetry*, not nonfiction, because it has a lot more to do with poetry. So I wonder, is there ever a time when you're writing and you stop to ask yourself, Is this prose or poetry? Because your writing is so lyrical it seems at times that a given line could be either genre.

HM: I have a former student, John D'Agata, who has named this form "the lyric essay," and in fact there's a poem in *Darling* called "Shoulder," which he published as a lyric essay. And he could conceivably have published "Gnostic" as an essay, and even "Exactly Perpendicular," for that matter. I personally think of them as poems, because I don't like to make that distinction. I wrote, also in *Conjunctions*, a piece called "Hobart's Brushes," about one of my grandfather's brothers, who died very young of Tuberculosis. I inherited his ivory brushes because we have the same initials. That's kind of a lyric essay, because it has a kind of self-conscious lyrical voice. That's a very different approach from the voice I used, for instance, in writing the introduction to my book of poems by Amy Lowell. So I think there are some prosey things that I write that are poems.

SL: Do you think more and more those lines between prose and poetry are blurring? Is lyric prose something contemporary writers are talking about? Kazim Ali has a lyric novel. Richard Hoffman works with this kind of prose.

HM: Well, I think it's the influence of the lyric essay. It's partly the influence of the language poets, and John D'Agata. I think he's been very influential. And there's a writer called Jenny Boully who writes these things called "creative nonfiction." I think that's such an ugly thing to call it.

JB: Oh don't you hate that? I think it's the worst term.

HM: Sarabande has a whole series of that kind of prose. Years ago I had a request from them to put together a lyric prose collection.

SL: Oh, working on assignment.

HM: I like assignments, but for me those are poems. And a memoir is a memoir. But I'm happy to

bring to bear anything I know how to do in a lyric voice in a memoir.

JB: You mentioned that you started writing *The Bishop's Daughter* **as an assignment in college.**

HM: Yes, that's so strange. It was '66 or '67. The teacher said to write a story about a parent. It's the part of the book about Nona Clark. But literally, it was that voice. Our voices are our voices. We have them from the beginning, and they don't really change that much. You figure out how to take advantage of it, or make it work better, or you get to know it, so you get to know how to use it. But this shocked me, it actually shocked me. I mean maybe some things in my voice have changed, but not really in a significant way.

JB: Were you a poet at that time?

HM: Not really. I was in college at a time when girls weren't supposed to be writers. That was for the boys to do.

JB: The rock stars and the poets were all men.

HM: It was wonderful encouragement when I took that class, but I was a senior. Maybe if I'd taken it earlier in college, I would have written more in college.

JB: What did you plan to become after college? Did you have a vocation?

HM: I was going to be in theatre, I was a theatre producer. But that was just the outside me. The inside me was, I guess, always writing something.

JB: You went to Yale School of Drama.

HM: Yes, in theatre management.

JB: That was your calling?

HM: Yes, but I had to stop. It was too much of a left-brain thing. The other thing, writing, was calling to me.

JB: And you went to Radcliffe as well.

HM: I loved being at Harvard. You got into the best college for a girl to get into, but then they treated you like a second-class citizen the whole time. You had to have a lot of ego to break out of it. It's all changed now, of course. But back then, it was really hard for a young woman to announce "I'm going to be a writer"—that reluctance really changed with the women's movement.

I'm doing this small anthology now for The Library of America, one of their poetry project series. It's a personal selection. I begin with Sylvia Plath's "The Applicant," and end with an Eileen Myles poem, "Joan," about Joan of Arc, the last image of which is when she's being burnt and a dove flew out of her mouth. So it begins "Am I your kind of person?" and ends with "a dove flew right out of her mouth."

JB: What's it called?

HM: *Poems From the Women's Movement***.**

JB: OK, that title brings to mind the questions we were talking about before, the activism in your work, about poetry and the women's movement. Do you think a poet has to be an activist or owes something to politics?

HM: My whole life there's been this argument. American letters is very hostile to activist work. I happen to think there are some great activist poets like Bertolt Brecht or Muriel Rukheyser, whom I don't think sacrificed any poetics to activism. She really integrated activism and poetry. And Adrienne Rich and Denise Levertov and many other people. But what I was talking about the other night was that we live now in the twenty-first century in such a flood of language, the Internet, television, radio, magazines—such a glut of language. I think writers, and maybe poets in particular, have a responsibility to keep words meaning what they mean. To keep words saying what they mean. I do think that's a political—or maybe social is a better word—role that we play.

