PAUL CRUMBLEY

Dickinson's Dashes and the Limits of Discourse

From their first publication in the 1890s until the present, Emily Dickinson's poems have been read and edited as though her stylistic innovations were imperfect attempts to convey the thoughts and feelings of speakers with fixed, unified identities. Because Dickinson's poetry consistently refuses to cooperate in this project, critics intent on imposing an aesthetics of coherence have tended to step back from Dickinson's work, blurring the details of individual poems while identifying familiar voices and dominant speaking selves in the corpus as a whole. As Margaret Dickie puts the critical situation in "Dickinson's Discontinuous Lyric Self," the apparent disjunction of Dickinson's work has "usually been resolved by the imposition of a master narrative" (228). However, David Porter expresses the frustrations inevitable in this attempt when he complains that Dickinson's poems are "the vast hoard of a traveler's snapshots without an itinerary of the trip or a map showing the destination" (293).

But if we accept Suzanne Juhasz's judgment that Dickinson is "the greatest woman poet in the English language" (*Feminist* 1), we must confront rather than avoid the fascinating, often maddeningly arcane details of her work, such as her orthography and syntax, that defy efforts to inscribe the poems within a unifying frame. Of the stylistic details that editors have most readily dismissed, the dash is the least accommodating to conventional readings that stress linear progression and logical coherence. The tendency of early editors to regularize the dash while leaving other features relatively untouched suggests

the degree to which the dash has been viewed as the most troublesome feature of Dickinson's writing. Even the publication of the standard 1955 variorum, which includes dashes, has produced little discussion of the way the dashes influence reading. This silence is perplexing, as it indicates that although the dash may be as troublesome for readers today as it was in 1890, it has acquired a new form of invisibility, functioning as a gap in the text that readers choose either to ignore or fill with whatever graphic marker seems most appropriate to them. In this sense, acknowledging the dashes on the printed page has done the opposite of increasing appreciation for Dickinson's style: now readers individually perform the task — once the exclusive province of editors — of regularizing and dismissing Dickinson's primary form of punctuation.

Perhaps one reason the dash has been so systematically ignored is that Dickinson's idiosyncratic use of it challenges, in almost every poem, the search for a particular speaker with a fixed and unitary identity. Precisely because the implications attendant upon taking the dashes seriously are so sweeping, we prefer to inscribe the poems within an internally coherent language system rather than consider the ways they undermine fundamental assumptions of unity. And we do this despite abundant critical agreement that the dashes are important and that they act to disrupt speech. As a component of what Gary Lee Stonum refers to in *The Dickinson Sublime* as Dickinson's "stylistic signature" (24), the dashes produce the "disjunction" Cristanne Miller identifies in *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (44–46), creating what Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe as "rending pauses, silences like wounds in the midst of speech" (626). An important clue to an otherwise adoring public's reluctance to pursue Dickinson's stylistic innovations is conveyed in the word "rending" and the phrase "silences like wounds" that Gilbert and Gubar so accurately employ. Here we see that the disjunction produced by the dash, which seems harmless enough on the surface, can actually threaten painfully to dismember the speech conventionally associated with poetic language.¹

But if by disrupting speech the dashes alter the status of the speaking subject, how do we read this shifting self and the corrolary shifts in voice? The theoretical work of Julia Kristeva gives us a way to approach this question. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva argues that poetry can present a signifying process that shatters discourse and "reveals that linguistic changes constitute changes in the *status of the subject*" (15). Poetry that is "revolution-

ary" in Kristeva's sense of the term presents the stages by which subjects enter language instead of the end result of that process. To understand this poetry, therefore, instead of attempting to discover the formal unity that suggests a single voice, the reader must observe the subject's participation in multiple discourses. Through these many voices, the subject expresses a self that is always in process, never entirely realizable in spoken language. What the poems that utilize dashes give us, then, is a self who emerges *through* rather than *in* language. As a result, normal oppositions between self and other, inner and outer that depend upon a clear and present "I," distinguishable from its surrounding environment, are impossible to maintain. Instead, the poems present us with a speaking subject whose utterances reflect an emergent self who is a mix of personal and social discourses not containable within a unified voice.

As we consider these divergent voices, we detect not just the dominant discourses of Dickinson's social and historical milieu, but also alternative discourses at odds with prevailing thought. And here the work of Mikhail M. Bakhtin is useful as a means of understanding the heterodox and polyvocal language through which the subject Kristeva describes moves. "Each word contains voices," he writes, "that are sometimes infinitely distant, unnamed, . . . and voices resounding nearby and simultaneously" (*Speech* 124). Within this multiplicity of voices and corresponding ideologies, "consciousness must actively orient itself . . . , it must move in and occupy a position for itself" (*Dialogic* 295). Like Kristeva, Bakhtin helps to illuminate the movement of a subject through language, but unlike Kristeva, he concentrates on speech and its relation to surrounding discourse, not on the speaking self. "The author speaks," Bakhtin tells us, "*through* language . . . that has somehow become more or less materialized, become objectivized, that [she] merely ventriloquates" (299).

