

Lauren Baird

Professor Elizabeth Mills

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“Oh Battle picturesque!”: Identity and Intertext in “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun”

I want this poem to be a weapon
I give it authority
To kill

—Olga Broumas

The master said *You must write what you see.*

But what I see does not move me.

The master answered *Change what you see.*

—Louise Glück, *Vita Nova*

The “Sovreign Woods” of poem 754 enclose an elliptical terrain of timber, shade, and ambiguity. Its undergrowth of intricacy belies simple investigation, and illumination falters in a verdant density of metaphor and trees. A landscape of poetic structures both sustains its irregular environment and invites diverse trajectories of exploration and explication. As a discrete poetic event, the poem’s sounds, form, and content delimit the parameters of a mysterious expanse. As a vaster intertext of fascicle, biography, and theme, the poem reveals the domain of a “Battle picturesque” (P 118)—a conflict that engages consciousness and conscripts a rhetoric of rage and terror. With the energetic discharge of a “Loaded Gun,” Emily Dickinson enacts a symbolic and psychological campaign for independence. The detonation reverberates throughout the poem’s critical history, its autobiographical impetus, and the “Sovreign” territory of the poet’s imagery.

Ultimately, the pioneering impulse of the poem's frontier aesthetic traverses the wilderness its various entanglements convey.

“gun: *l. b. Guns are fired in honour of persons and events, at festivities, and as signals*” (OED)

“In advance, I thank you for your patience in what you are going to endure” (Derrida ix).

The insuperable paradox of *aporia* describes a deconstructive text, the discussion of which Derrida prefaces with the caveat above. At this point of impasse, a self-subverting poem dissolves into its myriad incompatible significations, a disseminated state that “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” readily effects. Both the poet and her audience “endure” the linguistic and symbolic pilgrimage the poem presents, and the monologue amasses power as its *aporia* accrues. The epigraph of *Aporia* bears a cryptic definition: “DYING—awaiting (one another at) the “limits of truth[.]” The central trope of poem 754 engages death in a similar gloss, an encounter at the cusp of anticipation (interaction) and the “limits of truth.”

The poem commences with a resounding metaphor and possessive intonation:

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun – 1

In Corners – till a Day

The Owner passed – identified –

And carried Me away –

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods – 5

And now We hunt the Doe –

And every time I speak for Him –

The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light
 Opon the Valley glow – 10
 It is as a Vesuvian face
 Had let it's pleasure through –

And when at Night – Our good Day done –
 I guard my Master's Head –
 'Tis better than the Eider Duck's 15
 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 – 20

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 – ¹[.]

5 in] the 16 Deep] low
 18 stir] harm 23 power] art

In this drama of a central consciousness, “My Life” serves as the subject of the first stanza’s laconic stage directions. The phrase promptly creates and occupies a periphery: as a metonym or a dispatch of equivocation, “My Life” suggests detachment from both the unmediated “I” and the

¹ Poems and numbers reflect the Johnson edition. See appendix for manuscript and its typographical representation.

poem's immediate activity. The retrospective tonal quality of the past-perfect tense in the first line introduces additional obliquity to the narrative. This rhetorical maneuver renders the poetic moment an episode of stasis and the poetic task a deed of recollection. The alacrity and attention implied by "stood" suggest an extensive history of waiting, and the act of memory initiated by the poem serves to redeem (and indict) that antecedent epoch of inactivity. "Loaded" connects alliteratively to "Life" and secures the affinity of that description. Its denotations of potential energy reflect the gun's stationary posture as well as its placement at the beginning of the poem—before the narrative's kinetic explosion. However, "Loaded" also conjures the burden of overwhelming abundance (*OED*), a linguistic encumbrance that belies a state of blithe predisposition. The freighted vocabulary of "Loaded Gun" initiates the questions of intentionality and subjectivity that plague many of the poem's emblems. The "Loaded" condition is either a result of an external operation (an interjection of otherness) or an invitation to action (an extension of its autonomy). Both interpretations indicate an interdependency of the central metaphor's participants. The gun's latent danger and power represent an intermediate step of violent preparation: "In Corners[,] it is temporarily safe.

The plural qualification of "Corners" intimates other episodes of dormancy and stolid standing, a subtle maneuver that underscores the line's frustration. Not only does her life dwell in "Corners," but it is "cornered," as well. In its nonspecificity, "Corners" suggests a universal impasse. This method of entrapment extends the shaded perimeters of poem 754 to other neglected angles throughout Dickinson's canon and her contemporary milieu. However, this aperture does not exist in entirely negative space. As an essential interstice and convergence, the hidden alcove claims the creative promise of a charged weapon or a nascent poem. The abrupt and colloquial elision of "'till" signals the increasing energy and excitement of the stanza's expression. It also discloses a lapse of syntactical vigilance, a tacit censure of the Owner's

apparent negligence. “The Owner – passed – identified” on “*a* Day [emphasis mine]”: the indefinite article admits an entire narrative history of inattention and uncertainty. In this chronology related from the peripheral stance of recollection, the catalyzing effort of identification has a notably inexact trajectory.

In a context of a possessive registry (“My Life,” “Me”), “[t]he Owner” is conspicuously remote. The detachment of the definite article undermines the insurance of ownership, an early altercation in the poem’s nexus of power and control. The syntactical ambiguity of “identified” confirms this double agency. Ostensibly, the “Owner... identify[s]” the gun; however, “identified” may also act in apposition to qualify (or even enable) the Owner in this procedure. Lines three and four transpire in an intermediate domain of tense. By connecting the past-perfect periphery of the introduction to the subsequent five stanzas, these past-tense moments posit essential action in the present and relegate identification to a rapidly-recounted history.

“And” begins six of the first sixteen lines. Lines 6 and 7 employ the rhetorical trope of anaphora with their “asymmetric” conjunctions, and the immediacy of this successive recital contrasts with (and emancipates the speaker from) the calmly iterated stasis of the first four lines (Miller 35). The paratactic tension of the passage suggests an ordered sequence of the verbs: “We roam,” “We hunt,” “I speak,” “I smile,” “I guard.” In this thematic series, the collective pronoun “We”—a reflection of the union that ensues in the space between the stanzas—quickly disseminates into “I” and “Him” as narrative momentum increases. The progression of restrictive clauses (And now... every time I speak... do I smile... when I guard) asserts additional control (Miller 36) and presents the temporal agenda of the Speaker/Gun—a cooperative metaphoric entity. The pinnacle of this arrangement is her most autonomous act—“I guard”—and represents the only feat in the succession that excludes the Master’s influence or cooperation.

