If Robert Frost's poems demonstrate a continuing fascination with decay, it may be said that Marianne Moore's poetry reveals an equally compelling fascination with development. Like Dickinson and Whitman in the previous century, Moore was a compulsive editor and revisionist who apparently struggled over the publication of each of her poems. Like Dickinson, she wished to see her poems laid out exactly as she wished, but as a professional, rather than an amateur poet, she seized upon each opportunity for publication as a chance for revision. Thus, like with Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, it is difficult to call any of Moore's poems finished. Each time they were printed anew, she revised them. In this way, Moore's poetry works on a number of textual levels. Like Dickinson, Moore expressed hesitation at the appearance of her published work, but like her Modernist contemporaries, she embraced the opportunities that twentieth-century publishing, and the existence of numerous "little magazines," offered.

Moore's first published poems appeared in these "little magazines," the literary and artistic journals of the early twentieth century, around 1915, and her work was widely praised by the literary gatekeepers of the day, including Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. But it was her first collection of twenty-four entries, *Poems*, published without her knowledge in July 1921, that made her name widely known in the literary world. By the time that Moore herself produced a collection of poems, 1924's *Observations*, she was beginning to develop a reputation as a "poet's poet" that was only strengthened by winning the *Dial* prize in 1925. After winning the prize in 1925, Moore became editor of the *Dial*, a post that she held for the next four years.

"Poetry," the selection that follows, is a manifesto for Modernism, a demonstration of Moore's command of both technique and artistry, and an instruction manual. As a manifesto, "Poetry" is both disdainful of the rigid forms that dominated most poetry what Moore calls, "this fiddle," and celebratory of the experience of reading poetry. The experience of reading poetry, she argues, must yield an understanding of "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," and not be merely sites for "high-sounding," but "unintelligible," attempts at communication. Thus poetry, Moore argues, must be both precise and genuine.

Moore demonstrates both precision and authenticity throughout the poem by using concrete, rather than traditionally poetic, language and by avoiding many of our expectations about poetry. Not only does Moore's poetry fail to rhyme, but she also rejects Dickinson's rigid hymnody, eschews Whitman's free verse, and ignores Frost's blank verse in favor of poetry that shares more of its syntax with prose and the spoken word than it does with traditional poetic forms. In place
of lines and stanzas, Moore forces us to confront her poetry as a single unit where the expression begins with the first capital "I," and concludes with a single period at the end of the last line. Entangled in this extended expression, Moore guides the reader to a new understanding of poetry that reminds readers of Whitman’s *Song of Myself* while it advocates not for a song in the traditional sense but for the importance of ordinary human speech. While reading “Poetry,” careful readers should take note of the differences between Moore’s monologue, in which no response is required from the reader, and the dramatic monologues of Frost whose speaker is always questioning.

5.7.1 “Poetry”

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine. Hands that can grasp, eyes that can dilate, hair that can rise if it must, these things are important not because a high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful. When they become so derivative as to become unintelligible, the same thing may be said for all of us, that we do not admire what we cannot understand:

the bat holding on upside down or in quest of something to eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea, the base ball fan, the statistician nor is it valid to discriminate against “business documents and school-books”; all these phenomena are important. One must make a distinction however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry, nor till the poets among us can be “literalists of the imagination” above insolence and triviality and can present for inspection, “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” shall we have it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand, the raw material of poetry in all its rawnness and that which is on the other hand genuine, you are interested in poetry.
5.7.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. How does the presentation of Moore’s poem the ragged lines, the uneven breaks shape our understanding of the poem?

2. How does Moore distinguish her work from the work of her predecessors like Dickinson and Whitman?