

DICKINSON

The Anxiety of Gender

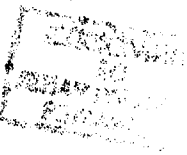
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ITHACA AND LONDON

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frustration enhances desire, her experience had instructed her in an even harsher reality: that persons deprived of experiential pleasure come to participate in their own self-destruction. To choose oneself is to choose death. To choose unity is to renounce diversity. And it was, finally, on diversity that Dickinson took her stand. "Renunciation," the "piercing Virtue" she practices within individual poems, was precisely the sacrificial art she refused to master. Had she mastered this art, her voice—a voice protesting against the circumstances of its generation—would have been silenced. Her poems are thus not in quest of a subject (her subject is herself) but in quest of an object. This object is a relationship other than her relationship to language that will maximize her sense of personal freedom. This relationship cannot, strictly speaking, be said to exist in Dickinson's poetry, since her imagination is activated by those relational losses against which she protests most vehemently. For this reason, social powerlessness is Dickinson's most thoroughly explored, consistently interesting, and intransigently feminist theme.



SISTERHOOD

Dickinson's innate feminism also informs those texts that memorialize another woman who has the power to confer identity on her. Ideally, these romantic friendships enhance Dickinson's self-confidence, defend her against the threat of patriarchal power, and compensate her for her lack of a magically potent mother: someone, for example, like the bewitching Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who seemed to transform a "sombre Girl" into an Amazonian beauty (593). Nevertheless, Dickinson's self-sufficient sisterhood is subtly impregnated by sexual rage, and the major theme, "never quite disclosed / And never quite concealed" (1173), is her suppression of a complex homosexual identity. Like Shakespeare, Dickinson writes love poems to men, to women, and to figures whose gender is unknown. Relatively few of Dickinson's love poems are unmistakably inspired by a woman, but once the presence of even a small body of such poems is noted, we also note how many of her poems are addressed to a sexually indeterminate "Thee," as in the celebrated "Wild Nights," with its perfect and perfectly ambiguous concluding stanza, "Rowing in Eden—/ Ah, the Sea! / Might I but moor— Tonight— / In Thee!" (249).¹ When Higginson was preparing the second posthumous edition of poems in 1891, he wrote to his coeditor, Mabel Loomis Todd, "One poem only I dread a little to print—

1. See my discussion of this poem on p. 185.

that wonderful 'Wild Nights,'—lest the malignant read into it more than that virgin recluse ever dreamed of putting there."² Presumably Higginson was troubled by the poem's heightened eroticism, whereas some modern readers have faulted the concluding image for its supposed biological role reversal.³

If her lover's gender is sometimes problematic, the psychic identification Dickinson makes with "the Man within" (746) is unmistakable. She associates the recovery of her prelapsarian past "When Memory was a Boy—" (652) with this latent power; adopts male personae, child or adult, even in the love poems; and describes positive elevations in status by an ineffectual female as the transformation into maleness, as in the following example, addressed to someone—probably a woman who has slighted her—she calls "Sweet":

No matter—now—Sweet—
But when I'm Earl—
Wont you wish you'd spoken
To that dull Girl?

Trivial a Word—just—
Trivial—a Smile—
But wont you wish you'd spared one
When I'm Earl?

I shant need it—then—
Crests—will do—
Eagles on my Buckles—
On my Belt—too—

Ermine—my familiar Gown—
Say—Sweet—then
Wont you wish you'd smiled—just—
Me upon? (704)

2. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, as quoted in Millicent Todd Bingham, *Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Discovery of Emily Dickinson: The Editing and Publication of her Letters and Poems* (New York: Dover, 1945), p. 127.

3. Albert Gelpi, in *The Tenth Muse: The Psyche of the American Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 242–43, observes that "the poem is perhaps the most unabashedly passionate poem that Dickinson wrote," that it "indicates something of the difficulties of Dickinson's emotional life," and that "the sexual roles are blurred," in order to conclude, "Something more subtle than an inversion of sexual roles is at work here, and the point is not that Emily Dickinson was homosexual, as Rebecca Patterson and John Cody have argued." Gelpi does not, however, explain this subtlety.

Dickinson's self-transformations are checked both by the reality of her situation and by her fear of the stranger within, as we see in the following instance. Though sent to Samuel Bowles in 1859, the poem was apparently intended for his wife Mary:

Her breast is fit for pearls,
But I was not a "Diver"—
Her brow is fit for thrones
But I have not a crest.

Her heart is fit for *home*—
I—a Sparrow—build there
Sweet of twigs and twine
My perennial nest. (84)

The tone here is undeniably regressive. Symbolically castrating herself, Dickinson inhibits the boldness she associates with male identity and is drawn back into a nest which is also, uncomfortably, a womb. Silencing the voice of the "Diver" leads to a declension in poetic power; imperious demands are retracted by a diminished alter ego—the Sparrow—who functions to sweeten nature, rather than to explore it.

Generalizations about the ninety or so poems in which other female figures appear must necessarily be qualified by the inherent ambiguity of Dickinson's imagery, but in fact the range of relationships depicted is rather narrowly circumscribed. Virtually all the poems of Dickinson's sisterhood group are concerned with some form of loss or renunciation, as in the example just cited. Most of them describe a relationship that has never been actualized or that has already disintegrated. Typically, these friendships matter more to the speaker than they do to her friend; in some crucial dimension, her love is unrequited.⁴ When this is not the case, there is a curious doubling effect, as though Dickinson were projecting the narcissism of a divided self into a barely credible social situation. In most poems Dickinson's subject, by which I mean the subject she consciously shapes, is her response to the inaccessibility of a female other. Consequently, the vitality of these relationships must be inferred from her attitudes toward their demise:

4. In "Emily Dickinson's Homoerotic Poetry," *Higginson Journal* 18 (1978): 19–27, Lillian Faderman observes that these poems depict love "that has been frustrated in one way or another" and that none of them "celebrates fulfillment."