The aimlessness of “roam” connotes both freedom and futility, a dubious culmination of this long-awaited journey. The broad figurative expanse of “Sovereign Woods” creates a similar dichotomy. Sovereignty’s authority and supremacy do *not* qualify the master, as a conventional appropriation of the word suggests (*OED*). Rather, her functional domain (the “Woods”) is rendered paramount and powerful. A nineteenth-century undertone of “wood” further intensifies the ambiguity of this imperial realm: “out of one’s mind, insane, lunatic; violently angry or irritated” (*OED*). The irregular orthography of “Sovereign”—either an intentional or mistaken elision of the middle syllable—lends the line to regular scansion and underscores again the polysemous word. Dense and lugubrious *o*-sounds also bewilder the line’s apparent energy.

The poem pursues activity in line 7, a succinctly-discharged clause that contains one of the poem’s most prominent emblems: “And now We hunt the Doe.” The eager, hostile search entailed by “hunt” (as well as the lingering resonance of “Sovereign[’s]” force) juxtaposes violently with the “Doe[’s]” female vulnerability, and this persecution directly opposes and seeks to destroy the animal’s nurturing abilities. Syntactically, “hunt” parallels “roam” and “speak,” an alarming system of affinities. “[T]he Doe” bears the conviction of its definite article and includes the entire category of female deer, intimating a conscious slaughter that “*a Doe*” would not necessarily include. Despite the ostensible independence of “speak,” obligation still mitigates privilege. The lineation in the manuscript (appendix I) emphasizes this relation by isolating “for him,”—the obligation—from “to speak,” placed auspiciously at the end of the line. “[S]peak” also evokes a rhetorical function. As an utterance or articulation, her words experience the gun’s incendiary power. With sonar specificity, “The Mountains straight reply[,]” and this simple and immediate response aurally enacts the soundless structure of the stanza. Like the instant echoes of “And now” and the syncopation of alliterative sounds, Nature replies directly to the Speaker/Gun’s movement and the motion of the poem. Her conversation

engages Nature in a reciprocal discourse, a mutuality of exchange that her association with the Owner conspicuously lacks. If the Owner does invite or entertain a discourse, it is implicitly *not* “straight,” a negative condition of delay and dishonesty that the first stanza intimates.

In the tacit interlude between stanzas two and three, the “Mountain[’s] straight reply” silently resounds; the Speaker/Gun responds with a “smile.” The subjunctive modality of the stanza recapitulates the uncertainty of the introduction, and the phrases “glow” in the grammar of uninflected verbs, consonance (*v* and *s*), and incandescence of “cordial light.” Restoration of the singular pronoun “I” accompanies the restorative warmth of “cordial,” an emanation from the heart (*OED*). This affable and curative “light” contrasts the antecedent reverberations of the gun, and the image of a smiling firearm begins to disable the metaphor and suggest an alternative gloss for “I.” With “Vesuvian” boldness, her visage interrupts the radiant complacency of the “Valley[’s] glow.” However, the scene belies the sudden and eruptive denotations of volcanic vocabulary. The past-perfect tableau (used to qualify the present-tense designs of the previous two lines) establishes a temporal juncture that casts an eccentric glow on the poet’s perception. The claim that “a Vesuvian face/ Had *let* its pleasure through [emphasis mine]” seems unlikely in the context of volcanic outburst. Suspicious presentation of this episode confirms the actual transgressive nature of “Vesuvian . . . pleasure” and insinuates a similar subterfuge in “smile.”

The final anaphoric “And” heralds an interval of “Night.” Its advent effaces both the “cordial light” and the complacent “glow” of daylight hours and offers a reversal of “Day” (line 2) in which the Speaker/Gun asserts the primary agency. “Our good Day done” verifies this transformation by avowing the end of “good” *and* “Day” and invoking a clerical rhetoric that ironically limns hunting and killing “the Doe” in positive remuneration. The consonance and alliteration of *d* throughout the stanza has a heavy and soporific effect, an appropriate acoustical ambience for nighttime’s deliberate activities. In the capacity of watchful sentinel, the

Speaker/Gun “guard[s] My Master’s Head,” protecting and defending him from danger. This duty also involves a sense of control: “to prevent from exceeding bounds, to keep in check” (*OED*), as well as an impression of being “on guard.” As the symbol of the mind, intellect, and imagination and an essential element of life, “Head” both alludes to the sexual power of the “Vesuvian face” and contrasts with the “cordial” action of the heart. “Master” suggests hegemony (and enslavement) that extends the authority and intimacy of “Owner,” and “My” recalls the first stanza’s possessive intonations. However, by inscribing his title in the terms of her possession, the Speaker/Gun commandeers an allotment of the Master’s supremacy.

The image of the Eider duck (*Somateria mollissima*) conjures Arctic scenes and fluff. Eiderdown consists of the bird’s small breast feathers (*OED*) and compels allegorical consideration. The female Eider duck lines her children’s nest with feathers from her breast, a sacrifice of warmth and protection that the Speaker/Gun consciously rejects in this nightly event. “’Tis better,” she asserts, contemplating and condoning her choice not to succumb to sleep’s “Deep Pillow” and the Master’s bed. The endless and drowning danger of “Deep” reflects the ominous rest that his “Pillow” provides, a nuance of submissive peril also supplied by the variant, “low.” The perfective moment at the end of the stanza (“have shared”) limns the present-tense action again in retrospective view, a fitting meditation amidst the night’s insomnia. In this dark landscape, her wary distance from the pillow and its disembodied “Head” permits the emerging soliloquy. Without the “cordial” illumination of day and the Master’s daytime agency, the poem cannot distinguish the features of its active narrative and lingers instead in the Speaker/Gun’s quiet self-sufficiency.

The penultimate stanza commences with a reciprocal engagement and a violent guarantee: “To foe of his – I’m deadly foe/ None stir⁺ the second time[.]” Repetition

⁺ harm

underscores her virulent intensity, but by identifying both the Master's enemies and the Speaker/Gun as "foe," the poet curiously allies them with each other and apart from him. The specific and anticipated instant of "*the* second time [emphasis mine]" certifies the Speaker/Gun's intentionality and reveals a narrative impulse towards conclusion. Neither the Gun nor the poet can be sure that its subject is subdued—and therefore incapable of inciting "stir" or inflicting "harm"—until both have applied the means of their prowess: "a Yellow eye/ or an emphatic Thumb." The sounds and syntax of the threat are strange and dissonant: a stark aural conflation of the night's peculiar imagery. Enmity lurks among the lines as the central metaphor of the gun collides with the speaker's life in the narrow sights of its loaded barrel. The "Yellow Eye," a piercing shaft and nighttime beacon, reaches with a sensory impulse towards a relation with its target. The tactile involvement of the "emphatic Thumb" makes a similarly desperate motion in an overture of physical empathy applied with a defensive force. These attributes do not convey the dull, metallic features of a firearm, but the presence of an interactive hunter with an embodied strength and motivation—a sentient and utterly responsive "foe." In the shadow of the silent mountain range (now acoustically obscure), the Master is a victim of the Speaker/Gun's "Yellow" and "emphatic" guard; she wields her "Eye" and "Thumb" over his vulnerable form, effectively surmounting the Day's violent interdiction against autonomy. The poet repudiates a scenery of hunting spoils, rejecting the Eider-duck's soft, deceptive coat as she tacitly avoids "the Doe."

