

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EMILY
DICKINSON AND MARIANNE MOORE

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

For years critics, as well as casual readers, have puzzled over the life and works of Emily Dickinson, the curious "Virgin Recluse" who timidly began to make an appearance on the American literary scene in the mid-nineteenth century. Similarly, in the mid-twentieth century American readers reacted with puzzling frowns and tingles of astonishment as they pondered the poetry of Marianne Moore.

Whenever an artist as great and as original as Emily Dickinson has made a place in history that person naturally becomes a yardstick by which future artists are measured and evaluated. Through the years many poets, especially new women poets, have stood in the shadow of Emily Dickinson for comparison of both method and message. Following this tradition, I naturally thought of Emily as I began to study the poetry of Marianne Moore. I quickly discovered an appropriate attitude with which to begin this comparison. Robert Hazel began his tribute to Marianne Moore's seventy seventh birthday with these words.

Two American women are poets beyond doubt: Emily Dickinson and Marianne Moore, the Empress of Calvary and the Commoner from Brooklyn.

How same, how different!

Lacking either, we would be half-starved, but would not even know the reason.¹

¹Robert Hazel, "A Birthday Cake for Marianne Moore," in Festschrift for Marianne Moore's Seventy Seventh Birthday, ed. Thurairajah Tambimuttu (New York: Tambimuttu and Mass, 1964), pp. 108-109.

Many critics make general statements about the similarities in the poetry of these two women, and indeed on the surface many likenesses seem to be evident. Two comments made by Glauco Cambon are typical of those made by most critics who liken Marianne to Emily in rather general terms. Mr. Cambon says:

It is of course true that Emily Dickinson affords, among other things, the ideal introduction to twentieth century Imagism and its affiliates like Marianne Moore, who has not turned a deaf ear to Emily's conversational tones. If Emily can be claimed as an ancestor by some of the outstanding contemporaries, it is because she was engaged, like Whitman, in the intransigent task of founding an American idiom in poetry.²

In a slightly more definitive statement, Mr. Cambon later adds:

Since with Emily Dickinson, nineteenth century American poetry seemed to have reached its deepest intensity and its widest "circumference", (sic.) it was historically fitting that the cycle should close with her and reopen at the beginning of our century with the powerful injection of French symbolism that started Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore on their thriving careers.³

In a statement which is more detailed and specific than those comparative suggestions made by most critics I discovered Jean Garrigue draws these parallels.

Both are alike in that they are prone to enigmatical brilliances, audacious impertinences and leaps of wit. The one with a propensity for hyperbole, the other with her zest in every extravagance of the stripes of a plant or beast, counting the whiskers, you might say, of a field mouse or the quills of a porcupine. As well---how deliciously, purposefully dry.⁴

Recognizing that these critics must have a basis for drawing these parallels, I began to take a closer look at the works of Marianne Moore

²Glauco Cambon, The Inclusive Flame: Studies in American Poetry. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 35.

³Ibid., pp. 49-50.

⁴Jean Garrigue, "Notes Toward a Resemblance: Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore," in Festschrift for Marianne Moore's Seventy Seventh Birthday, ed. Thurairajah Tambimuttu (New York: Tambimuttu and Mass, 1964), p. 56.

and Emily Dickinson, and soon the similarities became so numerous and varied that I became convinced that in order to have a definitive and valid study I would need to establish one specific point on which to base my comparison. After further reading and study, one common characteristic became strikingly apparent. Both of these women poets tend to make extensive use of small creatures as subjects of their poems. While many critics casually mention this tendency of both Emily and Marianne, I found no evidence that anyone has made a detailed study of this similarity between the two poets.

As I approached this definitive task, I became convinced of the necessity of answering certain questions about Marianne and Emily. Primarily, I wished to establish to what extent, to what purpose, and in what manner do each of these women poets use the small creature in her poetry. However, inherent in this rather ambitious question are several other more basic queries which demand primary attention. First of all, if an adequate analysis of the poetry of these women is to be made some attention must be paid to the background of the life style of each of them because we must know something of the foundations from which their poetry arose. Likewise, if Marianne and Emily have any basic common philosophies, they must be discovered because these, too, will provide foundations for their poetry. Once these background questions have been isolated and answered, I will hopefully be equipped to make an individual study of each poet's use of small creatures in her work and arrive at some conclusions as to whether or not any parallels exist in their manner of treatment.

As I begin my research, my objective is not to determine whether Marianne Moore made any conscious effort to follow the tradition set by Emily Dickinson, though there are critics who make this claim. I am

concerned only in searching out the basic differences and similarities between the two poets as I have indicated them. If similarities do exist, I will be content with isolating them without making judgment or conjecture as to whether they are accidental or purposeful.

CHAPTER TWO

LIFE STYLES

In his essay "On Privacy," William Faulkner claims that until a writer commits a crime or runs for public office the particulars of his private life should be of no concern to the public.¹ However, most of us, as readers and scholars, have interest in the backgrounds and life styles of those to whose works we devote time because we instinctively know that what a person is and what he does influences what he writes. Emily Dickinson and Marianne Moore share many similarities in their backgrounds, and some of these similarities appear to have an obvious importance in relation to their poetry. Likewise, many differences occur, and these too are important in some cases. The following discussion will catalogue some of the common facts about the lives of these two women and will also note any obvious differences which seem to be of importance.

Family Relationships

Both Marianne and Emily were closely tied to their immediate families, especially to their mothers, even into their later years. Emily Dickinson was born December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, to Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross Dickinson. Marianne Moore was born in 1887 near St. Louis, Missouri, in the small town of Kirkwood, to John Milton Moore and Mary Warner Moore. Both Marianne and Emily lived with their mothers until the time of their mothers' deaths.

¹William Faulkner, Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 66.

Each received a sustained influence from the female parent; though if we are to take their personal evaluations of the relationships at face value, Marianne received a much more positive influence from her mother than did Emily.

Emily made two often quoted critical remarks about her mother. They were both made to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, her life-time friend, critic, and advisor. In conversation with him in 1870, she remarked, "I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled."² Then four years later she told him, "I always ran Home to Awe when a child, if anything befell me. He was an awful Mother, but I liked him better than none."³ With her usual ambiguity, Emily leaves us wondering why she must refer to her mother as "Awe," and in the masculine gender, no less. Without attempting a complete interpretation of this statement we can at least assume that she is at this time dominated by some sense of uncertainty about her mother. However, when Mrs. Dickinson died in 1882 following a long illness, Emily's letters registered no sigh of relief. Instead they showed "only shock and loss and an enlarged sense of what her mother was and what she meant to her."⁴ Sewall reconciles these convergent attitudes with a statement which seems to be a good summation of Mrs. Dickinson's influence on her daughter.

It may have been that Emily was firmly convinced that her mother was no mother at all and that she bore her a lifelong grudge. But the main outlines of the relationship as seen over the years tend to put in question her acerbic remarks to Higginson.

²Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960) II, 152.

³Ibid., II, 215.

⁴Richard B. Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974) I, 88.

At any rate, of first importance is what she made of the relationship. And if we accept the notion that her mother's failure placed her under severe handicaps, it makes of her life with her mother even more of a triumph of self-discipline, humor, patience, and (however belated) love.⁵

The character of the relationship between Marianne Moore and her mother is much more clearly defined and positive in the eyes of the poet herself than is the case with Emily. In Selected Poems Marianne speaks of consulting freely with her mother about her poems and of frequently following her advice. When this collection appeared as a separate volume, it included a postscript in which the poet proclaims:

Dedications imply giving, and we do not care to make a gift of what is insufficient; but in my immediate family there is one who thinks in a particular way; and I should like to add that where there is an effect of thought or pith in these pages, the thinking and often the actual phrases are hers.⁶

Thus Marianne more readily, and positively, admits to the influence which her relationship with her mother had on her work than does Emily Dickinson. But nevertheless when considering the poetry of these two women one needs to remember that both poets did maintain long continuing relationships of responsibility toward their mothers. However, similarities of parental influence fails in the case of the male parents.

Few comments appear to have been recorded about Marianne's father, John Milton Moore. George Nitchie reports that he was an engineer, and that he faded from the picture before Marianne's birth. He was the victim of a business failure, which caused him to suffer a nervous breakdown from which he never satisfactorily recovered.

⁵Ibid., p. 75.

⁶Marianne Moore, Selected Poems (New York: Macmillan Co., 1935), p. 108.

According to Nitchie, Marianne never saw her father.⁷ If she suffered from the lack of influence from a male parent, I was unable to discover any obvious mention of the fact.

Quite the opposite seems to be true in the case of Emily's relationship with her father, Edward Dickinson. She lived in the same house with him for forty-four years, until his death in 1874, and according to most biographers she was directly under his influence. Owen Thomas makes this summation of their relationship. "The influence of Edward Dickinson on the life of his elder daughter was deep and pervasive, so much so that it provided her with a source of strength in her periods of crisis."⁸ No one denies that Edward Dickinson was a domineering and exacting man. Clark Griffith characterizes him succinctly. "He was also supreme master in a father-dominated household."⁹ But critics and biographers tend to disagree as to the shades of influence he exerted on Emily's poetry. Griffith claims, "Her father failed Emily Dickinson. She worshipped the man, as her letters again and again reveal. Austere and forbidding as he was, Edward Dickinson proved quite incapable of returning the affection, and his aloofness hurt her deeply."¹⁰

If we accept Griffith's view, we may find that Emily suffered more for the lack of a father who was present than Marianne did for one

⁷George W. Nitchie, Marianne Moore: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 3.

⁸Owen Thomas, "Father and Daughter: Edward and Emily Dickinson," American Literature XL (January 1969), 523.

⁹Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 280.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 167.

who was absent. Sewall tends to agree with Griffith's view also, though he states it more cautiously and in greater detail.

By the time she was twenty she recognized the profound difference between them (herself and her father) and began to carve out for herself a separate domain in which she could emerge to give her father the kindnesses and attentions that naturally flowed from her fondness for him but to which she could repair whenever she chose.¹¹

Whether Emily ever achieved a satisfying relationship with her father does not disturb the fact that he provided strong literary influences for her from the very beginning. In her characteristically whimsical manner Emily recorded in 1862, "He buys me many Books--but begs me not to read them--because he fears they joggle the Mind."¹² Edward Dickinson was an intelligent and active man whose very presence provided an intellectual stimulus for the household. He was a prominent man in public life. For several terms he was a member of the state legislature, and for one term he was a member of Congress. He was treasurer of Amherst College, a dedicated Whig, and a resolute defender of temperance.¹³ Although he was a busy man and often absent from home, both he and the acquaintances he frequently brought home with him offered Emily an opportunity for active and inspiring conversation whenever she chose to partake of it.

While Emily and Marianne differ vastly in the amount of controlling influence they received from their fathers, a strong parallel does exist between their relationships with their brothers. Each of

¹¹Sewall, Emily Dickinson, I, 56.

¹²Emily Dickinson, Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1971), p. 173.

¹³Denis Donoghue, "Emily Dickinson" in Six American Poets, ed. Allen Tate (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), p. 10.

the poets had an older brother, and in both cases the brother provided a unifying element for the family. Not much has been written about Marianne's brother, John Moore, but we do know that he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister. In 1916 he was appointed pastor of the Ogden Memorial Church in Chatham, New Jersey, and Marianne, along with her mother, moved from their home in Carlisle to keep house for him that year. A couple of years later John became a Navy chaplain and was transferred to New York; once again the mother and daughter moved also. Evidently living together as a family was very important to all three of the Moores. They seemed to stick together as a matter of nature.¹⁴ According to Donald Hall, "They were a close and affectionate family. Invariably, Miss Moore has spoken with respect and love of her mother and her brother. They seem to have been essential supports in her life."¹⁵

At the very same time that Marianne, who was now twenty-six years old and obviously capable of embarking on a life of her own, was making these moves with her mother and brother in an effort to maintain family stability, she also was beginning to take her first steps into the literary world. Donald Hall recognizes that:

It was during this interlude in Chatham, between 1916 and 1918, that Marianne Moore began to print her poetry regularly in a variety of journals and to meet in New York the new generation of poets for whom she was to become a guiding spirit.¹⁶

Living in Chatham with her brother required Marianne to make the drive to New York frequently in order to venture into this new literary circle.