I meant to find Her when I came—
 Death—had the same design—
 But the Success—was His—it seems—
 And the Surrender—Mine—

I meant to tell Her how I longed
 For just this single time—
 But Death had told Her so the first—
 And she had past, with Him—

To wander—now—is my Repose—
 To rest—To rest would be
 A privilege of Hurricane
 To Memory—and Me. (718)

Dickinson has transformed her specific loss of an actual woman into the symbolic loss of any lover. This point can be clarified if we change the word "Her" to "Him" and "she" to "he." We have some precedent for this kind of metamorphosis in Dickinson's own practice, since there are a number of poems in which alternate versions change the genders of pronouns.⁵ Arguably, something is lost when the triangle is an unindividuated "I," "He," and "Death." The last line of stanza two becomes cramped (And he had past, with Him); the seductiveness of death, especially in stanza two, is robbed of its force. But stanza one remains almost intact, and stanza three is identical. The possibility of this gender inversion suggests that Dickinson has created a psychological allegory which subordinates female friendship to her more pervasive interest in death, the betrayer of human connections.

Yet this is not one of the double-gender poems. The poem Dickinson actually wrote begins with her intention to locate another woman for some unspecified purpose. Its development describes the invasion of this embryonic female community by an alien male who destroys it. Its conclusion, at once urgent and meditative, describes the speaker's disorientation because of this affectional loss. Wandering has become repose; rest, hurricane. To distance this bereavement, the speaker wishes to annihilate her past, but to annihilate her past is to annihilate her identity. Wiping out memorial detail with hurricane force, death is both the speaker's competitor and her imperfectly repressed double. Dickinson created this third character

5. See, for example, poems 41, 446, 494, 1249, and 1562.

to dissociate herself from rage, jealousy, and sexual passion—de-meaning emotions that disrupted some of her relationships with other women. Her personification of death suppresses key elements of her experience as a daughter, a sister, and a friend. The poem reenacts a partially repressed drama, reproducing the original triangle (a female figure, an "I" of undefined gender, and a deathly male) in a less threatening form. Given this symbolic displacement, the reader must look to other poems and to Dickinson's life for a fuller presentation of the germinal occasion.

Like other Dickinsonian narratives, "I meant to find Her when I came—" begins with a hopeful occasion and concludes with an empirically justified moral—a definition that negotiates between the speaker's intention (to find a woman she loves) and her achievement (a stoical grief). In many of the poems of Dickinson's sisterhood group, the speaker's original aspirations are either disrupted or clarified by some form of death. Because this paradigmatic plot informs many of her heterosexual love poems, there are striking similarities between the narrative occasions of both groups of poems.⁶ There is the same "Day at Summer's full" ("Ourselves were wed one summer—dear—"); comparable episodes in which the speaker rededicates herself to someone who ignores her ("Precious to Me—She still shall be— / Though She forget the name I bear— / The fashion of the Gown I wear— / The very Color of My Hair—"); the same unregulated "awful leisure" the death or desertion of the other leaves behind ("The last Night that She lived / It was a Common Night / Except the Dying—this to Us / Made Nature different").⁷ But whereas Dickinson anticipates a heavenly reunion with her male lover in a significant cluster of poems, she never anticipates a postmortem resurrection of her devastated sorority. As a consequence, when her relationship to another woman is deadlocked, Dickinson's need to preserve her friendship is exceeded only by her desire to destroy it. To this end, she often introduces a symbolic male figure who relieves her of the burden of repudiating either her homosexual or her heterosexual identities. This closure corresponds both to her inner necessity and to the historical conclusion of her relationship with Susan Gilbert Dickinson during the 1850s.

Until sisterhood is drawn into the vortex of Dickinson's quarrel

6. Absent clear indications to the contrary, when Dickinson associates her lover with the sun or the deity, she is describing a heterosexual relationship.

7. The quotations are from poems 322, 631, 727, and 1100.

with death and reformulated as an ideal created through the loss of an actual relationship, her poems of female friendship are peripheral to her achievement as an artist. Nevertheless, even those poems that clearly depict active social relationships expose some of the psychological associations that enabled Dickinson to exclude limiting biographical facts from her art. For example, the following poems were addressed to Susan Gilbert Dickinson and reflect the quest of a childlike persona for a surrogate mother:

One Sister have I in our house,
And one, a hedge away.
There's only one recorded,
But both belong to me.

One came the road that I came—
And wore my last year's gown—
The other, as a bird her nest,
Buildded our hearts among.

She did not sing as we did—
It was a different tune—
Herself to her a music
As Bumble bee of June.

Today is far from Childhood—
But up and down the hills
I held her hand the tighter—
Which shortened all the miles—

And still her hum
The years among,
Deceives the Butterfly;
Still in her Eye
The Violets lie
Mouldered this many May.

I spilt the dew—
But took the morn—
I chose this single star
From out the wide night's numbers—
Sue—forevermore! (14)

You love me—you are sure—
I shall not fear mistake—
I shall not *cheated* wake—
Some grinning morn—
To find the Sunrise left—

And Orchards—unbereft—
And Dollie—gone!

I need not start—you're sure—
That night will never be—
When frightened—home to Thee I run—
To find the window dark—
And no more Dollie—mark—
Quite none?

