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## “The Plucked String”:

Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore and the Poetics of Select Defects

**Cynthia Hogue (bio)**

*[M]any who are “helped” by a brave note, do not admire the plucked string; by some the note of rapture is not caught; and by the self-sufficient, Emily Dickinson has been accused of vanity. A certain buoyancy that creates an effect of inconsequent bravado—a sense of drama with which we may not be quite at home — was for her a part of that expansion of breath necessary to existence, and unless it is conceited for the hummingbird or the osprey to not behave like a chicken, one does not find her conceited.*

Marianne Moore

*In connection with personality, it is a curiosity of literature how often what one says of another seems descriptive of one’s self.*

Marianne Moore

In her important study of American women poets’ relations with masculine and feminine literary traditions, *The Wicked Sisters*, Betsy Erkkila draws the conclusion that Marianne Moore “had no desire to place herself in the literary

tradition of Emily Dickinson,” based on the fact that, as Erkkila’s note states, she never mentioned Dickinson to Elizabeth Bishop (102, 239n.1). Moore, Erkkila observes, “found her precursors among men rather than women” (102).<sup>1</sup> Erkkila’s conclusion is literally correct (there is indeed a paucity of references to Dickinson by Moore), but in being quite precisely *partial* (that is, in taking Moore — or rather, Bishop — at her word), Erkkila may, in fact, be too hasty. [End Page 89]

As Jean Garrigue poetically observed some time ago, one notes the several stylistic and characteristic affinities between the two poets. He writes, “Both have the laconic abruptness of decisive daring. And the dignity of being curt about great things they know. An asceticism in each”:

Rectitudes of being they both infallibly stand for. Implications, as well, of the infinites.

Both have at their backs a firmament of reading—the black Bible, I mean,” he continues. Both conscious legatees to those ages of insight “proved on the pulse”, [sic] moral beauties acquired next, by virtue who knows, of being faithful to what they were and are (as Peter the cat was).

(52)

There is in both, he concludes, “a trenchant authority with language,” for neither a “conventional smoothness, sweetness, sleekness”: “Both are startlingly original” (53). As Garrigue’s sketchy comparison indicates, the affinities between the two poets call for a reconsideration of Moore’s relation to Dickinson.

In examining Moore’s critical reception of Dickinson in the unpublished as well as published record, I shall argue in the pages to follow that Moore developed a remarkable appreciation of Dickinson. In that light, I want to assert Moore’s relation to a formal tradition of female American poetic innovation that Dickinson helped to inspire and Moore herself to extend. I have termed this tradition elsewhere a poetics of “select defects,”<sup>2</sup> following Moore’s own characterization of the aspect of Dickinson’s poetic project that she publically appreciated, as detailed in her 1933 review of Dickinson’s *Letters*.

Moore published only one piece on Dickinson, a mid-career (1933) review of Mabel Loomis Todd's *Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1931), but a number of feminist critics, Erkkila among them, have been reconstructing the cultural context in which Moore and other women writers cultivated a network of literary and professional relationships.<sup>3</sup> This network represents "a specific historical response to the marginality of women writers in the landscape of literary modernism"; thus whom Moore reviewed — H.D., Bryher, Stein, for example — was selective and, as Erkkila observes, "privileged the specifically feminine ethics and poetics that Moore admired" (104). Moore's formative involvement with Dickinson's work may have been over by the time she and Bishop became friends, but given her selective reviewing, it is not insignificant (as Moore might say) that she chose to review Dickinson.<sup>4</sup> One reason, I want to suggest, may have been the "specifically feminine ethics and poetics" at work in the **[End Page 90]** poetry of a female precursor whose genius was generally acknowledged, if unevenly appreciated, by Moore's time.

During Moore's formative years, Dickinson's status was changing. Respectfully received in the 1890s when first published in small, conventionalized selections edited by Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, she was numbered in little more than a decade later one of three "forgotten poetesses," as a 1912 *Forum* article called her, which Moore noted in her reading notebook.<sup>5</sup> Then in the years leading up to and following Dickinson's centenary in 1930, there were the crucially influential reassessments — Marsden Hartley in *The Dial* in 1918; Conrad Aiken in 1924 in *The Dial*; Louis Untermeyer in 1929 in *The Saturday Review of Literature*; George Whicher in his *Dickinson Bibliography* published by The Jones Library in 1930; and Allen Tate in *Symposium* in 1932, among many others. Moore's reading diaries indicate that she followed this trajectory of critical response to and evaluation of Emily Dickinson's posthumous publications, beginning around 1912 and continuing sporadically until the eve of World War II. The last entry I could find was in the notes for a 1937 lecture, in which Moore mentions that Dickinson (along with Gerard Manley Hopkins) seems to be a later writer than her contemporaries, for she was not as self-absorbed and her poetry was more technically varied.<sup>6</sup> That Dickinson's not-so-self-centeredness, moreover, was a significant part of her appeal for Moore is also evident in a letter dated some years earlier to *Poetry* editor Morton Zabel, in which Moore reminds him that Dickinson cared about important national events

of concern (Moore mentions an 1855 letter to Mrs. Holland as an example).<sup>7</sup> Moore goes on to say that she has been upset recently about the ruthless self-interest that dominates the U.S., noting that she thinks of herself as a pacifist (though not, she qualifies, in favor of passivity).<sup>8</sup>

