

POETRY

Circumference & Co.: Catachresis as the Trope of Performativity in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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Emily Dickinson seems to be at her most innovative when she explores a concept—creates an idea by extending the meaning of an existing idea. *Circumference* is one such concept invented by extension, by extending, that is, the meaning of circumference from “rotundity, outer surface, periphery,” or “the line that forms the encompassing boundary of a circle or other closed curve” (*OED*), to a particular state of consciousness, formerly not conceptualized: the state of being taken to the edge of space and time. In poem 633,¹ for example, she defines circumference as the moment when time is suspended:

When Bells stop ringing — Church — begins —
The Positive — of Bells —
When Cogs — stop — that's Circumference —
The Ultimate — of Wheels.

In poem 378, circumference is the place which allows her to step out of both time (to go “Beyond the Dip of Bell”) and space (to touch the universe from an Earth with reversed hemispheres):

I saw no way — The Heavens were stitched —
I felt the Columns close —
The Earth reversed her Hemispheres —
I touched the Universe —

And back it slid — and I alone —
A Speck upon a Ball —
Went out upon Circumference —
Beyond the Dip of Bell —

Or, to take another example, in poem 1620, *circumference* appears as a state of awe—or a state wedded to awe, rather (“Bride of Awe”). “Possessing” as

well as “possessed,” it is defined by the possibility of simultaneous subjecthood and objecthood, in a mutually bounding relationship of service and war (coveted by “every hallowed Knight”).

Circumference thou Bride of Awe
Possessing thou shalt be
Possessed by every hallowed Knight
That dares to covet thee

Boundaries seem to function prominently in this understanding of *circumference*, with the self leaving its own peripheries in order to dissolve in the limitlessness of space and time. Other poems dealing with the boundaries of space and time seem to further elaborate on this new idea of *circumference*: 448 describes the experience “exterior — to time,” while 478 depicts the bizarre feeling of losing gravitation, passing things and fearing never to come back. In all its instances, *circumference* acts as a concept which Jacques Derrida calls heliotropic: one that “cannot be properly known” because there is “too little knowledge” of the term (“the sensible sun” for Derrida, the *helios*) (52). Neither the physical experience of stepping out of time and place can be known for her, nor that particular state of consciousness which the new extended meaning attempts to evoke. The concept gets defined figuratively and not by reference to the physical experience itself.

Exploring the capacity of figurative language as best expressing an abstract concept, Dickinson creates an idea of *circumference* in these poems. She does this with the use of catachresis. Catachresis is generally understood as a metaphor—albeit a forced and excessive one—lacking its literal referent. Lacking a structure brought about by duplication and replacement, catachresis is not a proper metaphor; changes in meaning come about by extension, not substitution.

Classical rhetoricians such as César Chesneau Du Marsais (1757) and Pierre Fontanier (1827) define catachresis as the trope of abuse, *abusio*, adding that what catachresis actually abuses is the figure of metaphor informed by substitution (substitution being the operation informing figures in general). As a trope that does not rely on analogy, substitution, or duplication, catachresis, as Gérard Genette agrees with Du Marsais, makes up for the absence of a sign (51). This is why Fontanier calls catachresis a “non-true figure” (213): no substitution based on similarity, no duplication of the literal into the figurative is at work here.

This is how Fontanier explained this extension of the meaning of a word to another meaning which had no expression before:

La Catachrèse, en général, consiste en ce qu'un signe déjà affecté à une première idée, le soit aussi à une idée nouvelle qui elle-même n'en avait point ou n'en a plus d'autre en propre dans la langue. Elle est, par conséquent, tout Trope d'un usage forcé et nécessaire, tout Trope d'où résulte un sens purement extensif . . . (213)²

In order, then, to mean something which no word meant before, an expression is assigned a new meaning. This extension, however, will not seem tropological: speakers will often think, Fontanier insists, that the expression with the extended meaning is the proper word (*le mot propre*). So although rhetoricians classify catachresis as a forced metaphor, for the speaker they will seem natural (213-14).

Modern rhetoricians, when they do discuss catachresis, explore it as a trope of de-realization, claiming that indirection and extension are the governing operations at work in the figure. J. Hillis Miller stresses indirection, whereby "'something' that can be named in no direct way" is named indirectly (ix). Derrida emphasizes the element of semantic extension as replacing duplication and substitution, which propel the metaphor. "There is no substitution," he claims, "no transfer of proper signs, but an irruptive extension of a sign proper to one idea to a sense without a signifier" (57). It "does not want to duplicate the reality of another world," as Michel Foucault puts it in connection with Raymond Roussel (*Death and the Labyrinth* 16). Following Fontanier, Derrida also calls catachresis a "non-true figure," one that is "preceded by no code of semantic substitution" (58). It consists, Derrida claims, in the "imposition of a sign on a sense not yet having a proper sign in the language" (57).