Be sure you're sure—you know—
I'll bear it better now—
If you'll just tell me so—
Than when—a little dull Balm grown—
Over this pain of mine—
You sting—again! (156)

At first glance these poems appear to be relatively uncomplicated accounts of an increasingly troubled friendship. The first, written in 1858, begins by comparing the sister in the house (Vinnie) and the sister "a hedge away," next door in the Evergreens, the house Sue shared with her husband. Stanza two builds on the contrast between the sisters with some devaluation of Vinnie, the younger sister who wore the poet's "last year's gown" and traveled the same road of family experience, always a pace behind. Stanza three suggests that Sue was happier and less influenced by public opinion than the Dickinsons. Lines three and four shift the analogy between Sue and a singing bird to an analogy between Sue and a bumble bee. In other poems, Dickinson's bumble bee is often a phallic symbol, but this association is not obviously present here. Stanza four begins by contrasting the present with childhood and describes a journey, presumably into womanhood, that is controlled by Sue's reassuring hand. Stanza five introduces the radically new motif of deception. Sue's beelike hum "Deceives" an unidentified butterfly. Thus, when the motif of deception is introduced, Dickinson's language becomes significantly more cryptic. Lines three through six say both that Sue's eyes are exempt from the mortality May violets suffer and also that her eyes "lie." The pun on "lie" may be intentional or inadvertent; the word choice may have been determined by the rhyme. The concluding stanza reemphasizes Sue's uniqueness and introduces other emblems of her spiritual innocence. The phrase "I spilt the dew" with Sue as flower is enigmatic if one asks what spilling the dew involves in terms of human experience. The word "spilt" may sug-

gest either that the speaker made a mistake or that she deliberately renounced something physical and inconsequential for something more permanent and comprehensive.

The second poem, written two years later, reintroduces the deception motif and develops it further. It incorporates the bee figure and again alludes to Dollie's (a pet name for Sue) capacity to calm the speaker's fears. The poem upbraids Sue for neglecting her and sounds as if it were a response to Sue's assurance of continued love. The surrealistic phrase "Some grinning morn" is superior to anything in the previous poem, drawing as it does on Dickinson's superlative vocabulary of misplaced emotions and displaced actions. A number of poems written to Sue beginning at about this time (1860) when she was pregnant with her first child allude to rebuffs that cause Dickinson (one wants to say "Emily" here) to feel cheated. Again, the poem's significance is primarily biographical.

Moving beyond these poems and others like them ("Is it true, dear Sue? / Are there *two*?" [218]; "Could I—then—shut the door— / Lest *my* beseeching face—at last— / Rejected—be—of *Her*?" [220]) that are too closely tied to the external frame of events, one finds a poem such as the following:

Dying! Dying in the night!
Wont somebody bring the light
So I can see which way to go
Into the everlasting snow?

And 'Jesus! Where is *Jesus* gone?
They said that Jesus—always came—
Perhaps he does'nt know the House—
This way, Jesus, Let him pass!

Somebody run to the great gate
And see if Dollie's coming! Wait!
I hear her feet upon the stair!
Death wont hurt—now Dollie's here! (158)

The persona makes no attempt to explain why she is "Dying! Dying in the night!" and this abrupt beginning opens up a more psychologically suggestive situation. The urgency of her situation is conveyed by a series of repetitions, by vocative ejaculations, and by strategically placed sentence fragments. The sequence Jesus-Dollie suggests that the speaker is more likely to be rescued by her friend than

by the proverbial "Savior" who "does'nt know the House." The cause of her desperation may be her friend's absence. The line "I hear her feet upon the stair!" anticipates an image that is thoroughly developed in the second stanza of one of Dickinson's most erotic heavenly-marriage poems, "A Wife—at Daybreak I shall be—" (461):

Midnight—Good Night! I hear them call,
The Angels bustle in the Hall—
Softly my Future climbs the Stair,
I fumble at my Childhood's prayer
So soon to be a Child no more—
Eternity, I'm coming—Sir,
Savior—I've seen the face—before!

These poems, "One Sister have I in our house," "You love me—you are sure," and "Dying! Dying in the night!" depict Sue as a maternal guide and as a faithless or faithful friend. These themes reappear throughout Dickinson's poetry of female friendship, both in poems addressed to Sue and in poems that were probably inspired by other women.

A poem written in 1862 introduces an explicit marriage motif. "Ourselves were wed one summer—dear—" neither mentions Sue by name nor, apparently, was it sent to her, although Dickinson shared more of her poems with Sue than with any other person. Given the biographical context of Dickinson's letters, together with the evidence of poems that either mention Sue or that Dickinson sent her as tributes to their friendship, I am convinced that "dear" and Sue are synonymous:

Ourselves were wed one summer—dear—
Your Vision—was in June—
And when Your little Lifetime failed,
I wearied—too—of mine—

And overtaken in the Dark—
Where You had put me down—
By Some one carrying a Light—
I—too—received the Sign.