Moore owned the 1924 volume of Dickinson's poems edited by Conrad Aiken, as well as the 1930 Whicher centenary Dickinson *Bibliography*.<sup>9</sup> Late in her life (1970), she was given a gift by Marguerite Harris of a privately-published anthology of forty-five contemporary poets honoring Dickinson,<sup>10</sup> giving us some indication of a lifelong interest in, if not direct involvement with, Dickinson's poetry. Tucked into her copy of Whicher's book were two photographs that Moore clipped out of a 1936 newspaper article about Dickinson by Richard M. Gibson. One was of the portrait of the three Dickinson children painted when Dickinson was eight; the other was of Dickinson's bedroom, with an annotation by Moore that the photograph portrayed Emily Dickinson's furniture for the first time.<sup>11</sup> Notwithstanding Moore's characteristic notation of the contiguous or tangential, the glaring absence in Moore's **[End Page 91]** library not only of later editions of the poems, but also of the very edition of the letters Moore reviewed, is reasonably explained by the Moores' life-long, necessary frugality. Moore routinely used the library rather than bought books.<sup>12</sup> There is enough of a trail in the unpublished papers to suggest that she did indeed find something of a female precursor in Dickinson, if not a primary, or perhaps readily acknowledged, influence. (We might recall Moore's caveat to the famously incomplete *Complete Poems*: "Omissions are not accidents.")<sup>13</sup>

References to Emily Dickinson in Moore's reading diaries cluster around the years of Dickinson's centennial celebrations, when two biographies, two volumes of reminiscences, a new edition of her poems, and many articles, reviews, and uncollected or previously unpublished poems were published. Moore regularly read the journals in which the majority of reconsiderations of Dickinson's work were published from 1912 on.<sup>14</sup> She makes note in her 1915 reading diary of a review in the August 14, 1915 *New Republic* of the 1915 reprint of *The Single Hound*, edited by Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Of the many poems

quoted in this review, Moore copies out one into her reading diary, the full text of a late, formally conventional Dickinson poem that is characteristic of her particular revisionary ethos:

A little Madness in the Spring  
Is wholesome even for the King,  
But God be with the Clown -  
Who ponders this tremendous scene -  
This whole Experiment of Green -  
As if it were his own!

(P1333) <sup>15</sup>

The reviewer's comment is simply that Dickinson's poem illustrates the "phosphorescence" of poetry. I suggest, however, that the poem caught Moore's attention because of the dehierarchization of "madness" with which it playfully opens and its impeccably ironic (imperfect) rhyme of "Clown" with "own," as well as its cautionary theme about self-aggrandizement. Moore had just begun to publish in 1915, and these early poems — "The Past is the Present," "To Statecraft Embalmed," for example — are already characterized by the ironic tone, ethical themes, <sup>16</sup> formal compression, and resourceful rhyming (both off and perfect) that would typify her mature syllabic style. The review, entitled "An Early Imagist," <sup>17</sup> is unlike many of the contemporary reviews in that it is refreshingly free from the condescension with which Moore would take eventual issue in her 1933 review. **[End Page 92]**

More often, major reconsiderations of Dickinson tended to give out contradictory messages, critically respectful on the one hand, condescending on the other. Marsden Hartley, for example, effusively—and patronizingly—characterizes Dickinson as a darling "child," both "Saint and imp." <sup>18</sup> Conrad Aiken portrays her unequivocally as "among the finest poets in the language" (308), but he is at the same time troubled not only by the "unhealthy vanity" in her letters (304) but by an interest in the details of death that is "almost vulture-like" (308). George Whicher argues that Dickinson's "'letter to the world' was the clear message of a poet, not the mumbling of a pythoness" (11); that "few

competent writers have studied her life and mind with intuitive understanding”; and that the “mass of comment constitutes a monument of critical ineptitude.” But, he goes on:

Her inadvertences and slipshod lapses have been soberly defended as beauties beyond the comprehension of the vulgar, and her name has been invoked to support the favorite predilections of her critics for movements in verse that she could never have heard of.

(10)

According to Whicher, she is not so much “profound” as “instinctive”; unlike Emerson’s “aesthetic *tour de force*, her hands grew deft in the finer ‘gem tactics’ of her verse” (12–13). Allen Tate’s influential and insightful “New England Culture and Emily Dickinson” praises her superior poetry because, as Tate famously put it, “like Donne, she *perceives abstraction* and *thinks sensation*.” But, he continues, her secret (unlike Donne’s, one is left to conclude) is her “ignorance, her lack of formal intellectual training, [which] spared her the risk that imperilled Hawthorne. She cannot reason at all. She can only see” (215–16, Tate’s emphasis). We must conclude, Tate concludes, “that her intellectual deficiency was her greatest distinction” (218).<sup>19</sup> The unpublished and published records of Moore on Dickinson indicate that, subtly, wittily, specifically, Moore responded to and thoughtfully recast this kind of contradictory portrait.<sup>20</sup>

Moore either purchased or was given an edition of the poems Aiken edited, for which his 1918 essay in *The Dial* served as an introduction. Moore pencilled two notes on the back jacket, both from Aiken’s introduction: “by the board” and “as erratic as it was brilliant.” Aiken’s full passage reads:

Her genius was . . . as erratic as it was brilliant. Her disregard for accepted forms or for regularities was incorrigible. Grammar, rhyme, metre, — anything went by the board if it [End Page 93] stood in the way of thought or freedom of utterance. Sometimes this arrogance was justified; sometimes not.

