“Finished knowing – then –”: The Destruction of Certainty in Dickinson’s Death Poems

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the ways in which Emily Dickinson’s death poems challenge romanticized nineteenth-century and Puritan conceptions of death, undermining the idea of death as a meaningful, knowable phenomenon. As Dickinson’s poems place pressure on Puritan logic—indeed, on the idea that logic might be applied to death at all—they rupture syntactically and semantically, rendering futile the search for certainty in death. This destruction of certainty, as I argue, allows Dickinson’s death poems to explore a variety of philosophical and spiritual perspectives on death and dying, taking on a renewed “life” of their own as they engage in forms of poetic play. By examining Dickinson’s poems within the context of the Civil War era and New England Puritanism, I argue that they offer a crucial rebuttal to systems of belief that were eager to bring false certainty to the unknowable.

KEYWORDS: Puritan, death, certainty, Emily Dickinson

Mr. Higginson, – Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?

—Emily Dickinson, letter to Thomas Higginson, 1862

INTRODUCTION

Summaries of Emily Dickinson’s life read as a series of contradictions. At the age of thirty-eight, she permanently confined herself within her family’s property, and yet maintained a broad network of letters to friends and family¹; she “did not see any of her almost 1,800 poems through the process of publication”² and yet committed to her own practice of binding book-like “fascicles” and, indeed, striving for publication through her communication with author Thomas Higginson³; she was raised in the Puritan tradition and yet, according to Mary Loeffelholz, her “unprofessed faith was a matter of public fact in Amherst.”⁴

It is the third point in particular that gives Dickinson’s death poems a similar sense of insurmountable tension, a noticeable pull between faith and disillusionment, comfort and terror. Her own faith dictated an immense awe and fear of death, conceiving of life as merely the process of waiting for death: “much of the average Puritan’s life was centered about and predicated on the vision of death, the afterlife, and the expected manner in which the passage from this world to the next should be made,” notes Stannard in “Death and Dying in Puritan New England.”⁵ Stannard describes a vision of religion in which religious beliefs, called “world view,” confirm and are confirmed by religious practices, or “ethos”; “the two phenomena,” he writes, “ethos [e.g.,] the prescribed way of dying) and world view (the vision or concept of death) reinforce one another and thus fused give meaning, order, and stability to their cultural source.”⁶ Dickinson’s death poems, however, flip this process on its head; they present a variety of “world views,” many of which refute and destabilize the Puritan “ethos” of death. This

destabilization is rendered visible through the poems’ own syntactical and semantic ruptures, suggesting the ultimate futility of our search for certainty in death.

BACKGROUND: TRENDS IN DICKINSON ANALYSIS

Dickinson’s death poems are a frequent subject of literary analysis. Though several critics acknowledge the poems’ nontraditional portrayals of death, few explore, as this essay aims to, the unique intersections between their form, poetic subjectivity, and sociohistorical and religious contexts. By marrying a literary historical approach with close readings of key poems in Dickinson’s oeuvre, I aim to explore the ways in which the poems arrive at *their own* deaths—of logic, of philosophy, of the very ideas on which they are grounded—on a structural and syntactic level. This unique process, I argue, works twofold, simultaneously dismantling the Puritan structures within which Dickinson was raised *and* offering the reader a playful poetic experience through which to confront questions of life and death.

Recent literary scholarship has explored the ways in which Dickinson’s death poems challenge traditional conceptions of identity. Michael Clune’s “How Poems Know What It’s Like to Die,” for instance, analyzes Dickinson’s treatment of sensory experience in “I Heard a Fly Buzz,” concluding that the poem ultimately separates experience from subject, challenging “the literary historical view that equates descriptions of first person experience with individualist ideology.”⁷ Clune argues that, rather than attempting to convince the reader that the poem is the testimony of someone who has died, Dickinson aims to create “a convincing experiential analogue for death.”⁸

Much critical analysis has also been dedicated to Dickinson’s varying poetic treatments of Puritanism. In “The Glimmering Frontier: Emily Dickinson and Publication,” Martin Greenup is quick to note how wildly Dickinson’s stances vary across her poems: “aspects of Puritanism feature prominently in her poems,” he notes, “either because she is challenging its assumptions and tradition, or because she is evoking its theology.”⁹ Throughout the essay, Greenup examines the tensions between Dickinson’s desire for religious immortality (achieved in faith) and literary immortality (achieved in

¹ Wendy Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 19.

² Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them* (London: Harvard University Press, 2016), 1.

³ Martin Greenup, “The Glimmering Frontier: Emily Dickinson and Publication,” *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 33 (2004): 351.

⁴ Mary Loeffelholz, *The Value of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 110.

⁵ David E. Stannard, “Death and Dying in Puritan New England,” *The American Historical Review* 78.5 (Dec 1973): 1305.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1307.

⁷ Michael Clune, “How Poems Know What It’s Like to Die,” *ELH* 83.2 (Summer 2016): 635.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 636.

⁹ Martin Greenup, “The Glimmering Frontier: Emily Dickinson and Publication,” *The Cambridge Quarterly* 33 (2004): 349.

publication), musing, “it is as though Dickinson’s desires for lasting literary success are cast into doubt by Puritanism.”¹⁰ Greenup’s analysis of these apparently contradictory impulses is typical of other Dickinson criticism, centering more on the internal paradoxes of the poet herself than the contradictory structures and philosophies crafted in her poems.

This is not to say that close readings of Dickinson’s poems on the syntactic level are lacking; there are, to be sure, many and varied investigations into her nontraditional uses of language and syntax, all of which note her uniqueness among her nineteenth-century contemporaries. Espousing a perspective consistent with other Dickinson theorists, Mary Loeffelholz observes,

Dickinson’s diction favors the colloquial middle registers of American English, hoarding multisyllabic Latinate words—such as “Provincially”—for emphasis, wrenching plain German monosyllables into new grammatical places, as in “Miles of Stare,” and eschewing the kinds of classical literary references and lumbering poetical stage-sets that conventionally advertised nineteenth-century poets’ elite learning and demanded similar learning from their readers.¹¹

Loeffelholz, too, is quick to note Dickinson’s religious malleability:

Dickinson never fixed herself permanently in the posture of the lonely skeptic superior to the “deluded” believers. Her many and memorable blasphemies almost always take the part of human solidarity with the things of this earth against divine absence or vindictiveness, returning time and again to their starting point in “The Fact that Earth is Heaven— / Whether Heaven is Heaven or not.”¹²

Rather than the philosophical stances Dickinson’s poems espouse, however, this essay is most interested in examining the process of arriving at those stances. By analyzing the ways in which the poems themselves outline and follow (or, indeed, diverge from) a process of sense-making, I offer a new interpretation of Dickinson’s poems: not as means to philosophical ends, but rather experiments unto themselves, in which the dissolution of the speaker’s voice, rhythm, central imagery, or syntax are as instructive as the conclusions at which they arrive.

A TRADITION OF ROMANCE

Though Dickinson’s death poems vary widely—indeed, in many, even the references to death are implicit or allegorical—they are united in their refusal to embody romantic nineteenth-century and Puritan ideals of death. As critic Wendy Martin notes, Dickinson’s era popularized a number of rituals surrounding death: “nineteenth-century America’s widespread fascination with death and immortality was exemplified by the massive popularity of mourning manuals, the growth of the rural cemetery movement, and the near-meteoric rise of such sanitizing rituals as embalming.” Death itself, meanwhile, was increasingly romanticized: “often,” Martin notes, “death was depicted as a gentle angel, or a lover, conducting the faithful to a blissful new home.”¹³