¹⁴Nitchie, Marianne Moore, p. 5.

¹⁵Donald Hall, Marianne Moore (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p. 15.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 22

Since she made these efforts simultaneously, we can reasonably assume that she needed the security of family support at this time when she began to take active steps to become a poet. Interestingly though, in spite of this dependency, we do not find the oblique references to family members in Miss Moore's poetry that often appear in the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

The Dickinson family ties were also strong, but Emily's most important attachment was to her brother, Austin. Sewall strongly supports this view.

Of all the family, he (Austin) was the closest to Emily in temperament, taste, sense of self and of the world. He had something of the philosopher and the poet in him, without the talent for either. . . . It was Austin and Emily against the world, a relationship of infinite importance to both.¹⁷

In 1856, when Emily was twenty-six, Austin was married, and he and his wife, Sue, settled next door to the Dickinson family home. Emily visited them frequently during the first few years of their marriage and remarked that they were all she needed of society.¹⁸ Their home was a place of levity, especially during the early years, and was no doubt a place of welcome relief from the often somber Puritanical atmosphere of the Edward Dickinson household. For several years, Emily was especially close to Sue and "Little Ned," Austin and Sue's first child, and some of her earliest poems were addressed to them. At the time of Ned's birth, Emily sent Sue a lively little poem which began:

¹⁷Sewall, Emily Dickinson, I, 91.

¹⁸Ibid., I, 97.

Is it true, dear Sue?
Are there two?¹⁹ (Poem 218)

Years later, relationships between the households became strained, primarily because Emily's sister, Lavinia, and Sue were incompatible. During the year 1883 Emily struggled with nervous tension brought on by this friction as well as by the death of several of her friends. At this time her attempts at poetry were mostly elegies, and only fragments were produced. However, her letters from this year contain many of what Johnson calls "noble utterances,"²⁰ and significantly one of these was sent to Austin and Sue's household at the time of the death of their second son, Thomas Gilbert. Of little Gilbert, who was only eight when he died, Emily wrote in a letter to Susan:

No crescent was this Creature--He traveled from the Full--
Such soar, but never set--
I see him in the Star, and meet his sweet velocity in every--
thing that flies--His Life was like the Bugle, which winds
itself away, his Elegy an echo--his Requiem ecstasy--²¹

Apparently both Emily Dickinson and Marianne Moore drew substantial strength and inspiration from members of their families throughout their lifetimes. Though this is a generalized similarity, the obvious difference lies in the observation that in Emily's case the relationships were much more tense and at times more traumatic than they were with Marianne, and that she did occasionally allow incidents

¹⁹Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, 1 vol. ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1960). All future references to the poetry of Emily Dickinson will come from this book and will be identified by poem number at the end of the selection.

²⁰Dickinson, Selected Letters, p. 258.

²¹Ibid., p. 293.

of family occurrences to appear in her poetry. Possibly the differing emotional intensity within these family backgrounds accounts for the fact that while Emily Dickinson's poetry is often highly emotional with the poet herself making the contemplation, Marianne Moore is frequently accused of writing intelligent, but cold and unemotional verses. Donald Hall admits that "There is at the same time general agreement that they (Miss Moore's poems) are unemotional. As early as 1935, T. S. Eliot was defending Marianne Moore's work against charges of frigidity."²²

Educational and Social Backgrounds

Since Marianne Moore was born a year after Emily Dickinson's death, the passage of time itself obliterates many parallels in the social backgrounds of these two poets. Enumeration of differences between nineteenth-century Amherst and twentieth-century New York would be an absurdity. Yet we must search through the educational and social lives of these ladies because whatever comparisons we find will help to form a backdrop for the study of their poetry.

Emily Dickinson, considering that she was a woman, was well educated for her time. She had educational opportunities not available to all young girls during the first half of the nineteenth century. Emily first attended primary school at Amherst, and then in 1840 she entered Amherst Academy where she studied Latin, French, History, rhetoric, botany, geology and even mental philosophy. Seven years later she entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary at South Hadley. At Mount Holyoke Emily found success academically, but she

²²Hall, Marianne Moore, p. 12.

was also confronted and confused by deep religious questions and the pressure she received to become a "believer." Her official education also was often interrupted because of poor health, and by the end of the first spring term her father had decided that she should not return to Holyoke for another year.²³

On the informal level, Emily's education was limited only by her self restraint. Though Puritanical, Amherst did have an academic atmosphere. She had access to intellectual conversations through the contemporaries of her father, who was closely associated with Amherst College, and scholarly reading through many of the current publications. In most instances Emily chose to forego the conversations, but her reading was evidently varied and incessant. We know that she read the Springfield Daily Republican, The Atlantic Monthly, and other current publications religiously, and that she read the Bible, if not religiously in the literal sense of the word, at least in detail. She was also devoted to the works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Tennyson, Emerson, and the Bronte sisters and especially Thoreau, among many others.

Educationally, Emily seemed satisfied with the knowledge of the world which she ferreted out on her own. Many times in her poetry she shows preference for the more common and humanly stated theories rather than the academic or scientific approach. She says:

"Arcturis" is his other name--
I'd rather call him "Star."
It's very mean of Science
To go and interfere! (Poem 70)

or:

If the foolish, call them "flowers"--

²³Donoghue, "Emily Dickinson," pp. 11-12.

Need the wiser, tell?
 If the Savants "Classify" them
 It is just as well

 Could we stand with that Old "Moses"--
 "Cannan" denied--
 Scan like him, the stately landscape
 On the other side--

Doubtless, we should deem superfluous
 Many Sciences,
 Not pursued by learned Angels
 In scholastic skies. (Poem 168)

In a similar manner, Marianne Moore also had available whatever educational opportunities she chose to pursue, though her opportunities tended to be more on the formal side. Marianne received her early education at Metzger Institute in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Then in 1909 she was graduated from Bryn Mawr, and the next year she studied at Carlisle Commercial College.²⁴ Donald Hall reports that at Metzger she particularly liked art courses in which she was allowed to draw, and that:

She took Latin in a Latin class of two and found it difficult. She took German and apparently found that difficult as well. It seems curious that a person so gifted with language should have found courses in languages hardest throughout her school years. Drawing and painting were easier. Later biology was easier. All the raw material of her poetic imagery preceded her attempts to write, but when she began to write it was with the eye of a painter and the dissecting interest of a biologist.²⁵

Even at Bryn Mawr, Marianne was not an academically strong student. She failed German once and Italian twice, and she chose biology courses because her grades in English were not high enough

²⁴Jean Garrigue, "Marianne Moore" in Six American Poets, ed. Allen Tate (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), pp. 82-83.

²⁵Hall, Marianne Moore, p. 18

to entitle her to choose electives in English until her junior and senior years. Part of her problem was that she was terribly homesick and fearful of some of her less sympathetic instructors.²⁶ Another dimension of her problem was that she, in much the same manner that Emily chose her own contemplative reading over other more outwardly stimulating educational outlets, was focusing on the elements of education which would later provide the subject matter for the bulk of her poetry. Miss Moore was writing poetry even while she was at Bryn Mawr, and by the time she was graduated in 1909, thirteen of her poems had appeared in the Bryn Mawr publications.²⁷ During her time there she was, most likely unconsciously, being selective in her education because she was in the process of becoming the poet Louise Bogan describes some years later:

This is her value to us. She sees as a specialist trained and bred sees. She is never, therefore, indifferent to what might strike her contemporaries as either precious or rubbish. Advertisements, travel folders, yesterday's newspaper, the corner movie, the daily shop and street, the fashion magazine, the photograph and the map--these phenomena are gathered into her art with the same care with which she "observes" small animals, birds, reptiles; or with which she microscopically examines details of human artifacts "sharkskin, camellie leaf, orange-peel semi-eggshell or sang-de-boeuf glaze in Chinese porcelain," for example. . . She is occupied with the set task of imaginatively correlating the world's goods, natural and artificial as a physician correlates "cases" or a naturalist specimens.²⁸

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., p. 20.

²⁸Louise Bogan, "American Timeless," Quarterly Review of Literature, IV (1948), 151.

Thus Emily Dickinson and Marianne Moore received differing amounts of formal education, and though Emily's inclinations were more literary while Marianne's tended to be more scientific and artistic, a basic similarity exists in that the intellectual progress of each of them was dominated by their poetic instincts. In fact, in an interview with Donald Hall, Miss Moore admits to this connection with the response:

Did laboratory studies affect my poetry? I am sure they did. I found the biology courses--minor, major, and histology--exhilarating. I thought, in fact, of studying medicine. Precision, economy of statement, logic employed to ends that are disinterested, drawing and identifying, liberate--at least have some bearing on--the imagination, it seems to me.²⁹

One finds a much wider gap between the social backgrounds of these two women than between their educational experiences. Since horrifying ambiguities and abstractions appear in the term "social backgrounds," some specific categories need to be established in this area of investigation. I will, therefore, try to consider Marianne and Emily in the categories of their activities other than those related to their families or their poetry, the religious atmospheres which surrounded them, and the friendships which they cultivated.

Describing Emily's activities outside of her family or poetry is no chore. They were virtually none. As Denis Donoghue states so flatly, "With the exception of brief visits to Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, her life was lived entirely in a small New England

²⁹Donald Hall, "The Art of Poetry: Marianne Moore: An Interview with Donald Hall," in Marianne Moore: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Charles Tomlinson (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1969), p. 23.

circle of which Amherst was the center. Even in Amherst her life was not omniverous."³⁰ In her earlier years Emily made occasional visits to Boston where she stayed with her Norcross cousins. Then later, in 1864 and again in 1865, she spent some time in Boston for examination and treatment of her eyes by Dr. Henry W. Williams. On her first trip Lavinia accompanied her, and during her last stay she lived with her Norcross cousins at a boardinghouse.³¹ In 1855 Emily and Lavinia accompanied their father to Washington for one of his sessions in Congress. They remained in Washington from the middle of February until early March, and the sisters visited the Colemans in Philadelphia on the way home.³² Except for these brief trips and occasional visits to local activities in Amherst, Emily's life was centered around her family, her proliferate correspondence to friends, her flower garden, her dog, her birds, and her poetry.

Marianne Moore saw considerably more of the world than Emily; and yet, considering that she lived a century later, when traveling was much easier for young ladies and much more the acceptable thing to do, she could certainly not be called adventurous. In her interview with Donald Hall Miss Moore recalls spending a summer in Europe with her mother. They spent time in Paris, but she did not become involved in the literary or artistic circles there. She remarks, "It wouldn't occur to me to say, 'Here am I, I'm a writer, would you talk to me awhile?' I had no feeling at all about anything like that. I wanted to observe things. And we went to every museum

³⁰Donoghue, "Emily Dickinson," p. 12.

³¹Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, II, 86, 98.

³²Dickinson, Selected Letters, p. 132.