(308)

It's impossible to tell when Moore made these notes, or what she made of them, but they do indicate that she contemplated Aiken's characterization of Dickinson's problematic style. One can reasonably speculate, moreover, that in 1924 Moore's attention may well have been captured by the charge of Dickinson's "arrogance" as evidenced by her "erratic" — if "brilliant" — style, because of a stinging 1922 critical symposium in *Poetry* on Moore's work, which made similar charges against her poetry. As Robin Schulze recounts, Marion Strobel, for example, "damned Moore's poems as the 'contortions' of a too well-developed intelligence" (24). Because Moore herself "equates the artistic satisfactions of the clever mind with a prideful and hostile solipsism," Schulze adds, however, her "insistent critique of poetic sophistication . . . seems as much directed at her own work as at any of her subjects" (23).

In January 1925, Moore received the prestigious *Dial* award. The "Announcement" in the journal places her for the first time publically in a lineage of American women poets that begins with Dickinson. *Dial* publisher Scofield Thayer writes:

I have the honour to announce that our annual acknowledgement of distinguished service to American letters this year recognizes the unusual literary virtue of Miss Marianne Moore. . . . who seems to us so incomparably, since the death of Emily Dickinson, America's most distinguished poetess.

(89) 21

Moore's biographer, Charles Molesworth, notes that she wrote tactfully to thank Thayer, mentioning the symposium on her work in *Poetry*, and "noting that though *Poetry* had called her a painful acrobat, *The Dial* more than compensated for this by comparing her to Emily Dickinson" (215). 22

In what seem to be the notes for her 1933 review, and/or a lecture on Dickinson a few years later, Moore carefully works through Dickinson's strengths<sup>23</sup> Several points made in these notes are very little apparent in the published review, but their extensiveness (there are seven typed pages) suggests how seriously in the 1930s Moore analyzed Dickinson's themes, style, and creative methods. They also suggest that she had, by then, internalized *The Dial's*

public identification of her with Dickinson, albeit Henry James mediates this identification in the notes.<sup>24</sup> She writes that Dickinson illustrates [End Page 94] James's assertion, in his preface to the New York edition of *The American*, "that the partaker of the 'life of art' who repines at the absence of the rewards, as they are called, of the pursuit might surely be better occupied" (29).<sup>25</sup> Although Moore indicates with her use of quotation marks that she is quoting the passage above from James, what she actually transcribes into her reading diary characteristically paraphrases and interprets in places; much of the quoted passage is capitalized. Indeed, so many of her notes on Dickinson are capitalized that the graphic emphasis suggests points in which Moore may have been especially invested, possibly places of particular technical interest or even identificatory anxiety. Like Dickinson, Moore wrestled all her life with her *unChristian, unladylike literary ambition*, and we can surely hear in this characterization Moore's own conflicted desire to be, as she portrays Dickinson, a poet for whom the joy she takes in her work is reward enough.

Dickinson had the bravery of oddness, Moore writes (who had her own).<sup>26</sup> Famous for remarking that she looked like a "toad" (**Molesworth 450**), Moore quotes Dickinson describing herself as "Myself the only Kangaroo among the Beauty" (L268). For Moore, among Dickinson's poetic virtues is that she is quietly succinct, refusing the exhibitionism of displaying "MERE" technique that Plato called *noisy*. Dickinson has the tactfulness of "compactness," Moore notes approvingly.<sup>27</sup> As illustration of these points Moore quotes in full a poem published in the 1924 Aiken edition under the title "The Cocoon," a verse remarkable not least for its playful music of internal and end-rhymes:

Drab Habitation of Whom?  
Tabernacle or Tomb -  
Or Dome of Worm -  
Or Porch of Gnome -  
Or some Elf's Catacomb?

Moore comments, following Longinus, that Dickinson makes hearing *visible* — most evidently, in the above poem, in the modulated play of plosives and low, soft vowel sounds.

Her “triumph,” Moore continues, is her capacity to compel immediate attention. Dickinson often opens with a statement or observation, Moore finds, linking Dickinson to her own poetics of observation, which can be used by the mind. Moore foregrounds an intellectually pragmatic poetics: Dickinson commands our attention because of the use-value of her poetry. Moore then quotes an opening quatrain that constitutes a characteristic, Dickinsonian observation: **[End Page 95]**

The Devil - had he fidelity  
Would be the best friend -  
Because he has ability -  
But Devils cannot mend -

(P1479)

This poem was first published in *The Single Hound*, and was subsequently reprinted in the 1924 *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (with an introduction by Bianchi), as well as in the 1930 Centenary Edition, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (ed. Bianchi and Hampson).<sup>29</sup> What Moore finds of use in the passage above is, of course, open to speculation. But because of her own ethical concerns, I suggest that it is the poem’s ironic contemplation of the metaphysical and moral paradox of evil that interests her, the impossibility of mending (that is, “reforming” in the religious sense of *amend*, improve in *morals*) one who is — save for his “Perfidy” — otherwise so able. Stung by the criticism of a too-evolved intellect that “marred” her own poetry both substantively and stylistically,<sup>30</sup> Moore is not employing lightly the word *triumph* in conjunction with the intellectual usefulness of Dickinson’s poetry.