Puritanism, meanwhile, viewed the end of life as the beginning of an eternity in heaven—but only for the few chosen for ‘salvation’ by God. In the Puritan view, salvation is predetermined (a philosophy called ‘unconditional election’): one cannot change one’s likelihood of being saved through prayer or confession of sins, as in other denominations. Since one’s earthly life did not determine salvation, it

was seen, according to David E. Stannard, “as but a ‘vapour,’ a fleeting pilgrimage” on the way to salvation or eternal damnation.¹⁴ Though the Puritan faith could not be said to romanticize death in the manner of nineteenth-century literary tradition—indeed, as Stannard notes, ‘doubt of salvation was essential to salvation and that Puritan who, for so long as he breathed, became at any time secure and comfortable in the knowledge of his salvation, was surely lost’¹⁵—it nonetheless treated death as a clear end after which lay two knowable (and known) possibilities: eternal paradise, or eternal hell.

Dickinson challenges such neat—and, in the case of nineteenth-century tradition, romanticized—conceptions of death in an 1862 poem that begins with the line “Because I could not stop for Death –.”¹⁶ To appreciate the poem’s divergence from poetic tradition at the time, it is helpful to compare it with Robert Browning’s “The Last Ride Together,” an 1835 poem that Dickinson quoted in a letter, and a later “elegy commemorating the death of a family friend, Jacob Holt.”¹⁷ As Browning’s speaker rides on horseback towards his death, he enjoys the companionship of a female lover: “My last thought was at least not vain,” he says: “I and my mistress, side by side / Shall be together, breathe and ride, / So, one day more am I deified.”¹⁸ The speaker sees himself as “deified”—treated as divine—by virtue of his connection to the human world. This connection exists in the form of his living “mistress,” whom he must leave when they no longer “breathe and ride” together—that is, when the carriage arrives at his death.

Dickinson subverts this romantic image by pairing her speaker not with a human lover, but rather “Death” personified. Though a startling departure from Browning’s living “mistress,” Dickinson’s chauffeur nonetheless offers the speaker a dignified form of companionship: “He kindly stopped for me—” the speaker notes, later underscoring “His Civility.” With such a description, Dickinson initially appears to align herself with romantic nineteenth-century conception of death: as the poem progresses, however, Dickinson begins to call this romance into question.

“The Carriage held but just Ourselves –” the speaker notes, “And Immortality.” Such a description unites the speaker and Death into a unified “Ourselves,” and opposes both to “Immortality,” who is excluded from the group. Described in such a way, “Immortality” becomes a vague, faceless force, while Death is personified all the more, cementing his role as the speaker’s companion: “We slowly drove – He knew no haste,” says the speaker. “Immortality” could be read as representative of the Puritan belief in the soul’s immortality and the afterlife; by widening the division between the speaker and Immortality, Dickinson begins to disrupt the Puritan vision of life after death, suggesting that the speaker must confront a death without “Immortality,” accompanied by the fact of Death alone.

As their carriage progresses, Dickinson again imbues the scene with hints of romance that align with traditional nineteenth-century depictions; the speaker observes,

We passed the School where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

¹⁴ Stannard, “Death and Dying in Puritan New England,” 1317.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Emily Dickinson, in *Emily Dickinson’s Poems*, ed. Cristanne Miller, 239, Fascicle 23, Sheet 1, c. late 1862.

¹⁷ “The popular death-journey metaphor appears in Robert Browning’s “The Last Ride Together” (1835), which ED quoted in a letter (1885), and in an elegy commemorating the death of a family friend, Jacob Holt.” Miller, note to p. 239, *Emily Dickinson’s Poems*.

¹⁸ Robert Browning, “The Last Ride Together,” in *English Poetry III: From Tennyson to Whitman* (Harvard Classics, 1904-14), lines 19-21, <https://www.bartleby.com/42/665.html>. All subsequent references are to this edition and incorporated into the body of the essay.

¹⁰ Ibid., 352.

¹¹ Mary Loeffelholz, *The Value of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 85.

¹² Ibid., 105.

¹³ Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 99.