The rhymed and rhythmic cadences of the final stanza recall the poetic structure of the first four lines, framing the intervening verses with an ordered space. The "Mountain[']s straight reply" resounds again in the concluding lines: "Though I than He – may longer live" reverberates directly with, "He longer must than I[.]" Punctuated emphasis and repetition of the pronouns trenchantly dissimulate the collective "We" and construct the two as "foes" around a conflict of

longevity. “[M]ay” pivots on an intimation of permission and projection which challenges the meaning of “must” in the ensuing line. The Speaker/Gun’s life is not bounded by imperative or invocation, but her existence finds its span in uncertainty. In this chronology, longevity *may* claim an alternative method of empowerment, but a lifetime *must* define itself in relation to another. The deletions in line 22 are entirely recoverable (Miller). However, the disjunctive apertures at every dash admit enough ambiguity—of hesitant indecision or fraught deliberation—to render the account a testament to skepticism.

The comma at the end of line 23 represents a rare maneuver in the Dickinson grammar, and the isolation of “to kill” in the manuscript’s lineation emphasizes the act and aphorism of these lines. The variants “art” and “power” generate a network of linguistic timbre that summons the poem’s extant themes of authority, consent, and talent. Independently, the words assert different thematic expectations. One option equates the “power to kill” directly with the “power to die,” a strategy wherein the latter function assumes the violent and antagonistic nuances of the former. In this association, the act of dying participates in Day and life’s hostility. The substitution of “art” for “power” suggests an aesthetic and inventive alternative to murder and enlarges the gun’s “Yellow” view to encompass a larger metaphoric vista. In a simultaneous nexus of meaning, both words affirm an existential interest that exists beyond the periphery of “Sovreign Woods” and the practicalities of the “hunt.” Dickinson qualifies “the power to kill” with “but,” a limitation that diminishes the activity of the earlier lines. The power she ostensibly exalts is “but” a force: *mere* and *only*.

Privation impels “Without.” Despite the poem’s accumulated intensity and the exploits of its metaphor, the drama fails to complete its lyric act: the Speaker, Gun, and Poet linger evasively in the text—“without the power to die.” Whether “[w]ithout” refers to absence or an external space beyond the Speaker/Gun’s gaze, a means of death—and hence of legislating

life—eludes conscription in the forest and the poem. In this enigma, the emblem of the “Gun” recedes into its “Corner”: the metaphor effectively collapses—or detonates. There is no conclusion to the poem or to the life it encapsulates except in an eruption of gesture and soliloquy. “And when at Night” she meditates, the poem evokes the dead (‘tis better than the violent Gun in daytime to have shared). In the first stanza, “[t]he Owner passed – identified –” and animates the scene. “He longer must” live in order to identify, the activating instant that enables her to kill but (in its claim of recognition) withholds her right to perish. If the “Deep Pillow” ensconces death for a speaker powerless to die, the choice to shun the Master’s bed is compelled, not chosen. A weapon is an incompatible and dangerous attendant in the dark; if “Life had stood – a Loaded Gun,” safety literally constrains the separation. The Speaker/Gun has been casually “carried . . . away” once in her recollected past, and in the premeditated sequence of the poem, “[n]one stir a second time.” Intimidation protects her reticence, and inconclusion at the stanza’s edge astutely forfeits “the second time.” Language is the only unmitigated power⁺ the Poet/Speaker/Gun employs, her only “Sovreign” ploy. Dickinson enforces monologue within the Master’s silence: she installs him in slumber and buries him deep within eiderdown, woods, and stanzas. The cooperative female “We” of the vital trope—Poet, Speaker, Gun—proclaims to “speak for Him” and “smiles,” coveting her rhetorical challenge in conceit and trepidation.

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 –

Who am I?

⁺ art

“*At last, to be identified!*” (P 174)

Then the terrible Sword to its sheath return'd,
 While the Needle sped on in peace,
 But the Pen traced out from a Book sublime
 The promise and pledge of that better time
 When the warfare of the earth shall cease.

“The Needle, Pen, and Sword” (1849), Lydia Howard Huntley Sigourney

In the late months of 1863, Dickinson collected her “Needle, Pen, and Sword” and fashioned a poem “at the limits of truth”—an act amidst “the warfare of the earth” and a “terrible” history of affliction. Experience inflects a sage and reminiscent tonal quality: as in “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun,” her attitude is retrospective. “Life is death we’re lengthy at, death the hinge to life.” This fragment of prose, an excerpt from a letter to Louise and Frances Norcross (281), is the poem’s contemporaneous companion, and both “hinge” on a biographical context of life and guns. The tangential action of the Civil War infiltrates the central focus of Dickinson’s poetic contemplation, and the “fact of war . . . becomes an instance—and at times a model—for Dickinson’s confrontation with evil and suffering” (Wolosky 95). In this analysis, pervasiveness of death obliges the justification—and exoneration—of anguish.

The radical ubiquity of loss in a milieu of war challenges previous experiences of grief. Drastic movement away from the strictures of a martial theodicy (Wolosky 94), the kind of furtive progress Dickinson undertakes, can only ensue from a desolate awareness. In its grim advance, this awareness translates *loss* as *gain*, or at least restores an equilibrium between them (For I have *but* the power to kill – / *Without* – the power to die –). For Dickinson in 1863, the

heuristic function of loss involves more than a mere national incidence of mourning. The period of despondency that quietly inaugurates the decade and the therapeutic and prolific outbreak of poetry in the preceding year both considerably abate by 1863. The structure she erects of poetry, correspondence, and remembrance includes the essential “hinge of life” on which her new circumference revolves. Criticism qualifies her point of view: the connection with Higginson has been forged energetically, and she has seen a poem (“Safe in their Alabaster Chambers”) in publication. In 1862 she writes to Higginson: “I *had* a terror – since September – I could tell no one – and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground – because I am afraid – [emphasis mine]” (261). Her voice anticipates the tenor of “My Life *had* stood – a Loaded Gun” but declares a deliberate removal from unenumerated horror. The confidence Dickinson evinces in the activism of her art⁺ allays the “terror” of terrain, and the “Burying Ground,” like the poem, acquires an acoustic power⁺.