Dickinson helps us to realize, Moore observes, referring to James again, that in the creation of art, opportunity isn’t an indispensable advantage. Almost any experience will do, if accompanied by imagination and intelligent apprehension. In Moore’s original note, much of the quotation is in caps. In pencil below the

note, Moore has jotted a list of poets that includes Heine, Blake, and Milton, and refers to Whicher's comment about Dickinson in his Foreword to the 1930 *Bibliography*, that although "her poetry is saturated with the atmosphere of the countryside where she lived[, s]he is not a local poet in the obvious sense that Burns or Whittier are local" (14). Moore may also have had in mind James's observations about Emerson, which had been used by Aiken to characterize Dickinson:

The doctrine of the supremacy of the individual to himself, of his originality and, as regards his own character, *unique* quality, must have had a great charm for people living in a society in which introspection, thanks to the want of other entertainment, played almost the part of a social resource.

(qtd. in **Aiken, 305**)

As Aiken remarks, "This sums up admirably the social 'case' of Miss Dickinson — . . . the causes of her singular introversion" (305). Instead of reiterating James, that apparently limited experience need not be imaginatively **[End Page 96]** limiting (a point, after all, that Dickinson's poems make as well), Moore's comment not only links Dickinson with other great poets but connects *experience* very specifically with the act of *reading*. Moore thereby establishes an imaginative connection between Dickinson's work and her own methodology. In the gap between the typed, capped letters and the pencilled-in annotations, that is, Moore suggestively redefines reading as experience.

What is indispensable, Moore asserts, is imagination, by which she means both the capacity to *wonder* — the irresistible tendency to "fantasticate" — and, in a quotation from Dickinson's *Letters* that further establishes an affinity between her methodology and Moore's own, *indirection*: "To see is perhaps never quite the sorcery that it is to surmise" (L565). A parenthetical note underscores the primacy of internal over external "vision." Moore quotes Rainer Maria Rilke writing to Franz Kappus (that is, the "young poet"): "You are looking outside. . . . Go into yourself . . . because for the creator there is no poverty and no poor, indifferent place" (***Letters to a Young Poet 5-6,8***). Moore at once rehearses and recasts Dickinson's methodology of constative indirection: it is not an introspective turning from the world, but a more creative—and more

dangerous, as “sorcery” implies—act to go into oneself in order to develop creative vision. On the back of the final page, Moore appends another note that further redefines the inward-looking act very specifically as a Modernist, phenomenological attention to the observable world. For Moore, as for Eliot and Pound, the inner can most accurately be imaged through attention to the object. Moore quotes Rilke writing in 1915 of Spain (where he had spent several months in 1913): “External world and vision everywhere coincided as it were in the object; in each a whole inner world was displayed” (***Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 145–46***). This notion is not fully analogous to Dickinson’s “sorcery.” It does indicate, however, not only what authors Moore was reading to throw light on Dickinson’s meanings and methods but also that Moore was actively thinking-through the relationship of observation to knowledge (seeing and surmising, appearance and vision).

Finally, Moore quotes Dickinson on a point about influences that Moore will continue to make throughout her career. Dickinson, writing in 1862 to Col. Higginson, says:

I marked a line in One Verse - because I met it after I made it - and never  
consciously touch a paint, mixed by another person -

I do not let go it, because it is mine.

(L271) [End Page 97]

Moore’s paraphrase, again in quotation marks, is also again capitalized. She adds that life would be greatly diminished without influences, but appreciation of a work enough to *borrow* something from it and a “predatory” nature are very different issues. Moore, for whom *consciously* “mixing a paint” was a creative principle, draws in this observation an implicit connection between Dickinson’s and her own poetic methodologies, in addition to making a crucial ethical distinction between borrowing and the “predatory” nature. Moore’s point makes a characteristic distinction between a reader-oriented poetics that returns the borrowed material, albeit in another form (the poem), and an author-centered, “predatory” poetics that sees others’ material as *prey* or *fair game* on which artistically to “feed” (to extend the implications of Moore’s own metaphor). **31**

On the back of the last page of these typewritten notes are two striking Dickinson poems that Moore copied out in pencil and annotated: P341 (“After great pain, a formal feeling comes -“), published as an untitled, Roman-numeraled poem (VII) for the first time in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1929,<sup>32</sup> and P303 (“The Soul selects her own Society”), published for the first time in *Poems* (1890) under the title of “Exclusion.”<sup>33</sup> Moore’s marginal annotations provide us with a rare glimpse of a Modernist woman poet’s readerly musings about two of her precursor’s darkest poems.