'Tis true—Our Futures different lay—
Your Cottage—faced the sun—
While Oceans—and the North must be—
On every side of mine

'Tis true, Your Garden led the Bloom,
 For mine—in Frosts—was sown—
 And yet, one Summer, we were Queens—
 But You—were crowned in June— (631)

The symbolism is complicated but not impenetrable. Sue's "Vision" of her future has morbid consequences for the speaker. In other poems, Dickinson describes marriage as a ritual that obliterates the freedom she associates with girlhood, and this meaning is present in stanza one. When Sue's "little Lifetime" fails, the speaker loses interest in her own. Stanza two recalls the "Dark" of "Dying! Dying in the night!" and implies that Sue had carried her as a mother carries her child, before abandoning her. A third figure, a light-bearer, then rescued Dickinson from despair by bestowing a "Sign" upon her. The first two stanzas suggest that the "Sign" Dickinson received must be some emblem of love, but in stanzas three and four she continues to compare herself to Sue, rather than to describe her vision of her more recent lover. Sue's "Cottage" faces the sun; Dickinson's is surrounded by sunless "Oceans—and the North." Sue's "Garden" symbolizes the richness of her sexual nature and of her domestic experience; Dickinson's symbolizes a lesser triumph over sterility, because she never effectively renounced her love for Sue, transferred her affection to anyone else, or recovered from Sue's betrayal of her. The poem stops short of an unequivocal assertion that she and Sue were originally wed to each other, but Dickinson's reaction to Sue's marriage can be explained only if we assume that she felt displaced by Sue's husband. Together, she and Sue were "Queens" or powerful women and Sue's marriage is compared, in the poem's concluding line, to a coronation. Dickinson, however, was dethroned by it.

Even in 1862, six years after Sue's marriage, this narrative in its painful particularity was still profoundly unacceptable to Dickinson. Although she had effectively excluded some of the biographical facts that she wished to ignore, the symbolism is cryptic because she was not yet in command of her story. As late as 1872, Sue still had the power to wound her deeply and Dickinson continued to feel betrayed by her. The following poem, for example, opens strongly by contrasting physical presence and emotional remoteness, surely a metaphor for Sue's relationship to Dickinson at that time. Beginning with the fourth line of the concluding stanza, however, Dickinson

retreats from storytelling and hastens to resolve a dilemma that has been inadequately explored. Unable to explain "Love's transmigration" to herself, she attempts to achieve a broader perspective on any worthless sacrifice:

Now I knew I lost her—
 Not that she was gone—
 But Remoteness travelled
 On her Face and Tongue.

Alien, though adjoining
 As a Foreign Race—
 Traversed she though pausing
 Latitudeless Place.

Elements Unaltered—
 Universe the same
 But Love's transmigration—
 Somehow this had come—

Henceforth to remember
 Nature took the Day
 I had paid so much for—
 His is Penury
 Not who toils for Freedom
 Or for Family
 But the Restitution
 Of Idolatry. (1219)

Poems such as these in which her self-analysis is deflected by her analysis of someone else's neglect of her tend to be cluttered and underdeveloped. Furthermore, these poems arouse our suspicion that Dickinson was an overdemanding friend, though she portrays herself as a constant woman in an inconstant world. Both esthetic and psychological necessity converged to demand some further excision of her friend from her texts, but, as we have seen, the extent to which Dickinson could renounce or wished to renounce her dependence on Sue was precisely the issue she was struggling to resolve. One solution to this problem, which she had already begun to explore even in "One Sister have I in our house," was to compress a social narrative into a nature allegory. Depicting Sue as a bird, a bee, the morn, or a star, Dickinson simultaneously dehumanized and immortalized her. Still another solution, as we have also seen, was to introduce a male third who stabilizes Dickinson's sororities by de-

stroying them and who also deflects the homoeroticism toward which these relationships tended. How is it, then, that when Dickinson reimagines the crisis of passionate renunciation of "Ourselves were wed one summer—dear," which had been imperfectly worked out in that poem, makes death the defining characteristic of a living relationship, and introduces no male third, she writes a drama of haunting and unforgettable intensity? Perhaps no one could fully answer this question except some ideal version of Dickinson as critic. Nevertheless, one important difference between "Ourselves were wed one summer—dear—" and "Like Eyes that looked on Wastes—" is that, in the latter poem, also written in about 1862, both figures are equally implicated in deadlocked struggle. The other "Queen" no longer has a separate "Vision" as she had in the inferior poem. Uniting these characters apparently freed Dickinson to concentrate on the despair of imperfectly achieved renunciation. Having gratified her desire to make the other an agent of the self, she also makes the duality of the self the poem's focus:⁸

Like Eyes that looked on Wastes—
Incredulous of Ought
But Blank—and steady Wilderness—
Diversified by Night—

Just Infinites of Nought—
As far as it could see—
So looked the face I looked upon—
So looked itself—on Me—

I offered it no Help—
Because the Cause was Mine—
The Misery a Compact
As hopeless—as divine—

Neither—would be absolved—
Neither would be a Queen

8. Roy Harvey Pearce's insight in *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 179, also helps to explain this procedure: "In these poems the natural images exist only that they may contribute to the definition of a moral experience; they are not in any sense there for their own sakes, scenically; the language in which they are cast has no meaning except as it is focused on the moral experience involved. . . . The qualities . . . imputed to the natural scene are human qualities, but their humanness explicitly derives from the situation of the poet-protagonist—as though the objective reality of nature were irrelevant, whereas the felt quality were everything."