The anaphora of “We passed” brings a regularity and familiarity to the lines, which is expanded upon with the alliteration of “Recess. . . Ring,” “Gazing Grain,” and “Setting Sun”; further, the transition from the human world of “Children. . . At Recess” to the natural world of the “Setting Sun” suggests that the speaker’s death is a natural process, her life ending as the day does in the glow of a “Setting Sun.”

In the dash that ends the stanza and the empty space of the stanza break that follows, we hang in the beauty of the “Setting Sun –”. Unbeknownst to us, however, the speaker is reevaluating, as she abruptly reveals at the start of the next stanza: “Or rather – He passed Us –.” Here, Dickinson calls for a renegotiation of our understanding of the “Sun” in relation to the carriage’s movement, effectively uprooting our idyllic end scene. The finality bestowed upon us by the “Setting Sun” is thus proven to be a false one; so, too, Dickinson suggests, is the ease with which we assume the conclusiveness of death. Our attention is turned inward once more as the speaker asserts both her physicality and selfhood; “The Dews” bring her a “Chill,” which her clothing (“only Gossamer, my Gown”) is insufficient to withstand. This reminder of the speaker’s body functions as another rude awakening; she is not laid to rest, but is rather alert, still attuned to her surroundings and bodily sensations.

This false ending is the first of many throughout the poem, all of which guide us towards a vision of death not as a neat end to earthly troubles, but rather an uneasy “Eternity” stretching on without the resolution that nineteenth-century Americans were so eager to apply to it. The poem’s first stanza ends with a period, while all others end in inconclusive dashes; fittingly, the poem begins with a supposed finality—the speaker’s death—and then disproves it, situating her within an “Eternity” of waiting notably distinct from either Heaven or Hell. Likewise, the first stanza is the only one that follows the proper hymn rhyme of ABCB (“me” / “Immortality”), and thus the only stanza with a sense of sonic finality. Even the poem’s ending resists its own conclusion:

Since then – ’tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity –

By positioning the “Horses’ Heads” “toward Eternity,” Dickinson endows “Eternity” with spatiality, calling upon the Christian conception of the afterlife as a place one reaches after death. Such an afterlife proves unreachable, however; though the carriage seems aimed “toward” this place, the speaker passes “centuries” in the carriage, trapped in an unending journey akin to a species of purgatory. Dickinson’s use of the term “Eternity” further highlights the purgatorial qualities of the speaker’s environment; “eternity” is principally defined as “infinite time. . . which has neither beginning nor end,”¹⁹ opening the possibility of a carriage journey not toward a spatially-fixed Christian heaven, but rather one destined to continue ad infinitum—progressing “toward,” but no closer to, a distinct spatial environment with each additional “Century” that passes. This infinite carriage ride is a sinister echo of the poem’s first line, “I could not stop for Death –”; now it is the carriage that cannot stop, that appears to bring the speaker ever closer to her death even as it traps her in purgatory. The horror of this non-ending is made all the more salient in contrast to Browning’s speaker, who longs for such an infinity: “What if we still ride on, we two,” he muses, “The instant made eternity,— / And heaven just prove that I and she / Ride, ride together, for ever [sic] ride?” (105-10).

¹⁹ “eternity, n.2.,” Oxford English Dictionary Online, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://www-oed-com.proxyiub.uits.iu.edu/view/Entry/64704?redirectedFrom=eternity#eid>.

