

Lyric Time
Dickinson and the Limits of Genre

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Introduction

“THE ANGLE OF A LANDSCAPE”

“THERE IS no first, or last, in Forever—,” Emily Dickinson wrote to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, in 1864, “It is Centre, there, all the time—”¹ (L 288), and, in the same year,² to the man to whom she was serving such a bizarre literary apprenticeship, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “The only News I know/Is Bulletins all day/From Immortality” (L 290). However self-conscious the remarks may be, they effectively draw our attention to a central feature of Dickinson’s poetry—its resolute departure from temporal order and its reference to another absent or invisible order that is invoked as “Immortality” or alluded to, in this case, as “Centre.” It is hardly surprising that Dickinson’s language teases conception, exempting itself as it does from the necessity of acknowledging beginnings and ends and the points that intervene between the two; these are temporal relationships renounced as inferior to the conceptual harmony specified by the permanence of immortality and the promised completion of a center. For underneath words and syntax, at the primary level of thought, we sense Dickinson’s belief that to adhere to the exactions of temporal relationship is to relinquish all hope of the immortality that will replace time itself. Nonetheless it remains a paradox that Dickinson’s utterances fragment, word cut from word, stanza from stanza, as a direct consequence of her desire for that temporal completion which will fuse all separations into the healing of a unified whole.

Interestingly enough, she conceives of immortality not as morning but as “noon,”³ and if we investigate the many times the word appears

in her poetry, we realize that it implies not only noon, but noon in the middle of summer, not only summer but a summer light whose intensity dazzles to blindness, its glare burning away all but vision of itself. Thus "noon," alchemized into light, comes consistently to stand for the clockless escape from time that would liberate into the longed-for permanence. The pull between time and immortality charges Dickinson's poems. Once she polarized it as follows:

Some—Work for Immortality—
 The Chiefest part, for Time—
 He—Compensates—immediately—
 The former—Checks—on Fame—

 Slow Gold—but Everlasting—
 The Bullion of Today—
 Contrasted with the Currency
 Of Immortality—

 A Beggar—Here and There—
 Is gifted to discern
 Beyond the Broker's insight—
 One's—Money—One's—the Mine— (P 406)

In the imperative world of Dickinson's poems, immortality exists because its absence would be intolerable. There is frequently in the poems a time not present that haunts the present as it haunts the speakers' minds, confusing its dominance in memory or dream with a prediction about the future, mistaking itself for prophecy. The present, then, the "time" of Dickinson's poems, is overwhelmed by the promise of another, more satisfactory, order that will destroy time altogether, replace it by "Slow Gold—but Everlasting—," and this belief in that impossible future is strengthened in direct proportion to how deeply a given speaker is mired in the characteristic deprivations of experience. For many of Dickinson's speakers the world is a landslide of lost things, and their imagining of a future, rectifying providence lurks beneath the surface of the speech, as tenacious a conception as it is a wordless one. Silence serves illusion in such instances, for the dream that revenges itself on an inadequate reality by giving to itself what it will never be given conceals the consolation it knows is not true.

The profound confusion of loss and immortality, in which the presence of one signifies the promise of the other, is permitted, even encouraged,

by the way in which both are predicated on the transcendence of the body—in the case of loss, as the body is sacrificed to the outlines of memory; in the case of immortality, as the body is carved to the essence that underlies mortal appearance. In the sharing of the substitution (of spirit for body, image for form), temporal deprivation and immortal recompense are bound to each other by the negation at their center. For immortality as Dickinson dreams it into existence is not simply specified as permanence; it is also presence liberated from the mortal encumbrances of both flesh and language. In P 679, immortality, personified as a bodiless visitor, assumes the prophetic shape of pure essence, and Dickinson's description of it seems to borrow from the central store of a phenomenalist vocabulary she could not possibly have known. "Presence—," she writes, "is his furthest license—." In P 664, she scripts the presence in more personal terms:

Of all the Souls that stand create—
 I have elected—One—
 When Sense from Spirit—files away—
 And Subterfuge—is done—
 When that which is—and that which was—
 Apart—intrinsic—stand—
 And this brief Drama in the flesh—
 Is shifted—like a Sand—
 When Figures show their royal Front—
 And Mists—are carved away,
 Behold the Atom—I preferred—
 To all the lists of Clay!

As the dream literalizes itself and takes shape, we see it has no shape at all, that it reduces human form to the essence of an "Atom—" that underlies it; elsewhere the flinging away of the body (in P 511 Dickinson had spoken of tossing it away "like a Rind") is feared as well as desired. After the death of Edward Dickinson, his daughter writes: "I dream about father every night . . . and forget what I am doing daytimes, wondering where he is. Without any body, I keep thinking. What kind can that be?" (L 471). Yet however it puzzles conception, immortality purified of all but created soul is what Dickinson professes to want, and she sometimes appears to hoard the losses allotted to her, as if through the holes made by time and space immortality might be glimpsed. Implicit in the utterances on loss is the belief that immortality not only will

replace an inadequate temporal scheme in the future that is promised by a traditional Christianity (this is the mathematics of recompense about which I just spoke), but also that it does replace temporality in the present, as the body is transcended in the phenomena of loss and immortality alike.⁴ It is no wonder that Dickinson retreated to her legendary solitude, for to people her world would have been to forfeit the identification between loss and immortality and to substitute in its stead the palpable forms that negated both. She did not do it. Her poems juxtapose time and immortality with the fervor of a hallucination, and, notwithstanding the simplification of any such statement, the juxtaposition might be said to underlie all the temporal perplexities that aggravate the poems and to create as well the great mirages that transform illusion into something we can only call art, the complex meditations on the terrible grief of dying.

II

"Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—/Success in Circuit lies," Dickinson writes in P 1129, and the statement turns our attention to the implied synonymy between slantness and circuitry, even though one is linear, coming at an angle, and the other curvilinear, working around a circumference. The illogical overlap between obliquity and circuitry is a direct consequence of Dickinson's preoccupation with ineffable centerings. For however close the lens of a given poem comes to the subject of attention, to a center, its speaker perceives that subject shift out of the line of direct vision. To see from a perspective is to see at a slant, as the following poem indicates:

The Angle of a Landscape—
That every time I wake—
Between my Curtain and the Wall—
Upon an ample Crack—

Like a Venetian—waiting—
Accosts my open eye—
Is just a Bough of Apples—
Held slanting, in the Sky—
.....

(P 375)

In the "Bough of Apples—" forming its own angle, the subject comes to light readily enough, however deceptively it appears on the wrong side of

the horizon, but most poems are not so quick to distinguish the landscape from the linear displacements of the speaker's angle of vision. At a more subtle level of obliquity, entire landscapes can seem like indirect renderings of something larger of which they are a mere part. Landscapes are thus generally symbolic in the poems, bearers of more meaning than a given speaker can interpret (as in "There's a certain Slant of light"), or they are deficient of meaning, unable to rise to its occasion (as in "A Light exists in Spring"), and this excess or deficit indicates a profound discrepancy between the multitudinous lines of the world and the optics of a central vision that, more often than not, they may be accused of baffling. Thus the horizon, with which a fair number of Dickinson's poems are concerned,⁵ is an especially beguiling landscape, because the infinite transformations to which it is subject hint at an ultimate disclosure, the lurking of something behind the visible to which it will shortly give way.

To alter the metaphor, we can distinguish the lines of the characteristic Dickinson angle if we observe that it often brings time and immortality into direct proximity. The angle, then, is a comparative one, but the particular nature of the comparison raises problems: first, because since the immortal world cannot be seen, it must be specified in lieu of any concrete form, discerned in the shape of a formal absence; and second, just because we are at a loss to see the invisible half alluded to, the particularities of the temporal world, when it is invoked, can seem equally inscrutable and, sometimes for lack of any focusing comparative, even arbitrary. Dickinson seems to have the dilemma of an implied but unspecified second world in mind when she writes:

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.

(P 1138)

Here the relationship between what is visible and what is not strains toward formulation in the last stanza, but the polysyllabic abstractions

that link appearance, calculated effort, and an intimated other world cohere more as a consequence of verbal patterning (the like sound of words and their arrangement in a sequence suggestive of meaning) than of any demonstrated semantic connection. The poem advances an analogic relationship between "Physiognomy" and "Immortality"; the spider's "Arc of White" (the meaning of which cannot be discerned) is of a piece with the inscrutable web of "Immortality," but the confounding preposition "*Of*" which precedes "Immortality," backs away from the question of how (are the two connected by an identity of elements, by shared origin, or is the spider's unfathomable design a mere characteristic of "Immortality"?). Thus the fact of the relationship overtakes all single explanation of it, and the multiple possibilities hang between the two terms, a web of the poet's making. We might speculate that the form of the web is to the spider's conception of it ("Himself himself inform," as the poem puns)⁶ as the web is to immortality, and both the first and last terms of the analogy remain unspecified, for however close Dickinson comes to defining the relationship between the embodied world and the immortal one, she falls short of a satisfactory answer. "Not 'Revelation'—tis—that waits/But our unfurnished eyes—," she had written impatiently (P 685), and as if to jar vision from the modesty of its limitations, her poems spin out new attempts at defining the relationship, each time catching it at a different angle.

Sometimes the contrast between the embodied world and the immortal one assumes implicit temporal form, as in the following poem:

A Bird came down the Walk—
 He did not know I saw—
 He bit an Angeworm in halves
 And ate the fellow, raw,

 And then he drank a Dew
 From a convenient Grass—
 And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
 To let a Beetle pass—

 He glanced with rapid eyes
 That hurried all around—
 They looked like frightened Beads, I thought—
 He stirred his Velvet Head

 Like one in danger, Cautious,

I offered him a Crumb
 And he unrolled his feathers
 And rowed him softer home—

 Than Oars divide the Ocean,
 Too silver for a seam—
 Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
 Leap, plashless as they swim.

(P 328)

The discrete movements of the first stanzas, introduced by anaphora and rhythmically imitative of the rapid, uneven motions of the bird glimpsed close-up, give way to the sheer verb of flight, irreducible to singularity or sequence. Riding on the brilliance of Dickinson's similes for it, this latter, seamless movement suggests a further implied contrast between diachronic progression and the synchrony that surpasses it, between the mortal world which can be fathomed and the magical one which evades the understanding as it evades the eye. The second inscrutable world establishes its connection to the immortal one, first, because of the leap meaning takes off the metaphoric "Banks of Noon," which, even were this not Dickinson's temporal indication of immortality, would insist on an interpretation beyond all bounds of the finite, and second, because of the extravagant comparative ushered in by the one simile that does describe a finite reality: "And rowed him softer home—/Than Oars divide the Ocean,/Too silver for a seam—." The grammar makes it ambiguous whether it is the ocean that is seamless or the rowing, and the comparative statement poised between the possibilities insists that Dickinson intended this ambiguity, which imitates the indivisibility it talks about by refusing to allow us to separate the two ideas. In fact the poem exemplifies a typical pattern of development in a good number of Dickinson's utterances, as they linger on concrete, often trivial but entirely comprehensible phenomena, and then alter their focus in a tensile shift of the received lines into a shape that utterly perplexes them. Thus the question raised by "A spider sewed at Night" is now posed in the speaker's implicit query of the relationship between sequence and simultaneity, division and seamlessness.

In "The Soul has Bandaged moments," temporal contrast is made explicit, formulated by the soul's transcendence of temporal division:

The soul has moments of Escape—
 When bursting all the doors—

She dances like a Bomb, abroad,
And swings upon the Hours,

As do the Bee—delirious borne—
Long Dungeoned from his Rose—
Touch Liberty—then know no more,
But Noon, and Paradise—

and

The Soul's retaken moments—
When, Felon led along,
With shackles on the plumed feet,
And staples, in the Song,

..... (P 512)

The contrast between liberty and bondage is measured best by two lines that emphasize its antiphonal strains despite the fact that they are not grammatically parallel: by "And swings upon the Hours," which, borne into motion by the preceding line, eases the speaker from one temporal unit to the next as dexterously as if the hours had become partners in the fluid dance of movement, and by "And staples, in the Song," which continues the metaphor of music by internalizing it as song and, in its most complex achievement, drives together through one word, "staples," the separate ideas of division and pain. Although the poem presents an ostensible contrast between "Dungeoned" moments and "moments of Escape—," it does so partially in order to uncover the underlying dialectic of time and its annihilation (the "deliri[um]" of immortality which is "Noon").

Many of Dickinson's poems are balanced on such a contrast; others lean toward one of its extremes. In the following poem, for example, which envisions a leavetaking of the known temporal world, abstraction invests utterance with the foreignness of the venture:

I saw no Way—The Heavens were stitched—
I felt the Columns close—
The Earth reversed her Hemispheres—
I touched the Universe—

And back it slid—and I alone—
A Speck upon a Ball—

Went out upon Circumference—
Beyond the Dip of Bell— (P 378)

How much language depends upon the conceptual ignorance that underlies it is immediately apparent if we think of the systematic conversion of everything known into a territorial blank. The dead-end of the poem's beginning, which closes the speaker off from heaven and then more dramatically turns the world inside out so that, almost expelled from it, she is left standing upon a mere rim, the "Circumference—" of the last lines, is one of the most drastic metaphors for exile Dickinson ever conceived, and the language is giddy with the speaker's disorientation. When Dickinson's poems go "Beyond the Dip of Bell—," as this one attempts to do, to excavate the territory that lies past the range of all phenomenal sense, they are haunted by the terrible space of the venture, as language is flung out into the reaches of the unknown in the apparent hope that it might civilize what it finds there. At the other extreme, the temporal particularities of the familiar world are observed at close range:

Bees are Black, with Gilt Surcingles—
Buccaneers of Buzz.
Ride abroad on ostentation
And subsist on Fuzz.

Fuzz ordained—not Fuzz contingent—
Marrows of the Hill.
Jugs—a Universe's fracture
Could not jar or spill. (P 1405)

Even here, however, in the last lines, the unexpected "Fuzz ordained—not Fuzz contingent—" rescues the bee from the triviality to which "Buccaneers of Buzz" had almost certainly doomed it. This is not so much metaphor as it is metaphysics when, from another world, the bee is invested with priest-like powers. Inversely, at the end of "I saw no Way," the final image, "Beyond the Dip of Bell—," offers a concrete temporal sound (however it claims a departure "Beyond" it) to which we can anchor the preceding descriptions that might otherwise fail to survive abstraction.

As the contrast between "I saw no Way—The Heavens were stitched" and "Bees are Black with Gilt Surcingles" indicates, Dickinson writes best about what she must conceptualize, and Archibald MacLeish states this fact succinctly when he observes that her images are "not always visible

... nor are they images brought into focus by the muscles of the eye."⁷ When we recall some of the most typical Dickinson lines ("Pain—has an Element of Blank—" [P 650], "A nearness to Tremendousness—/An Agony procures—" [P 963]), we note that these lines strain toward conceptual realization that will replace, as by an effort of mind, what is visible with depictions that more adequately represent the landscape of the mind. Sometimes the angle of a poem is formed by the disparity between the dimensions of the palpable world and those of a less circumscribed interior. So she writes: "Two Lengths has every Day—/Its absolute extent/And Area Superior/By Hope or Horror lent—" (P 1295). Sometimes a poem is trained on the divergence of private and public value: "The Voice that stands for Floods to me/Is sterile borne to some—" (P 1189). And as I shall be suggesting in the following chapters, the poems that command the most interest are concerned with certain substitutions that relegate the visible world to the second place accorded it by the sharper demands of imagination and desire: the substitution of immortality for temporal progression, the remembered moment for the immediate one, presence for the language it has dispensed with. These poems address themselves to the world of absent things, to what is "Convenient to the longing/But otherwise withheld" (P 1753), and as a consequence they often become problematic, for, as I have been asserting, when an absent world is alluded to, especially in a comparative circumstance, the angle of a poem's landscape is frequently difficult to ascertain.

III

When Dickinson told Thomas Wentworth Higginson that she had not learned to tell time by the clock until she was fifteen,⁸ she must have shocked him, though like many Dickinson readers after him, he did not think to explain the disjointed syntax of her utterances or the reluctance of the words to totalize themselves in a concrete situation by their author's pull away from time. The poems bear traces of a different shock, as they are jarred loose and jolted from the requirements of a temporal world. I shall say more about temporality and Dickinson's poems in a moment, but I should like first to summarize some of the other, acknowledged critical problems that plague her work—problems of biography, literary history, and textual history, and those which arise more directly from a reading of the poems. My intention in these introductory pages is

to characterize the diversity of response to Dickinson and the difficulties of her poetry rather than to recapitulate it in total (for most of these subjects wholly adequate book-length studies exist), and to suggest a framework for my own discussion in the following chapters.