Without the Other—Therefore—
We perish—tho' We reign— (458)

The poem opens with an extended analogy implying that language is inadequate to represent emotional truth, that we are being offered an approximation of an essentially incommunicable suffering. Completing the analogy ("So looked the face I looked upon— / So looked itself—on Me—") redoubles the tension between the deliberately ambiguous perspective (who is seeing what?) and the absolute "Nought" of the landscape. The repetition with its rhythmic and thematic emphasis on "looked" causes us to examine whether the speaker is describing the way the wasted face of the mirroring other looks to her and vice versa or the mutual sight their eyes jointly perceive. That is, the connection between the eyes and the face or faces is severed, so that "Eyes" is no longer a synecdoche for "face" or "it." Stanzas one and two lack an independent subject-verb construction, nor are they grammatically associated with the self-contained complete sentence of stanza three, line one. The syntax, then, reflects the radical dissociation from any familiar order which is the effect of a compact "As hopeless—as divine." These eyes have seen too far into the "Night" where unconscious and conscious merge, where spiritual brideship is equated with sexual embrace, where self and double are no longer distinguishable. The word "absolved" suggests what we must already know. Although some feminist critics have suggested that homoerotic female friendships in nineteenth-century America were easily reconciled with heterosexual commitments and untainted by guilt, for Dickinson the bonds of womanhood are more confining.

The paradoxical logic of the concluding stanza sets up an ironic tension between the speaker's desire to extricate herself from this relationship and her desire to perpetuate it. If her "Compact" is nullified, both she and her lover will be absolved from guilt, but this absolution will eradicate their mutual erotic pleasure. Divided as they are against themselves, neither woman can aid the other and each is condemned to be Waste Land's Queen. Thus, in a rare poem in which Dickinson implicates both women equally in this proud homosexual terror, freedom and impotence meet. The climactic epithet "Infinites of Nought" brilliantly compounds the psychological duplicity of this symbiotic relationship—or indeed of any losing battle against obsession.

Since most poems totally exclude sisterhood as an immediate presence from the poetic structure, concentrating instead on the isolated speaker-survivor's adjustment to bereavement, it is with some interest that one turns to a poem that enables us to observe how and when the sororal bond is ruptured:

We talked as Girls do—
Fond; and late—
We speculated fair, on every subject, but the Grave—
Of our's none affair—

We handled Destinies, as cool—
As we—Disposers—be—
And God, a Quiet Party
To our Authority—

But fondest, dwelt upon Ourselves
As we eventual—be—
When Girls to Women, softly raised
We—occupy—Degree—

We parted with a contract
To cherish, and to write
But Heaven made both, impossible
Before another night. (586)

This lucid narrative, colloquial and lofty, concludes with an apparently unmotivated punishment, yet its outcome is thoroughly conditioned by the sexual politics of the relationship depicted. Dickinson's sorority provides her with an authentic social structure that subordinates "God" or masculine authority to the role of "Quiet Party." Her friendship reaches an impasse when the subject of marriage is broached, albeit euphemistically. The poem moves into a semiprivate symbolism as the speaker begins to expatiate on the content of those romantic aspirations which, she gives us to understand, formed the sentimental nucleus of their confidences. Stanza three employs another recurrent Dickinsonian figure for marriage: the transition from girlhood (at any age) to womanhood is an elevation in status, or "Degree." Linguistic coherence begins to break down when social forms are themselves inadequate to contain the loosely formulated dreams for the future that have already undermined the duration of this relationship. Similarly, the passive construction "softly raised" stands in sharp contrast to the active verbs previously employed. The concluding stanza severs their intellectually audacious yet sexually innocent union as "God" asserts his authority to

destroy the bonds of sisterhood by making the grave, the only subject never broached by these friends, very much their affair. Heaven's intervention freezes this union as a perfect memory; "Heaven" destroys Dickinson's female community before one of the parties to this ambitious affectional "contract" can desert the other by marrying. The "Grave" is a social and psychological reality that was never comprehended by the women themselves. It symbolizes both the death of their relationship and the destruction of their community from within. We can look back now on the lines "We handled Destinies, as cool— / As we—Disposers—be—" and observe the ruthlessness of these female overreachers, which is subsequently chastened by a violent death. If maleness and aggression are fully identified in this remarkable drama, so too are hubris and punishment. The poem knows more than it says.

Despite differences in the sexual component of their political imaginations, writers such as Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and Twain explicitly link male bonding to contemporary economic and political issues. As the basis for a more democratic society, male bonding is dignified in such works as *The Blithedale Romance*, *Moby Dick*, *Leaves of Grass*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, even though the relationships that are described fall short of their potential. Dickinson, however, describes socially subversive relationships that may alter individuals but that never have the potential to transform society, even metaphorically. In this extreme isolation from public history, her female communities participate in a normative nineteenth-century tradition of female separatism. One critic, Nina Auerbach, observes that "initiation into a band of brothers is a traditional privilege symbolized by uniforms, rituals, and fiercely shared loyalties; but sisterhood . . . looks often like a blank exclusion. A community of women may suggest less the honor of fellowship than an antisociety, an austere banishment from both social power and biological rewards."⁹ Lacking official social or biological function, Dickinson's communities introject the cultural, psychological, and metaphysical tensions they are ideally designed to exclude. Death's antagonists, they become death-ridden. Queenly enclaves, they threaten her with a diminished, dysfunctional male identity and with the subsequent loss of heterosexual experience. After they have ceased to exist they may, like perfect works of art, symbolize an unattainable ideal. For Dickinson, this "sumptuous Destitution" (1382) "edible to longing, /

9. Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 3.

But ablative to show" (1744) is sometimes enough. "Dear Sue," she writes in 1862, "You see I remember," enclosing the following poem:

Your—Riches—taught me—poverty!
 Myself, a "Millionaire"
 In little—wealths—as Girls can boast—
 Till broad as "Buenos Ayre"
 You drifted your Dominions—
 A Different—Peru—
 And I esteemed—all—poverty—
 For Life's Estate—with you!

Of "Mines"—I little know—myself—
 But just the *names*—of *Gems*—
 The *Colors*—of the *Commonest*—
 And scarce of Diadems—
 So much—that did I meet *the Queen*—
 Her glory—I should know—
 But *this*—must be a *different Wealth*—
 To miss it—beggars—so!

