

## Disentangling Emily Dickinson's Riddles and Encoded Voices in "My Life Had Stood—a Loaded Gun" and "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed"

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Over the last few decades, Emily Dickinson's life and poetry have attracted a great deal of attention in the form of biographies and a myriad of literary criticism. Although I have gone through only a moderate amount of this immense academic corpus, it seems clear that a great number of scholars continue to read her poems as mainly autobiographical. In this essay, through an analysis of "My Life Had Stood—a Loaded Gun" and "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed" I attempt to demonstrate that Dickinson's poetry is not the product of a self-centered personality, but of contemplation, imagination, and careful artistry.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson; literary criticism; poetry analysis; multiple poetic personae; fictional speakers; contemplation and imagination

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### Emily Dickinson: enigmas y voces crípticas en "My Life Had Stood—a Loaded Gun" y "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed"

En las dos últimas décadas, la vida y la obra de Emily Dickinson han sido objeto de renovado interés en forma de biografías y miríadas de estudios críticos. Aunque no he podido ahondar más que en un moderado porcentaje de este ingente corpus, me resulta evidente que en el mundo académico continúa predominando la tendencia a interpretar la poesía de Dickinson en clave autobiográfica. En este ensayo, a través del análisis de "My Life Had Stood—a Loaded Gun" and "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed," intento demostrar que lejos de ser reflejo de una mente ensimismada, la poesía de Dickinson halla su camino a través de la contemplación, la imaginación y la preocupación por la forma.

Palabras clave: Emily Dickinson; crítica literaria; análisis del texto poético; sujeto poético; sujeto ficticio; contemplación e imaginación

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since Emily Dickinson's manuscripts were made available for open access via the internet, hundreds of new studies have been produced in the form of biographies and literary criticism, as well as psychiatry perspectives that attempt to explain her eccentric personality and idiosyncratic use of language.<sup>1</sup> And yet, Dickinson continues to be a mystery. Indeed, her writings (poetry and letters) are so enigmatic, compact, polysemous, metaphorical, and full of allusions and striking imagery that no one can claim to have really deciphered them fully.

What particularly motivated me to undertake a new analysis, and so to add myself to the myriad of authors who have, like me, struggled to put into words the ineffable mental and spiritual experience of delving into Dickinson's work, was the large number of critical readings that still base their analysis on the assumption that the speaker, the "I" of the poems, is Emily Dickinson herself expressing her inner and often tormented feelings. This inevitably leads to attempts to understand the poet through her poems rather than the poems themselves. These approaches do not normally take into account the games of imagination that Dickinson was so fond of:

Now, my dear friend, let me tell you that the last thoughts are fictions,—vain imaginations to lead astray foolish young women. They are flowers of speech, they both make, and tell deliberate falsehoods... (L 31, to Abiah Root, 29 January 1850),<sup>2</sup>

or her wicked sense of humour:

[my family is religious]—except me—and address and Eclipse, every morning—whom they call their 'Father' (L 261, to Thomas Higginson, 25 April 1862),

or the several voices she assumed:

When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person (L 268, to Thomas Higginson, July 1862).

Each reader has his/her own way of making meaning out of texts according to a complex mix of personal experience, training and sensibility, but I have found that the best way to appreciate and enjoy the richness of Dickinson's poems is to regard them as the fruit of contemplation, imagination and careful craft. Indeed, what transforms anything of the world into poetry is imagination, albeit an imagination that drives its way through careful observation and a conscientious choice of structure, words, sounds and silences.

<sup>1</sup> Illustrative of this last type of study is Steven Winhusen (2004).

<sup>2</sup> I have used the electronic edition of Emily Dickinson's correspondence (henceforth *EDC*) available at <http://archive.emilydickinson.org>. For brevity and convenience, references to this edition will include the number assigned to the letter by Thomas H. Johnson (1960) followed by the name of the addressee.