And in that poem "Bucharest 1989" from *Darling*, I came to the idea that one person speaking can change things, can begin to change things. That's really what that poem is about.

SL: Yes, that is a wonderful poem. It's jarring, physically, the way that poem has a shape that ebbs and flows and…

HM: See, that poem is in syllabics.

SL: It is?

HM: Yes, you count the syllables and you see a pattern that recurs. It's not just that you count the syllables and you've got a line, it's a more complicated, intuitive, almost sculptural process. I use them now more as a kind of tool.

JB: I like reading things like that, where you can feel the underlying form tugging at you subtly.

HM: That's the trick.

JB: That's how I felt about your prologue.

HM: I still feel I haven't answered that question satisfactorily.

SL: I think the whole thing with the women's movement—politics are so personal, it can't help but go into your work.

HM: Right. Someone said to me, "Oh a whole book of political poems, ick." And I said, it's not like that, it's just that something happened to women writing poems, that changed us forever and I wanted to show how it happened within a bit more than a decade—I begin in 1966 and go to 1982. It first became evident perhaps in the work of activist poets, but the change—women inventing a new "I" and tackling more explicitly female subject matter—worked its way through women writing poems in many registers, from the literary to experimental.

JB: I think sometimes we forget that politics can be central in any genre, not just yelling at you from the editorial page. I remember talking to Terry Tempest Williams about the political aspects of her poetry, memoir, and nonfiction, and how she also writes the occasional op-ed piece. She said the writing doesn't feel all that different to her, that it all comes from the same heart and spirit. The difference is how she's shaping it. And maybe that goes back to what you were saying about American letters not being that open to politics.

HM: Well that's a conversation I often had with Arthur Miller, who always got criticism for being a socially conscious writer. His characters were always living in society. It's a conversation I've also had with Carolyn Forché. When she got the most flack was when she was working with Amnesty International and writing about what she saw, writing out of that experience. But why is that any less valid than someone who's writing while teaching in a college?

JB: Or here in the woods looking at a tree, writing.

SL: Or if you're Arthur Miller and you've gone through McCarthyism, and it has gotten so personal that you can't turn it off. Like most of us who were affected by the women's movement, you can't put the genie back in the bottle.

HM: Because it's about *life*. **When politics get separated from life, we lose politics. It's always irritating to me when politics get separated as an idea from the social organism that we're all part of.**

JB: Before I started reading *The Bishop's Daughter*, **I remember there was a little bit of background controversy about whether it was right or wrong to be writing about your father—a public figure who people had heard about—and revealing things he kept secret. At first I thought, oh no, the book is going to be just some kind of idea, or uncomfortable confession. But when I started reading it, I realized that it's lovely, that it's not about outing somebody sensationally, and it's not maligning a public figure. And then I heard you saying that when you wrote** *The White Blackbird,* **about your mother's mother, your father asked when you were going to write about** *his* **family. At the time, you thought his family was too dull to write about. But then when you found out about his sexuality, he suddenly became interesting to you as a character. He had depth. This hero had suffering. It seems to me that there is a political dimension to this: You were writing about him as a real person. You're not outing the bishop. You're writing about a real person. One with dimension.**

HM: Yes.

JB: You were talking about Patricia Hampl before, and she has an essay called "Other People's Secrets." It's about her first book of poetry, and I believe her mother suffered secretly from seizures of some sort, and she was afraid it would hurt her job, the '30s or '40s or something like that when you couldn't have a disability. Trish thought her best poem was about her mother's illness, but her mother said, That's my **secret,** *my* **secret. And Trish thought if she didn't have that poem, it wasn't going to be a good book. Her essay is about the ethics of writing about what others haven't revealed.**

HM: Personally, I don't believe you can out someone who's dead. I actually wrote a little piece for *The Huffington Post* **that they published on Father's Day, in which I talk about how I couldn't be whole without telling that part of my story. Some people have said that I continued my father's work by writing the book. I wouldn't presume to say that, but I can say that I worked to write it in the spirit of his work.**

But I also said that I was continuing my own work, and that of my generation—born between 1945 and 1955. Our work has been the exploration of sexuality. Of all kinds. I was continuing my generations' work, which is telling the truth about sexuality. Telling the truth about marriages, about homosexuality, opening up the utterance about desire. It has been our journey. So if someone were really a shrewd critic, that is the context in which he or she might see this book. That's what it's about. That's where it's coming from. It's part of a continuance. My work has always been about the erotic, and in that way, I'm very much of my generation.

