

*Concluding chapter (it is short) of my PhD Dissertation, Penn State University*

*Emily Dickinson's Wonderland: The Uses of Fantasy in Her Poetry*

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

Love to your World—or Worlds

ED, in a letter to  
Mrs. J. G. Holland,  
September 1877

It is hard, in just the telling, to adequately express Dickinson's extraordinary sense of the mysterious. The worlds out of sight—whether within the mind, within nature, or within the locked universe of the dead—are her primary poetic themes, even her obsessions. The four-line poem, “Lad of Athens, faithful be,” written at the end of her life, summarizes nothing less than her perspective on existence: denying life's wonders means committing an act of willful deception.

Lad of Athens, faithful be  
To Thyself,  
And Mystery—  
All the rest is Perjury—  
(1768. 111:1183)

Dickinson believed in mystery; it was within her, without her, behind her, beyond her. It lived in every created thing. Her lifelong habit of personifying flowers, for example, signifies more than just a desire to be “poetical.” It is the means by which she tries to express a belief about the strangeness of all flowers, their unknown qualities. “The career of flowers differs from ours only in inaudibleness,” she writes. “I feel more reverence as I grow for these mute creatures whose suspense or transport may surpass my own.”<sup>1</sup> Her thoughts about flowers were her thoughts about the world at large; beneath all surface appearances there is an “inaudible” life, one which can be apprehended through intuition, but which cannot be rationally understood or explained.

The Murmer of a Bee  
A Witchcraft—yieldeth me—  
If any ask me why—  
'Twere easier to die—  
Than tell—

The Red upon the Hill  
Taketh away my will—  
If anybody sneer—  
Take care—for God is here—  
That's all.

The Breaking of the Day  
Addeth to my Degree—  
If any ask me how—

Artist—who drew me so—  
Must tell!

(155. 1:111-12)

Yet Dickinson tried constantly to “tell,” to find the right words to fit her perceptions. The “noiseless noise” that she wanted to make audible to others tantalized and frustrated her. How can the ineffable and the unknown be transformed into tangible presences? Whether her subject was self or nature or death, the question was the same. “My Business is Circumference,” she wrote. The problem of measuring and defining “Circumference,” however, without reducing it to the limitations imposed by measurement and definition, was a complicated one.

The danger of definition, of course, is that it will drag the thing it defines down to a strictly human, earthbound perspective, thus making the infinite finite and destroying the very thing it seeks to explain. “With Holy Ghosts in Cages,” Dickinson writes, “The Universe would go!” (184. 1:134). To reason the universe tame is, for her, to deny its essential nature—that of unending complexity. As Dickinson puts it in another poem: “When ‘tis small enough / To Credit—’Tis’nt true!” (669. 11:516). This contrary philosophy (nevertheless well suited to the pursuit of a “noiseless noise”) forces the poet to seek another way into the mystery, to somehow define without the definition, or, to put it another way, to “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.” It was in search of this goal that Dickinson came to her sophisticated use of fantasy, which along with its close relation, metaphor, provide the “circuits” that jump the gap between the known and the unknown worlds. They make the inaudible audible, yet without reducing it to “noise.”

A long, early, complaining poem, “Bring me the sunset in a cup,” illustrates the failures of conventional measurements in trying to define the workings of the natural world. The abyss remains, with humans on one side and nature on the other.

Bring me the sunset in a cup,  
Reckon the morning’s flagon’s up  
And say how many Dew,  
Tell me how far the morning leaps—  
Tell me what time the weaver sleeps  
Who spun the breadths of blue!

Write me how many notes there be  
In the new Robin’s extasy  
Among astonished boughs—  
How many trips the Tortoise makes—  
How many cups the Bee partakes,  
The Debauchee of Dews!

Also, who laid the Rainbow’s piers,  
Also, who leads the docile spheres  
By withes of supple blue?  
Whose fingers string the stalactite—  
Who counts the wampum of the night  
To see that none is due?

Who built this little Alban House  
And shut the windows down so close  
My spirit cannot see?  
Who’ll get me out some gala day  
With implements to fly away,  
Passing Pomposity?