For a literary and creative mind like Dickinson's, this movement through language requires conscious awareness of the contradictory voices that proliferate in discourse. The utterances of her speakers reflect the mind's efforts to negotiate a passage through conflicting voices. Once we are sensitive to the range of voices Dickinson signals by means of dashes, we can understand the poems as her refusal to silence the many rebellious voices that registered clearly in her own mind despite the considerable social pressure of more orthodox

opinion seeking to enforce conformity. Speakers' efforts to express voices at variance with conventional beliefs about nature, religion, and the centrality of marriage in the lives of women, for instance, provide illuminating instances of the range of Dickinson's opposition to social confinement.

A familiar work like poem 441,² "This is my letter to the World," can show how a serious consideration of the dash changes traditional interpretations of Dickinson's poetry. As published in the 1890 first edition, the poem contains only one dash, and that is softened by a preceding comma. In this way the disjunctive power of the dash is diminished, and each of the two stanzas becomes a complete sentence.

This is my letter to the world,
That never wrote to me, —
The simple news that Nature told,
With tender majesty.

Her message is committed
To hands I cannot see;
For love of her, sweet countrymen,
Judge tenderly of me!³

According to this construction of the poem, the "simple news that Nature told" is conveyed in the speaker's "letter to the world" with the hope that future readers will, out of love for Nature, "Judge" the letter writer "tenderly." The speaker is communicating Nature's words and therefore trading on the authority of Nature to win the approval of unknown readers.

The hierarchical distribution of power from nature through the poet to the audience is altered significantly, however, when dashes are acknowledged in the text. Suddenly, the speaker seems to be saying not that she is communicating news transmitted to her by Nature, but that Nature is part of a "World" that never wrote to her:

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me —
The simple News that Nature told —
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see —
For love of Her — Sweet — countrymen —
Judge tenderly — of Me

Read with an eye to the dashes, the poem suggests the possibility that the speaker never received the “simple News that Nature told” and that Nature’s “Message” was sent to others, whose “Hands I cannot see.” The very possibility that there could exist such things as “simple News” and “tender Majesty” is placed in question. By means of dashes, these clichéd depictions of nature and nature’s sympathetic bearing on human life are held at arm’s length, suggesting the speaker’s rejection of the discourses to which they are attached. And here is the key to the multiple voices in the text: as the speaker questions the validity of culturally determined voices, she distances herself from these voices, so that through her we hear voices that no longer confine her within their discourse. As readers becoming aware of the speaker’s ambivalent relation to prevailing discourses, we do not “Judge tenderly,” precisely because we detect the speaker’s anger at an indifferent Nature that counters the rhetoric of “simple News” and “tender Majesty.” The reader’s response to this poem now grows out of an appreciation of the speaker’s outrage, an outrage directed to a “World” that never wrote.

In addition to presenting Nature as uncertain and antagonistic, the speaker also undermines the authority of her audience. The insertion of a dash between “Sweet” and “countrymen” separates the terms of an otherwise positive salutation, suggesting that the speaker is once again distancing herself from conventional discourse and, in this case, twisting the meaning ordinarily attributed to a congenial epistolary form of address. Yet as we hear the speaker’s tone become ironic instead of sincere, we do not begin to doubt her sincerity and replace it with something more akin to sarcasm. Rather, we observe the speaker moving through the network of discourses that constitutes the socio-symbolic domain of language, interrogating and manipulating culturally determined voices. Participating in this process acknowledges the power of the larger culture without accepting that power as determinant; we hear voices that aren’t the speaker’s and yet contribute to a discussion in which the speaker is a party. In this way, the poem traces the speaker’s movement away from conformity without excluding the influence conventional discourse has on the

self — a self that both includes and exceeds the voices that permeate it. Bakhtin's pioneering work in dialogics, especially his observation that "language — like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives — is never unitary" (*Dialogical* 288),⁴ helps to explain the multitude of voices that become audible as the speaking subject emerges through language.

While the dashes, in particular, point to the open and unresolved character of Dickinson's poems, this very open-endedness militates against any exclusionary tactic that would deny the possibility of a poem's achieving closure. In this way, the poems emphasize resistance to closure by respecting but not submitting to its appeal. A truly dialogic reading of poem 441, for example, would not dismiss the interpretation made available through the regularization of punctuation; rather, the dialogic approach builds on interpretations that assert a centripetal and unifying movement in the poems. In fact, the voices in the poem acquire distinction as they depart from unified discourses, making such discourses a necessary part of readings that acknowledge the dialogizing influence of the dashes. Bakhtin emphasizes the way speech grows out of opposing linguistic forces when he writes that "every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear" (*Dialogical* 272). Consequently, the regularization practised by Dickinson's editors maintains the monologic, centripetal forces in her poems while eliminating the centrifugal forces crucial to dialogic readings.