Catachresis has served as the most general trope of innovation and imagination. Indeed, it has been termed as "the most free and powerful of the tropes" by Renaissance rhetoricians, as the "source of invention" and the "expression of imagination" (qtd. in Herman, et al. 47), and posited by Du Marsais, among others, as the "form of all invention," which "reigns over all the other figures" (Herman et al. 47). Catachresis has been considered the vehicle of imagination: a trope which can, Paul de Man explains, "dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways," whereby the speaker of a language will be allowed to invent "the most fantastic entities by dint of the positional power inherent in language" (21). As such, catachresis has proved most helpful when

constructing some intellectual or philosophical concept—much like Dickinson's *circumference*—formerly unrepresented or incomprehensible. As explained by Foucault, in this trope we have a linguistic displacement by which some order of things can be altered or subverted as the author “wants to *discover* an unexpected space, and to *cover* it with things never said before” (*Death and the Labyrinth* 16).

As a figure without a referent, catachresis, moreover, is an empty signifier, operative solely in signifier-signifier relationships, and not by establishing an analogy between referent and sign, signified and signifier. As such, it does not point outside language. This is indeed its most provocative, most surprising feature. As Derrida puts it, “[c]atachresis does not go outside the language, does not create new signs, does not enrich the code; yet it transforms its functioning; it produces, with the same material, new rules of exchange, new meanings” (59).

Finally, catachresis, I would like to claim, is the trope of performativity par excellence: its function is performative in the sense that by remaining within discourse all along, catachresis brings about new ideas or concepts by extending the meaning of existing ideas.

Today performativity is understood in two senses, referring to the linguistic utterances whereby actions are performed,³ defined originally by J. L. Austin, and to the social-discursive processes described by poststructuralist theories as informing the idea of constructionism. Coinciding with the time of the modern episteme in philosophy, linguistics, and literary theory, Austin's early conceptualization of performativity exhibits several traits of the formalist-structuralist paradigm. Among these traits is an understanding of language as capable of creating something outside language. This, I believe, is the case of strong or logocentric performativity, where the signifier is taken to bring about the signified.⁴ Speech act theory born between the 1950s and '70s took off from Austin's constative-performative dichotomy, taking for granted, even in the locutionary-illocutionary-perlocutionary triad of the later lectures,⁵ the binarity of language processes as foregrounded in reference. All along, the binaries, understood as transformations of the signifier/signified dichotomy—such as word and thing, word and deed, saying and doing—remained uncontested.

In poststructuralist critical thinking the Austinian concept and its further elaboration by speech act theory came to be seen as a function of the signifier only, a non-referential discursive operation, where changes that

the performative brought about remained within the realm of discourse. Extended to all kinds of discursive processes where signification comes about discursively, the performative has become a generative concept, applied to support the critique of metaphysics.⁶ Feminist critics put the performative in the middle of their constructionist work on the subject, especially when exploring the problematics of identity inflections.⁷

This new understanding of performativity contests the assumption of a subject as signified, one pre-existing the utterance or existing independently of language. Indeed, as poststructuralism calls into question language or the text as a transparent medium revealing a reality behind it, the subject or self that pre-exists the text (or can have an existence outside the realm of language) is concomitantly repudiated. The subject does not exist as self-presence, poststructuralism claims: all our experience is mediated by the signifying practices of culture or is constructed through discourse.

Already Austin allowed that an utterance might go both ways, be a constative and a performative at the same time. This constative-performative aporia, revealing a fundamental undecidability in language, made the Austinian hypothesis only more appealing to poststructuralism. Since people do exist even before they speak, even before they construct themselves as subjects in discourse, very often it is difficult to detect where self-referentiality gives way to self-construction. For example, when, after her long illness in 1864, Dickinson complains to her sister Lavinia, "I have been sick so long I do not know the sun" (Letter 435⁸), she relies on both the constative and the performative function of language. On the one hand, she gives a verifiable account of her illness (this is the constative element), while, on the other, she assigns ailing and malady to herself as the subject of the sentence, the figure saying "I," and illness will emerge as the dominant marker of her subjectivity (this is the performative element). The subject of Dickinson's sentence takes the position defined by what is being narrated in the text, thereby leaving room for a constative-performative aporia.

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Catachresis is the governing trope of Dickinson's poetry. Poem 448, whose two lines I evoked in the title of this essay, can be read as the theorizing of catachresis itself, the discussion of the mechanism of catachretic extensions:

This was a Poet — It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings —

Serving many purposes for the poet so keen on capturing unrepresentable concepts, catachresis is responsible for her incessant innovation and her outstanding strangeness. As a rhetorical trope that does away with the dual structure of the metaphor, catachresis allows for her questioning or subverting the metaphysical binaries which she refuses to take for granted. In addition, catachresis serves as a vehicle of a particular view of language here, capable of accommodating ambiguities and undecidabilities.

