

'Finite Infinity': Paradox in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Johanna Schakenraad

In a letter to T.W. Higginson Emily Dickinson wrote about her family: "They are religious – except me – and address an Eclipse, every morning- whom they call their "Father."(L 261) Her parents, sister and brother had all joined the church, but Emily had been unwilling to publicly confess faith in Christ, which left her with a sense of exclusion and being *bad*. Despite her rejection of established religion, her interest in faith and religion remained all her life, as her poems show. For some critics she now stands as one of the major religious thinkers of the nineteenth century, who saw clearly the difficulties of belief in the modern era. In *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* Roger Lundin calls her one of the first to trace the trajectory of God's decline.(4) "With its brilliance and originality, the body of poetry that she produced over a quarter of a century places her in the ranks of her contemporaries Herman Melville, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Like them, she took the full measure of the loss of God and bravely tried to calculate the cost."(151) In *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson* Jed Deppman also compares Dickinson to Nietzsche and considers her one of the "...thinkers who understand, first, that when God dies – becomes an unnecessary hypothesis – the possibility of foundational truth dies too, and second, that the resulting nihilistic possibilities can be more than just passive or reactive. They can be positive, creative, and poetic in the widest sense." (21) In one poem Dickinson explicitly indicates that the disappearance of God is tantamount to the disappearance of absolute truth:

Truth- is as old as God-
His Twin identity
And will endure as long as He
A Co-Eternity -

And perish on the Day
Himself is borne away
From Mansion of the Universe
A lifeless Deity.
(Fr795)

The loss of belief in the revelation of truth and eternally valid definitions compels her to find truth and meaning for herself. This is the great quest Dickinson undertakes in her poetry, and it will turn out to be a lifelong and lonely search. And throughout this search God and religious themes remain of the utmost importance to her. God has disappeared, but he still is there, somewhere, hidden, a possibility, and the old religious questions are still posed. Now it is the poet's task to engage herself in the great themes of life and death, immortality, eternity. Yet together with these questions there is always the problem how she, Emily Dickinson, as a poet and as a human being, can speak about subjects like immortality and eternity, subjects that lie beyond human experience and beyond the limits of what can be known. Dickinson has found a solution for this predicament but, as we shall see, it is a highly paradoxical one. She chooses poetry as her medium: "I dwell in Possibility - | A fairer

House than Prose -". Poetry is the realm of possibilities, where she can spread her narrow hands to gather paradise (Fr466). It is the opposite of prose, commonplace sentences restricted to their literal meaning. "They shut me up in Prose ... Because they liked me "still" - (Fr445). Prose is something she wants to escape from, it is discourse, true or false, subjected to the logical rule of non-contradiction. In poetry, and in Dickinson's poetry above all, the law of non-contradiction is suspended. She can freely explore all kinds of (contradictory) possibilities. She needs this freedom to express her complex views of God, death and eternity, but also her view of poetry and of herself as a poet. Sometimes such conflicting aspects occur in one poem, which then evolves into a paradox. When Dickinson renounces absolute truth she finds a wealth of perspectives but she never makes a clear choice among them. Instead she lets them develop into full paradoxes.

Emily Dickinson has often been called a paradoxical poet, or a poet of paradox. The word 'paradox' is employed frequently to refer to the enigmatical aspects of Dickinson's work or of her life. Dickinson wrote almost 1800 poems and numerous letters. In Johnson's edition there are over 1000 letters addressed to more than 100 recipients, and this is only a small part of the correspondence she maintained. Dickinson's correspondence is an important source of information for scholars writing on the life or personality of the poet. But in spite of the great number of poems and letters she wrote, Dickinson still eludes us. Somehow we do not really get to know who she was, how she lived or what her motives were for writing as she did. There is a paradox in knowing so much about her, and yet so little, but the paradox we find in her poems is of a quite different nature.

In *Paradoxes Their Roots, Range and Resolution* Nicholas Rescher says: "A paradox is literally a contention or group of contentions that is incredible – beyond belief. ... One must distinguish between logical and rhetorical paradoxes. The former type is a communicative predicament – a conflict of what is asserted, accepted or believed. The latter is a rhetorical trope – an anomalous juxtaposition of incongruous ideas for the sake of striking exposition or unexpected insight." (3-4) A paradox is first of all a phenomenon within logic. Generally a paradox arises when premises that are all plausible but mutually inconsistent entail a conclusion which is also plausible. We have a plurality of theses, each individually plausible in the circumstances, but collectively inconsistent. Every member of the group stakes a claim that we would be minded to accept if such acceptance were unproblematic. But when all these claims are conjoined, a logical contradiction ensues. (4-7) Paradoxes are often posed as a kind of riddle. Assuming that of two contradictory statements only one can be true, the riddle can (and should) be solved.