The Master correspondence represents a similar interface of loss and gain. Enacted (or imagined) from the spring of 1858 to the summer of 1861², the letters outline a narrative of terror and loss. In the moment of “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun,” this vulnerable chronology lies unedited in boxes and under two years of personal and poetic accumulations, a substantial detritus of both anger and empathy that offers her stability. She enjoys a paradoxical stasis in creative motion, a balance achieved by the inactivity of dire fear and dramatic change. The national vernacular of civil war invokes a lexicon of loss and grief and glory that correlates her own context of skirmish. Establishing a rhetoric enables distance, a removal³ of subjectivity

⁺ power

⁺ art

² Letter numbers 187 (“I am ill”), 233 (“If you saw a bullet”), and 248 (Oh – did I offend it”) in Johnson’s 1858 edition of *Letters*. In *The Master Letters*, Franklin reorders them 1 (“I am ill”), 2 (Oh – did I offend it”), and 3 (“If you saw a bullet”) and locates them in spring 1858, early 1861, and summer 1861, respectively (7).

³ “**The Second Remove** But now, the next morning, I must turn my back upon the Town, and travel with them into the vast and desolate Wilderness, I knew not whither . . . My own wound also growing so stiff that I could scarce sit

from subject that requires a perfective stance and reveals the passion of (finally) disembodied pain. The intervening years construe the many “warfare[s] of the earth” as gain, a “Sovreign” souvenir of painful experience and a “promise and pledge” to validate the “Pen.”

“*that Campaign inscrutable/ of the Interior*” (P 1188)

Emily Dickinson asserts an intertextual commentary, reporting on the rhetoric she finds within her intellect and imagery. From *within*, we read the solemn cartography of her “Sovreign Woods” and register the “noiseless noise” (L 271) of every “Night” and “Gun.”

*So hopeless is the world without,
The world within I doubly prize;
Thy world where guile and hate and doubt
And cold suspicion never rise;
Where thou and I and Liberty
Have undisputed sovereignty.*⁴

In the environment of Fascicle 34 and in other works that provoke ownership, identity, and violence, Dickinson establishes a linguistic system that exerts a narrative influence. The “odd backwoodsman” of the Master letters evolves into the Vesuvian entity of the “Loaded Gun” script: a world *within* “identified – .”

The masculine agency of poem 754 “passe[s]” through many other lyric scenes. In Poem 174, the speaker acclaims the act of recognition: “At last, to be identified!/ At last, the lamps upon thy side/ The rest of Life to *see!*” In a distinction that recalls 754’s nighttime occupation, the poet muses, “Ah! What leagues there *were!* Between our feet, and Day!” A

down or rise up; yet so it must be, that I must sit all this cold winter night upon the cold snowy ground” (*A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, 345-46). The “remove” is one of twenty.

⁴ Emily Brontë, quoted in Howe (59).

more sinister conscription of the motif emerges in poem 410, where “sing!” proclaims the same freedom as “see!”:

The first Day’s Night had come –
 And grateful that a thing
 So terrible – had been endured –
 I told my Soul to sing –
 . . .
 And then – a Day as huge
 As Yesterdays in pairs,
 Unrolled its horror in my face –
 Until it blocked my eyes – [.]⁵

The attendant and abundant horror of “Day” underscores the dark allure of “Night” and “Corners,” and this poem intimates that light (“cordial” and “Vesuvian”) may stymie sight. As an instrument of the Master, she is also assembled by his instructions, an imposed hierarchy of parts and operations that disallows autonomy:

He found my Being – set it up –
 Adjusted it to place –
 Then carved his name – upon it –
 And bade it to the East

 Be faithful – in his absence –
 And he would come again –

⁵ And Something’s odd – *within* –
 That person that I was –
 And this One – do not feel the same –

With Equipage of Amber –

That time – to take it Home – (P 603).

And he would come again. The line resonates with subjunctive ambiguity that defines the proof-text's final stanza. In both the poems, “[a]djusted” and “identified” involve the force of external artistry, conveyed in dubious laconic and mechanical terms. When she writes in 1865, “’Twas my one Glory – / Let it be / Remembered/ I was owned of Thee – [,]” the extant throng of poems belies a single “Glory” and suggests an alternative⁺ proprietor of “Thee.” As the poet owns the poem and the poem possesses its themes, the “Loaded Gun” may purchase the means of its eruption.

“[P]erhaps her odd – Backwoodsman ways teased his finer sense[,]” laments the poet in her second epistle to the Master. In her abstract “Daisy” voice, she wonders, “Wont he come to her – or will he let her seek him, never minding so wandering, if to him at last – [.]” In “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun,” “wandering” transforms to “roaming” and is iambically announced (and achieved). Self-consciousness of “odd ... ways” appears again as surreptitious pleasure: the Speaker/Gun performs “at Night” when sleep subverts the Master’s “finer sense.” The most disruptive alteration occurs in the “Daisy[’s]” immense transition. She emerges from her stance of conquered petiole to the transgressive height of “Loaded Gun,” a feat of power⁺ that violently reinscribes her apparent vulnerability.

And do I smile, such cordial light/ Upon the Valley glow – / It is as a Vesuvian face/ Had let its pleasure through.

Could it be Madness – this? [emphasis mine] (final stanza, poem 410)

⁺ ulterior

⁺ art

cordial: the possibility – to pass/ Without a Moment’s Bell – / Into Conjecture’s presence; a Face of Steel / ... With a metallic grin; the Cordiality of Death – / Who drills his Welcome in (P 286⁶); “of the heart as the seat of feeling; *internal*” (*OED*).

Vesuvian: a still – Volcano – Life – / That flickered in the night; the Solemn – Torrid –Symbol – / The lips that never lie (P 601⁷); Vesuvias don’t talk – Etna – don’t – one of them – said a syllable – a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever – She could’nt look the world in the *face*, afterward – [emphasis mine] (3, *Master Letters*).

The lexicon that lingers in the text of “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” extends its “limits of truth” in the poem to the restive border of a progressively empowered vocabulary. Within the parameters of Dickinson’s established artistry, the “Loaded Gun” is “frugal of its Ball” because its template is an internal impulse, the “Ordinance of Vitality” (P 1188). These poems explain the speaker’s reticence to render the gun’s explosion explicitly in poetry. Hence, the “Mountains straight reply” in stanzas to circumvent an accidental articulation of the fleeting blast. In the network of meaning that resounds throughout her canon, Dickinson’s Speaker/Gun realizes that to “speak for Him” assumes a “We” that necessarily excludes her own initiative. Like loss and gain, death and silence inhabit a precarious equilibrium. This balance revokes the glow of day—

[I] could play in the woods – till	And now We roam in Sovereign Woods ...
Dark – till you take me	And when at Night – Our good Day done –
Where sundown cannot find	I guard My Master’s Head –
us ⁸	‘Tis better [.]