In the following pages, I analyze the poems “My Life Had Stood—a Loaded Gun” (1863, J754) and “I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed” (1861, J214),<sup>3</sup> paying attention to this process, from specific to general, closely examining images, metaphors, double meanings, polysemes, allusions, structures, subjects and, particularly, their speaking voice. Then, only at the end, will I offer a tentative transcendental interpretation.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF “MY LIFE HAD STOOD—A LOADED GUN”

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—  
 In Corners—till a Day  
 The Owner passed—identified—  
 And carried Me away—  
 And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—  
 And now We hunt the Doe—  
 And every time I speak for Him—  
 The Mountains straight reply—  
 And do I smile, such cordial light  
 Upon the Valley glow—  
 It is as a Vesuvian face  
 Had let its pleasure through—  
 And when at Night—Our good Day done—  
 I guard My Master's Head—  
 'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's  
 Deep Pillow—to have shared—  
 To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—  
 None stir the second time—  
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—  
 Or an emphatic Thumb—  
 Though I than He—may longer live  
 He longer must—than I—  
 For I have but the power to kill,  
 Without—the power to die— (1863, J754)

This poem has elicited a number of quite different interpretations, most of which, as far as I have read, assume that the speaker is Dickinson herself who is comparing her life to a loaded gun. The poem has been regarded as an expression of rage and love, of spiritual restlessness, and of frustration in female writers<sup>4</sup>. Others, like Palmerino

<sup>3</sup> J# corresponds to the Thomas H. Johnson edition of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1960) and the number assigned to the poem by him.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of these approaches and of the assumption that Dickinson (or a human “she”) is the speaker of this poem can be found at the website of *The Modern American Poetry Journal* online. It features fine critical

(“Emily Dickinson’s ‘My Life Had Stood—a Loaded Gun,’” see it “as a metaphor for the union and subsequent lifelong relationship between a man and a woman” (Palmerino 2011, 81). However, none of these interpretations explain the flow of images and concepts, the allusions, the shifts of tone, or the sharp, wicked sense of humor so characteristic of the author. Like most critics, I have tried hard to see the ‘loaded gun’ as an extended metaphor of how Dickinson felt about her existence, but despite these efforts I failed to find any evidence in the poem that sustains such a comparison, particularly in the last stanza. Some scholars solve the equation gun ~ Dickinson by attributing the problem to a flaw in the poet’s art: “The last stanza is difficult, tangled and perhaps indicates some confusion in Dickinson’s thinking” (Melani 2010). “The characters in the narrative become inconsistent, their roles founded on the sand of an overextended metaphor” (Bonheim 2008, 259).

On the other hand, the ‘Owner/Master’ has been interpreted metaphorically as, for instance, God, a devil, a lover or poetic inspiration, which are tenors that, in my view, seem to owe more to the reader’s imagination than to evidence from the text. Raymond Tripp, for example, uses a very intricate, metaphysical argument to explain the Master as God:

She speaks of her own death and resurrection as a human being who has died into the higher life but must continue to live this lower one. Therefore, her riddle. Though biologically “I” may live longer than “He,” as God “He” “longer must” [“live”] spiritually in spite of early crucifixion. This is so, because as a human being “I” have “but the power to kill” the desire for ordinary living, but do not possess “the power to die” and go directly to heaven. The “power to die” means power over death, that is, to die and live. This power God, of course, does have. He can “die.” (Tripp 1989, 293)

Indeed, this religious or metaphysical interpretation is so extended that it has become a kind of recipe for high school and undergraduate students, such as the following example taken from the Dickinson study guide of the popular educational website Sparknotes:

Dickinson portrays God as a murderous hunter of man in “My Life Had Stood—a Loaded Gun,” in which Death goes about gleefully executing people for his divine master. These poems are among the hundreds of verses in which Dickinson portrays God as aloof, cruel, invasive, insensitive, or vindictive (Sparknotes on *Dickinson’s Poetry*, 2002)

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excerpts by different authors, some quite well-known such as the poet Addrienne Rich ([http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/dickinson/754.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dickinson/754.htm)).

Yet, it seems to me, no single line of the poem, or its imagery, supports an interpretation of the Master as a supernatural being, whether a devil or a god. On the contrary, the Master is shown as a normal human being who needs rest at night (fourth stanza) and who will die someday (sixth stanza), much sooner than the gun.