By suggesting that meaning is created by the tension between such competing discourses, the dashes emphasize the notion that speech is an amalgamation of discourses. For this reason, reading the poems with attention to the dashes forces the reader to participate in a selection process parallel to the one the speaker enacts while uttering words that are themselves "chosen" from other discourses. The necessary participation of the reader in this process further dialogizes the self of the poems.

Seen from this perspective, the regularization of Dickinson's language in early editions of her poetry — the way lines were indented, capitals replaced with lower case, and dashes eliminated — can be seen as attempts to bring the poems into line with prevailing cultural belief in the stability of language, meaning, and self. In this sense, the poems provide a locus within which

conservative, monological notions of self contest with dialogical notions, challenging culturally founded assumptions about the unity of nature, the logic of language, and the need to define one's identity as a speaker or a writer. In particular, we can see how her poetics, by requiring inclusion rather than exclusion, challenges definitions of authority born out of hierarchical and monological visions of truth.

And here — through her insistence on inclusion and her refusal to silence the voices that inform the self — the feminist implications of Dickinson's poetics register with greatest force. Because the voices conventionally attributed to a patriarchal "other" are shown to exist within and not outside the speaker's mind, any power associated with those voices is in some sense accessible to the speaker. As Mary Loeffelholz points out in *Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory*, the boundaries that Dickinson describes "exist to be breached." When this breaching of boundaries takes place, the metaphorical border that distinguishes self from other and male from female is illuminated in order that it "might be seen deconstructively, not as irreducibly 'primary,' but as the effect of its own undoing" (111). The dash contributes to this "undoing" by revealing the interplay of speakers' voices and the mix of discourses so crucial to the perpetuation and reification of boundaries. The self that surfaces in the poems and is no longer restricted by the border, no longer subject to its power, comes very close to fulfilling the project Kristeva outlines at the end of "Women's Time": "to demystify the identity of the symbolic bond itself, to demystify, therefore, the community of language as a universal and unifying tool, one which totalizes and equalizes" (210). How better to further the aims of demystification than by showing that neither speech nor the speaking self is unified?

As Margaret Dickie argues, Dickinson's refusal to fix the identities of her speakers directly violates the most powerful of socializing impulses — the impulse to conform. Describing the self's resistance to conformity, Dickie refers to "an unaccountable surplus" of individuality that "cannot be made uniform, narrated, and organized into a single individual" (215). Such resistance defies both linguistic and social containment:

Dickinson's lyric speakers have no narrative continuity, no steadfast identity. In their squandering, melodrama, and excesses, they express an individuality that resists final representation and the control that signifies. (228)

This absence of "steadfast identity" fuels our perception of the self as uncontainable, perpetually thwarting any impulse to stabilize meaning.

As we have seen in poem 441, "This is my letter to the World," acknowledging the dashes means considering dialogical readings that do not yield to the pressures of binary logic. Instead of resolution, we are given language that reflects a pluralistic and inclusive vision of the self resembling Kristeva's "subject-in-process," a self responsive to dialogical heterogeneity rather than fixed identity (*Desire* 135). Such a vision accounts for the absence of unity that Porter and others find so troubling and reconstructs that absence as a positive accomplishment. But as many of Dickinson's poems tell us, speakers encounter enormous difficulties when they seek to express a multitude of voices in the face of unrelenting social pressure to silence all but the voice of convention. Poem 475, "Doom is the House without the Door —," traces the path followed by a speaker who consciously and painfully recalls how he or she was unconsciously seduced by the desire for certainty:

Doom is the House without the Door —
'Tis entered from the Sun —
And then the Ladder's thrown away,
Because Escape — is done —

'Tis varied by the Dream
Of what they do outside —
Where Squirrels play — and Berries die —
And Hemlocks — bow — to God —

As the final stanza tells us, doom is equated with a house from within which the speaker dreams of what an unspecified "they" "do outside." By telling us that the dream varies the speaker's experience within the house, this line communicates the monotonous nature of life inside. Because the speaker's perception is situated within the context of a dream, her removal from the reality of waking life strengthens and develops the discourse of inner and outer, confinement and exclusion — defining characteristics of "Doom." We see how

the world the speaker originally inhabited outside the house has been reduced to a few natural details depicting the cycle of life and death in a world dominated by God. But what is the speaker's attitude toward this state of affairs?

The poem can yield dramatically conflicting answers to this question; as with #441, the poem's tone depends on whether the reader takes seriously the disjunctions signalled by the dashes. What might be called a "linear" reading grows from the assumption that the speaker has a single voice and that the dashes enforce that voice, if they are significant at all. In this interpretation, the speaker inhabits a world that conforms to a romanticist vision. The house of doom is entered through a process resembling humanity's fall from innocence; the dreams that take place within the house suggest the paradise from which the speaker is alienated. According to this reading, confinement within the house is constructive because it establishes the speaker's proper position within a hierarchy ordained by God.