“My Life⁹ had stood – a Loaded Gun” relies on intertextual experience to move beyond the

⁶ c. 1861.

⁷ c. 1862.

Master and dwell in irate⁺ equipoise: “When the Ball enters, enters Silence – / Dying – annuls the power to kill” (P 358).

Fascicle 34 contains 18 poems; “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” occupies the series’ center, its veritable “hinge to life” and a thematic crux. The first poem considers souls: “In dying – ‘tis as if Our souls/ Absconded – suddenly” (P 645). The rapid action of death resounds again in the second poem (P 646). “No start in Apprehension’s Ear” provides an early warning against detonation, and the poem offers advice for invention, an aphorism to contemplate throughout the fascicle: “That I esteem the fiction – real – / The Real – fictitious seems – [.]” Poems four (P 649) and six (P 651) in the sequence directly evoke the action of the central poem. The fourth poem depicts the frame of mind that might proceed the phrase, “– and carried me away.” In this narrative, “Her Sweet turn to leave the Homestead/ Came the Darker Way – [.]” and the speaker narrates the expedition with candid declarations. “’Twas more pitiful Endeavor/ Than did the *Loaded* Sea/ O’er the Curls attempt to caper [emphasis mine].” This journey, a moment also enacted “at Night,” scripts the Master’s identification in poem 754 as a kind of test. In the latter text, he blithely “passed – identified/ And carried.” However, poem 649 imposes an obstacle and impossible stipulation:

He – must pass the Crystal Angle

That obscures Her face –

⁸ Master Letter 3.

⁹ One other Dickinson poem (of an unknown date) begins with the invocation, “My Life”:

My life closed twice before its close –
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me

So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell.
Parting is all we know of heaven,
And all we need of hell.

If indeed “[n]one stir the second time,” the “third event” of poem 1732 may descry the enigma of 754’s final stanza.

⁺ sympathetic

He – must¹⁰ have achieved in person

Equal Paradise – [.]

Read in this context, the Owner/Master seems not to merit his adventure with the gun, and in its loaded sights, vision—or clairvoyance—acquires the saliency of a “Crystal Angle.”⁺ Poem 651 inspects another of the “Loaded Gun[’s]” sensory allusions. Its syntax is difficult to disentangle but clearly investigates the “smile”:

So much Summer

Me for showing

Illegitimate –

Would a Smile’s minute bestowing

Too exorbitant+[.] *And do I smile, such cordial light/ Upon the Valley glow.*

The intensity of a “minute” signal in the sixth poem erupts into a “Vesuvian” gesture by mid-sequence. The fascicle entails collaboration throughout its anecdotes. “Crystal Angle” and “Smile” involve both an agent of art⁺ and someone who perceives it, creating an interdependent nexus of conduct and reaction that requires participation—a referent network of “We.”

Death permeates many of the series’ themes and stanzas, and the process of dying commands detailed contemplations. In poem 648 (number 7), the poet extols the “Bliss of Death” and cherishes her macabre watch:

Mine – to guard Your Narrow Precinct –

To seduce the Sun

Longest on Your South, to linger,

Largest Dews of Morn[.]

¹⁰ “Though I than He – may longer live/ He longer *must* – than I[.]”

⁺ “Corner”

⁺ extravagant – · importunate –

This nighttime reverie speaks directly to the dark sentry of “My Life had stood –a Loaded Gun” and infuses the latter scene with an element of jealousy. With the intonation of “My Life” and “Me,” the speaker in 648 claims the watch as “Mine.” The ostensibly benevolent guard is less protective than preventive: she accedes to his “low⁺ favor” in order that the grass not “fonder cluster/ Round some other face[.]” The fascicle evinces both a reluctance to identify with the Other and a clandestine pleasure in his company. “[F]ellowship – at night” (P 690) and “Eyes” recur, as well, and sustain 754’s ironic inclination for sight and shadows. The Speaker/Gun’s vision roves throughout the progression. “On whom I lay a Yellow Eye . . .

Enabled of the Eye – (P 647)

Mine – to Belt your Eye – (P 648)

Your low Eyes – demand – (P 648)

One blessing had I than the rest/ So larger to my Eyes (P 756)

These – saw Visions – (P 758)

The Absence of an Eye – (P 993)

their superior Eyes/ Include Us – as they go (P 993)

. . . Or an Emphatic Thumb[.]”

The sixteenth poem in the fascicle details the challenge of an excursion in “Desert or the Wilderness” (P 711). Like the “Loaded Gun,” an “Hermetic Mind” provides a compact receptacle for incendiary cargo. It also offers an incentive against discharge, as encapsulated thoughts are both protected and free from the limits of trajectory—“[h]ow powerful the stimulus.” The centripetal forces of contextual commentary in Fascicle 34 converge (“at Night”) on the “Loaded Gun” of poem 754. In a larger script of scenes and linguistic systems, the poem emerges from isolated “Corners” of meaning and engages the language of custody, sight, and

⁺ power

interior provisions. After its emotional removal¹¹ from the Master Letters and the succession of night and day, the fascicle admits ambivalence and change. Ultimately, uncertainty comprises the poet's strident sovereignty, and her "Woods" encompass variant topography.

"a notoriously vexing poem"

Adrienne Rich describes "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun" as "the central poem in understanding Emily Dickinson, and ourselves, and the condition of the woman artist, particularly in the nineteenth-century" (113). It is the Dickinson work "which has caused commentators the most consternation over the years" (Gelpi 122) and has elicited various description as "a metaphysical ballad" (Mossberg 19) and a "notoriously vexing poem" (Porter 209). John Cody labels it "a most perfect poem" (415), but Judith Farr asserts, "It's not the best, not even the most characteristic, poem in the Dickinson canon" (241). An eminent biographer terms this "brilliant and enigmatic" poem (Bennet 5) a "failure" (Wolff 445). Louise Bogan ethereally states, "[the poem] defies analysis" (101).

Critical conversations inevitably converge on the "famous literary 'cruxes'" (Gilbert 168) of "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun"—the emblems and ambiguities that its "gnarled, resistant, enticing verses" (Dobson 123) confine. Analyses often intersect in *aporia* as interpretation seeks to decode the poet's script of loss and gain⁺. Here, the critics' "consternation" exists in the "Loaded Gun['s]" subjective space. In considering what relationship(s) can be defined by the violence of the focal trope, the reader must define and circumscribe its "Life."