RUPTURES IN LOGIC AND MEANING

In confronting these contradictions inherent to any conception of death, Dickinson’s poems reach levels of tension that lead to the obliteration of logic, and indeed, what might be called the destruction of the poems themselves. The poems’ search for logic ends in nothingness; so too, Dickinson suggests, might life. With this shift in reasoning, Dickinson calls into question the Calvinist conception of life as the process of waiting for death; life is indeed a process of waiting, she argues, but waiting for “nothing” to happen. In a poem that begins with the line “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,”²⁰ Dickinson once again addresses our artificial tidying of death:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through –

The word “Sense,” described here as a physical entity capable of “breaking through,” opens up a realm of semantic possibilities, the most salient of which is “meaning, intelligibility, or coherence.”²¹ A funeral is, in effect, a way of making sense of death—of attempting to find coherence and intelligibility in the immense and sudden lack of a life. Dickinson portrays such an attempt as violent, even painful, to the speaker’s brain. “A Service, like a Drum –,” she insists, “Kept beating – beating – till I thought / My mind was going numb –.” This “treading,” crescendoing to a “breaking,” foreshadows the destructive effects of searching for a logical conception of such an ultimately unknowable, and logic-resistant, concept as death.

Dickinson amplifies the scope of this destruction in the image “Then Space – began to toll,” which recruits the vast cosmic “Space” to sound a funeral bell of its own.²² In the following stanza, cosmic forces intertwine with humanity in complex and shifting power dynamics:

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –

“Heaven” and “Space” are recruited to honor human suffering, to join in on the funeral by sounding a “Bell”; meanwhile, however, “Being”—the collective action of humanity—acts only as an “Ear” to these cosmic forces, relegating humanity to a decidedly inferior position. Next, however, arrives the speaker’s “I,” the individual; this arrival brings with it a “Silence,” which pushes against this cosmic scale of sounding and listening: in a Heaven full of sound, where can “Silence” exist? In a “Being” full of people, where can “I”? The poem’s ambiguity escalates to new heights: does “some strange Race” refer to the union of the “I” with “Silence,” the outliers in this heavenly sounding board? Is it a new addition to Dickinson’s ever-expanding list of actors, an alien “Race” found “wrecked” and “solitary” in empty space?

In this radical absence of intelligibility, we begin to wonder whether the funeral bell is tolling for the life of the poem itself. Indeed, destruction soon arrives in metrical form: the a-asonance in the phrase “strange Race” lends each word equal emphasis, creating a spondaic foot that disrupts the poem’s steady iambic meter. Further, in the enumeration “Wrecked, solitary, here,” the comma after “wrecked”

²⁰ Dickinson, *Emily Dickinson’s Poems*, 179, Fascicle 16, Sheet 2, c. summer 1862.

²¹ “sense, n.1,” Oxford English Dictionary Online, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://www-oed-com.proxyiub.uits.iu.edu/view/Entry/175954?rskey=BPnUCR&result=1#eid>.

²² The OED defines “toll” as (def. v2.1a) “To cause (a great bell) to sound by pulling a rope” (def. v2.2b) “on the occasion of a death or funeral.” “toll, v.2,” Oxford English Dictionary Online, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://www-oed-com.proxyiub.uits.iu.edu/view/Entry/203011?rskey=svxZPE&result=6>.

demands a pause before “solitary,” rendering “wrecked” an accented syllable; the resulting spondaic foot disrupts the poem’s meter yet further, effectively wrecking itself against the structure of the poem.

Dickinson builds upon this metrical wreck in the next stanza’s image:

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing – then –

The destruction begins with the rupturing of “Reason”—slight, but enough for the speaker to “drop down” and “hit” a number of “Worlds,” suggesting the existence of a variety of worlds (and thus worldly beliefs and rituals) beyond the one to which our own experience is limited. In *Poets Thinking*, Helen Vendler similarly reads “the speaker’s collapse” as a rebuttal to the comforts of death rituals: “although ritual and other such exhaustive chromatic orderings have in the past kept existence intelligible for her, this rupture, persistently reasserting itself by repetition of static moves, is stronger than reassuring ritual.”²³

It is the ambiguity of the last line, however, that truly spells the death of logic: does the phrase “Finished knowing” suggest that knowledge is of no use anymore—that the speaker is “finished” with the act of knowing—or has she somehow, via her mental fall through “Reason,” reached the end of knowledge, “Finished knowing” the mysteries of human life and death?²⁴

To “Finish knowing” is a kind of death of the mind, and the speaker’s mind is the sole location of the poem (as we are invited, from the start, into her “Brain”); this alone could certainly constitute the poem’s death. The real breaking point comes, however, when the poem confronts its own attempt to conceive of death: how can one truly “know” that which is inescapably physical through entirely mental reasoning (as we cannot, as it were, think our way out of death)? With its fundamental logic broken beyond repair, the poem cannot continue on; the speaker’s attempted segue into what happens next, “then –,” is the final word on the page, cut short and jagged with a dash. We, too, “Finish knowing”; death remains a mystery.