"Biography first convinces us of the fleeing of the Biographied—" (L 972), Dickinson wrote in an assertion her biographers have been fond of ever since, because it seems to offer such compelling justification for the blurred distinctions between fact and fiction that have characterized the attempts to explain her life. Thus in the earliest full-length biography, George Whicher reminds us that we should not "heedlessly disregard Emily Dickinson's warning that the speaker is not herself but a 'supposed person,'" but in the next sentence he adds: "Her romance was not created out of nothing, and the supposed person may often be considered as identical with the author to the extent of voicing her real feelings."⁹ And when in *Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson* Robert Sherwood suggests that an accurate ordering of the poems would show us the specific nature of Dickinson's spiritual crisis,¹⁰ we see that the problem has come full circle: the life is now the primary text, the poems an explication of it. Though biographical studies were supplemented by documentary ones (in 1970 Jay Leyda published his two-volume reference book, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*,¹¹ which reconstructed Dickinson's life and the life of the Amherst community by juxtaposing entries from diaries, church records, newspaper clippings, letters, and the like, and in 1966 Jack L. Capps brought out his sourcebook, *Emily Dickinson's Reading*,¹² the demythologizing of Dickinson's personal history was countered from the beginning by the many studies that sought to advance their own myths by offering elaborate theories on the identity of Dickinson's lover(s) and, more recently, by the psychoanalytic speculation of John Cody's *After Great Pain*.¹³

We assume that the penchant for reconstruction and invention is the consequence of a dearth of biographical material. Perhaps, however, the problem is exactly the reverse, for we have those endlessly suggestive letters that are on the one hand held up as literary documents¹⁴ and, on the other, appealed to as if their assertions could command the authority of fact. It is questionable whether anyone's letters should be taken as a reliable form of biography, and Dickinson's letters are particularly suspect, for, as her brother, Austin, claimed, his sister definitely posed in

them. Once, for example, she wrote to Higginson: "Father . . . buys me many Books—but begs me not to read them—because he fears they joggle the Mind" (L 261). In the face of Austin's astonishment at the story, we may speculate that Dickinson was merely literalizing the harshness of an emotional truth, translating Edward Dickinson's indifference into outright unreasonable severity. It is what we do all the time when we wish to ground a feeling in the palpable occurrence that would substantiate it. We say "It was like . . ." if we are scrupulous, and "It was . . ." if we are not. We lie for the sake of accuracy. In Dickinson's letters we can observe that the more vested the relationship with the letter recipient, the more aphoristic, epigrammatic, and explicitly literary the letters become, almost as if she were calling on distance to temper the disquieting anxieties of unmediated connection, and the letters may, in fact, tell us more about the postures that replace relationship than about the relationships themselves.¹⁵ In addition, they share characteristic features of the poems: many of them are metrical compositions, some are subject to meticulous revision, and certain phrases, even whole formulations, appear in both letter and poem contexts. Thus as Brita Lindberg-Seyersted suggests, the letters bear a frank confusion between the public and the private,¹⁶ and if we have difficulty separating the life from the poetry, this is aggravated by Dickinson's confusion of the two. Even Richard Sewall's wonderfully complete two-volume biography reads like a detective story with a chapter devoted to each of the characters, the details of whose lives we note so that we may better construe the intricacies of plot. When we are baffled by the poems, we dismiss our confusion by embracing the myth, ready at hand, of Dickinson the half-cracked poetess.

If the story of Dickinson's life is unclear, her place in literary history has been subject to greater uncertainty. Even after literary opinion warmed to the texts, no longer dismissing them as incompetent or incomprehensible, critics seemed unable to determine Dickinson's relation to the tradition into which they welcomed her, and it was not until Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* was published in 1961 that her connection to Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman was firmly established in a literary history.¹⁷ To this day Dickinson criticism remains divided between those who regard her as a Romantic poet and those who see her work firmly rooted in the New England tradition of an earlier Puritanism. Allen Tate, advancing a compromise position, maintains that Dickinson stands between a declining theocracy

and a rising industrialism, and that she "probes the deficiencies of the tradition" in which she lives, continuing to enact "the puritan drama of the soul," but now on individual terms.¹⁸ Albert Gelpi, echoing Tate, calls her "a Romantic Poet with a Calvinist's sense of things."¹⁹ But Charles Anderson asserts that she had "less kinship with her romantic predecessors than with Jonathan Edwards,"²⁰ and Sherwood agrees, insisting that the "conjoining of passion with status that distinguished the Puritans from the enthusiasts they detested . . . separates Emily Dickinson from the Romantic tradition into which Tate would like to place her work."²¹ These points of view are, of course, predicated on unstated assumptions about social influence and identity. Elsa Greene argues with them: "[Dickinson] did not, in fact, inhabit the same milieu which influenced Ralph Waldo Emerson and his puritan male forebears; and it is a deadly favor to assume that she did. . . . Emily Dickinson risked psychic and social penalties unknown to her masculine predecessors."²² Dickinson's place within a literary tradition is thus a problem that invites multiple interpretation, and I shall consider it explicitly in the last chapter when I discuss the relationship between the temporal features of Dickinson's poems and the temporal representations characteristic of both an older Romanticism in England and of a newer, more audacious American Romanticism.

The discriminatory haggling over status and position has gone on at a critical level, too. Yvor Winters writes, "Probably no poet of comparable reputation has been guilty of so much unpardonable writing," and he adds, "One cannot shake off the uncomfortable feeling that her popularity has been mainly due to her vices."²³ And R. P. Blackmur: "One exaggerates, but it sometimes seems as if . . . a cat came at us speaking English."²⁴ Robert Hillyer defends the idiosyncrasies when he asks "Who, in the presence of these amazing poems, would wish a single twisted syllable straightened to ensure the comprehension of mediocre minds or the applause of pedants?"²⁵ But while we might agree with him that Dickinson's works will not stand regularizing, the critical bickering suggests problems. These are problems of text, of poetic development, of syntax and diction, of consequent ambiguity, and of the temporal assumptions that underlie these features, and I shall say a few words about each of them.

With the publication of the Johnson variorum in 1955, it became possible to determine whether a given Dickinson piece is a finished poem, a note for a poem, or a prose fragment,²⁶ but although the textual

situation is improved beyond measure, the variorum is less free of editorial interpretation than one could wish, and the reader's edition is even more burdened with it. This is true first because while any hand-written text must suffer the inexact representation (the regularizing) of the printed word, the problem is particularly severe for Dickinson's texts, punctuated as they are with dashes of varying lengths and perhaps of varying meanings.²⁷ A second and more central textual difficulty arises over the question of the variants. This is stated succinctly by R. W. Franklin in his invaluable book on the editing of the Dickinson manuscripts: "Scholarly editions are concerned only with authors' sanctioned texts, preferably the latest . . . [but] with Emily Dickinson we do not have the guidance of this principle, for she never willingly committed herself to print."²⁸ Problems posed by the reader's edition are even more complex, for there one variant must often be arbitrarily selected as representative, a process that is tantamount to editorial completion of the poem in question.²⁹

If we could observe changes in the style of the poems, it might be easier to arrive at textual decisions. But, in fact, as most critics agree, there is no development in the canon of poems.³⁰ The experiences recorded by these poems are insular ones, subject to endless repetition.³¹ Indeed it sometimes seems as if the same poem of pain or loss keeps writing itself over and over. Perhaps there is no development in the poetry because development is at least partially the result of influences that mediate the given, and Dickinson never accepted any mediation, even that which she enthusiastically solicited.³²

The absence of development within the 1775 poems is reflected in the resistance of many individual poems to the rigors and exactions of sequence and progression. For the words in Dickinson's poems often exist outside of a situation and, more disturbing, seem to shrink from the necessity of creating one. In fact many poems contain lines that are memorable in contexts that are not, and the memorable lines are frequently the first lines. Of the provocative first lines, Charles Anderson writes, "Not one in ten [poems] fulfills the brilliant promise of the opening words,"³³ and R. P. Blackmur adds, "The movement of the parts is downward and towards a disintegration of the effect wanted."³⁴ Dickinson herself, hardly blind to the power of initial lines, wrote of another (unidentified) poet, "Did you ever read one of her Poems backward, because the plunge from the front overturned you? I sometimes . . . have—A something overtakes the Mind" (PF 30).

Sometimes problems of sequence and structure are apparent at the simplest level of relationship. The feeling after great pain is of "A Quartz contentment, like a stone—" (P 341), but quartz is a stone, and without explanation, the meanings overlap seemingly without purpose. When an entire line is unclear the situation is more baffling yet. "Unit, like Death, for Whom?" P 408 begins, and although we learn from context that the "Unit" alluded to is comprised of death and its victim, the simile in the first line remains perplexing because it presents an identic connection as if it were an analogic one. The relationship between the elements of Dickinson's poems can be difficult to perceive as a consequence of the order in which they are introduced. When we are told that "The difference between Despair/and Fear—is like the One/Between the instant of a Wreck—/And when the Wreck has been—" (P 305), we adjust to the fact that the terms of the simile are presented in inverse order from those of the initial comparison, but I have yet to teach the poem when the adjustment has not been a grudging one.

Frequently, as I have suggested, Dickinson presents us with states of feeling that are severed from the geography that would explain them, and many poems begin with a deliberately unspecified "it," as, for example, "Tis so appalling, it exhilarates" does, in which we are never quite certain whether the subject is death or a horror so manifestly unspeakable that it evades all attempts at direct naming. Robert Weisbuch attributes the apparent "scenelessness" of Dickinson's poetry to the replacement of scene by analogy:³⁵ "The poems do not lack a situational matrix—that would be impossible—but mimetic situations are transformed, transported to a world of analogical language which exists in parallel to a world of experience, as its definition."³⁶ Given this interpretation, poems do not progress in customary sequences, because they are intent on dramatizing the heart of an experience rather than its outward shape. While one could wish Weisbuch had somewhere distinguished between a type of lyric poetry (which he assumes these analogic collections to be) and a problem with it, his study, concerned with poems as analogues and, in a larger context, as types, makes impressive sense of the obscure relationships in Dickinson's poems, and it brings to the critical foreground difficulties of situational coherence, of meanings that break through the surface of a poem and seemingly bear little relation to it, and of the balancing of a poem on its divided loyalties (whether they be to type and antitype, analogue and its reference, this world and the next).

A reader may perceive the problem of fragmentation first at the level of syntax that is often hopelessly involuted, as if in response to the task of representing interior experience. Richard Chase comments on the bizarre syntax when he writes, "It is clear that, however memorable some of her phrases are, she had an exaggerated idea of what could be accomplished merely by tinkering with syntax. This faith in the efficacy of . . . word magic is one of the permanent acquisitions of the period."³⁷ Thus in Dickinson's poems we often have the impression that the phenomena presented have been subjected to extreme compression—objects elided with each other so that we can no longer observe the totality of their separate shapes, but only the jutting of lines away from an unseen center of convergence. It is almost as though utterance conspires to angle meaning to such a degree that it becomes oblique to the point of invisibility. In the following poem, for example, verbal designation seems to guard the meaning it ostensibly specifies:

As the Starved Maelstrom laps the Navies
As the Vulture teased
Forces the Broods in lonely Valleys
As the Tiger eased

By but a Crumb of Blood, fasts Scarlet
Till he meet a Man
Dainty adorned with Veins and Tissues
And partakes—his Tongue

Cooled by the Morsel for a moment
Grows a fiercer thing
Till he esteem his Dates and Cocoa
A Nutrition mean

I, of a finer Famine
Deem my Supper dry
For but a Berry of Domingo
And a Torrid Eye.

(P 872)

The analogues for ravenousness (the "Maelstrom" for the "Navies," the "Vulture" for the "Broods," the "Tiger" for the "Crumb of Blood," and, finally, the speaker for the unspecified object of absence) collapse upon each other, each an illustration of the same thing, except progressively humanized and growing in the extremity of famine.³⁸ The utterance

is not easy to read; everything about it conspires to withhold sense, a fact emphasized by the long single sentence that attenuates meaning, making it wait on the finality of a grammatical completion. The synecdochic process of taking a part for the whole, common to all poetry, is exaggerated in Dickinson's characteristic use of it in which the representative incompletions are placed in a larger context of verbal incompleteness, of truncated verb forms ("Till he meet a Man"), of unlike terms disconcertingly coupled with each other ("Crumb of Blood"), and of those off-rhymes that can often seem a paradoxical combination of singsong and dissonance (Man/Tongue, thing/mean, Famine/Domingo)—all pushing utterance dangerously close to a mere word tangle. The utterance is intent on joining two lines of thought that have an unclear relationship to each other, and at the same time the claims made by these thoughts are not fleshed out by any discursive explanation. Thus the whole vision is seen from the vantage of an unspecified perspective (in this case, the relationship between famine and fulfillment) that must be specified before the reader can begin to make sense of it.

Addressing himself to comparable difficulties, David Porter writes, "Here is the verbal equivalent of *sfumato*, the technique in expressionistic painting whereby information . . . on a canvas is given only piecemeal and thereby necessarily stimulates the imaginative projection of the viewer, who, out of his own experience, supplies the missing . . . context."³⁹ Mention of contextual difficulty in Dickinson's poems runs like a theme throughout the criticism, but the crucial relationship between contextual disorder and temporal conception has never been examined in detail, and in chapters 1 and 2 I shall look closely at words that refuse to totalize themselves in a context and at the shrinking from temporal sequence that underlies such a refusal.

It is easy to assume that the individual words in Dickinson's poems startle as a consequence of their rare usage, but William Howard, in his informative article on Dickinson's vocabulary, tells us that according to statistical study, Dickinson does not have certain favorite or idiosyncratic words. What accounts for the seeming oddness of the diction is her habit of using a word now in a metaphoric context, now in a literal one, with no clear distinction between the two.⁴⁰ Austin Warren agrees that "the referent and its metaphoric referend are often difficult to distinguish,"⁴¹ and he reminds us of "There's a certain Slant of light," where death is a metaphor for winter light and winter light is a metaphor for death.⁴² I shall have more to say about comparable fusions between

death and despair in chapter 3 when I discuss the collapse of figure and thing figured, and underlying, even prompting it, the terror of temporal and spatial difference. The unclear relationship of words to their context and the fusion of metaphor and referent leads predictably to ambiguity. Jay Leyda specifies a further explanation for the ambiguity when he notes that "a major device of Emily Dickinson's writing . . . [is] the 'omitted center,' [t]he riddle, the circumstance too well known to be repeated."⁴³ While I would want to qualify that assertion by suggesting that in many poems ("A route of evanescence" or "Further in summer than the birds," for example) the center or heart of the experience is presented in lieu of any surrounding context, in chapter 4 I shall look at problems of the omitted center in order to define more explicitly the connection between utterance, absence, and temporality.

Fragmentary lines, the refusal of syntax and diction to subordinate themselves to each other, the subsequent absence of context and progression, the resulting ambiguity and tension—we may conceive of these problems as temporal in origin, for the relationship between the parts of a poem is inevitably a temporal relationship.

IV

All poetry is characterized by problems; put differently, its characteristics, those properties that individuate and distinguish it, also define the specific form of its difficulty. So Yeats's philosophic system is at once a feature of his poetry and a barrier to its accessibility; so the heap of broken images in Eliot's *The Waste Land* asserts an aggressive challenge as well as a method; so Raleigh's *Ocean to Cynthia*, restless in its psychological shifts, presents us with the dilemmas of a fragmentary poem. But to the extent that characteristics become obstacles we must scrutinize them differently; the question of the problematic is really one of degree, and in the next few chapters I shall look more closely at poems that fragment as a consequence of their failure to adhere to the rigors of a temporal scheme. If one reason for investigating these poems is the relationship between problems and characteristics, a second and more theoretical reason is that assessments of the problematic, if they survive scrutiny, have much to tell us about what we imagine to be the model or norm. I am speaking here of fictional models or, to use a more classical term, of mimetic ones, and the subject is a touchy one for many reasons, not the least of which is raised by the old question of whether there is or

is not a normative reader with normative expectations of a text that is or is not stable with respect to its hold over us. These questions aside (and I can afford momentarily to put them aside because they have already been partially explored by such writers as Hans-Georg Gadamer, E. D. Hirsch, Stanley Fish, and Richard Ohmann), we wish to know whether a comprehensive picture of actual difficulties in a specific body of poetry will outline the shape of that elusive fictional model on which so many of our assumptions rest unquestioned. Seeing the shape of the problem, might we see double the shape of the form that the problem displaces? The conception here is admittedly Platonic, and if it is exaggerated in its suggestion that good poems conform to one shape, it is useful in its reminder that certain forms of deviation are, for reasons that require investigation, intolerable.