⁺ Deep] low (P 754).

¹¹ "The Thirteenth Remove But when I was without, and saw nothing but Wilderness, and Woods, and a company of barbarous heathens, my mind quickly returned to me . . . I had time and liberty again to look into my Bible: Which was my Guid by day, and my Pillow by night [sic]" (353-355).

⁺ life and death

life: 2. fig. Used to designate a condition of power, activity, of happiness, in contrast to a condition conceived hyperbolically or metaphorically as ‘death’.

Chiefly in biblical and religious use: The condition of those who are raised from the ‘death of sin’ and are ‘alive in righteousness’ (*OED*).

“My Life” reads as a low⁺ and earthly stasis to endure. “Sovreign” classifies the Deity’s relation to his created realm, and the psalmic reverberations (Wolosky 93) in the “Mountains” and the “Valley” corroborate divine authority. With doubt and wary anger, the speaker struggles to comprehend murder committed in God’s name. She seriously deliberates the eschatology of “the second time,” one of the poet’s paramount theological concerns, and erects a riddle within which God’s presence clearly “stir[s].⁺” This riddle recalls the enigmatic qualities of Biblical paradox, the domain from which it finally extracts its clues. Referentiality of “He” and “I” comprises the central interpretive dilemma. “To an Amherst audience, even as late as Emily Dickinson’s day, the answers would have probably been patent: death and Christ. Death “may” live longer than Christ, for Christ died on the cross; yet Christ “must” live longer than death, for the righteous cannot be raised from the graves until Christ first vanquishes death” (Wolff 443). The embodied and malevolent image of mortality “roams” in poem with violent steps, endorsing threats—the kind Dickinson hears recurrently in her Puritan milieu—to ensure the devastating “glow” of “cordial light.” Wolff claims the poem “strains too violently against the Christian myth: rather than walking the razor’s edge, it drops into obscurity” (446). But if the poem moves brutally, it merely reproduces the activity of its aggressive subject. The “Loaded Gun” of Christian subjectivity fails to discharge because it must wait for “Christ [to] vanquish death.” The poem’s subversion detonates its context—“a failure.”

⁺ Deep
⁺ harm[s]

life: 5.b. My life, my beloved, my dearest. Not now in familiar use (*OED*)¹².

“Not now in *familiar* use” suitably describes the matrix of wife and daughter that Dickinson engaged. These female designations depend on a male figure who assumes patriarchal sovereignty, particularly in a nineteenth-century network of responsibility. William Shurr illuminates individual Dickinson poems in their fascicle contexts and discovers a narrative of marriage. In the “Sovreign Woods” of the marriage bed, she exits the “Corners” of inhibition to experience a sexual awakening—the “pleasure” and “straight reply” of which the second and third stanzas exuberantly illustrate. The absence of sexual intimacy in stanza four belies the proud fidelity of the ensuing lines, but the final stanza situates the marital impulse in a desperate relationship. “This final stanza begins with a plea that lover and beloved not be separated by the death of one of them” (Shurr 111), a development that refigures the import of the “Loaded Gun”:

The imagery of the gun, centered in the myth of the frontiersman, serves to focus much in Dickinson’s mind regarding her marriage and its aftermath: the loneliness and yet the danger and adventurousness of her enterprise; the violence of her passions matched by the fierce loyalty to the beloved; the fidelity of the wife to her husband, without the license to share his bed (Shurr 111).

Essentially, the accomplishment of death is an authentic union, a potential realization death itself threatens to annihilate if the “Loaded Gun⁺” cannot pursue its Master in decease.

As a daughter, Dickinson undergoes a similar “trauma of articulation” (Mossberg 18). Her merit and identity are “functions of her serviceability as a weapon” (Mossberg 20), a value she exploits by emerging from the “Corners” of traditional female expression and gentility. She affects a posture inimical to comfort but indicative of duty—a naïve demonstration of power⁺

¹² 1847 Tennyson *Princess* vii. 339 My Bride, My wife, my life (*OED*).

⁺ “My Life”

⁺ art

above the “Master’s Head”—but continues to attend Him with female placability. As the “Gun,” Dickinson attempts to remove¹³ herself from the culpability and legal responsibility of murder. However, she continues to affect a “criminal identity” that clings to instruments of male autonomy as a means to disavow the feminine identity her mother so submissively embodied (Mossberg 66-67).

life: 1. a. Primarily, the condition, quality or fact of being alive; animate existence. Opposed to death; an assertion of continuing competence, strength, etc., notwithstanding evidence to the contrary (*OED*).

“My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” in its most literal sense, can be read as her psyche’s response to her own boldness” (Howe 79). The “psyche’s response” to life in poetry speaks an unconcealed overture of “competence” and “strength” in poem 754, “notwithstanding [psychoanalytical] evidence to the contrary.” The poem describes divergent aspects of a single personality—“the directing, executive, volitional function (the ‘Owner’) and the aggressive, destructive, and erotic impulse (the ‘Gun’)” (Cody 332). Dickinson’s inability⁺ to uphold a “single-faced sexual identity” (Cody 397) involves dramatic fluctuations of her speaker’s gendered inflection. The elusive integration of sexuality and destructiveness represents a psychic fissure, a rift the poet quickly bridges with “extreme defense mechanisms” (Cody 404). In the poem’s suspicious chronicle, “[d]ay soon turns to night, conversion to cunning, union to sexual aggression” (Howe 85): as Cody suggests, the “new sectors of the poet’s personality are masculinized” (406)¹⁴. The excited delivery of the lines entailing “roaming” and “hunting” extol the privileges of a formerly eschewed domain. Yet, the emergent “personality sectors” (Cody

¹³ **The Nineteenth Remove** [I]f there should come an hundred without Guns, they would do them no hurt. So unstable and like men they were . . . For there was little more trust to them then to the master they served (357).

⁺ disinclination

¹⁴ Susan Howe would undoubtedly abhor this association, (even at its syntactical level). She berates Cody’s “reprehensible biographical psychoanalysis” and labels *After Great Pain* “the rape of a great poet” (24).

414) of the poem describe a complicated (and psychologically ambivalent) sense of sexuality. With patently “Vesuvian” potential, the female genital hovers destructively over the maternal topography of “Mountains” and the feminine space of “Valley” (Cody 410). The Speaker’s Gun’s “sadistic fantasy” (414) attempts to discharge masculinity. However, “as a homosexual woman with a ‘Vesuvian face’” (413), she reveals the intuitive authenticity of a female psychic quality. Concern for sexual periphery launches the entire poem towards divisive boundaries. Hence, “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” traverses the “ambiguous terrain of dream, *between* power and execution, sensuality and sadism [emphasis mine]” (Howe 92)—notwithstanding evidence to the contrary.

life: 8.a. The animate existence of an individual viewed with regard to its duration; the period from birth to death. Also adverbially, all my (his, etc.) life (*OED*).