Martin Greenup notes a similar kind of destruction in Dickinson’s “Safe in their Alabaster chambers –”: he reads the poem’s first stanza as an allegory of immortality, and the second as representing the passage of time. The two are incompatible, he argues: “undeniably, the poem ends in oblivion. The movement of time does not sit well with the eternality/immortality of the first stanza.”²⁵ Such radical denials of conclusiveness, however, do not preclude Dickinson from exploring a range of possible descriptions of death; on the contrary, each of her death poems confronts a different philosophy of death, tracing through its possible implications as if enacting a lyric experiment. In a discussion of Dickinson’s revisions, Miller envisions the variant versions of Dickinson’s poems as “multiple performance options for a single production: variation is potentially unlimited, but when performing—in Dickinson’s case, reading a poem aloud or circulating a text to a friend—the artist chooses a single version.”²⁶ Each of Dickinson’s death poems, too, might be called a singular “performance” of death, crafted to illustrate, and then reveal the limitations of, a different perspective of death. Dickinson’s destruction of the Protestant teleology of living in constant anticipation of death thus opens up a realm of philosophical and spiritual possibilities, enabling her to manipulate different conceptions of death in a form

of creative play.

DEATH AS PLAY

And indeed, akin to a number of experimental monologues from different characters, Dickinson’s poems espouse a number of contrasting views on death and immortality. In “’Tis so appalling – it exhilarates –”²⁷ [sic], she urges the reader away from contemplation of death, claiming “Looking at Death, is Dying – / Just let go the Breath – / And not the pillow at your cheek”; “The Blunder is in estimate,” however, paints death as a constant and inescapable presence, one that the speaker does indeed “look” at: “No friend have I that so persists / As this Eternity.” “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –”²⁸ is an experiment, Michael Clune argues, in the complete erasure of selfhood as an analogue for death²⁹; in “I felt my life with both my hands,”³⁰ however, the speaker finds herself in “Heaven” and examines all aspects of herself: “I held my spirit to the Glass...I turned my Being round and round...I judged my features – jarred my hair –.” Each new contemplation of death yields a new conclusion, allows Dickinson to step into a new philosophy as if donning play-clothes. By readily encapsulating these contrasting depictions of death within her oeuvre, Dickinson effectively lowers the stakes of this death-reflection, and, indeed, converts death into a tool for her own—and perhaps, too, the reader’s—poetic play.

POETIC CONTEXTS: NEW ENGLAND PURITANISM & THE CIVIL WAR ERA

Dickinson’s near-performative modes of poetic engagement with death are rendered all the more striking when considered within the contexts in which she wrote—namely, the American Civil War and New England Puritanism. The poems’ destructions of certainty bring the tensions inherent to Puritanism to their logical conclusion, rupturing, as discussed above, the momentous picture of death perpetuated throughout the religion. Stannard, noting such tensions, asserts that:

By clinging to the rhetorical tone and style (the ritual) of a Christianity equipped with a variety of mechanisms whereby man might affect his fate and secure his own salvation, a Christianity that had little application to their own deterministic concept of reality, the Puritans trapped themselves between conflicting belief systems—more specifically, in this case, between conflicting schemes of ethos and world view.³¹

Dickinson’s death poems, then, may place pressure on the breaking points of Puritanism beliefs—the call, for example, for both “a serene deathbed acceptance” and a “concept of death and its attendant and deserved terrors”³²—and act as a demonstration of the incompatibility of these conflicting ideals. Through these poems’ logical breakdowns, Dickinson highlights the impossibility of living under such a contradictory ethos on death.