One would expect to find primarily rhetorical paradoxes in poetry, and in fact when paradoxes in Dickinson's work are discussed, they are generally treated as rhetorical devices. But, as we shall see, it is typical of Dickinson's work that the inconsistencies in her poems come closer to logical paradoxes and that she does not set out to solve them. At times she seems to invite the reader to do so, but most of all they are set forth as carriers of a special meaning. In many cases she pushes thought to the (logical) extreme and the conflicting consequences that are formulated in her poems. Yet Dickinson's paradoxes are subtle and intricately woven into her work. Her different and sometimes opposing views yield contradictions that do not beg to be solved and yet claim some kind of truth. Her poems convey possibilities, possible views on nature, death, eternity and God, 'truths' about what lies beyond truth and confer meaning to what seems meaningless. The poet's point of view exceeds that of the woman living in her father's house in Amherst. Who is she to perform this task, that was the prerogative of God?

God

During adolescence, especially when she was studying at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Emily Dickinson had engaged in a long struggle with faith. Eventually she refused conversion and never joined the church. Still many of her poems show that she was preoccupied with religious matters and always took theology seriously. She was keenly aware of the difficulties and ambiguities of belief and tried to think out the consequences of the disappearance of God and the desolation of man because of this loss:

Those – dying then,
Knew where they went –
They went to God’s Right Hand –
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found –
(Fr1581)

In “I know that He exists. | Somewhere – in silence – | He has hid his rare life | From our gross eyes.” (Fr365) Dickinson displays the full extent of her complicated feeling. The first line is a positive statement, ending with a period, as if no doubt were admitted. But at once it is made clear that the certainty of the first line must be qualified. God exists, but is he is hidden somewhere, where we cannot find him. “This World is not conclusion.” (Fr373) starts equally affirmative, but in this poem too uncertainty creeps in and it ends in the forthright expression of doubt: “Narcotics cannot still the Tooth | That nibbles at the soul - ”. In a later poem she resists doubt: “I never spoke with God | Nor visited in Heaven – | Yet certain am I of the spot | As if the Checks were given” (Fr800). The search for God and the search for truth are basically the same pursuit. The disappearing of absolute truth has opened for Dickinson endless possibilities, it enables her to write her kind of poetry and give meaning to the world and to her own life. On the other hand it evokes her fears, the existential doubt that has become inescapable after the disappearance of God. “I know that He exists.” ends thus:

But – should the play
Prove piercing earnest –
Should the glee- glaze-
In Death’s – stiff- stare-

Would not the fun
Look too expensive!
Would not the jest –
Have crawled too far!
(Fr365)

When God leaves, death comes in. God and death have become rivals, for Dickinson it is one or the other. Believing in immortality is equivalent to believing in God. Harboring doubts entails giving room for death and consequently the obligation to find the meaning of it now there is no longer a God to offer the prospect of life after death. At the same time this predicament opens an endless space for

thought. Is there any meaning at all if it is not inherent to the world? Can she trust herself to create meaning when it is not present in creation?

Dickinson explores an instance of a meaningless world in "Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre – | Without Design | Or Order, or Apparent Action –" (Fr778). Helen Vendler says about this poem: "This poem on apparent Chance (in the features and random distribution of four trees), and apparent Uselessness (of the trees to the world at large), is a meditation on nature as a permanent withholder of meaning. (326) Dickinson sees no plan for living beings in nature, she refuses to see a message in the acre and the trees. In "This is my letter to the World | That never wrote to Me – " (Fr519) she herself is the carrier of the message, not of God but of nature. Here she states that her poetry conveys the meaning she has found in nature. But more often for her meaning is nowhere to be found, God is gone and nature is random. On the whole not meaning itself, but the possibility of conferring meaning to a meaningless world is the purpose of Dickinson's search, trying to find the outlines, the limits of meaning and truth. To do so, she employs different strategies.

Poetic Strategies

For Dickinson writing poetry is the expression of thought. Emily was the one of her family who most valued thought. She had to think– she was the only one of us who had that to do, her sister Lavinia said about her. She could not imagine what a life without thought would be like. "How do most people live without any thoughts. There are many people in the world (you must have noticed them in the street) How do they live. How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning", she asked Higginson when he visited her in 1870. (L342a). The mind has nearly endless power, enough to fill her life with profound considerations:

The Brain – is wider than the Sky –
For – put them side by side –
The one the other will contain
With ease – and You – beside
(Fr598)

Dickinson's poetry is more about mind and thought than about feeling and great emotions. She tries to think through exhaustively the subjects that are most important to her. When she writes about grief or despair, she writes about her thought's response to them. Often her way of addressing these feelings, and abstract notions, is by asking: "what is...?" or "what is the meaning of...?" Poetry is the form that allows her all the freedom she needs to find and formulate (tentative) answers. When she writes about subjects that lie at the limits of human experience, or beyond them, she has to push her language to the limits of what can be said. Therefore at the same time as she is experimenting to distill meaning from an apparently meaningless world, or to fashion it, she has to create her own language for this project. She herself has to assign meaning to words.

We will now consider some of Dickinson's strategies to explore these subjects and to formulate an poetic answer to these "what is ...?" questions.