Sandra Gilbert calls poem 754 “a ritual of initiation”: it becomes “*that which has to be translated*, an opaque and enigmatic text which empowers itself” (175). For all of “My Life,” the “animate existence of an individual”—her poetic animus—struggles towards fulfillment in the text. Killing comprises a rite of initiation; the poem is the subsequent ceremony. Death (a masculine demonstration) brutally unsettles the (female) speaker’s inertia: “Emily Dickinson accedes to the ‘rape,’ because she longs for the inversion of the sexual roles which, from the male point of view, allows a hunter or soldier to call his phallic weapon by a girl’s name and speak of it, even to it, as a woman” (Gelpi 126). However, as Gilbert intimates, this action—or accession—involves translation, a conversion of life into image and being into emblem. In this methodology, “the fixity of ‘life’ in art and the fluidity of ‘life’ in nature are incompatible” (Gelpi 129). As animus obliterates the feminine into a semiotic male, the poet “kills experience into art” (129). Life’s “duration” depends on the annihilation of the poet’s “I” into the speaker’s

“We” life so that mere existence “may longer live” in poetry.

life: 4.a. Energy in action, thought, or expression; liveliness in feeling, manner, or aspect; animation, vivacity, spirit (*OED*)¹⁵.

The “area of reference” in the poem lies largely beyond its boundaries (the “Sovreign Woods” and “good Day done”), and its metaphor commands “without the provision of markers” (Dobson 124). An ultimate motif—exceeding even its loaded trope—resides in the estrangement of text and meaning from each other and from the “Life” they convey. “The gun in this poem, as the second stanza makes plain, is the instrument of language” (Porter 209). If the “Loaded Gun” of communication requires the “Owner[’s]” interaction to activate, it pursues autonomy as the poem unfolds. Disjunctive syntax and absent antecedence in a poem about a poet’s grammar exert a highly dislodging force. Textual variants and thematic variance additionally subvert the narrative, offering a kind of anti-anecdote for life that empowers language by sundering its referentiality. This defiant chronicle refuses to cohere in a manner. Rather than a poem of experience, the lines comprise a “poem about utterance,” endowing tone with the power⁺ customarily reserved for denotation. The last stanza, “whatever it *means*, communicates to us more through tone—through the sense of irresolvable and disorienting contradictions—than through statement or even through analogy” (Dobson 126).

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 –

“Intelligibility suffers” (Porter 216), but language survives every nexus of death. “Without”

¹⁵ 1858 Hawthorne Fr. & Jrnl. II 59 The most picturesque aspect of the scene was the life given to it by the many faces (*OED*).

⁺ art

transmits the largesse of a linguistic life—not dearth. For “My Life” in language, “the power to die” does not transmute to immortality. But, “to kill” perpetuates the idiom of the logocentric “deadly foe” with “Yellow Eye[s]” of adjectives and the “Emphatic Thumb” an an inflected dash.

life: 5.a. The cause or source of living; the vivifying or animating principle; he who or that which makes or keeps a thing alive (in various senses); ‘soul’; ‘essence’. Also in collocation life and soul (*OED*)¹⁶.

“My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” immediately resists “the phallogocentric naming of the other” (Holland 138), and by the end of the compact narrative, “she achieves the maximum illusion of personal autonomy” (Pollack 153). Adrienne Rich addresses a precarious desolation in the poem; for her, female power only faintly inheres—“If there is a female consciousness in this poem it is buried deeper⁺ than the images: it exists in the ambivalence toward power, which is extreme” (112). However, even if her skill is “*merely* lethal [emphasis mine]” (113), her artistry still wrestles the anxiety of gender. Instead of challenging an esoteric bloc of God and Death, Dickinson and her Speaker/Gun “cooperate with a demonic male who appears to invest [them] with authentic social power” (Pollack 150). Collaboration both anticipates victimhood and renders it impossible, a structural verity that the “Doe” and “Corners” emphasize.

In terms of textuality, the speaker realizes that nascent “Corners” and her disfigured name define her (Holland 138). “My Life” serendipitously eradicates her selfhood from her own autobiography. Although “My Life” substitutes for “I” (“I had stood – a Loaded Gun”) in the first moment of the poem, the embedded self does not accept the Owner’s abrupt identification. Instead, she proceeds within a “narrative of synecdoche” (Holland 138), cognizant and chary of

⁺ art

¹⁶ 1720 Defoe Capt. Singleton 73 These indeed were the Life and Soul of all the rest, and it was to their Courage that all the rest ow’d the Resolution they shewd (*OED*).

externally subversive threats—both physical and linguistic. Dickinson organizes the Owner’s busy stir⁺ transgressively. Not only does he never speak, but he also neither owns nor masters in any effectual or authentic way. “Her . . . voice asserts [his] absence without asserting presence” (Holland 139), and the poem moves forcefully towards latitudes of greater destruction. The brief altercation with the “Doe” underscores the dangerous position of a female victim. Vulnerability precludes the discourse of the “Loaded Gun” and thus quickly disseminates beyond the margin of the narrative.

This strange odyssey in phallic female maturity finally “bursts the bonds of her subservience” to the Master (Pollack 153). She revels thematically and syntactically in her independence (the “magical power to obliterate an alien environment”) and moves with exuberant caesura to the final stanza, re-figuring him from far above the Eider-plain on her way. “The rhetoricity of the text, which stirs⁺ and twists in its tropes, is perceived by the Master as a threat to his straightforward grammaticality” (Holland 142). This masculine order—“[t]he Mountains straight reply”—ultimately masters the Master: he “must” perform his narrative drills. In their mastery, Dickinson (rhetorically) and the speaker (thematically) relegate him to silence with the threat to kill. Mere emergence from the conventional domestic enclave of the “Corner” empowers the succeeding text, imprinting cultural history with “an Emphatic Thumb” of contravening gesture (“also in collocation of life and soul”).

life: 12.a. The series of actions and occurrences constituting the history of an individual (esp. a human being) from birth to death. In generalized sense, the source of human existence from birth to death (*OED*)¹⁷.

⁺ low[er]

⁺ harm

⁺ harm[s]

¹⁷ 1853 C. Brontë *Villette* I. xii. 229 Thinking meantime my own thoughts, living my own life, in my own still shadow-world (*OED*).