In the following I will explore the workings of this unusual trope in Dickinson and show that catachresis becomes the vehicle for a performative reconceptualization of some master tropes of her culture in order to provide the poet with the necessary meanings. I will also offer the tropological or figurative as a complement to the autobiographical. While Dickinson is extending concepts into catachreses—trying out new meanings and trying on new roles—she is either recording things as they are (in a constative manner) or is playfully performing the figurative possibilities (in a performative manner). (Or, indeed, she is rhetorically experimenting with a concept she might plan to put into practice in life.) Dickinson will not relieve the undecidability between the autobiographical and the rhetorical or figurative. In other words, catachresis as the performative master trope allows her to retain the constative-performative aporia throughout her poetry and letters, thereby to defacilitate reality and biography.

To take one example, this constative-performative aporia can be detected in the famous self-portrait Dickinson sent to Higginson, her hoped-for “Preceptor,” who could not offer his guidance without first asking about her age and then her looks. The verbal self-portrait she sent (instead of a portrait itself) was as much constative as performative. “I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur—and my Eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves. Would this do just as well?” (Letter 268). Dickinson acts subversively when she offers a catachretic construct as a substitute portrait by deferring the purportedly non-existent signifier towards another, imagined or constructed signifier. Just like in the case of the poems discussing *circumference* I quoted earlier, she will take an existing expression, *portrait*, extend its meaning to include the description of the wren-like woman with

eyes like the sherry left in the glass of the departing guest. Her self-construction is as much referential as discursive: while it offers a duplicate of sorts of the living woman, she also constructs a verbal (catachretic) portrait of her own excessively original intellect, making this performed subject more real than the person of whom the portrait was requested.

In her poetry, Dickinson will construct catachreses typically when venturing into some unknown intellectual space: when an idea is unknown or not conceptualized. Her famous definitions, in which she is trying to get hold of mental objects by connecting them to physical things, are all catachretic. Always, her method is to give concrete definitions to concepts: she pins down abstractions to experiences, reifying them through catachretic extension. Among these we find such abstractions as past, death, risk, crisis, escape, faith, fame, hope, power, home, and brain. The past, for example, is conceptualized as a woman dangerous even to look at for she might "reply" by shooting back her "faded Ammunition" to those who meet her "unarmed."

The Past is such a curious Creature
To look her in the Face
A Transport may receipt us
Or a Disgrace —

Unarmed if any meet her
I charge him fly
Her faded Ammunition
Might yet reply.
(1203)

She will reify other unknowable concepts, or heliotropes, by supplying surprising definitions: by claiming that "Death is a Dialogue between / The Spirit and the Dust" (976); that "Death is like the insect / Menacing the tree" (1716); that "Risk is the Hair that holds the Tun" (1239); that "Crisis is a hair" (889); that "Escape — it is the Basket / In which the Heart is caught" (1270); that "Faith is a fine invention" (185) or "Faith is a peerless bridge" (915); that "Fame is a bee" (1763); that "Hope is a strange invention" (1392), "Hope is a subtle glutton" (1547), or "Hope is the thing with feathers" (254); that "Power is a familiar growth" (1238). Her grand statements are catachretic too: by writing, for example, that "Home is the definition of God" (Letter 483) or that "The Brain is wider than the Sky" (632), she will assign a common expression (home, brain) to an idea

which has no current expression, thereby extending one (home) to include the “definition of God” and the other (brain) to include the concept of being “wider than the sky.” Or when she writes that her “Basket holds . . . Firmaments” (352), she will again reverse the container/contained hierarchy, letting a woman’s basket stand metonymically for the mind of the woman capable of catachretic extension even to contain firmaments.

Dickinson seems to construct all her master concepts—*God, death/time/the past; the mind/the psyche, inner events; womanhood, and creativity*—by applying catachretic-performative processes.

Poem 1270 asks whether Heaven—or, by synecdochic transfer, God—is a physician and an exchequer. This question extends the meaning of Heaven/God to include the very concrete, very everyday: physician and exchequer.

Is Heaven a Physician?
They say that He can heal —
But Medicine Posthumous
Is unavailable. —
Is Heaven an Exchequer?
They speak of what we owe —
But that negotiation
I’m not a party to —

The meaning of the master concept of *God* is similarly extended in poem 49, where the speaker, verging on the blasphemous, calls Him a burglar and a banker, thereby performatively bringing about the catachresis of *God as banker and burglar*.

Angels — twice descending
Reimbursed my store —
Burglar! Banker — Father!
I am poor once more!