Below the title, “After Great Pain a Formal Feeling Comes,” Moore parenthetically indicates that this line may refer to the psychological phenomenon of repression. About line 9, “A quartz contentment like a stone,” Moore observes that quartz is a hard stone; about lines 10–11, “This is the Hour of Lead / Remembered, if outlived,” Moore suggests that the experience described resembles a death. And about the stages of grief analogously imaged in the last four lines — “As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow - / First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go -“ (P341) — Moore writes that they describe one who can not suffer any more, whose mind has, in self-defense, let go. These remarks not only astutely acknowledge the psychological accuracy and complexity of Dickinson’s poetry but also suggestively reinforce a sense of Moore’s identification with Dickinson’s poetic method of finding external analogies for emotional experience. This analogical method is characteristic of Calvinist rhetoric, and both poets were, however revisionist, strongly influenced by their Calvinist roots, as Jeredith Merrin has recently argued (in addition to Karl Keller some time ago).<sup>34</sup> Moore inflects her understanding of the analogy Dickinson draws with psychoanalytic nuances, as *repression* indicates,<sup>35</sup> at once casting light on her own analogical method and underscoring the experiential process that Dickinson’s poem describes as psychic struggle, the [End Page 98] mind’s battle against, as it were, the death-drive (Moore emphasizes that the mind struggles not to let go).

There are only two words Moore notes in the margins of P303, both shorthand for her Modernist understanding of Dickinson’s revisionary, individualist allegory of the soul’s self-sufficiency. Slantwise down the lines of the last stanza —

I've known her - from an ample nation-  
Choose One -  
Then - close the Valves of her attention -  
Like Stone -

— Moore has observed that Dickinson describes a mullusk, and below that mentions Mallarmé. Moore spells out the metaphor from the fauna world that Dickinson leaves implicit, ignoring the simile and slant rhyme that give material, emphatic weight to the sense of closure in the last line. She overlooks Dickinson's irreverent rewriting of Calvinist and American Enlightenment individualism in favor of a reference to a linguistically innovative, Symbolist poet. These brief notes suggest that Moore reads Dickinson as anticipatory of Modernist, post-Symbolist poetic innovations, implying, through the mediatory figure of Mallarmé, that Dickinson is a significant poetic precursor from whom Moore strategically distanced herself and to whom she placed herself in carefully contemplated (if unpublished) relation.

Moore's published review differs remarkably from the specificity of her notes for the review. It is both a more detailed defense of Dickinson's life from charges of morbidity and a less technically analytical — and more consciously-ironic, public defense — of Dickinson's work than her journal notes. Moore criticizes the volume's editor, Mabel Loomis Todd (in a statement that could well register a protest of Moore's own critical reception at times, as Erkkila also observes [102]) for exoticizing Dickinson as a "rare thing, the truly unartificial spirit — flashing like an animal. . . . One resents," Moore comments dryly, "the cavil that makes idiosyncrasy out of individuality." Dickinson "was not a recluse," Moore asserts; nor was her "process of 'interiorization' . . . a dark one" (we recall Moore's redefinition of Dickinson's "interiorizing" process as, in fact, exteriorizing). The letters, Moore asserts, give us a line into "the wholesomeness of the life. They are full of enthusiasm. The effect of the whole personality" is present in them. <sup>36</sup> Moore defends Dickinson from the charges of vain morbidity: her life was wholesome, not unhealthy; she was enthusiastic, not morbid. In the passage from her review, which served as the first epigraph **[End Page 99]** to this essay, Moore wittily negotiates objections to Dickinson's particularity of style and content:

To some, her Japanesely fantastic reverence for tree, insect, and toadstool is not interesting; many who are “helped” by a brave note, do not admire the plucked string; by some the note of rapture is not caught; and by the self-sufficient, Emily Dickinson has been accused of vanity. A certain buoyancy that creates an effect of inconsequent bravado — a sense of drama with which we may not be quite at home — was for her a part of that expansion of breath necessary to existence, and unless it is conceited for the hummingbird or the osprey to not behave like a chicken, one does not find her conceited.

(CPr 292)

As such heavily weighted words as “reverence,” “rapture,” and “expansion,” among others, suggest, Moore is addressing very weighty objections to Dickinson’s work, especially those forwarded by Whicher, Aiken, and Tate, whose essays on Dickinson she studied carefully in preparing to write the review.

By properly classifying Dickinson, Moore intervenes in the process of self-righteously inaccurate categorization by which a hawk or hummingbird is mistaken for a conceited chicken and then blamed for her unchicken-like pride. In order to defend Dickinson, Moore thus rehumanizes her (rendering her that very animal spirit which Moore protested when depicted by Mrs. Todd). Dickinson is nothing so mundane as a chicken, but, whether hummingbird or hawk, she has a fantastic — that is to say, Oriental — reverence for the particular. By this circuitous route, Moore is able to claim that only a “select critic” notices “the note of rapture,” finds Dickinson’s attentiveness to the small and particular interesting, and, somehow rendering the bracing “help” of a “brave note” ordinary, this same select critic eschews it, admiring instead the rarer, distinct sound of a “plucked string.”