If we free our reading of the anxiety arising from the need to identify transcendental meanings, and instead assume what is evident, namely that the speaker is none other than the gun and the work is not autobiographical, but just a game of the imagination, the poem becomes explainable from the first to the last line. It is only then that we can attempt the transcendental/metaphorical reading that I leave for the end of this analysis. I would first like to stress that Dickinson enjoyed using a variety of personae:

I'm so amused at my own ubiquity that I hardly know what to say. . . . First, I arrive from Amherst, then comes a ponderous tome from the learned Halls of Cambridge, and again by strange metamorphosis I'm just from Michigan, and am Mattie and Minnie and Lizzie in one wondering breath—Why, dear Susie, it must'nt scare you if I loom up from Hindoostan, or drop from an Appenine, or peer at you suddenly from the hollow of a tree, calling myself King Charles, Sancho Panza, or Herod, King of the Jews—I suppose it is all the same. (L107, to Susan Dickinson, 12 March 1853)

She also loved to anthropomorphize things and animals. Whether a gun, a butterfly, a serpent, or a hummingbird, everything she touched with her poetry—as a kind of King Midas—was converted into something extraordinary, and into something with a soul. Dickinson used the personal pronouns “she” and “he” to refer to all kinds of creature, from pets to worms, birds, serpents and insects. The following lines show how natural personification was for her: “You ask of my companions Hills—Sir—and the Sundown—and a dog—large as myself, that my father bought me—They are better than Beings—because they know—but do not tell” (L261, to Thomas Higginson, 25 April 1862). Meanwhile, these lines portray her wickedly funny defense of herself for rejecting social interaction: “Of ‘shunning Men and Women’—they talk of Hallowed things, aloud—and embarrass my Dog—He and I don't object to them, if they'll exist their side” (L274, to Thomas Higginson, 6 October 1862).

As far as I am aware, very few readings of “My Life had stood...” take into account Dickinson's warning, the playful and trenchant side of her personality, or the fact that poets, like any other writers, are able to not only talk about human emotions that are alien to them, or about the feelings of animals, but can also project feelings onto inanimate objects. The insistence on the autobiographical reading may confirm that “[one] of the most deep-rooted preconceptions about poetry in our culture [is] that it records profound personal emotions and experience” (Furniss 2007, 7).

The interpretation of the poem's first line has been the key to the transcendental reading. Anna Priddy, among many others, sees in it an implicit comparison: "The entire poem is based on the metaphor of the life being a 'Loaded Gun'" (Priddy 2008, 234). This is also the case for Allan Douglas Burns, who considers it to be a love poem in which "[t]he speaker describes herself in the first stanza as a Loaded Gun" (Burns 2002, 103). Both of these scholars see an adverb of comparison hidden, embarrassed behind the skinny dashes: "My Life had stood *as* a Loaded Gun." Yet, in my view, this line, taken in isolation, does not lead us anywhere. Indeed, it seems to me that no careful reading can sustain the tenor/vehicle of Dickinson as the gun. How could we possibly explain then that after working hard in the woods, she can stand by the bed of her master without sleeping, and that she cannot die? Moreover, based on a reading of her letters, it does not make sense to me that Dickinson could identify herself with such a sinister figure, with such an angel of death.

If we shift our thinking a little and respect both the obliged enjambment of the first line with the 'corners' in the second, and the grammatical function of the dashes, which introduce an explanatory (not a comparative) subordinate clause, a new meaning emerges. We can paraphrase these verses and the rest of the stanza as follows: "I, a loaded gun, had spent my life in corners, without a purpose, until a hunter found me and took me out with him." The word 'identified,' which is isolated by dashes, is polysemous. Indeed, it could have one or all of the following meanings: the owner identified the gun as his property; or, following the personification game, he identified himself to her;<sup>5</sup> or he identified with her, meaning that both of them wanted to kill. Who the enigmatic owner stands for is not relevant for my analysis at this point. From the text, we can only deduce that he is a human being (he needs rest) and that he has enemies, whom the gun kills while he is asleep. The language of hunting is shooting; the gun is its phonatory organ. All of the images of the following two stanzas derive from this association.