In 357, God appears as a distant, remote, hyperbolic lover, who sends Christ, his only son, as an intermediary. Evoking the story of Miles Standish, John Alden, and Priscilla from early American history, Dickinson here points at a weakness in God, who out of an insurance policy of sorts sends Christ as His envoy, risking the possibility that the people—much like Priscilla, who preferred John to Miles—might choose Christ, not God the

Father. By choosing Christ over God, Dickinson dared indeed to go against Christian belief in her testing of concepts.

God is a distant — stately Lover —
Woos, as He states us — by His Son —
Verily, a Vicarious Courtship —
“Miles,” and “Priscilla,” were such an One

She typically hides behind the persona of the child when discussing a major theological problem. In poem 251, *God* is performatively assigned the subjectivity of the authoritative parent who excludes Himself from the lives of His children when, instead of playing with them like another child, he scolds them (251). More blasphemous is *God's* conceptualization as a petty, jealous person (1719):

God is indeed a jealous God —
He cannot bear to see
That we had rather not with Him
But with each other play.

A similar catachretic extension of the concept of *God* can be found in a letter, written to Mattie in 1884, some time after Gilbert died, where she accuses Jesus of avarice and the Father of encroachment, that is, as overstepping His rightful territories: “Ineffable Avarice of Jesus, who reminds a perhaps encroaching Father, ‘All these are mine’” (Letter 823).

In these poems, Dickinson is constructing her own religion, her own theology, rejecting the received theology based on the absolutes of good and bad. What she is really doing, however, is alert us about a particular feature of language itself. Using images of extreme strangeness—such as *Heaven is a physician, an exchequer, God is burglar and banker, God is a distant, stately lover, God acts the scolding parent, Jesus is avaricious, God is a jealous God*—Dickinson will shock her readers into recognizing that words try in vain to fill what Foucault calls the “tropological space” of language (*Order of Things* 114) or the “tropological space of vocabulary” (*Death and the Labyrinth* 18), the space where meanings get deferred. Originally, Foucault insists, “everything had a name—a proper or peculiar name” (*Order of Things* 113), but then “they [names] were being scattered over representations by force of spontaneous rhetoric” (114), the rhetoric of deferral into multiplicity.

Catachresis will figure prominently in this deferral, what Dawne McCance calls “meaning’s original deferral” (113): the “displacement of words from their original meaning through the multiplication of figures and tropes” (113), the “opening to difference” (129). Because *God* is not a proper name but a master concept with many possible conceptualizations, the catachretic extension might come about by the performative act of (re)naming: making *God* into a burglar, a banker, scolding, or jealous. Indeed, there is no distinction between literal and figurative meaning: “words were figurative before being proper,” as Foucault claims (*Order of Things* 114). Therefore, whenever we talk about *God*, we are using catachreses—because meaning is not referential here, and the concept of *God* is unknowable, a heliotrope. And although the concept seems more proper than figurative to us, it is only because the abuse has become natural.

For Dickinson, words are certainly self-deceiving. More precisely, *having* words is self-deceiving; the fact that we constantly use supposedly familiar words for things we do not know or cannot even conceptualize: this is self-deception. Speakers must know, Dickinson insists, that language does not have words for every experience. For example, that “something quieter than sleep,” she writes in poem 45, “will not tell its name.” Similarly, no name exists for that “certain Slant of light” which she famously claims to be the “Seal Despair” (258); or, as she writes in poem 510, for that other death-like, night-like, frost-like moment of despair, “When everything that ticked — has stopped — / And Space stares all around.” When an unfamiliar experience demands expression, the poet can revert to catachresis: extend an existing concept to create a new meaning. Often she will allow rhythm and figure carry the meaning, even perform it. Innovation will be of a special imaginative kind because extension reaches across a gap, a semantic gap or space left between name and referent.

Speakers must also know that whenever they take words for granted, they might be fooled by the impossibility of signification: for it is only possible to deal in language (words extended to other words and yet other words) and never the things themselves. In other terms, speakers cannot assume the solace of constativity, for only the constative-performative aporia is certain. Moreover, by using words in their received (inherited) meanings, we cannot gain a clear understanding of the truth of things (even the truth of our thought), and the only means to become a more precise, more conscientious user of language is if speakers understand the impossibility of words matching experiences. The model speaker is the poet, who does not assume that language is a transparent medium, nor will

ignore the spaces opening up between words and things. Rather, the poet will admit the spaces or gaps within—for example, by defamiliarizing certain words by using quotation marks (“Paradise,” “Farmers,” “Amherst,” “Eden,” “Jasper”; 215). This poet will hear what language is telling her: words “in new inflection” and “Breaking in bright Orthography” (276), and will recognize unfamiliar experiences—like tasting “a liquor never brewed” (214) or the “Languor of the Life / More imminent than Pain” (396). Finally, this poet will recognize experiences for which no name exists (“are not brayed of Tongue”): for example, the “Bandaged moments” of the soul, “moments of Escape” (512).