For Moore, Dickinson’s letters and poems alike display her “frankness,” “nakedness,” “the choicest originality,” and an “exciting realness.” As in her unpublished notes for the review, as we have seen, however, Moore redefines the common definitions of these terms, indicating an identificatory response to Dickinson. What Moore defines as Dickinson’s frankness is that she “speaks verse as if it were prose” in her letters (Moore, we might say, does the opposite). Dickinson’s originality lies in her “Chinese taste,” by which Moore not **[End Page**

**100]** only (re)exoticizes Dickinson but renders in shorthand an important organizing principle of her own poetry: its “daring associations of the prismatically true.” <sup>37</sup> Finally, by “exciting realness” Moore refers to the “sound workmanship” of Dickinson’s poems, which associates them with other New England objects of beauty, like the Yankee clipper and the Connecticut clock. This “realness” is achieved by carefully crafted construction (the “instinct of sound workmanship” that she shares with other New England craftspeople), as Linda Leavell has thoroughly argued. <sup>38</sup>

Moore’s review defends Dickinson’s poetic crimes by turning her excesses effectively into strengths. Dickinson’s poetic imperfections—her “sudden swerve to a pun or the quoting of a familiar phrase in a new connection”; her use of “near rhyme or no rhyme where rhyme is *required*” (emphasis added)—comprise a “eulogy of flaws” from which “the mind [may] dissent.” But, Moore counters, Dickinson was “a person of power and could have overcome, had she wished to, any less than satisfactory feature of her lines.” Thus, Dickinson’s poetic transgressions—the “self-concealing pronoun . . . , independence of the subjunctive, and many another select defect” — become, “for the select critic, attractions” (**CPr 292**). Moore portrays not only the conventionally-judged “defects” of Dickinson’s work as “select” but the critics who appreciate them as well.

Moore never allows such implicit self-satisfaction to congeal, however: Dickinson’s flaws are notable because they uncannily startle us, creating “an effect of inconsequent bravado . . . with which we may not be quite at home” (**CPr 292**). As such, they are significant as “marks of the genuine,” as Stacy Carson Hubbard asserts “embrace” (17), signs of that “unfeigned gusto” that bespeak “idiosyncrasy,” by which Moore signifies the textual traces of authorial “personality” (**Moore, CPr 514**), “originality” (which she redefines as curiosity), <sup>39</sup> and “individuality.” As Bonnie Costello argues, Moore’s sense of “gusto” (“idiosyncrasy and energy penetrating a formal, impersonal framework”) refers to the experience of being “snapped alert” by deviations from conventions of expression that give a text *charge*, “allowing formal connections to compete with semantic ones” (233, 231). As her very different published and unpublished

elaborations of Dickinson's poetic "select defects" suggest, Moore thoroughly contemplated Dickinson's available works, regarding her as anticipatory of Modernism and identifying (with) her chosen isolation as a strength.

Finally, it is worth noting that imperfections have ethical as well as authorial implications for Moore. They bespeak, as Laurence Stapleton suggests, "a victory of sensibility over everything in one's self or in others that defeats life" **[End Page 101]** (189): "Be infallible at your peril," Moore cautions in "Tom Fool at Jamaica." <sup>40</sup> What is useful to us to consider about Moore's approach to Dickinson is not so much that she better intuited Dickinson's strengths than many of the contemporary male critics, for double messages aside, their reviews stand as evidence that they acknowledged Dickinson's genius. Moore's explanations of Dickinson cast light not only on her own poetic ethos, but on the stylistically radical nature of what she discerned and appreciated about Dickinson (even in the edited form in which Dickinson was available to her at the time). The quotation from Moore that served as my second epigraph — "In connection with personality, it is a curiosity of literature how often what one says of another seems descriptive of one's self" (**CPr 514**) — applies, as I hope is by now apparent, to Moore herself.

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### **Cynthia Hogue**

Cynthia Hogue has published two collections of poetry, a chapbook of poems, and a critical book on American women's poetry (*Scheming Women: Poetry, Privilege, and the Politics of Subjectivity*, 1995). For her work she has received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar Fellowship, and a Fulbright-Hayes Fellowship (to Iceland). She directs the Stadler Center for Poetry and teaches English at Bucknell University. She is completing a fourth collection of poems, *The Body in Pain*, and is working on a critical book about postmodern women's poetry, tentatively entitled *Ecstatic Contracts*.

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### **Footnotes**

**1.** Margaret Holley connects Moore and Dickinson, arguing that like Herbert's and Dickinson's, Moore's reputation as a "major" poet must rest "largely on the collection of lyric-length pieces" (114). On Dickinson's connection to H.D., whose volume of Dickinson poems (the 1924 edition edited by Martha Dickinson Bianchi) was much marked, see Eileen Gregory, "H.D.'s Volume of Dickinson's Poems; and A Note on Candor and Iniquity," *H.D. Newsletter* 3. 1 (1990): 44–46; Susan Stanford Friedman, "'Remembering Shakespeare Always, But Remembering Him Differently': H.D.'s *By Avon River*," *Sagetrieb* 2.2 (Summer-Fall 1983):47n.7; and Martha Nell Smith, "Not Each in Isolation," *H.D. Newsletter* 2.1 (Spring 1988):48–51.

**2.** Hogue, "The Plucked String: Marianne Moore and the Poetics of Select Defects." Panel on Emily Dickinson: Influences and Traditions in the Twentieth Century (Part I), ALA Conference, Baltimore, 27 May 1995. Stacy Carson Hubbard also remarks on the importance of the notion of "flaws" to Moore's work. See "The Many-Armed Embrace" and *Dissemblances*.

**3.** See also Jayne Marek's important study of the role women editors played, in collaboration with each other, that contributed substantially to the development of Modernism, *Women Editing Modernism*.