A very different vision of the speaker's situation and identity emerge if we attend to the dashes. In this "spatial" reading we can hear voices that express extreme dissatisfaction both with the speaker's physical entrapment in the house and, more profoundly, with a system of thought so totalizing that it employs dream images in the objectification of subjects, so that speakers become tools in their own imprisonment. This speaker rejects the romanticist vision within which imprisonment is a way to imagine absolute freedom in a divinely ordered universe, but she remains frustrated by the difficulty of fully imagining an alternative freedom, one separate from the hierarchal paradigm implicit in images of an imprisoned humanity and an omnipotent God. In this reading, the dashes show how the reader "quotes" from this romanticist system of thought only to damn it.

If we examine the lines and words set off by dashes in light of such a "spatial" reading, we can begin to hear degrees of surprise, anger, shock, and finally resignation that challenge monologic assumptions about self and voice. The initial mention of "Doom" in the first line introduces an ominous atmosphere at the same time that it provides a relatively straightforward declaration that the general topic of doom is metaphorically expressed as a house with no door: "Doom is the House without the Door —." Though a certain mystery surrounds this image, the sense at the beginning of the poem

is that Doom has been contained and to some extent safely sealed. The first line, then, sounds like a nominally conventional voice authoritatively setting the scene for the poem. The second line reverses the expectations raised by the first when it suddenly shifts the focus from outside the house to inside: "Tis entered from the Sun —." And here the dash points to the potential for disjunction that regularization disregards. The speaker, who discovers — only after it is too late to avoid being trapped — that there is no "Escape," may have assumed that the sun would provide protection from precisely the sort of gloomy atmosphere attributed to this house. There is, after all, no evidence in the poem that the speaker either chose to enter the house or even knew of its existence prior to discovering herself in it. This line, then, could easily be spoken with the sort of shock and dismay associated with the recognition of deception or betrayal. The third and fourth lines suggest bitterly that a malevolent intelligence is at work in the world the speaker inhabits, an intelligence that preys on naive trust in the sun deliberately to manipulate and disempower its victims.

Again, any determination of how to read the lines depends entirely on how dramatically we as readers interpret the disjunctions represented by dashes. The most radical disjunction would magnify the shock and anger reflected in a speaker so distraught that his or her voice changes as new impressions dispell previously held assumptions linking sunlight with security. Only after the speaker gains sufficient composure, would the second stanza (the longest uninterrupted syntactic unit in the poem) begin: "Tis varied by the Dream / Of what they do outside —." These two lines communicate the view available to the speaker once he or she is resigned to captivity. And here we begin to see a very different take on dreams from that which privileges conformity within a harmony ordained by God. Rather than treating the dream of unity as a heightened perception of divine order possible only through immersion in a monologic universe, the lines bemoan the speaker's radically diminished access to anything resembling a larger world. Indeed, the forced separation of inside from outside is itself treated as an unacceptable surrendering of personal authority.

As the poem progresses, we see that the dream is characterized by the same coercive and exclusive movement that was so clearly expressed in the speaker's entry and entrapment within the house. The speaker's freedom or "play" in

the sun has become imprisonment within the house of doom, just as the “play” of squirrels and the death of berries are brought into conformity with an order or “house” where all things “bow — to God —.” Because we know both that experience in the house is “varied by the Dream” and that the dream itself conveys images of conformity, we can conclude that the dream is a further refinement of the experience from which it varies; it is revealed as another Chinese box that further confines the speaker. We can then imagine the speaker uttering the final two lines with the realization that what is dreamt about the outside is only a reflection — albeit more varied — of what happens on the inside: “Where Squirrels play — and Berries die — / and Hemlocks — bow — to God —.” Such stereotypic images of nature can therefore be articulated with a sort of deafening calm, emphasizing the death of imagination once the trap of conformity is sprung. The speaker quotes clichéd images of spring and winter or youth and age, epitomizing the binary oppositions that characterize conventional discourse on nature but infuses these words with deep irony and bitterness. “Squirrels play” and “Berries die,” because that is their function within a discourse on nature that at this stage forms the basis for the speaker’s dream life. The isolation of “bow” in the final line can for this reason be read as a dissection of the stereotypic image of sympathetic nature. Here the speaker’s tone expresses amazement at his or her own credulousness; the lines are spoken as a sort of mortified confession that is exceeded only by the force of the last words, where the origin of conformity toward which the Hemlocks bow is identified as “God.” In this final withering admission, the speaker acknowledges that God is the logical foundation of a monological world view that transforms perceiving subjects into objects whose perceptions confirm a preordained order.