In the context of the Civil War, Dickinson’s poetic explorations of death offered a jarring rebuttal to the consolations of religion, calling attention to the injustices of massacre at a time when impossibly

²³ Helen Vendler and Helen Hennessy, *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004).

²⁴ In this interpretative scenario, the dashes before and after “then” read as rhythmic pauses rather than signifiers of interruption; “then” thus functions as a marker of time, suggesting that the reader “finished knowing [at that moment].”

²⁵ Greenup, “The Glimmering Frontier: Emily Dickinson and Publication,” 355.

²⁶ Miller, *Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them*, 6.

²⁷ Dickinson, *Emily Dickinson’s Poems*, 179, Fascicle 16, Sheet 3, c. summer 1862.

²⁸ Dickinson, *Emily Dickinson’s Poems*, 270, Fascicle 26, Sheet 1, c. summer 1863.

²⁹ Clune, “How Poems Know What It’s Like to Die,” 633–54.

³⁰ Dickinson, *Emily Dickinson’s Poems*, 189, Fascicle 17, Sheet 5, c. summer 1862.

³¹ Stannard, “Death and Dying in Puritan New England,” 1328.

³² Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 99; Stannard, “Death and Dying in Puritan New England,” 1329.

frequent and widespread deaths blunted onlookers' ability to conceive of the magnitude of each life lost. Dickinson's own vision of the role of poetry in the Civil War discourse reveals itself in her poem "My life had stood – a Loaded Gun –" (1863).³³ The politics of the Civil War are inextricable from the poem; the central conceit, a comparison of the speaker's life to a gun owned by a master, allows Dickinson to pull apart the act of killing from the perspective of a weapon, forcing the reader to confront the humanity present (and lost) in every death: "To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –" says the speaker-as-gun; "None stir the second time –."

Yet more explicit references to the Civil War are to be found in the "Sovereign Woods." The speaker and master "roam in"; one definition of "sovereign" in use in the nineteenth century was "A free citizen or voter of America."³⁴ Questions of who was a "free citizen" in America were central to the Civil War; by pairing "sovereign" with "woods," Dickinson calls into question the arbitrary human boundaries on both natural spaces and other humans: Who has the freedom to traverse "sovereign woods"? Where did this ownership come from?

However, the poem does not hold exclusively political resonances; Dickinson also opens up the interpretive possibility that the "gun" might be the poem itself. Within the original 1863 fascicle copy, Dickinson includes an alternative to the poem's penultimate line ("for I have but the power to kill"): "art" is written next to "power" as a potential substitute. Starting in 1861, Dickinson frequently included alternative words on her pages, "usually marking," as Cristanne Miller notes, "with a small plus sign the word or phrase potentially being replaced."³⁵ This alternative seems to encourage the reader to consider the "gun" not only as a conceit for the speaker's life, but also an allegory for writing. Another hint at this allegory takes places in the lines "every time I speak for Him / The Mountains straight reply –." A poem, too, might be said to "speak for" its owner, deepening its association with the gun. According to an allegorical reading of the poem, poetry might thus be said to "kill"; like the gun, however, it lacks "the power to die," as it will continue to exist long after its creator has passed—and, indeed, perhaps find new owners in future readers.

Dickinson's inclusions of alternative words, however, also suggests a desire to control—or perhaps thwart—the interpretive process. "That she retained the poem with this alternative (and others)," notes Miller, "suggests that she wanted to keep a range of possible interpretations open, at least at the time she copied the poem."³⁶ By keeping the end in a state of flux, Dickinson demands that the readers hold at least two distinct interpretive possibilities within their minds, resisting (perhaps, indeed, killing?) readers' search for a stable conclusion. Such a gesture might be said, at the same time, to keep both the poem and the poet herself "alive": while the poem refuses to exist in one finite, bounded state of being, the poet asserts her power over its future interpreters by demanding that they consider and re-consider the poem in all of its varied and indeterminate forms.