Aristotle spoke of poetry as the imitation of an action; John Stuart Mill specified the action by suggesting it to be one of speech in overheard soliloquy, and we may consider these two assertions as the beginning of a definition of poetic utterance, whose fiction lies in the illusion that someone is really talking. Although we generally believe that how a given speaker talks, or is talked about, will be determined by the ruling assumptions of the fictional world out of which he steps, we are not always sharp to the dramatic implications of that fact. Erich Auerbach, contrasting the different styles of Homeric and Biblical worlds in the unforgettable argument of *Mimesis*, demonstrated that the constructs of a given fictional world impose a reality—they do not mirror it—and these impositions are as various as interpretive possibility permits. One of the largest single differences between Homeric and Biblical worlds is their sense of time. Auerbach writes:

So little are the Homeric heroes presented as developing or having developed, that most of them—Nestor, Agamemnon, Achilles—appear to be of an aged fixed from the very first. Even Odysseus, in whose case the long lapse of time and the many events which occurred offer so much opportunity for biographical development, shows almost nothing of it. Odysseus on his return is exactly the same as he was when he left Ithaca two decades earlier. But what a road, what a fate, lie between the Jacob who cheated his father out of his blessing and the old man whose favorite son has been torn to pieces by a wild beast!—between David the harp player, persecuted by his lord's

jealousy, and the old king, surrounded by violent intrigues, whom Abishag the Shunnamite warmed in his bed, and he knew her not. . . . Fraught with their development, sometimes even aged to the verge of dissolution, they show a distinct stamp of individuality entirely foreign to the Homeric heroes. Time can touch the latter only outwardly, and even that change is brought to our observation as little as possible; whereas the stern hand of God is ever upon the Old Testament figures; he has not only made them once and for all and chosen them, but he continues to work upon them, bends them and kneads them, and, without destroying them in essence, produces from them forms which their youth gave no grounds for anticipating.⁴⁴

Auerbach's assertion that each representation of reality is predicated upon a unique understanding of time, history, spatial configuration, and meaning itself is one of the most crucial lessons modern literary theory has to teach us, and the only danger of his stunning examples is that they illustrate the implied contrasts so dramatically that we may mistakenly take them for the exceptions they are not. But narrative predilections (the representation of speech by choral voices or singular ones, as hermetically determined through the interpretations of a censorious narrator, or direct enough to go it without mediation) are an indication of the temporal suppositions that underlie them, and if we doubt the crucial relationship between the ability to speak at all and an indispensable sense of time, we have only to recall the floundering misery of Beckett's Unnamable, whose speech slows to a halt because it is no longer carried by the temporal momentum that would guarantee thought its most rudimentary completion: "The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter. And at the same time I am obliged to speak."⁴⁵ Speech falters at a coherent story, even at a complete sentence, because no temporal unity holds the generating conception in the glue of a complete thought. We could say that the Unnamable has no memory of thought's intention beyond the circumscribed present of a given phrase; or, to put it differently, he has no sense of time. Although this is perhaps an extreme example, and although Beckett's work, like that of many other contemporaries, breaks all the generic rules we might specify, it points

out the uncompromising relationship between temporal disorder and the ensuing disintegration of speech. Conversely, the narrative generosity of Nabokov's *Lolita* may be explained partly by its central character's desire to transfix the world in the apotheosis of what he calls "minus time-space or plus soul-time,"⁴⁶ as, drunk on the nuance of memory, the rapt magnanimous words coax the objects of his descriptions—much as he coaxes the little girl—out of the dull plane of ordinary temporality and into the immutable radiance, the soul-time of that impossible love.

Ideas of temporality perhaps reveal themselves more easily in the complexities of narrative construction, for in narratives problems of linking actions and hence of establishing their relationships in time are necessarily overt. But temporal structures and suppositions are also visible in the imitated action of overheard soliloquy, and if we doubt this we have only to consider the temporal invention of Herbert's "The Sacrifice," or, less conspicuously, of Blake's "Ah Sun-flower," which, caught in the circularity of the lyric cry against time, does not even know how to imagine anything outside of the temporal limitations it desires to overcome. Often, in fact, we cannot perceive the meaning of a given utterance until we understand its speaker's conception of time; this is transparently true in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, where temporal advance is countered by the vagaries of terror, however socialized into wit, and in the desperate strategies of Marvell's coy seducer. It is equally true in Eliot's layered speech that would coerce past, present, and future into the sudden illumination of a given moment. It is true in the temporal juxtapositions of Yeats's "Long-Legged Fly," in which greatness is interpreted by the temporal lethargy that fuels its most monumental acts: "Like a long-legged fly upon the stream/His mind moves upon silence," and true also of the multiple possibilities in many of Stevens's poems that express as a sequence what is really a simultaneity ("Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black-bird" is the most obvious example). It is in fact frequently the case that a poem remains difficult when (or because) we do not understand the temporal suppositions of its speakers, and that this should be so may be explained partially by the fact that a poetic structure (like other mimetic structures, but less obviously because it is shorter) is a complete structure, framed by an end and a beginning (points that are definitively temporal) whose tasks are not only to start and conclude but also, however implicitly, to specify the basis on which speech is begun and ended through the unique particularities of the experience itself.

In *Poetic Closure* Barbara Herrnstein Smith discusses the relationship

between fictional totality and the specific context out of which a certain closure is deemed an appropriate one, and she stresses the fact that our ideas about the adequacy of given closure are directly contingent upon how we assess a speaker's situation and motive.⁴⁷ Stanley Cavell, writing more philosophically of the temporal-spatial closure that seals a fiction from the hazards of our interruption, points out the consequences of the fact that its characters do not exist in our time and space. Thus the man who rushes to the stage to rescue Othello from the lunacy of his actions only puts an end to the performance: "For that farthest extremity has not touched Othello, he has vanished; it has merely interrupted an evening's work. Quiet the house, pick up the thread again, and Othello will reappear, as near and as deaf to us as ever."⁴⁸ And Cavell continues, "We know we cannot approach him, and not because it is not done but because nothing would count as doing it. Put another way, they and we do not occupy the same space."⁴⁹ It is precisely because a fiction is housed within the walls of its limitation that we may recognize its characteristics and concerns for what they are, as we are frequently prevented from doing in "real life," where phenomena spill outward, refusing to respect the neatness of any boundaries; precisely because of the intractable adamance of fictional boundaries that we are forced to give over our time and space to the task of true witness. But our ability to do this rests imperatively on the willingness to recognize the fictional world as adjacent to our own, one whose temporal-spatial perspective must first be discerned in the absence of all assumptions except those that are immediately "given."

If a specific fiction is predicated on the unique organization of temporal-spatial reality, it also takes its cues from those generic conventions that spell out the range of the possible alternatives. It goes without saying that how a novel organizes experience (allowing its characters to play out the conflict of their points of view against the backdrop of a narrative authority) is different from how a drama organizes it (liberated as drama is from any visible or embodied unitary perspective), and both novels and drama distinguish themselves from the lyric (whose speaker plots out his concerns in the absence of both action and others), and as my parenthetical qualifications indicate, we tend to cast such differences in terms of narrative technique. All literature attempts to regulate chronology, much literature to defeat it, but the strategic ingenuities of the novel, drama, and lyric regale us variously with the dreams they have wrought. Unlike the drama, whose province is conflict, and unlike the

novel or narrative, which connects isolated moments of time to create a story multiply peopled and framed by a social context, the lyric voice is solitary and generally speaks out of a single moment in time. From the vantage of this distinction certain questions arise: If not by a plurality of characters, how does the lyric represent division, conflict, and multiple points of view? If seeming to defy the social world from which it is set apart, how is it coerced back into relationship with that world? And if speech in a poem is not utterance as we talk or think it, what connection does it bear to the less recognizable world of dream and nightmare? To address these questions, as this book will do, as it considers the relationship between the temporal characteristics of Dickinson's poems and the temporal characteristics of other lyrics, is to acknowledge their origin in the problematics of temporality. The heart of the lyric's sense of time might be specified, at least preliminarily, by its propensity to interiorize, as ambiguity or outright contradiction those conflicts that other mimetic forms conspicuously exteriorize and then allocate to discrete characters who enact them in the manifest pull of opposite points of view.

I shall be suggesting that the temporal problems in Dickinson's poems are frequently exaggerations of those generic features shared by all lyrics, and that it is precisely the distance some of these poems go toward the far end of coherence, precisely the outlandishness of their extremity, which allows us to see, literally magnified, the fine workings of more conventional lyrics. Although I have specified Dickinson's poems as concerned with "The Angle of a Landscape—," with those recondite lines and relations that interpret the landscape and often come to constitute it, most lyrics similarly look under the surface of external phenomena for the hidden perspectives that organize meaning. And although I have suggested that Dickinson's lyrics are especially caught up in the oblique dialectic of time and immortality, we shall see the extent to which all lyrics oppose speech to the action from which it exempts itself, oppose voice as it rise momentarily from the enthusiasms of temporal advance to the flow of time that ultimately rushes over and drowns it. This is a book, then, about time in a particular body of poetry as it teaches us to be aware of the temporal characteristics of a genre, and my interest here is unabashedly theoretical. What is a temporal structure? How is it manifested in the lyric? From what necessity do we engineer such prodigious rearrangements of time?

The poems I shall look at in the next two chapters present interpretive

difficulties as their words come unhinged from all context, and this phenomenon is perfectly consistent with the speakers' desire to shelter themselves from the anxieties of temporal sequence. As much at loose ends as Beckett's *Unnamable*, they seem to imagine a bitter equation between coherence and completion, completion and an analogic association with death. They will not make sense, will not totalize themselves, for to make sense is to do so in the clutches of temporal finitude. Thus courting distance from the pain of all complexity, the poems discussed in chapter 1 shy away from a dialectical understanding of experience, and sometimes their speakers seem literally stunned to the standstill of a poem's disengaged meanings. In chapter 2 I compare narrative conceptions of temporality with lyric conceptions of it, as I try to account for that group of Dickinson poems in which a story is begun only to be violently broken into and disrupted. Defining life as a series of unviable alternatives, these poems establish the dialectic eschewed by the first group of poems, but only for the sake of dismissing it. They thus end in a similar state of disorder, equally seeming to pin their hopes on the belief that a verbal sabotage of sequence will trigger a temporal one, that, grown sufficiently desperate, the maneuvers of speech can stop time dead. As they straddle the line between utterance and cry, between coherent gesture and mere inarticulate protest, they remain curiously unconscious of the dilemmas they enact.

The poems discussed in the next two chapters examine their recoil from temporality; they do not, as a rule, enact it, and the result is more cohesive as well as more conventionally structured utterances. Their subject, however, is far from conventional. Dreaming time to a halt in the trespass of the proleptic utterances, the speakers in the poems discussed in chapter 3 survive the finality of the grave, and the chapter examines the structure of these death excursions as they fuse the terms of the contradictions they do not know how to dispel—the transcendence of mortal vision and the impossibility of that transcendence, an analogic experience of death and the formidable restrictions of a literal one. The poems discussed in chapter 4, no longer angling for a way out of time and its attendant terminus of death, steel themselves on the grief of the suddenly acknowledged relationship between language, temporality, and loss. At times in the following pages, and in the fourth chapter especially, I shall be suggesting that Dickinson practices a phenomenalist poetics as she argues the connection between presence, its loss, and the restorative labors of language.

Throughout the next four chapters, in order to focus on the specific features of Dickinson's poems, I have relegated general comments about lyric utterance to the margins. These assertions are recovered, explored, and, in some instances, qualified in chapter 5, which, as Dickinson waits in the wings, turns its central attention to more theoretical observations about the temporal features of the lyric and attempts to discriminate between Dickinson's lyrics and the subcategory of lyric utterance that her poems help to define, as both exist against the backdrop of lyric speech in English.

"What, then, is time?" Augustine asks in *The Confessions*,⁵⁰ but the following passage precedes his direct query, as the intimation of an absent permanence precedes sudden bewilderment about change:

[The] heart flutters among the changing things of past and future, and it is still vain. Who will catch hold of it, and make it fast, so that it stands firm for a little while, and for a little while seize the splendor of that ever stable eternity, and compare it with times that never stand fast, and see that it is incomparable to them, and see that a long time cannot become long except out of many passing movements, which cannot be extended together, that in the eternal nothing can pass away but the whole is present, that no time is wholly present? Who will see that all past time is driven back by the future, that all the future is consequent on the past, and all past and future are created and take their course from that which is ever present?

Who will hold the heart of man, so that it may stand still and see how steadfast eternity, neither future nor past, decrees times future and those past? Can my hand do this, or does the hand of my mouth by its little words effect so great a thing?⁵¹

In the following pages we shall observe the ways in which lyric poems attempt such a stasis, as they slow temporal advance to the difficult still point of meaning. "The Torrents of Eternity/Do all but inundate—," wrote Dickinson in P 1380, but, like Augustine, she was speaking out of desire.

II
"A Loaded Gun"
THE DIALECTIC OF RAGE

The storyteller . . . is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story.

—Walter Benjamin

*All men are heroes
By the simple act of dying
And the heroes are our teachers.*

—Nicanor Parra

STORIES are time- and space-bound phenomena, structured by plots that, as Aristotle pointed out, have beginnings, middles, and ends. The narrator does not tell his character's story all at once; incident or event (indeed, like language itself) reveals its meaning gradually, in slow and often painful unraveling. In that time, certain confrontations occur. Perhaps the most central of these takes place between the individual character and the demands of the world to which he must accommodate himself. Stories are the working out of such accommodations, and we value them partly for their insistence that the world's demands, albeit difficult, can be complied with. The fair lady must guess Rumpelstiltskin's name to be saved from his demands; Sir Gawain confront the Green Knight; Dorothea Brooke win freedom from Casaubon, Don Quixote from his illusion, and for each of these imperatives only a limited time is allotted. Most stories show characters coming to the world's terms or suffering because they have failed to do so. In this respect, stories are astonishingly moral. Stories both enact chronology

and insist that it is chronology that has the power to save us. Time will sanction reversals, permit insights, provide space for action, or so we are assured.

Such generalizations about stories, which I must leave, for the moment, incomplete, lead me directly to my subject, which is not stories at all but rather poems, and specifically a group of Dickinson poems that retreat from the telling of stories; from chronology; and sometimes even from coherence. These poems, like those which "name" experience by exempting themselves from it, are patterned by their refusal to make the sort of accommodations described above; they seek a way out of time, a reprieve from it. As such, they raise questions not only about themselves but also about lyric poems as we are going to want to distinguish them from narratives or stories proper. My concerns in the following pages then, will be twofold: first, with a specific group of Dickinson's poems, and second, with the insights they shed on lyric poetry generally.

The Dickinson poems about which I shall be speaking tell a story predicated on a dialectic: this life versus the next; the pleasures of love and sexuality versus a more chaste and bodiless devotion; the demands of the self versus their capitulation to the world's otherness. The dialectic, as my examples suggest, is based on sacrifice (and on protest at its necessity), and it therefore appears to fit into my description of the way in which stories reveal the world as schooling individual expectations. The conflict in the poems, put simply, seems to be between forces of sexuality and forces of death; the poems schematize experience for the explicit purpose of preventing the convergence of sexuality and death, of avoiding the acknowledgment that the two join each other in time, and that the self comes to its end at their meeting. A third voice, intervening in the dialectic, which takes its passion from the knowledge of sexuality and its vengeance from the knowledge of death, is often one of rage.