**4.** A November 1923 entry in the unpublished conversation diary indicates that Moore thoroughly read the originals in preparation for her reviews, because she felt it her *moral* responsibility (VII:11:01, Rosenbach). A letter earlier that year gives further insight into Moore's reviewing principles. She mentions that *The Dial* has asked her to review Vachel Lindsay's collected poems, but says that she refused because the poems don't inspire her. This letter suggests that whom she reviews is determined by whose work she finds of essential poetic interest (Moore to Bryher, 5 July 1923, V:08:06, Rosenbach).

**5.** On Dickinson's reception by the reading public at the turn of the last century, see Willis J. Buckingham, *Emily Dickinson's Reception in the 1890s*. As Buckingham notes, religious family weeklies played a role in determining popular literary taste (xi–xii). It is difficult to confirm whether Mrs. Moore introduced her children to Dickinson's poetry when it was first published after Dickinson's death, but we do know that Mrs. Moore regularly read a number of the journals — *Forum* and *Outlook*, for example — in which reviews of *Poems* were published. We might therefore speculate that she did, especially given that in the 1890s Dickinson fulfilled readers'"religious and sentimental expectations for poetry," as Buckingham puts it (xvi). See also Martin Orzeck and Robert Weisbuch (eds.), *Dickinson and Audience*.

For a sense of Dickinson as the "latest Boston fad" that has passed, as Buckingham notes (xiii), see Warwick James Price, "Three Forgotten Poetesses," *Forum* 47. 3 (March 1912): 361–76. Moore simply notes the title (unpublished reading diary, VII:02:02, Rosenbach). On Martha Dickinson Bianchi's protest over this description of her aunt, however, for which the editor apologized, see Elizabeth Horan, "To Market," 93.

**6.** Unpublished reading diary, II:09:04, Rosenbach. It is pertinent that Moore would make this observation about Dickinson, because Aiken's *Dial* essay (which doubled as the introduction to his edition of Dickinson poems, and which Moore would have reread in preparation for her review of the *Letters*) asserts that Dickinson "did not care in the least for variety of effect. . . . Everywhere, when one first comes to these poems, one seems to see nothing but a colourless dry monotony" (308).

**7.** Thomas H. Johnson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, L182. All subsequent citations of Dickinson's letters will be cited parenthetically, but see also Moore's source, Mabel Loomis Todd, *Letters*, 162–63.

**8.** Moore to Zabel, 6 October 1932, V:79:29, Rosenbach.

**9.** Marianne Moore Library (MML) 0350 and 0351, Rosenbach.

**10.** MML 0608, Rosenbach.

**11.** MML 9351, vertical file, Rosenbach.

**12.** Moore procured the vast majority of her books from the library (Robin Schulze, personal communication, 22 June 1996). Moore transcribed a letter that Mrs. Moore wrote to Warner, in which she mentions that while they are to be on vacation, Moore has to write an article for *Poetry* magazine of Chicago on Emily Dickinson and will be bringing along a number of library books to study (unpublished conversation diary, 12 August 1932, VII:03:12, Rosenbach). Later that

fall, Moore writes in a letter to Bryher that she wasn't happy with the review she had completed (Moore to Bryher, 3 October 1932, Rosenbach). The references and notes indicate not only that she read Dickinson's letters but also the poems extensively.

**13.** My thanks to Alicia Ostriker for our discussion of this remarkable near-absence in Moore's canon, and for reminding me of Moore's famous statement, 9 September 1996. See also Diehl, Slatin, and Heuving on Moore and the issues of influences and originality in Moore.

**14.** The publications include *The New York Times*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, *Outlook*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Nation*, and *The Saturday Review of Literature*.

**15.** Unpublished reading diary, VI:01:01, Rosenbach. Poems are quoted from Johnson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. All subsequent quotations of the poems will be cited parenthetically in text followed by the number.

**16.** Moore responds in the affirmative to questions raised in G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* on whether there is an ethical justification for art and whether it leads to a "good state of mind" (unpublished reading diaries, VII:01:01, Rosenbach).

**17.** Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, "An Early Imagist," *The New Republic* 4. 41 (14 Aug. 1915): 52–54.

**18.** Marsden Hartley, "Emily Dickinson," *The Dial* 65.771 (15 Aug. 1918): 95–97.

**19.** For a review of patronizing commentary and criticism on Moore, see Helen Vendler.

**20.** Of the major reviews of which I found traces in Moore's unpublished reading diaries, Louis Untermeyer's review of *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson* probably seemed the most unequivocal in its assessment of Dickinson: "had she written nothing but this one book, she would have to be reckoned among the indisputably major poets" (771). See Untermeyer, "Colossal Substance," *The Saturday Review of Literature* 5.34 (16 March 1929): 769–71.

**21.** "Announcement," *The Dial* 78 (January 1925): 89–90.

**22.** As Molesworth observes, "*The Dial Award* was one of those positive events that shape a writer's career in ways that are hard to overestimate, and Moore seemed to appreciate this from the beginning" (215).