The political implications of this poetic "play" are immense, not least within the context of the Civil War. Wars are founded upon absolute conviction; one would not endanger their life and that of others unless they are certain that their perspective is morally right, and that it alone must prevail. At a time when Americans in both the North and South likely consumed media primed to confirm their pre-existing beliefs, Dickinson's refusal to draw conclusions about killing, death, and sovereignty places the reader in a wholly revolutionary state:

uncertainty. The role of the poet in political debate, Dickinson's poems suggest, is to act as a challenging space for self-critique, for the slow unraveling of one's own systems of beliefs and processes of conclusion.

CONCLUSION

All poems remain "alive" long after their creator dies through their distribution, publication, and readership. Just as a performance may be repeated, so too may Dickinson's poems act as repeated experiments on the threshold of life and death, carrying various conflicting beliefs through to their conclusions to test their viability. Though critics such as Greenup assert that "Dickinson's work does not seem to evolve" and find "no trajectory of progression over time from one position in her work to another,"³⁷ the poems present a wide range of dynamic "positions," entering into dialogue with each other and themselves in an ever-"evolving" negotiation of tensions. Such discussions of death—nuanced, admitting their own flaws and inconsistencies—offered, and continue to offer, a crucial rebuttal to nineteenth-century and Puritan discourses eager to bring false certainty to the unknowable. In destroying historical conceptions of death, Dickinson's poems instead give birth to a realm of new perspectives that continue to hold revolutionary power long after her own passing.

Dickinson's unique approach to the "revolutionary" may be, indeed, why her poems continue to hold such power over a century after their conception. Though Dickinson spent most of her life confined to her family's property, she would not have been a stranger to rebellious social action: The Evergreens, her brother Austin Dickinson's home and one of the two places Dickinson frequented, regularly hosted abolitionists and suffragists, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and abolitionist and suffragist Wendell Phillips.³⁸ What sets Dickinson's poems apart from other forms of revolutionary literature, however, is their refusal to embody a stable or measurable political, religious, or philosophical stance. Her poems demonstrate a remarkable malleability of content as and with form, even as they challenge religious and social tradition.

Perhaps this is why Dickinson's poems appear to transcend the boundaries of time and space: they rebel, but not along the traditional pathways or modes we have come to expect from modern political upheavals. Her poems are worlds unto themselves, reconciling apparently contradictory ideals and constraints in never-ending processes of performance, destruction, and mystery. When we encounter an artistic voice so radical, so deeply challenging, as Dickinson's, it is tempting to expect from it a species of lyric heroism: we want a rallying cry, a clear delineation of what is wrong with our way of life and how we might fix it. Dickinson offers no such heroics; indeed, her selfhood does not present itself through any stable lyric "I," but rather through the structure—and destruction—of her poems. What might it mean to re-approach the process of seeing, and knowing, through poetry? This reevaluation is one aspect, certainly, of what Dickinson's poems demand from us. In a Dickinson poem, we are asked to make our own way with her words, questioning them, but also ourselves, as we experience and experiment along with the poet herself. The only way to access a Dickinson poem is to be willing to change your perspective—to accept the unknowable, the ambiguous, the strange. So too, with these challenging death poems, might Dickinson be offering us a better way to access the world.

³⁷ Greenup, "The Glimmering Frontier: Emily Dickinson and Publication," 362.

³⁸ Martin, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, 28.

³³ Dickinson, *Emily Dickinson's Poems*, 354, Fascicle 34, Sheet 4, c. late 1863.

³⁴ "sovereign, n.1d.," Oxford English Dictionary Online, <https://www.oed.com.proxylib.uit.edu/view/Entry/185332?rskey=uWcnsV&result=1>.

³⁵ Miller, introduction to *Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved Them*, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

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