(128. 1:91)

The “gala day” is, apparently, the day of death; only God can open those shut windows. Life is unfathomable while alive, with understanding of any kind no more possible than capturing the sunset in a cup. “If any ask me how,” Dickinson writes, “Artist—who drew me so— / Must tell!” She did not, however, settle passively down to wait for the divine Word. The poet is an artist, too, in her own sphere as powerful as God, and she can, working through the word as God works through the Word, achieve a creator’s perspective on her world, thus coming closer to God’s own. Those shut windows can be opened through the subterfuge of the human imagination, within which nothing is impossible. The poem which describes the creation by “Fancy” of a climate “Of unsuspected Suns” (562. 11:430) demonstrates that power: it reveals itself throughout Dickinson’s work. As a modern-day fabulist, Robert Scholes, puts it: “. . . language is as swift as thought itself and can reach beyond what is, or seems, to what may or may not be, with the speed of a synapse.”<sup>2</sup> The power words afforded to the poet lets her go places closed off from both her reason and her empirical experience.

Where Dickinson perceived mystery in life, she was free to create it in art. The ghost lurking in a corridor within the brain, the gnomes returning to their houses, the maelstrom raging in the sky while the moon settles into the sea—all are attempts to relay “Reportless Subjects.” They wear the shape of fantasy when they are “translated” into concrete terms.

Reportless Subjects, to the Quick  
Continual addressed—

But foreign as the Dialect  
Of Danes, unto the rest.

Reportless Measures, to the Ear  
Susceptive—stimulus—  
But like an Oriental Tale  
To others, fabulous—

(1048. 11:740)

To one with a “Susceptive” ear the “Reportless Measures” make sense; their language is his own. To others, however, they are “like an Oriental Tale” and can only be understood as “foreign” and “fabulous.” Todorov writes that “language alone enables us to conceive what is always absent: the supernatural.”<sup>3</sup> So a poet can conceive the unknown world, crossing an abyss in imagination that cannot be crossed in life.

Yet what kind of bridge does fantasy make? It is a paradoxical mode—taking away as it gives—lying as it tells the truth—playing as it is serious. Its truth rests in its ability to capture mysteries, “Reportless Subjects,” without destroying their mysteriousness. Its lie is that it is a game, a construct of thought (at best, its “sense” is only symbolical). Through fantasy a poet can grasp the ungraspable while still admitting that it is ungraspable by anything save the imagination. For that reason, fantasy, like the “Circumference” it tries to capture, both screens and reveals.

Sunset that screens, reveals—  
Enhancing what we see  
By menaces of Amethyst  
And Moats of Mystery.

(1609. 111:1107)

In the end the mystery remained. For all its extravagances and its freedom from factual restraints, fantasy could only acknowledge and express the “noiseless noise”; it could not explain it. The “menaces” and “Moats” around the natural world (and around the self and the afterlife) were no less estranging for their being recreated figuratively in poetry. The bridge over the abyss is finally a conjuror’s trick—at most a hypothesis. Yet it is faithful to the “Mystery,” if only because it never tries to reduce it to rational terms. “Indirect vision,” Todorov writes, “is the only road to the marvelous.”<sup>4</sup> Fantasy’s indirection or “slant” provided for Dickinson one such road; if it never could finally define the supernatural aspects of existence,

neither did it deny them. And, in its own way, it was a peculiarly honest approach. Discussing a fantasy novel by Walter De la Mare, Katharine Briggs observes that “its very unreason brings it closer to reality.”<sup>5</sup> This is Dickinson’s case also; through the fantasy poems she tries to depict the radically unreasonable realities that she believed lay outside the provinces of the “Daily Mind.” In their allegiance to the “noiseless noise,” in all its manifestations, these poems deserve Dickinson’s own highest praise: they are true. Their paradoxical, mysterious, evanescent qualities represent a measurement of “Circumference” itself.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “To Louise and Frances Norcross,” April 1873, Letter 388, *Letters*, 11, 505.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future* (Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Todorov, p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> Todorov, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> K. M. Briggs, *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 107.