An object of Dickinson’s scorn in this poem is the discourse of natural theology. This very popular doctrine, which saw evidence of a divine plan in every detail of nature,⁵ was the kind of simplifying theory Dickinson resisted throughout her life. From a relatively early age, she appears to have been preoccupied with the fear of being co-opted by any ideology that demanded conformity to a single unified system of belief. In one of the most famous of all her letters, she associates natural theology with patriarchal domination by conflating sunlight with male power and stating her fear of being trapped within that power. Writing to Susan Gilbert in June 1852, Dickinson describes

the undeniable attraction men exert on women. Like flowers in the morning “satisfied with dew,” young women are bowed by the sunlight that “scorches them, scathes them.” “Oh, Susie,” she writes, “it is dangerous, and it is all too dear . . . the spirits mightier, which we cannot resist! It does so rend me, Susie, the thought of it when it comes, that I tremble lest at sometime I, too, am yielded up” (*L* 210).⁶ Though the situation described in the “Doom” poem does not explicitly involve sexual attraction and the gender conflict overtly described here, the figurative linkage of sunlight with male power and a consequent loss of the speaker’s freedom does provide an undeniable parallel. What is perhaps most important is the way the letter and the poem together iterate Dickinson’s awareness that the security associated with sunlight and the sun threaten the independent existence of female consciousness. Vivian R. Pollak states the matter succinctly in *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender*, when she writes that the “comparison of women to flowers who depend on the sun’s phallic potency” is a favorite metaphor of Dickinson’s and that “the structure of society is based on this metaphor. That is, society is based on a hierarchy of social status, and women’s accomplishments . . . are correspondingly devalued” (159–60). Systems of thought that anchor experience in unified identity at one extreme and in deity at the other leave no room for the surplus of selves that Dickinson’s poetry expresses.

Given Dickinson’s awareness of the threat to freedom posed by patriarchy’s demand for hierarchy and resolution, we can understand her fascination with marriage, the institution that most blatantly implicated women in the silencing of their own voices. Of the many poems on marriage, none more clearly expresses the speaker’s sense that she has been drawn into a house of Doom than #461, “A Wife — At Daybreak I shall be —.” From the first line on, the poem uses dashes to set off the thoughts of the speaker from phrases familiar in the contemporary discourse on marriage:

A Wife — at Daybreak I shall be —
Sunrise — Hast thou a Flag for me?
At Midnight, I am but a Maid,
How short it takes to make it Bride —
Then — Midnight, I have passed from thee
Unto the East, and Victory —

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!

Unlike the speaker in the "Doom" poem, this speaker does not reflect on past experiences but rather takes the reader through her experience as it unfolds. The chronological sequencing of lines suggests that we are approaching a glorious moment of marital consummation, when the bride will become a woman. Instead, the speaker is shocked and dismayed when the anticipated spiritual ascent by means of a husband who is also "Savior" suddenly reverses, and she is struck not with newly altered and elevated perceptions consistent with spiritual enlightenment but with a familiar face that the speaker has encountered "before." Indeed, Paula Bennett's observation about this poem in *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* is particularly relevant in establishing the basis for the speaker's dismay: "So closely does Dickinson identify the male lover with the male governing principle that . . . it is impossible to tell whom the speaker is addressing: a lover or a God" (158). For this reason, when the speaker discovers that the face is part of her mortal past rather than the herald of a new spiritual dispensation, her astonishment is profound, as the terminal exclamation point suggests.

From the first line to the last, we are presented with the thoughts of a hesitant and naive speaker who consoles herself with language that she has apparently learned from others. The dashes establish a dialogic tension in the speaker's thoughts by indicating that spoken words and phrases are being repeated almost mindlessly from outside sources. Matters that trouble the speaker, for instance, stimulate responses that sound like a litany of unconvincing assurances lifted from a handbook on bridal preparation. The word "Wife" triggers the response, "at Daybreak I shall be," just as the word "Sunrise" triggers first the question, "Hast thou a Flag for me?" and then the catechismic formula: "At Midnight, I am but a Maid, / How short it takes to make it Bride —." We see how empty and platitudinous the phrases are in proportion to the degree of anxiety evident first in the question about the

"Flag" and the "Victory" it would signal, and later in the speaker's fumbling at her "Childhood's prayer." In the second stanza, where the speaker moves even more completely into the domain of culturally engendered figuration, we hear women who say "Good Night" at "Midnight," and we are told that they become "Angels" in the hall. The husband on the stair, who becomes the speaker's "Future" first and then her "Savior," fits the hierarchical model that leaves no room for a self not unified and solidly contained within a totalizing system. Like the speaker in the "Doom" poem, the bride awakens to the realization that she has contributed to building the prison she now inhabits. As Mary Loeffelholz reminds us, "it is important to remember that the prison is not in any direct way a simply external, masculine force, but an aspect of the speaker's own identity" (107). The irony of the bride's discovery that she has committed herself to repeating the past — and hence to complying with what threatens to become a pattern of containment — acquires considerable dramatic power in this poem, because her expectations are so much more thoroughly defined. As a result, the final word, "before!" releases centrifugal force that gathered pressure through the bride's questions, producing an explosion even greater in intensity than that achieved in the "Doom" poem.