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in Paris, I think, except two."³³ Miss Moore also recalls returning to England in either 1935 or 1936, and when asked by Mr. Hall if she had mostly stayed put in Brooklyn since she moved there in 1929 she answers, "Except for four trips to the West: Los Angeles, San Francisco, and British Columbia. My mother and I went through the canal previously, to San Francisco, and by rail to Seattle."³⁴

Marianne definitely became more involved in the world outside of her family and poetry than did Emily, though there is certainly no preponderance in the list of her activities. An outstanding difference between the two is that, for a relatively short time, Marianne was in positions of employment. For four years, from 1911 to 1915, she was in charge of the commercial department of the United States Indian School at Carlisle, where she taught typing and bookkeeping and coached the Indian boys in field sports. Then in 1918, she taught for one year in a private school in New York, and her last place of employment was at the Hudson Park branch of the New York Public Library where she worked half time as an assistant from 1921 to 1925.³⁵ In addition to these nine years of employment, Marianne Moore also spent a few years in a professional position with The New York Dial, a popular literary publication of that period. Nitchie records that her "association with The Dial went rapidly from contributor, to award winner, to acting editor, then to editor,

³³Hall, "An Interview with Donald Hall," p. 25.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Garrigue, "Marianne Moore," pp. 82-83.

a position she held from 1926 until 1929, when Thayer and Watson decided to stop publishing."³⁶

All of these activities sound profuse as one thinks of Emily sitting in her garden at Amherst, but Bernard Engel puts Marianne's adventures in a perspective which tends to level the two as he records:

She says that if her life story is written it will be a "very tame affair." It will be that if the biographer concentrates on the routine dates and dimensions of her life. Thousands of women have taught school and worked in a library, and many of them have lived the scarcely munificent life of a free-lance poet. Even editorship of The Dial, outstanding though Miss Moore's conduct of it was, was hardly in itself a flamboyantly unusual activity for an American writer in the 1920's. An understanding of her talents must come from somewhere other than a résumé of her outward circumstances.³⁷

Inherent in Engel's remark is the conclusion that considering the opportunities available to her, Marianne Moore was nearly as reticent toward becoming involved in the activities of the twentieth century as Emily Dickinson was toward those of the nineteenth century.

Though their responses toward the stimulus of activity were much the same, we discover a marked difference in the way these two women responded to the strong religious influences which surrounded them both. From the beginning, Marianne Moore was under the influence of a strict Christian doctrine. Both her grandfather and her brother, who together provided the dominant male influence for her life, were Presbyterian ministers, and if Marianne ever doubted or strayed from the faith, we have no record of the fact. Donald Hall's summation of this area of her life leaves us with little room for doubt:

³⁶Nitsche, Marianne Moore, p. 6.

³⁷Bernard F. Engel, Marianne Moore (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964), pp. 30-31.

Religion was, of necessity, important in the childhood of Marianne and of John Moore. John Moore went on to become a Presbyterian minister. Miss Moore has attended church regularly every Sunday of her life and has taken an interested and active part in church activities. A Christian upbringing can produce a sensitivity to mystery, to things of the spirit. To be attuned to mystery is to sense its presence in any of its guises; it is this sensitivity that informs Miss Moore's poetry.³⁸

Miss Moore's poetry does reveal the strength of her Christianity, and as Sister Therese points out, the Christian concepts come to us through the positive portrayal of love, courage, and faith. In her poem "Blessed is the Man," which Sister Therese observes simulates the rhythm and rhetorical structure of the Beatitudes,³⁹ Miss Moore proclaims him blessed whose:

faith is different
from possessiveness--of a kind not framed by "things which do appear"-
who will not visualize defeat, too intent to cower;
whose illumined eye has seen the shaft that gilds the sultan's tower.⁴⁰

Even though Emily Dickinson was surrounded by a similarly staunch Christian background--the Dickinson household and virtually all of Amherst was strictly Calvinistic--she never made the unquestioning surrender to faith which seemed to come so easily to Marianne. Speaking of Emily's response to this atmosphere, Denis Donoghue captures her religious ambiguity.

. . . Of her own religious faith, virtually anything may be said with some show of evidence. She may be represented as an agnostic, a heretic, a skeptic, a Christian. She grew up in a Christian family, but she was not devout. She did not

³⁸Hall, Marianne Moore, p. 16.

³⁹Sister Therese, S.D.S., Marianne Moore: A Critical Essay (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1969), p. 39.

⁴⁰Marianne Moore, The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), p. 174. All future references to the poetry of Marianne Moore will come from this book and will be cited by page number.

possess a talent for conviction.⁴¹

Expanding upon this, Donoghue suggests that Emily rejected the Calvinistic interpretation of Christianity primarily because of its commands for total acceptance, submersion of self, and either/or obedience, and that she sifted from Christianity those elements which her sensibilities denied. In a practical manner she used her Bible and hymn books as rhetorical manuals and applied their doctrines according to her own discretion.⁴² Thus we find Moses, Elijah, and even God, occasionally involved in unusual and unconventional circumstances. Something of this tone is evident in:

The Bible is an antique Volume--
 Written by faded Men
 At the suggestion of Holy Spectres--
 Subjects--Bethlehem--
 Eden--the ancient Homestead--
 Satan--the Brigadier--
 Judas--the Great Defaulter--
 David--the Troubadour--
 Sin--a distinguished Precipice
 Others must resist--
 Boys that "believe" are handsome--
 Other Boys are "lost"-- (Poem 1545)

In spite of this, one cannot leave Emily here without recording that she apparently often longed for the religious faith and conviction which came so easily for Marianne. Several of her poems express this longing, as we find it in these words:

Those--dying then.
 Knew where they went--
 They went to God's Right Hand--
 That Hand is amputated now
 And God cannot be found--

The Abdication of Belief
 Makes the Behavior small--
 Better an ignis fatuus
 Than no illume at all-- (Poem 1551)

⁴¹Donoghue, "Emily Dickinson," p. 17.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 19-20.

With these differing responses to similar religious atmospheres established, only one area of the social backgrounds of Marianne and Emily remains to be explored. Can we find significance in the friendships cultivated by these two spinster ladies? Denis Donoghue finds considerable significance in Emily's major friendships, proposing that she actively sought to maintain friendships with Benjamin Franklin Newton, Reverend Charles Wadsworth, Thomas Higginson, Judge Otis P. Lord, and Samuel Bowles, because at varying times in her life each of these men provided a needed stimulus for her poetic sensibilities.⁴³

Benjamin Franklin Newton was a law student who worked in Edward Dickinson's law office when Emily was seventeen and eighteen, and she found through him an opportunity for widening her intellectual horizons and sensitivities. By Emily's admission:

I was but a child, yet I was old enough to admire the strength, and grace, of an intellect far surpassing my own, and it taught me many lessons, for which I thank it humbly, now that it is gone. Mr. Newton became to me a gentle, yet grave Preceptor, teaching me what to read, what authors to admire what was most grand and beautiful in nature. . . .⁴⁴

Emily first met Reverend Charles Wadsworth during her 1855 visit to Philadelphia. Biographers of Emily have since devoted volumes to exploring the many possible facets of the alleged love affair between the two, with the most recent trend placing their relationship on a more casual and spiritual basis than had been suspected earlier. Without attempting to resolve this conflict completely, Sewall supports Donoghue's theory that Emily sought Wadsworth's friendship to fulfill a definite need, in this case a spiritual one. Sewall says:

⁴³Ibid., pp. 13-15.

⁴⁴Dickinson, Selected Letters, p. 112.

. . . all we can say with confidence is that she needed someone all her life with whom she could share her spiritual problems and disbeliefs honestly and on her level--" to keep Believing nimble." And at a crucial point, the very time when their first meeting was most likely, she would have been especially susceptible to the kind of Christianity Wadsworth preached and to the kind of man he was.⁴⁵

While Emily sought spiritual comfort and guidance from Wadsworth she was also cultivating her own personal literary critic, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Emily first contacted him by letter in April of 1862, asking "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?"⁴⁶ Emily knew Higginson as an essayist and critic who was interested in the advancement of women, especially women writers, and as Leyda claims, "She needed a sensitive literary stranger's reactions to her work, and she aimed to keep him interested in both her work and herself."⁴⁷

So far as I can discover, critics have not suggested any romantic attachments between Emily and Higginson. However, along with Reverend Wadsworth, biographers often depict Judge Lord and Samuel Bowles to be the men Emily chose as lovers. Thomas H. Johnson puts these two of her friends in a logical framework. He proposes that she sought the friendship of Samuel Bowles because he brought to the Dickinson household a dimension of the world which Emily longed for but was unable to capture. Bowles was liberal and independent in his thinking, he was editor of the Springfield Daily Republic, he was widely traveled, and he knew many of the famous people of his day.⁴⁸

⁴⁵Sewall, Emily Dickinson, II, 462.

⁴⁶Dickinson, Selected Letters, p. 171.

⁴⁷Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, I, li, lii.

⁴⁸Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson: An Interpretative Biography (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1955), p. 46.

Is it surprising that Emily, who sought to understand the world in her own terms, would encourage such a friend? Both Johnson and Donoghue agree that in Judge Otis Lord Emily sought a type of "last chance" impassioned relationship. Johnson says they enjoyed a mutual love which "gave Emily some measure of fulfillment--at least enough to satisfy her yearning."⁴⁹ His conclusion is that for Emily the fulfillment lay in her knowledge that Judge Lord had desired her.⁵⁰

Considering the intensity of these friendships which Emily cultivated, there can be little doubt about their effect upon her poetry. With the exception of Higginson, all of these people died before Emily, and she suffered deeply from the loss of each one. As Donoghue proposes, the influence of both the lives and deaths of these friends was intense.

These relationships were important to Emily Dickinson, in different ways and in different degrees. It is impossible to be precise; not enough is known. Where a friendship was crucial to her, she commanded it even beyond the grave, writing to Bowles's widow, for instance, as if to retain the affection by reciting it. Some of her greatest poems were provoked by moments in the drama of these relationships... . The least that may be said of these relationships is that they tested, extended, and sometimes tormented her sensibility, with results good in the poems if hard in life.⁵¹

Not nearly so much has been written about specific relationships between Marianne Moore and any of her friends. In fact, almost without exception when critics discuss Miss Moore's friends they refer to them collectively. Donald Hall does this as he tells of

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 64.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 66.

⁵¹Donoghue, "Emily Dickinson," pp. 14-15.

Marianne and the Others group. This was a group of young poets who banded together in Greenwich Village along with Alfred Kreymborg and Walter Arensberg to publish their work in a new experimental journal by the name of Others. Marianne joined this group, along with William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, and Orrick Johns, as well as others. The group met frequently for social purposes, but their discussions usually centered around their work. Occasionally one would bring a poem to read, but they mostly just talked about writing and enjoyed sharing the company of other writers. William Carlos Williams remembers Marianne as being a favorite of this group, and one in whom their purposes seemed to come together.⁵²

As her reputation grew around New York, Miss Moore became acquainted with many other people in the literary world, meeting people such as William Rose Benét, Elinor Wylie, Hilda Doolittle, Scofield Thayer and Sibley Watson, who were the publishers of The New York Dial.⁵³ Very little mention is made of any of Marianne's friends other than those in the literary world and even with these friends we find no accounts of intimate personal relations. This is not to infer that her friends were not loyal, because in response to her poetry they often demonstrated undying faith and devotion. In fact, her friends were eager to take into their own hands the publication of her poetry. Her association with The New York Dial actually began when Scofield Thayer heard her read a poem and asked permission to print it,⁵⁴ and in 1921 two of her friends, Hilda Doolittle and Winifred

⁵²Hall, Marianne Moore, pp. 23-25

⁵³Nitchie, Marianne Moore, p. 6.

⁵⁴Ibid.

Ellerman, published, without her knowledge, the first book of her poetry, Poems. This first book was published in England, and Marianne's first American published volume was also initiated by two of her friends, William Carlos Williams and Robert McAlmon.⁵⁵

What kind of influence did all this literary hurrah have on Marianne and her poetry? Sister Mary Cecilia Carey gives an acceptable answer.