Definition poems

"What is ...?" is in the first place asking for a definition. Dickinson has written many poems trying to define such things as hope, despair, suffering, agony, loneliness, longing: feelings or situations that

will be familiar to most of her readers: “Hope” is the thing with feathers – That perches in the soul –” (Fr314), Hope is a subtle Glutton – (Fr1493), Grief is a Mouse – ... | Grief is a Thief - (Fr753), Presentiment – is that long shadow – on the Lawn – (Fr487), Remorse – is Memory – awake – (Fr781), Exhilaration is the Breeze | That lifts us from the Ground (Fr1157), Longing is like the Seed | That wrestles in the Ground (Fr1298). There are several kinds of definition poems, as Dickinson does not always use the same technique to arrive at a definition of an emotion, experience or concept. Deppman remarks that “like other Dickinsonian mini-genres they cover a large spectrum that admits many valid classifications.” He distinguishes nine kinds of definitional gestures, but there are many other possible categorizations. (125 and 228-9)

Many of Dickinson’s poems are structured around clusters of verbs. According to Cristanne Miller this is a characteristic aspect of the definition poems: “These poems tend to proceed syntactically through repeated relative pronouns and verbs, with the syntax emphasizing literal action. Whereas definition normally takes an A = B form and syntactically favors substantives (the first non-function word of any A = B sentence will always be some form of substantive), Dickinson’s definitions most often take the form: A is the B that ----, or else they make a noun (A) correspond to a verbal or verb form (B) instead of to another noun.” (84-85).

In the definition poems either the defined feeling/ situation or the entity used in the comparison are found within common experience or everyday life. They establish a connection between the inner life of feeling and the outer world of object. The poet communicates a truth about human consciousness by linking it to some natural phenomenon or event that can be shared with the reader.

“What is ...?” can also be seen as an attempt at classification. The question is “what sort of thing is this?” and Dickinson proceeds to categorize it. As Vendler says in her commentary of ““Hope” is the thing with feathers - ’ (Fr314): “Dickinson’s relentless intellectual demand that experience be classified and defined leads to her inclination to place acts and feelings first under the rubric “thing”, and then to track the “thing” back to specificity through various inner questions.” (118)

Lack of context

Emily Dickinson saw it as her task in life to think about the world, life and all important matters human beings have to deal with. She chose poetry as the medium to express her thoughts. When she writes about emotions or the dilemmas of human existence, she writes what she thinks about them, and her thoughts always reflect the complexities of her feelings. This leads to a certain abstraction in her work, a lack of setting or *scenelessness*, which according to Weisbuch is the “fully unique quality which identifies Dickinson’s lyric technique.” (16)

When Dickinson writes about pain, she does not as a rule write a poem about a concrete situation, the pain she then felt or what caused it, and this has led to much speculation among commentators about her motives for writing the way she does. But we do learn what pain is and what it can do: “Pain expands the time - ” (Fr833), “Pain – has an Element of Blank - ” (Fr760), “There is a pain – so utter - | It swallows substance up - ” (Fr515). In “After great pain, a formal feeling comes - ” (Fr372) Dickinson describes the emotional paralysis that follows an emotional shock, the stages the sufferer goes through and eventually how he/she survives: “First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –”. Although we have to guess when or why Dickinson herself may have been so hurt, her poems leave no doubt that she has deeply felt the pain she writes about.

Generally, when Dickinson describes feelings or life events she is looking for the essence of the phenomenon at hand. The question “What is ...?” turns into the question what the *essence* of

something is and for this reason many of the poems can be read as philosophical reflections. On the other hand, the essence thus described can be applied to many instances.

As Weisbuch remarks, the scenelessness of the poems also gives them a vital versatility: "This versatility depends upon what we call scenelessness, as each apparently mimetic scene in the poem is revealed to be a choice from an infinitude of potential exemplings of the poem's unifying proposition." (Handbook 200). Miller remarks that the use of nouns creates an illusion of *thingness*, but they do not direct us to particular events or things. They give, instead, the sense that the world is as mobile and flexible as her perception of it. (63)

The scenelessness of the poems makes it difficult to determine their meanings. As is clear from a great number of analyses of the poems, they can be interpreted in various and often opposite ways. Dickinson asks "What is ..?" and then shows that there is never one single answer. She can only partially answer her question and give the reader a glimpse of the way she has looked at it. The poet is not the only one who has to think, she demands the same of her readers.

Riddles

Dickinson wants the reader to *think*, and trying to understand her meaning is one of the great challenges her poetry offers. The lack of context leaves a number of possible readings and the poet gives no final criterion for the right interpretation. In some of Dickinson's poems several, even conflicting meanings co-exist, and mutually exclusive interpretations may all have a claim to truth. *There is not one truth*, the poet seems to say. Because of this inherent ambiguity some poems take the form of riddles. In these poems Dickinson does not provide even a provisional answer to the question "what is..?" She mirrors her question and shares her task with the reader: "What do you think 'it' was?":

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down –
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.
(Fr355)

It was not frost, nor fire, and yet it tasted like them all, Dickinson tells us. The poem gives some clues, but it only circles its theme, the identity of 'it', which in the end is not revealed. Dickinson herself too seems to be examining what it was she experienced. Cynthia Griffin Wolff says about this poem that a reader can best understand it if the terms of the puzzle are made clear. "Question: what is the unstated antecedent of "It" in the first line? Answer: the resurrection from the grave into Heaven." (338) But other interpreters argue it must be a state of emotional paralysis.