**23.** Unpublished notes, II:2:05, Rosenbach. Schulze comments that these pages may be Moore's notes for a lecture on Dickinson. Many of them are typed in caps, and, Schulze remarks, Moore frequently recorded lecture notes in capital letters, for ease of reference while she was speaking (personal communication, 9 April 1997). Such a possibility would certainly explain the seemingly later but related notes that Moore made on Rilke and a 1937 Museum of Modern Art catalogue on Max (McKnight) Kauffer, both typed and jotted in pencil on the back of the typed Dickinson notes. Although I did not find in either Moore's or her mother's correspondence (or in her conversation diaries) mention of a lecture, the possibility remains that these notes, differing so much from Moore's published review, may have been made a few years later. In any event, the notes suggest that Moore contemplated Dickinson's work, aesthetic, and life more extensively — at least through the 1930s — than her published remarks have seemed to many Moore scholars to suggest.

**24.** James was a significant identificatory figure for Moore. She transcribed into her reading diary (VII:02:02, Rosenbach) the following passage from Tate's "New England Culture and Emily Dickinson," on the moral emphasis that connects Dickinson with James and Hawthorne:

Mastery of the world by rejecting the world is the doctrine, even if it was not always the practice, of Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather. It is the meaning of fate in Hawthorne: his people are fated to withdraw from the world or to be destroyed. And it is the exclusive theme of Henry James. . . . he could only take his Americans to Europe upon the vain quest of something they had lost at home.

Tate's point about Dickinson, preceding the passage above, is that Dickinson is not to be pitied for a "starved life," that rather, like James's characters, she "mastered life by rejecting it" (213). What seems to me of interest here is that, clearly relating to Tate's overarching point, Moore associates Dickinson with James.

**25.** In the following pages, I shall be quoting directly from Moore's sources wherever possible, and otherwise paraphrasing where necessary, because I am respecting the wishes of Moore's estate, which is not at present granting permission to quote from the unpublished material.

**26.** I can give but a sense of the appearance of this remarkable document in Moore's unpublished papers. The seven pages of notes are strewn with careful, analytical phrases about Dickinson in caps. They are, here and there, and on the back of the pages, supplemented with notes in Moore's handwriting.

**27.** The epigraph to a February 1925 "Comment" in *The Dial* on Moore's work is a quotation from Democritus, "Compression is the first grace of style," clearly associating Moore with this virtue that she validates in Dickinson as well (174). See the anonymous "Comment," *The Dial* 78 (February, 1925): 174–80.

**28.** This poem was published for the first time in *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, Third Series, ed. Mabel Loomis Todd (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1896), 131, entitled "Cocoon." Buckingham notes that a 25 September 1896 review in the *New York Times* of *Poems* mentions "a certain quaintness of thought and peculiarity of rhyme," giving "The Cocoon" as an example (478). Moore shares a remarkable affinity with Dickinson in conjunction with inventive rhymes. H.D. once wrote approvingly of Moore's later poems, for example, mentioning in particular her "wonderful *new* rhymes": "prove, trove, shove, move" (H.D. to Moore, 12 October 1958, Rosenbach; H.D.'s emphasis).

**29.** For a fascinating discussion of the Dickinson "copyright wars" between Millicent Todd Bingham and Martha Dickinson Bianchi, see Horan. See also Richard Sewall.

**30.** As Schulze recounts, Harriet Monroe opened the 1922 critical symposium in *Poetry* by countering H.D.'s and Yvor Winger's assertions that "Miss Moore [is] a poet," by mustering a series of critiques to the contrary (23–24, *passim*).

**31.** On Moore and her creative practice of incorporating quotations into her verse, see Hubbard, "The Many-Armed Embrace," Miller, and Gregory.

**32.** "Unpublished Poems by Emily Dickinson," *Atlantic Monthly*, 143.2 (Feb. 1929): 184.

**33.** She would not only have read the *Atlantic Monthly* publication of new Dickinson poems, in which "After great pain" was published for the first time but also the Untermeyer review of *Further Poems*, which mentions "After great pain" in passing. She may also have seen it collected in *Further Poems*, 175.

**34.** See Karl Keller, *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty*; and Jeredith Merrin, "Sites of Struggle." See also Alik Barnstone, "Mastering the Master."

**35.** Although Moore deferred to H.D.'s greater knowledge of psychoanalytic theory, there is an entry of several pages on it in Moore's unpublished conversation diary (24 October 1930, VII:11:01, Rosenbach). H.D. wrote Moore informatively about her sessions with Havelock Ellis and Freud during the 1920s and early 1930s, coinciding with Dickinson's centenary celebration and the period during which Moore was most extensively engaged in thinking-through Dickinson's work.

**36. Moore, *Complete Prose*, 191.** All subsequent quotations are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in text as *CPr*, followed by the page number.

**37.** The notion of a reassociating activity is central to her poetics, as I have argued in ***Scheming Women (73–116, passim)***.

**38.** For these excellent discussions of Moore's appreciation of and education in "the ideology of the Arts and Crafts movement," as well as of her relationship to contemporary modernist art, see Linda Leavell, "When Marianne Moore Buys Pictures" and *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts*. For a discussion of Marianne Moore's relationship to avant-garde artists as distinct from Modernist, see Elisabeth Joyce, *Modernist Aesthetics and Cultural Critique*.

**39.** See Moore, "Idiosyncrasy and Technique": "Thoreau, you may recall, demurred when commended for originality and said that it was curiosity: 'I am curiosity from top to toe'" (**CPr 516**).

**40. Moore, *Complete Poems*, 162.**

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