JB: Very early in the memoir you get into the romance of your parents' marriage, and the shift to discord, and the sexuality of the older generation. It's all there.

HM: I felt the erotic was one of the prisms, if not *the* prism, through which I could look at my relationship with my father. It seems strange actually that no one has taken up my sexuality, which I treat in the book.

JB: That's interesting. That's right.

HM: I was with women for fifteen years of my life, which I feel in some way was a response to my father, but no one has said that. Instead, all the uproar is about a woman outing her father. The origin of this controversy is that three of my siblings wrote a letter to *The New Yorker* about it.

SL: Oh my God.

HM: It was very hard to have anybody you knew, let alone people you were related to, do that. But what's wonderful now is that people are able to put that aside and concern themselves with the more complex story the book tells. Like you said, there's some vague thing in the air, but people are led to the book, which makes me very happy.

SL: It's strange too, that you have to ignore those voices to get the work done, ignore those voices that say, What are your siblings going to think? I think every artist has to do that.

HM: Well as my therapist is fond of reminding me, I thought long and hard about writing this book.

JB: Started in '66, published it in 2008.

HM: Well, I wouldn't say I *started* that book in '66, but it took a long time to finally sit down and write it.

JB: It's part of the politics we've been discussing. Why should a woman be silenced?

HM: Exactly.

JB: It's similar to what Kathryn Harrison had to go through when she published *The Kiss*: Big deal that you wrote a lovely, evocative book. Your father was a minister and you revealed that he cheated on his wife. We have this thing about fathers, with a capital *F* and small *f*. People just don't attend to what's in the book.

SL: I think it's this Puritanical stream we have from way back. I have a colleague who won't teach *The Awakening* because she thinks the mother is terrible for leaving her children and walking out into the water. It's immoral. And I think, I'll have to check your papers. Are you female? What about *Richard III*? You'll teach *that*. He smothered little boys for God's sake.

HM: It's *literature* for God's sake.

SL: She just couldn't accept that a woman did that. She couldn't even see her own sexism.

HM: I think a lot about this, what I feel very much is that what and how I write is informed by my being a woman, and now, by what women have been writing for the last several decades. I write out

of myself, but that includes my femaleness.

SL: I was reading Eavon Bolland's book *Object Lessons*, about being a woman poet in Ireland—talk about a boys' club. She would go into Dublin, then go back to raise her kids, and she slowly broke in. She has a very clear view of patriarchy. It's like a castle she was trying to break into. She had to start speaking right from herself.

HM: Well, I think for a while, women who wrote out of their own experience were accused of writing political poems.

SL: Or pornographic, as in Anne Sexton.

HM: In that anthology, I include that poem of Anne Sexton's, "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator": "At night, alone, I marry the bed…"

SL: I have one more question: It's kind of a poetry question. I was singing a song from *The Sound of Music* about you. You have a way of holding onto a dream state and making it actually appear. I was singing, "How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?"

HM: Which poem are you talking about?

SL: I'm talking about any poem where you are bold enough to use memory and dream sequences. This kind of dream state where a lot of poems come from, there's this state that you are able to linger and be in, and I think it's very alluring to many poets, but by the time you actually try to write about it, it's gone, evaporated. You seem to harness this very delicate material.

HM: I write it down right when I wake up, or write it down right before I go to sleep. I just write in bed before I get up. That's not when I do actual *writing* writing. But drafting, very often. I think they're interesting, those states—I try to go back into them when I'm revising.

JB: Poetry conceived in bed.

SL: What I think is so interesting about it is you're not cutting yourself off from experience with the other people in your poems, in fact, you find a way to connect with their dream states, too. It's almost like, let's go to another plane. Only it's just as real. That's the high wire feat I was talking about in some of your poems.

HM: Thank you.

SL: The other thing I wanted to bring up was the elegiac mode. In our generation, we're losing people, I've lost both parents. It's almost impossible not to write about it in some way. This loss is universal, but every story is so different. Somehow the loss of your parents is intertwined in your poems about Inge.

HM: Probably. But she was such a mother to me. She and Arthur were such parents, artistic parents, and that's the story I try to tell in those poems. I guess the last person I heard say it was Mark Strand: Lyric poems are about love and death. So we're stuck with it.

SL: And luckily there's plenty of both.

HM: A little bit more death than love.