I'm sure 'tis "*India*"—all day—
 To those who look on you—
 Without a stint—without a blame—
 Might I—but be the Jew!
 I know it is "*Golconda*"—
 Beyond my power to dream—
 To have a smile—for mine—each day—
 How *better*—than a *Gem!*

At least—it solaces—to know—
 That there *exists*—a *Gold*—
 Altho' I prove it, just in time—
 It's distance—to behold!
 It's far—far—Treasure—to surmise—
 And estimate—the Pearl—
 That slipped—my simple fingers—thro'
 While yet a Girl—at School! (299)

But if Dickinson here finds solace in the shapeliness of poverty, when she zooms in for a close-up, gem-encrusted idolatry yields to a more searching poem and a more limited conclusion:

Her sweet Weight on my Heart a Night
 Had scarcely deigned to lie—

When, stirring, for Belief's delight,
 My Bride has slipped away—

If 'Twas a Dream—made solid—just
 The Heaven to confirm—
 Or if Myself were dreamed of Her—
 The power to presume—

With Him remain—who unto Me—
 Gave—even as to All—
 A Fiction superseding Faith—
 By so much—as 'twas real— (518)

With its dreamlike nocturnal setting, this poem admits an image of physical intimacy rarely found in Dickinson's poetry of womanly love. The ambiguous phrasal modifier ("When, stirring, for Belief's delight") at first refers back to the speaker, roused with pleasure, and then forward to her lost bride. This slippery syntax fuses the identities of the speaker and her lover; the boundary between them has been temporarily eliminated. Such a fusion arouses the speaker's apprehensiveness, arrests the development of her delight, and accounts for her bride's disappearance. Realizing this fantasy (whether it happened or not) raises moral issues Dickinson deflects by appealing to a third party, "Him" or God. Was this solid dream intended to confirm her faith in heaven? Did her bride reciprocate her affection, or was her "sweet Weight" a lie? The power to resolve these mysteries is attributed to a God whose authority is undercut by the word "presume"; even He has no final power, since Dickinson prefers hallucinatory fictions to an even more hallucinatory faith. The fiction, that is, corresponds to some deeper imperative to usurp "The power to presume" and to recapture her bride.

"Another elegy on Mrs. Browning," asserts John Evangelist Walsh.¹⁰ There is no basis for this speculation. Throughout her sisterhood group, Dickinson's relationship to her animus—to the psychic reservoir of male-identified behavior and emotion which, or so Jung has posited, all women possess—is activated when she competes with male figures for possession of a female other.¹¹ As I have

10. John Evangelist Walsh, *The Hidden Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 255.

11. But see Martin Bickman's "Kora in Heaven" in *The Unsounded Centre: Jungian Studies in American Romanticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980). He argues that the concept of "animus" is of "little use to us in analyzing Dickinson's male figures."

already suggested, this anima-animus conflict is typically objectified through three separate characters: a weak female, herself, and a powerful male often personified as death or God. Thus Dickinson's social powerlessness takes on a psychological fatality within a pattern of fortuitous occurrences for which she bears no responsibility and from which the poetic structure specifically absolves her. Yet because metaphors of loss and death and emotional remoteness are so fully functional for Dickinson's art—in freeing her from the threat of sex they tend to universalize her status anxieties—critics have usually ignored the suppressed homoeroticism that defines one pole of Dickinson's sexual imagination. As Leslie Fiedler has shown, writers who are engaged in a flight from adult heterosexuality are often attracted by "innocent homosexuality."¹² What remains to be emphasized is that Dickinson's style can transform innocent homosexuality into self-loathing.

Although most of the poems we have been examining cast the speaker-poet in the (female) victim tradition, in the touchstone text "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" (754) pain's underside, rage, is more fully explored. Instead of competing with Death or God, the speaker cooperates with a demonic male who appears to invest her with authentic social power. Preserving her paradigmatic oedipal triangle, Dickinson moves beyond the accidental victimization of her "I" into an implied critique of the autotherapeutic value of her language. In comparing her self-expression to the outbursts of a rifle or the eruptions of a volcano, Dickinson both expresses her rage and attempts to control it. The object of her fury is another woman, a composite sister-lover-mother whom she represents through two static animal figures that rob her nemesis of any independent volition in the drama. As the speaker and her Master prey on other women, as they "hunt the Doe," she becomes overdependent on him. The speaker recognizes this overdependency in the poem's difficult concluding stanza but is unable to view him as a permanent ally. Having exorcized the seductive feminine element from her universe, Dickinson has committed herself to a dehumanizing relationship and therefore fantasizes the perpetuity of her affectional impotence.

How one reads the poem depends, of course, on what one thinks

12. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), p. 12.

these characters, the Life-Gun and her Owner, are up to. Does the action objectify "the psychological dilemma facing the intelligent and aware woman, and particularly the woman artist, in patriarchal America,"¹³ or does the poem reflect that dilemma? May her relationship to her Owner be viewed as a loving one, her aggression as an effective defense of it? We can begin to make sense of the text's significant ellipses by observing that Dickinson's extended analogy speaks for itself. Her gun kills:

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 it's 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—

Inert, loaded, cornered, the speaker is identified by her Owner, the male personification of her aggression, and transported into emotional terrain hitherto denied her. The poem does not encour-

13. Albert Gelpi, "Emily Dickinson and the Deerslayer: The Dilemma of the Woman Poet in America," *San Jose Studies* 3 (1977); reprinted in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 122.