"It knew no Medicine - | It was not Sickness – then -" (Fr567) equally seems to be looking for an answer and ends with a question mark. Both poems may point to something behind death and the feeling evoked by it. What may be after death is the most puzzling theme Dickinson occupies herself with. As Miller says: "'It'" often acquires extraordinary significance in Dickinson's poems because it remains absolutely mysterious and absolutely feared or desired. (...) Dickinson manipulates this potential ambiguity in pronoun reference most frequently when her subject is a devastation that approaches death, or death itself." (81)

In "He fumbles at your soul" (Fr477) "he" has a position similar to "it" in the previous poems. Crucial to the interpretation of this poem is: who is "he"? A lover, God, or the poet? The same question arises for "He gave away his Life -" (Fr530): "he" is by different commentators thought to refer to the poet (Kher 132), Frazer Stearns, a friend of Austin who was killed in the Civil War, or Jesus (Lundin 175). We find another riddle, along with the question if it can ever be solved, in one of Dickinson's most famous and most commented-upon poems:

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –
In Corners – till a Day
The Owner passed – identified –
And carried Me away –
. . .
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 -
(Fr764)

What is this poem about? Who (or what) is the loaded gun? Who (or what) is the owner? Dickinson's riddle-poems all operate on the verge of what can be said. The subject of such a poem is an emotion or an idea that is not quite clear to her yet, but still has to be worked out in the poem itself. Therefore she cannot name it but it has to be approached in an indirect manner. She has to outline her purpose. "My Business is Circumference", she wrote to Higginson (L268). When her poems are riddles, they are often riddles she herself seems not to have solved either.

Experiments in thought

Dickinson seeks ways to think about the problems she finds herself confronted with. Because she does not accept the views religion provides, she has to think for herself and to find her own method for developing her thoughts and expressing them. Poetry is her medium, but she has to create her own poetic language, her own images and her own truth.

So there are two difficulties she has to tackle simultaneously. She has to develop her thoughts about philosophical and religious issues and to compose the language to express them in. In some poems the process of thinking is described explicitly as an experiment. She leaves the domain of possible experience: "Of Death I try to think like this..." (Fr1588) and

I tried to think a lonelier Thing
Than any I had seen –
Some Polar Expiation – An Omen in the Bone
Of Death's tremendous nearness –
(Fr570)

Deppman comments on this poem: "The poem's first line represents an attempt to will or define loneliness into the category of "thing," a hypostasizing gesture Dickinson uses to enable preliminary

linguistic access to an otherwise unspeakable loneliness, roughly on the model of the assertive but mysterious "'Hope' is the thing with feathers -" (Fr 314). The speaker then tries to find a clearer name for the "Thing" being thought, and we see right away both how important indexing can be in a serious try of thought and how much this particular lonely feeling defies nominative language." (65) Dickinson is trying to think beyond the limits of reality. How can she think anything more lonely than the loneliness she has experienced? How can she know what death is? Trying to think means trying to regain her subject and bring her thoughts that had ventured beyond possible experience and observation back to the world of visible and tangible objects.

In these poems the real and what is fictitious become entangled, the experiments of thought explore the endless space of possibilities, but the poet is constantly aware that she is liable to cross the limit of thought at any moment, at any phrase or word.

Thinking the unthinkable

In some poems she deliberately goes beyond these limits. Dickinson thinks about the great subjects in life that had become problematic since she stopped being religious in the traditional sense and now her thoughts especially address the subject of the limits of both life and thought. Many of her poems have to do with loss and endings and especially with death.

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died – (Fr591)

Because I could not stop for Death – | He kindly stopped for me – (Fr479)

In both these poems Dickinson extends her possibilities beyond death. They are not just abstract reflections. In fact these poems describe a concrete scene: a deathbed, a journey, but she depicts them from the viewpoint of the dying or the dead. In "I heard a Fly buzz" she describes the last moments of the dying person, who is ready for death and then "there interposed a fly". There are numerous deathbed scenes in nineteenth-century fiction but Dickinson's approach is new and bound to make the reader uncomfortable. What are we witnessing? In "Because I could not stop for Death" we hear some details of the journey. The poet describes the clothes she wears during the ride with death and how the carriage passes the school and the playground and fields of grain. The reader can imagine what happens but realizes at the same time the impossibility of it. These poems are written from the perspective of an "I", but in both cases from an "I" who has died, someone who speaks from beyond the grave. The paradox consists here in the tale being told by a person who is both dead and alive. In these poems the scene itself is an illusion.