Rage is a way of preventing the convergence of sexuality and death, albeit momentarily and albeit in full and painful awareness that the two can be kept apart only conceptually and only one step removed from experience. This third voice (the one breaking into the established dialectic in order to complicate it) is a complex one, for its existence, its presence, effects the stopping of time by framing the dilemma in words that exempt themselves from the very process against which they rage and to which they must inevitably return. Thus, if we were to chart the three voices, the two dialectical ones would appear along the same linear plane, although distanced from each other. The third, disruptive, voice

would place itself erratically above that linear progression, in defiance of it. Its position in relation to the two dialectical points against which it was lodging its protest would of course determine the specific nature of the poem.

Often protest in the poems I shall discuss takes the form of a speaker's recoil from the eminence of her own insights. When the refusal to know is an unconscious one, Dickinson loses control over her subject, and seems afflicted by the same paralyzing despair that prohibits coherence as her speakers are. If, to simplify matters, we look first at a poem not structured explicitly by the triad of voices but one in which, nonetheless, the subject matter invites distraction, we will see the disruptive consequences of knowledge that dares not scrutinize itself:

I got so I could take his name—
Without—Tremendous gain—
That Stop-sensation—on my Soul—
And Thunder—in the Room—

I got so I could walk across
That Angle in the floor,
Where he turned so, and I turned—how—
And all our Sinew tore—

I got so I could stir the Box—
In which his letters grew
Without that forcing, in my breath—
As Staples—driven through—

Could dimly recollect a Grace—
I think, they call it "God"—
Renowned to ease Extremity—
When Formula, had failed—

And shape my Hands—
Petition's way,
Tho' ignorant of a word
That Ordination—utters—

My Business, with the Cloud,
If any Power behind it, be,
Not subject to Despair—
It care, in some remoter way,

For so minute affair
As Misery—
Itself, too vast, for interrupting—more— (P 293)

The first three stanzas, with their fusion of agonizing physical and emotional pain, are clear enough. The remembered transport of agony, the marriage of excruciation and ecstasy, the subsequent mastery of emotion—and the speaker's distancing of all of these in the past tense—lead us to expect a peripety. Control recollected may be control that has suffered a collapse, and the stress on the past-tense nature of the control at the beginning of the initial stanzas suggests that the space between the stanzas, to which the speaker's mind temporarily reverts, is occupied by a less manageable present that will eventually overwhelm even memory. But instead of the collapse of control with which the poem tantalizes us, we get a distraction from it: an appeal to God that becomes a way of avoiding feeling, and the poem ends not with passion, as we might expect, but rather with passion defended against. For passion would need to acknowledge directly the attendant circumstance of its loss, the "him" whose most palpable fact is absence.

Thus in the last stanza, confounded by the requirements of the present, utterance is most in disarray. There the speaker seems to be suggesting she would have commerce with a cloud *if* she could be sure a God were behind it, and, in addition (for "be" in the stanza functions as the verb for two subjunctives), that, could she determine such a power were not itself subject to despair, she would cease petitioning it for relief from an affliction that, failing to understand experientially, it could not mitigate. As my paraphrase suggests, the pronoun referent, like the reason for speech itself, is a matter of confusion. Though "It [would] care" refers grammatically to the cloud, the pronoun would be a less enigmatic. "He" if the speaker had any confidence in the power behind it. But although the fifth stanza claims to invoke a God, it is clear by the last stanza that the speaker does not know to whom she is talking, does not know whether she wishes to be talking, and ignorance finally gives way to the acknowledgment that, in such a state, no more can or must be said. For the breaking off of utterance comes at a point when "more" would be an affront not only to God, who may or may not be attending from a distance, but also to the speaker, who acknowledges, albeit covertly, that she has herself become distanced from her subject.

Indeed, what begins as the endurance of great feeling turns into

sudden
change
or
reversal

blasphemy on two counts, first with respect to the earthly lover and second with respect to the God who displaces him, for the poem's initial line suggests a pun on "taking His name in vain." To take it in vain is to take it without comprehending its significance, and this the speaker does initially when his name (the lover's) fails to tap the current of meaning, and later when His name (God's) becomes a denomination so remote in significance that it can barely be summoned, and, once recalled, is attributed to someone else ("I think, they call it 'God'—").

Though the reduction of the experience is attributed to God, "remote[ness]" is a psychological remedy, not the divine cause. Put briefly, God is a way out, an object of simple projection. To the extent that Dickinson fails to know this and does not, I maintain, intend it, we have a complex hermeneutic situation here. Meaning breaks off, dissolves, goes under, at the moment when it is perceived as too painful, and that fact is attended by the rhythmic transformations in the last three stanzas: full rhyme disappears, the common particular meter established in the first three stanzas gives way to variation, as does the regular four-stress line. Such rhythmic change also counterpoints the paraphrasable sense of the lines. The message of the words (their meaning insofar as it can be figured) is "God does not understand and hence cannot care." The rhythmic message of the last three stanzas, however, is "I myself no longer wish to understand and therefore, of course, you must not either." Such a proposition may be arguable, but it makes experiential sense. It is, in fact, the only explanation that makes sense of the abrupt and rather elaborate confusions with which the poem concludes. Agony—in fact all meaning—goes dead on the speaker when she summons distance from her experience and, in so doing, relinquishes it. The poem, though not, I suspect, intentionally, is about what it is like to trivialize feeling because, as is, feeling has become unendurable. Better to make it nothing than to die from it.

The disjunction between the two parts of "I got so I could take his name" is revelatory of narrative breakdown, not of controlled narrative transformation. The speaker is not in possession of her story, or rather she is in possession of two stories, the bringing together of which points to a fundamental ambivalence and an attendant obfuscation of meaning. As a consequence of the ambivalence, meaning becomes symptomatic, breaks out into gesture where it cannot be fully comprehended and where it often expresses feelings that seem antithetical to the earlier intention of its speaker or author—it is difficult to distinguish

adequately between the two in such instances, since both are victims of the same confusion.

Stories are comprehensible because of the connections, implicit or otherwise, that exist between their respective elements. Freud saw health in such connection and in the intelligibility that connection implies. The severing of connection, the gaps in chronology, the faulty memory—it is these psychoanalysis claims to treat so that the end result is nothing less than a complete story that is, in Freud's words, "intelligible, coherent, unbroken."¹ I bring this up here because Stephen Marcus's description of such a coherent story offers an important insight into the problematic aspects of Dickinson's poems when they resist knowledge:

It is a story, or a fiction, not only because it has a narrative structure but also because the narrative account has been rendered in language, in conscious speech, and no longer exists in the deformed language of symptoms, the untranslated speech of the body. At the end—at the successful end—one has come into possession of one's own story. It is a final act of self-appropriation, the appropriation by oneself of one's own history. This is in part so because one's own story is in so large a measure a phenomenon of language, as psychoanalysis is in turn a demonstration of the degree to which language can go in the reading of all our experience.²

Poetry, one might say, acknowledging the substitution, is a demonstration of the degree to which language can go in the reading of all our experience. When it fails, erupts into gesture, becomes "untranslatable," or when its rhythmic manifestations grow so distracting as to convey a separate meaning of their own, we may want to ask why devastation is preferable to coherence, how knowledge threatens the self so that it forgets its own story or falters in the telling of it.

Recognizing that the poems often resist cognitive enclosure, we may want to seek another way of understanding them, or we may modify our conception of what a successful poetic statement is. Jerome McGann, writing of Swinburne's poetry, speaks of poetic speech that conveys "its most moving insights at a level below or beyond the limits of customary discourse."³ McGann continues, "Swinburne deliberately puts meaning beyond the grasp of the cognitive faculties by creating immensely difficult poetic systems or relations; and . . . he simultaneously presents those systems as perfected enclosures which, though they do not define a comprehensive meaning, represent the fact and the idea of wholeness."⁴

While Dickinson's and Swinburne's poetry lie distant from each other in almost every respect, McGann's description could well apply to the poems about which I shall be speaking. Like "I got so I could take his name," the poems that present the triad of voices are problematic ones. In them, it is easy enough for the reader to follow the story established by the dialectic. What is not so easy to interpret is the disruptive third voice, which often finds direct language inadequate.

In the first group of poems I shall consider, we will be dealing with that third voice, the one that interrupts a poem's conclusion and, in so doing, hints at a story other than the one propounded by the ostensible narrative. In the second group of poems, the third voice makes its appearance earlier and more openly by breaking into the center of the narrative and suggesting an outright criticism of the story, which it then revises. In the first instance, disruption of the story renders meaning ambiguous; in the second instance, disruption becomes meaning.

Both groups pose questions about how voice or presence (terms that I shall use synonymously) exists in contradistinction to action, consequence, and even story, and in both groups voice seems to fight against coherence, because it assumes coherence means consequence and consequence, death. Speech in the poems, then, is not the end of, or a response to, emotion, but rather its eruption, and this defense against completion (which, as we shall see, is in fact a defense against death) is exactly opposite to the one employed by the definitional poems. There we observed meaning to be trivialized, winnowed from its own complexity. In the following poems, however, we are dazzled by the confusions of complexity, by multiple meanings often contradictory. The profusion of meaning, the simultaneous posing of its antitheses, does not arise from the dialectic, as we might expect, but rather from the conversation between the dialectic and the third voice, which wishes to subvert it. The dramatic manifestations of such speech indicate that these utterances are neither tranquil nor recollected. Caught in the moment, they draw the reader into the net of their own irresolutions, and, if he does not look sharp he, or his comprehension at any rate, perishes there.

II

"Repetition and recollection are the same movement," Kierkegaard wrote, "only in opposite directions: for what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards, whereas repetition, properly so called, is recollected

forwards."⁵ Kierkegaard continues: "When one does not possess the categories of recollection or of repetition, the whole of life is resolved into a void and empty noise."⁶ In possession of them, however, one takes the universe to task for failing to sanction the categories it has prescribed as requisite for meaning. The following poem is generated by the insight that this world must not be allowed to duplicate the next, lest the latter be found superfluous:

I should have been too glad, I see—
Too lifted—for the scant degree
Of Life's penurious Round—
My little Circuit would have shamed
This new Circumference—have blamed—
The homelier time behind.

I should have been too saved—I see—
Too rescued—Fear too dim to me
That I could spell the Prayer
I knew so perfect—yesterday—
That Scalding One—Sabachthani—
Recited fluent—here—

Earth would have been too much—I see—
And Heaven—not enough for me—
I should have had the Joy
Without the Fear—to justify—
The Palm—without the Calvary—
So Savior—Crucify—

Defeat—whets Victory—they say—
The Reefs—in old Gethsemane—
Endear the Coast—beyond!
'Tis Beggars—Banquets—can define—
'Tis Parching—vitalizes Wine—
"Faith" bleats—to understand!

(P 313)

By the end of the poem it is manifestly clear that what "they say—" is different from what the speaker knows, for the concept of too much salvation is a horrifying, if not nonsensical, concept. Yet God, far from abjuring sameness, seems to require it: the pattern of the speaker's life must duplicate the Savior's lest the "little Circuit" of this life outclass

the "new Circumference—" of the next. If there is a threat prompting the implicit denials, it is inherent in the thought that God does not permit "The Palm—without the Calvary—." Although we might regard the last line as continuous with the poem—considering it only proper for one of the flock to assert that faith must "bleat" its comprehension of God's demands for sacrifice—the quotation marks suggest that this member of the flock who tries to utter the truisms finds herself instead speechless with rage. Thus the implicit grammar of the last line is altered slightly by its juxtaposition to the rest of the poem. The speaker is not saying that faith would have to bleat in order to understand, but rather that faith shakes off human utterance and is roused to animal fury precisely because it cannot. The cry of outrage disrupts the complacent irony that had seemed to structure the initial dialectic, for since "Faith" is the designation for every assertion that has preceded it, at the moment we perceive quotation marks enclose it, the entire poem is suddenly cast into quotation marks.

Although the poem is about excess and the prohibitions against "too much—," it must itself be seen as an extravaganza of protest, enacting the very "too-muchness" that it claims has been prohibited. "Too glad," "too lifted," "too rescued," "too much"—the repetition defies (and not very subtly at that) the injunction against duplicating experience. The syntactic repetitions are equally attention getting ("I should have had the Joy," "My little Circuit would have shamed"); and also attention getting, all the choral expressions of insufficiency ("too dim," "not enough," "without the Calvary—"). Both the common particular meter and the rhyme scheme remain regular throughout, and the poem employs a number of exact rhymes with an insistent repetition that renders their presence didactic, even harsh. It is just the regularity or monotony of sound which seems charged with the fury that will explode at the poem's conclusion.

Thus far my analysis might suggest the poem is an example of what Booth would call "stable irony,"⁷ the discrepancy between the content of the words and the tone of their delivery intimating that all is not what it says. But since the reader is overwhelmed by the resonances of verbal and syntactic repetition *before* he understands their significance, and since the poem will ultimately subvert implication entirely, we must distinguish it from a purely ironic statement in which there is a balanced discrepancy (accorded by the simultaneity of perception) between the content and tone that always remains implicit. Here, although the poem

seems to move between the dialectical terms it has established—this world versus the next, defeat versus victory, the Palm versus Calvary, words of acceptance versus words of denial—there is neither balance nor distance. The speaker cannot echo the words Christ said in Gethsemane, "not as I will, but as Thou wilt"; she cannot echo any words at all. Insofar as fury is the foundation of the poem, it threatens to rupture the walls of each stanza and to dissolve, as it finally does, into the "bleat[ing]" of incomprehension. At that moment, there is only the fluency of rage, whose true language, as the poem's conclusion attests, leaves words in its wake.

The third voice, then, finds direct language inadequate. The inadequacy is exposed by the neat dialectics, for a dialectical understanding of experience here seems to be a way of simplifying it. Underlying the dialectic, inarticulate but fulsome in its power, is the generative force of rage, an alternative voice that concludes the poem by disrupting or redefining its established meaning. Such a conclusion suggests that even irony, which, in other circumstances, we might have trusted as a mirror for the truth, is an evasion of feeling. The ironic story, no less than the one "told straight," is subject to the revisions that passion cannot contain.

If the conclusion of "I should have been too glad I see" is a readily comprehensible demonstration of the way in which rage grows louder than story until it finally submerges the latter, the conclusion of the following more troubled poem makes it necessary to observe that, although sense is to be found, it is not in the telling of the story:

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—
And now We hunt the Doe—
And every time I speak for Him—
The Mountains straight reply—

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow—
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through—

And when at Night—Our good Day done—
 I guard My Master's Head—
 'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
 Deep Pillow—to have shared—

To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—
 None stir the second time—
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—
 Or an emphatic Thumb—

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—

(P 754)

I should like to offer two conventional paraphrases of the poem, which I shall then suggest are inadequate. In the first, picked up by God,^① the speaker becomes His marksman: the mountains resound with the echoes of her shots; those bursts of gunfire are as "cordial" as the eruption of a volcano; with the threat of more gunfire, she guards him at night, imagining her power to be total. Alternatively, if "Owner" is a term that suggests a deity, "Master" may suggest a lover (a theory prompted by the "Master" letters). In this reading, the speaker receives identity when she is carried off by the earthly lover whom she thereafter guards with murderous and possessive fury, anxious to protect him from his enemies and preferring, it seems, to watch over his bed than to share it with him; preferring, that is, violence to sexuality. But the problem with the poem is that it makes sense neither as religious allegory—the speaker's service to God does not involve the killing of the unrighteous—nor as the depiction of an erotic relationship. For either paraphrase, once it confronts the last stanza, faces its own inadequacy.