The dashes in this poem contribute to our sense that the speaker may finally be able to escape this onerous sentence. The dashes introduce degrees of disjunction in the speaker's thought process which allow us to distinguish throughout the poem between the bride's thoughts and those imposed from without. For instance, the formulaic litany that moves from "Wife" to "Victory" in the first stanza introduces the sort of rhetoric Vivian Pollak describes as "the language of nineteenth-century Christian evangelism, language suffused with the tone of the Book of Revelation and Watts hymnal" (165). When in the last line the astonished bride exclaims, "I've seen the face — before!" we sense that we are hearing *her* voice for the first time, that up to that moment she has been fumbling at childhood prayers handed down through history. The dash that precedes "before!" sets that word and the exclamation point apart as an expression of shock that promises to release the speaker from the infantilizing discourse that takes her back to childhood prayers. For this reason, her preceding commentary on maidenhood and her expectation that she will undergo some mysterious translation into wifedom all the more clearly reflect voices from the culture she inhabits.⁷ Joanne Dobson understands this

language as part of the “cultural mythos” of Dickinson’s day, according to which “a new and transcendent identity awaited the married woman”:

It is the seductive lure of this mystical transformation co-existing alongside the nagging awareness of identity loss in conventional marriage that informs the complex and self-contradictory figure of the wife/bride in Dickinson’s highly charged marriage poems. (“Lady” 50)

The bride’s concluding exclamation could be her rejection of the implied social judgment that says there is no life outside of marriage.⁸ We leave the poem with the hope that the bride will refuse to accept containment in the trap she has helped to devise by discovering other, less conventional voices within herself.

The dialogic approach to Dickinson’s poems that acknowledges multiple voices requires a model for reading that opposes both linear constructions of meaning and interpretations that conform to the requirements of a binary logic. This way of reading allows us to treat the poems as independent utterances rather than as expressions of an elusive “fugitive identity” (Porter 5) and encourages us to take seriously the uniquely Dickinsonian grammar, orthography, and punctuation. Attentiveness to such detail not only respects the syntactic integrity of the poems but is consistent with hints about reading that Dickinson provides in her letters. As she states in an August 1862 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, hierarchical organization was antithetical to her practice: “I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize — my little Force explodes” (L 414). Further on in the same letter, she explains why she is unwilling to adopt Higginson’s recommendations, linking her refusal to her ability to see “Orthography”: “You say I confess the little mistake, and omit the large — Because I see Orthography —” (L 415). Looking at these words closely, we see Dickinson informing Higginson that his confusion as a reader of her poems is the result of his search for an ordering system that she has not employed. Her sensitivity to orthography, in particular, suggests that she attributes meaning to features of the text that conventional approaches to reading treat as secondary at best.

When in another letter to Higginson — this of August 1876 — Dickinson observes that “a Pen has so many inflections and a Voice but one”

(*L* 559), we sense her continued concern with the control a writer can impose on written language. Without the physical presence of a speaker to specify the relation of thought to word, words become increasingly susceptible to the assumptions readers bring to texts. Precisely because words are so unruly, orthography takes on additional significance. Rather than seeking to confine the meaning of words in her poems, Dickinson uses each poem to liberate the words of her speakers. As the speaker of poem 1212, "A word is dead," tells us, the stating of a word is the beginning, not the end of its life: "I say it just / Begins to live / That day."

Close attention to the expanding life of words within the poems means reading with an eye toward spatial rather than linear progression. The dash liberates meaning from a syntax that would ordinarily narrow the field of reference for specific words; at the same time it alerts readers to the role they play in expanding these fields of reference. In this sense, the poems trigger imaginative responses to conservative, centripetal impulses within language that aim to stabilize meaning, so that readers personally experience the explosion of centrifugal force that Dickinson described in her letter to Higginson and that we remarked in #461, "A Wife — at Daybreak I shall be —." As participants in the poems, readers share the experiences of speakers who are themselves breaking free from the limiting syntax of culture.

By confronting limitation in all realms of social, intellectual, emotional, and linguistic life, Dickinson constructs poems that operate as holograms, containing in each particle the struggle for imaginative expression that typifies the whole. In her article, "The Holographic Paradigm: A New Model for the Study of Literature and Science," Mary Ellen Pitts proposes that "privileging particularization" (80) — or what we have discussed as the tendency to confine meaning — derives from a mechanistic model that should be replaced by the hologram. She argues that whereas the machine paradigm allowed for the logical analysis of discrete parts in terms of a larger assemblage, the hologram "suggests wholeness through multiple perspectives" (81); this model implies that "all things are part of an interlinked web and are actually inseparable" (87). Pointing out that with the hologram "a single piece, rather than reflecting only a part of the image, will reflect the entire image" (81), Pitts touches on the most important application of the hologram to the poems of Emily Dickinson. If we think of the poems as defining loci where discontinuous speaking selves

emerge though the dialogical play of centrifugal and centripetal forces, we need no longer look beyond the specificity of particular poems to discern meaning. The whole is in this sense reflected in the details that communicate each speaker's resistance to a totalizing system that progresses by means of exclusivity. Once we understand that no single voice exists in isolation, we can discover in the poems how disjunction signals an inclusivity that enables us to participate in the speaker's emergence. In terms Bakhtin applied to the work of Dostoevsky, we have a "*plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses . . . with equal rights and each with its own world, combin[ing] but not merged in the unity of the event*" (*Problems* 6).