In "Our journey had advanced – | Our feet were almost come | To that odd Fork in Being's Road – | Eternity – by Term-" (Fr453) the reader is also addressed from beyond the grave, but now the speaker speaks not only for herself but also for at least one other person. "We" is not the human race as the persons walking are all dead and therefore the poem is not about human life (and death) in general. The poem describes a journey, but when the reader attempts to define what is happening it turns out that any description is inadequate. Wolff says about this poem: "The surrealistic geography of this poem concisely renders the impossibility of Heaven as a "place." Moreover, the reader's efforts merely to follow the course of the verse and extract a plausible vision of the "journey" to it produce inevitable frustration. And the feelings of helplessness and anxiety that the poem thus engenders are precisely mimetic of our feelings when we attempt to clarify the notion of Heaven that God has offered to us." (337) Here we see a difference with "I heard a Fly buzz" and "Because I could not stop for Death": because of the specific background of these poems and the story they tell us, we come to realize the paradox in them. The poet assumes the position of

someone who has died to give a view of death. In "Our journey had advanced" the lack of referents and the obscurity of the setting lead to feelings of helplessness in the reader when he or she tries to comprehend what is going on in the poem. The story itself is unclear, and this may evoke any kind of reaction in the reader.

In the first two poems about death it is not (just) a laborious riddle that is the obstacle for interpretation, nor the scenelessness or lack of context, but the impossible perspective from which the poems are written. These poems are impossible possibilities, as experiments in thought they go further than what is possible. These paradoxes prove to be Dickinson's utmost means to handle the hardest subjects her thought has taken up.

We now discern the metapoetic aspects in all of Dickinson's poetic strategies. In a great number of her poems the basic question is "What is ...?", but in the strategies she employs to find an answer the adequacy of her poetry for the expression of thought is not self-evident. As we have seen, there is an undetermined, and sometimes indeterminable element in her poems, a want of certainty. There may be a lack of context that hinders interpretation, or the poems are formulated as riddles that invite the reader to find out who or what "he" or "it" is, or what is meant by some of the nouns Dickinson uses. Her poems do not pin down their meaning, but designate a field of possibilities where it may be found. They are just directions. When the rules of logic do not apply everything is at least conceivable. As there is no God to warrant the truth of any view or judgment, Dickinson gives her ideas the weight of art. "Tell all the truth but tell it slant -", she writes (Fr1263). What does it mean to tell the truth?

One of the major subjects Dickinson thinks about is poetry itself. At the same time as she was writing her great poems about the most weighty issues in life, she was also fashioning a theory about the nature of poetry. Sometimes her poetry about her own art commends poetry as a way to immortality but more often it refers to its own fragility. Dickinson needs a view of poetry to evaluate her own work. Sometimes she exposes her thoughts about the purpose of writing poetry: "This was a Poet – | It is That | Distills amazing sense | From Ordinary Meanings – | And Attar so immense" (Fr446) and "The Poets light but Lamps – Themselves – go out -" (Fr930), but ideas about herself as a poet are as a rule implicitly present. Many poems are written in the first person singular. In fact, these poems contain the greatest riddle: Who is the "I" of the poems? Who is the poet and what authority has she to speak and tell the truth? It is part of the metapoetic bearing of her poetry that she deals with these questions herself in the broader context of the problem of the self or the soul: "What is the soul?"

The Poet

Dickinson thinks highly of the poet. The world is empty, a void the poet can fill with meaning, using language as her instrument. The poet becomes an almighty maker, whose creation can be seen as similar to God's:

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

But, looking back – the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole –

The Others look a needless Show –
So I write – Poets – All –
(Fr 533)

Dickinson's role in writing poetry suggests a likeness to the divine creator, which gives her a position of tremendous power. In many poems and in some of her letters Dickinson explores this position, first of all as the place from which the poet speaks, which is indistinguishable from the place of the "I" of the poems. "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person" she wrote to Higginson. (L268)

The voice of the poet, the poetic "I" coincides with the place from which the poet proclaims her point of view. She needs a house, a workshop, a forge to build her thoughts. A home was important not only to the person Emily Dickinson, but it is also crucial to the supposed person in the poems that must acquire her own spot to view the world. From this place she can see all: life and death and beyond:

Behind Me – dips Eternity –
Before Me – Immortality –
Myself – the Term between –
(Fr743)

The place she chooses for herself to speak is at the same time the place that determines the self. The problem of the self is analogous to the problem of eternity and immortality.

"Dickinson defines the self by means of the concepts of Eternity and Immortality, yet without semantically fixing either those terms or herself. ... The ambiguity of the "Term" leaves the self undefined. In a linguistic sense the word "term" designates the self as something abstract and indefinable, a something in- "between." But the word "term" also alludes to the temporally limited existence of the self in-between Eternity and Immortality." (Grabher, 233)

Dickinson's workshop and her tools are poetry and language. She uses them to build the place where she can write poetry and assign meaning to the world, again a fundamental paradox in Dickinson's work which we shall now address.