While the last stanza plays with the connections between life and death in a joke of comparative terms, those terms fail to make sense when applied literally to human beings (how could they have the power to kill without the power to die?) and make such obvious sense when applied to the inanimate gun (it goes without saying, and therefore it is unnecessary to say, that guns can kill but not die) that something further seems intended. The seepage of additional meaning, resonances of more complicated intention, infect the experience of the whole poem so that on the first reading we reject a superficial interpretation—the poem depicts

neither the relationship between a man and his gun—nor one between a woman and her God or between a woman and her lover. Meaning bearing down on us and, at the same time, eluding us casts doubt on our ability to identify what we are reading, and this mystification is partly a consequence of the way in which the conceit draws attention to its own transparency. In stanza one, for example, it is unclear whether we are to imagine the speaker as gun or as person, and the revealing taint of human presence continues in stanza two, where the echoes returned by the mountain might as easily be those of a voice as of a gun. Likewise in the third stanza, the speaker's smile, however provisional, conceivably takes place on a human countenance—the Vesuvian face that admits, albeit reluctantly, of pleasure. In the next stanza, the implicit alternatives of sexuality and death are clearly human alternatives. In the next, the human parts of the body are so fused with, and completed by, the parts of the gun, that our attention is drawn to the speaker's thumb rather than to the hammer it cocks.⁸

The fusion of gun and person, force and identity, possessor and possessed defines the central problematic features of the poem as well as the central problematic dilemmas of its speaker. The central trope—life as a loaded gun belonging to someone else that, when claimed, goes off—once it is figured, still leaves many questions unanswered, the most crucial of which is: What imaginable relationship can be explained by such violence?⁹ I shall begin to address these questions by suggesting that "identity" in the poem is conceived of as violence, just as life is apparently conceived of as rage. The poem is thus the speaker's acknowledgment that coming to life involves accepting the power and the inescapable burden of doing violence wherever one is and to whomever one encounters. But that interpretation, if it is a true one, is also terrifying, for violence turned upon the world can be returned by it. It is to guard herself against this return that the speaker imagines herself immortal. For the most foolproof protection from violence against the self is the denial of death. Although my interpretation may sound extreme, it is prompted by the enigmatic last stanza, which makes a shambles out of any conventional interpretation of what precedes it. In the stanza, the focus shifts to the speaker's scrutiny of her own fury, and suggests, as we might have suspected, that this was the real subject after all. The speaker-gun is viewed as the agent of death and not (as the person for whom it stands would be) the object of it. Or, in other terms: fury grown larger than life disassociates itself in terror from the one who feels it and

fantasizes its own immortality. The problem with the poem, then, is not that it is devoid of meaning but rather that it is overwhelmed by it (a problem exactly opposite to the one we witnessed in the definitional poems, though related to it, because both are prompted by the same retreat from both partiality and ending). Its phenomena surpass, seem larger than, their explanations. This fact suggests that any explanation will be inadequate, and it therefore draws our attention away from explanation and toward something else.

A similar distraction occurs in the following poem of anonymous authorship, believed to have been written in England around 1784:

There was a man of double deed
 Who sowed his garden full of seed.
 When the seed began to grow
 'Twas like a garden full of snow,
 When the snow began to melt
 'Twas like a ship without a belt,
 When the ship began to sail
 'Twas like a bird without a tail,
 When the bird began to fly
 'Twas like an eagle in the sky,
 When the sky began to roar
 'Twas like a lion at the door,
 When the door began to crack
 'Twas like a stick across my back,
 When my back began to smart
 'Twas like a penknife in my heart,
 And when my heart began to bleed
 'Twas death and death and death indeed.

Although the poem employs a rigid logical structure—the pairing of life and death images, one of which generates, by association, the first term of the next pair (as “melt” suggests “ship,” “sail”/“bird,” “roar”/“lion,” etc.)—the connections that link the images and seem to anticipate their own conclusions are themselves thrown off balance by the shock of death, for which no anticipation can prepare the speaker. Hence, as we read, our experience is not primarily one of the logical relation between incidents, for, like the speaker, we are diverted from logic by the swiftness with which it flashes by us.

In “The Man of Double Deed,” as in “My Life had stood a Loaded

Gun,” it is death that breaks out of the metaphor or allegory at the poem’s conclusion. Metaphor and allegory collapse and give way to a more inescapable reality—death “indeed,” which in the one poem is recognized as inevitable and in the other is defended against as impossible. In both poems, however, there is a rapid progression toward terror. That progression is set in motion by forces that are as incomprehensible as they are sudden, triggered in the one case by the “Owner’s” appearance and, in the other, by the planting of a seed that bears not fruit but snow. The release of power—in each case destructive: power to kill, power to be killed—corresponds to and becomes no less than the speaker’s identity. Who each speaker is, then, is presented strictly in terms of the force that annihilates him or by which he annihilates others. All the storytelling conventions (“This happened, then this, then this”) are a thin disguise for the deeper story, which is elegantly simple in its assertion that human life gains its identity when it encounters death. Death “indeed” snaps the conventions of the ordinary and raises man to the dimensions of the hero. The real connections, the likenesses that shoot us through a dizzying sequence of events whose specific content matters less than our inability to order or perceive its shape, inform us that the only defining experience that does not admit of ambiguity is death. Putting an end to experience, death also reveals its shape. It specifies who we are. Despite Shakespeare’s adage about cowards who die a thousand deaths, it is those experiences which prefigure death by imitating it that also prepare us for it. Our concern with that preparation is a partial explanation for why we read. For when we read, at least when we read novels, what we read are completed stories: stories whose characters have come in touch with their own ends, or who perceive a stopping point to incident that implies a closure akin to death.

Death makes incident finite and one can best order or assert meaning over that which has both a beginning and an end. At the moment of death, therefore, experience not only becomes knowable, it also assumes transmittable form. Commenting upon the relationship between a storyteller’s power and his knowledge of a character’s death, Walter Benjamin writes, “Death is the sanction of everything that the story can tell. . . . In other words, it is natural history to which [the teller’s] stories refer.”¹⁰ Benjamin elaborates:

“A man who dies at the age of thirty-five . . . is at every point of his

life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five." Nothing is more dubious than this sentence—but for the sole reason that the tense is wrong. A man . . . who died at thirty-five will appear to *remember* at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five. In other words, the statement that makes no sense for real life becomes indisputable for remembered life. The nature of the character in a novel cannot be presented any better than is done in this statement, which says that the "meaning" of his life is revealed only in his death. . . . The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.¹¹

Only autobiographical novels, as Scholes and Kellogg remind us,¹² cannot find their resolution in the protagonist's death and must substitute a stasis of insight for a stasis of action. Indeed, this is also true for the lyric, which casts off its knowledge of remembered life, driving past and future apart and away with the wedge of the eternal now. Thus one crucial difference between most lyric poems and most novels is that the former do not ordinarily yield the representation of completed lives. Epic poems do so—Adam's expulsion from paradise is perhaps the greatest story of the first end. Narrative poems can do so—Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" not only posits an end for its protagonist, it is also obsessed by the proper interpretation of that end. But lyric poems catch their speakers in isolated moments and off guard. Insofar as they record a history, it is not the history of a life but rather of a moment. In fact, as the following assertions are meant to imply, the lyric's premise of temporality bears obvious similarities to the temporal assumptions of the poems discussed in these two chapters, though Dickinson's exaggeration of that premise may distort it past all recognition.

Concerned neither with ends nor with beginnings, concerned with etiologies only on occasion and sometimes, then, by chance, the context of the experience narrated in a lyric will need to be reconstructed from the particularities of the moment. It is its speaker's words that matter, not her past or future. For the configuration the lyric speaker presents is usually a static one; not because nothing happens in it but rather

because what does happen is arrested, framed, and taken out of the flux of history. One might almost go so far as to say that in lyric poems history gets sacrificed to presence, as if the two were somehow incompatible. Hence poems often begin in the middle of an action ("I struck the board and cry'd, No more") or in direct address ("Batter my heart, three person'd God"), with an injunction ("Do not go gentle into that good night") or a complaint about a specific relationship ("They flee from me that sometime did mee seek"). No matter how expansive or elaborately philosophical their implications, they frequently withhold physical geography, or if one exists, it seems shockingly limited ("I walk through the long schoolroom questioning"). Experience, then, is unitary in these worlds and it is incidental, although the incident is curiously independent of both time and place. Lyric poems insist that coherence be made of isolated moments because there is no direct experience of an alternative. They suggest, too, that meaning resides neither in historical connection nor in the connection between one temporal event and another. Meaning is consciousness carved out of the recognition of its own limitations. They insist that meaning depends upon the severing of incident from context, as if only isolation could guarantee coherence. The lyric's own presence on a page, surrounded as it is by nothing, is a graphic representation of that belief. If there is a victory in the form of the lyric—the stunning articulation of the isolated moment—despair underlies it. It is despair of the possibility of complete stories, of stories whose conclusions are known, and consequently it is despair of complete knowledge. In its glorification of the revelatory moment, the lyric makes a triumph of such despair.

To return now to "The Man of Double Deed" and "My Life had stood a Loaded Gun," with which we began, it is clear that those poems do tell stories and that the stories they tell are concerned with the way in which death confers both knowledge and power. In "The Man of Double Deed," death can be neither anticipated nor known; it can only be experienced, and before it is experienced, the life of the poem comes to a halt. In the Dickinson poem even the anticipation of death is denied the speaker, though what could put an end to violence (violence turned against the self) would also explain it. Without a foreseeable end, with the fantasy of immortality, there is also no interpretation. The poem thus plays with the idea of death as explanation and concludes by despairing of both death and explanation. Its power is a direct consequence of the explosion that hovers over the individual incident each

stanza narrates, and provides a counterstrain to it. One final, parallel example, Marvell's "The Mower's Song," may help to illustrate how the threat of violence (here, the fact of violence) dominates, as an obsession dominates, and actually obscures the progressions in each stanza:

I

My Mind was once the true survey
Of all these Meadows fresh and gay;
And in the greenness of the Grass
Did see its Hopes as in a Glass;
When *Juliana* came, and She
What I do to the Grass, does to my Thoughts and Me.

II

But these, while I with Sorrow pine,
Grew more luxuriant still and fine;
That not one Blade of Grass you spy'd,
But had a Flower on either side;
When *Juliana* came, and She
What I do to the Grass, does to my Thoughts and Me.

III

Unthankful Meadows, could you so
A fellowship so true forego,
And in your gawdy May-games meet,
While I lay trodden under feet?
When *Juliana* came, and She
What I do to the Grass, does to my Thoughts and Me.

IV

But what you in Compassion ought,
Shall now by my Revenge be wrought:
And Flow'rs, and Grass, and I and all,
Will in one common Ruine fall.
For *Juliana* comes, and She
What I do to the Grass, does to my Thoughts and Me.

V

And thus, ye Meadows, which have been
Companions of my thoughts more green,
Shall now the Heraldry become

With which I shall adorn my Tomb;
For *Juliana* comes, and She
What I do to the Grass, does to my Thoughts and Me.

The refrain of Marvell's poem, like the concluding stanza of Dickinson's poem, brings the narrative up short with omnipresent and present-tense violence. It is as if conception can tolerate nothing further than violence that shifts curiously enough from past to present tense, in both poems, and defies historical connections by reversing them: "*Juliana* came" but now she "comes." In "My Life had stood a Loaded Gun," the distinction between the pluperfect and the present tense is somewhat less abrupt, but the insistence upon the recurrent present baffles progression in a similar manner: the story we first thought past tense, first thought over, cannot, does not know how to, conclude. Thus the act of annihilation that is promised and prophesied in every stanza of both poems never comes to pass or never ceases coming to pass. "None stir the second time—," but the fact that the killing must be repeated, albeit with a different object, suggests that violence is never done until life itself is done.

Different as the traditions are that shaped Marvell's and Dickinson's poems, and easy to understand as "The Mower's Song" is in comparison, the source of their magic is similar. The "Owner" in Dickinson's poem reveals no presence; all that we know of him is contained in the speaker's response. Although *Juliana* in "The Mower's Song" is a more conventional figure (the cruel lady of courtly love), she bears analogies to the "Owner" in that she is not so much an individual as a force: she appears precipitously, cuts down life as the mower cuts grass, disorders the natural world and transforms it into a decorative heraldry for his tomb. Though in the poem's beginning Marvell's speaker is victim rather than murderer, the fourth stanza makes clear how thoroughly "Revenge" dissolves the distinction between those terms and how ineffective either posture is against the mysterious otherness of the world. For threaten as he may, *Juliana* still "comes," and murder as Dickinson's speaker will, she is nonetheless "Without—the power to die—." The real otherness, then, in both poems (represented by *Juliana* in one and by the "Owner" in the other) is the world, in whose service one engages one's powers. It is against the world or for it (the distinction barely seems to matter) that one does battle, a world whose identity is, at best, shadowy and is, at most, a projection of the force against which, or for which, one fights, and whose power is finally inexorable.

"My Life had stood a Loaded Gun," like "The Mower's Song" and "The Man of Double Deed," is a story that is both without an ending and cognizant of where that ending lies. Held up against the world's otherness and deriving identity in its service, the meaning of the speaker's experience remains hidden in the future of its defeat. The relationship between meaning and death, ending and interpretation—the hero who will not die in Dickinson's poem, and the one who will not stay dead in Marvell's—reminds us of Freud's assertion that the person asleep never dreams of his own death. For the speaker in these poems, as for Freud's dreamer, death is a reality that escapes completion. Huger than life and eventually overtaking it, it lurks meantime in the underlying rhythm of all action.

III

When death is the center to which "Each Life Converges" (P 680), the semiotic distractions it creates will be discernible below the surface of the poem's meaning and will erupt only at its conclusion, as we have seen in "My Life had stood a Loaded Gun." There death's static is perceived as an undercurrent, for the cause of the static is precisely death's failure to manifest itself. Always threatening exposure, it ceases to counter the signs of life only at that moment when it overwhelms them. With this explanation in mind, we can perhaps better understand why the apparent sense of "My Life had stood a Loaded Gun" is threatened by resonances or undertones that are not entirely audible. When, however, the situation is reversed so that death is viewed directly as so omnipresent and continuous a force that it suffers a rupture only brief enough to admit life, the disruptions will themselves break into the center of the space that has been cleared for them. "Human life," Geoffrey Hartman writes in "The Voice of the Shuttle," "... is an indeterminate middle between overspecified poles always threatening to collapse it. The poles may be birth and death, father and mother, mother and wife, love and judgment, heaven and earth, first things and last things. Art narrates that middle region and charts it like a purgatory, for only if it exists can life exist."¹³ In the following poem, which provides a clear demonstration of Hartman's insight and an important definition of those poems I shall discuss in this section, the speaker is that middle term whose presence pushes eternity and immortality apart and, by so doing, creates the space of life:

Behind Me—dips Eternity—
 Before Me—Immortality—
 Myself—the Term between—
 Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,
 Dissolving into Dawn away,
 Before the West begin—

'Tis Kingdoms—afterward—they say—
 In perfect—pauseless Monarchy—
 Whose Prince—is Son of None—
 Himself—His Dateless Dynasty—
 Himself—Himself diversify—
 In Duplicate divine—

'Tis Miracle before Me—then—
 'Tis Miracle behind—between—
 A Crescent in the Sea—
 With Midnight to the North of Her—
 And Midnight to the South of Her—
 And Maelstrom—in the Sky—

(P 721)

"Eternity" and "Immortality" are literally out of this world. Free of both beginning and end ("Dateless") and unbroken by event ("pauseless"), they escape real characterization or comprehension. "Midnight" echoes "Midnight," "Miracle" "Miracle"; even dawn suggests death, so closely does it resemble twilight. Meaning stuck in the same groove becomes nonsense. Divinity duplicated is thus nothing but an absence, our world drained of all its meaning. For while the second stanza, which elaborates on "Immortality," might at first be mistaken for a reverential expression of dogma, the vacancy of the internal rhyme ("Son of None—") and the insistence on establishing these facts as suspect ("they say—") are clear indications of scorn. Were Christ humanly fathered, we might recognize Him. But perfection rules out both recognition and discrete identity. "Eternity" and "Immortality" seem like mirrors hung on opposite walls, with barely anything between. Except, as the last stanza insists, there is something between, which is the speaker's presence. Her existence disrupts order, is a movement rising out of the sea, shot upward, finally, in chaos ("Maelstrom—in the Sky—"). As Charles Anderson notes in his provocative comment on the poem, the east-west axis of eternity-immortality is entirely different from the referential poles of the

speaker's life.¹⁴ In the concluding stanza, the switch in pronouns from the first to the third person suggests that even the speaker's vision of her own life has been redefined and objectified. As she presses against the poles of eternity and immortality with the force of life's disorder, we know that the price of her collapse, the disappearance of the middle term, is not only personal extinction but the omission of life itself, leaving mirrors that reflect the diversity of nothing.