Woman as artist experiences a “fluency of rage” (Cameron 65). Indeed, in poem 754, as long as wrath permits eruptive speech, “rage defines her” (Bennett 7). This visceral response to cerebral provocation intensifies in poetry, where life constitutes a history only insofar as lyric time permits. In her book *Lyric Time*, Sharon Cameron imagines that the speaker in “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” prefers violence to sexuality. Hence, identity in the poem “is conceived of as violence, just as life is apparently conceived of as rage” (67). The “actions and occurrences” of the poem revolve around a central dialectic—often, “the demands of self versus their capitulation to the word’s otherness” (Cameron 57). Anger and alienation result from this tense dynamic, and as Bennet allows, “the picture of Dickinson that emerges is not an attractive one” (6). Although the woman writer may ostensibly vouchsafe the dialectic’s compliant imagery, a third and intervening voice emerges—“one of rage” (Cameron 57). In “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun,” the “Vesuvian face” superimposes herself upon the “Valley[’s] glow,” and her lofty “art to kill” infiltrates the man’s mere “power.” The stultifying space of neglected shelves and “Sovreign Woods” can terrify. A reciprocal exchange of violence sanctions a predicate of terror, as well; thus the last stanza careens towards its unequivocal effort of reversal. In its final remove, the poem relates a saga from “birth to death”—“identified” to “died”—in an internal explication of Fury¹⁸.

Twentieth Remove

I can remember the time, when I used to sleep quietly without workings in my thoughts, whole nights together, but now it is other wayes with me . . . I remember the night season, how the other day I was in the midst of thousands of enemies, and nothing but death before me (*Narrative* 365).

¹⁸ 1: intense, disordered, and often destructive rage. 2 a. capitalized: any of the avenging deities in Greek mythology who torment criminals and inflict plagues, b: an avenging spirit, c: one who resembles an avenging spirit; especially a spiteful woman. 3: extreme fierceness or violence. 4: a state of inspired exaltation: FRENZY (*Websters*).

“that restless, nervous energy”: Dickinson’s frontier

Poem 754 transpires in an unambiguous space, a conjectured jurisdiction of wilderness and “Sovreign Woods” that convenes in each stanza in counterdistinction to textual uncertainties. On the frontier she constructs, “exploring, farming, trapping, and trading” (Howe 40) are literary acts. Every enterprise approaches a boundary—at the margin of the text, the parameters of Victorian demeanor, the frame of night and day, and the periphery of meaning—but circumvents conclusion in recurring acts of Manifest Destiny. At the “hither edge of free land” (Turner 2), the American frontier “is productive of individualism” (10). Rugged eccentricity distinguishes the boundary’s inhabitants:

. . . to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things . . . powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, . . . and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom. (Turner 12-13)

From her own Homestead in Amherst, Dickinson imagines a “Homestead/ [that] Came – the Darker Way – .” The very act of writing poetry evocative of distant woods provokes the constraints of the poet’s own physical domain. However, “with instinctive rightness Dickinson’s imagination grasps her situation in terms of the major myth of the American experience” (Gelpi 124). The extant iconography of the West casts settlement as conquest and upholds the overwhelming privilege of masculine provenance. Dickinson’s Speaker/Gun *may* not only commence a westward trek, but *must* also assume its traditional itinerary. Daneen Wardrop posits Dickinson and her poetry in a “natural gothic space” that alludes directly to the American frontier (31) and harbors menacing copses and “woods . . . of sexual threat” (122). On this

sexually-charged trajectory, the burden of external ownership elicits a language of rage that finds referentiality in previous exploratory poems. Resourcefulness creates compression, and topography coerces change. “[T]ill a Day,” this frontier aesthetic of style and structure establishes “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” securely in a shifting space of “hither edge.”

“*The Cordiality of Death*” (P 286)

To Louise Norcross

early September 1880

What is it that instructs a hand lightly created, to impel shapes to eyes at a distance, which for them have the whole area of life or of death? Yet not a pencil in the street but has this awful power, though nobody arrests it. An earnest letter is or should be life-warrant or death-warrant, for what is each instant but a gun, harmless because “unloaded,” but that touched “goes off?” (L 656).

In this letter written almost twenty years after the first inscription of “My Life,” Emily Dickinson remembers the art⁺ and outcome of a “Loaded Gun” and an “earnest letter.” Scenes of decoding in the poem stridently re-mystify, an ironic triumph that contemporary artist Linda Schwalen reproduces in abstract visual form (appendix II). In her artist’s statement, she says, “words appear and disappear, forming and re-forming. This is intended to provide a visual metaphor for the task and dilemma of the Dickinson reader”(Danly 94). The interacting text of the drawing speaks to the first stanza mimetically, and the dialogue yields an expanse of negative space—a dense low⁺ plain of *aporia* economically condensed in the poem’s torrential gravity.

“[F]or what is each instant but a gun?” The question briefly stipulates the vital query of the poem. In “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun,” Dickinson liberates the Speaker/Gun from the poem’s inflexible panopticon. Like a textual prisoner, the “Loaded Gun” “is seen, but [s]he

⁺ power

does not see; [s]he is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (Foucault 200). The vertiginous structure of the poem preserves terror and superficial order; however, polysemous divisions admit spaces of “deadly” meditation. “[O]pposite the central tower” of the poem’s metaphor, the Speaker/Gun experiences “axial visibility” (201) in “the Valley,” paratactic symmetry, and intra-stanzaic commentary. The obliquity of life and death, day and night, “My Life and “Master,” and “I than He” enforces restrictive “lateral invisibility” (201) and separates the poem’s final mystery from its nascent intertextual identity.

As her grammar allows for the sublime exhilaration of action and surprise, Dickinson collapses⁺ the violent trope and Panopticism’s hierarchy. New geometry conflates⁺ lateral and axial views in an entirely circumferential movement. In the rhythm of a round, autobiography and sexuality simultaneously resonate with elements of enclosure and theodicy. This spherical terrain¹⁹ encompasses the Speaker/Gun’s cyclopean “Eye”/“I”, the “Loaded Gun[’s]” symbolic reverberations, and an emerging poetics of renunciation and return. In the inclusive acoustical structure of circumference, the final riddle of the poem returns directly to its provenance in “Life” and “Corners.” The “limits of truth” ultimately occupy this embattled, geodesic line—

My friend attacks my friend!

Oh Battle picturesque!

Then I turn Soldier too,

And he turns Satirist!

How martial is this place!

Had I a mighty fun

⁺ Deep

⁺ conflates

⁺ collapses

I think I'd shoot the human race
And then to glory run! (P 118).

the low harm art

¹⁹ of timber, shade, and ambiguity

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