By creating such a plurality of speaking selves, each of which seeks to replace an exclusive and historically determined identity with an inclusive multiplicity of voices, Dickinson proposes an alternative to the "culturally monitored feminine community of expression" that Joanne Dobson states was designed "to screen out personal expression" (*Dickinson* xii). Indeed, Dickinson indicates that knowledge of a preordained identity can itself be understood as a potent stimulus for exceeding the confinement of a unified self:

Estranged from Beauty — none can be —
For Beauty is Infinity —
And power to be finite ceased
Before Identity was leased.

(poem 1474, first variant)

To be alive, the poem tells us, is to know that identity is a temporary state, something we "lease" as a departure from the reality it attempts to exclude. Identity attempts to deny infinity — here defined as Beauty — by means of hierarchical and exclusive forms of logic. The dashes that rupture the first line emphasize the way the phrase "none can be" immediately resists the finite, hierarchical state described in the phrase "Estranged from Beauty." The last two lines then tell us that identity, the "power to be finite," is an illusion. As in #475, "Doom is the House without the Door —," this poem challenges Romanticist assumptions that being alive means being alienated from infinity.

This poem presents a discussion of identity that considers the possibility of estrangement. We witness conflicting voices set off by dashes in the first

line, followed by the consideration of a new premise: "Beauty is Infinity." This statement simultaneously denies the power of finite identity while affirming the fact that identity is an option that can be "leased." By contemplating a limiting and exclusive notion of the self, the speaker provokes the expression of alternative voices that exceed this concept without excluding it from the domain of possibility.

For Dickinson, the value of limitation is the way it functions to ignite the imagination in protest. In her clearest statement of this belief, Dickinson asks Otis P. Lord, "dont [sic] you know that 'No' is the wildest word we consign to language?" (*L* 617). Implicit in this question is the understanding that through language limits are imposed that can stimulate wild responses. Julia Kristeva accounts for the power of these responses when she argues that poetic language, when it violates the logic of the socio-symbolic order, "becomes a permanent struggle to show the facilitation of drives within the linguistic order itself" (*Revolution* 81). The violence inherent in this struggle threatens the "unity of the social realm and the subject" (80). In Kristeva's terms, the subject who challenges the historical form of the symbolic enters a signifying practice within which "the strictly subjective" struggles with "all preexisting natural, social, scientific, and political systematicities" (204). This subject, who is simultaneously inside and outside objective social process, may reconstitute herself "within social process" or "reject all stasis and symbolize the objective process of transformation, . . . in which case [she] produces a revolutionary discourse" (205). As this theory suggests, in Dickinson's poems we witness repeated attempts to illuminate the moment in which speakers' imaginations lift them out of conformity. The voices that explode in the poems originate in social environments out of which speakers emerge as creative subjects whose efforts point toward revolutionary discourse, even if they never consciously realize it. In this sense, Dickinson's poetics departs from the Romantic vision of the solitary individual, suggesting instead a self that cannot exist in isolation from others.

By composing poems in which speakers struggle to achieve a degree of imaginative freedom in their lives, Dickinson gives voice to the forces that drive the mind toward exclusionary visions of the self. She pursues the implications of social identity in an effort to show how the mind too often submits to unacceptable restrictions. Suzanne Juhasz observes that "if the poet

wishes for total experience, if she is daring and dedicated enough to pursue this quest, she can do no better than to explore, then write about, the place of the mind." Only by "journeying towards the farthest reaches of consciousness" can poets and readers "become most fully alive" (*Continent* 27). Once at these reaches, new voices and new speakers emerge as language is used to express new forms of experience. And the poem functions to urge perception beyond the confines of what is known.

Describing the writer in terms similar to those Dickinson used when advising her readers to "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —" (poem 1129), Bakhtin asserts that "the writer is a person who is able to work in a language while standing outside language, who has the gift of indirect speaking" (*Speech* 110). He writes that "any truly creative voice can only be the *second* voice in the discourse," because only a second voice expresses "*pure relationship*" and is not bounded by objectification. Speakers reflecting on their own material and spiritual conditions establish a creative influence over those conditions once they begin to voice alternative points of view, setting in motion dialogistic relations (*Speech* 110). Such a practice necessarily involves refracting speakers' perceptions through language freighted with discourses that encourage conformity. To "tell it slant," then, requires speaking from the periphery or circumference of language; it means using language to say that which has never been said before.