The disruption in the poem, then, is literally the story the speaker has to tell about life. What can be chronicled, what, in other words, has both beginning and end, also has identity. But while the speaker in "My Life had stood a Loaded Gun" shies away from the knowledge that her story has an end (because she equates its end with her own annihilation), this speaker turns her attention elsewhere; here value is wedded to the fact of action as it can be seen to survive its origins and to shake off or, at any rate, stall, its consequences. Value is disruption and disorder: it lies in the volatile middle term.

It must by now be clear that the poems about which I have been speaking enact a tug of war between life and death. The equanimity with which the speaker in "Behind Me dips Eternity" holds at bay the surrounding forces that converge on her is, however, rare. Indeed, a poem like "Behind Me dips Eternity" is marked by its competence in managing the upstart forces of both life and death; even "Maelstrom—in the Sky—," as presented to us, is not especially threatening. But the quiescence of the middle term vanishes when we see it no longer in a definitional context, but now in active engagement with those forces that threaten its existence. In the following two poems, life is also represented as a disruption of stasis. But the disruption here seems more like an outbreak around which control keeps trying, unsuccessfully, to close:

I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl—
Life's little duties do—precisely—
As the very least
Were infinite—to me—

I put new Blossoms in the Glass—
And throw the old—away—
I push a petal from my Gown
That anchored there—I weigh
The time 'twill be till six o'clock

I have so much to do—
And yet—Existence—some way back—
Stopped—struck—my ticking—through—
We cannot put Ourselves away
As a completed Man
Or Woman—When the Errand's done
We came to Flesh—upon—
There may be—Miles on Miles of Nought—
Of Action—sicker far—
To simulate—is stinging work—
To cover what we are
From Science—and from Surgery—
Too Telescopic Eyes
To bear on us unshaded—
For their—sake—not for Ours—
'Twould start them—
We—could tremble—
But since we got a Bomb—
And held it in our Bosom—
Nay—Hold it—it is calm—

Therefore—we do life's labor—
Though life's Reward—be done—
With scrupulous exactness—
To hold our Senses—on—

(P 443)

Here, in two places, meaning disrupts both vacuous action and the sententia in which such action takes refuge: first, in the lines acknowledging that, if one were to admit it, life would be seen to have come to a dead halt:

And yet—Existence—some way back—
Stopped—struck—my ticking—through—

and second, in the suppositional statement that plays with the possibility of exploding the "Bomb [be]got[ten]" by the speaker's fury at life's loss of meaning:

We—could tremble—
But since we got a Bomb—
And held it in our Bosom—
Nay—Hold it—it is calm—

but steadies itself ("Nay—Hold it—"), rejecting such an explosion. For in order to "hold [her] Senses—on—" course or, more simply, "on" (intact), she thinks fury must tolerate repression.

From its similarity to other Dickinson poems in which the speaker's loss of love is not accompanied by the loss of her life, we can infer that "the Errand" she "came to Flesh—upon—" is both incarnation and carnal destination, the general effort to wrest meaning from experience and the more particular effort to gratify the desires of the flesh. The ticking of existence, the heart, stops not because death overtakes it, but rather because vengeance at the inevitability of loss overtakes it, transforming it into a bomb, as love suffers a metamorphosis into fury. Though the speaker asserts that there is nothing to help and everything to hide, that science and surgery would be "start[led]" by this transformation, it is for purposes of self-protection that calm is maintained, as the last stanza makes eloquently clear. For fury let loose would explode the very reason of the poem: it would blast holes in reason as the lines I have pointed to blast holes in the narrative. Here again, then, life is represented as fury coming to terms with sexuality, and both are subject to the efforts of repression.

If "I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl" makes an oblique acknowledgment of sexuality and its loss, the following poem rises to the occasion of explicit statement and finally to heresy, and the consequence is not rage but rather ecstasy. Although its catechism is one of renunciation, we must scrutinize the poem carefully to see how renunciation can be so resonant with the presence of what has been given up:

I cannot live with You—
It would be Life—
And Life is over there—
Behind the Shelf

The Sexton keeps the Key to—
Putting up
Our Life—His Porcelain—
Like a Cup—

Discarded of the Housewife—
Quaint—or Broke—
A newer Sevres pleases—
Old Ones crack—

I could not die—with You—
For One must wait
To shut the Other's Gaze down—
You—could not—

And I—Could I stand by
And see You—freeze—
Without my Right of Frost—
Death's privilege?

Nor could I rise—with You—
Because Your Face
Would put out Jesus'—
That New Grace

Glow plain—and foreign
On my homesick Eye—
Except that You than He
Shone closer by—

They'd judge Us—How—
For You—served Heaven—You know,
Or sought to—
I could not—

Because You saturated Sight—
And I had no more Eyes
For sordid excellence
As Paradise

And were You lost, I would be—
Though My Name
Rang loudest
On the Heavenly fame—

And were You—saved—
And I—condemned to be
Where You were not—
That self—were Hell to Me—

So We must meet apart—
You there—I—here—

With just the Door ajar
 That Oceans are—and Prayer—
 And that White Sustenance—
 Despair— (P 640)

With the exception of the second and third stanzas, which digress both from the form of assertion established elsewhere and from the patterned recital of facts, the poem is structured as a list of criteria that would make union impossible. In most stanzas we hear two voices: one that renounces the earthly lover and another that explains the need for renunciation, the foremost explanation being the imminence of a divine rival. But the comparison between earthly and divine, and the rhythm of statement and counterstatement established by the pairing, is broken into by the even stronger, more subversive force of sexual energy. The energy is, in part, revealed in the colloquial speech rhythms that disrupt the more formal and laconic litany of renunciation (I cannot live with You—/It would be Life—) in order to qualify it (“And I—Could I stand by/And see You—freeze—/Without my Right of Frost—”). The intimacy of address, with its tone of patient explanation and its scrupulous concern for accuracy (“For You—served Heaven—You know,/Or sought to—”), warms to its subject and becomes impassioned by it in its testimony of what finally keeps the lovers apart.

Interestingly enough, what prohibits union seems to be the fact that it has already occurred. The injunction, then, cannot be to avoid union but must be rather to guard against its repetition. For although “Because Your Face/Would put out Jesus’—” seems suppositional, two stanzas later the event is echoed, explained, and located not in the future at all, but rather in the past:

Because You saturated Sight—
 And I had no more Eyes
 For sordid excellence
 As Paradise

The lines here are rich with the pride of acknowledged sexuality, and in their acknowledgment of supremacy they demote paradise from its conventionally unrivaled estate. The speaker is not only saying “I had no more eyes for *such* sordid excellence as Paradise,” but also, more radically, “I had no more eyes to see sordid excellence as Paradise.” The

lover, in this latter interpretation, not only occupies vision but also, apparently, purifies it. Thus, while we are expecting the notion of paradise to be rivaled by love, we are not expecting it to be revised by it, and the revision constitutes much of the power of the lines. A similar transformation occurs two stanzas later where we expect to hear:

And were You—saved—
 And I—condemned to be
 . . . [In] Hell

and what we hear instead is a new definition of Hell prompted not by God’s judgment but rather by the lover’s absence, and half-echoing Milton’s “Myself am Hell”:

And were You—saved—
 And I condemned to be
 Where You were not—
 That self—were Hell to Me—

To return to the earlier stanza, even the lover’s excellence is seen as sordid because it is excessive. Indeed, it is precisely the absoluteness of the lover’s excellence, his uncontested supremacy, against which the denomination “sordid” makes its puritanical outcry. For the excess of pleasure is the real force that drives the two lovers apart, notwithstanding the more superficial reasons reiterated by the closing stanzas, which are fashioned around all the external prohibitions against union: the difference in age (implied by the fifth and sixth stanzas), in religious status (implied by the eighth and eleventh stanzas), etc. Although the poem attempts to recover its composure, the stanzas I have spoken about remain too dazzling to be dismissed as containing just a number of good reasons for the lovers’ separation. Even their syntactic introductions (“Because Your Face/Would put out Jesus’—,” “Because You saturated Sight—”), with their direct announcement of explanation and their implicit accompaniment of passion, insist we consider their centrality.

Despite the “Door ajar,” which leaves a distance commutable only by ocean or prayer, and which we might suppose would produce tension, there is a curious quiet to the concluding lines, and two extra lines to the stanza that seem to insist on the enlarging space between the two lovers. The resolution of tension is a consequence of the fact that the renunciation the speaker has predicted as inevitable has been accomplished. The sustenance she now lives on (she calls it “Despair—,” but

perhaps it is memory drained of detail) is "White" because it has been purified of presence and sexuality. The rhythms of "Oceans" and "Prayer" are calm, all the passion of life has slowed to them. Thus, while the voice of implicit sexuality is quelled utterly in the last stanza, the poem's conclusion offers a resolution, not of the passion, for which there is no resolution, but rather of the less problematic series of statements and counterstatements that have served to divert speaker and reader from passion's verbal enactment throughout the poem.

"To lose what we never owned might seem an eccentric Bereavement but Presumption has its Affliction as actually as Claim—," Dickinson wrote in L 429. But loss also legitimates the desire for possession by freeing desire from all illusion that its object will be granted, and a speaker then affirms her absolute claim to what has absolutely been denied her. As I suggested in the Introduction, in such instances the bodily absence of both loss and immortality associates the two states as if in an identity, and utterance is charged with the task of the pouring of form into what has no form, shape into the hollows of absence. In the service of the reconstruction, memory can be so delusively persuasive that, like the speaker in the following poem, we are swayed into confusing it with actual presence:

I live with Him—I see His face—
I go no more away
For Visiter—or Sundown—
Death's single privacy

The Only One—forestalling Mine—
And that—by Right that He
Presents a Claim invisible—
No Wedlock—granted Me—

I live with Him—I hear His Voice—
I stand alive—Today—
To witness to the Certainty
Of Immortality—

Taught Me—by Time—the lower Way—
Conviction—Every day—
That Life like This—is stopless—
Be Judgment—what it may—

(P 463)

There is something incantatory about the poem's tone, which suggests that its meaning is positive, that immortality has been discovered in the presence of the earthly lover. But what makes the tone sound so positive is also what makes it sound suspicious. To "see His face—," to "hear His Voice—" is to know the lover by his absence, through memory or longing rather than in fact, for the insistent affirmations (his voice, his face) offer proofs that compensate in the absence of the whole. And as if to reveal the pain of such a memory, its perpetuity is designated by the word "stopless—," familiar to us from "It was not Death for I stood up," and customarily used by Dickinson to indicate despair. The poem, then, is structured to produce a reversal of what it first leads us to expect, and only on a second reading do we really see what is being said.

In the first stanza, we are told that the speaker retreats with the memory of her absent lover in otherwise perfect isolation for, in context, "I live with Him—I see His face—" is the cry of vision estranged from presence. In the second stanza, the pronoun reference switches from the lover to death. Only death, the second stanza informs us, can exact a more imperious solitude; its demand is the only one powerful enough to "forestall" the speaker's vision by canceling her life. But the speaker's life, once canceled by the absence of the earthly lover, leaves little more for death to negate. Sufficient proof of endlessness, loss is the only certainty, the unconditional "given" of human existence. Any other judgment, even death itself, as the grammar of the last stanza reminds us, seems weak as an untested hypothesis. And, if proved, redundant.

"For fear of which hear this thou age unbred," Shakespeare wrote, flaunting the mortality of the friend. Dickinson, acquainted with a more harrowing vision of mortality, one whose consequences were inevitably only personal, faced time with less bravado. If "I tie my Hat I crease my Shawl," "I cannot live with You," and "I live with Him I see His face" all create worlds where vacancy postdates meaning, in the latter poems the speaker insists on its reconstruction. In this case, reconstruction is tantamount to memory—the invention of presence where not to have it would leave the world absent even of pain. The speaker here will not reduce the world to nothing. Only death can relieve the world of meaning; only death can wipe it clean like a slate. And after death? In another one of Dickinson's poems the speaker, anticipating a meeting with God, can only say half drolly and half in disappointment, "Savior—I've seen the face—before!" (P 461).

IV

Holding to one's course, and the evenness of rhythm therein implied, might be defined as the inability to feel, the pulse that refuses to quicken, or so Dickinson suggests in the following poem:

Through the strait pass of suffering—
 The Martyrs—even—trod.
 Their feet—upon Temptation—
 Their faces—upon God—
 A stately—shriven—Company—
 Convulsion—playing round—
 Harmless—as streaks of Meteor—
 Upon a Planet's Bond—
 Their faith—the everlasting troth—
 Their Expectation—fair—
 The Needle—to the North Degree—
 Wades—so—thro' polar Air!

(P 792)

Convulsion is "Harmless," however, only when not experienced. But what constitutes convulsion? What elements of sexuality and death and in what relationship? For it is these elements in combination that characterize every poem I have spoken about in this chapter. Only the martyrs in the above poem, seemingly not subject to the force of sexuality, give the illusion of escaping the force of death, for when sexuality is not even there to be overcome, life assumes death's shape. In poems other than this one, however, a choice has been made against sexuality and for death. The consequence of the choice, since it is an unwilling one, is rage that is speechless ("I should have been too glad I see") or subverted by ecstasy ("I cannot live with You") or explicitly repressed ("I tie-my Hat I crease my Shawl"), or that escapes repression by protest ("I live with Him I see His face") or defines life as disorder ("Behind Me dips Eternity"), or that erupts openly into violence ("My Life had stood a Loaded Gun").

Insofar as rage constitutes a tear in the established fabric of the narrative, it exists in relation to that narrative very much as Todorov describes the supernatural's relationship to the narrative and with the same important "coincidence": "We see, finally, how the social and the literary functions coincide: in both cases, we are concerned with a transgression

of the law. Whether it is in social life or in narrative, the intervention of the supernatural element always constitutes a break in the system of pre-established rules, and in doing so finds its justification."¹⁵ Like the supernatural, rage, too, is a transgression of the social, of the agreed-upon laws that ritualize life and sometimes render it immobile. Both contain outbreaks of sexuality that would not be sanctioned in the mainstream of the narrative or in the mainstream of social action out of which it is woven. "Sexual excesses will be more readily accepted by any censor if they are attributed to the devil," Todorov writes,¹⁶ and indeed the same claim might be made about the scapegoat function of rage. For rage is a kind of devil that bears the burden of all our disapprobation: it is that which, no less than primitive sexuality, we are socialized out of. And significantly it is what, when it overtakes us, we make responsible for all our expressions of will and desire. As Kent reminds us in *Lear*, "Anger hath a privilege." Rage is the great disclaimer, the feeling that puts us beyond ourselves, and in so doing puts us in touch with all the social and private dictates that vie against one another for the dominance of the self. Recognition becomes sanction at precisely that moment when the alternative is seen in its death-dealing context: existence "struck-through" and "stopped." At such a moment, speech itself is a protest against the status quo. The speaker elects words rather than silence, mediation rather than stasis, disruption rather than death.

Ultimately, of course, election is complicated by inadequate alternatives. In one of Dickinson's central utterances, the acknowledgment of inadequacy, of the poverty of both literal and imaginative terms, leads the speaker to a despair rich with the sense of life pressing against its own limitations:

Title divine—is mine!
 The Wife—without the Sign!
 Acute Degree—conferred on me—
 Empress of Calvary!
 Royal—all but the Crown!
 Betrothed—without the swoon
 God sends us Women—
 When you—hold—Garnet to Garnet—
 Gold—to Gold—
 Born—Bridalled—Shrouded—
 In a Day—

Tri Victory—
 “My Husband”—women say—
 Stroking the Melody—
 Is *this*—the way?

(P 1072)

My reading of the poem is hypothetical by default, for its syntax alone, not to mention the elliptical progressions and the rapid transformation of pronouns, insists upon respect for its difficulty. What we can ascertain is that the speaker is comparing the life of the heavenly bride to that of the earthly one. The woman exalted in the first half of the poem is royal by virtue of what she does not have. Without the sign or ring legitimating marriage and without the swoon of sexuality, this woman, seemingly self-elected, is dangerously close to Plath's “Lady Lazarus,” who will also insist upon “Acute Degree—” and who will carry the claim of suffering one step further into hyperbole than Calvary. This miracle—a woman without the swoon, divine by virtue of its absence—makes us hunger for a more generous world where salvation is not had at the expense of life. It is the other world we think we are getting when we read of “the swoon/God sends us Women—/When you—hold—Garnet to Garnet—/Gold—to Gold—.” But the transition is strangely enough no transition; deprivation is here not absent, it is simply of another order. “When you—hold—Garnet to Garnet—/Gold—to Gold—” (in the secular context of the earthly wedding ceremony), what you get is death (“Born—Bridalled—Shrouded—/In a Day—”). The shift in pronouns is a shift to the colloquial “you,” almost as if in talking implicitly about sexuality the speaker had to cast attribution as far from herself as possible. But in the very process of distinguishing herself from the wealth of the earthly alternative, she temporarily allies herself with it, with the swoon “God sends us Women—.” In the fusion and confusion of these lines, both options funnel to death, the contraction of the self into its own ashes. For the birth of the wife becomes the death of the woman. Upon such sacrifices, the gods themselves throw incense. The problem is that both alternatives require sacrifice.