Her family, her education, books, personal friends, and literary acquaintances provided a milieu that encouraged her natural ability. Although she has been familiar with experimentalist writers and the important literary movements of her times, particularly the Imagist movement, she has remained completely independent. Despite her familiarity with many writers of poetry and prose, she has imitated none.⁵⁶

The friends of both Marianne Moore and Emily Dickinson were instrumental in the development of their poetry, though the help apparently came from opposite directions. Emily cultivated friendships which answered the needs of her sensitivities and thus allowed her to build the inner emotional climate necessary for her to create her poetry. In Marianne's case, her friends provided the outward climate which prompted her to bring her work out into the public view. With both poets, friendships, as well as other social contacts and educational endeavors, were dominated by their poetic instincts. At this point, since Emily Dickinson is the subject of at least half of this study, some attention must be given to the reclusive tendencies of these two ladies.

⁵⁵Hall, Marianne Moore, p. 32.

⁵⁶Sister Mary Cecilia Carey, "The Poetry of Marianne Moore: A Study of Her Verse, Its Sources, and Its Influence," Dissertation Abstracts XX (1959), 1023-1024.

Reclusive Tendencies

No energy needs to be expended in establishing whether Emily was a recluse; that she was is historical fact. And as a student of Emily, one hesitates to jump on the already overcrowded treadmill with those who try to discover why she was a recluse. Among the more modern of these critics are those, such as Clark Griffith, who attempt to provide Freudian interpretations to explain Emily's seclusion. Griffith rejects the genteel maiden lady picture and gives us instead an Emily Dickinson whose seclusion is haunted by sexual fantasies and terrors of violation.⁵⁷ Among what I believe to be her more reasonable critics are those who, like Thomas Johnson, see her seclusion as both a contrived means to her achievement of poetic sensibilities and an inescapable result of these heightened sensibilities. Johnson insists:

Her stratagems, like her poetry, once thought to be eccentric, were part of the drama of her existence. She saw only those she chose to see. She conversed in aphorisms. She dressed immaculately and only in white. To small children she was always accessible, and to them she opened her heart and her cookie jar. She secured her privacy by the stalwart aid of her sister and their faithful Irish maid. She organized her daily routine so that she could live and think and express her thoughts as she herself wished them lived and expressed. Her life, like her art, was planned with utmost economy.⁵⁸

Giving Emily credit for being the artist she was, need we doubt that she saw this as a necessary step in her own development. By the mid-seventies her seclusion was almost total; and though she did not write many poems during this later period of her life, the ones she did produce have been described by Johnson as "some

⁵⁷Griffith, The Long Shadow, p. 179.

⁵⁸Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 56.

of her finest genre sketches of movement and color observed from the world of nature. . . ."59

Whatever its cause or purpose, we must accept that Emily's seclusion was absolute and seldom violated in her later years. Certainly we cannot make such a statement about Marianne Moore when we have records of her attendance at dinners, ceremonies, and even baseball games involving the Brooklyn and New York teams after she was in her seventies. Evidence indicates that Marianne enjoyed a variety of social functions and that she happily entertained people whenever they called, going to great lengths to provide for their comfort and enjoyment. Even so, she did demonstrate some reclusive tendencies which have earned comment by her critics. Louis Untermeyer sees her reticence simply as a personality trait, saying, "As a person Marianne is notorious only for her avoidance of notoriety. Modest without mock-humility, shy but not reclusive, she is one of the most delightfully unassertive people I know, yet one whose responses are touched with an unobtrusive but nimble wit."⁶⁰ In a somewhat similar manner, Miss Moore explains herself with this assertion, "I think that the more you respect people the more you let them alone. I'm a metropolitan recluse."⁶¹

Nitchie explains Marianne Moore's tendencies for withdrawal in terms which bring her a little closer to Emily's position. He

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Louis Untermeyer, "An Addendum for Marianne Moore," in Festschrift for Marianne Moore's Seventy Seventh Birthday, ed. Thurairajah Tambimuttu (New York: Tambimuttu and Mass, 1964), p. 114.

⁶¹Jane Howard, "Leading Lady of U.S. Verse," Life LXII (January 13, 1967), p. 42.

claims that she was reticent because she viewed herself as an artist and found a measure of propriety in being that way. She possessed a scrupulous regard for form and refused to expose herself unduly. In Nitchie's words, "Like one of her own armored animals, she has her means for self-protection, both in her life and in her art . . ." ⁶²

Though Emily and Marianne went to varying lengths to provide themselves with this self-protection, it appears as an extremely important element in each of their lives and, as we shall see later, arises as a common theme in their poetry. If our search through the life styles of these two charming, as well as puzzling, ladies has been successful we should be able to find other common philosophies or themes which will lead us directly to the small creatures which portray them.

⁶²Nitchie, Marianne Moore, p. 15.

CHAPTER THREE

COMMON THEMES AND PHILOSOPHIES

Marianne Moore and Emily Dickinson were both prolific poets, and concentrated study of their many hundreds of poems could no doubt reveal almost every theme and philosophy which appears in literature. Once again then, some selection must be made, so I have established four common philosophies which are important to these two women and which appear as themes in their poetry. We find in their works that both poets struggle to present a concept of death; both poets believe in a type of armoured self protection; both poets reveal their attitudes about the creative process; and both poets use nature as a theme in their works and as a vehicle to aid in the portrayal of other themes.

In this chapter these themes will be presented with some evidence and discussions as to their existence in the works of both poets, but I will not attempt to give a thorough explanation of how the themes work for each poet because each theme will be handled more definitively in the following chapters as I look at their portrayal through the use of small creatures of nature.

Concepts of Death

As established in the previous chapter, practically all of Emily's close friends died while she was still living and many of her poems were prompted by these personal losses. However, Charles Anderson claims that her best poems about death were not a result of these personal experiences, but rather that they arose from her struggle with

the ambiguity of the grave.¹ Aside from expressions of personal grief, her death poems represent an attempt to define or capture immortality, and in this attempt she often becomes fascinated with the borderline moment between life and death. According to John Pickard, Emily handled the theme of death in more than five hundred lyrics. If we accept Pickard's calculation, we must admit that in her poetry the struggle to understand death and immortality is an important theme.²

In several poems Emily flatly states her hesitancy to accept this eternal life, or immortality, as she does when she says:

Their Height in Heaven comforts not--
 Their Glory--nought to me--
 'Twas best imperfect--as it was--
 I'm finite--I can't see--

The House of Supposition--
 The Glimmering Frontier that
 Skirts the Acres of Perhaps--
 To Me-shows insecure--

 This timid life of Evidence
 Keeps pleading--"I don't know." (Poem 696)

However, in a few other of her poems she presents death and immortality as inseparable companions, as in:

Because I could not stop for Death--
 He kindly stopped for me--
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves--
 And Immortality. (Poem 712)

In most cases though, we find neither an acceptance nor a rejection of immortality. Instead, we find Emily contemplating the threshold of death and searching for the destiny of the soul. This was

¹Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960), p. 227.

²John B. Pickard, Emily Dickinson: An Introduction and Interpretation (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), p. 101.

perhaps an easy and natural mood for her to assume because living in the tight social structure of Amherst made each death a very conspicuous part of life for those left living. From her window, Emily could view the funeral processions and the dead were inescapably acquaintances of hers. Thus we find the constant question, "Where do these people go from here?" The question marks are significant; for instance, in

We pray--to Heaven--
 We prate--of Heaven--
 Relate--when Neighbors die--
 At what o'clock to Heaven--they fled--
 Who saw them--Wherefore fly?

Is Heaven a Place--a Sky--a Tree?
 Location's narrow way is for Ourselves--
 Unto the Dead
 There's no Geography--

But State--Endowal--Focus--
 Where--Omnipresence--fly? (Poem 489)

The question here is clear, and the answer is nonexistent, but Emily pushes the question to the point of intensity when she lets us experience it with a person at the moment of death.

I've seen a Dying Eye
 Run round and round a Room--
 In search of Something--as it seemed--
 Then Cloudier become--
 And then--obscure with Fog--
 And then--be soldered down
 Without disclosing what it be
 'Twere blessed to have seen-- (Poem 547)

In an earlier poem, and definitely in a lighter tone, Emily gives a mock personification of death. But in spite of the mockery, the question and the mystery are still present.

Dust is the only Secret--
 Death, the only One
 You cannot find out all about
 In his "native town"

Nobody knew "his father"--
 Never was a Boy--
 Hadn't any playmates,
 Or "Early History"-- (Poem 153)

Pickard gives a good summation of Emily's treatment of death which tends to put the previous examples in perspective. He explains:

The range of her poetic treatment varied from a philosophical examination of death's relation with love to a grim consideration of its physical process. As she surveyed the broad universe and society itself, Emily Dickinson perceived that death remained the one free agent, greater than nature and second only to God. She considered death the great unknown and never ceased to ponder its fascination and mystery.³

Marianne Moore did not write nearly as many poems which are specifically about death as did Emily Dickinson; however, because of the way she treated the subject of death it becomes tangentially important in a great number of her poems. Marianne does not waver in her view of death as Emily does. Throughout her poetry, she takes the constant stance that man must take courage and meet death with fortitude. This is not a surprising stance because, as we have established in the discussion of her life style, Marianne was an unfaltering adherent to the Presbyterian faith. In her poetry she reveals none of Emily's curiosity about the nature of death, but instead she places her emphasis on the preparation of man for death. In "What Are Years?" Marianne speaks specifically of death and the necessary courage to face it.

. . . And whence
 is courage: the unanswered question,
 the resolute doubt--
 dumbly calling, deafly listening--that
 is misfortune, even death,
 encourages others
 and in its defeat, stirs

³Ibid., p. 102.

the soul to be strong? He
 sees deep and is glad, who
 accedes to mortality
 and in his imprisonment rises
 upon himself as
 the sea in a chasm, struggling to be
 free and unable to be,
 in its surrendering ⁴
 finds its continuing.

In this poem we find, in addition to the plea for the courage to face death, Marianne's unfaltering acceptance of immortality as expressed in the sea imagery. In a similar manner she often portrays the experience of death as a learning exercise for the living. "In Distrust of Merits" tells us:

 . . . If these great patient
 dyings--all these agonies
 and wound--bearings and bloodshed--
 can teach us how to live, these
 dyings were not wasted.⁵

And again, in "Keeping Their World Large," she says we profit and learn from the deaths around us.

 Keeping their world large, that silent
 marching marching marching and this silence
 for which there is no description, are
 the voices of fighters with no rests between,
 who would not yield;
 whose spirits and whose bodies
 all too literally were our shield, are still our shield.⁶

Thus from Marianne we get admonitions to learn from death and draw up our courage to face it with fortitude. From her we find no visions of, or even questions about, the nature of eternity. Emily gives ambiguous visions of heaven, sometimes saying whimsically:

⁴Moore, Complete Poems, p. 95.

⁵Ibid., p. 138.

⁶Ibid., p. 146.

I don't like Paradise-- . . . I know--

Because it's Sunday--all the time--
And Recess--never comes-- (Poem 413)

or perhaps more seriously:

Where tired Children placid sleep
Thro' Centuries of noon
This place is Bliss--this town is Heaven--
Please, Pater, pretty soon! (Poem 112)

From Marianne though, we get no vision of heaven unless we infer it from her concrete pictures of earthly life. James Dickey has done just this and he concludes:

Well, what kind of Heaven would Miss Moore's be? Much, most probably, like the earth as it is, but refined by responsiveness and intellect into a state very far from the present one; a state of utter consequentiality. . . . Miss Moore's Heaven would have a means of recording such objects and actions; it would have a history, and a way of preserving its discoveries and happenings: it would include an enormous amount of matter for there to be opinions about and so it would make possible vivid and creative personal parallels between things, and conclusions unforeseeable until they were made. It would take forever from Fact the deadness of being only fact, for it would endow what is with the joyous conjunctions that only a personality itself profoundly creative, profoundly accessible to experience--a personality called a soul--can find among them.⁷

Both poets, then, present a struggle in relation to death, but while Emily Dickinson's struggle is to understand the nature of death and eternity, Marianne Moore's struggle is to persuade mankind to be prepared for death and to accept it courageously. From whence does this courage come? While analyzing the life styles of these two poets we discovered a common characteristic which was given the label "armoured self protection." While this self protection does not always provide courage, it often does; and the concept definitely

⁷James Dickey, Babel to Byzantium (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968), p. 161.

arises as a common theme in the poetry of these two women.