I imagine the speaker as one of those nineteenth-century shotguns which, when triggered, produces a bright flash (the 'yellow eye') accompanied by a loud roar ('every time I speak for Him—/The Mountains straight reply') and a lot of smoke. These associations, which I develop further below, rely on the metaphoric relation I find between the speaker's eye and voice, and the roaring burst of flame of a gunshot. The power of the images in the second and third stanzas lies partly in the rich symbolism and partly in the long-standing literary tradition of the doe, which may refer, at a first level of meaning, to the female deer or another mammal (rabbit, reindeer, goat, etc.) as the innocent victim of the nefarious sovereign of the wilderness, namely the hunter.<sup>6</sup> The doe is also a symbol of femininity and therefore

<sup>5</sup> Given the anthropomorphism of the gun and the quasi-erotic relationship it maintains with the hunter, from now on, I will refer to it mostly as "she."

<sup>6</sup> It is worth remembering that hunting with firearms began as the sport of noblemen.

of fertility and life itself. The act of killing is portrayed so hyperbolically that it becomes sacralized as the reversal of creation. It thus converts Nature into a prey.

The gun is pleased to hear the shot reverberate in the mountains, to see its flame glow in the valley and the smoke pouring out of its double barrel. The entire scene is amplified to almost Dantesque proportions in the condensing image that likens the act of shooting to the eruption of an anthropomorphized volcano: "It is as a Vesuvian face / Had let its pleasure through." The image of the 'Vesuvian face' does not connect with the sun, as Burns suggests: "The peculiar image of the sun as a 'Vesuvian face'" (Burns 2002, 103), but with shooting and smoking. The weapon's discharge is likened to an eruption of Vesuvius and, also, through puckish hyperbole, to the striking of a match and the act of smoking. Introduced to America in 1849, the *Vesuvian* was a slow-burning match with a bulb of sulfuric acid at the tip that was used to light cigars outdoors. It is quite possible that Dickinson had the matches in mind, because they were quite popular at the time. She may thus have associated, as I do now, the *jouissance* experienced by the smoker when sucking and expelling a mouthful of smoke with that of the gun when "puffing" the gunpowder and seeing the sudden flare and smoke; an understandable pleasure, if one can get in the shoes of a gun. The polysemy of the word *Vesuvian* does not end there. According to Dickinson's beloved 1844 Webster's dictionary, it also refers to "a mineral found in the vicinity of Vesuvius chiefly composed of silex, magnesium, iron, and aluminum" (Webster 1844, s.v. vesuvian). Dickinson may also have associated the 'Vesuvian face' with the flint-stone (composed mainly of silex) used in firearms to strike fire.

This delving into the meaning of words is not wanton; it is sustained in the passion for words that Dickinson felt. As Lilia Melani points out, "Dickinson was enamoured of language; she enjoyed words for their own sake, as words. One of her amusements was to read Webster's *Dictionary* (1844) and savour words and their definitions" (Melani 2010). Indeed, as Dickinson herself said in one of her poems: "This was a Poet—It is That / Distills amazing sense / From Ordinary Meanings" (1862?, J448). In a letter in which she refers to words, Dickinson said: "I don't know of anything so mighty. There are [those] to which I lift my hat when I see them sitting princelike among their peers on the page. Sometimes I write one, and look at his outlines till he glows as no sapphire" (L 7, to Joseph Lyman, late 1840s?). Following this line of thought, the adjective 'cordial' in the first line of the third stanza better fits the context if taken in its older sense, namely "tending to revive, cheer, or invigorate," rather than the meaning more common today "warmly and genially affable" (Webster 1844, s.v. cordial). Accordingly, the phrase 'cordial light' may be understood as *invigorating* 'light.'

In the fourth stanza, we return to a stillness like that in the first. The gun prefers to stand head up by her owner's bed rather than lie with him. It would be ludicrous for a slender, rigid creature to melt into an embracing, luring shape. The eroticism

of violence does not fit well with the eroticism of a soft bed. However, there is something mystical, quite subversive, in this image of the sinister gun guarding the hunter's sleep, as a guardian angel, ready to shoot whatever enemy appears:

None stir the second time—  
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—  
 Or an emphatic Thumb—

These lines evoke the uneasy stillness of the night, a stealthy looming bird of prey with yellow eyes and the irrevocability of death. The anthropomorphized gun, the emperor of death, lays her 'emphatic Thumb' on the marauding foe,<sup>7</sup> like one might crush an insect. In my view, to liken this ever-awake killer to Dickinson or to any other human speaker is to stretch the metaphor beyond its limits.