Death is another master concept central to Dickinson’s poetry; these are ideas which she tries to capture through catachresis as well. Catachretic extension happens again by the most Dickinsonian form of reification: giving a new definition to the concept of dying by pinning down the experience of dying.

The famous death poems—“I felt a Funeral in my Brain” (280), “I heard a Fly buzz — when I died” (465)—show her preoccupation with the act of dying, the experience itself. Convinced that some faculties are sharpened during the process and interested in the degree that awareness or consciousness might remain alive after death, she allows for a self-inspection of the dying. Dickinson makes the superb intellectual effort of imagining one’s own death, which, we know from Freud’s 1915 essay “Thoughts for the Times of War and Death,” is just about impossible.⁹ No wonder that in these poems she comes close to touching bottom.

In poem 627, death claims—“arrogantly”—to possess a different ability of seeing: “Until the Cheated Eye / Shuts arrogantly — in the Grave — / Another way — to see.” Elsewhere, death adds significance to things otherwise overlooked: “Things overlooked before / By this great light upon our Minds / Italicized — as ‘twere” (1100).

We can detect prosopopeia overlapping with catachresis in these poems. For Dickinson, prosopopeia never seems to lose the epitaph’s original rootedness in death. Death indeed appears as defacement, suspending the self’s consciousness of understanding itself, the prosopopeia of consciousness. Death makes “finished faces” (1227), depriving the dying of consciousness capable of apprehending itself. Moreover, death fixes the mask in memory too, as claimed in the two poems dealing with Christ on the cross, promising the Thieves their places in Paradise: “‘Remember me’ implored the Thief!” (1180); “Recollect the Face of me / When in thy Felicity” (1305).

Poems on perception, consciousness, and psychological states provide arresting instances of (heliotropic) master concepts catachretically expanded. These poems about personal madness, disjointedness between time and person, explosive or destructive moments, and moments of anguish are excavations of the psyche of a poet known to have the courage for relentless self-inspection. Trying to understand the mechanics of perception, she explores particular ways of seeing ("There's a certain Slant of light" [258]), moments coming after emotional loss ("By a departing light / We see acuter, quite" [1714]) or after the crushing experience of pain ("After great pain, a formal feeling comes" [341]). In poem 822, the meaning of the concept of *consciousness* will be expanded to cover the capacity of intense experiencing ("This Consciousness that is aware"). In other poems she presents consciousness as prosopopeia, with emphasis on how death fixes the face of the dying ("That awful stranger Consciousness / Deliberately face" [1323]). Infinitude also appears as a psychological experience in Dickinson's poetry, whether it is the infinity of the abyss (340), or the recognition of infinitude (564). The infinitude of time, immortality, is recognized in some rare, privileged moments only: some "Favorites — a few" are then granted "Eternity's disclosure" in "The Soul's Superior instants" (306).

Another recurring experience presented in her poetry is her own psychological activity. Insisting that an unobserved life is not worth living, she would strive for extreme levels of awareness of the "soul admitted to itself" (1695) and of making her "soul familiar — with her extremity" (412). She is interested in the concrete experience of personal madness as disjointedness between time and person ("The first Day's Night had come" [410]), explosive moments of the soul when the "Bomb" might go off ("The Soul has Bandaged moments" [512]), moments of anguish (376), the "scarlet experiment" of dissecting the body to find the soul (861), as well as going to the ultimate limits of knowing or "experience" into outer space (875).

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea.

I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch —

This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience.

A particular psychological experience is described in poem 701: that of encountering a thought one has had before.

A Thought went up my mind today —
That I have had before —
But did not finish — some way back —
I could not fix the Year —

Nor where it went — nor why it came
The second time to me —
Nor definitely, what it was —
Have I the Art to say —

But somewhere — in my Soul — I know —
I've met the Thing before —
It just reminded me — 'twas all —
And came my way no more —

Clearly this is *déjà vu*, the curious feeling that one is reliving a familiar experience. In the Dickinson poem, Thought is presented as the agent that will sometimes visit the mind: it comes or goes, as it pleases. The mind does not have the ability to control the thinking process; its only job is to remain open and receive the honor of Thought's visits. Thought, moreover, may deceive the mind: it might give the impression of having been there before.

The constructions of womanhood, traditional as well as untraditional, form a conspicuous group of Dickinson's poems, gender preoccupying the poet perhaps even more than *God*, *death*, or *consciousness*. Before taking a closer look at the poems themselves, I would like to make a detour to clarify the difference between the performative processes behind traditional and those behind untraditional gender roles.