Armoured Self Protection

As we have established earlier, both Emily and Marianne, in varying degrees, demanded personal isolation from the world, and they did so at least partially for contemplative artistic purposes. In the poetry of both women we find echoing themes of this need for isolated self protection. One basic difference arises in the manner in which these two poets treat the protected self. Emily finds armoured protection for the self, and she presents it in the plural form, content within its own society. Marianne, on the other hand, presents a highly individualized self whose armour is the result of its perfected individualism and its ability to correctly digest and cope with its particular situation in the world.

Emily, for instance, pictures the self as a nation.

The Heart is the Capital of the Mind--
The Mind is a single State--
The Heart and the Mind together make
A single Continent--

One--is the Population--
Numerous enough--
This ecstatic Nation
Seek--it is Yourself. (Poem 1354)

This paradox of one being a numerous nation is a simple puzzle when measured against one of Emily's more famous poems about the plurality of self:

We don't cry--Tim and I,
We are far too grand--
But we bolt the door tight
To prevent a friend--

Then we hide our brave face
Deep in our hand--
Not to cry--Tim and I
We are far too grand-- (Poem 196)

In a similar vein we find:

Never for Society
 He shall seek in vain --
 Who His own acquaintance
 Cultivate--Of Men
 Wiser Men may weary--
 But the Man within

Never Knew Satiety-- (Poem 746)

Though giving a positive identification to "Tim" or "the Man within" may be difficult, certainly we can recognize them as some essence of the self which provides Emily with sufficient company to allow her to remain within this isolated state of protection, and that in this state she will "bolt the door tight" for fear of intrusion from the outside world. As in these two poems, she often refers to her inner self in the masculine gender, and at times she suggests that this masculine mind is indeed the creative side of her nature. Whatever its characteristics, Emily placed a premium value on the mind and was content with its association. Anderson speaks of "her absolute loyalty to mind" as that which "is her distinguishing trait as a poet."⁸ For present purposes let us accept, as Anderson suggests, that this isolation of the mind is a dominant theme of Emily's poetry, the purpose here being only to introduce these themes so that we may later see how she uses small creatures to portray them.

While Emily finds self protection through companionship within the solitary mind, Marianne finds it through the confidence and ability of the individual to be self sufficient against the opposing forces of the world. In "People's Surroundings" she tells us:

Here where the mind of this establishment has come to the conclusion that it would be impossible to revolve about oneself too much,

⁸Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 166.

sophistication has, "like an escalator," "cut the nerve of progress."

In these noncommittal, personal-impersonal expressions of appearance, the eye knows what to skip;⁹

In explanation of these lines, Nitchie projects that "People's surroundings answer our questions about the people they surround--and by and large, relieve us of the necessity to consider the people."¹⁰ The tone of the self sufficiency is clear, and it also comes through in "Novices."

the good and alive young men demonstrate the assertion
that it is not necessary to be associated with that which
has annoyed one;
they have never made a statement which they found so easy
to prove--¹¹

"In Distrust of Merits" not only shows Marianne's dedication to this concept of isolation of the inner self, but in the poem we also find her condemning the inner self for a failure, as if through these punitive measures she can prepare it for future trials. She says:

There never was a war that was
not inward; I must
fight till I have conquered in myself what
causes war, but I would not believe it.
I inwardly did nothing.
O Iscariot--like crime!¹²

Somewhat the same tone appears, though in a milder manner, when the self becomes the mind and Marianne proclaims;

. . . the mind
feeling its way as though blind,
walks along with its eyes on the ground.¹³

⁹Moore, Complete Poems, pp. 56-57.

¹⁰Nitchie, Marianne Moore, p. 102.

¹¹Moore, Complete Poems, p. 61.

¹²Ibid., p. 138.

¹³Ibid., p. 134.

Emily and Marianne both personally rely heavily on the inner self and thus they protect its purity and isolation, but with Emily a plurality of self is used primarily for contemplation while with Marianne the self is more often presented as an independent agent which is expected to act decisively and intelligently.

Creative Process

These two poets insisted on maintaining a state of armoured self protection because they saw it as a necessary ingredient in the creative process, and, as is the case with many writers, this creative process itself becomes a common theme in much of their poetry.

Emily's poetry frequently deals with the creative process, though usually it is in an expressive manner rather than evaluative. She seems to be using her poems about the creative process to share with her readers the inner feelings which result from the creation, rather than using them to judge her own work or to set forth her criterion for art. For instance, the exhilaration is almost contagious when we read:

I dwell in Possibility--
A fairer House than Prose--
More numerous of Windows--
Superior--for Doors--

Of Chambers as the Cedars--
Impregnable of Eye--
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky--

Of Visitors--the fairest--
For Occupation--This--
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise-- (Poem 657)

If this gathering of paradise is the true exhilaration of the poet, we are perhaps not so surprised to find that Emily considers the poet to be of supreme importance, even in this case preceding God and nature.

I reckon--when I count at all--
 First--Poets--Then the Sun--
 Then Summer--Then the Heaven of God--
 And then--the List is done--

But, looking back--the First so seems
 To Comprehend the Whole--
 The Others look a needless Show--
 So I write--Poets--All-- (Poem 569)

With this confidence, she should not surprise us when she speaks of her creativity as ecstasy and pleads:

Take all away from me, but leave me Ecstasy
 And I am richer then than all my Fellow Men--
 Ill it becometh me to dwell so wealthily
 When at my very Door are those possessing more,
 In abject poverty-- (Poem 1640)

We must not assume from these passages that to Emily the internal result of creativity is always exhilaration or ecstasy, because she also says:

The Poets light but Lamps--
 Themselves--go out-- (Poem 883)

indicating perhaps that the poet also loses a part of herself in the process.

At times Emily even shows an inner reverence for her creativity. In a frequently explicated poem which begins, "My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun" she gives a paradoxical masculine personification of her creative mind. Strongly echoing the "Tim" poem, she says:

Though I than He-may longer live
 He longer must--than I--
 For I have but the power to kill,
 Without--the power to die-- (Poem 754)

Thus, through many of her poems, Emily gives us a panoramic view of the range of emotions which accompany the creative process. She does not, however, attempt to define for us the source of this creativity. As Anderson tells us, "The ultimate mystery of poetic

creation she confessed was beyond her grasp:"¹⁴ As evidence Anderson quotes:

This is a Blossom of the Brain--
A small--*italic* Seed
Lodged by Design or Happening
The Spirit fructified--

Shy as the Wind of his Chambers
Swift as a Freshet's Tongue
So of the Flower of the Soul
Its process is unknown (Poem 945)

Like Emily, Marianne does not identify the source of poetic creation, but unlike Emily she would never argue that "Its process is unknown." While Marianne's poetry is certainly not void of the emotional response to creativity, this is not her point of concentration. In fact, many of her poems about the creative process concentrate, though not exclusively, on identifying the very process which Emily proclaims as "unknown." In "An Octopus," Marianne explains:

It is self-evident
that it is frightful to have everything afraid of one;
that one must do as one is told
and eat rice, prunes, dates, raisins, hardtack, and tomatoes
if one would "conquer the main peak of Mount Tacoma, . . ." ¹⁵

Of this passage Weatherhead says, "The terms one must accept in order to climb are, of course, a metaphor for the self-discipline of clear perception and 'relentless accuracy' that the poet accepts prior to the discovery and utterance of truth in her poetry."¹⁶ Perhaps Emily approaches this when she writes, "After great pain,

¹⁴Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 63.

¹⁵Moore, Complete Poems, p. 75.

¹⁶A. Kingsley Weatherhead, The Edge of the Image (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967), p. 66.

introduced the struggle toward a theory of death, the need for armoured self protection, and views of the creative process. While both of the poets are concerned with these themes, each of them takes a different view and therefore a somewhat different approach to the subjects. However, the fourth common theme which appears in their works can be considered as a theme in itself, but also it serves as a method of approach to other themes. I speak now of the tendency of both these poets to dwell on the works of nature. Certainly it is no revelation to mention that much of the poetry of these women centers around nature, nor is there any question about the objects of nature often appearing as central themes within their poetry. Therefore, I will confine myself only to mentioning these facts and then move on to my point, which is that the objects of nature--and more specifically the small creatures of nature--often become the vehicle through which both Marianne and Emily approach the other themes presented in this chapter. Most likely I will discover that the small creatures also portray additional themes which merit recognition, but most of my search through the next two chapters will be for small creatures which point the way to the views of death, isolation, and the creative process held by Emily Dickinson and Marianne Moore respectively.

CHAPTER FOUR

EMILY DICKINSON AND THE SMALL CREATURE

For many years Emily Dickinson was considered to be primarily a nature poet, and indeed biographically the realm of nature provided one of the major stimulations for her life. She was particularly interested in observing and writing about the small creatures which she encountered within her garden. Whicher gives an interesting synopsis of the number and kinds of these creatures which appear in her poetry.

The small creatures that her poems favor are those of the meadow and garden, the bee, the butterfly, the cricket, and the spider. Butterflies appear thirty-one times, exclusive of a caterpillar, two chrysalises, and several cocoons (which she did not reserve for moths), crickets seven times, houseflies six; the beetle, the gnat, the midge, and the moth are also included, but only conventionally . . . Of all nature's people bees were by all odds her favorites. She names them fifty-two times, not counting nine specific references to bumblebees.¹

Likewise, Cambon makes this suggestion: ". . . Emily lives with little things, she converses with diminutive creatures and sings a thin birdlike solo; . . ."² Though "a thin birdlike solo" could have unflattering connotations, I prefer to interpret the imagery as referring to Emily as a solitary bird who poses above the small creatures of the world and uses their characteristics and habits to aid in her song-like interpretations of life's mysteries.

¹George Whicher, This Was a Poet (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), p. 255.

²Cambon, The Inclusive Flame, p. 28.

Small Creatures and the Struggle with Death

As established in the previous chapter, death is a major theme in Emily's poetry, and one of her primary efforts is the capture of the soul at the moment of death in hopes of finding an answer to the question of immortality. Often Emily uses small creatures of nature to help in her depiction of this questioning attitude toward death and immortality. We find poems in which she specifically uses the spider, the butterfly, the bee, and the housefly.

In several poems Emily reveals a fascination with spiders, and especially with the spider's web. One of her spiders contemplates immortality as he weaves.

A Spider sewed at Night
Without a Light
Upon an Arc of White.

If Ruff it was of Dame
Or Shroud of Gnome
Himself himself inform.