Between the nothing that is the self and the nothing to which the self gets reduced when it capitulates to another, we see our options clearly. While it is true that the jewels in the poem suggest the blessing of the earthly wife, the lines, coming as they do in the middle of the poem (as a manifestation of its transition from divine to earthly), are a half-implicit metaphor for the necessary complement of divine and earthly

wife, for each by herself is inadequate. Thus although the lines tell us that garnet is held to garnet and gold to gold (each alternative able to assess only itself), the proximity of the lines requires us to see the colors (and the choices they represent) held against each other, as if the speaker's vision of impossibility momentarily enabled its transcendence.

“Stroking the Melody—” is perhaps a metaphor for the very impossibilities delimited by the poem. For the need to get a hold on sound, to imbue it with physical dimensions, reminds us that we have a metaphoric world to console us for the impoverishment of the physical world. Like Lear's desire to “sweeten the imagination” or to wipe the hand “of mortality,” Dickinson's phrase suggests that simultaneous perception of loss and compensation that grips the mind at such moments of imaginative invention, as, in the process of calling wishes into being, the speaker inevitably acknowledges their status as wishes, not subject to fulfillment in reality. If only one could “sweeten the imagination” or “Strok[e] the Melody.” So utterance grows out of desperation and registers violence at its fact.

Yet options exist because we must take them. We cannot, as Sartre pointed out, not choose. This recognition is the moment the poem records. For the speaker, from the vantage of Calvary, looks enviously at the earthly alternative and finds that it is nothing. Previously she thought she could imitate in name, if nothing else, the title of the earthly wife. Now it is apparent that the imitation is purposeless. She could not have it if she wanted it, and if she had it, she sees now that she would not want it. Her title, then, like the earthly wife's, is empty, the “Melody—” sought after but finally strained once it is acknowledged that any possession is by itself inadequate.

The problem of otherness perceived as death; the problem of otherness for lack of which there is death: the alternatives in these poems are stark ones. Yet the poems themselves are not stark, are, in fact, loaded with energy that is, as I have been suggesting, close to explosive. And it is the energy that needs accounting for, fed as it is by the fuel of sexuality on the one hand, and death on the other, by that combustible that ignites into rage. In the poems presence seems manifested as rage and, in particular, as rage at all that is temporal, all that has a history whose requirement is sacrifice and choice. If narrative is that thing which carries a story to its conclusion, presence disrupts the continuity of narrative by holding its moments apart so that its outrageous demands relax their grip on the speaker, as she scrutinizes at leisure and rejects at will

the alternatives to which she must eventually capitulate, and this is quite different from the passive protest against temporality as we observed it in the definitional poems. We might say that here protest requires rage because only rage can provide a sufficient stronghold against each of the two terms that threaten to reclaim the speaker. Voice at cross-purposes with conflicting forces, coherence purchased at the expense of continuity,¹ is a central phenomenon in all lyric poems, as I suggested earlier. What is important about the Dickinson poems that I have discussed is that we see the dynamics of this ordinarily hidden triad more explicitly and hence with greater clarity.

It is a commonplace, albeit a sophisticated one, that speech in poems exists across time and space, that a poem never happened or that it happens every time it is read. The commonplace becomes important when we acknowledge its consequences for annihilating process, for Yeats's vision of Byzantium or Keats's of the Grecian Urn. Yet these latter poems are conscious gestures, controlled rejections of the world replaced by the artful vision. The rejection of process is neither as conscious nor as stable in the Dickinson poems I have discussed. True, the world is envisioned as a dead-end, eternity and immortality, for all practical purposes, one and the same. Yet presence or voice breaks into and disrupts the dreaded sequence of moments that follow so rapidly on one another that their very movement blurs to the illusion of stasis. Voice cannot be in a poem except in contradistinction to action. Voice gives way, exhausts itself, at the recognition that it cannot make a difference, that it cannot *be*, except removed from time, also static. So prose wears a poem's guise at last.

If these poems counsel that we must return to what kills us, they also console us by revealing that reading, no less than speaking, offers us a reprieve. For when we read, we are no longer engaged in the world of action: we have set aside those concerns that drive us, willingly or not, to shape our own ends. Like the speaker in the poems, we have agreed that action requires reprieve—because it hurries by, fails to take adequate account of the self entangled in the web of its own inevitabilities. Voice (or as I have been calling it, presence) breaks through the linear sequence of events, disrupts it, offers a temporary escape by refusing the only alternatives, alternatives that are, at the same time, inadequate ones. Yet the temporary escape that is really no more or less than presence afforded the provisions that guarantee its existence—unbounded by event, free of

both past and future—suffices, and in the next chapter we shall see how poems take the escape from temporality as their explicit subject (as they have not done in the utterances discussed in these last two chapters) and dare to dream themselves into the structure of the defiant death excursions.

We cannot change the story of our lives. We cannot undo or do again, and if we could, we would not always do better. Even the future takes its shape beyond us. All that we have to make good on is the space of the present. Freud suggested that to be in possession of a story is somehow to be reconciled to it. But no knowledge is sufficient to permit us to forgive the exigencies of a world whose demand for sacrifice is absolute. And, as comedy teaches, without forgiveness, there is no reconciliation. It is not knowledge that saves us but rather the recognition that salvation is a luxury our lives will not purchase. Salvation might mean that our lives could be shaped with the coherence of written stories, well authored and progressing with deliberation toward the promised end. In lieu of this, we accept the space left vacant by the abandoned idea of salvation. Like Keats's "Negative Capability," this space is liberated from the strictures of certainty, closure, and conclusion, all those inevitable first laws of action. Presence occurs at the moment when the self absents itself from the flow of action because comprehension of it requires a slowing and temporary halt of the momentum that, blurring past, present, and future, renders them indistinguishable. These occasions of presence gain the self the only immortality it will ever know, for in a very real sense they lie outside of time and do not "count" in (are not counted by) it. Thus, the absence of consequence that we might once have greeted with despair, we come finally to understand as a consolation. At a distance from experience, presence comes to know its own mind. It shakes off the imperatives of past and future, self and other, sexuality and death, by learning its responses to them and by learning, too, that action, however inexorable, cannot do away with response. Presence then is action's corollary. It is action's "other," and its wisdom consists in what it comes to know of experience once it has been freed of the compulsion for consequence. Purified of event, presence summons up all that is representative of untempered vision, what Yeats called "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."

Yet though severed from experience, presence remains in touch with experience's dilemmas and in touch, too, with the fact that it must inevitably vacate its privileged position and rejoin the stream of action.

As we shall see, even in the proleptic utterances, the speaker's freedom from this world prescribes the limits that return her to it. The hope is that once the self is returned to event, it will know better what to do in it. The poem is like a breathing space, a necessary "time out." The aside to oneself, the soliloquy to an audience, the rush of adrenalin in the actor the moment before the play begins, or simply the man alone pausing before his options—these are analogies. Ultimately, of course, the world will not wait. It catches the speaker up in its momentum again and exerts its authority to insist he make choices. As I have been suggesting, in Dickinson's poems, if choice involves the resolution of conflict, rage represents the refusal to choose: the splitting of impossible infinitives. Vitalized by this refusal, presence meets conflict head-on. Heroic in its "power to kill, / Without—the power to die—," presence is not yet weakened by the realization that immortality is an illusion. In its dissociation from action, its repudiation of necessity, lies strength, a redemptive counter to the dutiful complicity that characterizes our lives.

III

Et in Arcadia Ego

REPRESENTATION, DEATH, AND THE PROBLEM OF BOUNDARY

The events of the unconscious are timeless, that is, they are not ordered in time, are not changed by the passage of time, have no relation whatever to time.

—Sigmund Freud

. . . the fact is that consciousness deteriorates as the result of any cerebral shock. Merely to faint is to annihilate it. How then is it possible to believe that the spirit survives the death of the body?

—Marcel Proust

THE PROBLEM of boundaries is integral to some of our most profound concerns. What is the relationship between self and other, interior and exterior, literal and figural, past and present, time and timelessness? Were they not so crucial these questions would be pedestrian, and indeed how we answer them, whether we are able to answer them, is often an indication of the way in which we lead our lives. Jean Starobinski has recently pointed out that the connection we often make between history or past and interiority or depth is seductive precisely because it avoids the acknowledgment that some boundaries (in this case the one between past and present) render experience irrecoverable: "Making the most remote past coefficient to our most intimate depth is a way of refusing loss and separation, of preserving, in the crammed plenum we imagine history to be, every moment spent along the way. . . . To say that the individual constructed himself through his history is to say that the

Me—dips Eternity—/Before Me—Immortality—/Myself—the Term between—” (P 721); in the picture presented by “Our journey had advanced,” which predicates choice three ways: “Retreat—was out of Hope—/Behind—a Sealed Route—/Eternity’s White Flag—Before—/And God—at every Gate—”; we see it in the stages that come after great pain: “First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—.” The triad of terms that situates Dickinson’s poems between the fixed relations of English Romanticism and the more serial progression of a later American Romanticism schematizes, even exaggerates, the shape of the lyric endeavor: the collapsing of eternity into immortality in the designated space of the present.

Elemented by what Stevens would have called “flawed words and stubborn sounds,” Dickinson’s poems attempt to stall time to a stasis, and, as we have seen, they accomplish their enterprise with varying degrees of success. But however primitive the methods, the generative conception is not. “To live, and die, and mount again in triumphant body . . . is no schoolboy’s theme!” (L 184), Dickinson remarked long before she could have known how much of her own writing would require the testiness of this defense. The deathless world of no time is a world we lose by merely waking up. Dickinson’s poems articulate the loss and, like all lyrics, they attempt to reverse it. If she dreamed this reversal bolder than most lyrics do, throwing into relief the shape of the lyric struggle itself, she also knew more profoundly the shocking certainty of its disappointment.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Texts for Dickinson’s poems and letters are from the editions by Thomas H. Johnson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1955), and *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1958), abbreviated here as “P” and “L” respectively. “PF” stands for Prose Fragments. Poems and letters are cited by the numbers assigned to them in the Johnson editions. When I use Dickinson’s first lines as titles, I omit the punctuation of the Johnson text.
2. Dates of the poems and letters, as specified by the Johnson texts, are often approximate.
3. Immortality will be “When from a thousand skies/On our developed eyes/Noons blaze!” (P 63). It will be “Centuries of noon” (P 112).
4. The longed-for immortality is often not heaven but earthly pleasures made permanent, and the speaker in P 636 makes a distinction between the two when she says, “I . . . sigh for lack of Heaven—but not/The Heaven God bestow—.”
5. Dickinson often focuses her attention on contained moments of transition during which something palpable lapses into the void from which no observation can pry it. When in P 1420 she asks, “Why Birds, a Summer morning/Before the Quick of Day/Should stab my ravished spirit/with Dirks of Melody,” the answer lies in closer scrutiny of that ambiguous time, “the Quick of Day,” at the arrival of which the flood of music abruptly ceases. In the same spirit of observing boundary lines, she trains her eyes on the horizon, and there are a fair number of early poems especially taken by the cyclical motion of the sun’s rising and setting from which she thought she could learn. See, for example, P 1349, P 152, P 291, P 290, P 228, and P 552.
6. Charles R. Anderson suggests that the pun might have come from one of the definitions of “physiognomy” in her lexicon: “Her Lexicon, after defining physiognomy in the usual sense, has a bracketed note: ‘This word formerly comprehended the art of foretelling the future fortunes of persons by indications of the countenance.’ Yet it is clearly this obsolete sense, connected with astrology and magic, that she has resurrected for her poem on the spider. He spins out his inner self into his web, a figurative extension of his face. If his design corresponds to his soul then this is his ‘Strategy’ for comprehending ‘Immortality,’ but not revealing it.” *Emily Dickinson’s Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966), p. 143.
7. “The Private World,” in *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson: Selected Criticism since 1890*, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 302.
8. In L 342b, Higginson reports Dickinson’s comment to his wife.
9. *This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1938; reprint ed., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 97. Of the first three major biographies, Whicher’s is the most comprehensive, notwithstanding Thomas H. Johnson’s

important chapter, "The Valley," on Dickinson's connection to the traditions of the Connecticut Valley (in *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1955]) and Richard Chase's discussion of the achievement of status as the single most symbolic act in the poems (in *Emily Dickinson* [New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951]).

10. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 230.

11. 2 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1960; reprint ed., New York: Archon, 1970).

12. *Emily Dickinson's Reading: 1836-1886* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966).

13. *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1971). In summary of the earlier studies Klaus Lubbers writes:

Side by side with sober biographical research the quest for the identity of the lover continued. Rebecca Patterson retraced the steps of Kate Scott, a close childhood friend of Susan Dickinson, and believed she had found in her an answer to the riddle. . . . Later, two critics elevated Samuel Bowles to the rank of a lover. David Higgins supposed that the small group of 'Daisy' letters was addressed to Bowles; Winfield Scott went further by trying to show that all dates and allusions which had earlier been connected with Hunt, Gould, and Wadsworth, would apply as well to the editor of *The Springfield Republican*. . . . In a group of love poems Griffith saw an unconscious fear of everything male. . . . A year later Anna Mary Wells made an amateurish attempt to render the poet's life in the form of a clinical report to prove that she was for a time psychopathic and was treated in Boston for this. . . . In *Ancestor's Brocades*, which was often far removed from the pretended 'objective factual account' . . . Millicent Todd Bingham . . . first played off Susan Dickinson against Lavinia and then Lavinia against Mrs. Todd, and . . . unveiled both sister and sister-in-law of the poet as furies filled with irreconcilable hatred for each other. (*Emily Dickinson: The Critical Revolution* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968], pp. 167-68).

Suppositions about the lover's identity have been continued in Ruth Müller's *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968).

14. Richard Chase calls her aphorisms "one of the striking mementoes of American inventiveness, like Whitman's free verse or Melville's combination of American folk language with traditional English forms" (*Emily Dickinson*, p. 105), and David Higgins speaks of her prose as so original that the closest approximations of her style are Emerson's journals, "which she cannot have read" (*Portrait of Emily Dickinson: The Poet and Her Prose* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1967], p. 74).

15. In an unpublished dissertation, "Dramatic Poses in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson" (Stanford University, 1962), Thomas Arp comments on the connection between familiarity and formal strategy when he notes an abrupt change in Dickinson's letters to Higginson after their first meeting: "The closer she grew to him personally, hinged as that growth was on their two meetings, the more impersonal her letters to him. He might have the illusion of understanding her private life, because of the many reports of domestic event, but her mind delivered to him contrived and bombastic comments on life, death, and immortality which have apparently little reference to her own psychological state, and which even contradict themselves on occasion" (p. 52).

16. *The Voice of the Poet: Aspects of Style in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 19-27.

17. Lubbers, *Critical Revolution*, p. 214. This book presents an excellent discussion of the various phases of critical reception.

18. "New England Culture and Emily Dickinson," in Blake and Wells, *Recognition*, pp. 153-67.

19. *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 91.

20. *Stairway of Surprise*, p. 76.

21. *Circumference and Circumstance*, p. 157. See also Johnson (*Interpretive Biography*), who, in regarding Dickinson's poetry as bound to the traditions of the Connecticut Valley, would agree with Sherwood.

22. "Emily Dickinson Was a Poetess," *College English* 34 (October 1972): 67. At times efforts to individuate Dickinson run the risk of overt ahistoricism. Chase writes, "Emily Dickinson's eschatological cast of mind, on the whole a departure from New England Puritanism, was entirely a personal vision of life and has no direct historical or social implications. . . . She lived with a loose and sometimes mutually contradictory complex of ideas historically akin to Calvin-

ism, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Stoicism, Gnosticism, and even a revolutionary Futurism. Philosophically considered, it is a hopelessly confusing creed" (*Emily Dickinson*, pp. 186-7). On p. 225, however, Chase seems to take it back when he asserts: "Amherst was not exempt from the large operations of history. The poet lived in the last decadence of a religious culture."