In the first case, normative gender formations come about when existing scripts of womanhood are evoked and replayed: this is the script of normative heterosexuality (woman portrayed as part of a love-and-marriage plot). These are theatrical (re)performances, where culturally intelligible forms of gender get reproduced; while woman is constructed through a series of citational and iterative (re)performance acts. In Dickinson's poetry,

as I will show, normative gender (re)performances are presented through metaphors, the figure mapping the real or familiar into the imaginative.

A very different kind of performativity can be detected in those cases where womanhood is performed through acts of non-compliance with existing norms of heterosexuality (woman portrayed outside the love-and-marriage plot). Unlike the citational (re)performances of traditional female roles, these are performative processes with an ontological force: they bring about some new discursive entities. Here woman is performatively constructed against a background of contrary expectations. Resisting and subverting gender normativity, such gender constructions are open: multiple, unstable, unpredictable, problematic, and often unintelligible. In Dickinson, as I will show, the figure carrying this open version of performativity is catachresis.

There are numerous poems of gender compliance where she is mocking traditional gender roles, trying on each: the lady courted, the innocent girl of "the While Election," the woman portrayed in a painting, the abandoned woman, the wife, and the bride. These roles are playfully constructed in conformity to conventions (the love-and-marriage plot), and the normative social scripts of 19th century womanhood seem to regulate the performance. In other words, Dickinson cites existing conventions, existing traditions, in making some of her woman figures. Moreover, these traditional roles all seem to be captured by proper metaphors, where the dual structure of the figure is kept. For example, in poem 1339, the courting lover is presented as the bee, the courted woman as the rose: all the four elements of this metaphor are present (woman/rose, man/bee), allowing for the figure to come about through substitution and mapping.

A Bee his burnished Carriage
Drove boldly to a Rose —
Combinedly alighting —
Himself — his Carriage was —
The Rose received his visit
With frank tranquillity
Withholding not a Crescent
To his Cupidity —
Their Moment consummated —
Remained for him — to flee —
Remained for her — of rapture
But the humility.

The persona in the “Master letters” (Letters 187, 233, 248) is also conveyed by metaphors. The normative script used here is that of the vulnerable and fragile woman, ailing, as all Victorian women were supposed to be. The Master letters can be read as the playful reperformances of these scripts: Daisy, interested in flowers and birds only, is wholly dependent upon the Master, her Lord. A similar topos of self-proclaimed lowliness permeates the poems written around the time of the Master letters. In poem 472, for example, the “Dowerless Girl”—bashful, self-effacing, ashamed of her own worthlessness—gives an expressive-citing theatrical performance of the well-known scripts of Victorian womanhood.

I am ashamed — I hide —
What right have I — to be a Bride —
So late a Dowerless Girl —
Nowhere to hide my dazzled Face —
No one to teach me that new Grace —
Nor introduce — my Soul —

Poem 461 can again be read as an instance of expressive-citational theatricality; this time it is the bride on the eve of her wedding speaking, still unable to comprehend the wonder of turning overnight from Maid to Bride:

A Wife — at Daybreak I shall be —
Sunrise — Hast Thou a Flag for me?
At Midnight, I am but a Maid,
How short it takes to make a Bride —

Elsewhere (505), she cites the orthodox feminine role, too: the script of the woman who is receptive rather than creative, portrait rather than painter, played-upon rather than playing, listening rather than speaking, thinking of her dower only and not of dangerous thoughts.

I would not paint — a picture —
I'd rather be the One

.....

I would not talk, like Cornets —
I'd rather be the One

.....

Nor would I be a Poet —
It's finer — own the Ear —

In every case the metaphor stands solidly on its dual structure: woman/portrait, man/painter; woman/cornet (played upon), man/musician (playing the cornet); woman/owning the ear (hearing the poet), man/mouth (the poet speaking). This is the same woman claiming in another poem (486) to be "the slightest in the House," taking the "smallest Room," never speaking "unless addressed," expected to die "noteless." Produced as much by the cult of purity as by the cult of female sacrifice, the woman's prosopopeia addresses her own heart, unable to decide whether she will be able to forget the man who abandoned her.

Heart! We will forget him!
You and I — tonight!
You may forget the warmth he gave —
I will forget the light! (47)

The neatly constructed metaphor of wife/Czar/Woman in poem 199 also contributes to the performance of traditional womanhood, where safety and comfort are hoped for in marriage.

I'm "wife" — I've finished that —
That other state —
I'm Czar — I'm "Woman" now —
It's safer so —

Similarly, in poem 528, the metaphors of "White Election," the "Royal Seal," "Delirious Charter," and womanhood as a "Titled" state contribute to the self-mocking reperformance of the normative script of marriage celebrated.