Of Immortality
His Strategy
Was Physiognomy. (Poem 1138)

The spider's web for Emily is often an image of creativity; but while this poem does speak of creativity, it also goes beyond it to the questions of death and immortality. As the spider spins at night, he alone considers whether he is dealing with things mortal, the ruff of a dame, or things eternal, the shroud of a gnome. Significantly, the spider knows the answer, but he does not reveal it, "Himself himself inform." Interpretation of the last stanza of this poem depends upon the meaning assigned to the term "physiognomy." Anderson explains that an early meaning of the word referred to the art of

foretelling the future fortunes of persons by studying their countenance, and he claims that Emily resurrected this obsolete meaning connected with astrology and magic for this poem on the spider. Applying this meaning, she presents the spider spinning out his inner self into his web, which becomes a figurative extension of his face. Thus, Anderson explains, "If his design corresponds to his soul then this is his 'Strategy' for comprehending 'Immortality,' but not revealing it."³ What Emily presents is a spider who, as a part of nature, knows the source of information about immortality but does not reveal it to mankind. Even if we do not accept Anderson's implication of the mystical and astrological meaning, we can still accept that as the spider contemplates the question of death and immortality he gives no outward sign of his knowledge about its reality. Sherwood insists that by 1861 Emily had already concluded that "nature offered no reliable evidence of the character or disposition of the supernatural word, . . ."⁴ This spider poem, which was written in 1869, seems to support Sherwood's claim.

While the spider spins his web knowingly, a web which Emily describes in a later poem as being "The fairest Home I ever knew," (Poem 1423) the butterfly also slips away into eternity leaving no affirmation or description for mankind.

³Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 127.

⁴William Sherwood, Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 99.

Two Butterflies went out at Noon--
 And waltzed upon a Farm--
 Then stepped straight through the Firmament
 And rested, on a Beam--

And then--together bore away
 Upon a shining Sea--
 Though never yet, in any Port--
 Their coming, mentioned--be--

If spoken by the distant Bird--
 If met in Either Sea
 By Frigate, or by Merchantman--
 No notice--was--to me-- (Poem 533)

"Noon" symbolizes the moment of truth for Emily, and since she looked to the moment of death as simultaneously the moment of truth, we can in this case accept that she is using the noon symbol in the traditional sense. At this moment the butterflies step "straight through the Firmament," or escape the limits of circumference and enter into immortality. Sherwood explains, "When she felt closest to death, the despair that was death in all but one body, she described herself as standing on that very line 'out upon circumference--' (Poem 378)"⁵ This is the same position in which Emily describes the butterflies in this poem. They escape circumference, but as with the spider, their escape provides no answers to the poet's questions about the nature of eternity. In fact, Emily's doubts about the reality of immortality are strongly evident in the last two stanzas. She says quite simply that if anyone ever mentioned the arrival of the butterflies it was not noticed by her. The question, then, still stands, and it is the same for butterflies as for humans. What happens after death?

Emily also uses the bee frequently, and though at times he

⁵Ibid., p. 220.

has several other purposes, in one poem he, too, faces death and perhaps immortality.

A single Clover Plank
Was all that saved a Bee
A bee I personally knew
From sinking in the sky--

'Twixt Firmament above
And Firmament below
The Billows of Circumference
Were Sweeping him away--

The idly swaying Plank
Responsible to nought
A sudden Freight of Wind assumed
And Bumble Bee was not--

This harrowing event
Transpiring in the Grass
Did not so much as wring from him
A wandering "Alas"-- (Poem 1343)

In the second stanza of this poem Emily uses almost the exact imagery as that which we examined in the butterfly poem, but in this selection a new dimension is added to the small creature's reaction to death and immortality. We discover from the bee that not only do the creatures of nature know the answers to immortality and refuse to divulge them to man, but also because of their security in this knowledge they are neither frightened by, or even concerned with, approaching death. The bee is about to be swept away, out of circumference, but he registers no fear. Neither does he, when rescued by a plank of clover, reveal any relief. This poem possesses a curious contrast of tone between the stoicism of the bee and the involved fear and curiosity of the poet. This contrast emphasizes both the poet's questioning stance toward death and her use of the creatures of nature to reveal the inaccessibility of the answers she sought.

The most famous of Emily's poems in which a small creature becomes involved in the question of death is centered around the

arrival of a fly.

I heard a Fly buzz--when I died--
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air--
Between the Heaves of Storm--

The Eyes around--had wrung them dry--
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset--when the King
Be witnesses--in the Room--

I willed my Keepsakes--Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable--and then it was
There interposed a Fly--

With Blue--uncertain stumbling Buzz--
Between the light--and me--
And then the Windows failed--and then
I could not see to see-- (Poem 465)

The irony in this poem is effective as the poet presents a dying person and the curious mourners all awaiting a glimpse of eternity at the moment of death being ultimately foiled by the fly. The satire of the onlookers is curious here since Emily herself often displays this same hope for a revelation at the moment of death, but in this case since she is dealing with the traditional Christian practice of awaiting the arrival of "the King," we can most logically locate Emily as being on the deathbed rather than among the onlookers. Thus it is, as Pickard explains, that "The traditional Christian belief that death leads to eternal happiness is undercut by the appearance of an insignificant, distracting fly."⁶ If we accept Emily to be the dying person who is the speaker in this poem, we find that once again a creature of nature refuses to reveal to her the secret of death. Indeed in this case the fly makes what can be

⁶Pickard, Emily Dickinson, p. 102.

interpreted as a direct purposeful interference between the poet and the answer.

In the cited examples, then, Emily uses the spider and the butterfly to show that although the creatures of nature may have the secrets of death, they do not reveal them to mankind. The point is then strengthened first by the bee, who possesses the knowledge, but is actually indifferent to its importance, and ultimately by the fly who makes a purposeful intrusion between the seeker and the secret. Could this be Emily's reason for assigning the fly this curse several years later:

The Butterfly in honored Dust
Assuredly will lie
But none will pass the Catacomb
So chastened as the Fly-- (Poem 1246)

Small Creatures and the Theme of Isolation

The one area of Emily Dickinson's life which has received the greatest amount of attention from critics and biographers has been her withdrawal from society. In many respects this has been unfortunate and somewhat a handicap to the advancement of the scholarship regarding her works. In fact Allen Tate suggests that "this failure of the scholars to feel more than biographical curiosity about her"⁷ has created one of the main barriers between Emily and her readers. While we cannot deny the logic of Tate's theory and are forced to admit that it does contain an element of truth, neither can we deny the fact that many of Emily's poems are expressions of her need for isolation and that these poems are closely connected with that area

⁷Allen Tate, "New England Culture and Emily Dickinson" in The Recognition of Emily Dickinson, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1964), p. 154.

of her life. Earlier we established that Emily enjoyed the society of her own mind and found in it sufficient company for contemplation. In several of her poems this attitude is portrayed through the persona of small creatures of nature. The robin, the bee, and the butterfly, who profits from his sojourn in the cocoon, are three of the creatures who help Emily present this theme.

According to Whicher, Emily mentions the robin twenty times in her poetry.⁸ Out of this many references, the bird obviously might assume many meanings, but in one instance she presents a female robin in such a way that she seems to be a direct spokesman for the poet.

The Robin is the One
That speechless from her Nest
Submit that Home--and Certainty
And Sanctity, are best (Poem 828)

In a very simple and sincere manner, Emily uses the robin to explain her decision and determination not to leave home. The robin is passive and speechless but certain of her decision. Interesting in view of her constantly questioning attitudes toward religion, death, and immortality, Emily never wavered in her belief regarding the sanctity of her seclusion. She occasionally reveals in her poetry a desire for escape, but primarily in a creative sense, rather than a social one, and she, like the robin, is certain of her choice.

Emily uses the bee to explain the type of escape which she sought, which was actually an escape to creative seclusion.

Could I but ride indefinite
As doth the Meadow Bee
And visit only where I liked
And No one visit me

⁸Whicher, This Was a Poet, p. 254.

And flirt all Day with Buttercups
 And marry whom I may
 And dwell a little everywhere
 Or better, run away

With no Police to follow
 Or chase Him if He do
 Till He should jump Peninsulas
 To get away from me--

I said "But just to be a Bee"
 Upon a Raft of Air
 And row in Nowhere all Day long
 And anchor "off the Bar"

What Liberty! So Captives deem
 Who tight in Dungeons are. (Poem 661)

In this poem the bee escapes from, or is isolated from, society and through this escape he becomes able to creatively select whatever company he finds stimulating. The longing tone which arises in the last two lines, as Emily evidently refers to herself, leads us to believe that she not only sees her creative isolation as portrayed through the bee, but also that he has achieved this type of existence to an even greater degree than she. Of course since this is a natural state for the bee, he is oblivious to his fortune in much the same manner as the bee who was threatened by death was oblivious to his impending destruction. Emily, being human, is destined to long for, and strive for, this degree of separateness from society.

Evidently Emily found the silken web of the cocoon just as fascinating as the spider's web because the cocoon with an emerging butterfly appears several times in her poetry. These cocoon poems help to cement the connection between Emily's armoured isolation and her devotion to creativity. In one of these cocoon poems she specifically asks, "What is the purpose of this hiding?" Then she gives the answer through the imagery of the emerging butterfly.

Cocoon above! Cocoon below!
 Stealthy Cocoon, why hide you so
 What all the world suspect?
 An hour, and gay on every tree
 Your secret, perched in ecstasy
 Defies imprisonment!

An hour in Chrysalis to pass,
 Then gay above receding grass
 A Butter fly to go!
 A moment to interrogate,
 Then wiser than a "Surrogate,"
 The Universe to know! (Poem 129)

Several critics quite logically interpret this poem to be a question about death and resurrection. When speaking of Emily's cocoon poems, Anderson claims that "one is all too aware that the butterfly does emerge eventually, and that it is the traditional symbol of the soul."⁹ However, in this statement Anderson forgets two points. Emily's poetry is not bound to "traditional symbols" and to her "the soul" is a creative spirit more frequently than it is a religious one. If we accept these facts we can see that Emily considers herself as the occupant of the cocoon, and that in this poem she tells us why she prefers this existence. In an hour the metamorphosis occurs and her creative soul, the butterfly, emerges, "The Universe to know." The shortened time period, which is stated twice in the poem, gives us a clue that Emily finds contentment within her cocoon, and yet the combined ecstasy and wisdom of the released butterfly leads us to believe that while in her cocoon she found the truth she sought.

In a very similar poem, written much later, she specifically places herself in the midst of this imagery. She says, "My cocoon," and she looks forward to the release accomplished through this period of isolation.

⁹Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 129.

My Cocoon tightens--Colors tease--
 I'm feeling for the Air--
 A dim capacity for Wings
 Demeans the Dress I wear--

A power of Butterfly must be--
 The Aptitude to fly
 Meadows of Majesty implies
 And easy Sweeps of Sky--

So I must baffle at the Hint
 And cipher at the Sign
 And make much blunder, if at last
 I take the clue divine- (Poem 1099)

The purpose of the butterflies in both these cocoon poems seems to emphasize the ultimate result of the isolation which was revealed earlier through the female robin and the bee. These creatures are filled with certainty and ecstasy which result from the freeing of the creative spirit.

Small Creatures and the Creative Spirit

Emily frequently uses the same familiar creatures of nature in her poems about the creative process. Some of them she uses as vehicles to aid in the expression of her points, and likewise she sometimes views them as focal points to help in the formulation of her ideas. However, ultimately she finds the answers within herself rather than through the creatures of nature. Thus in one of her best statements about creative contemplation she says:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
 One clover, and a bee,
 And revery.
 The revery alone will do,
 If bees are few. (Poem 1755)

This brief poem gives the key to the relationship Emily sees between small creatures and the creative spirit. They may serve as aides to the creative mind; they may indeed attempt creation on their

own, but they do not hold the secrets of artistic creativity as they hold the secrets of death. To Emily, the secret of creation is ultimately available only through contemplation.

While using nature's creatures to help in her statements about the creative mind she uses the same everyday creatures of the garden which have appeared in other sections. As established earlier, most of Emily's poems about the creative process tend to be comments about the emotional results of creativity rather than attempts to define its source, and to reveal these emotions she uses the familiar bee, spider, and bird.