The Building Metaphor

The soul itself must lay the foundation for the thoughts that can be expressed in poetry. In Dickinson's poetry it is impossible to differentiate clearly the "I" of Emily Dickinson, the poetic "I" and the supposed person of the poems.

The Props assist the House
Until the House is built
And then the Props withdraw
And adequate, erect,
The House support itself
..
- then the scaffold drop
Affirming it a Soul - (Fr729)

This poem is about growing up and becoming a self-sufficient woman or man. After the self has been nurtured by family, friends and community, it emerges strong and independent. The soul stands erect like a house that is finished. Kher says about this poem: "Man's life is like this house: in the process of self-making, one needs and accepts the props, symbolizing the forces of culture and tradition and all other forms of external assistance. Once it has been shaped, the self becomes sufficient, robust, and assertive. In due course, the self ceases to recollect, retaining no memory of the tools and the artificer who were instrumental in its making." (267)

Another poem of self-reliance is "On a Columnar Self – How ample to rely" (Fr740) The result of the building in this poem is the columnar self. This self stands alone and as the center of circumference offers its own perspective on the world. As Vendler says: "In extremity, with no one on her side, Dickinson stands alone – or so she thinks, until she realizes that when the Columnar self is joined by rectitude and the spiritual "Assembly" of the Just, she is a crowd unto herself." (312) This columnar self comes closest to God. Just like in e.g. "The Soul selects her own Society -" (Fr409) "On a Columnar Self" states that for Dickinson it is enough to be in the company of ideas, abstract entities, her own thoughts. As she withdrew from the world and declined to meet people outside her family circle, these thoughts became even more important to her.

Dickinson wrote to Higginson: "A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend," to which he replied: "It is hard for me to understand how you can live so alone, with thoughts of such a quality coming up in you ... Yet it isolates one anywhere to think beyond a certain point or have such luminous flashes as come to you – so perhaps the place does not make much difference." (L330 and 330a) Dickinson however had accepted the loneliness that came with the choice she had made and the task she had set herself.

The House and the Prison

In "The Props assist the House" the soul is compared to a house that needs scaffolding to be built. In other poems the soul is not the house itself but she has a dwelling place of her own, where she can receive guests or shut the door if she wants to be alone.

The "house" is an important image in Dickinson's work. For Dickinson, poems are the medium to convey her thoughts, but they are also the house for her poetic "I". Just like Emily Dickinson herself lived a secluded life in her father's house, the poet lives in a house of ideas. It is the place of the soul from where it can contemplate the world. However, her feelings toward her home are ambivalent: it is the home where she is safe and which allows her room and freedom to think, but it is also a place of routine and confinement.

"I dwell in Possibility" expresses her view of poetry as her home, a dwelling place superior to prose, in which "they" shut her up, just as they put her in a closet when she was a child, to make her "still". She has left this confining world of prose for the house of endless possibility. And she has no need to leave this house because here everything is within reach, with the spreading wide of her hands she can gather Paradise. But in this dwelling place of her mind dangers are lurking. The mind can also be its own enemy:

One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –
One need not be a House –
The Brain has Corridors – surpassing

Material Place –
(Fr407)

This poem, that reminds of a gothic tale, warns us that building the house and shutting the door may give a false sense of security. One can never be sure who or what lives inside: demons, persecutors one cannot escape from. There are indications that Dickinson suffered from depression in the years 1853-57 and again after a breakdown that occurred in her relationship with a man to whom she had been writing since 1858 (“the master”, whose identity has never been confirmed). Poems like “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” (Fr340) and “After great pain, a formal feeling comes –” (Fr372) testify how well she knew what it meant to be desperate, they show the pervasiveness of existential anguish. Dickinson herself was haunted by painful memories, gloomy thoughts and feelings of despair. A house could become a dismal prison. “I never hear the word “Escape” | Without a quicker blood, | A sudden expectation - | A flying attitude!” she had written in 1860 (Fr144). Yet, even a prison has different aspects and can be viewed positively:

A Prison gets to be a friend –
Between it’s Ponderous face
And Our’s – a Kinsmanship express –
And in it’s narrow Eyes –

We come to look with gratitude
For the appointed Beam
It deal us – stated as Our food –
And hungered for – the same –
(Fr 456)

In this poem Dickinson’s speaking about “we” and “us” indicates she is describing the general human condition. The freedom of the mind is of the greatest value and may compensate for any restrictions to move or act as one chooses. For Dickinson herself withdrawal from society is a necessary prerequisite for the self-encounter of the human being. As the world without diminishes, the inner world grows.

Like on so many other subjects, Dickinson has a double view of seclusion and even imprisonment. She has built a house for the soul in poetry. The house allows her freedom to think and write, but it also means being shut up with the dangers of her own mind. On the other hand imprisonment is no impediment for thought and can even be annulled by it. Dickinson expresses this idea in her most paradoxical way: “No Prisoner be - | Where Liberty - | Himself- abide with Thee - ” (Fr742). When she is in the company of her own thoughts, Dickinson feels invulnerable:

No Rack can torture me –
My Soul – at Liberty –
Behind this mortal Bone
There knits a bolder One –

.
.