Mine — by the Right of the White Election!
Mine — by the Royal Seal!
.....
Titled — Confirmed —
Delirious Charter!

Unlike the citational reperformances of gender, constructed each time by way of dual metaphoric structures, gender presentations that defy traditions seem to be given in catachreses. Dickinsonian topoi for gender roles for which there is no name, to invoke the definition of catachresis, place woman outside the love-and-marriage plot and include womanhood as “bachelorhood,” or creative celibacy, woman lover as buyer, wifehood “without the Sign,” and the creative woman. These are all new discursive entities that the poet brings about performatively against or in the absence of existing discourses or conventions. No one-to-one correspondence can be detected here between existing scripts and gender roles; therefore, the figurations of new subjectivities will be multiple, unfixed, mobile, and mutable, involving transgressions and extensions of categories. In such cases, the subject comes about by resisting the normative codes of thought and behavior—by enacting a rupture from convention. These performative processes also rely on repetition, quotation, or citation, only this is quoting with a difference, discarding the previously coded script, ignoring the pre-established formulae, and replacing the earlier context with a new one.

In these cases *womanhood* is presented not as a familiar or fixed concept but as an abstraction of which there is too little knowledge. Then the concept gets extended and a new subject is performed that includes features that were not part of it earlier. This catachretic extension can be detected in her idea of “bachelorhood” as fitting the female gender, too: as she writes, she was “born for Bachelorhood” (qtd. in Martin 151). She opted for a life best captured by the term celibacy, another catachresis, where the original meaning restricted to male Catholic orders now gets extended to include the woman devoting her life to a deity who is as powerful for her as Christ is to the priests and monks: poetry. Often she thought of marriage as sacrifice, allowing no opportunity for her creativity to flourish. Indeed, seeing married women turning into flowers “with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun” (Letter 93), she dreaded the moment when she too would be “yielded up.”

How dull our lives must seem to the bride, and the plighted maiden, whose days are filled with gold, and who gather pearls every evening, but to the *wife*, Susie, sometimes the *wife forgotten*, our lives seem dearer than all others in the world. . . . Oh, Susie, it is dangerous, and it is all too dear, these simple trusting spirits, and the spirits mightier, which we cannot resist! . . . I tremble lest at sometime I, too, am yielded up. (Letter 93)

Elsewhere, too, she is unable to see love in its conventional, idealized terms. In poem 223, she pictures it as a trade relation, where the woman is bargaining even for his smile ("I Came to buy a smile"), thereby extending the concept of love to encompass the idea, metaphor really, of love as commerce. (I will discuss this possibility of extending catachresis by metaphor later, in connection with poems defining *womanhood* by creativity.)

I Came to buy a smile — today —
But just a single smile —
The smallest one upon your face
Will suit me just as well —

Woman as buyer dictating the terms of a contractual relationship is indeed a far cry from the modest, self-deprecating woman figuring in Dickinson's traditional metaphors, discussed earlier, offering herself to be mastered by her lord. In poem 508, the new woman is performed: mature, proud, willful, self-confident, independent, autonomous, and majestic.

I'm ceded — I've stopped being Theirs —
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now,
And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading — too —

Baptized, before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace —
Unto supremest name —
Called to my Full — The Crescent dropped —
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,
With one small Diadem.

My second Rank — too small the first —
Crowned — Crowing — on my Father's breast —
A half unconscious Queen —
But this time — Adequate — Erect,
With Will to choose, or to reject,
And I choose, just a Crown —

The idea of self-possession—together with a familiarity with circumference experiences (“Existence’s whole Arc”)—is now included in the new understanding of *womanhood*, and catachresis turns into a trope of mastery. Having discarded all scripts of Victorian womanhood, this speaker is in complete self-possession: Queen, reigning over herself in full recognition of her creative powers (“Adequate — Erect / With Will to choose, or to reject”). It is this sovereign creativity that she celebrates in Elizabeth Barrett Browning as well, the woman poet whose “Head [was] too High to Crown” (312). In poem 1072, too, it is the poet’s persona as a creative master who she gains her “Crown” from: it is her creativity—and not her being a bride, therefore “Bridalled”—that bestows “Title divine” upon her, allowing her to become “Wife — without the Sign,” clearly a contradiction in terms.

Title divine — is mine!
The Wife — without the Sign!
Acute Degree — conferred on me —
Empress of Calvary!
Royal — all but the Crown!
Betrothed — without the swoon
God sends us Women —
When you — hold — Garnet to Garnet —
Gold — to Gold —
Born — Bridalled — Shrouded —
In a Day —
Tri Victory
“My Husband” — women say —
Stroking the Melody —
Is *this* — the way?