The incongruity of the psychoanalytical and metaphysical approaches unravels in the final stanza. As noted above, this stanza has been regarded as "some confusion in Dickinson's thinking" (Melani 2010) or, for those who take it as a love poem, "an unresolved paradox" that makes it "difficult to map these metaphors back onto an actual relationship between male and female lovers, both of whom are mortal" (Burns 2002, 104). In the interpretation by Anna Priddy (2008, 230), who reads the poem as "a declaration of poetic intent and a paean to poetic power," the explanation of this stanza seems to me to be perhaps even more unlikely:

If one accepts the premise that poetry is her master, a fitting paraphrase would be, I may outlive my poetic gift, but I pray it is not so; I have the power now to arrest the world with my speech (that is, to kill), but I have not the power to die. And to live without the gift, as most poets would agree, is not to live at all. It is the poem that does not have "the power to die," a testament to Dickinson's belief in the immortality of the word. But the poetic gun does have "the power to kill" others. (Priddy 2008, 204)

I endeavored unsuccessfully to find any supporting evidence for the assumption that this poem is about the power of poetry in any of Dickinson's statements about this craft. Why would we suppose that she considered poetry to be a sinister weapon that kills innocents (the doe) during the day and enemies at night?

Once we accept that the speaker is the gun, and nothing but the gun, the paradox of the final stanza vanishes into an interplay of allusions and parodies. The gun can outlive the Master—even for centuries—but without his breath of life, she (the gun) is condemned to sink into stillness and silence, to the neglectful corners of the beginning of the poem. The paradoxical style of this stanza brings echoes of the

<sup>7</sup> The 'emphatic Thumb' may also refer to the Roman Emperors' upturned thumb, as a signal of death, in gladiatorial combat.



metaphysical poets John Donne (1572-1631) and George Herbert (1593-1633), but particularly of Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582):

Vivo sin vivir en mí,  
y tan alta vida espero  
que muero porque no muero.<sup>8</sup> (Manero 1992, 425)

Dickinson's profane and violent poem very cleverly subverts the deep spirituality of the mystic. Without the owner, the hunting gun will suffer spiritual death; she will enter a permanent state of no-self and metaphysical anguish, deprived of her vital function: to kill. To identify Dickinson with the gun would be to ascribe to her the soul of a serial killer who rejoices in killing, first the innocent Doe and then any enemy not of her own, but of her Master. I have also not found any hint in Dickinson's biography that sustains the association of Dickinson with a metaphorical subordinate who happily kills for others. This is instead the task of the soldier. This poem's subtext or controlling metaphor, if any, could only be the American Civil War, which was at its height when Dickinson wrote it. Men all over the country, inflamed with patriotism, went to fight for business or ideals. Hundreds of thousands died, but the firearms remained. The convulsive, violent spirit of the times was really a loaded gun. The poem was thus a sustained irony from the first line to the last.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF "I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED"

I taste a liquor never brewed—  
From Tankards scooped in Pearl—  
Not all the Vats upon the Rhine  
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air—am I—  
And Debauchee of Dew—  
Reeling—thro' endless summer days—  
From inns of Molten Blue—

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee  
Out of the Foxglove's door—  
When Butterflies—renounce their "drams"—  
I shall but drink the more!

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<sup>8</sup> I live without living in myself, / and in such a way do I hope, / that I die because I do not die (Bilinkoff 1992, 100).