age us to identify further this animus type, but, rather, to define him as the speaker does, solely by his dramatic function in her psychic economy. The initial consequence of her contact with him is a rejuvenated relationship with nature. As she projects the sovereignty she feels onto the woods where they together roam, as she "speak[s]" for Him, she revels in her magical power to obliterate an alien environment. The mountains echo her assumed omnipotence back at her; her smiles radiate explosive, Vesuvian light onto the glowing valleys; her fiery "Yellow Eye" and triggering "emphatic Thumb" command the power of life and death. In all these orgiastic figures, eroticized death and thanatized love have been perfectly commingled: gun and "I" are indistinguishable, as are the ambitions of the speaker and her Master. Boasting of her selfless fidelity, she wards off his foes, and again the poem does not encourage us to inquire who these foes might be, since Dickinson's orgiastic self-expression is dissociated from its moral context. Lulled into mute acquiescence by the rollicking rhythms and simple coordinate sentence structure, we find ourselves responding as the Life-Gun does, by obliterating other points of view. Drawn into this all-encompassing present, we focus only on the miraculous transformation of a useless into an aimed life. How this transformation has occurred and what its long-range consequences are likely to be concern us no more than they do the speaker, throughout the first five stanzas.

The only alternative to these episodes of joyous carnage is rejected by the Life-Gun in stanza four, when she compares her nocturnal vigilance to a softer, drowsier ending: "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." A proverbial symbol of maternal devotion, the Eider-Duck lines her nest with feathers plucked from her breast.¹⁴ This comparison is slipped in so easily and rejected so firmly that its significance seems negligible, but within the context of the poems we have been examining it takes on greater clarity. The defeminized or neutered self, the male Owner, and the maternal female reproduce the oedipal configuration we

14. This regressive symbolism would have been somewhat more accessible to Dickinson's contemporaries than it is to us. The *Springfield Republican*, for example, published an essay in 1860 entitled "When Should We Write" employing this eider-duck figure and warning against the perils of what it saw as the characteristic female genre, "the literature of misery." As quoted in Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), 2: 489-90. Poem 1059, "Sang from the Heart, Sire," may be a response to the *Republican* essay.

have observed in other poems. Dickinson's rejection of this alternative source of female identity suggests that the poem will develop in the direction of even greater destruction, as it does.¹⁵ After this comparison, the syntactical parallels ("And now," "And do," "And when") are halted by a construction that moves the consequences of this euphoric killing into the foreground of the speaker's consciousness: "To foe of His—I'm deadly foe." The lines "None stir the second time— / On whom I lay a Yellow Eye— / Or an emphatic Thumb—" acknowledge the slaughter more directly than any of the previous declarations of power, as they extend the gun analogy and allow the speaker to overwhelm her Master. Thus her fantasy of phallic womanhood bursts the bonds of her subservience to him; having completely subordinated herself to his purposes, she achieves the maximum illusion of personal autonomy.

The concluding stanza, by examining what would happen were the Life-Gun to outlive her Master, directs our attention to the speaker's automatic behavior, to the absence of moral context in which the fantasy has been played out, and to the internal incoherence of her emotions. Although we might expect the resolution to turn on the opposition between killing and loving, instead the poem turns on the opposition between "the power to kill" and "the power to die," which separates the Life-Gun from her Owner by positing alternative conclusions for them. The Owner, or the liberating mania he represents, can die; his miraculous appearance at the poem's beginning has already implied the possibility of an equally sudden disappearance. The Life-Gun cannot in a trivial sense (never having been human, a gun does not have the "Capacity to Terminate"). Nor can a gun "live ever—or else swoon to death." A gun is incapable of dying in the Shakespearean or Keatsian sense of the word, of achieving human sexual climaxes. At night the Life-Gun has guarded rather than shared her (its?) Owner's bed. More crucially, rage split off from its origins is unable to comprehend its generation and thus can achieve no final catharsis or death. Were

15. As Janet Todd remarks in her valuable study of female friendship in the novel, the attitudes of women toward other members of their sex are informed by a constellation of interdependent social relationships. One of these is "the first female tie," the tie between mother and daughter which, in Dickinson's poetry, is extremely weak. Todd extends her argument to suggest that, in seeking to recapture "the mother who failed her," a literary heroine may wish to revenge herself on other women "for the first female hurt." See *Women's Friendship in Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

the Owner to predecease the Life-Gun, the speaker would return to the psychological stasis of the opening lines. Although "the power to kill" is no longer enough, unless the speaker can integrate the Owner into her self, no further neutralization of her aggression or of her death instinct can be achieved. The poem's resolution, however, separates the Life-Gun and her Owner more firmly than ever before.¹⁶

Throughout "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun," rage has triggered language. In the summation, where style and tone shift to an epigrammatic moral, the speaker wishes to deny that rage has been her muse. Thus the moral emphasizes her Owner's mortality, together with her fear of being abandoned by him. He is mortal, she is immortal. She can imagine his death, but she cannot imagine her own. As a gun, however, there is a sense in which she is already dead: her rage is, quite literally, inhuman. Because rage activates her voice, her language does not express the power to love. That the moral does not quite fit is, in essence, the poem's point. The predatory or regressive relationships with other women Dickinson has depicted impede the integration of the masculine and feminine components of her personality. When "I" is also "It" rather than "She," the Life-Gun is engaged in a parody of creative resolution. To restrain her rage, Dickinson collapses her analogy, but the poem concludes with an imperfect death, a partial renunciation. The alternatives posited (life as a loaded gun, used or unused) make adequate commentary impossible. If the power to die implies the power to be reborn, the Life-Gun does not have this power. Although the poem is predicated on the assumption that repression is deathly, it is to qualified repression that the poem resorts for its sense of an ending. No other Dickinson poem testifies more urgently to the rage engendered by her suspicion of the feminine principle in her universe, seeks more urgently to expel it, or fails more absolutely in the attempt. This conclusion is not a pretty one, but this is the poet who likes "a look of Agony" because she knows "it's true—" (241).