The creative act of poetry will then transform the meaning of wifehood into the figure of wife as yet unscripted (for which no name existed); catachresis comes about by the extension of the familiar concept into a particular Dickinsonian understanding of wifehood. To complicate matters even further, this catachretic extension happens by way of a metaphor again (as in poem 223); this time she uses a metaphor that she created in several other poems, too, for poetry and the poet. Indeed, the creative is mapped by well-known sexual metaphors: the “Loaded Gun” (754), the volcano (1677), or the lip (1409). Poem 605 presents the spider, who “from Nought to Nought” creates, conceptualizing the spider’s creativity in masculine terms: “He” is “dancing softly to Himself” while

"His Yarn of Pearl — unwinds." By synecdochic transfer, Dickinson talks about books in masculine terms as well, referring to each creator of the "Antique Book," including Sappho, as a "He" (371). In poem 448, the poetic self is again given the masculine pronoun ("it is He — / Entitles us"), and the creative act gets related to the uncanny feeling of circumference: of stepping out of time ("Himself — to Him — a Fortune — / Exterior — to time"). In several other poems, too, the male persona within the female appears to have the function to mark creativity: in poem 704, the rhymes "Earl" and "Girl" construct a solid dual metaphor whereby the poet's belief in her creative powers is expressed. In poem 670, the metaphor of the corridors of the brain hiding the assassin is further metaphorized by the haunted chambers of the house: the Ghost, a "He" again, is responsible for the interior drama of the split self. This construction of catachresis by using a metaphor to extend the meaning of an existing expression is really one possible form described by Fontanier himself: he called it *catachrèse de métaphore* (214) or *métaphore-catachrèse* (215), and investigated it as a grand type of his "non-true figures" (214).

As much as they invoke curiosity for the autobiographical, these poems cannot be read as directly autobiographical. At times it is indeed her life that demands expression or justification as Dickinson constructs herself as a rebel via catachreses and through the pathos of her sense of singularity. At other times, however, catachresis will provide the rhetorical means to fill the Foucauldian space of language between name and referent, and will serve as her spacious capacity for playfully performing a variety of differences. Performativity will open up an unlimited range of experiments with meanings; she only cannot do what is "Unknown to possibility," as she writes in poem 361. By opening up the spaces for catachreses, she will make full use of the performative force of language: she performatively generates new concepts via catachreses by extending the meaning of existing expressions, allowing us, as catachreses always do, according to Foucault, "to think otherwise, to do something else, to become other than what one is" (*Death and the Labyrinth* 201). To cite the instances explored in this essay, *circumference* will now, by the performative gesture, mean being taken to the edge of space and time. *God* will include physician, exchequer, distant lover, scolding, encroachment, and jealousy; *death* will encompass the experience of dying, the sharpened senses, and the alert consciousness; *psychological states* will accommodate infinitude, disjointedness, explosive moments, and *déjà vu*; and *womanhood* will contain celibacy, the crown, wifehood without the

title, and creativity. A multiplicity of new meanings is created by catachresis, which acts as the conduit of performativity.

Loránd Eötvös University, Budapest

Notes

¹ Poem numbers refer to those in the Thomas H. Johnson edition.

² *Catachresis, in general, consists in this, that a sign already assigned to a first idea should be assigned also to a new idea which has no other sign at all, or no longer has a sign as its proper expression. It includes, therefore, any Trope whose usage is forced or necessary, any Trope which results in a purely extended sense*" (qtd. in Derrida 57; italics in the original).

³ See especially in his conference lecture and article "Other Minds" (1946), his Oxford lectures in the 1940s and '50s on "Words and Deeds," and his William James lectures given at Harvard from 1955, to be published posthumously in 1962 [Austin died in 1960] as *How to Do Things with Words*.

⁴ See the detailed discussion of performativity in literature in Bollobás, *They Aren't, Until I Call Them*.

⁵ These are chapters VIII to XII of *How to Do Things with Words*.

⁶ See, for example, Jacques Derrida ("Signature Event Context"; *Limited Inc, Specters of Marx*; "Performative Powerlessness"; *Negotiations*), Roland Barthes ("The Death of the Author"), Stanley Fish (*Is There a Text in This Class?*), Shoshana Felman (*The Scandal of the Speaking Body; Claims of Literature*), and J. Hillis Miller (*Versions of Pygmalion; Tropes, Parables, Performatives; Speech Acts in Literature; On Literature; Literature as Conduct*).

⁷ Among them are Diana Fuss (*Essentially Speaking*), Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble; "For a Careful Reading"; Excitable Speech; The Psychic Life of Power; Undoing Gender*), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*The Epistemology of the Closet; Touching Feeling*).

⁸ Letter numbers refer to the Thomas H. Johnson edition.

⁹ "Our own death is unimaginable, and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it we can perceive that we really survive as spectators" (289).

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