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats—  
 And Saints—to windows run—  
 To see the little Tippler  
 Leaning against the—Sun! (1861, J214)

“I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed” has also quite frequently been read as autobiographical. Most critical analyses assume that the speaker is the author (or at least a human “she”) talking about the ecstasy that the contemplation of nature produces in her. Raymond G. Malbone, for instance, thinks the speaker “is a person intoxicated with the liquors of nature, rain (from the cumulous clouds), air and dew” (1967, 26), and Deborah Cadman sees the poem as autobiographical, suggesting that the speaker is a daisy, a flower with which Dickinson liked to identify herself: “If the poet identification of herself with the daisy extends to this work, then the subject becomes the natural relation between the daisy and sun throughout the seasons of New England” (1989, 31). Only a few readers, such as Cecil D. Eby and Christopher Benfey disagree with this view and argue that the speaker is a hummingbird, bee, or similar creature (Eby 1965, 517; Benfey 2008, 54). I align myself with the latter position, since a hypothetical human speaker, particularly if that speaker is considered to be a woman, can only account for the meaning of a very few lines of the poem.

Emily Dickinson loved riddles. They were the essence of her poetry: “Tell all the truth, but tell it slant—/ Success in Circuit lies”—(1868, J1129). Some are quite easy to acknowledge as such. For instance:

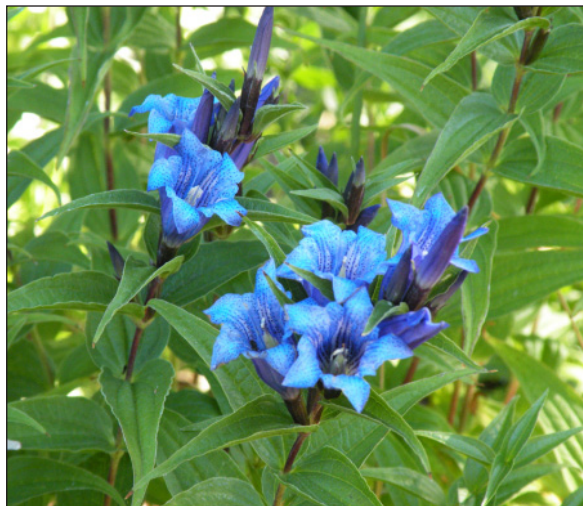
His bill an auger is,  
 His head, a cap and frill.  
 He laboreth at every tree,—  
 A worm his utmost goal. (1865, J1034)

Others are not so straightforward, as is the case with “I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed.” Though apparently a simple poem about nature, a careful reading soon unveils its complexity, in which fact and imagination are as inseparable as the two sides of a coin. Yet it is far from my intention to explain all the metaphors, images, allusions and yokes that give shape and significance to this poem, because, as Christopher Benfey points out, “Dickinson’s imagination moves on several tracks” (Benfey 2008, 119), and attempting to track them all would be as futile a task as dissecting a brain to discover Thought.

Let us start then by trying to identify who the speaker is. The poem’s first two stanzas are unspecific about this identity, so we can tentatively assume that it is a human being, perhaps a male, since the word ‘debauchee’ in the second stanza hints at this. Debauchee means “[a] man given to intemperance, or bacchanalian excesses. . . . [A] man habitually lewd” (Webster 1828, s.v. debauchee). Yet this hypothesis is dismantled in the third stanza, where the world of the poem is clearly dimensioned. The drinking buddies (or

competitors) of the speaker are bees and butterflies, and the taverns are foxgloves and blue flowers, a key symbol in Dickinson's poetry. The 'inns of Molten Blue' have often been seen by critics as a metaphor for the sky,<sup>9</sup> but I think that any tubular blue brilliant flower, such as the lily, gentian (shown in Figure 1) or campanula, are more suitable tenors. These flowers' elongated petals form a cavity where the nectar lies concealed, so insects are obliged to go deep inside to take their 'drams.'

Figure 1. "Gentian." © Linda Steider, 2012. [Available online].



The likening of "flower" to 'inn' sheds light on the imagery of the first stanza, making clear that the 'liquor never brewed' cannot be anything other than nectar, which is the beverage *sold* in these peculiar establishments. The speaker, who feeds on it, therefore cannot be a human being, although we are not yet certain about its identity. Why can it continue drinking long after bees and butterflies and why are those two kicked out of the foxglove? The reason may lie in two facts that were surely well known to Dickinson, a careful observer of nature: (1) many flowers close before dusk to protect their pollen, thereby denying insects access to the nectar; (2) long tubular flowers such as the foxglove and the gentian hide their nectar deep within, where it is accessible only to animals with the appropriate morphological *tools*, such as the long narrow beaks of hummingbirds. These insatiable little birds do not have to worry about closing time at the inn.<sup>10</sup> Their beaks, up to 10 cm (4 inches) long, give them immunity against the law.