Despite its allusion to "a Vesuvian face," "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—" may be the most "American" poem Dickinson ever wrote. Its frontier psychology participates in a recognizable native

16. Poem 358 repeats the phrase "the power to kill," poem 1651 "the power to die." To the best of my knowledge these are unique instances of a pivotal word group repeated among poems.

tradition which dwells lovingly on physical conflict and on savage emotion. Some of Dickinson's most striking metaphors for herself are, however, unmistakably European, and these compensatory images are often most pronounced when her anger is thoroughly blocked. Whether as Queen or Earl, Emily Dickinson attempts to uproot herself from a culture that impedes female bonding. Although she herself stated in 1856 that home "is where the *house* is, and the adjacent buildings" (L182), she later modified this conclusion. In her poetry, national identity is a state of mind.

Adopting an aristocratic, European male persona, Dickinson returns once again to the paradigmatic situation recounted in "Our-selves were wed one summer—dear—" and develops still another allegory of competition with a male figure:¹⁷

The Malay—took the Pearl—
Not—I—the Earl—
I—feared the Sea—too much
Unsanctified—to touch—

Praying that I might be
Worthy—the Destiny—
The Swarthy fellow swam—
And bore my Jewel—Home—

Home to the Hut! What lot
Had I—the Jewel—got—
Borne on a Dusky Breast—
I had not deemed a Vest
Of Amber—fitt—

The Negro never knew
I—wooded it—too
To gain, or be undone—
Alike to Him—One— (452)

This searching parable of insufficient courage distances its origins in Dickinson's life so effectively that Robert Weisbuch has argued that the poem does not refer to any subject, that it carries on "the moral recommendation of certain attitudes, the 'teaching' function of traditional allegories, without referring to extrapoetic codes of

17. Poem 270, "One Life of so much Consequence!" employs the same pearl-diver figure and is perhaps a transitional poem between "Her breast is fit for pearls," previously quoted, and "The Malay—took the Pearl."

conduct. The poem gracefully transforms material to spiritual gain to illustrate a forceful moral: that nothing will come to the man who waits in selfish fear—not wealth in any real sense of the word, not paradise, not beauty, not a realization of the meaning of things, not any of the potential values contained in Dickinson's pearl. Yet this recommendation of risk does not derive from any particular moral system and it does not apply to any particular sphere of action."¹⁸ In one sense, of course, Weisbuch is right. The pearl need not be Sue, the Malay need not be Austin, and the Earl need not be Emily. Yet however generalizable the situation depicted, the poem is informed by the sexual temptations of Dickinson's experience. Rather than wooing her pearl of great price, she merely covets it, both because she feels polluted and because she views "the Sea" that is the pearl's element as frightening. Although "the Sea" is the poem's most powerful emblem, it is the least fully explored, and I have seen no discussion of this poem that adequately explains it. Perhaps the Sea represents the speaker's unconscious or female sexuality or an alien environment or nature or death. Probably the Sea represents the unknown. As such, it can never be comprehended either by Dickinson or her readers.

In calling herself the "Earl," Dickinson wishes to legitimize a threatening male identity. Because this status-transformation is psychologically incomplete, she is forced to witness the triumph of raw physical acquisitiveness over her Puritanical self-restraint. The poem's most poignant moment turns on her inability to explain her inhibition to herself: "I—feared the Sea—too much / Unsanctified—to touch." The disintegrated syntax obscures her history and her reasoning; sexual anxiety almost unhinges her thought. Finally, the poem's three figures represent the internal divisions of a single nature. The unattainable ideal self (the Pearl), the paralyzing conscience (the Earl), and the admired and despised id (the Malay-Negro) are locked together by incestuous doublings of sound that emphasize the ironic contiguity and dispersion of the characters. Dickinson satirizes the primitivism of male dominance, fears the sea-change of homosexual conquest, and laments an un-lived life.

18. Robert Weisbuch, *Emily Dickinson's Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 58.



THE WIFE— WITHOUT THE SIGN

Informed by our reading of Dickinson's sisterhood poems, let us now turn to the much larger group of poems to and about male figures. Of these are hundreds. Among these hundreds, perhaps forty, in whole or in part, are concerned with wedlock, figurative or actual. This latter cluster suggests that Dickinson was engaged neither in a continuous critique of the frustrations of marriage nor in a continuous affirmation of its pleasures. Instead, her poetry accommodates both attitudes, attitudes prefigured by her 1852 letter to Sue (93), which is centrally concerned with the risks of this venture. Just as this letter does not describe the risks of marriage to a particular man, so too Dickinson's marriage group reflects sexual anxieties that predetermine her responses to any lover. Thus, the fantasy-husband whom Dickinson imagines herself addressing in several poems is a faceless personage who represents the idea of home as fireside, as garden, and as "Celestial Sea." Such abstract images enable Dickinson to describe departures from this secure yet various place, the patterns of a safe return, and a mutual ministry "to poorer lives." Though this home does not include children, it includes childhood as a sheltered state of mind. Though this home includes mutual work, both partners also fulfill their separate tasks. His, some "Problem—of the Brain—"; hers, "some foolisher effect— / A Ruffle—or a Tune—":