Many times Emily expresses the spirit of creativity by actually establishing a type of physical comradeship between herself and the small creature in such a way that the creature becomes not only a symbol of her creativity but also a sort of physical extension of herself. For instance in the last stanza of a poem in which she describes a robin in great detail she speaks of another very different kind of robin:

You beg the Robin in your Brain
To keep the other--still-- (Poem 634)

Then in another poem she has this combination of the physical and creative relationship with a bee.

We--Bee and I--live by the quaffing--
'Tisn't all Hock--with us--
Life has its Ale--
But it's many a lay of the Dim Burgundy--
We chant--for cheer--when the Wines--fail--

Do we "get drunk"?
Ask the jolly Clovers!
Do we "beat" our "Wife"?
I--never wed--
Bee--pledges his--in minute flagons--
Dainty--as the trees--on her deft Head--

While runs the Rhine--
 He and I--revel--
 First--at the vat--and latest at the Vine--
 Noon--our last Cup--
 "Found dead"--"of Nectar"--
 By a humming Coroner--
 In a By-thyme! (Poem 230)

This poem softly echoes the "Tim" poem which was written just one year earlier. She finds much the same type of relationship with the bee which she found with Tim, and in both poems she ends with the contemplation of their death. The first two stanzas of this portrayal of the bee as her creative spirit help us feel the ecstasy of possessing such a bee for a companion, but the last stanza reveals the consequence of meeting the truth creatively. At noon, the moment of truth, she and her bee are "Found dead"--"of Nectar," which reminds us that several years later she wrote the previously quoted lines:

The poets light but Lamps--
 Themselves--go out-- (Poem 883)

In the same manner, though to a lesser degree, Emily reveals a feeling of brotherhood with the spider as an artist.

The Spider as an Artist
 Has never been employed--
 Though his surpassing Merit
 Is freely certified

 By every Broom and Bridget
 Throughout a Christian Land--
 Neglected Son of Genius
 I take thee by the Hand-- (Poem 1275)

She takes the spider by the hand as a brother because she has compassion for him as a fellow creator. In this poem, however, the spider is a separate creative spirit rather than a part of her creative duality. Whicher says of this poem that Emily is making the assertion

"that artistic merit is certified by the hostility of the vulgar."¹⁰

He also suggests that perhaps this "Christian Land" where the works of genius are brushed off just as a housemaid might treat a spider well might just be New England.¹¹ In this light, this poem becomes the emotional reaction of a poet whose creative efforts are not adequately appreciated by her contemporaries. Since many of Emily's ideas were premature for her time, this is certainly one emotion which she could be expected to reveal about her art.

In the previous poem only the spider's web is destroyed by the insensitive force, but in an earlier poem the spider, along with the web, succumbs to the blows of an unknowing and uncaring force, the housewife's broom.

The Spider holds a Silver Ball
In unperceived Hands--
And dancing softly to Himself
His Yarn of Pearl--unwinds--

He plies from Nought to Nought--
In unsubstantial Trade--
Supplants our Tapestries with His--
In half the period--

An Hour to rear supreme
His Continents of Light--
Then dangle from the Housewife's Broom--
His Boundaries--forgot-- (Poem 605)

At first this spider is nearing the secret of perfection in his creativity, even about to surpass the human artist. He "holds a Silver Ball," "Supplants our Tapestries with His--" and in an hour will "rear supreme," but he meets his devastating defeat at the end

¹⁰George Whicher, "Emily Dickinson Among the Victorians" in The Recognition of Emily Dickinson, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1964), p. 249.

¹¹Ibid.

of the broom. The creative product of neither of these spiders is allowed to stand. Is it possible that Emily does not see their works as enduring because they are the result of industry rather than revery? This would no doubt be difficult to prove; but, just as Emily says she will take the spider by the hand as a fellow artist, she also has admitted earlier that she sees him as an intruder upon her countenance.

Alone and in a Circumstance
Reluctant to be told
A spider on my reticence
Assiduously crawled

And so much more at Home than I
Immediately grew
I felt myself a visitor
And hurriedly withdrew
.....
If any take my property
According to the Law
The Statute is my Learned friend
But what redress can be
For an offense nor here nor there
So not in Equity--
That Larceny of time and mind
The morrow of the Day
By spider, or forbid it Lord
That I should specify. (Poem 1167)

Above all else in this poem is the tone of possessive jealousy with which Emily protects the poetic contemplation of her mind. Much has been written about her attempts to maintain her creative purity, and in this instance she uses the spider to show that even nature itself can be a contaminating force.

For Emily the small creatures of nature have a wide range of influence upon the creative spirit. They are creators themselves, they are companions for her in the creative process, they are even opposing forces in the process, but they do not hold for her the secrets of the creative process.

CHAPTER FIVE

MARIANNE MOORE AND THE SMALL CREATURE

Marianne Moore makes extensive use of animals in her poetry, and critics have written much about how and why she uses these many creatures. A remark by Dembo serves as a typical example of these opinions. His observation is that

Miss Moore's poetic zoology, marked by a predilection for exotic animals, is at once an exercise in "X-ray-like inquisitive intensity" of vision into unparticularities and an assertion of the moral values that characterize her attitude toward experience in general. . . . Hedgehogs, salamanders, mockingbirds, plumed basilisks, frigate pelicans, cats, buffaloes, and unicorns are a part of a menagerie whose perfections invariably reflect on human greed, aggressiveness, and instability.¹

Two points from Dembo's statement are applicable to Marianne's specific use of small creatures. She does often use the exotic creatures rather than those which are commonly a part of the reader's everyday experience, and she definitely uses these creatures as models from which she can point out human imperfections. In this chapter, I shall attempt to discover how Marianne uses small creatures in this way to illustrate her philosophy regarding the themes of death, isolation, and the creative process.

Small Creatures and the Struggle with Death

The philosophy of death which appears in Marianne's poetry involves her insistence that man should face it with courage, and

¹L. S. Dembo, Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 115, 117.

that he can profit from observing the creatures of nature who bravely face the threat of death daily. Thus the knowledge of death as observed through the animal kingdom should inspire mankind toward moral perfection. She gives no contemplation of the nature of death; instead she treats it as a fact of life and implicitly urges her readers to go about their lives with the conviction and determination evident in the lives of the creatures of nature. Therefore, frequently rather than specifically writing about death, she writes about life and the courage one should gain from it as a sort of object lesson for the preparation for death. Marianne, then, becomes somewhat of a moralist as she uses small creatures to show mankind how to live so that death may be met with valor.

In "What Are Years," she makes a strong plea for strength of the soul in the face of immortality. In the concluding stanza she uses a bird (surprisingly the species is unidentified) to illustrate the desired strength and courage.

The very bird,
grown taller as he sings, steels
his form straight up. Though he is captive,
his mighty singing
says, satisfaction is a lowly
thing, how pure a thing is joy.
This is mortality,
this is eternity.²

Earlier in this poem she says, ". . . even death, encourages others and in its defeat, stirs the soul to be strong? He sees deep and is glad, who accedes to mortality . . ."³ The bird serves as an example

²Moore, Complete Poems, p. 95.

³Ibid.

of one who has become visionary, wise, and courageous as he "accedes to mortality." Emphasizing this point, Nitchie claims, "So here, acceding to mortality . . . is a source of vision, gladness, and continuity as well as defeat, which under such circumstances may be tragic triumph--not lowly satisfaction, but the purity of joy."⁴

Part of Marianne's strategy in the use of small creatures is, as suggested earlier, to use them to mirror the shortcomings of mankind. This use is particularly evident in "Virginia Britannia," one of her longer and more elegiac poems. The poem is based on a series of contrasts between that which is indigenous to the land, including butterflies, various species of birds, and even a cotton-mouth snake, and that which the settlers have made of their natural surroundings, which is best characterized with the lines:

Like strangler figs choking
a banyan, not an explorer, no imperialist,
not one of us, in taking what we
pleased--in colonizing as the
saying is--has been a synonym for mercy.⁵

With man thus characterized should we be surprised to discover that the indigenous creatures, specifically the hedge sparrows, are the ones who rise to bursts of joy? These creatures who are instinctively courageous, and joyous in their courage, do not flee from the danger and destruction posed by man; instead, they join in a celebration of confidence, as evidenced by the hedge sparrow's "ecstatic burst of joy,"

⁴Nitchie, Marianne Moore, p. 122.

⁵Moore, Complete Poems, p. 110.

the lark's song, and the "undulating boughs" of the live oak.⁶ That these creatures possess the faith which is necessary in the face of death while mankind lacks such faith becomes clear in these closing lines of the poem:

. . . while clouds, expanding above
the town's assertiveness, dwarf it, dwarf arrogance
that can misunderstand
importance; and
are to the child an intimation of what glory is.⁷

Once again the bird and his song validate the faith and courage necessary to conquer death, in "Melchior Vulpus."

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

"Hallelujah." Almost
 utmost absolutist
and fugue-ist, Amen; slowly building
from miniature thunder,
crescendos antidoting death--
love's signature cementing faith.⁸

The composer can create an anthem praising God "for conquering the faith which feareth neither pain nor death." Yet, none can

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., p. 111

⁸Ibid., p. 188.

understand this mastery except the bird, the "mouse-skin-bellows'-breath," which sings "Hallelujah" and crescendos to the antidote for death--love which cements faith. Within the text of this poem we are not told specifically that the "someone" who acquires this understanding is a bird. Indeed, Engel insists that the "mouse-skin-bellows'-breath" refers to an automaton, which is to be respected, yet inferior to, the creations of God.⁹ However, when Marianne gives the full quotation from Daniel Alain's Réalités, which was the source of the term, we find that the subject matter is a bird.¹⁰ This song bird in "Melchior Vulpus" has the same confidence and faith as the one who grew taller as he sang his way to eternity in "What Are Years?"

The ordinary bird, then, seems to be the primary creature Marianne uses to exemplify the courage and faith necessary to conquer death. The birds have this fortitude, and they rejoice in their possession as their singing demonstrates it to mankind. As we look at other themes, however, we will see less of the ordinary creature and more of the exotic.

Small Creatures and the Theme of Isolation

While Marianne never reached the degree of isolation and separation from society which was a part of Emily's life, she did believe that a person should rely on his own strength and be an

⁹Engel, Marianne Moore, p. 145.

¹⁰Moore, Complete Poems, "Notes," p. 293.

individual instead of just a part of the social order. Her poems which explore the theme of isolation emphasize this strong individualism. In many of them we find small creatures who possess this strength and are able to survive because of their intellectual and moral preparation. These creatures, because of their preparation, have a protective armour which Marianne implies would be convenient and profitable for mankind.

One such creature is the wood-weasel as he

emerges daintily, the skunk--
 don't laugh--in sylvan black and white chipmunk
 regalia. The inky thing
 adaptively whited with glistening
 goat fur, is wood-warden. In his
 ermined well-cuttlefish-inked wool, he is
 determination's totem. Out-
 lawed? His sweet face and powerful feet go about
 in chieftain's coat of Chilcat cloth.
 He is his own protection from the moth,

noble little warrior. That
 otter-skin on it, the living polecat,
 smothers anything that stings. Well,
 this same weasel's playful and his weasel
 associates are too. Only
 wood-weasels shall associate with me.¹¹

After being introduced to this creature by his more sophisticated name and viewing his approach as he "emerges daintily," we may be surprised to learn he is the ordinary skunk. Marianne presents him as a prime example of individualism, without any of the usual baser connotations which surround him. Indeed, he is a rather royal "wood warden" with his chieftan's coat. Two lines in this poem give us a key to Marianne's use of this creature, "He is his own protection. . . ." and "Only wood-weasels shall associate with me."

¹¹Ibid., p. 127.