<sup>9</sup> This line of interpretation is followed, among many others, by Malbone (1967, 2), Leiter (2007, 121), Schaap (2012, 9), Melani (2010, 1) and Priddy (2008, 73).

<sup>10</sup> They consume more than their own weight in nectar each day; to do so, they must visit hundreds of flowers.

Figure 2. “Inns of Molten Blue.” © Gary Ashley, 2007. [Available online].



Once the speaker is identified as a hummingbird, we can try to explain the poem through his eyes. He starts by telling us that the natural liquor (‘never brewed’) he usually drinks (the frequency is dictated by the present tense of the verb ‘taste’) is far better than those from the Rhine region, which were wines considered in Dickinson’s times to be the greatest in the world. The phrase ‘Tankards scooped in pearl’ alludes to both the precious quality of the beverage and the scale of the world he is presenting to us (see Figure 2). The exhilarating effect of alcohol works as a controlling metaphor for the images and concepts developed in the poem.

In the first place, it evokes the frenzied flapping of wings as the hummingbirds hover in the air and reel from flower to flower (see Figure 3). The image ‘Debauchee of Dew’ condenses a lot of information. Structurally, it places us at the onset of the day; semantically, it introduces a sexual dimension, establishing a comparison between a libertine and the hummingbird. The libertine goes from woman to woman; the bird from flower to flower. The dew may represent droplets of water produced by plant transpiration, vaporously suggesting sexual receptiveness. In other poems, Dickinson worked with similar sexual imagery even more explicitly:

I tend my flowers for thee—  
 Bright absentee!  
 My Fuchsia’s Coral Seams  
 Rip—while the Sower—dreams—. (1861, J339)

The mocking orgy among flowers, bees, butterflies and hummingbirds goes on throughout the day until the plants (the 'Landlords') close the inns. Only the hummingbird—he 'shall but drink the more!'—continues to be active, reeling from flower to flower until dawn, when, exhausted, he 'leans against the sun.'

Figure 3. "Hummingbird in flight." © Linda Steider, 2012. [Available online].



As I noted formerly, Dickinson was a poet of contemplation and imagination. She interlaced facts and experience with atemporal associations. In "I Taste a Liquor" we can see this process at work, and no doubt its images of drunkenness are rooted in careful observations of nature. Indeed, in her own garden, she may have seen bees and hummingbirds behaving oddly: staggering, bumping clumsily or lacking vitality. On morning walks in the mountains, I myself have seen sparrows get drunk on overripe arbutus berries. They stumble and stagger comically; if you get too close, they try to take flight but soon crash to the ground. Certainly, nowadays, it is well documented that some insects and birds become intoxicated by fermented nectar from flowers and other natural chemicals in the environment.

The poem's final stanza ends with the sun low on the horizon and a winding down of all activity. In the plane of reality, the frenzied speaker from the start of the poem enters into torpor, "a state of lowered body temperature and metabolic activity" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2015, s.v. torpor) assumed by hummingbirds on cool nights (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. “Hummingbird in torpor.” © Terry Sohl, 2006. [Available online].



In the plane of imagination, he is presented as a “tippler leaning against the sun,” as if against a lamppost (Gibert Maceda 2007, 388). The seraphs and saints introduce a twist that gives new meaning to the innocent scene we have just contemplated. Apparently, they come into the picture just to bless and say goodnight to the little scoundrel, as loving parents do with their naughty children at bedtime. This would round the poem structurally in its temporal and natural sequence, but would leave unfinished the complex atemporal associations and sensory impressions formerly developed. As Maria Teresa Gibert points out: “what is unique here is the subversive aspect that is revealed when the last stanza is compared with the lines that inspired it” (Gibert 2007, 387). Gibert is referring here to the lines of the poem “The Day of Doom” (1662) by Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705), in which sinners contemplate with horror the second coming of Christ:

Sinners awake, their hearts do ake,  
trembling their loynes surprizeth;  
Amaz'd with fear, by what they hear,  
each one of them ariseth.