Precisely because Dickinson's poetry seeks to expand the circumference of what is known, we as readers must attempt to enter the imaginations of her speakers as they confront limitation. Doing so requires that we consider alternatives to orthodox patterns of thought, replacing the exclusionary tactics of binary logic with inclusive and spatial possibilities that are not bound by the desire to achieve resolution. By acknowledging the authority of both the received knowledge of culture and the unique perceptions of individuals, Dickinson introduces us to the dialogic relation maintained among the voices that inform the minds of her speakers. As we participate in the efforts of her speakers to assert independence without creating exclusive hierarchies, we enact a struggle with limitation that is as visible in the dashes that separate individual words and lines as in the collective utterances of speakers that constitute the whole of her poetic creation. Throughout, we see her urging an imaginative life that cannot be contained within a single unified voice.

Notes

1. The way the dash signals the complexity of a self resistant to stabilization is traceable to the “dash” entry in the 1828 edition of Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. There the dash is described in a manner that would strike the eye of a young poet as highly suggestive: “A mark or line in writing or printing, noting a break or stop in the sentence; as in Virgil, quos ego —: or a pause; or the division of the sentence” (55a verso). The words of Virgil, “quos ego —,” which mean “what I am” or “that which I am,” suggest an inconclusive assertion of identity; Virgil asserts that he is something but does not further define what this something is. The appearance of Virgil’s assertion within a definition describing the disjunctive function of the dash associates identity with syntactic rupture. The dash then becomes a form of punctuation that both challenges the linear progression of sentences and emphasizes the uncertainty of identity. Given Dickinson’s friendship with the Webster family, the presence of a family dictionary inscribed by Noah Webster, and numerous references to the importance of her “lexicon” in her writing, we can readily accept Crisanne Miller’s conclusion that Dickinson “spent a lot of time reading her dictionary” and that doing so liberated her “to speak as she might not otherwise dare” (153).
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all of Dickinson’s poems are referred to according to the numbers and text assigned them in Thomas H. Johnson’s 1955 three-volume variorum edition of her poems.
3. The text for this poem comes from *Poems 1890–1896 by Emily Dickinson*, a facsimile reproduction edited by George Monteiro (1967).
4. Even though Bakhtin is well known for having stated in “Discourse in the Novel” that “in the majority of poetic genres (poetic in the narrow sense) . . . the internal dialogization of discourse is not put to artistic use . . . and is artificially extinguished” (*Dialogic* 284), I am using his thought as a means to clarify Emily Dickinson’s poetics. I do so precisely because she does not write with a unified voice but rather employs a multitude of speakers whose utterances are the primary subject of the poems. As Tzvetan Todorov observes in *Mikhail Bakhtin and the Dialogic Principle*, “It isn’t that the representation of discourse, and therefore of its utterer, is impossible in poetry, but it just isn’t aesthetically valorized there as it is in prose” (64). In “The Problem of the Text,” written near the end of his life, Bakhtin himself questions the possibility that any creative use of language could be as devoid of dialogism, as he had previously thought was the case with poetry:

Is not any writer (even the pure lyricist) always a “dramaturge” in the sense that he directs all words to others’ voices, including to the image of the author (and to other authorial masks)? Perhaps any literal, single-voiced word is naive and unsuitable for authentic creativity. (*Speech* 110)

My reading of Dickinson suggests that her poetry displays many of the traits the young Bakhtin considered the exclusive domain of the novel. A precise determination of genre is

less important than finding ways to discuss the functions of speakers and voices in the poems. Perhaps the best solution is to think of Dickinson as not poetic in the "narrow sense" the young Bakhtin had in mind, but perfectly poetic in the broader sense the elder Bakhtin perceives even in "the pure lyricist."

5. Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues convincingly for the influence of William Paley's *Natural Theology* and his "Argument from Design" in her biography, *Emily Dickinson* (80–83).
6. All references to Dickinson's letters cite page numbers in the 1958 Johnson and Ward three-volume collection, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*.
7. Harriet Beecher Stowe provides an excellent example of the way the expectation of dramatic personal change was commonly associated with marriage. In a 6 January 1836 letter to Georgiana May, the as-yet-single Miss Beecher informs her friend of an absence of transformation similar to that expressed by the bride in Dickinson's poem:

Well, my dear G., about half an hour more and your old friend, and companion, school mate, sister, etc. will cease to be Hattie Beecher, and change to nobody knows who. My dear, you are engaged, and pledged in a year or 2 to encounter a similar fate, and do you wish to know how you shall feel? Well, my dear, I have been dreading and dreading the time, and lying awake all last week wondering how I should live through this overwhelming crisis, and lo! it has come, and I feel nothing at all. . . . (59)

8. Bakhtin comments on the relationship of consummation or wholeness to the life of the subject in "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity." His choice of terms is particularly appropriate and even playful when applied to the bride who speaks in poem 461:

If I am consummated and my life is consummated, I am no longer capable of living and acting. For in order to live and act, I need to be unconsummated, I need to be open for myself — at least in all the essential moments constituting my life; I have to be, for myself, someone who is axiologically yet-to-be, someone who does not coincide with his already existing makeup. (*Art* 13)

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