Except Thyself may be
Thine Enemy –
Captivity is Consciousness
So's Liberty –
(Fr649)

The Soul

Many critics have argued that the self of Dickinson's poems is largely autobiographical. Especially regarding her love poems many have tried to find out the identity of the man or woman who inspired them. It is tempting to look for Dickinson's life in her poems because the details of her life are so unclear. Dickinson herself however wrote that the "I" of her verse was not herself but a supposed person. This should warn the reader, and the critic, not to put too much emphasis on biographical aspects. Hence the problem of the relation between Dickinson herself and the "self" created in the poems is pervasive in all interpretations of the poems.

Besides the "I", the speaker of the poems, there is also the self or the soul that Dickinson writes *about*. The soul is a recurrent theme in Dickinson's poetry and her handling of it recalls some peculiarities that are known of her life. When it is the subject matter of a poem, the soul is generally placed in a isolated position, being by choice alone in the house, seldom admitting a guest:

The Soul selects her own Society –
Then – shuts the Door –
To her divine Majority –
Present no more-

Unmoved – she notes the Chariots – pausing –
At her low Gate –
Unmoved – an Emperor be kneeling
Opon her Mat –

I've known her – from an ample nation –
Choose One –
Then – close the Valves of her attention –
Like Stone -
(Fr409)

In this poem we find some of the elements already noted: in the first stanza the soul is at home where she can choose to receive visitors or shut the door. The third stanza repeats the first, but now we encounter an "I" who speaks from a personal acquaintance with the soul and we come to understand the poem is not about "the" soul in general, but about one particular soul, familiar to the "I", who is selective in choosing her society. Although an Emperor be kneeling on the mat at her door, she is still unmoved. Then she chooses one of many callers and after she has selected the guest she values most, she closes the door on all others. The soul is female here, like in most of Dickinson's poems. Because of the parallel to her own secluded life with infrequent visits of people outside her own family circle, this poem has often been read as autobiographical. It has been interpreted as a

love poem, and again this has led to speculation who the chosen one, the lover, might be. Habegger for instance thinks that it is the reflection of Dickinson's estrangement from Samuel Bowles, on whom she slammed shut " 'like Stone' – the valves of her attention" (451).

In "The Soul that hath a Guest, Doth seldom go abroad -" (Fr592) the visitor is again an emperor, but now "The Emperor of Men", who may be Christ or God, and consequently the poem can be read as a religious meditation. In another version of the poem the guest is "The Mightiest – of Men -", who may be Christ but also a real person, perhaps a lover.

The Soul's Superior instants
Occur to Her - Alone –
When friend – and Earth's occasion
Have infinite withdrawn –
.. .
Eternity's disclosure
To favorites – a few –
Of the Colossal substance
Of Immortality
(Fr630)

This is a poem about the soul without any features of a scene or context. It is about the soul's most exalted inner experiences and hence it is probably about Dickinson herself. Now she is in the company of her own thoughts again. The soul of this poem is unmistakably her own, and we must read these lines as autobiographical, not as regards her life events but as regards her inner life's most crucial moments.

Poems like "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died- " and "Because I could not stop for Death – | He kindly stopped for me - " are general reflections on death and immortality, but the poems about the soul have a more personal aspect. Dickinson writes about her inner life and emotions, or she generalizes her own experiences to develop a view of the soul.

The Soul should always stand ajar
That if the Heaven inquire
He will not be obliged to wait
Or shy of troubling Her

Depart, before the Host have slid
The Bolt unto the Door
To search for the accomplished Guest,
Her Visitor, no more – (Fr1017)

She, the host: the soul, any soul, Dickinson, should always be ready to receive *him*, her guest: another soul, a lover, an idea, God. If she lingers he may leave and the opportunity may be lost forever. Even if the soul has chosen to be alone in her house she should always be on the lookout for the guest she would welcome.

There is a distinct parallel between the position of the soul in the poems and Dickinson's secluded life. Even if the "I" of the poems is largely a supposed person, as Dickinson herself claims, the soul in the poems has some distinguishing features in common with her creator, which gives these poems a special biographical relevance. They can be read as a vindication of the kind of life she chose to live and therefore they can help to explain how and why she wrote her poetry. Dickinson did not want to meet strangers and sometimes refused to come downstairs to meet even close friends, but she cultivated friendships through letters. In this way she could pick her friends and still keep them as distant as she wished by controlling the frequency and tone of the correspondence. Her behavior may well have been a form of self-defense. When people were held off they could not make any demands of time or service and Dickinson could spend her time thinking and writing. Living a life devoid of special event may also well have been a necessary condition for intense thought. Dickinson behaves like the "soul" of her poems, or the "soul" behaves like her.