23. "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment," in Blake and Wells, *Recognition*, p. 187.

24. "Emily Dickinson's Notation," in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 80.

25. "Emily Dickinson," in Blake and Wells, *Recognition*, p. 103.

26. The distinctions are Blackmur's. In 1937 he wrote, "Without benefit of comparative scholarship it is impossible to determine whether a given item is a finished poem, an early version of a poem, a note for a poem, a part of a poem, or a prose exclamation" ("Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact," in Blake and Wells, *Recognition*, p. 201).

27. For discussions of Dickinson's punctuation and capitalization, see R. W. Franklin, *The Editing of Emily Dickinson: A Reconsideration* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), pp. 117-28; Edith Perry Stamm, "Emily Dickinson: Poetry and Punctuation," *Saturday Review* 66 (30 March 1963): 26-27, 74; Austin Warren, "Emily Dickinson," in Blake and Wells, *Recognition*, pp. 268-86; David T. Porter, *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 140-45, and on style generally, pp. 125-55; and Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, *Voice of the Poet*, pp. 180-96.

28. *Editing of Emily Dickinson*, p. 128.

29. See Franklin's discussion in *Editing of Emily Dickinson*, pp. 131-43. In an address before the English Institute, 1951, Johnson discusses the problems of editing the texts; he concludes by explaining why it is so difficult to determine which variants of a given poem are definitive ones:

In one instance I thought she herself had provided a solution. One of the poems which she copied into a packet had several suggested readings for eight different words in the course of the five stanzas, but with no indication of her choice. . . . Then I found the same poem included in a letter to Higginson with choices made in every instance. Here, then, seemed proof that she had established her final version. But in another letter to another correspondent, written at substantially the same time, she has included the same poem—also evidently a final version—wherein she adopted six of the choices made in the Higginson letter, but selected two from among her variants in the remaining instances. If any conclusion is to be drawn from this citation, it would seem to be that there are no final versions of the poems for which she allowed alternate readings to stand in the packets. Franklin, *Editing of Emily Dickinson*, p. 130.

30. Inder Nath Kher (*The Landscape of Absence: Emily Dickinson's Poetry* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974], p. 5); Warren ("Emily Dickinson," p. 271); Herbert Read ("The Range of Emily Dickinson," in Blake and Wells, *Recognition*, p. 174); David Porter (*Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, p. 175); and Charles Anderson (*Stairway of Surprise*, p. xii) are some of the many critics who speak of lack of development in the poems. Robert Sherwood and Thomas W. Ford regard Dickinson's work as falling into distinct periods, but they don't characterize them similarly. See Sherwood, *Circumference and Circumstance*, pp. 23-67, and Ford, *Heaven Beguiles the Tired: Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Alabama: University of Alabama, 1966), pp. 68-71.

31. Porter writes: "In the years from 1850 to 1862 she succeeded in refining genuine and effective expressions of feeling from a clutter of commonplace ideas and syntaxes. Perhaps the principal reason for her early success is that she addressed herself again and again to a single theme" (*Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, p. 174).

32. F. O. Matthiessen calls her a "private poet" ("The Private Poet: Emily Dickinson," in Blake and Wells, *Recognition*, p. 224).

33. *Stairway of Surprise*, p. 70.

34. "Notes on Prejudice and Fact," p. 215.

35. Weisbuch's study, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), along with Charles Anderson's *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* and David Porter's *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry* is one of the finest book-length contributions to Dickinson scholarship, and what he has to say both about the scenelessness of her poetry and the confusion of its categories leaves the reader of Dickinson's poems profoundly indebted to the clarity of this way of conceiving of them.

I read the Weisbuch study when my own book was well along toward completion, and I was struck by the parallels between parts of my third chapter and his similar sense of death utterances as figural in nature, a coincidence that I took to be a reassuring gauge of the accuracy of the

perception. Though, finally, Weisbuch and I use the explanatory apparatus of type and antitype for different purposes, I have returned to several passages of my book, and where I have observed similarities between the two discussions, I have acknowledged them after the fact with footnotes.

36. Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, p. 19. While Weisbuch makes the astute observation that the analogic language of the poem exists parallel to the world of experience, one would like him to distinguish still further between analogies that parallel experience when experience is inadequate (as, for example, in the poems whose speakers survive death in order to secure knowledge of it) and poems that parallel experience when experience, itself perfectly adequate, lacks adequate vocabulary in which to articulate itself (as for example, in "It was not death for I stood up").

37. *Emily Dickinson*, p. 107.

38. Weisbuch offers the poem as an example of a typical "analogic collection," though he makes more sense of it than perhaps it deserves, when he writes, "The poem may be thought of as a wild and disconsolate rewriting of Wordsworth's Immortality Ode, a dirge to lost powers, a dirge in which mere intimations of the thing itself torture rather than console" (*Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, pp. 20-21).

39. *Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, p. 99. For the most complete discussion of Dickinson's syntax, see Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, *Voice of the Poet*, pp. 214-60, and for a wonderful discussion of the precedents for Dickinson's bizarre verb forms, see Grace B. Sherrer, "A Study of Unusual Verb Constructions in the Poems of Emily Dickinson," *American Literature* 7 (March 1935): 37-46.

40. For a discussion of Dickinson's diction, see William Howard, "Emily Dickinson's Poetic Vocabulary," *PMLA* (March 1957), p. 236. The three primary idiosyncrasies in Dickinson's diction, as singled out by Howard, are "her ratio of 5:12:8 for adjectives, nouns, and verbs; the small number of words—only 17—that she uses 8 or more times per 1,000 lines; and her occasional use of many words in a somewhat singular way, e.g., the use of a noun to denote a quality possessed by the thing for which the noun stands" (p. 248).

Howard makes the excellent point that we call a word rare or unusual if our own linguistic experience of it is a limited one. In fact, many words that strike us as odd in Dickinson's poetic vocabulary ("attar," or "cochineal," for example) were in common usage in the early nineteenth century. "Cochineal" occurs as the name of a food coloring in recipes of the period (see p. 231).

See also J. V. Cunningham's discussion of metonymy or the proximate word in "Sorting Out: The Case of Dickinson," *The Southern Review* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 436-56.

41. "Emily Dickinson," in Blake and Wells, *Recognition*, p. 285.

42. Robert Weisbuch amplifies such distinctions in his discussion of the "willful confusion of categories" in the poems (*Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, p. 13).

43. *Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, 1: xxi. On the subject of confusion and ambiguity, see also Dolores Dyer Lucas, *Emily Dickinson and Riddle* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1969).

44. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 17-18.

45. *The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 4.

46. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Berkeley Medallion, 1955), p. 97.

47. *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 20.

48. "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 330.

49. "Avoidance of Love," p. 334.

50. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1960), book 11, chapter 14, pp. 285-86.

51. *Augustine, Confessions*, book 11, chapter 11, p. 285.

CHAPTER I

1. In *I. A. Richards: Essays in His Honor*, ed. Reuben Brower, Helen Vendler, and John Hollander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 173.

2. For discussions of the relationship between pain and atemporality in Dickinson's poems, see Charles R. Anderson, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966), p. 230; Inder Nath Kher, *The Landscape of Absence: Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 23 and 82; David T. Porter,

The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 155; George Frisbe Whicher, *This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938; reprint ed., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 302; and Richard Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution," in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 128.

3. *Disease, Pain and Sacrifice: Toward a Psychology of Suffering* (Chicago: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 77.

4. "Literature as Equipment for Living," in *Perspectives by Incongruity*, ed. Stanley Edgar Hyman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 106.

5. For a discussion of how a verbal community determines response, see B. F. Skinner's "The Tact" in *Verbal Behavior* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957), pp. 81-146.

6. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. E. W. Emerson, Centenary Edition, 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903), 2: 109.

7. For an excellent summary of the history of views on the function and nature of definitions, see Raziel Abelson's discussion in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols., ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 3: 314-24. Abelson gives a brief and critical history of the three major philosophic positions on the problem of definition: the essentialists, who believe that definitional knowledge is that of essences; the linguistic philosophers, who assert that it is knowledge of language usage; and the prescriptivists, who maintain that definitions contain no knowledge of any kind. Abelson concludes: "An evaluation of a definition must begin with the identification of the point or purpose of the definition, and this requires knowledge of the discursive situation in which the need for the definition arises" (p. 322).

8. Millicent Todd Bingham, *Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Discovery of Emily Dickinson; The Editing and Publication of Her Letters and Poems* (New York: Harper, 1945; reprint ed., New York: Dover, 1967), p. 311.

9. *This Was a Poet*, p. 305.

10. "Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact," in *The Recognition of Emily Dickinson: Selected Criticism since 1890*, ed. Caesar R. Blake and Carlton F. Wells (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 223.

11. Blackmur, "Notes on Prejudice and Fact," p. 215. David Porter, in *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, also mentions Dickinson's habitual use of emphatic opening and closing lines.

12. "Aphasia as a Linguistic Topic," in Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, 6 vols. (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 2: 232, 254.

13. In "Precision and Indeterminacy in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson," Roland Hagenbüchle also discusses the relationship between Dickinson's use of metonymy and aphasia. *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 20, no. 1 (1974): 33-56.

14. Jakobson, "Aphasia as a Linguistic Topic," p. 236.

15. Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language," in *Selected Writings*, 2: 251.

16. *Modern American Poetry, Mid-Century Edition*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), p. 7.

17. In "Structural Patterns in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," *Emerson Society Quarterly, A Journal of the American Renaissance*, no. 44 (1966), pp. 12-17, Carroll Laverty specifies the single sentence as one of eight basic patterns in Dickinson's poetry.

18. Donald E. Thackeray, "The Communication of the Word," in Sewall, *Emily Dickinson*, p. 51.

19. "Aphasia as a Linguistic Topic," p. 237.

20. Albert J. Gelpi, *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 145.

21. In *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), Robert Weisbuch discusses a similar phenomenon in Dickinson's definitional poems when he observes that they sometimes propose analogues that the rest of the poem revises or even overthrows (see pp. 63-71).

22. *Disease, Pain and Sacrifice*, p. 65-66.

23. *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 85.

24. "A Note on Dialectic," *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary*, ed. Maynard Solomon (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), pp. 534-35.

25. "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words" in Sigmund Freud, *On Creativity and the Unconscious* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1958), p. 60.

26. *Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967), p. 8.
 27. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 46.

CHAPTER II

1. Sigmund Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," in *Collected Papers*, 5 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1949), 3: 25.
2. "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History," *Partisan Review* 41, no. 1 (1974): 92.
3. *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 169.
4. *Swinburne*, p. 170. For another description of poetic distraction from the centrality of story, see Geoffrey Hartman's essay on Valéry's "Fable of the Bee" in *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975). Hartman speaks of that poem as being drained of story or event, purified to a melodic line: "The most brilliant thing in Valéry is indeed this melodic élan, never quite determined by a content it half-creates. It purifies its own movement toward closure, rendering all figures figures of speech, all terms charms of language. The author will not close the sense for us, by insisting on sense" (p. 231). What is interesting about both Hartman's and McGann's descriptions is the attention each pays to the deviations from story, and to the alternative ways of conceiving of poetic completion. For the Dickinson poems under discussion in this chapter, such alternative explanations often bequeath the only sense these poems can be said to make.
5. Soren Kierkegaard, *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1941), p. 33.
6. *Repetition*, pp. 52-53.
7. Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 1-31.
8. In "Dickinson's 'My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun,'" *Explicator* 21 (November 1962), item 21, Laurence Perrine discusses this fusion between gun and body.
9. Robert Weisbuch's discussion of "My Life had stood a Loaded Gun" identifies the poem's subject as that of the relationship between power and freedom, nothingness and "self-realization through subservience" (p. 27), but because he considers the analogies it employs as almost infinitely extendable, the discussion seems close to suggesting that the poem is about everything or nothing, as Weisbuch himself acknowledges. Such hospitality to diverse interpretations is carried to its furthest extreme when Weisbuch offers one of Dickinson's letters that employs similar imagery as a new gloss on the poem, suggesting (as I think the poem does not) that this may be a poem about the power of writing poetry. Despite the improbability of the latter speculation, Weisbuch's willingness to look below the surface of the poem's images, as few critics before him have, allows him to see its problematic posing of the dilemma of power and identity, of "transcendence at the cost of freedom or freedom at the cost of meaning" (*Emily Dickinson's Poetry* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975], p. 32).
10. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), p. 94.
11. "Storyteller," pp. 100-101.
12. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 214-35.
13. "The Voice of the Shuttle: Language from the Point of View of Literature," in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958-1970* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 348.
14. *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966), p. 320.
15. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 166.
16. *The Fantastic*, p. 159.

CHAPTER III

1. "The Inside and the Outside," *Hudson Review* 28, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 334.
2. "Sorting Out: The Case of Dickinson," *The Southern Review* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 454.

3. "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), p. 206.
4. "Rhetoric of Temporality," pp. 207-8.
5. "Figura" in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959). Tracing the semantic development of the word *figura*, Auerbach tells us that as it evolved with Augustine's usage, it came to designate two historical and real events, the first predictive of the second, the second fulfilling the first, and both promising a third ultimate fulfillment at the end of the world. The primary purpose of figural interpretation was to demonstrate the way in which the Old Testament prefigured the New Testament and its providential history.
6. Any general reader of poetry who wants to know more about Dickinson's consistent attempt to dramatize typological relationships as a way of knowing the unknowable should turn to Robert Weisbuch's *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), which offers a complete discussion of Dickinson and the typology of death. The Dickinson reader has, I assume, long ago found his way there with appreciation. Weisbuch invokes the typological apparatus to suggest the multiple relationships of prefiguration in Dickinson's poems: the type of death's anticipation and the antitype of its reality, the type of experience and the antitype of eternity, the type of separation and the antitype of the death of affection, to name a few of the most important patterns that are discerned and discussed. Weisbuch argues that the typological pattern is a shifting one in Dickinson's poetry, the terms of anticipation and its fulfillment fleshed out in different forms, although he sees each attempting to invert, internalize, or otherwise transform a traditional Christian typology. My own use of the typological theme is a limited one: to specify the way in which despair in these poems comes to anticipate death and, at the same time, to epitomize it.
7. "Figura," p. 58.
8. "Time as Succession and the Problem of Duration," in *The Voices of Time: A Cooperative Survey of Man's Views of Time as Expressed by the Sciences and by the Humanities*, ed. J. T. Fraser, and trans. Francesco Gaona (New York: G. Braziller, 1966), p. 39.
9. "Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1955).
10. Panofsky refers to Poussin's second composition on this subject.
11. Panofsky, "Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," p. 316.
12. "Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," pp. 316-17.
13. *Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966), pp. 230-34.
14. See Hartman, "The Voice of the Shuttle: Language from the Point of View of Literature," in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958-1970* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 349; Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, p. 51, and Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 19.
15. Another way of conceiving of the "Fork" of "Eternity—" is to see it composed of the separate possibilities of salvation and damnation, possibilities whose distinction ceases to matter as the speaker turns all her attention to the more immediate fact of death.
16. *Stairway of Surprise*, p. 263.
17. See, for example, Anderson, *Stairway of Surprise*, p. 263; Ford, *Heaven Beguiles the Tired*, pp. 113-14, and Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, p. 101.
18. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1959), p. 86.
19. In *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 263, Claude Lévi-Strauss writes:
 The characteristic feature of the savage mind is its timelessness; its object is to grasp the world as both a synchronic and a diachronic totality and the knowledge which it draws therefrom is like that afforded of a room by mirrors fixed on opposite walls, which reflect each other (as well as objects in the intervening space) although without being strictly parallel. A multitude of images forms simultaneously, none exactly like any other, so that no single one furnishes more than a partial knowledge of the decoration and furniture but the group is characterized by invariant properties expressing a truth. The savage mind deepens its knowledge with the help of *imagines mundi*. It builds mental structures which facilitate an understanding of the world in as much as they resemble it. In this sense savage thought can be defined as analogical thought.
20. In "The Inside and the Outside," Jean Starobinski speaks, in fact, of the Fall as that