Another creature is celebrated for his self-sufficiency and innate preparation in the "The Plumet Basilisk." The basilisk is a lizard of Central America, and Marianne brings him to us in a long, four section poem. In the opening stanza, the basilisk is described in images of royalty and strength. To begin with, the term "basilisk" comes from a Greek word meaning "king of animals;" and later in the poem the lizard meets his own reflection as he dives in the water "king with King" and hides himself "as the chieftain with gold body."¹² Then eventually he becomes "the ruler of Rivers, Lakes, and Seas, invisible or visible."¹³ As we meet the basilisk in the first stanza, he is alone and self-sufficient. He has no companions except his likeness in the stream, and his armour lies in his ability to move agilely and his adaptability. He is amphibious, which implies he can conquer two of the major forces of nature, and he can be "long or short, and also course or fine at pleasure."¹⁴

In the second and third sections, "The Malay Dragon" and "The Tuatera," we meet similarly admirable lizards from other parts of the world, "We have ours; and they have theirs."¹⁵ These creatures, too, have an armoured individualism, which is a natural characteristic of their social order. The sea lizards are "congregated so there is not

¹²Ibid., p. 20.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

room to step, . . . among birds toddling in and out" and "are innocent of whom they neighbor."¹⁶ The judgmental statement which follows this picture is significant, "Bird-reptile social life is pleasing."¹⁷ The basilisk, along with these other lizards of the world, provides a living example of the skill and the fulfillment which result from internal strength and self reliance.

As Nitchie suggests, Marianne seems to imply a connection between the basilisk species and the human race with the line, ". . . the basilisk portrays mythology's wish to be interchangeably man and fish. . ." In Nitchie's words, these lines reflect "human aspiration, not animal adaptation."¹⁸ While Nitchie's point is applicable, we need to remember his use of the word "reflect." The basilisk, as other of Marianne's animals, is a basilisk, not a distorted human being. He is useful to mankind as a mirror which reflects our own lack of adaptation and internal fortitude.

Of all of Marianne's animals, the pangolin is one of the best armoured. "The Pangolin" is another of her longer poems, and in it she presents a truly admirable creature, the scaly anteater, with this opening description which emphasizes his isolation, "Another armored animal--scale lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity until they form the uninterrupted central tail-row!"¹⁹

¹⁶Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Nitchie, Marianne Moore, p. 115.

¹⁹Moore, Complete Poems, p. 117.

qualities for which mankind should aspire. Again, as in the case of the wood-weasel and the plumed basilisk, a creature of nature has presented an object lesson which demonstrates admirable qualities which are lacking in humans. Because of innate qualities which result from their armoured individualism they are able to rule their surroundings and accomplish their necessary goals with grace and skill.

Small Creatures and the Creative Process

Marianne, through her poetry, has much to say regarding the creative process. She often attempts to define what is good, or what is necessary, in the poetic art; and occasionally the creatures of nature are the creators, though they are often ambiguously both the creators and the creation. In their portrayal of the creative process the emphasis is primarily on purity and preparation.

In "The Paper Nautilus" the poet explains the necessity of dedicated preparation of the artist and of maintaining the purity of details. The nautilus is the artist who constructs her thin glass shell. Her dedication as an artist and her attention to minute details are evident in the second and third stanzas of the poem.

Giving her perishable
souvenir of hope, a dull
white outside and smooth-
edged inner surface
glossy as the sea, the watchful
maker of it guards it
day and night; she scarcely

eats until the eggs are hatched.
Buried eightfold in her eight
arms, for she is in
a sense a devil-
fish, her glass ram's-horn-cradled freight
is hid but is not crushed;²⁷

²⁷Moore, Complete Poems, p. 121.

This dedicated attention which the nautilus gives to these minutely perceived details eventually gives rise to a knowledge of the truth that "love is the only fortress strong enough to trust to,"²⁸ but also it results in ultimate creation. In the fourth stanza, the watched eggs come from the shell so that as the cycle comes to a close, the newly hatched nautilus become the creation, which by leaving the shell actually frees it. This poem definitely contains a comment about the creative act of the artist, though one wonders if Marianne, with her usual personal reticence, actually meant for it to be as personal as Weatherhead assumes it to be when he claims, "The paper nautilus is in a sense the poet herself, who, working indeed with paper, constructs a form, a part of herself, in which to foster and deliver her ideas."²⁹

In "To a Snail," Marianne gives us an animal which represents what she sees as the epitome of a work of art. As she addresses the snail, her first two statements are almost epigrammatical, but she then becomes more expository.

If "compression is the first grace of style,"
 you have it. Contractility is a virtue
 as modesty is a virtue.
 It is not the acquisition of any one thing
 that is able to adorn,
 or the incidental quality that occurs
 as a concomitant of something well said,
 that we value in style,
 but the principle that is hid:
 in the absence of feet, "a method of conclusions"; (sic.)
 "a knowledge of principles,"
 in the curious phenomenon of your occipital horn.³⁰

²⁸Ibid., p. 122.

²⁹Weatherhead, The Edge of the Image, pp. 62-63.

³⁰Moore, Complete Poems, p. 85.

The brevity of this poem is apropos to her opening appraisal of compression, and contractility is evident too, as she embodies her theory of poetic style in these twelve lines. Two points are the most obvious, and they are both related to restraint. Contractility, or compression, is a virtue related to modesty, and what we value in style is the principle "that is hid," rather than flaunted or elaborated. This principle of style is evident in Marianne's animal poems. She seldom makes a direct application of the principle which the creature demonstrates; instead, she leaves the implied lesson to man at the level of implication.

In "The Jerboa," one of Marianne's longer and better known poems, we find a sharp contrast between that which is real and natural in art and that which is artificial and pretentious. The first section of the poem, appropriately titled "Too Much," catalogues the lavishness of that which the Romans and Egyptians called art. In the opening lines we are told of a Roman artist who contrived a pine or fir cone with holes for a fountain which was given a place of honor and "passed for art."³¹ In the second and third stanzas the poet further condemns this artificiality.

A huge cast
bronze, dwarfing the peacock
statue in the garden of the Vatican,
it looks like a work of art made to give
to a Pompey, or native

of Thebes. Others could
build, and understood
making colossi and
how to use slaves, and kept crocodiles and put

³¹Ibid., p. 10.

baboons on the necks of giraffes to pick
fruit, and used serpent magic.³²

As a direct contrast to this unnatural ornateness which dwarfs and distorts the natural creatures of the earth we are given the jerboa, a small desert rat, who is both a creator of artistic skills and at the same time a perfect and natural creation in his own right. As a creator he builds "a shining silver house of sand"³³ and he "honors the sand by assuming its color."³⁴ Even his movements reveal artistic images:

By fifths and sevenths,
in leaps of two lengths,
like the uneven notes
of the Bedouin flute, it stops its gleaning
on little wheel castors, and makes fern-seed
footprints with kangaroo speed.³⁵

Also, the jerboa is a work of art in his own right, and his beauty is the result of true naturalness and simplicity.

Looked at by daylight,
the underside's white,
though the fur on the back
is buff brown like the breast of the fawn-breasted
bower-bird.³⁶

This description of the desert rat in the daylight of the desert comes from the second section of the poem called "Abundance." The titles of the two sections alone make a statement about the artistic preference Marianne demonstrates in this poem. "Abundance,"

³³Ibid., p. 13.

³⁴Ibid., p. 14.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 14-15.

³⁶Ibid., p. 14.

as exemplified by the simplicity of the rat and the desert, is preferable to the "too much" of the Romans and Egyptians.³⁷

The jerboa, nautilus, and snail all three help demonstrate some of Marianne's theories of poetic creation, primarily her emphasis of meticulous attention to detail, her belief in conciseness, and her admiration for the simple and natural. In addition to these, other creatures such as the basilisk, the wood weasel, the pangolin and several birds provide active examples of the strength necessary to face death and the inner strength and skillful ability which result from armoured isolation of the individual.

³⁷Charles Tomlinson, "Marianne Moore, Her Poetry and Her Critics," in Marianne Moore: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Charles Tomlinson (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1969), pp. 4-5.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

After considering the uses Marianne Moore and Emily Dickinson make of the small creatures of nature, I must pause now to reflect on any similarities or differences which have appeared in this usage. Considering specifically the poems which have appeared in this study and generally some of the dominant tendencies of the two poets, I have discovered one major similarity in their treatment of small creatures, as well as three characteristics which are quite different.

One major difference in the manner which Marianne and Emily treat the creatures in their poetry relates to their own personal involvement with them. While Emily frequently becomes personally involved with the creature-subject of her poem, Marianne consistently remains an outside observer. For example to the spider, Emily says, "I take thee by the Hand--," (Poem 1275) and as she speaks of the butterfly's cocoon she imagines herself so encased. (Poem 1099). Marianne finds no such personal relationship with her animals or their surroundings. She may examine them closely with microscopic vision, as when she observes the sculpture of the moth in "Armor's Undermining Modesty," or from a far removed distance, as when she gives the details of the bird's song as he rises above the sea in "What Are Years?," but always she is the detached observer recording the details of her subjects. This difference in emotional involvement is no doubt largely responsible for the second contrasting method.

Emily frequently tends to endow her animals with human traits, thoughts, and actions, while in Marianne's poems the creatures seldom lose their animalistic identity. For instance, we have Emily's spider who not only "sews" at night, but also contemplates the identity of his creation (Poem 1138) and her robin who makes an intellectual decision to remain in the comfort of her nest. (Poem 828). Likewise, she gives us butterflies who "waltzed upon a Farm-- (Poem 533).

On the other hand, for Marianne the animals remain strictly animals and rarely ever adopt human actions or traits for their own. Vivian Koch points out that in "The Monkeys" is "one of the few places, significantly, where an animal is given speech."¹ In a more general statement of this point Koch explains, "With Miss Moore the animals as animals count for just as much as the humans they may eventually inform."² Many morals are portrayed through Marianne's creatures, but always the lizard is a lizard rather than a human being encased in lizard skin, and the weasel forever acts as a weasel would. The implied human element results only from minute observation and contemplation of the natural creature in its natural surroundings. Cleanth Brooks finds this to be an outstanding characteristic of Marianne, saying:

Miss Moore's animals are not conceived of clinically and scientifically even though they are not treated romantically or sentimentally. The latter point is to be emphasized. For Miss Moore's animals do not become easy caricatures of human types that we know. The poet does not patronize them.

¹Vivian Koch, "The Peaceable Kingdom of Marianne Moore," Quarterly Review of Literature IV (1948), 157.

²Ibid., p. 154.

Not even the more furry, tiny ones ever become cute. Instead, she accords them their dignity; she accepts them with full seriousness, and they become the instruments by which man is judged and known.³

A similarity between these poets which is not necessarily significant but is nevertheless interesting, involves the types of creatures which appear in their poetry. As established earlier, Emily used only the common creatures which one might easily encounter in the field or garden. In her poems we meet the everyday housefly, spider, bee, bird, and butterfly. Marianne, though, tends to present the more unusual and exotic creatures, such as the jerboa, the nautilus, the mongoose, and the unicorn; or if she uses a common creature she frequently dignifies it by using its scientific name or specifying its species. Thus, we are introduced to the skunk as the wood-weasel, the anteater as the pangolin, and the lizards retain the identifying species of basilisk or tuatera.

The one common characteristic which I have discovered to be evident in the work of both poets probably results from the quality of work they produced. After studying the poetry in which Marianne and Emily use small creatures, I have concluded that in the work of both women the poems produce an insight into and appreciation of the animal creatures which becomes almost as dynamic as the morals or the themes which they are meant to portray. Thus we not only come to understand Marianne's and Emily's views about death, isolation, and the creative process, but we also become minutely acquainted with spiders, bees, butterflies, pangolins, jerboas, basilisks, and many other charming creatures of nature.

³Cleanth Brooks, "Miss Marianne Moore's Zoo," Quarterly Review of Literature, IV (1948), 179.

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