Another poem that is illuminating as to her ideas about her life and art is "A solemn thing – it was – I said | A Woman – white – to be –" (Fr307) which ends by saying that the sages call a life like hers small, at which she softly sneers "small"! Of course she knows better. This poem is often associated with Dickinson's wearing white dresses, like a nun, a bride or as "a visible sign of perpetual mourning" (Wolff, 507). In this poem "white" is the sign of the lacking of any sign. The size of her life has swelled in her vest and she knows better than the sages how large it is, even if outward it is the same. "White" gives no clue, it is the blank still to be filled, the ultimate riddle about the poet herself and her motives.

The Double

In Dickinson's poetry the position of the soul is one of solitude. The soul lives alone in the house that was built for her and she is perpetually waiting for the one guest she wants to admit. In her elevated position the soul is bound to experience the horrors of the utmost loneliness. Relieving her loneliness however is not a matter of the number of visitors, but of the right visitor calling on her.

And naturally Dickinson addresses loneliness in her poems by asking: what is loneliness? "The Loneliness One dare not sound | ...I fear me this – is Loneliness –" (Fr877) is one long sentence defining loneliness. The most extreme loneliness Dickinson has experienced is marked as the essence of loneliness. The soul has only herself and her own thoughts for company, and these are not always a pleasure to be with: "The Soul unto itself | is an imperial friend - | Or the most agonizing Spy - | An Enemy – could send -" (Fr579), "My Soul – accused Me – And I quailed -" (Fr793).

Loneliness is the soul creating her own guest and the soul's most triumphant moment is also the moment she realizes she cannot escape her solitary abode, her prison. She finds comfort in the creation she acknowledges as her mirror and her equal. The soul has made her double:

I tried to think a lonelier Thing
Than any I had seen –
Some Polar Expiation – An Omen in the Bone
Of Death's tremendous nearness –

I probed Retrieveless things
My Duplicate – to borrow –

A Haggard comfort springs

From the belief that Somewhere –
Within the Clutch of Thought –
There dwells one other Creature
Of Heavenly Love – forgot –

I plucked at our Partition –
As One should pry the Walls –
Between Himself – and Horror's Twin –
Within Opposing Cells –

I almost strove to clasp his Hand,
Such Luxury – it grew –
That as Myself – could pity Him –
Perhaps he – pitied me –
(Fr570)

Dickinson finds, invents, creates a double, one other creature like herself who dwells in the clutch of thought. Deppman makes the following remark on this poem: "is it ... a reactive attempt to use language, argument, and other mental tools to redescribe the painful conditions into which the poet has been thrown? I think the main purpose of this poem and many others is not to invent or define an extreme experience but to deal with it once it arrives, to knead it, battle it, alter it, realize it, or just survive it through thought." (64) Dealing with loneliness is a matter of thought, or trying to think. Thinking, and therefore also writing poetry, is for Dickinson the means to banish loneliness, which, at the same time, is the prerequisite for poetry. This leads to the paradoxical situation that "loneliness" itself makes her less lonely: "It might be lonelier | Without the Loneliness-" (Fr535)

The handling of loneliness and the introduction of a double are the culmination of the paradoxical elements in Dickinson's poetry. The soul finds herself in utter solitude which can only be relieved by her own thoughts. The double she creates in her poetry enables her to write poetry. She has lost her belief in God, but has taken upon herself the task, that was traditionally his, to create from scratch, i.e. from within herself:

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself
Finite infinity
(Fr1696)

The Poet's Truth

The soul admitted to itself is the soul that is her own guest, who has selected her own society and opens to eternity, to the colossal substance of immortality. She acknowledges her status as both finite and infinite. Dickinson primarily describes her own situation, but at the same time the poems express her inherently paradoxical views about the human condition. In her poetry Dickinson has built her house, the prison that allows her mind unlimited freedom. Within a world of facts she has created a universe of possibilities, a landscape without features that she fills with attempts at definition, riddles without a solution and experiments in thought, drawing the outer lines of the unlimited. In doing so she prefers possibility to fact and paradox to truth, *yes and no* to *yes or no*. There is no definite truth about life and death, eternity or God, nor is there a definite truth about truth, which constitutes the ultimate paradox in her work. Truth is the twin identity of God and will perish when he dies (Fr795) but truth is also stirless and holds without a prop (Fr882), truth is too bright for our infirm delight and must dazzle gradually, it must be told slant (Fr1263). Truth may die and is eternal, just like human beings.

Dickinson's thought is at once the reason for her isolated position and the consequence of it. She is the woman in white who withdraws from the world to explore mentally all possibilities that present themselves, but who also knows the dangers of her enterprise:

Much Madness is divinest Sense –
To a discerning Eye –
Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
'Tis the Majority
In this, as all, prevail –
Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you're straightway dangerous –
And handled with a Chain –
(Fr620)

Truth about important issues is not only affirmed by religion, science or logic, it is also a matter of social convention and acknowledgment by the majority. It may be dangerous to harbor views that are unorthodox and conflicting with those of the majority, and moreover mutually exclusive. Even if they are *divinest sense* to her discerning eye, the paradoxes Dickinson cherished would not have been appreciated by everyone. So she withheld her letter to the world. The world was allowed to read it only after her death.

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