They rush from Beds with giddy heads,  
and to their windows run,  
Viewing this light, which shines more bright  
then doth the Noon-day Sun.

Straightway appears (they see't with tears)  
 the Son of God most dread;  
 Who with his Train comes on amain  
 to Judge both Quick and Dead... (Wigglesworth [1662] 1867, 5)

In Dickinson's poem, those who run to the windows are not sinners, but saints; nor is it a blinding light and an angry Jesus that they see, but the little tippler in a torpid state—or sleeping it off—under the peaceful and beautiful light of dusk. This irreverent parody of “The Day of Doom” is paramount, but there is another twist introduced by the word ‘saints.’ Puritans often referred to themselves as saints, so it is quite probable that Dickinson was equating saints with puritans and therefore with sinners. The seraphs complete this *tableau* of Adoration,<sup>11</sup> waving their hats as in applause and veneration for the little rascal whose frantic diurnal activity still reverberates in our ears. The hummingbird, then, becomes a god; a god born from the pantheistic mind of a poet who used to mock Christian beliefs—

If God could make a visit—  
 Or ever took a Nap—  
 So not to see us—but they say  
 Himself—a Telescope ... (1862, J413)

—and saw the Supernatural only as “the Natural, disclosed” (L 280, to Thomas Higginson 25 February 1863).

#### 4. FINAL REMARKS

The two poems studied here follow a circular pattern, from a restful state to motion and back again to the restful state. The first movement (first stanza) acts as a prologue to the events that are about to unfold. The second movement captures the action through dislocations of language and disconcerting images. The third movement introduces a shift in tone, a glide towards reflection that endows the scene just seen with a dense array of meaning. The poet is not in the picture, but hidden still aside it (as are we when a bird of rare beauty lands on our windowsill), as if afraid to drive away with her presence the ethereal vision that has sprung out from contemplation and imagination.

This circularity connects with one of Dickinson's more puzzling statements: “My business is circumference” (L 268, to Thomas Higginson July 1868). In the sense that I understand it, the circumference is an abstract concept that served her as a tool to organize the products of the mind, the emotional life and the sensory experience. It seems to me that Dickinson's art stems from epiphanies—images, movements,

<sup>11</sup> Seraphim stand above God's throne singing praises: “Holy, holy, holy, *is* the LORD of hosts: the whole earth *is* full of his glory” (Isa., 6: 3, *King James Bible* 1611).

words or any other elements that precede conscious and articulated thought—that she struggled laboriously to shape into verse: “While my thought is undressed, I can make the distinction; but when I put them in the gown, they look alike and numb” (L 261, to Thomas Higginson 25 April 1862). The ‘gown’ she mostly used was the riddle, which, according to Northrop Frye, is “a fusion of sensation and reflection, the use of an object of sense experience to stimulate a mental activity in connection with it . . . The idea of the riddle is descriptive containment; the subject is not described but circumscribed, a circle of words drawn from it” (Frye 1957, 280).

When one tries to unveil the mysteriousness in Dickinson’s writing, her devilishly clever use of the riddle makes one feel a paralyzing sense of helplessness. However, although I have polemicized in this essay with a number of Dickinson’s scholars, I am indebted to their labors, because they all stimulated, inspired and enriched my perception of the poems here analyzed and, therefore, alleviated my feeling of powerlessness. We humans are all so unique, so different. Yet, at the same time, we are oddly similar. Those of us who love Dickinson’s art, no matter how much our interpretations of it may differ, recognize in her fractured writing and eerie imagery something of the sublime as defined by Longinus (the alleged author of *On the Sublime*, written around the second century AD) as that “thought [that], if happily timed, illumines an entire subject with the vividness of a lightning-flash . . . It is natural to us to feel our souls lifted up by the true Sublime, and conceiving a sort of generous exultation to be filled with joy and pride, as though we had ourselves originated the ideas which we read” (Longinus? [213?] 1890, 12). The nature of experience produced in me by her texts cannot be expressed better.

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Received 4 November 2014

Revised version accepted 7 April 2015

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